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A dysfunctional family: Australia's relationship with Pacific Island states and climate change

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ABSTRACT

I argue the instrumental, paternalistic strategic culture often adopted in Australian foreign policy circles is counter-productive, preventing Australia from having productive and sustainable relationships with Pacific states. If Australian officials want to follow through on rhetorical commitments to enhance Australia's relationships in the Pacific, Australia must actively recognise the agency Pacific states have and place itself within this community of actors. Australia often positions itself as part of the 'Pacific family,' but to be a collaborative member of this family it must go beyond headline commitments and fundamentally reconsider the evolving agency of small Pacific states and how this shapes Australia's interactions with them. We can understand this through the lens of normative communities. Revisiting constructivist International Relations theory, I reexamine who is included and excluded in the communities of actors that norms apply to. This has particularly significant implications around norms of climate change action and mitigation. Australia has historically tried to water down agreements and slow-role actions in this space. The ongoing bid to host COP31 perhaps offers an opportunity to both show leadership on climate-related issues and to reconfigure assumptions around Pacific agency and address the effects this has on Australia's relationships in the Pacific.

KEYWORDS

Australia; Pacific; foreign policy; climate change; norms

Introduction

For Australian leaders and policymakers, the Pacific is often seen in an instrumental sense—a strategic geopolitical area that Australia and its allies must have control over (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Fry 1991; Wallis *et al.* 2023). Pacific states are often seen as lesser actors to be controlled, rather than collaborated with. However, ignoring the agency of small states may not only prevent Australia from creating and maintaining the strong relationships in the Pacific they wish to have, but also leave them out of step with their neighbours—and potentially a large portion of the international community. This is

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especially the case on issues related to climate change, where Pacific states have found their voice in recent years and developed new forms of statecraftiness and contestation (Carter 2015; Carter 2020; Futaiasi *et al.* 2023; Theys 2021; Wallis *et al.* 2022).

There is inherent asymmetry in Australia's relationships with Pacific Island states, however, I argue this can be managed and negotiated in more productive ways that predetermined assumptions of leadership and domination. Under the current approach, Australia has placed itself outside of the Pacific normative community in a position where it does not operate under the same rules as the rest of the states in this collective (Strating 2020). I argue this is counterproductive for Australia and its stated national interests in the Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, 101; Strating and Wallis 2021, 7). While this paternalistic position of exceptionalism may seem to benefit Australia, as it is not bound by the normative expectations for the community, it also leaves Australia outside the group of actors who can author and contest these norms.

I argue that the lens of normative communities is key to understanding the imperative for Australia to improve and maintain productive and collaborative relationships with Pacific states, despite any asymmetry. Revisiting constructivist International Relations theory, I reexamine who is included and excluded in the communities of actors that norms apply to. I argue these communities can be broadly defined—they are not limited by history or geography. Communities are also intersubjectively constructed, with the self-narratives that states tell about themselves key for whether they are perceived, or perceive themselves as part of a certain community of actors or not. Importantly, however using this lens sheds light on how it is those who are included within normative communities who can access the local normative opportunity structures where behaviour guides are constructed and contested (Orchard and Wiener Forthcoming, 12; Wiener 2018, 56–58).

With the advent of the Labor government under Anthony Albanese in 2022 there has been a new face to Australia's engagement with the Pacific. Despite the rhetorical shift, however, there are concerns over whether this will result in the practical and policy changes that Pacific states are hoping for. How Australia manages the asymmetry of its relationships—if at all—will determine how Australia's role in the Pacific and its diplomatic relations with Pacific Island states evolve and develop in the coming years.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first briefly looks at the historical legacies of Australian and European colonialism in the Pacific and how this has formed the foundation of current discursive framings of Australia as part of the Pacific family and of the Pacific as its home. Secondly, I introduce ideas of norms and normative communities and suggest that Australia should place itself within the Pacific normative community to be able to author and contest the norms within this community. Thirdly, I trace the evolution and continuation of the asymmetrical relationships between Australia and Pacific Island states through the lens of climate negotiations at Pacific Islands Forums. This shows how these ideas have been entrenched across time and governments, persisting due to an inertia driven by politics, policy, and identity that can be understood through applying a lens of ontological security. Finally, looking forward, I consider Australia's bid to host COP31 and how this could be an opportunity to reevaluate Australia's diplomatic strategy in the Pacific and better manage the asymmetry to reflect Pacific agency and secure Australia's foreign policy interests. While stronger relationships

with Pacific states are in Australia's national interest, this will only come with concerted and concrete action on climate change mitigation by Australia.

