

# The challenges and opportunities for the pacific islands politics essay



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When hearing the word “ Pacific Islands” our minds wander off and mirror images of swaying palms, idyllic beaches, tranquil waters, cheap holidays and smiling locals. Beyond these characterisations, the Pacific island region is also known for its immense complexity and intriguing diversity. This is partly symbolised by the area’s landmass fragmentation into thousands of scattered islands spread over the South Pacific. In line with this, my essay assesses some challenges to and some opportunities for the Pacific Island states since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prior to this assessment, a regional profile is presented. Secondly, there is a brief explanation of the Pre- and Post-Cold War Pacific Island history. Thereafter, this essay addresses its core issues through the identification and assessment of some relevant Post-Cold War challenges to and a number of opportunities for the Pacific island region. To conclude I reiterate the essay’s major points of analysis.

## **Pacific Island states in the post-Cold War World**

### **Regional Profile**

The Pacific Island region, which consists of 14 Island states and 21 political entities, is unique in many ways. Firstly, the South Pacific, which stretches from Australia and Papua New Guinea in the West to South America in the East, makes up one third of the earth. Simultaneously, this massive area is only home to 0. 5% of the world population. Secondly, the region shows its uniqueness in a political sense through its distinctive cultures which gravely impact national and regional Pacific politics. This cultural diversity is reflected in the region’s 3 main cultural groups: Melanesia in the West, Americanised Micronesia in the North and Polynesia in the South and East.

Finally, according to Graham this aid dependent region, is exclusive and unseen due to its vast distance from global metropolitan centres, fragile ecosystems, limited resource base and the cultural clash between traditional lifestyles and the individualistic orientation of cash economies.

## **The Pacific Islands in the pre and post-Cold War era**

### Pre-Cold War era

In the early twentieth century, the Pacific Island region entered a new era after its colonisation by the Western Powers. Over the next 50 years, the region, which was subjected to various territorial power shifts and the Japanese Invasion during World War II, remained under control of the Western nations. These latter established the South Pacific Commission, an advisory body on economic and social matters and more importantly a first form of regional cooperation, in 1947. Despite their decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s, the newly emerged fully independent or self-governing island nations, maintained close connections due to a lack of economic self-sufficiency with their former Western colonisers, in particular Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

In the early 1970s, the regional cooperation was further expanded through the establishment of the South Pacific Forum, a 16-member consisting advisory body on political matters. In the same decade and basically throughout the Cold War the aforementioned 3 regional powers used a strategic denial tactic against growing Chinese and Russian regional interests. While those three external regional powers were able to rebuff Soviet and Chinese overtures as well as control the region through the

provision of development and financial aid assistance in the 1970s, the Pacific Island nations became more unsettled as a myriad of conflicts emerged in the following decade. Hence, the volatile 1980s, which resulted in increased domestic and regional political instability, were characterised by a series of illustrious events: military coups in Fiji, New Caledonian violence, temporary cession of the NZ-US ANZUS relationship, lawlessness in Papua New Guinea, a civil war on Bougainville and so forth.

### Post-Cold War era

Since the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the superpower rivalry by around 1990, the Pacific Island region has been confronted with numerous changes. For instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in an increasingly multi polar world and made international and regional organisations more influential. Furthermore, the economy started to play a pivotal role in international affairs. Contrastingly, the strategic value of the region for superpowers such as the US and the UK dwindled at first.

However, after a growing Chinese interest, in particular the United States reviewed its regional strategy and policies. Some of these changes also created tensions and fuelled political instability at times. Corollary, the end of the Cold War also gravely affected the interests of the ANZAC countries. Due to the global emphasis on economic rationalism, the region's largest aid donors were pressured to lessen their unilateral involvement. After signing a number of agreements in the beginning of the new millennium, the Pacific Island forum leaders implemented The Pacific Plan for strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration in 2005. Overall, these numerous

changes, which not only had a great impact on the region, have resulted in a series of challenges and opportunities for the Pacific Island nations.

