

Navigating the Rift Between Micronesia and the Pacific Islands Forum

By Richard Pruett

While the U.S. presidential election was garnering much of the world's attention, another acrimonious election was roiling the Pacific, causing the entire Micronesian bloc of nations to exit the region's leading policy-making body, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). This is an opportune time to re-think the PIF and possibly realign Pacific regional architecture in preparation for future challenges.

The Republic of Palau left the Forum on February 5, followed three days later by the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of Kiribati, Republic of Nauru, and Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). That all five countries chose to leave the PIF was an act of remarkable Micronesian solidarity. The immediate reason for their departure was the February 4 election of a non-Micronesian as the PIF's new secretary-general.

Until now, leadership had cycled among the three major racial and cultural groups in the Pacific – i.e., Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian. The Micronesian countries felt snubbed when the leadership was passed over them to a Polynesian, instead. In fact, a Micronesian has held the leadership of the PIF only once in its 50-year history. The Forum's 2009-2014 suspension of Fiji fractured regional institutions along Melanesian lines. This latest failure to achieve consensus — the “Pacific Way” — has led to its complete rupture, North-South, along the Micronesia cultural fault line.

Cultural and racial differences in the diverse Pacific, the normative tug-of-war with Fiji, and the power differentials between the Tasman allies and the Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) have been the principal sources of tension within the Forum. But a fundamental contradiction also limiting its role as the region's premier policy-making body is the anomalous fact that the most important Pacific power of all, the United States, stands outside it.

Moreover, Washington has evinced little interest in joining. The United States initially took a major hand in the post-war development of Pacific regional architecture by helping to found what is now the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and administering the Caroline, Mariana, and Marshall Islands for the United Nations. Washington then became relatively passive for many years as the Tasman allies and the PICs themselves came increasingly into their own.

In 2000, the PIF adopted the Biketawa Declaration, giving the Forum a framework for responding to regional emergencies in Solomon Islands (2003-2017), Nauru (2004-2009), and Tonga (2006). Over-extended in its commitments and distracted by events in Southwest Asia, the United States limited itself to a supporting, logistical role in Pacific emergencies. Washington eventually became a PIF “Dialogue Partner,” and its Pacific territories became PIF observers. But the PIF was seen as Australia's project.

Meanwhile, Canberra, Wellington, and the South Pacific members used their dominant numbers and influence to institute non-U.S. practices and standards that sometimes tended to alienate the U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI) from the other PICs.

America's relative apathy began to dissipate with the rise of China's navy. Washington declared 2007 the “Year of the Pacific.” Next, despite Fiji's pariah status within the PIF, Washington actually stepped up its non-military engagement with Suva and established its embassy there as a regional hub, the largest diplomatic mission of any

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country in the Pacific. In 2011, Washington announced a "pivot" that signaled greater emphasis on the Asia-Pacific and the repositioning of some military forces. In recent years, Washington significantly heightened its Pacific profile through several high-level visits.

Today, the Pacific Defense Initiative (PDI), allocating \$6 billion to bolstering U.S. defenses in the Pacific, affords the United States an opportunity to re-exert its influence in the region, especially if combined with the \$5 billion "BLUE Pacific Act" proposed by the U.S. Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus. Untethering from the PIF does not untether Micronesia from the West. Nonetheless, Beijing will be eager to exploit any opportunities, especially to sever diplomatic ties between Taiwan and Nauru, Palau, and the RMI.

Washington is renegotiating the financial frameworks of its Compacts of Free Association with its closest allies in the Pacific, the Freely Associated States (FAS), consisting of the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau. Although U.S. investment in their trust funds is due to end imminently, they should be further capitalized, instead, in order to compensate for investment shortfalls and forestall increased Micronesian immigration to Guam and Hawaii. As part of its ongoing capacity-building efforts and humanitarian assistance to the FAS, Washington also should consider prioritizing delivery of COVID vaccines.

Without the Micronesian nations, the Forum will be a sub-regional body and its role as a policy-making body for the Pacific greatly attenuated. Washington should rationalize its representation to the PIF Post-Forum Dialogue accordingly. It should be represented by its ambassador to Suva, absent a new ambassador-at-large posting for the Pacific.

The same ambassador is also accredited to the SPC. Founded in 1947, the SPC is the most inclusive of all Pacific intergovernmental institutions. Ideally, the Pacific probably should have a regional development and collective security organization with the same inclusivity as the SPC; however, the Tasman allies stipulated from the beginning that the organization eschew political and military matters. The Pacific Community provides much-needed technical and scientific advice to the PICs and serves as a major channel for donor development funding. Washington should exert greater leadership in this important organization, and also should step up its outreach to Melanesia, particularly to Papua New Guinea as it seeks a new *modus vivendi* with Autonomous Bougainville.

The East-West Center's Pacific Islands Development Program should re-invigorate its Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders to fill part of the new policy coordinating void among the Micronesian countries. A greater emphasis on public-private partnerships could offer the best approach to many of the PICs' most intractable development challenges. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command should take such an approach, in coordination with the PICs, when mapping out its programs under the PDI, which should include Australian and New Zealand contractors and steer away from any courses of action potentially prejudicial to future PIF unity.

This test of the PIF is not yet played out. The withdrawals will take up to a year and must be ratified by their respective capitals, leaving some room for compromise, such as a pledge by the PIF that the next secretary-general be Micronesian. Even if this rupture of the PIF proves temporary, it already has created a new sense of Micronesian solidarity. Consequently, should the Micronesian countries choose to return to the PIF, it likely will be as a bloc, not unilaterally.

The PIF has a choice — resign itself to sub-regional status bereft of its wider policy role, or demonstrate more solicitude and flexibility toward the USAPI, perhaps achieving a new consensus and emerging even stronger than before.

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