



The Institute for Regional Security

Occasional Paper 2020

Strengthening Australia's Relations
with Pacific Island States

Chris Gardiner

The Institute for Regional Security

The Institute for Regional Security is an Australian not-for-profit organisation and approved research institute under Australian Government regulations.

Published: July 2020 by The Institute For Regional Security

© The Institute For Regional Security

Cover Illustration: Inklab

Published and distributed by:

The Institute For Regional Security
2/10 Kennedy Street
(PO Box 4060), Kingston ACT 2604

Tel +61 2 6295 1555
Fax +61 2 6169 3019
Email info@ifrs.org.au
Web www.regionalsecurity.org.au



A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

Occasional Paper 2020

Strengthening Australia's Relations
with Pacific Island States

By Chris Gardiner

**The Institute
for Regional
Security**

regionalsecurity.org.au

About the Institute

We promote the peace, stability and prosperity of the peoples of the Indo-Pacific region through policy research, policy advice and advocacy, international dialogues, and the professional development of policy-makers.

About the Author

Chris Gardiner

Chris Gardiner, BA, MA (International Relations), M Prof Ethics, MLM, is the Chief Executive Officer of The Institute for Regional Security, and Director of The Institute's Digital Engagement and Diplomacy Program.

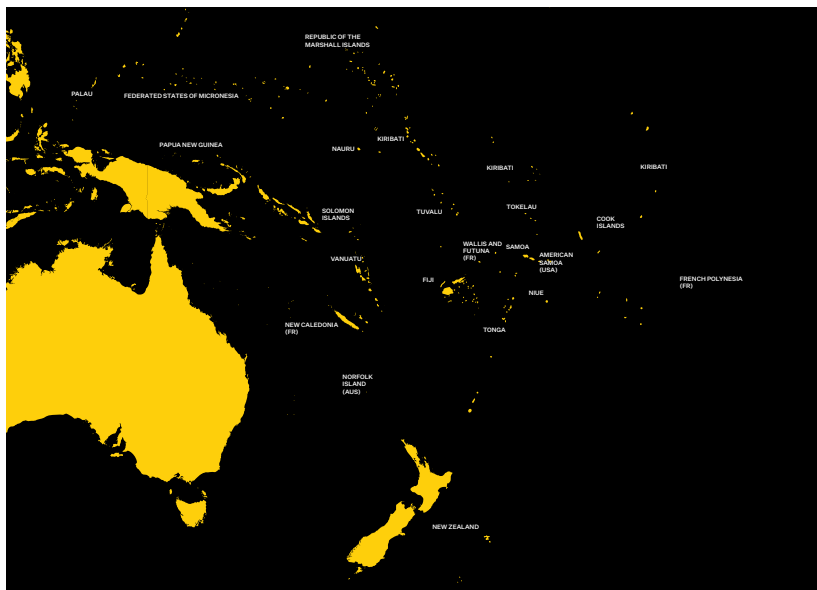
Summary

This paper articulates a long-term strategic goal for the Pacific region, recommends a strategic initiative in each of Australia's current 'Step-Up' policy areas of economic development, security, and climate change, and touches briefly on a number of additional initiatives intended to address the mutual needs of Australia and island states.

The paper incorporates the content of submissions to the Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) Sub-Committees on Foreign Affairs and Aid and on Defence, for their inquiries into Australia's relationships in the Pacific, and a submission to the recent Independent Review of Australia's International Development Assistance.

I provide a statistical overview for the region in Table 1¹.

For clarity, in this paper the Pacific region in question is the area covered by Pacific Island Forum (PIF), and ‘island states’ and regional ‘members’ are the Members thereof.



¹ Statistics drawn from the Pacific Island Community Statistics for Development Division website at <https://sdd.spc.int/> accessed 12 June 2020

Table 1

	Country	Capital	Population 2018	GDP per capita (US\$ 2016)	Land Area Km ²	% Population Growth 2018
Melanesia	Fiji	Suva	888,400	4,274	18,333	+0.4
	New Caledonia	Noumea	285,500	31,418	18,576	+1.5
	Papua New Guinea	Port Moresby	8,558,800	2,384	462,840	+2.2
	Solomon Islands	Honiara	682,500	1,647	28,230	+2.3
	Vanuatu	Port-Vila	304,500	2,682	12,281	+2.5
Polynesia	American Samoa	Pago Pago	56,700	11,667	199	+0.3
	Cook Islands	Avarua	15,200	19,183	237	+0.2
	French Polynesia	Papeete	277,100	18,231	3,521	+0.6
	Niue	Alofi	1,520	15,586	259	-1.2
	Samoa	Apia	196,700	4,208	2,934	+0.7
	Tokelau	No official capital	1,400	7,069	12	+0.1
	Tonga	Nuku'alofa	100,300	4,024	749	-0.2
	Tuvalu	Funafuti	10,200	3,537	26	+0.4
	Wallis and Futuna	Mata Utu	11,700	10,938	142	-0.4
Micronesia	Federated States of Micronesia	Palikir	105,300	3,154	701	+0.3
	Guam	Hagatna	172,400	34,177	541	+0.8
	Kiribati	Tarawa	120,100	1,533	811	+2.1
	Mariana Islands	Saipan	56,200	22,298	457	+0.4
	Marshall Islands	Majuro	55,500	4,032	181	+0.4
	Nauru	Yaren	11,000	9,393	21	+1.0
	Palau	Melekeok	17,900	16,262	444	+0.2

Background

White Papers & ‘Step Up’

The key concepts and themes of Australia’s 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper² regarding Pacific island states are as follows:

- Common interests held by Australia and island states;
- Australia’s need to defend northern approaches, secure its borders, and protect its EEZ;
- The acute development challenges island states face;
- The governance and delivery constraints island states face to address their development challenges;
- Australia’s commitment to stronger bilateral and regional partnerships;
- Increasing competition for influence and economic opportunities in the region.

