



Leading from the Frontline: A History of Pacific Climate Diplomacy

Wesley Morgan, Salā George Carter & Fulori Manoa

To cite this article: Wesley Morgan, Salā George Carter & Fulori Manoa (27 Jun 2024): Leading from the Frontline: A History of Pacific Climate Diplomacy, The Journal of Pacific History, DOI: [10.1080/00223344.2024.2360093](https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2024.2360093)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2024.2360093>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 27 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 663



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Leading from the Frontline: A History of Pacific Climate Diplomacy

WESLEY MORGAN, SALĀ GEORGE CARTER AND
FULORI MANOA

ABSTRACT

Pacific Island states have, for decades, considered climate change a threat to their security. In 1991, island leaders declared global warming and sea level rise as serious environmental threats, and that their ‘cultural, economic and physical survival’ was at risk. Pacific Island countries have since played a disproportionate role in United Nations climate negotiations, working as a diplomatic bloc to shape new rules and to drive multilateral cooperation to reduce emissions. Pacific Island states have also sought greater recognition of climate change as a *security* threat. This article considers the history of Pacific climate diplomacy. It explains how Pacific Island countries have played a key role in the global response to the climate crisis and outlines the history of regional climate politics in the Pacific Islands Forum. We also focus on recurring tensions between Pacific Island states and Australia with regard to ambition to tackle climate change.

Key words: Pacific Islands Forum, climate change, Pacific climate diplomacy, UN climate negotiations, climate security, COP31

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the Pacific climate negotiators who have worked so tirelessly to pursue ambitious climate action, many of whom have spoken to us during our research. We would also like to acknowledge the three anonymous reviewers for helpful and constructive comments which have helped to improve the final version of this article, the *Journal of Pacific History* editorial board for their generous support during the review process – with special thanks

Wesley Morgan – Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. w.morgan@griffith.edu.au

Salā George Carter – Department of Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia. george.carter@anu.edu.au

Fulori Manoa – School of Law and Social Sciences, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji. fulori.manoa@usp.ac.fj

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

This article provides a history of Pacific Island climate diplomacy. Other histories of Pacific climate diplomacy have been written, but this is the first to provide a general overview of the Pacific's role in global climate diplomacy at the United Nations (UN) and consider the implications of climate diplomacy for international relations in the Pacific. This article focuses especially on discussions at the South Pacific Forum and its present-day successor, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and considers cooperation and tension in the relationship between Pacific Island states and Australia. While it is the largest and most powerful member of the PIF, Australia is also the world's third-largest fossil fuel exporter (after Russia and Saudi Arabia) and its approach to global climate diplomacy has differed markedly from Pacific Island states.

This article finds that Pacific Island countries have had a disproportionate influence in global climate discussions. Through determined and creative diplomacy island states have shaped multilateral cooperation at the UN. Their role was especially crucial for securing the 2015 Paris Agreement, which now guides international collaboration to cut greenhouse gas emissions. Pacific Island states have shaped global climate action despite the divergent position of Australia, which instead of rapidly reducing emissions has sought to minimize obligations and to expand coal and gas exports to growing economies in Asia. Differences on climate have proved a running sore in the relationship between Australia and Pacific Island countries. Failure to take serious action on climate change – seen by island states as their key security threat – has undermined Australia's claim to be the security partner of choice for Pacific Island states. The 2022 election of a Labor government vowing to take more ambitious climate action has seen something of a rapprochement with island countries and Australia intends to co-host the UN climate talks with Pacific Island nations in 2026. But it remains to be seen whether tensions associated with climate policy can be overcome.

The article is organized as follows. The next section provides a 'thick history' of Pacific engagement in international climate diplomacy, by considering five distinct time periods: (1) pre-1990, when Pacific leaders helped frame global warming as an urgent crisis; (2) 1991–7, when Pacific Island countries played a key role in the negotiation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the subsequent Kyoto Protocol; (3) 1998–2009, the period of implementing the Kyoto Protocol and the collapse of talks for a post-Kyoto treaty in Copenhagen; (4) 2010–15, including the crucial role played by Pacific Island states in the negotiation of the Paris Agreement; and (5) the post-Paris period, when major powers committed to meaningful action to reduce emissions, but the impacts of a warming planet also became increasingly evident. The significance of Pacific climate diplomacy is considered in the conclusion to the article.

(Acknowledgements continued)

to Jon Fraenkel and Nick Hoare for their guidance (and patience) finalizing this paper. All errors are the responsibility of the authors.

A HISTORY OF PACIFIC CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

This section provides a ‘thick history’ of Pacific engagement in international climate diplomacy. It considers five distinct time periods (summarized in Table 1) which represent key stages in the evolution of the global climate

TABLE 1: A Timeline of Pacific Island Countries in the Global Climate Regime.

Period	Key moments
1985–90: Framing the Problem Pacific Islands help to frame global warming as an urgent crisis. Sea level rise poses an existential threat for atoll islands. Island states form an important global coalition – AOSIS – to lobby for action at the UN. Australia initially works with the Pacific region, and positions as a climate leader on the global stage.	1979: First World Climate Conference 1988: Toronto Conference; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change formed; First UNGA resolution on climate change; South Pacific Forum leaders first discuss climate change 1989: Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise (Malé); Intergovernmental Meeting on Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific (Majuro) 1990: Second World Climate Conference; IPCC first assessment report; Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) formed
1991–7: Shaping the Global Response Pacific Islands play a key role in negotiation of the UNFCCC and subsequent Kyoto Protocol, which requires emission reductions from developed countries first. Australia reassesses its approach and seeks to minimize obligations to reduce emissions.	1992: UN Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) 1995: COP1; AOSIS proposes a binding protocol to reduce emissions 1996: IPCC second assessment report 1997: South Pacific Forum issues first standalone leaders’ statement on climate in Rarotonga 1997: Kyoto Protocol
1998–2009: Pressing for Action Pacific Islands continue to press major powers to take action on mitigation, and increasingly on adaptation as well. Global action stalls as United States and Australia refuse to ratify Kyoto Protocol. Australia’s position makes for an ‘uncomfortable’ decade of regional relations with island states. Pacific Islands lobby UN for recognition of climate as a security threat. Talks for a post-Kyoto climate treaty collapse in Copenhagen.	2001: US refuses to ratify Kyoto; IPCC third assessment report 2005: Kyoto enters force; Montreal COP agreement to negotiate second period of Kyoto commitments; Pacific Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change (PIFACC) 2007: IPCC fourth assessment report; Bali Plan of Action launches process for post-Kyoto treaty 2008: Niue Declaration on Climate Change 2009: Copenhagen climate summit; Pacific Islands Forum issues ‘Call to Action on Climate Change’ in Cairns; UN passes resolution on security implications of climate change (proposed by Pacific states)

(Continued)

Table 1: Continued.

