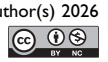
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Is Australia part of the Pacific? Re-imagining Australia's Pacific identities and relationships for an 'Island' future

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Abstract

Since the beginning of colonisation, Australian authorities have had a persistent desire to control the Pacific. While Australia is a long-standing key partner for Pacific Island states, there is an underlying discontent with the often domineering and exploitive nature of Australia in the region. Seeking to understand why this approach to diplomacy in the Pacific has been so hard to change for Australia, I suggest it is because ideas of Australia as a powerful regional administrator have become so central to its collective identity that they have been fused into the diplomatic, strategic, and political culture in Canberra. Using lenses of ontological security, narratives, and articulation theory, I examine how this identity has evolved through three vignettes: the initial portrayal of Australia as a Western, continental, colonial controller; the discursive construction of Australian primacy in relation to the Pacific and its peoples; and an examination of recent diplomatic interactions between Australia and Pacific partners. Drawing on Teaiwa's vision of articulation theory, I suggest these ideas have become akin to a bodily part of Australia's core identity concerns—and it will generally act to preserve its sense of this self. However, while difficult, change is possible. In a forward-looking coda, I propose that future change is funnelled towards 'islanding' Australia. A fundamental reorientation of identity, culture, and practice that embraces Australia's vulnerability and possibility could open the space for a more productive future with Pacific partners and a more comfortable relationship with Australia's own core identity.

Keywords

Islands, identities, Pacific politics, ontological security, Australian politics

> Continents do not exist, metaphysically speaking. It is islands all the way up, islands all the way down. Islands to the right of us, islands to the left. (Teresia Teaiwa, 2022)

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In 2018, former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison claimed that for Australia, the Pacific was 'our patch… our part of the world' (Morrison, 2018). This idea was not new. Since 1788, Australia—and before this, Britain—has persistently acted like the Pacific was a region to be controlled and administered. Despite the range of global actors who have sought to insert themselves into the geopolitics of the Blue Pacific in recent years (Keen and Tidwell, 2024; Wallis et al., 2025; Waqavakatoga and Wallis, 2023), the idea that Australia is preordained to be the dominant force or the 'partner of choice' in the region continue to dominate formal narratives and strategic cultures in Canberra.

This approach has not always endeared Australia to its so-called 'Pacific family.' There is a long-standing perception in the Pacific that while Australia is a fairly reliable partner, it is often 'domineering, exploitative, and in possession of the gentleness and sensitivity of the proverbial bull in a china shop' (Hau'ofa, 1998). The question then is why, in the years since Pacific independence, has Australia been so slow to change its approach to Pacific diplomacy, and even when changes do occur, why are they unable to alter the underlying paternalistic and colonial logics underlying formal interactions with Pacific states?

I suggest the answer lies at the interface of geography, history, and identity. Australia occupies a rather unique position in conceptions of the Pacific. Geographically and metaphorically, Australia is on the fringes of the sea of islands that comprises the Blue Continent. It has a long history of colonialism and attempted control of the Pacific region, and these experiences have layered over time to constitute a core part of Australia's relational identity. To understand this, I bring the burgeoning literature on ontological security, identities, and narratives together with Teaiwa's reading of articulation theory. Through this amalgamated lens, we can observe how Australia's identity has become reinforced over time, fusing elements of coloniality and paternalism to the fundamental core of diplomatic, strategic, and political culture in Canberra. Therefore, I posit that the answer to the question of why Australia is so reluctant to change is that the maintenance of this core identity is such an important ontological security goal that, whether knowingly or unknowingly, key actors in the Australian diplomatic apparatus seek to preserve historical identity traits over achieving more recently articulated interests and goals.

The identity inertia in cases like this is so strong it pushes actors like Australia towards path dependency and routinised practices, even when they run counter to their objectives (Zarakol, 2010). As a result, Australia is unable to quickly come to terms with the evolution of forms of new Pacific, or Oceanic, diplomacy (Carter et al., 2025; Fry and Tarte, 2015). The following sections show how what began as a mandate to control the islands of the Pacific, transitioned into concerns about an arc of instability, and now manifests in an inability to react to Pacific regionalism or understand the Pacific strategy of 'friend to all, enemy to none.'

