

Redefining the Pacific? Regionalism Past, Present and Future

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Since 1966, the University of Otago has held an annual Foreign Policy School that has spotlighted international relations topics of special significance to the Pacific. The chapters in this collection — which forms a volume in Ashgate's *International Political Economy of New Regionalisms* series — have their genesis in the 39th Foreign Policy School, which was held in 2004. The contributors are predominantly New Zealand academics, politicians, foreign policy makers and senior public servants, but there are many worthwhile contributions from writers with Pacific backgrounds and experience. From these perspectives, the volume's thirteen chapters provide valuable insights into the history and status of regionalism in the Pacific.

The date of the colloquium goes a substantial way to explain the centrality of specific regional events to many of the contributed chapters. There is detailed discussion, for example, of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which was instigated in 2003 as a cooperative exercise to restore law and order to the Solomons after many years of civil unrest. There is also in-depth consideration of the then nascent Pacific Plan, and security cooperation in the Pacific in the wake of the 'war on terror'. The passage of time has made some of these regional developments seem less extraordinary and a similar volume commissioned today would perhaps give greater prominence to regional controversies regarding trade liberalisation. However, time has not dulled the importance of four general themes that emerge strongly from the editors' panoramic introduction and subsequent authors' detailed analyses.

The first of these is that the Pacific has not yet made a complete transition from colonial rule to full independence. Many Pacific territories formally remain external territories of metropolitan states, namely, France, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. Many others have opted for 'free association' with metropolitan powers, which continue to exert substantial control or influence over their affairs. Still others have attained formal independence but are strongly shaped by their economic dependence on developed states of the Pacific Rim and beyond. As an example of this incomplete transition, the United Nations Special Committee on Decolonization (the 'Special Committee of 24') continues to hold regional meetings in the Pacific to monitor the situation of peoples in non-self-governing territories, especially New Caledonia. This imperfect severance of colonial ties has coloured many aspects of Pacific regional relations.

Another theme of the book is the continuing tension between Pacific Island Countries and metropolitan states for dominance of the Pacific regional agenda. Both Australia and New Zealand are members of the principal political forum in the region — the Pacific Islands Forum — as well as being members of many other regional bodies. Not surprisingly, these positions have sometimes been used to advance the 'global and economic goals of metropolitan powers' rather than

achieve ‘genuine development in the island states’ (p 20). This is especially true of Australia, which has been described as a ‘reluctant Pacific nation’ and which, unlike New Zealand, has never embraced a perception of itself as having strong ties of culture and friendship with Pacific Island Countries. The book documents Australia’s scuttling of a Pacific climate change initiative by five Small Islands States, and its utilisation of Nauru to house refugee claimants offshore as part of a former Australian Government’s ‘Pacific Solution’. More recently, the strong push by Australia and New Zealand for further trade liberalisation — in the face of mounting disquiet among sceptical Pacific countries — raises similar concerns about control of the regional agenda and the interests that regional institutions serve.

The book also discusses the theme of fragmentation of interests among Pacific Island countries, and the concomitant internal divisions and rivalries. In 1988, four Melanesian countries in the Pacific — Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, together with the *Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) of New Caledonia — formed the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) to promote the exchange of Melanesian cultures, traditions and values. The MSG has not necessarily undermined the work of the Pacific Islands Forum, but it has not always been in complete accord with it either. A notable example arose out of the treatment of Fiji following the 2006 coup. In 2009 the Pacific Islands Forum suspended Fiji for its failure to meet a timetable for returning to democracy, but the MSG continued to press for Fiji’s return to the Forum, claiming that the Interim Fiji Government had a clear plan for returning to democracy. Other splintering has occurred from time to time, reflecting the fact that the interests of Pacific Island Countries are not monolithic, even if those countries share much in common.

A final theme that emerges from the contributions to this book is the gradual evolution of Pacific regionalism from a model of cooperation and ‘collective diplomacy’ to one that has stronger supranational dimensions, with its goal of deeper regional economic integration. In 2003, an Australian Senate Committee recommended the establishment of a Pacific regional and political community along the lines of the European Union, with shared defence, labour market, currency and fiscal standards. When the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, promoted a similar idea of an Asia Pacific Community in 2008 it received an indifferent response from neighbouring states, particularly in Asia. Yet, in subtle ways, supranationalism is on the march, and is reflected in the current trade liberalisation agenda, the Biketawa Declaration on regional security interventions, and in other developments.

This collection of essays examines these various themes in four parts. The chapters in the first part articulate a vision for Pacific regionalism in the future. Philip Goff notes that the region has underperformed economically in the past and that foreign aid has failed to deliver the hoped-for improvements in human development. He looks optimistically to the Pacific Plan (then still under negotiation) as a means of benefiting all Pacific people through stronger and deeper regional integration. Continuing this theme, Andie Fong Toy claims that a fundamental shift is needed in the Pacific’s approach to regionalism because

existing institutions are inadequate to meet current challenges. In outlining the four pillars of the Pacific Plan (economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security), Fong Toy identifies the need to build regionalism around the cultures and traditions of the Pacific, while separating national interests of member countries from the interests of the regional institutions themselves. Michael Powles identifies the practical challenges faced by Pacific Island Countries if the region is to 'move forward'. These include the need for political buy-in from participating countries; for shared values; to define the geographical reach of the region, and to address the free movement of people across borders. In Powles' view, popular cynicism towards new ideas about Pacific regionalism can only be avoided if there is genuine debate and engagement that extends beyond political elites to individuals at the grass roots level.

