

Who 'Lost' the Pacific?

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Leaders pose for a photo at the Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, on Aug. 26, 2024. Ben Mckay/AAP Image via AP



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Commentary

The “great powers of the Pacific”—including the United States, China, Australia, and others—have largely lost control over the Pacific,

particularly the South Pacific, due to different methods resulting in different degrees of paternalistic diplomacy.

Regional states have largely become impatient with the major powers, have become restless in their roles as supplicant societies, and have begun to take matters into their own hands.

They have done so even with the knowledge that—and because—they lack major economic, population, and military resources. They have begun, incipiently, to rethink the strategic calculus of their future, now taking for granted that the “great powers” will never stoop to understanding the needs of the local states they promise to protect and support.

It is not that the regional states comprising the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which also includes Australia and New Zealand, and the Melanesian Spearhead Group have no wish for trade and friendship with their “great power” partners. Instead, they have largely abandoned hope that the political officials of the “great powers” will ever pause to gain the knowledge required of the region’s peoples and needs. Australia and the United States have, at times, struggled to align their aid with the priorities voiced by Pacific Island states. In contrast, communist China’s direct investments come with significant strategic strings attached.

It is not insignificant that the great Anglophile—and yet great Melanesian leader—Sitiveni Rabuka, the prime minister of Fiji, has taken the lead in starting to reshape the strategic capability and defensibility of the PIF region outside the Australasian (Australia and New Zealand) sub-region. He proposed the “Ocean of Peace” concept at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2023.

Since then, the concept has evolved significantly, no longer denoting a utopian dream of peace but a practical, regional, and mutual commitment to cooperation, oceanic and territorial protection, and regional security. Some in the halls of Washington and Canberra (as well, presumably, in Beijing) are perplexed as to why this process is taking place without the counsel of the great powers. The answer is

that they were invited to participate but did not understand that the rules had changed.

The island states had distinct requirements that were being ignored. While Canberra, Washington, and Wellington (New Zealand) aid has bureaucratic inefficiencies that mismatch with local priorities, Beijing aid, on the other hand, tends to focus on large infrastructure projects with obvious strategic interest to the Chinese Communist Party. In many cases, the aid given was not necessarily related to the help required. And, yes, to a great degree, the aid proffered was not rejected, but it was often useless.

So Fiji, working within the overarching framework of the Ocean of Peace as a regional and defensible strategic geopolitical bloc, has begun to take steps unilaterally. These steps will almost certainly be expanded on at the next Pacific Islands Forum, to be held in September 2025 in Honiara, in the Solomons.

Australian maritime leader Stuart Ballantyne told me: “At present, when Southwest Pacific islands are struck by cyclones or *tsunamis*, the affected area has to wait for Australia or New Zealand to select a vessel and equip it for the task, sometimes taking two to three weeks to arrive at the disaster site.

“This Fiji-based vessel, perhaps the first of a fleet, can carry 84 disaster response containers, which can cater for up to 750 people in distress, and can reach most neighboring nations within two days.”

The vessel has accommodation and meeting rooms for regional peacekeeping duties, providing a neutral zone for parties to discuss and resolve differences before they become irreconcilable.

The Bougainville crisis (1988–98) was, for example, brought to an end after a meeting of opposing sides on the visiting Christian mission ship *Doulos* at Bougainville wharf. The whole Southwest Pacific region is predominantly Christian with its accompanying family values and people who live happier, healthier, more contented, peaceful lives.

Fiji is exploring the pioneering use of marine micromodular (nuclear) reactors, which would allow this flexible Ocean of Peace vessel to respond rapidly throughout the region for 10 years without refueling and with zero emissions.

A significant impediment to Fiji's prosperity is the \$1 billion of imported diesel fuel it requires each year. This is the same for most Pacific islands. Even in emergency response, having a solid electrical energy supply is always a prime requirement for first responders. Alongside a home port for most of a year, with the vessel's power system connected to the grid, this system would reduce the local annual fuel consumption by more than 5 million liters, along with a corresponding reduction in emissions.

That is just one aspect of the concept.

Just taking control of its own destiny has begun to impact the PIF member societies (outside Australasia). Prime Minister Rabuka told me on Dec. 3: "Tonight at the Australian High Commission in Suva, I told the president of the Australian Senate [Sue Lines], when she asked me about the Ocean of Peace in the region. I described it to her conceptually as providing a feeling of true 'wellness' just as Captain [Ferdinand] Magellan felt after the waves and currents of the Cape [Horn], sailing into the ocean of peaceful waves, currents, and peoples, calling it the Pacific Ocean: the Ocean of Peace!"

It is feasible to envisage the Ocean of Peace bloc, at some time in the future, as a component of greater 21st-century alliances, including possibly as a companion to a combined and enhanced Five Eyes–AUKUS community. At its most fundamental, the Ocean of Peace region is one of the world's largest and most strategic oceanic territories, with control over the significant seabed and fisheries resources, not to mention strategic sea lanes vital to global trade and access to the Antarctic.

The concept is now too big to be ignored.

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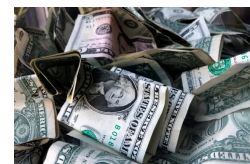
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