Following Hau'ofa, however, I resist the urge to surrender to hopelessness (1994). In light of this, I make a final claim in a forward-looking coda to the piece; if Australia wants to address diplomatic and policy misalignments with Pacific neighbours, it needs to fundamentally challenge the continental identity it has constructed since colonisation and shift towards an 'island' future. There is no doubt this would be difficult; the articulata that constitute collective identities are deeply embedded (Teaiwa, 2017). However, change is not just possible, but inevitable. What is to be determined is whether change reinforces the old or alters course. Therefore, I echo the call of Teaiwa for island to become a verb and for Australia to island itself (2022). This must stretch beyond performative discourse and rhetorical realignment; Australia must jettison imagined ideas of continental invulnerability and make peace with both its dark histories and its ongoing vulnerabilities. In practice, this requires a radical and reflexive ontological re-orientation of how Australia understands itself and its place in a rapidly changing world. Only then, I suggest, can the foundations be laid for Australia to have a more productive relationship with its closest neighbours

and a settled identity that encourages actions that are at once physically, diplomatically, environmentally, and ontological secure.

Identity, ontological (in)security, and the articulated embodiment of narratives

Identities are core to understanding the behaviour and logic of states and actors. Building on the broader field of ontological security studies (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Subotić, 2016; Zarakol, 2010), I follow Wallis and Rees in applying an ontological security lens to Australia's foreign policy practices in the Pacific (Rees, 2024; Wallis, 2023), and extend this by bringing it into conversation with Teaiwa's reading of articulation theory (Teaiwa, 2017). In doing so, we can better understand how identities and self-narratives become objects to secure in and of themselves. In this case, it helps us understand why Australia will seemingly put the maintenance of its position as a regional neo-colonial power over the possibility of creating stronger and more meaningful relationships with Pacific partners; or why it continues to frame itself as a continent outside of a sea of islands.

Identities are constituted by the sum of an actor's practices, values, and history. Ongoing works in process, they are inherently fluid and constantly contested, reimagined, renegotiated, and transformed in response to new contexts. Importantly, as identities evolve, they in turn (re)shape, and are (re)shaped by, the interests and values of actors (Moore and Orchard, 2023; Steele, 2008; Tully, 1995). States are not homogeneous entities, though; individuals and groups within states have many contrasting and often conflicting views on what the identity of the state should be, and a multiplicity of identities can be attached to a single actor. In this sense, identities are relational, shifting depending on the forum and actors one is interacting with. Differences also manifest between self-identity—how an actor thinks of themselves—and external identities—how other actors relationally perceive them (Patten, 2011; Zarakol, 2010). The identities an actor embodies are not fixed or externally imposed, but co-created through the narratives they construct and project (Subotić, 2016), and the communities they are embedded in. Therefore, we must operate under the assumption that an actor's identity will often be internally variegated, contradictory, and inconsistent (Mitzen, 2006: 344; Moore and Orchard, 2023; Patten, 2011: 745; Steele, 2008: 46; Tully, 1995: 11; Zarakol, 2010: 7). In the context of Australia, this means we have to account not just for a national identity, but also the identity and culture of the foreign policy apparatus, the security and defence services, and elite-level policymakers and politicians.

More recent critical scholarship has built on this theory to claim interests can be superseded by issues of ontological security. Steele succinctly defined the field of ontological security as the study of 'how individuals, groups, states, and societies secure their sense of identity through time and space' (Steele, 2020). This means some issues or practices are so core to the identity and narrative a state tells about itself that they can be preserved even when preservation may be harmful to its security or other interests (Mitzen, 2006; Zarakol, 2010: 19–20). Practices can be reinforced through routine and repetition, sometimes to the point of the routine becoming part of the identity itself. Therefore, while the simplification and predictability of routines can be helpful, they can also be an obstacle to self-reflection and lock actors into path dependency by obscuring alternative possibilities (Subotić, 2016; Zarakol, 2010). Even if actors can recognise environmental, social, or contextual changes and self-reflexively revise their routines, they must consider the impacts this will have on their identities. A new or unexpected course of action has identity costs, as well as more traditional concerns like capacities and interests (Subotić, 2016).

