

How Does the ‘Pacific’ Fit into the ‘Indo-Pacific’? The Changing Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands

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In the 2013 Defence White Paper the Australian Government identified its zone of strategic interest as the ‘Indo-Pacific’, which it described as “connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia”.¹ That formulation was repeated in the 2016 Defence and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Papers² and is increasingly used by the United States (US), India, Japan, France and Indonesia.

While academic and policy debate about the Indo-Pacific concept has been voluminous,³ the question of how the Pacific Islands fit into this strategic region has been overlooked.

This changed when Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, emphasised during a keynote address at the Australian National University (ANU) in September 2018 her concern about the “recasting of geostrategic competition and cooperation under the rubric of the ‘Indo-Pacific’”.⁴ A week earlier, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi delivered a speech in which he highlighted the “real risk of privileging Indo over the Pacific”.⁵ Both were concerned that the Indo-Pacific formulation encouraged external powers to overlook the particularities and interests of the Pacific Islands and to see the region primarily through the lens of geostrategic competition between major powers.

In recent years, Pacific Islands’ leaders have developed and advanced the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’. This formulation is intended to encourage Pacific Island states to act as a ‘Blue Continent’ based on their “shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean”.⁶ Taylor has argued that this could see Pacific Island states “exercising stronger strategic autonomy”,

1 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2013), p. 7

2 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2016); DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017).

3 See, for example: Rory Medcalf, ‘In Defence of the Indo-Pacific: Australia’s New Strategic Map’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2014), pp. 470–83; David Scott, ‘Australia’s Embrace of the ‘Indo-Pacific’: New Term, New Region, New Strategy?’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2013), pp. 425–48.

4 Dame Meg Taylor, ‘Keynote Address: 2018 State of the Pacific Conference’, Australian National University, Canberra, 8 September 2018, <www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-secretary-general-meg-taylor-to-the-2018-state-of-the-pacific-conference/>.

5 Hon Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, ‘Pacific Perspectives on the New Geostrategic Landscape’, speech at the Lowy Institute, Sydney, 30 August 2018, <www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/speech-hon-prime-minister-tuilaepa-sailele-malielegaoi-pacific-perspectives-new>.

6 PIFS (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat), *Forum Communiqué*, Apia, Samoa, 5–8 September 2017.

“understanding ... the strategic value of our region” and “maintain[ing] our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us”.⁷

While the ‘Blue Pacific’ concept originally developed independently of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ formulation, the evolving geostrategic situation in the Pacific Islands has nevertheless raised the question of how the two concepts might relate to each other: should they be seen as visions in opposition to each other, as simply inconsistent with each other, or even as potentially compatible with each other?

In June 2019, speakers from Australia, New Zealand and across the Pacific Islands convened at a workshop at the ANU to use the question of how the Pacific fits into the Indo-Pacific as a starting point to analyse the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands and their implications for the region and Australia. They also asked whether the Blue Pacific concept has the potential to advance Pacific Islands’ regional cooperation in pursuit of their strategic interests. The workshop featured keynote speeches by Collin Beck, Permanent Secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, and Ewen McDonald, Head of the Office of the Pacific in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (transcripts of which are included in this special issue), as well as six panels that explored how Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands viewed their security and strategic interests in the context of the changing geopolitics of the region.

The workshop constituted a valuable, but unusually rare, opportunity to bring together scholars and practitioners working, on the one hand, on Australia’s strategy and defence and, on the other hand, on the interests of the Pacific Islands. The discussions revealed that Australians, New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders were concerned about the implications of the changing geopolitics of the region, but that—perhaps not surprisingly—they did not always share the same geopolitical perspective.

Brendan Sargeant, the principal author of the 2013 Defence White Paper and now at the ANU, said that he thought the Indo-Pacific was still being formed as a geographical and political concept in Australian, and wider, strategic thinking. Despite this, Graeme Dobell from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) argued that the concept had become synonymous with US strategy, particularly its effort to draw in states such as Australia, Japan and India to counterbalance an increasingly assertive China. Indeed, Michael O’Keefe from La Trobe University argued that the concept was influencing Australia’s global military threat perceptions, leading it to deprioritise human security concerns in its approach to the Pacific Islands. In contrast, Anna Powles from Massey University noted that, while New Zealand broadly supported increased US activity in the Pacific Islands, it was concerned about potential militarisation in the region.⁸ With this in mind, former New Zealand diplomat, Marion Crawshaw, now at Victoria University, made the case for Australia and New Zealand to work together more proactively in the region to align their policies with the interests of Pacific Island states. A shift in emphasis from the Indo-Pacific framing would likely assist this. Richard Balkonan, Head of the Asia

7 Taylor, ‘Keynote Address’.

8 Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, ‘Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Islands: Ambiguous Allies?’, *Centre of Gravity* series, no. 43 (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2018), <sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/6508/australia-and-new-zealand-pacific-islands-ambiguous-allies>.

