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MANUSCRIPT

Large Ocean States: Pacific Regionalism and Climate Security in a New Era of Geostrategic Competition

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Abstract

This article explores the geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on independent Pacific island states. In narratives of great power politics, Pacific island countries tend to be portrayed as small, isolated, and vulnerable. In recent times, however, Pacific states have asserted an alternative narrative of their place in the world. Drawing on cultural and economic connections with the ocean, they have sought to reframe their identity as *large ocean states* with sovereign rights over a huge swathe of the earth's surface—an area they have labelled the '*Blue Pacific*'. Island leaders have also expressed a willingness to pursue collective diplomacy in the face of challenges like climate change and ocean management. This article also considers the role of Australia in the region. Australia is the largest member of the Pacific Islands Forum, yet remains an ambiguous actor in the *Blue Pacific*. Australian engagement is ultimately driven by a desire to maintain influence and to deny the islands to other powers. Concerned about a more powerful China, and with an eye to the developments in the broader Indo-Pacific region, Australia has launched a Pacific 'Step Up' intended to reaffirm Australia as a security partner of choice for Pacific island states. Australia's approach is problematic as it tends to prioritise Australia's own security interests, and comprises for the most part unilateral initiatives developed in Canberra. These concerns notwithstanding, if Australia is to achieve its security ambitions in the region, policymakers will need to better understand and take seriously the *Blue Pacific* narrative and the security agenda it sets out.

Keywords Blue Pacific · Pacific islands · Regionalism · Climate change · Indo-Pacific

This article explores the contemporary geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on the 14 independent Pacific island states. The article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of regional geopolitics. Instead, it focuses on strategies

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that Pacific island states have deployed to pursue their interests. Often portrayed as small, isolated, and vulnerable, Pacific island states have asserted an alternative narrative of their place in the world. Drawing on cultural and economic connections with and across the ocean, they have pursued collective diplomacy intended to gain recognition as large ocean states rather than small island states. Today, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Pacific nations have sovereign rights over a large swathe of the earth's surface, which are codified in their large maritime Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Since 2017, Pacific island leaders have expressed a willingness to work together as the *Blue Pacific*, to pursue common interests, particularly in the face of shared challenges such as climate change and increasing geostrategic rivalry in their ocean. This article contextualises the *Blue Pacific* as the latest iteration of a history of active and successful indigenous Pacific regionalism.

While focussing on the *Blue Pacific* narrative, this article also considers Australia's new security agenda in the Pacific. As the largest aid donor to Pacific island states and a key security partner, Australia has recently renewed engagement with Pacific countries through a new foreign policy initiative: the 'Pacific Step Up'. The Pacific Step Up is driven primarily by Australian strategic imperatives, especially concern that China is developing greater influence in the region and, most-pointedly, that Beijing may leverage infrastructure lending to island governments to establish a naval base in the Pacific. Canberra hopes to shore up influence in what it regards as its 'sphere of influence', and to more closely integrate Pacific island states into Australian economic and security institutions [13]. This article argues Australia's Pacific Step Up is problematic, because it is comprised for the most part of initiatives that are designed in Canberra and reflect Australia's own concerns. This approach pays insufficient attention to Pacific-led processes of regional cooperation. In the post-colonial period, Pacific regionalism has developed its own guiding ideas, shared norms, and even regional sources of international law—all of which are important to Pacific island countries. This form of Pacific regionalism, manifested in the contemporary *Blue Pacific* narrative, is largely absent from Australia's Pacific Step Up, which contributes to perceptions the Step Up is something done 'for or to the Pacific, not with it' [39]. Driven as it is by Australia's own strategic anxieties, the Step Up also downplays the unique security concerns of Pacific island governments themselves. Most pointedly, the Step Up does little to address the issue of climate change, considered by island states to be their most pressing security threat.

This article is in four parts. Part one considers the narrative of the *Blue Pacific*, explaining that collective diplomacy in the Pacific draws from a shared narrative of oceanic identity to negotiate international challenges. Part two explains that Pacific island states view climate change as the single greatest threat to the *Blue Pacific* and have pursued collective diplomacy to shape global efforts to reduce emissions. Part three explains that the USA, and allies like Australia, tends to position the Pacific within a broader narrative of the 'Indo-Pacific'. Maritime competition between the USA and China has increasingly meant both the Indian and Pacific Oceans are considered a single interconnected theatre of strategic rivalry. For its part, China has also positioned Pacific island countries as part of a 'Maritime Silk Road', a geographically amorphous extension of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' [25]. The

strategic narratives of both the 'Indo-Pacific' and the 'Maritime Silk Road' obscure the unique concerns and interests of states in the *Blue Pacific*. The fourth and final section considers Australia's Pacific Step Up in detail. It suggests Australia has an ambiguous relationship with Pacific regionalism, and that Australia's approach to the region would be strengthened if policymakers engaged more closely with the security concerns of the *Blue Pacific*.

