

# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

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ATHAULLA A. RASHEED, JAN 15 2020

The foreign policy and international politics of small island developing states (SIDS), including the Pacific Islands have been shaped by particular interests associated with their unique vulnerabilities to climate change and the need to establish international cooperation to address them (See Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Biuvakaloloma, 1989; Klöck & Nunn, 2019; UN-OHRLLS, 2018; UN, 2017; UNFCCC, 2005). Since the mid-1980s, international policy frameworks, including the landmark United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement, have recognised the special case of SIDS in climate policy and politics (Ashe, Lieropb, & Ashe, 1999; Betzold, Castro, & Weiler, 2012; UNFCCC, 2005). This architecture of international and regional policy concerning SIDS has been significantly impacted by their vulnerability-based climate ideas (Betzold et al., 2012; Jaschik, 2014; Rasheed, 2019a). As the most vocal actors in regional climate action (Clarke, 2019b; Fry, 1994; Ourbak & Magnan, 2017), the Pacific Islands have promoted climate ideas about unique vulnerabilities of the small and low-lying islands to climate change and the need for collective action to address them (Barnett & Campbell, 2010; Betzold, 2015; Rasheed, 2019a; SPC, 2017; UNFCCC, 2005). Their 'regionalism through partnership' and 'Blue Pacific' approach to regional order and security have been influenced by the impact of climate change and sustainable development issues (Greenwood, 2018; PIFS, 2018, 2019d; Tarte, 2014; UN, 2017). More so, climate ideas have significantly influenced new purposes and expectations of the Pacific Islands in dealing with regional issues associated with rising competition between development partners in the region. For example, while notifying the lack of climate action from traditional allies, specifically Australia (Packham, 2019), the Pacific Islands have often expressed their readiness to face new regional challenges and accommodate growing powers like China rising to their aid (Dayant, 2019; Greenwood, 2018; PIFS, 2019c). On a global scale, when the US decided to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement, the Pacific Islands confidently declared the limited role the former would have in future regional decision-making.

Constructivists have rightly argued that ideas can shape foreign policy and regional (and international) politics (Flockhart, 2016; Wendt, 1992, 1995, 1999; Zehfuss, 2002). In foreign policy processes, ideas generated by individual states are shared among states during their interactions taking the form of negotiations, statements, declarations and conventions. This creates a system of intersubjective understanding which shapes their relationships and alliances over time (Flockhart, 2016; Schimmelfennig, 1998; Wendt, 1992; Wicaksana, 2009; Widmaier, 2005). Climate change has created such ideas among the SIDS since the 1980s, in driving their foreign policy and international politics (Rasheed, 2019a). The shape and outcome of their climate foreign policy and engagements in climate negotiations were informed by shared ideas about unique vulnerabilities to climate impacts (Ashe et al., 1999; Betzold et al., 2012; Jaschik, 2014). Taking this constructivist viewpoint, this article shows how climate ideas of SIDS have shaped the interests of the Pacific Islands in regional politics and cooperation. Foreign policy statements, regional declarations and policy documents are analysed to identify the climate ideas concerning SIDS and the Pacific Islands.

### Impact of climate ideas on international policy concerning SIDS

Vulnerability-based climate ideas have been at the very core of SIDS' foreign policy agenda for over decades. During crises, ideas are generated by individuals or groups of actors about the impacts and the policy solutions they seek.

# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

Written by Athaulla A. Rasheed

These ideas have little to do with the policy approaches prescribed by pre-existing political and socio-economic systems (Blyth, 2002; Flockhart, 2016; Wendt, 1992, 1995, 1999). In this constructivist viewpoint, ideas about unique vulnerabilities, threat of inundation and need for cooperation of development partners have been generated and embedded in SIDS' climate foreign policy (CFP) (Betzold, 2016; Betzold et al., 2012). As international climate policy debate unfolded in the 1980s, SIDS were the keenest actors in the negotiations because climate action was considered a key policy priority for their development and existence (Lee & Smith, 2010; Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 1987; Petzold & Magnan, 2019). For SIDS, climate action had emerged as a necessary means to survival and development. Characterised in the most vulnerable forms, SIDS' inherent experiences of climate impacts created a practical case to prove climate science and influence policy thinking (UNFCCC, 2005).

