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Statecraftiness: Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands

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Introduction

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review recommended that the Australian government implement ‘much more active Australian statecraft’, which it identified as involving ‘deepening diplomatic engagement and stronger defence capabilities’.¹

This reflected that the importance of Australia’s ‘statecraft’ has become a common theme in the government’s foreign and defence policy pronouncements. Statecraft refers to *the actions that states take to try to change: (a) their external environment; (b) the policies and/or behaviour of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals; and/or (c) the beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions of target states, actors, communities, and/or individuals.*²

An important element in Australia’s kit of statecraft tools is defence diplomacy. While traditional diplomacy is conducted by civilian diplomats, defence diplomacy involves the peaceful use of defence resources to pursue foreign and strategic policy objectives. Therefore, defence diplomacy does not include offensive military operations, but it can involve ones for peaceful purposes, such as humanitarian and disaster relief. Chief of the Australian Defence Force General Angus Campbell is a strong advocate of diplomacy, which he says ‘complements harder power like military capability’.³

Defence diplomacy is generally viewed as a positive contributor to Australia's statecraft in the Pacific Islands region. Consequently, in its 2021 report, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 'Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations' recommended that the Defence Cooperation Program and the Pacific Maritime Security Programme be expanded.⁴ But defence diplomacy is often not well-understood,⁵ partly because diplomacy is commonly seen only as the domain of civilian diplomats, and partly because there is scepticism about its value.⁶

Therefore, it is timely to assess the nature and effectiveness of Australia's defence diplomacy. In this paper we do this with a focus on the Pacific Islands, one of the most strategically important regions to Australia. We analyse the following elements of Australia's defence diplomacy: the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP); maritime surveillance and support; people-to-people links; humanitarian and disaster relief; and unilateral and bilateral arrangements.

We conclude by making the following recommendations to improve the effectiveness of Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region:

- the effectiveness of Australia's defence diplomacy should be demonstrated, rather than assumed. Defence should consider reviewing its efforts in the region to assess both how they are received and perceived by Pacific Island countries and how they specifically meet Australia's strategic interests;
- the perceived success of Australia's defence diplomacy should not encourage the Australian government to uncritically support all proposed activities in the region. Instead, the government should proceed cautiously and strategically;
- Australia's defence diplomacy should continue to emphasise partnership with Pacific Island countries. The longstanding practice of the DCP meeting both Australian and Pacific priorities should be continued;
- Australia should support continued localisation, recognising that, rather than always 'stepping up', it is sometimes most effective to 'step-back' and provide support (whether logistical, financial, materiel, or otherwise) to Pacific Island countries and people to meet their own needs;

- Australia should think about how it will work with – or at least alongside – other partners in the region, particularly those with which it has tense relations, such as China; and
- Australia should discourage fracturing the region through bilateral defence and security arrangements.

¹Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence Strategic Review*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 18.

²Joanne Wallis, et al., *Statecraftiness: weaving webs of statecraft in the Pacific Islands*, *Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security* 01/2022, Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 2022, p.2.

³<https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/skilled-diplomacy-is-vital-to-australias-defence-says-adf-chief/>

⁴Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2021.

⁵Lech Drab, 'Defence diplomacy – an important tool for the implementation of foreign policy and security of the state', *Security and Defence Quarterly* (2018) 20(3): 57-71.

⁶Brendan Taylor, et al. *Defence Diplomacy: Is the game worth the candle? Centre of gravity paper #7*, Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2014.



Defence Cooperation Program

Much of Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region is conducted via its DCP. Worth A\$227 million in 2022–2023,⁷ the DCP involves Australia:

- providing assistance to the defence forces of Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Fiji and the paramilitary elements of police forces in other Pacific Island countries;
- engaging in humanitarian and development projects (particularly civil engineering);
- providing range of education and training opportunities; and
- engaging in personnel exchanges, strategic dialogues, visits, and exercises with Pacific defence and security forces.

Recently the DCP has expanded to undertake some major defence infrastructure projects. In early 2022 Australia completed work on redeveloping the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces. Australia is also constructing a Maritime Essential Services Centre in Fiji, upgrading the Cook and Tiroas barracks for the Vanuatu Police Force, and constructing border posts in Solomon Islands.

The DCP is not presented as an aid program, but instead as 'means of facilitating cooperative activities between the Australian Defence Force and regional security forces'.⁸ This means that the DCP has differed from Australia's development assistance program, because rather than seeing Australian assistance as a one-way transaction, it has long had the aim of fostering two-way cooperation.

