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# Comparing Australian/South Pacific and UK/Caribbean relations

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## ABSTRACT

This article compares the relationship between Australia and the South Pacific Commonwealth states with the relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth Caribbean islands. It explores these links through strategic, economic, political, and cultural lenses, finding that while both sets of relationships contain elements of all these ties, they are characterised by fundamentally different dynamics. The Australian-South Pacific relationship revolves far more around hard-nosed calculations of security and economic advantage, while the British-Caribbean relationship exists strongly in the cultural realm, with less emphasis on strategy and politics; both cases exemplify the range of potential relationships between large and small Commonwealth states. The article also observes an increasing tendency for the small states to broaden and diversify their international relationships.


## KEYWORDS

Small island states; large-small state relations; Caribbean; South Pacific

## Introduction

How do large states relate to small states in the Commonwealth? This is a question important to students of Commonwealth affairs for several reasons. Firstly, states within the Commonwealth vary greatly in scale, size, wealth, and power, and grasping how they relate to one another has important consequences for developing our understanding of asymmetrical power relations within the Commonwealth. Secondly, charting these relationships helps us to understand the strength of the Commonwealth as a coherent political system more broadly. Finally, it will help us to appreciate better the legacies of colonialism within the Commonwealth framework, particularly the way that large and small states negotiate legacy dependencies and emergent opportunities.

This paper explores this question through the comparative study of two cases: the relationships between Australia and Commonwealth countries of the South Pacific and between Britain and the countries of the Commonwealth Caribbean. These cases have several things in common. Commonwealth legacies of language, cultural elements (particularly sport), institutions, and diasporas help to inform regional identities and tie the small states to the large in multiple informal ways. Both cases have a similar configuration: a large, wealthy state partnered with a group of smaller, less-developed, geographically-scattered island societies. On the part of the large state, developed policies

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of international aid-giving emerge from a political sensibility urging responsibility to assist developing countries. Taken together, these aspects create a set of imperatives in which the small states have incentive to pursue economic deals, aid, and other forms of assistance from the large partner state. This invokes a sense of responsibility on the part of the larger states for development outcomes in these small island states. These dynamics impart the expectation of a homogeneous set of outcomes in small Pacific and Caribbean Commonwealth countries' relations with their larger partners.

This is not the case, however. Despite similar contexts and shared Commonwealth historical experiences, there are two fundamentally different relational dynamics at play, with the Australian-South Pacific relationship dominated by 'hard-nosed' strategic and economic interaction, while the British-Caribbean relationship is characterised by cultural and social affinities. Ultimately, this means the Australian-South Pacific relationship consists of closer and more detailed interactions with a higher measure of opprobrium and discord. Contrastingly, while Britain and the Caribbean are less involved in each other's affairs (and their relationship is correspondingly quiescent), their ties are warmer and more enduring. Overall, both cases demonstrate the diversity of inter-state relationships possible in the contemporary Commonwealth. To advance this argument, the paper is divided into three sections. The opening section describes the key features of Australian-South Pacific relations, before outlining the centrifugal tendencies and fault lines weakening the relationship. The next section performs the same move with the British-Caribbean relationship, while the final section compares and contrasts the two cases.

## **Australia and the South Pacific**

Diversity is the defining characteristic of the South Pacific. Its islands' geography varies widely in size and terrain, from tiny coral atolls to Papua New Guinea (PNG), featuring thick tropical forests and snow-capped mountains. The region's human diversity mirrors this geographic diversity, with a wide variety of languages, cultures, customs and peoples spread across 800,000 km<sup>2</sup> of ocean. Although this would suggest a tendency to political and social fragmentation, there are also forces promoting cooperation and a sense of broader Pacific community. These include a common experience of colonialism at the hands of European powers, mostly British; increasing political imperatives to work together in international diplomatic fora, and drastic climate change exposure. Most societies in the region also struggle in various ways with poverty and underdevelopment, exacerbated by the challenges of remoteness and small size. Combatting this poverty has been part of the basis for the long history of Australian-South Pacific cooperation, but Canberra's presence has been felt in the region through various other means.

Initial involvement came via colonialism, through formal colonial possession and/or management of various South Pacific territories, most notably PNG, and also through various forms of coercive labour practices involving Islander workers. (Gapps, 2019; Munro, 1995, p. 617) The Australian military also fought across the region throughout the Second World War, and, as we will see, security activity remains a driving factor motivating Australian involvement in the region. This, fundamentally, is based on proximity: Australia's closeness to the islands has meant that Canberra has often had a strategic anxiety about their use as a platform for aggression (Wallis, 2017, p. 14). In the

late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Canberra's commitment to the region has waxed and waned according to political priorities, although the effect of Australian presence remains outsized in the islands regardless of the attention paid in Canberra. Despite these fluctuations in Australian commitment and interest, Australia and the South Pacific remain deeply connected across several dimensions. This section divides those connections into four areas: security, diplomacy, economic/aid measures, and culture, highlighting security as the most consistent dimension of Australian involvement in the region.

