



Attention to the Periphery?

Germany and the Pacific Island States

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In September 2020, Germany adopted policy guidelines for the Indo-Pacific that comprehensively set out its approach towards this increasingly important region, seeking to diversify partnerships beyond China. The Pacific Islands sub-region is conceptualized in the document as part of the broader Indo-Pacific, encompassing the Indian Ocean and the Pacific.¹ Although the Pacific Islands were not an object of particular attention – neither in the almost 70 page-long guidelines, nor in subsequent policymaking, that seems to be changing.

Indeed, several developments in 2022 suggest that Germany seeks to put more focus on this sub-region. The cabinet-approved progress report on the country's Indo-Pacific policy in September 2022 clearly states that Germany – alongside existing priorities in the region – will place a "stronger focus on what is known as the Blue Continent and the Pacific island states," promising to "tangibly step up its engagement."² Other signs of growing interest in the region include Germany's first-ever appointment of a special envoy for the Pacific Island states in July 2022,³ and the country's September 2022 decision to join the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative, launched three months earlier by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US) to coordinate their policies in this region more effectively.⁴

Germany's turn to the Pacific Islands coincides with mounting geopolitical competition in this region that has garnered international attention. In particular, the April 2022 security cooperation agreement between China and the Solomon

Islands has raised concerns among some observers about Chinese influence and possible naval presence in this strategic area. Countries like the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan have stepped up efforts to strengthen their engagement as a result. Against that background, this article investigates Germany's relationship with the Pacific Island states, seeking to understand what is driving the country's new focus on the region.

State of Relations: Low Level of Ambition

At present, the scope of Germany's relations with the Pacific Island states (PIS) is marginal at best. Amid budgetary pressures, Germany closed its sole embassy in this region in Papua New-Guinea in 1999, henceforth rendering consular and embassy functions through its representations in Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines. Berlin has provided some limited development support to the region, compromising \$12.6 million of German assistance in 2020 according to the Lowy Institute, although further funding is channeled through the European Union (EU).⁵ Still, German assistance remains small when compared to regional heavyweights such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan or the US, and also smaller than that of France or the UK. The German International Cooperation Agency (GIZ), which has been working with the Pacific region since 1977, plays a central role in administering support.⁶ Its projects have focused on topics such as climate adaptation, marine and coastal biodiversity management, and forest conservation. Aside from government-sponsored development projects, German church-linked organizations such as *Brot für die Welt* have also provided assistance to the region.⁷ Furthermore, it is also notable that Germany became a dialogue partner to the region's most important inter-governmental organization, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2016, participating in the annual post-forum meetings ever since.⁸

With the Pacific Islands remotely scattered in a vast geographic area that even at its nearest point is at a distance of around 11,000 kilometers, Germany has not perceived major interests in this region. Economic ties are insignificant in the context of overall German international trade or investment patterns. Given the Federal Republic's post-war self-understanding as a regional power focused

on the continental neighborhood, its policy vis-à-vis the PIS has been unambitious. While Germany was a colonial power in the northern part of Papua-New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Samoa, Caroline Islands, Palau and Mariana Islands at the end of the 19th century until its forced retreat through the Versailles Treaty of 1919, these historical ties play only a limited role in today's relations. Moreover, Germany has not shown particular interest in accessing the rich seabed resources – including minerals and energy – of the Pacific Islands region. In fact, the German government in November 2022 voiced opposition to deep sea mining until further research is conducted, given the possible negative consequences for the marine environment.⁹

The Rise of Pacific Island States in Germany's International Policy Agenda

The Pacific Island states have been of some relevance to German interests in its international policy agenda in two respects, namely in the context of UN voting and in climate policy. First, Germany has been keen to receive backing from the twelve United Nations (UN) members among the Pacific Island states for its bids to earn a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council. Having succeeded in this endeavor six times so far, Berlin is hoping to garner support for renewed membership in 2027/2028. The unanimous condemnation by the PIS of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the March 2022 UN resolution was also positively received in Germany.

Second, the Federal Republic has seen the PIS as important backers of an ambitious international climate policy, given their high vulnerability to the impact of climate change. Thus, Berlin has cooperated with the region's countries on some climate policy issues both bilaterally (such as through International Climate Initiative that Germany launched in 2008) and in multilateral frameworks. For example, the Federal Republic acted as the technical host and provided financial support to Fiji's 2017 presidency of the UN climate change conference (Conference of the Parties, COP 23). As an outcome of that conference, Germany since 2018 has supported the so-called Regional Pacific NDC Hub, which was set up to assist the Pacific Island states to enhance and implement their nationally

determined contributions and climate targets under the 2015 Paris climate agreement.¹⁰ Together with the Pacific state of Nauru serving as co-chair, the Federal Republic also established the Group of Friends on Climate and Security in the UN in 2018, seeking to draw greater attention to the security policy dimension of climate change in this multilateral framework.

