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EU-Pacific Development Relations and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

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In July 2022, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) launched its 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent setting out regional priorities and inviting development partners to engage with a Pacific vision for their future. In this context, Dr Mathew Doidge reflects on the development relationship of the European Union with the Pacific Island states, and the possibility for reframing that the Blue Pacific Strategy offers.

The Pacific Island states have a long history of engagement with the European Union (EU), mostly focused on the issue of development assistance. European engagement with Pacific development began as early as the 1950s: the original *Articles of Association* of the founding Treaty of Rome, an important precursor to a formal EU development policy, incorporated the French Pacific territories including what is now Vanuatu. But the big bang, as far as EU–Pacific relations is concerned, was the accession of the United Kingdom in 1973. The reimagining of development policy that this entailed resulted in the establishment of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) grouping of states through the 1975 Lomé Convention, to which the Pacific states were progressively added over subsequent years. It is that EU–ACP structure that has largely inhered ever since.

Partnership or Benign Neglect?

But from a Pacific perspective, and notwithstanding the positive intentions and innovative practice deployed by the European Union over the decades, it has never been clear that the policies pursued in the EU–ACP relationship have been entirely appropriate to the needs of the region. Intrinsic to this has been a failure to fully implement the principle of partnership that has been at the core of the EU’s approach to the developing world since the signing of the Lomé Convention in 1975, which committed the signatories “to establish on the basis of complete equality between partners, close and continuing cooperation in the spirit of international solidarity”. This was a response to earlier criticisms as to the donor–recipient power dynamic that had shaped an asymmetric relationship. And it is this asymmetric reality that has long been at the heart of Pacific Island concerns around their engagement with the European Union.

While the ACP has a greater collective voice in relations with the EU than its members acting alone, the Pacific voice and Pacific interests have failed to resonate strongly within that collective. Consequently, the frameworks and priorities established by the EU in relation to the ACP have largely been constructed with the interests of sub-Saharan Africa in mind, with the Pacific Islands very much being an afterthought. The Pacific Island states have often felt themselves to be marginalised, with the EU seen to have [failed to recognise or understand the complexities of the region](#).

So notwithstanding [long recognition](#), for example, of the special needs of the Small Island Developing States of the Pacific, the EU approach has largely been to squeeze the region into existing frameworks and priorities, rather than to focus clearly on Pacific needs and interests. The resulting development frameworks and interventions have therefore not been as successful in the Pacific as they might otherwise have been. Participation in the regional Economic Partnership Agreement, for example, that has been the focus of EU development strategy since 2000, and which was expected to be concluded by 2007, has been defined by a certain reticence on the part of Pacific states. Even now in 2022, only a minority of Pacific Island states (Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and the Solomon Islands) have acceded to the framework.

The EU–Pacific relationship has been characterised by drift rather than clear-eyed focus on Pacific issues, a form of benign neglect facilitated by a lack of substantive EU interest in the region to date (reflected, perhaps, in the relative invisibility of the EU as a regional development actor) and the comparative lack of weight of the Pacific states in engagement with Europe. This in turn has meant that the Pacific states have themselves largely been unable to shift the parameters of the development relationship in a substantive fashion.

2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

In this context, the Pacific Island Forum’s (PIF) [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), launched in July 2022, is an invitation to third parties to engage. Building on a number of prior regional agreements and declarations (including the 2003 *Pacific Plan*, the 2017 *Blue Pacific Narrative* among others), it sets out a broad framework defining the way the Pacific states see their region, and their priorities for its survival and development. It also emphasises engagement with international stakeholders such as the European Union, though on the basis of partnerships that are substantively equal, “where all respect the region’s faiths, cultural values, and traditional knowledge, and genuine and durable partnerships are based on principles of national and/or regional ownership, mutual trust, transparency and accountability”. It is, as Zarak Khan (the PIF Secretariat’s Director of Programmes and Initiatives in Fiji) commented, [“\[the Pacific’s\] north star. It’s about securing our region’s prospects, people, and place”](#).