The key concepts and themes of Australia’s 2016 Defence White Paper³ regarding Pacific island states are as follows:

- A secure nearer region, the threat of foreign military power seeking to influence in ways that could challenge the security of maritime approaches, and transnational crime;
- Stability in the South Pacific;
- Being the principal security partner with island states and deepening our security relationships;
- Strengthening island states’ ability to manage internal, transnational and border security challenges, including natural resource protection, and build resilience to natural disasters;
- Limiting the influence of any actor from outside the region with ‘inimical’ interests.

Australia's Pacific 'Step-Up' provides initiatives and additional funding in five broad areas: Economic Development, Climate Change, Security, Pacific Women and Girls, and People Connections⁴.

Underlying Approach

Geo-political strategies and over-arching diplomacy for the region must draw on defence, economic and social resources, policies, and actions and involve whole of government collaboration and coordination.

I adopt the following view of 'strategy' in the service of that whole-of-government approach: strategy involves articulation and pursuit of goals or end-states and the selection, prioritisation and leveraging of

- resources (material, human and immaterial),
- terrain or domain, and
- policy positions,

in the context of

- limited and constrained resources, and
- opposition, competition and contested operational environments,

to enable, exploit and maximise advantage to achieve the articulated goals or end-states.

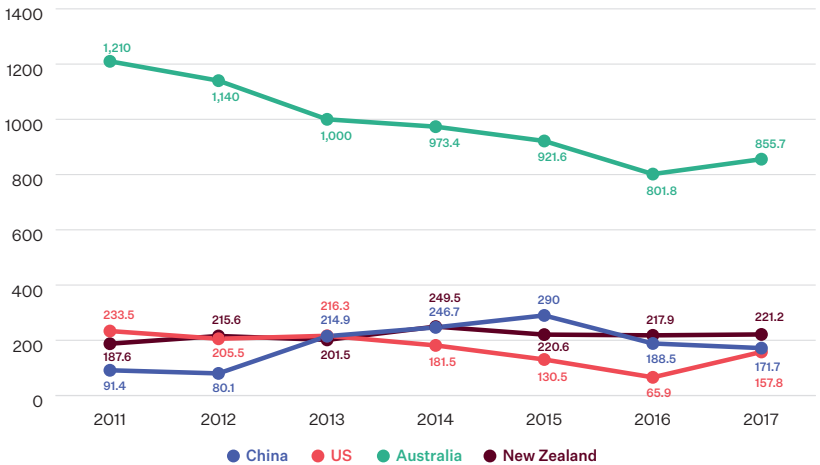
⁴ For details of Australia's 'Step-Up', see information provided by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/Pages/stepping-up-australias-pacific-engagement> accessed 12 June 2020

The Long-Term Goal and End-State

The longer-term goal and end-state for the region should be the creation of a formal regional community based on shared political, cultural and economic interests, and mutual defence of those interests, with such strong ties and capabilities that no external, antithetical power is able to establish itself or operate successfully in the region. The members' affinity and allegiance with and to such a community must have deep roots within their respective societies and polities.

Australia has considerable political and cultural capital in engaging regional states in this regard. It, like them, operates as a democracy. A primary cultural foundation for Australia has been Christianity, as it has been for island states. Australia shares with island states a love of sport and football in particular. Australia has championed and honoured self-determination in the post-colonial era, freely giving up in 1975 the control of Papua New Guinea it had been given in 1906 and sustaining it as an independent state since. It provided the key military support needed to establish and protect the freedom and stability of Timor Leste and the Solomon Islands respectively. It has played a crucial role in establishing the region's key institutions, the South Pacific Forum in 1971, now the Pacific Island Forum, and the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency in 1979. As Figure 1 shows, Australia is the largest provider of development assistance to the region – greater than the US or China⁵ – and has now in place significant export and infrastructure financing facilities (EFIC, AIFFP) to supplement that development assistance.

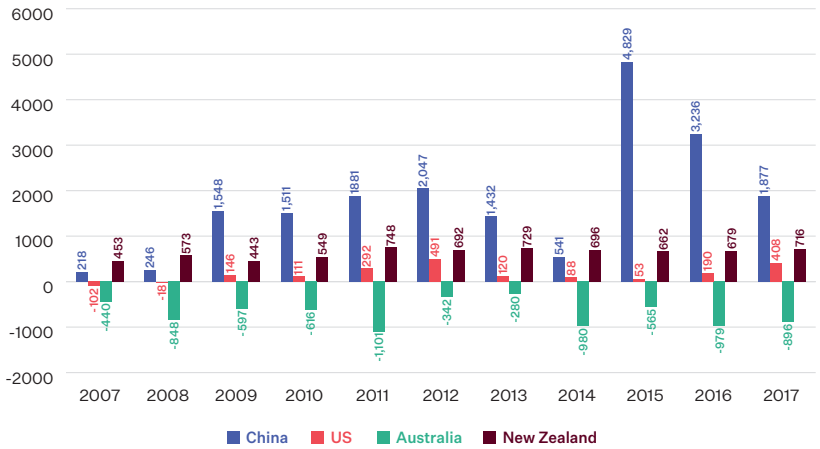
Figure 1: Aid from China/US/Australia/New Zealand to PICs in 2011-17, USD million



Source: compiled by author based on Lowy Institute data.

