

JOSTLING FOR POSITION: THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL POWER-SHARING AND THE ROLE OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

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Abstract: The Pacific Islands Forum has long held the title of the most dominant regional association with links in trade, politics and regional security. Following two political coups in the region the PIF was forced to shift its approach to regional governance opting for a more active and hands-on role with its first such mission being the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). The role undertaken by the PIF within RAMSI is noteworthy for its shifts and changes with an initially minimalist role morphed into an intermediary role as tensions rose between the major funding donor, Australia, and the host state, Solomon Islands in 2006-07. Although the PIF acted in a mediator role in this instance this has not been the normal role for the institution. This article examines the role the PIF has adopted in managing regional democratic stability through targeted development activities, whether their adopted role is applicable on a wider regional-level scale, and further, through examining key human-security related challenges, such as climate change, where the PIF fits into regional power-sharing institutions in the Pacific Islands of the future.

Keywords: regional power-sharing architecture, mediation, Pacific Islands, democratic transition, state-building.

INTRODUCTION

A key element in the success of western political systems is the adoption of democratic normative behaviours within government including through building institutions that uphold the rule of law, consistency in the enforcement of laws, enshrining the inalienability of human rights, and facilitating international adoption. As a method of promoting consistent regional cooperation towards achieving these goals neighbouring states have formed blocs and forums aimed at unifying and coordinating regional approaches to important issues, such as security. A central themes in this series of papers is the tension between states and regional-

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level associations in the application of democratic norms, this paper will critique the difficulties associated with monitoring and managing the regional approach to rebuilding in the aftermath of civil conflict and, further, whether the forms of management have wider ramifications for regional security infrastructure. With the increasing recognition by governments that internal and external state security are intimately linked, the importance of regional-level state associations in processes aimed at producing democratic stability, specifically in post-conflict environments has arisen. In the Pacific region there are a number of forums that have been established to bring together states to realise common goals, chief amongst these institutions is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). A sizeable element of the regional governance activities of the Pacific Islands Forum revolves around its UN mandated power as a regional organisation to create quasi-treaties and agreements concerning economic and political cooperation in the South Pacific region. The 2003 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was a by-product of this power, however despite its namesake status the PIF had little interaction with the Australian-led mission until internal disputes in 2006-07. This paper will utilise the case study of RAMSI to analyse the modalities of regional mediation utilised by the PIF in the 2006-07 period and consequently what role this period has in explaining the PIF's future presence in regional power-sharing architecture. The paper will be split into three sections, beginning with a discussion of the PIF's role in regional development in the Pacific Islands. Secondly, the paper will document the pre and post-2007 role for the PIF in RAMSI activities, explaining the importance of the 2007 alterations shift within the wider regional power sharing infrastructure closely considering the role Australia plays in the region's political decision-making processes. Lastly, the paper will evaluate the future direction of the South Pacific's power-sharing architecture and provide insight into what role the PIF might play in meeting future security challenges.

THE REGIONAL ROLE OF THE PIF

The PIF is an “intergovernmental regional organisation, which aims to enhance cooperation between the independent countries

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of the Pacific Ocean and represent their interests” (Australian Parliament, 2010). The organisation is comprised of 16 states from throughout the South Pacific region, current members include: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, New Zealand, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (PIF 2015). The current forum stems from the establishment of the South Pacific Commission in 1947, and then the South Pacific Forum itself forming in 1971, with the title changed in 2000 to the current form to better reflect the “geographic location of its members in the north and south Pacific” (PIF 2014). When viewed in comparative terms the forum was unusual as it had two developed states, Australia and New Zealand, as founding members and active contributors to the future direction of the forum likely derived from their sizeable contributions to the forum’s finances (McDougall 2011: 9). Initially the forum maintained a form of non-interference in state activities and in a manner similar to the non-interference pacts made by ASEAN in 1976 (Jones 2008: 735). The then South Pacific Forum maintained a strict approach to the traditions of the region through adherence with “The Pacific Way” (Haas 1989)¹.

The current goals of the forum revolve around furthering economic growth and regional stability. These goals are delivered through providing policy advice and guidance to member states, which are then reinforced through regional cooperation, and integration as provided through the Leaders’ decisions and the policies of the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Forum. There are six guiding principles of forum activities: special and differential treatment, the Pacific Way, Foresight, Common heritage, Communication, and Continuous Performance (PIF 2016). The organisation of forum activities is split into three main sectors: Economic Governance; Political Governance and Security; and, Strategic Partnerships and Coordination. In order to trace the regional political role of the PIF the focus will for this article remain on the Political Governance and Security elements of the PIF’s mandate, and the influence these sectors have on political power-sharing and regional decision-making.