Discourses of family and home

Australia's relationship with the Pacific is a complicated and multifaceted story. From Australia's point of view, there is a 'substantial and special responsibility' (Howard 2001), in the region that manifests itself in a 'long assumed leadership and indeed custodianship of the Pacific' (Collett 2009, 10; Dobell 2007; Fry 1991). Some have argued that this is rooted in ontological security needs (Wallis 2023), while others ground this in more traditional security claims. These claims assert that 'Australian security hinges on a stable Pacific region' (Fry 1991; Wallis 2023), with Pacific regional security second only to Australia's own (Department of Defence 2016, 33). The result is that Australia is the largest donor in the Pacific and is deeply invested in the region's development and security (Poiohia, Moerman, and Perkiss 2022, 162). As this article focuses on the problems within Australia's approach to Pacific diplomacy, it mostly refers to the broad and variegated community of actors within the Pacific collectively. It must be acknowledged that part of the shift required by Australia, however, is to recognise the inherent agency and sovereignty of each individual state, alongside the growing influence of the Pacific regional community as a whole.

While Australia is the largest donor in the Pacific and recognises the strategic significance of the region, this is framed against colonial histories and historical imbalances in Australia-Pacific relationships. These are illustratively spelled out by the case of 'blackbirding' during the nineteenth century. Blackbirding refers to when 60,000 people from what is now Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu were brought to Australia between 1863 and 1901 to work on sugar cane fields in Queensland. Some came willingly, but most were coerced. As many as 15,000 died in conditions described as akin to slavery (Wallis 2023, 5). More recently, comparisons have been drawn between this indentured servitude and the more exploitative of the Pacific labour mobility schemes endorsed by the Australian government (Petrou and Connell 2022; Stead 2019; Wallis 2023). This is just one example of how the logics underpinning historical power imbalances have persisted. As Chacko has argued, it is the underlying dialectics of racism, capitalism, and more broadly white possession that have coloured Australia's 'expropriation of Pacific capacities and resources,' in its attempt to sustain a regional sphere of influence and controlling bilateral relations (Chacko 2023, 2). It is these exploitive and controlling logics and hierarchies that are reproduced in Australia's paternalistic framing of its special position within the 'Pacific family' (Chacko 2023, 7).

Discussions of relationships and influence in the region cannot be mentioned without raising the geopolitical competition between Western and Eastern powers for influence in the Pacific (Abbondanza 2022; Barnes and Makinda 2022; Beck 2020; Hawksley and Georgeou 2023; Idris, Sasongko, and Kuntjoro 2022; Koro *et al.* 2023; Wallis 2021; Wallis and Batley 2020). The most recent Foreign Policy White Paper from 2017 summarised Australia's foreign policy goals and outlined the intention to 'engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition' (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, 101). However, on security, the White Paper noted the 'limited capacity' of

states in the Pacific to respond to security challenges and Australia's intent to continue to support and cooperate with regional actors to ensure regional security (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017, 103). Though the fine-grain details of discussions of regional competition between major powers are beyond the scope of this piece, what is relevant is how security issues have been framed by Australia and what this tells us about their diplomatic relations with the Pacific.

Geopolitical discourses of security and influence often originate from metropolitan powers, where they not only adopt dominant Western conceptions of power, space, and relations but also overlook the agency of Pacific states and the actors within them (Koro *et al.* 2023, 1). Pacific voices have pushed back against these framings, though. Pacific leaders have expressed concerns that 'the big powers are doggedly pursuing strategies to widen and extend their reach and inculcating a far-reaching sense of insecurity' in the region (Sa'ilele 2018). Further, those in the Pacific have asserted that they are not simply pawns in this geopolitical contest (Ivarature 2022; Koro *et al.* 2023, 1). As others have outlined in detail, Pacific states have woven together their own forms of statecraft in order to influence their partners, one another, and the broader global community (Futaiasi *et al.* 2023; Hawksley and Georgeou 2023; Wallis *et al.* 2022). In particular, a strong Pacific voice has been established within the climate change realm, particularly around negotiations in the UNFCCC (Carter 2015; 2020). These changes in the relational dynamics between Pacific states and traditional partners have not been reflected in commensurate changes in diplomatic strategy and practice, however.