The *Blue Pacific* Narrative: Indigenous Regionalism in the World's Largest Ocean

From 'Small Islands in a Far Sea' to the 'Blue Pacific'

To Australia's north and east lies a vast maritime region comprised of 14 independent nation states. As one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions on earth, it contains hundreds of societies spread across an area of ocean larger than continental Africa. In recent times, Pacific island leaders have developed a new narrative for their maritime region, which they have recast as the *Blue Pacific*. Island leaders have endorsed 'a long-term foreign policy commitment to act as one Blue Continent' and have agreed to develop a shared '2050 Strategy for the *Blue Pacific*' [45] (Fig. 1).

Understanding the political significance of the *Blue Pacific* narrative requires an appreciation of Pacific cultural connections to the ocean, and the ways those connections contrast with a bias toward the terrestrial in other parts of the world. In the Western cultural imagination, the ocean tends to be conceived as a blue 'void'—an unpeopled and lawless space between the terrestrial spaces that *really* matter [60].

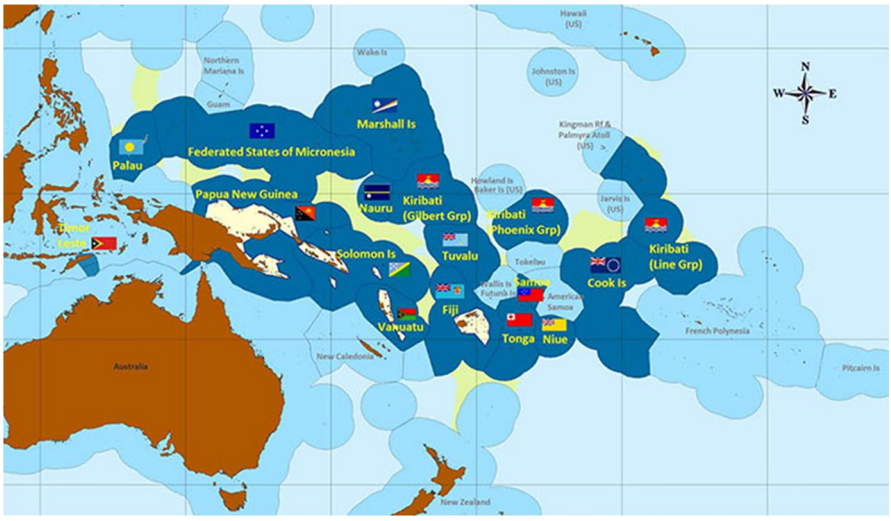

Fig. 1 The *Blue Pacific*—Exclusive Economic Zones of 14 independent Pacific island countries

Indeed, norms of international law originating in Europe and developed over centuries hold that nation states have exclusive sovereignty tied to defined areas *on land*, and/or in waters immediately adjacent to land masses. In this rendering, the open ocean is imagined as a form of *aqua nullius*: a space across which navies might roam, and merchant ships might travel unhindered, and over which no one holds exclusive control. By contrast, Pacific islanders have a different conception of their place in the world, one defined by enduring cultural, economic, and political connections with and across the ocean. The Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa describes Pacific islanders as amongst the 'proportion of Earth's total human population who can be truly referred to as Oceanic Peoples, having developed a shared pan-oceanic cultural heritage based on centuries of isolation from continental cultures [21, p. 404]. More recently, when former Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi introduced the *Blue Pacific* narrative at the United Nations in New York in 2017, he explained:

> The Pacific Ocean has provided our island communities their cultural and historical identity since time immemorial. It has been the major influence in the history of Pacific Island communities. Throughout the region, customary association with the sea forms the basis of present-day social structures, livelihoods and tenure systems and traditional systems of stewardship governing its use. Pacific leaders urge the world to recognise the inseparable link between our ocean, seas and Pacific island peoples: their values, traditional practices and spiritual connection [29].