### ***Australian and South Pacific relations***

Security is the largest and most consistent component of the Australian-South Pacific set of relationships. Security interaction with South Pacific Commonwealth countries occurs across multiple dimensions: capability development initiatives, ongoing training and operations, and episodic military intervention. Many of these initiatives fall under the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP), through which Australia has conducted highly successful patrol boat and associated equipment transfers to partner countries, aimed at boosting their ability to monitor sovereign resources like fisheries, as well as to generate maritime intelligence to be shared with Australia (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020a). Australia has instituted the Australia-Pacific Security College in Canberra and the Pacific Fusion Centre in cooperation with Vanuatu, aimed at boosting knowledge and skills sharing among defence professionals and creating a source of intelligence for Pacific decision-makers, respectively (Australia Pacific Security College, 2021; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). Australian Defence Force (ADF) vessels and aircraft frequently stop at regional ports, carry out an ongoing regional surveillance and monitoring role under Operation SOLANIA, and regularly conduct search and rescue and humanitarian work (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020b).

Furthermore, Australian security forces have had conducted multiple regional interventions in recent decades, particularly in the Solomon Islands and PNG's Bougainville province. These service personnel worked closely with civilian authorities – both Australian and locally – to mediate communal conflicts and facilitate disarmament (Wallis, 2017, pp. 53–55). Beyond involvement in armed conflict, the ADF also frequently conducts humanitarian work. The South Pacific is disproportionately exposed to drought, cyclones, floods, large waves, and volcanic activity. The ADF lifts supplies and personnel to offset the effects of these disasters, ensuring that Australia's military is strongly represented in the region in times of intense crisis (Wallis, 2017, p. 138).

Diplomatically, Australia and the South Pacific relate to one another through several international institutions. Of these, the most established is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which has been promoted by Australia as a primary means of regional integration since at least the 1980s (Wallis, 2017, p. 125). The PIF has historically been the main mechanism through which the serious, region-spanning political and security matters are handled, and it is the main diplomatic forum through which Australia seeks to influence regional discourse and dialogue with South Pacific countries, helping to set regional goals and priorities (Wallis, 2017, pp. 125–126).

The PIF Secretariat currently manages a range of policy streams, including economics and development, security, and climate resilience (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2021). According to Joanne Wallis, Australia has used the PIF as a vehicle for influencing Pacific Island Countries' (PIC) uptake of Australian priorities, particularly around matters of security, including counter-terrorism, fisheries management against external intrusion, and approval of Australian military intervention in the Solomon Islands (Wallis, 2017, pp. 125–126). Canberra is also a partner through the Pacific Community, a technocratic forum promoting development through the delivery of scientific and technical expertise. Key initiatives revolve around education, healthcare, agriculture, and human rights, among other things, and Australia has recently agreed to provide \$42.5 million to continue the Pacific Community's work (Pacific Community Secretariat, 2020).

Indeed, economic aid and development is a key objective of the South Pacific's engagement with Australia. Trade, economic activity and aid are often fused together in pursuit of this objective, and Australia has worked hard to promote economic development through various market-based initiatives. Key among these is the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus free-trade agreement linking Australia to New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Cook Islands, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, and Niue (Gay, 2017). Australian firms have invested heavily in economic enterprises throughout the South Pacific, particularly in a range of primary industries. In PNG alone, examples include the Panguna copper mine in the autonomous Bougainville region, the Lihir gold mine, and the now-nationalised Ok Tedi copper/gold mine. In 2018, Australian investment in PNG was at \$17 billion AUD, typically in these types of major economic projects (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2020c).

Australia also conducts labour-mobility and skills-training initiatives for Pacific islanders, particularly for migrant work in Australian agricultural industries (Commonwealth Government of Australia & Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021). Although the regional aid picture is complicated by increased Chinese spending, Australia is still the major aid donor in the traditional sense for most of the region, according to the Lowy Institute (Lowy Institute, 2021). The focus of Australia's aid spending is often on grass-roots programmes aimed at boosting healthcare, disease resilience, education, governance, gender equality, and other such measures, and much of the funding is set out in bilateral Partnerships for Economic Development (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2021).