Pacific Division of the Vanuatu Ministry of Foreign Affairs, observed that the Indo-Pacific framing had not been met with much enthusiasm in Vanuatu, as there was uncertainty about what it entailed and whose interests it served.

Although scepticism about the consequences of the Indo-Pacific framing and China's increased presence in the Pacific Islands was expressed at the workshop, several speakers acknowledged that Australia had legitimate strategic interests in the region. Australia has long articulated a strategic interest in ensuring that no power with interests that are potentially inimical to its own establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on Australia or threaten allied access or its maritime approaches.⁹ Reflecting this, Captain Sean Andrews, Director of the Royal Australian Navy's Sea Power Centre, drew historical parallels between Australia's strategic interest in ensuring that European powers were excluded from the Pacific Islands at Federation with its focus on excluding potential hostile powers today.

In contemporary Australian strategic debates the risk that China could establish a military base in the Pacific Islands has gained prominence since reports in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a base in Vanuatu.¹⁰ Both Sargeant and Andrews considered the potential consequences of such a base for Australia, including the fact that it would: provide less time for Australia to respond to potential hostility; motivate increased defence spending as a countermeasure; reduce Australia's capacity to exercise freedom of movement; and generate domestic political unease. However, they both observed that it would be costly and difficult for China to maintain a base in the region, particularly because its distance from China would make supply lines vulnerable and logistics difficult. The establishment of military bases was also discussed with reference to the redevelopment of the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG). While some participants expressed concerns that this signalled an attempt by Australia to "militarise" the region, it was noted that there was a history of Australian involvement with that base. Moreover, Anthony Bergin from ASPI pointed out that the redevelopment of the base is taking place in the context of Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program and is required to accommodate the new Guardian class patrol boats that Australia is donating to PNG to help it to protect its sovereign waters.

A number of speakers identified the need for Pacific Island states to have a platform from which to engage in conversations about these, and other, geopolitical developments. Beck identified the importance of strengthening the role of the Pacific small island developing states (PSIDS) bloc to represent the island states of the Pacific at the United Nations (UN). In this regard, Fulori Manoa from the University of the South Pacific (USP) explained how Pacific Island states had successfully amplified their collective voice at the UN over the past decade, overcoming resource and personnel constraints by organising as the PSIDS. The need for regional voices to be heard on the global stage was imperative for Pacific leaders; as Beck remarked, "If you're not in the room, then someone else is in your chair and talking on your behalf".

9 See survey of relevant documents in: Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017).

10 David Wroe, 'China Eyes Vanuatu Military Base in Plan with Global Ramifications', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2018, <www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html>.

Other speakers cited PNG's hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2018 as an example of Pacific Island states having a voice in larger forums. Yet, for the smaller Pacific Island states, bilateral relationships and informal spaces in subregional organisations and the Pacific Islands Development Forum, which included both government and civil society organisations, were cited as platforms through which they could exercise their agency creatively. Professor Stephanie Lawson from the ANU and Macquarie University also highlighted the potential for small island states in the Pacific Islands and Indian Ocean to work together to strengthen their negotiating power, noting that the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Pacific Islands Forum shared similar values.

At the same time, some caution was expressed about the limitations of regionalism in the Pacific Islands. Wesley Morgan from Griffith University identified the tendency for Pacific Island states to go “forum-shopping” to achieve outcomes when traditional forums had failed to reach a consensus, which could undermine the potential of the Pacific Islands Forum to serve as the focal point for policymaking and cooperation in regional security. This was especially the case on issues such as the West Papuan independence movement. Beck also lamented that the proliferation of regional organisations—there are now nine major agencies—had contributed to the Pacific Islands becoming the “most workshopped region in the world” and cautioned that this era of renewed regional cooperation was costly and had not alleviated previous challenges to interstate diplomacy. To address these concerns, Beck made three proposals. First, the Pacific's regional architecture should be reformed to address the differing concerns of Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian states, as pressing issues in regional giant PNG were not necessarily the same as those in much smaller Niue. Second, the concept of equity in regional organisations should be rethought, with allocation of roles and influence weighted according to population size. Third, responsibility for ocean management and regulation should be better coordinated and targeted, instead of being spread across the Pacific Islands Forum, the Forum Fisheries Agency, USP and Pacific Community.

