



The 'Tilt' and the 'Pacific Uplift' in 'Global Britain's' ties with the Pacific Islands

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Abstract

Following the 2016 vote to leave the European Union, the British government sought to construct the UK as “Global Britain” to reinvigorate its foreign policy. Subsequently, in 2019, the UK government announced a “Pacific Uplift” to facilitate greater engagement with the Pacific Island States. Alongside Australia’s “Pacific Step Up” and New Zealand’s “Pacific Reset”, this engagement is part of a wider shift in foreign relations as Western powers seek to counter perceived Chinese influence in the region. Within this article, I consider the changing relationship between the UK and the Pacific Island States. I argue that the UK’s “Pacific Uplift” was shaped by colonial legacies despite the absence of discussion of them. I contend that the UK’s re-engagement with Pacific Islanders is influenced by the announcement of the Australian-UK-US (AUKUS) security alliance and the UK’s wider military presence continues to be framed by colonial legacies. Finally, I argue that climate-ocean governance has been utilised by the UK to leverage influence as a partner rather than a former colonial power. I advocate for greater scrutiny of the UK’s changing relationship with Pacific Island States.

Abbreviations

AUKUS	Australia-UK-US
CCOA	Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance
COP	Conference of the Parties
CPTTT	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific
EU	European Union
HMS	His Majesty’s Ship
IRIS	Infrastructure for Resilient Island States
NZ	New Zealand
PIF	Pacific Island Forum

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PIS	Pacific Island States
PNG	Papua New Guinea
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

Introduction

On June 23, 2016, the UK voted in a referendum on its membership of the European Union (EU), with 51.9% of votes cast in favour of leaving. The UK had been a member of the EU, and its predecessor the European Communities, since 1973. Thus, its exit led to considerable debate and contestation among politicians, diplomats, and commentators about what role the UK could, and should, play internationally in the twenty-first century. “Global Britain” was first used in October 2016 by then Prime Minister Theresa May. Subsequently, it has been promoted by the British government as a framework for the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy—although the term has been used fluidly (Turner, 2019) and has declined in use (Wilkins 2023). This reimagining of Britain’s role across the globe has materialised in particular spaces with the UK announcing in 2019 a “Pacific Uplift” to strengthen relations with Pacific Island States (PIS). This consisted of establishing three new diplomatic posts, in Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu—which alongside existing posts would mean that the UK had the greatest diplomatic coverage across the PIS of any European country (Dayant 2020). Indeed, there has been a degree of “islandness” within “Global Britain” more broadly with seven of the nine new diplomatic posts announced in 2018 in island states (Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2018). Within the “Pacific Uplift” component of “Global Britain”, there has been a focus on trade, security issues, and environmental issues—with the Commonwealth playing a key role in facilitating this interaction (Dayant 2020).

More broadly in the 2021 Integrated Review, the UK announced a wider tilt towards the Indo-Pacific which was intended to alter the dynamics of international politics and counter a perceived threat from the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China) (Nilsson-Wright 2023). Part of this was the UK seeking membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (Wilkins 2023) which it joined in March 2023 (Nilsson-Wright 2023). There have also been several prominent visits to PIS by British politicians with COP26 President Alok Sharma visiting Fiji in July 2022, Minister of Asia and the Middle East Amanda Milling visiting Vanuatu in August 2022, and Foreign Secretary James Cleverly visiting Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Samoa in April 2023 (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office 2022; 2023). Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh refined the UK’s approach towards the Indo-Pacific—by “setting out the nature of the Chinese challenge to UK interests” (p.85) and emphasising NATO’s significance and the need to restore Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Nilsson-Wright 2023). The Indo-Pacific “tilt” is now seen as completed by the British government with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak writing in the foreword “I am proud that

the UK has delivered the ambition we set for the Indo-Pacific tilt" (HM Government 2023).

The "Pacific Uplift" was targeted at the PIS, but this grouping is nebulous to define, with various assemblages of states and territories included and excluded from different organisations and imaginaries (Wallis et al. 2022a). Within the 2021 Integrated Review, the UK government set out how the "UK will deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific... establishing a greater and more persistent presence than any other European country" (HM Government, p.62) focusing on the importance of the region for the UK's economy, global security, and international law. Like the "PIS", the "Indo-Pacific" is another construct with unclear boundaries (Sargeant 2020). Coined by the Australian government in 2013, the Indo-Pacific is a fluid term which connects the Indian and Pacific Oceans via Southeast Asia and is used by the USA, India, Japan, France, and Indonesia (Wallis and Batley 2020). However, the Indo-Pacific terminology has not been welcomed by China as it signals a reimagining of regional security apparatuses (Sargeant 2020).