As Figure 2 shows, Australia has opened its economy to island states, operating a large surplus in their favour⁶, and has begun to liberalise access to its labour market from island states. Australia’s Defence Cooperation Program in the region, and specifically its patrol boat program, has been a vital element in the increasing effectiveness of island state defence of their economic exclusion zones, and fishing stocks in particular.

Figure 2: China/US/Australia/New Zealand-PICs two-way trade balance in 2007–17, USD million



Source: compiled by author based on World Bank data.

Professor John Blaxland has made the argument⁷ (and drawn on that argument in his recent submission to the JSCFADT Defence Sub-Committee⁸), for Australia to offer and establish a ‘grand compact of association’ with island states within the region. Such a compact should be the long-term (ie, 10 year) goal of Australian diplomacy in my view. At this time, however, there is an increasing sense of autonomy and collective power amongst island states, as reflected in the establishment and success of the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) bloc in the UN. Notwithstanding its political and cultural capital outlined above, Australia will need to tread cautiously in proposing any integration initiative that could appear to involve loss of sovereignty (a compact of association giving up defence and foreign policy) or economic absorption (labour and brain drain through migration programs). A strategy of confidence building is required to achieve the goal articulated in the first paragraph of this section, and confidence building around policy and resource allocations in key areas of advantage for Australia against geo-strategic competitors.

As an example of the changing geo-political and geo-economic competition Australia faces in this regard identified as an issue in the Foreign Affairs White Paper, consider the indicative research into public opinion in Vanuatu regarding China’s engagement with the country undertaken by Professors Clarke and Feeney in 2018, reflected in data they have presented to the JSCFADT Sub-Committee on Foreign Affairs and Aid⁹:

⁷ John Blaxland (2020), ‘Developing a Grand Compact for the Pacific’ in *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Issue 8, February 2020 pp. 91-98

⁸ Submission by Professor John Blaxland identified as Submission 1 at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Submissions accessed 12 June 2020

⁹ Submission by Professors Clarke and Feeney, identified as Submission 38 at https://www.aph.gov.au/sitecore/content/Home/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificRelationships/Submissions accessed 12 June 2020, with their research to be published as Clarke, M and Feeney, S (2019) ‘The Dragon versus the Kangaroo: Perceptions of Chinese and Australian Influence and Development Assistance in Vanuatu’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.54, Issue 3, pp.334-354.

Figure 3: In your opinion, does China’s economic development assistance to Vanuatu do a good job or a bad job at meeting the country’s needs, or haven’t you heard enough to say?

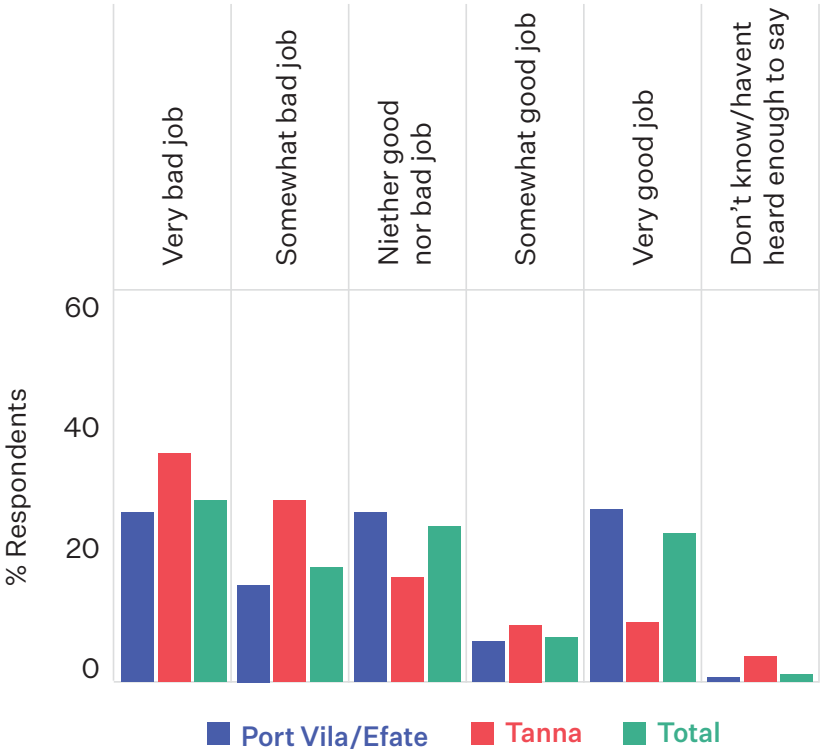
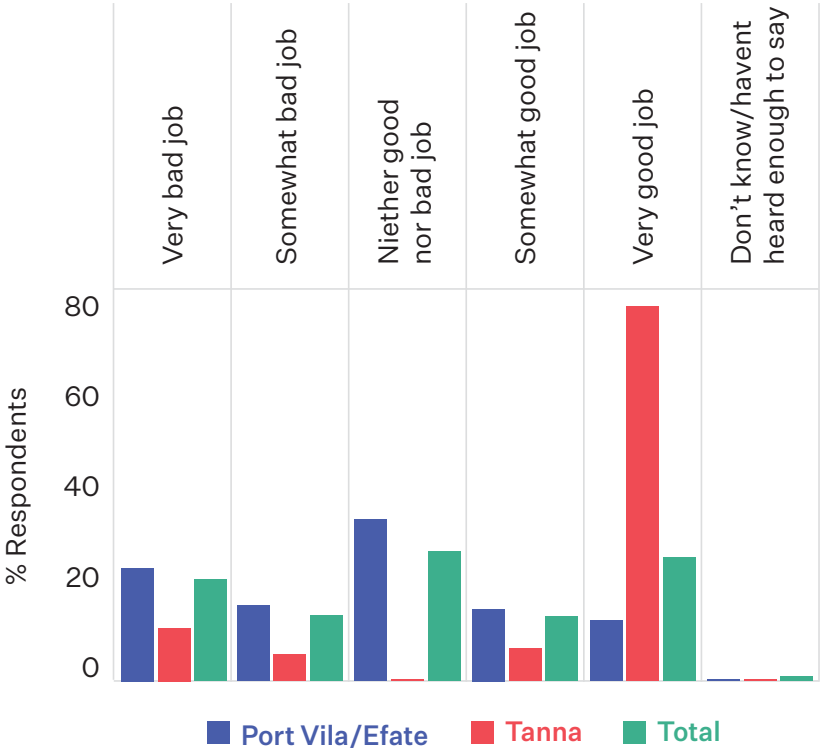