Australia specifically 'has discursively produced and reproduced a securitised understanding of the Pacific Islands' (Koro *et al.* 2023, 3). These productions often focus on the fragility and smallness of Pacific states, framing issues in ways that are absent of Pacific agency. Former Samoan Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele has spoken of the '"patronising" nuance in believing that Pacific nations did not know what they were doing' (Koro *et al.* 2023, 3; Sa'ilele 2018). In the same speech, Sa'ilele noted the resistance to these framings and that the Pacific region was 'building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change.' These actions occurred despite the wishes of the larger global powers who 'are doggedly pursuing strategies to widen and extend their reach.' The challenge was then specifically extended to Australia, noting that traditional Forum partners had 'left the neighbourhood, even if momentarily, and are coming back to claim a jurisdiction under their watch … And in the process, our partners have fallen short of acknowledging the integrity of Pacific leadership' (Koro *et al.* 2023, 3; Sa'ilele 2018). Other leaders have regularly challenged Australia, claiming that if Australia truly wants to be a friend and family member in the Pacific, it should step up and 'take the lead when it comes to the issues of climate change' (Martin 2022). These interactions show that the paternalistic nature of the relationships between Pacific states and Australia is noted, and it is not appreciated. It also shows that climate policy may be a way back in for Australia and a space to reconsider how it manages its relations with Pacific states.

A simple shift of policy would not be enough to reverse the long-term construction of the identities and relationships between Australia and states in the Pacific region. In particular, I focus in this section on the concerted post-2018 shift by the Australian government to refer to itself and its Pacific neighbours as part of a 'Pacific family' (Koro *et al.* 2023, 4). This shift was articulated by Prime Minister Scott Morrison in a speech at

Lavarack Barracks in Townsville in November 2018. Morrison said that Pacific was 'one of Australia's highest foreign policy priorities … front and centre of Australia's strategic outlook, our foreign policy, our personal connections' (Morrison 2018). But this relationship went beyond mutual interests according to Morrison; in illuminating language, he went on to say that 'this is our patch. This is our part of the world. This is where we have special responsibilities … We are more than partners by choice. We are connected as members of a Pacific family' (Morrison 2018).

Despite evoking notions of ownership and dominance with the language used, Morrison said that it was time to open 'a new chapter in relations with our Pacific family. One based on respect, equality and openness' (Morrison 2018). However, Morrison himself noted that this would not always be easy, saying 'that's not to say we will always agree. But that's not the true test of friendship or family. Tell me a family that always agrees' (Morrison 2018). This alludes to the tensions within the discourses of family and home that have been constructed. Taken together with the language of 'our patch' it points towards a special relationship, but not necessarily an equally beneficial one.

This familial narrative has persisted since the 2022 election—meaning it has now been promoted by governments of both major parties (Albanese 2023; Albanese *et al.* 2022; Batley 2022; Wong *et al.* 2023). This inertia can be largely put down to the inertia of the prevailing strategic culture within the Australian foreign policy apparatus. As Beeson has suggested, perhaps one of the defining traits of the distinctive Australian strategic culture is its 'resistance to change' (Beeson 2021, 9). The 'intellectual inertia' is reinforced and reproduced in the practices of the 'very small "epistemic community" of like-minded experts' that make up the Australian security and foreign policy community, resulting in a preference for path dependency and a reliance on familiar framings and solutions (Beeson 2021, 9–10; Beeson and Bloomfield 2019, 18).

Some have also suggested that Australia's history and foundational identity as a settler colony of the British Empire has shaped its perception of security and how it goes about achieving its security goals. This long-held identity predisposes Australia to a specific settle colonial ontology and the range of acceptable policy options this entails (Clayton and Newman 2023, 511). In both the case of the small group of foreign policy experts and the broader settler-colonial identity of Australia, there is a reluctance to change—to change would be to endanger the ontological security of these groups. Ontological security is the need to feel security in one's sense of self and have continuity in the biographical narratives an agent or collective tells about itself. Protecting one's ontological security can compete with and even take precedence over physical security in some instances (Clayton and Newman 2023; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016). This helps to explain why on issues of climate change or Pacific diplomacy, there is a reluctance to change tact even when it would appear to be in the direct interests of the nation.

Further, according to Wallis, the shift towards the use of the metaphor of family is part of the 'anxiety' Australia has about its apparent declining influence in the region. To reassert its influence, Australia has 'tried to enclose' its Pacific neighbours in a type of domestication strategy focused on framing the Pacific as part of Australia's 'family' and its 'home.'[1] This narrative, or psychological construct, performs political functions as well. As Hopkins and Dixon suggest, it works through 'naturalising certain person-place relationships' in political projects (Hopkins and Dixon 2006, 175). Morrison even actively used affective language to reinforce this particular framing of the Pacific

community, speaking of Australia's 'family in the Pacific, who we love dearly' (Morrison 2021). There was also a shift from historically referring to the Pacific as Australia's 'backyard' or 'neighbourhood' to now framing it as its 'home' (Dobell 2020; Wallis 2023).