Despite growing academic interest in Pacific diplomacy (e.g. Fry and Tarte 2015), UK foreign policy post-Brexit (e.g. Turner, 2019), and the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt (e.g. Breslin and Burnham 2023), there has been little consideration of the "Pacific Uplift" and the current and future British relationship with PIS. Indeed, within much analysis, the PIS are scantily considered—for instance Breslin and Burnham (2023) discuss the ten Commonwealth members "going east from India" (p.416) only citing Fiji and Papua New Guinea neglecting the other Commonwealth PIS—Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. This suggests a need to evaluate the UK's relationships with the PIS. In this article, I firstly consider the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands and range of powers (re)engaging with the region. Secondly, reflecting on how the limited engagement with the "Pacific Uplift" has largely been ahistorical, I argue the need to consider the UK's colonial history and postcolonial relations with PIS. Thirdly, I explore the broader geopolitics of this (re)engagement with the PIS, considering how the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) military alliance is affecting UK-PIS relations and the Royal Navy's wider role in this relationship. Fourthly, I consider how the UK has tried to use climate-ocean governance within its (re)engagement with the "Blue Pacific" to reposition itself as a partner to PIS rather than merely a formal colonial power.

Wider (re)engagement with the Pacific: China, "Old" friends and "new" powers

Post-Brexit foreign policy considerations are one reason behind the UK's (re) engagement with the PIS. However, the UK's renewed diplomatic and military presence in the Pacific is also responding to wider Western concerns about China's increasing regional influence. China provides large amounts of aid in the region, competes for recognition with the Republic of China (Taiwan), and is increasing its trade links (O'Keefe 2015). In 2017, Australia announced a "Pacific Step-Up" which sought to demarcate a new chapter in Australian-Pacific relations—partly to counter the perceived Chinese threat. Until 2018, Australia's official discourse

towards China was one of cautious optimism; this then gave way to a much more explicit focus on competition (Wallis et al. 2022b). Despite Australia's efforts, commentators have suggested that its Step-Up has had limited success with some PIS, like the Solomon Islands, increasing engagement with China (Layton 2022). Australia's approach to PIS is often counterproductive, with its domestic policies disconnected from state foreign policy goals and Australian politicians mismanaging the balance between their strategic concerns and the sovereignty of PIS. Australian foreign policy towards the PIS has long been critiqued as "instrumental in its focus – the islands have been seen as objects that can be shaped and used in various ways to enhance Australia's strategic position" (Sargeant 2020, p.28). Parallel to Australia, New Zealand announced the "Pacific Reset" in 2018—a combination of soft power and public diplomacy focusing on engagement, partnerships, and collaboration (Mark 2022). Powles and Powles (2018) contest that this is the most significant shift in New Zealand's policy towards the Pacific in decades, with the region being where New Zealand has the most influence and impact within its diplomacy, with a unique and substantial overlap between its domestic and foreign policy given its Pacific identity. The Pacific Reset addresses New Zealand's concerns about Chinese influence in the Pacific and China's role in the region (Iati 2021).

Beyond Australia and New Zealand, other Western states have also "reengaged" with PIS. In February 2022, the Biden administration announced its Indo-Pacific strategy with a focus on trade, investment, and deepening bilateral and multilateral partnerships (Hornung 2023). Within this, the PIS were specifically mentioned with the USA announcing \$810 million in expanded support and developing the first ever American strategy for the PIS (Hornung 2023). This has included the US Pacific Islands Partnerships which consists of recognising the Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign states, appointing the first ever US envoy to the PIF, and establishing embassies in the Solomon Islands and Tonga with planned embassies for Vanuatu and Kiribati (Hornung 2023; White House 2023). Vice President Kamala Harris appeared virtually at the Pacific Islands Forum in July 2022—although Biden's cancelled visit to the PIF in Papua New Guinea in 2023 was widely criticised and seen as a missed opportunity for US diplomacy (US Department of State 2022; Hornung 2023).