Figure 4: In general, do you think that China’s economic and political influence on Vanuatu is mostly positive, or mostly negative, or haven’t you heard enough to say?



Regional Economic Development

As noted above, Australia is the largest provider of aid to the region and manages a trade relationship of great advantage to island states, which, together with its provision of funding through EFIC and AIFFP, provides a very significant contribution to the economic development of the region. Whilst it should, especially in collaboration with its allies and partners (New Zealand, US, France and Japan), seek to maintain such prominence in the domain of economic development, it may find it increasingly difficult to match or prevent the largesse of the major geo-political competitor in the region – China. Taking a strategic approach, an area of economic benefit, however, that provides it with unequalled advantage is access to its labour market for workers from island states. Australia's Seasonal Worker and Pacific Labour Programs and their success reflect both the significance of labour market access to island state communities and Australia's geo-political advantage in offering such access. It would cost little to further and significantly liberalise this area of relations with the region. The following is proposed as strategic in strengthening Australia's relations with island states:

A Pacific Integration Visa

I support the ideas and work of Professor Stephen Howes¹⁰, who proposes that Australia establish a 'Pacific Integration Visa'. He suggests that education, training, employment and locality settlement conditions could be placed on the Visa. He also suggests pre-empting a possible argument about migration numbers by allocating places within the existing migration cap, justifiable by our commitment to our local 'Pacific family'. I go further:

- One access pathway for work, residency and citizenship in Australia would be via the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) – another area of advantage to Australia in which resources should be increased – allowing students in the Pacific to obtain the new Visa upon graduation from an APTC linked training course, whilst continuously aligning APTC course offerings with evolving labour market priorities in Australia;

- Subject to a set of employment skills criteria, and accepting Howes' suggestion to absorb numbers within overall migration intake caps, there should be no cap on migrant intake from the Pacific, providing a massive boost for Pacific communities via a growing but regionally-based diaspora; and
- Access to the Pacific Integration Visa could also be available to those who serve in the Pacific Island Regiment proposed below and their families.

Liberalising access to work and residency in Australia meets a number of objectives:

- it indicates to the region just how deeply we see ourselves as part of the region,
- it provides real and sustainable economic benefit to the peoples of Pacific island states,
- it provides highly compatible migrants within Australia's overall intake,
- it creates ex-patriot communities in Australia, invested both in Australia and in positive relations between island states and Australia, with consequent political impact in those island states,
- it builds unmatched geo-political advantage.

Mapping, Exploitation and Defence of EEZs

A second area of further investment of strategic value to the relations with island states is assistance Australia does and should increasingly give to island states to assert, exploit and defend their economic exclusion zones (EEZs). Greater support in this area would allow island states to benefit fully – and in amounts of hundreds of millions of dollars not fully obtained at this point – from their fish and natural resources within their EEZs, providing much greater economic self-reliance. As support to assert, exploit and defend their EEZ's involves defence relations, I deal further with the matter below.

Regional Security

I adopt the following approach to the role of Defence policy, capabilities and activities and the role they play in strengthening Australia's relations with island states¹¹:

- Defence policy and ADF capabilities and activities play a key role in the broader geo-political and diplomatic strategies for the region;
- Defence policy, strategy, alliances and capabilities should seek to shape operational environments in the region in favour of Australia and island states and to enable ADF and island state forces to deter, deny and defeat threats or attacks in those environments;
- Current threats and capabilities to be addressed include both 'regular' and 'irregular' warfare. The latter concept includes grey zone strategy and tactics and political and information warfare in a time of 'total competition'¹²;
- A longer-term, strategic approach is required that draws disparate initiatives and programs together to secure the region and the interests of its members.

