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Submission – Australia’s Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations

The Pacific Islands: an ‘arc of opportunity’

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The Pacific Islands matter to Australia¹

Since before Federation, Australia has been anxious about its proximity to the Pacific Islands, the region's vulnerability to penetration by potentially hostile powers, and its distance from its major security allies (first the United Kingdom, later the United States).

Accordingly, Australia has had (and continues to have) two primary strategic interests in the Pacific Islands:

- First, to ensure that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on Australia or threaten allied access or its maritime approaches.² To achieve this, Australia has sought to be the region's 'principal security partner'.³
- Second, to ensure 'security, stability and cohesion' in the region,⁴ as instability is perceived to leave Pacific Island states vulnerable to hostile powers.

Australia also has significant economic interests in the region; thousands of Australians live there, and many more visit each year.

The **Pacific Islands have become increasingly 'crowded and complex'** as both traditional and non-traditional external powers increasingly focus on having a presence in the region.⁵ The increased presence of these external powers poses challenges to Australia, both in terms of its own security and in terms of how they may shape – and potentially constrain – Australia's ability to act in the region.

The Pacific Islands matter to Australia; while Australia's recent 'step-up' represents a welcome refocus on the region, more needs to be done to improve Australia's relationships and enhance our influence. **Australia's defence relationships are some of its most enduring and influential in the region** and – although they could be expanded and improved – they offer a model for how other Australian activities in the region could be conducted.

¹ This submission is based, in part, on Joanne Wallis, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017.

² Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016, para. 3.7.

³ *Ibid.*, para. 3.21.

⁴ Department of Defence, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2013, para 1.21.

⁵ Joanne Wallis, *Crowded and Complex: The Changing Geopolitics of the South Pacific*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2017, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/crowded-and-complex-changing-geopolitics-south-pacific>; Joanne Wallis and James Batley (eds.), "How does the 'Pacific' fit into the 'Indo-Pacific'? The changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands", *Security Challenges* (forthcoming); Joanne Wallis, James Batley and Ruben Seaton, *How Does the 'Pacific' Fit into the 'Indo-Pacific'? The Changing Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands: Workshop Report*, Working Paper 2019/1, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU, 2019, http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2019-08/dpa_wp2019_1_workshop_report_final_0.pdf.

Australia as a Pacific Power?

As I argue in detail in my book, *Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands* (Melbourne University Press, 2017), although Australia has vital strategic interests in the Pacific Islands, our influence has eroded, and we are now less well placed to pursue them.

Consequently, I argue that it is time to recharacterise the Pacific Islands as an 'arc of opportunity'.⁶ This positive characterisation is intended to highlight the potential of Pacific Island states, rather than their perceived weaknesses.

The arc of opportunity characterisation focuses on two sets of opportunities:

- First, opportunities for Australia to stop treating its proximity to the region as a source of anxiety and to instead recognise, and capitalise on, opportunities for strengthening and developing Pacific Island states to bolster its own security.
- Second, for Pacific Island states to take advantage of opportunities available to them, including Australian support, in order to improve stability and advance development.

This recharacterisation may change how Australia defines and pursues its strategic interests in the Pacific Islands by **encouraging Australia to see itself as a regional partner, rather than a regional power**, which would reflect Australia's stated strategic interest in being the region's principal security partner. It may also improve regional perceptions of Australia and receptiveness to Australian influence.

Guided by this recharacterisation, in my book I identify a number of opportunities for Australia to improve the effectiveness of its levers of influence in the future. I also identify opportunities for Australia to mitigate the limits on its influence. Reflecting the focus of the current inquiry, I focus on defence assistance in this submission.

Defence Cooperation Program

Australia's defence assistance to the Pacific Islands is primarily delivered via the Defence Cooperation Program (DCP).

The DCP has been **driven by Australia's strategic interests** in the Pacific Islands:

- Reflecting the belief that ensuring security, stability and cohesion in the Pacific Islands enhances Australia's security, the DCP is based on the premise that enhancing security in the region enhances Australia's security.
- The DCP also reflects Australia's strategic interest in ensuring that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region, as it intends to enhance the ability of Pacific Island states to withstand external pressures.