The DCP has also been distinguished by the fact that it has sought to 'tailor... engagement to meet the national priorities, capacity considerations and cultural imperatives' of recipient countries. These are identified through 'annual officers' level defence talks and in-country Defence Attaché networks'.⁹

Recently Defence has established an Australian Defence Force (ADF) Pacific Support Team to enhance its engagement with Pacific Island countries about their needs.¹⁰ While Australia's development assistance program has shifted to factor in recipient priorities over the last two decades, that approach has been baked into the DCP since its inception.

The DCP is often seen as an effective tool of Australian statecraft because it can help to strengthen the capacity of regional security forces, improve Australia's capacity to work with those forces, and contribute to building strong 'strong people-to-people links with regional militaries at the tactical, operational and strategic levels'.¹¹ In its submission to the 2021 Joint Standing Committee inquiry on Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations, Defence stated that the DCP supports Australia's national interests and defence relationships in the Pacific Islands region.¹² This view was supported by a number of submissions to the inquiry.¹³

But there are concerns about the DCP. The first is that it has, at times, supported militaries that repress their populations or commit human rights abuses. This was most obvious during the Bougainville crisis, when donated helicopters were used by the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) to undertake offensive operations against Bougainvilleans. The second is that there have been questions about spending under the DCP and the management of individual projects.¹⁴ Third, the links between the DCP and defence strategic guidance are at times unclear and the strategic benefits of the DCP are often assumed, rather than demonstrated.¹⁵

⁷JoDavid Watt, 'Defence overview', *Budget Review April 2022–23*, Canberra: Australian Parliamentary Library, 2022, [https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview202223/DefenceOverview#:~:text=Defence%20Cooperation%20Program%20\(DCP\),99](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview202223/DefenceOverview#:~:text=Defence%20Cooperation%20Program%20(DCP),99).

⁸Stephen Merchant, 'Australia's Defence Cooperation Program and regional security', in David Hegarty and Peter Polomka (eds.), *The Security of Oceania in the 1990s, vol. 1: Views from the Region*, Canberra: Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 60, 1989, p. 72.

⁹Department of Defence, *Submission 10 to the Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations*, 2020, p. 3.

¹⁰Department of Defence, *Submission 10*.

¹¹Department of Defence, *Submission 10*, p. 3.

¹²Department of Defence, *Submission 10*.

¹³See: Joanne Wallis, *Submission 2 to the Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations*, 2020; High Commission of Tonga, *Submission 18 to the Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations*, 2020.

¹⁴Australian National Audit Office, *Audit Report No. 32: Defence Cooperation Program*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2001.

¹⁵Australian National Audit Office, *Audit Report No. 32: Defence Cooperation Program*.

People-to-people links

While it is hard to immediately identify the benefits of defence education and training opportunities – since they don't generate anything concrete – their value can be immense.

When selecting Pacific participants for its education and training programs, the ADF makes efforts to identify and target potential future leaders so that it can expose them to Australian training, invite them to conferences, and provide other opportunities for them to get to know Australia and their counterpart Australian personnel. This reflects a recognition that longstanding relationships can start with early professional military education and then develop over the years through further education, training, exercises, and deployments. These people-to-people links are enhanced by ADF members frequently embarking on multiple deployments to the Pacific Islands region, helping them to further develop their relationships. This can be compared to civilian public servants, including diplomats, who tend to be generalists and therefore don't necessarily get the same opportunity for repeat visits or deployments. The ADF has also developed 'soft power' defence diplomacy strategies based on sports such as rugby union and rugby league.

The ADF also conducts visits to the region. For example, in August 2020 Australia docked HMAS Choules and Huon in Port Vila and staged flypasts by Royal Australian Airforce Super Hornets to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence. But while such visits may provide an opportunity for people-to-people links to develop, they are primarily a demonstration of Australian military capability – and presence.

Similarities between the 'cultures' of defence forces also helps to build relationships: while there may be some cultural differences between Australia and Pacific Island countries, all defence (and many security) forces share similar institutional structures, expectations of behaviour, career progression, and standard operating procedures.

The value of people-to-people links was illustrated during the INTERFET deployment to Timor-Leste following the 1999 referendum on its political future. Members of the ADF and Indonesian military were able to draw on their familiarity with each other from joint-training and exchange programs to defuse tense situations.¹⁶ Connections between Australian military personnel and their Pacific counterparts go even deeper.

However, personal relationships can have limits, as was demonstrated after the 2006 coup in Fiji. Australian personnel who had developed close relationships with coup-leader Frank Bainimarama were unable to persuade him to abandon the coup. And even if the relationships between individual military officers are good, if there are strategic tensions between their two countries they might not make much difference. For example, it wasn't that long ago that Australian forces were cooperating with Chinese forces in the search for Malaysian Airlines flight MH370 or conducting joint exercises with American and Chinese forces. But it's hard to see how any goodwill earned then is paying off now.

