



11 April 2023

AUKUS: Climate Security overtaken by Defense

The Pacific Elders' Voice (PEV) expresses grave concerns about the recently announced AUKUS partnership presented as "deepening of long standing diplomatic, security and defense cooperation to meet the challenges of the future".

AUKUS signals greater militarisation by joining Australia to the networks of US military bases in the northern Pacific and is triggering an arms race, bringing war much closer to home. Not only does this go against the spirit of the Blue Pacific narrative, agreed to by all the Forum member countries last year, it also demonstrates a complete lack of recognition of the climate change security threat that has been embodied in the *Boe* and other declarations by Pacific Island leaders.

The staggering \$368 billion allocated for the AUKUS deal also flies in the face of Pacific Island countries which have been crying out for support for climate change. The fact that not even a significant fraction of this figure is available for the region to deal with the greatest security threat shows a complete lack of sensitivity to this key Pacific priority in Canberra, London, Paris and Washington. When there is money available for such military expansionism, surely the region's pressing existential threat from climate change also deserves this focus and substantive investment.

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report emphasises the need for bold and swift action that reduces emissions and we must stop digging up new fossil fuels. Current policies across the world are projected to lead to 2.7°C or more global warming by 2100, and net-zero climate commitments would still produce warming of around 2.2°C. This would be catastrophic for the Pacific and would also lead to the submergence of large areas of the atoll nations Kiribati, Marshalls and Tuvalu. Most Pacific Island states would face major challenges to cope with worsening climate impacts leading to significant population movements and major destabilisation of the region.

We strongly support the sentiment of the Forum Chair and PM of Cook Islands, Hon Mark Brown that the AUKUS deal is "going against" the Pacific's principal non-proliferation agreement – the Treaty of Rarotonga – signed in 1985 and in force since 1986. The current States Parties to the Treaty are: Australia, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu.

The Pacific has tragic history of nuclear testing. The Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty was borne of the South Pacific's first-hand experience with nuclear weapons testing and was only the second Nuclear Weapons Free Zone to enter into force in a populated region

For further information contact:

Mahendra Kumar +61 410641161 / +679
9252898



following the Treaty of Tlatelolco in Latin America. It is also concerning that New Zealand is flagging that it may join AUKUS. This is despite the fact that, up to now it will not allow any nuclear submarines into its ports under its nuclear free zone policy.

The geographic scope of the *Rarotonga Treaty* is vast, extending from the West coast of Australia to the boundary of the Latin American NWFZ in the east, and from the equator to 60 degrees south, where it meets the boundary of the zone established by the Antarctic Treaty.

Articles 5 & 6 of the Treaty of Rarotonga talk about nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament by preventing the placement of nuclear weapons within the South Pacific by member states. , A further and quite distinctive feature of the Treaty is its emphasis on keeping the region free of environmental pollution by radioactive wastes and other radioactive matter (Article 7).

Whilst the Australian Government and its allies are emphasising 'no nuclear weapons' will be carried on these expensive submarines, this claim will never be verified because of the US Policy *to not confirm or deny* if nuclear weapons are on board any submarines that enter the Pacific. Furthermore, it does not talk about the disposal of nuclear wastes that will be generated by the operation of the nuclear-powered submarines. We do not condone Australia's deliberate exploitation a loophole in the Treaty of Rarotonga which permits the transit of nuclear-powered craft such as submarines. We also condemn DFAT's recent arguments that the stationing of B-52 bombers in the Northern Territory does not constitute "stationing" in breach of the Treaty of Rarotonga. We also condemn the United States' failure as the only major nuclear weapons state to ratify the three protocols to the Treaty of Rarotonga.

We only have to remind ourselves of the nuclear legacy in our region, including over 315 nuclear weapons tests in the Marshall Islands, Australia, Kiribati, Johnston Island and French (Occupied) Polynesia. We have been assured of technology safety before, but as the cracks on the Runit nuclear dome in Marshall Islands demonstrate, there can be no guarantee on the long- term management and regulation. We cannot overlook the impacts of the two recent major nuclear reactor accidents: Chernobyl and Fukushima, and many others before. The region is rightly, strongly opposed to Japan's proposal to discharge waste water from the Fukushima reactor into the Pacific Ocean.

We urge the Pacific Islands Leaders to take a decisive and ethical stand on this important matter and not be subsumed by the rhetoric from the AUKUS nations. This not only puts our region at greater risk of a nuclear war but the real environmental impacts arising out of any incident will be huge.

We are particularly keen to ensure the Pacific provides a united and forceful voice particularly to Australia, our largest development partner in the region and signatory of the Rarotonga Treaty. Australia is also a signatory to all PIF Declarations and the '2050 Strategy of the Blue Pacific Continent' adopted at the Forum meeting in Suva last year, and recognises that the most urgent security issue for the region is climate change.

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Mahendra Kumar +61 410641161 / +679
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We are of the view that the PIFS demands Australia clarify what the benefits of AUKUS are to the region and what elements of this will impact on the Pacific Islands. We must also discourage countries like New Zealand, home to many Pacific Islanders, from resisting the lure to join this military alliance.

The United States, the United Kingdom and France have left an unfortunate and unaddressed nuclear legacy in the Pacific. Adequate victim's assistance for Indigenous civilian and military populations (including healthcare and compensation) and environmental remediation has not been addressed by colonial powers. We highlight that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) which has positive obligations to address the nuclear legacy has been ratified by the majority of Pacific states in the region. We urge Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to follow through on his pre-election commitment to ratify the TPNW and become more aligned with a region concerned with nuclear justice for all survivors and affected communities and embrace the goal of nuclear-weapons-free world.

In response to AUKUS, the President of Kiribati, Hon Taneti Maamau, reflected on the South Pacific nuclear experience: "our people were victims of nuclear testing, we still have trauma".

We must continue to emphasise that paramount amongst the broader geopolitical and security challenges in the region is the climate security issue.



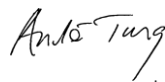
Hilde Heine,

Former President of the Republic of the Marshall Islands



Thomas "Tommy" Remengesau,

Former President of Palau



Anote Tong, Former President of the Republic of Kiribati



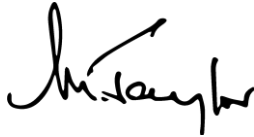
Enele Sopoaga,

Former Prime Minister of Tuvalu

For further information contact:

Mahendra Kumar +61 410641161 / +679
9252898





Dame Meg Taylor,

Former Secretary General of the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat



Robert Underwood,

Former Member of U.S. Congress & President of the University of Guam



Kaliopate Tavola,

Ambassador and Former Minister, Government of Fiji



Konai Helu Thaman,

Former Professor, University of the South Pacific

cc

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PIF Leaders
PSIDS Ambassadors
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The *Pacific Elders' Voice* is an independent group of Pacific people who have been leaders in the region. Our purpose is to provide guidance and advice that will strengthen Pacific resilience to current and future environmental, security, and human rights threats. We provide constructive policy inputs for current and future challenges and opportunities facing the Pacific.

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