

The Ocean of Peace: Vision to Treaty

How the Blue Pacific can
promote its geopolitical interests

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About the author



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Ben Burdon is a former Australian diplomat and senior public servant. He worked on Australia's partnership with the Pacific from 2016 to 2019 at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Ben was closely involved in the establishment of the Pacific Labour Scheme (now PALM). He also played a role in Australia's contribution to the development of the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, and the establishment of the Pacific Security College and Pacific Fusion Centre.

More recently, Ben has been a contributor to the Pacific Wayfinder blog focusing on Pacific diplomacy, traditions and achievements.

About the Pacific Security College

The Pacific Security College serves members of the Pacific Islands Forum through learning and training, policy engagement and regional collaboration.

We have a holistic approach to Pacific security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional security issues, taking our lead from the Forum's *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*.

We work in a spirit of service and collaboration with our Pacific stakeholders in national governments, universities, civil society organisations and regional institutions.

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- Geopolitics will only get sharper and strategic competition more difficult to manage in the Pacific.
- The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* articulates Pacific expectations of strategic behaviour in the region.
- Turning the Declaration into a Pacific-wide regional peace and security treaty won't solve the challenges of geopolitics and strategic competition, but will help make the region more predictable and less dangerous.





Executive summary

The Pacific is in a state of permanent strategic competition.

This has been true for some time.

It is unlikely to change for the better any time soon.

And it will only become more difficult to manage.

Geopolitics is hardening

2026 began with the Chinese blockade exercise of Taiwan, followed by United States (US) military action in Venezuela and then Iran.

This has prompted discussion of a 'rupture' of the global system as we know it.

The end of the rules-based order, multilateralism and the United Nations; raising concerns for many countries, particular those for whom international law, global norms and the United Nations give voice.

And prompting some to call for a renewed focus on mini-lateralism and middle power activism.

Asking questions for countries that are neither nuclear hegemony nor middle powers.

How do countries without nuclear weapons or military, trade or economic heft protect their interests?

Or, to put it bluntly, how do they prevent themselves from being on the menu when they're not even at the table?



Strategic competition will sharpen in the Pacific

In 2027, the so-called ‘Davidson window’ opens as China acquires the capability, but not necessarily the intent, to retake Taiwan militarily.

Ahead of this, President Xi reportedly issued President Trump with a sharp warning over Taiwan during their recent summit in Beijing. Xi telling Trump that “the Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-US relations” and that “if it is handled properly, the bilateral relationship will enjoy overall stability. Otherwise, the two countries will have clashes and even conflicts”.

In the event of a Taiwan contingency, the Pacific’s strategic geography is critical for military access and denial. Raising the stakes for strategic competition in the Pacific. And increasing the premium on the decisions the Pacific takes individually and collectively around strategic partners, security cooperation and dual-use infrastructure.

In this context, how should the Pacific manage geopolitics in its region and continue to exercise agency and authority in its own interests?

The Ocean of Peace Declaration sets out Pacific strategic expectations

The Pacific worldview is clear.

Peace, security, development. On its own terms and aligned with its own values, interests and aspirations. Framed by the rules-based order and international law. Founded on the fundamental tenets of the law of the sea, human rights and nuclear non-proliferation.

The Pacific’s key priority is climate change. It is an existential threat to Pacific livelihoods, security and wellbeing.

The region seeks to prosecute its interests through an approach that is inclusive of all and grounded in community, civil society, the church and long-standing traditions of customary peace and reconciliation practices.

The Pacific commitment is clear: a culture of peace grounded in the Pacific Way.

The Pacific is equally clear about what it wants to see from its friends and partners.

Engagement based on the Pacific Way.

Respect for sovereignty and sovereign equality.

A Pacific-led and Pacific Islands Forum-endorsed approach.

And, most importantly, bold, decisive and transformative action to stop global warming.



Turning vision into law and practice will help

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* is a clear statement of the Pacific's strategic vision for its own region.

As a next step, the Pacific could embed the Ocean of Peace and Pacific values, norms and practice into international law and practice, as it has done previously with nuclear weapons, fishing and climate change.

The Pacific could agree to an Ocean of Peace treaty to:

- establish the Pacific Ocean as a Zone of Peace
- embed the Pacific Way as the cornerstone of international engagement in the region
- agree to strategic transparency and consultation measures, particularly in relation to defence and security agreements and engagement with external powers
- establish climate security as a peace obligation
- agree to binding crisis management procedures
- provide a mechanism for external powers to commit to strategic restraint
- strengthen regional peace and security governance and institutional arrangements.

One option could be to negotiate the new regional peace and security treaty as a protocol to the *Treaty of Rarotonga*. This would transform a respected and foundational nuclear-free zone into a legally binding regional peace and security system built and owned by the Pacific.

But such a regional peace and security treaty is not without risk. The negotiations could fracture regional unity and trigger geopolitical pushback – real risks in a strategic environment already fraught with peril.

On the plus side, there may be a strategic opening through President Trump's "decent peace" in the Indo-Pacific and President Xi's constructive strategic stability.

The strategic guardrails set out in a regional peace and security agreement could help the Pacific manage the difficult geopolitical environment ahead.

