

Conversations: Geopolitical Change and Everyday Life in Oceania – *Keynote Address*

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A Reluctant Start – Answering the Call to Leadership

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands upon which the University of Melbourne stands—the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my deepest respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and extend this respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be with us tonight.

Reflecting on the significance of land, community, and wisdom, I am reminded of my own journey and the path that led me to stand before you today. It is truly a privilege to join this Oceania Institute forum on “Conversations: Geopolitical Change and Everyday Life in Oceania.” Allow me to begin with a personal story—one that illustrates how the unexpected can sometimes shape our lives profoundly. In late 2022, I found myself stepping into the role of Vice Chancellor of the Solomon Islands National University, under rather unusual circumstances. I had not formally applied for the job; in fact, I had deep reservations about accepting it. My career until then had been entirely outside academia—as a lawyer and a fisheries expert—and I was acutely aware that I lacked traditional university leadership experience. Moreover, SINU at that time was emerging from years of turbulence, marked by student protests, industrial disputes, and the removal of two previous Vice Chancellors amid controversy.

Quite frankly, the thought of inheriting such daunting challenges left me deeply hesitant.

It took persistent encouragement from colleagues and friends for me to even consider the post. The Chairman of the University Council, an old schoolmate of mine, was one of those who persuaded me to serve. *“He will provide the strategic leadership the University needs,”* my friend had said when I finally accepted. Still, I recall signing the contract with mixed emotions: humility, a bit of anxiety, and a growing sense of duty. In that moment I realised what a huge opportunity this was to give back to my country – perhaps my last chance to do so in a meaningful way. I was torn between a comfortable international career abroad and the call of home, the call to help steer our national university through stormy seas. In the end, *my heart won over my head*. I chose to serve the people of Solomon Islands, because I knew in my heart that I might never again be given this chance to serve them.

Looking back now, I’m grateful I answered that call. The first days were daunting – I was stepping into a community where trust had been frayed and morale was low. I knew I had to tread carefully. In fact, during my first months in 2023, I made a conscious decision to *“not look back”* at past troubles but instead to observe, learn, and focus on the future. I told myself: *do not charge in to change everything overnight; first win the hearts and minds*. This patient approach helped me ease into the role despite my initial reluctance.

Embracing Responsibility – From Hesitation to Vision

As the weeks turned into months, my hesitation gradually gave way to a sense of responsibility and excitement. I realised I now had a platform to make a difference for the young people of Solomon Islands – the students and future leaders who pass through SINU’s doors. I felt an intense *pride and humility* at the honour of serving them. After years working abroad, this was my

homecoming, and it came with a clear purpose: to give nothing but my best to the institution and country that had given me so much.

In February 2023, at my official inauguration as Vice Chancellor, I outlined a vision for SINU's future – a vision shaped both by the immediate challenges I saw on campus and by my hopes for what our university could become. I spoke about the road ahead being filled with challenges, *“but deep in my heart, I know that with your support we can achieve a lot... to drive the country towards the 22nd Century.”* Despite tight finances and past turmoil, I felt a profound optimism. We could turn those challenges into opportunities by drawing on the “enormous intellectual horsepower” of our people and by embracing innovative solutions.

Let me share some pillars of that vision, which remain my guideposts today:

- **Ethical Leadership and Good Governance:** Above all, I committed SINU to becoming an *“oasis of good governance”* – a place of zero tolerance for corruption or “corrosion of systems”. Our university must *model* the values we want to see in our society. If elsewhere in the country unethical practices are rampant, then SINU must stand apart as a beacon of integrity and accountability. In my very first address to staff, I warned that I have no tolerance for corruption, especially when it involves misusing funds that struggling parents entrust to educate their children. We in higher education hold a sacred trust – we are *custodians* of the hopes of our families and communities. I truly believe that a core part of our mission is to instill ethics, leadership, and good governance values in every graduate we produce. Our future nurses, teachers, engineers and leaders should leave SINU not only with degrees, but with a moral compass to serve their communities with integrity.

