

„Micronexit“: Regionalism in confusion

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Abstract: Pacific regionalism is in a severe crisis after the Micronesian states Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia have announced their withdrawal from the most important regional organization, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). This article discusses the reasons for the split that go beyond the mere selection of a new Secretary General of the Forum as the major trigger of the withdrawal and analyses possible consequences of the split within Oceania and beyond. It argues that characterizing “Micronexit” as a result of diverging interests between the United States and China is an oversimplification that ignores intraregional causes of the conflict. There are manifold divisions amongst PIF’s member states, which can lead to a decline of cooperation in the Pacific Islands’ region, even outside the Forum structures, e.g. at the United Nations, if no solution to the impasse can be found.

Keywords: Pacific Islands Forum, Regional Cooperation, Micronesia, US, China

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Introduction

Pacific regionalism is in one of its most severe crises since the independence of the Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). The five Micronesian states Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) have announced their withdrawal from the region’s premier institution of political cooperation, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), following the election of the former Prime Minister of the Polynesian Cook Islands, Henry Puna, as the new Secretary General of the Forum. The withdrawal of the Micronesian states may not only result in a loss of importance of the most critical regional organization, but may also reshape how the region is perceived and defined in Oceania and by the outside world.

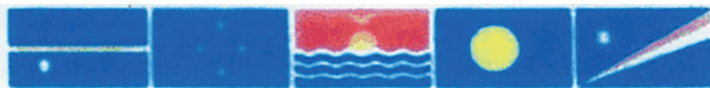
The first half of 2021 has been a fateful year for Pacific politics and regional cooperation more generally. New COVID-19 outbreaks in Papua New Guinea and Fiji and increasing economic impacts from the pandemic have flawed the image of the PICs as role models for the management of the pandemic. Samoa, praised as the most stable country in the Pacific for decades, is experiencing political instability following an election and

the caretaker government’s refusal to transfer the power to its successor. The controversy about the future of the regional University of the South Pacific (USP) has increased significantly after Fiji has expelled the University’s Vice-President to frustrate ambitions to limit Fiji’s influence over the institution. And the passing away of Papua New Guinea’s first Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, a strong advocate for Pacific regionalism, was mourned in the entire region and perceived by many as a bad sign for the future of regionalism.

While there is no extensive literature on the “Micronexit” and its consequences yet, it is striking to see the wide variety of different assessments as well as the emotionality and excitement in the debate even by some academics, ranging from decidedly Micronesian perspectives (Teaiwa et al. 2021; Penjueli 2021) to descriptions of the behaviour of the Micronesian states as “toddler’s tantrum” (Flitton 2021) that has been criticised as “neo-colonial” (Teaiwa et al. 2021). Interestingly, also a comparatively large number of media and think tanks from outside Oceania that usually hardly give attention to the region attested pivotal geo-

political and strategic significance to the split of the Forum. They especially referred to the rivalry between the United States of America and China as a major source for the regional conflict (e.g. Gesellschaft für Sicherheitspolitik 2021; The Diplomat 2021a).

Is the Micronesian withdrawal from the Forum a “move of tectonic scale whose impact will reverberate across the region” (Penjueli 2021) or just another “momentous development in the long history of Pacific regionalism” (Fry 2021a)? Does the Forum and its potential breakdown actually matter, both in general (Flitton 2021a) and to the governments of its member states (Howes & Sen 2021)? And what role have external actors like the US and China truly played in the escalation? This article will discuss possible causes and consequences of the regional split as well as possible ways forward to overcome the division in regional politics. It examines statements by Pacific leaders, articles and blog posts published by scholars from within and outside the Pacific region following the division of the Forum, but also draws on scientific literature on the broader history of Pacific regionalism. It also assesses possi-



MPS Leaders Meeting

Micronesian Presidents' February 2021 Communiqué

1. The President of the Federated States of Micronesia, the President of the Republic of Kiribati, the President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the President of the Republic of Nauru and the President of the Republic of Palau convened a virtual meeting on 8th February, 2021.
2. The Micronesian Presidents expressed unity and solidarity and restated that their position remains in accordance with the Micronesian Presidents' Summit (MPS) Special Leaders Meeting Mekreos Communiqué, 2020. There is no value in participating in an organization that does not respect established agreements, including the gentlemen's agreement on sub-regional rotation.
3. The Micronesian Presidents collectively expressed great disappointment with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General appointment process.