None are perfect.

And they won't necessarily stop strategic competition.

But they could help manage it and make the region more predictable and less dangerous.





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Director's introduction

I am pleased to launch the latest issue in the Pacific Security College's policy paper series. This paper comes at a time of increasing geopolitical contest and uncertainty across our region. In such a period, clarity about Pacific priorities and confidence in Pacific-led solutions is important.

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* is a significant expression of regional unity and a clear statement of the Pacific's determination to define its own security on its own terms. It sets out a holistic approach to Pacific security, reflecting Pacific culture and tradition; expectations for how external actors should behave; the climate change threat; and the importance of multilateralism and the rules-based order.

It is a collective commitment from Pacific Islands Forum Leaders to a vision of the region as one of "peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity".

Where might we go from here? Translating shared ambition into coordinated regional action is complex, particularly where it requires consensus across diverse national contexts and goals. Yet the Pacific's capacity to come together in pursuit of common goals remains one of its greatest strengths – and one that carries particular weight in an increasingly contested strategic environment.

In this paper, Ben Burdon examines how the Ocean of Peace concept might evolve beyond a regional declaration into a legally binding agreement, including the possibility of a Protocol to the *Treaty of Rarotonga*. He recognises that such a step would carry risks but also argues that inaction has its own consequences.



The proposal will undoubtedly generate both support and critique. That's its value, when the topic is so important and the stakes are so high. Our policy papers are designed to prompt careful reflection and constructive debate, and to create space for diverse perspectives on the region's most pressing issues.

The thought-provoking responses from Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Dr Sandra Tarte, Dr Anna Naupa and Sione Tekiteki reflect that intent, and I extend my sincere appreciation to them for their contributions.

This publication, like others in the series, is offered to support regional dialogue and policy development. The views expressed are those of the author and respondents, and do not represent the official positions of the Pacific Security College, our university, or our funder.

Our policy papers do reflect our strong belief that effective policy emerges from engaging with a diversity of perspectives, and from exploring how we can work together to realise the shared vision set out by Forum Leaders in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Professor Dave Peebles
Director, Pacific Security College



The Pacific's strategic competition challenge

The Pacific is in a state of permanent strategic competition.

All signs are that this will get harder rather than easier.

2027 sits at the heart of strategic thinking about the Indo-Pacific, China and Taiwan. It's the 100th anniversary of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the year in which President Xi Jinping has reportedly ordered the PLA to be ready and capable of invading Taiwan.

To be clear, it is not a fixed 'cross-strait invasion date' but more of a capability and political milestone. Capability does not mean intent, but nonetheless 2027 has major strategic implications for the Pacific and globally.

It means that a number of different scenarios could eventuate.

From low-end grey zone coercion – maritime quarantine, customs blockade, cyberattack, outer island occupation.

Through to mid-range, air and naval exclusion zones, air interdictions and limited missile strikes.

To high-end conflict and full amphibious invasion.



What does this mean for the Pacific?

The region faces continued and heightened strategic competition and continued militarisation.

Why?

The Western Pacific is critical in the event of the Taiwan scenario, as it provides the United States (US) with military and economic access to Asia. If China wanted to take Taiwan and prevent a US response, it would need to deny this access.

The region might then see both PLA naval expansion into the Western Pacific and a stronger US force posture.

The focus on the Pacific will only sharpen, with increased strategic competition for access to ports, airfields and maritime zones.

In this context, Pacific countries will face increased pressure to provide access and alignment.



A Pacific Peace and Security Treaty

“The Rarotonga Treaty remains a powerful symbol of our leadership and unity. It reflects the Pacific’s moral clarity in pursuing disarmament and our shared stand against nuclear threats.

This commitment continues to guide our regional security approach and is an enduring example of the Pacific speaking with one voice on global issues.”

Baron Waqa, Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General,
Pacific Regional and National Security Conference, Suva, 2025



The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* sets out the Pacific's vision and expectations for regional peace and security.

In doing so it offers a potential foundation for new regional peace and security rules.

The Rarotonga precedent

When the *Treaty of Rarotonga* was negotiated in 1985, the Pacific was not only responding to nuclear testing but asserting a regional identity grounded in shared vulnerability, geography and political purpose.

The treaty established the South Pacific as a nuclear-free zone, embedding regional values into international law.

A contemporary 'Rarotonga II' could extend this logic beyond nuclear weapons into the broader issue now dominating the Pacific: managing strategic competition in the region while focusing on the existential threat of climate change.

An Ocean of Peace Protocol to the Rarotonga Treaty would leverage the existing treaty, capitalising on its scope, boundaries, international recognition and status as a cornerstone of nuclear non-proliferation.

From norms to rules

The 'Ocean of Peace' concept is currently a normative framework. It signals vision and expectations.

A modernised treaty could transform this vision into binding expectations.

The new protocol could establish the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace and agree to a code of conduct for state behaviour in the region.

It could encapsulate some or all of the following principles:

Principle 1:

The Pacific as a Zone of Peace

Parties would:

- recognise the Pacific as a Zone of Peace
- agree that their territory and waters are used exclusively for peaceful purposes
- renounce any threat or use of force originating from their territory.