Around the end of the 1990s members of the Pacific Islands Forum, of which Australia is the major contributor (Winder Lamborne and Vaai 2012), became concerned with the growing

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instability of the South Pacific region. Shibuya stated “most major internal security issues have been ignored or avoided by the Forum” (Shibuya 2004: 112), with only four major statements on security and stability in the region throughout its history. As a move towards suggesting possible remedies for this gap the PIF created a series of agreements that began with the 1992 Honiara Declaration, followed by the 1997 Aitutaki Agreement, the 2000 Biketawa Declaration, and 2002 Nasonini Declarations. At first the agreements shied away from issues of regional security and political governance, the Honiara Agreement concerned transnational crime issues only, with mentions of drug trafficking and money laundering, although the declaration was never implemented (South Pacific Forum, para 1). The subsequent Aitutaki Agreement made incremental movements into discussions on regional security with more specific detail provided on issues of environment and transnational crime. The measures of the Aitutaki Declaration broadened the approach beyond law enforcement cooperation (Peebles 2005) towards larger regional challenges such as, amongst other things, “challenges to national integrity and independence” (Peebles 2005: 63). This shift was likely linked to the inaction of the forum in the Bougainville conflict that reflected poorly on the forum’s institutional capacity and regional sovereignty capabilities. It seemed at this point the internal crises that were affecting the region during the late 1990s would be largely ignored within the Pacific Islands Forum. Reactions from the forum would not come until 2000 after the overthrow of the Chaudry government in Fiji, and the conflict in Solomon Islands. Consequently, both Australia and New Zealand governments pushed for “a strong statement and an attempt at developing guidelines to assist on internal security matters” (Shibuya 2004: 112). The regional reaction was to create the 2000 Biketawa Declaration. Biketawa came to be understood as a capstone instrument with specific focus on the ability for the Forum to undertake regional responses in times of conflict and crises, providing in 2003 an avenue for the creation of RAMSI. Biketawa demonstrated a form of recognition that the internal and external security of the state had “become increasingly interconnected” (Jones 2008: 735) and regional stability was required for internal securitization. Following the deployment of RAMSI Biketawa was later utilised as the basis for the Pacific Regional Assistance to Nauru when the

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state requested help with its growing national debt. The assistance given to Nauru was provided in a collaborative manner from the Forum Secretariat, AusAID and the ADB who used the in-line model to provide “expertise to assist in key governmental positions” (MFAT 2014). More recently in 2009 the Biketawa Declaration (para 2, iv) was used to sanction the then Interim Fijian Military Government under Bainimarama acting to suspend participation by the interim Fijian government in PIF events, and to preclude Fiji from benefitting from PIF-driven cooperation initiatives in order to encourage democratic elections (Markovic 2009).

The Biketawa response provided the regional architecture necessary for neighbouring states to assist in times of conflict, however responses to regional challenges differ between regional institutions. Haacke and Williams note the decision-making process involved in determining responses is a two-step system, firstly, there is the question of whether the dispute makes it onto the formal or informal agenda. Secondly, which instrument or technique will be used to manage the dispute (2009: 9). Prior to Biketawa in 2000 there was an understanding within PIF members that each state should look after its own internal disputes through domestic governance. The agreements and measures adopted through the Biketawa Declaration demonstrate a shift in the understandings of state sovereignty practiced in the South Pacific, and a movement away from more strict interpretations of the Pacific Way. The importance of economic development in the region was not lost in this agreement, although the focus of many interpretations of the Biketawa Declaration have been on its ramifications for security and governance, it also makes express mention of economic and social development. A clear justification for the movement towards a regional response to conflicts that were affecting the region was creating a form of response, or solution, The presence of an *economic* rationale behind the creation of the Biketawa Declaration, which was most prominently aimed at assisting in conflicts throughout the region, leads to questions as to the influence of larger regional partners in its creation, and raises concerns as to the level of input from smaller partners of the PIF. This is particularly evident in Annex A, wherein it is specifically stated any regional response should “discuss” measures with the authorities in the country concerned. Under this provision there is no express statement that the host state necessarily agree to the

