

The Melanesian Spearhead Group: reshaping migration in the western Pacific?

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A new Pacific regionalism

“ Unity must be achieved firstly at the subregional level before it can be achieved at the regional level. ... Once sub-regional groups are united and strong, regional partnership will be stable and have a firm foundation”

Lawson Samuel (a Ni-Vanuatu political analyst, 2013).



A significant political development

- **Between 19 and 21 June 2013 a Leaders' Summit of the independent states of Melanesia (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji) and the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) was held in New Caledonia.**
- **This was the 19th Summit since the Melanesian Spearhead Group emerged in the early 1980s and was formalised at a meeting in Port Vila of leaders of the independent states in March 1988.**
- **At the Noumea Summit the chairmanship of the MSG transferred to the FLNKS for the next two years.**



The Noumea Declaration

- The MSG Leaders' Summit's *Declaration* on 21 June 2013 renewed its long-standing commitment “to self-determination of the indigenous Kanak people of New Caledonia in accordance with the UN Charter and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights” (clause (i)).
- The Summit *Communique* on 20 June 2013 also endorsed that the MSG “fully supports the inalienable rights of the people of West Papua towards self-determination as provided for under the preamble of the MSG Constitution” (clause 21).
- The West Papua National Council for Liberation (WPNCL) was not admitted to full membership of the MSG at this stage.

Origins of MSG

- **1983 the Melanesian countries within the Pacific Forum form a group to foster discussion of issues of common interest, including the decolonisation of New Caledonia which was not seen to be given much priority by the Forum.**
- **On 14 March 1988, a year after the first Fiji military coup, the group met in Port Vila, Vanuatu and signed the “Agreed Principles of Co-operation amongst Independent States of Melanesia” with a view to promoting Melanesian identity and solidarity especially through trade and economic development.**

MSG in the 1990s

- **An initial trade agreement between PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu was signed in 1993. Fiji was subsequently added in 1998.**
- **In June 1996 the “Agreed Principles of Co-operation” were revisited at a meeting in the Trobriand Islands in PNG with the issue of decolonisation of New Caledonia high on the agenda following almost a decade of secessionist unrest between pro and anti-independence groups.**
- **On 5 May 1998 the FLNKS along with anti-independence groups in New Caledonia and the French Govt signed the Noumea Accord accepting there would be a 15 year transition towards greater autonomy and a referendum on independence after 2014.**

