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THE PACIFIC WAY – SPECIFICS OF SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONALISM

Nikolay N. GORIACHEV¹

¹IHAЕ FEB RAS, Vladivostok, Russia

goryachev@ihaefe.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3582-5611>

Abstract: The article examines the specifics of regional identity and the model of regional cooperation in the South Pacific, known as the “Pacific Way”. The study is based on the hypothesis that contemporary ideas of regionalism promoted by the Pacific Small Island States (PSIS) have developed under the influence of unique internal and external factors, acquiring ideological features not inherent in other regional models. Internal factors include the historical development of the region and its vulnerabilities stemming from the geographical environment. The key external factor has been the legacy of colonialism and persistent geopolitical pressure.

The author traces the evolution of regionalism from the colonial period, characterized by Eurocentric discourse, through the process of “managed decolonization”, to the establishment of the South Pacific Forum (now Pacific Islands Forum) in 1971. The concept of the “Pacific Way”, first articulated by Ratu Kamisese Mara, evolved from denoting a peaceful transition to independence into a comprehensive socio-philosophical value system formulated by Epeli Hau'ofa. This philosophy, based on mutual respect, consensus, communality, and collective diplomacy, has proven its practical significance. It has enabled small states to effectively defend their interests, as evidenced by the signing of the Treaty of Rarotonga and subsequent strategic documents of the Forum, such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. The analysis concludes that the “Pacific Way” serves as an effective ideological and practical foundation for regional consolidation in the face of ongoing geopolitical rivalry.

Keywords: *South Pacific, regionalism, colonization, decolonization, Pacific Way, Pacific Island Forum*

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Научная статья. Исторические науки

ТИХООКЕАНСКИЙ ПУТЬ – СПЕЦИФИКА ЮЖНО-ТИХООКЕАНСКОГО РЕГИОНАЛИЗМА

Николай Николаевич ГОРЯЧЕВ ¹

¹ ИИАЭ ДВО РАН, Владивосток, Россия,
goryachev@ihaefe.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3582-5611>

Аннотация: Статья посвящена исследованию специфики региональной идентичности и модели регионального сотрудничества в Южно-Тихоокеанском регионе, известной как «Тихоокеанский путь». Исследование строится на гипотезе о том, что современные представления о регионализме, продвигаемые малыми островными государствами Тихого океана, сформировались под влиянием уникальных внутренних и внешних факторов и обладают идеологическими особенностями, не присущими другим региональным моделям. Внутренними факторами выступили историческое развитие региона и его уязвимости, обусловленные географической средой. Ключевым внешним фактором стало наследие колониализма и постоянное геополитическое давление.

Автор прослеживает эволюцию регионализма от колониального периода, характеризуемого евроцентристским дискурсом, через процесс «управляемой деколонизации» к созданию в 1971 г. Южнотихоокеанского форума (ныне Форум тихоокеанских островов). Концепция «Тихоокеанского пути», впервые озвученная Камисесе Мара, прошла путь от обозначения мирного перехода к независимости до целостной социально-философской системы ценностей, сформулированной Эпели Хау'офой. Эта философия, основанная на взаимном уважении, консенсусе, общинности и коллективной дипломатии, доказала свою практическую значимость, позволив малым государствам эффективно отстаивать свои интересы, что подтверждается подписанием Договора Раротонги и последующими стратегическими документами Форума.

Ключевые слова: Южно-Тихоокеанский регион, регионализм, колониализм, деколонизация, «Тихоокеанский путь», Форум Тихоокеанских Островов.

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The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is currently the only organization in Oceania responsible for formulating and promoting a regional political agenda. The South Pacific region holds significant prospects for resource exploitation (both bio-resources and minerals) and the development of maritime logistics, making it an arena for geopolitical rivalry. Such rivalry (in this case, between China and the US) significantly complicates the development of a common PIF agenda, as it creates certain political pressure. A particular issue is the role of Australia and New Zealand within the PIF, as their positions regarding participation in new US initiatives (primarily AUKUS) raise concerns among the Pacific Island States (PIS) about regional militarization and a departure from the principles of the so-called “Pacific Way”. The current atmosphere of apprehension resembles that which existed in the region in the 1980⁵. The escalation of contradictions and tensions between the USSR and the USA during the Cold War led to the consolidation of the PIS and the preparation of one of the foundational documents for regional unity – the Treaty of Rarotonga.