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measures, a later provision in Annex A states there must be “a sufficient degree of consensus on the resolutions by those that have to implement them” including local players, donor-states and outside agencies. A wide interpretation of this agreement signals conflict-prone states may have a minimalist role in responses to internal conflict undertaken within their own borders, a narrower interpretation of the provisions may point towards a form of process-design that moves away from government authorities and towards more local-level participation. Either way, Biketawa’s construction and application provides insight into the transformation of Pacific states’ democratic systems, illustrating the creation of a meaningful point of reference for South-Pacific interstate political responsibility. The role of a regulatory structure need not extend to entire responsibility for a particular decision for it to be useful, as is seen in Asia with ASEAN, and NATO in Europe. Although the PIF is a useful point of reference when examining political responsibility in the region, its authority does not subsume the responsibilities or impact of middle power states such as Australia. As Haacke and Williams have stated regional arrangements may have a “local hegemon or a state that is perceived to harbour hegemonic ambitions” (Haacke and Williams 2009: 6) such as in the case of Australia and the PIF. In this vein academics have argued Australia views the Pacific Islands region in three distinct ways: as a threat, an opportunity and as a special responsibility (See Schultz 2014; Wallis 2012). Australia’s dominance in the region is particularly evident in the case of RAMSI wherein the host state, and the PIF, provided little guidance in the design of the Solomon Islands response that was predominantly constructed by Australian Government representatives (Evans 2015).

THE REGIONAL ASSISTANCE MISSION TO SOLOMON ISLANDS

The specific decision to assist in Solomon Islands was quick, however the political context that facilitated the intervention was both long and drawn out. Australia had previously been asked twice to assist with the emerging, and then more serious, conflict in Solomon Islands. Although the conflict itself could not be called a major international incident and did not gain large inter-

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national recognition having a relatively low casualty rate of around 200 people, although a conservative estimate of the amount of displaced Malaitans sits at well over 20,000 people (see Allen 2013: 43). After the failed Townsville Peace Agreement the state institutions descended into political chaos with the government losing control of the legitimate use of force through the police, and the ability to provide basic services (Braithwaite, Dinnen, Allen, Braithwaite and Charlesworth 2010). On announcing Australia was entering Solomon Islands PM Howard began promoting the notion of “pooled regional governance” in the weeks following the announcement the PIF also announced a “major regional overhaul of regional arrangements” (Fry 2005; 90). Outwardly, according to the then Foreign Minister Alexander Downer Australia intervened in Solomon Islands on 23 July 2003 because we were the “only ones that could” (Downer 2013). In an interview with the writer Downer cited the chief concern driving the intervention as the potential “contagion” risk the internal conflict of Solomon Islands presented for Australian and regional security, stating it was considered unacceptable for conflict to spread to Papua New Guinea and the newly peaceful Bougainville (Downer 2013).

The early days of RAMSI, under the tutelage of the first Special Coordinator Nick Warner, passed with quick law and order based wins with swift movements towards the state securitization through the surrender of key self-proclaimed warlords Harold Keke, and Jimmi “Rasta” Lusibea, the respective leaders of the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, and the Malaitan Eagle Force. In addition, the mission quickly restored basic law and order to the capital, Honiara, and was able to present a visceral centrepiece for this win via a public showing, and burning, of the 2000 guns collected from Honiara and surrounding provinces (Frewen 2013).

By 2006, three years after the initial deployment of RAMSI, the mission had shifted gears into the government strengthening section of the mission which was characterised by RAMSI personnel taking on in-line positions in Solomon Islands government with aims to speed the rebuilding of state strength. This position relied, importantly, on the ability of the largely Australian force, to impart their own knowledge of governmental processes and systems – gained in general from the Australian context – to Sol-

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omon Islander staff. The methodology utilised by RAMSI in this strengthening mission was heavily criticised by Solomon Islands government during the Prime Ministership of Manasseh Sogavare (Dobell 2007a; Unknown 2007). High amongst Sogavare's concerns was the fact that Australians were undertaking the roles of Solomon Islanders, and consequently RAMSI was seen to be acting as a parallel government in Solomon Islands (Nanau 2008: 151-53). The Australian Federal government did not react well to criticism from the Sogavare government with the Australian government expressing sentiments that Solomon Islands was being somewhat ungrateful for the expensive assistance being provided by Australia (McDougall 2006). The diplomatic rows that had developed during the 2006-7 period brought about a shift in the type of international relations practiced between Australia and Solomon Islands. Until this point the Pacific Islands Forum had kept a relatively low profile in the activities of RAMSI, so despite the PIF being the official patron of RAMSI it was largely an Australian-led and financed intervention (See Hayward-Jones 2014). Channels of communication between Australia and SIG were frayed and this was exacerbated by international altercations between high-ranking Australian and Solomon Islands representatives, such as Patterson Oti representing RAMSI as a neo-colonist mission in the United Nations General Assembly (STO 2007), and the open letter from Foreign Minister Alexander Downer to the Solomon Islands people criticising the actions of the Sogavare government (Dobell 2007b). The heavy influence of Australia in RAMSI did not stop following the diplomatic stoushes of this period, rather the lines of strategic communication between Australia and RAMSI, and separately, the Pacific Islands Forum, RAMSI and SIG came to be seen as requiring alteration. The methods that would eventually be utilised by RAMSI, Australia and Solomon Islands to regulate and control this international diplomatic dispute would require active assistance from an intermediary, the Pacific Islands Forum.

