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Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners

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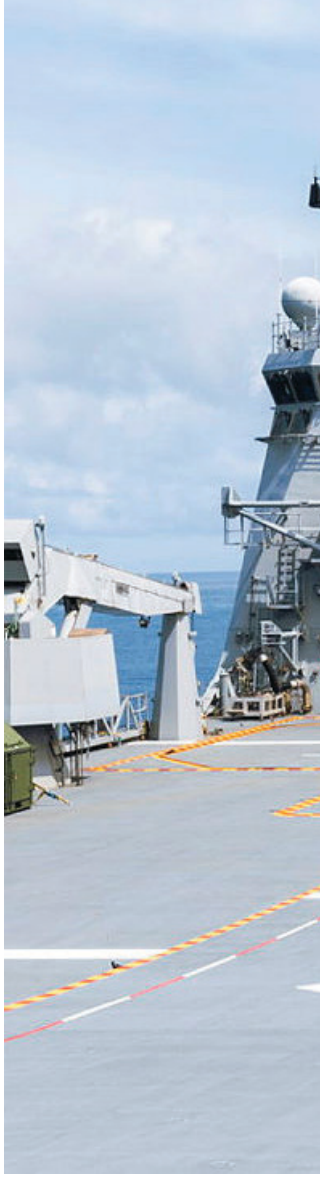
1. Introduction

Joanne Wallis



The ocean is critical to the lives and livelihoods of Pacific people, and Pacific Island countries manage more than ten percent of the earth's oceans,[1] because more than 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean[2] falls within the Exclusive Economic Zones of these 'large ocean island states'.[3]

The concept of the 'Blue Pacific Continent' adopted by **Pacific Islands Forum** leaders captures the 'shared stewardship' of the ocean by Pacific Island countries and peoples.[4]

But the ocean ecosystem and its resources face multiple challenges, and many challenges traverse or emerge from the ocean. This project analyses how Pacific Island countries and their partners are seeking to respond – both individually and collectively – using the lens of maritime security. It stems from our concern that, as the range of partner countries seeking to provide maritime security assistance in the region grows, there is the risk that partners and their Pacific counterparts will 'talk past' each other, assuming shared understandings that may not exist. There is also the risk that new players do not have expertise or developed relationships both in the region and/or with other partners. These factors may, in turn, lead to poorly coordinated, duplicative assistance that overwhelms the absorptive capacity of Pacific countries and regional institutions.

Pacific leaders have repeatedly identified poor partner coordination as undermining maritime security.[5] While focused on the maritime domain, our project will offer lessons for other forms of assistance being offered in the region.

Therefore, as our project develops over the next two years, it will answer four key questions:

1. What is maritime security?
2. What maritime security mechanisms already exist and what forms of assistance are partner countries providing?
3. What are the maritime security priorities of Pacific Island countries?
4. How can Pacific Island countries and their partners best target and coordinate maritime security assistance?

These papers begin to answer the first two questions. This paper proposes working definitions of two key terms: 'maritime security' and 'maritime security cooperation'. The papers that follow provide primers on key issues relating to the maritime domain: fisheries, the legal and regulatory environment, maritime-based transnational crime, managing geopolitical tensions, humanitarian and disaster relief, and search and rescue. They also provide background on the maritime security activities of established partners Australia, New Zealand, the United States (US), and France, and new partners China, India, Japan, and South Korea, including a paper specifically focused on non-sovereign territories.

What is the Pacific Islands region?

For simplicity, we define the **Pacific Islands region** as the island membership of the Pacific Community: American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna. We have chosen the membership of the Pacific Community, rather than of the Pacific Islands Forum (the region's preeminent political and security focused multilateral institution), because it captures many of the non-sovereign territories in the region. For the same reason, we deliberately refer to **Pacific Island *countries,*** rather than *states.*

Our use of the collective expression 'Pacific Island countries' should not be read as implying that all Pacific Island countries are alike, have the same priorities, or experience the same challenges. Pacific Island countries are highly diverse and range from the 'comparably populous and linguistically diverse' Papua New Guinea, with over ten million people, to Niue, with a 'culturally and linguistically homogenous' population of approximately 1400

people.[6] As our project develops we will explore the differences between Pacific Island countries and their maritime security priorities, opportunities, and challenges in greater detail, but given their introductory nature, for simplicity we use the term in these papers.

We acknowledge that definitions of the Pacific Islands region are contested. The region is home to a range of different organisations, each with differing memberships, and which sometimes include countries on the region's geographical fringes, such as Timor-Leste.[7] The region is also often divided into three geographical and cultural sub-regions: Melanesia,[8] Micronesia,[9] and Polynesia.[10] While these sub-regions are also contested,[11] they have been broadly adopted for political purposes by Pacific Island countries, which have created sub-regional organisations to represent their membership.[12]

The role of metropolitan powers raises questions, especially Australia and New Zealand, which are the only metropolitan members of the Pacific Islands Forum, and members of the Pacific Community along with France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US. France, New Zealand, the UK, Chile, and the US also all maintain non-sovereign territories in the region,[13] and Hawai'i is a constituent state of the US. New Zealand and the US also have relationships of free association with several Pacific Island countries.[14] Reflecting that these metropolitan powers frequently have different interests to Pacific Island countries, and that significant power asymmetries (particularly measured in material terms such as economic weight, military power, and population and geographic size) exist between these powers and Pacific Island countries, in our project we treat them as ***partner countries*** of the region, rather than as 'part' of the region.

What is maritime security?

The most commonly used definition of security is a negative one: 'freedom from threats to core values for both individuals and groups'.[15] If applied to the maritime domain, this definition seeks to achieve the absence 'threats' such as 'maritime inter-state disputes, maritime terrorism, piracy, trafficking of narcotics, people and illicit goods, arms proliferation, illegal fishing, environmental crimes, or maritime accidents and disasters'.[16] But this negative definition has been criticised as a 'laundry list' approach that does not provide space to debate which issues should be included, to prioritise those issues, find interlinkages between them, or to discuss how they can be addressed.[17]

An alternative positive definition of maritime security seeks to achieve a 'good' or 'stable order at sea'.[18] An order exists when 'interaction among

states is not arbitrary but conducted in a systematic manner on the basis of certain rules'.[19] This approach tends to focus on the ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*** (UNCLOS) and other international legal regimes that attempt to provide order in the maritime domain. Included in this definition is the concept of 'maritime governance', the 'capacity to enforce the framework of laws, regulations, policies, and institutions generated both within the legal jurisdictions of states and the international community' relating to good order at sea.[20] But this positive definition has been criticised for failing to specify exactly who gets to decide what this order should be, what constitutes a 'good' or 'stable' order, and who should enforce it —although often this is implied within geopolitical discourse.[21]

An alternative positive definition of maritime security seeks to achieve a 'good' or 'stable order at sea'

In their 2018 ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security*** the Pacific Islands Forum adopted an 'expanded concept of security' that included many issues relevant to 'maritime security': human security, transnational crime, cybersecurity, environmental security, and climate security. The ***Boe Declaration Action Plan*** highlighted the importance of resolving territorial boundary disputes in the region, safeguarding maritime zones in the face of sea level rise, disrupting criminal networks which facilitate the illicit movement of goods and people, and enhancing the safety and security of maritime transportation.[22] As many of these challenges have a maritime and land dimension, this highlights the difficulty of drawing boundaries between challenges that happen on, in, or to the ocean, and those that relate to the land. Conversely, the breadth of challenges that have a maritime dimension can make addressing them difficult, particularly as many also have implications for development (raising, in turn, the question of whether development is a security issue). Notably, when the Forum adopted its ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** in 2023, in part to operationalise the *Boe Declaration*, it did not refer to the term 'maritime security', although it did identify two relevant thematic areas:

- 'Secure a future for our people', by 'deepen[ing] our collective responsibility and accountability for the stewardship of the Blue Pacific Continent and protect our sovereignty and jurisdiction over our maritime zones and resources, including in response to climate change induced sea level rise, and strengthen our ownership and management of our resources'.
- 'Ocean and environment', which it defined as relating to 'safeguarding the integrity of our natural system and biodiversity through conservation action and by minimising activities that degrade, pollute, overexploit, or undermine our ocean and natural environment'.[23]

These thematic areas provide us a valuable starting point from which to construct our project's working **definition of maritime security**. Our working definition also attempts to capture both the negative and positive dimensions of security described above:

> *Pursuing opportunities and responding to challenges that occur in, or are linked to, the maritime domain.*

In our project we recognise the complexity of the opportunities and challenges facing the Pacific Islands region, particularly in the maritime domain. We also recognise that these opportunities and challenges are frequently interlinked, either mutually reinforcing or undermining each other. Therefore, when understanding maritime security in the region, it is important to answer three questions:

1. Whose security is being analysed? (i.e. who is the referent object: a Pacific Island country? The Pacific Islands region? Other actors?)
2. What is the scope of security from? (i.e. what opportunities or threats are we interested in?)
3. What is the approach to security? (i.e. how can the referent object being analysed achieve security?)

Maritime security cooperation

In broad terms, security cooperation describes 'common action between two or more states to advance a common security goal'.[24] As there is no formal regional collective security agreement in the Pacific Islands region, an earlier project[25] assessed the relevance of the major ways that security cooperation is conceptualised to the region – 'security architecture', 'security complex', and 'security community'.[26] It concluded that security cooperation in the region consists of 'a patchwork of agreements, arrangements and activities' between Pacific Island countries and their partners 'that reflect differing priorities and geopolitical dynamics'.[27]

Guided by this understanding, and our definition of maritime security, in our project we adopt the following working **definition of maritime security cooperation:**

> *The formal and informal, bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral, mechanisms, institutions, meetings, dialogues, and other processes used by countries to coordinate their maritime security assistance across local, national, regional, and international levels.*

The papers

As noted above, the papers that follow provide primers on key issues relating to the maritime domain and background on the maritime security activities of established and new partner countries. They are written by experts from across the Pacific Islands region and its major partner countries.

2. Cooperation to manage Pacific fisheries

Transform Aqorau, Quentin Hanich, Kamal Azmi, and Genevieve Quirk

- In the vast Pacific maritime domain, cooperation is critical to addressing the capacity and capability challenges of fisheries management and the diverse maritime security issues that occur in the fishery sector. Pacific fisheries governance lies at the nexus of the 'expanded concept of security' under the 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* encompassing environmental and resource security, human rights, transnational crime and cybersecurity.
- The region has developed distinctive and influential institutions to optimise the governance of transboundary and coastal fisheries in Pacific Island countries. While these institutions are advanced by global standards, they can better coordinate Pacific-led responses to emerging fishery-related security threats.

The ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** aspires to safeguard fisheries as integral to the economy, livelihoods, ways of life, and culture of the Pacific.[28] Cooperation through regional institutions is the foundation of fisheries governance, enabling collective approaches to foreign interests in Pacific oceanic and coastal fisheries. The first order of work is to safeguard the Pacific's economic interests, particularly focusing on commercial fishery revenue and the livelihoods that depend on coastal fisheries.[29] Balancing the rights of Pacific Island countries with the flag state rights of Distant Water Fishing Nations in lucrative oceanic fisheries is a key challenge. Today, partnerships for fisheries surveillance are inextricably linked to geostrategic interests and play a crucial role in combating fisheries-related maritime crimes. Pacific Island countries, however, remain concerned that geostrategic competition in their region could distract attention from Pacific priorities.[30] Increasingly, coastal fisheries are a regional focus, due to new threats from climate change, coastal pollution, and foreign fishing deals.[31] This paper addresses oceanic and coastal fisheries in turn, examining how relevant security challenges are tackled.

Two key institutions, the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) and the **Pacific Community** (SPC), allow the region to 'punch above its weight' in cooperative fisheries management. In the Pacific region, the FFA's fisheries monitoring, control, and surveillance performs a critical regional role in maritime domain awareness. The Pacific Ocean is undergoing significant shifts due to climate change, which disrupts the distribution and abundance of marine ecosystems, adversely impacting Pacific fisheries.[32] The SPC provides vital services at the science-policy interface for capacity development, technical expertise and fisheries data management. The SPC's coordination of oceanic and coastal fisheries are aimed at climate resilience and community-led management, and it performs a key role in stock assessment and data management for the nearly $6 billion regional tuna fishery.[33]

> Balancing the rights of Pacific Island countries with the flag state rights of Distant Water Fishing Nations in lucrative oceanic fisheries is a key challenge.

The Regional Fishery Management Organisations (RFMOs) with jurisdiction in the South West Pacific are the **Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna** (1993), **Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission** (WCPFC) (2000) and the **South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation** (SPRFMO) (2012). The central regional fisheries advisory body, the FFA (1979),[34] is complemented by the **Parties to the Nauru Agreement** (PNA) (1982),[35] which established its own advisory office in 2010, and the **South Pacific Group** (2023).[36] Together, they focus on developing and protecting Pacific interests in the world's largest tuna fishery governed by the WCPFC.

The WCPFC remains a cornerstone in the governance of the region's tuna fisheries. As the key international body responsible for the conservation and sustainable use of highly migratory fish stocks, the WCPFC plays an essential role in facilitating cooperation between coastal states and distant water fishing nations. Its conservation and management measures (CMMs) have been crucial in ensuring the sustainable management of tuna stocks while addressing the impact of fishing on bycatch species, such as sharks and seabirds. The WCPFC's ongoing commitment to ecosystem-based management is a critical part of the region's fisheries architecture. Climate change is expected to lead to a shift in the distribution of tuna biomass eastward from Pacific Island countries' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean toward the high seas and the convention area of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission's (IATTC).[37]

Since 1979, the FFA has championed regional cooperation and effectively advocated for Pacific interests in the lucrative WCPFC tuna fisheries.[38] The FFA's 2012 ***Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region*** facilitates data sharing, and cooperative law enforcement, and surveillance

between Parties.[39] Arrangements that aid the operation of the FFA's **Vessel Monitoring System** (VMS), and the administration of the **Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre** (RFSC) and **Aerial Surveillance Programme** (ASP).[40]

The PNA have been instrumental in transforming the management of the tuna fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific. Notably, the introduction of the **Third Implementing Arrangement** in 2008 brought about innovative conservation measures, such as the three-month FAD closure, the requirement for 100% observer coverage on purse seine vessels, and the prohibition of purse seine fishing in two high seas pockets.[41] These initiatives have significantly strengthened the management framework for tuna fisheries. The development of the MSC-certified free school skipjack fishery under the PNA has been another significant achievement, promoting responsible fishing practices and setting an international benchmark for sustainable fisheries management.[42] The success of this certification has been a catalyst for change across the tuna fisheries in the region, driving the broader adoption of sustainable practices and benefiting Pacific Island countries economically.

Additionally, the PNA's introduction of the **Vessel Day Scheme** (VDS) has revolutionised the way fishing activity is regulated within the EEZs of PNA members, allowing them to optimise the economic value of their tuna resources. This has also enhanced the sustainability of the fishery. The new integrated **Fisheries Information Management System** (iFIMS) facilitates cooperation by integrating industry reports on catch and vessel positions, with VDS activity data, and information from mandatory fishery observers.[43] International development partners are driven to support these fisheries

surveillance systems, recognising, among other things, their role in enhancing maritime domain awareness in a region of growing strategic importance.

Surveillance is enhanced through cooperation with international partners from the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Australia, France, New Zealand and the USA) under Operation Solania.[44] Australia, however, remains the most significant donor in Pacific fisheries governance with Britain, Canada, the EU, and Korea also contributing support.[45] Pacific Island countries also overcome the capacity challenges of surveilling their vast oceanscape through innovative alliances. The FFA is leveraging emerging technologies such as the **Dark Vessel Detection system** and the **Starboard Maritime Domain Awareness tool.**[46] To enhance data collection, it also collaborates with organisations like Global Fishing Watch and Skylight.[47] Cyber security remains a threat to commercially and strategically sensitive surveillance data, as does the potential for online penetration of diplomatic meetings related to regional fishery resources.[48]

Cooperation to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing occurs through the RFMOs to align with requirements under the **FAO's International Plan of Action for Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU** and the **Port State Measures Agreement**.[49] Regional cooperation is also needed to fulfil responsibilities governed by the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime** (UNODC) which works with the FAO and Interpol on IUU fishing and instances of drugs, weapons, human trafficking and smuggling on fishing vessels.[50] The **International Labour Organisation** (ILO) tackles the persistent threat of forced labour and modern slavery in fisheries.[51] The WCPFC and SPRFMO are responding to these international requirements on fisheries-related crime, human rights, and labour abuses with the preparation and adoption of conservation and management measures (CMMs) to improve efforts to combat these crimes. Enforcement, however, typically relies on adequate surveillance and robust national legislation for prosecution. Pacific Island countries rank poorly in governance and transparency indices and bad actors can exploit these deficiencies and in the case of transnational organised crime actively pursue them.[52]

To realise sustainable fisheries, support global food security, and conserve marine biodiversity the **Sustainable Ocean Initiative** developed a cross sectoral coordination mechanism between RFMOs and **Regional Seas Organisations** (RSOs).[53] The Pacific RSO, **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP), provides technical assistance and support to its Pacific Island members on environmental security threats such as marine pollution (inclusive of vessel pollution, plastics and fishing gear),[54] and the management of fisheries bycatch species, for instance cetaceans, seabirds, sharks, and turtles.[55] The adoption of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Treaty in 2023 provides an enhanced role for RSOs to uphold the high standards for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) within RFMOs' convention areas.[56] Cooperation between SPREP and the WCPFC is facilitated through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which, with increased participation from SPREP, could enhance CMMs on bycatch species.[57] In the SPRFMO, despite the 'significant adverse impacts'[58] of destructive fishing methods on vulnerable deep-sea communities, SPREP lacks an MoU with SPRFMO to guide their conservation.

