

Australian Outlook

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A Dysfunctional Family: How Australia Can and Should Repair its Relationships with the Pacific by Acting on Climate

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The prevailing strategic culture in Australian foreign policy circles that view Pacific Island states in instrumental and paternalistic ways is unproductive. Moving forward, there must be active recognition of the agency of these actors and engagement with their key concerns — particularly climate change.

There is a long-held view in Australian foreign policy circles that the Pacific Islands are an area of strategic importance that must be controlled. I suggest this persistent instrumental and paternalistic view within Australia's strategic culture is not just outdated, but actively counter-productive to Australia's stated national interests and foreign policy goals. Ignoring the agency of small states in the Pacific, especially their rapidly increasing legitimacy on climate change, may not just harm Australia's Pacific relationships, but leave it out of step with a large portion of the international community. There is an opportunity to reassess the strategic culture and reorientate it towards a position more commensurate with Australia's proclaimed role as a part of the "Pacific family," however, in the bid for the presidency of COP31 in 2026.

Framing the Pacific family

When Anthony Albanese's Labor government took office in 2022 there was a much-touted new face to Australia's Pacific diplomacy and engagement. Despite the rhetorical shift, however, there are real concerns that the inertia of the foreign policy apparatus means the changes in policy and practice Pacific states are hoping for will fail to materialise.

From Australia's point of view, there has always been a "substantial and special responsibility" behind its "long assumed leadership and... custodianship of the Pacific." This is manifested in the most recent Foreign Policy White Paper (2017), which stated Australia's intention to "engage with the Pacific with greater

intensity and ambition.” The logic behind this intent is important, however. Some argue that rather than a desire to cooperate with regional partners, Australia’s drive to control the region is motivated by the legacies of settler colonialism and discursive reproductions of a securitised region.

From a Pacific point of view, former Samoan Prime Minister Tuila’epa Sa’ilele has spoken of how the region has responded to this continued “patronising” treatment by “building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change.” In his view, Australia has “fallen short of acknowledging the integrity of Pacific leadership” while trying to “claim a jurisdiction under their watch.” Other leaders have similarly 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.”

Instead, what we have seen by governments of both major Australian parties since 2018 has been a shift to talking about a “Pacific family.” As Joanne Wallis has argued, using the metaphor of family is emblematic of the anxiety felt about Australia’s apparent declining influence in the region. The shift in language is an attempt to discursively enclose Pacific states as part of Australia’s family and home.

Families and homes are hierarchical places filled with structures of power, control, and dominance. While Australia has close ties to the Pacific, it is clear it sees its role in the Pacific family as an inherently paternalistic one. By virtue of Australia’s contributions to aid and security assistance, it sees itself as the leader who sets the agenda in the region. However, this is unlikely to stack up against how the concept of family is understood in many Pacific cultures, where collectives are more important than individuals and communal ties persist across space and time.

In-fighting and arguments: Australia at Pacific Island Forums

The formal forum for much of the disagreement between Pacific states and Australia in recent years has been the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Before the 2018 PIF in Nauru, Palau’s National Climate Change Coordinator, Xavier Matsutaro, told reporters that Australia is “responsible for making our declarations weaker.” While Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama questioned whether leaders wanted to tell their citizens that they “had the chance to do something truly great... but lacked the will to get it done?” Despite the pleas, Australia was accused of watering down the text of the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, and particularly the references to climate change mitigation. Further inaction and “insulting and condescending” behaviour by Prime Minister Scott Morrison the following year, in 2019, contributed to the Tongan Prime Minister Akilishi Pohiva coming to tears.

It wasn’t until after COVID-19 and the 2022 PIF that the new Albanese government had an opportunity to promote its version of Pacific diplomacy. Continuing the discursive pattern of his predecessor, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said at the meeting that “we are family when it comes to the Pacific.” After making key concessions on climate change, Albanese was met with hugs instead of tears from his Pacific counterparts.

These scenes, however, masked a deep inertia in Australia’s foreign policy and strategic culture. While climate issues are increasingly recognised as important in areas like security, they have only been addressed in “partial and piecemeal” ways. Climate concerns are still not integrated into the governance and diplomacy platforms in sustained and systematic ways. The approval of new coal and gas exploration projects and the reluctance to commit to more ambitious emissions reduction or energy transition targets suggests that the pleas of Pacific leaders have been ignored.

An opportunity for a Pacific COP and change?

Continuing the contradictory nature of Australia’s relationship with climate change and the Pacific, Australia is bidding to host COP31. Ostensibly, this will be done “in partnership with Pacific Island nations.” While this has been billed as a Pacific COP in the words of Minister for Climate Change and Energy Chris Bowen, it is also an opportunity for “Australia to remind the world that we’re back” at “the world’s biggest trade fair.”

The bid was received with caution in some Pacific circles. 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 emissions. Tuvalu’s Minister of Finance and Economic Development Seve Paeniu, meanwhile, has said Tuvalu would only back the bid if Australia supported “the priorities of the Pacific on climate change.”

The bid could, however, be an opportunity to shift the relationship between Australia and the Pacific. Climate Minister of Vanuatu, Ralph Regenvanu, said this is a chance for Australia “to prove its dedication to addressing the global climate crisis,” while former President of Palau Tommy Remengesau said 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.” What this COP bid provides is a critical juncture for Australia to reflect on the growing effects of the climate crisis — both at home and abroad — and fundamentally reassess its diplomatic priorities in the Pacific region. Foregrounding Pacific concerns at an Australian-hosted Pacific COP would ingratiate Australia with the Pacific community and begin to rebuild the ties that have been unravelled by climate inaction over the last three decades.

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