THE SHIFTING ROLE OF THE PIF

In the aftermath of the 2006-07 rocky patch RAMSI was placed under increasing scrutiny, with a number of reviews of

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RAMSI's programs and activities being undertaken during the supervision of Special Coordinator Tim George (2007-2009). Prior to 2006 RAMSI had reported to the PIF for an Annual Performance Report that dealt with the activities of the mission, the objectives for the coming year, and the performance of RAMSI programs. RAMSI's reporting to the PIF was (prior to 2007) a fairly routine practice and not one upon which the Special Coordinators placed too much emphasis (Warner 2012). As relations between RAMSI and SIG became unworkable it became obvious that a mediator was necessary to move the intervention forward and avoid the expulsion of the RAMSI from Solomon Islands. Mediation between members of regional organisations is fairly common, with numerous examples in Africa through the work of the Panel of the Wise working as part of the African Union (Vines 2013: 98). Although this process is not uniform across all regional institutions, as ASEAN has shied away from this approach instead opting in most cases that members deal with issues between themselves, unless there is a possibility for disrupting regional peace, as was the case in 2008 during the spat about the listing of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage site when ASEAN facilitated a diplomatic solution through establishing a contact group (Haacke and Williams 2009: 11). The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation adopts yet another approach to member-based disputes positioning itself as "a unique diplomatic platform for regional confidence building" (Haacke and Williams 2009: 12) with its role more aligned with consultation through extended dialogue between partners, aimed at wider aims of building regional norms. Interestingly although the PIF adopted the mediation approach with RAMSI this is not its usual approach for disputes between members, it is generally more in the vein of the ASEAN-style diplomatic approach to problem solving leaving them to negotiate between themselves. In cases where the PIF has stepped in such as in 2009 with the expulsion of Fiji from the PIF this step centred on concerns for the democratic integrity of Fiji, specifically Banimarama's illegal removal of a lawfully elected parliament (Poling 2015).

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MEDIATION BETWEEN FORUM MEMBERS

The most significant shift in the role of the PIF in relation to RAMSI came in 2007 when the Sogavare Government requested the PIF conduct a review of RAMSI. The PIF Taskforce Review was undertaken from April to June 2007 with the remit to make “substantive recommendations across a broad range of RAMSI activities and future operations” (Charles-Jones 2011). The review team constituted three members: Secretary to the Forum Peter Forau; the former Foreign Minister of Fiji Mr Kaliopate Tavola; and, former New Zealand diplomat, Mr Neil Waters². Later during Phase 2 of the review Waters would be accompanied by a team from the PIF Secretariat wherein the taskforce visited six provinces and the Honiara City Council to gauge thoughts on RAMSI activities (Solomon Times 2007) and finally, debriefing sessions with major stakeholders such as PM Sogavare (ECM 2008). The areas of focus for the review included: sovereignty issues; the regional character of RAMSI; establishing a new oversight committee for RAMSI; an exit strategy; and, establishing a clear demarcation between AusAID and RAMSI (PIF Taskforce 2007; 3). Interestingly an important element of the PIF RAMSI Review included submissions from citizens, interest groups and private organisations with the express interest of collating a wider examination of views on RAMSI. This community consultation is significant as it demonstrates a movement towards greater public ownership of the processes of government, ensuring a form of public legitimacy was attached to both the results of the review and its terms of reference.

The results of the review involved a more active role for the PIF in maintaining open lines of communication between the SIG and RAMSI, along with the PIF adopting a more informed perspective on the progress of the mission (ECM 2008). The PIF would, as other regional organisations have in the past, mediate differences of opinion between two of its member states to ensure regional stability and to guide RAMSI through delicate issues of political responsibility and state sovereignty. The inclusion of a mediating role for the PIF is not new and has been noted in statements from the Secretary-General of the UN (PIFS 2011) concerning the continued value of the relationship between the UN and the PIF. However, the 2012 PIF Review questioned the

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authority of internal forum mediation processes questioning the authority of Forum Officials Committee members when acting as mediators or filters concerning which issues progressed onto the forum agenda (Winder Lambourne and Vaai 2012: 46).