¹⁶Craig Stockings, *Born of Fire and Ash: Australian operations in response to the East Timor crisis 1999-2000*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2022.

Maritime surveillance and support

Since the late 1980s, one of the most important aspects of Australia's defence diplomacy has been the provision of patrol boats to Pacific Island countries. As islands and archipelagos, Pacific Island countries have extensive exclusive economic zones (EEZs) under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: combined, they cover approximately 30 569 000 km² of the Pacific Ocean, in contrast to their combined landmass of 552 789 km² (84 per cent of which is Papua New Guinea).

The Pacific Ocean is home to the world's largest remaining stocks of tuna, providing over half of the world's catches of tuna.¹⁷ Many Pacific Island countries depend on revenue from fishing licences and access agreements. In many places commercial fishing boats are a significant source of employment. Small scale local fisheries also supplement nutrition and household income.

From the late 1980s, the security of Pacific Island countries' maritime territories was challenged by overfishing by vessels from distant-water fishing nations, in particular Japan, Taiwan, the United States, and South Korea. Over the past 20 years boats from the People's Republic of China have become increasingly active in this area. These distant-water fishing vessels, particularly longline vessels, frequently breached their licence agreements, and mis-reported their catches. There was also significant corruption in the management and governance of fisheries.¹⁸

Australia's initial response to these challenges was the Pacific Patrol Boat Program. This program responded to a 1979 request by Pacific Island countries for Australian and New Zealand defence experts to assess their surveillance needs. It also reflected Australia's prioritisation of policing Pacific Islands' EEZs.²⁰ The Pacific Patrol Boat Program consisted of 22 boats that were donated to 12 Pacific Island countries between 1987 and 1995, with the first boat being delivered to Papua New Guinea. To ensure that the boats were easy to operate and locally

sustainable and to minimise costs, they were built to commercial standards, which also meant that they could be supported by commercial supply and repair organisations.²¹

In 2009 the Rudd Government announced that the Pacific Patrol Boat Program would be replaced by the Pacific Maritime Security Programme,²² which was confirmed in the 2013 Defence White Paper.²³ The Pacific Maritime Security Programme involves 23 Guardian-class patrol boats being donated to 12 Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste between 2018 and 2024. It also includes a program of contracted aerial ocean surveillance and the secondment of regional personnel to the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) to help enhance regional coordination.

Australia and the FFA also increasingly cooperate with Canada and other national agencies and non-government organisations to access satellite monitoring and surveillance platforms.

Under both programs the patrol boats have focused on fisheries enforcement, although most boats are used by the police rather than fisheries agencies. In Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga they are operated by the defence forces. The boats are also used for search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and medical evacuations. The local crews are brought to Australia for training at the Australian Maritime College. Technical and operational support is provided by 25 in-country Royal Australian Navy maritime surveillance advisers, who have patrol



boat experience, and technical advisers, who are senior sailors with marine engineering or electrical specialisations. Support is often also provided to purchase fuel for the boats and build the infrastructure required to support them, such as the construction of wharf facilities, accommodation for crews and their families, and maintenance. Australia is currently upgrading wharf infrastructure in 13 Pacific countries to ensure that they can safely operate and maintain the new, larger *Guardian*-class patrol boats. The most well-publicised upgrade is of Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, on which Australia is partnering with Papua New Guinea and the United States.

These programs are seen as effective tools of statecraft to support Australia's strategic interests. They give Australia a strategic presence in the region, particularly through the Australian maritime surveillance and technical advisers stationed in recipient states. These personnel build personal networks and gain a 'detailed understanding of the marine environment of the region and normally play an important role in the development of maritime security and surveillance policies in the recipient countries'.²⁴ Indeed, they have effectively established an Australian network of maritime surveillance in the Pacific Islands, which has enabled Australia to gain situational awareness throughout the maritime domain.

As with the DCP, an important aspect of these programs is that they represent a partnership between Australia and Pacific Island countries, with Australia playing a 'facilitating role' while Pacific Island countries operate the boats.²⁵

Pacific Island countries report that they appreciate that, alongside other measures such as the Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement and increasingly effective measures against illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, these programs have helped them to protect their maritime resources and, in turn, increase their fisheries revenue.