France has a complicated regional role as "it sees itself both as a leading European power in the Pacific, and as an internal Pacific Islands regional power, based on its sovereignty there" (Fisher 2020, p.37). Its colonial presence is evident through institutions like the PIF, with France both a dialogue member and represented through French Polynesia and New Caledonia's membership (Fisher 2020). Other states have also "engaged" or "re-engaged" with the PIS, with O'Keefe (2015, pp. 126) noting that "the most notable of the 'new friends' – Indonesia, India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey – are simply trying to increase their relative power and influence in the existing system (and in the Pacific)". For instance, Indonesia announced a "Pacific Elevation" in July 2019—although this is more focused on Jakarta's efforts to quieten discussions on West Papua among Pacific Islanders (Griffith Asia Institute 2020). However, these shifts are often incremental and may not be as transformative as geopolitical discourses suggest. Envall (2020, p.65) notes that although Japan has shifted from primarily a development focus to a "more

strategic set of policies towards the Pacific Islands” within its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy that “the importance of the Pacific Islands in Japan’s FOIP strategy should not be exaggerated”. Furthermore, Pacific Islanders are increasingly asserting their own cultural and geopolitical identity through motifs like the “Blue Pacific” and “large oceanic states” which prioritise their concerns like climate change and shape their regional identities (Wyth 2018).

China’s growing influence in PIS has been long discussed (e.g. McElroy and Bai 2008)—although some commentators and academics have criticised such work for overstating China’s role or merely reproducing Western narratives (Crocombe 2009). Moreover, Pacific Islanders are not “passive recipients but active agents exercising choice” (Rodd, 2016, p.95) as Rodd argues in relation to Fiji’s engagement with the Maritime Silk Road under the Belt and Road Initiative. Nevertheless, China’s increased regional presence has alarmed Western powers. The UK signed a new trilateral security pact with Australia and the USA in 2021—AUKUS (Australia-UK-US)—facilitating Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines. Perceived as an effort to counter China, the pact focuses on military capability as opposed to intelligence-sharing which is facilitated by the broader Five Eyes alliance (BBC 2021a). AUKUS’ announcement led to France recalling its ambassadors to Washington and Canberra and the cancelling of UK-France defence talks—despite assurances from then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson that France should not be concerned about the deal (BBC 2021b). Moreover, the UK was portrayed by international media and foreign politicians, as the lesser party in the agreement with France’s Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian calling the UK the “third wheel” (Caulcutt and Gallardo 2021). Whilst China is clearly the driving factor of AUKUS, this dismissal by Le Drian undermines the UK’s efforts to use AUKUS to project itself as a key player regionally and globally. Given the history of Pacific Islander anti-nuclear activism and nuclear testing’s legacies, the announcement of Australia procuring nuclear submarines was met with widespread condemnation among Pacific Islanders thus risking Britain’s diplomatic relations with PIS (Blades 2021). These new military alliances are seen as reproducing colonial understandings of the Pacific as a space to be controlled by powerful actors.

British colonial and postcolonial relations in the Pacific

Firstly, before considering the UK’s contemporary relationship with PIS, it is imperative to consider its colonial and postcolonial history in the region. This history shapes the UK’s contemporary diplomacy, Pacific Islanders’ attitudes towards the UK, and wider international relations in the Pacific and beyond. The British are frequently described as an unenthusiastic Pacific power with McIntyre (2012, p.136) stating the “British Government was only reluctantly involved in the [Gilbert and Ellice] Islands” with activities of Australian and New Zealand colonists leading to British control of Fiji in 1874. Similarly, Rodd (2016, p.506) argues that “even at the height of imperialism, the British had fairly little interest in the Pacific Islands” and that “in the Pacific, colonial rule was shorter, and comparatively less intrusive” (p.516). Pacific colonies are often described as neglected imperial

outposts—typified by minimal British intervention, under-staffed administrations, and small budgets (Rodd 2016). Despite this often-apatetic description of empire, Britain’s regional imperial legacy in is shaped by negative impacts on people, societies, and environments. British colonialism in the Pacific did not occur in a vacuum but was connected to global forms of oppression with wider justifications underpinning British colonial exploits. For instance, in 1787, there was a British mission to recover breadfruit from Tahiti which was intended to provide a food source for African slaves on British sugar plantations in the Caribbean (Matsuda, 2012). Originating with James Cook, one can trace how British colonial systems in the Pacific lead to the control and exploitation of its people and environments, whether that is the forced movement of labour and people, nuclear testing, or resource exploitation (Matsuda, 2012). Indeed, this contested, and troubled, history is epitomised by ongoing controversy over Cook’s legacy as his voyages are seen as epitomising colonialism and imperialism (McLaren and Clark 2020). This legacy has material and discursive impacts on Pacific Islanders today. Under the British Phosphate Commission, co-owned by Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, Banaba and Nauru were devastated by phosphate mining for Australian agriculture with ongoing detrimental impacts (Teaiwa 2015). British colonial legacies, like the forced movement of indentured Indian labours to Fiji, continue to be felt in politics across PIS (e.g. Sharma and Irvine 2016).