The main problems of geopolitical confrontation are examined in a number of articles by various authors, who consider both individual aspects concerning specific countries^{1,2,3}, and groups of countries⁴, as well as the PIF as a whole^{5 6}.

The hypothesis of this article is that contemporary ideas of regionalism promoted by the PIS, evolving in a post-colonial and neo-colonial (and partially in a post-hegemonic regionalism) reality, have acquired unique ideological features not inherent in other regional models. Moreover, this development was dictated more by the historical process than by anything else. These characteristics are explained, on the one hand, by the features of the South Pacific space as a whole. The historical development of the region, its traditional vulnerabilities, the genesis of which lies primarily in the geographical environment, are internal factors in identity formation. On the other hand, due to colonialism and its legacy, the region exists in a state of constant geopolitical stress – the main external factor. Its significance for identity formation is critical, as it pushes small states to seek and implement new models of cooperation and to establish a regional order based on both rules and international law. This, in turn, provokes geopolitical tension.

Based on this hypothesis, the aim of the article is to study the internal and external conditions, prerequisites, and features of the formation of Pacific regional identity during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The practical result of this process was the establishment in 1971 of the South Pacific Forum, which since 2000 has been known by its current name – the

Pacific Islands Forum, and the theoretical result – the formation of the concept of the “Pacific Way”. This concept subsequently served as the basis for developing the Forum's political course, and its key significance persists to this day.

Historical Prerequisites for the Development of Civilizational Identity. Colonial Discourse

The Age of Discovery served as a trigger for the colonial expansion of European countries. The expeditions of the late 15th to early 17th centuries were driven not only by purely geographical interest but were also aimed at finding new sources to fuel the economies of European empires – the extraction of gold, silver, and other precious resources through the plunder or even extermination of the peoples who possessed them. During the era of mercantilism (mid-17th to late 18th centuries), overseas possessions were also viewed through a similar lens; however, during this period, alongside the extraction of raw materials, colonies were being developed as markets for the metropolises, as well as for organizing production and exploiting resources locally with their subsequent processing. The creation of companies like the East India and West India Companies consolidated state policy through public-private partnerships and provided a powerful economic incentive for colonial development. During this time, colonies became a troubling factor in international relations, and disputes over their possession escalated into conflicts between European powers. Under the conditions of industrial imperialism in the 19th century, new countries – Belgium, Germany, and Italy – joined the ranks of active colonizers. Industrial economies required raw materials, markets, and new investment opportunities. The very essence of colonial expansion was justified by ideas of racial and cultural superiority (the so-called “White Man's Burden”).

To a certain extent, the process of colonizing Oceania occurred within the same paradigm as in other regions of the world. However, unlike America or Asia, it was a more protracted process. European expeditions were mostly exploratory in nature. Blank spots on maps were filled in, but no one claimed control over the territories. The exception is the establishment of Spanish control over Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands in the 17th century. After the exploratory phase ended, from the late 18th century, missionaries from both Protestant and Catholic organizations began to penetrate the island territories of Oceania. But this process was not a deliberate state policy; it was rather a private initiative, similar to the appearance of European traders and whalers. Furthermore, most island territories did not hold great economic significance in terms of natural resource exploita-

tion, and the desire to possess them was aimed at addressing issues of control over the Pacific Ocean from security and logistical perspectives.

Oceania was not affected by colonial conflicts to the same extent as other directions of European colonization. Nevertheless, confrontation took various forms, not limited to armed conflict alone. The most common were economic and diplomatic rivalries. Such was, for example, the rivalry between France and Britain for dominance over Polynesia from the mid-19th century. Moreover, this struggle had a character that today we would call ideological warfare or “soft power”, conducted through missionary work and persuasion, imposing Western values. Unique entities also emerged in the region, for instance, the joint administration (condominium) of France and Britain over the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), which lasted until 1980. The most striking example of armed confrontation is the Samoan Crisis between Germany, the USA, and Great Britain in 1887-1889.

However, it can be said that it was during this time that Europeans began to comprehend the specificity of the region. Missionaries often held the opinion that the island territories of Oceania were “devilish places devoid of virtue as such”^{7,8}. Although there was also a different viewpoint among them, according to which Protestant missionary activity negatively impacted local communities, and the islanders were not inherently lazy and culturally underdeveloped⁹.

