Inquiry into Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island countries and the Pacific region

The Pacific will always be an area of great strategic significance for Australia. Peace and stability in Pacific Island countries goes to the heart of Australia's security, prosperity and national interest. While geopolitical competition has brought the Pacific to the forefront of Australia's foreign policy debate, viewing the region solely through that lens is detrimental to Australia's engagement with the Pacific and the mutual interests of both.

Short-term, transactional approaches are counterproductive – Australia's interest in the region, and the attention it pays to it, should remain clear, consistent and coherent, irrespective of whether there are crises or not. Genuine, unfluctuating Australian engagement needs to address each Pacific Island country's unique needs through both bilateral and regional Pacific-led initiatives.

There are strong foundations to work on. Australia has security cooperation arrangements with most Pacific Island states, ranging from police-to-police cooperation, defence capacity-building and joint military exercises through to development programs designed to address drivers of fragility such as inequality and inclusive economic growth. In the area of climate change there has been cooperation on climate science, on sustainable fisheries and on preserving maritime boundaries in the face of sea level rise. More needs to be done, but there is goodwill towards Australia in the region to draw on.

Australia needs to envisage Pacific Island countries as a network of interaction, trade, exchange, communication and influence reaching across much of the Pacific Ocean. Strong relationships are not made up only of defence and security ties, and do not come into play only in situations of threat. They are the product of long-term, consistent and multi-faceted engagement, of genuine partnership with and respect for countries that are equally sovereign, and exchange that takes seriously the priorities, concerns and values of all the parties.

There is an opportunity for Australia to see itself as a generational partner for Pacific societies and pursue a long-term approach that will reap dividends far beyond transactionalism. Realising such a vision demands a whole-of-nation, "all tools of statecraft" approach to regional engagement. The establishment of the Office of the Pacific in 2019 was a positive step in this regard, representing a new approach to managing and coordinating whole-of-government policy towards the region.

This aligns with the work of the Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D), which creates a new dimension in Australia's international policymaking by bringing together the development, diplomacy and defence communities to achieve new insights, develop new ideas and promote strategic collaboration around shared interests. It is a platform for ideas that encourage more integrated statecraft to maximise Australia's ability to influence regional and global developments.

Since 2021 AP4D has produced a significant body work relating to Australia's engagement with the Pacific,[1] holding consultations with more than 300 experts from Australia and across the region. All of this work is informed by local priorities and perspectives.

Drawing on that work, this submission outlines several recommendations for strengthening Australia-Pacific engagement across nine thematic areas:

- Supporting Pacific youth, civil society and media (p. 3)

- Using all tools of statecraft in the information environment (p. 3)

- Being a partner on digital resilience and transformation (p. 4)

- Partnering on maritime safety (p. 5)

- Being a strategic partner on women, peace and security (p. 6)

- Being a partner for infrastructure (p. 7)

- Being an effective partner for a secure and peaceful Pacific (p. 7)

- Being an effective climate ally (p. 8)

- Being a generational partner for Pacific economies and societies (p. 9)

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[1] Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, www.asiapacific4d.com

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.   Supporting Pacific youth, civil society and media [2]

Youth, civil society and media are key interconnected groups that will shape the trajectory of the Pacific region into the future and should therefore be a key focus for Australia across its Pacific engagement.

Young people are vital to the continuing development of their nations' environments, economies, societies and cultures. Australia has a role in:

- supporting education systems to better suit the educational needs of Pacific populations
- funding entities such as National Youth Councils and youth-focused non-government organisations
- building increased links between young people across the region and with Australian First Nations communities.

A vibrant civil society makes for more effective and accountable government. Australia has a role in:

- building the institutional capacity of civil society organisations and providing predictable core funding for organisations that coordinate and engage in public policy and hold leaders accountable
- engaging with Pacific civil society organisations through the design of the Development Partnership Plans and Civil Society Partnerships Fund to demonstrate a long-term investment in civil society.

A healthy media plays a crucial role in underpinning democracy, normalising a plurality of views, enabling dialogue and serving the public interest. Australia has a role in:

- ensuring that media organisations in the region are supported to develop business models that promote digital transition and help ensure financial viability, business resilience and improved wages for journalists
- investing in digital media transition including production equipment and ageing infrastructure
- providing media capacity-building programs across the region
- encouraging content sharing to the region and from the region for Australians, creating closer cultural ties and sharing human connection and experiences.

2.   Using all tools of statecraft in the information environment [3]

Media has a particularly important role in light of malicious information operations that have been proliferating. In the Pacific the information environment is becoming increasingly captured – especially by Chinese influence – and independent public interest media is facing existential threats. With core central news services facing financial and staffing crises, Pacific media experts say that the fate of public interest media in the region will be decided in the next five years.