Period	Key moments
2010–15: Securing a New Global Agreement Pacific Island states work with major powers including the EU and the United States to secure the Paris Agreement. Pacific Islands shape negotiations by pressing for a global temperature limit of 1.5°C and stitching together a ‘High Ambition Coalition’. Australia refuses to back 1.5°C target. Regional differences stoke tensions and fuel emergence of a ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’.	2009: Fiji suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum 2013: Pacific Islands Forum issues Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership; Pacific Islands Development Forum formed 2014: IPCC fifth assessment report 2015: Paris Agreement; Suva Declaration on Climate Change; Port Moresby Declaration on Climate Change; High Ambition Coalition formed (led by the Marshall Islands)
2016–23: The Age of Consequences Pacific Islands bolster the UN climate regime when the United States (under President Trump) withdraws from Paris. By 2021, climate moves to centre stage in global geopolitics as US returns to the Paris Agreement and major powers strengthen climate targets. Australia isolated as countries commit new climate targets, although a change of government in 2022 sees a shift closer to international consensus. Impacts of climate change increasingly evident as Pacific struck by a series of severe cyclones. Australia is also devastated by unprecedented bushfires and floods, while the Great Barrier Reef is hit by multiple bleaching events.	2016: Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) 2017: US withdraws from Paris Agreement; Fiji president of COP23 2018: IPCC special report on 1.5°C of warming; Pacific Islands Forum issues Boe Declaration on Regional Security 2019: Pacific Islands Forum issues Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Change Action Now 2021: US returns to Paris Agreement; At COP26 major powers revise Paris targets and commit to net-zero emissions by mid-century 2022: IPCC sixth assessment report released; Pacific Islands Forum declares a Pacific Climate Emergency

Note: Table adapted from: Joyeeta Gupta, ‘A History of International Climate Change Policy’, *Climate Change* 1, no. 5 (2010): 636–53; George Carter, ‘Pacific Island States and 30 Years of Global Climate Change Negotiations’, in *Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations*, ed. Carola Klöck, Paula Castro, Florian Weiler and Lau Øjford Blaxekjær (London and New York: Routledge 2020), 73–90.

regime. For each period, a general overview of developments in global climate diplomacy is offered before considering the distinct role played by Pacific countries, and exploring the implications of global developments for regional politics in the Pacific Islands.

Framing the problem, 1985–90

A scientific consensus emerged around global warming in the mid-1980s, and policy-makers were forced to confront the reality that greenhouse gas emissions, caused

especially by the burning of fossil fuels, had serious consequences for the planet's climate system. In 1985, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) warned that 'in the first half of the next century a rise of global mean temperature could occur which is greater than any in man's history'.¹ This prompted increasing political concern. In 1988, a Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere warned that climate change was a 'major threat to international security' with consequences 'second only to a global nuclear war'.² The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was formed in the same year to provide policymakers with a regular assessment of the available scientific information on climate change.

Amidst growing scientific concern, regional assessments considered the potential impacts of climate change for Pacific Island countries. A report prepared for the South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) in mid-1988 painted a dire picture, warning that 'global warming threatens the physical and cultural survival of several South Pacific societies'.³ Pacific Island leaders meeting at the 1988 South Pacific Forum 'expressed concern about climatic changes in the South Pacific and their potential for serious social and economic disruption in countries of the region'.⁴

By the late 1980s, the prospect of sea-level rise associated with global warming was especially concerning for Pacific leaders. That low-lying atoll islands might be swallowed by the rising sea also captured the imagination of the international community.⁵ The issue received global coverage in 1987 when tidal waves caused widespread flooding in Malé (the capital of the Maldives), prompting a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution for assistance to strengthen coastal defences.⁶ At the 1988 South Pacific Forum, Kiribati President Ieremia Tabai told reporters 'if what the scientists are saying is true, within 50–60 years there are countries like my country which will no longer be there'.⁷ In March 1989, the front cover of the *Pacific Islands Monthly* ran with a full page headline:

¹ World Meteorological Organization, *Report of the International Conference on the Assessment of the Role of Carbon Dioxide and of Other Greenhouse Gases in Climate Variations and Associated Impacts*, Villach, Australia, 9–15 October 1985 (Paris: World Meteorological Organization, 1986), 1.

² 'Conference Statement', in *Conference Proceedings, The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security*, Toronto, Canada, 27–30 June 1988 (Geneva: Secretariat of the World Meteorological Organization, 1988), 292.

³ 'Abstract', in *A Climate of Crisis: Global Warming and the Island South Pacific*, ed. Peter Hulm (Port Moresby: Association of South Pacific Environmental Institutions, 1989).

⁴ South Pacific Forum, 'Annex 5: Forum Communiqué', in *Nineteenth South Pacific Forum, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 20–21 September 1988: Agreed Record*, SPEC(88)Rep, 57.

⁵ See, for example, James Lewis, 'Sea Level Rise: Some Implications for Tuvalu', *Environmentalist* 9, no. 4 (1989): 269–75.

⁶ UNGA, '42/202, Special Assistance to Maldives for Disaster Relief and the Strengthening of its Coastal Defences', *General Assembly – Forty-second Session*, 11 Dec., 1987, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/42/203> (accessed 4 Mar. 2024).

⁷ David Clark Scott, 'Shoring up Regional Interests in South Pacific', *Christian Science Monitor*, Sep. 22, 1988.

‘The Greenhouse Effect: Say Goodbye To Kiribati, The Marshall Islands, Tokelau, Tuvalu, The Great Barrier Reef’.⁸

A series of multilateral meetings in 1989 cemented the view that global warming would have serious implications for small island states. At the South Pacific Forum in July leaders ‘expressed concern about the possible effects on Island countries of rising sea levels’ and agreed to ‘take decisive action to draw world attention to the way the environmental problem affected the South Pacific’.⁹ Two weeks later, the first Intergovernmental Meeting on Climatic Change and Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific concluded that the impacts of climate change ‘are potentially catastrophic, threatening in the long term the very existence of low-lying island countries’.¹⁰ At this meeting, the President of the Marshall Islands, Amata Kabua said ‘It is truly frightening to think that our ocean will turn against us . . . I hope that the appeal of the peoples of the Pacific can help convince the industrialized nations to discontinue their profligate contamination of the atmosphere’.¹¹ In November, a Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise was held in Malé, which included representatives from island states in the Pacific, Caribbean, Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. Discussion there centred on ‘the need for a common strategy on sea level rise and on how to protect the SIDS [small island states] from the effects of global warming’.¹² The ensuing *Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise* called for negotiations toward a UN framework convention on climate change to start as soon as possible. It also established a new small states Action Group to ‘coordinate a joint approach on the issues of climate change, global warming and sea level rise’.¹³

The first assessment report of the IPCC – released at the second World Climate Conference in Geneva in 1990 – confirmed human activities were driving global warming and predicted average global temperature would increase by 1°C

⁸ The cover referred to a special report by Peter Roy and John Connell, ‘The Greenhouse Effect: Where Have all the Islands Gone?’, *Pacific Islands Monthly*, April/May 1989, 16–21.

⁹ South Pacific Forum, ‘Annex 6: Forum Communiqué’, in *Twentieth South Pacific Forum, Tarawa, Kiribati, 10–11 July 1989: Agreed Record*, SPFS(89)Rep, 55–6.

¹⁰ South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, *Report of the SPC/UNEP/ASPEI Intergovernmental Meeting on Climatic Change and Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific, Majuro, Marshall Islands, 17–20 July 1989* (Noumea: South Pacific Commission, 1989).

¹¹ Amata Kabua, ‘Welcome Address’, July 17, 1989, quoted in Patrick D. Nunn, ‘The End of the Pacific? Effects of Sea Level Rise on Pacific Island Livelihoods’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 34, no. 2 (2013): 157.