The assertion of determinist concepts largely served to justify colonialism, which was reinforced by academic research. For example, the studies of Ellsworth Huntington significantly demonstrated such justification and reinforcement¹⁰. However, it can be noted that Huntington (as well as Otis Mason¹¹) successfully identified one of the main internal factors of regional development – the influence of climate on civilizations. For Oceania, this issue is, as we have already mentioned, one of the key internal challenges. Critics later challenged many of the conclusions of such studies, debunking geographical and environmental determinism as an extremely Eurocentric model that denied, among other things, the distinct culture of the peoples of Oceania^{12,13}.

Regarding Toynbee's views, the question of the existence of Polynesian civilization was considered on a more substantive basis¹⁴. For Toynbee, Polynesian civilization was a convenient, “ideal type” – a clear example confirming his theory of Challenge-and-Response and what happens when the creative impulse wanes. He viewed Polynesian civilization as a classic example of an “arrested civilization”. This was justified by several theses. Firstly, the Pacific Ocean was a hyper-challenge, to which the Polynesians gave a very successful response, developing seafaring, navigation,

and adapting to the environment. Secondly, having conquered the ocean, the Polynesians encountered a new environment – small, highly isolated islands. The challenge of these islands as an environment (the necessity of agriculture, creating social structures) was much less severe than the challenge of the ocean. After successfully responding to the challenge, no new global challenges followed for Polynesian civilization, and the creative development of the civilization faded. It stagnated and did not produce achievements characteristic primarily of the Western model of civilizational development, upon which Toynbee relied in his studies.

Later criticism of Toynbee's viewpoint showed that Polynesian societies were not static and developed quite dynamically. Their economic and governance structures were not a sign of stagnation but stemmed from the features of the environment¹⁵. We can also criticize Toynbee for his methodological assumptions. By placing non-Western (including Polynesian societies) into abstract categories, he thus deprives them of their own history and agency, despite the fact that all societies were involved in historical processes and had their own context of causal interaction.

From the perspective of post-colonial studies, it can be said that Toynbee thus created a dichotomy (dynamic and developing West vs. static and stagnating Others), measuring the civilizational heritage of the non-West by a Western scale of values. It is also necessary to note that the very presence of complex state formations in island Oceania (for example, the Kingdom of Tonga and the Kingdom of Tahiti) already indicates at least a complex evolution of state-building without the influence of Western ideas. The structure of Pacific societies was quite complex, and the culture developed dynamically. However, they were not united in any way into a single institutional space. What united them was the Pacific Ocean itself, as a geographical environment.

Thus, a rather complex discourse arose around the colonial presence, largely justifying it. The specificity of the colonial narrative allowed for explaining the necessity of applying Western governance models by regional backwardness. But at the same time, it should be considered that the research and views of the colonial period laid an important foundation for this article in terms of further understanding of the events in the region, highlighting certain trends in regional development.

Decolonization: from the South Pacific Commission to the Pacific Islands Forum

The World War II became the culmination of the confrontation laid down in the colonial period. Victory over Japanese militarism, on the one hand, meant the end of Japanese colonial exploitation. But, on the other hand, colonial administration persisted. The impact of military actions on the local population in the South Pacific region was, perhaps, much stronger than in Africa. Not only due to the scale of military operations but also from the perspective of increased Western presence in the South Pacific.

The end of the war significantly strengthened the regional positions of the USA. According to the decision and in accordance with the UN Charter, the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands was created¹⁶. And in a certain sense, from 1947, the USA took Japan's place in the structure of the colonial administration architecture.

Also in 1947, another event occurred in the region that substantially changed the colonial structure. The South Pacific Commission was established, comprising – the powers having dependent territories in the region. Initially, ideas about creating such a structure were expressed by Australia and New Zealand and were included in an intergovernmental agreement of 1944¹⁷. Both sides believed that such a commission for the South Seas should ensure a common policy in the field of political, social, and economic development to improve the standard of living and welfare of the indigenous peoples of the region. Specific measures envisaged recommendations for expanding the participation of residents in governance to ultimately achieve self-government in a form that would suit the Pacific peoples themselves. And also specific issues in the economic (production, finance, marketing, etc.), social (health and education) spheres and mechanisms of cooperation in these areas.

