

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Submission to the Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region

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Submitter

I present this submission as both Fijian and Australian. I am a Young Pacific Leaders Alumni, member of Pacific Climate Warriors, and former Pacific Fellow for Young Australians in International Affairs. This submission is presented by myself and not on behalf of any affiliated group or organisation.

Submission

The decision for the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Penny Wong, to direct the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (the Committee) to undertake the *Inquiry into supporting democracy in our region* (the Inquiry) is an important, promising and heavily supported action. The subject of democracy in the Pacific region is an under-appreciated and often neglected area of Australia's foreign policy that has not received sufficient action. Whilst Australia's foreign policy approach has been internally profiled with an emphasis on democracy and liberty, this has not coincided with sufficient regional engagement that aims to uphold these standards in the Pacific.

The submission aims to provide the Committee with a brief analysis of Australia's foreign policy engagement with the Pacific by identifying some notable issues regarding democracy and sovereignty and listing several recommendations for the Committee and the Commonwealth Government. This is neither a comprehensive nor academic-level review of Australia's foreign policy, but a concise presentation of Pacific priorities and democratic concepts in Australia's engagement in the region.

This Inquiry provides a prime opportunity for Australia to reassess its position as an influential democracy in the Pacific and as an active ally that should be instrumental in assisting the self-empowerment and independence of Pacific states. I urge the Committee to genuinely consider the information and advice provided in submissions to the Inquiry and that these may be incorporated in better informed policy and strategic direction.

This submission responds to the following points in the Terms of Reference:

- Australia's interest in supporting the sovereignty and independence of our immediate neighbours;
- the importance of stability, democracy and good governance for the wellbeing of all people in our region; and
- ways in which Australia can assist our neighbours in these objectives.

Response

This submission is directed by three overarching propositions that are intended to guide Australia's approach to the Pacific. Firstly, if Australia is to maintain the profile of a genuine Pacific-ally, it must fulfil a regional responsibility to uphold and contribute to the democratic policy priorities of the Pacific, not solely those that are mutually in the interest of Australia. Traditionally, Australia's foreign policy in the Pacific has not been adequately conducive to Pacific regional interests, which has hindered its regional standing, and at times, resulted in Pacific leader-level criticism of Australian policy and regional activity. This is most notable and relevant to Australia's activity in delivering

positive climate change policy and its continued investment in unsustainable fossil fuel projects (ref.1, ref.2). Considerable improvements to the regional perception, and reality, of Australia's respect for Pacific policy priorities are required if Australia is to promote an approach that it respects the democratic integrity and shared interests of the Pacific as a region.

In defence of Australia's regional standing and reputation, it is critical to eliminate the classification of Australia as an ally to the Pacific only through circumstantial convenience. Whilst Australia has significantly benefitted from its geographic proximity to the Pacific, this privilege will not sustain its traditional value in the face of increased foreign, bilateral deals and soft-power regional partnerships between Pacific territories and foreign states. Australia must continue to present a more substantial package based on supporting democratic growth and state-stability. The independence and democratic prosperity of the Pacific region is both favourable to the development of Pacific states as well as to Australia.

It's recognised that the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) performs an integral role in supporting electoral assistance throughout the region and it's role in the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Administrators Network (PIANZEA) provides an immense asset to the quality of electoral information sharing. Whilst it's noted that the AEC delivers elite and essential democratic-strengthening projects throughout the region, it's noted that political-instability in the Pacific will continue to result in disruptions to voting integrity and transparency. It's strongly recommended that the AEC's regional work to protect democratic processes is maintained and increased.

Reference 1 – Nadi Bay Declaration

- On 29-30 July 2019, the Conference of the Pacific Islands Development Forum endorsed the Nadi Bay Declaration on the Climate Crisis in the Pacific (the Declaration).
- The Declaration formally announced the mutual recognition of a Climate Crisis in the Pacific region and provided recommendations and declaration for Pacific states, many targeting Australia.
- The Declaration included a "call" for:
 - governments of high emitting countries that are hindering progress in climate change efforts to heed the climate science and urgently change direction for the benefit of all, including the people in their own countries
 - all coal producers to immediately cease any new mining of coal and develop a strategy for a decadal phase-out and closure of all existing coal production; and
 - relevant parties to the Kyoto Protocol to refrain from using 'carryover credits' as an abatement for the additional Paris Agreement emissions reduction targets.