Here, we can turn to Teaiwa's critique of articulation theory to add to our understanding. Articulation theory explores how discourses, social groups, political interests, and structures of power within society are continually severed, realigned, and recombined, thereby highlighting how

cultural and political complexity is constructed, contested, and reconstructed. In this sense, we can see how this could explain the multi-layered articulata that are laid down to create the matrix of a complex state identity. However, while traditionally these articulations were spoken of through the metaphor of a lorry with detachable trailers, Teaiwa suggests this fails to accurately capture the sticky embeddedness of some ideas. Instead, it is more accurate to think of the links as joints in a body; while detaching the joints may be possible—with substantial force—there are still ligaments, tendons, nerves, blood vessels, and skin that make the disarticulation difficult, violent, and traumatising (Teaiwa, 2017). In the case of Australia, we might also consider the colour of the skin covering this articulated limb. While the make-up of the continent's population has evolved and changed since colonisation, the political and cultural identity attached to the idea of the Australian nation-state has arguable always had whiteness at its core (Carey and McLisky, 2009; Huynh and Neyland, 2020; O'Keeffe, 2024).

One way that states can justify practices that conflict with their prior identities and potentially ease this pain is through the stories they tell about themselves (Subotić, 2016). These biological narratives are how self-identity is reflexively understood, both by the actor and by others in relation to them. Narratives 'breathe life' into the nation-state, (re)constructing identities in an ongoing process. These stories do not secure self-identity on their own, but contribute towards constituting the context within which state actions can take place (Steele, 2008: 10, 72). As the external world inevitably changes, the ability of agents to coherently organise their biological narrative is key to transcending anxieties of disruption and maintaining the consistent sense of self which ontological security depends upon (Steele, 2008: 72–3). A good narrative can therefore allow states to justify fairly extreme changes in policy and practice by preserving their autobiographical continuity, sense of routine, and collective histories (Subotić, 2016: 611, 616). This can effectively be like an anaesthetic to the violent interventions Teaiwa spoke of.

Applying this understanding of the driving need for ontological security and narrative consistency helps to understand Australia's, often counterintuitive, contemporary policy and diplomacy in the Pacific. While Australia has current interests to portray itself as a core member of the Pacific family and the region's partner of choice, it must balance these against the long-term articulations of its identity as a colonial outpost—a European continent at the edge of a dangerous sea of islands.

Australia's relational relationships with the Pacific

The following section looks at how the articulata of Australia's relational identity with the Pacific have been constructed over time. We can see that, from Australia's point of view, it has always had a 'substantial and special responsibility' towards the Pacific; a responsibility that has manifested in self-conferred 'assumed leadership and indeed custodianship of the Pacific' (Chacko, 2023; Collett, 2009; Dobell, 2007; Fry, 1991; Howard, 2001). How this came to be and why Pacific security is considered second only to Australia's own (Department of Defence, 2016), is explored through three short vignettes. The first examines Australia's relational identity with allies and the Pacific; the second, how the Pacific has been discursively constructed in the Australian identity, and finally, how this identity has shaped contemporary Australian diplomacy in the region. These are not exhaustive historical reproductions, but illustrative examples that trace the process by which articulations were layered on top of each other to assemble this complex self-identity over time.

From colonisation to control, the anxieties of an island continent

When Captain Arthur Philip was commissioned in 1788 to establish a British colony in what would come to be known as Australia, he was given a broad mandate. Philip was instructed not just to

establish colonial control over the mainland, but also 'all the islands adjacent in the Pacific Ocean' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1914: 1). The foundations for the initial articulata of the Australian identity came from its history as part of the British Empire.

Early Australia was viewed as 'an outpost of Europe' with 'blood ties' to Britain so strong that even after independence in 1901, it would put these before questions of trade or commerce (Walker, 2020). This suggests an early preference for protecting issues of identity over material security or other interests. But while many in Australia may have felt they were just as British as their counterparts living in London or Liverpool (Gyngell, 2021: 13), geographically, Australia is a long way from the British Isles. Come February 1942 and the fall of Singapore during the Second World War, this distance became viscerally real. The advances of Japanese forces onto Australian territory in Papua New Guinea (PNG) had ideational effects as well as material ones. As Gyngell and others argue, the events of World War Two sparked a crisis of anxiety in the Australian identity and collective mentality—the fear of abandonment by protective partners exacerbated by the tyranny of distance (Gyngell, 2021; Sobocinska, 2024; Walker, 1999, 2019).

In the search for security, Australia managed to dilute those supposedly all-powerful ties with Britain and turn towards the United States (US) as its principal security partner. As former Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies stated on numerous occasions, 'no country in the world more than ours needs great and powerful friends' (Gyngell, 2021: 45). Yet the friends Australia sought were Western nations from the other side of the world. Historically, it has been assumed that the main animating thread of Australia's foreign policy has been these key alliances; firstly, with the United Kingdom (UK) and then the US. Some have even argued that it wasn't until the 1940s that Australia had any sort of discernible independent foreign policy. However, this perpetuates a narrow view of what constitutes foreign policy and ignores the actions of Australian actors in the Pacific region.