Consequently, it has been estimated that Pacific Island countries now lose around A\$333.49 million annually owing to illegal fishing, which represents a significant decline in losses from estimates of A\$616.11 million in 2016.¹⁹

In addition, more than 16,000 people are currently employed in the fisheries industry.²⁶ The boats have also helped in relation to other security challenges, including search and rescue, medical evacuations, transporting ballot boxes during elections and, most significantly, in humanitarian and disaster response (although there has been criticism that the boats are also used for non-security-related tasks, such as transporting VIPs). Recipient states have also said that they appreciate the training that is provided to support the boats.²⁷

Pacific Island countries are accordingly committed to the boats, reflected by the relatively high number of sea days that they manage to achieve, often at significant human and financial expense. Although the number of sea days that Pacific Island countries achieve (36 days a year on patrol out of an average of 55 days a year at sea) is lower than similar boats operated by Australia and New Zealand (100 days per year), it can be challenging for Pacific Island countries to maintain and manage the boats.²⁸ Indeed, Australia anticipated these challenges when it was planning these programs, which is why it adopted a 'package deal' approach, whereby it trains crews, and provides logistics support, advisers, assistance with maintenance and, in some cases, fuel costs.²⁹

These programs have also facilitated regional cooperation, including through the FFA, which coordinates policy advice and provides expertise and technical support to Pacific Islands Forum members, and to which Australia is a major donor. In support of regional approaches to surveillance, Australia supports the FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre and annual regional maritime law enforcement operations such as Operation Kurukuru, which was first conducted in 2004. The operation has continued, with its scope being expanded to maritime law enforcement more broadly and participation enhanced by whole-of-government contributions.

Australia is also a party to the 2017 *Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement*, under which some members of the FFA agree to engage in cooperative surveillance and enforcement activities through sharing of research and information and joint operations. Australia has also funded the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, which facilitates research, information-sharing, and coordination between Pacific Islands Forum members to address security challenges, including in the maritime domain.

Australia has also supported Pacific Island countries integrating their maritime law enforcement activities, by funding in-country training, workshops, consultations, and legislative reviews.

Reflecting the perceived success of these programs, as well as the importance of the maritime domain in the Pacific Islands region, Australia is not alone in conducting 'patrol boat diplomacy'. Japan is the most active after Australia and has provided boats to Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, with support provided both through its national agencies, and the philanthropic Nippon Foundation. Taiwan has also donated patrol boats (significantly smaller than those provided by Australia) to Tuvalu, Palau and Nauru. Meanwhile, the US Coast Guard has plans to deploy a cutter permanently in the region from 2024. This is on top of the shiprider agreements that the US has with 12 Pacific Island countries that allow US Coast Guard to take aboard Pacific law enforcement officials to pursue suspected illegal fishing activity in their waters.

At the 2023 meeting of the Partners in the Blue Pacific, members announced plans to provide a Fisheries and Ocean Science Vessel to the Pacific Community to support fisheries management and ocean science research.

Although China has donated patrol boats to Nigeria, the Philippines, and Sierra Leone, it has not yet donated any to Pacific Islands countries. It is perhaps telling that the two Chinese patrol boats purchased by Timor-Leste in the mid-2000s are currently inoperable due to lack of maintenance. This can be contrasted to the Australian approach, which involves not just the provision of boats, but also maintenance and sustainment support. However, Australia's programs have not been without challenges. Recently, there were defects in the exhaust, sewage, and safety systems of the first 15 new *Guardian*-class boats delivered to Pacific Island countries. Some of these boats were out of service while they were being rectified.

Australia has also extended maritime surveillance cooperation over the last five years, including information-sharing, supported regional multilateral maritime surveillance activities, and coordinated surveillance support to Pacific Island countries from Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States (US) through the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (the 'Pacific Quad'), the FRANZ Arrangement between

Australia, France and New Zealand and the 2012 Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France.

The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has also been involved in maritime security assistance, providing small craft for local policing to Vanuatu, as well as support to the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre and Transnational Crime Units.

¹⁷Thomas Ruaia, Steve Gu'urau and Lily Wheatley, 'Economic and Development Indicators and Statistics: Tuna Fisheries of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean 2022. Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, 2023.

¹⁸Quentin Hanich and Martin Tsamenyi, 'Managing fisheries and corruption in the Pacific Islands region', *Marine Policy* (2009) 33(2): 386-392.

¹⁹MRAG Asia Pacific, *The Quantification of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing in the Pacific Islands Region – a 2020 Update*, Honiara: Forum Fisheries Agency, 2021, p. vii.

²⁰Department of Defence, *Defending Australia, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1994*; Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Australia's Defence Co-operation Program*.

²¹Anthony Bergin and Sam Bateman, 'Law and order at sea in the South Pacific: The contribution of the Pacific Patrol Boat project', *Oceans and Coastal Management*, vol. 42, 1999, pp. 555-568.

²²Kevin Rudd, 'Remarks at the opening of the 40th Pacific Islands Forum', Cairns, Australia, 5 August 2009.

²³Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013.

²⁴Bergin and Bateman, 'Law and order at sea', p. 557.