Across the Pacific, the British Empire controlled a range of territories, with each territory having a different relationship with London thus ensuring there was no uniform colonial experience (McIntyre 2014). Colonialism in the region was justified for several reasons including resource extraction, a fear of European expansion, and to deter blackbirding (McQuarrie 1994; 2000; Teaiwa 2015). Moreover, British imperial expansion into Pacific Islands was intertwined with the colonial ambitions of other territories like Australia. Morgan (2020, p.50) contends that “concerned about German and French designs in the region, Australian politicians implored British authorities to assume control of islands which subsequently became British New Guinea, the British Solomon Islands Protectorate and the New Hebrides (jointly administered with France)” thereby ensuring Britain was the dominant regional colonial power by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Whilst lacking a formal independence date, Australia and New Zealand were de facto sovereign by the early twentieth century. Independence for the PIS came much later. Following World War Two, Britain reclaimed Japanese-occupied islands and expanded its presences—for instance through the Colonial Development Welfare Grants and Land Commission in contemporary Tuvalu and Kiribati (Hughes 1992). However, this was short-lived with McIntyre (2014) noting the British adopted a position of accelerated decolonisation from 1975 with “hastily erected island governments” (p.259) left behind in newly independent states. Many PIS were among the last British colonies to receive independence with Vanuatu only achieving independence from the UK (and France) in 1980 (Lindstrom 2022). There has been a failure of British-derived institutions to be fully accepted in states like Fiji and the Solomon Islands as they remain shaped by the institutional and political legacies of colonisation (Rodd 2016). The contemporary maps of PIS can only be understood through British colonialism, like the

drawing and redrawing of colonial boundaries in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands (McIntyre 2014; McQuarrie 2000).

Postcolonial UK-PIS trade has been minimal. Pacific exports make up 0.03% of import volume in the UK, although the relationship is unequal in significance, with any change in demand having a greater impact for PIS (Dayant 2020). 6.4% of Fijian exports go to the UK, and on average, 6.14% of the Solomon Islands' exports are to the UK (Dayant 2020). After decolonisation, there was a period of British regional decline. This accelerated post-2000 with Britain retreating "from the southwest Pacific, handing bilateral political and economic dealings over to the European Union, Australia and New Zealand" (Lindstrom 2022, p.100). This has been acknowledged by British diplomats. Laura Clarke, the British High Commissioner to New Zealand, in a 2018 speech, argued "the UK has long been in and of the Pacific. But in the 2000s, we scaled down our presence. We remained present and engaged in Fiji, PNG and the Solomon Islands, and covered other Pacific countries from non-resident accreditations – as I currently cover Samoa. But we closed our High Commissions in Vanuatu and Tonga. And quite frankly we stepped back too much from our Pacific friends and partners". Clarke's statement that the UK "stepped back too much" from the PIS is indicative of wider discourses of UK withdrawal from the region and laments the UK's declining influence among its "friends and partners". Following Brexit, the various UK prime ministers have been forced to reconsider its wider diplomatic relations and seeking to create, and reinforce, relations worldwide to assert itself as a "global" player.

Global Britain, as a geopolitical narrative, has close parallels to and is shaped by the legacies and narratives of empire (Turner, 2019). To appreciate the ambition of Global Britain, one must have some pre-existing knowledge of past imperial success and acceptance of empire as a force for good. Similarly, British imperialism underpins, but is not explored, much of the "Pacific Uplift" rhetoric. Clarke described how the UK and PIS "have strong historical connections" and that this "was one of the far-flung corners of the British Empire and – whatever we may think of the Empire and its legacy, and that is surely a topic for another speech – the ties that are left are strong" (Clarke, 2019). Here, Clarke avoids the difficult topic of Britain's colonial past and instead focuses on contemporary relations. The Commonwealth has played a key role in the British government's reimagining of the UK's foreign relations. Of the 54 Commonwealth members, 11 are former British colonies in the Pacific. Although usually dismissed as a relatively minor geopolitical player (Craggs 2014), the Commonwealth has played an important role in framing Britain's efforts to reimagine its relationship with PIS in a way that alters and reinforces historic colonial relations. The UK is portrayed as a partner to PIS—although these ties are colonial legacies. All of three new diplomatic posts in the region, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, are in Commonwealth countries, and the UK has doubled its diplomatic staff in Fiji (Clarke, 2019). British cooperation with the Pacific Islands on environmental issues (discussed below) is often channelled through the Commonwealth. Beyond the Commonwealth, the UK has long been engaged with regional institutions, being a founding dialogue partner of the PIF in 1989 (Wallis et al. 2022a). This relationship is likely to become more significant with the forum identified as a key partner

organisation for the UK government and the UK increasing cooperation with Australia and New Zealand (HM Government 2021; RNZ 2019).

