



Opinion Piece - 21 March 2018

Pacific Reset: A new New Zealand foreign policy direction in the Pacific?

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Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of being part of the new coalition government Pacific 2018 delegation that visited four Pacific Island Countries – Samoa, Niue, Tonga and Cook Islands. The mission was led by the Rt Hon Prime Minister Jacinda Arden and Deputy Prime Minister Rt Hon Winston Peters, supported by Government Ministers, Opposition Members of Parliament, Business and Community Leaders, and the media. It was the first official visit to the region by the new coalition government since it took office in October 2017.

Pacific reset

As a prelude to the visit, the Rt Hon Winston Peters' speech to the Lowly Institute, Sydney, Australia, **'Shifting the dial,' Eyes Wide Open, Pacific Reset**, on 1 March 2018 set the stage for visit, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/shifting-dial>:

NZ's coalition government was formed with the intention of leading change rather than managing a modified status quo.

From domestic policy through to foreign policy, the coalition [government] intends to shift the dial. This energy and desire for action also informs a reset of New Zealand's foreign policy direction in the Pacific.

He reaffirmed New Zealand place and standing in the region.

New Zealand is a Pacific country, linked by history, culture politics and demographics. One in five New Zealanders – approximately one million people – now have Maori or Pasifika heritage, and this demographic trend is growing.

The Pacific reset policy agenda is premised on five principles to steer the government's future Pacific diplomacy:

1. To demonstrate a depth of understanding of the Pacific shaped by academic, community, civil society, and private sector expertise that exists in NZ;
2. To exhibit friendship, including honesty, empathy, trust and respect. This means staying in frequent touch at a political level and having frank and open conversations when necessary;

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3. To strive for solutions of mutual benefit when developing domestic and foreign policy with impacts on the Pacific. For example, pension portability, criminal deportations, climate change, labour mobility and health and education policy;
4. To achieve collective ambition with Pacific partners and external actors on a shared understanding of what Pacific Island Countries and NZ are trying to achieve together;
5. To seek sustainability by focusing on the region's long-term goals, to play NZ's part in promoting greater autonomy and resilience among NZ Pacific friends through improved economic and social achievement.

Pacific reset visit 2018

So how did this 'reset grand plan' play out during the Pacific visit? It is difficult to measure.

In Samoa, our first stop, the Honourable Prime Minister Tuilaepa and his government laid out the red carpet and guard of honour for the New Zealand PM, followed by person-to-person talanoa (dialogue), no doubt about how the new NZ foreign policy direction could be an integral part of NZ-Samoa future relations. Although I was not part of the official dialogue, from what I gather, the relationship between the two countries is on solid ground, guided by long and close historic relations, and the Friendship Treaty. In reality, the Pacific reset five principles are indeed the cornerstone of the Friendship Treaty. Thus, the new Pacific reset direction needs to spell out in detail how it could enhance and strengthen future relations between the two countries. Immigration and customary lands were contentious issues. Granting permanent residence visas for seasonal workers was apparently put on the table by the Samoan government, but received a "cool" reception from their NZ counterparts. The heated debate amongst Samoans about the Lands Titles Registration Act (L.T.R.A) 2008 was not lost on the Deputy PM Winston Peters (with his eyes wide open). Critics of the Government are concerned the Act could alienate customary land.

In my country, you're seen dramatic transfer of land and houses to foreign investors.²

It has driven the price up so bad that people are now buying in Auckland houses that are 12 times their annual income.

He re-iterated his government position on foreign investments – that of a more protectionist stance when it comes to foreign investment in NZ.

Next stop was Niue for a day. This was truly NZ Incorporated territory. The whole of Niue's police force welcomed us. Niueans claimed Niue is the adopted home of the Prime Minister and her family. Ross Arden, the PM's father, is the current NZ High Commission in Niue, therefore, the visit was billed as a home coming. A moving daughter-father warmth and affection was on display upon arrival.

² Samoa Observer newspaper:

http://www.samoobserver.ws/en/09_03_2018/local/30900/%E2%80%98They%E2%80%99re-not-making-any-more-land%E2%80%99-deputy-PM-Vaovasa-warns.ht, download, 19March 2018, 10.38am, Wellington Local Time.

Tonga was next on the itinerary. Upon touch down, the atmosphere was tense. The Tongan PM was on health leave, a curfew had been implemented in downtown Nukualofa, and the impacts of tropical cyclone Gita were visible everywhere. UN agencies, Government agencies, NGOs, aid agencies and local community machinery in full swing helping with the relief efforts to rebuild affected communities. I have witnessed and experienced similar efforts in Samoa (during September 29, 2009 tsunami) and what was obvious was the realisation that the disaster relief space today is highly contested compared to the past. Numerous players have entered the space that was for only a couple of decades ago predominantly occupied by NZ, Australia, France, USA and UK. This fact demonstrates why the Pacific Reset is needed.

The final stop was Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Like Samoa, Niue and Tonga, the Cook Islands government and people rolled out the 'green' carpet for the PM and her delegation. It began with an elaborate welcome at the marae, followed by the opening of new school buildings funded by NZ (initiated by the former National Government). Our final night at Rarotonga was the highlight of the visit.

Where to next?

It is clear the Pacific reset policy agenda developed by the new coalition government is bold, transformative, extremely ambitious, and innovative. I am impressed and supportive. The five set of principles to steer the refreshed NZ Pacific diplomacy addresses the reality of our relations with our Pacific whanau today. I wholeheartedly endorse Hon Peters' closing remarks to the Lowry Institute:

In navigating a more complex strategic environment, New Zealand's view is that we must be respectful of Pacific island countries' clear wish to manage their own international relations while at the same time retain New Zealand's tradition emphasis on human rights, the rule of law, transparency, good governance and the promotion of democracy.

Our wish is that accountability across the Pacific embodies these tenets because we know that leadership is good government, and what we need is more good political leadership to lift performance across the region.

The fact remains - Pacific Islands will continue to face multiple challenges, which in some cases they are not able to address on their own. This is where New Zealand can lend a helping hand, as we have always done in the past.

Building resilient development in the face of change – whether it be social, economic, political or climatic – requires good leadership and neighbours. We owe it to our Pacific neighbours to do our part. The Pacific regional reset agenda needs to be further refined and defined: What does it mean for NZ? Why are we doing it now? How can we make it work? Who's who in this grand plan?

I urge the government to set up a Pacific Region Reset (PR2) Commission tasked with further developing the PR2 initiative.