Withdrawal from the Pacific Islands Forum

4. The Micronesian Presidents jointly agreed that all five nations will initiate the formal process of withdrawing from the Pacific Islands Forum, as set out in Article XII of the Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. Each nation will undertake this process with respect to its own internal legal and procedural requirements and final decision rests with respective governments.
5. The Micronesian Presidents look forward to strengthening the work of subregional organizations including the Micronesian Presidents' Summit.

Lionel Rouwen
His Excellency Lionel Rouwen
President and Chairman of the Micronesian Presidents' Summit
Republic of Nauru

David W. Panuelo
His Excellency David W. Panuelo
President
Federated States of Micronesia

Taneti Maamau
His Excellency Taneti Maamau
President
Republic of Kiribati

David Kabua
His Excellency David Kabua
President
Republic of the Marshall Islands

Surangel S. Whipp
His Excellency Surangel S. Whipp, Jr
President
Republic of Palau

Figure 1: Joint communiqué of the presidents of the five Micronesian countries on their intention to cease their membership in the Pacific Islands Forum.

ble motivations and influence on the development of actors in Oceania and abroad by considering their broader strategies, alliances and previous diplomatic actions.

The withdrawal of the Micronesian states

The Forum was established in 1971. It currently has 18 members, including the Micronesian states whose withdrawal will come into effect in February 2022, all other independent PICs, Australia and New Zealand as well as the French territories New Caledonia and French Polynesia. On 4 February 2021, the heads of state and government of the member states of the Forum convened for a digital meeting

for the election of a new Secretary General as the term of the incumbent Dame Meg Taylor from Papua New Guinea came to an end. After a lengthy meeting, Henry Puna, who resigned from his political duties in the Cook Islands prior to the election, was elected new Secretary General. He received one more vote than his adversary Gerald Zackios from the Micronesian Marshall Islands. Subsequent to Puna's election, the Micronesian states announced their joint withdrawal from the Forum. They legally confirmed their exit by individual notes communicated to Fiji in its capacity as the host of the Forum Secretariat in the following weeks (ABC 2021).

The Micronesian states had argued

at least since 2019, but also prior to previous elections, that they finally wanted to see a Micronesian candidate being elected as the new head of Forum Secretariat and protested vocally against the nomination of candidates from other sub-regions by their national governments, including next to Puna Fiji's former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, Amelia Kinahoi Siamoma as the only female candidate from Tonga and Solomon Islands' Jimmie Rodgers (Fry 2021a; Penjueli 2021).

In fact, the position of the Secretary General of the Forum was only once held by a Micronesian, the first president of Kiribati, Jeremia Tabai, from 1992 to 1998. The Micronesian states argue that there is an informal "gentlemen's agreement" established in 1978 on the rotation of the Secretary General among the three subregions Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia, (before some of the Micronesian states joined the Forum). Other states in the Pacific region have denied the existence or at least validity of such an agreement, something Penjueli has called "collective amnesia" by Pacific Leaders (Penjueli 2021). However, some scholars argue that the Micronesian claim for the existence of the agreement were "borne out by subsequent practice" and by some fundamental reforms changing the structure of the Forum's Secretariat (Fry 2021a). They also point to another gentlemen's agreement established at the foundation of the Forum to ensure that future Secretary Generals would not come from Australia or New Zealand that got obsolete with the election of the Australian Greg Urwin in 2004 (op. cit.).

'Zooming' out of the Pacific Way?

Informal rotation agreements on the selection of high-ranking officials are not unique to the Pacific region. They for instance also exist at the United Nations (UN), even though regional rotation has not been honoured in the selection of the current UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Pacific cooperation, though, has always relied much more on informal rules than cooperation elsewhere. For many decades, Pacific regionalism is based on the informal concept of the 'Pacific Way'. While there is no written agree-



Source: Marshall Islands Journal.

Figure 2: Zoom meeting of Forum leaders to elect a new Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum in February 2021.

ment on what constitutes the Pacific Way, experts and policy makers agree that it is characterized by consensus, solidarity, and the upholding of traditional Pacific customs (Crocombe 1976). It also has been described as a “norm of diplomacy” based on unity, Pacific brotherhood, a sense of cultural affinity, equal treatment and informal incrementalism (Haas 1989). The informality of regional cooperation in Oceania has helped governments to keep the costs for regional cooperation relatively low and the system of regional cooperation relatively flexible, but also has been a burden for further institutionalization and accountability.