¹² Espen Ronneberg, ‘Small Islands and the Big Issue: Climate Change and the Role of the Alliance of Small Island States’ in *The Oxford Handbook of International Climate Change Law*, ed. Kevin R. Gray, Richard Tarasofsky and Cinnamon P. Carlarne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 762.

¹³ ‘Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise’, Nov. 18, 1989, reproduced in *Commonwealth Law Bulletin* 16 (1990): 646.

and global sea levels would rise 20 cm by 2030.¹⁴ Alarmingly for Pacific countries, the IPCC found ‘people living in archipelagos and coral atoll nations that lie almost entirely within three metres of sea level, such as the Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Tokelau and other archipelagos and island nations in the Pacific, Indian Ocean and the Caribbean, could lose much of their beaches and arable lands’.¹⁵ In response to the IPCC report, the Geneva Conference called for negotiation of a global convention on climate change.¹⁶ A UNGA resolution in December 1989 formally launched negotiations for a UN climate convention.¹⁷

By this time Pacific Island countries had become significant actors in the international discussion of climate change. Island leaders helped to frame global warming as an urgent crisis that required immediate action, especially from industrialized nations. That sea-level rise might pose an existential threat for atoll islands meant Pacific Islands leaders had a unique moral authority when they called for measures to reduce emissions. Tuvalu’s Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu told a session of the 1990 World Climate Conference that Pacific islands were ‘extremely vulnerable to the environmental hazards and dangers of the Greenhouse Effect and sea level rise. These are problems which we have done the least to create but now threaten the very heart of our existence’.¹⁸ Media reporting increasingly identified with the plight of Tuvalu and other island nations. But Pacific states were not just an emerging poster child for the impacts of climate change. They also developed diplomatic strategies to respond to the issue. At the second World Climate Conference in Geneva, Pacific Island countries joined counterparts in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean to establish an Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) that was intended to build on the initiative of the 1989 Malé Declaration and to represent the shared demands of small island developing states (SIDS) in negotiations toward a UN climate convention.

During this problem-framing phase of global discussions on climate change, Australia’s approach was closely aligned with that of Pacific Island countries. In 1989, Australia funded a network of stations across the Pacific to monitor sea-level rise and

¹⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *IPCC First Assessment Report: Policymaker Summary of Working Group I: Scientific Assessment of Climate Change* (Geneva: World Meteorological Organization, 1990), 63–4.

¹⁵ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group II, 1990, in John W. Ashe, Robert Van Lierop and Anilla Cherian, ‘The Role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the Negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)’ *Natural Resources Forum* 23, no. 3 (1999): 210.

¹⁶ ‘Final Statement of the Second World Climate Conference’, November 8, 1990, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Digital Archives, A/45/696/Add.1, reproduced in *Environmental Conservation* 18, no. 1 (1991): 62–66.

¹⁷ UNGA, ‘43/53, Protection of Global Climate for Present and Future Generations of Mankind’, General Assembly – Forty-third Session 6 Dec. 1988 *Protection of global climate for present and future generations of mankind: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly*, 21 December 1990, A/RES/45/212

¹⁸ Bikenibeu Paeniu quoted in Jon Barnett and John Campbell, *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific* (London: Earthscan, 2010), 87.

climate change.¹⁹ At the South Pacific Forum, Australia backed a call for industrialized countries to ‘enact immediately significant cuts in the emission of greenhouse gases’.²⁰ Australia positioned itself as a leader in multilateral discussions, with Foreign Minister Gareth Evans describing climate change as ‘the biggest problem, the biggest challenge, faced by mankind in this or any other age’.²¹ In 1989 and 1990, Australia supported a target of reducing emissions by 20 per cent from 1988 levels by 2005.²² Pacific Island states – through AOSIS – would later propose this target as binding on all developed countries. Through the South Pacific Forum, and SPREP, Australia supported Pacific Island countries to engage global climate diplomacy. Australia also supported Pacific countries to work with island states that faced similar challenges. Indeed, the Small States Conference on Sea Level Rise, in Malé, which led to the formation of AOSIS, was partly funded by Australia. In subsequent negotiations for a UN climate convention, AOSIS would play an important role, but key differences emerged between Australia and Pacific Island countries.

Shaping the global response, 1991–7

In the early 1990s negotiations began in earnest for a global response to climate change. A ‘North–South’ fault-line quickly emerged as poorer nations argued that developed countries – which had burned fossil fuels for centuries – were obliged to move first to cut emissions. Among wealthy countries, differences emerged between European states that wanted clear targets and timetables to reduce emissions, and the United States, which initially opposed any targets.²³ During this period, Pacific Island countries proved a consistent voice for ambitious climate action based on the science. Because global warming was seen as an overriding threat to their survival and they had done so little to cause it, Pacific Island countries came to be seen as the ‘international conscience’ on the issue, and they were able to exert considerable moral pressure during UN climate negotiations.

In the lead up to the landmark 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, UN member states negotiated a Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). During these

¹⁹ South Pacific Forum, ‘Annex 6: Forum Communiqué’, in *Twentieth South Pacific Forum, Tarawa, Kiribati, 10–11 July 1989: Agreed Record*, SPFS(89)Rep, 56.

²⁰ South Pacific Forum, ‘Annex 6: Forum Communiqué’, in *Twenty-First South Pacific Forum: Agreed Record*, SPFS(90)Rep, para. 6.

²¹ Evans made the comment on the adoption of the ‘Declaration of The Hague’, which he signed on behalf of Australia on 11 March 1989. See ‘Declaration of The Hague on Protection of the Atmospheres’, *Australian International Law News* 5 (1990): 37.

²² Matt McDonald, ‘Fair Weather Friend? Ethics and Australia’s Approach to Global Climate Change’, *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 51, no. 2 (2005): 221.

²³ Daniel Bodansky, ‘The History of the Global Climate Change Regime’, in *International Relations and Global Climate Change*, ed. Urs Luterbacher and Detlef F. Sprinz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29.

talks Pacific Island countries formed common positions through the auspices of AOSIS. Vanuatu's ambassador to the UN Robert Van Lierop was the inaugural chair of AOSIS. At this time AOSIS advocated targets to limit emissions by developed countries and proposed a global compensation fund to pay for loss and damage incurred by climate change, with funds to be provided by industrialized nations on the principle of 'polluter pays'.²⁴ With the United States opposed to targets, the convention signed in Rio contained only ambiguous language on emissions reduction and there was no reference to compensation for loss and damage. The UNFCCC did establish a shared objective of preventing 'dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' and paved the way for negotiation of tougher measures in subsequent protocols under the convention.²⁵ The UNFCCC also recognized the special circumstances of small island developing states, who were allocated specific seats on various bodies established under the convention.²⁶ At the South Pacific Forum in 1992, island leaders described the convention as 'an important first step' but warned it 'would not be sufficient to arrest the threat of global warming' and called for early commencement of negotiations for a tougher protocol.²⁷

After Rio, Pacific Island countries continued to shape discussions at UN climate talks. Nauru drafted the first text of a proposed protocol under the UN climate convention, which was put forward by AOSIS in 1994.²⁸ When introducing the draft protocol (as vice-chair of AOSIS), Samoa's ambassador to the UN, Tuiloma Neroni Slade, explained the proposal 'would put in place a mechanism to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from industrialized countries by 20% [from 1990 levels] by the year 2005'.²⁹ The AOSIS Protocol became an important point of reference at the first Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC (COP1) in 1995 where AOSIS won support from most developing countries for their position, and China and India adopted the AOSIS text as the basis for a negotiating proposal. While the draft AOSIS Protocol was ultimately not adopted, it 'rendered politically unacceptable' less ambitious proposals from others, including the United States which wanted to stabilize emissions rather than set targets to reduce them.³⁰ It also paved the way for the negotiation of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

During negotiation of the UN climate convention and subsequent Kyoto Protocol, a clear rift emerged between Pacific Island countries and Australia.