- Digitisation and Modernisation:** One of the first practical steps I championed was leveraging technology to reform our systems. I often say that technology and innovation are at the forefront of effective management today—a lesson I learned from years in international fisheries management. At SINU, we are pursuing “innovative digitized systems to achieve efficiencies \[and\] improve the efficacy of teaching and all processes in the organization.” In plain terms, this means introducing a fully integrated digital campus system—from finance and procurement to student records. My aim has been that within a couple of years, all our enrolment, financial, and governance systems would operate under a unified automated platform. This not only improves services, but also tightens accountability by reducing paperwork and opportunities for fraud. A related dream of mine—one that is a work in progress, dictated largely by the resources available—is to see the entire campus connected to high-speed Wi-Fi, enabling students to study from anywhere and staff to seamlessly work from home. I often imagine the extraordinary possibilities if we had all the necessary resources readily available to fully develop these systems. The transformation would be enormous. Embracing ICT and digitisation is crucial for a 21st-century university, and it strengthens our resilience against problems like corruption through transparent, traceable systems.
- Global Employability and Labour Mobility:** As a small island nation, Solomon Islands cannot afford to think small. I want our graduates to dream big and be competitive anywhere in the world. In my inauguration speech I expressed a “*fervent hope*” that within 5–10 years, SINU graduates will have skills “*recognized internationally so that [they] can get jobs in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Canada, and Asia.*” In other words, a SINU degree should open doors globally. To achieve this, we are working on accrediting our programs to international standards and

building joint degrees and partnerships with overseas universities. For instance, I have envisioned joint programs with universities in the Pacific (like USP) and Australia/New Zealand, so that at least a handful of SINU programs are delivered collaboratively and carry dual recognition. We're also reforming our curriculum – including strengthening English language training – so that our graduates have the communication skills to thrive abroad. Why is this so important? Because labour mobility is an opportunity for our people. By equipping students with globally relevant qualifications, we empower them to take up jobs and experiences overseas, whether it's nurses working in Australian hospitals or seafarers on international shipping lines. They will gain income and skills, support their families, and ultimately contribute back to our home economy. In the long run, I see a growing *Solomon Islands diaspora* as part of our economic strength – our people succeeding abroad while maintaining their identity and ties to home.

- **Research and Partnerships – A Global University for a Global**

Challenge: From day one, I have seen SINU's potential to be more than a teaching institution; it can be a focal point for evidence-based research that guides national policy. The challenges our country faces – whether in sustainable development, public health, or education – need local research solutions. I have advocated strengthening our research capacity by reaching out in partnership: with government ministries, industries, NGOs, international donors and sister universities abroad. The future growth of SINU will come from “*strategic public-private partnerships with industry, donors, government... overseas research institutions, communities and alumni.*” We are actively pursuing collaborations that bring in expertise and resources from outside while focusing them on local priorities. For example, last year SINU was proud to be a founding member of the Pacific Academy of Sciences, connecting our scholars with regional and global networks.

These partnerships in research and innovation will help ensure our teaching is cutting-edge and that our university contributes directly to solving real-world problems in Solomon Islands and Oceania.

All of these efforts tie into a broader philosophy: the role of a national university in nation-building. I have always felt that SINU, as the only national university of Solomon Islands, carries a special responsibility in shaping our national identity and future. It's not just about workforce training; it is about *who we are* as a people. In one interview, I remarked that leading SINU is “*very important as part of building up our national identity – our sense of Solomon Islanderness – and nation-building.*”. We help inculcate a shared identity, instil civic values, and create an informed citizenry. The university should be a think-tank for the nation, generating ideas and critical debate on our development path. It should also be a mirror that reflects society's aspirations for ethical leadership and good governance. In short, a national university must be both a brain trust and a heart trust for the nation – developing human capital with the minds to drive progress and the hearts to serve their community. That is the lofty but worthy goal I see for SINU in our society.

Islands of Innovation – The Centre for Islands Futures and Living Labs

One of the most exciting initiatives we have embarked on at SINU is the establishment of a Centre for Islands Futures – complete with “Living Labs” – which I see as a cornerstone for our university's unique contribution to Oceania. Let me explain what this is. The Centre for Islands Futures is conceived as a “*beacon of transdisciplinary research and education,*” championing the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern academic frameworks. In our Solomon Islands and across the Pacific, we have a rich repository of wisdom in our cultures, our languages, and our traditional practices. For too long, our own knowledge systems were sidelined as something less “scientific.” I

fundamentally believe the opposite – that our *ancient wisdom and modern science* must work hand-in-hand.