Despite several attempts of institutionalization, also the Pacific Islands Forum as the most important regional organization remains rather informal in its structure. At the heart of the Forum are the annual high-level meetings of the Pacific heads of state and government, the so-called “Leaders’ Retreats” that combine decision-making with personal interaction and a cultural side program, “where eating and kava drinking together creates many opportunities to discuss and ‘pre-decide’ things at an informal level” (Mückler 2021).

Even though the Pacific countries were hit less dramatically by the Covid-19 pandemic than other regions in February 2021, prior to the new outbreaks in Papua New Guinea and Fiji, there were strict entry regula-

tions and have been no physical meetings of all Forum leaders since their last retreat in August 2019 in Tuvalu. Several attempts by the Tuvaluan Prime Minister Kaurea Natano, who still holds the rotating chairmanship over the Forum, to further postpone the election of the Secretary General because of the Covid-19 pandemic to the next physical retreat planned in Fiji later this year were rejected by several states (Penjueli 2021).

Because Pacific regionalism is usually centred on personal and direct interaction, combined with a great sense of hospitality of the Forum retreats’ host countries, digital diplomacy is even more challenging than elsewhere in the world. In fact, in the long-run, at least theoretically, the PICs could even benefit from virtual diplomacy to reduce the negative consequences of their isolation. But because of the sensitivity of the issue it is likely that the absence of personal interactions and room for manoeuvre, including backroom deals, have contributed to the split of the Forum. It has at least favoured regional distrust and the emergence of regional divisions that have been under the surface. Mückler (2021) describes traditional conflict resolution mechanisms in the Pacific as impressive and even as role models for other parts of the world, but believes that they are not working during the pandemic when there are no physical meetings, which resulted in a “changed culture and dynamics of discussion”.

Since the Pacific Way is centered on the idea of making decisions in consensus, the very fact that there was a competitive vote about the Secretary-General is remarkable. Voting was confidential, but there are some well-founded assessments on the probable voting behaviour of the individual Forum members. Most likely, Puna was supported by the Polynesian countries as well as French Polynesia, Fiji, Australia and New Zealand, while the Melanesian states Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands supported the Micronesian bloc (Penjueli 2021), some of them like Papua New Guinea issuing statements after the election to punctuate their support for Zackios. New Caledonia did not participate in the vote because of a recent change in government.

Neglect or detachment?

The causes of the split of the Forum go far beyond the mere selection of the new Forum Secretary General. The Micronesian decision to withdraw from the Forum needs to be understood as the result of a more persistent feeling of being neglected with their interests in regional decision-making. As the former President of Palau, Tommy Remengesau Jr, said, “[t]his is something bigger than just the PIF secretary-general position – it’s about respect, it’s about fairness” (ABC 2021).

Especially the three former US ter-

ritories Marshall Islands, FSM and Palau that gained independence considerably later than other PICs and still maintain Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the US have been “sidelined in Pacific regional issues”, partly due to geographic distance, but primarily “due to historical and political dissimilarities” (Lowe Gallen 2015:178). While Nauru was a founding member of the Pacific Islands Forum in 1971 and Kiribati joined in 1977, the Marshall Islands and FSM were admitted in 1987 and Palau only in 1995. After the admission of the three COFA states to the Forum, the institution changed its name from “South Pacific Forum” to its current name in 1998.

Amongst others, there is dissatisfaction among the COFA countries that New Caledonia and French Polynesia were granted full membership in the Forum in 2016, while US dependencies especially in Micronesia were never even granted associate membership, which the two French dependencies have had since 2006. Guam’s former delegate in the US House of Representatives, Robert Underwood, even suggests that the division of the Forum “could have been avoided if Guam, the Northern Marianas and American Samoa were members of the forum” (Underwood 2021).

