

2022 PIF talks: Opportunity to invigorate climate change action
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The existential threat posed to Pacific island countries (PICs) by climate change has been recognised by Forum leaders for many years. In 2018, the Boe Declaration explicitly noted that 'climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific'. In the lead up to the Paris negotiations, Pacific Island countries articulated their concerns and expectations through the Suva Declaration on Climate Change and the 2015 Forum Communiqué. Many Pacific Island Leaders worked tirelessly during the Paris COP to achieve the Paris Agreement, and they are rightly given much credit for the historic outcome.

Regional security has become more contested in recent years with China's more assertive push into the region, expanding its traditional economic assistance to more contentious security cooperation. Australia's recent intransigence over climate action - not only refusing to take domestic action in line with international expectations, but actively undermining the efforts of others - has left it on the back foot. After all, how could PICs take it seriously as a security partner when it was refusing to act on the region's biggest security challenge?

When the newly elected Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese attends his first Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Fiji next week, he has an opportunity to fundamentally re-set Australia's relationship with the region.

The Australian government has already made significant and welcome gestures since its election in May 2022: it has upgraded its UN climate change commitments (a 43% reduction in 2005 emissions by 2030, compared with the previous 26-28%); Foreign Minister Penny Wong gave her first speech as foreign minister at the Forum Secretariat, underlining the importance of regional institutions; Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek has told the UN oceans forum in Lisbon that climate action is central to ocean conservation.

Australia's increased 2030 climate target must be the floor for ambition: the science tells us that a reduction of at least 50% will be needed to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Moreover, Australia's emissions reductions must be real and focused on stopping emissions at source. This means accelerated movement away from use of fossil fuels, not just reliance on averted land clearing or carry-over credits from the Kyoto Protocol. Carbon offsets must be used sparingly and be rigorously assessed for integrity. Actions like phasing out coal, removing fossil fuel subsidies and investing heavily in green (renewable) energy are obvious pathways. The technology developed and promoted may also help developing island countries to decarbonise their own energy systems and enhance their energy security.

If Australia wants to reclaim its status as a favored partner in the region, it must address the mitigation and adaptation challenges facing the region. The consequence of even a 1°C rise on island countries is clear, as countries face impacts. From increasing salinity of the oceans and the water systems with its effects on food supply, to the devastating impacts of stronger cyclones, extreme rainfall and temperature, and the effects on health and livelihoods, there is a pressing need to adapt and build resilience. Australia needs to commit new and

additional climate finance and rejoin the Green Climate Fund. The A\$500 million promised in Fiji is welcome but only a start.

Some climate-related losses are permanent. 'Loss and damage' looms large in the Pacific agenda and island countries should seek Australia's support to have the international community address it. Australia's position on these issues will demonstrate its sensitivity to how PICs see their own survival.

If the Australian government is to fulfill its wish to co-host, with Pacific Island countries, a 'Pacific COP' in 2024, it must be a genuine partnership with the Pacific small island states. It will need to demonstrate a real shift in its negotiating position to regain its credibility. Pacific island countries could use this opportunity to push the new Australian government further to adopt truly world-leading climate ambition and to accelerate - rather than undermine - international action.

Australia must acknowledge the current trajectory of global heating poses an existential threat to some island countries due to sea level rise. In some cases, viable resettlement options may be necessary. While island countries do not see this as their preferred option, the Albanese government should expedite consideration of permanent resettlement for those whose homelands may disappear. The earlier it begins this task, the more orderly any such resettlement process will be, in the event such an extreme option becomes unavoidable.

The 2021 Forum Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise sought to assert the legal right of Pacific island countries to their current territorial seas and exclusive economic zones even in the event of losing their land mass. Australia signed this Declaration and should work to ensure that the global community recognises it. This is particularly pressing in light of China's interest in regional fisheries and maritime economic development and its expansive claims in the South China Sea. While land has traditionally formed the basis for sovereignty, Australia should strongly support its island neighbours in preserving their legal and economic sovereignty, in the face of loss of territory due to sea level rise.

Finally, in a region still scarred by nuclear tests of former colonial powers, the prospect of nuclear-powered Australian submarines - arranged by the former government but supported by the current one - raises genuine concerns. Prime Minister Albanese should offer a frank and honest briefing to his Pacific island counterparts on why Australia considers this the best course, what its implications will be for island nations, and what safety measures will be in place to guard against nuclear accidents. Forum Leaders have regularly voiced concerns on transport and discharge of hazardous radioactive material in the Pacific ocean.

The Australian government has taken significant and welcome steps towards the Pacific since winning office in May 2022. It now has the opportunity to consolidate the good will generated with real and effective action to protect the livelihoods and sovereignty of the other members of the Pacific family in the face of inexorable climate change. A strong climate declaration as part of the Leaders' Communiqué would be a clear manifestation of the renewed sense of urgency of action and partnership.

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