The Canberra Agreement establishing the SPC¹⁸ is an evolution of the initial idea. However, the main roles in the commission belonged primarily to the metropolises. At the same time, the distribution of financial roles was unequal and reflected the desire of Australia and New Zealand to somehow cement their notions of being “shepherds” of the island territories. Also, the commission's work did not include political issues or security matters. These topics were excluded from the competencies of the Body.

G. Fry calls the creation of the Commission and the initiation of the South Pacific Conferences the “South Pacific experiment”. He emphasizes the important regional features that became evident in the work of the new body: government bodies, representation, and administration were at une-

ven stages of development depending on the territory. In some places, power was highly institutionalized, as, for example, in the Kingdom of Tonga. And in some territories, delegates were selected based on their significance to local communities. This state of affairs determined the difference in approaches to self-determination, or more precisely – to the question of realizing the necessity of such a step for a particular territory¹⁹.

In the 1960^s, independence movements in Africa and Asia created space for the development of anti-colonial sentiments on a global scale. The South Pacific region was no exception. The policies of colonial powers also changed because of this, were varied, and in some ways unique.

For Great Britain, the decolonization of its dependent Pacific islands not only reflected a revision of the British government's policy towards its imperial legacy. The attitude towards the region as a whole changed. From the start of its campaign to join the European Economic Community in the 1960^s, Britain gradually withdrew from regions remote from the metropolis. At the same time, after decolonization, it continued to provide assistance to its former territories in the Pacific, but only at a minimal level. They all remained members of the British Commonwealth of Nations. But this did not imply direct financial aid. The costs of maintaining public services and the level of development assistance that would help maintain political stability in the South Pacific were shifted to countries with more direct strategic or economic interests in the region – the United States, France, Australia, and New Zealand.

For Australia and New Zealand, the post-war structure of the region was more a matter of international respectability. The decolonization policy pursued by New Zealand was innovative and highly rated by the UN. This positive assessment was largely the result of a flexible approach made possible by New Zealand's lack of significant strategic or economic interests in its trust territories – Western Samoa²⁰, the Cook Islands²¹, and Niue²². In the case of Nauru, with its phosphate reserves, the New Zealand government's position in the initial stage was noticeably less accommodating. Australia, in turn, showed less resolve in matters of decolonizing its Pacific territory – Papua New Guinea, which was the cause of international criticism^{23,24}. The Australian authorities encountered a complex set of internal problems there and were forced to consider their own strategic and economic interests in the region.

The uniqueness of the decolonization process by Australia and New Zealand lies in the fact that its course and final forms were determined to a decisive degree by the metropolises. At the same time, a new form of governance was implemented – “free association” for the Cook Islands and

Niue. In general, with the exception of Nauru, the colonial authorities themselves provided the controlled territories with political autonomy, often ahead of the actual demands of the local population. The return of sovereignty in the 1960^s-1970^s, like the initial colonization, was dictated primarily by the interests and needs of the colonial powers, not their dependent peoples. This process can be characterized as managed decolonization, or “decolonization from above”.

As a result of World War II, the United States acquired three island territories: American Samoa, Hawaii, and Guam. After World War II, the UN Trust Territory in Micronesia was added. The American presence in the region was primarily motivated by strategic military security interests, confirmed by their use as naval bases. In the post-war period, the strategic logic of “denying” hostile powers (primarily the Soviet bloc) access became the cornerstone of US policy, subordinating economic development and the governance of indigenous populations to military needs. US policy towards dependent territories was also influenced by three factors: ideological aversion to its own colonial status, based on confidence in the US's exceptional role as a defender of democracy; the lack of desire among some island peoples to break ties with the US; and the reluctance of Congress and the federal bureaucracy to relinquish control over the territories.

This self-perception led to a certain paradox: the US did not develop a consistent colonial policy, did not train colonial administrators, and did not recognize the necessity of decolonization, which became relevant for the region from the 1960^s. But the US *de facto* was a colonial power, whose policy was characterized by strategic expediency and ideological duality. Under pressure from international institutions, the US was also forced to initiate decolonization processes, although it showed no internal drive for it²⁵. And the process dragged on for decades and also led to the creation of associated territories instead of truly sovereign states – American Samoa, the Marshall Islands, etc.