Although it is less characteristic of the entire relationship than the 'harder' dimensions, there are important cultural interrelationships between the Pacific islands and Australia. Australia has a concentrated Pacific diaspora, particularly in Queensland, although people claiming Pacific ancestry were still only 0.88% of the Australian population in 2016 (Batley, 2017). Beyond citizenship and permanent residency, many Pacific Islanders also have transitory presence in or connections to Australia via the previously-mentioned labour mobility schemes, or through the freedom of movement conferred by New Zealand citizenship. Pacific-Australians are increasingly represented in Australian media and cultural activities and have a high rate of participation in Australian sport. Indeed, sport remains a powerful bond between island societies and Australia: Australian rugby league teams have significant followings in the South Pacific, particularly in PNG, where championship matches have sparked violence between rival supporters' groups

(*The Guardian*, 2015). Australian media is also present in the South Pacific: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation operates a Tok Pisin service providing news broadcasts and online media in the PICs (ABC News Australia, 2021a, 2021b). Although the South Pacific is not a mainstream part of Australian cultural or social discourse, Pacific islanders are certainly part of the wider Australian story, and Australian media and culture remain similarly important to the region-wide cultural landscape.

Ultimately, however, it is still the ‘harder’ aspects of the Australian-South Pacific relationship which really define it. In recent years, many of these diplomatic, aid/economic, and security measures have been grouped under the Pacific Step-Up, a major policy initiative intended to deepen Australia’s South Pacific relationships. The boundaries of the Step-Up are somewhat fluid, and it is not always clear what constitutes a Step-Up activity and what does not, but the Australian Government has argued its intent is to promote a ‘secure and prosperous’ Pacific region, to ensure that its strategic backyard is stable and amenable to its agenda (Commonwealth Government of Australia and Prime Minister of Australia, 2018). Accordingly, many of the Step-Up measures are aimed at firming up PICs’ allegiances to Australia’s goals and interests. In the security dimension, for example, Australia has partnered with PNG on the modernisation of a naval base on Lombrum Island, binding PNG closer to the Australian security agenda while also offering the Papua New Guineans a facility to operate their own vessels (Department of Defence and Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2021; Whiting, 2018).

In the aid dimension, it has instituted the significant Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), a loans programme facilitating ‘high-impact, safeguarded projects’ spanning energy independence, communications, and disaster mitigation (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2019). More recently, Canberra has promoted a range of efforts to help PICs offset the impacts of COVID-19 (Pacific Community Secretariat, 2020). This intensification of relations occurs against a backdrop of mounting tensions with China and increasing Chinese aid and diplomatic presence in the South Pacific region (O’Keefe, 2020, p. 95; Whiting, 2018). The Step-Up, therefore, is largely aimed at countering China’s efforts to secure influence in a region close to the increasing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring that strategic concerns fundamentally shape Australia’s renewed interest in the Pacific.

### ***A changing South Pacific***

If South Pacific societies have historically exhibited a preference for Australian aid and assistance, that is increasingly less the case. Previously, we explored the avenues through which the South Pacific states and Australia align, finding that there were a range of mechanisms through which deep and enduring ties were expressed, including aid, diplomacy, and perhaps most importantly, security. This trend is complicating, however, and a centrifugal tendency is creeping into regional politics. Pacific Step-Up notwithstanding, the PICs have increasingly sought to chart an independent way for themselves in international politics. This centrifugal trend consists of building internal relationships between the PICs, and external relationships outside the traditional, Australian-dominated frameworks that defined Pacific foreign relations. The net impression is that although the Australian relationship remains important to the Commonwealth

Pacific, many of the islands are increasingly restless with various aspects of the existing arrangements and are seeking to broaden or diversify their international politics.

Institutionalisation forms the first mechanism through which Pacific states seek to shift their options away from Australia. At the highest, global level, South Pacific states are participants in the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) grouping, which serves as their main method of representation in larger Global South coalitions, particularly the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the G77 coalition of developing states at the UN, replacing the Pacific Islands Forum in this regard (Manoa, 2015, p. 93). PSIDS has served as a vehicle for Pacific states' ongoing effort to get their own interests on the agenda of much larger international institutions, and it has had some success in this regard, particularly in the effort to get climate change resolutions through the UN system, and in the ongoing matter of independence movements within French regional territories (Manoa, 2015, p. 95). The PSIDS also acts as a platform for individual states to achieve chairmanship positions within these larger frameworks, particularly the Vice Presidency of the UN General Assembly (Manoa, 2015, p. 95).

South Pacific societies have also grouped themselves into the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF, whose members consist of Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Timor-Leste, The Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) (Pacific Islands Development Forum, 2021b). Australia possesses only observer status at the PIDF, indicating an increasing view among South Pacific leaders that their interests are better-served by locally-oriented institutions in which traditional partnerships with larger powers are more muted (Wallis, 2017, p. 128). Indeed, the PIDF's various programmes appear to accord with these goals, with a strong focus on climate change: initiatives include a partnership with the Republic of Korea (ROK) to boost renewable energy access in rural areas, promotion of a Pacific bamboo industry, resilience promotion in line with Sustainable Development Goals, and solarisation of public and official buildings (Pacific Islands Development Forum, 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a).