Consistent with this approach, with the themes and concepts of the Foreign Affairs and Defence White Papers, and in pursuit of the long-term goal articulated above, Australia should consult with PIF Members on establishing a Pacific Islands Treaty Organisation (PITO¹³).

A number of key programs and initiatives exist upon which to build PITO:

¹¹ The material to follow is based on the complementary submission recently made to JSCFADT's Defence Sub-Committee.

¹² See the discussion of 'total competition' by Patrick Cronin at <http://cimsec.org/chinas-bid-for-maritime-primacy-in-an-era-of-total-competition/43146> and <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/total-competition>, accessed 13 March 2020.

¹³ The name and acronym is, of course, less relevant than the organisation and set of mutual obligations it represents.

- the Defence Cooperation Program, and in particular the Pacific Maritime Security Program and Pacific Maritime Boundaries Project;
- the Pacific Fusion Centre;
- the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group and the FRANZ Arrangement;
- the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre;
- the Australia Pacific Security College.

Australia gives significantly from its Treasury and ADF capability to strengthen and aid the security of island states. The key question – from the perspective of island states whose affinity and allegiance we seek – is whether Australia would be willing to commit forces in defence of that security. If Australia is not willing to commit itself in this way, why should it expect island states to put themselves at risk in defence of or to secure Australia's interests?

Australia should state that it would be willing, through PITO, to consider:

- an armed attack on any island state to be an attack on Australia;
- the breach of their sovereignty and economic exclusion zones to be a breach of its sovereignty;
- and the subversion of an island state, including by organised crime, to be a subversion of Australia's and the region's law-based political order.

It should state that it would, where invited by a PITO member state, deploy its resources and forces in defence of that state's security.

PITO would, of course, involve mutual security commitments. A requirement and key element of PITO would be agreement not to allow the establishment of military bases or programs by or with non PITO Members. It is unlikely that Australia could prevent investment approvals by island states for foreign companies in infrastructure, ports or commercial activities – it should not expect island states to forego what it has sought for itself, with the Darwin Port the prime example. But PITO would preclude military bases and military programs, and PITO associated intelligence programs would seek to deter, identify and neutralise use of businesses and commercial assets for intelligence, influence, or ‘immersion missions’¹⁴.

PITO Members would establish an integrated and jointly governed maritime and air command. Whilst Australia would contribute major assets and capabilities to the Command, the burden would be shared with other potential developed state members such as Japan, the US and France. The creation of a 21st century integrated command will also favour heavily the use of long-range UAVs, USVs, UUVs, drones and satellites to provide effective but lower cost ISR and interdiction. The recommendations by Northrop Grumman in its submission to the Defence Sub-Committee are pertinent in this regard¹⁵. Members would also establish a PITO Information, Intelligence and Communications Command focused on effective political and cyber warfare in the region¹⁶. PITO headquarters and bases would be located within the region and not in Australia as a further sign of commitment to the region.

¹⁴ For an example of this threat, see the recent discussion of China’s use of Philippines Offshore Gaming Operations for immersion missions and to establish influence and control in the Philippines, in the article by Jason Castaneda on the Asia Times site, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/03/china-quietly-filling-us-vacuum-in-the-philippines/>, accessed 13 March 2020.

¹⁵ Submission by Northrop Grumman identified as Submission 3 at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Submissions accessed 12 June 2020

¹⁶ For insights into the nature of the political warfare to be addressed, see the two volumes by Ross Babbage (2019), *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, Washington, DC and especially the case studies on the Western and South Pacific in Volume Two.

The Case for PITO

A major piece of regional defence architecture commensurate to the threat and goal

The establishment of a military base in the region by a power with ‘interests inimical to ours’ (to use Defence White Paper terminology) would constitute a very significant strategic setback and threat for Australia and its allies which would be difficult to undo. Prevention of such an outcome must be seen as the major objective of Australian policy and strategy in the region. PITO would ensure no such base would be established.

The interests of island states

In promoting PITO to island states, two arguments would be made. The first would be that PITO would be the best development of institutional architecture in the region to meet the objectives of the Boe Declaration and of section 9 of the Declaration in particular¹⁷. The second would be that only states committed in the structure of their polities and in their governance to the principles underpinning the Biketawa Declaration¹⁸ and reaffirmed in the Boe Declaration would be considered for PITO membership.

Collaboration to meet limited resources

Australia, as an island continent with limited economic and defence resources, faces the challenges of maritime security in the Pacific, Southern, and Indian Oceans and in the island chains and straights to its north. Its overall strategy must be built on hard-nosed, long-term and collaborative regional strategies. To secure the region to its northeast, in a way that does not draw maritime and air resources from its other regions and theatres of operation, it must strengthen, adapt and build alliances – alliances that prevent the establishment of regional presence by competitors. In 2020, those alliances must include alliances established with the region’s island states and Australia’s

¹⁷ See the Boe Declaration at <https://www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>, accessed 16 March 2020.