For centuries, the Pacific has also existed as an imagined geography in Western narratives, though for much of that time conceived as the 'South Seas', or the 'South Pacific'. From the moment European vessels first entered the world's largest ocean, Pacific islands were understood as small and isolated places, months of perilous sail away from Western capitals. As Hau'ofa explains, 'continental men', influenced by their bias toward the terrestrial, tended to see only 'small islands in a far sea', and did not appreciate that Pacific peoples in fact live in a vast and interconnected, 'sea of islands' [22, p. 153]. More than semantics, Hau'ofa's distinction is a profound reminder that the social construction of 'other' places and peoples in Western discourse has been imbricated with the exercise of power, especially during the colonial era, but also in contemporary international relations. The seminal theorist of the Western construction of the 'Other' is Edward Said, who drew on Foucault in his classic study of Orientalism [53] to describe the way that European societies have imagined 'the East' (primarily the Middle East) in literary and cultural production. Said argued the social construction of places is a form of 'imaginative geography'—a particular form of narrative representation that has been inseparably linked with imperial interventionism. Said's academic legacy has been immense. Several scholars have borrowed from his insights to explore the construction of self/Other and the politics of representation in the global South and in Asia (see for example [9, 46]). Numerous scholars have considered the representation of Pacific island societies in Western discourse (see for example [22, 24, 65], and [26]). More than any other scholar, Greg Fry has applied Said's insights to interrogate the production of narratives and 'images' of the South Pacific, with a particular focus on representations of

the Pacific in the 'Australian imagination' [18, p. 306]. Fry points out that, over the past 200 years, influential Australians have variously stereotyped Pacific islanders as 'savages', 'noble savages', and even 'children', and have portrayed the Pacific as a 'defence shield', a region that is a 'frontier', 'vulnerable', 'empty', or 'unstable' [18]. He suggests these narratives act as framing devices to reinforce and justify intervention in Pacific societies to bring about 'development', 'stability', and 'security' [18]. Fry's latest work provides a sweeping overview of the evolution of Western narratives on the Pacific islands from the eighteenth century to the present day, and suggests that these narrative framings have been deployed as a means of 'managing' diverse Pacific island societies [17].

In the context of renewed great power competition in the Pacific Ocean, Pacific island states find themselves understood, by traditional powers, as a subregion of a broader geographical frame that is increasingly favoured in Canberra and Washington, Wellington, and Tokyo, that of the 'Indo-Pacific' [33]. While this narrative framing has a maritime dimension—relating as it does to the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans—it is still one in which terrestrial spaces are the ones that really *matter*, in which great powers, on the continents of Asia and North America, approach maritime spaces (and the island and archipelagos in them) as a field across which they might project, or deny, military power. In this rendering, Pacific islands become waystations or obstacles in the naval strategies of others. Thus, in much of the recent debate on power shifts from the USA to China, the Pacific islands have become 'mere backdrop' to the grand strategy of others [46, p. 390]. Yet, as this article explains, it remains critically important to attend to local context, and to appreciate Pacific island states *on their own terms*, not least because divergent ways of understanding the region—and of perceiving and responding to threats—can lead to missed opportunities for regional engagement and cooperation. This article adds to the debate by exploring contemporary narratives of Pacific regionalism, particularly the attempt by island leaders to articulate *their own* 'counter-regional' narrative, by asserting their own status, individually as 'large ocean states' and collectively as the *Blue Pacific*.

Recent narratives of the *Blue Pacific* draw from a well-spring of literature and art in the Pacific that has, in the decades since independence, revived pre-colonial culture and custom and emphasised pan-Pacific identities. Since the 1970s in particular, key works by Pacific islander poets, novelists, musicians, visual artists, choreographers, and dancers have sought to 'destabilise myths of island isolation' and to assert a 'transoceanic imaginary' rooted in ocean voyaging and maritime kinship connections [12, p. 2]. Seminal texts in this tradition include the 1976 essay 'Towards a New Oceania', by Samoan novelist Albert Wendt [69], the essays 'Our Sea of Islands' [21] and 'The Ocean in Us' [22] by Epeli Hau'ofa, and writings by poet and academic Teresia Teaiwa, who explained: 'we sweat and cry salt water, so we know the ocean is really in our blood' (cited in [21], p. 392). More recent works include those of Katerina Teaiwa [63, 64], Cresantia Koya [27], and Karin Amimoto-Ingersoll [1]. This cultural production—artistic, literary, and academic—has had a significant influence on political forms of regionalism. As Greg Fry explains, the influential essays of Wendt and Hau'ofa especially have provided inspiration for a unique Pacific regionalism guided by 'the unifying

links of the past—the epic ocean voyages, the exchange relationships and the unifying Pacific Ocean'[17, p. 15].