Beyond the ROK, the PIDF has also sourced funding for its activities from Beijing, with China also sending envoys to attend PIDF meetings (Pacific Islands Development Forum, 2015). Closer to home, Melanesian states have set up the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), initially to advance the cause of Kanak liberation in French-held New Caledonia, but the Group now facilitates a range of issues including closer economic relations among members, movement of people, cooperation on law enforcement, and climate change (Komai, 2015, p. 119). In recent years, the MSG has faced a challenge in the form of increased Indonesian influence over the question of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua's membership, which is resisted by PNG and Fiji (Newton Cain, 2018). Although the MSG's tangible achievements are still somewhat limited, its continued existence suggests an increasing confidence among Pacific island leaders about their economic and trade objectives and a recognition that other cooperative institutions were not providing the same outcomes (Newton Cain, 2015, p. 151). Other institutions include the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, focusing on the single-issue management of tuna stocks (PNA Tuna, 2011).

Underlying much of this turn to new institutions has been a deeper discomfort on the part of South Pacific states with the Australian-led status quo, particularly the political and economic influence that status quo entails. Fiji has been a central figure in this discontent, arising from that country's troubled relationships with the Commonwealth and the



international community more broadly: it was expelled from the Commonwealth in 1987 following a series of coups, and was only readmitted in 1997 (Canning, 2015; Ewins, 1998). These external problems have continued well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century: more recent Australian sanctions were applied in the wake of the 2006 coup installing the current leader, Frank Bainimarama, into power, and Commonwealth membership was suspended again in 2010 following failures to host elections there in that year (Komai, 2015, p. 112; O'Keefe, 2015, p. 130). Consequently, beyond the promotion of regional institutionalisation, Fiji has also pursued greater unilateral independence in its foreign affairs in the form of its Look North and Friends to All foreign policies (Komai, 2015, pp. 113–114). Both policies seek to broaden Fiji's relations with external powers, particularly China, which is – depending on the source consulted – either the largest or second-largest donor to the island country, as well as signatory in various cooperative aid and security-related programmes (Levick, 2018; Lowy Institute, 2021; Vula, 2019).

This discomfort with Australia extends beyond just Fiji, however. In early 2021, the PIF was rocked by the departure of all the Micronesian states, or one-third of its total membership. The proximate and ostensible reason for this exit from the PIF was the institution's failure to award chairmanship to a Micronesian country, an office which had informally been rotated between the PIF's various sub-regional groupings. Cleo Paskal's reporting and analysis around the Micronesians' departure has emphasised dissatisfaction with Australian and New Zealand influence as an underlying motivation for the departure; this, in turn, is based around deeper dissatisfaction with Canberra's deeper push for regional integration and a perception that its aid and diplomatic approach has been too heavy-handed and transactional (Paskal, 2021). Micronesian states, Paskal argues, have increasing options in the form of traditional associations with the United States and newer associations with China, meaning that they can afford to abandon frameworks in which they perceive Australia to possess undue influence.

Joanne Wallis argues there are two causes of this leaning away from Canberra: firstly, sharp differences of opinion around 'climate change, trade, asylum seeking, and decolonisation', and secondly the 'confrontational style' of Canberra's diplomacy, which sits uneasily with regional expectations around diplomatic conduct (Wallis, 2017, p. 131). Beijing's large purse and no-strings-attached approach to aid (its only requirement is voting alignments in international organisations) has ensured that it has become an increasingly major aid, economic and diplomatic partner not only with Fiji, but also with countries like Vanuatu and PNG (Wallis, 2017, p. 131).

Overall, therefore, there is a clear tension built into the relationship between the South Pacific and Australia: South Pacific states are undertaking a diversification move right at a time when Australia is taking a renewed interest in the region. Australia's return to the Pacific is motivated largely by strategic considerations, while the Pacific islands appear to be more interested in principles like autonomy, sovereignty, economic development, and climate change. This sets up great potential for misaligned aims and incompatible objectives; certainly, developments like the departure of PIF members indicate increasing ambivalence on the part of some Commonwealth (and non-Commonwealth) PICs about the regional order in which Australia dominates, and an increasing sense that PICs can get what they want elsewhere.

## Caribbean

In the beginning of this paper, we noted some important commonalities between the South Pacific and the Commonwealth Caribbean, but it is important to note that there are distinct differences as well. The first of these is in the depth and degree of colonial experience: Britain first established itself in the Caribbean in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, building an African-slave-based plantation economy producing sugar and other crops. In time, Britain came to control many of the islands in the Caribbean. Indeed, a large majority of the populations of the Commonwealth Caribbean are in fact descended from one form or another of British-imported labour: African slaves were but the first group to be brought or lured to the islands. Accordingly, because the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean were largely destroyed by centuries of European colonialism, Britain's long possession of the majority of the region's islands left a deep mark on the makeup of the population. Secondly, perhaps reflecting the higher investment of colonial capital in Caribbean societies, coupled with greater concentrations of population and wealth and proximity to the global economy, economic development among Caribbean states is higher than in the Pacific: the Commonwealth Caribbean's 2019 collective GDP per capita (\$10,500) is substantially higher than the Pacific's island states' equivalent figure of \$4,264 (minus PNG). (World Bank, 2021b, 2021c)

