

Identity, national security and influence: The ‘Pacific Reset’ and shaping New Zealand’s relations with the Pacific islands

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In 2018 the newly formed Labour-led coalition government launched the Pacific Reset. The Reset was New Zealand’s most notable foreign policy shift towards the Pacific islands region in decades and consequently steeped in expectation. The new government promised to lead change ‘rather than managing a modified status quo’ (Peters 2018a) and in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s first foreign policy address, she forecasted the policy shift stating that, in the Pacific, ‘we can do better, and we will’ (Ardern 2018). Labelled the government’s ‘top foreign policy priority’, the strategy was extolled as representing a:

refreshed New Zealand approach to the Pacific region ... driven by our strong Pacific identity and interconnectedness with the region, coupled with the direct impact the Pacific’s stability and prosperity has on New Zealand’s national interests (MFAT 2019a).

The Reset’s primary objective was to serve as a policy framework or guide to reshape New Zealand’s relations with its Pacific partners and the region as a whole. Accordingly, the Reset reflected efforts to recalibrate New Zealand’s strategy towards the Pacific and signalled a potentially transformative approach towards the region that would prioritise partnership and emphasise mutual respect. The Cabinet Paper (2018) outlining the rationale for the Reset cited three drivers for New Zealand’s engagement in the Pacific islands region: New Zealand’s Pacific identity; national security; and shared prosperity. Significantly, the Reset signalled an effort to address those domestic policy settings which have implications for the Pacific (MFAT 2020:6).

Since the Reset’s inception, two inter-related questions have dominated. First, to what degree was the Reset inspired and influenced by geopolitical contestation and concerns about China’s rising influence in the Pacific? And second, to what extent does the Reset seek to address the persistent dilemma in both New Zealand domestic and foreign policy: what is New Zealand’s standing and place in the Pacific? Two years later, the Reset remains a core foreign policy objective for the second-term Ardern government and is likely to become increasingly central to New Zealand’s response to intensified geopolitical competition in the region. Through a survey of key policy documents, this chapter considers the ways in which two of the drivers – identity and national security – have informed the Reset. The chapter will conclude that influence lies at the nexus between the two drivers and that New Zealand will be increasingly called upon to exercise influence in an environment of geopolitical competition.

The Pacific Reset

Growing dissatisfaction and concern with the highly transactional nature of New Zealand’s relations with the Pacific

led to calls in 2017 to review and reset New Zealand policies towards the Pacific (Powles and Powles 2017). Cabinet deliberations in early 2018 echoed the need for a ‘refreshed approach’ to New Zealand’s relations with the Pacific and stipulated that the strategy would include the following five elements: building deeper, more mature political partnerships with Pacific island countries, including by reinvesting in leadership diplomacy in the Pacific; ensuring New Zealand Government decision-making on domestic policies considered the implications for the Pacific islands region; and enhancing the effectiveness of Pacific regional organisations to better respond to shared challenges (Cabinet Paper 2018). The strategy also stated that New Zealand activities in the Pacific would be guided by five principles of engagement: understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective impact and sustainability (ibid).

From the outset, the official discourse consistently emphasised that the Reset reflected a sea change in New Zealand Government policy towards the Pacific. The Reset was described as a ‘reenergised approach’ and that New Zealand would move away ‘from a traditional donor-recipient relationship to one based on partnership, friendship and mutual benefit’ (MFAT 2019b:22). It claimed to reflect:

a fundamental change to how our government works that includes deeper collaboration with Pacific partner countries, greater coherence and connectivity between domestic and Pacific policy, more ambition for our Pacific development programme, and increased resources to use our voice and connections internationally to raise awareness for Pacific issues (ibid).

To achieve this the Reset initially had a strong domestic focus. Deepening Pacific policy across government required building the architecture within and across 32 government agencies to support ‘a cross-government commitment to Pacific issues’ (MFAT 2019a) and an ‘integrated approach to foreign policy’ (MFAT 2019c). This accompanied the expectation that the ‘heightened tempo of effort and investment across the State sector’ needed to ‘become the new normal for New Zealand’s Pacific engagement’ (MFAT 2019b:22). With the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) as lead agency, this included integrating development and diplomatic efforts into the purposefully created Pacific and Development Group in Wellington and the Pacific Connections office in Auckland.

The Reset was also accompanied by a significant budgetary increase of NZ\$714m (A\$661m), a 30 per cent increase, over four years to support diplomatic and development activities. Of New Zealand’s total aid budget, the increase of aid to the Pacific equates to approximately 60 per cent (around NZ\$1.331bn (A\$1.234bn)) over the 2018–21 period. Additional initiatives under the Reset included

the establishment of a NZ\$10m (A\$9.2m) Pacific Enabling Fund to support engagement with Pacific partners from cultural and sporting diplomacy, people to people links, to military cooperation activities and the launching of Pasifika TV at a cost of NZ\$10 million over three years. Moreover, superannuation requirements were removed allowing residents of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau to receive their pensions without spending the required five years in New Zealand when over the age of fifty.