²⁴ Ashe, Van Lierop and Cherian, 'The Role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)', 215.

²⁵ See Article 2 of the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (1992).

²⁶ Article 4.8 of the UNFCCC specifically highlights the adverse effects of climate change on small island countries.

²⁷ South Pacific Forum, 'Annex 6: Forum Communiqué', in *Twenty-Third South Pacific Forum, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 8–9 July 1992: Agreed Record*, SPFS(92)Rep, 65.

²⁸ See Marlene Moses, 'The Role and Influence of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in UN Climate Change Negotiations', Public Lecture, Resources, Environment and Development Group, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, 19 Feb. 2013.

²⁹ Slade quoted in Ronneberg, 'Small Islands and the Big Issue', 767.

³⁰ Carola Betzold, "'Borrowing" Power to Influence International Negotiations: AOSIS in the Climate Change Regime, 1990–1997' *Politics* 30, no. 3 (2010): 141.

Under sustained lobbying from industry groups, particularly fossil fuel exporters, the Australian government came to view global efforts to tackle climate change as a *threat* to the country's economic prosperity. At COP1 Australia joined the United States to oppose binding cuts to emissions and argued for *differentiation* of national targets, on the basis that Australia was a fossil fuel-dependent economy and emissions reduction would be relatively more costly than for other countries.³¹ At COP2, following the 1996 election of conservative Prime Minister John Howard, Australia sought to minimize any national obligations to reduce emissions. By COP3 in 1997, Australia was arguing the only target it could agree to in Kyoto would be one that allowed 'reasonable growth in its greenhouse gas emissions'.³²

During this time, Australia tried to paper over differences with Pacific Island countries, but things came to a head at the 1997 South Pacific Forum, when island leaders tried to persuade Howard to support their positions ahead of climate negotiations in Kyoto. Discussions at the Forum leaders' retreat proved bitter and ran into overtime. Ultimately, Island leaders compromised. While the 1997 Forum leaders' statement 'urged all Parties to the [UN]FCCC to consider fully the AOSIS Draft Protocol' it also 'recognised that participants at the Kyoto Conference can be expected to adopt different approaches'.³³ In the aftermath of the Forum, Cook Islands Prime Minister Geoffrey Henry argued Australia's approach was a 'self-serving' attempt to protect 'its coal and energy intensive industries'.³⁴ Tuvalu Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu told media 'Australia dominates us so much in this region . . . For once we would have liked to have got some respect'.³⁵ For his part, Howard dismissed concern that sea-level rise could threaten the existence of island states as 'exaggerated' and 'apocalyptic'.³⁶ At the talks in Kyoto, Australian negotiators secured concessions that would allow Australia to *increase* emissions by eight per cent by 2012. Moreover, by including land-clearing in the baseline year, Australia would be able to use changes in land-use to meet its Kyoto target without making any significant policy change.

Pressing for action, 1998–2009

In the decade following the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, global action on climate change proved disappointing. While the protocol was a significant achievement it was hamstrung by unresolved issues. The United States, then the world's largest emitter,

³¹ For further discussion, see McDonald, 'Fair Weather Friend?', 226.

³² Bernadette Hussein, 'The Big Retreat', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Nov. 1997, 11.

³³ South Pacific Forum, 'Annex 10: Forum Communique', in *Twenty-Eighth South Pacific Forum, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 17–19 September 1997: Agreed Record*, SPFS(97)Rep, 65.

³⁴ Xiaojiang Yu and Ros Taplin, 'The Australian Position at the Kyoto Conference', in *Climate Change in the South Pacific: Impacts and Responses in Australia, New Zealand, and Small Island States*, ed. Alexander Gillespie and William C.G. Burns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 113.

³⁵ Hussein, 'The Big Retreat', 11.

³⁶ McDonald, 'Fair Weather Friend?', 227.

withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in March 2001.³⁷ Despite this, other powers – most notably the European Union (EU), Japan and Russia – recommitted to the Kyoto Protocol. This was an important show of faith in the UN climate regime, even if the commitments were widely acknowledged to be short of what was required to actually reduce global emissions.³⁸ During this period, Pacific Island countries did their bit to keep the protocol alive, even in the absence of the United States.³⁹ Samoan Ambassador Tuiloma Neroni Slade was chair of AOSIS from 1997 to 2002 and played a key role in negotiations for the Protocol's rules of implementation (Slade would later become Secretary General of the PIF from 2008–14).⁴⁰

By the early 2000s, with a growing recognition that significant climate change was likely, UN climate talks increasingly focused on adaptation and finance to help developing countries deal with impacts. An Adaptation Fund linked with the Kyoto Protocol was established in 2001 and there emerged a corresponding focus on adaptation in the Pacific Islands, with a plethora of national and regional climate change projects launched early in the new millennium.⁴¹ Funding for climate change projects was also integrated into the aid programmes of key donor countries, especially Australia.

At this time Pacific Island countries also began to lobby the UN for recognition of climate change as a first-order security threat. In 2004, Tuvalu Ambassador to the UN Enele Sopoaga called for climate change to be considered as part of the reform agenda at the UN Security Council (UNSC). During the first UNSC debate on climate change in 2007, Papua New Guinea's Ambassador Robert Aisi (speaking on behalf of PIF), argued the impact of climate change on small islands was 'no less threatening than the dangers guns and bombs posed to large nations'.⁴² Island diplomats faced resistance from permanent Security Council members – including China, Russia and the United States – who argued the UNSC was not the right forum for this discussion. US representatives told Pacific diplomats they were making a 'losing bet' by taking climate change to the UNSC.⁴³ Not to be deterred, Pacific ambassadors to the UN – working together as the Pacific Small

³⁷ Even while the Kyoto Protocol was being negotiated, the US Senate passed the Byrd-Hagel resolution (by a margin of 95–0) which stated the United States should not sign a climate treaty mandating emissions reductions without similar commitments also being required of developing countries. This effectively meant the United States could not *ratify* the Kyoto Protocol.

³⁸ By 2005, the Kyoto Protocol was ratified by 164 countries.

³⁹ Each of the South Pacific Forum leaders' communiques between 1998 and 2002 urged member states of the UNFCCC to sign and ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

⁴⁰ In 2000–1, Slade was co-chairman of the Working Group on Compliance under the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change.

⁴¹ See Barnett and Campbell, *Climate Change and Small Island States*, 116–8.

⁴² UNSC Press Release, 'Security Council Holds First-Ever Debate on Impact of Climate Change on Peace, Security, Hearing over 50 Speakers', 17 Apr. 2007, SC/9000.

⁴³ UN (New York), 'Pacific Islands Elaborate on Draft GA Resolution on Climate Change, Hear USG Views', 1 Aug. 2008, WikiLeaks: Public Library of US Diplomacy, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08USUNNEWYORK695_a.html (accessed 13 May 2024).

Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping – successfully sponsored the first UNGA resolution on climate change and security in 2009. By the time this resolution passed, without being put to a vote, more than 100 countries were co-sponsors – indicating significant support. This led to a report from the UN Secretary General on ‘climate change and its possible security implications’.⁴⁴ Pacific concerns were also recognized when the Security Council held its second debate on climate change in 2011, with the council expressing ‘concern that possible security implications of loss of territory of some States caused by sea-level-rise may arise, in particular in small low-lying island States’.⁴⁵

While Pacific diplomats pressed for recognition of the security threat posed by climate change, progress remained slow in the UN climate talks. The Kyoto Protocol was clearly inadequate to limit warming, especially as the United States and developing countries were not subject to commitments. At COP13 in 2007, countries agreed to negotiate an arrangement to succeed the Kyoto Protocol, and a deadline was set to complete talks in 2009 in Copenhagen. Burden sharing remained a central point of contention. By 2007 China had become the world’s largest emitter, and the United States wanted any new deal to include commitments from rising economies such as China and India. For their part, developing countries wanted to see deeper cuts from wealthy nations before they would act. They also wanted more finance made available to help the poorest countries adapt to climate impacts. These differences dogged the discussions going into Copenhagen.

With global negotiations stymied by political realities Pacific Island countries continued to press for action based on the science. In 2008, AOSIS commissioned research from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research which found a global rise of 2°C compared with pre-industrial levels would have devastating consequences for small island states.⁴⁶ At COP14 climate talks in 2008, AOSIS argued any new agreement should limit warming to 1.5°C above the long-term average. ‘1.5 to stay alive’ quickly became the rallying cry of Pacific Island states.⁴⁷ In the lead up to discussions in Copenhagen, both Tuvalu and AOSIS proposed a legal text for a new ‘Copenhagen Protocol’ that would aim to limit warming to 1.5°C and would require a global reduction in emissions by 85 per cent (from 1990 levels) by 2050.⁴⁸ In Copenhagen, Pacific negotiators

⁴⁴ UNGA, ‘Climate Change and Its Possible Security Implications: Report of the Secretary-General’, 11 Sept. 2009, UN Digital Library, A/64/350.

⁴⁵ UNSC, ‘Statement by the President of the Security Council’, 20 July 2011, UN Digital Library, S/PRST/2011/15.

⁴⁶ Alliance of Small Islands States, ‘AOSIS Input into the “Shared Vision” Assembly Document, UNFCCC Climate Conference, Poznan, December 2008.

⁴⁷ Lisa Williams-Lahari, “‘1.5 to stay alive’ the only option: AOSIS”, *Climate Pasifika*, 8 Dec. 2009, https://climatepasifika.blogspot.com/2009/12/15-to-stay-alive-only-option-aosis_08.html (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁴⁸ Michael Bascombe, ‘AOSIS Release: Islands Propose “Survival” to COP15’, *Climate Pasifika*, 11 Dec. 2009, <https://climatepasifika.blogspot.com/2009/12/aosis-release-islands-propose-survival.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

pressed hard to have their proposals considered. At one stage emotional appeals from Tuvalu's ambassador for the environment held up the talks altogether. But they were not able to win over either the industrialized nations or larger developing countries such as China and India.⁴⁹

Differences between China and the United States remained too far apart in Copenhagen for agreement on a new global climate treaty. Instead, countries 'noted' a short Copenhagen Accord, which nevertheless represented some progress as it set out a goal of limiting warming to below 2°C. The accord also saw developing countries agree to take action to reduce emissions, and developed countries committed to jointly mobilize one hundred billion dollars a year by 2020 to help developing countries address climate change, with most funds to be dispersed through a new Green Climate Fund.

During the first decade of the new millennium, clear differences persisted between Australia and Pacific Island countries. Australia joined the United States in withdrawing from the Kyoto Protocol, which Howard's conservative government refused to ratify even though Australian negotiators had secured concessions that required very little policy change. Not signing up to Kyoto made for an uncomfortable decade in Australia-Pacific relations, though things improved somewhat when the Labor Party came to power in 2007 and ratified Kyoto as its first act of government. Incoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd also announced a new \$150 million climate adaptation programme focused on the Pacific.

In the lead up to Copenhagen, Australia tried to find alignment with Pacific nations on climate. Australia hosted the 2009 PIF in Cairns. There, Rudd convinced Island leaders to sign on to Australia's preferred negotiating positions in a statement which called for an outcome in Copenhagen that would limit global warming to 2°C and reduce global emissions by at least 50 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.⁵⁰ This contradicted the negotiating positions of AOSIS, which sought to limit warming to well below 1.5°C and called on states to reduce emissions by 95 per cent by 2050. When they went to Copenhagen, Pacific Island countries backed the AOSIS targets. In Copenhagen, a frustrated Rudd told Tuvalu's lead climate negotiator his approach was 'unhelpful and unproductive',⁵¹ while Tuvalu Prime Minister Apisai Ielemia complained Rudd was lobbying Pacific governments 'to probably water down our position on 1.5°C'.⁵² By the end of the Copenhagen talks more than 100 nations supported the Pacific's call to limit warming to 1.5°C. Differences in ambition at the UN climate talks proved to be ongoing.

⁴⁹ Makereta Komai, 'AOSIS Shakes, Goliath Stirs: US, China Hands Off on "1.5 to Stay Alive" Call at COP15', *Climate Pasifika*, 11 Dec. 2009, <https://climatepasifika.blogspot.com/2009/12/goliath-stirs-at-cop15-us-china-back.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁵⁰ 'Pacific Leaders' Call to Action on Climate Change', 6 Aug. 2009, Annex A, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, PIFS(09)REP.

⁵¹ Samantha Maiden, 'Rudd Accused of Bullying', *The Australian*, 18 Dec. 2009, 2.

⁵² Nic Maclellan, 'The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 2010', *Contemporary Pacific* 23, no. 2 (2011): 411–2.

Securing a new global agreement, 2010–15

After Copenhagen, global climate negotiations turned toward achieving a long-term climate treaty that would require commitments from all countries. During this period the United States pressed for a redesign of the UN climate regime, to move away from binding targets to a pledge and review system that would allow countries to set nationally determined commitments.⁵³ This shift won cautious support from China, and bilateral cooperation between the United States and China helped pave the way for a new global climate treaty. For their part, Pacific Island countries pressed for a legally binding agreement that would limit warming to 1.5°C. Pacific countries also built a coalition across traditional negotiating blocs at the UN when the Marshall Islands forged a ‘High Ambition Coalition’ that helped seal the 2015 Paris Agreement. During this time, differences in approach to climate policy fuelled the emergence of a ‘New Pacific Diplomacy’.⁵⁴ Frustrated with Australian attempts to veto regional positions at the PIF, Pacific governments increasingly pursued collective climate diplomacy through island-only bodies.