The introduction of the idea of 'home' and what it implies is illuminating. As Handel states, 'homes are always part of power structures' and can be places of domination (Handel 2019, 1046, 1048). The Australian government's use of this metaphoric narrative could be interpreted as an attempt to assign certain members of the 'family' ranks and roles, some of which have reduced or no agency. Key figures in Pacific state leaderships have variously referred to Australia as a 'big brother,' 'uncle,' and one of the 'Pacific brothers and sisters' (Wallis 2023, 6–7). However, as Wallis suggests, the emphasis on Australia as a key donor and security provider in the region, and Pacific states as the recipients of this aid and assistance, points to a significantly more paternalistic understanding of Australia's place in the 'Pacific family' (Wallis 2023, 6–7).

This stands in contrast to the understandings of family in many Pacific cultures. While a generalisation, family is generally central to the identities of Pacific peoples. Collectives rather than individuals are emphasised and communal ties extend over time and space (Bonnemaison 1984; Enari and Fa'aea 2020; Wallis 2023, 7; Yamamoto 2020). Listening to voices from the Pacific, though, we can see an uneasiness with how Australian voices frame notions of home and family and the roles that different actors are assigned. The National Climate Change Coordinator for Palau, Xavier Matsutaro told reporters of interactions between Palau and Australia:

> it's like you're in a relationship and you get abused by your spouse but at the same time they feed you and clothe you and things like that … You could say it's a bit of a dysfunctional relationship. (Lyons and Doherty 2018a)

It is clear Pacific states want to be respected and engage in meaningful dialogue with their diplomatic partners, including Australia. However, Australia constructing itself as an exceptional case outside of the community that established laws and norms apply to means that these relationships are based on asymmetry instead of shared values. Hierarchies exist within notions of family and community, however, for Australia to achieve its stated foreign policy goals and continue to be the partner of choice for Pacific states, it must better manage the asymmetrical dynamics of its relationships with states and coalitions across the Pacific. I argue the best way to ensure Australia remains an influential Pacific partner is to place itself firmly within the Pacific normative community and engage with the norms it entails, rather than exempting itself from them.

Australia: part of the Pacific community, or standing on the outside looking in?

I advance an understanding of norms rooted in the third move of norm research (Orchard and Wiener Forthcoming). This sees norms as intersubjectively constructed works in progress, where actors interpret the meaning of norms from their practice, reenactment, and memories of these (Betts and Orchard 2014, 271–273; Krook and True 2012, 104; Wiener 2014, 19). The power of these norms comes from their sharedness—they have suasion because they are communal and shared (Checkel 1997, 477; Katzenstein 1993, 268; Wiener 2007, 58). There is a range of acceptability built into this

sharedness that allows norms to diffuse and become shared because of their explicit vagueness and interpretability (Klotz 1995, 461–462; Krook and True 2012, 104–105; Winston 2018, 648). This shifting range of acceptability changes depending on whether other actors within the community judge practices or understandings of norms as 'close enough' to the original meaning or prescribed behaviour (Krook and True 2012, 104; Winston 2018, 648).

This brings us to the question of communities, which I define broadly. Communities do not need to be global—they can be regional, domestic, or local (Acharya 2004, 241; 2011, 96–97; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 892). Additionally, communities do not need to be spatially bounded. They can be created or built around ideas, narratives, histories, cultures, issues, and emotions. The constitution of communities is fluid, their membership and communal identities shift over time. Examples of these collectives are communities of practice (Adler 2004), emotional communities (Koschut 2018, 126), or other forms of community based on epistemes (Cross 2013), laws, identities, or other forms of shared experiences and histories (Cho 2014, 688, 690–691; Hutchison 2016; Koschut 2014; Wallis *et al.* 2023). The community or communities that an actor perceives themselves to be a part of, and those that other actors perceive them to be party to, is key here. If an actor does not perceive themselves to be a full-fledged member of a certain community, it is less likely they will see the rules of that community as applicable to them. The alternative would be for Australia to continue to place itself in a position of exceptionalism, or as Strating describes it, exemptionalism. The material difference in size and capacity between Australia and Pacific Islands states means that Australia could take advantage of asymmetrical relations and exempt itself from the rules it insists its smaller partners adhere to (Strating 2020). However, I suggest this would be counter-productive to Australia's stated foreign policy goals in the Pacific.