In 1987, the Maldives discussed ideas about its vulnerability to climate change at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) and the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Its moral claims equating climate impacts to a 'death of a nation' and arguments for principles of equity and rights to exist became influential ideas in generating international views about the special case of SIDS. At the 1987 UNGA, former president of the Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom warned the policy community: 'As such, I have brought to this Special Debate *the testimony of the people of the Maldives* [emphasis added]. The rich and developed nations clearly have the wealth and the land to defend themselves from a rise in sea level even if they wait for it to occur, yet they are already preparing', he further added (Maldives Permanent Mission to UN, 1987). Malta also, in 1988, negotiated an island-vulnerability and rights-based UN resolution (43/53) entitled "Protection of Global Climate for Present and Future Generations of Mankind" which characterised climate change as a common concern of mankind (Government of Malta, 2019). However, the vulnerability-based statements of the Maldives at CHOGM and UNGA made a crucial ideational impact on SIDS in driving their climate agenda in international negotiations (Rasheed, 2019a, 2019b).

Ideas can strategically shape policy thinking 'to frame interests, mobilize supporters, ... build coalitions', merge and recast common interests, and shape political power relations (Béland & Cox, 2016, p. 429). Shared ideas create an ideational process of interactions among states where their mutual decisions are driven by those ideas (Blyth, 2002, 2013; Flockhart, 2016; Wendt, 1995). Following the 1987 CHOGM and UNGA meetings, the Maldives in 1989 hosted a regional climate conference in its capital island Malé to drive SIDS attention and support for collective action on climate change. In that, SIDS declared their collective effort to ensure international cooperation on climate action claiming that the world's nations 'now have a moral obligation to initiate on an urgent basis, international action to stabilise and subsequently reduce greenhouse gases' (UNESCO, 1989). The then Minister of Environment and National Service of Trinidad and Tobago Lincoln Myers affirmed at the conference that 'states must therefore act now and let [their] voices be heard so that [their] circumstances are taken into consideration and incorporated into any response strategy developed to combat environmental problems' (Myers, 1989). The then Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Vanuatu Jack T Hopa urged 'industrial countries to recognise these potential problems and work together with small countries in an effort to find solutions and develop a plan of action to take' (Hopa, 1989). As the Maldives discussed, mobilising necessary financial and manpower resources and 'voice concerns', and to 'seek the collaboration and assistance of international agencies' (Ibrahim 1989), the then Minister of Rural Development and Rural Housing of Fiji, Apolosi Biuvakaloloma assured that 'the acceptance of my Government of the invitation issued by the Government of Maldives to send a delegation to this Conference is a confirmation of our stance in the issue of global warming' (Biuvakaloloma, 1989).

International policy developments over the subsequent years showed how SIDS' shared climate ideas have influenced their collective effort in driving international and regional system design. International negotiations leading up to the UNFCCC and its subsequent agreements including the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, 2009 Copenhagen accord and the 2015 Paris Agreement have been influenced by vulnerability-based ideas of SIDS. The formal recognition of SIDS by the policy community at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) held in Rio de Janeiro was significantly driven by SIDS' climate ideas. The Earth Summit decided to adopt the UNFCCC, giving SIDS special considerations (Betzold et al., 2012; Paterson, 1996; UN-OHRLS, 2018). Shared ideas at the 1989 Malé conference created the Alliance of Small Islands States (AOSIS) to drive their climate agenda in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) for the UNFCCC in 1992 (Betzold, 2015; Betzold et al., 2012; Corneloup & Mol, 2014; OECD, 2015). Ashe et al (1999) explained that most of the provisions on differentiated treatment and international cooperation as advocated by AOSIS were embedded in the outcome of the

# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

Written by Athaulla A. Rasheed

INC – i.e. in the UNFCCC.

In post-UNFCCC process following the Kyoto negotiations and when debates heated up in 2009 Copenhagen negotiations (Revkin, 2005), same climate ideas brought SIDS together in building confidence in the UNFCCC process (Roberts, 2015; Walsh, 2009). For example, the Maldives finally declared that 'the [Copenhagen] document could serve as a basis to continue negotiations and result in a legally-binding instrument by 2010' (IISD, 2009, p. 8). As such, climate ideas enabled SIDS in shaping the interests of significant negotiating powers including the G77 (presently G77 + China) and occasionally the European Union (EU). In the 2011 Climate Change Conference in Durban, the EU supported AOSIS because their ideational CFP platform provided a strategic leverage to set out 'a firm architecture for international cooperation on climate change' which EU promoted in 2009 Copenhagen (Schaik, 2012, p. 15). Moreover, despite the 2°C emissions reduction target that was agreed, the 2015 Paris outcomes did not change the purposes and expectations of SIDS. The Chair of AOSIS was reported as declaring that 'we [SIDS] continue to believe that the [Paris] agreement is not only central to averting the worst impacts of the climate crisis, including the loss of entire nations to sea level rise, but also our *ability to address problems that can only be solved by the international community working together* [emphasis added] (McGrath, 2015).