As a result of the PIF Review of RAMSI in 2007 the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders agreed to establish the Enhanced Consultative Mechanism (ECM), with the first meetings held in February 2008. The purpose of the ECM was to “facilitate the work of RAMSI as a high level reference group, representative of RAMSI’s regional character, to discuss the broad policy directions of RAMSI and its progress” (Pacific Islands Secretariat 2014). The extended roles of the ECM were to report six-monthly to the Forum Ministerial Standing Committee (FMSC), acting as a secondary level of governance for the activities of RAMSI that could not be dealt with by the Triumvirate (SIG, RAMSI and PIF) (SIG 2008: 4). One of the key pieces of advice to emerge from the PIF Review was that SIG felt the lines of state sovereignty were being blurred as a result of a lack of communication between RAMSI and SIG, stating “the question of sovereignty was raised in situations where the SIG felt that it was not in control of developments under RAMSI operations” (ECM 2008). The recommended “fix” for this issue was enhanced consultation between the two parties. It was later noted by Solomon Islands Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hon. William Haomae that the purpose of the ECM was “very important for achieving the objective and goals of RAMSI... and more significantly for better realisation of these goals” (PIF 2008). The establishment of the ECM could be interpreted as a form of more permanent mediation by the PIF between SIG and RAMSI ensuring transparency in communication and activities.

Following the second meeting of the ECM, then Secretary General of the PIF Greg Urwin stated:

Since the first meeting of this Enhanced Consultative Mechanism in February, the relationship between Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI has continued to strengthen. Some of the issues that were causing some uneasiness in the partnership are now being addressed (Solomon Times 2007a).

Amongst the additional steps taken as a result of the 2007 PIF Taskforce Review was the enhancement of formal and infor-

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mal levels of communication between RAMSI and SIG. In addition to the formal step of inserting the ECM into the communication processes between parties, there were also informal means adopted including the appointment of two political appointees. The two political appointments were of a Government Special Envoy to RAMSI, Michael Maina, and a Pacific Islands Forum Representative to Solomon Islands, Lase Korovala. The expectation from these appointees was they would improve and open lines of communication on current and future developments in RAMSI between SIG, RAMSI and Australia. The then Special Coordinator stated in a personal interview conducted for this research that the response for the “stresses and strains” that existed between RAMSI and SIG was “a lot of new ways of engaging” and “a lot more involvement from the Forum countries, both formally and informally” (George 2013). George noted the active involvement of Korovala in the communication between RAMSI, SIG and PIF greatly assisted in the latter stages of his tenure in Solomon Islands (2008-09). George further placed a large debt of gratitude to the role of the Pacific Islands Forum Review team in providing the impetus for both the involvement of the two new PIF appointees, and the evolution of the ECM in ensuring open lines of communication between RAMSI and the SIG (George 2013). George’s statements demonstrate the importance of the PIF’s role as intermediary through the PIF Taskforce Review, and as mediator in its newer role through the processes of the ECM.

The events of 2007 in Solomon Islands cannot be accurately reported without explaining the political leadership fluctuations for it was not merely the actions of the PIF that cleared the road for RAMSI. During 2007 the political leadership and constitutional validity of Solomon Islands’ government oscillated dramatically between Manessah Sogavare, often represented as “an evil overlord of a Banana Republic” (Moore 2008: 496) and external pressures from Australia and New Zealand concerning challenges to what they understood as weaknesses in state stability brought on by actions of SIG political leadership. Although Sogavare was not liked in the media or Australian diplomatic circles, Moore argues Sogavare was an intelligent leader with “calculated policy” which permitted him to accrue “more political power than any other Melanesian leader has ever possessed” (2008: 496-7). Moore goes on to suggest that Sogavare’s accumulation of political clout

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was accomplished via a shrewd utilization of particular political situations to control key positions in the judiciary, and the Sogavare government's movement towards a two-thirds majority of the unicameral parliament signalled the possibility the government might have the ability make changes to the constitution. To be precise the danger of Sogavare's political power was he had already overruled the constitution on a number of occasions during his second term in government (Martin 2007), so further changes to the democratic nature of government through its structures and processes were worrying for international onlookers. To break this situation down, Sogavare's government presented dangers to several areas of the rule of law including: notions of parliamentary balance; the division of power between the judiciary and executive branches of government due to selected appointments of the Attorney-General, Solicitor-General, and the Director of Public Prosecutions; and possibly, a shift in Solomon Islands' wider democratic system via moving away from the colonial legacy of the Westminster system towards an untested, though possibly more Melanesian, alternative. Whether this shift in the political systems of Solomon Islands would have happened or not the continuation of such a style of government would have brought a less democratic Solomon Islands. Thus, the check on national control represented in the December 2007 no-confidence motion, and subsequent insertion of Dr Derek Sikua as PM of Solomon Islands on 20 December 2007 was viewed with promise in Australia (Jones 2007). Given the political circumstances of 2007 the insertion of the PIF as a mediator in the dispute between RAMSI, Australia, and SIG may have had consequences that reached far beyond the boundaries of RAMSI activities and into regional-level security concerns such as maintaining democratic balance and regional stability for the recovering South-Pacific region.