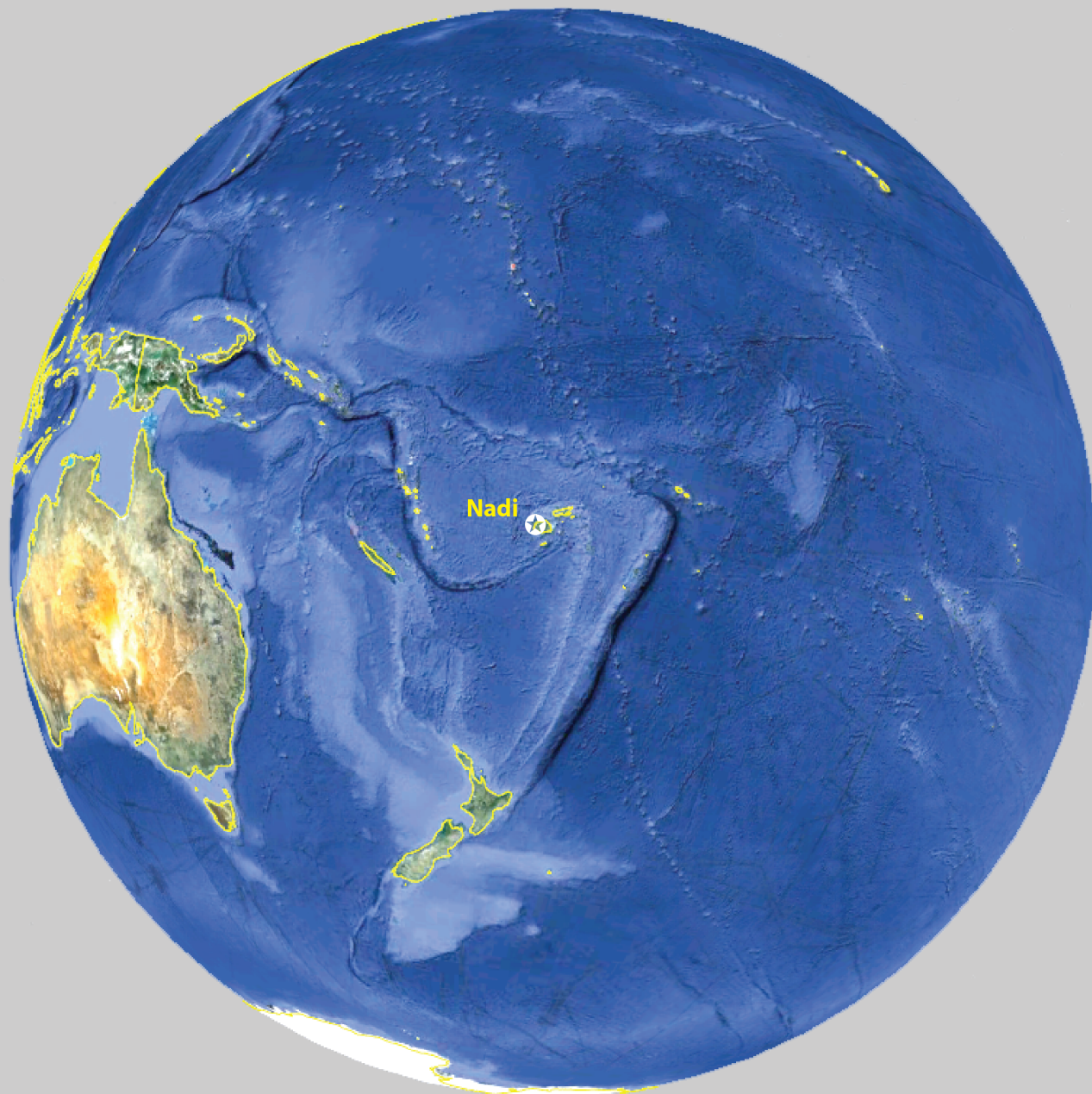


Challenges facing the MSG

- The Bougainville civil war, the ethnic tensions in Solomon Islands that eventually led to the Regional Assistance Mission led by Australia (RAMSI) and further coups in Fiji posed major challenges for the MSG's agenda of co-operation and collaboration around a shared vision for development in Melanesia.
- In March 2007 the MSG, including the FLNKS, signed an *Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group* as a formally constituted sub-regional organisation with a permanent secretariat, headed by a Director-General, located in Port Vila. A much more elaborate series of institutional arrangements were set in place to ensure regular, high-level consultation and the negotiation of agreements.

Attempts to isolate Fiji

- The expulsion of Fiji from the Pacific Forum in 2009 and the decision by the Forum to exclude Fiji from the PACER Plus negotiations on a free trade agreement between Forum countries and Australia and New Zealand was a critical turning point in strengthening the resolve by leaders in Melanesia to work together in a “Pacific way” to resolve disputes in the region without the participation of NZ and Australia.
- The subsequent expulsion of Fiji from the Commonwealth and from the Pacific arm of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States which negotiates Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU created further challenges for MSG members, especially when the Pacific Forum meeting was held in Vanuatu when it was chair of the MSG in 2010.



The MSG under Fiji's leadership

- In 2011 it was Fiji's turn to chair the MSG's Leaders' Summit and act as spokesperson for the Group's agenda. Fiji's Prime Minister, Commodore Bainimarama, made the most of this opportunity to get Fiji included again in sub-regional and regional development initiatives and consultations.
- In August 2011, just before the leaders of Pacific Forum countries met in Auckland, Bainimarama called the leaders to an "Engaging with the Pacific" meeting in Nadi – most of the MSG members plus several other Pacific leaders attended. This event signalled clearly to other Pacific states that the MSG was determined to play a major role in setting the agenda for debates about development in the region without the formal involvement of NZ and Australia.