This is the core of my theoretical argument here. I simply argue that if Australia continues to treat itself as an exceptional member of the Pacific family, one that is above the rules of everyday politics in the region, then we cannot conceive of them as part of the core epistemic, geographical, emotional, or cultural communities of the Pacific. For Australia, setting itself apart may have the advantage of placing it outside the sphere of influence of Pacific-centric norms, but it also places Australia outside of the forum to influence the development of these Pacific norms. Therefore, if Australia wants to have a more consistent, deeper, and more meaningful political and diplomatic engagement with Pacific states and Pacific-based actors, it needs to place itself firmly within these constructed communities. To contest and author norms, one has to be within the community that the norms apply to. One straightforward way to do this is to engage with the issue most at the fore for Pacific states—climate change.

Tracing relations through recent Pacific Islands forums

The friction between Australia and Pacific states on climate change has also not always been present. Initially, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Australia was aligned with Pacific nations. By 1995, however, sustained lobbying from the fossil fuel industry had closed this window of cooperation and led to Australia pushing for weaker emissions targets at the first COP in 1995 (Morgan 2023). Australia's relationship with its 'Pacific

family' since then has often been tense. To trace the evolution of the relationship and the interactions over climate change in recent years, it is illuminating to look at the interactions around the Pacific Islands Forum meetings. These meetings and the negotiations surrounding them have occasionally descended into anger, 'fierce' clashes, and once even resulted in the Tongan Prime Minister shedding tears (Lyons 2019a).

One illustrative example of how elite-level policymakers in Australia have failed to understand or empathise with Pacific views on climate change and displacement is the accidentally recorded comments made by future Liberal-National Party leader Peter Dutton to the then Prime Minister Tony Abbot and a future Prime Minister in Scott Morrison. In 2015, Dutton, who was then Immigration Minister, was speaking to Abbott and Morrison, who was the Social Services Minister, before a community roundtable on the resettlement of Syrian refugees at Parliament House in Canberra. While discussing the recent Pacific Islands Forum meeting held in Port Moresby, the trio shared a joke about 'Cape York time.' This led to Dutton saying to Abbott and Morrison that 'time doesn't mean anything when you're about to be, you know, have water lapping at your door' (Medhora 2015). Abbott responded by laughing and Morrison pointed out to his colleagues that there was a live microphone on a boom recording the conversation. When pushed at a press conference later to comment on what he had said, Dutton said that it was a private conversation with the Prime Minister and that he didn't intend to comment (Medhora 2015). Two days later, Dutton finally apologised for the comments. He told Sky News that 'it was a light-hearted discussion with the PM and I did not mean any offence to anyone.' Abbott meanwhile said the issue was 'not about me' (Wahlquist 2015). Reports from the time noted that these comments came as Australia was being criticised by Pacific Island leaders for its refusal to commit to climate change action and emissions reduction pledges (BBC Staff 2015; Cochrane 2015).

The week prior, leaders at the 46th Pacific Islands Forum in Port Moresby had been unable to convince the Australian and New Zealand delegations to commit to taking a target limit of 1.5 degrees of warming to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations in Paris that year. Prime Ministers Abbott and John Key of New Zealand were seen celebrating the result over beers in the Grand Papua Hotel bar following the final press conference of the forum (Australian Associated Press 2015). These few incidents alone cannot explain the complex dynamics of the relationship between Australia and Pacific Island states. However, it does point towards some of the key tensions that exist, particularly around climate change. The difference in views has led Australian negotiations to force Pacific leaders into altering communiques on multiple occasions. Reporting suggests similar things happened in 1997 (Collett 2009, 21; Morgan 2023), 2015 (Cochrane 2015), 2018 (Lyons and Doherty 2018b), and 2019 (Lyons 2019b; O'Keefe 2019).

The 2018 and 2019 incidents are particularly notable. Before the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru, Palau's National Climate Change Coordinator, Matsutaro told reporters that Australia is 'responsible for making our declarations weaker sometimes in the region.' While Samoan Prime Minister Sa'ilele said that climate change posed an existential threat 'for all our Pacific family' (Lyons and Doherty 2018a), Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama followed these comments by asking

> would any of us like to return to our people and tell them that we had the change to do something truly great and truly necessary for the world we will pass to our children, but we lacked the will to get it done? (Lyons and Doherty 2018a)

Despite these pleas, Australia was accused of attempting to water down the text of the Boe Declaration on Regional Security. This important statement adopted an expanded concept of security and recognised climate change as the single greatest threat to Pacific peoples (Cain 2020; Naupa, Ackman, and Tuimalealiifano 2018). Tuvalu's Prime Minster Enele Sopoaga said a country 'starting with a capital A' had objected to the inclusion of language on climate change—leaving Australia as the only possible culprit (Cain 2020; Dziedzic, Walsh, and Kilbride 2018; Lyons and Doherty 2018b). Vanuatu's then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ralph Regenvanu confirmed the claims, saying 'I was there, and can confirm this is true. And unfortunate' (Doherty 2018).