Several speakers saw a legitimate, but perhaps redefined, role for Australia in regional geopolitical conversations. Sargeant argued that, while Australia's strategic policy towards the Pacific Islands in the past had largely been instrumental, this approach was no longer sustainable. Instead, he argued that Australia needed to treat Pacific Island states as participants, rather than pawns, in its strategic planning in order to build a regional community based on common interests. Indeed, Steven Ratuva from the University of Canterbury commented that Australia's past references to the Pacific Islands as its ‘backyard’ reinforced negative perceptions of the region, observing that, “the backyard is where you throw all the trash; the front yard needs to be clean”. This contributed to Ratuva's concern that Canberra—and, to a lesser extent, Wellington—saw Pacific Islands' security as a “box-ticking exercise” focused on their geostrategic interests, which diverted attention away from human security concerns. Contrary to this, Ratuva argued that Pacific Island states were not “docile and passive”, but were instead exercising their agency in increasingly creative ways to play more powerful states off against each other and access benefits.

In this regard, the concept of the Blue Pacific was identified by Morgan as emblematic of the assertiveness of Pacific Island leaders in the face of geopolitical shifts and as a further step in a continuous campaign to move the narrative of Pacific states and territories away from “small, isolated and fragile” and towards recognition of a “pan-Oceanic identity”.

Sandra Tarte from the USP highlighted the “new Pacific diplomacy” being practised by Pacific Island states, which were exercising new-found assertiveness to act as more independent participants in global processes. She argued that this has positioned the region to both push back against “hegemonic security agendas” and to promote their interests through the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security¹¹ and via the concept of the Blue Pacific. Picking up on this theme, Meg Keen, Director of the Australia Pacific Security College, asked what a “blue economy” in the Blue Pacific would look like, and whether the current rules-based order advocated by Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States helps, or hinders, its formation.

Discussion of the Blue Pacific concept reflected the emphasis in workshop discussions on the importance of non-traditional security issues in the Pacific Islands, and particularly the nexus between security and development. A number of speakers expressed concern that, by using the Indo-Pacific framing, Australia could be perceived to be primarily focused on traditional geostrategic concerns at the expense of non-traditional ones such as human and environmental security, although (see below) Ewen McDonald explicitly acknowledged non-traditional security concerns in his speech and spoke about Australia’s commitment to addressing Pacific priorities. Among others, both Beck and Balkonan argued that national security was linked to development aspirations in Pacific Island states. The touchstone of this discussion was the Boe Declaration, in which Pacific Islands Forum leaders affirmed an expanded concept of security that emphasised human and environmental security.

Former Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) special coordinator Tim George spoke about translating Pacific Island states’ perceptions and concerns into practical policies by working with Samoa and Vanuatu to generate national security strategies (NSS). Through consultation with government and non-government stakeholders, NSS aimed to identify threats, increase awareness and assist development partners in prioritising support. George identified border management, transnational crime, protection of EEZs (exclusive economic zones), climate change and cyber security as the top issues to emerge for Samoa and Vanuatu. Some in the audience expressed reservations about the value and necessity of NSS, questioning whether Pacific Island states had been “forced” into the NSS process; George responded that Samoa and Vanuatu had in fact requested assistance in the development of their NSS. Ratuva voiced concern about what he claimed as the “militaristic connotation” of the NSS, noting that “the Pacific doesn’t need national security; it needs wellbeing”.

A number of speakers echoed the Boe Declaration, which identified climate change as “the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific”. Beck spoke passionately about the impact of climate change on Solomon Islands and other Pacific Island states. He observed that, for his nation, the Paris Agreement was not a symbolic gesture; the Pacific Islands were “on the front line” and the agreement was the “first and last line of defence”. In his words, when major contributors to climate change failed to meaningfully address their greenhouse gas emissions, “you basically know that people are going to die, but you allow that to happen. The science is very clear on that”. Consequently, a number of speakers expressed concerns about Australia’s

11 PIFS, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, Boe, Nauru, 5 September 2018, <www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

commitment to meet its Paris Agreement targets. Indeed, while Australia's efforts at climate adaptation in the Pacific Islands are significant, it was noted that there has been less emphasis on climate mitigation, which is a priority in the region.