The re-emergence of Fiji in Pacific fora

- **Following the Pacific Forum meeting in the Cook islands in September 2012 the leaders of 14 Pacific states moved to get Fiji re-admitted as a full member of PACP – the Pacific arm of the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Group of States.**
- **This was an historical move to bring Fiji back into meaningful engagement with regional issues despite being excluded from the Pacific Forum meetings and the PACER Plus negotiations.**
- **In October 2012 Fiji was chosen to chair the ACP's Ministerial Trade Committee and, in 2013, Fiji is chairing the G77 – the largest intergovernmental organisation of developing countries in the UN. Fiji has been firmly included again in regional and global fora.**

The MSG Skills Movement Scheme

- **While a key focus of the MSG since the 1980s has been a trade agreement amongst member countries, freeing up movement of skilled labour within Melanesia has also been on the agenda, especially during the two years Fiji's Prime Minister, was in the chair**
- **In March 2012 the MSG Summit approved the introduction of a labour mobility scheme allowing at least 400 people from each of the member countries to work in another MSG country. This agreement came into force in September 2012 and Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea are currently in the process of implementing the scheme**

Addressing unemployment and skill shortages in Melanesia

- The scheme was seen to be a model for temporary movement of people in the Melanesian region in that it would serve to assist address unemployment in Fiji while at the same time addressing skill shortages in other MSG countries.