France's position differed from other colonial powers in its desire to retain control over territories without alienating them. French colonial administration policy had two doctrinal extremes – assimilation and association, which successively replaced one another. The policy of assimilation implied the gradual transformation of colonies into French possessions, little different from the territories of the metropolis. Mainly – through the virtual destruction of the culture of the autochthonous population. This doctrine was implemented in the Maghreb countries, where its shortcomings became obvious. Moreover – Algeria became the main evidence of the failure of such a policy. It was replaced by the more universal doctrine of as-

sociation. Its proponents wanted to create a flexible basis for native policy, the specific features of which would be determined by the local administration of any colony according to its level of development and the strength of its native institutions²⁶. It was this model that was applied to France's Pacific possessions, and it was more sparing for the autochthonous population.

The issue of Pacific territories for France was essentially in the same scope as for the US – a problem of ensuring security. Although France saw itself as a colonial empire, the decolonization process was closely linked to securing nuclear interests. After Algeria gained independence in 1962, the Pacific Ocean became the only place where France could conduct nuclear tests. Furthermore, the possession of overseas territories allows France to have the most extensive maritime EEZs in the world. It is necessary to note that, strictly speaking, colonial rule does not persist on these French territories, since on the one hand, each of them can theoretically achieve constitutional independence simply by voting for it in elections, and on the other hand, they already have a certain degree of internal self-government. But as practice shows, such aspirations are not encouraged by France – as evidenced by events in New Caledonia since the 1980^s, this is clearly understood.

Thus, the decolonization process was not only significantly protracted in time but also, based on France's actions, effectively unfinished.

In the early 1960^s, dissatisfaction was growing within the South Pacific Commission among island territories over their limited influence on the decision-making process. A turning point was the sixth conference in Lae (1965), where delegates from the territories openly criticized the dominance of the former metropolises. The initiator of what later became known as the "Lae Rebellion" was the representative of Fiji, Ratu Kamisese Mara – later one of the most authoritative Fijian leaders in history. He himself described the events as follows: «For some time we had felt that the constitution and procedures of the South Pacific Commission were too rigid, and that the attitudes of what may be called the administering powers were at best too paternalistic, and at worst arrogant and autocratic. This feeling boiled over at the conference in Lae, Papua New Guinea, in 1965, over the ban on political discussion. In 1962 Western Samoa had become independent and Nauru was on the way. In Fiji we were trying to stem the tide of independence whipped up by agitation at the United Nations. We wanted to talk about it, to hear the views of the main countries in the South Pacific Commission. But we were not allowed. France was the most insistent on this, probably on account of its own vulnerable position in the Pacific, because of both its overseas territories there and its nuclear-testing pro-

gramme at Mururoa Atoll. Economic and social issues, oui, politics, non. We decided that if we could not talk inside the conference room we would talk outside, and the island leaders talked politics far into the night. Eventually our patience inside was exhausted, and I found I was the one “to bell the cat”. I walked out of the conference, and the rest of the Pacific delegates followed – Papua New Guinea, the Cook Islands, both Samoas, and Tonga. The next day, when the commission refused to meet us even on a non-controversial level, I said, ‘Well, it’s no use talking to you people. It’s the end of the conference as far as we are concerned’. And we walked out again”²⁷.

This episode became a catalyst for institutional reforms. In response to the demands, new procedures were introduced in 1967: the draft budget and work program began to be provided to the territories in advance for discussion at annual (rather than triennial) conferences, and the conference chairman began to be elected from among the representatives of the territories. By 1968, the conference had effectively taken on the key function of determining the budget. Further democratization continued: in 1969, a Committee to Review the Commission's Work was established, and in 1970, for the first time, a representative of the island territories was appointed to the post of Secretary-General. In the same year, most territories (except those under French control) gained the right to make financial contributions. By 1971, the conference gained the right to determine its own rules of procedure and agenda²⁸.

However, according to K. Mara, the island leaders were already firmly convinced that they needed their own political organization²⁹. It should be noted that by this time, the Pacific Island leaders already had experience in creating their own independent organization. In 1965, the Pacific Islands Producers Association (PIPA) was formed, in the creation of which Ratu Mara also took an active part. Its initial goal was cooperation among Pacific territories supplying bananas to the New Zealand market. But later, its scope of activity expanded to cover full cycles of production, transportation, and marketing of various products. Moreover, the creation of PIPA, rather than addressing these issues through the South Pacific Commission, was a kind of political gesture – an association of islanders created by themselves and successful only thanks to its participants³⁰.