A Pacific cultural renaissance in the decades following independence emphasised indigenous agency and technology. Ocean-going sailing canoes, for example, became a common motif and a powerful metaphor for cultural sovereignty across the world's largest ocean. Prior to the colonial era, ocean-going vessels, like the *vaka* of Polynesia and the *drua* of Fiji, were key to political power over maritime domains. Indeed, European sailors were often surprised by the sailing technology of Pacific islanders and marvelled at Pacific ships built without metal, which carried hundreds, and were faster and more easily manoeuvered than their own [41, p. 5]. Famed British navigator James Cook admired the navigational abilities of Polynesians, and described Polynesian society as 'by far the most extensive nation on earth' [10, p. 231]. During the era of colonisation by missionaries and colonial administrations, connections across the ocean became more limited as inter-island travel was discouraged or banned outright. Following the Second World War, Pacific leaders reclaimed their status as custodians of a vast 'maritime continent' [40]. Fiji's first prime minister Ratu Kamisese Mara argued connections severed by colonialism needed to be reforged, and that Pacific regionalism ought to be guided by the norms and sensibilities of a 'Pacific Way' [17, p. 14]. This became a key narrative, guiding Pacific collective diplomacy on issues like decolonisation and shared ocean management [35]. Faced with new pressures in the twenty-first century, including geostrategic competition and the impacts of climate change, Pacific island leaders are again asserting a regional narrative, that of shared stewardship of the *Blue Pacific*.

The Promises of Pacific Regionalism

Pacific regionalism has tended to be deployed as a means of negotiating pressures to conform to external ideas about trade, economics, governance, and security. As Fry [17, p. 11] explains, regionalism has been embraced by island leaders not as a means to achieve market efficiencies or to pursue deeper integration, as per the model of regionalism in Europe, but rather to achieve political ends. Pacific regionalism has served as an 'arena for negotiating globalisation, as a source of regional governance through agreed norms, as a regional political community, and as a diplomatic bloc' [17, p. 21]. The former secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, argued the contemporary narrative of the *Blue Pacific* draws from 'a rich history of thinking about the possibilities of an Oceania continent' [62]. In a 2018 speech delivered in Canberra, she explained:

> In essence all of these appeals to Oceania, of who we are, respond to an awareness of the missed potential of our ocean continent, or as Hau'ofa describes it, the way the hoped-for era of autonomy following political independence has not materialised. In response they all seek to reframe the region away from the enduring narrative of small, isolated and fragile islands, to a narrative of a large, connected and strategically important ocean continent [62].

The Pacific Islands Forum, a key site Pacific diplomacy, was itself founded as a means of gaining greater control of the regional diplomatic agenda. Originally called the South Pacific Forum, it was formed in response to limitations at the South Pacific Commission (SPC), a regional institution established in the aftermath of the WWII to foster regional cooperation *between colonial powers*. Pacific islanders had no decision-making powers within SPC, and pressing political matters, such as decolonisation and nuclear weapons testing, were excluded from the Commission's remit. This constraint proved a primary motivation for establishing the South Pacific Forum.

From the outset, the Forum helped Pacific island states secure sovereign rights over ocean spaces [4]. At the first Forum meet, island leaders declared their unique connection to the ocean 'merited special consideration in the recognition of territorial claims' during Law of the Sea negotiations at the UN [59]. During those UN negotiations, island states diverged from land-centred, legal norms to assert identities as countries 'of water interspersed with islands' and to 'claim jurisdiction over a block of ocean, far from any continent' [2]. Working with other coastal states in the global South (and despite opposition from naval powers like the USA and Britain), Pacific island countries secured recognition of large Exclusive Economic Zones in the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. This meant that island states suddenly became *large ocean states* and gained control of significant marine resources, including one of the world's largest tuna fishery and valuable reserves of seabed minerals. Today, the collective Exclusive Economic Zone of Pacific island states comprises around 20% of the world's ocean that is under national jurisdiction [20]. Over the decades since UNCLOS was negotiated, island states have looked to give substance to their traditional understanding of their maritime domain. At a practical level, they have developed joint management strategies for their Exclusive Economic Zones, with the aim of deriving greater economic returns from their marine resources. The Pacific is the source of more than 60% of the world's tuna catch, and the region's tuna fishery is worth $US5.8billion [20]. However, most of this tuna is caught by the fishing fleets of distant nations. In recent times, island states have coordinated *regional* tuna fishery access conditions, across national jurisdictions, and by doing so have dramatically improved returns [16]. Today, fishing access fees provide between 10 and 60% of all government revenue for six Pacific nations [20].