The DCP has differed from other Australian assistance to the Pacific Islands because:

⁶ Joanne Wallis, 'The South Pacific: "Arc of instability" or "arc of opportunity"?', *Global Change, Peace and Security*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2015, pp. 39–53; Joanne Wallis, 'The Pacific: From "arc of instability" to "arc of responsibility" and then to "arc of opportunity"?', *Security Challenges*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2012, pp. 1–12.

- **It has not been presented as an aid program**, but instead as a ‘means of facilitating cooperative activities between the Australian Defence Force and regional security forces’.⁷
- It **‘coincide[s] with the ambitions and interests’ of recipient countries**.⁸ Therefore, to find programs that were relevant to the region, annual defence cooperation talks are held with each recipient state to identify priorities.

There are **concerns about the DCP**:

- Some projects lack of clear objectives;
- It sometimes supports militaries that repress their populations or commit human rights abuses;
- There can be a lack of clarity about spending and management of projects; and
- The links between the DCP and defence strategic guidance are often unclear, as is whether the projects selected are the most cost-effective.

Despite these concerns, the **DCP contributes Australia’s strategic interests in the Pacific Islands**:

- The DCP contributes to Australia’s strategic interest in being the region’s principal security partner, by **building ‘strong people-to-people links** with regional militaries at the tactical, operational and strategic levels’⁹ through training and personnel exchange.¹⁰
- The DCP has **strengthened the capacity of regional security forces** and **improved ‘Australia’s capacity to work with partners** in response to common security challenges’.¹¹

Therefore, the finding of the 1984 Senate Standing Committee review that **the benefits the DCP delivered to Australia’s bilateral relationships were ‘more important than the strictly military benefits** which flow from the program’,¹² continues to stand today.

Pacific Patrol Boat Program

The **most important aspect of the DCP is the Pacific Patrol Boat Program (PPBP)** and its replacement, the **Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP)**. As islands and archipelagos, Pacific Island states have extensive maritime territories. As they often have limited government capacity, they face difficulties in monitoring these territories. As a result,

⁷ Stephen Merchant, ‘Australia’s defence cooperation program and regional security’, in David Hegarty and Peter Polomka (eds), *The Security of Oceania in the 1990s*, vol. 1: *Views from the Region*, pp. 71–7, 72.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Department of Defence, *Annual Report 2013–2014*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2014.

¹⁰ Interview with Stephen Merchant, 27 April 2016.

¹¹ Department of Defence, *Annual Report 2013–2014*, program 1.1.

¹² Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, *Australia’s Defence Co-operation with its Neighbours in the Asian-Pacific Region*, AGPS, Canberra, 1984, p. 7.

they are vulnerable to illegal (and often unsustainable) fishing, unregulated seabed mining and transnational crime.

The PMSP serves Australia's strategic interests in several ways:

- It **helps Australia secure its maritime approaches** from powers or forces hostile to western interests. Successive Defence White Papers have focused on protecting the 'air-sea gap'.¹³
- The PMSP **gives Australia a strategic presence** in the region¹⁴ and helps Australia to be seen as the 'natural strategic partner of the recipient countries'.¹⁵
- The PMSP has **helped Australia to build personal networks throughout the region** via the maritime surveillance and technical advisers stationed in recipient states.^{16, 17}
- The PMSP has effectively established an **Australian-controlled network of maritime surveillance** in the Pacific Islands,¹⁸ which has enabled Australia to gain situational awareness throughout the maritime region.¹⁹
- The PMSP **bolsters the security, stability and cohesion of Pacific Island states**, by improving their maritime security and generating much-needed fisheries revenues. Seabed mining, including of rare earth minerals, presents another potential future source of revenue.²⁰

Pacific Island states appreciate the PMSP:

- It has helped them to **protect their maritime resources and, in turn, increase their fisheries revenue**. The Forum Fisheries Agency reported that the value of tuna caught in western and central Pacific tuna fisheries rose from US\$3.04 billion

¹³ Department of Defence, *The Defence of Australia*, AGPS, Canberra, 1987, p. 27; Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2000; Department of Defence, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2009; Department of Defence, *Defending Australia and its National Interests*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2013; Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with Hugh White, 5 April 2016.