Whilst clearly significant, Brexit is not the only factor regarding the UK's "re-engagement" with the region. The UK's reengagement, such as reopening its High Commission in Vanuatu in 2019, is occurring partly due to concern about China's increasing regional influence (Lindstrom 2022). Consequently, the UK is also reconsidering its defence implications within the wider Indo-Pacific. However, "the Russian offensive in Ukraine has also revealed significant fault lines in the UK's tilt strategy" (Breslin and Burnham 2023) with a credibility gap in the UK's security commitments and ability to act unilaterally (Nilsson-Wright 2023) thus necessitating alliances.

Military engagements: AUKUS and HMS Spey

Militarily, the UK's renewed Indo-Pacific presence is most clearly manifest in AUKUS. Alongside the USA, the UK has announced a deal to facilitate Australia acquiring nuclear-powered submarines between 2023 and the mid-2050s (Doherty and Hurst 2023). Since its 2021 announcement, the UK, Australia, and the USA have expanded on AUKUS' details—with broader implications for the UK's regional role and perception. In March 2023, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak alongside US President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced the UK and Australia will build nuclear-powered submarines, and that the UK and the USA will increase their submarine visits to Australia (Brooke-Holland 2023). Drawing the UK into Pacific security, AUKUS is described by Wallis et al. (2022a) as an extra-regional security agenda. Most commentary has focused on Australia and the USA, with the UK viewed as the third, and minor, party. However, the UK may constitute the main beneficiary of AUKUS. Camroux (2021) highlights how most commentators have seen AUKUS as providing symbolic value for the UK post-Brexit, whether this is a revival of an imperial Anglosphere or a renaissance of Britain as a global player. The UK will have a permanent base for its nuclear-powered submarines in the region, facilitating its strategic goals as well as providing a major boost for Britain's arms industry.

Although AUKUS is seen by the British government as strengthening its relevance in the Indo-Pacific security apparatus, the alliance risks damaging British relations with PIS. After AUKUS' announcement, there was significant concern expressed by Pacific Island diplomats and politicians, given longstanding efforts for a nuclear-free Pacific (Wallis et al. 2022a). The spectre of nuclear testing by the Americans, French, and British in the region remains a sensitive geopolitical topic. Britain tested hydrogen and atomic bombs at Malden Island and Kiritimati as part of Operation Grapple as well as facilitating American testing on Kiritimati with the legacies of these tests still apparent (MacLellan 2017; Alexis-Martin 2019). Responding to AUKUS, i-Kiribati President Taneti Maamau, expressed frustration that he had not been consulted on the trilateral deal—emphasising "our people were victims of nuclear testing...we still have trauma" (Maamau, 2021 cited in Grant 2021). This is a viewpoint that the UK would rather remain unspoken. As argued

by Alexis-Martin et al. (2021, p.117) “the global and national policy response to the humanitarian and environmental legacies of UK and US nuclear weapons tests in Kiribati have been patchwork and inadequate at best” with AUKUS reinvigorating debates around Britain’s nuclear legacy. Similarly, Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare criticised the Australian government for its lack of consultation, and a communique from four former PIS leaders critiqued the high cost in light of the lack of climate action (Brennan 2023). Coloniality underpins these critiques, whether that is a perceived exclusion from decision-making processes, echoing colonial governance, or the nuclear aspect raising spectres of colonial nuclear testing and environmental degradation. However, other key regional actors, like Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, have been more positive towards AUKUS (Brennan 2023).

