



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The Ocean of Peace or a new dividing line? A Pacific summit without major powers



The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting, which will **take** place from September 8–12 in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, began with a decision that set the tone for the entire meeting: the host, the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Jeremiah Manele, **excluded** all "dialogue partners" from this year's meeting, including the United States, China, and Taiwan.

It is the first "non-major power summit," where Pacific leaders discuss their main rivals, security and climate without having them at the table.

The decision confirms that the region wants to regain control of its own agenda, even if it comes at the expense of nervousness in the world's major capitals.

The political horizon of the Honiara summit was defined by the attempt to **adopt** a declaration on the "Ocean of Peace"—a common framework that would keep strategic competition in the Pacific under control and measure security in terms of stability rather than bloc discipline.

Included in the same package are issues of greater importance to the Pacific than great power rivalries: funding for climate adaptation, increased coordination in responding to cyclones and floods, control over fisheries, and even the controversial exploitation of deep-sea mineral resources.

The fact that the United States, China, and Taiwan—along with twenty other traditional donors—had to stay away this year sends a double message: firstly, the region wants to meet alone; secondly, it does not want to allow the discussion to turn into a proxy showdown between Washington and Beijing.

A desire to avoid the presence of Taiwan

Why now? The chronology is important. At the beginning of August, the host announced that all "dialogue partners" would not attend the

summit until the internal reviews of relations with the individual countries had been completed.

A few weeks later, the foreign ministers of the PIF members held a "robust" **discussion** on the decision but left it in place.

Several Pacific leaders and European officials have publicly expressed their displeasure—especially because donor countries play a key role in financing infrastructure and climate projects.

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However, the procedural explanation also hides political clues: several sources in the region linked the host's move to a desire to avoid the presence of Taiwan, which is a sensitive issue for Beijing but also for the three PIF members that maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei.

Neither Australia nor New Zealand denied the fact that they felt uncomfortable in the format without a partner, but they supported the unity of the forum—at least publicly.

The Australian Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, only **arrived** in Honiara after his visit to Vanuatu, where he announced new cooperation packages and expected PIF members to support Australia's bid to host the UN Climate Change Conference (COP31).

This is part of a broader effort by Canberra to show that even without a formal partner presence, discrete lines of influence and funding still work.

A 'clean room' without major powers

The geopolitical framework is, of course,

larger than a single procedural decision. In recent years, the Pacific has become a laboratory for the model of "many small sovereignties" in the shadow of the two big ones.

When the Solomon Islands broke off diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 2019 and **established** official relations with China, it marked a turning point in the region.

Since then, there has been growing pressure on other Pacific states to ally with either Beijing or Washington and its allies that support Taiwan.

Today, the PIF includes countries formally linked to the US through bilateral security agreements and others deeply involved in Chinese infrastructure and credit arrangements, but also French territories with their own political calendar.

In Honiara, climate is not treated as a "thematic chapter" but as an existential category

In recent years, the formats with the "partners" have often resembled a sideshow—with American and Chinese "side meetings" outside the main hall—rather than discussions within one regional house.

In this respect, Honiara 2025 is an attempt to close the doors of these parallel events for a while.

How long can the "Ocean of Peace" last beyond the protocol? The idea is simple: the region wants to define security as a product of stability and cooperation and not as an exchange of security guarantees by major powers.

But behind this simple idea lie difficult questions. Is the security of island nations measured by the number of patrol boats and radars donated by Canberra, Tokyo or Washington, or by the forecast that the next decade will bring a two-degree rise in temperature and more frequent cyclones?

In Honiara, climate is not treated as a "thematic chapter" but as an existential category — and that is why climate change adaptation and mitigation funding and fisheries management are equal to "security" as any bilateral agreement. This is one of the reasons why a "clean room" without major powers makes sense this year.

A diplomacy of realignment

However, this decision's symbolic power will only materialise if a political strategy follows the summit. In practice, this means two steps.

First, the PIF must clearly outline the next steps for the "Ocean of Peace" so that it **remains** not just a declaratory framework but a set of practical tools—from coordinated coastal patrols and joint fishing quotas to mechanisms for the rapid exchange of disaster information.

Secondly, the format of relations with partners must be redefined so that it does not stifle the autonomy demonstrated these days but also the financial and security needs of the member states. The Forum cannot permanently do without donors, but it can receive them on its own terms.