The specific idea of creating the South Pacific Forum was expressed by the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, A. Henry, in June 1970. He emphasized that “islanders need their own forum, not a paternalistic model”, and characterized its essence as a “mini-UN”³¹. This idea was supported by four other heads of island states: Ratu Mara (Prime Minister of Fiji), Prince

Tu'ipelehake (Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Tonga, the King's brother), Hammer DeRoburt (President of Nauru), and Tupua Tamasese Lealofi IV (Prime Minister of Western Samoa). These were the leaders who sought to decolonize the SPC, created PIPA, and believed it was necessary to change the architecture of regional cooperation.

In September 1971, the first meeting of the South Pacific Forum was held in Wellington. In addition to the five small island states of the region, Australia and New Zealand also participated, represented by the Minister for External Territories Charles Edward Barnes (Australia) and the Prime Minister of New Zealand Keith Jacka Holyoake. The meeting discussed practically all goals and directions of cooperation: security, trade, logistics, education, health, etc³². Interestingly, DeRoburt was initially categorically against including Australia among the Forum participants, believing that Australia (and New Zealand) were more developed countries. Therefore, they did not face the same problems as the islands and would dominate the Forum, putting the islands' interests at risk. While Mara insisted that the islands needed to maintain close relations with these countries, that their guidance and assistance in solving their problems were important, especially since political independence was unthinkable without economic independence, and the islands needed peaceful cooperation³³.

The main principle in creating the Forum was self-determination in the regional agenda. In this sense, the creation of the new organization marked more the end of the institutional stage of the struggle for not only independence but also self-identification on the international stage for the newly independent states. They finally received an international platform that, in perspective, allowed them to unite to develop a political agenda for the region.

The Pacific Way – Evolution of the Concept

The “Pacific Way” was first mentioned by R. Mara in his address to the UN in 1970, even before the creation of the Pacific Islands Forum. Speaking about Fiji and other countries gaining independence, he stated: “Many speakers have commented on our peaceful transition to independence, and we ourselves are deeply grateful for our good fortune in this way. But this is nothing new in the Pacific. Similar calm and orderly moves to independence have taken place in Western Samoa, in the Cook Islands, in Nauru, and in Tonga. We like to think that this is the Pacific Way, both geographically and ideologically. As far as we are authorised by our friends and neighbours, and we do not arrogate to ourselves any role of leadership, we would hope to act as representative and interpreter of that voice”³⁴. That

is, essentially, it referred to a strictly peaceful path of development and co-operation without establishing any alliances of some against others? Which would be realized through diplomacy.

The discourse on what constitutes the "Pacific Way" began to form in the region's academic community, based at the University of the South Pacific. In the 1970s the university began establishing regional extension centres to deliver continuing education, correspondence and extramural courses. In 1975, a seminar "The Pacific Way: Social Issues in National Development" was held. At it, representatives of the emerging academic and expert community expressed their views on what the Pacific Way should be. Ron Crocombe noted that "The Seminar neither sought nor found final answers. But it did identify considerable areas of consensus among leading Pacific thinkers, and a widespread desire to evolve a "Pacific Way". How far this will be achieved, and what its unique features will be, remain to be seen, but the following papers will be referred to for some time to come as a notable turning point, an indication of the goals which Pacific leaders will be aiming for in the 1970s"³⁵. Different viewpoints were also expressed, emphasizing that on the one hand, the main problem lies in the disruption of the historical way of life of the Pacific island populations, which led to dependence on the colonizers that persists even after independence. Because of which "beggars can't be choosers"³⁶. And on the other hand, the opinion was expressed that for the Pacific islands, it is necessary to develop new theoretical and, consequently, practical approaches for sustainable development, despite the ongoing economic and military dependence, and political independence is a good platform for that³⁷.

Meanwhile, the SPF in its early years was aimed at resolving regional issues related to economic problems. As the Forum gradually expanded (Papua New Guinea joined in 1974, Niue in 1975, Kiribati in 1977, Tuvalu and the Solomon Islands in 1978, Vanuatu in 1980), its activities became more complex. Forum members focused on issues of economic development and forming regional ties. At the same time, expansion allowed, through a collective voice, to gradually increase the level of regional involvement in the global agenda. The main problem, important for all Forum participants regardless of their level of economic development, was nuclear safety. France continued to use the region as a testing ground for nuclear tests, constantly causing environmental and economic damage. Diplomatic efforts, led by Australia and New Zealand, eventually led to the signing of the Treaty of Rarotonga, which became the first result of consolidated efforts by the Pacific islands to defend their interests³⁸. This result showed that the collective diplomacy of the Pacific Way is effective and

can serve as an efficient instrument for shaping geopolitical reality on par with major powers.

