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INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



AUSTRALIA'S CLIMATE RESPONSIBILITY IN SAFEGUARDING TUVALU

POLICY BRIEF - ISHA DESAI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Pacific Islands Forum reaffirmed the Biketawa Declaration (2000) in 2018 under the Boe Declaration which states that 'climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific' [1].

Tuvalu's nine islands are at the forefront of experiencing the extreme and disproportionate effects of climate change. A NASA-UN Partnership led a technical assessment to find that sea levels are 0.15 metres higher than thirty years ago and the average rate of increase is expected to double by 2100. Tuvalu's island infrastructure will be below the average high tide level by 2050, supplemented by worsened natural disasters [2].

The 2017 DFAT White Paper outlines its aim for an 'open, inclusive and prosperous Indo Pacific region in which the rights of all states are respected.' Furthermore, the 'cultural, education and people-to-people links' are considered 'vital to our modern, vibrant nation' [3]. As Australia has striven for a leadership role in the region, it must take existential

threats to the Blue Pacific seriously, exercising its resource power and influence to protect our neighbour. Tuvalu's impending timeline requires urgent effective action. If taken, this pursuit will help develop practices in the Indo Pacific that consider rising sea levels and climate change at all levels of future policy.

On 28 August 2024, Australia signed the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union guided by 'a commitment to care for, share and protect each other' [4]. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is supporting the Government of Tuvalu with a Long Term Adaptation Plan (L-TAP) to support the relocation of people and infrastructure across all islands. Importantly, this is the first national adaptation plan based on known sea level rises [5].

However, these initiatives neglect the historical and cultural components of Tuvalu's future. It decentres Tuvalu as the knowledge holder of its own environment and adopts foreign aid strategies with little regard for native perspectives on the outcome.

This policy brief proposes amendments to existing agreements and actively situates Australia as a primary supporter following Tuvalu's lead in the mechanisms it chose to safeguard its country.

This brief recommends that Australia:

1. Take action to preserve the identity, culture and history of Tuvalu and the Tuvalu people
2. Encourage the QUAD to pursue bilateral agreements with Tuvalu and provide their resource power to climate resilience
3. Pursue ecosystem-based solutions under the Pacific Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership (PCIFP) through following Tuvalu's lead [6]

BACKGROUND

Tuvalu is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) located in the Indo Pacific region, comprising nine islands with a total population of 11,204 [7]. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an international scientific assessor for climate change that reports on future risks and mitigation options, has clearly identified a quicker increase in sea level rise due to the effects of climate change for small island states, measuring at an average of 0.2 metres over the last 100 years [8].

At COP26, Tuvalu's Foreign Minister Simon Kofe presented his speech to the United Nations whilst knee-deep in seawater to appeal for immediate action, claiming that Tuvalu 'is on the front line of climate change' [9]. The NASA-UN Partnership has predicted that Tuvalu will be the first country to be completely submerged, with 95 per cent of its islands projected to be underwater by 2100 [10]. Countries like Tuvalu have disproportionately suffered the effects of climate change despite being one of the world's smallest contributors to the issue - being hit with recurring and severe floods over the last 30 years.

The youngest generation in Tuvalu have been termed the 'last generation' to live on their homeland, given their high likelihood of being forced out of their homes as climate refugees. Yet for climate activists in Tuvalu, migration is considered a 'last resort' according to Grace Maile, who made a plea at COP28 for international support to save her country [11].

As a striving leader in the Indo Pacific region, Australia signed the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union in August 2024, to enact 'transformational arrangements to safeguard the future of Tuvalu'. The key pillars of this bilateral agreement are to build climate resilience, safeguard collective peace and security, support mobility with dignity and uplift the partnership [12]. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has created a Long-term Adaptation Plan (L-TAP) to implement risk assessment, land raising, planned relocation and adaptive scenarios. Whilst both plans include climate resilience strategies, their main focus is on the international migration of Tuvaluans [13].