The history of relations between Australia and PNG in particular highlights how Australia was an active regional player. After the Torres Strait Islands were annexed by Queensland in 1878, the Premier unsuccessfully tried to extend this to New Guinea in 1883 (Chacko, 2023: 4). The following year the southern part of the island was proclaimed a British protectorate, setting the residents of New Guinea on a pathway of colonial, protectorate, and trusteeship relationships with first the British and then Australia. After almost 70 years of these external controls, and now 50 years of independence, PNG and Australia are now officially treaty partners (Dobell, 2025; Ferns, 2020; Gardner et al., 2024; Gyngell, 2021; Wallis and Wesley, 2016). Dobell notes that the fifty-year delay may be indicative of how Australia was slow to understand how to deal with its newly independent Pacific neighbours

As a result, when Australia looked to its independent future in the second half of the last century, it was not a Pacific future, but an Asian future that was spoken of. Located at the geographic crossroads between the Pacific and South-East Asian archipelagos, Australia very clearly chose to look North rather than East. Whenever the Pacific was mentioned, the focus was almost always on terrestrial peripheries of the ocean and not the 'wide-flung yeasty expanse' of the Pacific Islands (Murdoch quoted in, Walker, 1999: 211–2). Walker describes how the geographical placement of Australia was seen as an opportunity for it to transition from a distant colonial outpost of the British Empire towards a new nation strategically positioned within an Asian region set to determine the course of future global events (2019: 15). In contrast, the Pacific was seen as less developed, less filled with potential, and a place to be controlled and exploited rather than invested in for the future (Morris, 2019; Petrou and Connell, 2022; Teaiwa, 2015; Wardhani, 2023).

Constructing Pacific relationality: In discourse and practice[1]

Building on its histories as and with Western colonialists, Australia grew a unique identity as a regional power within the broader Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific region—as it has variously been referred to over time.[2] Even the catch-all labels for these regions speak volumes; semantically, combining the Pacific Ocean, which covers nearly a third of the globe, with prefixes of Asia- or Indo-immediately suggests a devaluing of Pacific agency and importance is all pervasive. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that when Australia stepped into significant Pacific diplomatic environments, like the Pacific Islands Forum, they framed themselves as too big to be influenced or bow to the will of others and constantly tried to dictate terms. The enactment of this 'grown' identity highlights Teaiwa's point that articulata can become so ingrained that they are almost biologically grafted to an identity. In Australia's case, this means that while words have changed, there are common logics to its approach to framing foreign relations with Pacific Island states over the years.

Relational framings of the region persistently undervalue and diminish Pacific agency (Ratuva, 2022). One particularly significant framing prominent in the early 2000s was the Pacific as an 'arc of instability.' In diplomatic and security terms, this constructed the Pacific, and particularly Melanesia, as a space that must be controlled to minimise potential threats—the underlying assumption being Pacific peoples were 'weak' and unable to govern themselves (Dobell, 2007, 2012, Koro et al., 2023: 3; McNeill and Walton, 2025: 1801; Wallis, 2012; Waqavakatoga and Wallis, 2023; 2024). A later iteration of this colonial logic was the more discrete framing of the Pacific as part of Australia's 'backyard.' In this metaphor, Australia is the house, the Pacific the space out the back. Examined through a Pacific lens, however, the metaphorical framing appears even more misguided. As McNeill and Williamson point out, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare noted that backyards are often places where 'rubbish is collected and burnt' (2024).

Since 2018, this imagery evolved under governments of both stripes to encompass the framing of Australia and the region as part of a 'Pacific family,' with Australia as its patriarch. As Wallis has argued, this shift 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' (Moore, 2024; Wallis, 2023) This means Australia does not see itself as an equal member of the Pacific community, but as an exceptional case to which the same rules do not apply. Australian officials have instrumentalised narratives of family, which are often powerful in Pacific cultures, to place itself in a position of patriarchal power and control (Moore, 2024).