Working together through the auspices of the *Blue Pacific*, Pacific island states have sought to influence global cooperation on ocean management. For example, Pacific island states successfully championed an ocean goal as part of the UN's 2030 *Sustainable Development Goals*, arguing that, absent a stand-alone ocean goal, there would be a terrestrial bias in the UN's vision for sustainable development [50]. Subsequently, Fiji co-hosted the inaugural United Nations Ocean Conference in 2017, and Fiji's ambassador to the UN, Peter Thomson, was appointed UN Special Envoy for the Ocean. Today, Pacific island states are active in simultaneous UN negotiations to develop a new management regime for the high seas (negotiations at the UN are ongoing for a treaty to manage Biodiversity in Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction), and to govern seabed mining in international waters (negotiations are ongoing at the International Seabed Authority to develop an 'exploitation code'—a legal framework that would enable deep sea mining in waters beyond national

jurisdiction). At the UN, island states have developed regional positions through the auspices of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (P-SIDS) grouping [28]. Coordination has also been improved through the establishment (in 2010) of a new 'Pacific Ocean Commissioner' [49].

Finally, Pacific leaders are working together to secure the outer boundaries of the *Blue Pacific* continent in the face of global warming. Island governments hope to make 'permanent' the outer edges of their maritime Exclusive Economic Zones, using fixed coordinates to demarcate those boundaries rather than coastal features of the islands themselves, which are likely to shrink as sea levels rise [15]. As former Pacific Islands Forum secretary general, Dame Meg Taylor told Australian media in 2018: 'island leaders are taking very seriously the demarcation of the maritime boundaries and are making sure all EEZs are finalised' [37]. She explained:

> Look, right back in the early days, before the formation of the South Pacific Commission, in the [19]40's, there was an articulation about the 'seventh continent'. Just because it is water, doesn't mean it doesn't have legal boundaries, if we can secure them [37].

In 2021, Pacific Islands Forum leaders issued a shared 'declaration on preserving maritime zones in the face of climate change–related sea-level rise' [43] which declared Pacific states intend to maintain their existing EEZ's 'without reduction' notwithstanding expected sea-level rise.

Climate Security in the *Blue Pacific*

Pacific island leaders have, for decades, been adamant that the greatest threat to the *Blue Pacific* is that of climate change. When a scientific consensus on the issue emerged in the late 1980s, Pacific leaders declared that 'global warming and sea-level rise were the most serious environmental threats' and that 'the cultural, economic, and physical survival of Pacific nations is at great risk' [58]. Pacific leaders argue that climate change constitutes a first-order threat to their security, particularly for atoll island states who face the prospect of inundation and lost territory as sea levels rise [61]. As Marshall Islands foreign minister, Tony De Brum told the UN Security Council in 2013, 'in whose warped world is the potential loss of a country not a threat to international peace and security?' [11]. In 2018, Pacific leaders issued a regional security declaration reaffirming climate change is 'the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific' [44].

Pacific island states have pressed for global ambition to tackle climate change. Indeed, the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific* has been crucially important for global cooperation on climate. Since 1991, Pacific island states have developed common regional positions and taken them to climate negotiations at the United Nations. Pacific island states have also worked with island countries in the Caribbean and Indian Oceans, together forming an 'Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)' that represents 20% of UN membership. By aggregating common positions, island states have disproportionately shaped international cooperation to reduce emissions [8, 31, 52]. Most significantly, Pacific diplomacy was important for securing for the 2015

Paris Agreement. By 2015, UN climate negotiations had long been stalled by arguments about who was most responsible for climate change and how much finance would be provided to poorer nations to help deal with its impacts. In the months and years leading up to the Paris climate talks however, Marshall Islands foreign minister Tony de Brum carefully stitched together a coalition of countries across traditional negotiating blocs. During the Paris talks, the Marshall Islands-led 'High Ambition Coalition' swelled to more than 100 countries and was crucial for sealing the first truly global climate treaty. This was acknowledged by US President Barack Obama when he met with Pacific leaders in Hawaii in late 2016. He explained 'we could not have gotten a Paris Agreement without the incredible efforts and hard work of the island nations' [76].

Increasingly, much of the world shares the Pacific's perception of climate change as a first-order security threat. In early 2021, Britain's prime minister Boris Johnson told the UN Security Council that 'it is absolutely clear that climate change is a threat to our collective security and the security of our nations' [19]. US President Joseph Biden sees climate change as an existential threat, arguing: 'if we don't get this right, nothing else will matter' [6]. In one of his first moves as president, Biden issued an executive order 'putting the climate crisis at the centre of US foreign policy and national security' [74]. Under the Paris Agreement, all countries are required to set more ambitious climate targets every five years, and it is by this means they will decarbonise the global economy by the middle of this century. So far, the signs are good. Major economies are setting new, more ambitious, targets to reduce emissions. More than 120 countries have also pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. Collectively, these pledges send a powerful signal the world is starting to take the threat of climate change seriously. There is hope yet for stabilising the Earth's climate system.

