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New SIC Report: Rethinking Insecurity In The Blue Pacific Region

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Citation: Van Jackson (ed.), 2024. Rethinking Insecurity in the Blue Pacific Region. Security in Context Report 24-02. May 2024, Security in Context.

The Violent Contradictions of “International Order” in the Blue Pacific

By Van Jackson

When rioting broke out in New Caledonia in May 2024, France deployed hundreds of paramilitary police to quell large-scale unrest. Although New Caledonia is located in the Pacific—16,000 miles away from Paris—the French government responded to societal rupture there by banning TikTok, imposing a nationwide curfew, and using force to ensure that “Republican order will be restored whatever the cost.”¹

Ironically, New Caledonia is a French colony, not a republic, and the need to impose order through state violence obscures the reason why political grievance boiled over in the first place: withholding self-determination from the indigenous Kanak. The Kanaky have been fighting for independence for decades, mollified only through the 1998 Noumea Accord, which offered the prospect of a conditional pathway to self-



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determination. But the independence movement saw the Accord being subverted by France's recent attempts to dilute Kanak voting power in a referendum for independence.

Although this sounds like a problem that should belong to a bygone era, it is both very current and hardly unique. The contradiction in France's response to New Caledonian unrest—seeking “republican order” in a place systematically denied it—is merely one expression of a larger pattern.

The Blue Pacific—a vast oceanic region of states, nations, and non-sovereign territories—is a key site of contradiction for not only U.S. foreign policy but for Western romanticism about how the world works.

It is a highly militarized region—and becoming more so—yet home to only three Pacific Island militaries. Its people express a clear-eyed sense of the security priorities that concretely threaten them—climate change, economic immiseration, political corruption, and gender violence—yet it is military and policing considerations that dominate how outside powers engage with the region. And whereas regionalism is the heart of Blue-Pacific politics, bilateralism is the dominant mode for dealing with militarized security issues.

These tensions all spring from a common source: a geopolitics of control and exclusion imposed from without.

The Pacific Islands region is supposed to comprise at least half of what U.S. officials have repeatedly proclaimed is a “free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific” region. Yet the Pacific is none of those things. Dame Meg Taylor, a member of the Pacific Elders' Voice and the former Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, commented in 2023 that America's “Indo-Pacific Strategy is incompatible with Blue Pacific priorities and values.”²

The United States itself maintains lopsided relations of formally consensual domination with the Federated States of

Micronesia (FSM), Palau, and the Marshall Islands. Washington also denies self-determination to Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa. A century ago, unadulterated imperialism was the modus vivendi of outside powers operating in the Pacific. Today, an insistence on maintaining U.S. primacy while keeping China out has become America's newest justification for perpetuating the same old-style hierarchies. Australia, France, and to an extent New Zealand have followed and supported America in this misguided mission. All are on the wrong side of history in the Pacific, and China is just the latest excuse for it.

Nevertheless, concerns about China are not wholly unwarranted.

Beijing has massively expanded its economic presence in the Pacific since 2006. This partly owes to an economic vacuum left by a United States that looked past the Pacific entirely in favor of the expanse of East Asia beyond it. Australia, France and New Zealand remained engaged in the region—including economically—but in the most narrowly self-interested ways, allowing the region's sovereign debt holdings to pile up while its development prospects wither and its people's existence becomes increasingly menaced by climate change.

With substantial economic needs going unmet, China stepped in, plowing surplus capital into the Pacific Islands as a spatial fix for its own slow-burning crisis of capital accumulation at home. But China's more expansive material interests in the Islands have stimulated political interests that Beijing has sought to secure by expanding policing resources in the region, not unlike Western powers. Both China and the United States, moreover, think the Pacific must function as a strategic buffer in order for each to realize security from the predations of the other, leading to the geo-politicization of everyday life in the Pacific and a zero-sum approach to diplomacy that eats away at the region's collective autonomy.

Outside powers, whether China or the West, are relating to the Blue Pacific region in ways that only bring it greater insecurity while proclaiming precisely the opposite. But where there is contradiction there is hope.

Stuart Hall once explained that, “A conjuncture is a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape.”³ And understanding the contradictions that comprise a historical conjuncture, as Rob Carley has relayed, “provide opportunities for groups to raise consciousness, organize, mobilize, and combine...”⁴

Security in Context is releasing this roundtable series on Pacific insecurity to better understand the cross-currents and contradictions of our present-day conjuncture.

In “Large, Illegal, and Permanent: U.S. Oceanic Empire in the Compact States,” Edward Hunt not only reveals the sinews of America’s still-existing empire in the Pacific; he makes the case that it exists in flagrant violation of international law. The Compacts of Free Association that the United States has bilaterally—not collectively—negotiated with FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands respectively gives the United States literal control over the land, air, and surrounding seas of these three nations. This amounts to what Hunt calls, “Compact colonialism,” and it is not only responsible for the Compact nations’ profound levels of economic insecurity and deep inequalities; it puts all three nations at odds with its Pacific neighbors on militarized security issues.