From 2009, Pacific countries pursued regional climate diplomacy through avenues outside of the PIF.⁵⁵ One catalyst for this was Fiji’s suspension from the forum in 2009, after the ‘interim government’ of Voreqe Bainimarama failed to meet a deadline for democratic elections. Keen to maintain ties with island neighbours, and even to assert regional leadership, Fiji established a rival body which excluded Australia and New Zealand. Established in 2013, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) became a site for Pacific leaders to issue island-only regional positions on issues of concern, and especially on climate change. There was a similar development at the UN, as Pacific ambassadors based in New York developed shared diplomatic strategies through the auspices of the PSIDS – a grouping that also excluded Australia and New Zealand.⁵⁶ The PSIDS group became important for aggregating shared positions in the global climate negotiations.⁵⁷ Arguably, for a period, the PSIDS grouping ‘all but replaced the PIF as the primary organizing forum for Pacific representations at the global level’.⁵⁸

⁵³ Charles F. Parker and Christer Karlsson, ‘The UN Climate Change Negotiations and the Role of the United States: Assessing American Leadership from Copenhagen to Paris’, *Environmental Politics* 27, no. 3 (2018): 524.

⁵⁴ Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, ‘The “New Pacific Diplomacy”: An Introduction’, in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 13.

⁵⁵ George Carter and Stewart Firth, ‘The Mood in Melanesia After the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands’, *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 16.

⁵⁶ Fulori Manoa, ‘The New Pacific Diplomacy at the United Nations: The Rise of the PSIDS’, in *Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), 90.

⁵⁷ Fulori Manoa, ‘The Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) Early Advocacy on Climate and Security at the United Nations’, *Griffith Asia Insights*, 27 May 2021, <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/the-pacific-small-island-developing-states-psids-early-advocacy-on-climate-and-security-at-the-united-nations/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁵⁸ Fry and Tarte, ‘The “New Pacific Diplomacy”’, 7.

In the run up to UN climate talks in Paris in 2015 there were parallel processes underway in the Pacific. Fiji hosted a regional meeting of the PIDF the week before Papua New Guinea hosted the annual PIF. Both summits were attended by island leaders, and both set out regional positions for a new UN climate treaty. But there were clear differences. The ‘Suva Declaration on Climate Change’ – released from the PIDF meeting – set out island-only positions, calling for the Paris Agreement to limit warming to 1.5°C.⁵⁹ In Port Moresby, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott refused to back the 1.5°C temperature goal and the PIF declaration did not reference the 1.5°C target.⁶⁰ This raised the ire of some island leaders. Kiribati President Anote Tong suggested Australia should leave the forum altogether if it was not prepared to back the islands’ positions in global climate negotiations.⁶¹

As happened in Copenhagen and Kyoto before that, Pacific Island countries took their own positions to the Paris talks, where the Marshall Islands played an especially important role, securing a global climate agreement. In the lead up to the Paris summit it again looked like talks would stall on the rich–poor split between nations. Issues around finance, and legal liability were especially difficult. In this context, Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum developed a sophisticated diplomatic strategy, helping to stitch together a coalition across traditional negotiating blocs in the UN climate negotiations.⁶² During 2015, de Brum convened a core group of foreign ministers from both developed and developing countries who met at least three times, including in the sidelines of the UNGA, to arrive at shared positions for a new global climate agreement. Worried they would be compromised, they met in secret, and handwrote their sensitive communications.⁶³ During negotiations in Paris, this core group was joined by the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) grouping of states, which swelled the group’s membership to almost 100 countries. The United States also joined. De Brum formally announced this new ‘High Ambition Coalition’ at a press conference halfway through the Paris talks. He also convinced Brazil to join. Brazil was part of a negotiating coalition that included South Africa, India, and China; and Brazil’s support helped ensure India and China would not veto the final agreement.

⁵⁹ PIDF, *Suva Declaration on Climate Change, 2nd–4th September 2015* (Suva: PIDF Secretariat, 2015).

⁶⁰ Greg Fry, ‘Pacific Islands Forum: Climate “Consensus” on the Road to Paris’, *The Strategist*, 21 Sept. 2015, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-pacific-islands-forum-declaration-on-climate-change-consensus-at-the-cost-of-strategy-on-the-road-to-paris/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶¹ Liam Cochrane, ‘Pacific Islands Forum: Australia May Be Asked to Leave Group Unless Action is Taken on Climate Change’, *ABC*, 8 Sept. 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-08/australia-may-be-asked-to-leave-the-pacific-islands-forum/6759914> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶² For a good overview of the diplomatic strategy developed by de Brum from 2013 to 2015, see Dean Bialek, ‘Tony de Brum’, *Profiles of Paris*, <https://profilesofparis.com/profiles/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶³ Jeff Goodell, ‘Will the Paris Climate Deal Save the World?’, *Rolling Stone*, 13 Jan. 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/will-the-paris-climate-deal-save-the-world-56071/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

Pacific Island states shaped the final design of the Paris Agreement. The campaign to limit warming to 1.5°C was reflected in the agreement's ultimate objective of limiting warming 'to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels'.⁶⁴ Carefully crafted, this wording reflected a compromise among the negotiating blocs. Here, de Brum played a key role, as he brokered wording on the temperature goal to bring Brazil across to the positions of the High Ambition Coalition.⁶⁵ The Paris Agreement required countries to pledge new, more ambitious, national targets to reduce emissions, every five years. By this means countries would work together to decarbonize the global economy by the middle of this century. Three decades after scientific consensus emerged on the issue, the world finally had a truly global agreement to tackle greenhouse gas emissions.

Pacific leadership was recognized in Paris. When Minister de Brum walked to the plenary hall for the final negotiating session, he was flanked by the EU Climate Commissioner Michel Canete and the US Special Envoy for Climate Change Todd Stern. All three of them were wearing medallions fashioned from coconut leaves, to symbolize their membership of the High Ambition Coalition. Canete told media that 'when we walked all together ... I knew that we would get a good deal'.⁶⁶ Australia tried to join the High Ambition Coalition in Paris. But de Brum explained membership would require more ambitious commitments, telling media 'we are delighted to learn of Australia's interest, and we look forward to hearing what more they may be able to do to join our coalition'.⁶⁷ When Australia announced its first Paris Agreement target – to reduce emissions by 26–28 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030 – de Brum argued that if the rest of the world followed Australia's lead, vulnerable nations such as his would disappear.⁶⁸ In April 2016, when members of the High Ambition Coalition met at a New York signing ceremony for the Paris Agreement, Australia was not invited.⁶⁹ By contrast, the global leadership of Pacific Island

⁶⁴ United Nations, 'Paris Agreement', 12 Dec. 2015, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶⁵ 'Acordo global sobre clima é aprovado pela 1ª vez', *BlogdoDC*, 12 Dec. 2015, <http://www.blogdopc.com.br/2015/12/acordo-global-sobre-clima-e-aprovado.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶⁶ Ed King, 'Foie Gras, Oysters and a Climate Deal: How the Paris Pact Was Won', *Climate Home News*, 14 Dec. 2015, <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/12/14/foie-gras-oysters-and-a-climate-deal-how-the-paris-pact-was-won/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶⁷ 'Australia "Not Yet Welcome" in Climate Alliance', *SBS News*, 12 Dec. 2015, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/australia-not-yet-welcome-in-climate-alliance/go1d3r8uv> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶⁸ Pacific Beat, 'Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum slams Australia's Proposed 2030 Carbon Emissions Targets', *ABC*, 11 Aug. 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-11/marshall-islands-slams-australias-carbon-emissions-targets/6688974> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁶⁹ Tom Arup and Adam Morton, 'Australia Snubbed by "High Ambition" Group at Climate Talks in New York', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 Apr. 2016, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-snubbed-by-highambition-group-at-climate-talks-in-new-york-20160421-gobk58.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

states was widely recognized. When he met island leaders in Hawai'i in September 2016, US President Barack Obama explained: 'We could not have gotten a Paris agreement without the incredible efforts and hard work of the Island nations. They made an enormous difference ...'.⁷⁰

The age of consequences, 2016–23

After 2015, global climate negotiations turned towards consolidating the new Paris climate regime. Countries moved quickly to ratify the Paris Agreement and it entered into force in late 2016. Commitment to the new climate pact was tested in 2017 when President Donald Trump announced the United States would withdraw from the Paris Agreement. While this dampened climate ambition in some countries – including Australia – no other country joined the United States's defection. For their part, Pacific Island countries did what they could to bed down the agreement. Fiji for example was the first country to ratify the Paris Agreement and assumed presidency of the UN climate negotiations in 2017. When Fiji presided over discussions in Bonn (the logistics of hosting more than 10,000 participants made it difficult to hold negotiations in Fiji) it was the first time a small island developing state had led the UN climate talks. Pacific leaders called on the United States to return to the Paris Agreement at the 2018 PIF.