Beyond AUKUS, the UK has also strengthened its regional bilateral security ties with PIS. In 2022, the UK and Fiji signed a Memorandum of Understanding focusing on Fiji’s maritime borders (British High Commission Suva 2022a). There is a long history of Fijians serving in the British military, with Royal Navy crew attending medals ceremonies for Fijians who attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and the Britannia Royal Naval College (British High Commission Suva 2022b). Notably, HMS Spey has been at the forefront of efforts to reassert a British naval presence with PIS. Alongside HMS Tamar, HMS Spey was deployed in 2021 to the “Indo-Pacific Region” and will remain there for 5 years (Royal Navy 2021). This has been described as a short-term improvement to the British presence in the region, with Type 31 Frigates planned to be permanently deployed in the late 2020s or early 2030s (Vitor Tossini 2021). HMS Spey has no home base, instead traversing the Pacific with its Commanding Officer Lieutenant Commander Ben Evans stating, “we are going to places that the Royal Navy has not visited in a long time – that’s really exciting” with visits to Hawaii, French Polynesia, Pitcairn, Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, and Fiji (Evans, 2021 cited in Royal Navy 2021; British High Commission 2022b). In March 2022, HMS Spey was the first Royal Navy ship to visit Fiji since 1997 and in April 2022, the first to visit Vanuatu since 1978 (Madigibuli 2022; Ball 2022). Despite this interlude, the visit was framed by a narrative of return and continuity with British sailors visiting the Nakelo district in Fiji which was described by Lieutenant Commander Bridget Macnae as having “a strong link and historical ties with the Royal Navy who the villagers had supported about 100 years ago” (Macnae cited in Madigibuli 2022). Colonial and imperial nostalgia underpins much of the rhetoric around HMS Spey, even its appearance is described as having a “retro World War era ‘dazzle paint’” (Royal Navy 2021).

With PIS, the UK has reinforced discourses of partnership—promoting HMS Spey as serving a humanitarian role. Following the 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption and tsunami, HMS Spey delivered aid including bottled water, medical supplies, personal protective equipment, and sanitation products (British High Commission Suva 2022a; Ministry of Defence 2022). UK Armed Forces Minister James Heapey stated: “The UK is a long-standing partner of the Pacific Islands and having the ship deployed in the Indo-Pacific meant that we could be there for Tonga” (Heapey, 2022, cited in Ministry of Defence 2022). Here, Heapey stresses the longevity and reciprocity of the UK-PIS relations, neglecting the colonial history. This engagement

has also reinforced domestic narratives about British scientific and technical expertise post-Brexit and the reimagining of Britain's "global" role. For instance, the UK-controlled and developed uncrewed surface vessel *Maxlimer* mapped the caldera of Hunga-Tonga Hunga-Ha'apai (Ormiston 2022). HMS *Spey* is also portrayed as crucial to Britain's contribution to regional climate-ocean governance.

Climate-ocean governance: Britain's changing role in the Pacific

Within the 2021 Integrated Review, the UK government argues the Indo-Pacific tilt is significant as "in the decades to come it [the Indo-Pacific] will be the crucible for many of the most pressing global challenges – from climate and biodiversity to maritime security and geopolitical competition linked to rules and norms" (HM Government 2021, pp.66). Within the Refresh, "climate" remains prominent being mentioned 35 times (HM Government 2023). Britain's re-engagement with PIS has been framed by numerous aquatic and vertical metaphors, namely through the "Uplift", with such a move figuratively "lifting" relations with large oceanic states as these partners are threatened with environmental degradation through a shared focus on issues such as security. Morgan (2020, p.62) argues that "the UK has made clear that pursuing global climate action is a 'central plank' of its renewed engagement in the Pacific. British ambassadors in the region have joined island states to call for countries worldwide to 'follow through on their commitments under the Paris Agreement, particularly on cutting emissions'". The UK government has stated one of its Indo-Pacific priorities is "tackling climate change, using both adaptation and mitigation activity to support a transition to clean, resilient and sustainable growth in the Indo-Pacific through influence with major and growing emitters and the most vulnerable countries, linked directly to our wider COP26 strategy" (HM Government 2021, p.67). Not only does this approach to climate diplomacy align with PIS' priorities, but it also reinforces British efforts to engage in nation branding to construct a new post-Brexit identity. The UK has presented itself as a world leader on climate with COP26 providing the UK government with "a stage upon which to play out the role of an independent 'Global Britain', countering the loss of influence that most analysts predicted would follow British exit from the EU" (Vogler 2020, p.31). During COP26, "the media agenda for the first nine days was taken up almost entirely by a series of sectoral 'side agreements' carefully choreographed by the British presidency" (Jacobs 2022, pp.274). Alongside these "global" efforts, the UK has also increased support on environmental issues targeted at SIDS and specifically PIS.