- Fiji especially has a surplus of qualified tradespeople and professionals who could meet some of the demands for skilled and qualified workers in PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The MSG countries saw they could make better use of human resources within the region rather than outsourcing skills from other countries.

Skill shortage priorities, 2013

- **Fiji: nurses, doctors, surveyors, urban and regional planners, engineers, ship repairers, seafarers (3 yrs + 3)**
- **PNG: service and production managers, agriculture, fishing, mining, construction, hospitality managers, health and teaching professionals, marine biologists, environmental scientists, engineers and trademen (1 yr minimum, 3yrs extendable by employer)**
- **Solomons: engineers, financial professionals, architects, IT specialists, aviation, mining, hospitality and health professionals (3 yrs + 3)**
- **Vanuatu: health and teaching professionals, business, legal and administration professionals, science and engineering professionals (3yrs +3)**

An initial proposal

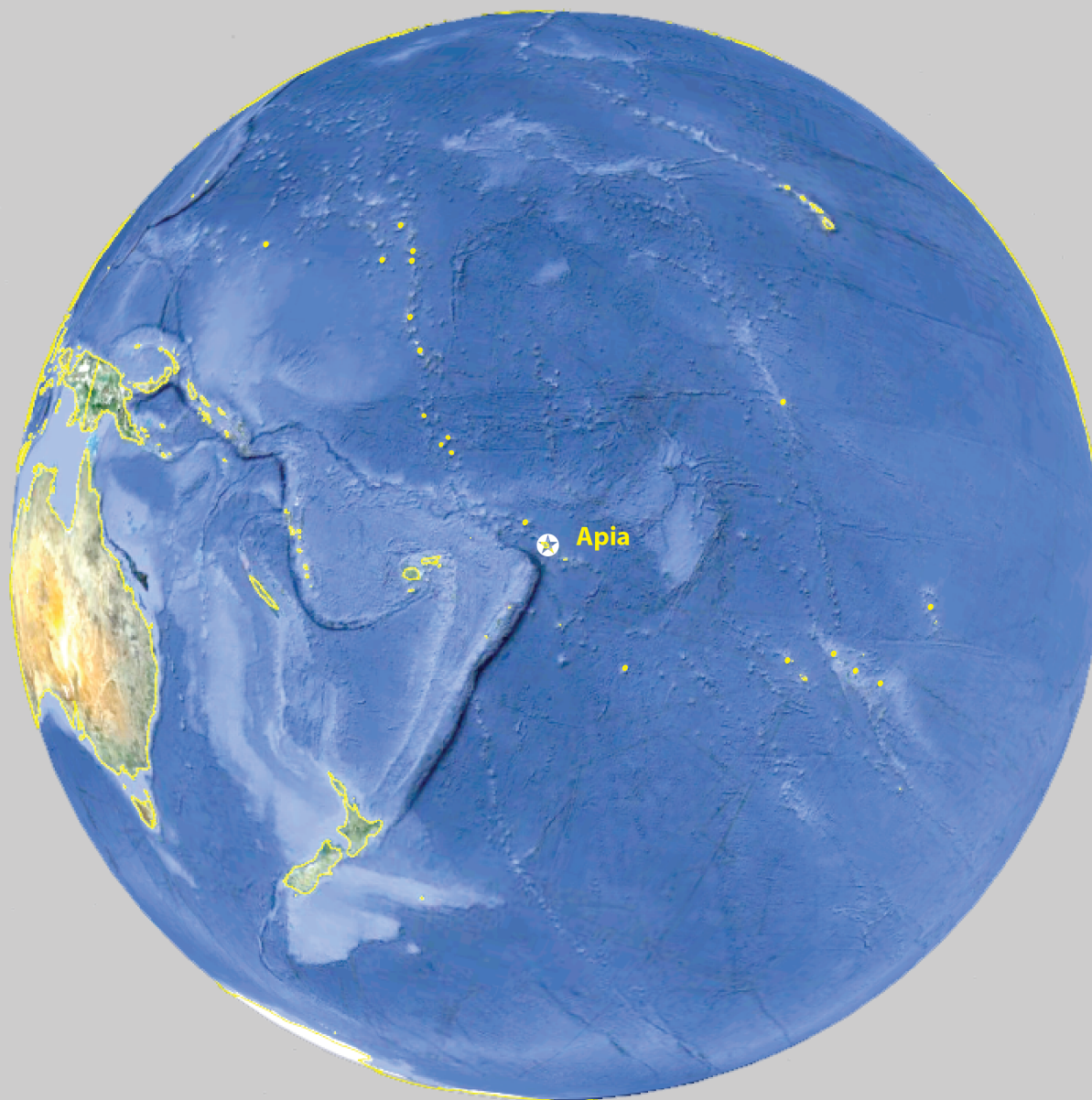
- **In January 2013 Fiji's Minister of Foreign Affairs offered the Solomon islands the opportunity to send some of its Cuba-trained doctors to Fiji to meet a short-fall in provision of trained medical personnel in rural areas especially.**
- **Several countries, including the Solomon Islands, have sent students to study for medical qualifications in Cuba on a programme sponsored by the Cuban government.**
- **The Director-General of the MSG secretariat, Solomon Islander Peter Forau, indicated in January that despite a current shortage of medical personnel in the Solomons there would be too many qualified students returning from Cuba in 2013 to be absorbed into the local workforce in one hit.**