Through this Centre, we are creating Living Labs where communities become active partners in research. Rather than academics working in isolation, a living lab means taking the university into villages and bringing the village into the university. It's about co-designing solutions with our people on the ground. Whether it's sustainable agriculture, marine resource management, or public health, we set up field sites and pilot projects *in partnership with local communities*. This way, research is not done *on* communities but *with* them. It's a two-way learning street: the community's traditional knowledge and resilience inform the science, and scientific findings inform community innovations.

Our vision is that the Centre for Islands Futures will promote exactly this kind of integrated, innovative approach to problem-solving. As I have described it elsewhere, “*by valuing and leveraging our cultural heritage, we can lead the way in climate resilience and sustainable development.*” We want to foster a resilient and sustainable future for the Solomon Islands and the broader Pacific region by drawing on the best of both worlds: our ancestral wisdom and cutting-edge research. For example, one of the Centre's first programs is a postgraduate diploma that merges indigenous and scientific perspectives – courses like *Solomon Islands Indigenous Knowledge Foundations* alongside climate change science. The aim is to produce graduates and research outputs that are culturally informed and practically relevant.

There is incredible potential in this approach. When we set up a “*living lab*” around, say, coastal management, it might involve local elders sharing how they have protected a fish spawning ground for generations, while our marine science faculty monitor reef health with modern instruments. Together, they test what combination of traditional practice and new technology best revives the fish stocks. This is not a hypothetical scenario – it is exactly the kind of projects

we want under Islands Futures. Already, initiatives like our proposed “Indigenous Knowledge for Climate Resilience” research have highlighted how traditional resource management (like our *tolo* sacred site protection or rotational gardening) can be combined with scientific insights. By grounding education and research in the *real-world experiences and needs of local communities*, we ensure our work is not just academic exercise, but truly serves our people. This approach also helps preserve and elevate our cultural heritage, positioning Solomon Islands – and SINU – as leaders in demonstrating how indigenous knowledge can contribute to global challenges.

Of course, bridging indigenous and Western knowledge systems is not without challenges. We have to navigate differences in worldviews and methods. But I see that as a *creative tension*, not a setback. It forces us to be innovative and respectful. If we succeed, the payoff is immense: holistic solutions that are both scientifically sound and culturally resonant. Our Centre for Islands Futures and its living labs aspire to be that “*hub for interdisciplinary research, education, and community engagement*” where “*diverse knowledge systems converge to address complex environmental and societal challenges.*” In simpler terms, it’s a meeting ground for wisdoms – the wisdom of our ancestors and the knowledge of today’s world.

I am proud that SINU is championing this approach. It is something deeply personal to me as well. I grew up in the islands; I know the ingenuity of our people, the way our parents and grandparents read the weather, managed the land, cared for each other. To bring those lessons into the curriculum and research lab is to *honour where we come from while innovating for tomorrow*. It also exemplifies the theme of this gathering – connecting geopolitical or global change with everyday life in Oceania. Because what is more “everyday” in our islands than the knowledge passed down around the fire or on the fishing

canoe? By linking that to global science, we empower our everyday lives to shape our own future amid global change.

Harnessing Ancestral Wisdom – Reflections on Climate and Knowledge

This integration of indigenous wisdom with modern science is not just an academic ideal for me; it is something I have been actively advocating on the regional stage. In May 2024, I delivered a keynote at the Pacific Ocean Pacific Climate Change Conference (POPCCC), where I spoke on “*Harnessing Ancestral Wisdom: Traditional Knowledge and Practices for Climate Resilience.*” The message I shared with that audience is one I carry into every discussion about development in Oceania: we must not view our cultures and traditions as obstacles to modernisation, but rather as powerful assets in tackling modern challenges.

Too often, Pacific Islanders are portrayed as victims of climate change, helplessly awaiting external salvation. I reject that narrative. “*Why not see ourselves as saviours,*” I asked, “*showcasing the strength and resilience of our cultures and traditions?*” After all, for thousands of years our communities have thrived in these islands, navigating environmental changes through ingenuity and resilience. Long before climate change became a buzzword, our ancestors had *developed sustainable practices* like agroforestry, rotational farming, taboo areas for fishing, and water management that ensured we lived within our means and in harmony with nature.

