

## Geopolitics and the Blue Pacific<sup>i</sup>

### 1. Key points

#### **Multilateralism is under siege globally and in the Pacific**

- Recent geopolitical and geostrategic shifts – notably the intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States – have re-situated the Pacific and the Pacific Ocean at the very centre of great power rivalries. Recent years have also witnessed a global resurgence in nationalism that is undermining multilateralism.
- China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”, the US’ “Indo-Pacific Strategy”, Australia’s “Pacific Step Up”, New Zealand’s “Pacific Reset” and intensifying engagement from other Pacific-rim powers such as Japan and Taiwan, as well as more distant powers such as Britain and France, are producing “an increasingly crowded and complex region”. Unlike other geopolitical “moments” that have come and gone in the Pacific, this one is likely to play out over a very long timeframe.

*The spirit of the Blue Pacific speaks to the Pacific finding its own way, on its own terms, through collective action and cooperation; but at a time when the region and individual Pacific Island states are coming under unprecedented pressure to “take sides” and multilateralism everywhere is waning.*

#### **The Blue Pacific in the Indo-Pacific: the resurgence of sea power and maritime geopolitics**

- The recent shifts in global geopolitics have seen the re-emergence of the “maritime theatre” and “sea power” in great power rivalry. This has been driven by China’s ambition to become a sea power and the threat this poses to US naval predominance in the western Pacific (Morgan 2019). In response, the US announced in 2011 a strategy of rebalance to Asia; followed by a “Pivot to the Pacific”; and, more recently, the Indo-Pacific Strategy to which other Pacific-rim powers, notably Australia and Japan, have also subscribed (Medcalf 2018).
- The US’ Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to enlist maritime democracies – particularly the US, Japan, India and Australia – in a strategy of “off-shore balancing” in the Indo-Pacific region, with an emphasis on combined naval power projection and cooperation to enhance maritime security (Morgan 2019).

*The ocean is now a more important strategic domain than it has been at any time since the end of WWII. This especially applies to the Indian and Pacific oceans and it is likely to intensify over coming decades.*

#### **The merging of maritime geopolitics, maritime security and the sustainable blue economy**

- With intensifying geostrategic competition over the Pacific Ocean, the lines between maritime strategy, maritime security and the blue economy are likely to become increasingly blurred.

- The intensifying Pacific engagement by Pacific-rim democracies has had a strong focus on maritime security, particularly Australia’s Pacific Step Up (Morgan 2019). The maritime security agenda is frequently couched in terms of enhancing the capacity of Pacific Island states to monitor and police illegal activities within their EEZs and adjacent high seas, including illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and, increasingly, transnational crime (e.g. Bueger and Bergin 2018). The importance of these capacities and cooperative arrangements cannot be disputed (e.g. Hanich et al 2009). However, it has also been argued that the emphasis on maritime security cooperation in the Pacific cannot be seen in isolation from the wider geopolitical imperatives of the Indo-Pacific Strategy (Morgan 2019).

*There is a pressing set of questions around the blurring of the boundaries between the Blue Pacific’s concern with “policing” its blue economy and large ocean territory; and the wider military, naval and strategic agendas of Pacific-rim powers.*

### **The geopolitics of the Pacific’s sustainable blue economy**

- There are three main geopolitical dimensions to the oceanic resources and territory of the Blue Pacific, which vary in intensity and configuration depending on the resource in question.
  - a. The ability to access, and in some instances control, large swathes of the Pacific Ocean*
    - This has been the case with the Pacific’s tuna fishery in which all of the world’s major trading states and blocs have been involved, including Japan, Korea, the US, the EU and China. “Access to the region’s tuna resources allows [these powers] a physical presence over a large geographic area of the Pacific, from which they can pursue their strategic interests” (Aqorau 2015:224; also see Giron 2016). A similar issue has been highlighted in relation to the recent and rapid expansion of Large Marine Protected Areas in the Pacific under the apparent control of external actors including US philanthropic foundations (Mallin et al 2019, Giron 2016).
  - b. Asymmetrical power relations in the negotiation of access and use agreements*
    - There has been a longstanding issue with the Pacific’s tuna resources whereby powerful Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFNs) have played Pacific states off against one another, employed aid as a political lever, and eschewed multilateral negotiations in favour of bilateral agreements the contents of which are often confidential (Govan 2017, Hanich et al 2009). That said, as a region we continue to gain strength through cooperation and solidarity in employing region-wide management systems such as the Niue Subsidiary Treaty Subsidiary Agreement, the Harmonised Minimum Terms and Conditions for fishing access, and the FFA’s Integrated Monitoring, Control and Surveillance Framework.
    - Moreover, the adoption of strong zone-based management arrangements, such as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement’s Vessel Day Scheme (PNA VDS), has achieved significant success in redressing power asymmetries in tuna negotiations. The coordinated approach of FFA member countries to negotiations within the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, with a strong focus on regional solidarity and advancing of pre-agreed positions,