Climate change is not the only security issue facing the *Blue Pacific*. In recent times, external powers have become interested in the Pacific in the context of more 'traditional' security concerns—especially a growing geostrategic rivalry between the USA and China—which has seen Pacific island countries framed by new narratives that of the 'Indo-Pacific' and the 'Maritime Silk Road' [25, 71]. These are considered below.

The *Blue Pacific*, the Indo-Pacific, and the Maritime Silk Road

For 75 years following the end of the Second World War, the USA has been an unrivalled naval power in the Pacific Ocean. Today, however, the distribution of power is beginning to shift, driven especially by China's rapid economic growth and investment in military capabilities. The Australian treasury estimates China's economy will be nearly double the size of the US economy by 2030 [13]. With increased economic clout, China has invested in a multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative, which entails massive public finance for infrastructure projects abroad (ports, roads, railway, and energy) which improve connectivity with China's own economy. China is also modernising its navy, and developing an ocean-going blue-water fleet [51]. In response, the USA has developed a more competitive posture toward Beijing and

is working with allies and partners in the Indian and Pacific Ocean to circumscribe China's rise. In this context, Pacific island states find themselves repositioned by the USA and its allies as a geographic subset within broader narratives of the 'Indo-Pacific'. For its part, China has recast its own initiatives in the Pacific as part of a new narrative of the 'Maritime Silk Road'. Both these narratives of the Pacific maritime region threaten to overshadow the unique concerns of the *Blue Pacific* [26].

A renewed emphasis on sea power is again shaping international affairs in the Pacific Ocean. At issue are certain 'brute facts' that have unsettled the maritime order—particularly China's investment in Anti-Access Area Denial capabilities such as missiles and radar tracking stations. China has also built artificial islands on disputed reefs and shoals in the South China Sea and fortified some of them with anti-ship cruise missiles, surface to air missiles and equipment designed to jam military communications [48]. These developments have undermined US naval predominance in parts of the western Pacific Ocean. The USA has responded by signalling that it intends to remain a Pacific power, and by 'rebalancing' some of its forces from elsewhere in the world as part of a pivot that has evolved into an 'Indo-Pacific' strategy that encompasses both the Pacific and Indian Oceans [46]. Emblematic of this shift, the US Pacific Command—based in Hawaii—has been renamed the Indo-Pacific Command. The US' Indo-Pacific strategy entails greater cooperation amongst US allies and partners in the region, especially through the 'Quadrilateral Security Dialogue' between the USA, Japan, Australia, and India. By working together with these maritime democracies, each of which possesses naval capabilities of their own, the US seeks to counter-balance China and to renew commitment to existing rules and norms of regional order (Fig. 2).

The formal Indo-Pacific strategies of the USA and its allies tend to be focussed on balancing China, and emphasise relations with states in Asia, with only a limited focus on Pacific island countries themselves [73, 75]. While the naval dimensions of the US-China rivalry centre on developments in the South China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait, 'spillover' effects are also reshaping political life in the Pacific islands. The most direct impacts are occurring in Guam, a US territory that is central to the US pivot to the region, and which has seen intensified militarisation in recent years [55, 71]. New US military assets have also been deployed to Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, the Northern Marianas Islands, Wake Islands, and Johnston Atoll. The USA is also partnering with Australia to develop a new naval base at Manus Island, in Papua New Guinea, and is rotating troops through the Australian port of Darwin [56]. The USA has also entered a new AUKUS trilateral security agreement with Australia and the UK, which will see Australia develop nuclear-powered submarines [16]. More broadly, US allies and partners—including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, France, and even the UK—have all developed new economic and diplomatic strategies for the Pacific islands [34, 36]. Australia, for example, worried that China could leverage infrastructure lending to establish a military base in the Pacific, has launched a 'Pacific Step Up' intended to reaffirm Australia as a security partner of choice for Pacific island countries (see further below).

For its part, China has also adopted a new narrative form of 'geostrategic mapping' that encompasses the Pacific islands [25, p. 47]. For decades, China's primary strategic interest in the Pacific has been a competition with Taiwan for diplomatic

Fig. 2 The 'Indo-Pacific'

recognition by island governments [67, p. 48]. In recent years, however, China's interests in the region have grown. Notably, a range of Chinese infrastructure projects in the Pacific—some financed by the state, some pursued by state-owned enterprises—have been considered part of a 'southern expansion' of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [71, p. 87]. The BRI includes a 'twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road' intended to build economic connectivity between China and maritime nations in South-East Asia, the Indian subcontinent, east Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe. Chinese maps issued in 2015 extended the reach of the Maritime Silk Road to include parts of the South Pacific [7, pp. 226–227]. Since 2015, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Kiribati, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, and Niue have all signed Memorandums of Understanding to cooperate through the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping attended the 2018 APEC meeting in Port Moresby, where he also signed 'strategic partnerships' with leaders of the Pacific island countries that recognise Beijing [67, p. 48].