In my POPCCC address, I highlighted a number of these time-tested practices. For example, agroforestry – intercropping trees with crops – is a traditional method still alive in our rural communities, and it creates diverse, resilient agro-ecosystems that can better withstand droughts or floods. Or consider how rotational gardening and letting land lie fallow was a form of soil management that preserved fertility and reduced pest outbreaks. In coastal areas, our people

built fish ponds or used mangrove planting for natural coastal defence long before engineers started talking about “nature-based solutions”. These examples illustrate a key point: traditional knowledge is a vital resource for contemporary climate action. It’s not about living in the past; it’s about weaving our *past wisdom* into present policy.

I shared with pride how at SINU we are trying to do exactly that through our living labs and Centre for Islands Futures. *“I am working to configure SINU to leverage this knowledge through the proposed development of living labs and the Center for Islands Futures,”* I told the conference, *“which exemplify how we can integrate indigenous knowledge with modern scientific research to create resilient and sustainable communities.”* In other words, we want to practice what we preach: to actually demonstrate on the ground how marrying ancestral wisdom with modern science can yield innovative solutions for climate resilience. This approach resonated strongly with the conference’s theme of *“Our Ocean, Our Home: Climate Resilience for a Blue Pacific.”* I proposed that integrating ancestral wisdom and modern science is a perfect example of a holistic approach needed for climate resilience.

What I found moving was the response from other Pacific Island leaders and scholars at POPCCC. There was a real recognition that our cultures are not just heritage to preserve, but knowledge systems to apply. By turning to our own traditions, we also reinforce our unique identity and agency. As I put it in that speech: *by weaving traditional practices into official government policies, we reinforce our identity and show our strength, leading the way in climate resilience.* This is as much an assertion of cultural confidence as it is a climate strategy. It says: we believe in *ourselves*.

In practical terms, this means governments should incorporate things like customary marine tenure or traditional crop diversity into their climate adaptation plans. And indeed, a number of Pacific nations are now doing so –

Vanuatu, for example, has revived *nakamal* (community meeting house) networks for disaster response; Fiji is integrating mangrove-based defences with engineering. My hope is that through SINU's research and advocacy, Solomon Islands will be at the forefront of this movement. We have already started projects on documenting indigenous weather prediction signs, on using local ecological knowledge for biodiversity conservation, and on community-based climate adaptation planning. These efforts underscore a simple truth: the knowledge that resides in our villages is as important as the knowledge in libraries and laboratories. When facing an existential threat like climate change, we need to draw from every tool and wisdom available – especially our own.

Navigating Geopolitical Currents – Big Powers and Everyday Life

Shifting now from climate to the geopolitical climate – let us talk about the changing geostrategic landscape of Oceania and how it intersects with everyday life. As someone who grew up in the Solomon Islands and has worked internationally, I find that geopolitics in the Pacific is deeply personal. It is not an abstract great-power chess game; it's woven into the fabric of our daily experiences. Let me illustrate this with another personal reflection. When I was a boy growing up in Solomon Islands, Chinese traders were an inseparable part of our daily lives. They ran the small trade stores in our villages; they extended credit to families when times were tough; their children sat next to us in school. Many of those families had been in Solomon Islands for generations. So when today I hear talk in foreign media about China's "new infiltration" into the Pacific, I often smile at how out-of-touch that sounds. *China in the Pacific is not new to us – we Pacific Islanders have been engaging with Chinese, and many other cultures, on our own terms for a very long time.* We are not naive pawns in other's grand strategies; we have *agency* and a history of making our own adjustments to external influences.

That said, there is no denying that the geopolitical landscape around us has shifted significantly in recent years. The Pacific Islands have been thrust to the center of attention as major powers – the United States, China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and others – all ramp up their engagement in our region. We see it in infrastructure projects, in competing offers of security agreements or development aid, in the flurry of high-level diplomatic visits. This heightened attention presents *both* opportunities and dilemmas for Pacific nations. On the one hand, it means more resources potentially flowing into our countries – perhaps new roads, universities, hospitals, or investment that we badly need for development. On the other hand, we must be vigilant: these external initiatives “*come with expectations*” and can create new dependencies or vulnerabilities if not managed carefully.