¹⁵ Anthony Bergin and Sam Bateman, 'Law and order at sea in the South Pacific: The contribution of the Pacific Patrol Boat project', *Oceans and Coastal Management*, vol. 42, 1999, pp. 555–68, 560; Sam Bateman and Anthony Bergin, *Staying the Course: Australia and Maritime Security in the South Pacific*, Strategic Insights no. 52, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Canberra, 2011.

¹⁶ Interview with Chris Barrie, 5 April 2016.

¹⁷ Interview with Hugh White, 5 April 2016; interview with James Goldrick, 18 April 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with Stephen Merchant, 27 April 2016; Anthony Bergin, *The Pacific Patrol Boat Project: A Case Study of Australian Defence Cooperation*, Australian Foreign Policy Papers, ANU, Canberra, 1994; Norman MacQueen, 'Island South Pacific in a changing world', *Pacific Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1993, pp. 145–53.

¹⁹ Gareth Evans, *Australia's Regional Security*, ministerial statement, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Canberra, 1989; Department of Defence, *Strategic Review 1993*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1993; Department of Defence, *Defending Australia*; Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1997.

²⁰ Paul D'Arcy, 'The lawless sea? Policy options for voluntary compliance regimes in offshore resource zones in the Pacific', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2013, pp. 297–311.

in 1997 to US\$5.78 billion in 2014.²¹ In addition, more than 16 000 people are currently employed in the fisheries industry.²²

- Pacific Island states appreciate the fact that the **PMSP has helped in relation to other security challenges**, including search and rescue, medical evacuations, transporting ballot boxes during elections and, most significantly, in humanitarian and disaster response.
- Recipient states also appreciate the **training that is provided** to support the program.

Consequently, the **PMSP has been well received by Pacific Island states**. An important element is that the **PMSP represents a partnership** between Australia and Pacific Island states, with Australia playing a 'facilitating role' while Pacific Island states operate the boats.²³

Pacific Island states are also committed to the PMSP, reflected by the relatively high number of sea days that Pacific Island states manage to achieve with their boats, often at significant human and financial expense.

The PMSP has also facilitated regional cooperation and confidence-building, including through the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

Other maritime support

In addition to the PMSP, Australia has provided other maritime support to the Pacific Islands. The most significant is **maritime surveillance**. Most importantly, Operation Solania complements the PMSP, as ADF units conduct Pacific Island maritime surveillance patrols. Navy vessels operating in or transiting through the region also provide surface reporting under Solania.

However, **aerial surveillance patrols by Australia and other powers has declined over time** in the face of other operational demands, particularly Australia's commitment to operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan, its focus on border surveillance and the search for missing Malaysian Airlines flight MH370.²⁴

Given the importance of maritime resource protection, Australia is encouraged to **extend its current maritime surveillance cooperation**, including information-sharing, supporting

²¹ Forum Fisheries Agency, *2014 WCPFC Area Catch Value Estimates (reported in July 2015)*, Forum Fisheries Agency, Honiara, 2015, www.ffa.int/node/425.

²² John Virdin, Tibor Vegh, Alexandra Aines and David Bjorkback, *Pacific Possible: Tuna Fisheries*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2016.

²³ Linda McCann, *The Future of Australia's Pacific Patrol Boat Program: The Pacific Maritime Security Program*, Shedden Papers, Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, Canberra, 2013, p. 8.

²⁴ Interview with Chris Barrie, 5 April 2016; interview with James Goldrick, 18 April 2016; Bateman and Bergin, *Staying the Course*; Rory Callinan, 'Claims costly MH370 search leaves Australia blind to illegal fishing', *SMH*, 29 November 2015.

regional multilateral maritime surveillance activities and coordinating surveillance support to Pacific Island states from Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States (US) through the **Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group**, the **FRANZ Arrangement** between Australia, France and New Zealand and the 2012 **Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France**.