This would thread a fine strategic balance between non-aggression, deterrence, and denial.



Principle 2:

Respect for the Pacific Way and Pacific sovereign equality and autonomy

Parties would:

- affirm that the Pacific Way will guide engagement among states in the region
- respect the sovereignty and sovereign equality of all states
- affirm the right of every state to conduct its national affairs free from external interference, subversion or coercion
- commit to non-interference in one another's internal affairs.

This principle directly addresses concerns regarding strategic pressure from larger powers.

Principle 3:

Strategic transparency and consultation

Parties would commit to transparency and prior consultation to establish and maintain the Ocean of Peace, including with respect to:

- the negotiation of defence and security agreements with external partners
- the establishment of basing, access, and visitation rights for the defence and security forces of external partners
- the establishment or expansion of defence and dual-use infrastructure involving external partners
- the planning or conducting of defence and security activities or exercises with external partners.

Rather than prohibiting such activities, this principle seeks to:

- encourage regional consultation
- reduce misperception and the risks of escalation.

It would also shift the emphasis of regional consultation from reactive, after the fact engagement, to upfront, preventive diplomacy.

Principle 4:

Climate security as a peace obligation

Parties would:

- recognise climate change as the primary threat to Pacific security
- commit to undertaking activities that strengthen climate security, including through the *Pacific Resilience Facility Treaty*
- commit to avoiding activities that undermine Pacific climate security.

This would extend one of the key principles of the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* into international law and reinforce the strategic objectives of the *Pacific Resilience Facility Treaty*.



Principle 5: Crisis management

Parties would:

- affirm their commitment to the prevention of conflict, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the collective maintenance of peace, security and stability in the Pacific region
- recognise that regional peace and security are strengthened through consultation, cooperation and collective action
- agree to use established mechanisms for consultation, assistance and regional response in times of crisis.

This would extend the key principles of the *Biketawa Declaration* and Pacific-led crisis management and consultation to external partners.

Principle 6: External partners

A key element would be provision for accession by external partners, enabling them to commit formally to Pacific peace and security law and practice.

Importantly, this provides a mechanism for external countries to recognise and commit to:

- the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace
- the Pacific Way as the modus operandi of the region
- strategic transparency and consultation
- climate change as the existential threat to the region
- Pacific-led crisis consultation mechanisms.

Principle 7: Oversight and review

To give the peace and security regime effect, the Pacific could introduce an oversight and review regime that includes:

- a review of security and defence reporting and consultation
- development of an annual 'State of the Ocean of Peace' as part of the existing *Pacific Security Outlook Report*
- maintenance of a regional register of defence and security agreements, exercises and activities
- reports undertaken by the Forum Sub-committee on Regional Security and relayed to Forum Leaders
- a mandatory five-year review conference.

This would help strengthen Pacific regional security architecture, governance and oversight.





Benefits

Rarotonga II would turn vision into law. It would strengthen Pacific strategic agency and reaffirm the Pacific as a security rule maker.

Importantly, it has the potential to establish regional norms ahead of any intensification or deterioration of major power competition in the region.

And at the same time, it would take the risk and pressure out of ad hoc bilateral security deals.

Rarotonga II would leverage the legitimacy, universal regional membership, and recognition by nuclear powers of the established treaty.

It would build on a successful precedent, with nuclear-free zones historically having shaped behaviour, influenced global norms and attracted at least a modicum of nuclear powers' respect.

The shape of Rarotonga II would create preventive diplomacy tools, flipping the current pattern of the region reacting to security deals after they happen.

Rarotonga II would introduce prior consultation, transparency, early warning and collective discussion, reducing surprise and mistrust between Pacific countries and external powers while strengthening regionalism, and Pacific strategic agency and authority.



Risks

Pacific unity

There is a real risk that the negotiation of Rarotonga II could fracture Pacific unity.

Pacific Island countries have diverse security relationships, security architecture and threat perceptions.

A protocol touching on military presence and security partnerships could expose differences between, for example, the Freely Associated States with deep US ties, the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia, regional and allied actors such as Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, and Pacific countries with growing China defence and security engagement.

If not carefully managed, negotiations could:

- create clear divisions within the Pacific Islands Forum
- reopen debates about regional leadership
- slow consensus-building on other priorities and initiatives.

Negotiating a protocol to the Rarotonga Treaty could also reopen historic sensitivities about the scope of the original treaty and the compromise focus on nuclear weapons and exclusion of nuclear propulsion.

Any suggestion of reopening the scope of the Rarotonga Treaty to include nuclear propulsion would pose serious challenges to Australia and its commitment to AUKUS, as well as all partners with nuclear propelled navies.

Ironically, a treaty designed to manage external competition could initially intensify internal Pacific tensions.



Geopolitical backlash

External powers may see Rarotonga II as constraining defence cooperation, targeting specific countries, and limiting the freedom of security partnerships.

Backlash could include real diplomatic pressure on the region, such as reduced cooperation on aid, climate change, fisheries and law enforcement.

External powers could simply choose to ignore Rarotonga II and its security requirements, and bypass the region and its established mechanisms for cooperation.

