



Pacific Island Forum Summit 2018: An Assessment

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Nauru hosted the 49th Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Summit and related meetings from September 3-6, 2018 in Yaren, Nauru. The theme of this year's gathering was "Building a strong Pacific: Our Islands, Our People, Our Will". The leaders of the 18 member PIF welcomed the theme as an opportunity and also as a reminder "to act together and value the strategic potential of the region".¹

Crucial issues of concern that stood out during the discussions were highlighted in the communiqué issued post summit. The 49th edition of the summit focused on strengthening the collective will of the members' to enhance Pacific security in the light of the dynamic regional geopolitical environment: as increasing attention of powers like China and India, in addition to traditional players notably US, Australia and New Zealand is creating a complex regional situation. The members reaffirmed the importance of promoting disaster resilience and securing maritime boundaries. The forum recognized climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the people of the Pacific. It called for all the members to meet their emission targets within the committed timeframe. The leaders also underscored the importance of 1st Quadrennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report, which tracks the region's progress in realizing SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (S.A.M.O.A.) pathway and other global commitments for emission reduction. The forum called on the members to build momentum towards the goal of *Blue Pacific*.²

The most significant outcome of the summit was the signing of the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, for promoting closer security collaboration among the members to respond to the complex regional security environment. The declaration among other things recognized the concept of security as 'all inclusive' with 'multifaceted challenges', prioritizing issues of human security, environmental security, transnational crimes and cybersecurity. Therefore, regional cooperation in building resilience to these challenges needs to be given importance.³

Another significant development was the announcement by the Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne to set up a *Pacific Fusion Centre* with the support of the regional countries. The centre will assist Pacific governments to better "enforce their laws and protect their

sovereignty by strengthening maritime domain awareness and providing security alerts".⁴ It will collect information from multiple sources to identify and respond to challenges, such as illegal fishing, people smuggling and narcotics trafficking. The announcement is recognition that maritime security remains a primary concern for all the PIF members given their geographical location.

The diplomatic deliberations of this year's summit were overshadowed by the controversies surrounding Australia's detention centre in Nauru and row with China on the issue of ill-treatment of its delegates during the summit.

Nauru's move of banning and limiting foreign media during the PIF was widely criticized as an apparent attempt to avoid media scrutiny of the conditions in the detention centre on its territory. The small island of Nauru hosts a refugee detention camp, on behalf of Canberra, at times labeled by the media as 'Australia's Guantanamo'.⁵ The processing center for asylum seekers is a major source of income for Nauru. Lately, pressure has been building up on the Australian government in the light of deteriorating conditions in the camp. The United Nations has also deplored the living conditions in the detention centre. The New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden also expressed concerns about the indefinite detention of people and offered to assist in resettlement of asylum seekers.

Another major controversy which almost stalled the summit meeting came in the form of host Nauru's spat with China. Chinese delegates were in Nauru to attend the meeting as a dialogue partner of PIF. Nauru refused to stamp entry visas into the Chinese diplomatic passports of the delegates, instead saying it would only process their personal passports. Later, during the Leaders Session with Forum Dialogue Partners, Chinese delegates were allegedly humiliated by denying the opportunity to be heard. However, other PIF members did not approve of Nauru's treatment of Chinese delegates. Samoa criticizing unilateral actions of Nauru as 'dangerous precedent' in fact threatened to withdraw from the Summit and warned that other leaders were likely to follow.⁶ Important to note here that Nauru does not have diplomatic relations with China. On the other hand, it maintains close ties with Taiwan and also receives significant amount of aid from it. Later though, a compromise was worked out but the entire episode created a very tense environment. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chyunying argued that Nauru's actions were against international norms and also PIF regulations and termed it as a "despicable farce" staged by Nauru.⁷

The controversy also exposed sensitivities towards China's rising influence in the region. China has gradually emerged as one of the highest aid donors to the Pacific Island countries (PIC's) challenging Australia and New Zealand's position as the traditional dominant donors in the region. China provided nearly US\$1.78 billion in aid, including concessional loans to the PIC's between 2006-16.⁸ Beijing's attempts at 'soft power' diplomacy have created apprehensions in Australia about possibilities of China's large scale intervention in the region. Earlier this year, Australia replaced China for construction of high-speed undersea telecommunications cables to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Solomon Islands. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, formally announced that the government will partner with the telecommunications company Vocus, which was awarded the \$136.6 million contract to start the physical installation of the Coral Sea Cable System.⁹ Originally the 4,000 kilometers long cable network was set to build by the Chinese giant Huawei, which was given the contract by the Solomons in 2016.¹⁰

In recent years, as global attention shifts to the Indo-Pacific, the South Pacific sub-region has become increasingly important economically, politically, and strategically. In recent years, India has also been trying to reach out to these small island states. India has been a part of PIF as a key dialogue partner since 2006 and regularly sends delegates to the Summits. The formation of *Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation* (FIPIC) in 2014 has given a much needed push to India's relations with the PICs. The volume of aid from India to the PIC's has been doubled under FIPIC, which now stands US\$200,000 to each country.

PIF was established back in 1971 as South Pacific Forum and is the only regional organization in the South Pacific. The rising significance of the Indo-Pacific region has brought it at the centre of global attention. The PIF, therefore, becomes even more crucial, to articulate a united voice of the member countries on the international stage. The multilateral platform, based on the 'sense of common identity and purpose' provides the small and remotely located countries an opportunity to be heard and to attract the attention of the international community. Next summit of the forum will be held at Tuvalu in 2019.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

End Notes

¹Forty-Ninth Pacific Islands Forum: Communiqué, 3-6 September 2018, https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2018/09/05/1FINAL_49PIFLM_Communique_for_unofficial_release_rev.pdf

² I. bid

³ Boe Declaration on Regional Security, <https://www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

⁴Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia to support new Pacific Fusion Centre", 5 September 2018,

https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2018/mp_mr_180905.aspx

⁵Major media banned for upcoming Pacific Island Forum on Nauru, home of 'Australia's Guantanamo', <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/08/02/asia-pacific/politics-diplomacy-asia-pacific/major-media-banned-upcoming-pacific-island-forum-nauru-home-australias-guantanamo/#.W58m1-gzaM->

⁶ China visa spat almost derailed Pacific leaders summit in Nauru, 04 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/04/china-visa-spat-almost-derailed-pacific-leaders-summit-in-nauru>

⁷Ministry OF Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Spokesperson's Regular Press Conference on September 05, 2018,

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1592240.shtml

⁸ The Mapping Foreign Assistance in the Pacific Project, Lowy Institute for International Policy, <https://chineseaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>

⁹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Media Release, 19 June 2018, https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2018/jb_mr_180619.aspx

¹⁰Australia supplants China to build undersea cable for Solomon Islands, 13 June 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/australia-supplants-china-to-build-undersea-cable-for-solomon-islands>