Climate change is also affecting the fisheries on which many Pacific Island states rely. Quentin Hanich from the University of Wollongong outlined issues of governance and sustainability in Pacific fisheries. Hanich noted the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea gave Pacific Island states extensive exclusive economic zones; Kiribati became the twelfth largest country in the world if its maritime territory was taken into account. The value of tuna stocks in these waters was between US\$5 and 7 billion per year, and 87 per cent of total catches were taken from waters under national jurisdiction. However, climate change might move fish stocks out of national waters, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing challenged the ability of Pacific Island states to get the full benefit of this resource. Although Australia did much to assist Pacific Island states to secure and manage their fisheries, Hanich recommended that it should be a stronger global advocate for sustainable fishing and related issues such as ensuring food security and responding to climate change.

Another security concern facing Pacific Island states discussed at the workshop was the intersection between security and democratic governance. Bal Kama from the ANU identified several factors affecting the integrity of Pacific Island states' democracies, particularly foreign influences, which could have an outsized effect on what he said were the Pacific's "very dynamic but weakly regulated political systems". Reflecting the emphasis on the need to address both traditional and non-traditional security challenges, Kama advised that, to secure the region, Australia should help to address the domestic security concerns of Pacific Island states.

This last point reflected attention paid to Australia's approach to the Pacific Islands during the workshop. To provide a picture of the Australian Government's approach to the region under its "step up",¹² in his keynote McDonald outlined the various tasks that were being prioritised by Australia's new Office of the Pacific. McDonald emphasised the importance of fostering people-to-people relationships, vowing to "spend as much time in the Pacific as I do in Canberra". He also identified the importance of Australia speaking with a "common, respectful and coordinated voice" about the Pacific Islands, with the whole-of-government nature of his office playing an important role in achieving this. McDonald focused on the three pillars of Australia's step-up: economic growth, people-to-people relationships and security. He noted that economic integration underpinned Australian initiatives such as the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus and the new Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), while people-to-people links would be enhanced by funding for education, sports and community projects. McDonald noted that Australia was a signatory to the Boe Declaration and said Australia was committed to working with Pacific Island countries to address the security challenges and priorities set out in the Declaration, including climate change. McDonald also outlined Australia's efforts to enhance ocean security and to establish a Pacific Fusion Centre to aggregate and analyse security information from across the region.

12 DFAT, 'Pacific Step-up', <dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/pages/the-pacific.aspx>.

A number of speakers identified ways in which Australia could improve or refine its approach to the Pacific Islands. Salā George Carter from the ANU highlighted the current sense of uncertainty in the region concerning the nature and intent of Australia's step-up and New Zealand's parallel "Pacific reset",¹³ particularly whether they were long-term guarantees of commitment. Carter encouraged the Australian and New Zealand governments to involve Pacific Island states in decision-making about their policies. Echoing this, Tess Newton Cain from Griffith University encouraged Australia to listen more to Pacific Islander concerns, to understand the region's cultures, and to engage its citizens in Pacific affairs through quality education and media reporting. Bergin made three recommendations for future opportunities for Australian businesses in the region: extending labour mobility opportunities for Pacific Islanders to skilled positions; inviting Pacific Islanders to partake in placements in Australian agencies; and bolstering existing volunteer schemes to enable young Australians to gain work experience in the region, particularly in the medical sector.

While much of the discussion focused on Australia's approach to the Pacific Islands, speakers also considered some of the region's major external partners. David Envall from the ANU observed that Japan had been a "slow and steady" donor and partner to the region, but that it was now attempting to redefine its role to align with its vision of a "Free and Open" Indo-Pacific centred on maintaining a "rule-based" order, including freedom of navigation. Envall argued that it was important for Japan to be seen as a strong proponent of the US' Indo-Pacific strategy in order to dissuade US President Donald Trump from the possibility of strategically abandoning Tokyo.

Denise Fisher from the ANU addressed France's experience in the Pacific Islands as an example of the capacity of the island states to influence, and eventually change, policies they view as antipathetic, even those of a major power. She noted that France now characterised itself as being "internal", rather than "external", to the region, on the basis of its sovereignty over Clipperton Island, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and New Caledonia, with the latter two now members of the Pacific Islands Forum. While this signalled that France had been rebuilding its relations in the region, Fisher noted that recent elections and future referenda pointed to a "bumpy few years" ahead in New Caledonia, against a more complex geostrategic regional context, particularly since France had instrumentalised its Indo-Pacific vision and specific anti-Chinese rhetoric in the lead-up to the 2018 independence referendum in order to dissuade pro-independence voters. To minimise prospects of future tension, Fisher concluded that "any ongoing role for France in the region must be on the terms of Island states".