This would have a serious impact on the Pacific's strategic and foreign policy credibility and its ability to prosecute any international agenda requiring major power support or consensus.

The negotiation risk is high

Negotiating Rarotonga II will be difficult and there is a very real risk of treaty paralysis.

While leveraging the existing agreement has some advantages, it means that any new treaty would require the unanimous acceptance of all parties.

One country could block the reform.

Members could change heart.

Diplomatic pressure could be brought to bear.

Regional consensus could become hard to maintain.

Members might avoid triggering the amendment processes at all.

That's only the beginning.

Delivery risk is higher

Assuming Rarotonga II is negotiated and enters into force...

Would parties actually disclose agreements, consult before signing, and forgo dual-use infrastructure investment?

Would all Forum members have the capacity and capability to participate in the new regional security architecture and the assessment of complex defence agreements, provision of transparency reporting, and engagement in consultations?

Would Rarotonga II meet Pacific expectations for the Ocean of Peace or would compliance and enforcement fall short?



The risks and benefits weighed

Rarotonga II has clear benefits: formalising the Ocean of Peace as a regional treaty, strengthening regional sovereignty, improving transparency, building preventive diplomacy and enhancing the Pacific's strategic voice.

There are also clear risks: regional division, geopolitical backlash and diplomatic pressure, the difficulties of negotiating unanimity, and the challenges of overreach and implementation.





Managing the risks

Pacific unity and major power support

Arguably Rarotonga II's key risk is fracturing Pacific unity, followed closely by triggering a major power backlash.

Including a clause that explicitly preserves sovereign choice will go a long way to preserving Pacific unity and reassuring Pacific compact states, treaty allies, and Forum members with close external security relationships. Such a clause will also likely ameliorate the concerns of external powers and manage the risk of provoking diplomatic backlash.

Framing the regional consultation process as supporting sovereign decision-making, rather than placing limitations or vetting security agreements and partnerships, will help manage both the internal and external risks.

Similarly, characterising the security obligations as procedural – focusing on transparency, reporting, consultation, dialogue – instead of strict prohibitions, will help secure acceptance and maintain consensus and support for the treaty's principles and commitments.

Applying Rarotonga II and its principles and commitments to all external partners equally, and to existing and future agreements, will help avoid the perception of targeting any one country.

In that way, Rarotonga II becomes more about process not permission and prohibition.



Rarotonga II

Negotiating Rarotonga II as a protocol to the Rarotonga Treaty rather than as core text amendments will be politically easier, provide an opt-in pathway, preserve the original treaty's integrity, and likely speed up the negotiations.

On the other hand, negotiating an entirely new and separate legal instrument would avoid the risk of reopening the controversies around the scope of the Rarotonga Treaty.

One option might be to make a clear declaratory statement at the beginning of the negotiations on the intent to involve external partners and to enable them to commit to the peace and security law and practice of the new regime.

A decision on Rarotonga II's final form could then be set aside until the end of the negotiations.

Staged negotiation and entry into force

One option to manage the negotiation and delivery risks could be to negotiate and introduce the commitments in tranches.

So, for example, in the first phase the Pacific could agree to the declaration of the Pacific as an Ocean of Peace, the commitment to peaceful uses, and the renunciation of the threat or use of force.

The recognition of the Pacific Way and sovereign equality as the cornerstones of international engagement in the region could form part of the first tranche.

And, importantly, the provision for external partners to sign on to Rarotonga II could round out the first phase of measures.

At a subsequent stage, the Pacific could negotiate the transparency and consultation measures and the provisions on climate security and crisis management.

Such a staged approach runs the very real risk that the negotiations become stalled at the lowest level of ambition, meaning the peace and security aims and objectives for Rarotonga II are never realised.

A more palatable approach might be to negotiate all the proposed measures in one package but to stage entry into force with commitments at defined intervals.

For example, Rarotonga II could commence with the least controversial measures, such as the declaration of the Ocean of Peace, the commitment to peaceful uses, the renunciation of use of force, and respect for the Pacific Way and Pacific sovereign equality.

More sensitive measures such as transparency and consultation could be phased in over time.

Staging entry into force runs the risk that it too becomes stalled, and the region's peace and security ambitions are left unfulfilled.



Partner reactions

Questions for Australia

Rarotonga II raises complex questions for Australia and its relationship with the Pacific.

Canberra is committed to both Pacific regionalism and the Ocean of Peace vision, and to deeper alliance integration through AUKUS.

But these commitments create inherent tension around nuclear propulsion, expanded military presence and defence transparency.

Why AUKUS creates sensitivities

Under AUKUS, Australia will host rotational deployments of US and United Kingdom (UK) nuclear-powered submarines at the Royal Australian Navy base HMAS Stirling in Western Australia through the Submarine Rotational Force-West. This creates three sensitivities:

Nuclear propulsion and ambiguity: As discussed earlier, the *Treaty of Rarotonga* bans nuclear weapons, not propulsion. Australia argues nuclear-powered submarines are compliant because they do not carry nuclear weapons. Politically and symbolically, however, nuclear-powered vessels in the Pacific remain sensitive and have already raised concern among some Pacific states.