Coastal fisheries contribute to national economies, enhance community resilience, and ensure food security through subsistence, artisanal, and commercial fishing, as well as aquaculture.[59] Rapid population growth, intensifying urbanisation and coastal development have undermined ecosystem health, traditional tenure, and custom within seascapes.[60] Together with climatic shifts that amplify cyclones, storms, and floods, the role of coastal fisheries in promoting community resilience has been weakened. Against this background, declines in coastal fisheries present an immediate threat to the security of Pacific Islanders.[61]

Furthermore, incursions by small foreign vessels illegally exploiting coastal fisheries present immense challenges to existing coastal state surveillance and prosecution capabilities.[62] Despite the challenge this poses to small island administrations foreign vessels have been successfully caught in the waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.[63] Diseconomies of scale in coastal fisheries are a consequence of capacity constraints on market-ready products as well as remoteness from regional and international markets. These market factors will continue to impact the potential of coastal fisheries, along with climate-induced changes to natural disaster intensity and frequency.

The Pacific's collective response to coastal fishery threats occurs at multiple scales. At the international scale, under SDG14, Pacific Island countries advocated for a specific target 14.7 for Small Island Developing States aimed at increasing the economic benefits and market access for their coastal fisheries.[64] At the regional level, **SPC's 2015 Noumea Strategy** 'A new song for coastal fisheries – pathways to change'[65] reset support for improved education, user rights, and inclusivity toward integrated community-based fishery management.[66] The SPC and FFA have jointly committed to supporting enhanced surveillance and investment, as outlined in the 2015 '**Future of Fisheries: A Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries**', to effectively implement the roadmap's objectives.[67]

Concretely, the 2002 ***Pacific Island Regional Ocean Policy*** and the 2010 ***Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape*** direct more integrated solutions, guiding the development of Pacific national policies towards realizing scalable and functional community-based fisheries.[68] Further direction is provided in the SPC's '**Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up Community-based Fisheries Management: 2021-2025**,' aimed at empowering and enhancing the resilience of Pacific communities.[69]

Pacific oceanic and coastal fisheries management encompasses environmental security, food security, human rights, and combating transnational and cyber blue crime. The region's collective institutions and regional strategies have enabled remarkable achievements in managing international cooperation for monitoring, control, and surveillance toward the fisheries' sustainability.

3. The legal and regulatory environment for maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Islands

Margret Joyce Kensen and Genevieve Quirk

- Pacific Island countries are united in their foreign policy objective to act as one Blue Pacific Ocean Continent. This unified approach recognises their interconnectedness and shared stewardship for governing their vast maritime space. Collective security performs a critical role in responding to intensifying climate change and geostrategic competition. This vision culminated in the ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** designed to strengthen the regional security architecture and influence and shape the strategic environment.
- The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) set a comprehensive interpretation of security under the 2018 ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security*** inclusive of human security, environmental and resource security, cybersecurity, and countering transnational organised crime. To improve coordination among the existing collage of overlapping regional, sub-regional, and national security arrangements, the region is committed to developing a 'flexible, inclusive and responsive Regional Security Mechanism'.[70] Tension exists, however, between the regional ambition for an integrated regional maritime security architecture and national and external efforts for bilateral and minilateral arrangements.

Pacific Island countries recognise the strategic value of their maritime space and affirm their commitment to a peaceful rules-based international order under the UN Charter. The PIF is exploring the potential of designating their Blue Pacific Ocean Continent as a Zone of Peace.[71] For maritime security issues the ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*** (UNCLOS) is the central legal

instrument guiding state and regional practice. Cooperation through the regional maritime security architecture is necessary – given national resource and capacity constraints – to give effect to their rights and duties as coastal and archipelagic states.

Together PIF members are influencing the interpretation and state practice of UNCLOS in response to adverse climate impacts with their 2021 '**Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise**'. In Oceania, regional instruments implementing UNCLOS are often inclusive of areas within and beyond national jurisdiction.[72] Consequently, adherence with the three Implementing Agreements under UNCLOS for seabed activities, conservation and management of highly migratory species, and conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction form a critical component of their regulatory framework.[73]

The main institution of the regional security architecture is the PIF. Specific guidance under the '**2050 Strategy Implementation Plan 2023-2030**' acknowledges the central role of the PIF in a 'strengthened, inclusive and harmonised regional security architecture, guided by the Forum processes, with improved ability to address existing, evolving and/or emerging security issues; and to guide decision making on regional and global security issues'.[74] The aim is to 'develop a flexible, inclusive and responsive Regional Security Mechanism' to strengthen the regional security architecture in the fulfilment of regional security priorities under the *Boe Declaration*.[75]

Effective maritime cooperation will depend on an integrated approach to coordinate the regional-scale security architecture with minilateral and bilateral arrangements.

Of foremost importance in this array of tactical approaches is the centrality of the Pacific Islands Forum. The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* sets the Forum's direction and priorities for internal and external security relations.[76] The *Boe Declaration* articulates the Pacific's priorities for maritime security under an expanded concept of security that includes human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cyber security. The **Forum Officials Subcommittee on Regional Security** (FSRS) has the authority to operate across this spectrum of maritime security priorities. The Pacific region requires a comprehensive and resilient security architecture to effectively assert and implement its strategic priorities. A central aim of the '**Boe Declaration Action Plan**' is to create an appropriate coordination mechanism to oversee implementation.[77]

The regional security architecture to implement the *2050 Strategy* is composed of Regional Law Enforcement and Legal Secretariats,[78] the Council of the Regional Organisations of the Pacific, and other regional organisations be explored below.[79] A key priority for the implementation plan of the *2050 Strategy* is '[s]trengthened security policy arrangements in the region'.[80] Former PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor warns that because 'Pacific regionalism does not have its own means to fund new institutions and structures ... richer countries ... will be increasingly able to influence our institutions to deliver their own agendas'.[81] Vigilance is required to ensure that all funding for the architecture is transparent and unconditional. It is therefore timely that the **Review of the Regional Architecture** is underway.

To better assert control over its security interests, the Pacific must strengthen oversight of the various maritime security arrangements. The very first recommendation of the Review of the Regional Architecture is for the PIF to retain control as the apex of the regional architecture. Many bodies in the diverse collage of maritime security arrangements in the Pacific operate outside the Pacific regional security architecture.[82] The next phase of the Review of the Regional Architecture aims to comprehensively analyse the 'existing institutional structures, arrangements and governance mechanisms that are part of the regional architecture and which operate alongside the CROP'.[83] The purpose is to understand the roles and responsibilities of this diverse architecture and develop 'effective engagement mechanisms to ensure that their support to the region is aligned to the Vision and Values as laid out in the 2050 Strategy'.[84] An advance in this respect would be the requirement for these bodies to report to FSRS on their alignment with the *2050 Strategy* and *Boe Declaration*. This procedure is already in operation for the **Regional Law Enforcement and Legal Secretariats**.[85]

The Pacific security architecture is composed of relevant **Council of the Regional Organisations of the Pacific** (CROP) institutions that govern the comprehensive scope of security issues: **Pacific Community** (SPC), **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP), **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA), **Pacific Island Development Programme** (PIDP), **Pacific Aviation Safety Office** (PASO), and **Pacific Power Association** (PPA) and their relevant subsidiary bodies such as the SPREP's **Pacific Meteorological Council** and SPC's **Pacific Islands Emergency Management Alliance** (PIEMA). Many CROP organisations have – in accordance with their mandate – regional instruments to meet Member State obligations under UNCLOS.

The regional security architecture also includes regional law enforcement bodies: the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police** (PICP), **Oceania Customs**

Organisation (OCO), **Pacific Immigration Development Community** (PIDC), **Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network** (PILON), **South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces, Pacific Immigration Development Community** (PIDC), and the **Pacific Transnational Crime Network** (PTCN). Additionally, new innovative agencies such as the **Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner** (OPOC), **Joint Heads of Pacific Security**, the **Pacific Resilience Facility**, and the **Pacific Fusion Centre** complete this architecture.[86]

The regional vision for a harmonised regional security architecture under the *2050 Strategy* Implementation Plan lies in tension with the divergent national and external alliances of Pacific States. Complex fractures to unified and collective regional security are evident through: bilateral alliances with competing external powers; cleavages from the rising influence of sub-regional groups; the division of the Forum diplomatic bloc with the **United Nations Pacific Small Island Developing States** (UN PSIDS).

Effective maritime cooperation will depend on an integrated approach to coordinate the regional-scale security architecture with minilateral and bilateral arrangements. In this context, the PIF FSRS established in 2019 performs a key convening role between CROP and other law enforcement agencies to implement the *Boe Declaration*. Despite the 2019 Boe Declaration Action Plan's ambition to create supportive conditions with an appropriate coordination mechanism, deeper maritime security integration and coordination are still required. The current PIF Review of the Regional Architecture presents a crucial opportunity to address disconnections and overlapping competence within this maritime security architecture.

For Pacific Island countries, maintaining their agency in maritime security collaborations is a constant challenge when their capabilities rely on external resources. Intensifying geostrategic competition has, however, signalled a new era in Forum diplomatic relations with the expansion to 21 Forum Dialogue partners. The Forum's inclusive approach to partnership is viewed by some as counter to Western allied efforts toward the denial of China emerging as a strategic power in the region.[87] Yet, the Forum remains open to collaboration with states who continuously adhere with the '**Blue Pacific Principles for Dialogue and Engagement**'.[88] Specifically, recognition of the region as 'One Blue Pacific' and a commitment to advancing the Forum's regional priorities.

Beyond traditional maritime security issues, Pacific Island countries pursue a future-focused agenda aimed at influencing international climate regulation,[89] securing maritime boundaries,[90] enhancing ocean resilience[91] and anticipating and managing climate displacement.[92] Indigenous analytical lenses are increasingly applied to Pacific maritime security offering more comprehensive and inclusive perspectives on security issues.[93] Finally, the assertive, innovative, and uniquely Pacific style of diplomacy at the United Nations Security Council, under the UN *Framework Convention for Climate Change,* and for advisory opinions under UNCLOS has reset climate as a global security issue that continues to shape the Pacific maritime security environment.[94]

4. Security cooperation to respond to maritime-based transnational crime

Henrietta McNeill and Genevieve Quirk

The *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* acknowledges that law enforcement of transnational crime faces dual challenges: the vast geographic scope and the growing global connections to their oceanic continent.[95]

Global rankings indicate that the Pacific has a relatively low rate of transnational crime, but it is on the rise.[96] The Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF) 'Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022-2023' expressed concerns that geopolitical competition could divert attention and resources from existing security priorities, including efforts to disrupt transnational organised crime.[97] In practice, this geostrategic competition has heightened engagement and connections across the Pacific, which transnational crime networks have exploited.[98] This paper examines the recent shifts to confront these trends and better coordinate the regional security architecture. It focuses on cooperation to combat transnational crime, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and fisheries-related crimes, and other maritime environmental crimes.

Cooperation to combat transnational crime

Dimensions of maritime transnational crime have cumulatively been articulated in PIF declarations from the 1992 ***Declaration on Law Enforcement Cooperation*** (Honiara Declaration)[99] elaborating transnational environmental crime and narcotic trafficking and the 2002 ***Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security*** (Nasonini Declaration)[100] expanding the focus of towards migration-related transnational crime. The 2014 ***Palau Declaration on 'The Ocean: Life and Future': Charting a course to sustainability***[101] highlights the threat posed by IUU fishing. Each declaration has sought to deepen cooperation and prevent duplication, overlap and potential for conflicts in authority among regional security networks.[102] The 2018 ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security*** set a clear direction of 'expanded security' for the region including prioritising combatting transnational organised crime.[103] Subsequently, the PIF now leads the '**Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy 2024 – 2028**'. The Strategy recognises '[t]here is a need to unify national and regional efforts, make connections between the various risks identified and respond in a coordinated and systematic way.'[104]

In 2019, the PIF established the **Forum Officials Subcommittee on Regional Security** (FSRS) to promote and coordinate security activities under the *Boe Declaration*, bringing together the various organisations (most of which do not sit under a PIF mandate) that deal with transnational crime.[105] Cooperation in regional law enforcement substantially improved through the 2018 declaration of partnership between the **Oceania Customs Organisation** (OCO), **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police** (PICP),

Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC).[106] The maritime security dimension of this cooperative partnership was enhanced with the addition of the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) in 2024.[107] Transnational crimes underscore the importance of border security to prevent the movement of illicit goods and people across borders, supported by the regional law enforcement agencies including the OCO and the PIDC. The OCO facilitates border security by aiding the alignment of member administrations with international customs standards.[108] The PIDC provides a forum for Pacific official immigration agencies to share intelligence and policy guidance to strengthen territorial borders and the integrity of their immigration systems. The PICP, including through its **Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation** (PCLEC), provides coordination for region-wide police training, capacity building, and a network with the scale of connectivity needed to combat transnational crime. This policing network forms the crucial national link toward the prosecution of transnational crimes.

Given that many of the vessels transhipping and transporting illicit drugs are using the same techniques of 'going dark' as IUU fishing vessels, the cornerstone for tackling these threats are the maritime security arrangements to undertake surveillance for these transnational crimes.

These organisations together with the **Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network**, and to a lesser extent, the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**,[109] **South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces**,[110] and the Australian-led **Joint Heads of Pacific Security** (JHoPS),[111] compose the regional PIF-led security architecture relating to transnational crime.[112] This also demonstrates the range of cooperative mechanisms that exist between military forces and law enforcement agencies.[113] However, overlaps with the Pacific-led regional architecture could duplicate and undermine existing collaborative efforts, especially as the collage of arrangements contain differences in membership.[114] Continued collaboration and alignment of these efforts to the PIF-led regional security architecture are crucial to effectively combat transnational crime.

Maritime domain awareness is essential for effective maritime surveillance and border security to combat transnational crime. The FFA hosts the **Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre** in Honiara which undertakes monitoring, control and surveillance of IUU fishing, and maritime-related transnational criminal activities associated with fishing boats. In addition, and in cooperation with the FFA, the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group**, comprising Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States, conducts comprehensive maritime surveillance primarily focused on fisheries and is increasingly active in addressing transnational crime.[115] These are supported by Australian-donated patrol vessels donated to Pacific Island countries. The PICP notably hosts the **Transnational Crime Network** (PTCN) and its central operational hub, the **Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre** (PTCCC) which is supported by (and supports) all law enforcement agencies.[116] The PTCCC functions include managing and disseminating transnational criminal intelligence, collaborating with law enforcement and regional forums, and enhancing capabilities of the PTCN.[117] The **Pacific Fusion Centre** also provides strategic policy information to Pacific Island countries about managing transnational criminal threats.