Lowe Gallen (2015:178) has argued that, while the COFA countries have been neglected in regional politics, this “may sometimes be self-perpetuated” and for many years after the admittance of the COFA states to the Forum “northern Micronesian participation in Pacific regional matters has largely been characterised by a sense of detachment” despite attempts by other PICs to include them. Some experts have also argued that the Micronesian states are not just victims in the process of selection of the new Forum Secretary General, but that their choice for “tactics of intimidation” may not have been “a diplomatic, well thought-out approach” and that “[c]omplaints that one’s own confrontational tactics have not worked, and that this is unfair, are frivolous in a democratic secret ballot” (Mückler 2021).

A vote about Chinese and US influence in the Pacific?

Many institutions have linked the split of the Forum with the broader

geopolitical competition between the US and China. This argument refers to the increasing influence of China in the Pacific and notes that Puna as the new Secretary General of the Forum is known for his close relationship to China from his time as Prime Minister of the Cook Islands (Milne 2021). His opponent, Zackios, in contrary is serving as the Marshallese ambassador to the US. Because of their special relationship with the US, it is likely that the Micronesian COFA countries are not happy about the profile of Puna.

However, the voting behaviour of many PICs can hardly be explained if the selection of Puna is only understood as a vote about Chinese and US influence in the region. Most importantly, not all of the Micronesian states are as close to the US and as sceptical of China as the COFA states. Nauru and Kiribati historically have closer ties to Australia and New Zealand than to the US, and the current i-Kiribati government has become one of the greatest proponents of Chinese influence in the region. Likewise, the Polynesian state Tuvalu that supposedly supported Puna in the vote is one of the few remaining PICs to recognize Taiwan.

Moreover, even if there are signs of a revivalism of the close ties between the COFA states and the US, it should not be overlooked that the relations always have been highly ambiguous and have rather experienced dire straits in recent years. Despite their close relationship, the three COFA countries are also among the strongest critics of the US on climate change and the nuclear legacy of the US in the Marshall Islands and have even tried to sue the US and other nuclear powers at international courts. The voting coincidence of the three countries with the US at the UN has declined significantly in recent years, most strikingly in the case of Palau from 96.7% of the contentious votes in the UN General Assembly in 2012 to only 33% in 2019 (US Department of State 2020; Hasenkamp 2016), only partly a result of the former presidency of Donald Trump.

The role of Australia, New Zealand and Fiji

Characterizing the election simply as a vote about Chinese influence would also imply that Australia and New

Zealand as close allies of the US have supported the Chinese bloc. It is more likely that Australia and New Zealand opted to support Puna because they hoped to be able to exert some

influence over the agenda of a Secretary General from the Cook Islands that have a free association with New Zealand. Penjueli (2021) even calls Puna the “de facto New Zealand and Australian candidate” and argues that Australia and New Zealand may profit most from the “sudden departure from the Pacific Way”. This is a controversial argument given that other experts have argued some years ago that “manufactured consensus, patronizingly justified under the ideological rubric of Pacific Way, has often undermined the views of the smaller island states in favour the powerful countries like New Zealand and Australia” (Ratuva 2016:605).

The former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2021) also believes that “[i]f the forum implodes, Australia too would lose its formal seat at the table of the Pacific family”, something that “would be strategically disastrous for Australia”. With alternative vehicles of regional and international PICs’ cooperation without Australia and New Zealand strengthened over the past decade, the two countries actually should have an interest in retaining their influence in regionalism by consolidating cooperation via the Forum. Indeed, Australia and New Zealand and their powerful role within the Forum are regularly criticised by the PICs, not only those from Micronesia, especially because the PICs feel alienated about their lack of support on climate change. Pushing through a “de facto Australian and New Zealand” candidate would have been a very difficult diplomatic task given the widespread criticism about their regional influence.

In contrast, there are some indications that by supporting Puna in the hope of retaining their own influence, Australia and New Zealand have made another grave diplomatic mistake. Penjueli (2021) agrees that “New Zealand and Australia may have miscalculated their level of influence” and it was a mistake that neither Jacinda Ardern nor Scott Morrison “attended in full the controversial Special Leaders Meeting” and that their “notable absence at such a crucial moment



Source: UN Photo-Mark Garten.

Figure 3: UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and Fiji's Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in Fiji in 2019.

challenges their commitment to our region". Unlike most PICs, Australia and New Zealand have much more diplomatic capacities that should have enabled them to better anticipate the reactions of the Micronesian states and the consequences for regionalism. Their larger diplomatic bureaucracies compared to the PICs, where decision-making is much more concentrated in heads of state and heads of government, also should have facilitated a less emotional approach towards the Micronesian threats to leave the organization.