Expanded allied military presence: Rarotonga II seeks stronger transparency and consultation on external military engagement. AUKUS involves long-term rotations, deep defence integration and new infrastructure – developments squarely within the policy space the treaty would regulate.



Security agreement transparency: AUKUS is highly classified and alliance-driven. Australia would resist mechanisms requiring disclosure of operational details or formal regional scrutiny of alliance arrangements.

Australia's likely positive responses

Australia could still see advantages. A Pacific-owned framework aligns with its support for Pacific-led security architecture and its 'Pacific family' narrative.

Transparency could reassure partners, reduce militarisation concerns and act as a confidence-building measure.

A regional framework could also discourage fragmented bilateral security deals and reinforce cohesion.

Likely concerns and red lines

Australia would reject any provision constraining AUKUS, limiting submarine rotations, requiring regional approval, restricting defence cooperation or prohibiting foreign military presence.

It would accept information-sharing, consultation and high-level transparency, but not veto or authorisation processes.

Any transparency obligations would need to remain high-level, summary-based and non-operational.

External powers and the future strategic balance

A Pacific treaty would inevitably attract scrutiny from major powers.

Their reactions would differ, but none would ignore it.

The **United States'** National Defense Strategy describes the US approach as deterring China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not confrontation.

Importantly, the US seeks to build, posture and sustain a strong denial defence along the First Island Chain.

And in doing so, US military strength would set the conditions for a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that allows the US, China and others to enjoy "a decent peace".

In this context, the US could see Rarotonga II and its commitments on use of force, strategic transparency and consultation as broadly consistent with its own efforts to deny access and deter strategic competitors in the Indo-Pacific and maintain the balance of power.

But the US would need careful convincing that Rarotonga II would not constrain its own access to and through the Western Pacific.

China would likely greet the Rarotonga II proposal cautiously and carefully.

Beijing consistently advocates non-alignment and opposition to 'bloc politics' and security alliances.



A treaty emphasising non-militarisation and sovereign choice would align neatly with that rhetoric.

But China would be wary of provisions that complicate its own security relationships, infrastructure projects and access arrangements.

And, as demonstrated by President Xi's sharp warning to President Trump, anything that China perceives as touching on Taiwan will raise immediate red flags.

France, as a resident Pacific power, would view the treaty through a dual lens: regional stability and national sovereignty.

Paris would support mechanisms that reinforce regional consultation but resist any suggestion that its territories or military presence were subject to external scrutiny.

Other partners – Japan, India, the UK and the European Union – would broadly support the language of rules and stability.

Like the larger powers, they would seek reassurance that cooperation remained welcome.

In short, external powers would neither embrace nor reject the proposal outright. They would attempt to shape it.



The last word

Reinforcing Pacific agency

The most important consequence of a new treaty would be political.

It would signal that Pacific states intend to shape the strategic environment rather than merely respond to it.

The Ocean of Peace is not a rejection of partnerships.

It is a framework for managing them on Pacific terms.

But the ASEAN tale is cautionary

ASEAN's *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation* (TAC) did much of what Rarotonga proposes to do.

To a certain extent it transformed Southeast Asia's strategic environment – not by excluding major powers, but by requiring them to accept ASEAN's rules of behaviour.

What worked for ASEAN

The TAC embedded principles of peaceful dispute settlement, non-interference, sovereign equality and renunciation of force. These norms:

- built habits of diplomacy and restraint
- raised reputational costs for coercion
- enabled small states to shape regional agendas
- helped prevent interstate conflict among members.



As such, ASEAN's enduring success lies in conflict prevention, dialogue and convening power.

But sharper geopolitical competition revealed structural weaknesses in ASEAN and the TAC:

- consensus decision-making often led to slow or diluted responses
- strict adherence to the principle of non-interference limited collective action
- external powers could exploit internal (ASEAN) divisions
- ASEAN struggled to deter coercion and militarisation in the South China Sea.

In short while ASEAN and the TAC remain indispensable to regional diplomacy, they were insufficient to manage strategic rivalry on their own.

There is a real question as to whether the Pacific will be able to achieve what ASEAN could not.

From vision to strategy

Rarotonga II could transform the Ocean of Peace from a diplomatic vision into a strategic doctrine that includes:

- engagement without alignment
- partnerships without polarisation
- security without militarisation.

But Rarotonga II would not eliminate strategic competition.

Nor would it prohibit defence cooperation or alliance activity.

Rather it would establish guardrails designed to make competition more predictable, transparent and less destabilising.

In doing so, it would reduce pressure on Pacific countries to choose sides, clarify expectations for external partners, and strengthen the region's diplomatic agency.

Negotiating such a protocol would not be without risk.

Differences among Pacific states, sensitivities surrounding alliance commitments, and concerns among major powers about operational flexibility would all shape the negotiation environment.

However, the risks of inaction are likely greater.

Without agreed norms, strategic competition in the Pacific will continue to intensify in ways that may undermine regional stability and cohesion.

The Pacific has a long history of shaping global norms – from nuclear disarmament to fisheries to climate diplomacy.

By negotiating an Ocean of Peace Protocol to the Treaty of Rarotonga, Pacific countries can take the next step in that tradition.





In conversation with...



