

Scott Morrison travels to Europe for D-Day commemorations next week. While there, he may also hold talks with leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel ahead of the G20 meeting in Japan in June.

With the UK and US in the midst of internal and international repositioning –otherwise known as turmoil – and with China continuing to flex and grow, safeguarding Australia’s strategic and commercial interests has rarely been more complicated, nor more of a singular Australian responsibility.

Somewhat perversely, this may explain why Morrison’s first stop as a freshly re-elected prime minister will not be London or Washington, or even Berlin, but rather, the Solomon Islands capital of Honiara.

That is significant. Whoever won the May 18 election, the regional “backyard” was set to become a renewed priority for Australia.

Attention now turns to small and micro nations, who suffer in varying degrees from the effects of remoteness, narrow economies, endemic poverty, poor infrastructure, and, most existentially, rising sea levels. These countries are eager for assistance in securing their futures, whether sourced from old friends like the US and Australia, or new enthusiasts like China.

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**Read more:** [\*\*For Pacific Island nations, rising sea levels are a bigger security concern than rising Chinese influence\*\*](#)

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## China’s influence continues to grow

Labor’s new deputy, Richard Marles, has long championed improved development aid and other assistance to Australia’s nearest neighbours, arguing it is Australia’s moral responsibility. That’s

a given, but so is the strategic case for a renewed presence. Namely, the expanding diplomatic and strategic reach of Beijing.

Morrison is alive to it too.

China's influence across the region – particularly as an infrastructure and project financier – is growing. This is seen in Canberra as a serious threat, with both major parties looking for ways to strengthen ties with Pacific nations that had been allowed to fray.

Darwin-based Labor MP Luke Gosling told me he would make the Northern Territory capital the official base for Australia's renewed regional extension.

"Whether it is responding to earthquake, cyclone, tsunami, or terrorist attack – it should be the hub for humanitarian, emergency and disaster assistance to the region, but more importantly involved in capacity building with our regional neighbours," he said.

Valid though this is, success will turn not so much on a change of arrangements internally, as a whole new basis to Australia's regional pitch.

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**Read more:** [\*If there's one thing Pacific nations don't need, it's yet another infrastructure investment bank\*](#)

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## **Australia needs to listen first**

Experts say the key to closer relations is talking to smaller countries about their concerns, rather than the tendency we've had to date to talk about ours.

## As Morrison heads to the Pacific, our nearest neighbours will be looking for more than kind words

Written by Mark Kenny, Senior Fellow, Australian Studies Institute, Australian National University

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For Morrison, that is a political challenge with distinct domestic characteristics. It means acknowledging the contemporaneous real-world effects of global warming, including the direct contribution to carbon emissions from mining and burning coal.

For low-lying island countries including Kiribati, with a population of just 110,000, and Fiji, this is no abstract debate but rather one of life and death, here and now.

“It’s their top security priority,” Michael Wesley, Dean of the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, told Sky News “whereas our top security priority in the Pacific is China”.

“Pacific leaders have made it very clear that they don’t see China in the Pacific as a threat, so we’ve got an immediate mismatch of what we perceive to be the problems between us and the Pacific Islanders.”

Wesley described global warming as an existential concern “happening to them right now”.

“We have to be extremely sensitive about how things like the Adani coal mine, [and] a new coal-fired power plant perhaps being opened, will play out in the Pacific, it goes down like a lead balloon.”

As with Mr Morrison’s visit to Honiara, the order of things matter when communicating internationally.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*Pacific nations aren't cash-hungry, minister, they just want action on climate change\*\*\*](#)

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## **Taking climate change concerns seriously**

Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama was among the first to congratulate Morrison on his surprise election win. The pair had struck up a warm relationship when they met earlier this year. But now, as then, the Fijian used the opportunity to seek stronger climate leadership from the region's wealthiest economy.

His longer post on Facebook provided the kicker:

In Australia, you have defied all expectations; let us take the same underdog attitude that inspired your parliamentary victory to the global fight against climate change. By working closely together, we can turn the tides in this battle – the most urgent crisis facing not only the Pacific, but the world. Together, we can ensure that we are earthly stewards of Fiji, Australia, and the ocean that unites us. Together, we can pass down a planet that our children are proud to inherit.

It was a similar message from Samoa, where Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi welcomed the election result, but noted in an [interview with The Guardian](#) that “[Australia] has been lagging behind,” regarding the need for action on the climate emergency.

And it's a fair bet the content will be the same in Honiara.

The finer points of diplomacy have not been a strength of Morrison, who, even after his recent electoral endorsement, is still less than a year in the top job.

A plainly cynical suggestion made during the Wentworth byelection of moving the Australian embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem [caused nothing but embarrassment](#). More recent comments depicting the US as our friend and China as merely our client raised eyebrows in Beijing.

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But a desire to succeed, a personable nature, and an avowedly conservative disposition, suggest the Australian prime minister does not envisage significant direction changes in Australia's stance on either regional or global affairs. That is a reality likely to prove disappointing to Pacific Island leaders looking for a lot more than kind words as their citizens face inundation.

*Mark Kenny does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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