Both the 'Maritime Silk Road' and the Indo-Pacific narrative—concerned as they are with geoeconomics and hard power competition—risk obscuring the unique concerns and interests of the *Blue Pacific.* Pacific island leaders are uncomfortable with their ocean being framed as a 'theatre' or 'basin' for great power rivalry. These depictions tend to relegate Pacific island states to the status of potential naval bases or stationary aircraft carriers, essentially 'pawns in a power play-off by larger states' [38]. Island leaders are also concerned that their unique interests, and the distinct norms and guiding ideas of Pacific regionalism, should not be eroded in broader

framings of the region. In 2018, then Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi highlighted the 'real risk of privileging Indo over the Pacific' in the Indo-Pacific narrative [29]. Island countries have responded to renewed geostrategic competition in the Pacific Ocean by reasserting their collective identity as the *Blue Pacific* and leveraging renewed great power engagement to focus on security concerns of their own, particularly those relating to climate change. The final section of this article considers these dynamics and explores Australia's relationship with the *Blue Pacific*.

Australia's Pacific Step Up and the *Blue Pacific*

Australia has an ambiguous relationship with the *Blue Pacific*. To be sure, Australia is the most powerful and wealthy member of the Pacific Islands Forum. Australia has been the largest provider of development aid to Pacific countries for the whole of the post-independence period. Australia is also an indispensable Pacific nation in times of major disasters, ready to provide assistance to communities struck by monster cyclones—increasingly a feature of life in the region. But an ambivalence remains. Australia is not *really* a Pacific country. Connections with, and across, the Pacific Ocean are not central to Australian identity in the same way they are for island countries in the *Blue Pacific*. Australia is often described as a 'big brother' to island countries: part of the Pacific family by geography and history but set apart by wealth and national identity. Australians themselves are not sure if Australia is a Pacific country. A 2010 poll from the Lowy Institute found that just 31% of Australians thought the country was part of the Pacific [28]. With its Polynesian heritage, New Zealand has a greater claim to cultural connection with the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand are close allies, and consult closely on their engagement with Pacific island states. For the most part, they pursue a shared approach, but New Zealand is a significant player in the region in its own right and has sought to differentiate its own 'Pacific Reset'—launched in 2018—from Australia's more security focussed 'Step Up' [68]. New Zealand's approach to climate change, and attitude toward nuclear presence in the region, is closer to that of most Pacific island governments.

For Australia, engagement with Pacific island countries is driven above all by a strategic imperative to maintain political influence, and to deny the islands to other powers [72, p. 5]. In the broader context of the Australia-US alliance, Pacific island states are understood as part of Australia's sphere of influence. Security relations are shaped by the ANZUS treaty, but also by an ancillary Australia-US naval cooperation agreement—the 1951 Radford Collins agreement—which deems Australia responsible for maritime security in the southwest Pacific. This results in a curious state of affairs. Australia views itself as a regional leader, yet its identity as part of the *Blue Pacific* remains uncertain. To compound matters, Australia's attention span is short, and engagement with Pacific island nations tends to be episodic, driven by periodic crises that are understood to require Australian intervention, like the civil war in Bougainville in the 1990s, unrest in the Solomon Islands which began

in 1998, or coups in Fiji in the early 2000s [54]. Between periodic crises, Canberra tends to forget the Pacific again.

A new chapter of Australia's episodic attention to the Pacific has been written in recent years. Again, perceived security threats were the catalyst, especially the prospect of China leveraging infrastructure loans to establish a military base. In 2018, then prime minister Malcolm Turnbull raised the alarm, explaining 'we would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific Island countries and neighbours of ours' [66]. Concern about growing Chinese presence underpinned a new foreign policy initiative—the Pacific Step Up—which has sought to integrate Pacific states into Australia's economic and security institutions and complements broader Indo-Pacific strategies of the USA and its allies. The Pacific Step Up has a significant military dimension, including a new naval base on Manus Island; a new rotational Australian Defence Force mobile training force for the Pacific; and an increase in defence and security spending in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji [34], pp. 54–55]. Australia is also funding the development of a regional military facility in Fiji that will serve as a hub and training camp for peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief operations. Canberra also established a new Australia-Pacific Security College to train Pacific officials to develop new national security strategies, and a Pacific Fusion Centre to provide advice to Pacific officials on maritime security. Economic initiatives associated with the Pacific Step Up—like a new infrastructure financing facility for the Pacific—were also designed to help Pacific countries avoid 'debt-trap-diplomacy' that Australian analysts worry might be associated with some Chinese infrastructure projects. Finally, the Pacific Step Up was accompanied by a new 'Office of the Pacific', located within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade but intended to coordinate a 'whole-of-government' approach to the Pacific.