Tuiloma Neroni Slade Former Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum

Mr Burdon offers a perceptive and realistic account of the sensitivities involved in giving the Ocean of Peace vision legal expression through a new protocol to the *Treaty of Rarotonga*. I broadly agree with his assessment of both the possible benefits and the attendant risks, particularly the danger of destabilising existing security relationships, fragmenting Pacific unity, and inviting geopolitical backlash.

My concern, however, is that a new protocol may not be the most promising or appropriate course in the present security environment. Treaty-making and treaty revision are politically and diplomatically exacting exercises. Pacific leaders were able to reach consensus when the *Treaty of Rarotonga* was concluded in 1985, but the region's diversity and the strategic risks of the present moment make comparable consensus much harder to secure. Forty years on, Pacific agreement would be required on difficult issues including alliances, differing views on the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017)*, seabed mining, militarisation, and, above all, nuclear weapons and the threat of their use.

Accordingly, careful reflection is warranted, together with serious consideration of other credible options. The *Treaty of Rarotonga* remains the principal treaty safeguarding the Pacific from nuclear involvement and a durable expression of Pacific leadership and solidarity. It is therefore the most appropriate legal and political reference point for the Ocean of Peace. Rather than reopening the treaty, it may be both more practical and more effective to strengthen implementation of Article 5, which prohibits the stationing of nuclear weapons in the zone, while making fuller use of Articles 8, 9 and 10 on compliance and accountability.

This approach is consistent with the Forum Communiqué from the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Honiara, and the Pacific Leaders' endorsement of "operationalising the *Treaty of Rarotonga*" and "elevating the treaty in light of emerging issues". It also accords with the Leaders' statement marking the treaty's 40th anniversary, which recommitted the region to a peaceful Pacific free of nuclear weapons and nuclear testing. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat memorandum on the activities of the *South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty*, submitted to the 2026 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, points in the same direction.



Broader regional implications

Beyond the treaty question, the communique from Honiara is significant in reaffirming the region's commitment to peace and unity and its resolve to move from regional cooperation to "deepened regionalism" (Forum Communique, para. 6). This reflects the theme 'lumi Tugeda: Act Now for an Integrated Blue Pacific Continent' and the need for a collective Forum response to the evolving geostrategic environment, with Pacific unity at the centre.

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* rightly recognises the importance of inclusive approaches to peace, the contribution of indigenous communities, and the need to cultivate a culture of peace grounded in the Pacific Way. One of the clearest definitions of the Pacific Way was given by the Eminent Persons Group chaired by the Rt Hon Sir Julius Chan in its 2004 review of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Like the *Treaty of Rarotonga*, the declaration endorsed in Honiara reflects the authority and responsibility of Pacific leadership to speak for peace, for our communities, and for the wider world. In that sense, the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* is a statement of Pacific worldview, aligning peace, security, development and regional priorities with Pacific values, interests and aspirations. It could also provide a natural basis for a Pacific contribution to the United Nations Secretary-General's *New Agenda for Peace*.

Among the risks identified in Mr Burdon's paper is inaction on the Ocean of Peace initiative. There may be danger in how "stationing" and "visits" in Article 5 of the *Treaty of Rarotonga* are interpreted, especially as major-power deployment strategies evolve and become normalised. Yet there is also clear momentum for elevating the treaty. As the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* makes clear, the regional policy direction is to strengthen the existing security architecture by building on Forum declarations and agreements such as the Treaty. In that sense, the Ocean of Peace should reinforce, not reopen, the *Treaty of Rarotonga*.

The Pacific is strongest when it acts collectively. Whatever form the next steps for the Ocean of Peace may take, they will need to be guided by unity and deepened regionalism.



Dr Sandra Tarte University of the South Pacific

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* has created new impetus for Pacific Island countries to engage in discussions on peace and security – including the impacts of intensifying geopolitical rivalries. It thus represents a nascent confidence-building measure for the region.

As I have argued elsewhere, and as highlighted in the 2050 Strategy consultations, there has been a lack of clear focus in regional strategies on how the Pacific should navigate the profound power shifts and geopolitical tensions that are increasingly impacting the Pacific. In part this reflects a lack of willingness to discuss sensitive issues. *Talanoa* and policy discussions on the development of the Ocean of Peace declaration have signalled an important shift in how the region engages with issues arising from geopolitical threats and challenges.

This paper makes an important contribution to the ongoing dialogue about what the Ocean of Peace could, and should, look like. This dialogue has provided an opportunity for regional officials, academia and civil society to ‘think differently’ about peace and security, and has generated new perspectives on the Pacific’s regional security architecture and its normative foundations. There have been proposals for developing what has been referred to as a ‘Pacific-centric rules-based order’ as well as for a Code of Conduct to operationalise the Ocean of Peace declaration.

The region already has legal instruments in place that provide building blocks for the Ocean of Peace architecture. A crucial one – as highlighted in this paper – is the *South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (Treaty of Rarotonga)*, which in 2026 marks its 40th anniversary. This is an instrument that promotes regional nuclear non-proliferation and in so doing advances global nuclear non-proliferation. It is therefore acknowledged as a Pacific contribution to world peace. The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* is an opportunity to strengthen regional resolve to revitalise the *Treaty of Rarotonga* in the face of escalating geopolitical and military competition. It remains the only existing treaty focused on the management of nuclear state involvement in the region.