During this period, the effects of climate change became increasingly evident in the Pacific. Impacts that had been warned of for decades became reality. Most notably, Pacific countries were struck by a string of powerful cyclones. The Pacific Islands are not strangers to cyclones, but a warming ocean provides more energy for tropical storms. In 2015, Vanuatu was devastated by Cyclone Pam, the strongest recorded storm to make landfall in the Pacific, with economic losses equivalent to 64 per cent of Vanuatu's GDP.⁷¹ The following year Fiji was hit by an even stronger storm, Cyclone Winston, which was the most powerful storm recorded in the southern hemisphere. Winston left 32,000 homes damaged or destroyed.⁷² Australia also faced unprecedented impacts, as the Great Barrier Reef was hit by four mass bleaching events (in 2016, 2017, 2020 and 2022), with widespread death of heat-sensitive corals.⁷³ In 2019, Australia recorded its hottest and driest year on

⁷⁰ Office of the Press Secretary, 'Remarks by the President to Leaders from the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress', *The White House*, 1 Sept. 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/01/remarks-president-leaders-pacific-island-conference-leaders-and> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁷¹ Asian Development Bank, *Pacific Economic Monitor: Midyear Review* (Manila: ADB, 2015), 17, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/161669/pem-july-2015.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁷² International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Emergency Appeal Operation Update: Fiji: Tropical Cyclone Winston*, Interim Report, 20 Sept. 2016, 2.

⁷³ See Climate Council, *In Hot Water: Climate Change, Marine Heatwaves & Coral Bleaching*, Briefing Paper (Potts Point: Climate Council of Australia, 2022).

record, which led to an unprecedented ‘Black Summer’ of widespread bushfires that burned 186,000 km² (an area larger than South Korea) and killed over a billion mammals, birds and reptiles.⁷⁴ The economic costs of the fires were estimated at close to AU\$100 billion, making them Australia’s costliest disaster on record.⁷⁵ Parts of eastern Australia also faced unprecedented floods in early 2022.⁷⁶

Faced with the impacts of a warming world, Pacific Island states continued to seek recognition of climate change as a critical security threat. In 2018, Nauru and Germany together launched a ‘UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security’ which pressed the UNSC to do more to address climate change.⁷⁷ Subsequently, Security Council debates on climate change were held from 2018–23. Pacific Island countries were active in these UNSC debates, calling for the appointment of a Special Representative for Climate and Security who would report on the security implications of climate change.⁷⁸ The United States joined the UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security in 2021, swelling membership to more than 50 countries.⁷⁹ By this time, major powers began to use similar language on climate and security to that Pacific Island governments had used for decades. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the UNSC in early 2021 ‘it is absolutely clear that climate change is a threat to our collective security and the security of our nations’.⁸⁰ US Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry told the Security Council that failing to address climate change was ‘tantamount to a mutual suicide pact’.⁸¹

After 2017, security issues also began to reshape regional politics in the Pacific. Major powers became more interested in Pacific Island states in the context of geostrategic competition. The United States and its allies Australia and New Zealand became especially concerned about the growing influence of a more

⁷⁴ Bureau of Meteorology (Australia), ‘Annual Climate Statement 2019’, 9 Jan. 2020, <http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/annual/aus/2019/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁷⁵ Paul Read and Richard Denniss, ‘With Costs Approaching \$100 Billion, The Fires are Australia’s Costliest Natural Disaster’, *The Conversation*, 17 Jan. 2020, <https://theconversation.com/with-costs-approaching-100-billion-the-fires-are-australias-costliest-natural-disaster-129433> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁷⁶ See Climate Council, *A Supercharged Climate: Rain Bombs, Flash Flooding and Destruction* (Potts Point: Climate Council of Australia, 2022).

⁷⁷ Manoa, ‘The Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)’ early advocacy ...’.

⁷⁸ UNSC Meetings Coverage, ‘Addressing Security Council, Pacific Island President Calls Climate Change Defining Issue of Next Century, Calls for Special Representative on Issue’, 11 July 2018, SC/13417.

⁷⁹ Margaret Besheer, ‘US Joins UN Group of Nations on Climate and Security’, *Voice of America*, 8 Apr. 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/science-health_us-joins-un-group-nations-climate-and-security/6204337.html (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁸⁰ Laurie Goering, ‘Small Island States, Britain warn U.N. of Climate Threats to Security’, *Reuters*, 24 Feb. 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2AO04J/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁸¹ Somini Sengupta, ‘Biden’s Climate Envoy, at U.N., Likes Global Inaction to a “Suicide Pact”’, *New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/23/climate/john-kerry-united-nations.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

powerful China. Most pointedly, they worried Beijing might leverage loans for infrastructure projects to establish a military base in the Pacific. Partly in response, Australia launched a new foreign policy initiative – a ‘Pacific Step-up’ – that sought to integrate Pacific states into Australia’s economic and security institutions and reaffirm Australia as a security partner of choice for Pacific Island countries.⁸² New defence and security initiatives, including construction of a regional military facility in Fiji, also indicated the depth of Australian concern.⁸³ For their part, Pacific Island countries were adamant that climate change remained the key threat to the region. At the 2018 PIF in Nauru, leaders issued a regional security declaration reaffirming climate change as the ‘single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of peoples of the Pacific’.⁸⁴ Compared with geostrategic competition between the United States and China, many Pacific leaders regarded the impacts of climate change as more tangible and immediate threats.⁸⁵ As Fiji’s military commander Rear Admiral Viliame Naupoto told the 2019 Shangri-La Security Dialogue in Singapore:

I believe there are three major powers in competition in our region. There is the US ... there is China [and] the third competitor is climate change. Of the three, climate change is winning, and climate change exerts the most influence on countries in our part of the world ... If there is any competition, it is with climate change’.⁸⁶

In this context, Australia’s reluctance to reduce emissions proved a challenge for its ‘Pacific Step-up’. At the 2019 PIF, held in Tuvalu, regional differences came to a head during the negotiation of a regional climate declaration. When Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused to support language calling for more ambitious emissions reductions the meeting descended into acrimony and came close to breaking down altogether.⁸⁷

In 2021, climate change moved to the centre stage of global politics. Following the election of Joe Biden as president, the United States returned to the Paris Agreement and quickly moved to press other countries to submit stronger targets to reduce emissions. China announced it planned to become a carbon neutral economy by 2060. These developments proved an important vote of confidence in

⁸² See Wesley Morgan, ‘Large Ocean States: Pacific Regionalism and Climate Security in a New Era of Geostrategic Competition’, *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2022): 45–62.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸⁴ Pacific Islands Forum, ‘Boe Declaration on Regional Security’, 5 Sept. 2018, <https://forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁸⁵ Wesley Morgan, ‘Ripple Effect: The Cost of our Pacific Neglect’, *Australian Foreign Affairs* 12 (2021): 30–48.