From my perspective as a Solomon Islander, one of the clearest examples of this dynamic is how different external partners engage with us, and how that impacts our choices. Let’s consider Australia and New Zealand versus China, since these are oft-discussed actors in our region. Broadly speaking, one might say Australia and NZ have a *process-driven, institutional approach*, while China is very *action-oriented and quick to deliver visible results*. Many in my country have noted this difference. For decades, our people felt that “*traditional development partners have not delivered enough tangible benefits*” and have been “*slow to respond*” to our needs. This frustration has sometimes fuelled our leaders to seek out alternatives, including China, who is often willing to fund and build big projects with impressive speed.

In my role at SINU, I have interacted with both sides and seen these different styles up close. For instance, when we engage with Australian or New Zealand-funded initiatives, there is a strong emphasis on consultation, feasibility studies, and meeting governance standards. Do not get me wrong – this emphasis on good process is beneficial. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, one reason I have

been pushing to strengthen SINU's governance and financial systems is to meet the "*due diligence requirements*" of traditional donors. They need to trust our systems before they invest, which is perfectly reasonable. So we do things by the book: audits, reports, safeguards. It can be time-consuming, but it usually leads to more sustainable outcomes in the end.

China's engagement, in contrast, often bypasses some of these steps, preferring a direct, action-oriented approach—essentially asking, "What do you need built? Let's build it." Let me illustrate this with a concrete example. Earlier this year, in April, we visited Wuhu University in China and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with them. Shortly after that visit, we agreed to establish a China-Pacific Research Center at SINU, dedicated specifically to applied research on natural disasters, infrastructure resilience, and sustainable development. This initiative leverages Wuhu University's internationally recognized expertise in disaster risk management, particularly in addressing hazards like earthquakes, tsunamis, and tropical cyclones. We are already in the process of identifying land where the Center will be constructed, and we've designated a local counterpart at SINU to coordinate these efforts closely with Wuhu University. The remarkable aspect is the speed with which this moved—from merely an idea in April to tangible actions and plans now well underway. Now, that kind of responsiveness is very attractive when you have urgent needs. New Zealand or Australia might have said "let's do a scoping study first, maybe next budget cycle," whereas China's approach was more "let's make it happen now." Each approach, of course, comes with strings of different sorts – whether financial, political, or procedural.

So, what does this mean for us Pacific Islanders in our everyday lives? It means a new road might suddenly appear in your village built by a Chinese company, or a long-promised Australian-funded clinic might still be in planning because of protracted consultations. It means our leaders have more offers on the table

than before – but also more pitfalls to navigate. The key lesson I have drawn is that we must be proactive in asserting our own priorities and standards amid these competing courtships. We cannot afford to be passive recipients of aid or pawns in a larger game. We must be, as I often say, the navigators of our own canoe.

Regional solidarity is one way to avoid being divided and weakened. Institutions like the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) are crucial for this reason. If Pacific nations stand together and “*speak with one voice on critical matters*” – like security, climate, and development – we are much better positioned to ensure that outside engagement aligns with our interests. In fact, I believe PIF remains our best vehicle for collective decision-making and protecting our common interests. We must strengthen it and insist that external powers respect our united stance.

Another strategy is what I call “owning our development agenda.” Historically, external powers – be it colonial governments or modern donors – have framed what “development” should look like for us, often based on their priorities or worldview. It is high time we reverse that dynamic. As I have articulated elsewhere: “*Pacific nations must set their own development agenda and ensure that external investments contribute to long-term economic sustainability, not short-term political expediency.*” This means if a donor – whether Canberra or Beijing – offers an infrastructure project, we evaluate it against our national plans and standards. Is it something we truly need? Will it be sustainable after the ribbon is cut? Will it burden us with debt or undermine sovereignty? If it meets our criteria, great – if not, we should be willing to say no or negotiate terms that do. For example, we want projects that employ local people, transfer skills, and are environmentally sound. Transparency is key: a highway or hospital must be more than a geopolitical trophy; it should be a genuine asset to the community, built to last and serving local needs.