### *British and Caribbean relations*

The affinities generated by Britain's colonial legacy ensure Caribbean states have a greater proclivity for the Commonwealth. Indeed, Commonwealth heritage and identity forms the motivating logic for one of the main regional institutions: states there organise themselves in a formal grouping, the Caribbean Community – or CARICOM – originally organised among English-speaking Caribbean states. Currently, there are fifteen states with full CARICOM membership: Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Lucia, St Kitts and Nevis, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. (CARICOM, 2021) Not all of these members are Commonwealth countries, but the Commonwealth's historical, social, and political legacies are strong enough to inform a regional identity and form the organising principle for what is arguably the main regional institution. Indeed, this is the primary contribution of the Commonwealth to regional politics: an ordering identity. This *should* predispose the Commonwealth Caribbean to have a much closer relationship with Britain than Australia does towards the Pacific, but this is not the case. Instead, formal Commonwealth ties provide a relatively limited basis for interaction between Britain and the Caribbean island states, functioning mostly as a diplomatic and political platform.

There are strong cultural links between CARICOM countries and the UK, reflected in the significant British Caribbean diaspora. Many Caribbean people moved to Britain in the post-WWII era, symbolised by the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* bringing migrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean countries (BBC, 2019). This development heralded the arrival of many more Caribbean immigrants whose cultural presence in British society has transcended their relatively small size and the often-systemic racism endured by Black Britons. Currently, although only around 1% of the UK population are thought

to belong to the Black Caribbean community, their cultural contributions to British society remain significant (Government of the United Kingdom, 2019). For example, Caribbean influences are intertwined through much of contemporary British music, while Caribbean food has become a staple of British diets. These and other cultural contributions are celebrated every year at enormous popular festivals including the Notting Hill and St Pauls Carnivals, reflecting significant Caribbean communities in major urban centres and those communities' pride in their identity and contribution to British culture (Taylor & Kneafsey, 2016, p. 188). The islands themselves serve as a strong focus for British tourism: the Caribbean Tourism Organisation registered 1.2 million UK visitors in 2015, with Barbados and Jamaica each receiving around 200,000 Britons (Special Report, 2016). British governments emphasise cultural connections in their rhetoric about Caribbean relationships: Foreign Minister Dominic Raab's opening remarks at the 10<sup>th</sup> UK-Caribbean Forum argued that 'we are more than friends, we are family' (Government of the United Kingdom, 2021a). Raab's statement built on older sentiments expressed by previous British leaders, including David Cameron, who emphasised the historical, cultural, and economic links between Britain and the Commonwealth Caribbean in a 2015 address to the Jamaican parliament (Cameron & Government of the United Kingdom, 2015).

These cultural ties have not translated directly into 'harder' political and economic ties of similar strength, however. The UK has a mixed record of aid and economic engagement with the region, marked by fluctuations of commitment. In 2018/19, the UK spent £104 million on aid to the Caribbean, channelled mostly into infrastructure funds, health facilities, and climate change/renewable energy measures (Department for International Development, 2018). Much of this was delivered through multilateral bodies' programmes including the Caribbean Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Pan American Health Organisation, and the World Bank (Department for International Development, 2018). The UK Government funds infrastructure through the UK's Caribbean Infrastructure Fund (UKCIF), which had an initial allocation of £330 million (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and Government of the United Kingdom, 2021).

British and Caribbean governments have also flagged COVID-19 and climate change resilience as areas of future aid and economic cooperation (CARICOM Secretariat, 2021). The overarching trend, however, is one of undeniable decline. British aid has steadily diminished in scale, reflecting a slackening of British interest in the Caribbean. One key marker of this is the collapsing total value of British Caribbean assistance: from the 2018/19 high of £104 million, the UK's spending dropped to £41 million in the 2019/20 period, and currently sits at £23.9 million for the 2020/21 financial period, spread across 15 projects (Department for International Development, 2018).

Economically, a similar pattern prevails. There is a lopsided trade relationship between the two parties: Britain is the main destination for Caribbean exports, with the island countries supplying the UK with agricultural products and minerals, and the UK sending back manufactured and finished goods (Department for International Trade, 2019a, p. 10). This trade is economically insignificant to Britain, with trade between the UK and the CARICOM countries valued at £2.5 billion, or 0.1% of British exports and 0.3% of imports (Department for International Trade, 2019a, p. 8).