Underestimating the conviction of the Micronesian states to leave the Forum and therefore the Australian and New Zealand sphere of influence altogether, would be the next serious diplomatic misjudgement of Australia and New Zealand with fundamental regional consequences after the suspension of Fiji from the Forum in 2009. Driven by Australia and New Zealand in the aftermath of the 2006 coup in Fiji, the suspension was never fully backed by most PICs. Unintended by Australia and New Zealand, and with support from China, Fiji arguably even benefited from the suspension. The country was quite successful

in generating alternative vehicles of cooperation, increasing its activities in international politics, establishing Pacific islands cooperation without Australia and New Zealand at the UN and using the frustration of the neighbouring island states on climate change to establish itself as a regional adversary to Australia and New Zealand (Hasenkamp 2016).

Fiji always played an important role for regional cooperation as it is located in the centre of the region and host country not only of the Forum, but also many other regional and international institutions which combines cultural aspects associated with all three sub-regions. Politically, it used to identify itself as a Polynesian state after independence, but now belongs to the Melanesian bloc (Fry 2021a). The suspension was lifted automatically after elections in Fiji in 2014, but it took some years until Fiji gradually returned to the Forum. Having only come back to prime ministerial representation at the last Forum retreat in 2019, Fiji wanted to celebrate a cheerful comeback as incoming chair of the Forum, but may be one of those actors suffering most from the current regional impasse. Criticising Australia

and New Zealand for not honouring the 'Pacific Way' for many years, Fiji now sees itself confronted with the same allegation and is criticised by the Micronesian countries for its support for Puna and rejection of a postponement of the election (arguably, underestimating the Micronesian response, to avoid negative associations with its upcoming chairmanship over the Forum). But also, some of its non-Micronesian neighbours are angered by Fiji's stance on the USP. Thus, Fiji is experiencing a dramatic decline of regional trust. Palau even announced it would close its embassy in Fiji. Being a critic of Fiji's influence for some time, Samoa's caretaker Prime Minister has started another attempt to move regional institutions from Fiji to Samoa.

Consequences for international politics

If the five Micronesian states are indefinitely to leave the Forum, this will reduce the organization's membership, "diminishing the organization's legitimacy as the peak regional body" (Ratuva & Teaiwa 2021). The consequences of the division go far beyond a mere loss of relevance

of one regional institution, though. Ratuva (2021) has pointed out that the division of the Forum is actually “not only political but deeply emotional and cultural” for many Pacific people to whom “the fractures within the Forum appear tantamount to a family breakup”. If the PICs do not find a solution to overcome the division, this in the long-term possibly result in the outside world perceiving Oceania no longer as one region, but as separate North and South Pacific regions. This could further contribute to alienation from Pacific politics to the people living in and identifying with Oceania.

The crisis of the Forum and even more importantly the more profound underlying regional divisions, even among those states that remain in the Forum will, at least in the short run, result in a dramatic decline of Pacific cooperation even outside the Forum structures, with effects that will likely go far beyond the Pacific region. While regional and international cooperation of the Pacific states is likely to decline, bilateral relations in contrast will become more important. This is not good news for most PICs, because the small states usually have the less powerful roles in bilateral relations. Even though the dispute between the US and China over influence in the Pacific may not have been the fundamental trigger of the split, it will likely further increase the tensions between the super powers in the Pacific region, because the PICs will become more reliant on bilateral relations with larger states and when acting individually more vulnerable to their power games. This is even reinforced by the fact that a rather small number of states have elaborated bilateral relations to the individual Pacific states. Other possible partners next to the US, China or Australia and New Zealand like the European Union, whose members especially after the exit of Great Britain, have hardly any elaborated bilateral relations to the PICs, in contrast may suffer from the regional split, which is also revealed by a strong message from the European Union urging the PICs to overcome the division.

Over the last decade, the PICs have become much more active and self-confident in international politics, constituting an important voting bloc within the UN (Hasenkamp 2016). Fiji especially has advanced Pacific

inter-islands cooperation via the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping in recent years (Hasenkamp 2016) and has shown its ambition to take international responsibility by chairing the UN General Assembly, the 23rd United Nations Climate Change Conference and the 1st United Nations Ocean Conference, successfully portraying itself as a Pacific leader. Without the full backing of the PICs, Fiji’s further ambitions, including the first ever election of a PICs to the United Nations Security Council, may be thwarted.