Direction in 2022: Demonstrating Commitment to the Indo-Pacific, Climate Change and Rules-based Order

This second aspect – cooperation on climate policy goals – appears to be a driving force behind Germany's increased attention to the Blue Pacific in 2022. Formed in December 2021, the coalition government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz resolved to focus more on climate change. The Foreign Ministry was charged with international climate policy and related negotiations – previously handled primarily by the Environment Ministry – with Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party keen on leading the initiative in this field. However, the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and its global ripple effects soon drew political focus away from climate issues. While the ongoing Russian war continues to demand political attention, Baerbock has tried to revive the climate agenda over the course of 2022. In fact, the aforementioned 2022 progress report specifically refers to climate change as one area where Germany seeks to “intensify efforts” in the context of its Indo-Pacific policy.¹¹ Putting more focus on the Blue Pacific in this context seemed sensible from several angles: It allows Germany to strengthen cooperation with states that in recent years have proved themselves as leading voices in international climate negotiations.

At the same time, it enables Berlin to showcase its continued commitment to the Indo-Pacific as a region. The growing geopolitical tensions in the Blue Pacific highlighted by the security pact between China and the Solomon Islands in the spring of 2022 exposed what could be seen as a blind spot in German engagement. This created an opening for officials, who have become more interested in the dynamics of the Pacific Islands region, especially through the “2+2 talks” between Foreign and Defense Ministers with Australia since 2016, highlighting a need to improve German understanding.

While these considerations shaped Berlin's new attention to the region, some officials have nevertheless questioned the viability of further broadening the Indo-Pacific agenda in light of limited resources.

Foreign Minister Baerbock's July 2022 trip to Palau – the first German minister to visit in 120 years – underlined the centrality of climate issues in Berlin's outlook. Not only was she accompanied by a group of German journalists and NGO representatives focused on this topic, her speech there also squarely addressed what she called the “climate emergency,” describing it as the “most challenging security issue of our time.”¹² She commended the Pacific Island states as “front runners” in international climate talks and promised to take Germany's relationship with the region to a new level.

The press coverage of Baerbock's visit generally overlooked one aspect, however. Her speech linked the climate policy agenda with an unequivocal call to stand up for an international order underpinned by the UN Charter, international law and common regulatory frameworks. She noted that climate change necessitates new international agreements and rules, for example regarding the validity of fishing rights or rights to exploit natural resources when territories are threatened by rising sea levels. In this context, she clearly called for an order that “protects each and every state no matter its size” while cautioning against a world where powerful states can attack or suppress smaller neighbors by force or coercion.¹³ This clearly shows that in a time of growing geopolitical competition in the region, Germany's climate engagement with the Pacific Island countries is linked to normative ideas around international law and order. For other like-minded countries with an interest in developing and strengthening the rules-based order, particularly in the maritime field, this presents a chance to work together with Germany to develop joint initiatives and proposals.

Unsettled Issues

Despite German signals of increased attention to the Pacific Island states in 2022, below the surface, there is actually more uncertainty about Berlin's approach than policy moves may suggest. For now, the special envoy to the Pacific Islands is only a one-year appointment,

with the task of traveling around the region to identify issues where Germany could step up its engagement in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it remains to be seen how Berlin will contribute to the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, which is conceptualized as an inclusive and informal cooperation mechanism without particular obligations for members and thus low barriers for participation.

The key issue yet to be settled is the scope and ambition of Germany's engagement with the Pacific Islands. So far, Berlin has not committed any additional financial resources for cooperation, although deliberations on this issue are being held behind closed doors. To some extent, Germany may simply relabel existing policy engagements under its new policy focus. However, more resources seem to be in the cards, at least for certain projects. For example, the possibility of opening an embassy in Fiji is an idea floating around in the political establishment. Germany is also likely to push for a project focusing on the Pacific Islands in the context of Global Gateway, the EU's global infrastructure initiative, although no specific ideas have emerged yet.

In the eyes of Pacific Island states, Germany probably has more credibility as a partner in climate issues than other key regional actors like the US, China or Australia, given that Berlin has pursued a comparatively more ambitious climate policy for years. Going forward, the Federal Republic can use this as an advantage and offer expertise in this area, thereby making visible contributions to the region. As it steps up its engagement, Germany's willingness – as asserted by Foreign Minister Baerbock – to support the advancement of international laws and regulatory frameworks will thus be tested.

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 4. Joint Statement on Partners in the Blue Pacific Foreign Ministers Meeting, September 22, 2022, www.state.gov.
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7. I would like to thank Dr. Roland Seib for pointing this out to me as well as for generally sharing his expertise on the region and German involvement therein.
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 13. *Ibid.*