One area this principle clearly applies is in security and policing – a hot topic since Solomon Islands signed a policing cooperation with China. I have been vocal that Pacific countries should avoid getting sucked into any new Cold War between great powers. Instead, we need a *Pacific-led security approach* that might welcome outside support but on our terms, with full transparency and respect for our sovereignty. Whether the assistance comes from Australia, China, the US, or anyone, it should *strengthen our local capacity* not create dependency. It should respect that Pacific security has facets unique to us – for instance, the role of customary chiefs, or the security threats of climate change and resource depletion which outsiders might not prioritize.

In essence, geopolitical change is being felt on the ground in our islands, from telecom networks to who trains our police, and it is up to our leaders and citizens to steer that change in a positive direction. We have more leverage now than perhaps ever before, precisely because the world's powers are interested in us. So, rather than being overwhelmed by the attention, we must use it. Think of it like traditional navigation: when multiple winds blow, a skilled sailor trims the sails and adjusts the canoe to harness the forces to reach the destination of their choosing.

Pacific Agency and Leadership from Within – Our Own Destiny

What all these threads tie back to is the importance of Pacific agency. By Pacific agency, I mean our ability to make decisions for ourselves based on our own knowledge, values, and aspirations. It is about *who holds the pen* when writing the story of our future. I am a firm believer that the pen should be in Pacific hands. We cannot outsource the thinking, planning, and leadership required to navigate these turbulent times.

As an educator, I naturally see building our human capital as fundamental to this. If we want to stand toe-to-toe with global powers in negotiations, we need

negotiators who are confident and well-prepared. If we want development on our terms, we need planners and analysts providing *homegrown advice*. This means investing heavily in our people – through quality education, leadership training, and opportunities for our bright minds. In a recent writing I noted: “*The future of the entire Pacific’s foreign policy and strategic positioning depends on a well-educated, globally aware, and politically astute generation of leaders.*”. That starts in classrooms and lecture halls across the region. It is one reason I am passionate about elevating SINU and also collaborating with other universities like the University of the South Pacific. We must produce the strategists, the scientists, the policy experts here at home.

Part of Pacific agency is also about knowledge production – conducting our own research and telling our own stories. Far too much of the analysis about the Pacific is done by external think tanks or scholars in Canberra, Wellington, Washington, or Beijing. While we value outside perspectives, nobody understands the cultural and historical context of our region like we do. I often argue that we cannot afford to be “*passive consumers of external policy analysis – we must become active producers of our own knowledge, our own strategies, and our own solutions.*”. This is a call to arms for our academics, our writers, our researchers: step up and lead the narrative. If there are studies on climate migration, why not have Pacific researchers leading them? If think tanks are advising on regional security architecture, why not a Pacific-led think tank driving that conversation?

Encouragingly, there are initiatives pushing in this direction. The revitalisation of the Pacific Islands Political Studies Association (PIPSA) – of which I am proud to serve as President – is one such avenue. PIPSA is creating platforms for Pacific scholars to publish and for research to directly inform policy. We talk about things like establishing a *Pacific Policy Journal*, hosting policy dialogues between scholars and governments, and even embedding Pacific researchers

within our regional organizations to inject fresh, local ideas. The aim is to close the gap between academia and governance, so that our leaders have data-driven, culturally informed insights at their fingertips when making decisions.

I also want to highlight the role of moral leadership in Pacific agency. Earlier I spoke of the moral role of a university. This extends to the regional stage as well. We in the Pacific have often taken the moral high ground on issues like climate change – and rightly so. We have called out the world’s major polluters in global forums, reminding them of their responsibility to low-lying island states. We must continue to occupy that moral leadership space, because it gives us influence beyond our size. But moral leadership starts with putting our own house in order. That’s why I emphasise good governance and ethics within our institutions. It is much easier to demand accountability from others if we practice it ourselves. I am happy to say that across the Pacific, we see a new generation of leaders and activists – many of them educated at our universities – who are passionately fighting corruption, advocating for transparency, and leading community initiatives. They give me hope that our calls for Pacific-driven development are not just rhetoric but are becoming reality.