Brexit has also caused trouble for Caribbean countries, because Britain's membership in the EU meant London could lobby Europe for Caribbean aid, and argue on behalf of the Caribbean's offshore finance industry, which is regarded with (justifiable) suspicion by the EU (Sanders, 2016). In 2019, Britain signed the CARIFORUM-UK Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), ensuring continuity of trade in sectors important to the Caribbean economy, including sugar, agricultural products, and spirits (Department for International Trade, 2019b). There is some suggestion that Britain is keen to develop these trade relationships post-Brexit, with London appointing a trade envoy charged with developing closer UK-Caribbean trade relations in December 2020 (Department for International Development, 2018, p. 2; Morgan, 2020). Despite these efforts, however, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Caribbean remains marginal to Britain from aid and economic perspectives, given the decline in aid spending and the miniscule role that Caribbean economies play in sustaining British wealth.

Security and law enforcement agency cooperation forms a more consistent if equally low-level dimension of British-Caribbean relations. The UK Armed Forces have a standing presence in the region, most notably in the form of Royal Navy vessels which conduct security patrols, drug seizures and smuggling interdiction operations, and humanitarian support activities, particularly in the clean-up period following annual hurricane seasons (Clegg, 2006, pp. 416–417). The British Army has also undertaken exercises there alongside Jamaican troops (Clegg, 2006, pp. 417, Royal Navy, 2020a, 2020b). This seems to be an ongoing commitment: the Royal Navy maintains a permanent presence through its Atlantic Patrol Tasking (North) standing deployment. In 2020, the Royal Navy committed two ships – the *RFA Argus* and the *HMS Medway* – to the Caribbean, tasked with the usual mix of humanitarian and counter-narcotics missions (Nurse, 2020). British forces and government officials have also been involved in training local law enforcement in various capacities including watercraft and navigation and first aid, among other skills (Royal Navy, 2016).

Despite the consistency of low-level British security participation in the Caribbean, overall, the theme of decline is the defining characteristic of the 'hard' aspects of British-CARICOM relations. Indeed, Peter Clegg has observed that British-Caribbean relations have slowly diminished in strength since the beginnings of formal decolonisation in the early 1960s (Clegg, 2006). That is not to say that the islands are completely marginal to British foreign policy: there is potential for stronger British-Caribbean relationships under the Global Britain agenda, but the legacy imparted by the Commonwealth is currently not enough to sustain a major programme of diplomatic or trade interaction (Bardouille, 2021). Part of this decline lies in changing global economic patterns: the islands no longer have the same economic importance to Britain thanks to the decreased importance of agricultural products to the British economy. Instead, the real strength of the UK-CARICOM relationship lies in its more intangible aspects: culture and history.

### ***Dynamics beyond the Commonwealth***

Unlike in the Australian case, there appears to be more of a reversal in the dynamic of interest between the large and small powers. In the Caribbean, it is the larger power whose interest and involvement in the relationship has declined, with the result that there

is now a process of increasing autonomy and activism on the part of Caribbean states in international politics. As a bloc, CARICOM possesses a more robust and well-developed foreign policy, particularly when compared with the nascent efforts by Pacific states.

These efforts at developing alternatives have followed several similar patterns. Firstly, Caribbean states have demonstrated a marked proclivity for institutionalisation. This is best expressed in the CARICOM grouping itself, which unites all the island states of the eastern Caribbean along with Belize, Guyana and Suriname into a single bloc (CARICOM, 2021). CARICOM functions by drawing funds from members to promote institutions conducting collective action on trade negotiations, tertiary education funding, climate change, infrastructure development, resource management, and justice, among a host of other programmes (CARICOM, 2020). As such, CARICOM is a key source of expertise and technical management for some of the region's micro-states, and it is therefore of vital importance for many of its members both for the material benefits it brings and also for the sense of community it engenders among a region marked by differing linguistic and ethnic experiences. This is not to say that it is a harmonious and more perfect union of interests, however: CARICOM's integrity continues to face a series of internal and external pressures. Internally, efforts to implement a single market and economy have met with limited success, and there have been equally limited subscriptions to the universal court mechanisms (Lewis, 2016, p. 533). The internal politics of some of the larger members, particularly Jamaica, have played host to anti-CARICOM sentiment fuelled by Jamaican trade deficits, and there have also been tensions between Jamaica and other members over the migration of citizens between member states, particularly around the issue of employment (Lewis, 2016, p. 536). CARICOM has also faced difficulties in making its economic voice heard in larger forums, encountering particular difficulty in negotiating independently with the European Union, which it does under the guise of the CARIFORUM grouping (Williams, 2015, p. 27).

