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# When Pacific models of development fall short

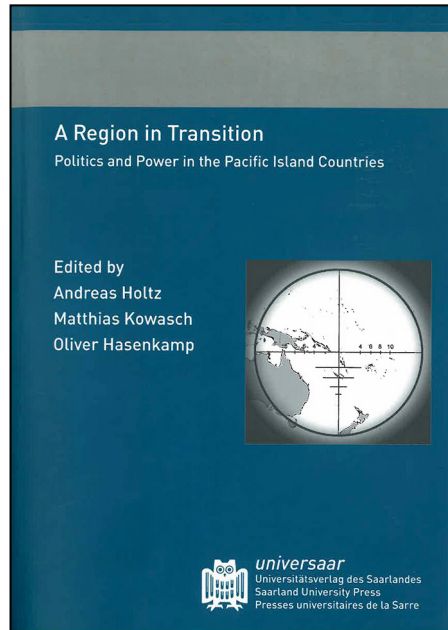
***A Region in Transition: Politics and power in the Pacific Island countries***, by Andreas Holtz, Matthias Kowasch and Oliver Hasenkamp (eds). Saarbrücken, Germany: Saarland University Press, 2016. 647 pages. ISBN 9783862231027/9783862231034

GERMANY'S involvement in the Pacific was cut short by the capture of its colonies by Australia, New Zealand and Japan in 1914. Agitation for the return of Germany's colonies continued unabated during the National Socialist dictatorship, but it was Mt Kilimanjaro, not Mt Wilhelm, that appeared on Nazi posters.

During the Cold War it seemed that the Pacific had been forgotten, but the links with Germany were not entirely severed as missions and churches continued their work and government-backed and NGO-supported projects slowly developed.

The message of *A Region in Transition* is that today Germany must re-engage with Oceania even more closely, but with a fully informed view of what is happening. As the editors note:

With China, Japan and the United States the region is bordered by three



economic powers, and by the economically emerging countries of Latin America—a fact that an export nation like Germany cannot ignore.

Produced by the German Pacific Network with the backing of the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany, this book nevertheless bears the imprimatur of the German government, with a foreword by Germany's ambassadors to New Zealand and Australia.

The editors make a point of stressing that too often when Germans and Europeans talk about the Pacific, they really mean the peripheral nations and emphasise that their book is a corrective to that view.

Drawing on a range of experts in the field, including New Zealand-based academics Geoff Bertram and Graham Hassell, the book sets out to present a

series of investigations and analyses of the political situation in the Pacific, deploying the tools of political, rather than human, anthropology to the task. Inevitably, there are questions about what constitutes the Pacific and as has been common for some time, the boundaries have been stretched to include East Timor.

Politically, the Pacific can be seen as a seething cauldron of opportunities or threats, depending on which view best suits your needs. Joanne Wallis notes that some Pacific leaders have played up the notion that the world's powers are competing for favours and influence in the Pacific, declaring that this is the result of the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the United States and the United Kingdom.

Elsewhere, however, Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna declared that his country's engagement with foreign powers 'should not be viewed as the subject of competition, but as representative of shared goals of mutual benefit and reciprocity'.

As Wallis also points out, the opportunities for Island states to play outside players off against each other also means that they no longer have to see themselves as being automatically on the outer ring of the classic centre-periphery model with Australia or New Zealand.

Elsewhere in the book, Holtz emphasises this point with his discussion of the relationship between Australia and Fiji. Here he argues that the present diplomatic game is one in which the Island states are seeking to act in their own interests by using China to

establish a new political order. Fiji, he argues, wants 'nothing less than an attempt to redefine Oceania's regionalism without the traditional leading powers'.

Wallis argues that whether you see the Pacific as undergoing a period of turmoil or opportunity is a matter of perception. Other chapters in *A Region in Transition* argue that even when scientific or mathematical tools are deployed to assess the situation, problems can remain.

Financial as much as political interests define the relationships between the Island states and their larger neighbours, but as Tisdell points out, traditional methods of mapping the island economies do not always work and there are now a number of competing systems for measuring economic progress.

A country like Tonga, for instance, can win praise from the World Bank for its financial reforms, but still have an economy that is extremely reliant on overseas remittances. Elsewhere, countries teeter on the verge of bankruptcy, but may actually have a rosy economic future.

In matters of political development, Hassall presents evidence that all too often the models and expectations of democracy and good governance by which the Island states are measured are inappropriate.

This is a deeply interesting book that will be of great use to anybody interested in the Island states and very useful for journalists covering the region.