When I think about local leadership from within, I think about the many respected men who provide steady guidance and wisdom rooted deeply in our communities—men whose leadership shapes local governance, culture, and decision-making. I also think about our women leaders in the villages who sustain entire communities through their networks, forming an often unseen backbone of our societies. Leadership from within means valuing these local leadership structures—churches, chiefs, youth groups—and linking them with formal governance. It means a village leader in Polynesia or Melanesia should feel just as much a part of steering our regional canoe as a President or Prime Minister does. After all, geopolitics ultimately affects whether that village leader’s grandchild will fish in clean waters, or have to move to a foreign land,

or enjoy the fruits of a new road. Therefore, involving and listening to our grassroots voices in national and regional decision-making is vital. That is something our governments and regional bodies must consciously work on—to avoid a disconnect between high-level strategies and the day-to-day aspirations of our people.

Charting a Hopeful Blue Pacific Future – Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by bringing these threads together and circling back to the theme: *geopolitical change and everyday life in Oceania*. In sharing my personal journey – from a reluctant Vice-Chancellor to a determined reformer and advocate – I hope to illustrate how the big picture and the personal are intertwined. I started by talking about my hesitation in 2022. I was unsure if I should step up. In many ways, the Pacific region has gone through a similar soul-searching. Faced with global powers vying for influence, some ask: *Are we doomed to be caught in a geopolitical storm?* I pose instead the question I asked at a recent regional conference: Can we chart a path forward that ensures peace, stability, and prosperity for the Pacific? I firmly believe we can, and we will – if we chart it together.

We have the tools: our knowledge, our unity, our values. We are, as one concept frames it, an “Oceanic continent” – the Blue Pacific – not a scattering of small islands but a vast community connected by ocean and culture. If we act as one Blue Pacific, we amplify our voice and agency. In my country when we fare out to fish, we say let’s “join our canoes” for safety on the sea. Likewise, regional solidarity is our lifeline in a turbulent world. Through mechanisms like the Pacific Islands Forum and our shared 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, we have declared our intention to take charge of our future. We must continue to invest trust and effort in these forums, ironing out our differences behind closed doors but presenting a united front when engaging outside.

I also talked about everyday life – how a trader in a village or a student at SINU feels geopolitics. My concluding thought is that everyday life is actually where hope lives. It's in the small encounters – a community adapting with ancestral knowledge, a local graduate starting a new business, a regional research team publishing new findings – that we are steadily shaping a better future. The moral role of our universities and institutions is to nurture those everyday agents of change. We must be the guides, the way finders, for our communities. I often refer to universities as beacons, and I truly see SINU's role as being a “beacon of hope” in our society. We shine light on the path, we uphold principles of fairness and curiosity, and we give people the skills to navigate. If every Pacific university, government, and community organization commits to that role, the combined glow will illuminate a truly hopeful path across the Blue Pacific. I warmly invite collaboration and partnership with all universities across our region, because investing in universities is ultimately an investment in national economic reform programmes for our countries. Together, we can strengthen our communities and shape prosperous futures.

In the end, all the geopolitical wrangling in the world matters less than what we ourselves do. The identity, solidarity, and agency of Pacific peoples are our strongest assets. Let us continue to embrace our cultural heritage as a source of strength, to integrate it with new ideas, and to stand together in solidarity. Let us educate our children to be proud Oceanians with global minds and local hearts. And let our conversations – whether in villages or high-level meetings – always include those most affected by decisions.

My story is just one of many in our vast ocean of stories. From a hesitant professor to an advocate for change, I have learned that *leadership is not about power or title, but about purpose and service*. The same is true for our region: Pacific leadership will not be measured by military might or economic size, but by our moral courage, unity of purpose, and service to our people and planet. In

these qualities, we can lead the world – indeed we are already doing so on issues like climate justice and ocean stewardship.

So, as we conclude this conversation on geopolitical change and everyday life, I leave you with this aspiration: may our Blue Pacific future be one where our children live in societies that are just, prosperous, and true to who we are. A future where no one needs to leave their islands for lack of opportunity unless they choose to, and if they do, they carry their identity proudly abroad. A future where our region is not a chessboard for others, but a hub of peace, cooperation, and sustainability.

I believe in that future. I can see it on the horizon. And like the navigator elders of old, we will plot the stars and the waves to get there – together. Tagio tumas (thank you very much) for listening, and let's continue this journey in unity. Fa'afetai tele lava. Vinaka vakalevu. Tangio tumas. Thank you.