

REALIZING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY POTENTIAL FOR PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES: THE CASE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

By Miles McKenna

If this is truly the Pacific Century and not simply the Asian Century, the conceptual dimensions of the Asia-Pacific ought to include the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). While these relatively small, isolated communities lack the financial resources to play on the international political stage, their national interests are no less vital to their citizens. Their challenges are no less real. How then can they ensure that the Pacific Century includes the Pacific Islands?

Part of this effort will require much greater engagement with the international community. Essentially, this means a more effective strategy in allocating resources and targeting partnerships that help inform and influence global public opinion. PICs need public diplomacy strategies. They need to build alliances that are mutually beneficial, and show the world what is to gain by recognizing their contributions. With global powers repositioning and reinvesting in the Pacific, opportunities abound.

A Pacific Scope

The notion of a Pacific Century has thus far focused almost exclusively on East Asian economic development, maritime trade, and increased securitization in Australasia.^[1] What it has not focused on are the asymmetries of power within the broader Asia-Pacific. A political power vacuum was created as the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Pacific Commonwealth Countries slowly receded from the region in the 1990s.^[2] With Australia primarily focusing on security in only a few of its larger neighboring states,^[3] the vacuum has quickly and quietly been filled by the Chinese.^[4] But while the Chinese have increased their efforts in regional development and economic integration, the national interests of PICs still remain largely subservient to the broader geopolitical interests of Western and now East Asian powers. It is no wonder that PIC diplomats sometimes see China and ANZUS as “two sides of the same coin.”^[5]

The problem is that PIC national interests are not al-

ways the same as their development partners'.^[6] While major powers focus on issues like free trade, maritime security, and terrorism, the national interests of PICs are much more focused on human security, food security, and climate change.^[7] The reality of the matter is that PICs do not have the economic clout or the military might to influence major regional organizations like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). What are their alternatives?

Public Diplomacy

To truly have a say in the Pacific Century, stronger public diplomacy must become the cornerstone of PICs' engagement with foreign powers and their publics. Traditional diplomacy will not suffice. With minimum human, technical, and financial resources, PICs simply lack the capacity to globally promote themselves by establishing diplomatic missions. Papua New Guinea and Fiji have established 16 missions each, but they are the exception. Tuvalu and Tonga have four. Kiribati has one.^[8] And for most PICs, this is more the rule: It is unrealistic to expect a minimal diplomatic corps to achieve major gains abroad.

Without direct representation, the majority of PICs rely on their United Nations mission websites as their primary point of interaction. Yet these sites are often lacking in content, out of date, and full of broken links. As the complexity of global interaction evolves with technological advances, it places PICs at a disadvantage. As Kiribati's Honorary Consul to the United Kingdom, Michael Ravell Walsh, said recently, “covering the angles is a recurring problem if you are a micro-state, purely because of lack of resources and intelligence bandwidth.”^[9] The question then becomes how best to invest PICs' finite capacities toward the most efficient returns. Amplifying this bandwidth—advancing public diplomacy—will require strategic targeting of opportunities and partnerships with regional bodies.

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) has become the primary regional vehicle for strategic development of late. Yet this is problematic in its own right. Heavily influenced

by Australia, many PICs remain skeptical of the PIF's ability or interest in building a broader Pacific brand. So where else could PICs provide value to a major political organization? The Commonwealth is one possible answer. As it repositions itself in the Pacific, partnering with PICs on international issues could lend needed legitimacy to the Commonwealth as a geopolitical player and protector of its most vulnerable members.

The Commonwealth

The Commonwealth has been pledging increased commitment to the Pacific for years now.^[10] Back in 2010, at the 41st PIF Leaders Meeting in Port Vila, Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma insisted, "small states' concerns and needs are the central, powerful heart of the Commonwealth Secretariat's work."^[11] Following his visit to Kiribati last December, Sharma again outlined the Commonwealth's "agenda of reform and renewal," and recognized that it holds "a special responsibility in advocacy in respect of the needs of small and vulnerable states, and in protecting and advancing their interests."^[12] This renewed advocacy role could be pivotal in terms of potential for PICs' public diplomacy. "The Commonwealth is redefining itself and its relevance now," according to Papua New Guinean High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Winnie Kiap. "It could become the best advocate for developing member states including the Pacific countries both in the near-term and in the future."^[13]

Still, it is questionable whether the Commonwealth truly sees itself serving this function. It has certainly taken many steps in that direction, including the creation of the Commonwealth Small States Office in Geneva in January 2011. Based in one of the most influential hubs of international development and governance, the offices provide subsidized space for diplomatic missions and delegates from small member states. Tenants currently include the Maldives, Solomon Island and the PIF Secretariat, with others set to move in in the future.^[14]

Perhaps more importantly, the Commonwealth has also been partnering with PICs in hosting alternative public events. For example, a Pacific Island Night was recently organized by the Commonwealth Secretariat and held at its headquarters in London. The event featured Pacific Island food, dancing, and a fashion show put on by Pacific

Islander designers and featuring Pacific Islander models.^[15]

Events like these provide tremendous value to PICs. Presenting Pacific culture to international audiences creates new diplomatic space. Eddie Walsh, President of the Pacific Islands Society, provided the closing address, noting: "It is generally not a lack of interest in the region that is the biggest hurdle for the Pacific Island Countries; instead, it is a lack of familiarization. Through cultural relations, Pacific Island Countries can bridge the geographic divide that separates Pacific Islanders and Europeans and remind the latter of the enduring importance of the Pacific."^[16]

The Commonwealth thus helps PICs gain access to foreign publics in unique ways beyond what they might be able to achieve through traditional diplomatic missions and economic organizations. They create awareness, build relationships, and attract interest. Partnership in promoting cultural events and exchanges should be a primary tool of PICs' public diplomacy. But they ought to be implemented with strategic objectives in place.

In the case of the Pacific Islands Night, that wasn't the case and arguably not the intent. Despite hosting over 150 prominent members of the Commonwealth Secretariat, London-based High Commission staff, and the broader UK-based Pacific Island community, there was no promotion of the event beyond a Facebook page. It wasn't covered as news on

the Commonwealth website or listed in its events calendar. This highlights unrealized potential in these types of partnerships and events. While the Commonwealth can be an invaluable partner in PICs' public diplomacy, a more comprehensive strategy must be envisioned and enacted to ensure this potential is fully realized.

WHILE THE COMMONWEALTH CAN BE AN INVALUABLE PARTNER IN PICs' PUBLIC DIPLOMACY, A MORE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY MUST BE ENVISIONED AND ENACTED TO ENSURE THIS POTENTIAL IS FULLY REALIZED.

Outlook For The Future

The potential is here. The organizations and institutions are in place. But is the strategic vision? PICs already recognize the need to pool resources and build broader partnerships, but they lack a coordinated and comprehensive public diplomacy strategy that focuses on these types of achievable alternatives to traditional diplomatic efforts. If they cannot provide these themselves, they will seek out partners who can. The question then becomes who these

partners will be. Will it be the PIF and Australia? Will it be the Melanesian Spearhead group led by Fiji? Will it be another former colonial power like the French government? Or will it be something completely new, involving new actors like China? The Commonwealth is uniquely positioned to play this role, but it remains to be seen if this partnership will play out. In the end, if PICs are to join the Pacific Century on a more equal footing, they'll need a successful public diplomacy strategy in place. Without one, these small island states are just stepping stones as the world's superpowers hopscotch through the Pacific. 

References and Notes

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