²⁵McCann, *The Future of Australia's Pacific Patrol Boat Program*, p. 8.

²⁶John Virdin, Tibor Vegh, Alexandra Aines and David Bjorkback, *Pacific Possible: Tuna Fisheries*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2016.

²⁷Bergin and Bateman, 'Law and order at sea', p. 565.

²⁸Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, *Security Challenges Facing Papua New Guinea and the Island States of the Southwest Pacific*, vol. 2, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2010.

²⁹Bergin and Bateman, 'Law and order at sea'.



Other forms of defence assistance

The ADF provides other forms of assistance outside the DCP, most notably the disposal of unexploded Second World War ordinance as part of Operation Render Safe.

The ADF also participates in military exercises with some Pacific Island countries, which help 'promote interoperability and familiarity between armed forces'.³⁰ For example, the ADF has conducted joint exercises with the PNGDF since Papua New Guinea's independence, including Exercise Puk Puk, involving Australian and Papua New Guinean engineers. In 2013 the inaugural South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting established a Cooperative Exercise Framework, known as Povai Endeavour, which provides a coordinating mechanism for exercises in the region.

Regional engagement activities such as Indo-Pacific Endeavour and the annual Pacific Partnership humanitarian operation can also play a valuable role. For example, since 2008 China has got a lot of mileage out of the tour of its Peace Ark hospital ship to more than 40 countries around the world, including Solomon Islands, Tonga, Kiribati, Vanuatu, and Timor-Leste in 2023.

³⁰Department of Defence, *Submission 10*, p. 5.



Humanitarian and disaster relief

An important element of Australia's defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region is humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR).

Pacific Island countries are vulnerable to natural disasters.

While Australian HADR plays an important role, it should be acknowledged that Pacific Islanders are highly resilient and have been finding ways to adapt to social, political, and environmental change for centuries. Australia and other partners were reminded of this by the successful localisation of HADR in Vanuatu in 2020 and Tonga in 2022 necessitated by COVID-19 related border closures.³¹

It has been claimed that HADR offers Australia an opportunity to conduct 'disaster diplomacy'.³² Although a potentially cynical way to characterise HADR, this was particularly important in respect of Cyclone Winston in Fiji in 2016, which offered an opportunity for Australia to rebuild its relationship with Fiji after the 2006 coup. Australian personnel working with the Fijian military forces was 'welcomed by both communities', as they shared a 'strong collective sense of purpose'.³³ Australia's assistance encouraged then Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama to declare that Fijians 'will always be grateful' and that he wanted to 'reset the direction of our relationship and work together to confront our many challenges in the region and the world'.³⁴

However, this example also illustrates the complexities of defence diplomacy. While Australia's support to Fiji helped to rebuild its relationship with Bainimarama and his government, it also bolstered the image of that government domestically.³⁵ Given that Bainimarama had led a coup, and that his government had implemented policies that arguably restricted democratic freedoms, this meant that Australia's assistance had unintended consequences.

Australia currently faces the mixed blessing of a growing number of partners seeking to aid Pacific Island countries. When that assistance comes from partners that Australia has close relations with, it can involve valuable opportunities for coordination and burden-sharing. For example, to respond to the January 2022 tsunami in Tonga, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, France, Japan, the United Kingdom and Fiji coordinated their sizable response through an ad hoc International Coordination Cell established by the ADF at Headquarters Joint Operations Command.

China remained outside the cell and mounted its own extensive response. This resulted in competition for pier-side support, access to tarmacs and flight scheduling, as well as poorly coordinated donated equipment. Today, 75 eight-tonne inappropriate and unwanted one-bedroom prefabricated homes donated by China sit gathering salt spray on the wharf in Nuku'alofa.³⁶ The potential for friction between China and Australia and its partners was circumvented in this case by the fact that most assistance was delivered by contactless means, to limit the introduction of COVID-19. But given the increasing frequency of natural disasters in the region due to climate change, it's only a matter of time before defence personnel from these states are deployed to deliver humanitarian relief in the same geographical area. That could raise serious coordination challenges, with potentially adverse consequences for the host Pacific Island countries and for the personnel delivering assistance.

³¹Vanuatu Association of NGOs and Humanitarian Advisory Group, *No Turning Back: Local Leadership in Vanuatu's Response to Tropical Cyclone Harold, 2020*, https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/TC-Harold-Practice-Paper_final-electronic.pdf; Pacific Resilience Partnership, *Humanitarian Action in the Pacific: Towards Strengthening Local Action in the Pacific, 2021*, https://www.resilientpacific.org/sites/default/files/2021-07/Humanitarian-Action-in-the-Pacific_ecopy.pdf.