Post-Cotonou Pacific Protocol

Alongside this strategy stands the EU’s own [post-Cotonou Agreement](#). Initialled in April 2021, this is the framework through which the EU’s relationship with the ACP states will be structured in coming years. Importantly, the agreement’s *Pacific Protocol* has strong

resonance with the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. It calls again for genuine partnership, though as noted above this is not new in EU development relations, and it reflects a range of thematic issues highlighted by the Pacific states themselves, including on climate change, ocean governance, sustainability and so on. And importantly, it requires that the partners “take into consideration their respective strategic and policy frameworks, including regional strategies adopted by Pacific OACPS Members, as appropriate” (art.8). The extent to which such consideration results in the Pacific voice – expressed, for example, through the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* – shaping the relationship and its priorities in practice remains the key question. Can Pacific Island relationships with donor actors such as the European Union be made substantively equal going forward, or will they remain trapped within an asymmetric donor–recipient paradigm?

The Resurgence of Interest in the Pacific

If such a reframing of the EU–Pacific relationship, and a strengthening of the Pacific voice within it, is to take place, now is potentially the most conducive period that has been seen for some time. In addition to the publication of the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, and the initialling of the post-Cotonou Agreement, Western interest – including that of the European Union – in the Pacific is at something of a high, a consequence of the increased geopolitical contestation that has been taking place in the region centring particularly on the role of China, but in which other powers – notably Russia – have also played a part. This is a product of the benign neglect with which the Pacific has been treated by both the EU and the US over recent decades, and which has opened space for others to make their presence felt.

China, for example, has been increasing its aid footprint in the Pacific as a mechanism for increasing its international support, and for supporting its own strategic priorities. This is nothing new in the field of development – this sort of chequebook diplomacy was a defining feature of Cold War geopolitical competition. But there has certainly been a significant increase in the volume of China’s aid, notably as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Much of this has been in the form of loans rather than grants, raising the question of debt sustainability.

And China has been active in pursuing key strategic priorities. The issue of the diplomatic recognition of Taiwan has re-emerged since 2016, with Kiribati and the Solomon Islands prominently switching allegiance to China in 2019. And then most recently we have seen moves by China to establish an active security presence in the region, signing an agreement with the Solomon Islands in April 2022 which provides military access, the first such arrangement in the Pacific Islands. That a proposal for a wider agreement involving security, policing, data cooperation and other matters with the 10 Pacific states with which China has formal ties was rejected by those states at the end of May, demonstrates perhaps the unwillingness of the Pacific states to be drawn into any camp.

Nevertheless, this active push by China has raised significant concerns among Western powers. This in turn has drawn Western attention back to the region, embodied in strategies such as Australia’s *Pacific Step-up* in 2016, the US’ *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy* in 2017, and New Zealand’s *Pacific Reset* in 2018.

For the European Union, this was reflected in the publication in 2021 of its [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). The Indo-Pacific context, however, is a fuzzy one – the question as to how much Pacific is present remains a little unclear. Certainly, the initial conceptions of the Indo-Pacific very much focused on the arc of maritime trade routes running from India through to the South China Sea, with Southeast Asia as its core. And this is very much the conception, for example, of the [German Indo-Pacific Strategy](#). The [French have a wider vision](#) penetrating the South Pacific, largely due to their territorial possessions which therefore allows them to claim to be an Indo-Pacific power. And the EU’s strategy document takes this broader French conception incorporating the Pacific Islands, though the focus is still very much the Indian Ocean-South China Sea arc in which ASEAN is seen as central. However, the increasing regional presence of China may strengthen the place of the Pacific Islands in the Union’s Indo-Pacific vision, and indeed make the need to listen to Pacific voices more apparent.

A Greater Pacific Voice

So can the EU–Pacific relationship be reframed to afford greater recognition of the Pacific voice? The answer is, ‘possibly’, though this requires the European Union to be willing to make a reality of the ‘genuine partnership’ highlighted in the post-Cotonou Pacific Protocol. While there is apparent synergy between the Pacific Protocol and *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* on paper, these should not be viewed as interchangeable. And indeed the way these are shaped in practice will depend very much on the strength of the voices involved. From a Pacific perspective, it has long been the case that it is the EU’s voice that is seen to have carried the greatest weight.

Any fundamental change will require a recognition by the European Union (and, indeed, other donors) that the Pacific Island states should be the key interlocutors in their own development. Emerging geopolitical contestation in the region may be one way in which Pacific states are able to leverage their position to make themselves heard. Beyond this, a reframing of development relationship with the Pacific Island states will also require acknowledgement that, while coordination with other regional donors such as New Zealand and Australia may be necessary, these should not be the first port of call when designing development interventions. Substantive engagement with Pacific Island states requires time and investment in building strong relationships with the region, rather than shortcutting the process by acting through other regional donors. The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* is an invitation to do this, on terms reflective of the Pacific’s own values and interests.