¹⁸ See the Biketawa Declaration at <https://www.forumsec.org/biketawa-declaration/>, accessed 16 March 2020.

allies and partners in the Pacific. PITO would draw those alliances and partnerships into a strategic block.

The burdens of being a major regional power

The recommendation that Australia propose and enter into a formal mutual defence and security pact with Pacific island states might be seen as involving too great a commitment of its resources and too great a constraint on its independent decision-making. To which I would reply:

- the nature and significance of the threat – the risk and likelihood of a maritime base being established in the region by a foreign power with inimical interests – warrants such a strategic action and commitment;
- the PITO proposal is consistent with and best addresses all the key concepts and themes identified in the White Papers at the start of this paper;
- Australia, as a developed and major power in the region, must adopt a hard-nosed realism about what is involved in securing its region, and its own interests through a secure region. Brands and Edel¹⁹ have written recently of the ‘tragic sensibility’ that must be at the heart of US foreign policy, a sensibility that properly understands the nature of, and is willing to bear the burdens of, a great power’s defence of the liberal democratic global order. Australia must develop a similar sensibility as the major power in its own region. Establishing PITO and accepting the responsibilities, burdens and constraints therein for the longer-term strategic goal is what is proposed.

PITO would be a significant confidence builder for island states considering the merit and integrity of any Australian overture to formalise a Pacific community and enter eventual compacts of association. In the medium term, however, and indeed apart from any such compact proposal, PITO would deliver one of Australia’s primary strategic defence outcomes by hardening the region against hostile intrusion and influence.

¹⁹ Hal Brands and Charles Edel (2019), *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Related Priorities and Initiatives

PITO could immediately focus on two projects (both of which stand as priority confidence building measures apart from the proposed PITO):

IUU Fishing

The statistics regarding the island states' Economic Exclusion Zones (EEZs) reveal the potential and challenges faced by their governments in managing and defending their ocean resources. Whilst constituted by a collective landmass of just over 550,000 km² (of which 84% is held by PNG), island states cover over 30 million km² of the Pacific Ocean²⁰. As one example to highlight the issue, Kiribati becomes the 12 largest country in the world if its maritime boundaries are taken into account²¹.

Competition for fish catch will intensify in the near future. Massola reports that even as the percentage of the world's oceans being fished has risen from 60% to 90%, the actual catch has declined dramatically from 25 tonnes per 1000 kilometres travelled in the 1950s to 7 tonnes per 1000 kilometres²². In the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea, he reports, accounted for 12% of the global fish catch in 2015 but catch rates have declined by 75% in the last 20 years and fisheries in the region teeter on the brink of collapse²³.

²⁰ Joanne Wallis (2017), *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, digital edition, location 3218.

²¹ Joanne Wallis and James Batley (2020), "How Does the 'Pacific' Fit into the 'Indo-Pacific'? The Changing Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands", *Security Challenges*, Vol 16 No 1, p 12.

²² James Massola (2020), "Why are fish wars heating up all over the world?" Sydney Morning Herald, 12 July 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/why-are-fish-wars-heating-up-all-over-the-world-20200129-p53vyp.html> accessed 16 July 2020

²³ Ibid



Economic Exclusion Zones for Pacific island states

A key issue for island states is the enforcement of their EEZs, not least against illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing boats. According to the Stimson Centre in the US, the top five countries targeted by IUU fleets are Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Micronesia and Papua New Guinea²⁴. The Head of the Office of the Pacific, Ewen McDonald, has noted that access fees paid by fishing vessels to Pacific island states “amount to around US\$350M, but could be as much as 40 per cent higher if IUU fishing were eliminated”²⁵. Professor Wallis in her submission to the Defence Sub-Committee²⁶ references Forum Fishing Agency figures suggesting that the value of

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ewen McDonald (2020), “Realising the Pacific’s Vision for Stability, Security and Prosperity”, speech at the ANU in June 2019, *Security Challenges*, Vol 16 No 1, p 17.

²⁶ Submission by Professor Joanne Wallis identified as Submission 2 at https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Submissions accessed 12 June 2020

tuna caught in the western and central pacific rose from US\$ 3.04 billion in 1997 to \$US\$5.78 billion in 2014²⁷.

Chinese fishing fleets pose a significant threat in this regard²⁸. China's is the world's largest distant-water fishing fleet²⁹, and as an example of its activities in the Pacific, its tuna-fishing fleet in the western-central Pacific grew from 244 vessels in 2014 to 418 in 2016³⁰. The threat Chinese fishing fleets pose is compounded by the incorporation of maritime militias into the fleets³¹. Increased deterrence and enforcement of EEZs by ADF must be seen as a priority for both island state security and economic development. PITO would develop doctrine and rules of engagement focused both on enforcing EEZ rights and on grey zone tactics involving IUU fishing³².

Increased deterrence and enforcement of EEZs by ADF must be seen as a priority for both island state security and economic development. PITO would develop doctrine and rules of engagement focused both on enforcing EEZ rights and on grey zone tactics involving IUU fishing.

²⁷ For up-to-date data from the Forum Fisheries Agency go to <https://www.ffa.int/node/425> accessed 9 April 2020

²⁸ See Matthew Carney's (2018) article <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-30/china-super-trawlers-overfishing-world-oceans/10317394>, accessed 13 March 2020.