IUU fishing crimes

The geography of Pacific Island countries, with EEZs spanning over 40 million km² and surrounding high seas enclaves, hosts the world's most significant and lucrative tuna fishery.[118] Under the FAO's 2001 ***International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing***, illegal fishing is defined as fishing by national or foreign vessels in contravention of the laws of States or the relevant Regional Fisheries Management Organisation.[119] The ***UN Convention on Transnational Organized Crime*** (UNTOC) classifies all aspects of IUU fishing as environmental crimes, which deplete fish stocks crucial to Pacific economies and livelihoods.[120] According to the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, IUU fishing is identified as one of the most significant forms of maritime crime in the region.[121] Between 2017-2019, it is estimated that IUU fishing cost the region USD$333.49m.[122] Corruption can also be a factor in the fisheries sector.[123]

The role of Monitoring, Control, and Surveillance (MCS) under the FFA 1992 ***Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region*** is crucial for ensuring compliance with and enforcement of fisheries laws and regulations.[124] Effective MCS relies on robust regional and national fisheries legislation that outlines the powers and functions of management authorities, enforcement entities, and the use of specific MCS tools, as well as the processes for enforcement and sanctions.[125] Regional reports indicate that regional cooperation led by the FFA on MCS is reducing the rate of IUU fishing.[126] However, there is inherent risk in fisheries observation, with at least three i-Kiribati fisheries observers killed in suspicious circumstances since 2009.[127]

Fisheries-related transnational crimes

The **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime** (UNODC) distinguishes between IUU fishing crimes and fisheries-related crimes, which can include narcotic, wildlife and firearms trafficking, human trafficking, people smuggling, and forced labour and exploitation.[128] It is important to note that there has only ever been one case of maritime people smuggling in the Pacific Islands region, to Federated States of Micronesia in 2014.[129] Known cases of human trafficking tend to be non-maritime—either domestic; foreigners brought to Pacific Island countries for forced labour; or Pacific Islanders trafficked to Australia or New Zealand for forced labour.[130] However, exploitation and forced labour aboard foreign fishing

vessels working within the Pacific Ocean is rife and should be addressed.[131]

The key issue for the PTCCC is the illicit trafficking of narcotics, which is transhipped within the Pacific Islands region and generally transported on small crafts (although occasionally by shipping containers and light planes). Heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine (including precursors) have all been found in maritime operations by Pacific law enforcement agencies.[132] While in the past, packages of cocaine have gone unrecognised (and been used as other products), there is a growing use of illicit drugs within Pacific Island countries and fishers are increasingly seeking out lost packages of narcotics in maritime zones to sell locally, making the region an emerging destination for illicit drugs.[133] Much of the security cooperation on combating transnational crime, particularly capacity-building from Australia and New Zealand (and more recently, the United States), focuses on the detection and prosecution of illicit drug trafficking. Notably, the Australian-developed Pacific Small Craft App is used by Pacific law enforcement agencies to monitor the entry and departure of small crafts in the region, particularly from islands with smaller populations and less law enforcement resources.[134]

Given that many of the vessels transhipping and transporting illicit drugs are using the same techniques of 'going dark' as IUU fishing vessels, the cornerstone for tackling these threats are the same maritime security arrangements to undertake surveillance for IUU activity.

Maritime domain awareness is essential for effective maritime surveillance and border security to combat transnational crime.

Other marine-based environmental crimes

The UNODC is increasingly focused on transnational crimes that impact the environment.[135] The transnational crime of IUU fishing can include non-target species protected under the 1973 ***Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora*** (CITES). Only seven Pacific Island countries are members of CITES, although those that are involved are actively proposing additional species to the protected list including sharks, rays, bêche-de-mer (sea cucumbers), and turtles.[136] In addition, non-members like Cook Islands also participate in CITES procedures to combat the trafficking of endangered species.[137] Despite concerns about the illegal flora trade, the prevalence of wildlife trafficking is not well understood in the Pacific Islands region. Bêche-de-mer is illegally or over-harvested in the region, particularly in Solomon Islands despite local and customary bans.[138] There is also a large industry in the Pacific which exports live marine animals for the aquarium trade, mostly from Kiribati—while this is legal, the rate of sustainable exploitation of these resources is unknown.[139]

International crimes

Pacific Island countries are spearheading international court cases to establish the legality of climate-related harms, potentially holding states and companies accountable for these environmental crimes. The **International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea** (ITLOS) delivered its Advisory Opinion on Climate Change in 2024, clarifying that greenhouse gas emissions are a form of 'marine pollution'.[140] Consequently, states are obligated under article 194 of the ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*** to 'take all necessary measures' to prevent, reduce, and control greenhouse gas pollution so it does not cause damage to Pacific Island countries and their marine environment.[141] Marine shipping pollution is regulated under the auspices of the International Maritime Organisation's ***International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships***.[142] A 2023 Pacific Community (SPC) initiative aims to harmonise regional efforts to address shipping pollution in the Pacific maritime transport sector.[143] Three Pacific Island countries have requested the International Criminal Court amend the list of serious crimes to include ecocide alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, crime of aggression and war crimes.[144] The advisory proceedings before the International Court of Justice led by Vanuatu on the obligations of states with respect to climate harms could pave the way for Pacific Island countries to prosecute fossil fuel companies and states as perpetrators of international climate-induced marine environmental crimes.

5. Managing geopolitical tensions to advance maritime security cooperation

Maima Koro and Genevieve Quirk

- Pacific Island countries collectively manage geopolitical competition by pursuing shared interests through national and regional policy instruments. For maritime security, partners' maritime security agendas are directed towards respect for the Blue Pacific identity and engaging with the expanded concept of security under the 2018 *Boe Declaration for Regional Security.*
- The Large Ocean States of the Pacific are redefining their ocean space as a Blue Pacific Ocean Continent. This is to ensure that the collective political efforts of Pacific Island countries, as outlined in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,* remain central to external interests in the region.

Reframing the region as a Blue Pacific Ocean Continent is about 'strengthen[ing] the existing policy frameworks that harness the ocean as a driver of a transformative socio-cultural, political and economic development of the Pacific…[and]… gives renewed impetus to deepening Pacific regionalism.'[145] The ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** sets the Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF's) direction and priorities for internal and external political and security relations. The ***Boe Declaration*** articulates the Pacific's priorities for maritime security under an expanded concept of security that includes human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cyber security. This paper explores political efforts to advance Pacific maritime security priorities in an era of geostrategic competition, understanding that Pacific Island countries view maritime security as extending beyond the ocean to include the land, the people, and the environment.[146]

There is a fundamental mismatch between the Indo-Pacific maritime security framing of metropolitan powers and the Pacific's counter framing of the **Blue Pacific Ocean Continent**. Historically, the Pacific has been a region of interest to external partners for its geostrategic location and the region's abundant resources. To the people of the Pacific, this dynamic and diverse region is home. The Indo-Pacific framing is, at its core, competitive, designed to limit China's strategic control of critical maritime choke points and island chains. Waqavakatoga and Wallis (2023) outline the risks posed by this geopolitical competition, including threats to regional solidarity, a race to the bottom among donors, overwhelming debt burdens, the strain on absorptive capacity, and culturally insensitive investments that undermine local stability.[147]

The Pacific's stance of 'friends to all' affirms their resolute pursuit of sovereignty and political autonomy as independent countries.[148] Kabutaulaka (2021) has articulated the disempowering impact of external geostrategic claims upon the Pacific and noted the continued influence of this practice.[149] Naupa (2017) has argued the Blue Pacific identity is a shift in Pacific diplomacy with the Blue Pacific framing as a 'new super region is a strategic opportunity for the Pacific Islands to place themselves at the forefront' of diplomacy on maritime security.[150] Koro, McNeill, Ivarature, and Wallis (2023) have also argued that 'dominant western accounts do not adequately account for the geopolitics of the Pacific because they overlook the multi-temporal, multi-spatial, multiscalar, and relational ways in which states and other actors behave in the Pacific, and how Pacific Island states and Oceanic peoples perceive, respond to, and influence their behaviour'.[151] Accordingly, reimaging Pacific geopolitics and addressing the ethical dilemmas of these external geopolitical designs upon the Blue Pacific cannot be understated.[152]

Foremost, the escalation of military involvement in the Pacific represented by the AUKUS agreement between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia is at odds with the Pacific Island countries' priorities for their Blue Pacific Continent. Former PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor has articulated the 'Blue Pacific's firm and long-standing opposition to militarization,'[153] a goal that can only be realised when partners respectfully prioritise the peace component of the 2050 Strategy's thematic area for Peace and Security. Reconciling the divergent security priorities of metropolitan powers and the Pacific Island countries lies at the heart of contemporary diplomatic relations for the Blue Pacific Continent.

A renewed regional architecture is envisaged to enhance coordination and strengthen links between leaders' policy decisions across sectors and the collective priorities for the region.

To protect their ocean continent, the PIF leads innovative maritime security initiatives like the ***South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty*** 1985 (also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga) and more recently the 2023 ***Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change Related Sea Level Rise*** initiated by Tuvalu.[154] The 2021 ***Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise*** is already exerting substantial influence on the interpretation of maritime boundary laws.[155] The Declaration operates to assert sovereign rights and preserve maritime boundaries, reinforcing their framing as 'Large Ocean States'. This declaration also operates to prevent any increase in the extent of the high seas enclaves, areas where Pacific Island countries have less control of extractive activities in their Blue Pacific Ocean Continent. It is noteworthy that effective and innovative advocacy by Pacific Island countries has already substantially limited fishing activities in these high seas enclaves.[156] Additionally, there is the **Mota Lava Treaty** between Solomon Islands and Vanuatu on maritime boundaries, formally recognized by the UN in 2016,[157] and the **Tirvau Agreement** between the same countries, also on maritime boundaries, based on their cultural heritage.[158]

The Pacific's priority interests are pursued through their relentless fight for climate and nuclear justice.[159] The region's support for the re-election of the Marshall Islands on the UN Human Rights Commission is a step in the right direction for advocacy on these issues. Recent achievements on nuclear issues include obtaining ongoing monitoring evaluation from the International Atomic Energy Agency on the release of contaminated Fukushima wastewater, and securing a place for this subject as a standing item for the **PIF leaders' meeting** and the **Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting** (PALM) summit hosted by Japan.[160] The **Pacific Resilience Facility**, a Pacific-led transformational initiative that invests in communities vulnerable to climate change, speaks to the Pacific's leadership in implementing its expanded concept of security in the maritime space. In his 2024 speech to the PIF Foreign Ministers Meeting, the PIF's Secretary General Baron Waqa stated that 'geopolitical manoeuvring means nothing to Pacific peoples who have water lapping at their doorsteps due to sea level rise' to emphasise that climate change remains the Pacific's top security priority.[161] As a further demonstration of

commitment to climate action, Pacific leaders recently agreed to elevate sea level rise as a standalone item at the United Nations General Assembly.[162]

Solidarity remains the PIF's signature policy approach to managing the geopolitical environment. As eloquently put by a longstanding PIF leader, the Samoan Prime Minister Honourable Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, 'our survival is premised on our togetherness'.[163] In 2022, noting the geopolitical competition playing out in the region, PIF leaders reaffirmed the need for a fit for purpose regional architecture to effectively deliver on the *2050 Strategy.*[164] A renewed regional architecture is envisaged to enhance coordination and strengthen links between leaders' policy decisions across sectors and the collective priorities for the region. For this reason, it was not a coincidence that Tonga, as host and Chair of the 2024 PIF leaders' meeting, reaffirmed the importance of integrated resilience across all communities to leverage collective solutions for the region.

To achieve the vision for a fit for purpose regional architecture, leaders have endorsed four key considerations, namely: (i) political settings for collective interests and decision making; (ii) institutional settings and mechanisms; (iii) governance mechanisms; and (iv) engagement with partners.[165] Through enhanced coordination, the review presents the opportunity:

- to streamline decision-making processes at the PIF, ensuring that all members have equal input in setting the PIF leaders' annual agenda;
- improve the transparency and equity of members' contributions to tackle perceived power imbalances; and
- ensure that a renewed structure is fit for purpose and manageable for the PIF Secretariat and members.

Now in its third phase, the **Review of the Regional Architecture** will look at how '[l]eaders ensure that there is collective political leadership that is aligned to international law and unity to overcome shared challenges and disputes, as well as to maintain collective momentum on the 2050 Strategy'.[166] The **Review of the Post Forum Dialogue** falls under consideration (iv) of the review of the regional architecture. Wesley-Smith and Finin (2024) have highlighted the 'growing concerns about climate change, rising militarisation, and inadequate consultation on major initiatives,' which reflect the insufficient consideration of Pacific priorities by external partners.

In 2019, the '**Blue Pacific Principles for Dialogue and Engagement**' were endorsed by PIF leaders to align external partners involvement in the Pacific with the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.* Subsequently, in 2024 PIF leaders endorsed the recommendation for a new '**Forum Partnership Mechanism**'[167] that links the access and privileges of **Forum Dialogue Partners** to a tiered system, outlining rigorous partnership conditions, reporting requirements, and accountability measures.[168] These revisions to Forum Dialogue Partner engagement encourage external partners to genuinely commit to the Blue Pacific framing and its priorities, rather than merely paying lip service.[169] The Forum Dialogue Partner conditions are a component of a broader array of 'tactical, shrewd, and calculate[ed] approaches'[170] that Pacific Island countries employ to manage the ongoing competition among materially more powerful states.

To prevent Pacific Island countries from being objects in external defence strategies and to enhance their agency[171] it is essential partner countries maintain the alignment with the *Boe Declaration* and the *2050 Strategy.* All efforts should be made to ensure the priorities of the region, under the vision of the Blue Pacific Continent, are respected.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6. Security cooperation to deliver maritime-based humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and resilience and search and rescue

Miranda Booth and Genevieve Quirk

- Both humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and search and rescue (SAR) involve operations with extensive access to areas of military interest. In the crowded geostrategic oceanscape of the Pacific, HADR, in particular, is increasingly seen as an opportunity for strategic advantage.
- Security cooperation aligned with an international rules-based order adheres to international disaster response laws and guidelines for civil-military interactions in HADR and SAR.
- For HADR, the primary principle is that the affected community and government lead disaster relief efforts. Accordingly, the Pacific seeks regional coordination through its own mechanisms within the Blue Pacific regional security architecture. The Pacific also reframes HADR to include a resilience-based approach, which must guide maritime security partners' engagement with the region.
- Regional initiatives for SAR are vital to support Pacific Island countries' capacities to meet their obligations and respond to SAR needs in a challenging oceanscape.

As the geostrategic space becomes increasingly crowded, HADR and SAR is a more significant currency for assisting and acquiring visibility and priority as a Pacific partner. HADR, in particular, is fast becoming a tool of statecraft as crises and competition for influence escalate in the Pacific.[172] The past decade has witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of climate change-related disasters such as tropical cyclones, and forecasts are far more catastrophic.[173] This paper focuses on *who* and *how* and *if* international partners meet the Pacific priorities for HADR and SAR.

The United Nations (UN) **Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs** (OCHA) has established an Office of the Pacific which coordinates humanitarian action for fourteen Pacific Island countries in partnership with international actors.[174] International actors are, however, under international disaster response law only deployed with the consent of the affected government and in principle, when the affected government has formally requested external assistance.[175] The guidelines on the use of foreign military assets in disaster response operations also specify that foreign military assets should be utilised only if comparable civilian assistance is unavailable.[176] This foreign military assistance must be strictly time-bound, specific in its geographic scope, and include a clear exit strategy.[177] International relief efforts are further underpinned by the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality.[178]

Although the engagement of foreign military assets is a 'last resort' option

under international disaster response law, they are among the first capabilities offered by assisting states in the Pacific. The magnitude of climate-related disasters mean that large-scale events may overwhelm national and international civilian capacity more frequently, and that foreign militaries will continue to provide unique and vital capabilities to meet humanitarian gaps.[179] Furthermore, whilst all international disaster relief efforts including HADR are guided by humanitarian principles, the military is not a humanitarian actor. HADR conducted by foreign military forces may contain an element of coercion;[180] and can advance hard and soft power interests of assisting governments, including by signalling readiness and capability; enhancing military interoperability across allies and partners; exercising a regional presence; building trust; and fostering a positive public image and standing with the affected communities.[181]

HADR is a key dimension of international partnerships including the **Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue** (QUAD),[182] the **FRANZ (France, Australia, New Zealand) Arrangement**,[183] **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Pacific-Quad),[184] and the **Partners in the Blue Pacific**.[185] Military partners cooperate through joint exercises to promote preparedness and inter-operability for HADR. The 2023 Southern Cross HADR exercise, for example, involved 19 states, 10 surface vessels, 15 aircraft, and 3000 people.[186] The 2023 **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting** (SPDDM) members approved the development of a **HADR Interoperability Guide**, an instructive document to facilitate planning of future exercise and operations.[187] During HADR operations, disaster diplomacy between assisting and affected governments can form the basis of productive networks of assistance in support of the affected government.