The nature of China's changing and growing presence in the Pacific Islands was a focal point for the duration of the workshop. Graeme Smith and Denghua Zhang, both from the ANU, dissected the details of Beijing's recent activity. Zhang argued that even though the Pacific Islands were far from the top of China's agenda, the number of high-level bilateral visits between Chinese and Pacific leaders now dwarfed those between the region and India and Japan. Smith described the changing nature of China's infrastructure investment in PNG, noting that improvements in quality were enhancing the reputation of Chinese companies.

13 Winston Peters, "'Shifting the Dial', Eyes Wide Open, Pacific Reset', speech to the Lowy Institute, Sydney, 1 March 2018, <www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/winston-peters-new-zealand-pacific>.

Overall, the workshop demonstrated that there are two dominant perspectives in debates about the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands. The first is generally expressed by strategic thinkers and is concerned that a potentially hostile China could establish a strategic foothold in the Pacific islands from which to threaten Australia. Even if the risk of such a development was assessed as low (and the relative absence of publicly available information makes this calculation an uncertain one), its strategic consequences for Australia would be such that pre-emptive action by Australia is unavoidable. The second is characterised by scepticism about what China's presence in the Pacific Islands means for Australia and Pacific Island states and criticism of what is characterised as Australia's increasingly securitised approach to its relations with the region. This perspective emphasises the autonomy and agency of Pacific Island states when dealing with China and other external powers, as well as their desire to be "friends to all".¹⁴ Yet, as Rory Medcalf from the ANU cautioned, the strategic dynamics of the broader Indo-Pacific might be unavoidable for Pacific Island states.

An exchange between O'Keefe and Bergin crystallised these differing perspectives. When O'Keefe argued that Australia's step-up had a "distinctly khaki tinge", Bergin countered that characterising Australia's actions as supporting a "militarisation" agenda in the Pacific Islands was a misrepresentation, because even its defence-related initiatives primarily supported Pacific Island states' own security priorities. For example, Bergin argued that the proposed Pacific Fusion Centre would contribute to maritime safety, not military intelligence; the Australia Pacific Security College would focus on Pacific Island countries' priorities such as transnational and human security; and the Lombrum Naval Base would primarily support PNG's maritime resource protection capabilities using the new Australian-donated Guardian class patrol boats.

Bergin's point highlighted the influence of framing in discussions about the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands and Australia's responses. For example, while Australia's step up in the region is supporting human security initiatives, this is not always the rationale foregrounded by the Australian Government or, particularly, Australian media. This demonstrates the difficulty of untangling what Sargeant described as "the divergent discourses of defence and human security" when discussing the region. Yet while the workshop exemplified some of the apparent divisions in debates about the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands, it hinted that there was more shared understanding between these perspectives than is at first apparent. No participant at the workshop denied the emerging strategic and geopolitical realities facing both Australia and the Pacific Islands, although some were more sceptical than others. And participants broadly agreed that Australia should do more to listen to, and respond to, the interests of Pacific Island states.

There were some gaps in the workshop discussion that warrant further analysis. In his keynote, Beck questioned the extent to which Pacific Island states all share the same security interests and perceptions, and whether (over)use of the collective expression 'the Pacific Islands' might pay insufficient respect to individual Pacific countries' interests and concerns, and might indeed mask tensions between regional and bilateral approaches to managing their security interests. The status of Indonesia in the Pacific Islands,

14 Taylor, 'Keynote Address'.

which Tarte described as an “elephant in the room” due to its uncertain but potentially highly influential role within Melanesian polities, also requires further consideration, as do the potential roles of India and the United Kingdom, which are both seeking to enhance their role in the region.

All participants were invited to submit pieces for this special issue in which they developed the ideas they had discussed at the workshop. The resulting special issue reflects the submissions received. It begins with transcripts of Beck and McDonald’s keynote speeches, followed by three commentaries by Sargeant, Newton Cain and Fisher, and articles by Morgan, Envall, Zhang and O’Keefe. The workshop represented an important opportunity for the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands to be discussed by Australians, New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders. But it by no means provided the last word on this issue. As Beck observed in his concluding remarks at the workshop, the Pacific Islands “can’t divorce” Australia and New Zealand, as they are permanent neighbours, “connected at the hip by geography”.

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