The key influence on the concept of the “Pacific Way” was Epeli Hau'Ofa, who in his works reconstructed and supplemented the concept of the “Pacific Way”, making the most significant theoretical contribution and establishing the theoretical framework of the concept.

In his essay “Sea of Islands”, he proposes a fundamental shift in perception of how the South Pacific region should be viewed (both by its inhabitants and external states). Arguing against the colonial narrative already mentioned in this article, which depicts the Pacific as a collection of disparate and isolated communities, he proposed seeing Oceania as a “sea of islands”. The ocean in this case is a unifying force and also expands the boundaries of the living space of the peoples, including not only the land but the ocean as such. Through this, he affirmed the historical subjectivity and agency of island communities³⁹.

In “The Ocean in Us”, he more seriously revised the essence of the “Pacific Way”. He believed that it was not merely the search for compromises and a style of negotiation among elites, but rather a social and cultural philosophy based on the historical experience of the Pacific peoples. He identified several key values of this: mutual respect (especially for elders, traditional leaders, and other cultures), consensus (decision-making through discussion and achieving general agreement, not a majority vote), community & reciprocity (the well-being of the group is placed above individual interests), and relationships and kinship (kinship and social ties are the foundation of society). He also warned that the “Pacific Way” should not be used by elites to justify corruption, cronyism, or the suppression of dissent under the pretext of following “traditions”. Hau'Ofa also touched upon regionalism, believing that external dominance (including from Australia and New Zealand) should not be allowed; regionalism must originate from and be directed by the peoples of Oceania themselves; it is necessary to collectively defend common interests and strive for the peoples of Oceania to regain control over their history, destiny, and space⁴⁰.

Hau'Ofa's ideas are valuable because he most fully and comprehensively concentrated all the features of the “Pacific Way” into a unified whole. And subsequently, we can see that his reasoning underlies most of the program documents of the Pacific Islands Forum, starting with the Biketawa⁴¹ and Boe⁴² Declarations and ending with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent⁴³ and the “Ocean of Peace” concept presented at the 54th Forum meeting⁴⁴.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis allows us to assert that the “Pacific Way” represents a unique and holistic model of regionalism, formed as a result of the complex interaction of internal and external factors. The historical development of Oceania, marked by colonial expansion and the subsequent managed process of decolonization, acted as a catalyst for the Pacific Small Island States' search for their own voice on the international stage. This search culminated in the establishment of the Pacific Islands Forum, which became the institutional embodiment of their aspiration for self-determination and collective action.

The evolution of the “Pacific Way” concept— from its initial emphasis on a peaceful transition to independence to the profound socio-philosophical system of values formulated by Epeli Hau'ofa – demonstrates its dynamic nature. This philosophy, based on mutual respect, consensus, communality, and the rejection of external dominance, has proven its practical significance. The Treaty of Rarotonga and subsequent PIF strategic documents, up to the “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent”, serve as clear evidence that collective diplomacy, grounded in shared values, enables small states to effectively defend their interests in the context of intense geopolitical rivalry.

Thus, the “Pacific Way” is not merely a rhetorical figure but an effective ideological and practical foundation for regional consolidation. In the modern era, as the Pacific region once again becomes an arena for great power competition, it is the commitment to this Way that allows the small island states to maintain agency, shape the regional agenda, and act as an independent actor striving for peace, sustainable development, and control over its own future in accordance with its own cultural codes and historical experience.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

ГОРЯЧЕВ Николай Николаевич, кандидат исторический наук, старший научный сотрудник, зав. Лабораторией Азиатских и Тихоокеанских исследований, Институт истории, археологии и этнографии народов Дальнего Востока Дальневосточного отделения Российской Академии наук, Владивосток, Россия

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INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nikolay N. GORYACHEV, PhD (History), Senior research fellow, Head of Laboratory of Asian and Pacific Studies, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology, Far-Eastern Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Vladivostok, Russia

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