- has ensured that Pacific Island countries continue to drive the work of the Commission, ensuring the Pacific’s tuna stocks continue to be managed at sustainable levels and that management measures support the existing frameworks that have been established by FFA members over many years.
- The issue of asymmetries of power - including technical, financial and negotiating capacity – could also arise in relation to deep-sea mining and marine genetic resources (Govan 2017). The role of “first mover” states and corporations in shaping emerging regulatory regimes for DSM has been controversial, both in national jurisdictions in the Pacific (e.g. Deep-sea Mining Campaign et al 2019) and in the Area (e.g. Zalic 2018). The strong, coordinated regional approach taken by Pacific Island countries to protect and advance our interests in management of tuna fisheries could be usefully applied to other sectors.

### *c. Strategically important resources*

- This particularly applies to deep-sea mineral resources, which include so-called rare earth elements. Developed states regard these minerals as critical to future “resource security” and low carbon infrastructures. This is particularly the case in Europe where the “security of supply” for rare earth elements is seen as essential given China’s dominance of the market (Childs 2018). The military industrial complex has been heavily involved in research and development activities in the Area since the Cold War (Zalic 2018). The US weapons company Lockheed Martin continues to be involved in deep-sea mining exploration in the Area and attempted to enlist Fiji as a sponsoring state in 2013 (Zalic 2018, Deep Sea Mining Campaign et al 2019). Chinese corporations have also acquired exploration licenses in the Area (in the Clarion Clipperton Fracture Zone), and the Chinese government has directly engaged a number of Pacific states in relation to exploration activities in territorial waters and “might use foreign aid to pave the way for its involvement in seabed mining” (Zhang 2018).

## **2. Challenges and opportunities (appetite for integrated ocean governance)**

- While the Pacific Ocean may have become a source of strategic anxiety for Pacific-rim powers, this also makes the ocean an important *collective strategic resource* for Pacific Island states. Therefore, should geopolitics be included as a ‘sector’ within an integrated ocean governance approach?
- Will the maritime security agenda facilitate an increasing militarisation of the Blue Pacific Continent? More broadly, is the enhanced external engagement with the Pacific being primarily driven by the security agendas of Pacific-rim powers rather than those of the Blue Pacific Continent as articulated in the 2018 Boe Declaration? If so, how can these agendas be reconciled to maximise sustainable benefits for the Blue Pacific Continent?
- What might be the impacts of geopolitics on Blue Pacific Continent’s ability to implement integrated ocean governance, including in relation to the influence that Pacific-rim powers and external donors might have on technical advice provided by CROP agencies?



- What experiences can be drawn from the successes of Pacific SIDS in UN oceans and climate processes, as well as the successes of regional approaches to tuna management, to guard against geopolitical influences that might undermine ocean health and sustainability?

**3. How issues link to key policies (SDG14, FPO, Samoa Pathway, 2050 Regional Strategy, etc.)**

*“Boe Declaration”*: issues of sovereignty and freedom from outside influence; how ‘hard security’ agendas of Pacific-rim powers relate to the expanded concept of security outlined in Boe.

*2050 Strategy*: identification of key geopolitical drivers impacting on the Blue Pacific Continent’s ability to protect our ocean health and integrity and island and ocean resources.

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<sup>i</sup> This brief was compiled by USP with inputs from relevant organisations and experts