Civil-military interactions in HADR have demonstrated substantial success and have built upon regional lessons-learned in disaster relief. Cyclone Winston (2016) was the most intense cyclone in the Southern Hemisphere, and Cyclone Pam (2015), the most destructive. Both operations involved a significant international civil-military component in support of the affected governments, and HADR evaluation reports emphasised robust operations under national disaster management offices.[188] Cooperative initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the **Pacific Humanitarian Pathway** established by Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers, are equally demonstrative of the success of Pacific-led coordination structures.[189] However, the geostrategic oceanscape is also changing, with disasters now a growing site for geostrategic competition.[190] The 2022 Tongan volcanic eruption response is illustrative. The Australian Defence Force established an **International Coordination Cell** with Tonga, Fiji, Japan, France, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States (US).[191] China delivered assistance without directly coordinating with other partners;[192] and demonstrated the range of its military capabilities with the rapid use of People's Liberation Army vessels and planes.[193] The Tongan disaster engaged a diverse array of regional and external powers, whose efforts were not always coordinated, yet all sought credit for their contribution. Analysts from the European Union (EU), for example, piqued in their observation that 'Canberra and Wellington were initially given full credit, without France or the EU gaining a mention'.[194] Alongside these cooperative and competitive dynamics, are ongoing questions related to the quality of humanitarian assistance partners provide;[195] the absorptive capacity of affected governments; and the effectiveness of coordination between partners and affected countries remain.[196]

There is significant interest in a regional coordination centre for HADR within the regional security architecture. One evident route is through the established Office of the Pacific under the UN OCHA, which has links to the UN's Civil-Military Coordination Section and the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. In 2023, SPDMM members also supported Australia's proposal for a **Pacific Response Group**, which has been likened to a Pacific battalion of SPDMM members, and would include HADR in its scope of operations.[197] China has also proposed a centre for disaster management and risk reduction outside the regional security architecture.[198] While many models for a regional HADR coordination centre are possible, the Pacific is determined under the 2018 ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security*** to strengthen the existing regional security architecture.[199] The Pacific is commencing a Pacific-led approach to HADR through the new **Pacific**

Islands Forum Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting.[200]A Pacific-led coordination centre is crucial to facilitate oversight of international HADR actors to ensure their conduct in Pacific Island countries is aligned with Pacific priorities and preferences; and is responsive to the needs and absorptive capacity of affected governments.

It is also critical that Pacific priorities for resilience-based and non-militarised HADR options form central pillars in this coordination centre.[201] At the grassroots level in Pacific Island countries there is resistance to the use of foreign military assets in HADR operations.[202] Extensive non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society organisations, and Church-based organisations together 'firmly oppose the militarization of our islands and oceans' and spoke out with one voice for the cancellation of the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) warfare exercises which does also include HADR practices.[203] Leveraging alternatives to foreign military assets is possible, because HADR operations are in principle civilian in character, with foreign military assets in principle only used to address critical gaps between humanitarian needs and available civilian capacities. NGOs are significant players in HADR operations and those with vessels can offer key resources in support of maritime-based disaster relief efforts.[204] NGOs are also non-state actors who respect the principle of neutrality and build credibility during disaster relief interventions by upholding the requirement for impartiality.[205] Another alternative is a Pacific-owned vessel; the Pacific Community (SPC) is currently seeking funding toward a **Pacific Fisheries Science Vessel** to enable regional scientific capacity.[206] Regional HADR partners with genuine interest in Pacific agency and resilience could contribute to a Pacific-owned vessel with the unique attributes suitable for HADR operations.

The Pacific is consistent, clear, and direct in their classification of climate change as the single greatest security threat to their region. From the Pacific's perspective, the threat of climate change demands mitigation and resilience. The Pacific recognises the interdependence between climate change responses and disaster risk reduction, reorienting intra-regional cooperation under the integrated 2016 ***Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific***.[207] In linking climate resilience to disaster management, the Pacific has reframed the conditions through which HADR is practised with the Pacific-led Pacific Resilience Facility.[208] In 2024, the Pacific leaders endorsed the Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting's work to 'coordinate regional efforts to effectively address disaster risks, manage humanitarian action and response'.[209]

Since the 2016 ***Pohnpei Statement: Strengthening Pacific Resilience to Climate Change and Disaster Risk*** the Pacific has called on international partners for nationally-led disaster responses and support for a resilience based approach.[210] In response to this and other calls, HADR partners to Pacific Island countries require a complementary climate strategy to address their collective role in contributing to climate change-related hydrometeorological disasters.[211] Such a strategy must avoid placing the Pacific on an accelerated trajectory for marine natural hazards, thereby preventing low-lying islands from becoming new sites for HADR operations. One challenge to realising such an approach is that players that regard the Pacific as a geostrategic theatre have the resources to compete, design their own resilience outside the regional architecture, and employ parallel strategies in *defence* and *development* to realise their primary defence agenda whilst only partially satisfying Pacific demands. Arguably, however, if partners show up for the accolades of cooperative relief, without contributing to resilience, they have missed the boat.

SAR is regulated under the 1982 ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*** which obligates states to provide search and rescue services and requires flag states to render assistance at sea.[212] The 1974 ***International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea and 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue***, both operating under the **International Maritime Organisation** (IMO), have recently incorporated amendments on human rights and maritime crime.[213] In the Pacific region, the SPC coordinates the regional arrangements to meet the requirements set forth by these IMO instruments on SAR.[214] Nonetheless, meeting SAR duties in the vast oceanscape of the Pacific is often beyond the capabilities of Pacific Island countries. Hence, Pacific Island countries and partners cooperate to provide SAR through the 2014 ***Maritime Search and Rescue Technical Arrangement for Cooperation Among Pacific Island Countries and Territories that Support International Life Saving in the Pacific Ocean***.[215] The SAR region of responsibility of New Zealand is 40 million km^2; Australia's covers nearly 53 million km^2; Fiji 6 million km^2; France has duties for SAR in the New Caledonian zone of 2.4 million km^2, and French Polynesian zone of 12.5 million km^2; and the US duties for SAR extend in the north of the Blue Pacific to 36.7 million km^2. All contribute robust and extensive coverage across the across the vast and challenging expanse Pacific. As Pacific Island countries have significant SAR regions, efforts are also undertaken through the **Pacific SAR Steering Committee**, which seeks to build capacity to addressing the unique maritime SAR challenges faced by small island developing states, including the vast geographic space with varied weather patterns and dispersed island groups, and different resource capacities for SAR, thereby enhancing regional safety.[216]

The current issue of HADR and SAR is the matter of access to strategically important Pacific security assets. The *who* and *how* of HADR and SAR is regulated by international disaster response law and guidelines and other multilateral arrangements; the needs, priorities and preferences of affected governments; and the capacities and interests of assisting governments. International partners have successfully met Pacific priorities for HADR and SAR through a combination of cooperative preparedness and response initiatives. However, diverging security priorities, attempts at geostrategic game playing for credit, and ongoing questions related to mechanisms for effective assistance have the potential to undermine the credibility of partners and the quality of partnerships in HADR. For SAR, continued cooperation is vital to ensure ongoing capacity across the vast Blue Pacific.

7. The involvement of non-sovereign territories in maritime security cooperation

Kenneth G. Kuper and Genevieve Quirk

- Strategically, the non-sovereign territories of the Pacific are pivotal to colonial maritime and security strategies. These territories, focused on their own strategic priorities for development and self-determination, can clash with colonial priorities, creating tensions and regional vulnerabilities.
- Prioritising the autonomy and voices of Pacific non-sovereign territories is crucial. Ensuring their active participation in maritime security initiatives can enhance regional stability and foster more inclusive and equitable ocean governance. Addressing historical wrongs and promoting collaborative decision-making will lead to a more resilient maritime security environment.

Beginning in the 1960s, the process of decolonization led to the emergence of independent Pacific Island states, including those who entered into free association arrangements with the United States and New Zealand. This wave of decolonization did not reach the shores of all Pacific Islands, however. As a result, there are multiple non-sovereign territories in the region administered by metropolitan powers. These include Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa ––United States (which illegally annexed the Kingdom of Hawai'i as a State); Ma'ohi Nui (French Polynesia), Kanaky (New Caledonia), and Wallis and Futuna––France; Tokelau––New Zealand; Pitcairn Island––United Kingdom; Rapa Nui––Chile; and West Papua––Indonesia.

Some of these islands are officially on the United Nations' list of non-self-governing territories, and thus have a clear pathway in international law to exercise self-determination. Others, however, have been either removed from the list or were part of a trust territory after World War II. The unifying thread for all these islands is their lack of sovereignty and subsequent lack of complete foreign affairs power to engage in maritime security cooperation and governance to their fullest extent.

These territories have often endured the environmental and human costs of nuclear testing, military activities, and now climate change. Contemporary maritime security strategies, such as strategic denial and EEZ claims by colonial powers, projected from Pacific non-sovereign territories, place these territories in a position of being drawn into a foreign policy which they did not craft or have final say over. Rather, this foreign policy is crafted and executed by their administering power. The response from the diverse peoples of the Pacific non-sovereign territories to the escalating geostrategic contest in the region ranges from protests within Guam on the proposed establishment of a 360-degree missile defense system, the continued push for independence in Kanaky, and the welcoming of US military tourism in the CNMI. To understand maritime security, cooperation, and governance, it is insufficient to exclude the non-sovereign territories in the

analysis. The strategic and economic priorities of colonial powers can conflict with their responsibilities to the people of non-sovereign territories. This dynamic complicates maritime security cooperation with these territories, requiring careful and respectful navigation of their unique circumstances. The future of maritime security and the Pacific's regional ability to navigate this future is being shaped by activity or lack of activity within the non-sovereign Pacific.

The Pacific Islands Forum's ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** has a commitment by leaders to 'protect our sovereignty and jurisdiction over our maritime zones and resources'.[217] The presence of non-sovereign territories in the Pacific arguably complicates this commitment.

First, as ultimate sovereignty over foreign policy does not lie with these territories, these pockets of non-sovereignty will impede a true regional approach to maritime governance, while providing metropolitan powers with more influence. While these powers are trying to 'partner' with the Pacific on maritime issues, the holding of territories is anything but 'partnership.' Non-sovereign territories are places where these powers can largely act unilaterally and push their own agenda for the Pacific Islands region. No treaties need to be signed with non-sovereign territories. This creates a tension. Building up a 'partnership' in a region while simultaneously holding places of unilateral action diminishes the integrity of this partnership from the start, and thus jeopardizes genuine maritime security cooperation. As Jackson notes, 'the Non-Sovereign Pacific is actively at risk, and the Independent Pacific Nations will remain far weaker than they could be so long as their neighbors are denied the same political status they enjoy'.[218]

Second, the exclusive economic zones generated by the non-sovereign territories add a significant amount to their overall EEZs. In the case of France, for example, 'Metropolitan France has only 340,290 km^2 of EEZ in Europe, but its overseas dependencies add 11 million km^2 of EEZ worldwide. Of France's 11,000,000 km^2 of overseas EEZ, more than 7 million are located in the Pacific.'[219] Furthermore, lawful maritime boundaries are the fundamental basis of the peaceful order of the oceans. In this context, France's desire as a

credible leader on maritime issues in the region is undermined by the claims by France and Vanuatu to the Matthew and Hunter Islands.[220] While some non-sovereign territories have agency regarding resource management, colonial powers have emphasized that they have ultimate sovereignty over territory EEZs.

For those on the non-self-governing territory list, this colonial control is arguably contrary to international policy. The United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution reaffirming that 'the natural resources are the heritage of the peoples of the Non-Self-Governing Territories, including the indigenous populations'.[221] This resolution has also called on these administering powers to 'take effective measures to safeguard and guarantee the inalienable right of the peoples of the NGSTs to their natural resources.'[222] Yet, metropolitan powers have resisted this. Guam has made exclusive claims to its EEZ, utilizing relevant international law, yet the United States does not acknowledge Guam's claim, rather claiming it as US EEZ. Resolving these issues will be critical towards understanding how these powers truly view partnership with the Pacific. How they treat their colonial holdings is a litmus test for how they may engage overall in the region.

Also important to maritime security cooperation is how the non-sovereign territories in the Pacific Islands enables the metropole powers to: **a) Make a case for their presence in the Pacific;** and **b) Attempt to uphold a 'free and open Indo-Pacific**.'

First, the holding of territories in the region has been rhetorically used to justify metropolitan involvement in the region. Amongst this renewed competition with China, western powers use their colonial possessions as an anchor of their Pacific identity. The core document for US-Pacific Islands engagement, the Pacific Partnership Strategy, states, 'The United States is a Pacific nation, with its homeland including the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, American Samoa, and Hawai'I'.[223] France's Indo-Pacific strategy similarly emphasizes, 'With its overseas territories, France is an Indo-Pacific nation...President Macron underlined the essential role that the territories play in French strategy through regional cooperation'.[224] Thus, these powers are using their colonial holdings in the region to justify their ramped up presence in the region.

Second, the non-sovereign territories are being used in the name of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' to include military exercises. The United States, through its Indo-Pacific Strategy, places significant emphasis on non-self-governing territories for its maritime security strategy in the Pacific region. This strategy aims to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, by safeguarding crucial sea lanes and lines of communication, and countering the influence of competing powers. The United States is using Guam at the core of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This ranges from the opening of a new Marine Corps base, the use of Guam for missile defense technology experimentation, and the host of partner militaries (such as the proposed bed-down of Singapore aircraft in the island). Guam, and the freely associated states in Micronesia, are being used for joint military exercises (such as Cope North) with ally and partner forces in order to 'enhance security and stability to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.'[225] This is all occurring in the context of the CHamoru people of Guam not yet exercising the right to self-determination. As Kuper (2024) has argued elsewhere, 'A free and open Indo-Pacific cannot be fully accomplished without resolving the paradox of the United States maintain a modern-day colony'.[226]

The French also have military presence in their Pacific territories which they use for protection and surveillance of their territories, EEZ, and airspace. Yet, this presence in French territories also allows them to engage with other militaries and push their agenda for the region in Melanesia and Polynesia. For example, in summer 2024, the French hosted the 'Marara' military exercise, which hosted military personnel from 15 nations with the aim of increasing 'interoperability.'[227] As their Ministry of Defense writes regarding French military presence in the territories, '[o]ur permanent capabilities and facilities.... ensure the credibility of our presence, sustain our contribution to security and our support to our partners.'[228] Similar to Guam, this happened in a territory (Ma'ohi Nui) that has a long history of fighting for self-determination. Thus, this strategic focus can sometimes overshadow the aspirations of non-sovereign territories in the region, whose goals for self-determination and development may be sidelined by security agendas.

To conclude, the Pacific Islands is a region where the pursuit of self-determination remains an ongoing process. The geostrategic strategies of colonial powers often rely on Pacific sites, resulting in the disregard for their obligations to these territories in favour of maritime security priorities. Efforts for decolonisation remain sites of instability within the Blue Pacific Continent. Reconciling and respecting non-sovereign territories and Indigenous peoples' rights is a critical component of the effective operation of maritime security cooperation.

8. Australia's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

Joanne Wallis and Genevieve Quirk

- Australia seeks to be viewed as a partner of choice for Pacific Island countries and institutions when responding to maritime security issues.
- As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum and most key regional organisations, Australia is intimately involved in responding to opportunities and challenges in the maritime domain.
- Australia is engaged in extensive maritime security assistance provision and cooperation, but there is scope for better coordination with other partner countries and deeper cooperation with Pacific Island countries, particularly via Pacific-led mechanisms.

Australia has long been the most active partner providing maritime security assistance in the Pacific Islands region, which it delivers both cooperatively and bilaterally. Australia provides approximately 40% of all aid to the region,[229] which includes efforts to address maritime opportunities and challenges, and is also the major provider of humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), particularly in the Melanesian and Polynesian sub-regions. In the context of rising concern about China's activities and intentions, since 2018 Australia has increased its focus on the region, including with respect to the maritime domain, as part of its efforts to be seen as Pacific Island countries' 'partner of choice'.[230] But at times Australia faces the challenge of balancing its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific with its relationships in the Pacific Islands region, particularly as it is a member of the Pacific Islands Forum and many other key regional organisations.

Australia's interests in the Pacific Islands region

The Pacific Islands region lies across some of Australia's most important sea and air lanes of communication. As a result, Australia has long pursued a policy of strategic denial, which attempts to position Australia as the primary regional power and to exclude potentially threatening powers.[231] The 2024 ***National Defence Strategy*** specified that Australia pursues a 'Strategy of Denial' that aims to prevent and deter coercion, bolster security, and uphold a strategic balance favourable to Australia in the Indo-Pacific region (which Australia defines as including the Pacific Islands region).[232]

In the context of strategic competition between China and Australia's ally, the United States (US), in the Indo-Pacific,[233] Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong has observed that Australia is 'in a state of permanent contest' with China in the Pacific Islands region.[234] This encouraged the Coalition government to pursue the 'Pacific step-up' policy implemented from 2018. The Labor government elected in May 2022 continued this focus on the region through its 'Plan for a Stronger Pacific Family'.

