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Lessons for Australia's Engagement in the Pacific

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The new Albanese Labor government has made engagement with island nations in the Pacific one of the cornerstones of its foreign and security policy. Animated by a prominent campaign from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to move beyond investment deals with Pacific nations and towards proposed security pacts, the former LNP government also swiftly pivoted to a Pacific focus in the last months of its tenure. Thus far, given the positive signals from various nations in the region, Australia's renewed attention to the Pacific has been welcomed. But how should Australia approach its relationships over the longer term with states in the region in order to best advance its interests? In this edition of the *Looking Glass* we examine this question in more detail. We argue that an effective Australian approach to the region will need to focus on deep engagement, demonstrate respect for the legitimate security concerns of Pacific island nations – which can differ considerably in form and scope from our own – and treat regional multilateral engagement mechanisms as ways to bring together stakeholders as equals.

In the process, Australia must also be careful not to fall into some of the traps that have previously provided ammunition to its critics: treating the region with 'benign neglect'; acting in a manner that can be perceived as paternalistic; unintentionally creating problems for effective governance at the local level; and inadvertently creating the perception that its approach has more to do with power politics than genuine engagement. Doing so would not only diminish Australian standing and credibility in a geostrategic space where it has longed claimed special interests, but also embolden other states seeking to expand their strategic economic and security footprints in the region.

Nurturing the region's fragile multilateralism

The main outcome from the recently-concluded 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIFLM) was the landmark endorsement of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. With seven key theme areas encompassing leadership, resources and development, climate change, the oceans and natural environment, people-centered development, technology and connectivity, and peace and security, the Strategy encapsulates the primary security concerns of the core 16 members.

Australia has a strong interest in continuing to shape this agenda because it will be central to both aligning Canberra's rhetoric with the reality of upholding the rules-based order. Certainly the whirlwind visits by Foreign Minister Penny Wong to Samoa, Tonga, the Solomon Islands and Fiji prior to the Forum highlighted the Albanese government's strong desire to arrest Australia's dwindling influence in the region. Wong's emphasis on listening to rather than talking at Pacific nations about issues of central concern like climate change and development also set the right tone.

However, Australia – and also New Zealand, following the recent reset in the Trans-Tasman relationship – will need to do more in order to shore up regional politics that are the product of consensus. Multilateralism in the Pacific is fragile, and affected by local positioning as well as broader concerns: a fact underscored by Micronesia's threat in 2021 to pull out of the PIF, as well as Kiribati's shock withdrawal just days before the Leaders Meeting in July 2022. While Kiribati's exit was bad enough, the potential withdrawal of five members comprising the Micronesian grouping (Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia) would have thrown the ongoing viability of the Forum into question. It would also have provided an opportunity for Beijing to further reshape the region into one characterized by fragmented bilateral investment deals at the root of regional politics, and an overarching security pact with China as the capstone.

Maintaining an emphasis on Pacific-led multilateralism will also assist Canberra to smooth over its own chequered history with regional engagement. Although Australia had signed the 2018 Boe Declaration identifying climate change as the primary security threat faced by Pacific nations, it did virtually nothing to uphold it. The much-vaunted 'Pacific Step Up' also gained little regional traction, with Australian experts of various striped labelling it part of a longer tendency to treat the South Pacific with benign neglect. Indeed, the PIF nearly fragmented at its 2019 meeting when Scott Morrison was repeatedly castigated for Australia's emissions record, with Forum members staying eight hours later than the official conclusion of the talks to lambast the Australian Prime Minster and accusing him of paternalism.

Averting own goals

There are a number of historical examples where otherwise well-meaning Australian diplomacy in the Pacific has hit the wrong note, or inadvertently caused problems for individual governments. Partly this is the result of the fact that Australia is a former colonial power in the region, which generates lingering suspicion about its motives. But it has also been a product of occasionally poor design. As Michael Wesley noted in his forensic dissection of RAMSI in 2007, liberal state-building projects have a tendency to fail to heed the lessons of reality 'beyond the whiteboard'. And while the RAMSI mission is often lauded as a great success of Australian humanitarian intervention, closer inspection reveals some less praiseworthy outcomes that contributed towards the successful campaign of Manasseh Sogavare to mobilise Solomons elites against it.

First, RAMSI's emphasis on law, order and good governance in the Solomons mission led to a massive backlog for the court system, perversely deepening community resentment in spite of the fact corruption was an endemic problem there. Second, RAMSI also annoyed elites in the Solomons because it came to be perceived as essentially a better organized and more effective alternative government. In that instance, a desire to help people with their immediate problems even prompted the local term 'Weitim olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem' ('wait for RAMSI to come and fix it').