The **criticism** from Paris, Washington and Taipei that this is a "wasted moment" is not unfounded: budgets for the Coast Guard, digital warning networks, and climate adaptation come precisely from partnerships with major powers and multilateral banks.

Three PIF members still recognise Taiwan, while most are on the "one-China" line

But in recent years, there have also been incidents that have caused discord on these side tracks — the controversial wording of the communiqué on Taiwan, discreet diplomatic "corrections" to the text behind closed doors, and demonstrative "gifts" that stifled the host's agenda.

The paradox of the Pacific is that aid and pressure often came in the same packages. Honiara is trying to separate the two for the first time.

The trickiest test will be the attitude towards Taiwan. Three PIF members still recognise it, while most are on the "one-China" line. By excluding all partners, the host was able to avoid the immediate diplomacy of realignment, but the issue will not go away after the last joint photo.

If the PIF manages to **talk** about it behind closed doors and without an international megaphone, it would be a signal that regional "autonomy" is more than a bold gesture by the host. However, if everything reverts to the old matrix at the next ministerial meeting—with twenty or so delegations working on their own agendas—then Honiara will be remembered as a short-lived experiment.

The Pacific remains a contested arena

Australia's **bid** for COP31 is the most visible short-term test. Canberra claims it wants a "Pacific COP", promising greater funding for climate change adaptation and co-alignment with regional partners.

If the PIF stands united behind this candidature, it would confirm that the partnerless format was not a sign of isolationism but the first phase of negotiated consolidation.

If, on the other hand, the members are divided along their own agreements with the major powers, it will become clear that the "Ocean of Peace" needs more time and a more favourable political wind.

Neither Washington nor Beijing will pull out because they had no credentials for the plenary session for one year

A quieter but remarkable dynamic also takes place in the margins. Australia and China's pre-summit gestures of "goodwill"—from equipment donations to symbolic visits and treaties—**show** that the Pacific remains a contested arena, which one regional analyst called "comic giveaways".

The partners' absence from the main hall has not prevented the contest but moved it outside into a series of parallel meetings and media releases. And that is part of the reality: neither Washington nor Beijing will pull out because they had no credentials for the plenary session for one year.

If the 'Ocean of Peace' survives the first storm

Even if this format seems like an episode, the political impact could be longer term.

If, in the coming period, the PIF transforms the "Ocean of Peace" into an operational plan with clear commitments—joint coastguard training, agreed procedures for emergencies, resource allocation for fisheries, a framework for moratoria, or licences for deep-sea exploitation—then Honiara 2025 will go down in the "books" as the point at which the Pacific ceased to be primarily the object of others' strategies and became the author of their own.

If this is not the case, the announced "autonomy" will remain in the realm of ceremonial courage.



If the "Ocean of Peace" survives the first storm after the ceremony, Honiara will be the start of a new practice where the region does not seek permission to be itself

The fact is, however, that the leaders have gathered in a format of their own choosing and that the most important things they have to say are the issues that concern them directly: climate, maritime security, and economic resilience.

The Pacific has shown that "big stories" are only worth something if they are confined to the height of the waves and the height of the piers, despite the attention given to the rivalry between China and the US.

This is not an anti-Western or pro-Chinese gesture, but rather an attempt to shift the region away from a geopolitical reflex.

Such an attempt will only be successful if there is an agreement on what is prioritised, how much it will cost, and who will pay for it — and if this agreement is signed at the head table rather than on the sidelines.

In this respect, the peace metaphor from the title of the declaration will only be convincing if it evolves into a series of prosaic but measurable decisions.

How quickly will regional disaster response mechanisms reduce the time to first aid on a cyclone-hit island? How much more transparent will the allocation of fishing quotas become? How much more precise will the discussions about the exploitation of the deep sea be, in which the hope of income and

the fear of ecological consequences are interwoven? And to what extent will the members ultimately succeed in modernising relationships with partners in such a way that money and equipment come without political demands that undermine the community?

Most of these questions will take the Pacific months, perhaps even years, to answer. It is useful to note, however, that this September the leaders decided to "pause" the usual show of the great powers and speak alone.

If the "Ocean of Peace" survives the first storm after the ceremony, Honiara will be the start of a new practice where the region does not seek permission to be itself.