²⁹ Reported as approximately 2500 vessels, constituting 38% of the global fleet. Massola, op cit.

³⁰ Michael Wesley (2020), "Oceania: Cold War Versus the Blue Pacific", *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition*, The National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington DC, p 211.

³¹ See the Stratfor (2016) article on China's arming of fishing fleets at https://www.stratfor.com/api/v3/pdf/269654/Stratfor_WorldView-why-china-arming-its-fishing-fleet and Nguyen Khac Giang's (2018) article <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/08/04/vietnams-response-to-chinas-militarised-fishing-fleet/> accessed 13 March 2020.

³² Ibid

Mapping

The Permanent Secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Colin Beck, has noted³³ that the Pacific Ocean ‘is being dealt with in silos and on a piecemeal basis’ with nothing being done ‘deep enough to make an impact’. As an example, he states that the ‘coastal waters of most of the Pacific countries are not mapped’. Mapping is crucial both to the assertion of EEZ rights and to island state civil and defence needs. A commitment to funding or undertaking such mapping must be seen as both a security and economic development priority by Australia.

Other initiatives related to Pacific relations would be the creation of a Pacific Islands Regiment within the ADF and provision of humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR):

Pacific Islands Regiment

I endorse the proposal by Anthony Bergin³⁴, supported by the Fijian Defence Minister³⁵, to establish a Pacific Islands Regiment in the ADF. The creation of such a regiment would, to a significant degree, be part of geo-political efforts to build stronger relations between the islands communities from which members of the regiment would be drawn and Australia. I recommend that residency and eventual citizenship be offered to those serving or having served in the Regiment and their family members. One of the aims of Australia’s geo-political strategy should be the political and social integration of the Pacific community, as intimated above. Having growing ex-patriot islander communities in Australia, with family networks throughout the region connected to serving and ex-regiment members, would contribute to such a strategy. In the context of the recommendation in this paper to establish PITO, a Pacific Island Regiment could be trained and ready to be deployed into the region as part of PITO forces, drawing on its particular knowledge of and connection to the region as part of its ethos and expertise.

³³ Colin Beck (2020), “Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands. How Should the Pacific Islands States Advance Their Strategic and Security Interests”, speech at the ANU in June 2019, *Security Challenges*, Vol 16 No 1, p 14.

³⁴ See <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/pacific-islanders-boots-would-help-defence-step-up/news-story/24d6ecd8d8619a832500d2a6cd38c9b8> accessed 9 April 2020

³⁵ See <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/defence/fiji-seeks-pacific-regiment-in-australian-army/news-story/bd425f643a0e5bd3247f06bafccf4e27> accessed 9 April 2020

HADR

Australia has an honourable and unequalled record of deploying the ADF to provide humanitarian and disaster relief to island states. Such responses see deployment of expensive, sophisticated military assets for non-military purposes and can stretch ADF resources considerably and inappropriately. Australia and its neighbours expect to see increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters in the coming years. As the recent bushfires in Australia show, there will be increasing demand for ADF deployments to respond.

HADR should not be primarily a defence capability. It should be part of what Australia does because of its values and, from a more hard-nosed perspective, as part of its geo-political strategy. I propose that Australia establish a standing humanitarian and disaster response centre/command – as an international aid program – with dedicated maritime and air assets. It could be located in northern Queensland and be equipped with: a Multi Role Vessel³⁶ designed to deploy and sustain ship-to-shore emergency humanitarian and medical assistance (including drones, helicopters, and landing craft); 2 heavy lift aircraft; 2 long-range UAVs; and a dedicated satellite capability. The Centre/Command would offer collaboration and integration in command, training and exercises, and operations with the armed forces and disaster response authorities in the region, including secondments into command and operations. It would house Australian-based stockpiles of relief items. It would also assume responsibility for the resourcing and coordination of AUSMAT and DART. It would identify and develop world's best planning, logistics, technological and operational capabilities in rapid and sustained disaster and humanitarian response. No other regional power would be able to point to equivalent disaster response capabilities dedicated to the region. Its disaster responses, and indeed even its simple MRV regional visitation and exercises program, would provide for very significant soft-power diplomacy – 'aid-boat' rather than 'gun-boat' diplomacy.

³⁶ See the discussion in a British context at <https://www.savetheroyalnavy.org/a-closer-look-at-the-littoral-strike-ship-concept/> and <https://www.savetheroyalnavy.org/the-plan-for-a-british-hospital-ship-gains-political-support/> accessed 9 April 2020

In terms of this paper, I would envision the standing HADR command/centre serving the greater Indo-Pacific, but nevertheless be able to be deployed to underpin and/or complement ADF or PITO resources and forces in HADR missions in the Pacific region.

Societal & People Connections

The sports and church partnerships initiatives within the Step-Up are examples of low-cost but strategic initiatives that geo-political competitors will struggle to match. I endorse them as key components of Australia's efforts to strengthen relations in the region. I propose, however, one additional program that would strengthen island state community ties to Australia, and build on and strengthen Australian strategic advantage:

The Australian Pacific Islands Virtual Hospitals Program

It is unrealistic to expect that many Pacific States will be able to build or, if built, sustain modern tertiary hospitals to service their populations. Australia has unequalled medical expertise and infrastructure that can be connected into medical facilities in the Pacific via cable, satellite, digital platforms, virtual theatres and robotics. This is a clear example where smart aid expenditure would benefit partner states and involve further strengthening of Australian expertise, infrastructure and comparative advantage. By funding the establishment and operation of a virtual hospitals or virtual theatres program, Australia would be offering the people of the Pacific, and the medical teams serving them locally, access to its world-class specialists and medical capabilities. There are Australian service providers (eg, Aspen) who could establish such a health connection and the necessary training programs, in partnership with Australia's leading hospitals.