THE PROBLEM

Currently, the wishes of Tuvaluans remain neglected on the international stage. In the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference, the island nations halted discussion when other countries opted out of committing to a climate deal. Tuvalu's representative Ian Fry explained that it was being 'offered 30 pieces of silver to betray our people and our future...our future is not for sale' [14]. At COP21, Tuvalu advocated for a global goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius below pre-industrial levels, stating that this was critical for SIDS to preserve their future. However, the Paris Agreement's goal remained to achieve 'below 2 degrees Celsius', which Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga called 'a weak compromise' [15].

Despite this, Tuvalu has adopted several internal measures to mitigate the effects of climate change on their country. The Tuvalu government has been training women in climate negotiation, advocating for women and children who are disproportionately affected by health issues, food insecurity and gender-based violence during the climate crisis [16].

In 2021, Tuvalu's Foreign Minister, Simon Kofe, developed the 'Future Now Project' which is the first time that a values and culture based approach will be employed. The key values include olaga fakafenua (communal living), kaitasi (shared responsibility) and fale-pili (being a positive neighbour) [17] Global legislation such as the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union and L-TAP jump straight to migration options, accepting Tuvalu's demise and neglecting domestic policies that desire to use values-based initiatives to save their country. Australia needs to do more in supporting Tuvalu as an autonomous nation by following its lead in how it protects its islands.

Finally, Tuvalu will not be the only country to be subject to existential rising sea levels. Australia has the opportunity to act as a strong and benevolent partner to a country whose circumstance will befall others in the region. It is extremely important that the region fosters a culture of taking climate change seriously and a solidarity to help each other during crises in the most suitable way possible.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1

Mobilise Australia to engage in the cultural and historical preservation of Tuvalu

Australia's diplomatic approach in the Blue Pacific has been criticised for being inconsistent and paternalistic, providing funding against performance indicators and only for specific outcomes. In addition, Australia's agenda to 'influence' the region to become a 'partner of choice' fails to understand that island nations in the Indo Pacific do not have a choice. They are often dependent on Australian aid, reinforcing a paternalistic dynamic [18]. As Tuvalu's communities face deterioration, Tuvalu must be held as the author of its future, using Australia as a key resource.

The islands of Tuvalu are being digitally cloned and Tuvalu stands to be the first country to exist in the metaverse. This is being supplemented by a digital passport system that will register the births, deaths and marriages of Tuvalu citizens [19]. All current processes of cultural preservation are being taken by Tuvalu.

However, the cultural and historical preservation of Tuvalu transcends its physical and geographical data. Records of identity, family and life in Tuvalu must be included in the actions taken to conserve national culture. Ani Vave states that this 'begins with our language', and by speaking gana Tuvalu, his community is able to ensure they safeguard their heritage to pass down to future generations [20]. Lilian Tine, from the National Tuvalu Council of Women explains 'my greatest fear is losing our identity. We're resilient, but how much can we adapt before we forget who we are?' [21]. It is vital that Australia supports the Tuvaluan peoples' concern for protecting their identity and cultural heritage.

It is recommended that Australia increase their responsibility to go beyond providing financial aid under the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty. An agenda for cultural and historical perseverance should be developed that puts the lives and needs of the Tuvalu people first.

This should include:

- Resources for language preservation that are transformed into educational programs
- Passing down cultural traditions and sharing them with neighbouring Indo Pacific countries, who can protect historical practices for increased awareness and education about Tuvalu [22]
- Physical museums across the Indo Pacific for all to experience Tuvalu heritage and learn about the effect of the climate on the nation

2 Utilise the QUAD for the human protection and security of Tuvalu citizens

Australia has granted 280 visas to Tuvalu citizens annually for permanent residency in Australia under the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union [23]. The other key entry for Tuvalu citizens is the Pacific Access Category Resident Visa in New Zealand which functions as a lottery visa [24].

The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), consisting of the United States, Australia, India and Japan has been a key contemporary body in shaping and agenda-setting for the Indo Pacific, 'delivering outcomes...for climate change and humanitarian assistance' [25]. Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo compared the QUAD to an 'Asian NATO' with 'shared security and geopolitical goals' [26]. This is reinforced by joint naval operations and an aligned diplomatic approach, centering on counterbalancing China's growing influence. The QUAD's hard and soft power in the Blue Pacific increases the consequences of their actions, thereby increasing their responsibility to act in the best interest of smaller nation

states with comparatively less resource power. Consequently, the QUAD should take action to leave a positive impact on smaller states, who will be more likely to support their global agenda after experiencing practical benefits.