What this paper clearly sets out is a possible pathway for codifying key principles of the Ocean of Peace while reinforcing the centrality of the *Treaty of Rarotonga* in the Pacific’s security architecture. In this way it significantly advances thinking around how to manage inter-state tensions and external engagement, thereby promoting greater transparency in security matters and reaffirming the rules-based order.

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* has drawn international and regional attention to the broader contributions the Pacific region can make to global peace and security. The declaration has positioned the region as a partner in various global initiatives, such as the United Nations Secretary General’s *New Agenda for Peace*, while providing a strategic platform from which to advocate for the Pacific’s priorities and agenda. It is time to take the next step and, as this discussion paper explores, to ‘turn vision into law’.



Dr Anna Naupa Research and Engagement Fellow, Pacific Security College

Ben Burdon's article prompts the question of what 21st-century deterrence could look like to safeguard Pacific peace and security in a context of hardening geopolitics.

The *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration* is now considered to be an important basis for shared strategic deterrence – a pre-emptive approach to discourage unwanted conflict within our region. Or, as Professor Transform Aqorau has said, ensuring that the Pacific “is not a chessboard for global competition”.

Burdon's proposal to leverage the 40-year-old *Treaty of Rarotonga* – essentially as a ‘second chapter’ – pragmatically recognises past regional strategies for navigating strategic competition (i.e. during a Cold War era) and extends thinking about the principles and legal underpinnings of Pacific deterrence options in the 2020s.

Using international law as deterrence is a valued tool in Pacific regionalism, and it particularly requires cautious consideration if it is to align with the spirit of the *2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and its expanded conceptualisation of security. Pacific peace and security are multidimensional – inclusive of traditional and non-traditional security – therefore deterrence strategies must equally straddle these dimensions.

Three aspects warrant attention.

Firstly, notwithstanding Pacific Island countries' wholehearted commitment to an international rules-based order, it is resource-intensive for already highly burdened small Pacific government administrations. Burdon's article resonates with a 2025 proposal by Sione Tekiteki and Joel Nilon for a regional rules-based order to stabilise geopolitical uncertainty. Burdon advances this in proposing principles for a legal pathway for the Ocean of Peace and for it to become embedded in the regional architecture.

However, engaging in these lawmaking processes requires significant diplomatic resources and competes with other important national priorities. Furthermore, it should not be at the expense of distracting countries from the important work to address deepening climate insecurities and development inequalities. Nor should a new legally binding protocol be designed without close attention to how the governance of other regional protocols have fared.

Secondly, Pacific historian Marco de Jong has highlighted that demilitarisation and decolonisation are blind spots in the Ocean of Peace declaration. His fellow Pacific scholars Romitesh Kant, Vehia Wheeler and Mereoni Chung have also cautioned against a militarising of the region, and the importance of inclusive consultation and grassroots-driven processes. Combined, the policy reminder is clear: state-led security strategies must be Pacific peoples-centred and address historical legacies. Designing a regional deterrence model therefore needs to consider how these long-standing elements of Pacific regional policy would be integrated into the preventative diplomacy model proposed by Burdon.



Finally, using unilateral and bilateral security agreements are another form of Pacific deterrence, which Australia in particular has pursued with tremendous energy in the past decade. Burdon's proposal "would take the risk and pressure out of ad hoc bilateral security deals" through providing Pacific Islands Forum members greater certainty and "reinforce cohesion". However, how Burdon's proposal would address the 'friends to all, enemies to none' policies of several Pacific Island states would need to be further explored beyond the stated recognition of risk in securing agreement.

Recent history has shown that many countries – for example, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu – wish to remain open in their partnership choices, and vocally defend their sovereignty and independent foreign policy. Country interests in ensuring that economic and development issues are part of any type of security discussions have been a major aspect of the delayed Nakamal Agreement between Australia and Vanuatu, for example. Security deals, whether multi-, mini- or bilateral must therefore also reflect the spirit of the Boe Declaration's expanded concept of security.

The lingering question for policymakers and leaders is whether the many parts of strategic deterrence currently pursued by and between Forum members produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. A strength of Burdon's proposal is that it could alleviate the ad hoc negotiation burden on states by consolidating efforts under Rarotonga II, freeing up diplomatic space to pursue other priorities. The trade-off for countries between national priorities and regional consensus, however, cannot be rushed. There is as much value in slow diplomacy as there is in preventative diplomacy.



Sione Tekiteki

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The idea of an Ocean of Peace treaty framed as a protocol to the Treaty of Rarotonga is compelling, particularly in its attempt to move the Pacific beyond the largely normative framing of the Blue Pacific Continent towards something more concrete and grounded in legal order.

In reading the paper, I couldn't help but think of the deeper tension that has long underpinned Pacific regionalism: the fine balance between regional integration and sovereignty. Deeper regional security coordination may strengthen solidarity and collectively position the region against intensifying geopolitical competition. In this sense, an Ocean of Peace protocol emerges as an attempt to institutionalise and safeguard Pacific agency – albeit at the cost of constraining aspects of strategic autonomy. Conversely, Pacific states may seek to preserve sovereignty by engaging simultaneously with both traditional and non-traditional partners, reflecting Pacific states' long-standing 'friends to all' posture. Ultimately, this is a strategic choice on which Pacific states may hold differing perspectives.

