

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Impulse and ego are risking Pacific diplomacy

by Jayden Evett | Aug 17, 2025

New Zealand's personality-driven approach to Pacific diplomacy is increasingly problematic, writes Jayden Evett.

Aotearoa New Zealand's Pacific diplomacy is in trouble, and not just because of the headlines this past fortnight. The personal impulses and political egos of the prime minister and the foreign affairs minister are steering our relations with Pacific countries off-course, eroding the trust and whanaungatanga that our place in the region depends on.

This diplomatic disorientation wasn't inevitable. Winston Peters has been an effective foreign minister in the past — first under Helen Clark and then Jacinda Ardern — working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) to strengthen our Pacific relations and advocate Aotearoa's interests.

But there were warning signs this time. A clash last October with the Cook Islands prime minister, Mark Brown, over proposals for a separate passport, and a review of all Kiribati aid, announced in January after Peters took offence at an apparent snub by President Taneti Maamau. Both hinted at the more combative, less disciplined approach that has followed.

Last week, that backsliding came into sharp focus. The Cook Islands celebrated Te Maeva Nui, the 60th anniversary of self-governance, a milestone we as a country have always marked by sending high-level members of government. This year, no one was sent.

Only the Governor-General, Cindy Kiro, attended — and while she spoke of representing the government and people of Aotearoa, she is also the Cooks' head of state, and her presence was no real substitute for sending a senior cabinet minister to mark the occasion.

The absence followed months of escalating tension between Peters and Brown over the Cook Islands government's decision to sign a broad, secretive agreement with China in February without first consulting New Zealand, a requirement of the free association arrangement.

In June, Peters suspended nearly \$20 million of funding (10 percent of the annual total) to the Cooks, and in July, publicly dared Brown to hold an independence referendum — a move that serves no conceivable interest for Aotearoa and risks long-term damage to one of our closest relationships. Doing so tramples the mana of our Cook Islands whanaunga, with whom New Zealanders share a history, a citizenship, and a country.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon was in Port Moresby for, ostensibly, Papua New Guinea's 50th anniversary of independence from Australia. New Zealand's historical links to PNG are limited, yet Luxon delivered a speech to parliament and presented Prime Minister James Marape with half a gift, the base to a yet-unfinished manu aute — a gesture that looked rushed and underprepared.

Strategically, the visit made little sense. It was announced just two days before it occurred, as an impromptu stopover on the way to Japan, and took place two months before PNG's actual independence celebrations. That decision sent the PM to a country with which we have comparatively little engagement, while ignoring another with much deeper cultural, kinship, historical, and constitutional ties to us at a critical time in our bilateral relationship. Yet, we have a duty to maintain those ties as part of being a Pacific nation.

While Luxon was in PNG, Peters marked Te Maeva Nui in Auckland, where he sought to stifle media questions about his decision not to attend the official celebrations in the Cooks. His refusal to do so laid bare the extent to which personal impulses have driven bilateral relations to this point. When Aotearoa-Cook Islands relations are at their lowest in decades, personal discomfort at the possibility of being held accountable won out over the whakawhanaungatanga and healing this relationship desperately needs.

The pattern is clear. MFAT's experienced diplomats, who have spent decades nurturing the region's trust in Aotearoa, appear to no longer be steering our Pacific diplomacy. They seem to have been sidelined, their advice overridden by the temperament and short-term political instincts of ministers who appear blind to the phenomenal risks it poses to Aotearoa.

Alienating our Pacific whānau is not rooted in any coherent policy or strategy: it's the product of personal grievances and political theatre.

The contrast with our diplomatic conduct elsewhere is striking. In parliament this week, Peters chided efforts "rushing" New Zealand's recognition of Palestine, insisting it was "not straightforward or clear-cut" and that such changes to our diplomacy required careful, depoliticised consideration.

Yet in the Pacific, decisions of equal sensitivity, with far-reaching consequences for relationships grounded in reciprocity and mana, appear to be made on impulse, driven more by ego and personality than by the same careful deliberation.

This is not a sudden collapse. It reflects a deeper structural weakness within our diplomacy. For years, New Zealand's foreign policy machinery has been reactive rather than proactive, particularly in the Pacific. Without a consistent framework of public position papers and strategic statements, our diplomacy has relied on the instincts and goodwill of the sitting prime minister and foreign minister to maintain stability and predictability. That "she'll be right" approach has now been exposed as dangerously unreliable. Without the discipline of institutional strategy, Pacific diplomacy has become vulnerable to whoever happens to hold office, jeopardising trust built over generations.

Diplomacy works best when it rises above the individuals who carry it out on our behalf. Predictability is what makes Aotearoa a trusted member of the Pacific and the broader global community. When our relations are set by impulse, that trust erodes, and repairing it will be far harder than maintaining it.

MFAT is almost certainly doing its best to limit the damage of recent developments. But without the authority to implement a durable, transparent, strategy-led Pacific policy — one that reflects national interests and upholds our whanaungatanga with the region — it cannot prevent personalities from steering us off course.

The sooner we recognise that danger, the better our chances of correcting course before too much is lost. Restoring a steady hand on the tiller will not only protect our Pacific relationships but also uphold the mana that underpins Aotearoa's legitimacy on the international stage.

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