THE PIF'S REGIONAL UTILITY VALUE

Acting within its role as a regional intergovernmental organisation the PIF has publicly stated a key goal of the forum is to ensure positive relationships between its forum members. As part of this goal it was in the best interests of the PIF to ensure that Australia, its largest contributor, and Solomon Islands, another forum

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member, reconstruct their relationship in the 2006-07 period. Following the diplomatic disputes, and findings of the PIF Taskforce Review, the nature of the PIF's role in RAMSI was forced to change from a neutral bystander to a mediation role geared towards opening and maintaining lines of communication between Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI, with the overall objective of continuing RAMSI's programs in Solomon Islands. Forms of alternate dispute resolution feature heavily in the histories of Pacific Island countries (See Hassall 2005), hence, the use of a form of mediation to resolve conflict in this situation fits with traditional modern DR approaches and as a facet of the wider peace-building projects. In the case presented the PIF played an intermediary role wherein it was able to redefine the boundaries of RAMSI, AusAID, SIG and regional partners, in doing so there was a corresponding strengthening and redefining in levels of political responsibility between the state, regional partners and the forum. In stating this it must be noted that although ADR features heavily in Pacific cultures express mention in the mission and vision of the PIF is scant with vague mentions of mediation-type interactions through statements relating to providing assistance, support and quality interactions between members (PIFS 2016).

At the time the ECM began its function was to smooth waters between RAMSI (and the major partner Australia) and Solomon Islands Government during a period of tensions. The situation between SIG and RAMSI shifted dramatically in the years following the implementation of the formal and informal recommendations of the PIF Taskforce. A major issue to emerge from the PIF Taskforce Review was the possibility of amending the Facilitation of Assistance Act that governs the behaviours of RAMSI in Solomon Islands. In the aftermath of the report it was decided the Facilitation Act would not be amended. In efforts to rectify the lack of positional clarity concerning RAMSI's roles and duties in the rebuilding process the Partnership Agreement was agreed upon in 2009. The aim of this agreement was to provide targets, goals, and as a consequence further definition for the roles and direction of RAMSI in Solomon Islands (SIG RAMSI 2009: 4). However the agreement revolved around a matrix or checklist, of sorts, whose main objective appeared more geared towards an exit strategy with countable objectives as opposed to a form of qualitative measurement for RAMSI's progress. As part of the fieldwork for

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this research prior RAMSI Special Coordinator James Batley stated the movements towards the emergence of this document had begun as early as his own tenure in Solomon Islands from 2004-2006 (Batley 2012). Given the dates presented by Batley it would then seem likely a form of transitional movement existed prior to the RAMSI Review with objectives aimed at creating specific criteria to assess the activities of the mission and, specifically, the achievements of the Machinery of Governance element of RAMSI. However, the 2009 SIG-RAMSI Agreement should not be solely attributed to PIF dispute resolution, nor to the RAMSI Review, rather likely represents a logical evolution in RAMSI's peace-state-building mandate geared towards exiting Solomon Islands and minimising regional (Australian) aid expenditures.

Given the nominal changes that were brought about as a direct consequence of the increased PIF role in RAMSI it is questionable whether the active reporting that existed between RAMSI/SIG through the guidance of the ECM provided more than an additional level of checks and balances for the activities of the mission. Although on the one hand the ECM, along with other informal measures improvements, may have provided a more regional character to the mission the actual funding of the mission remained thoroughly Australian owned. In this way although the "character", generally understood as being comprised of the participating personnel of the mission, may be slightly more regional with representations from Fiji specifically, the large proportion of the personnel that undertook the work of RAMSI's activities were either Australian or New Zealand, in addition, the personnel contributions of other Pacific states were also paid for by Australia (Hayward-Jones 2014). An alternate perspective in interpreting the shift in the PIF's role in RAMSI may be less derived from the actual numbers of participating personnel provided through the auspices of the regional organisation and more directly relational to levels of transparency in RAMSI's activities, specifically the amount of overlap between Australian foreign policy objectives and RAMSI's activities. As such, the real contribution the shift in PIF involvement had on RAMSI was ensuring the lines of communication remained open between SIG and RAMSI/Australia. The mediation performed by the PIF during the conflicting "stresses and strains" of the 2006-2007 period cooled with the removal of Sogavare and the subsequent insertion of Dr Derek