Australia's strategy for regional outreach should be urgently expanded to match the magnitude of the information environment challenges in the region. This includes supporting regional broadcasting and news, regional cultural content and storytelling, a social media strategy to promote credible information, and disinformation literacy training. Non-government entities should be involved in all these efforts.

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[2] AP4D (forthcoming 2024), What does it look like for Australia to support Youth, Civil Society and Media in the Pacific
[3] AP4D (2024), What does it look like for Australia to use all tools of statecraft in the information environment, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/information-environment/

Australia should invest in substantive journalism training – not just for a few weeks, but ongoing – to support a culture of accurate, credible and accountable journalism and analysis. Australia could also invest more in supporting the wages of journalists through its development program. Small media organisations looking for a financial lifeline are vulnerable to capture by foreign and domestic elements interested in subverting press freedom, so this is an area where Australia could make a big difference for a small cost.

Australia needs to explore the potential to work with the United States on media in the Pacific. Australia has been leading on media development in the region on a shoestring budget, however USAID has just announced a program to support media in the region which in budgetary terms dwarfs what Australia has been able to do.

Australia could also help the Pacific to negotiate with major social media platforms to remove harmful coordinated disinformation networks and to navigate cultural nuances: for example, posts of Pacific people painted for ceremonies are often taken down because they contain nudity.

3. Being a partner on digital resilience and transformation [4]

Technological change is one of the most critical issues facing the Pacific. Digital technology cuts across all sectors of society and government and is vital for how Pacific island countries function now and into the future. It is not a niche concern.

Digital technology provides an immense opportunity for the Pacific, meeting the deep desire to be better globally connected in a region where logistics and connectivity has always been an issue. At the same time, digital technology poses a major risk to state sovereignty and challenges the nature, viability and legitimacy of Pacific island countries as functioning states.

Australia needs to partner with the Pacific both on digital resilience – the ability to withstand incidents and criminal and malicious attacks and still continue to operate – and on digital transformation – the ability to reap the benefits of technological change.

- Australia should enhance cooperation with regional networks to strengthen responses to cyber incidents including through the Pacific Cyber Security Operational Network, Forum of Incident Response and Security Teams and Pacific Islands Law Officers Network.
- The Australian Government has a clear role in financing the physical infrastructure required to build Pacific connectivity, as it did for the Coral Sea cable network. It should work collaboratively with other actors. Australian development cooperation should support infrastructure promoting digital connectivity that addresses the different levels of development across the region. This goes beyond just providing technology and requires affordability of access. Australia can provide practical assistance at the local level, for example simple solar technology to enable charging of phones.
- Australia's eSafety Commissioner should work collaboratively with Pacific governments to reduce online harm and protect the safety of citizens across the Pacific, including education for digital and media literacy. Australia can work with Pacific governments to strengthen their capabilities and capacity to manage misinformation through understanding and mapping the threat landscape.
- Australia should take an active role in regional forums and seek platforms for Pacific island countries in forums including the Asia Pacific Telecommunity, Global Forum on Cyber Expertise and the United Nations Internet Governance Forum. Australia can strengthen regional forums to encourage Pacific-led dialogue on governance and the use of technologies. Australia should ensure human rights discussions are part of engaging with Pacific counterparts on cyber and digital policy and legislative development.

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[4] AP4D (2022), What does it look like for Australia to be a partner on digital resilience and transformation in the Pacific, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/digital-resilience-and-transformation/

- The Australian Government should partner with platforms that support cultural and economic connectivity for communities to increase their reach, for example working with chambers of commerce to adopt digital marketplace platforms and funding research on markets for digital content and digital products. The Australian Government should support fast-tracking more digitally skilled Pacific people to support a safe and secure digital transformation. Australian development cooperation should focus on strengthening skills and knowledge through mentoring, training and upskilling to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital technology.
- The Australian Government should invest resources in coordination of cyber security activities to maximise the benefits for all. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should be resourced to coordinate a whole-of-government effort in the Pacific. Australia should be open to learning and collaborating with other countries and should take the lead and proactively bring together different actors to encourage collaboration in the digital space. DFAT can play a convening role for government, academics and tech companies to work creatively to find ways to partner together.