Strating suggests the best way to understand how this gap is internally justified is that Australia has created itself a position of 'exemptionalism.' One of the key dimensions of exceptionalism is how states carve out exemptions for themselves from the standards of behaviour they promote (Strating, 2020: 308). While Strating highlights how Australia has crafted exemptions for itself in the areas of immigration and border security in recent times, here, I want to extend this to how Australia frames security and cooperation in the Pacific. As the discourse of the Pacific family has evolved to explicitly include references to security provisions, we can see the devaluing of not just Pacific agency, but Pacific security as well.

Since the Boe Declaration, it has been explicitly clear that the biggest security issue for Pacific states is not geopolitical conflict or transnational crime, but climate change. On this issue, Australia has constantly failed the test (Collett, 2009; Moore, 2024; Morgan and Baxter, 2022). However, there is another way that Pacific security is now being devalued by Australia, with a two-level game that constructs Pacific security as a regional affair and Australian security as a matter of international concern. As Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said in an interview in 2024, 'we think that stability and peace are best preserved by the Pacific family taking responsibility for

Pacific security' (Wong et al., 2024). This has been followed by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles, noting Australia's desire to build 'a Pacific defence family' (Wong et al., 2024), and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese proclaiming that 'security in the Pacific is primarily the responsibility of the Pacific family' (Albanese and Marape, 2024). In this way, the encircling discourse of the Pacific family has been ratcheted up to include an implicit agreement to recognise Australia as the ultimate security guarantor for the Pacific.

This is a continuation of a long-standing policy of strategic denial in the region. Efforts to ensure foreign powers, especially China, do not extend their power and influence in a region that Australia sees as its mandate (McNeill and Walton, 2025: 1802; Waqavakatoga and Wallis, 2023). This is so key to Australia's defence posture that a 'strategy of denial' was described as the cornerstone of Defence planning in the 2024 National Defence Strategy (Defence, 2024). Australia has firmly encircled these states, wrapping them up in the idea that Pacific security should only be done by the Pacific family, and placing China and other would-be foreign partners on the outer. In effect, Australia has tried to position itself as the *only* partner for Pacific states.

Conversely, however, Australia's security is framed as far too important to be left to the family. Whilst implying it can help guarantee the security of the entire Blue Pacific, Australia is at pains to reiterate domestically that without massive investment and ongoing commitments from larger foreign allies, its own security is in grave peril. This is where Australia exempts itself from the rules of the family—its exemptionalism allows it to be both inside and outside the Pacific family at once. The headline case here is the AUKUS security agreement between Australia, the UK, and the US. There is an argument, particularly after Australia torpedoed a similar deal with France to produce submarines, that AUKUS is putting relationships with old 'great and powerful' friends before material security needs or stated national interests. Rees asserts that Australia's enthusiastic participation in AUKUS can best be explained as a quest for ontological security. It is not traditional security concerns that have driven Australia towards engaging in this security alliance, but rather the desire to maintain identity narratives, particularly around the strong ties between Australia and its far-flung friends (2024).

When Albanese confirmed Australia's AUKUS participation, his speech noted that Australia was 'determined to promote security by investing in our relationships across our region,' yet he only spoke about the predominant trilateral association, not relations with Pacific states (Albanese, 2023) Here, the echoes of past approaches to Pacific engagement ring loudly; Australia resorting to the familiar idea of itself as a Western continent outside of the instability and vulnerability it confers on Pacific Island states. Further emphasising its position as an exemptional member of the Pacific 'family,' Australia has not limited itself to one agreement either. Alliance and coalition building extend across the globe, from bilateral relationships with Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and India (Defence, 2024) to multilateral agreements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan, India, and the US (Rees, 2024), the Five Power Defence Arrangements (with Malaysia, NZ, Singapore, and the UK) (Defence, 2024), the Five Eyes network (with the US, Canada, NZ, and the UK), and the long-standing ANZUS alliance with NZ and the US. Australia's strategic culture is still geared towards reaching for secondary power status and building a worldwide reputation, yet its foreign policy in the Pacific seems to want to limit Pacific Island states from pursuing this themselves.