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Sikua as Prime Minister. It is unquestionable that Sogavare was a key figure in critically challenging RAMSI's activities and methods. However, the PM's critique is not without warrant, in fact, there is some credibility to the PM's concerns as during the 2006-07 period large numbers of in-line personnel performing the decisions of government were RAMSI foreign nationals, hence could have been construed as acting without the direct approval of the people and SIG (see Nanau 2008). In this respect the quasi-treaties governing RAMSI did not actively engage with, or thoroughly consider, the effects of large numbers of personnel within the state's public administration, thus, the sovereignty of Solomon Islands government may have appeared to be undermined by the direct approval permitted for in-line RAMSI personnel. The PIF Review stated Sogavare's concerns were driven by blurred lines of communication, although later scholars have widened the scope of issues involved beyond blurred communication pointing towards problematic western political assumptions being imposed on Solomon Islands regarding the constituent elements of politics and governance (Moore 2008), and a lack of public input into MP decision-making processes (Corbett and Wood 2013). The distancing of western assumptions and evaluative standards from localised political realities along with minimal communication between MPs and their constituents speaks less to the action of RAMSI and more to the ideology of state-building. Indeed one of the key reasons that RAMSI was deployed was to assist in strengthening the processes of governance itself.

At base level the tension between the activities of RAMSI and the role of SIG comes back to a very important issue regarding the performance of one of the guiding RAMSI principles, partnership. RAMSI, SIG and PIF engaged in a partnership relationship driven by a desire to rebuild the institutions of state to ensure wider regional stability. During the period of highest active assistance (2003-2007) the relationship between RAMSI and SIG became strained, due in large part to the perceived connection between Australian foreign policy objectives (and funding) and the activities of RAMSI. The role of the PIF during this period was to act as a circuit breaker between Australia and Solomon Islands, essentially mediating a conflict between a forum sponsored mission and forum members. Acting as a mediator, the PIF's most active role was as a regional point of contact for resolving an inter-

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state dispute concerning activities of a regionally-sanctioned security mission. In providing an alternative dispute resolution mechanism the PIF assisted in maintaining rule of law in Solomon Islands and in wider processes of regional stabilization. In the years since 2007 a number of other regional institutions have emerged and others have grown in power, however it remains questionable if their power will ever usurp that of the PIF.

THE RELEVANCE OF POWER-SHARING ALTERNATIVES IN PACIFIC ISLANDS

Thus far this article has focussed on state security which tends centralise the importance of border management and effective political systems, however the 2009 UN General Assembly's Resolution 64 explained that climate change may also have implications for security (UN General Assembly 2009). Thus to consider the largest future challenges to PIF dominance in the region we must move beyond civil conflict and consider the management and coordination processes relevant to the governance of climate change (Umemura 2015). Pacific Island states have been amongst the first to feel the effects of climate change with prominent examples in Tuvalu's sea level rises becoming the international symbol of climate change at the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009 (Maas and Carius 2012), and Kiribati's climate-change driven land purchase from Fiji in 2014 (Caramel 2014). A central concern for the PIF's dominance in climate-related issues has been the decision by Pacific Islands' states to unite with other Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the 44-member Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). This organisation has been utilised as the first point of contact for the UN climate change negotiation effectively excluding the PIF from high-level international climate change negotiations and isolating their regional power in this area to the auspices of the Pacific Plan. When this decision is taken alongside the recommendations of the 2012 and 2013 PIF Reviews it seems clear that significant reforms are necessary for the PIF to remain relevant, raising concerns for the continued usefulness of the forum for the region (Tarte 2014: 312-313).

Dealing firstly with the regional shift to align with the AOSIS, this decision must be taken in its international context, the AOSIS

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is part of a wider framework of UN recognition for the problems and issues faced by SIDS in combatting climate change. As such, although the decision may lessen the role of the PIF in climate negotiations at the UN it is not a direct reflection on the regional power of the institution, rather recognition that to drive international change a larger alliance of states is necessary. Further the decision represents a logical step as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is recognised as the institution most likely to lead reductions in greenhouse gases (Barnett and Campbell 2010: 90), and further an acceptance that no single Pacific Island country (PIC) could single-handedly stay abreast of all issues being negotiated at the COPs (Barnett and Campbell 2010). Secondly, the PIF Reviews in 2012 and 2013 highlight a heavy reliance on funding from Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand, and the corresponding influence of these neighbours have on the goals and objectives of the PIF. To a certain extent the diplomatic sway these countries gain from other smaller states due to their dominant positions in the PIF funding structures challenges the regional character of the institution, however, pragmatically speaking there will always be a stronger state or partner in regional blocs.