Australia's strategic interest in the maritime domain in the Pacific Islands region has sharpened since reports in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a naval base in Vanuatu. Although this did not occur (and was denied by both governments), Australia's anxieties grew after Kiribati and Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition to China in 2019, and then China attempted to lease a Second World War-era Japanese naval base in Solomon Islands and to update strategically located airstrips in Kiribati. Australia's anxieties grew acute after Solomon Islands and China signed a security agreement in April 2022, which several Australian commentators interpreted as paving the way for a Chinese naval presence in the region (although this has not occurred).[235]

Australia's Pacific policy in the maritime domain

Several key initiatives under Australia's step-up had a maritime dimension. In 2019 Australia created the **Pacific Security College** at the Australian National University in Canberra to strengthen the capacity of Pacific officials, including with respect to maritime security issues. It also created the **Pacific Fusion Centre**, initially in Canberra and then later in Vanuatu, to promote regional maritime domain awareness by facilitating research, information-sharing, and coordination between Pacific Islands Forum members. The **Australian Defence Force** (ADF) now also maintains a 'near-continuous presence'[236] in the region, including through **Royal Australian Navy** survey ships, patrol boats, and large-hulled vessels such as Canberra-Class Landing Helicopter Dock. The dedicated **ADF Pacific Support Team** is involved in HADR, stabilisation, and other security operations.

Longstanding Australian programs also have a maritime dimension. Australia's support for Pacific police forces, both bilaterally through the **Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation Program** through the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police,** and regionally through the **Pacific Police Development Program**, both enhance the capacity of Pacific police forces to respond to challenges both on land and at sea, particularly transnational crime (which is also aided by Australia's support to the **Pacific Transnational Crime Network** (through the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police** and the **Transnational Serious Organised Crime Pacific Taskforce**). The **Pacific Policing Initiative** endorsed at the 2024 Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting will also provide police training and capability to response to regional crises. Australia also supports the **Oceania Customs Organisation** (OCO) and **Pacific Immigration Development Community** (PIDC), which both respond to the challenge of managing Pacific Island countries' borders in a regional dominated by the ocean.

Guided by its intent to be the region's security partner of choice, Australia has pursued bilateral security agreements with Pacific Island countries which can be activated to respond to maritime security challenges. Australia agreed on: a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017; a vuvale (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019; a comprehensive security and economic partnership with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2020 and a security agreement in 2023; a security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022; an economic and security focused memorandum of understanding with Kiribati in 2023; an economic and security focused bilateral partnership agreement with Samoa in 2023; and the Falepili Union security treaty with Tuvalu in 2023.

Under its longstanding **Defence Cooperation Program**, Australia has funded an increased number of major defence infrastructure projects over the last decade. Several of these projects have a maritime security dimension, including the construction of the Maritime Essential Services Centre in Fiji and the redevelopment of the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (which was completed in early 2022).

Protecting the marine environment

Australia contributes to protecting the marine environment by investing in the **Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner** (OPOC). The OPOC coordinates regional ocean governance and advocacy, recently shaping influential international norms under the ocean Sustainable Development Goal (SDG14) and the High Seas Biodiversity Treaty.[237]

Climate change is already having a profound impact on the marine environment, including through ocean warming and sea level rise. Consequently, in 2018 Pacific Islands Forum leaders made the ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security***, which identified climate change as the 'single greatest threat' to regional security. As a member of the Forum, Australia was a signatory to that declaration, and it has announced several policies to respond to the impacts of climate change in the Pacific Islands region. But several Pacific Island countries have concerns about whether Australia's domestic climate policy is sufficiently ambitious, particularly as Australia is not on track to meet its 1.5-degree emission target under the *Paris Agreement.*[238] Australia is likely to face greater scrutiny of its poor record on managing its greenhouse gas emissions[239] following the May 2024 International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) Climate Change Advisory Opinion, which directly linked greenhouse gas emissions to marine pollution duties under the ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea***.[240] This opinion had been sought the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law, initiated by Vanuatu, Niue, Palau, Tuvalu, and several Caribbean countries.

Maritime surveillance and support

Since the 1980s Australia has bilaterally provided patrol boats to Pacific Island countries to help them secure their massive Exclusive Economic Zones. This initially manifest in the **Pacific Patrol Boat Program**, which ran between 1987 and 1995, under which 22 boats were donated to 12 Pacific Island countries. The replacement **Pacific Maritime Security Programme** (PMSP) is providing 24 Guardian-class patrol boats (21 have been delivered), three landing craft, and a small loan fleet, to 16 Pacific Island countries (including Timor-Leste).[241] The PMSP also includes contracted aerial ocean surveillance and the secondment of personnel to the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) to help enhance regional coordination. Australia and the FFA increasingly cooperate with Canada and other national agencies and non-government organisations to access satellite monitoring and surveillance platforms.

Pacific Island countries have used the Australian-donated patrol boats primarily for fisheries enforcement, although most boats are used by the police rather than fisheries agencies, and in Fiji, PNG, and Tonga they are operated by the defence forces. They also use the boats for search and rescue, HADR, and medical evacuations. The local crews are brought to Australia for training under the **Pacific Maritime Training Services Program**. Technical and operational support is provided by 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.[242] Australia also provides support for maintenance and sustainment of the boats and is upgrading wharf infrastructure in 13 Pacific Island 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 PNG, on which Australia is partnering with PNG and the US.

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** through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police.

Support to the Forum Fisheries Agency

Australia is a major donor to the FFA, which coordinates policy advice and provides expertise and technical support to PIF members. To support regional approaches to fisheries surveillance Australia supports the **FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre** and annual regional maritime law enforcement operations such as Operation Kurukuru. This inaugural operation focused on countering illegal fishing 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. As noted above, Australia also funds the Pacific Fusion Centre to help share maritime domain awareness information. Australia has also supported Pacific Island countries integrating their maritime law enforcement activities by funding in-country training, workshops, consultations, and legislative reviews.

Maritime surveillance cooperation with partners

Since 2018, under the Pacific step-up, Australia has extended maritime surveillance cooperation with partner countries. Australia, France, New Zealand and the US coordinate their maritime surveillance support through the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (the 'Pacific Quad').[243] The purpose of the Pacific Quad is to 'promote security and stability through multilateral activities' including regional surveillance operations on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, supporting the work of the FFA, transnational crime maritime interdictions, and coordinating maritime security assistance and humanitarian assistance.[244]

Since 2022 Australia has also been a member of the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** initiative. This informal mechanism brings together Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US (Germany, Canada, and South Korea later joined) with the intention of 'harness[ing] our collective strength through closer cooperation' in the region.[245] When announcing the initiative, the partners identified 'maritime security and protection' as a priority issue identified by Pacific Island countries.[246] In January 2023 the partners held a workshop on 'Strengthening Shared Understanding Among the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) and Pacific Islands: Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF) and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)' that brought together Pacific and partner officials to discuss Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) and maritime domain awareness.[247] At their first foreign ministers meeting in September 2023, the partners announced several programs related to maritime security: the **Pacific Humanitarian Warehousing Program**, to pre-position humanitarian and emergency supplies in Pacific Island countries; funding towards a **Pacific Fisheries and Oceans Science Research Vessel** to conduct research about climate change impacts on oceans and fisheries; further support to better coordinate IUU fishing and maritime domain awareness cooperation; and support for the **Pacific Climate Change Centre** within the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme.[248]

Humanitarian and disaster relief

Australia is the major provider of HADR in the Pacific Islands region, particularly in the Melanesian and Micronesian sub-regions. When providing HADR, Australia cooperates with France and New Zealand under the longstanding **FRANZ Arrangement**,[249] and the 2012 **Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France**.[250]

Australia has recently sought to expand its cooperation on HADR. In January 2022 it established ad hoc **International Coordination Cell** at the ADF's Headquarters Joint Operations Command to coordinate the response to the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai eruption and tsunami. This cell involved Australia, New Zealand, France, the UK, the US, and Fiji. In 2023 Australia proposed the creation of a **Pacific Response Group** (PRG) at the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**,[251] which was endorsed at their 2024 meeting. The PRG will seek to improve how Pacific and partner defence forces coordinate to respond to natural disasters and other crises.

Minilateral defence arrangements

Australia is involved in minilateral defence arrangements in the region that provide Australia an opportunity to express its support for Pacific Island countries and to 'identify how best to collaborate and coordinate our efforts' with them and other partners,[252] and which have a maritime security dimension:

- The **South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting**: an annual meeting to discuss maritime security.
- The **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**: an annual forum that provides an opportunity for Pacific defence ministers to discuss regional security challenges and share experiences.[253]

- The **Joint Heads of Pacific Security** meeting: an annual opportunity for the heads of Pacific defence, police, customs and immigration agencies to influence the regional security agenda.

Broader initiatives with implications for the Pacific

As part of its pursuit of a Strategy of Denial in the Indo-Pacific, since 2019 Australia has partnered with the US, India, and Japan in the **Quad diplomatic partnership**. Since 2022, the Quad joint leaders' statements have identified strengthening cooperation with Pacific Island countries as a priority, including efforts to 'improve their maritime security and sustain their fisheries'.[254] In 2022 Quad leaders announced the **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness** (IPMDA), which provides maritime domain awareness data to the FFA (and its counterparts in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean).[255] In 2023 Quad leaders committed to support a Pacific-led **Weather Ready Pacific initiative** to provide natural disaster early warnings in the region.[256] In 2024 the leaders announced the **Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific** (MAITRI), which is intended to help Pacific Island countries and other partners to maximise the benefits of the IPMDA and other Quad initiatives relating to maritime security, through legal dialogues, training, and collaboration.[257] In addition, **Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Missions** are set to begin soon.[258]

A key element of Australia's Strategy of Denial is enhancing its naval capabilities,[259] in part through the **AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) security partnership**.[260] Under AUKUS pillar I Australia will acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines.[261] The AUKUS agreement will also bring UK and US submarines to Australia.[262] The AUKUS partnership had been controversial in the Pacific Islands region,[263] particularly given sensitivities about nuclear technology due to the legacy of the catastrophic human and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons testing in the region. There are concerns that, while the submarines would not technically breach the 1986 **Treaty of Rarotonga** (to which Australia is a party) that created the **South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone**, they might set a 'nuclear proliferation precedent'.[264] While intensive Australian diplomacy has helped to quell some regional concern,[265] other Pacific leaders remain sceptical.[266]

Pillar II of AUKUS is planned to involve shared development of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, hypersonics, quantum technologies, and undersea warfare. It also seeks to improve the collective capabilities in uncrewed and autonomous maritime operations through 'Maritime Big Play'.[267] Therefore, pillar II has implications for the maritime security of Pacific Island countries, since much of this capability will likely be deployed in their region, given its strategic location. This has generated concerns in the Pacific about the region being caught up in strategic competition in which it has no interest and undermining Pacific regional priorities.[268]

Looking forward

While Australia is engaged in extensive maritime security assistance provision and cooperation in the Pacific Islands region, this project will explore scope for better coordination with other partner countries and deeper cooperation with Pacific Island countries, particularly via Pacific-led mechanisms. This project will also consider how Australia can address tensions in balancing its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific with its relationships in the Pacific Islands region. These tensions are exemplified by Australia's involvement in the Quad diplomatic partnership. On a generous reading, Quad initiatives relating to maritime domain awareness have the potential to enhance the efforts of the Pacific Quad, the FFA, and other regional initiatives. But a sceptical reading would argue that Quad initiatives risk overriding the priorities of Pacific Island countries and overwhelming the capacity of Pacific mechanisms. Similarly, the AUKUS security partnership is perceived to further Australia's Strategy of Denial, but potentially undermines Australia's relationships in the Pacific Islands region through its emphasis on nuclear technology and potential to exacerbate the effects of strategic competition on the region.

9. New Zealand's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

Henrietta McNeill and Genevieve Quirk

- New Zealand is 'a Pacific Island nation, surrounded by water' with vast maritime security interests.[269]
- New Zealand's stance on nuclear issues has traditionally influenced the nature of its engagement with partners in maritime security.
- New Zealand strongly advocates for Pacific-centred regionalism; however, the deteriorating geostrategic environment appears to be shifting New Zealand's focus from the Pacific's climate emergency to the revival of old alliances in the Anglosphere.

New Zealand's commitment to regional maritime security in the Blue Pacific Continent is directly articulated in its strategic defence policies. A vast (30,000,000km^2) maritime search and rescue region is surveiled by New Zealand's air and naval forces, stretching from the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of Tokelau, Cook Islands, and Niue in the north, all the way to the Ross Dependencies in Antarctica—and interestingly also incorporates the independent EEZs of Samoa and Tonga. This extensive coverage enhances regional maritime domain awareness and underscores New Zealand's commitment to monitoring the vast EEZs of the states and territories with which it maintains constitutional relationships.[270] Within this region, New Zealand responds to approximately 1,500 search and rescue incidents annually.[271]

Geostrategic competition within the Pacific is shrinking the space for New Zealand's soft-balancing tactics in the region and forcing New Zealand to rethink which maritime security alliances will meet its goals for long-term regional security.[272] New Zealand, as a small power, benefits from and supports a stable, rules-based international order which it says is becoming contested due to relative power shifts, economic power being reassessed in a militaristic lens, and a need for greater resilience and prominence of social and sustainability issues.[273]

New Zealand's defence policy has traditionally been shaped by the strategic perception of its distant location in a relatively stable and secure regional environment. Since 2021, New Zealand has re-evaluated this threat perception to acknowledge and address a deteriorating regional strategic environment.[274] The New Zealand Defence Force recognises that 'Pacific stability, security and resilience are connected to, and directly impact, our own security' aiming to 'deliberately to shape our security environment, focusing in particular on supporting security in and for the Pacific'.[275] Given New Zealand's limited assets and resources, one key strategy is to engage with a strong security partner network and enhance their interoperability to realise collective regional security.[276]

Collaboration with non-Pacific partners over the maritime domain

Within this geopolitical context, historical alliances within the Anglosphere, once strained by New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance, are now being significantly revived and revised.[277] New Zealand uses the Indo-Pacific lexicon, is a

member of the **Five Eyes network**, and is increasingly considering joining the (non-nuclear) **Pillar II of AUKUS**.[278] New Zealand's recent joint statement with the US pronounced 'as the security environment in the Indo-Pacific evolves, so must our defense cooperation'.[279] As further evidence of this shift, Australia recently alluded to its long history of the ***Australia-New Zealand-United States Treaty*** (ANZUS) despite New Zealand's fraught history and downgrading within this alliance by the US when New Zealand held its ground on its anti-nuclear position.[280] If New Zealand were to join AUKUS, it would constitute a 'seismic' foreign policy shift that aligns with a broader shadow objective of defending the geostrategic interests of historical alliances with the English-speaking colonial powers of the US, UK and Australia.[281] As a prominent advocate of a nuclear-free Pacific, any deviation from New Zealand's strong stance would have significant implications for regional maritime security.[282] There have already been questions raised from within the Pacific about New Zealand's dual membership of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the western-orientated Partners to the Blue Pacific—can New Zealand be both a member of the region and a partner?[283]

Anti-nuclear stance

New Zealand has always taken a strong anti-nuclear stance, and the issue has 'dominated' its global efforts at the United Nations.[284] In the 1970s the Prime Minister sent defence assets carrying a cabinet minister to Muruora (French Polynesia) to protest against French nuclear testing in the region; responded to what is largely considered a French-sponsored terrorist incident in 1986 where French spies bombed a Greenpeace boat in Auckland Harbour over anti-nuclear protests; and (alongside Australia) took France to the International Criminal Court successfully over its atmospheric testing. It was a proponent of the ***South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty*** 1985 (Treaty of Rarotonga), which is a central feature of Pacific regionalism.

From 1984, New Zealand declared its country a nuclear-free zone and banned nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships from using New Zealand ports or entering New Zealand waters with serious implication for its involvement in the ANZUS Treaty. The ***New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act*** 1987 prohibits the entry of nuclear-powered or armed vessels in its territorial waters. New Zealand's participation in the New Zealand-US aspect of ANZUS was suspended in 1986 as New Zealand refused US military vessels entry as they would not declare whether the vessels carried nuclear weapons or not. It was 2016 when a US navy vessel was next allowed to dock in New Zealand.[285]

New Zealand also undertakes efforts to combat maritime-related crimes, including illicit drugs trafficking often undertaken on small crafts which traverse the Pacific.