## **Challenges**

### Environmental

One of the key challenges for the Pacific Island environment is the issue of Climate Change. In an era characterised by increasing sea levels and the warming of the globe, the world was forced to commit itself to sustainable development. In response to the looming scenarios and dire implications of this phenomenon, international and regional organisations have prioritised the Pacific Island situation due to its above average rising sea levels. This latter has placed more stress on systems already under a lot of pressure. For instance, as a result of global warming, in the short term, the Pacific islands could become prone to devastating storms. This could then lead to the contamination of the region's drinking water by sea water and ultimately to the inundation of many Pacific Island entities. Being fully aware of this, the South Pacific Forum has lobbied to raise international awareness and has aimed for the implementation of a framework convention on climate change. Unfortunately, at present the involved small island states have yet to reach a consensus due to a negative cost-benefit analysis. However, unless a large-scale cooperation is established, the further existence of many low-lying islands will indeed be at stake.

Another important environmental and economic issue concerns the resource management of Fisheries. In particular the Pacific Island tuna fishery, one of the world's largest, is of vast importance to the region. Despite the region

having a rich and extensive marine life, its lack of funds to develop and protect its 200 mile exclusive economic zones (EEZ) has created a major regional challenge. While having ensured the property rights over its marine resources, due to poor management and lacking funds, the island nations only receive a small proportion of the tuna fishery revenue. Moreover, tuna stocks face depletion due to unregulated fishing and open access. This results from the fact that the commercial fishing industry in the region is in hands of transnational companies and foreign fishing fleets. Therefore, to maintain this major source of income for future generations, it will be vital to safeguard a fairer distribution of the tuna fishery benefits and to prevent the depletion of its marine resources.

Some of the other important regional environmental challenges are coastal area management, forestry, biodiversity, unregulated mining and domestic waste and problems of sanitation and water pollution.

### Political

One of the main political challenges is to establish good governance to eliminate or at least minimise internal and external conflicts. Unfortunately, due to its late decolonisation from the Western Powers and its current heavy dependency on foreign aid the regional island states lack political and constitutional tradition. As a result, the Pacific Island region has an abundance of young island states facing internal instability. Furthermore, given the withdrawal of most Great powers from the region, the island states face a tremendous task of dealing with plentiful political challenges: high

crime rates, numerous ethnic conflicts, corruption, drug trafficking, border disputes and so forth.

### Physical/Economic

The Pacific Island region has a relatively weak economy. It is generally believed that the area's geographic remoteness, small size and small population base are the main reasons for this feat. Furthermore, its poor transport and communication links, heavy dependence on foreign states and limited resources have further affected the region's low economic growth. This latter has a clear impact on the region's low levels of employment which has led to poverty, social instability and crime. Furthermore, the employment challenge faced by the region is massive due to the rapid population growth in Micronesia and Melanesia. In order to overturn this doom spiral, higher economic growth will need to be created by adequate government spending on healthcare, urban infrastructure, waste management and environmental adaptation systems.

### **Opportunities**

While the region faces a high number of challenges, one can be optimistic as there are definitely some growth opportunities for the region.

One of these is the effect current Chinese investment has on the Pacific Island economy. Ever since the late 1990s China's influence in the South Pacific has grown rapidly. Regardless what China's motivations are, from the Pacific Island nations' point of view any financial assistance can be an opportunity for the region. At present, China has already offered high amounts of financial and development assistance to enhance trade, <https://assignbuster.com/the-challenges-and-opportunities-for-the-pacific-islands-politics-essay/>

improving local infrastructure, develop natural resources such as mining and petroleum and so forth.

Another regional opportunity for growth lies in the region's tourism industry. Despite its high potential, the region's weak infrastructure, costly transportation, social and political instability, high crime rates and disease risks have slowed down tourism growth. To overcome these obstacles and truly capitalise on this massive opportunity, local governments and regional mechanisms need to address these above mentioned external constraints, develop national tourism policies in terms of its environmental impact, invest in tourism-related training to boost employment and improve marketing and data.

Politically, establishing effective political leadership resulting in sustained growth is considered as a regional opportunity. This latter can only be accomplished through reforms. For instance, if one can strengthen the electoral systems and parliaments and involve the civil society in politics it will have a hugely positive effect on the government performance which will reverse the current doom spiral by minimising the numerous challenges the region is currently facing.

In conclusion, it is evident from the above analysis of the Pacific Island region that due to slow growth various challenges are looming for the South Pacific nations. While there are a multitude of opportunities and despite foreign financial and developmental aid, without rapid economic growth the island nations will be unable to meet the various regional economic/physical, political and environmental challenges. Besides creating economic growth, it



will be vital to manage its resources such as fishery, forestry, mining and tourism. In order to do so, vast and dramatic changes in political governance will be required. It remains to be seen though whether a combination of regional cooperation and local political stability through good governance will result into a major turning point in the Pacific Island history.