Integrating Pacific islands into Australian security institutions is not the same as supporting regionalism in the *Blue Pacific*. While initiatives associated with the Pacific Step Up have for the most part been welcomed by Pacific leaders, many of them are essentially unilateral in nature, driven by Australian security concerns, and key substantive elements have been designed in Canberra. To cement relations with Pacific island countries, more will need to be done to engage with the unique security concerns of the *Blue Pacific* and to develop regional initiatives together with island states, through processes of Pacific regionalism. Differentiating engagement with the *Blue Pacific* from the broader Indo-Pacific narrative (which is so transparently focussed on countering China) would likely be more productive. As Michael Wesley argues: 'by adopting a Blue Pacific rather than a Cold War framing, Australia will decrease perceptions of its apartness and neo-colonial impulses, and increase its influence' [70].

Moreover, there continues to be a mismatch in strategic priorities between Australia and Pacific countries. While island leaders understand the climate crisis as a first-order threat to their security, Australia does not yet see it in the same way. Indeed, Australia is one of the world's largest exporters of coal and gas, and policymakers in Canberra tend to see national interests tied to exports of fossil fuels to a growing Asia [57]. Canberra's reluctance to acknowledge the existential threat that global warming poses for island states, while continuing to promote coal, has

been felt as an affront by a generation of Pacific leaders. This divergence of security priorities threatens to undermine Australia's Pacific Step Up. As then Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga explained in 2019: 'we cannot be regional partners under this Step Up initiative—genuine and durable partners—unless the government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change' [14].

Increasingly, Australia is isolated from the international consensus on climate change. Key trading partners and security allies are, like Pacific island countries, looking for Australia to do more to reduce emissions, and to move away from promoting fossil fuels. Climate change is also a direct threat to Australia's own national security [5]. The threat was underscored by unprecedented large-scale bushfires over the 2019–2020 fire season [32]. Increasingly, Australia's security and prosperity are linked with the opportunities presented by a global shift away from carbon. Australia is well placed to take advantage of surging demand for renewable energy and alternatives to emission-intensive products.

More ambitious climate policy would also enable a reset of Australia's Pacific strategy, and help cement Australia's place as a security partner of choice for Pacific countries. As Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama has recently said, strengthening climate policy 'will make strong friendships' in the region [42]. If Australia does take meaningful action on climate change, it could more readily embrace the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific*. Working with Pacific island states to pursue climate diplomacy would strengthen Australia's own credentials as a regional power and do much to enhance its image on the global stage.

Conclusion

This article has considered the contemporary geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean, with a focus on the agency and diplomacy of 14 independent Pacific island nations who have developed a narrative for themselves, as large ocean states in the *Blue Pacific.* This contemporary expression of regional identity draws on a shared cultural affinity with the ocean, which predates any European presence in the Pacific and has been reinforced by recognition, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, of sovereign rights across ocean spaces. As this article explains, the *Blue Pacific* is a regional narrative that has been deployed by Pacific island states to negotiate and manage impinging global pressures.

Today, indigenous Pacific regionalism continues to be an important political phenomenon, guided by foundational ideas about self-determination, by key diplomatic norms of consultation and consensus building, and by pan-Pacific cultural connections. The *Blue Pacific* narrative continues to guide Pacific regionalism, and Pacific island states continue to draw from their pan-Pacific identity to pursue collective diplomacy. Island states are currently preparing a 2050 strategy for the *Blue Pacific*, a long-term vision to work together as one maritime region.

This article has also considered Australia's role in the Pacific. It suggests Australian engagement is driven by a desire to maintain influence and deny the islands to other powers. However, a limited engagement with the unique security concerns and interests of independent island countries stymies warmer relations. Most pointedly,

Australia's reluctance to tackle climate change hampers its strategic ambition in the region. Efforts to work *with* Pacific island states, guided by uniquely Pacific norms of diplomacy, would do much to improve relations. Furthermore, supporting the collective diplomacy of the *Blue Pacific* would enhance Australia's own soft power. Perhaps most importantly, if Australian policymakers take steps to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and pursue diplomatic strategy to promote global action on climate change, they would find Pacific island states to be powerful allies.

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