Climate Change

Australia is a signatory of the 2018 Boe Declaration, which states as its first substantive declaration:

We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific ...³⁷

Australia, alongside its PIF partners, reaffirmed this statement in the Kainaki Declaration in August 2019³⁸.

Notwithstanding this joint declaration, there is a mismatch in assessment of priority strategic threats in the region. For Australia, it is China. For Pacific island states, it is climate change. Our perceived interests focus on a more complicated strategic environment. Their perceived interests are existential. Protection of their interests involves much stronger and more desperate motivation³⁹. The strength of their concerns on climate change must be reflected in the significance of policy positions Australia has to take if it is to win their support for its most significant regional objective – ensuring no antithetical military base or program is established in the region.

I note that there is a certain imbalance in the politics of the climate debate in the region. China is unarguably the world's biggest coal producer and consumer⁴⁰, with its Shandong province alone 'surpassing the total coal consumption of Europe'⁴¹ and with some projections

³⁷ Section 1 of the Declaration, Op cit.

³⁸ See section 14 of the Kainaki Declaration at <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/50th-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Communique.pdf>, accessed 24 March 2020

³⁹ See the May 2019 SBS report <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/pacific-islands-call-on-help-from-neighbouring-bigger-countries-to-battle-climate-change> and the article by Melissa Clarke (2019) 'Pacific leaders, Australia agree to disagree on action on climate change' at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-15/no-endorsements-come-out-of-tuvalu-declaration/11419342>, accessed 24 March 2020

⁴⁰ See some of the statistics at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/these-are-the-worlds-biggest-coal-producers>, accessed 24 March 2020

⁴¹ See the article <https://www.beltandroad.news/2019/09/06/china-is-the-worlds-biggest-coal-user-can-it-break-the-habit/>, accessed 24 March 2020

suggesting it will build between 300 and 500 new coal-fired power plants by 2030⁴². Whilst China's plans could 'single-handedly jeopardise global climate targets'⁴³, it has been Australia that has been the focus of much of the region's diplomacy to do more to address climate change concerns of island states⁴⁴.

Notwithstanding that arguably unfair focus on Australia, and accepting the value of the Government's Step-Up commitments around climate policies and assistance, this paper proffers what it considers to be a further, necessary strategic initiative to strengthen ties with island states. The aim is to prevent the establishment of unacceptable military bases and programs in the region, and to build towards a longer-term goal of establishing a formal Pacific community. It has also intimated that Australia needs to consider the nature and extent of the burdens it must carry to achieve this longer-term goal and as the major power in the region.

I believe that the further significant strategic initiative, that could assuage island state hostility to Australia over its climate change policies and, significantly, allow for a contrast with China's climate damage trajectory, would be for Australia to state that the Adani coalmine will be the last coal mine approved for development in Australia. In making the announcement, the Government would state that it had taken into consideration the nature of climate threats confronting the Pacific region and the understandable concerns of its regional neighbours and partners, as a major factor in its decision-making.

⁴² See the article <https://unearthed.greenpeace.org/2019/03/28/china-new-coal-plants-2030-climate/> accessed 24 March 2020

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ See the September 2019 Reuters report on statements by the PM of Fiji <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-fiji-climatechange-idUSKBN1W1159>, accessed 24 March 2020

Some might argue that a foreign policy consideration should not determine a domestic economic development decision, or that what could be suggested are misplaced island state judgments as to the efficacy or impact of Australian actions on climate change should be factor in such a domestic policy decision. I make the following points:

- Australia is in fact in the process of transitioning towards gas, hydrogen and ‘clean’ power domestically and in trade, and additional coal mines would be counter to such transition and involve an opportunity cost for investment in areas of future geo-political and geo-economic advantage such as hydrogen;
- Security and defence must be primary concerns in all areas of Government decision-making. Whether framing Australia’s geo-strategy in terms of island chains⁴⁵ or ‘inner arcs of strategic space’⁴⁶, the failure to sustain the affinity and allegiance of island states with the resulting risk of establishment of a military base or program by China in the Pacific on the eastern side of the ‘island chain’ running from Japan through the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia would be a catastrophic security and defence outcome for Australia and its allies. That strategic concern is clearly a greater priority than the benefits of an additional private coal mine.

⁴⁵ See Robin Laird’s (2020) “A Look at Strategic Geography for Pacific Defence: Putting Chinese Military Challenges into Strategic Context” as an example at <https://defense.info/re-thinking-strategy/2020/04/a-look-at-strategic-geography-for-pacific-defense-putting-the-chinese-military-challenge-into-strategic-context/> accessed 9 April 2020

⁴⁶ See Paul Dibb (2020) “How Australia Can Defend Itself Against China’s Military” at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-australia-can-defend-itself-against-chinas-military-132677> accessed 9 April 2020