4. Partnering on maritime safety [5]

Ships and seafaring are fundamental Pacific traditions, but Pacific Island countries have the most expensive shipping in the world, the longest transport routes, and often the oldest and least energy efficient ships. Efficient, safe, affordable and accessible transportation systems not only promote economic productivity and create jobs but can increase access to employment, recreational and other essential life-shaping opportunities that enable people to improve their living conditions and escape poverty. There is a clear, urgent need to upgrade domestic vessels in the region to ensure all Pacific peoples have access to safe maritime transport, balanced with a regional desire for a fossil fuel free Pacific, which will require decarbonisation of fleets.

Australia is a committed maritime partner with the Pacific. Improving domestic passenger safety is a priority need for the Pacific that Australia supports – it has a mutual interest in ensuring that the ships in the region are seaworthy, have competent crews and are able to safely navigate through sensitive marine areas.

There is scope for Australia to build on existing programs and strengthen maritime safety in the region by leveraging the expertise and capacity of regional organisations and other partners:

Access to safe and reliable passenger vessels

- Australia could donate a fleet of modern ferries to the Pacific, modelled on the Pacific Maritime Security Program patrol boat program.
- Australia could provide support for creating a shipbuilding industry within the Pacific region.
- Australia could work with the Pacific to leverage climate financing to replace or retrofit vessels to create a low or zero carbon fleet.

Support for decarbonisation of shipping in the Pacific

- Australia can work with the Pacific to support the transition to a fossil fuel free Pacific.
- This could include supporting options for zero-emissions cargo transport such as uncrewed surface vessels powered by solar.

Regulation

- Australia can contribute to common standards across all Pacific Island countries to access Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) for safety purposes through expanding the use of MDA platforms.

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[5] AP4D (2023), What does it look like for Australia to be a Partner on Maritime Safety with the Pacific, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/pacific-maritime-safety/

- Australia can provide support, bilaterally or through regional organisations, to implement the IMO Model Regulations on Domestic Ferry Safety.
- Australia can support regulatory reform across the Pacific, sharing lessons learned from its involvement in the development of PNG's Small Craft Act.

Donor-coordination and strengthened partnerships

- Australia can support efforts to use climate financing to provide the funding and investment in secure and safe shipping.
- Australia should support strong partnerships between key agencies to maximise available resources and improve donor coordination.
- There is scope for Australia to partner with New Zealand to replicate the Pacific Maritime Safety Program in countries which are not currently covered.
- Australia should consider providing long-term and consistent funding for the SPC Pacific Domestic Ships Safety program, ensuring adequate support and resourcing for key programs.

Private sector engagement

- Australia can partner with the private sector to encourage investment in transport and servicing centres and support service organisations to establish a presence in the region.

Capacity-building

- Australia can support capacity development and training to deliver the skills needed to address each country's own unique safety challenges through partnering with regional and international organisations.
- Existing successful programs should be offered to the rest of the Pacific.

5. **Being a strategic partner on women, peace and security** [6]

A stable and peaceful Pacific region is a key strategic interest of both Australia and Pacific island countries. Key to this is inclusive security. Recognising that the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is not an add-on to the security agenda, but is intrinsic to it, there is scope for Australia to progress genuine partnership with the Pacific through greater collaboration.

Australia and the Pacific are generally in alignment in framing security as human security. Australia and Pacific island countries can support each other to recognise, amplify and resource the important role women play in progressing and maintaining peace and security in the region both within and beyond formal security architecture.

Being a strategic partner on WPS requires greater coordination and policy coherence across the development, diplomacy and defence communities, with a WPS lens applied to all of Australia's investments and responses in the region:

Supporting Pacific agendas

- Australia should support the Pacific to apply a WPS lens to implementation of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.
- Australia should play a facilitating, convening and coordinating role that brings key stakeholders together and encourages a genuine Pacific voice.

Working collaboratively with Pacific women

- Australia should make targeted, systematic, long-term investment in civil society organisations to promote opportunities for Pacific women to define and drive their own agendas for peace and security in the region.

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[6] AP4D (2023), What does it look like for Australia to be a strategic partner on Women, Peace and Security with the Pacific, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/partner-on-pacific-wps/

- Australia should prioritise a deep understanding of local contexts both within and outside the formal security architecture.
- Australia needs to understand the diverse and significant peace work that is already being done in the region, amplifying, resourcing and incorporating this into security institutions and decision-making forums.

Implementing a coordinated approach across government

- Australia should implement an interlinked domestic and international focus on WPS by providing complementarity and policy coherence across portfolios.
- Australia's institutions must continue to improve on their operationalisation of WPS commitments, including ensuring security service personnel and those they interact with are safe from harassment, violence and discrimination.