This was not an isolated event; in 2019 there was more controversy after Morrison's lack of willingness to compromise and commit to greater climate action contributed to Prime Minster Akilishi Pohiva of Tonga coming to tears at the 2019 Pacific Island Forum Leaders Retreat (Lyons 2019c). This reflects the Tongan practice of shedding tears in public forums when people are deeply touched or connected to a subject (Koro *et al.* 2023, 5). After negotiations almost broke down twice due to Australia's insistence to remove all references to coal in the text and reluctance to commit to limiting warming to 1.5 degrees or achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, Pohiva reportedly cried while reflecting on a presentation given by two young women earlier in the summit about their fears for the future (Lyons 2019c). Morrison's behaviour at the leaders' retreat was described as 'very insulting and condescending' by then Fijian Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama (Lyons 2019c). In reaction, Tuvalu Prime Minister Sopoaga told Morison 'you are trying to save your economy, I am trying to save my people' (Lyons 2019c). This shows the disconnect between the Australian approach and what states in the region want and expect from Australia.

After the meeting, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama said that 'Australia and New Zealand should not be in the Pacific Islands Forum.' He qualified his comments on New Zealand, saying that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had been 'much more compromising,' and had 'said the right things about climate change,' while 'Morrison did not' (Lyons 2019b). What these repeated confrontations highlight is there is significant contestation about Australia's role in the Pacific and whether Australia is actually accepted as part of the Pacific family in the paternalistic role it has assigned to itself. These tensions particularly arise when issues of climate change come to the fore.

Under the Albanese government, there appears to have been a slight shift and perhaps a willingness to bring climate policies and ambitions more in line with what states in the Pacific expect of Australia (Batley 2022; Hsu 2022, 49–52; Schleich 2022; Tyler 2022, 100). Four days after being sworn in, Foreign Minister Penny Wong told the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to expect a 'new era in Australian engagement in the Pacific,' and that this was 'a different Australian government' (Wong 2022). Some have argued this is likely to be an evolution, not a revolution in the government's approach; (Batley 2022; Tyler 2022) the pace of which may be too slow for Pacific leaders who say the historical ties that bind together this Pacific family may be in danger if Australia does not do more to cut its emissions (Foley 2023).

The 2022 Pacific Islands Forum was the first real chance for the new government to reset the relationships and promote its new vision of Pacific relations, including action on climate change. Prime Minister Albanese returned to familial rhetoric, saying that it was 'a very successful meeting … We are family when it comes to the Pacific' (Lyons 2022). The meeting was seen as an occasion that 'enhanced' Australia's influence in the region according to the Prime Minister. Instead of tears this time, there were hugs—Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare embraced Albanese before their bilateral meeting (Lyons 2022; Zhuang 2022). The contrast between the position of the Albanese government and the prior government under Morrison was striking. While Morrison blocked the words 'climate crisis' from being included in the final communique in 2019, Albanese came to the meeting in 2022 and joined the leaders in officially declaring a Pacific climate emergency (Morgan 2022).

After these positive developments though, the Albanese government sent mixed signals to its Pacific counterparts in June 2023. On the one hand, when meeting with Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Henry Puna, Prime Minister Albanese noted that 'climate action is an absolute priority for the world but has very specific and harsh consequences for our region and for the Pacific family' (Ton 2023). However, the day before, the Australian Representative at the UNFCCC's Third Technical Dialogue of the First Global Stocktake delivered a markedly different message. It was noted that 'developed countries alone are not responsible for greenhouse gas emissions,' and the representative stated that 'we do not accept the argument that there is an unambiguous debt owed by developed countries for actions taken prior to 2020.' The argument presented was that developed states should take the lead based not on historical responsibility, but on the basis of common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities as laid out in the Paris Agreement (Australian Government 2023). This suggest that as well as the inertia on foreign policy, there is also a strong reluctance to deviate in terms of climate policy in Australia as well. While climate issues have been recognised as a security issue by key government agencies and actors, this has only been done in a 'partial and piecemeal' way. As a result, there has been 'little sustained follow-through in terms of the integration of [climate change] concerns into strategic outlooks, defence planning and activities or broader whole of government responses to advancing security' (McDonald 2021, 10). Therefore, while the rhetoric has shifted in some forums, Australia has repeatedly ignored the pleas of Pacific leaders to stop the approvals of new coal and gas exploration projects or commit to more ambitious targets in transitioning away from fossil fuels (Dziedzic 2023; Hodge 2023; Morton 2022).