More recently, New Zealand has been a strong supporter of the ***United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*** 2017. Since 2019, New Zealand has been an active part of the Pacific Islands Forum's Task Force on Nuclear Legacy Issues which examines outstanding environmental and health issues from nuclear testing.[286]

New Zealand's involvement in regional maritime security governance

As a founding member of the PIF,[287] New Zealand has from the outset played a pivotal role in shaping collective maritime security policy. It actively calls for the Pacific to assert its 'Pacific Centrality' within the geopolitical environment, and argues that 'we should continue to work together as Pacific countries to strengthen our own regional architecture'.[288] New Zealand is a member of all **Council of the Regional Organisations of the Pacific** (CROP)—many with a mandate for ocean governance—governed by the PIF and collectively work towards the ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent***. New Zealand is also an active member of the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting**, and all regional law enforcement bodies which have maritime governance roles, including the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, Pacific Immigration Development Community**,

Oceania Customs Organisation, and the **Joint Heads of Pacific Security**.

New Zealand's alignment with the 2018 PIF ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security***, is directly articulated in its 2023 **Defence Policy and Strategy Statement**, demonstrating its public commitment to collective security efforts. The *Boe Declaration* emphasizes regional security cooperation and acknowledges climate change as the single greatest threat to regional security, a stance New Zealand strongly supports. In the 2018 defence document 'Climate Crisis: Defence Readiness and Responsibilities,' New Zealand highlighted the impact of climate change on national and regional security, including marine natural disasters that threaten regional resilience and strain resources and infrastructure. However, there are contradictions within New Zealand's alignment with Pacific priorities. Most fundamentally, New Zealand remains a high emitting and low performing state in global rankings on climate change performance.[289]

New Zealand's defence policy has traditionally been shaped by the strategic perception of its distant location in a relatively stable and secure regional environment.

New Zealand actively promotes the Blue Pacific Continent concept, with Foreign Minister Winston Peters stating that 'the most important thing of course being the peaceful future of the Blue Continent'.[290] This concept is PIF-led under the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*, and (among other regional issues) emphasises the importance of safeguarding maritime boundaries against the impacts of climate-induced sea-level rise and promoting peace and stewardship for marine environmental security.[291]

Fisheries assistance

New Zealand supports the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) both financially,[292] and through regular joint Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) fisheries compliance operations. In addition to bilateral support, New Zealand is a member of the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Pacific Quad), alongside Australia, France, and the US, which targets maritime crime, inclusive of IUU fishing, working closely with the FFA.[293] This grouping undertakes joint operations using maritime and aerial assets to patrol large EEZs, board suspicious vessels, and issue breaches on non-compliant activities.[294] New Zealand has recently upgraded its maritime domain awareness tools to be able to see IUU fishing and potentially malicious activity in its own EEZ and in the Pacific region.[295]

New Zealand also financially supports the PIF **Office on the Pacific Ocean Commissioner** and the Pacific Community's **Centre for Ocean Science**. New Zealand provides bilateral capacity-building support for Pacific Island countries regarding port inspections, and monitoring EEZs.[296]

Through its maritime domain awareness work and bilateral capacity-building with law enforcement agencies, New Zealand also undertakes efforts to combat maritime-related crimes, including illicit drugs trafficking often undertaken on small crafts which traverse the Pacific. While New Zealand has recently passed legislation to improve its response to potential maritime mass arrivals,[297] it is important to note that New Zealand has never received a maritime mass arrival and there has only ever been one maritime mass arrival in the Pacific Islands region—in the Federated States of Micronesia in 2014.[298] While climate change is undoubtedly likely to change migration patterns, scholars do not predict mass arrivals to New Zealand from the Pacific occurring, with migration occurring at the family level via airplanes.[299]

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

Since 1992, New Zealand has cooperated with Australia and France under the *Joint Statement on Disaster Relief Cooperation in the South Pacific*. Under this trilateral **FRANZ Arrangement**, when requested these states coordinate disaster relief efforts in the Pacific region. This arrangement emphasizes Pacific-led cooperation between civilian and military entities with a stated respect for the sovereignty of affected nations.[300] Originally designed to ensure effective humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) during natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis. Climate change is changing the severity and frequency of natural disasters for HADR, affecting the ability to respond.[301] FRANZ partners have a strong history of disaster response collaboration. However, with new states entering this space, maintaining trust and reputation is crucial to a continuing invitation to secure the role of first responders.[302]

One of New Zealand's unique contributions to HADR efforts was its specialist dive and hydrographic vessel, HMNZS Manawanui. The naval vessel undertook hydrographical surveys of the sea floor following disasters, charted changes in reefs following tsunamis and cyclones, and identified and disposed of undersea bombs left over from WWII.[303] However, in October 2024, the HMNZS Manawanui collided with a reef in Samoa, and sunk with no lives lost. This caused concerns about the salvage operation and the environmental impact of oil leaks on reefs which are used for food security and tourism. The event occurred just before the Palolo (*Palola viridis* - marine worm, a delicacy only able to be collected on certain nights of the year) season, and the inability to collect the Palolo has a significant economic impact for the villages in that area;[304] several have claimed compensation from the New Zealand government, although New Zealand has not yet responded.[305] Given that New Zealand only had nine naval assets (supported by aerial assets), the loss of the HMNZS Manawanui also affects New Zealand's unique contribution to future HADR responses.

Maritime safety

New Zealand's **Pacific Maritime Safety Programme** was established in response to several passenger ferry sinkings in Kiribati and Tonga in 2009, the grounding of a cargo ship in Samoa in 2009, and more recently the grounding of two fisheries patrol boats in Samoa and Fiji. The programme assists regulatory capacity in Pacific Island countries; provides search and rescue boats; and supports domestic vessel safety compliance and fleet improvements for seaworthiness.[306]

10. The United States' maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

April Herlevi and Genevieve Quirk

The United States (US) has global maritime security interests and pursues specific maritime security cooperation activities in the Pacific Islands region.

This paper describes overarching US views on maritime security and existing mechanisms for cooperation in the Pacific, including both US-led and Pacific-led initiatives. After summarizing broad global views and specific mechanisms, we assess the compatibility of US goals with Pacific Island priorities and potential challenges to maritime security cooperation.

US views on maritime security

US views on maritime security are shaped by both global and regional perspectives. The US Navy, US Coast Guard, and US Marine Corps described the global perspective in the joint publication, *Advantage at Sea,* also known as the '**Tri-Services Strategy**'.[307] The Tri-Services Strategy recognizes that 'security and prosperity depend[s] on the seas' and also states that US strategy 'focuses on China and Russia … prioritiz[ing] competition with China due to its growing economic and military strength.'[308] For the Pacific and Indian Oceans, regional views are captured in the ***Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States***, published in February 2022. The Indo-Pacific Strategy states that the US will 'cooperate to improve maritime security to safeguard fisheries, build maritime-domain awareness, and improve training and advising' with partner Pacific Island countries to create 'a free and open Indo-Pacific that is more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.[309] More specific US policy guidance is contained in the ***Pacific Partnership Strategy*** released in September 2022.[310] Collectively, these strategic policy documents assert that

the US has global maritime interests and explain existing bilateral and multilateral initiatives that the US is pursuing in the Indo-Pacific and with the Pacific Islands.

Existing mechanisms for US maritime security cooperation

The Indo-Pacific Strategy recognises that regional maritime security depends on partnerships and reflects policy consistency across US presidential administrations.

US-led mechanisms

The 2022 ***Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*** was designed to rapidly increase US engagement in the Pacific.[311] The Pacific Partnership Strategy has already expanded regional diplomatic presence delivering embassies in Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, re-establishing the USAID regional mission, and appointing the first US envoy to the Pacific.[312] Nonetheless, one recent analysis argues that even this increased 'diplomatic presence no longer matches strategic needs in the Pacific' and highlights funding shortfalls in areas critical to maritime security.[313]

In terms of US-led maritime security cooperation, the **Oceania Maritime Security Initiative** (OMSI) is the newest explicit arrangement and has the potential to be an important coordination mechanism. OMSI is modeled on similar efforts undertaken in Southeast Asia beginning in 2016.[314] The main interagency partner for OMSI in the Pacific Islands is the **US Coast Guard**.

The **Coast Guard's regional command for the Pacific Area** (PACAREA) encompasses the entire Pacific Ocean inclusive of the Blue Pacific Continent.[315] The US Coast Guard's regional command is responsible for maritime safety, security, and stewardship in the Pacific. Oceanic fisheries surveillance significantly enhances regional maritime domain awareness (MDA)[316] through the contribution of enforcement capabilities and joint operations. Cooperation with the USCG had previously been undertaken annually through the **Operation Blue Pacific campaigns** which were focused on IUU fishing and transnational maritime crime.[317] The USCG has also recently established the Coast Guard '**Marine Environmental Response Regional Activities Center**' and '**Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Center of Expertise**' in Hawai'i aimed at countering maritime crime in the Indo-Pacific.[318]

The new Coast Guard centres should help meet commitments by the US under the latest MOU with the **Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) to continue the ***Treaty on Fisheries Between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island States and the Government of the United States of America*** 1987 (US Tuna Treaty). The former FFA Director General Pacific Dr Manu Tupou-Roosen recognised this treaty as the 'cornerstone in our relationship with the United States ... for enhanced collaboration between the Parties in key areas such as combating illegal fishing and tackling climate change'.[319] The US has committed US$600 million over the next 10 years and US$10 million in economic and climate development funds to secure continued access to lucrative tuna in Pacific fishing grounds.[320]

The **Shiprider program**, initiated under the ***Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region***, permits US vessels to extend their fisheries surveillance and law enforcement activities to the territorial sea and archipelagic waters of Pacific State Parties.[321] Together with the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** (PBP), the US aims to fund the Pacific's **Fisheries Science Vessel**, an initiative that responds to regional needs to build capacity as independent actors in maritime surveillance.[322] The US **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** (NOAA) also supports the **Pacific Islands Region Observer Program** which deploys observers on Pacific fishing vessels and contributes to the enhancement of the existing Early Warning System.[323] USAID's planned work with the Pacific Community (SPC) will provide US$3.6 million for disaster preparedness, food security, and emergency management systems.[324] The US government announced $US8 million for the **Information Services for Resilience Initiative**,[325] and a grant of over $US1.6 million for Vanuatu to enhance disaster preparedness.[326] Commitments under the Pacific Partnership Strategy have also been made for the **President's Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience** (PREPARE).[327]

In the North Pacific, the United States renewed the **Compacts of Free Association** (COFA) with the freely associated states (Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)), which extends economic assistance to the COFA states and maintains security guarantees from the US for these countries.[328] In Melanesia, the US has signed a comprehensive **Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Papua New Guinea** that includes access to Lae Seaport, Lombrum Naval Base, and Port Moresby Seaport.[329]

Pacific-lead maritime security cooperation with US involvement

The US is a founding member of the **Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific** (CROP) institutions—the **Pacific**

Community (SPC) and **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP). Within the CROP, the US maintains the **Pacific Islands Development Program** (PIDP) located in Hawai'i.[330] The PIDP has been an important diplomatic mechanism, previously hosting the **Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders** with Pacific Island Heads of State. In 2022, these meetings were upgraded as the **US-Pacific Island Country Summit**,[331] now a biennial event hosted by the White House.[332] These various efforts are aligned with the US *Pacific Partnership Strategy* as well as the thematic priorities of the Pacific Island Forum's (PIF's) 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

The US also participates in multilateral fora such as the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**, the **US Indo-Pacific Command's Indo-Pacific Environmental Security Forum**, the **Western Pacific Naval Symposium**, and the **Joint Heads of Pacific Security** meeting.

Potential compatibility challenges

Maritime security cooperation between the US and Pacific Island countries faces at least four main challenges. First, US financial support has not yet matched the policy rhetoric. The *Pacific Partnership Strategy* depends on a significant expansion of US presence in the Pacific. This includes establishing new embassies and increasing the 'diplomatic and development footprint'[333] of USAID and the Peace Corps. In the short timeframe since the 2022 *Pacific Partnership Strategy* was announced, the logistics to enable this expansion are still underway. To illustrate, following an announcement that the US will double the USAID footprint[334] efforts are still ongoing to 'secure larger office space in Fiji and Papua New Guinea to accommodate a growing staff presence'.[335] Coordination could be a challenge given that multiple US agencies, like NASA, NOAA, and the Peace Corps already have relationships with regional institutions and new programs are being layered upon this existing set of partnerships.[336] The White House's recent announcement of programs, still contingent on congressional approval, promised US$20 million toward the PIF's **Pacific Resilience Facility**; $4.5 million to USAID for advancing a democratic and resilient Blue Pacific Continent; and $500,000 to strengthen regional institutional capacity.[337] Congressional funding of these programs will be an initial test of successful US commitment and will need to be monitored.

The US Coast Guard is an effective partner in the Pacific but may need additional resources to maintain operations in the region. As noted in the 2022 USCG Strategy, 'increasing demand for the Coast Guard's unique authorities, partnerships, and capabilities will stretch our organizational capacity'.[338] Given the important role of the USCG in maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Islands region, competing priorities for the USCG could diminish its capacity to maintain combatting IUU fishing programs or other activities described above.

Second, while the US recognises the centrality of the PIF, US actions have not yet matched that rhetoric in terms of climate change and the region's broader conception of security under the 2018 ***Boe Declaration on Regional Security***. The *Boe Declaration* addresses a range of issues, including human and environmental security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster resilience, with each dependent on reducing climate emissions. Despite this, the US continues to rank among the highest emitters on global climate change performance.[339] The US also actively obstructed and diminished ambitions for the UN *Framework Convention on Climate Change* loss and damage fund, championed by Pacific states.[340] Given this history, fulfilling even the modest financial commitment to this global fund would represent a significant gesture toward mending relations.[341]

The third potential challenge for maritime security cooperation between the Pacific Island countries and the US is the lack of US ratification of UNCLOS, which hampers the US's ability to manage the global maritime commons and hurts US credibility. According to the Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. law largely comports' with the provisions in UNCLOS and other elements of customary international law, but the lack of ratification creates a barrier for coordination through this international convention.[342]

Fourth, upcoming US government changes in 2025 could mean the new presidential administration will not support Pacific partnership programs or the incoming Congress may not fund key initiatives. While there has been relative consistency across presidential administrations regarding the Pacific Islands region, Congress may alter funding priorities for any of the existing mechanisms described above.

Initial assessments

In 2024, the PIF adopted a new and assertive stance by proposing to categorise **Forum Dialogue Partners** under specific criteria for tier one or two diplomatic partnerships.[343] If the US is serious about the centrality of the PIF, aligning implied funding with delivery is vital.[344] As discussed in the introductory paper, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* does not explicitly state the term 'maritime security.' Rather, the 2050 Strategy focused on stewardship of the oceans. In contrast, while there are many mechanisms for coordination, the main US maritime strategy documents make clear that competing with China in peacetime and preparing for conflict are key elements of US policy. Given this reality, some Pacific Island countries may view the US as treating them instrumentally in service of strategic competition with China. While environmental stewardship, climate change, and combatting IUU fishing are important components of maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Ocean, it is not clear how those goals would align should a maritime conflict occur in Asia. Thus, as we evaluate maritime security cooperation opportunities for 2025 and beyond, assessment of funding mechanisms and their longevity will need to be key elements of future analysis.

11. France's maritime security cooperation in the Pacific

Céline Pajon and Genevieve Quirk

- France plays a significant role in Pacific maritime security, particularly through the active participation of its overseas territories and the contribution of its stationed armed forces to regional cooperation initiatives.
- However, uncertainties about the degree to which local authorities can independently or collaboratively exercise their competencies in maritime security and regional cooperation complicate France's role and contributions.
- Beyond its military presence, France can make substantial contributions to ocean governance in the Pacific. Its expertise and resources can support sustainable management of marine resources, enhance regulatory frameworks, and promote cooperation on environmental conservation and climate resilience across the region.

France, the only EU state with overseas territories in both the Indian Ocean and the Pacific (New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton) was, in 2019, the first European country to adopt an **Indo-Pacific strategy**.[345] France's Pacific territories encompass a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 7 million km², more than 65% of the country's total global EEZ. Therefore, maritime security lies at the core of France's Indo-Pacific approach, with a priority concern to ensure the protection of its resource-rich maritime domain from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, and other crimes at sea, while contributing to regional stability and the rule of law at sea.

French overseas territories represent both a responsibility and a strategic asset for France, enabling it to contribute effectively to regional maritime security. In particular, French armed forces stationed in the region have a long record of cooperation in the neighbourhood. That said, the existing ambiguities surrounding the extent to which local authorities can exercise their competencies and autonomy—either independently or in coordination—regarding maritime security and regional cooperation policies may complicate France's contributions. Beyond its military role, France can also provide a significant contribution to ocean governance in the Pacific.