At COP26, then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, alongside the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, announced the Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS) with the UK contributing £10 million for the fund alongside a £40 million overseas aid package for the "Small Island Developing States Capacity and Resilience" Programme (Island Innovation 2021). Contributing to the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway, IRIS is focused on improving infrastructure resilience, strengthening knowledge and partnerships, and promoting gender equality and disability inclusion (CDRI 2023). The UK has used its COP Presidency to emphasise its green credentials to PIS. On the 7th of July, Alok Sharma, the COP26

President, chaired an event entitled “UK/Pacific High Level Climate Dialogue” with a focus on building on Pacific-UK cooperation on climate to ensure “ambitious outcomes” at COP26 (Wilton Park 2021). Moreover, the UK has promoted its domestic legislation, like its net zero target, within its regional diplomacy to assert its position as a climate change “leader”. Climate’s centrality to the UK’s engagement with PIS is evidenced through its co-hosting of a Wilton Park Forum on Climate Change and Resilience in the Pacific with New Zealand (Clarke, 2019). Moreover, alongside these engagements, the UK has also provided climate finance, spending NZ \$88 million between 2016 and 2018 on Climate Finance in the Pacific and contributing £1.4 million to the Pacific Nationally Determined Contributions Hub (Clarke, 2019).

Environmental concerns have become intertwined with security issues through the UK’s bilateral diplomacy. For instance, the UK’s conflict, stability, and security fund is financing a £360,000 project to support Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu in undertaking training to submit extended continental shelf submissions under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (HM Government 2022). Indeed, the UK’s increased military presence in the region is carefully framed through an environmental lens. HMS Spey is described as the Royal Navy’s greenest ship, with emissions reduction technology reducing nitrogen oxide emissions from its diesel generators by about 90% giving the ship the ability to operate in emission-controlled areas (Madi-gibuli 2022; British High Commission 2022b; HMS Spey 2022b). Documented through public and digital diplomacy, HMS Spey’s crew have engaged in activities like “eco-hikes” and tree planting at Colo-I-Suva Forest Park and Village (Republic of Fiji Navy 2022). This integration of environmental and security issues is made explicit by the British High Commission arguing that HMS Spey “working alongside partners and allies the ship is helping tackle security challenges and support nations against the impacts of climate change” (British High Commission 2022b).

Britain’s imperial seafaring history has been selectively and partially invoked in the reimagining of the UK’s Pacific role, specifically regarding ocean governance. In 2023, Minister of the Indo-Pacific Anne Marie-Trevelyan sets out “as an island nation and global trading power, the UK is constantly focused on the seas and oceans” (Trevelyan, 2023). Clarke (2019) in her keynote speech on UK-Pacific relations argues “We are all seafaring nations, by and of the sea” emphasising how the UK jointly leading the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance (CCOA) with Vanuatu as part of the Commonwealth Blue Charter focusing on plastic waste. The Royal Navy has also been utilised to project the UK as an environmental actor in the region. HMS Spey has been involved in data collection and water sampling to protect marine life; supporting the UK Government Blue Belt Programme; countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing in Vanuatu; and patrolling Tonga’s Exclusive Economic Zone to deter illegal fishing (HMS Spey 2022a; 2022c; Blue Belt Programme 2022; Government of the Kingdom of Tonga 2022).

As the UK portrays itself as a “global” player in climate-ocean governance, the PIS have been championing their environmental concerns thus making the Pacific an important space for “Global Britain” to materialise. Pacific Islanders have been actively reimagining their region as the “Blue Pacific” of “large oceanic states” asserting agency over the region’s islands and oceans. Such geopolitical imaginaries draw on a postcolonial tradition of emphasising the connectivity of the ocean and

resisting colonial imaginaries (e.g. Hau'Ofa 1993). The “Blue Pacific” has focused on the role of islanders as stewards of the Pacific (Wallis and Batley 2020). This “Blue Pacific” offers an alternative representation to more common depictions of the PIS as remote and naturally at risk (Griswold 2021). Such representations were utilised to justify colonial rule, with tropical islands seen as exotic, primitive spaces in need of civilisation through colonial rule (Griswold 2021). Through focusing on climate-ocean governance, and with initiatives like the Commonwealth’s Blue Charter, the UK has an opportunity to engage with Pacific Islanders on their own terms and support geopolitical imaginaries, like the “Blue Pacific”, which place the environment at the centre of the Pacific-British relations. These seek to shift perceptions of the UK from postcolonial power to valued partner.

However, historical environmental degradation under British colonialism is absent from these discourses. This legacy is most evident in Banaba and Nauru’s devastated landscapes (Teaiwa 2015) but more broadly environmental degradation and governance were part of British imperial rule in the Pacific. Environmental pressures were used to justify population, like the Phoenix Island Settlement Scheme, when these relocations supported broader British geopolitical and economic goals (Weber 2016; Hughes 1992). Moreover, it remains to be seen how deep the UK’s contemporary environmental commitments are. Economic imperatives post-Brexit have taken precedence over environmental concerns; for instance, it was widely reported that UK ministers dropped climate change commitments to secure its Australian trade deal (BBC 2021c). Superficial engagement with climate action leads the UK vulnerable to being accused of greenwashing.