Climate ideas enabled SIDS to capitalise on and steer their way through these international negotiations (Chasek, 2005). This ideational approach enabled broader international audiences to better understand their CFP and what they sought from the UN climate negotiation process (Betzold et al., 2012; Paterson, 1996). As such, vulnerability-based climate ideas have had a determining impact on international and regional politics and cooperation concerning SIDS including the Pacific Islands.

## Regional implications of climate ideas

Climate change has been declared as the greatest threat to development in the Pacific region (Morgan, 2018). The 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security adopted at the Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru confirmed that 'climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihood, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific' (PIFS, 2019a). Climate change has been at the core of cultural, community and political discourse of the Pacific communities. 'Save Tuvalu, save the world' expressed the shared sentiments of Pacific people as small children of Tuvalu sang those words in greeting the delegations to the 50<sup>th</sup> Pacific Islands Forum in August 2019 (Taylor, 2019). For the President of the Marshall Islands Hilda Heine, continuation of global temperature rise means a 'death sentence' for Pacific Islands (Moeono-Kolio, 2019). At the turn of 2019 United Nations 25<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties meeting (COP 25) in Madrid, former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga expressed hope that 'not only the Pacific, but those that have polluted the atmosphere and caused global warming will come to react and do the right thing in response to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] special report [on 1.5°C] (Lyons, 2019). Speaking to the Pacific approach at the 2019 COP 25, the Cook Islands' Climate Office Director, Wayne King reassured that 'the only thing we can do, because every country has the sovereign right to do what it wants ... is bring pressure and in these negotiations' (Tahana, 2019). In similar vein, as the Prime Minister of Fiji, Frank Bainimarama urged Australia to 'join us [the Pacific Islands] in stepping up our collective response to the climate threat' (Karp, 2019), the Prime Minister of Samoa, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi expressed confidence that 'under the flagship of our Blue Pacific identity, we are building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change that looms for all of our Pacific family'. In 2017, Pacific Islands endorsed the Blue Pacific narrative, which promotes 'their commitment to the development of the region in a manner that reflects their shared Pacific values and concerns' (PIFS, 2019c). Moreover, climate change has been embedded in regional policy discourse as a primary concern for the Pacific Islands that required region-wide action.

Historically, the 1988 Pacific Islands Forum meeting had declared regional significance of climate change (Barnett & Campbell, 2010) where in its 1989 Communiqué, Pacific leaders had declared the 'concern about the possible effects on Island countries of rising sea levels, resulting from global warming, and emphasised the importance of a regional approach to environmental matters' (Pacific Islands Forum, 1989). Pacific islands have been considered the very first nations to have had initiated regional scientific research on climate impacts on islands as early as 1986 with the establishment of the Association of South Pacific Environmental Institutions (ASPEI) to 'facilitate regional cooperation and communication in conducting environmental studies' (Carew-Reid, 1989, p. 72). The Association

# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

Written by Athaulla A. Rasheed

operated within the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) (Carew-Reid, 1989, p. 72). SPREP in association with Pacific regional bodies was designed and still continues to 'promote cooperation in the South Pacific Region and to provide assistance in order to protect and improve the environment and to ensure sustainable development for present and future generations' (SPREP, 2019).

Such collaboration for regional development and security subsequently led to the creation of the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (FRDP) in 2017 as a regional strategy to guide the Pacific efforts 'on how to enhance resilience to climate change and disasters, in ways that contribute to and are embedded in sustainable development' (SPC, 2017). Regional implications of climate change had not come to the Pacific Islands as a single issue; it has emerged as a complex problem interlinked to their individual and regional development and security.

Thirty years following the declaration of regional significance of climate change, the 2018 Boe Declaration now aligns climate ideas with broader regional development and security cooperation and collective action. As declared, under the stewardship of Blue Pacific, the Pacific Islands recognise the 'multifaceted security challenges' and 'dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region' where climate change remains a single problem that challenges their regional policy and political action (PIFS, 2019a). In recognising that 'climate change is an existential threat to many countries in the Pacific', Pacific Islands Forum Secretary-General Dame Meg Taylor reminded the regional policy makers at the 2018 Climate Vulnerability Forum of the role the Pacific has at 'the forefront of promoting climate change as a security issue' (Taylor, 2018). In recognising Pacific integration to build regional resilience through the 2017 FRDP, in their strongest statement on collective action, *the Kainaki II Declaration* (Taylor, 2019), the Pacific leaders have also called 'on all countries and non-state actors to join with the Blue Pacific in taking bold, decisive and transformative action to address the ever-present challenges of climate change' (PIFS, 2019b, p. 15). There is a clear indication that climate ideas have a causal impact on regional politics and policy (O'Keefe, 2019; Taylor, 2019).