France as a significant maritime security provider in the Pacific

France maintains permanent military forces based in its overseas territories: with 1,650 personnel stationed in New Caledonia and 1,180 in French Polynesia. These forces are tasked with maritime surveillance and policing, crisis prevention, civil security, and participate in regional cooperation initiatives, offering support to Pacific Island countries to monitor their EEZs, and providing logistics for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR).[346] The **Armed Forces of New Caledonia** (FANC) and **Armed Forces in French Polynesia** (FAPF) possess significant military assets comprising surveillance frigates, patrol ships, aircraft and helicopters.[347] Although these capacities are aging and limited by the vastness of the region they cover, they are currently undergoing modernization.[348] New **Oceanic Multimission Patrol Vessels** (POMs) will enhance the effectiveness of surveillance in the EEZ. Four units will be deployed in the Pacific by 2025, with the first two already stationed in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Additionally, new patrol aircraft will be introduced by 2030 to allow more extensive and efficient coverage.[349] This increased capacity will also bolster regional maritime security partnerships.[350]

France's Pacific territories encompass a vast Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 7 million km^2, more than 65% of the country's total global EEZ.

France collaborates as a member of the **Pacific Quad** with Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (US) in maritime surveillance operations in the EEZs of Pacific Island countries in support of the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA). Since 1992, French forces have been coordinating with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts under the **FRANZ arrangement** to provide HADR to Pacific Island countries, as extreme weather events increase due to climate change.[351] The armed forces of New Caledonia and French Polynesia alternately hold two annual multinational joint exercises focusing on HADR and known as 'Marara' and 'Croix du Sud'. France also participates in joint naval exercises, such as **Exercise Rim of the Pacific** (RIMPAC), and engages in defence dialogues such as the **Western Pacific Naval Symposium** and **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**. Since 2021, France has been holding an annual **South Pacific Coast Guard** seminar, alternating between New Caledonia and French Polynesia as host locations. This initiative seeks to enhance regional coordination among France, the Pacific Islands, and Pacific Quad partners, while protecting the sovereignty of Pacific Island countries. Despite the setback of the AUKUS deal in 2021, by which Australia suddenly backtracked on a submarine deal with France to acquire nuclear-powered submarines from the US and the United Kingdom,[352] the operational cooperation between French and Australian forces in their neighbourhood never ceased.[353] France is, however, reluctant to associate with certain US-led initiatives, such as the **Partners in the Blue Pacific**, as it views them as overly antagonistic toward China.

The tricky coordination between France and its overseas territories of the Pacific

French Pacific overseas territories enjoy a degree of autonomy that allows their local governments to manage certain competencies, including environmental protection, the development of maritime resources, as well as regional policy. Hence, in 2016, New Caledonia and French Polynesia joined the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as non-state members. France, for its part, is a Forum Dialogue partner. As the French central government retains control over defence and foreign policy for its overseas territories, it creates ambiguities regarding France's posture and complicates New Caledonia and French Polynesia's roles as Forum members, affecting their agency in regional initiatives and relationships with other members.

For instance, local governments are involved in fisheries management and environmental conservation, while national bodies contribute to broader maritime security, disaster response, and international maritime cooperation. This dual structure can complicate responses to maritime challenges, as it requires continuous alignment between local priorities and national policies.

The coordination between the French central government and its Pacific territories' local authorities has been complicated by the enduring tensions over progress on decolonisation, nuclear testing in the Pacific, and ongoing discussions on future institutional status of 'Le Caillou'.[354] The outbreak of violence in New Caledonia in 2024, sparked by protests against the reform of the electoral body, has triggered a severe political and economic crisis in the territory.[355] The question of decolonisation represents an ongoing vulnerability for France in the region[356] as these territories are part of sub-regional groups that assert the identity and independence of their members and tend to challenge the legitimacy of the French presence. There are also growing concerns about foreign interference and attempts to influence or gain economic and political footholds in France's overseas territories.

This violence and uncertainty further erode regional trust and may hinder France's maritime security ambitions for the region, in particular, President Macron's plans to substantially enhance the New Caledonia military base with additional soldiers, a defence and security training academy in HADR, and an emergency response coordination hub.[357] The US$245 million initiative to enhance regional maritime security capabilities has potential to bolster France's reputation among civil security and defence forces in the region.[358] However, the current instability casts doubt on the timing of these enhancements.

The non-military contribution of France

Constant patrols by armed forces stationed in Noumea and Papeete, complemented by satellite monitoring, have made cases of IUU fishing in France's EEZ almost non-existent. Hence, France has extensive experience in developing a policy and legal framework

to regulate fishing activities, as well as enhancing maritime monitoring, surveillance, and enforcement of the rule of law at sea. In particular, France is at the forefront of the **30x30 initiative**, which aims to protect 30% of the world's oceans by 2030, by establishing **Marine Protected Areas** (MPA) and other tools. The **Coral Sea Natural Park** in New Caledonia, covering 1.3 million km², exemplifies the importance it places on large MPAs for preserving marine ecosystems. In French Polynesia, local authorities have come with the original model of 'managed marine areas' to reconcile protection and responsible exploitation, after extensive consultation with coastal community to incorporate Local and Indigenous Knowledge.[359] Following the **Marquesas World Heritage designation** this year, further French Polynesian MPA announcements may be on the horizon as France hosts the **United Nations Ocean Conference** in 2025.[360] France could, therefore, share its expertise in establishing, regulating, and implementing science-based MPAs with Pacific Island countries that are developing their national marine policies.[361]

Ocean governance, science, and conservation present opportunities for external partners, such as France, to leverage strategic advantages by providing expertise and technical assistance in accessing valuable maritime data and developing comprehensive climate mitigation strategies. The French Development Agency committed $AUS2.3 billion to its **Three Oceans Strategy**. Key initiatives are the KIWA funded projects operating in collaboration with the regional institutions - the **Pacific Community** (SPC) and the **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP) - for nature-based solutions and regional climate resilience.[362] France is also actively developing scientific cooperation for the ocean, under SPC MOUs with the 2022 **French National Institute for Ocean Science and Technology** (IFREMER) and the 2023 **French Naval Hydrographic and Oceanographic Service** (SHOM) on ocean forecasting and warning, safety of navigation, oceanographic data acquisition and sharing.[363]

Therefore, France has much to offer in terms of maritime security in the region, as its approach reflects its broad understanding of the concept, encompassing a diverse range of concerns, both military and civil, aimed at ensuring the safety of navigation, protection of national territories, and environmental preservation. This includes managing natural and man-made hazards and securing maritime routes vital for global trade, peace and economic stability.

12. India's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

Premesha Saha and Genevieve Quirk

- India is a key player in the Quad diplomatic partnership (Quad), aimed at a maintaining a stable regional order in the Indo-Pacific. The expansion of China's maritime capabilities and interests contributes to India's pursuit of partnerships with a distinctly Indo-Pacific focus. For India, this highlighted the strategic value of relations with Indian Ocean Island States and Territories. To shore up its waning influence, India improved engagement through regional joint dialogues, as well as naval and coast guard exercises. Now, India focuses on the Pacific Islands, recognising their strategic significance in the 'island chain' defence of China.
- India's recognition of its reliance on a free and open Indo-Pacific led to the establishment of the Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation. In the South West Pacific, India emphasizes strategic South-South cooperation with an empathetic approach to regional needs, frequently addressing specific development challenges unique to tropical nations. Through soft diplomatic efforts and in collaboration with allies, India contributes to maintaining the regional balance of power.

India, as global South power, is focused on an expansive Indo-Pacific presence. Ranked 7th globally in its maritime capabilities, India is an important strategic partner in the maintenance of the region's balance of power.[364] India has, since 2002, been an official **Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue Partner**. Diplomatic relations were significantly upgraded when India established the **Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation** in 2014. Additionally, India has deep historical alliances with the Pacific Island countries through the **Commonwealth, Non-Aligned Movement** and at the United Nations through the **Group of 77**.[365] These deep diplomatic links underscore the mutual interests and shared goals that strengthen India's partnership with the Pacific.

As a developing nation, India offers strategic empathy and advanced capabilities to address development and maritime challenges it shares with the region. In 2015 the **Indian Navy** formally made the shift to an Indo-Pacific sphere of operation under the '**Indian Maritime Security**

Strategy'.[366] Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasised in 2018 that 'India Armed Forces, especially our Navy, are building partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region for peace and security, as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. They train, exercise and conduct goodwill missions across the region'.[367]

India's diaspora form direct links within the Pacific and are largely located in Australia, Fiji, New Caledonia, and New Zealand.[368] Notably, Fiji has the largest Indian population, comprising almost 40% of its residents. In 2017, India signed a defence cooperation MoU with Fiji regarding their defence industry, military training, and humanitarian assistance & disaster management.[369] This cooperation has included the training of Fijian officers by the Indian Navy.[370] These efforts highlight the deep and tactical ties between India and the Pacific region, driven by both historical connections and mutual strategic interests.

The **Quad diplomatic partnership** (Quad), comprising Australia, India, Japan, and the United States, is a strategic partnership aimed at promoting a free and open Indo-Pacific. At base, tensions arise for the Pacific region when the Quad promotes its operation under an Indo-Pacific framing. This creates a clash in strategic narratives, with the Pacific striving to ensure its Blue Pacific Continent narrative is not eclipsed in this broader framing.[371]

The relationship between the Pacific region, India, and the Quad is complex, particularly when considering the strategic priorities at play. The prospect of declaring the Pacific a 'zone of peace' as a 'contribution to world order' is challenging to reconcile with the Quad and other states' array of military and security arrangements.[372] Notably, within this context, the 2023 Quad leaders' statement adopted a respectful tone, aiming to achieve shared aspirations and address common challenges. It recognized climate change as the region's greatest security threat and committed to a 'listening to and being guided by Pacific priorities at every step, including climate action, ocean health, resilient infrastructure, maritime security, and financial integrity.'[373]

India's involvement in the Pacific is shaped by a careful balance of factors: direct border tensions with China; a significant trade partnership with this rising power; a commitment to non-alignment principles; and its dual identity as a developing nation with the world's third-largest economy.[374] India's nuanced approach in the Pacific, influenced by its complex geopolitical and economic considerations, results in a less resolute partnership stance. As Sullivan de Estrada notes, within the Quad, 'India has declined to pursue an overt, collective strategy of Chinese containment',[375] reflecting its strategic balancing act.

India's strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific is multifaceted and complex. However, its absence as a **Partner in the Blue Pacific** is particularly notable, especially as it is the only Quad member not participating. This could be attributed to its unique status as the sole developing nation within the group. Regardless, as the only developing and 'tropical' power in the QUAD, India holds a distinct advantage in addressing the unique needs of developing tropical nations, from mosquito-borne diseases to the impacts of climate change at these latitudes.[376]

In 2014 India established a diplomatic dialogue with Pacific States – the **Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation**. Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 2015 FIPIC offered to engage the Indian Navy in IUU fishing, natural disaster management, and aiding Pacific Island countries with hydrography and coastal surveillance of their EEZs,[377] knowledge critical for strategic maritime security operations in the region. It is, however, unclear to what extent Prime Minister Modi's offer was accepted by the members of the FIPIC. In any case, India demonstrates its respect for upholding and defending UNCLOS, including adherence to rulings on its own critical maritime boundaries.[378]

The FIPIC membership does not comprise all members of the Pacific Islands Forum excluding the French Territories, Australia and New Zealand.[379] Wallis and Saha (2023) contend that the current membership configuration raises questions about India's commitment to the centrality of the PIF.[380] By comparison, support for the centrality of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a clearly articulated aspect of India's foreign policy with ASEAN states.[381] The centrality of ASEAN, PIF and Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is also expressly acknowledged by the Quad.[382] From the Pacific's viewpoint, 'recognising and engaging with the full Forum Membership' is the primary principle of the new **Blue Pacific Principles to guide Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue and Engagement**. This suggests that FIPIC membership should be revised to align with the new rules of engagement with the PIF as One Blue Pacific. India has existing relationships with Australia and New Zealand and would benefit from further engagement with the French Pacific Territories. Working alongside all members of the Pacific Islands Forum is aligned with India's own approach to the Indo-Pacific through the principles of inclusiveness and issue-based partnerships.[383]

Through the FIPIC, India has demonstrated a keen understanding and exceptional competence in addressing frontline development needs, delivering tangible and immediate changes. This includes a regional speciality hospital in Fiji, cyber training in PNG, educational scholarships and sea ambulances in all 14 Pacific States.[384] Soft diplomatic cultural offerings also extend India's reach in the region through the establishment of yoga centres and the translation of essential cultural literature books into Pacific languages.[385] India wields its strength in the Pacific region through this strategic empathy as a soft balancing power.

As a developing state, India finds a great convergence of interests with the Pacific Island countries, particularly regarding the importance of partnerships in upholding and defending the regional balance of power. India's position as a power of the Global South allows it to relate to the developmental needs and aspirations of Pacific Island countries. This strategic empathy, combined with its robust maritime capabilities, positions India as a pivotal partner in fostering regional stability.

The Pacific can leverage India's intention for deeper outreach in the region to its direct advantage. From a maritime security perspective, this means the Pacific can utilize India's extensive experience in the Indian Ocean with island states to build regional capacity. By doing so with a rising global power, the Pacific stands to significantly enhance its maritime security and overall regional stability.

13. South Korea and Japan's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

Jiye Kim and Genevieve Quirk

- Pacific maritime security relies on a strategic order where shared values and objectives are upheld by the region's diverse international partners. In a region that aims to be 'friends to all,' the deepening securitisation of United States-led alliances with Japan and South Korea driven by the rise of great power politics could impact the strategic balance and priorities sought by Pacific Island countries.
- Japan and South Korea are strengthening ties with Pacific Island countries in diverse areas of maritime security, including their regional development agenda that extends beyond great power politics. Careful harmonisation of resources coming from Japan and South Korea is needed to effectively contribute to the crowded donor space of the Blue Pacific.

Japan and South Korea are significant global naval powers with a newly developed focus on the Pacific.[386] Japan, a founding member of the **Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue** from 1989, and South Korea, an early Dialogue partner from 1995, are credible and trusted partners of the Pacific.[387] Japan developed and articulated its focus on a **Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy** in 2016 and Korea's 2022 **Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region** expands the geographical scope of their traditional maritime security focus area.[388] The 2024 Lowy Power index situates Japan and South Korea on the rise in terms resources and influence with China demonstrably impacting US primacy in the core strategic region of Asia.[389]

In examining major powers' engagement with Pacific Island countries, this paper highlights two key implications of analysing Japan and South Korea together. First, as formal Asian allies of the United States (US), Japan and South Korea are situating themselves in US-led minilateral alignments in the Indo-Pacific, e.g., the Quad and AUKUS. Japan and South Korea represent external security strategies rooted in great power politics, which Pacific Island countries' approach cautiously. Second, Japan and South Korea are involved in maritime security cooperation in the Pacific, with a regional focus on development and stability that aligns with the goals of Pacific Island countries and extends beyond great power politics. This paper argues that it is important for Japan and South Korea to continue their maritime security cooperation with Pacific Island countries in alignment with Pacific priorities.

The rise in power of South Korea and Japan establishes a foundation for elevated relations with Pacific Island countries, which nonetheless continue to occupy a peripheral position in the major strategic interests of Japan and South Korea.[390] The gambit for these two nations is that while deeper engagement in the Pacific may bolster their common ally, the US, it may cause tension in their strategic

and economic relationship with China. Despite these challenges, recent summits with Pacific Island countries reveal concrete outcomes on maritime security, which we will examine.[391] This paper explores Japan and Korea's relations with the Pacific in turn, set against the backdrop of great power politics in the region.

Diplomatic relations between South Korea and the Pacific Islands countries have been elevated, transitioning from triennial to biennial meetings between foreign ministers.

Foremost, maritime security is fundamentally dependent on the stability of maritime zones. Japan explicitly acknowledges the strategic significance of the Pacific for ensuring uninterrupted maritime connectivity of the Indo-Pacific.[392] Japan's official position, in 2024, for the preservation of existing baselines and maritime zones supports the Pacific Islands Forum's vital maritime priority under the 2021 ***Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise***.[393] Japan's 2024 launch of its '**New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'**' in India was a revealing diplomatic choice that underlines the rising power, connection and influence of these two nations in the Indo-Pacific region.[394] South Korea, in 2022, also notably supported this Pacific Islands Forum declaration despite the very real consequences of taking a position on maritime boundaries given its own maritime disputes.[395]

Japan

This section examines the Pacific maritime security cooperation aspects of Japan's 'New Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'' and later analyses the ramifications of Japan's potential accession to AUKUS and its discharge of nuclear wastewater.