Evidence for intra-regional labour mobility

- **There have been some very useful studies of movement of skilled workers from Fiji especially to other parts of the region. Carmen Voigt-Graf has written about movement of teachers, John Connell about movement of health workers, and Avelina Rokoduru about skilled Fijian migrants working in Micronesia.**
- **Statistics on this movement are difficult to obtain from migration data collected and processed by island countries, however.**
- **There is considerable potential for growth in this mobility, especially if sub-regional groups become very active in promoting shared agendas for sustainable economic growth.**

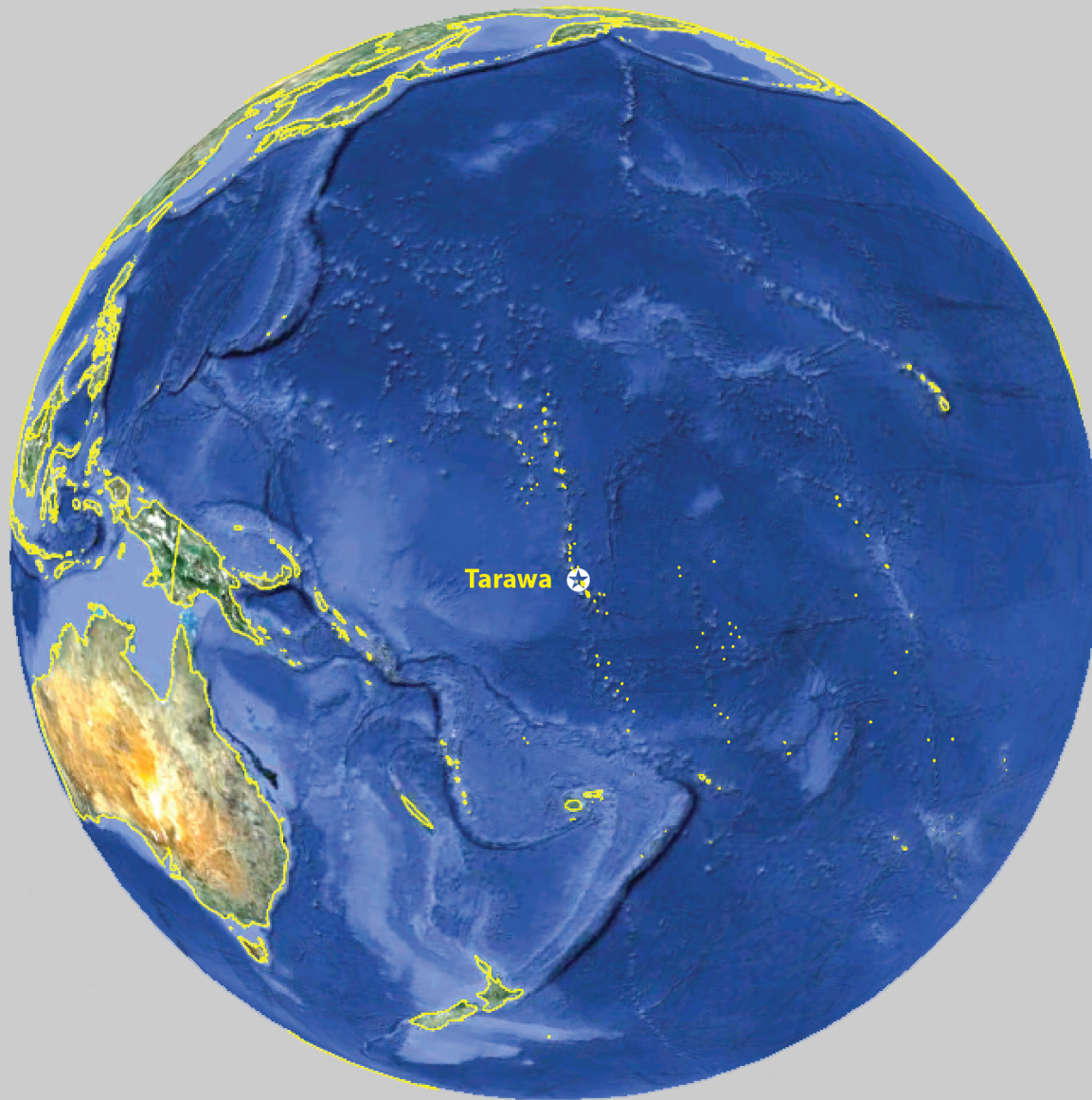
A Polynesian Leaders Group

- **The example of the MSG is being replicated elsewhere. On the margins of the 2012 Pacific Forum meeting in the Cook Islands a Polynesian Leaders' Group (PLG) was formalised to address issues that are particularly relevant for the island countries and territories of the eastern Pacific.**
- **Samoa has taken the lead in the development of this group comprising the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. The PLG is still undecided about whether to include New Zealand with its large Polynesian diaspora, as well as the indigenous Maori population (also Polynesian by heritage) in the group.**



A Micronesian grouping

- In the northern Pacific a Micronesian Chief Executive's Summit (MCES) has been meeting since 2003 to discuss common issues, especially issues around environmental protection and sustainable development.
- Because all of the island states in the northern Pacific draw their economic livelihood, cultural values and spiritual well-being from ocean-based environments they face several common challenges from climate change.
- The Pacific Forum met recently in the Marshall Islands and committed to a new declaration on climate change which requires much more action to be taken to reduce emissions.



Towards a new sub-regionalism

- **While the MSG, the PLG and the MCES encompass sub-regions that were identified and labelled by Europeans over a century ago, the current sub-groupings have very different agendas.**
- **New Zealand and Australia are being marginalised as the PRC, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Korea play major roles in creating new links, new flows of aid and commodities, and new senses of identity for Pacific states. PNG has observer status in ASEAN and Melanesian leaders increasingly see countries in Asia as future dominant partners.**

Towards a new neighbourhood

- **ANZ can no longer treat its Pacific neighbourhood as a zone of privileged influence – any more than Europe can be complacent about its influence in North Africa.**
- **Future migration patterns are unlikely to mirror those of the past as several of the scenarios developed during the IMI-led workshop in Auckland last year demonstrated.**
- **The Pacific as it is represented in the 19th century map in the final slide, courtesy of our next speaker, David Craig, is definitely no longer relevant for the contemporary western Pacific.**

MAP OF
AUSTRALIA.

By A. von Steinwehr.

