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Power Diplomacy at the 2011 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)

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This year's Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) successfully showed that it can attract major global and regional actors, including high-level delegations from the United States and the People's Republic of China. While future PIFs may not consistently attain this year's unprecedented level of attendance, at least for the near-term the PIF will remain prominent on the international meeting calendar for world powers. New Zealand spared no expense in hosting the Forum's 40th anniversary meeting in Auckland. The sixteen Pacific heads of government who attended the forum in early September represented a region that spans one-third of the globe, and were joined by high-level delegations from fourteen other countries for the Post-Forum Dialogue.

Gerard A. Finin, Resident Co-Director and Senior Fellow for the Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP) at the East-West Center, reports that on the PIF's 40th anniversary "The sixteen Pacific heads of government who attended the forum in early September represented a region that spans one-third of the globe, and were joined by high-level delegations from fourteen other countries for the Post-Forum Dialogue."

The largest delegation of approximately 50 officials came from the United States headed by Deputy Secretary of State Thomas Nides and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell. The clear message was that the United States would continue its increased engagement throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Deputy Secretary Nides noted a series of recent US initiatives towards Pacific island nations which include Campbell's high-level interagency mission to eight Pacific islands this past June, a grant of \$21 million for climate change projects coordinated from the new USAID office in Port Moresby, and the Defense Department's multinational Pacific Partnership civic action initiative. Other external participants included Canada, China, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, and Japan. In addition, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma, and European Commission President José Manuel Barroso each attended for the first time.

Many of the decisions in the 18-page Communiqué were settled well in advance of the meeting. The call for easier access to climate change adaptation and mitigation funding met no opposition. The high rate of non-communicable diseases and concern over the faltering public education system were clearly noted. The need to advance the PIF's long-stalled "Pacific Plan" to promote regional cooperation and integration—initially envisaged as akin to the EU—was endorsed and remains uncontroversial, based largely on the fact that most Pacific governments appear to have little interest or involvement.

In the wake of a 2006 military coup Fiji is currently suspended from the PIF, even though the PIF headquarters is still located in Fiji's capital of Suva. A small peace offering from the PIF that would have allowed Fiji to participate in the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations—PACER-plus talks—to advance a free trade agreement between Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands was summarily rejected. Informal discussions regarding Pacific Islanders seeking independence in West Papua did not lead to mention of this growing movement in the Communiqué, suggesting the absence of a consensus among PIF members.



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Ideas about the Pacific’s regional architecture date back to the 1860s, when King David Kalakaua of Hawai‘i, then leading a sovereign nation, considered how Oceania could be brought together through a confederation. At the conclusion of World War II, the South Pacific Commission (SPC) was formed by the then colonial powers: Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Headquartered on the French island of New Caledonia this grouping held sway through the initial period of decolonization. It was not until 1971 that the South Pacific Forum—today’s PIF—was established in Fiji to support a more independent voice for the new developing Pacific island nation states. Today, Australia and New Zealand are the PIF’s premier sources of funding. Although the SPC continues to serve a critically important role by providing regional technical support, it is the PIF that is the regional institution responsible for political and policy matters.

Standing in the shadows of this year’s PIF was another emerging regional grouping which coalesced in 1988. Collectively embracing over 80 percent of the Pacific islands’ population and land area, including much of its natural resource wealth, is the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) comprised of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and the Front de Libération National Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) independence movement of France’s territory of New Caledonia. The MSG is the only Pacific intergovernmental organization that does not include any of the region’s former colonial powers and their positions on issues are therefore seen as being far more independent. Located in Vanuatu, the MSG in 2007 opened a large secretariat building that was donated by China.

Fiji formally joined the MSG in 2007, shortly after the military coup that resulted in the imposition of international sanctions. Today, the MSG’s current chairman is Fiji’s military leader, “Frank” Bainimarama. Building upon his status as the MSG Chair, one week before the PIF gathering, Bainimarama brought together representatives from eleven island governments to “Fiji’s Engaging the Pacific Meeting” as a counteraction to the PIF.

The subject of Fiji was quietly debated in many PIF discussions and tested the organization’s preference for consensus based decision making. The fact that the UN utilizes Fiji’s soldiers as international peacekeepers did not go unnoticed. Australia, already miffed by the expulsion of its High Commissioner to Fiji, was displeased to learn that Luxembourg, a competitor for one of the highly valued UN Security Council Seats, had accepted an invite and was given prominence at Fiji’s pre-PIF gathering. Behind the scenes Fiji also advanced the name of a distinguished Fijian diplomat as a contender for the PIF’s Secretary-General position, against the incumbent Tuiloma Neroni Slade. Mr Slade was subsequently reappointed for a second term.

But it was China’s statements, conveyed by Vice-Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai, which received the most notice at this year’s PIF. Juxtaposing China’s position in sharp contrast to the broadly embraced Australian-led “Cairns Compact” initiative for development partner coordination, evaluation and transparency, Tiankai pointedly stated that China’s bilateral assistance is qualitatively different. Explaining that China views its increasing level of engagement as “South-South” aid, Tiankai unequivocally signaled that China has no intention of joining with other development partners, but will chart its own course in working bilaterally with Pacific island nations.

The increasing commercial interests and diplomatic engagement by China throughout Oceania will ensure a heightened level of attention from the United States and its partners. If American exceptionalism suggests a distinctive global role and inclusive democratic values, it now appears that Chinese indigenous concepts of exceptionalism may draw on their own unique development experience over the past two-and-a-half millennia. Handled properly, there may be sufficient space to accommodate both “exceptionalisms” in a manner that is beneficial to all Pacific island nations.

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