6. Being a partner for infrastructure [7]

In the Pacific there is a recognition that Australia lacks the resources and capabilities to assist with all the region's infrastructure needs. However, what is desired from Pacific Island countries is relationships built on trust where Australia can use its capabilities to:

- help develop a holistic infrastructure plan for Pacific countries that takes into consideration their debt levels;
- assist negotiations alongside Pacific countries concerning loans with multilateral development banks (MDBs) to help fund these plans; and
- supplement Pacific capacity to manage infrastructure projects when they come online.

A priority for Pacific Island countries is the technical aid that Australia can provide. Infrastructure investment should have a focus on building up the capabilities of local experts so that they can both maintain infrastructure and drive projects in the future. It is the transfer of skills more than the transfer of funds that is primarily desired. At present, Pacific companies find it difficult to win tenders from MDBs for infrastructure projects. Therefore, Australia prioritising the involvement of Pacific companies with its own investments could help make these companies more attractive to other investors.

To achieve this, Pacific Islanders should be included in the full lifecycle of projects. This uplifts local capabilities from scoping through to delivery, as well as ongoing maintenance.

Pacific Island countries are aware of their own requirements and can drive the strategic calculations for their own national development. The challenge is finding the financing for their identified projects, and especially financing that avoids generating unsustainable debt burdens. Part of this problem is that private sector actors do not foresee great returns throughout the region, so there is a need for more blended financing, and for governments to help address market failures. Strong accountability measures are needed within both the financing of projects and their delivery.

7. Being an effective partner for a secure and peaceful Pacific [8]

While there have always been differences in views on security between Australia and the Pacific – and among Pacific island countries themselves – a range of ongoing mechanisms, instruments and institutions facilitate cooperation for peace and security in the region.

But what has maintained peace in the region in the past cannot be assumed to be sufficient in a deteriorating strategic environment. Australia must work harder with the Pacific to respond to drivers of instability to support a peaceful and secure region in which sovereign states can prevent and respond to

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[7] AP4D (2023), What does it look like for Australia to be a Partner for Infrastructure with the Pacific and Southeast Asia, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/infrastructure-partner/
[8] AP4D (2022), What does it look like for Australia to be an effective partner for a secure and peaceful Pacific, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/a-secure-and-peaceful-pacific/

threats and coercive influences. This requires deepening relationships and making sure other security issues and shared concerns are not lost as geopolitical concerns come to the fore.

Within the human security frame, Australia and Pacific island countries can diverge in how prominent certain topics should be. Australia could align more with Pacific security concerns in its balance of finance, technical assistance, capacity-building, legal and law enforcement engagement, political engagement and diplomacy to support Pacific priorities. But having different security perspectives need not preclude regional cooperation, as can be seen in initiatives including the Pacific Maritime Security Program, joint statement on exclusive economic zones and multilateral cooperation on joint monitoring, control and surveillance operations on fisheries to deter and disrupt transnational crime.

There are several ways in which Australia can be an effective partner for a secure and peaceful Pacific:

- Australia should support regionalism in the Pacific as valuable in and of itself. This includes support for the Pacific Islands Forum and related regional agencies, particularly for services that can help member countries respond to security, technological and legal developments.
- National security strategies should anchor how Australia and like-minded countries coordinate and deliver cross-sectoral efforts. This ensures partners follow security agendas set locally and regionally rather than acting as paternalistic providers.
- Australia should review existing intergovernmental instruments between Australia and Pacific island countries (including information-sharing, logistics, defence cooperation and visiting forces arrangements) to identify gaps and prioritise areas for further work. Australia can assist in reviewing gaps in the extent to which Pacific island countries are parties to key international treaties, including on topics such as corruption, transnational crime and money-laundering.
- Australia should invest in Pacific literacy, building cultural understanding, language, better appreciation of divisions and shared chapters in our history. This should include promoting education, civil society and peer-to-peer linkages to increase knowledge of the Pacific among Australians for more mutual relationships. Australia should support enhanced movement of Pacific people to and from Australia, and increased economic flows in both directions, including pathways to citizenship.
- Australian can create more capacity for conflict resolution, mediation and peacebuilding including restoring the Conflict and Fragility team or setting up a Peace and Conflict unit within DFAT. Such services may be particularly valuable in cases such as secessionism and independence movements. While it is a politically sensitive issue, Australia needs to look ahead strategically to plan for any potential transition by Pacific territories to new political status. This would focus on the building blocks required to support peaceful transition, including capacity-building programs such as scholarships, technical assistance, medical training, information-sharing, English language, politics and other initiatives.

8. Being an effective climate ally [9]

The issue of climate change is all-encompassing in the Pacific. It permeates everything given its existential nature. There is a shared sense across the region of the importance of climate change as a security threat and an understanding of the loss and damage that climate change will cause.