The justification for an Ocean of Peace protocol is well made – though it leans towards a risk-management frame, positioning the Pacific as highly vulnerable to geopolitical contestation as opposed to a region capable of shaping geopolitical competition.

While the proposed protocol seeks to incorporate a broader security frame (i.e., climate and crisis management principles), these principles do not necessarily offer much beyond existing regional positions and initiatives. There is also an element of ambiguity with the use of the 'Pacific Way' as a guiding principle in the security domain, particularly regarding how it relates to other framings, for example the 'family first approach'. If an expanded security concept is the core determinant, then there are significant security issues impacting the region – including fragile supply chains, energy dependency, transnational crime, technological disruption and economic hardship – that are not covered here.

The substantive core of the protocol lies in the consultation imperative under Principle 3 and the partnership and oversight mechanism under Principles 5 and 6 respectively. These principles assert a new dimension around security cooperation that has obvious implications on the ability of Pacific states to exercise strategic autonomy.

While it represents a different form of integration, one of the clear advantages with bilateral agreements is that there is usually a clearer exchange of value in return for concessions or alignment. That value proposition is less obvious here, where some Pacific states are effectively being asked to cede aspects of sovereignty in the name of regional peace and solidarity. History tells us this works where vulnerabilities are clearly shared – such as climate change and nuclear issues – but is less straightforward in other domains.



The author rightly acknowledges the deeper political question at play here, and the implications for AUKUS. In doing so, the proposal raises a larger question about the kind of security order the proposal seeks to promote – peace through deterrence or peace through restraint and demilitarisation. This has implications not only for military presence but in the emerging domains of autonomous weapons systems and other advanced military technologies. Would larger metropolitan partners subject themselves to equivalent regional constraints, particularly in relation to security arrangements that directly affect the Pacific but are negotiated largely outside Pacific regional frameworks?

Ultimately, the proposal here reveals that the central challenge confronting Pacific regionalism is no longer simply whether the region can act collectively, but how collective action can occur without fundamentally reshaping the balance between deeper forms of integration, strategic autonomy, and collective regional agency itself.



Contributor profiles



Tuiloma Neroni Slade
Former Secretary General, Pacific Islands Forum

Tuiloma has served in senior capacities in Samoa, the Pacific region and internationally. He was Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat from 2008 to 2014, and one of the first elected Judges of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague from 2003 to 2006.

Prior to his election to the ICC, Tuiloma was Samoa's Ambassador/Permanent Representative to the United Nations, based in New York, from 1993 to 2003, and accredited to the United States of America and Canada. He was Chairman of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) from 1997 to 2003.

Tuiloma began his legal career as a lawyer in Samoa, serving as senior prosecutor and Parliamentary Counsel. He became the Attorney-General of Samoa in 1976 until 1982. He was Assistant Director in the Legal Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat in London before beginning his diplomatic career.

He is a member of the Pacific Security College Advisory Board.



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Dr Tarte is based in the School of Law and Social Sciences at the University of the South Pacific (USP). She has worked at USP for almost three decades and held various roles including Director of the Politics and International Affairs program. She specialises in the international politics of the Pacific Islands region.

Dr Tarte holds a Doctor of Philosophy in East Asian Studies from the Australian National University and a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Political Science from the University of Melbourne. She is a co-convenor of the Pacific Dialogue, a Track Two process that was inaugurated at USP in 2023 to promote dialogue on geopolitical and security issues in the Pacific.



Dr Anna Naupa
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Dr Naupa joined the Pacific Security College in 2026 as a Research and Engagement Fellow (Pacific Security). She serves as an Advisory Member to the Centre for Human Security and Social Change at La Trobe University (Melbourne) and sits on the Advisory Committee for the Toda Peace Institute (Japan).

For the past 20 years, Dr Naupa has worked in her home country of Vanuatu and at the regional level in the Pacific, holding senior advisory and management roles at the Pacific Fusion Centre, Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP).

She has produced expert strategic security assessments for Pacific Island countries in response to the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and is a thought leader on Pacific human and cultural security and geopolitics.

Dr Naupa holds a Master of Arts in Geography from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, a Master of Public Administration from Harvard University, and a PhD from the Australian National University. Her research interests include Pacific politics, statecraft, cultural security, decolonisation and Melanesian diplomacy.

Beyond academia, Dr Naupa is actively involved in preserving her Erromango island community's cultural heritage and Vanuatu storytelling.



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Mr Tekiteki has worked across the Pacific for more than 20 years in senior political advisory, governance, and strategic policy roles at both national and regional levels. He previously served as Director of Governance and Engagement at the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and as Clerk of the House of the Tongan Parliament.

Since entering academia in 2024, his research has focused on public international law and Pacific regional governance and security, particularly the tensions between sovereignty, regional cooperation, and strategic agency in practice. He also continues to advise the Government of Tonga on strategic policy matters.



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