The lack of nuance in how Australia manages its asymmetrical relationships was further illuminated by how the Falepili Union treaty between Australia and Tuvalu was constructed and announced. The agreement was signed alongside the 2023 Pacific Islands Forum and described as the 'world's first bilateral agreement on climate mobility' (McAdam 2023), Australia agreed to provide 280 visas annually for Tuvaluans to live, work, and study in Australia. In return, though, Tuvalu entered into a strict security agreement with Australia (Kitara and Farbotko 2023; Marinaccio 2023; McAdam 2023). Australia would assist in the instance of a major disaster, public health emergency, or military aggression. With notice, the agreement lays out Australia's rights to access, be present within, and overfly Tuvalu's territory (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023). Significantly, Tuvalu will be required to

> mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters. Such matters include but are not limited to defence, policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure, including ports, telecommunications and energy infrastructure. (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023)

While leaders of Tuvalu had long sought a climate mobility agreement with Australia (Baker 2007; Connell 2003; Freedom House 2001; Heller and Mani 2002; Hawksley 2009, 129; Simms 2001; Sydney Morning Herald Staff 2006), the direct linking of the visa program to the security agreement was widely criticised by commentators (Dreaver 2023; Kitara and Farbotko 2023; Marinaccio 2023). For one, there was little consultation with Tuvaluans on the details of the deal (Dreaver 2023; Kitara and Farbotko 2023). Even at the highest levels, the Tuvaluan Prime Minister Taneti Maamau was quoted downplaying the so-called veto power Australia had over Tuvaluan security arrangements, saying his country only had to 'first' approach Australia on military-related issues—an understanding that seems to be at odds with the text of the agreement and how it was represented by Australian officials (Dziedzic and Movono 2023).

The name of the treaty itself is significant. '*Fale pili* means looking after your neighbour as if they are family.' Generally, though, this type of relationship 'does not come with strings attached.' A true understanding of *fale pili* would have offered migration opportunities without the need for a security guarantee and handing over of sovereignty and independence (Kitara and Farbotko 2023). As it is, there are legitimate concerns that the treaty sidesteps questions on Australia's commitment to phase out fossil fuels as is simply another instrumental use of Pacific states to achieve geopolitical goals. These concerns were seemingly validated when Shadow Defence Minister Andrew Hastie noted that 'the great game is on in the Pacific.' Hastie went on to say it was 'important Australia leads and develops strong relationships,' especially as 'China is very assertive' in the region with its Belt and Road Initiative (Hastie 2023). Foreign Minister Penny Wong was more diplomatic, describing the deal as something that said to the region, 'when we say we're part of the Pacific family, we mean it.' Both Wong and Albanese, however, said that the agreement was about making Australia the 'partner of choice' for Tuvalu and the region (Dziedzic and Movono 2023; Wong 2023). Following the logic of the argument I have laid out here, in order to be the first-choice partner and to be able to influence the contestations occurring in the region, Australia should consciously place itself within the epistemic and normative community that Pacific Island states populate.

Regardless of the morality or intention of the agreement, it does again place Australia in this unique, elevated position of Pacific politics. The ability for people to choose to move in the face of climate-related harms is clearly a positive and principled way to approach issues of climate adaptation, displacement, and human mobility. The issue is with how the visa program is directly linked to the security agreement. The agreement effectively reinforces Australia's paternalistic Pacific identity and reaffirms that it sees itself as within the family unit, but as a special and privileged member who should dictate to the rest of the community. Even with the policy changes of the Albanese government, the underlying logics of dominance and exemptionalism have persisted. Perhaps what is required for Australia to break the path dependency and inertia of its

current position is a critical juncture where there is the opportunity to both justify domestic policy change and to reconfigure approaches to regional foreign policy.

A 'COP-portunity' for change?

Continuing the contradictory nature of Australia's relationship with climate change and the Pacific, Australia is bidding to host COP31 in 2026. The 2022–23 Budget set aside funding to support 'deeper engagement with key partners' to secure a bid to host a future COP, 'in partnership with Pacific Island nations' (Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water 2022, 3). Despite framing this as a Pacific-centred COP, when Minister for Climate Change and Energy Chris Bowen announced Australia's intentions, he said it was an opportunity for 'Australia to remind the world that we're back.' Bowen went on to say that 'Australia wants to be a renewable energy powerhouse,' and that 'the world's biggest trade fair' was the opportunity to 'show Australia's capacity to help the world' (Bowen 2022).