The PICs are among the most prominent advocates for strong climate action and played a significant role in including the goal to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 °C in the Paris Agreement. Recently, they also played an vital role in moving into force the UN Nuclear Ban Treaty. But soaring regional distrust makes it increasingly unlikely that the PICs will continue to speak with one voice in international affairs. This is especially tragic since the PICs continue to share similar positions on most global issues. The regional split comes at a very inconvenient moment with the important 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow ahead and many states being occupied by managing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that will make it even more difficult for the PICs to receive attention for their interests.

If the Pacific states cease to speak with one voice on climate change in international politics, the international community would lose the PICs as a unified bloc that is holding the world accountable on the climate emergency. The effects could not only be disastrous for the Pacific countries, but also for the rest of the world, especially since climate action is more urgent than ever before after the recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has revealed once again that the international community is far of track to reach the goal to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 °C or even 2° C.

The Forum’s loss of importance may also prove to generate new obstacles to global climate action. Despite very fierce arguments over climate action between the PICs and especially Australia, the Forum has proved to be a platform for the PICs to obtain com-

promises from Australia that would have been more difficult to reach globally. The success of the PICs in convincing Australia to ultimately agree to the Forum’s 2019 Kainaki II Declaration, including the agreement that global temperature rises should be limited to 1.5 °C – something Australia had opposed during the 2015 Paris Agreement negotiations – was a strong signal also on the international level.

Sub-regionalism – truly on the rise?

With the exit of the Micronesian countries the voice of the most vulnerable states to climate change within the Pacific Islands Forum will decline dramatically. Until recently, within the Forum, the Micronesian states and the Polynesian Cook Islands, Niue and Tuvalu formed the Smaller Islands States (SIS) grouping that was especially arguing for strong climate action. In contrast, until recently, the most important sub-regional platform of the Micronesian states, the Micronesian Presidents’ Summit (MPS), only included the COFA states (Lowe Galen 2015).

For a long time, it has been argued that sub-regionalism profits from the weakening of regional cooperation in the Pacific (Herr 1985). In fact, Micronesian sub-regionalism is on the rise and arguably stronger than ever before since the COFA states and Kiribati and Nauru are speaking with one voice, but it remains hardly institutionalized. Similar can be said about Polynesian sub-regionalism that has a much longer record with the Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG), but still remains rather loosely organized. The Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), by far the most elaborated and institutionalized sub-regional organization, on the contrary is divided more than ever before. For some years now, cooperation within the MSG has been restrained by some arguments between its member states, particularly diverging opinions about the Indonesian human rights violations in West Papua and the West Papuan independence movement. The West Papua conflict has become highly emotional issues for the Pacific region (Lawson 2016). While Fiji and Papua New Guinea as the two most powerful Melanesian states sided with Indonesia, those two

states are now divided about the election of the new Secretary General of the PIF.

Possible Ways Forward

The exit of the Micronesian states will formally move into force one year after they have communicated their withdrawal to Fiji as the Forum's host country. This gives the PICs a few months to solve the impasse. Pacific politics and regional cooperation are thoroughly known to be fast moving and having sudden spins. But so far there are no signs of substantial de-escalation and the Pacific states are still in a deadlock. The Micronesian states continue to demand the withdrawal of Puna, who formally was inaugurated as new Secretary General in June 2021, and the installation of a Micronesian candidate as the prerequisite to stay in the Forum. Even though some regional leaders have offered apologies, there is no indication that those states that supported Puna in the election could increase their pressure to force him to step down or he voluntarily decides to abdicate. Even though Australia and New Zealand are in a difficult position, given that one of the few things most PICs likely continue to agree about is the wish to reduce the two countries' influence in the region, it is surprising to see that they have made little attempts to use their diplomatic leverage to contribute to solving the impasse.

