



Pacific Regionalism

Understanding the Pacific's regional architecture

Introduction

Pacific regionalism has been talked about in many forms for more than 50 years. However, for the first time some critics believe it is close to a reality with the Framework for Pacific Regionalism that was adopted by Pacific leaders at the 2014 Pacific Islands Forum meeting. With Dame Meg Taylor at the head of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, comprehensive change is now looking more likely. This factsheet explores some of the history and takes a look at possible futures which will impact anyone working in the Pacific from now on.

Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

PIF is the most comprehensive regional institution in the Pacific. Its members include Australia, Cook Islands, FSM, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, NZ, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, as well as several observers. PIF emerged in the early 1970's, coinciding with the independence movements of many PICs, as an alternative to the form of regional governance established by the colonial powers at South Seas Commission in 1947. Australia and NZ were invited to join shortly after PIF's establishment, led by Ratu Kamisese Mara of Fiji.

PIC opposition to French nuclear testing, symbolic of imperialism in the Pacific, acted as a rallying point for the new organisation. Mobilised by this issue, PIF successfully enacted a series of international treaties on resource protection and tuna access, prohibitions on fishing and the dumping of radioactive wastes in Pacific waters, as well as placing New Caledonia under the oversight of the UN Decolonisation Committee. Many consider PIF's initial success waned, with the organisation's lack of progress on action against climate change – in many ways this century's equivalent to nuclear testing – illustrative of this.

Currently, PIF is guided by the [Pacific Framework for Regionalism](#). Successor of the largely ineffective [Pacific Plan](#), the Framework is intentionally broad, with PIF undertaking a Pacific-wide consultation in order to establish the Framework's priorities. This consultation

process includes both businesses and the NGO sector, as well as the general public, in line with PIF's commitment to greater inclusivity. While the consultation process is ongoing, Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor has outlined several key priorities on PIF's horizon: climate change, oceans, harnessing the benefits of fisheries and land resources, and economic development. Although welcomed by some, others are critical of this consultation process, with Luamanuvao Winnie Laban of Victoria University noting, in Melanesian Pigini, 'Man tokim, doim' – enough talk, let's get on with it.

Profile: Dame Meg Taylor

PIF announced [Dame Meg Taylor](#) as Secretary General in July 2014. Taylor is the first woman to hold the position; a significant [triumph for gender equity](#) in a region where representation of women in parliaments is the lowest in the world. Taylor was formerly an ambassador for Papua New Guinea, has served as a board member for a number of PNG companies, and most recently worked as a senior official for the World Bank.

Taylor is calling for a renewed focus on regionalism in the Pacific, with her initial focus being to enact the [Framework for Pacific Regionalism](#). For Taylor, the Framework is 'about changing the paradigm of the way development is done in the region, where the leaders of the Pacific are the ones that make the decision as to what are the regional priorities.' Taylor is not alone in her emphasis on Pacific leadership. She is voicing a need felt by many, as some see Australia and New Zealand increasingly treating PIF as an extension of their foreign policy.

Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG)

MSG, comprised of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, has become an effective policy broker for issues of sub-regionalism. Formed in the mid-1980's and reinvigorated in the last decade, MSG has implemented a comprehensive free trade agreement in goods and services, including the movement of skilled labour, achieving a level of economic integration yet to be found in the wider Pacific.



Key events:

[1947 – South Pacific commission established](#)
[1968 – University of the South Pacific established](#)
[1971 – South Pacific Forum \(SPF\) founded](#)
[1981 – South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement](#)
[1985 – South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty](#)
[1986 – Melanesian Spearhead Group \(MSG\) founded](#)
[1990 – Pacific Small Island Developing States Group established](#)
[1991 – Pacific Islands Association of NGOs established](#)
[1993 – MSG Trade Agreement](#)
[2000 – Renaming SPF: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat](#)
[2001 – Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations signed](#)
[2001 – Pacific island Countries Trade Agreement](#)
[2005 – Pacific Plan adopted by Forum leaders](#)
[2009 – Pacer ‘Plus’ negotiations launched](#)
[2010 – Parties to the Nauru agreement office opened](#)
[2013 – Pacific Islands Development Forum established](#)
[2014 – Pacific Framework for Regionalism](#)

While at times viewed as a threat to Pacific-wide regionalism, the [2013 Pacific Plan review](#) found that most leaders perceived MSG as ‘complementary rather than competitive’. The MSG can be understood as reflective of the distinctiveness of the three sub-regions of the Pacific – Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia – and as a true embodiment of the [Melanesia Way](#).

However, MSG is not without support from those outside of Melanesia; for instance, China is heavily invested in establishing the MSG secretariat in Port Vila. MSG faces several challenges, such as the plight of West Papuans, currently governed by Indonesia, yet identifying as Melanesian, with some advocating that the MSG grant them observer status.

Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) and Plus

Economic integration is a key feature of many other regional arrangements world-wide. PACER is a ‘stepping stone’ agreement towards the economic integration of the Pacific region. PACER Plus is using the PACER framework to negotiate a potential free trade agreement between the Forum countries, including the developed economies of Australia and NZ. Launched in 2009, PACER Plus is yet to eventuate; however, it remains the most comprehensive proposal for regional economic integration. See this CID [Factsheet](#) for more on trade agreements in the Pacific.

Pacific Small Island Developing States Group (PSIDS)

[SIDS](#) is a UN grouping of states sharing similar sustainable development challenges, including small population size, limited resources, and remoteness. PSIDS is the sub-grouping for the Pacific, which includes most PICs. In the last five years PSIDSs diplomatic profile has risen considerably, with some now considering PSIDS to be the main platform for representation of Pacific concerns at global level. Part of the diplomatic power of PSIDS is the absence of northern member states, like Australia and NZ, which allows PSIDS the opportunity to participate in southern diplomatic coalitions such as the Alliance of Small Island States.

Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA)

PNA, comprised of PNG, Kiribati, FSM, Solomon Islands, Nauru, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, and Palau, has grown in prominence since the opening of the ‘[tiny but effective](#)’ Majuro-based secretariat in 2010. Self-proclaimed as ‘[Global leaders in tuna conservation and management](#)’, PNA has sought to counter commercial overfishing by addressing the structural imbalances that distant water-fishing nations have long exploited. As an example, PNA negotiated a three-fold increase in the amount the US pays per year to secure fishing access. PNA is illustrative of the strength that sub-regional groupings can tap into; demonstrating just how effective such collective strength can be when dealing with larger, more powerful, northern states.

Profile: Fiji

Post-coup Fiji has responded to its diplomatic isolation, including its 2009 suspensions from PIF, by seeking an alternative route to Pacific regionalism. Fiji has done this through strengthening the non-Forum regional organisations (such as MSG and PSIDS), [condemnation of Australian and NZ ‘undue influence’ in PIF](#), and the controversial founding of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). PIDF was established in 2013 with a platform advocating wider civil society and private sector engagement in development, a focus on climate change, and emphasis on greater PIC leadership. However, despite the lofty rhetoric most PICs remain aligned with the more traditional PIF.

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Additional Resources:

[Recapturing the Spirit of 1971: Towards a New Regional Political Settlement in the Pacific](#)
[Island dreaming: A fresh look at Pacific regionalism](#)
[Pacific Institute of Public Policy](#)