The former President of Kiribati Anote Tong told reporters 'it would appear to be a contradiction' for Australia to bid to host COP while failing to limit its own emissions (Martin 2022), while Tuvalu's Minister of Finance and Economic Development, Seve Paeniu, was quoted saying 'we would only agree to the notion of framing [it] as a Pacific COP if Australia were to come on board and support the priorities of the Pacific on climate change' (Davies 2023). Former President of Palau Tommy Remengesau, used familial language himself when he commented that 'we want Australia, as the big brother, to set the tone and walk the talk for all of us … I think that will be a perfect opportunity for the Pacific to come together truly, as a Pacific family' (Martin 2022). While Bowen suggested that Australia would look to 'co-host the bid with the Pacific,' it remains the case that this would be an Australian bid, for a conference to be held on Australian soil, and, in Bowen's own words, 'an important opportunity to talk about what Australia brings to the table' (Bowen 2022). Even in this proposition, it is clear Australia sees the homogenously framed Pacific as a junior partner in its relationship at best. The underlying Australian attitudes are that Pacific states are not equals, nor individual actors with independent agency and agendas, but rather subordinate actors in a region that must be controlled (Barnes and Makinda 2022; Fry 1991; Wallis *et al*. 2023). Persisting with this politics of instrumentalism and exceptionalism is unlikely to achieve the goals Australia wants, nor the progress on climate change that Pacific states want.

Climate Minister of Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu said that 'Australia's bid to lead COP31 is a momentous opportunity for the nation to prove its dedication to addressing the global climate crisis.' Regenvanu argued that Pacific support for Australia's bid must be conditional on greater climate action (Regenvanu 2023). However, calls for support for Australia's bid to be withdrawn unless Australia stopped approving new coal and gas developments were rebuffed at the 2023 Pacific Islands Forum. Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna said that the regional body had already agreed to promote the joint bid, as 'Australia has already committed to making this the Pacific COP' (Hurst 2023).

As Regenvanu suggests, there is an opportunity here for Australia. There is a chance to be invited back into the Pacific community by both ramping up climate action domestically and increasing support for Pacific climate priorities. Foregrounding Pacific concerns at any

potential Australian-hosted COP would see Australia ingratiate itself with the Pacific community and begin to rebuild the ties that have been unravelled by climate inaction in the last three decades. Whether this will happen, however, is up for debate. Several of Australia's own key Ministers have noted that hosting COP31 would 'help restore Australia's reputation,' signalling another occasion where Australia is instrumentally using Pacific states to achieve their own ends (Wong, Conroy, and Bowen 2022).

Conclusion

Australia has a long history in the Pacific. However, despite recent rhetorical actions, sustained inaction on climate change and a paternalistic, instrumental view of Pacific states have placed Australia outside of the core community of Pacific actors. While Australia continually espouses itself as a central figure in the Pacific family, the inequality of its relationships with Pacific states and actors suggests this is not a safe or harmonious family.

To understand the dynamics of communities and membership within them, I utilised constructivist theories of International Relations. The intersubjectively constructed nation of these fluid communities of actors leaves space for the narratives that states tell about themselves to influence whether they are included and the influence they may have within a given community. I argued that Australia does not see itself as a core member of the Pacific normative community, leaving it as an exceptional outsider, yet one unable to contest the norms and behaviour guides emanating from the community.

In arguing this, I traced the history of Australia's relationship with Pacific states through the lens of rhetorical framings of the Pacific family and climate change-related issues at Pacific Islands Forum meetings in recent years. We saw how after initially being on the same page, Australia has consistently reproduced a narrative of exceptionalism and operationalised that in how it blocked and slow-rolled regional agreements on climate action. While Pacific states have succeeded in promoting climate action domestically and internationally, Australia has often been criticised as an outsider who is working against the agenda of Pacific states.

If Australia is to fulfil its stated goals and be the partner of choice for members of the Pacific family it needs to demonstrate a commitment to becoming a part of the Pacific normative community. Australia's bid for COP31 represents a potential critical juncture where the inertia of the foreign policy apparatus could be overcome and a change to how Australia manages the asymmetry in its relationships with the Pacific could be made. Instead of exceptionalism or exemptionalism, what is required from Australia is dialogue and respect for Pacific sovereignty and agency—alongside material action on climate change. If Canberra is reluctant to engage in climate action based on domestic security concerns, perhaps it would consider policy change in the interests of regional diplomatic and security goals.

Note

1. Wallis notes that simultaneously the Australian government has manifested a simultaneous parallel world that excludes Pacific peoples from living and working in Australia through aggressive securitised bordering practices (Wallis 2023, 1).

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