How to make friends and alienate Pacific partners

The result of this ideational stasis and lack of agility in how Australia responds to changes in the Pacific has meant that quite often Australian leaders, politicians, and officials have made the wrong kind of waves when visiting Pacific counterparts. Australia's actions in the region have often left noses out of joint, inflamed tensions, and even at times caused foreign leaders to come to tears

(Australian Associated Press, 2015; Lyons, 2019b). These misguided attempts at coercion, persuasion, and inducement can and have had unintended consequences with detrimental outcomes for relations with key Pacific partners (Wallis and Wesley, 2016). This is particularly important to note considering the recent increase in bilateral agreements that Australia has pursued with Pacific states. From the Falepili Union treaty, which was criticised for attempting to trade Tuvaluan sovereignty for climate assistance and a migration (Kitara and Farbotko, 2023; Marinaccio, 2023)[3], to the interlinked deals for a defence treaty and to provide a rugby league team for PNG (Campbell, 2024; Ivarature, 2023; Wallis, 2025), and the 2024treaty with Naoero (formerly Nauru) (see Collins, 2024; Corbett and Wallis, 2024), Australia is regularly engaging in quid-pro-quo deals. Australia trades whatever it believes states need, for guarantees that it will remain the preferred security partner—not China (McNeill-Stowers and Kant, 2025).

However, we know there is a strong and abiding desire for sovereignty and agency in Pacific states, as well as a clear preference for in-group cooperation and an expectation that partners align their actions with Pacific priorities (see Carter et al., 2025; Davis and Joly, 2025: 4; Mahuta, 2023; Morgan, 2022; Tekiteki and Nilon, 2025). In the same way that decolonisation brought about the advent of ASEAN-style non-interventionist diplomacy in South and South-East Asia (Jones, 2010; Ramcharan, 2000), the Pacific has developed its own way of doing things—the Pacific Way; friends to all and enemies to none (Davis and Joly, 2025: 4; De Jong, 2024; Koro, 2025). This approach has been embedded within regional agreements, such as the 2017 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting, where parties agreed to 'a long-term Forum foreign policy commitment to act as one "Blue Continent"' (Davis and Joly, 2025; Pacific Islands Forum, 2017). Overall, it reflects part of the 'new Pacific diplomacy' (Fry and Tarte, 2015), which includes the idea that Pacific states should exercise 'stronger strategic autonomy' (Taylor, 2018), and more 'assertively and creatively' pursue their interests (Waqavakatoga and Wallis, 2023).

Therefore, when external partners fail to live up to expectations, Pacific states are not afraid to look elsewhere. Leaders of Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and others have all expressed the sentiment in recent years that if Australia continues to fall short, they will happily embrace others (Dziedzic, 2024; Hill, 2018; Lyons, 2019a). Recently, the newly elected Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Jotham Napat, said he would reconsider a 2022 security deal with Australia because it did not meet ni-Vanuatu expectations on climate and climate security. When pushed on the competition between China and Western states like Australia in the region, Napat said that Vanuatu did not 'have any preferences,' and it would 'treat Australia the same as China and the United States' (Srinivasan, 2025). While the Nakamal Agreement between the two countries was eventually signed in July 2026, it was noted that Australia did not get exactly what it wanted (Janz, 2026), and even then the process of negotiations and its outcomes have been critiqued (McDonnell, 2026; Naupa, 2026; Newton Cain, 2026).

Similarly, in the wake of the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion on the obligations of states in the context of climate change, ni-Vanuatu Minister for Climate Change, Ralph Regenvanu, told CNN that Pacific states would not be afraid to look elsewhere for support if existing partners did not clean up their act on climate change (Regenvanu, 2025). Beyond Vanuatu, government sources told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that Australia was trying to use policing agreements to force Solomon Islands to choose between Australian and Chinese support. Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele acknowledged that during negotiations, there was debate over the type of language used. For Manele, the key point was that Solomon Islands would take 'the lead' in decision-making and remain in 'the driver's seat.' However, the Australian response did not seem to reflect this, when a spokesperson for Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade simply reiterated that Australia was 'Solomon Islands' partner of choice' (Aumanu-Leong and Dziedzic, 2025). Not only does this misunderstand the culture of Melanesian states like Solomon Islands, where each yes may be made up of a hundred little noes (Aqorau,

2025), but it also seeks to impose Australian views onto partner states. From these events, it appears that Australia continues to believe it can force Pacific states into making binding binary choices between partners. However, imposing itself on the Pacific is unlikely to get Australia very far in the long-term—if it wants to be the partner of choice, it better start giving Pacific states a good reason to choose it.

As Ratuva notes, the 'patronisation and paternalism' from states like Australia has been all too common since the arrival of Westerners in the region.