It is welcome that the PMSP has a tighter focus on maritime domain awareness and coordination with the FFA in order to focus surveillance efforts and target responses by the patrol boats.²⁵

Other forms of defence assistance

Australia also provides other forms of defence assistance, most notably the **disposal of unexploded World War II ordinance** as part of Operation Render Safe.

The ADF also participates in **military exercises with some Pacific Island states**, which help Australia 'to be proactively engaged with regional security partners to help build trust'.²⁶

In 2013 the inaugural **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting** also established a Cooperative Exercise Framework, known as Povai Endeavour, which provides a coordinating mechanism for exercises in the region.²⁷

Australia also participates in **multinational activities**, including the annual Pacific Partnership humanitarian operation and the biennial Rim of the Pacific military exercise.

Humanitarian and disaster relief

Reflecting Australia's strategic interest in ensuring security, stability and cohesion in the region, another important aspect of Australia's defence assistance is humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR).

Pacific Island states are **vulnerable to natural disasters** and have limited ability to respond owing to their weak security institutions and emergency response mechanisms. These challenges are exacerbated by the remoteness of many states and the difficulties of transport and communications, including of early warning systems. There is also evidence that **natural disasters may increase with climate change**.²⁸

Australian HADR is usually a joint civil–military effort. The ADF engages in the rapid deployment of material goods and provision of transport or logistics. The AFP protects

²⁵ Interview with James Goldrick, 18 April 2016.

²⁶ John Blaxland, *The Australian Army from Whitlam to Howard*, CUP, Port Melbourne, 2014, p. 303.

²⁷ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, Joint Communiqué, 2 May 2013, www.minister.defence.gov.au.

²⁸ Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australian Bureau of Meteorology and Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, *Climate in the Pacific: A Regional Summary of New Science And Management Tools*, CSIRO, Melbourne, 2015; Denis Jordy, *Pacific Possible: Climate and Disaster Resilience*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2016.

people affected by conflict or natural disasters, and then helps to restore law and order. Other civilian agencies, such as DFAT and the Australian Civilian Corps (ACC), deliver and coordinate the aid response, as well as efforts to rebuild afterwards.

Australia also **works with local partners**, including local communities, affected governments, **regional bodies and other humanitarian partners** such as the United Nations. In addition, since 1992 Australia has cooperated with France and New Zealand to provide HADR in the Pacific Islands under the **FRANZ Arrangement**. Australia also maintains Humanitarian Partnership Agreements with **Australian non-government organisations and contracts private sector suppliers**.²⁹

Australian HADR plays an important role in the Pacific Islands, although it should be acknowledged that **Pacific Islanders are highly resilient** and have been finding ways to adapt to social, political and environmental change for centuries.³⁰

Importantly, **HADR offers Australia an opportunity to conduct 'disaster diplomacy'**.³¹ This was particularly important in respect of Cyclone Winston in Fiji, which offered an important opportunity for Australia to rebuild its relationship with Fiji after the 2006 coup. The response provided the opportunity for Australian personnel to work with the Fijian military forces,³² which was 'welcomed by both communities', as they shared a 'strong collective sense of purpose'.³³ Australia's assistance encouraged Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama to declare that Fijians 'will always be grateful' and that he wanted to 'reset the direction of our relationship and work together to confront our many challenges in the region and the world'.³⁴

Opportunities for Defence assistance

Australia's DCP is one of its most effective levers of influence in the region. This is because the DCP has been **primarily directed at meeting what Pacific Island states identify as their needs in partnership with Australia**, as opposed to what Australia has identified for them. This differentiates the DCP from the approach that largely characterised the Australian aid program until the mid-2000s.

The PMSP is a good example of a program that tries to meet an important need in the region, by helping Pacific Island states protect their maritime territories. As a result, **Pacific Island states appreciate the PMSP and the broader DCP**, which has meant that Australia has

²⁹ DFAT, *Humanitarian Strategy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 2016.

³⁰ Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, *Pacific Islands Framework for Action on Climate Change 2006–2015*, 2nd edn, SPREP, Apia, 2011.

³¹ Anna Powles, 'Disaster diplomacy, Cyclone Winston, and regional preparedness', *Incline*, 26 March 2016, www.incline.org.nz.