Under the new plan Japan seeks to 'enhance the autonomy of each country and the unity of the region' and escalates its maritime security cooperation in the Pacific.[396] In 2024, Japan released more detailed information regarding its 'Plan for a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'' outlining the specific 'items of cooperation' under four pillars:[397]

- Pillar 1 Principles for Peace and Rules for Prosperity: Promote peace through respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and oppose unilateral changes by force; establish rules for transparent and fair development finance.
- Pillar 2 Addressing Challenges in an Indo-Pacific Way: Expand Japanese energy and infrastructure companies overseas to revitalize economies.
- Pillar 3 Multilayered Connectivity: Enhance connectivity to foster growth and reduce reliance on any single country to mitigate risk and political fragility.
- Pillar 4 Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the 'Sea' to the 'Air': Cooperate with countries and regional organizations sharing FOIP principles, promote the rule of law at sea through shared principles and knowledge exchange.[398]

The fourth pillar is focused on 'Extending Efforts for Security and Safe Use of the 'Sea' to the 'Air'' and Japan's core contribution is through the Quad's **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness** (IPMDA).[399] The 2024 Quad **Wilmington Statement** introduced the **Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Missions**, set to operate from 2025, and the **Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific** (MAITRI) to enhance capability and interoperability with partners in integrated monitoring and enforcement at sea.[400] The Quad explicitly acknowledges the centrality of the Pacific Islands Forum and its support for the ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** including the Pacific's expanded conception of security.[401] Japan also joined the **Partners of the Blue Pacific** in 2022, along with other founding members including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the US.[402]

In 2024, at the latest Japan Pacific Island Summit (PALM), there was a deepening of defence links under Japan's efforts for more expansive **Indo-Pacific Deployment** (IPD).[403] Specifically, continuing the arrangement for port calls by **Japan Self Defense Force** (JSDF) aircrafts and vessels and technical cooperation with the **Japan Coast Guard Mobile Cooperation Team** (MCT).[404] In 2024, the **Japan-Pacific Islands Defence Dialogue** (JPIDD) held its second dialogue, a critical forum to demonstrate alignment between its Indo-Pacific plan and the *2050 Strategy.*[405] At the JPIDD, the Japanese Defense Minister Kihara sought harmonisation with the existing regional security forum the **South Pacific Defense Ministers' Meeting** (SPDMM) which is attended only by those Pacific Island countries with military forces.[406]

This reinforces Japan's shift towards closer relations with Pacific Island countries, which emphasises capacity building for maritime law enforcement agencies.[407] This includes the Japan-Pacific Island countries **Ship Rider Cooperation Program** which has run since 2023.[408] Japan also shares its global expertise in disaster management through HADR cooperation of armed forces to increase Pacific resilience.[409] The outcome document of PALM 10 reflects a 27 year history of respectful cooperation, characterised by a well-thought-out and synergistic selection of mutually beneficial activities. This approach has solidified Japan's esteemed reputation for diplomacy, establishing it as a trusted regional partner.

There is a deliberate trend towards the securitization of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in response to the deteriorating geostrategic environment.[410] Japan seeks to reduce vulnerabilities within the Pacific and improve access to and within the region with an extensive and expensive 'accelerat[ion] of our support for the conventional infrastructure and to improve regional connectivity'.[411] Given the comprehensive investment, it is worthwhile outlining the scope of works includes: airport development in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Palau; port development in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Samoa; and laying submarine cables in Micronesia.[412]

Japan is also engaged in the softer diplomatic aspects of maritime security with diplomatic overtures to the Pacific aimed at enhancing capacity in ocean governance and the blue economy.

In 2022, at the global Our Ocean Conference Prime Minister Kishida made a US$400 million commitment to improve ocean security, reduce ocean pollution, and bolster the Pacific's blue economy.[413] There is also emphasis on support for regional implementation of SDG14.[414] A particular strength of its ODA are the people-to-people relations developed under the UN **Nippon Foundation Fellowship program, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths (JENESYS) Programme, Pacific Leaders' Educational Assistance for Development of State programme** and **Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers** (JOCVs) which include numerous maritime security related programs from climate change and disaster management to ocean affairs, marine science and fisheries.[415]

Korea

Since 2022, Korea has implemented its '**Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region**' aiming for a resilient regional order based on universal norms, rules, values, and inclusiveness, with Oceania specifically in scope.[416] For Korea, isolated from land-based connections with the Asian continent by North Korea, maritime trade is essential, with the South China Sea serving as the primary route for transporting critical fossil fuel energy.[417] The development of Korea's 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy shifts Korea away from its previous national strategy the 'New Southern Policy' aimed at hedging its allegiances in a delicate balance between the global powers of China and the US.[418] Korea's deepening security relations with the US and Japan through trilateral Indo-Pacific cooperation are of the utmost consequence for the Pacific.[419] Korea's membership in the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** is also a further signal of its alignment with US-led security interests.[420]

Diplomatic relations between South Korea and the Pacific Islands countries have been elevated, transitioning from triennial to biennial meetings between foreign ministers. Since 2023, these have been complemented by a meeting of Heads of State — the **Korea-Pacific Islands Forum Summit**.[421] Korea's commitment at the summit to double ODA by 2027 is a notable contribution to the region. However, the funding appears insufficient given the ambitious scope of marine and other security and development projects proposed at the Summit.[422] Maritime security investments are proposed for exchanges of maritime officials, training for marine engineers, fisheries officers, marine science PhD placements, fisheries conferences. Additionally, employing a phased approach, Korea aims for the expansion of an initial **Korea-Fiji Cooperation Center on Oceans and Fisheries** and Tuvalu fishing village small port construction project across the Blue Pacific Continent.[423] Nonetheless, Korea brings regional expertise with a formal MoU established in 2016 for marine science cooperation with the **Pacific Community** (SPC).[424] Recently, it has refocused its efforts on enhancing cooperation through the **Korea Institute of Ocean Science and Technology**, specifically in geospatial technology and marine spatial planning.[425]

To date, Korea's security engagement in the Pacific remains limited, with its resources primarily focused on Asia.[426] Korea's most significant future contribution to Pacific maritime security cooperation will likely come through its relationships with Australia and partners such as the US and Japan.[427] For instance, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus, includes the Pacific Island Forum members Australia and New Zealand which together 'conducted maritime security exercises to strengthen regional cooperation in the field of maritime security'.[428]

Prospects for the future

This final section investigates the potential effects on the Pacific arising from a new course in Japan and South Korea's security partnerships. The prospect of Japan or South Korea joining **Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement** is significant for the maritime security environment in the Blue Pacific. Pillar I of the AUKUS agreement facilitates cooperation on submarine equipment transfer to build and sustain nuclear-powered submarines, which Australia maintains is in line with international nuclear non-proliferation obligations.[429] Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement allows cooperation on advanced military capability in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber and hypersonic technology and undersea capabilities.[430]

The prospect of Japan or South Korea joining **Pillar II of the AUKUS agreement** is significant for the maritime security environment in the Blue Pacific.

To set the scene, the Blue Pacific and the AUKUS agreement bring into sharp focus the divergence between the regional security priorities under the 2018 ***Boe Declaration for Regional Security*** and those of external Indo-Pacific security strategies focused on increased militarisation of the Pacific.[431] Pacific Island countries' anti-nuclear stance means relations with Japan remain strained following the discharge of treated wastewater from its damaged Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power in 2023.[432] Japan and South Korea's technological, industry and military expertise would significantly enhance cooperation under the AUKUS agreement.[433] Given the geostrategic pressures upon Japan and South Korea it is difficult to envisage how Pacific priorities will affect decision making under national Indo-Pacific focused security strategies. What is important is that expanded maritime security cooperation by Japan and South Korea is informed by Pacific priorities and complements existing international efforts.

14. China's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

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- China has intensified its naval, economic, and diplomatic presence in the Pacific which is disrupting traditional regional geostrategic dynamics.
- China's strategic narrative of 'Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future', projected through the Belt and Road Initiative, presents an emerging vision that potentially threatens the legal order established by UNCLOS.

Since President Xi Jinping's 2014 visit to Fiji, China has increased its efforts to enhance its role and relationships in the Pacific Islands region. This has involved aid, infrastructure lending through its **Belt and Road Initiative**, and increasingly, security assistance, including in the maritime domain.

China's interest in the region is occurring in the context of broader strategic competition with the United States (US) and its allies and partners. China's interest also has a strategic edge, with the region's island chains – particularly those in the north – seen as crucial to China's defence.[434] China's efforts to pursue its strategic interests were signalled by its unsuccessful September 2019 efforts to lease Tulagi Island, home to a former Japanese naval base, in Solomon Islands, and by its May 2021 offer to fund the upgrade of an airstrip on Kanton in Kiribati, a remote coral atoll located near Hawai'i that hosted military aircraft during World War II. These moves, combined with the April 2022 security agreement between Solomon Islands and China,[435] have generated strategic anxiety amongst the region's metropolitan powers, as well as several Pacific Island countries.

These strategic anxieties have been exacerbated by advances in the capability of the **Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy** (PLAN) and the development of what the US describes as the '**People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia**' (PAFMM), a fleet of armed fishing vessels said to be controlled by the People's Liberation Army.[436] Against this background, the Pacific Islands region is a significant site for geostrategic manoeuvring in the maritime domain to control, constrain, and deter China.[437]

Several Pacific Island countries are also concerned about China's apparent willingness to ignore and sidestep the ***United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*** (UNCLOS), which is critical to the protection and assertion of their maritime rights and security.[438] China has declined to recognise the advisory competence of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea on issues critical to Pacific Island countries: climate change, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. It also refused to participate in the South China Sea Arbitration and rejected the tribunal's ruling on its and the Philippines' maritime entitlements.[439] China has since engaged in increasingly provocative behaviour against the Philippines over competing territorial claims in the South China Sea at the Second Thomas Shoal and the Spratly Islands.[440] These actions risk undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of UNCLOS.

China's most significant effort to sidestep the international maritime order is the '**Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future**' (MCSF) initiative that President Xi Jinping launched at the 70th anniversary of the PLAN in 2019.[441] The MCSF builds on the 'community of shared future for mankind' that President Xi proposed in 2017, which 'represents China's grand vision of global governance and the way the world will develop in the future'.[442] Therefore, the MCSF purports to promote maritime peace, security, environmental protection, and prosperity. At a rhetorical level, the MCSF appears to echo many of the principles advocated by Pacific Island countries, as it emphasizes China's historical and cultural ties to the ocean, highlighting the importance of preserving these connections for future generations.[443] Indeed, when launching the MCSF, President Xi described the connecting role of the ocean – a theme emphasised by the **Blue Pacific concept** – when he commented that: 'The blue planet that humans inhabit is not divided into islands by the oceans, but is connected by the oceans to form a community with a shared future, where people of all countries share weal and woe'.[444] Some Pacific Island countries may recognise mutual interests with the MCSF, including cultural alignment with China's vision for harmonised human relations with the ocean.[445]

The MCSF has been interpreted by some Chinese scholars as a benign discourse that provides 'a future vision of harmonious coexistence between humans and the oceans for the benefit of the

whole world'.[446] However, other Chinese scholars have argued that the MCSF represents a strategic narrative in which China is 'leading the restructuring of the international maritime order'.[447] They argue that the MCSF may emerge as a competing sphere of authority in global ocean governance[448] and undermine the maritime legal order enshrined under UNCLOS.[449] Indeed, comments by China's Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs Qian Bo that China will support the Pacific Islands Forum's ***2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*** and cooperate with Pacific Island countries 'within the framework of the BRI',[450] suggests that China may be seeking to shape the Pacific regional order to advance its priorities.

In this regard, Chinese scholars have argued that China's Belt and Road initiative[451] 'facilitates the proliferation and acceptance of the MCSF within the international community.'[452] This further suggests that China is seeking to influence the international maritime order to suit its interests. Notably, China has declined to sign-up to the Pacific Islands Forum's 2009 ***Cairns Compact on Strengthening Development Coordination in the Pacific*** which seeks to provide a coordinating mechanism for donors in the region. The Cairns Compact is aligned with the international 2005 *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* and the 2008 *Accra Agenda for Action*, both of which are already endorsed by China.

China's use of its Belt and Road Initiative lending to advance its interests exemplifies its efforts to deploy a full suite of 'maritime geo-economic' tools of statecraft.[453] Consequently, China has risen in donor rankings as a significant lender, donor, and development and business partner.[454] China has also intensified its diplomatic efforts, including as part of its ongoing diplomatic allegiance tussle with Taiwan.[455] While it has had some success at the bilateral level, including the diplomatic switches to China by Kiribati and Solomon Islands in 2019 and by Nauru in 2024, it has had limited success in its efforts to engage at a regional level. In 2022, China failed to obtain a five-year regional security and development deal. The proposed deal did, however, reveal an ambitious agenda for more substantive influence in the region.[456] At the time the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna had to remind China to be 'respectful of our shared values, built on joint collaboration and partnership, works with and through our regional mechanisms and progresses mutually agreed priorities'.[457]

The impression that China was seeking to bypass existing regional mechanisms has been enhanced by the MCSF's focus on establishing international cooperative mechanisms for effective maritime crisis management.[458] In the Pacific this is manifest as **China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism** and the **China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction and Cooperation**.[459] These mechanisms align with China's MCSF goals for 'the innovation and refinement of global maritime governance rules ... [and] ... developing governance mechanisms for emerging maritime domains',[460] but have been developed outside the Pacific regional security architecture. Indeed, these disaster resilience mechanisms duplicate efforts under the Pacific Community's **Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability Programme** and interfere with the Pacific Islands Forum's commitment to establishing their own **Pacific Resilience Facility** (PRF),[461] even though China is a founding donor to the Pacific PRF.[462]

Concerned about the efforts of China and other partner countries to try to work around existing regional mechanisms, particularly the Pacific Islands Forum, Pacific Island countries are seeking to update the rules of engagement for **Forum Dialogue Partners**, including explicitly requiring dialogue partners to jointly plan and implement programs through established regional mechanisms.[463] This highlights how China could contribute more effectively to Pacific maritime security cooperation by *consistently* supporting the existing regional architecture and values. This approach would accord with upholding a Pacific-led regional security architecture guided by the Blue Pacific concept that preserves the integrity of UNCLOS.

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Photo acknowledgements

Page – 0 [POIS Christopher Szumlanski/ Papua New Guinea Defence Force Ordinary Seaman Stallon Kuahen stands in the parade ground while attending the Royal Australian Navy Recruit School at HMAS Cerberus, Victoria], source: Department of Defence

Page – 2-3 [LSIS Daniel Goodman/ A Royal Australian Navy MRH-90 Taipan helicopter (front) prepares for take-off as an Australian Army CH-47F Chinook helicopter (rear) conducts a vertical replenishment with HMAS Canberra to deliver humanitarian and disaster relief stores to Nomuka Island, Tonga, during Operation Tonga Assist 2022], source: Department of Defence

Page – 6 [CPL Michael Currie/ Vanuatu Mobile Force police officer Private Carlen Kaldtapas (left) and Lance Corporal Gino Keneth ride in the bow of an Australian Army boat during a handling demonstration in Trinity Inlet near Cairns, Queensland, as part of Exercise Pacific Exchange 2024], source: Department of Defence

Page – 6 (inset) [CPL Emma Schwenke/ Chief Warrant Officer Stuart Gai from Papua New Guinea Defence Force Air Transport Wing, scans the waters for fishing vessels on board a RAAF C-27J Spartan during Operation Island Chief 2024], source: Department of Defence

Page – 8-9 [ABIS Connor Morrison/ Prime Minister of Tuvalu the Honourable Feleti Teo OBE and his wife Mrs Tausaga Teo on the bridge wing of HMTSS Te Mataili III with ship's Company following the Guardian Class Patrol Boat handover ceremony at Fleet Base West in Western Australia], source: Department of Defence

Page – 10-11 [SGT Craig Barrett/ Vanuatu Police Force and Vanuatu Fisheries enforcement officers listen to safety briefs aboard a RAAF 35 Squadron C-27J Spartan aircraft at Bauerfield International Airport in Port Vila, Vanuatu, during Operation Rai Balang], source: Department of Defence

Page – 13-14 [ABIS Connor Morrison/ Ships Company of HMTSS Te Mataili III stand for the singing of the National Anthems of Tuvalu and Australia during the Guardian Class Patrol Boat handover ceremony held at Fleet Base West in Western Australia], source: Department of Defence

Page – 15 [POIS Christopher Szumlanski/ Papua New Guinea Defence Force Commander Sebastian Marru (left), Papua New Guinea Defence Force Defence Attaché to Australia, Colonel Siale Diro (centre), and Royal Australian Navy Officer, Commander Jonathan Corker, CTM, RAN, (right) stand with Papua New Guinea Defence Force Ordinary Seaman Obadiah Orovea (second left) and Stallon Kuahen (second right) during their graduation ceremony on completion of the Royal Australian Navy Recruit School at HMAS Cerberus, Victoria], source: Department of Defence

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