On perceptions of Australia, there is recognition of Australian funding for disaster response and for community adaptation over at least two decades. Australian diplomats are perceived as having done well in understanding and engaging with the needs of the Pacific region. However, there can be a perceived disconnect between listening and action, with Australia sometimes viewed as listening to Pacific views then doing the opposite.

Pacific leaders believe that Australia has signed up to a series of regional agreements on climate and should meet these commitments regardless of the domestic pressure within Australia on energy policy.

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[9] AP4D (2022), What does it look like for Australia to be an effective climate ally with the Pacific, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/an-effective-climate-ally/

Australia is perceived as having tried to water down regional climate statements at key moments in international negotiations.

There is a deep concern among Pacific island countries about migration as a form of adaptation. Relocating is not the best or preferred option, especially given the cultural ties of Pacific peoples to their homelands. Migration as a form of adaptation also shifts the responsibility of adaptation away from carbon emitters to individuals and families.

The effects, impacts and root causes of climate change should be Australia's central foreign policy concern in the Pacific. There are a number of ways Australia can build on recent efforts to be an effective climate ally:

- Australia should build on the good practice relationships that exist between Australia's climate science organisations and Pacific equivalents – including CSIRO, Geoscience Australia and the Bureau of Meteorology – and through higher education and technical training. With so many projects, there can be a problem of coherence, meaning that there is a potential role for a regional knowledge broker bringing together ad hoc investments into an integrated response. Australia should investigate creating a knowledge bank that brings together and synthesises the data on Australia's investments in community climate resilience.
- Australia should conduct a national review of climate risks, following the lead of others including the United States and New Zealand. This should subsequently be extended by collaborating with Pacific island countries and New Zealand on a regional climate risk assessment. Within these risk assessments Australia should develop a greater understanding of what humanitarianism means in relation to climate change and the increasing impact and frequency of climate related emergencies.
- Australia should continue to engage with Pacific island countries in the emerging debate calling for reparation for loss and damage caused by carbon emitters. There are likely to be continuing calls as a question of climate justice. With outstanding issues following the Glasgow Conference of the Parties, there is an opportunity for Australia-Pacific collaboration to be part of this debate.

9. Being a generational partner for Pacific economies and societies [10]

At a time of intensifying geostrategic competition there can be pressure for Australia to take a short-term and transactional approach towards the region. Such crisis thinking would be unnecessary and counterproductive. Faced with a challenge to its profile and influence, the most sensible steps for Australia to take are those which resolutely focus on economic integration, reciprocity and sustained commitment to generational progress – rather than reactive short-termism fuelled by geostrategic competition.

Australia needs to embrace the chance to shape a sophisticated vision for its engagement in the region. This means moving to an approach based on a long-term, generational relationship linked to the sustainable development agenda. This requires a framing that embraces opportunities for Australians and Pacific Islanders to achieve their potential both now and into the future, supporting each other across generations.

The region has long been open to an approach to cooperation with Australia which focuses on strong partnerships and the transfer of knowledge, skills and people. There is a desire to see greater Pacific engagement in the different dimensions of the relationship. This includes people-to-people linkages, welcoming and engaging with Pacific people, more extensive trade and promoting leadership of local bodies in design, implementation and delivery of disaster recovery and development assistance.

Australia can be a generational partner for Pacific economies and societies across a number of areas:

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[10] AP4D (2022), What does it look like for Australia to be a generational partner for Pacific economies and societies, https://asiapacific4d.com/idea/generational-partner-for-pacific-economies-and-societies/

- Enhancing Pacific literacy among both Australian policy makers and the Australian community is key to demonstrating Australia listens to and respects local needs and priorities. Future programs can build upon long-standing, people-to-people links and educational exchanges. There is potential for Australian First Nations and Pacific Islanders in shared problem solving, particularly around the Coral Sea.
- As an active leader in international education, Australia can support the Pacific by overcoming secondary education gaps, barriers to entry into technical training and complicated pathways for degrees, accreditation and visas.
- Australia should build on existing initiatives that exemplify strong collaborative partnerships, including the Australian NGO Cooperation Program, to unlock opportunities through long-term civil society partnerships. This should integrate diplomatic efforts with development cooperation to create sophisticated, modern, and respectful partnerships that are genuinely collaborative and long-term.
- Australia should support small-scale appropriate technology development that can be used by rural Pacific communities for undertaking small scale economic enterprises. Australian training institutions and industry should establish partnerships to enable physically disconnected, informal and small-scale enterprises to become profitable and sustainable.