However, there are chances to overcome the divisions if traditional mechanisms of reconciliation are activated, especially if physical meetings will soon be possible again. Previous regional disputes have shown that traditional practices on reconciliation can help to overcome even significant political divisions in Pacific diplomacy. The Solomon Islands for example hosted a traditional reconciliation ceremony to successfully overcome a dispute within the MSG in 2010 (May 2011). Since the next physical meeting was scheduled to take place in Fiji, the situation was even more complicated by the COVID-19 outbreak in Fiji in May 2021, which made a physical meeting anytime soon increasingly unlikely. Because of the outbreak, the 2021 leaders' summit of the members of the Forum finally again had to take place virtually in early August 2021.

It is likely that the former Austral-



Figure 4: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres attends a meeting of Forum leaders in 2019.

ian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2021) is right when he says that “[e]ven if a deal can be worked out before [the Micronesian states] formally exit [...], the fact is that Pacific regionalism will never be the same”. Indeed, a solution will require fundamental reform to the current system of regional cooperation, which also addresses issues like the great influence of Australia, New Zealand, and to a lesser extent Fiji. Many experts like Katerina Teaiwa and Steven Ratuva (2021) have suggested that a formalization of the informal ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ on sub-regional rotation “to ensure that there is a sense of regional equity, diversity, fairness and balance in the way the Secretary General is selected” as well as a guarantee that the next Secretary General will come from Micronesia could be a basis for a compromise. The current crisis also could be taken as an occasion to approach a more fundamental reform of regional cooperation. Since most PICs agree that a reform of the institution should limit the influence of Australia and New Zealand on its agenda, the two larger countries could do their part by e.g. accepting that they are not participating in any future votes on the selection of Secretary Generals. Teaiwa and Ratuva (2021) propose a “reform to the highly centralized Suva/Fiji-based PIF structure to give more power and responsibility to the various sub-regions”, e.g. by setting up sub-regional offices.

However, the formalization of agreements and the further institutionalization of Pacific regionalism could create further challenges for the idea of the Pacific Way. Referring to Ratuva (2021), “[t]here is an assump-

tion that consensus has magical powers to address conflict, but the reality is that it also has the potential to generate and conceal conflict”. Therefore, for any reforms it will be important to find a balance between retaining the informal system that offers flexibility which is necessary for regional cooperation in the Pacific and the institutionalization of controversial informal agreements that have the potential to generate future conflicts. This will require a broader discussion about the ‘Pacific Way’ to make sure there is agreement on what the concept actually contains and can accomplish, especially because the current regional dispute reminds us of the questions whether there really is “a single Pacific Way or [rather] multiple ways” and whether “it manifest[s] itself in the same way across the region and over time” (Kabutaulaka 2021).

Herr (2021) points to a legal aspect that at least theoretically could become a game changer in the current situation: Even though the Pacific Islands Forum was originally established in 1971, the cooperation in the Forum today is based on the 2000 Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. A few years later, in 2005, the member states of the Forum decided on an Agreement Establishing the Pacific Islands Forum that has been signed and ratified by the Micronesian states, but is not valid since Fiji has not yet ratified the agreement. Herr (2021) notes that “the regional turmoil may be seriously aggravated” if Fiji decided to move the 2005 agreement into force as this would make null and void the Micronesian notifications to leave the Forum. New notes on withdrawal from the Forum would need to

Source: Pacific Islands Forum.

be submitted with new timeframes for the exit becoming effective. However, if the Pacific states manage to overcome their division before the exit of the Micronesian states moves into force, this legal aspect has the potential to provide a face-saving resolution of the current crisis. It would give the Micronesian states the chance to not withdraw their notes to quit the 2000 agreement, but to argue that all Pacific states jointly have been able to reform the system of regional cooperation and even advance regional cooperation.

Legacy of Dame Meg Taylor at risk after the election of Puna?

The Secretary General of the Forum used to have mostly symbolic and representative functions. This has changed to a certain degree over the past decades to “a more proactive, representational, and diplomatic, role in advocating for Pacific island country interests in a rapidly changing global context” (Fry 2021b). The outgoing Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor, who held the post since 2014, has “taken this broader interpretation of the role to a new and impressive level” (Fry 2021b) and was quite successful in implementing some reforms to strengthen the Pacific Islands Forum. Amongst others, Taylor was a very strong advocate of strengthening the inclusion of civil society in the Forum processes. Thereby, she addressed a long-existing criticism against the Forum and helped to increase transparency and accountability in the organization. It remains to be seen whether Puna will follow this path of reform. Having been Prime Minister for 10 years, there are some fears that he could – willingly or unconsciously – reverse some reforms and symbolizes a more traditional and state-centered orientation of the organization. Moreover, since Puna faces charges in the Cook Islands for misconduct while being the country’s Prime Minister, there is some risk that the court proceedings will obstruct administration or even damage the reputation of the Secretary General position.