For Australia the lesson is that local politics – for better or worse – is always going to form the centerpiece of a state's political institutions. In that context, treating Pacific states as essentially the same type of unitary actor, or alternatively as pawns in geopolitical games of chess not only denies them agency, but fails to understand the types of preferences and divisions that shape local contests and negotiated outcomes. Sometimes those will seem opaque, and they will also sometimes not resemble what we would regard as based on best practice governance standards. As Wesley further observed, this falls into the trap of imperial narcissism: 'a desire to imprint our values, civilization and achievements on the souls, bodies and institutions of other people'. Doing so in the context of increased contestation over regional influence from the PRC risks marginalizing Australia

considerably, and is something that Beijing has already begun to weaponize in its messaging.

Avoiding the security-dominates-everything trap

A third challenge for Australia's engagement with Pacific nations is that in order to advance its legitimate defence and security interests in the region, it will need to engage constructively with sovereign states that are typically reluctant to support policies that might lead to regional militarization, but are also capable of making pragmatic choices. As Greg Colton has pointed out, three of Australia's five main maritime trade routes pass through the Pacific, amounting to 45% of its maritime exports and 6% of its total GDP. These routes include imports and exports between Australia and the United States (via New Caledonia and Fiji); and exports from northern Australian ports that travel either near Papua New Guinea or follow the east coast of the Solomon Islands. It is little wonder, then, that the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper labelled the South Pacific a region of 'fundamental importance', and that the Pacific is routinely held up as an arena where Australia must act to check Chinese influence.

Recent developments have heralded good news and bad news on this score. The good news is that just as Pacific island nations have not been keen to host permanent bases for large Western powers, they have also pushed back against Chinese pressure to sign onto a broad security pact that could have resulted in the invitation of PLA personnel to perform local security functions. And while the deal between the PRC and the Solomon Islands that vexed the Australian security community in March and April 2022 has gone ahead, recent reassurances that Australia remains the Solomons security provider of choice should be bolstered by the fact that there would be considerable warning time in the (in the short term unlikely) event that the PRC managed to secure Honiara's permission to stage a major naval presence there.

The bad news, however, is that Australia – and also the United States – will likely have to accept some degree of regional fragmentation on the issue of Chinese influence. Increasingly close ties between the PRC and Kiribati are worrisome, and the broad attractiveness of Chinese investment, especially in connectivity and technology (and also in terms of infrastructure, mining and agriculture) is likely to continue. Western nations have proposed a number of development assistance programs – from the rarely-sighted 'Blue Dot Network' of the Trump Administration to the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative – but these have tended to be glorified best practice certification schemes around good governance rather than deep reservoirs of investment capital. In contrast, PRC investment has come with few strings attached, and is therefore appealing to regional actors in terms of scope and ability to deliver swift benefits. Nor should we be surprised that Beijing has opted to pursue economic statecraft in the region given that such practices are hardly limited to authoritarian nations.

What it does highlight, though, is that Australia and other actors with a strong strategic interest in regional affairs will need to recognize that security benefits are a flow-on effect of development investments at scale rather than the other way around. In that context, that Pacific island nations have also recognized the chance to embrace multiple avenues for such benefits given the interests of larger powers in the area should also not be surprising. There will be numerous opportunities for PIF members to pursue what are effectively multi-vector foreign policies with such incentives involved. The challenge for Australia is to encourage Pacific nations along the development pathway framed by the united and open spirit of mutual gain envisaged by the PIF 2050 Blue Pacific strategy. That will mean often putting security concerns second rather than front-and-centre. An example here, as Maima Koro and Joanne Wallis have astutely observed, is that the

Albanese government's proposed Australia-Pacific Defence School may not only end up duplicating the work of existing ventures (like the Australia-Pacific Security College and the Pacific Fusion Centre), but also undermine existing institutional links by creating new ones too hastily, and without consulting regional governments about their own preferences.

Conclusions

The emergence of the Pacific as an arena of geopolitical contestation has long been predicted, and in many respects Australia has been slow to react in order to shore up its regional influence. For Australia to effectively pursue its strategic priorities it will need to rethink how it has gone about its approach to the region. Navigating a complex series of relationships involving local politics, historical memory, and a desire for development but not dominance will be difficult. But as we have shown here there are some clear opportunities for Australia to smooth its path. First, championing multilateralism with strengthen Pacific nations' collective agency as well as upholding Australia's keen interest in promoting a normative commitment to a rules-based order. Second, learning the lessons of the past with a deeper and more engaged understanding of the conditions, contexts and pressures shaping local communities will minimize the risk of unintended outcomes from otherwise well-meaning policy. And finally, recognizing that Australian strategic objectives will sometimes need to be pursued without using conventional security as their primary lens will allow for a more engaged, trusted and ultimately advantageous position for Australia in a region of significant importance.

Further reading

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