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Japan's Increased Involvement with the Pacific Island Countries

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The 10th Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) took place over three days, from July 16 to July 18, with participation from 18 members of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a regional organisation that includes Australia and New Zealand, and Japan. Amid growing concerns about China's expanding military and economic influence in the region, the leaders of Japan and Pacific Island nations and territories expressed their opposition to "any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by the threat or use of force or coercion."

The meeting also discussed climate change and disaster resilience, maritime security, economic development, and the water discharge from the Fukushima nuclear plant.¹ Japan sought to clarify its intentions regarding the release of treated water from the damaged Fukushima nuclear power plant and to provide real-time satellite meteorological data.

Japan and the nations of the South Pacific have a long history of mutual influence. Specifically, before World War II, Japan administered the Federated States of Micronesia and Palau under the League of Nations mandate. During World War II, Japanese forces controlled Nauru and Papua New Guinea.² Even though neither side has fond recollections of these times, a segment of Japan's population appreciates its ties to the countries of the South Pacific despite the historical backdrop. Nevertheless, it cannot be claimed that Japan has placed a high premium on its contacts with the nations in the South Pacific or its interest in them.

Fisheries connections and development cooperation have been the main pillars of Japan's bilateral relations with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) since the 1960s. The first Pacific Islands Conference was hosted in Japan in 1988 by the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, while the first Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM1) took place in 1997.³ Their relationship has since broadened to include non-traditional security issues, such as projects about climate change and official development assistance (ODA). Under the 2016 Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework, former Japanese PM Shinzo Abe's administration started coordinating more closely with the Pacific Islands region in response to China's growing influence.

PIC leaders in November 2023 endorsed the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan, which included seven themes: climate change and disasters, ocean and environment, people-centred development, peace and security, resources and economic development, political leadership and regionalism, and technology and connectivity.⁴ PALM10 emphasised how Japan's cooperation aligns with these themes. The conference also focused on working together to protect the rule of

law, which is crucial for the growth and prosperity of the region, and to promote the exchange of unbiased, fact-based information on the Japanese government's release of water that has undergone Advanced Liquid Processing System (ALPS) treatment.

Given the shared history of nuclear testing between Japan and the Pacific Islands region, there is a rising dilemma. No island was able to clearly state its agreement with the Japanese government's proposal to release more than a million tons of wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant over a 30-year period, which sparked protests. The majority of Pacific Island leaders voiced disapproval at the national level.

The main focus of Japan's bilateral ties with the PICs continues to be trade diplomacy. In terms of natural resources, over 20 per cent of Japan's total import volume of tree logs comes from the export of tree logs from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and New Zealand alone.⁵ Additionally, the Pacific is a vital supply chain path for the movement of natural resource imports and exports, including food, between Japan and the PICs. About 40 per cent of the bonito and tuna that Japan consumes come solely from the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of the Pacific Island countries. Important Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) are located in the EEZs of the Pacific Island region. The utilisation of technologies is particularly important to this region; these include big data platforms and artificial intelligence for vessel monitoring, prediction, and anomaly identification, as well as satellite access for sharper, more precise photos.

As a result of the Chinese activities into the region and shared issues, including managing fishery resources, climate change, and marine pollution, Japanese diplomacy is increasingly showing more interest in the South Pacific. For instance, South Pacific Island countries should be partners in the pursuit of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), according to Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who made this observation in a policy address titled "The Future of the Indo-Pacific" that he gave in New Delhi in March 2023.⁶ Kishida's new plan for the FOIP shows Japan's commitment to bolster its cooperation with the Pacific Island nations.

In addition to this, in April 2023, Japan established the Official Security Assistance (OSA) Programme. This is a new framework for aid that addresses the security requirements of the nations in the area, with the military as the main recipient and equipment and infrastructure development as key components.⁷ This could be applied to a future South Pacific cooperation initiative. With the signing of an agreement with Japan regarding OSA in December 2023, which included a grant of 400 million yen, Fiji became one of the first recipients of the OSA in FY2023.⁸ The Fiji Navy was specifically set to receive ships and other equipment as part of this arrangement.

In a statement issued following the meeting in Tokyo, leaders underlined the significance of cooperating to create a peaceful, safe, and secure Blue Pacific region that contributes to world peace and security, omitting any reference to China. PALM10 is a significant chance to mend the rift that has recently developed between Japan and the PICs and establish a cooperative effort to address local, regional, and international issues. It is expected to start a long-lasting new chapter in the relationship between Japan and the Pacific Island nations. Kishida also declared that in order to implement the PIF's 2050 vision, Japan will work with its Pacific neighbours over the course of the next three years in seven areas, including security, climate change, and economic development. Regarding security, Tokyo and the Pacific island nations unveiled a coordinated action plan that called for strengthening defence cooperation through port visits by Japanese ships and planes of the Self-Defence Forces. It also involved encouraging cooperation amongst Coast Guard organisations.

Way Forward

The Japanese government must be more explicit about the precise areas of climate change that it intends to invest more in, particularly with regard to green climate and marine security projects. Japan might help reduce dependency on fossil fuels by exporting green energy in the future.

If Japan hopes to develop multilateral relations with the PICs, it might be in its best strategic advantage to maintain its participation in regional forums like the PALM10. This commitment reassures the PICs of Japan's dedication to fostering multilateral relations that do not advocate a particular security approach.

As Beijing expands its influence in the region, where many island nations (like many other countries) are economically dependent on China—Japan, the United States, and their regional partners, Australia and New Zealand, are becoming increasingly concerned about the security of the South Pacific island nations.

It is imperative that Japan and the Pacific Island Countries unite in their efforts to strengthen economic linkages, security, and climate change measures.

NOTES:

¹ Ibid.

² Kobayashi Izumi, The South Sea Islands and Japanese Mandatory Rule over Them, *Sasakawa Peace Foundation*, October 06, 2021, <https://www.spf.org/islandstudies/research/a00023.html>. Accessed on July 27, 2024.

³ Céline Pajon, Japan and the Pacific Islands Countries Longstanding Strategic Interests, Recent Strategic Engagement, *Centre for Asian Studies IFRI*, March 2023, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pajon_japan-pic_2023_v2.pdf. Accessed on July 28, 2024.

⁴ Pragya Pandey, Situation in the South Pacific: Regional Developments and Geopolitical Shifts, *Indian Council of World Affairs*, January 23, 2024, https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10416&lid=6643. Accessed on July 28, 2024.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Benny Teh, Kicking off Kishida's new Free and Open Indo-Pacific plan, *East Asia Forum*, May 11, 2023, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/05/11/kicking-off-kishidas-new-free-and-open-indo-pacific-plan/>. Accessed on July 29, 2024.

⁷ Jumpei Ishimaru, Japan's shifting foreign-assistance schemes, *IJSS*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.iiss.org/en/online-analysis/online-analysis/2024/04/japans-shifting-foreign-assistance-schemes/>. Accessed on July 29, 2024.

⁸ Ibid.