³²Anna Powles, 'Disaster diplomacy, Cyclone Winston, and regional preparedness', *Incline*, 26 March 2016, <https://www.incline.org.nz/home/disaster-diplomacy-cyclone-winston-and-regional-preparedness>.

³³David Johnston, quoted in 'Canberra first on a success', *Navy News*, 7 April 2016.

³⁴Bainimarama, Frank, 'Hon. PM Bainimarama's speech at the opening of the Fiji trade and investment symposium', Sydney, 14 October 2016.

³⁵The authors thank William Waqavakatoga for this insight.

³⁶This discussion draws on: Joanne Wallis, Anna Powles, and Henrietta McNeill, 'When disaster strikes, Australia, New Zealand and the US should partner with, not for, the Pacific', *The Strategist*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.aspi.org.au/when-disaster-strikes-australia-new-zealand-and-the-us-should-partner-with-not-for-the-pacific/>.

Minilateral arrangements

Beyond the longstanding partner arrangements like the FRANZ and Pacific Quad, there are a range of other minilateral defence arrangements in the Pacific Islands region:

- The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting is an annual defence-specific forum that provides an opportunity for Pacific defence ministers to discuss regional security challenges and share experiences.
- The South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces meeting is an annual meeting to discuss maritime security.
- The Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting engages with heads of Pacific security agencies, which includes defence, police, customs and immigration to shape the regional security agenda.
- In 2023 the Indo Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference was also held in the Pacific for the first time, in Fiji.

These defence arrangements provide an opportunity for Australia to express its support for Pacific Island countries and to 'identify how best to collaborate and coordinate our efforts' with them and other partners.³⁷



³⁷ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island Nations*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2021, p. 14-15.



What else could Australia do?

Australia conducts extensive defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands region, but it can improve the way it does things and increase its effectiveness as a tool of statecraft.

Demonstrate, rather than assume, effectiveness

As many submissions to the Joint Standing Committee on Defence's Inquiry into Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations indicate, Australia's defence diplomacy is frequently praised as an effective tool of Australian statecraft. But as is the challenge for all statecraft, demonstrating causality between defence diplomacy and outcomes that are favourable to Australia's strategic interests is challenging. This means that the effectiveness of Australia's defence diplomacy is often assumed, rather than demonstrated. We accordingly recommend that Defence consider reviewing its efforts in the region to assess both how they are received and perceived by Pacific Island countries and how they specifically meet Australia's strategic interests. Such a review would then provide a sound basis on which to design the expansion and improvement of Australia's defence diplomacy in the region.

Invest cautiously and strategically

As defence diplomacy in the Pacific Islands is generally viewed as an effective tool of Australian statecraft, the government may be tempted to invest more heavily in it – but this needs to be done cautiously and strategically.

This section draws on Joanne Wallis, 'Australia should offer our 'Pacific family' access rather than simply reacting to China', *The Conversation*, 1 August 2023, <https://theconversation.com/australia-should-offer-our-pacific-family-access-rather-than-simply-reacting-to-china-210460>



After a July visit to Solomon Islands, Defence Minister Richard Marles suggested that Australia was ‘very keen’ to help Solomon Islands to establish a military.³⁸ This followed Sogavare signing a policing pact during his visit to China. That pact built on a bilateral security agreement signed in April 2022 that several Australian commentators interpreted as paving the way for a Chinese military base.³⁹ However, the Solomon Islands government refutes this.

While it is the Solomon Islands government’s sovereign right to establish a military, questions over its likely benefit should give Australia pause.⁴⁰ Law and order are best guaranteed by police, and ultimately, by addressing sociopolitical challenges.⁴¹ This includes uneven development and underdevelopment.

Solomon Islands does not share a land border (a justification for Papua New Guinea having a defence force), and its maritime territory is already protected by a police maritime unit aided by the Pacific Maritime Security Programme.

While the logistical capabilities of defence forces are useful for humanitarian and disaster relief, given challenges of funding and scale, the most efficient way to provide it would be through developing a regional capability.⁴²

Australia may be concerned that China will otherwise step in. But even if Australia does help, it wouldn’t have the right to control a new Solomon Islands’ defence force. And while Australia provided substantial assistance to rebuild Solomon Islands’ police force during RAMSI, that hasn’t stopped China from developing its own relationship with that force, including through providing training and equipment.

There are also a few cautionary tales from elsewhere in the Pacific. The deployment of the PNGDF during the Bougainville conflict exemplified how a military can be used against a domestic population. The potential for small arms to be transferred to civilians or looted in the case of civil unrest is also a concern. And coups in Fiji demonstrate how the military can unseat a government. Australia had established the PNGDF during its colonial administration and had provided decades of support to the Fijian military.