The second part of the book comprises a tranche of chapters that examine specific areas of regional cooperation: security, fisheries and trade. Graham Fortune argues that the main security challenges facing the region are not defence challenges requiring a military response, but the complex and deep seated problems that arise from poor national governance, civil instability and international criminal activity. These are best addressed by assisting Pacific neighbours to develop their law and order and security capabilities. Dirk Nabers examines security cooperation in the Pacific in the post 9/11 environment and asks, in the light of international relations theory, why there has been effective collective action in the Pacific in recent years. His answer lies in the perception of a common threat and the forceful role of regional institutions.

Sandra Tarte's chapter is a lively discussion of the region's management of tuna fisheries, which is often held up as a shining example of Pacific Island cooperation. Tuna fisheries make an excellent case study of regional cooperation, and Tarte's explanation of its general success echoes matters identified by other contributors in this volume. The most significant factors have been the existence of global legal regimes for resource cooperation; perception of a common threat from deep water fishing nations; concern about resource depletion; 'islander' ownership of the relevant regional institution (Forum Fisheries Agency); and the fact that tuna is a resource (perhaps the *only* Pacific resource) that commands global attention. However, regional cooperation has not been faultless, and Tarte also makes a realistic appraisal of the pitfalls of Pacific cooperation in this field. The final area of regional cooperation under scrutiny, international trade, is addressed by Martin Holland and Malakai Kolomatangi. Focussing on aid and trade with the European Union, the authors examine how Pacific Island countries have dealt with the 'complex bureaucracy' in Brussels. Pacific trade issues with the EU have been significantly shaped by African agendas because the EU adopts a common framework for its African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) development partners, in which African states are the dominant players.

The third section of the book examines regionalism in the context of intervention in Solomon Islands under RAMSI. Addressing the issue of 'failed states' in the Pacific, Terence Wesley-Smith argues that the problem with Melanesian states is 'not so much that they are prone to falling apart ... but rather

that they have never really been put together' (p 123). This arises from their extreme cultural and linguistic fragmentation and the flawed nature of the decolonisation process in the 1960s and 1970s. Jonathan Fraenkel continues the discussion of Solomon Islands with the observation that catastrophist accounts of 'failed' Pacific states are unhelpful in guiding regional policy in the future. Many Pacific states are only 30 or so years from independence and their political orders remain in flux. They should not be regarded as unmitigated failures but as entities with the potential for stability and improvement through the harnessing of domestic forces for change.

In the final section, the book turns to the concept of 'new regionalisms' and explores their relevance to the Pacific. Timothy Shaw's chapter — the least accessible of the chapters in this volume — examines the implications of new regional arrangements for islands and ocean governance, with particular emphasis on the interrelationship with other disciplines such as security studies, political science and international relations. Elsie Huffer's chapter then offers a critique of the Pacific Plan. The chapter is a natural complement to those by Fong Toy and Powles, and thus could have been placed earlier in the collection. However, it is a suitable conclusion to the collection because it provides food for thought about the Pacific's most ambitious regional plan to date. Huffer claims that the Plan has two critical flaws. First, it pays insufficient attention to Pacific cultural identity, which is the people's 'source of wealth, confidence and sustenance' (p 166). Second, it fails to address issues of gender equality directly, including the pervasive problems of lack of female participation in decision making, and protection from domestic violence. In short, it is not clear what kind of region the Pacific Plan envisages 20 years hence.

In all, *Redefining the Pacific*, provides a valuable contribution to our understanding of the forces that shape Pacific regionalism, and the institutions through which those forces are expressed. The chapters are generally well written, carefully edited, and highly informative. The best of them provide both a contextual examination of the history of Pacific regionalism and insightful comments about its likely future course. The developments that have taken place in the region since publication of the book merely confirm many of the challenges flagged by the perspicacious authors in their individual contributions.

For many who have lived and worked in the Pacific, frequent calls for a high degree of Pacific regional integration, along the lines of the European experience, seem both unnecessary and potentially undesirable. Proposals for a Pacific confederation, a Pacific parliament, a Pacific appellate court, or a fully fledged Asia Pacific Community, rarely if ever originate from Pacific Island countries themselves. They are the creations of Rim dwellers. If there is caution in the Pacific about rushing headlong into greater regional integration, it is not because Pacific Islanders are inherently averse to cooperation. Trade and migration have been an integral part of the lives of the seafaring people that have inhabited 'earth's empty quarter' for nearly 3000 years, and there are strong cultural and social ties across many pan-Pacific communities. Rather, Pacific circumspection arises from the lack of ownership of the regionalisation agenda, and the concern that change is being