Besides institutionalisation, Caribbean states have pursued great-power patronage. Unsurprisingly, the United States has historically been the major regional superpower, but its interest in the Caribbean peaked during the Cold War and has been in decline ever since. Venezuela seized on Washington's Caribbean apathy, with the Chavez government translating high oil prices into an activist foreign policy agenda from 2005 onwards, mainly through two energy-related initiatives, PetroCaribe and Alba Caribe (Sanders, 2007, pp. 465–466). In return, Washington has countered by expanding Caribbean access to alternative and renewable sources of energy, particularly in Jamaica (Johnson, 2019). Venezuela's moves were not universally popular among CARICOM members, with some states reportedly dissatisfied with Caracas's efforts to turn its economic leverage into political influence (Sanders, 2007, p. 469). This opinion split has undermined CARICOM voting unity in larger international organisations, particularly in the Organisation of American States over resolutions around the various actions of the Venezuelan government (Johnson, 2019).

Caribbean states have also begun to court powers from further afield. China has begun to build links in the region through institutional means (the China–Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum and the China Caribbean Business Council) as well as through the pursuit of bilateral relationships, particularly with Jamaica (Bernal, 2010, pp. 282–283). Beijing offers a mix of economic assistance (\$87 million in 2010) for certain

industries, particularly shrimp farming and bamboo weaving, plus the construction of stadia, hospitals and other prestige infrastructure (Bernal, 2010, p. 284). Russia has also expressed some interest in deepening ties with the CARICOM countries, particularly Suriname. Moscow's efforts typically revolve around the acquisition of raw materials (energy, bauxite) and some low-level military cooperation (Clegg & Clegg, 2018, p. 94).

## Comparison and analysis

Indeed, this expansion of involvement with outside powers parallels what has happened in the South Pacific, as countries there seek to broaden their political, strategic, and economic options, although the PICs' efforts to diversify their relationships is complicated by strategic rivalry between Australia and China. In the case of the South Pacific, Australia's traditional relationship with the island countries there remains strong, grounded in 'hard' economic and political engagement with the region, entirely incidental to Australian politicians' appeals to concepts of family and community. Commonwealth legacies including language and some shared cultural attributes (particularly sport) are therefore best understood as *enablers* of the relationship, not a motivating force: the strength of Australia's relationship with Pacific Island states is founded far more on the aid, strategic, economic, and political benefits it can provide. In the Caribbean, the matter is somewhat different. There, the historical and social legacies of the Commonwealth play a more fundamental role as the background for the CARICOM grouping, reflecting the deeply-imprinted patterns emerging from colonialism.

Although the Caribbean-UK relationship is not founded on the same lines of political, strategic, and economic interest that define the Australia-South Pacific relationship, this is not to suggest that it is necessarily *weaker*, however. Although cultural and social ties are less tangible than aid dollars or patrol boats, they still form the basis for deep affinities and predilections whose impact on state alignments and preferences should not be underestimated. The weight of history and culture matters just as much as donations and interventions.

Despite these differences, there are also commonalities across both cases. Firstly, perhaps the most consistent aspect of state-state relationships has always occurred in the security realm, with Australian and British national-security apparatuses remaining consistently engaged with the respective island state communities over time. In the Australian-South Pacific case the DCP is regarded as the single biggest regional policy success, largely because the island states' governments feel it is more sensitive to their priorities rather than an outside imposition (Wallis, 2020). The DCP's offer of skills training and transfer and officer exchange combines with joint surveillance operations and exercises to create a sense that Australia facilitates the improvement of some South Pacific states' security.

In terms of physical presence, the ADF has also been the most consistent part of the state apparatus to be involved in the region: the Royal Australian Navy and the Royal Australian Air Force routinely conduct patrols, search and rescue, ceremonial duties and celebrations, and humanitarian work throughout the islands. (Bendle, 2005; Long, 2020; Smith, 2020a, 2020b; Whiteley, 2020) The British relationship with the Commonwealth

Caribbean exemplifies a similar trend: the Royal Navy's standing North Atlantic patrol tasking involves a similar range of patrol, enforcement, and humanitarian activities.

Similarly, security concerns drive the other dimensions of large-power involvement. This is more pronounced in the Australian case: the Pacific Step-Up is largely motivated by fear of outside – particularly Chinese – strategic penetration of a region viewed by Canberra as its near abroad. The Pacific Step-Up is part of a wider Australian return to Asia, including new efforts at conceptual entrepreneurship (the Indo-Pacific) and welding together great-power coalitions (the Quad, involving Japan, India, and the US), both to refocus international-political attention on the Pacific basin and counter China. The Step-Up aids this effort by re-creating a community of interest among PICs orbiting Canberra, not Beijing. This effort has gained urgency from what has been termed the 'New Pacific Diplomacy': efforts to diversify Pacific Island relationships have shaken Australian policymakers out of their Pacific island apathy (Fry & Tarte, 2015, p. 6).

British security interest in the Caribbean has been similarly consistent, although it occurs at a lower intensity than Australia's Pacific activity. The small size of British commitment is grounded in two facts. Firstly, the Caribbean sits in Washington's strategic backyard, meaning the US military's presence tempers major security issues, and secondly the greater distance of the Caribbean from British shores ensures that it cannot function as a base of threat against British society. Despite its relative modesty, however, Britain's security commitment to the Caribbean remains consistent.