Conclusion

The Micronesian exit from the Forum and the escalation of the conflict about the organization’s future leadership are

not isolated events. Rather they need to be understood in the context with other regional developments like the controversy about the USP revealing that there is not only a split between the Micronesian states and the rest of the region, but more profound manifold divisions between the Pacific states. The selection of the new Forum Secretary General was both a trigger for a crisis of regionalism and an indicator for many underlying divisions and soaring distrust between regional leaders that has been under the surface for some time.

Characterizing the decision about the Secretary General as a vote about US and Chinese influence in the Pacific is a misconstruction and oversimplification ignoring the manifold intra-regional motivations and dynamics that have triggered the escalation. Such characterizations are emblematic for the lack of interest of many institutions outside Oceania towards the Pacific region. The latter is far too often only perceived as a playing field for external powers, downgrading the PICs to mere objects. But the Pacific is not only relevant for its strategic importance to external powers like China or the US, rather there is the need to focus on the reasons why these actors perceive the Pacific as of strategic importance.

While Australia and New Zealand in fact have, once again, made some grave diplomatic mistakes, there is also some danger in statements from the region blaming the two countries for the crisis. This overshadows that there is a joint responsibility of the Pacific states, including Australia and New Zealand, but also the PICs, for the current impasse and its solution. To a certain degree, the current challenges in regionalism are rooted in historical dependencies and colonialism, especially since the classification of Oceania in three sub-regions as a result of colonialism has become relevant for Pacific politics. Despite the joint responsibility of all Pacific states, regional actors like Fiji have played a particularly unfortunate role in the development of the crisis, but also have to take a vital role in a possible solution.

While the division of the Pacific states may to a lower extent than many assume be the result of external actors’ influence, its consequences may well have even more impacts on global politics than many assume. It is not just the rivalry between the US and China in

the Pacific that is enforced by increasing dependency on bilateral relations, but also the loss of the PICs as a unified bloc in international politics. Especially, it may become even more challenging to agree on significant further steps to combat global climate change if the PICs are divided and therefore less insistent on urgent action than they have been in recent years. Consciously or not, the regional division matters for the region and matters for the world.

Howes and Sen (2021) have argued that “[w]hatever the precise reason or mix of reasons, the hard truth revealed by the SG selection and subsequent split is that member countries just don’t take the Forum that seriously”. There may be some truth in this analysis, but not necessarily because the PICs have a general disregard for regional cooperation or the Forum. The informality of regionalism may have comforted the PICs again, like in the past, to rather run away from the problems instead of looking for solutions even for sensitive issues. The COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of physical meetings between Pacific have contributed to the escalation. It reveals once more that while the ‘Pacific Way’ as a norm of regional diplomacy offers flexibility and traditional means of conflict resolution, it is not very flexible when the very format of Pacific regionalism is challenged. This is also a result of the high level of ambiguity in Pacific regional cooperation and politics with regularly changing regional alliances, and national interests often defined by individual Pacific leaders. While this appears to be a derogation, it also can become an advantage in finding flexible solutions for the current crisis.

There is much at stake for the Pacific states. The crisis is not just about the Forum, but about cooperation and the willingness to make compromises more generally. It requires but also offers the chance for much needed reforms of the regional cooperation system. The Pacific Island states should have an interest in continued cooperation and agree with Kevin Rudd (2021), when he says that the “Pacific Islands Forum is worth saving”.

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Endnotes

¹⁾ Backed by the supply of COVID-19 vaccines to the three states and the invitation of the Marshallese president David Kabua as only PICs' representative to US President Joe Biden's Climate Change Summit in April 2021 that especially angered Fiji as self-proclaimed leader of the PICs.

²⁾ With the exception of FSM that already mistakenly referred to the 2005 agreement in its note communicating its withdrawal.

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Figure 5: The former Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, attends a virtual meeting at the headquarters of the Forum Secretariat.

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