Shifting relations: the UK and PIS

The UK has a long, complex, and difficult history in the Pacific which continues to shape its contemporary relations. As argued by Breslin and Burnham (2023), the broader “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific, and the greater engagement with PIS specifically, has been largely a product of Brexit. Recent efforts to “reengage” with the PIS pay little attention to Britain’s colonial legacy, despite assumptions of empire in the promotion of particular narratives (Turner, 2019). This paper has outlined the importance of these colonial legacies in shaping how “Global Britain” is materialised in the Pacific. Grydehøj (2017, p.9) argues that “island studies frequently focuses on former colonies and/or islands that remain in colonial or neocolonial relationships with metropolitan powers. Matters are complicated by the fact that it is often scholars from the metropole in question who are most active in undertaking research on these islands. The desire to ‘study islands on their own terms’ risks allowing scholars to overlook the effects of colonialism”. To critique and understand the UK’s changing relationships with PIS, it is imperative to be attentive to these colonial legacies. The utilisation of the Commonwealth for climate-ocean initiatives illustrates how colonialism continues to shape British engagement. Indeed, the UK still retains one British Overseas Territory, Pitcairn, in the region, and the British Overseas Territories have featured heavily within imaginaries of “Global Britain”—particularly in relation to its role in climate-ocean governance. Britain’s colonial past shapes perceptions of its contemporary

environmental and military endeavours with PIS. Through environmental action, the UK is seeking to utilise soft power to construct a new role for itself.

I advocate for a more nuanced engagement to better understand the shifting regional geopolitics. Davis et al. (2020) challenge the notion of the PIS as being “caught” between China and the USA and its allies, arguing this fails to recognise how PIS simultaneously engage with multiple powers as they navigate foreign influences. Wallis et al. (2022a, pp.15) argue “security cooperation in the Pacific Islands is best characterized as a patchwork of bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral, formal and informal, agencies, arrangements, and agreements across local, national, regional, and international levels constituting a patchwork of cooperation”. In this context, climate change is increasingly an integral part of this regional patchwork—exemplified by the Boe Declaration. Through engaging with the PIS on climate-ocean governance, the UK has an opportunity to meaningfully cooperate with PIS, on their own terms. Chinese initiatives, (e.g. the Belt and Road) have been criticised for paying insufficient focus on climate change or the needs of small island states (Li et al. 2020), creating space for PIS cooperation with other actors like the UK. Environmental governance also provides the UK with an opportunity to distance itself from its colonial past. However, without sufficient domestic action to support the UK government’s discursive reimagining as an environmental leader, the UK risks replicating the mistakes of Morrison’s administration. Climate change could hamper relations rather than improving them. Emerging discussions on loss and damage, following the agreement at COP27, provide the UK with an opportunity to match its climate rhetoric with leadership on environmental issues to address the concerns of PIS.

Since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, there have been calls for the UK to refocus on its European presence (Dormen et al. 2022). The 2023 Refresh notes that although the UK will still prioritise the Indo-Pacific, the UK government has achieved its original goals and has a lesser presence in the region than other allies such as Japan and France (Brooke-Holland et al. 2023). The USA has been suggested as better placed to focus on the Indo-Pacific given initiatives like the US Pacific Islands Partnership (Nilsson-Wright 2023; Tossini 2021). Moreover, UK foreign policy post-Brexit has been unstable. Since the referendum, the UK has had four prime ministers and six foreign secretaries—with divergent views on Brexit and UK foreign policy. Given the UK’s domestic turbulence and other international priorities, it can only play a supporting role in the PIS region.

Beyond the PIS, the UK’s Pacific engagement through CPTTT will only have marginal economic gains but is still actively promoted by the UK government (Webb 2023). This illustrates the efforts that the UK government is undertaking to reinforce the globality of British trade and diplomacy. The UK is only one actor in an increasingly geopolitically complex region, with the UK having significantly less economic, diplomatic, and military influence than others. “Global Britain” is a largely ahistorical narrative—particularly in relation to the “Pacific Uplift”. Given domestic and international challenges, it remains to be seen whether the UK will sustain this renewed interest with PIS or whether it will just be a post-Brexit blip. It is imperative as academics we remain attentive to how colonial legacies shape British engagements in the region—especially as state actors seek to use environmental concerns as a less contentious space for collaboration and influence.

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