Continue to emphasise partnership and meeting both Australian and Pacific priorities

As noted, one of the longstanding strengths of the DCP is that it is designed to meet both Australian and Pacific priorities. This has contributed to the enthusiasm of Pacific Island countries for the DCP and enhanced its role as a partnership building exercise. We recommend that Australia continue to pursue this approach.

Support greater localisation

Australia should use its defence diplomacy to support greater localisation. As noted, this shift has been hastened by the need to close borders during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that most of the frontline humanitarian response in Vanuatu in 2021 and Tonga in 2022 was provided by locals. Australia and other partners provided vital logistical and material support. This suggests that greater forward positioning of humanitarian resources in the Pacific could empower local humanitarian responses.

This last point highlights that defence diplomacy, and Australia’s policy approach to the Pacific more generally, doesn’t have to involve ‘doing everything’. Sometimes being an effective partner means supporting Pacific Island countries to get on with things themselves: instead of always ‘stepping up’, Australia needs to be mindful when it should step back and get out of the way.

Think about how to work with – or at least alongside – other partners

The Pacific Islands region is increasingly ‘crowded and complex’,⁴³ so Australia is going to have to work with, or at least alongside, a range of other states.

Routes to improved cooperate with allies and partners are relatively straightforward and can build on existing mechanisms. For example, the FRANZ Arrangement that provides a coordinating mechanism for Australia, New Zealand, and France of humanitarian responses should be expanded to include Pacific Island countries as members.⁴⁴ We’ve already seen this on a small scale with Fiji being included in the response to the Tongan volcanic eruption and tsunami as part of the International Coordination Cell.

Similarly, the Pacific Quad that coordinate maritime domain awareness activities and coordinate maritime security assistance, could be expanded to include Pacific Island countries’ militaries or security forces.⁴⁵ This would give them an equal seat at the table when Pacific Quad activities are being planned, as well as increased opportunities to develop skills, and strengthen relations and interoperability. While this would place additional demands on both existing and new Pacific Quad members, that cost would be outweighed by the benefit of demonstrating respects for Pacific Island countries as equal partners, and a genuine commitment to increasing capacity within the regional security sector and strengthening the regional security architecture.

³⁸Quoted in Stephen Dziedzic, ‘Defence Minister Richard Marles happy for Australia to support Solomon Islands defence force’, ABC News, 19 July 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-19/australia-happy-to-support-solomon-islands-defence-force/102622652?s=03>.

³⁹See, for example: Anastasia Kapetas, ‘China’s maritime deal with Solomon Islands hints at dual-use facilities’, *The Strategist*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-maritime-deal-with-solomon-islands-hints-at-dual-use-facilities/>.

⁴⁰This section draws on: Joanne Wallis, ‘Australia should offer our ‘Pacific family’ access rather than simply reacting to China’, *The Conversation*, 1 August 2023, <https://theconversation.com/australia-should-offer-our-pacific-family-access-rather-than-simply-reacting-to-china-210460>.

⁴¹Transform Aqorau, *Personal Reflections on Political Economy and Nation-Building in Solomon Islands, Working Paper 2022/3*, Canberra: Australian National University Department of Pacific Affairs, 2022.

⁴²Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, *Smooth sailing? Australia, New Zealand and the United States partnering in – and with – the Pacific islands*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2023.

⁴³Pacific Islands Forum, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, 2018; Joanne Wallis, *Crowded and Complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017.

⁴⁴Wallis and Powles, *Smooth sailing?*

⁴⁵This discussion draws on: Wallis and Powles, *Smooth sailing?*

Although outside existing mechanisms, ongoing discussions on maritime cooperation with Japan, South Korea, and Canada are also likely to be facilitated by developing mechanisms such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, of which they are members alongside Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. However, these cooperative efforts need to be mindful of not sidelining Pacific institutions, particularly the Pacific Islands Forum.

Cooperation with China, with which Australia has a more tense relationship, is going to be less straightforward. But China's increased presence in the region means that Australia and its partners need to consider how they'll work alongside – if not with – China to respond to future disasters. This includes scenarios in which there are potential competing command-and-control arrangements, such as in Solomon Islands. This suggests that Australia should support the creation of a regional Pacific Coordination Centre for Humanitarian Assistance housed within the Pacific Islands Forum architecture.⁴⁶

But the signs for China's potential cooperation with Australia and other partners are not promising.⁴⁷ In early 2023 China launched a China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism and the China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation. It has also proposed a China-Pacific Island Countries Sub-Center for Marine Disaster Risk Reduction cooperation. While it seems pretty clear that China isn't interested in cooperating with Australia and other partners, there is a lot to be said for Australia to be seen to be trying to coordinate with China through regional mechanisms. This would show our Pacific partners that we have listened to their calls for the de-escalation of strategic competition and that we are prioritising a regional approach. The onus would then be on China to choose whether it wants to be seen as the partner who isn't playing ball.