The Reset also led to the expansion of New Zealand's diplomatic footprint in the Pacific. Ten new diplomatic posts were created in the Pacific (in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, PNG, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Honolulu) and four positions in Tokyo, Beijing, Brussels and New York to coordinate development policy and partnerships for the Pacific region. Leadership diplomacy initiatives resulted in two high-profile Pacific missions led by Ardern and Peters in 2018. In the first year there were 21 ministerial and parliamentary under-secretary level visits to Pacific countries and territories. This included the first ministerial-level attendance at a Forum Fisheries Agency Ministers meeting since 2009, the first ministerial visit to Tokelau since 2004, and, in 2019, the first visit by a New Zealand prime minister to Tokelau in 15 years. New Zealand also saw an increased tempo of visits from Pacific leaders and ministers in 2018 from eight countries and territories. Cabinet also approved a new policy framework to underpin New Zealand's engagement with the realm countries of the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau.

New Zealand's Pasifika/Pacific identity

New Zealand's Pacific identity narrative is contested, complicated, and arguably has greater currency internationally than within the region itself (Powles 2017). It is, however, a common anchor within official foreign policy – and increasingly domestic – discourse as New Zealand seeks to reconcile with questions of national identity. It is cited as a key driver for New Zealand's engagement with the Pacific that lays claim to New Zealand being a Polynesian country with greater interconnectedness between New Zealand, Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tokelau and Tonga than any other countries in the world with the partial exception of Australia (Cabinet Paper 2018).

The identity narrative is driven by three factors: geography, its constitutional obligations towards the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau, and its indigenous *tangata whenua* and its later migrant *tagata Pasifika* populations. New Zealand has a rapidly growing *tagata Pasifika* population with more than 40 different Pacific ethnic groups that together comprise the fourth largest major ethnic group, behind European, Māori and Asian ethnic groups (New Zealand Census 2013). By 2026, it is projected that New Zealand's Pacific population will have grown to 10 per cent of the total population, compared to 7.4 per cent in 2013 (Ministry for Pacific Peoples). Critically, *tagata Pasifika* are an increasingly powerful domestic constituency with the 2020 election resulting in the largest number of Pasifika ministers in cabinet (five in total) with Aupito Sio, the Minister of Pacific Peoples and Associate Minister of

Foreign Affairs, outside cabinet (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020).

New Zealand's place in the Pacific and, by extension, its place in the world as a Pacific nation, has long been a source of debate. From the 1970s onwards, New Zealand became increasingly more aware of its Pacific connections, however, these connections were frequently framed in terms of influence and national interest – themes that not surprisingly remain present in contemporary discourse. The Kirk government (1972–1974), for example, pursued a proactive policy of engagement with the Pacific and directly linked New Zealand's international reputation with its regional influence (Ross 2016). The 1978 Defence Review pointed to the need to incorporate the fact that 'New Zealand is a Pacific country' into the formulation of defence policy.

In 2002, then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Pacific Affairs, Phil Goff, conflated identity with a form of stewardship stating that:

we no longer see ourselves as an isolated British outpost somehow misplaced at the bottom of the Pacific. We see ourselves as a Pacific nation with key responsibilities in the South Pacific (Goff 2002).

Goff later expanded on this asserting that the presence of a strong Pasifika community has enabled a 'unique interaction between New Zealand and the Pacific which gives us a sense of identity with and a greater ability to work alongside our Pacific neighbours' (ibid). In 2009 then foreign minister Murray McCully drew a direct link between identity and regional leadership stating that:

New Zealand is truly a Pacific nation, not just in terms of geography, but also in terms of our increasing Pasifika population...This rich demography gives New Zealand both a responsibility and a unique capacity to play a leadership role...in this region (McCully 2009).

Furthermore, successive reviews of New Zealand's relations with the Pacific have linked identity with national interest and regional leadership. The 1990 policy review, *Towards a Pacific Island Community*, stated that New Zealand was coming to terms with its place as a Pacific island nation and even suggested that New Zealand was perceived by the Pacific island countries as in, and of, the region. However, the report also warned that New Zealand did not necessarily understand the Pacific and should not presume to take a proprietary or colonial approach to Pacific Island affairs (NZG 1990).