The second commonality lies in how smaller states broaden their options and autonomy. The first method is institutionalisation, which helps resolve disputes, pool technical expertise and capacity, and create commonality of interest and attention to issues important to the small states. For the Commonwealth Caribbean, this tendency is expressed in the CARICOM grouping, which emerged in 1973 as an agreement between Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago, expanding to include all of the Commonwealth Caribbean and later incorporating the non-Commonwealth states of Haiti and Suriname. The region plays host to other institutions as well: all CARICOM members are also members of either or both the Association of Caribbean States and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, both of which have various development goals and proposed common mechanisms.

Pacific Island states exhibit a similar trend. Initial, post-colonial efforts at institutionalisation crystallised into the Australia/New Zealand-dominated Pacific Islands Forum, which is increasingly superseded by other regional institutions, particularly the PIDF and the MSG, both of which Australia observes but does not participate in. These two forums' emergence is driven by Pacific states' local concerns, as well as Canberra and Wellington's perceived insensitivities towards issues like climate change. This can have a centrifugal effect on the old relationships: as these small states become better at managing international politics outside their traditional partnerships, they have less incentive to rely on older patterns of engagement.

Small states in the Caribbean and the Pacific have also struck out alone. In the Pacific, we saw that Fiji's foreign policies represent a new independence in its international relations: it courts other large powers, cultivates globe-spanning diplomatic connections, and pursues a more activist agenda closer to home. Although more independence does not entail abandoning institutions (indeed, in Fiji's case, it involves creating *more* of them), it tolerates or participates in institutions only so long as they expand Fiji's freedom

of action. The same trends can be observed in the Caribbean. Trinidad and Tobago has undertaken significant foreign policy activity with both Venezuela and the United States independent of a CARICOM framework, although these efforts have been largely unsuccessful (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010, pp. 414–419). Jamaica also plays a large unilateral role and is frequently in dispute with other CARICOM members over issues of people movement and trade, due to a significant domestic constituency hostile to any loss of sovereignty. (Lewis, 2016, p. 534) In all three countries' cases, achieving a certain level of economic development vis-à-vis the region seems to be correlated with a stepping-away from regional institutions: Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Fiji are among the wealthiest countries by GDP (PPP) per capita measures in their regions (World Bank, 2021a).

Increased commitment on the part of the larger power – particularly in the Australian-South Pacific case – has *not* resulted in deinstitutionalisation followed by resumption of the original patron-client patterns which characterised Australian-South Pacific relations. Although the power imbalances between South Pacific states and external powers remain stark, PICs show no sign of wishing to return to traditional relationship patterns with Australia despite its Pacific Step-Up. Instead, the region appears to be increasingly diversifying its international politics, giving PICs options which serve, at the very least, as bargaining chips in negotiations in Canberra. The recent defections from the Pacific Islands Forum by Nauru and Kiribati are clear examples that Pacific Commonwealth states increasingly feel confident in abandoning traditional relationships if they feel existing arrangements no longer work for them (Carreon & Doherty, 2021). In the Caribbean, this trend is again more muted but still present: the case of the OAS votes demonstrates that Commonwealth Caribbean states as a bloc are ambivalent about external powers' machinations: by splitting their votes, they demonstrate a range of different reactions to the normal incentives applied by great powers to small.

## Conclusion

Within the Commonwealth there exists a significant degree of diversity in the nature and strength of relations between large and small states. In the Australian-South Pacific case, the larger power is actively recommitting to the region and attempting to shape the political terrain in its favour. This appears to contrast with British-Caribbean relations: although the UK maintains ties and shares a sense of historical and cultural affinity with the Caribbean, the longer arc of the two-way relationship's 'hard' components is undeniably one of weakening bonds and slackening ties. This looks set to continue, especially given the UK's stated intent to refocus on the Indo-Pacific region (Government of the United Kingdom, 2021b, p. 66). It is important not to push this analysis too far, however. Although the British-Caribbean relationship is not necessarily founded in issues as urgent as the Australian-South Pacific relationship, it still has a strength of its own, resting as it does on the more intimate ties of culture, population exchange, and leisure.

These two different models have important implications for the Commonwealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the grouping's history includes the difficult legacies of colonialism, the Commonwealth also has the potential to be a vehicle for liberal-democratic ideals and values, ensuring it still has much to offer the international community. Theoretically, the smallest members should be the most committed to its existence due



to the benefits arising from partnerships with larger Commonwealth countries. As we have seen, however, the small island states involved in this study – particularly in the Pacific – tend to be quite hard-headed in their foreign relations and are quite willing to court other partners to extract the maximum possible benefit from their foreign policies. If the Commonwealth is to continue to have meaningful existence beyond the cultural realm, then large and wealthy member states must help less-developed members attain their economic and political goals.

## Disclosure statement

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