Discourage fracturing the region through further bilateralism

Therefore, we recommend multilateral efforts to cooperate on defence diplomacy in the region. While Australia has a range of longstanding bilateral defence and security relationships that reflect its unique history and geography, it should discourage its allies and partners from fracturing the region further bilateralism.

The April 2022 China-Solomon Islands security agreement has attracted the most attention and has raised concerns that it may fracture Pacific regionalism.⁴⁸ There are also concerns about the 2023 US-PNG defence cooperation agreement, and the 2022 Australia-Vanuatu security agreement are both also unpopular domestically. We saw this play out in Vanuatu with the successful vote of no-confidence against the government, in part because it signed the security agreement (although domestic political dynamics were more influential). It is currently playing out in Papua New Guinea, with the ongoing court challenge to the constitutionality of the defence cooperation agreement. Both Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea are long-term members of the Non-Aligned Movement and have strong domestic cultures of non-alignment that reflect this.

This also raises questions about the ongoing negotiations on an Australia-PNG security treaty. While that would arguably be less controversial domestically in PNG because of the depth of Australia's existing relationship with PNG, it isn't without risks both for the PNG government and for Australia. There are many reasons why Australia has been reluctant to provide an explicit security guarantee to PNG in the past and they haven't gone away, even if a short-term focus on strategic competition makes a treaty attractive now.

⁴⁶As recommended in: Wallis and Powles, *Smooth sailing?*

⁴⁷This discussion draws on: Wallis and Powles, *Smooth sailing?*

⁴⁸Anna Powles, 'Five things we learned about China's ambitions for the Pacific from the leaked deal', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2022.





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Page 1 - Royal Australian Air Force aviator Aircraft Woman Bethany Griinke with year 11 and 12 students from Fetuvalu secondary school in front of the Royal Australian Air Force KA350 King Air during Operation Solania 23-3. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 2 - Tongan Navy sailors from the Guardian-class patrol boat VOA Ngahau Siliva collect a donated boat delivered by the Royal Australian Navy ship HMAS Canberra as part of Operation Tonga Assist 2022. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 5 - Key stakeholders board a small boat to be transported between the Shortland Islands in Solomon Islands' Western Province, for a site visit to the Western Border Outpost project. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 7 - Federated States of Micronesia crew on board the FSS Bethwel Henry during the ceremony for the handover of the Guardian-class Patrol Boat FSS Bethwel Henry at HMAS Stirling, Western Australia. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 8 - Australian Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician Corporal Joel Macmillan (left) and Royal Solomon Islands Police Force Constable Armstrong Ragoso survey the coastline using metal detection equipment during Operation Render Safe, Nauru. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 10 - Royal Australian Air Force loadmaster Corporal Jakeb Thorogood looks out over the C-17J Spartan aircraft ramp during a maritime surveillance flight over Palau's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in support of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency during Operation Solania. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 11 - ADV Reliant's Intensive Care Paramedic, Craig Short, conducts first aid training for crew members of Kiribati's Guardian Class Patrol Boat, RKS Teanoai II, during a port visit in Tarawa, Kiribati on 04 July 2023. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 12 - Federated States of Micronesia personnel from the Guardian-class patrol boat FSS Toshiwo Nakayama after the handover ceremony at Austal ship building facility in Henderson, Perth, Western Australia. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 15 - Royal Australian Air Force aviator Aircraftwoman Bethany Griinke from No. 32 Squadron is presented a head wreath in appreciation for hosting a visit for the Bareaumai Primary School students to the Royal Australian Air Force KA350 King Air during Operation SOLANIA - ISLAND CHIEF 23-3 on the Republic of Kiribati. Source: Department of Defence.

Page 17 - Australian Army Corporal Charley Gledhill from Joint Task Group 637.3 assist members from the Royal Solomon Island Police Force in planning a patrol route during a multi-agency policing patrol at the Port of Honiara, Solomon Islands on 15 December 2021. Source: Department of Defence.



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We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Kaurna people, the original custodians of the Adelaide Plains and the land on which the University of Adelaide's campuses at North Terrace, Waite, and Roseworthy are built. We acknowledge the deep feelings of attachment and relationship of the Kaurna people to country and we respect and value their past, present and ongoing connection to the land and cultural beliefs. The University continues to develop respectful and reciprocal relationships with all Indigenous peoples in Australia, and with other Indigenous peoples throughout the world.