³² 'Canberra first op a success', *Navy News*, 7 April 2016, p. 3.

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

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

been able to use it as a lever of influence, such as when it threatened to withdraw the DCP from PNG during the Sandline crisis.

Australia's **HADR is another successful example** of Australia's activities in the Pacific Islands. HADR has offered Australia the **opportunity to use disaster diplomacy to build relationships with Pacific Island states**.

The opportunities for **military education and exchanges** under the DCP have also encouraged **Australian and Pacific Islander military personnel to develop personal relations**, on which Australia has been able to draw to influence Pacific Island military leaders in times of crisis. For example, during the Bougainville intervention several members of the TMG knew and were able to talk to PNGDF personnel who had been deployed on Bougainville and had been their classmates at the Australian Defence College and other officer training courses, to diffuse their concerns about the TMG's work. A similar dynamic was evident in Australia's intervention in Tonga in 2006, during which a history of Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers training Tongan Police meant that there was a high level of 'mutual trust' between them.³⁵ As the DCP with Fiji was suspended following the 2006 coup, Fijian military leaders who emerged during this period do not have personal relationships with their Australian counterparts, which suggests that there is an opportunity for Australia to work to rectify this situation so that the distance between Australian and Fijian military personnel does not widen in the future.

There are **opportunities to further develop Australia's defence assistance**. Australia could do more to:

- **Deepen its regional defence relationships, both with Pacific Island states and with other powers involved in the region**, particularly under the auspices of the FRANZ Arrangement and Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group. In this regard, the **FRANZ and Quad could be expanded to include Pacific Island militaries**.³⁶
- There are also further opportunities for Australia to **assist the region's states to take advantage of their maritime resources**, which may allow them to become less dependent on Australian development assistance.³⁷ For example, although the Quad provides some air surveillance, it could develop a dedicated air surveillance capability to the region, including through utilising drones.³⁸

³⁵ Bob Breen, *The Good Neighbour: Australian Peace Support Operations in the Pacific Islands 1980–2006*, CUP, Port Melbourne, 2016.

³⁶ Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos, *Principled Engagement: Rebuilding Defence Ties with Fiji*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 2016, p. 12.

³⁷ Sam Bateman and Quentin Hanich, 'Maritime security issues in an arc of instability and opportunity', *Security Challenges*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2013, pp. 87–105.

³⁸ Bateman and Bergin, *Staying the Course*.

Lessons for other Australian assistance

Australia's DCP is one of its most effective levers of influence in the region. This is because the DCP has been primarily directed at meeting what Pacific Island states identify as their needs in partnership with Australia, as opposed to what Australia has identified for them.

The following **key lessons can be learnt from Australia's defence assistance** for Australia's broader aid program and other Australian assistance to the region:

- The DCP has focused on **cultivating long-standing people-to-people links.** Although the government's step-up emphasises people-to-people links, the education and exchanges undertaken under the DCP provide a model for how deep and enduring relationships between Australian and Pacific Islander defence and security personnel can be cultivated, as well as their utility in times of crisis.
- The DCP has had a **highly cooperative approach with Pacific Island states.** The long-standing emphasis on meeting the priorities and needs of Pacific Island states – identified in consultation with those states – in the DCP offers guidance concerning how the new emphasis on partnership under the step-up could be operationalised.
- The PMSP, other maritime assistance and HADR have involved significant **coordination with Pacific Island states and other partners in the region,** particularly under the FRANZ Agreement and the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group. The relationships and modes of cooperation developed in these spheres could be expanded to other areas to facilitate cooperation between Pacific Island states and their external partners. This may help to mitigate against concerns that Pacific Island states have about being overwhelmed by poorly coordinated, overlapping and ill-targeted assistance as Australia and other partners rapidly increase their presence in the region. Our closest ally in the region, New Zealand, will be an important partner in facilitating this cooperation.³⁹

³⁹ Joanne Wallis and Anna Powles, *Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Islands: Ambiguous Allies*, Centre of Gravity paper, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, 2018, http://sdsc.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2018-10/cog_43_web.pdf.