The 2010 parliamentary review of New Zealand's relationships with the Pacific islands suggested that the close personal and family connections with the region distinguishes New Zealand from other countries that seek engagement in the region and in turn lends itself to a 'unique and intimate understanding of the region' (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee 2010:12). The review made further claims that 'New Zealand is increasingly part of the regional fabric' and that 'key partners expect New Zealand to strongly support the maintenance of peace and stability in this region.' The 2020 inquiry into New Zealand's aid to the Pacific also reiterated the link between identity and national interest, stating that New Zealand's engagement in

the Pacific is driven by ‘its strong Pacific identity and interconnectedness with the region’ and combined with the ‘direct effect that the stability and prosperity of the Pacific has on New Zealand’s national interests’ (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee 2020:9).

The linking of identity with national interest has led to a sense of ‘New Zealand exceptionalism and cultural capital’ (Goldsmith 2017). Salesa (2017:6) challenges this by calling for greater recognition of:

the ways in which the Pacific drives the configuration of New Zealand’s overseas priorities, its national defence, its view and understanding of the world, and indeed, how the Pacific inflates or amplifies New Zealand’s importance to others around the world.

Furthermore, Salesa (ibid) argues that the Pacific is New Zealand’s gateway to the world and ‘why New Zealand matters in a way a small country of its size typically does not’. Moreover, McGhie argues that despite the rhetoric of ‘New Zealand’s *Pacificness*’, the country has yet to fully address the complex nature of the problems facing Pacific states, which requires a change in attitudes as to how issues are approached.

New Zealand’s national security as a driver for engagement with the Pacific

The ‘safeguarding of New Zealand’s interests’ is a primary driver of New Zealand’s engagement with the Pacific (MFAT 2020:35). New Zealand’s national security, it is argued, is ‘directly affected by the Pacific’s stability’ (MFAT 2018). This includes contemporary security challenges, such as transnational organised crime, and increasingly, concerns about the rise of Chinese influence in the region and the destabilising impact of US–China strategic competition. As Dame Meg Taylor stated in mid-2017:

the geopolitical and development context of the Pacific has shifted and the region faces a range of external and internal factors that are acting to reshape it, including increasing plurality of regional actors, shifts in global power, and unmet development challenges.

That year then Prime Minister Bill English (2017) noted during an official visit to the region that:

much of the discussion ... was about the relative influence of a range of countries in the Pacific, whether it’s New Zealand, Australia, China, the US, or Russia to some extent.

The role of national security as a core driver of the Reset is reinforced across a stable of government policy. For example, the protection and promotion of stability, security and resilience in the Pacific is listed as one of the government’s 16 national security and intelligence priorities (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade *Strategic Intentions 2019–2023* (MFAT 2019b) states that:

New Zealand’s security is directly affected by the ability of the Pacific to increase resilience, grow sustainable economies, manage conflicts and combat crimes that transgress borders.

Accordingly, the promotion of a ‘stable, prosperous and resilient Pacific in which New Zealand’s interests and influence are safeguarded’ is one of seven strategic goals (ibid). The document outlines the desired 10-year outcome of a ‘more stable, secure, resilient and well-governed Pacific’ with indicators to measure success including ‘evidence of partnerships between New Zealand and Pacific bilateral partners strengthened’ (ibid:22).

The *Strategic Defence Policy Statement* unequivocally states that New Zealand’s national security ‘remains directly tied to the stability of the Pacific’ (ibid:24). The statement is a significant document as it provides the most coherent statement on New Zealand’s strategic environment, serving as a proxy foreign policy white paper. It sought to identify the challenges to the international rules-based order and the implications for New Zealand. Critically, it also located the Pacific within this context of heightened strategic uncertainty. The statement argues that the Pacific is confronted with intensifying challenges including climate change, transnational crime and resource competition with a ‘growing gap in capacity to adequately address them’ (Ministry of Defence 2018a:22).

The statement suggests that these complex disruptors could test local governance, exacerbate state fragility and likely require increased levels of assistance, including operations beyond humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (ibid). It announced a significant operational policy shift by elevating the ability of the New Zealand Defence Force to operate in the Pacific to the same level as New Zealand’s territories, the Southern Ocean and Antarctica. That same year the Ministry of Defence released its climate assessment that sought to highlight the intersection between climate change and potential conflict and instability in the Pacific, stating ‘the security implications of climate change are further magnified in areas dealing with weak governance or corruption’ (Ministry of Defence 2018b:6).

In 2019, the Ministry of Defence released a second assessment that aimed to translate the high-level strategic policy of the Reset and the Strategic Defence Policy Statement into a regional approach. The *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* assessment is effectively how defence will align its strategic policy settings and capability plan with the Reset. This is demonstrated through the *Vaka Tahī Pacific Partnership Model* for defence engagement as a platform for building relationships across the region and grounding it in the five principles of the Reset. The New Zealand Defence Force *Strategic Plan 2019–2025* (known as Plan25) further advances the link between the Pacific and New Zealand’s national security by stating:

The recognition of operating in the Pacific as equal in priority for the NZDF to New Zealand’s own territory is reflective of the Government’s Pacific Reset, and the importance of the Pacific to New Zealand’s national security (New Zealand Defence Force 2019:8).