⁸⁶ Naupoto in Peter Hartcher, ‘Cool Rationality Replaced by US-China Fight Club’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/cool-rationality-replaced-by-us-china-fight-club-20190603-p51tvu.html> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁸⁷ Morgan, ‘Ripple Effect’, 34–5.

the Paris Agreement. At the 2021 UN climate summit, major economies – including the United States, EU, China, Japan, South Korea and Canada – pledged to decarbonize their economies by mid-century. Somewhat reluctantly, Australia’s conservative government joined more than 130 countries to announce that Australia would achieve net-zero by 2050.⁸⁸ Many of the world’s wealthiest nations also committed to halving their emissions by 2030. For its part, Australia refused to strengthen the 2030 emissions target it had set in 2014, which left Australia out of step not only with Pacific Island countries, but with other developed nations as well.⁸⁹

In 2022, Australia moved toward something of a rapprochement with Island countries on climate. A new Labor government – elected in May 2022 – strengthened Australian climate policy by pledging to cut emissions by 43 per cent by 2030 (from 2005 levels). Alarmed that the Solomon Islands signed a new security arrangement with China in April 2022 and that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi sought a new regional security arrangement as well, Australia tried to reassure Pacific leaders it would do more to tackle the issue they saw as their key security threat. Days after coming into office, Foreign Minister Penny Wong gave a speech at the PIF Secretariat in Suva, acknowledging Pacific Island states have ‘led the global debate’ on climate change while ‘Australia has neglected its responsibility to act’.⁹⁰ At the 2022 PIF, Australia joined island nations to formally declare a Pacific Climate Emergency.⁹¹ New Prime Minister Anthony Albanese also announced Australia would bid to co-host a UN climate summit with Pacific Island states in 2026. While these steps were welcomed, island leaders cautioned that Australia would still need to do more to cut emissions at home and to move away from fossil fuels. It remains to be seen whether regional tensions on climate policy can be overcome.

CONCLUSION: CONSIDERING 30 YEARS OF PACIFIC CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

This article has explained how Pacific Island countries have shaped the global response to climate change in the decades since a scientific consensus on the issue emerged in the 1980s. Given their relative power endowments, Pacific Island countries have played an outsized role. The existential nature of the threat for

⁸⁸ ‘Net Zero Scorecard’, Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, <https://eciu.net/netzerotracker/map> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁸⁹ Wesley Morgan and Tim Baxter, ‘Letting the Team Down? Considering Australia’s Approach to Climate Policy after Glasgow’, *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 10 Jan. 2022, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2022/01/10/letting-the-team-down-considering-australias-approach-to-climate-policy-after-glasgow/> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁹⁰ Penny Wong, ‘A New Era in Australian Engagement in the Pacific’, Speech to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Suva, 26 May 2022, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/speech-pacific-islands-forum-secretariat> (accessed 13 May 2024).

⁹¹ Pacific Islands Forum, ‘Report: Communique of the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting’, 18 July 2022, <https://forumsec.org/publications/report-communique-51st-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-meeting> (accessed 13 May 2024).

island countries – especially the threat posed by sea-level rise to the ongoing habitability of low-lying atoll islands – was understood by Pacific leaders early on and has given them unique moral authority in climate discussions. Key Pacific actors have used this authority to good effect. Over the past three decades, a number of Pacific leaders, diplomats and negotiators have emerged as climate champions and have played key roles in the evolution of the UN climate regime.

The very nature of climate change, as a transboundary problem requiring a coordinated multilateral response, has given Pacific officials unique opportunities for influence. In forums of multilateral diplomacy with norms of formal equality, Pacific Island countries have formed negotiating coalitions with other countries, most notably through AOSIS. Working together as a bloc of nations has proved effective for exerting influence in multilateral talks. Pacific countries have also earned a reputation for ‘sticking to the science’, by consistently calling for global action commensurate with what is necessary to avoid climate harm, and to ensure the survival of vulnerable islands and ecosystems.

Perhaps the greatest achievement of Pacific climate diplomacy has been the role island states played securing, and shaping, the breakthrough 2015 Paris Agreement. A carefully crafted diplomatic campaign that consisted of coalition-building among developing countries and strategic collaboration with major powers, helped to build the consensus that underpins the Paris Agreement – especially the ambition to limit warming to 1.5°C above the long-term average. Despite these achievements, global efforts to tackle climate change are well short of what is required and the future for Pacific Island nations remains uncertain. The UN Environment Programme estimates that, even if all nations were to implement their 2030 targets to cut emissions, the world would remain on track for 2.4–2.6°C of warming this century – well beyond the 1.5°C threshold island countries see as key to their survival.⁹²

This article has also explored climate change and regional politics. Climate change has proved an enduring challenge for Pacific regionalism, one that has at times threatened to undermine the PIF. Fundamental differences between Pacific Island countries and Australia – the largest Forum member – have been a persistent source of regional tension. To be sure, Australia was initially a constructive actor and supported ambitious global action to cut emissions. Since the mid-1990s however, successive Australian governments appear to have conflated national interests with the interests of the fossil fuel industry, and have tried to minimize obligations to reduce emissions while focusing on expanding Australia’s coal and gas exports.

The PIF is the most important regional political body in the Pacific but differences on climate have denied island countries the chance to use it to press hard for their shared climate goals. Australia has used its position in the forum to weaken regional declarations put forward by Island nations at key milestones in the global climate negotiations. Despite this, Pacific Island states have pursued their own independent climate diplomacy agenda. In global efforts to address climate change, Pacific Island nations have played a much more influential and positive role than

⁹² United Nations Environment Program, *The Closing Window: Climate Crisis Calls for Rapid Transformation of Societies*, Emissions Gap Report (Nairobi: UNEP, 2022).

Australia has. Australia hopes to reset relations with the Pacific by co-hosting a UN climate summit with island nations in 2026, but it is yet to be seen if fundamental differences in perceived interests can be overcome, and regional tensions will likely remain.

Finally, this article has explained that Pacific Island countries have helped the international community to understand climate change as a key security threat. At the UNGA, and the UNSC, Pacific diplomats have argued that the impacts of climate change are akin to ‘traditional’ state-centric security threats, such as war. Increasingly, major powers also see climate change as a threat to national and international security. Climate change intersects with more traditional security concerns. With growing rivalry between the United States and China, Pacific Islands have assumed greater importance in the strategies of major powers. Pacific Island leaders and diplomats have leveraged renewed geostrategic competition to focus attention on their own concerns, telling would-be security partners they will need to do more to address climate change, which they see as their overriding security threat. Indeed, as global impacts become ever more apparent, climate change will likely come to be understood by policymakers from all nations as the most pressing security threat of our time.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

FUNDING

This work was originally supported by a Journal of Pacific History COVID-19 grant.