Multilateral organisations with fewer yet powerful member states such as the QUAD could prove to be more effective in international diplomacy efforts than the United Nations who are burdened with excessive bureaucracy. Having a global leader like the United States support a country like Tuvalu through tangible benefits would signal a step forward in climate action.

Australia should lead and encourage the QUAD in fortifying Tuvalu's human security. This includes:

- Encouraging all member states to enter agreements that provide travel and permanent residency options for citizens who seek to migrate
- Allowing Tuvaluans to pursue education opportunities at low costs in all QUAD member states
- Supplementing the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union by creating a shared pool of the QUAD's monetary and infrastructure resources

3 Emphasise eco-system-based solutions under the Pacific Climate Infrastructure Financing Partnership (PCIFP)

Tuvalu's dependency on Australia for climate aid has resulted in an industrialised, top-down approach under the PCIFP. Notably, this includes climate mitigation through renewable energy, adaptation via water purification and resilience in road and telecommunication services [27]. Whilst these actions are important, they undermine the natural advantage of Tuvalu's islands and the preferred strategy of the Tuvalu people and government.

Tuvalu is home to natural defence ecosystems such as coastal forest, mangroves and coral reefs. Tuvaluans wish to use home-grown and sustainable practices to preserve their lands. Teresa Lifuka-Drecala, a former employee of the Ministry of Health and Office of Attorney General in Tuvalu spends her spare time volunteering with Fuligafou, an organisation dedicated to coral replanting for a sustainable future. She also describes implementing 'Berm Top Barriers' which are 'bags of local sand and water,

revegetated to fit in with the natural environment', protecting communities from salt intrusion and large cyclones. The plan is to use these barriers along the outer coast of Nanumaga and Nanumea [28]. The Tuvalu Ministry of Home Affairs has committed to using climate-resilient agricultural practices to preserve their ecosystems and islands. This includes:

- Active planting of salt-tolerant and indigenous plant species
- Fostering climate resilient practices such as intercropping and soil remediation
- Restoring 534 hectares of degraded ecosystems which act as a buffer zone to protect farmlands

It is recommended that Australia engage with Tuvalu in this strategy to support diversified livelihoods and capacity building. The UN Environment Programme supports that promoting sustainable livelihood practices results in an increase to both community and ecosystem health [29]. Furthermore, employing strategies native to Tuvalu's land is vital to respect the nation state's autonomy. It ensures that Australia does not position themselves as a paternalist power but rather maintains their place as a supporter of Tuvalu's agenda-setting and decisions.

CONCLUSION

Tuvalu has been recognised as one of the most climate-vulnerable states in the world [30]. Sea-level rises of 0.15m in the next thirty years will enhance the intensity and frequency of floods, cyclones and storm surges. 95 per cent of the islands are expected to be flooded by 2100, making Tuvalu uninhabitable. [31].

In 2024, Australia entered the Australian-Tuvalu Falepili Union to step up and safeguard the future of Tuvalu through climate resilience, regional security and human mobility. However, the Tuvalu people and government insist that complete emigration is their 'last resort' appealing to the international community at multilateral summits to take their plight seriously and enforce action [32].

Their culture, history and identity has been neglected in current reforms and Tuvalu must be repositioned as the knowledge holder and author of their future. Australia must actively support Tuvalu, refraining from taking a paternalistic role and following their lead in the strategies it wishes to employ.

Additionally, as a leading middle power in the Blue Pacific, Australia must engage with the wider community, in particular the QUAD, to strengthen actions taken for Tuvalu.

To protect Tuvalu's cultural and physical future, it is vital that Australia uphold its responsibility as an ally. Australia must listen to the wishes of Tuvaluans and use them as a framework for policies. This includes placing a high value on Tuvalu's identity and working with it to protect its cultural heritage. It further involves emphasising the QUAD's climate responsibility in the region through encouraging them to facilitate bilateral agreements. Finally, Australia needs to understand the islands' natural advantages and follow Tuvalu's lead in adopting an ecosystem-based approach for climate infrastructure.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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