Partially in response to challenges to perceived challenges to the regional character of the institution some Pacific states have aligned in other formats to ensure state sovereignty and independence in their political objectives. Potentially the most significant impediment for the continued regional dominance of the PIF has been establishment of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) by Pacific Islands' leaders as a Pacific Islands-only forum, hence excluding Australia and New Zealand from membership. The PIDF has been marketed as "the Pacific's most inclusive South-South platform for action on the Green/Blue Economy" (PIDF 2015) and as the logical first point of contact for the Pacific sub-regional link in discussions with regional-based UN high-level political forums. In contending the PIF's regional relevance may have lowered it must be understood that an increase in regional institutions is not new in the Pacific with other regionally characterised structures such as: the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) being comprised of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS); the Secretariat of the Pacific Community which in-

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cludes 22 Pacific Island countries and four major members of Australia, France, New Zealand, and the USA; The Forum Fisheries Agency; the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme; the South Pacific Tourism Organisation; the Pacific Power Association and the Pacific Aviation Safety Office all active in the region (DFAT 2016). To counter the importance placed on Pacific Islands' regional organisational alternatives, Poling (2013) argues the PIF is relatively small and lacks the financing of the PIF stating it "is not and is unlikely to become a competitor to the Pacific Islands Forum... as the coordinating hub for Pacific development." Similarly, May argues in relation to the four-member MSG, "it seems unlikely that the MSG or some other MSG Plus grouping poses a serious challenge to the Pacific Islands Forum" (2011: 7). Although the MSG seems to have gained some regional power recently with the isolation of Fiji until 2014, the grouping has a relatively small member base, has not sufficiently capitalised on trade policy (Newton Cain 2015), although has significantly improved with the MSG Free Trade Agreement changes in 2013 (Marawa 2015). Although importantly it lacks the thorough funding base provided by Australia and New Zealand to the PIF as the largest "regional states" are not members. Given these accounts the likelihood of the MSG wholesale replacing the value of the PIF seems remote.

There are varied responses to why Pacific regionalism seems to be changing course with several applicable explanations, the most prevalent centres on the rise of China and new international players in the region (Wesley-Smith 2013; Hameiri 2015; Firth and Carter 2015). A secondary explanation explores the more activist role being taken by the MSG as a response to perceived failures in current regional infrastructure which leaves Pacific Island states reliant on development approaches and funding from Australia and New Zealand (Pareti 2013a), and wanting a greater level of control in the policy directions of their states and wider region (Tarte 2014). Overall it seems although the PIF was important as a circuit breaker in the RAMSI diplomatic disputes of 2006-07, the wider role of the institution is debateable when discussing the region's approach to security, especially human-security centred issues such as climate change and trade. In relation to security apparatuses the PIF appears to maintain its role as the prime regional association, however the link between PIF funding, Australia's

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regional dominance and its continued role in securitization of the region is problematic for the regional character and perceptions of inclusiveness in PIF decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

The role of regional associations in ensuring regional stability is important as they often provide political guidance, dispute resolution between bloc members and assistance in times of conflict or peril. The Pacific Islands Forum has a long history in the Oceanic region and this article has provided a case study of its role through its intervention in RAMSI activities in 2007. However, regional political power is dynamic and constantly shifting, the shifted role of the PIF in regards to climate change and the increase in other regional associations has to a certain extent diluted the importance of the institution in maintaining regional security. A number of scholars have stated it is unlikely the PIF will be wholesale replaced by newer regional associations such as the smaller MSG or Pacific-Islands only PIDF. However it seems likely the power of the institution will recede in coming years when the region's political stability becomes more interwoven with the effects of climate change and ensuring adequate implementation of adaptation processes. Overall the PIF continues to play a central role in the regional governance of the Western Pacific although relies heavily on funding from middle powers such as Australia and New Zealand which provides a certain level of diplomatic sway in PIF decisions and alignment of strategic regional goals. As was stated by Haacke and Williams, Australia appears to be the local hegemon with tendencies that suggest a tight rein on the direction of the PIF. It is quite possible these tendencies will, in the future, further extend the PIF's reputation for being tightly aligned with middle power needs, rather than the needs of smaller developing states which account for the majority of its members.

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NOTES

¹ The term “Pacific Way” was first used by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in 1970 and is understood to refer to actual or assumed common elements in Pacific Island cultures, specifically used in dealing with non-Pacific people – often as a method of exclusion (see Crocombe 1976).

² There was debate concerning the inclusion of Forum Secretary Peter Forau, possibly due to his Solomon Islander heritage, so the team was reduced to two members shortly after its inception in 2007.

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