There are several common but noteworthy threads across the policy documents. The first is that the Reset elevated the Pacific as a national security priority in a manner that had not been previously evident. Doing so aligns with New Zealand’s key ally and partner in the

Pacific – Australia who launched its own Pacific Step Up in 2017 – and offsets criticisms of New Zealand by its Five Eyes intelligence network partners who have suggested New Zealand is taking a softer line on China. The second thread is the consistent linking of New Zealand policy with Pacific identified priorities. This seeks to reinforce New Zealand’s identity as part of the Pacific and garner regional buy-in for New Zealand policy. For instance the Advancing Pacific Partnerships assessment foregrounds the Boe Declaration on Regional Security (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2018) notably the emphasis on an expanded concept of security, and the Blue Pacific (Malielegaoi 2017) as guiding frameworks for defence engagement with Pacific partners. The climate assessment, for example, locates defence’s response to climate security challenges within a wider policy context which includes both the Reset and the Boe Declaration. It also adopts the Boe Declaration language of an expanded concept of security. The third thread is the need for New Zealand to better understand and have improved capability and capacity to respond to the evolving strategic environment. This is reflected in stated policy deliverables such as a ‘refreshed New Zealand regional security approach by 2021’ (MFAT 2019b:22), which is perhaps evidenced by the defence assessments, particularly the Vaka Tahi partnership model, as well as New Zealand policing initiatives such as the three year NZ\$11m (A\$10.1m) Police Partnership program with the Fiji Police Force focused on combatting transnational crime, and support to defence policy development in Fiji and PNG.

There is no doubt that the Reset was driven in part by concerns about China’s rising influence in the Pacific. Growing concerns within government were reflected in the *Strategic Defence Policy Statement*, which in stating that China ‘has not consistently adopted the governance and values championed by the order’s traditional leaders,’ (Ministry of Defence 2018a:17) was the strongest statement New Zealand had made about China at the time. The *Climate Crisis* assessment, released later that year, made the explicit link between climate change and strategic competition in the region by suggesting that states could exploit climate assistance to increase influence and access (Ministry of Defence 2018b:7). Citing geopolitical shifts in the region, Peters, a leading proponent of a more hawkish stance on China, called on greater US engagement in the Pacific in two speeches in Washington (Peters 2018b, 2019). The view that ‘we can no longer take for granted...a benign Pacific neighbourhood’ is likely to become further entrenched as the shift in relative power of the US and China is more acutely felt (MFAT 2020:33). Newly appointed foreign minister Nanaia Mahuta (Powles 2020) appears to have adopted similar policy settings although these will likely be tested even more so as increasing strategic competition creates additional demands for New Zealand as its security partners harden their expectations.

Influence: At the nexus between identity and national security

The Reset captures and seeks to advance New Zealand’s strategic ambitions in the Pacific. For that reason, there is

heightened interest in New Zealand’s ability to influence its Pacific partners and considerable strategic anxiety that New Zealand’s influence has waned. Peters (2018c) acknowledged that, ‘our eyes are wide open to New Zealand’s decreasing influence in the Pacific’. Accordingly, the policy documents attempt to project a greater ease and confidence in framing New Zealand’s engagement with the Pacific in terms of influence as well as identity. For instance, the Cabinet Paper (2018) stated that ‘in no other region does New Zealand matter more, wield more influence, and have more impact than the Pacific. But our ability to pursue our interests is challenged by the dizzying array of problems the region faces and an increasingly contested strategic environment which is eroding our influence. This is seen within a broader international context where it is recognised ‘it is getting harder for New Zealand’s voice to be heard...and our influence will diminish over time’ (MFAT 2020:22).

New Zealand’s Pasifika/Pacific identity is regarded as a key soft power trait that has the potential to translate into influence (Powles 2017). This framing of New Zealand as uniquely and favourably positioned on cultural grounds to be a strategic diplomatic actor in the Pacific (Goldsmith 2017) is not new. Moreover, influence – and being seen to have influence – is a critical element of New Zealand’s relationships with its key partners including ally, Australia, and strategic partner, the United States. Influence is a soft power instrument New Zealand brings to the table, with the country marketing itself to its security partners as a ‘trusted bridge builder between countries in the Pacific and the wider Asia–Pacific region’ (MFAT 2014). However, increasing strategic competition in the region is likely to result in competing demands on New Zealand to exercise its influence to achieve broader Five Eyes security objectives. This poses risks for New Zealand, where its national security priorities and those of security partners diverge, or even cut across, the priorities of those sharing a Pacific identity. New Zealand’s challenge will therefore be how to balance the national identity project with its national security imperatives.

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