> Anglo-Western states see the Pacific as their "natural" habitat that should not be shared with anyone else because that's where they sent explorers, missionaries, and settlers, had colonies, fought against the Japanese invaders, tested their nuclear bombs, built military bases, and exerted significant cultural influence. (Ratuva, 2022)

This is the mindset that has been cultivated and reinforced since the conception of Australia. A relational framing of the Pacific as both less than and belonging to Australia. While Teaiwa said that articulata can be so embedded that they are like the joints and muscles holding bodies together, in this case, Australia has been working out; the logics of colonialism and control are not just part of their state-level identity, but have become stronger through reinforcement in narrative and practice over time.

Navigating change: The call 'to island'

The Vice Chancellor of Solomon Islands National University, Transform Aqorau, asserted recently that Pacific states are 'not passive pawns' within 'a grand chess game; we are navigators of our own destiny' (2025). While Australia may not always recognise it, Pacific states know their capabilities and value. Despite structural disadvantages, Oceanic diplomacy is alive and well (Carter et al., 2025; Fry and Tarte, 2015), and as the prior statements from Pacific leaders show, they are well aware of the dangers of letting Australia project its influence unchecked. Therefore, the main lesson here is one for Australia and not the Pacific.

If the late, great, Teresia Teaiwa was right and there is no such thing as a continent, then the pathway forward could be for Australia to embrace its islandness. In practice, this would be a difficult long-term process encompassing all of government, media, and civil society—an ambitious task. Yet the promise of articulation theory is that change is not just possible, but *inevitable*. What is uncertain is the type and direction of change.

Australia has long been described as an island, usually in terms of its isolation (Gyngell, 2021; Jones and Benvenuti, 2006; McMahon, 2010). More recently, the narrative has shifted to consider that Australia is metaphorically not just one island, but an archipelago; with metropolitan islands, regional atolls, and (literal) island territories (Carr, 2026; Mateer, 2006). But in her more poetic work, Teaiwa reminded us that everything is islands—the Earth is but an island in the solar system, one with finite resources and space, but filled with precious ecosystems and life; it is 'islands all the way down' (2022). This is an important ideational and rhetorical shift. While Australia's islandness has previously been used to reinforce needs for security, embracing Teaiwa's view of islandness may allow Australia to build better relationships, soothe the anxieties of its isolation, and even perhaps sever some of the more pernicious, tendential 'colonial fantasies' that push Australian policy and practice towards well-worn and counterproductive paths of control and exploitation (Teaiwa, 2022). If successful, islanding oneself can be an action of 'awesome possibility' that reverses the emphasis on vulnerability or isolation and instead refocuses on the relationships that matter and the spaces you exist within (Teaiwa, 2022; Weatherill, 2025). Instead of an isolated continent, Australia would be an island in an interconnected sea of others.

To be clear, to use island as a verb requires more than a policy reset or a new program of regional engagement. It is not a short-term solution nor one that can be issued as a top-down directive from institutional leaders. Islanding Australia requires a reflexive assessment of its relational position within the region's history, politics, and future—a radical ontological re-orientation. A practical example of a step towards this islandness could be a reorientation of Australia's foreign policy to meaningfully incorporate First Nations thinking and knowledge into its practice (Blackwell, 2023; Brigg and Graham, 2023a; Graham and Brigg, 2023; Phillips, 2023; Pugin, 2023; Reynolds, 2023). Some have already reckoned with the potential positive implications of this for relations across the Pacific (Carter and Fry, 2023; Lumā Vaai, 2023; Medcalf, 2023; Taylor et al., 2023), and specific lessons could be taken from similar moves in Aotearoa New Zealand under the Arden Government and Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta from 2020 to 2023 (McNeill, 2023). However, for these changes to happen, there needs to be a deep reckoning with Australia's history since colonisation. As Mary Graham says, 'sitting with and amongst difference and challenge also establishes the conditions for working through misunderstandings' (Brigg and Graham, 2023b: 685). This is required if we are to reorientate the balance between survivalism and rationalism in the Australian consciousness; to move towards a more sustainable form of political ordering that can deal with enmity and conflict both domestically and abroad (Brigg and Graham, 2023b; Graham and Brigg, 2023, 2026). Shifting our thinking like this could have knock-on effects that result in a more relational diplomatic profile, more grounded environmental strategy, more responsive social policy, and ultimately a more settled and sustainable self-identity.