Consequentially, the traditional role development partners have played in regional politics has been affected by the Pacific Islands' climate politics. As O'Keefe (2019) cautioned, 'the inability to meet Pacific Island expectations [in taking climate action] will erode Australia's influence and leadership credentials in the region, and provide opportunities for other countries to grow influence in the region'. Australia's strategic leadership in the Pacific region has long been drawn by aid donations, investments and trade partnerships marked as foundations for winning acceptance of the Pacific Islands (Hayward-Jones, 2019). However, this tradition of Australia's regional leadership has also been clouded by the growing acceptance from the Pacific Islands of China's aid and investment partnerships in the region today (Hayward-Jones, 2019; PIFS, 2019c). Secretary General Taylor has encouraged the 'shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean' through the 'Blue Pacific' identity which engenders the Pacific Islands to 'exercising stronger strategic autonomy', 'understanding...the strategic value of our region' and 'maintain[ing] our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us' (Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, 2019). While this shared identity between the Pacific Islands opens strategic opportunities to building constructive dialogue on regional cooperation, climate ideas have become a dominant factor shaping the emerging relationships between the Pacific Islands and regional partners.

For example, the 2019 Fiji-Australia Vuvale Partnership, which represented their shared ambition to take their development partnership to higher levels (DFTA, 2019), was challenged by the lack of commitment to and respect for identities and desires of the Pacific Islands. Regional cooperation depended on meaningful friendship that supported the local expectations and concerns of the Pacific Islands. This was crucial for the Pacific leaders including the Fijian Prime Minister. During the Vuvale Partnership agreement, the Fijian Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama reportedly warned that 'for Fijians, the bonds that bind families [Vuvale] together are sacred, unbreakable connections, [and] it's about more than being good mates to one another. It demands a level of understanding hereto [sic] unprecedented in the relations between our governments' (Clarke, 2019a). Lack of action on climate change was an indication of lack of commitment to meaningful regional partnership and cooperation. For example, in response to Australia's effort to block the islands' effort to set ban on new coal mines and rapid emissions reductions at the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum, Prime Minister Bainimarama further expressed that the Australian Prime Minister was 'very insulting, very condescending' (Clarke, 2019a). This indicated that although Australia is the main development partner, Pacific Islands' political thinking and regional agenda have not been

# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

Written by Athaulla A. Rasheed

merely driven by their regional stewardship with Australia. Rather, it has been affected by climate impacts and regional action that promoted their Blue Pacific identity – i.e. their shared concerns.

The lack of commitment from traditional partners has opened alternative policy routes for the Pacific Islands to new development partnerships including those with China (Greenwood, 2018; UNDP, 2017). However, such alternative partnerships have been affected by their desire for collective action to address the unique vulnerabilities, development and security. As Secretary General Taylor stated, 'when considering "the China alternative" [for example] in the region, I would argue that we must do so from the perspective of securing our future as the Blue Pacific continent' (PIFS, 2019c). The Pacific Islands' shared desires to lead the Blue Pacific can provide a policy angle to explore present and future thinking of the Pacific leaders in driving the regional agenda. The Blue Pacific identities bring the Pacific Islands together in driving regional collective action. In that, with climate change posing the single greatest (security) threat to the island region, the Pacific Islands regional politics and cooperation can be better informed by politics of climate change. Climate ideas can be used as primary indicators to inform regional action and change involving the Pacific Islands.

## Conclusion

Regional politics and cooperation of the Pacific Islands have been affected by climate ideas about unique vulnerabilities to climate change and the need for collective action. This ideational framework provides a useful platform for future research on Pacific regional and strategic studies. In this framework, climate ideas can be used to explain important determinants of regional politics and cooperation of the Pacific Islands. The Pacific Islands have developed their Blue Pacific Identity through which they see climate change as the greatest threat to their development and security. Collective action is required to address their unique vulnerabilities. This makes climate change an important driver of their regional decision making. As climate ideas have enabled SIDS to capitalise on and steer their way through international negotiations, an ideational approach to regional politics can better inform how climate ideas have shaped the Pacific Islands in driving their regional agenda.

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# Climate Ideas as Drivers of Pacific Islands' Regional Politics and Cooperation

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