In the aptly titled, “Security in Context: Regionalism in the Pacific Islands,” William Waqavakatoga and Joanne Wallis provide a rich primer on the history of regionalism in the Blue Pacific. Whereas regionalism was a means for coordination among empires in the wake of World War II, by the latter Cold War period, regionalism had become something different. For Western powers, regional confabs

were sites for waging Cold War rivalry like any other, but Pacific regionalism also grew to accommodate the voices of Islanders and their governments, making it a vehicle to oppose militarism and advocate for both national self-determination and nuclear disarmament. Today, Waqavakatoga and Wallis, argue, “Pacific leaders undoubtedly see greater Pacific regionalism as key to managing strategic competition and to pursuing their developmental, climate, and other goals.” The authors note numerous cleavages among Pacific Island countries, ranging from the issue of West Papuan independence in Indonesia to deep-sea mining to conflicts between pan-regionalism and sub-regionalism. But those disagreements are not the cause of Islands’ exposure to growing militarization or the deep dependencies that have perpetuated structural violence within their societies. Waqvakatoga and Wallis give reason to believe that the region will experience collective peace through regional cohesion or individual insecurity through regional fracture; every path seemingly leads to one or the other.

In “What You Should Know about New Zealand’s Potential Involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two,” Marco de Jong channels a unique perspective on Pacific insecurity. De Jong is a Pacific historian who is very active in New Zealand debates about AUKUS—the tripartite military arrangement among Australia, the United States, and the UK, the centerpiece of which is arming Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and precision-guided munitions. New Zealand occupies a unique position as both an insider and outsider when it comes to the Pacific. It partakes in Pacific regionalism and is located on the Australasian edge of the Pacific region, yet is also a former British settler colony that still pledges symbolic fealty to King Charles. Since the 1980s, Aotearoa New Zealand has prided itself on an independent foreign policy—most famously becoming a champion of nuclear disarmament when it spurned its alliance with the United States in 1985—yet it treats its intelligence relationships with the “Five Eyes” (US,

UK, Canada, and Australia) as crucial to its own security. De Jong argues that AUKUS not only represents a betrayal of New Zealand's anti-nuclear commitments but also an abdication of New Zealand's independent foreign policy tradition at a time when aligning with one great power or another only promises greater insecurity for the Pacific. If New Zealand abandons everything it hopes to stand for in the Pacific, de Jong suggests it will lack the credibility to be a productive partner in the region and instead be relegated to the role of just another outside power chasing a misguided sense of its interests.

Kristi Govella puts the spotlight on fisheries in "Fishing, Human Security, and Transboundary Maritime Challenges in the Pacific." The sustainable exploitation of oceanic resources is a key source of economic life for Pacific Island nations, and fishing is in many ways the region's most prized cash crop. Fisheries, Govella argues, mediate between environmental security and many other types of security, including economic, food, physical, and community security. Fish are a common-pool resource that all Islanders rely on to varying degrees, and is also a depletable resource. Collaborative, inclusive coordination via regional governance is the only way to secure fisheries for future generations without the emergence of an exclusionary regime that serves some at the expense of others. Such a sustainable regionalism, one that serves to bolster human security, requires that Pacific Island residents and other stakeholders confront issues of economic insecurity and unequal wealth distributions but also labor rights and worker abuses in the fishing industry.

The final working paper in this series comes from Kenneth Kuper from the University of Guam. In "From Strategic Denial to Strategic Reclamation: 'Mothballed' Micronesia," Kuper explains how U.S. military strategy is built on American preservation and exploitation of relations of domination with not only the Compact nations but also Guam, CNMI, and American Samoa. The latter three are all denied both nationhood and full incorporation into the U.S. federal

system. As formally non-self-governing territories, Guam, CNMI, and American Samoa form the largest share of the Non-Sovereign Pacific, meaning that they have no legal means to conduct their own foreign policy, provide for their own defense, or, crucially, overrule the U.S. “distributed and dispersed” (D2) strategy that entails an expansion of its military presence into long-neglected corners of the Micronesian sub-region. Despite not having a say in their own fates, these nations have become military targets of America’s enemies because they host crucial strategic sites for U.S. power projection into East Asia.

This collection of working papers on Pacific security bucks much of what passes for conventional wisdom in elite power centers outside the region. All the working papers are—on analytical grounds—either askew of or outright antagonistic toward Western notions of “great-power competition.” All see the values and priorities of Pacific peoples as the thing that ought to guide how outside powers interact with the Pacific. And all place a special emphasis on regionalism and community, not primarily as a politics of deference, but as a key source of future security. In so doing, the authors move beyond the contradictions that perpetuate so much harm and existential risk. These papers collectively give us hints about the kind of order that might emerge organically from the Pacific, if only we take seriously the link between justice and security—a link that requires centering the region’s people.

Footnotes:

- 1: Kim Willsher, “New Caledonia: Macron Calls Further Security Meeting as Deadly Unrest Grinds On,” *The Guardian* (May 20, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/20/new-caledonia-riots-french-president-emmanuel-macron-state-of-emergency>.
- 2: “Pacific-Led Regionalism Undermined,” Asia Society Policy Institute, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/pacific-led->

[regionalism-undermined.](#)

3: Interview with Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, “Interpreting the Crisis” *Soundings* no. 44 (2010), p. 57
<https://journals.lwbooks.co.uk/soundings/vol-2010-issue-44/article-7260/>.

4: Robert Carley, *Gramscian Critical Pedagogy: A Brief Introduction* (New York: Dio Press, 2021), p. 53.

The PDF for this Report can be found at the link below.

The links to individual articles can also be found below:

Large, Illegal, and Permanent: U.S. Oceanic Empire in the Compact States by Edward Hunt

Security in Context: Regionalism in the Pacific Islands by William Waqavakatoga and Joanne Wallis

What You Should Know about New Zealand’s Potential Involvement in AUKUS Pillar Two by Marco de Jong

Fishing, Human Security, and Transboundary Maritime Challenges in the Pacific by Kristi Govella

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