Those who shape the strategic and diplomatic culture in Canberra need to sit with the histories and legacies of past actions to truly understand the collective anxieties of Australia's diplomatic and security apparatuses and understand why whiteness and belonging within the 'west' are so central to the Australian identity. To belong among the sea of islands, Australia must dismantle its quixotic imagined armour of continental invulnerability (Weatherill, 2025: 44), and embrace the potential of an island identity and the relationality with friends, neighbours, and the environment this brings The longer this is avoided, the harder it becomes. The risk is these logics go on to permeate universities, schools, and wider civil society to the point that these pernicious logics are so widely accepted and legitimised that they become fused with permanency. As a white, male, employed academic, I exist in a position of immense privilege and power and can therefore claim very little prescriptive authority to dictate what needs to be done or how to do it; especially in relation to Indigenous Australian affairs and the long struggle towards decolonisation. However, the Australian state, as it stands, encompasses both the colonised and colonisers—the resisters and survivors, and those who perpetrated or benefited from perpetration. How we reckon with this in a way that values Indigenous culture without essentialising or reifying it, how we reconcile the genocidal actions the nation-state was constructed on, and how we understand our role in exported colonial horrors across the Pacific—this is what will shape the identity and narrative of Australia into the next decades. While recent events, such as the failed referendum on an Indigenous voice to parliament and the closing of the truth-telling commission in Queensland suggest there is a very long road ahead (Bray and Nakata, 2026; Stanford, 2024), it is a road that must be walked if Australia is to re-weave an identity that it can sit comfortably with, both domestically and within the Pacific. Clearly, this is an ambitious call; however, some green shoots suggest there is possibility here.

Upon her government's re-election in 2025, Foreign Minister Wong embarked on a multi-country Pacific trip. At the first stop in Fiji, Wong was asked about the role Australia might play in the region after the retreat of the US and gutting of USAID under the Trump Administration (Moore, 2025). Wong's response was striking in how she situated both Australia's role and its location. In what may potentially have been a bout of self-reflection, Wong said that Australia was 'not a superpower, but we are a committed, constant member of the Pacific family' (Wong and

Thistlethwaite, 2025). While critiques in the past have centred on Australia's positioning as a sort of regional superpower and on its tendency to filter in and out of the Pacific depending on priorities at the time, perhaps this could now signal a shift towards a more lasting recognition of Australia's place as just one of the islands in the sea.

Conclusion

If we accept that 'continents do not exist, metaphysically speaking' and 'it is islands all the way up, islands all the way down,' then Australia should let go of its continental fantasies and embrace its place as an island in the great sea of Oceania. This would entail living as if one were on an island, with precious ecosystems and finite resources. To live long and well, we would need to take care; care for plants, animals, the land, the water, and most importantly, of others. In this way, island becomes a verb, a stand-in for the shifts in ideology, identity, norms, and practices this change entails. While this would benefit the Pacific implicitly, the greatest benefit would likely be for Australia. After all, as the historical identity narratives traced here show, it is more than likely that Australia needs the Pacific more than the Pacific needs Australia.

Here, I have laid out two main claims. The first argument is that historical events have led to the layered construction of an Australian identity that is deeply rooted in colonial and patriarchal logics. This means that despite rhetorical shifts towards a language of partnership and family, inertia and path dependency in Australia's identity and strategic culture lead to a situation where the Pacific is still perceived as somewhere that needs to be controlled. This is not simply for traditional security reasons, however, but also to appease the deep-seated aspects of the Australian state identity as an isolated outpost of the West that is tasked with custodianship of its immediate region. As Teaiwa suggests, to uncouple these articulations of self-identity and regional control is not as simple as unhooking a trailer; it is more akin to a dislocation or amputation (2017).

However, my second claim is that this is not to say that it is impossible and certainly not that we should give up. As scholars, policymakers, practitioners, students, or engaged civil society, we should strive to avoid propagating views of hopelessness or participating in pervasive relationalities of belittlement (Hau'ofa, 1994: 151). Instead, if Australia focused less on its isolation and more on its relationality and islandness, there may be a way forward towards better relationships at home and across Oceania. This could be one small move towards Teaiwa's hope that we might 'turn the energy of the island inside out,' and '"island" the world!' (2022).

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Notes

1. For a discussion of what relationality means, both within practices of IR and Pacific communities (McNeill-Stowers et al., 2026).
2. For commentary and critiques on Asia-Pacific framings (Hau'ofa, 1998; Wilson, 2000) for those on Indo-Pacific (Alatas, 2021; Medcalf, 2014; Wallis and Batley, 2020).
3. For why the Falepili Union treaty is more complex than this (Molu and Moore, 2026).

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