

Introduction

1.1 On 4 December 2019, the Minister for Defence, Senator the Honourable Linda Reynolds CSC, requested the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) Defence Sub-Committee to inquire into and report on *Australia's Defence relationship with Pacific Island nations* in the following terms:

1. Current activities and outcomes undertaken by Defence in the South West Pacific, including the relationship between Defence's longstanding Cooperation Program and its Step-up activities;
2. How Australia's Defence Cooperation programs and Pacific Step up activities correspond to the needs, requests and feedback from partner nations in the Pacific (including consultation with civil society, parliaments and executive governments);
3. Opportunities for closer coordination and collaboration between Defence and other Government departments on Australian programs and activities across the South West Pacific;
4. Opportunities for closer coordination and collaboration between other nations seeking to invest and engage in the South West Pacific, including planning and execution of joint activities and preparation for HADR; and
5. Any related matters.

History of the Pacific in Defence Policy

1.2 Past Australian Defence White Papers and other Strategy documents trace the unique strategic importance of the Pacific Islands over time,

Australia's continuity of engagement in the region, and the importance of the Pacific to Australia's national security.

1.3 *The 1976 Defence White Paper*, noted:

...Australia's friendly relations with all governments in the region. Australia seeks to co-operate with and assist these countries in their development in conditions of stability and security...We intend to maintain and develop Australia's military capability to demonstrate its interest in the region.¹

1.4 *The Defence of Australia 1987* outlined Australia's defence relations with Pacific Island nations², including maritime security activities, noting:

The small size of the national economies and the limited defence forces in the South-West Pacific fundamentally affect the ability of these countries to protect their interests. In view of significant regional concerns over sovereignty protection and economic vulnerability, bilateral Australian defence co-operation has been mainly directed toward those areas...Defence activities in the South-West Pacific thus support and complement Australia's development assistance.³

1.5 Further it describes Australia's role and engagement in the South-West Pacific:

Australia is a major power in the South-West Pacific. We have the capability now to deploy significant forces there. The current substantial capacity of Australian forces to contribute to security in the South-West Pacific will be further enhanced by the Government's decision to increase our air and naval deployments to the region and to provide practical assistance in such fields as maritime surveillance and patrol and hydrography. In the event of a regional conflict, the forces we are developing for our own defence would have direct utility in the South-West Pacific.⁴

1.6 *Defending Australia: defence white paper 1994* noted the longevity and importance of defence relations with Pacific Island nations:

The countries of the South-West Pacific are strategically important to Australia. In the unlikely event that a potentially hostile power acquired undue influence over one or more of the island states, the effect could be detrimental to the region and to the security of Australia. Therefore, we will continue to cooperate with and assist

1 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper, November 1976*, p.8.

2 Department of Defence, *The defence of Australia 1987, White Paper*, March 1987, pp.16-19.

3 Department of Defence, *The defence of Australia 1987, White Paper*, March 1987, p.17.

4 Department of Defence, *The defence of Australia 1987, White Paper*, March 1987, p.6.

these potentially vulnerable countries in securing their protection. Our present defence activities with these countries reflect this commitment. We will continue to build on these relationships, and further our efforts to promote the prosperity and well-being of our Pacific Island neighbours ... In other South-West Pacific countries, we will give priority to developing the capabilities of these nations to assert and protect their sovereignty in peace, often cooperating with police forces where regular military forces do not exist.⁵

- 1.7 *The 2000 Defence White Paper* again committed to provide substantial support in the unlikely event that any country in the Southwest Pacific faced substantial external aggression.⁶ Significantly, regional maritime security and the Pacific Patrol Boat Program are at the core of our Defence Cooperation Program in the South Pacific.⁷
- 1.8 *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century: force 2030*, reinforced the importance of Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations, as well as the Pacific Patrol Boat Program.⁸
- 1.9 *The 2013 Defence White Paper* describes Australia playing a central role in the South Pacific, being a source of economic, diplomatic and, if necessary, military support.⁹ It outlined Australia's commitment to securing our 'immediate neighbourhood'.¹⁰
- 1.10 *The 2016 Defence White Paper* outlined the following 'Strategic Defence Objective' related to Pacific Island nations:
- ...The second Strategic Defence Objective is to support the security of maritime South East Asia and support the governments of Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and of Pacific Island Countries to build and strengthen their security...The Government will continue its commitment to strengthened regional security architectures that support transparency and cooperation. Australia will continue to seek to be the principal security partner for Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries in the South Pacific.¹¹

5 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia: defence white paper 1994*, White Paper, November 1994, p.92.

6 Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: our future defence force*, White paper, December 2000, p.43

7 Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: our future defence force*, White paper, December 2000, p.44.

8 Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific century: force 2030*, 2009 Defence White Paper, May 2009, pp.43-44.

9 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, pp.15-16.

10 Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, p.25.

11 Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, p.17.

- 1.11 *The Defence Strategic Update 2020* updates Defence strategic guidance in response to the relatively fast-changing geo-political environment in the Indo-Pacific region:

Military modernisation in the Indo-Pacific has accelerated faster than envisaged...Major power competition has intensified and the prospect of high-intensity conflict in the Indo-Pacific, while still unlikely, is less remote than in the past...Australia is concerned by the potential for actions, such as the establishment of military bases, which could undermine stability in the Indo-Pacific and our immediate region...The Indo-Pacific is at the centre of greater strategic competition, making the region more contested and apprehensive. These trends are continuing and will potentially sharpen as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic...The Government will also continue deepening our alliance with the United States and strengthening our regional engagement across the Indo-Pacific, including through the Pacific Step-up, and increase the Australian Defence Force's ability to respond to natural disasters.¹²

Conduct of the Inquiry

- 1.12 The Defence Sub-Committee announced the commencement of the inquiry by media release on 5 December 2019 and requested written submissions by 20 February 2020. Several extensions to the submission deadline were granted, principally to accommodate the disruption caused by the emerging COVID-19 crisis. Final submissions were received on 4 September 2020.
- 1.13 A total of 23 submissions were received from a range of government agencies, non-government organisations, academia, industry and private individuals. A full list of submissions received is included at Appendix A. Submissions are available on the inquiry website at:
www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Submissions

¹² Department of Defence, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*, pp.3-4, 11.

- 1.14 The Sub-Committee also held three public hearings. Details are available at:

www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/PacificIslandnations/Public_Hearings