Reference 2 – September 2022 Pacific Leader Advocacy

- In September 2022, former Kiribati president Anote Tong and former Palau president Tommy Remengesau Jr visited Australia on behalf of the Pacific Elders' Voice to discuss climate policy and advocate for increased cuts to carbon emissions and guidelines around new coal projects.
- In reference to Australia's push to co-host the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2024, COP29, Mr Tong claimed that Australia's decision to choose to

would be in contradiction to their domestic action regarding fossil fuel projects.

Secondly, Australia's approach to foreign policy in the Pacific must consider the contemporary relevance and impact of neo-colonialism, particularly in Melanesia and Micronesia (ref.3). Because of the modern existence of Pacific non-sovereign states and the dependencies formulated from the colonial era, the impact of neo-colonialism and "post-colonialism" continue to direct and manipulate regional development. This materialises either directly through foreign state ownership or indirectly through power dynamics and sustained external state-dependency. Whilst particular non-Pacific states have accelerated the reorientation of their foreign policy towards the Pacific region across the last decade, the developing level of Pacific statehood and general independence makes Pacific island countries vulnerable to the impacts associated with international strategic intervention. External states will continue to operate in the Pacific as a means to achieve geostrategic and political gains, which will consequently resulting in the region being regularly at risk of being impacted as collateral to interstate tensions (ref.4).

The efficacy of democracy is intrinsically linked with the virtue of independence and self-determination, and it should be recognised that this is still relatively new in the Pacific within the context of the nation-state-era. Notably, the Melanesian economic powerhouses of Fiji and Papua New Guinea only gained independence in 1970 and 1975 respectively. Both countries generate considerable economic activity, especially within the Pacific, and yet only became formal democratic states with economic sovereignty following key economic development periods in the 50s and 60s. Democracy within the Pacific has generally performed very strongly, yet Australia still does not adequately recognise that statehood remains a significant concept to indigenous peoples of the Pacific. Whilst current Pacific sovereignty-agreements that are centred on free-association do not initially present urgent issues, Australia has a clear interest, and responsibility, to support the sovereignty of territories where neo-colonial relationships perpetuate interstate activity in Australia's immediate region.

Reference 3 – Non-sovereign territories in the Pacific

- There is a sizeable list of non-sovereign territories in the Pacific with varying independency statuses.
- Several territories are incorporated through free association, such as Cook Islands and Niue (to New Zealand), and the countries within the Compact of Free Association: Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau (to the US).
- In particular territories, independency is a contested issue and characterises an inherent domestic conflict founded on free-determination and democracy.
- Non-sovereign territories where independency is formally advocated for and politically contested include:
 - **New Caledonia** (French territory) has held three recent independence referendums in 2018, 2020, and 2021 in accordance with the Nouméa Accord.
 - **West Papua** (Indonesian territory) has been the subject of internal conflict over independence since the fraudulent Act of Free Choice in 1969 where Indonesia was given control.
 - **Guam** (US territory) has an active independence movement, however, has not held a referendum since 1982.

Reference 4 – North Korea missile strike threat

- US hold multiple military bases in Guam, including two major military bases: Andersen Air Force Base and Naval Base Guam.
- On 9 August 2019, following public and sustained intergovernmental tension between former US President Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, the Korean Central News Agency announced that North Korea were examining an operational plan to launch missiles around Guam.
- As of 2020, approximately 85% of Guam's population (153,846) are local Guamanian citizens not involved in the military.

Finally, the independence and agency of Pacific states must be recognised and protected in regional development and multilateral partnerships that Australia pursues. Whilst Australia is the largest foreign aid donor to the Pacific region, it's regional activity, both through membership in groups such as the Pacific Island Forum and through diplomatic missions regarding Pacific affairs, has historically been characterised by a directed, imperialist approach which has prioritised the utilisation of the Pacific's developing geostrategic value to bolster its regional standing. Whilst Australian diplomacy in the Pacific should not be comprehensively critiqued and noting that *Australia's Pacific Step-up* is designed to address this issue directly, it must be recognised that a contemporary form of multilateral engagement in the Pacific should emphasise the value of Pacific state-agency. Australia's involvement in the recently announced *Partners in the Blue Pacific* initiative (PBP) is prime example of a contemporary, well-suited policy approach to the Pacific (ref. 5)

Strengthening agency and democracy is a diplomatic avenue that Australia has a unique opportunity to pursue as a leading Pacific state with the greatest capacity to genuinely empower the region, whilst still rivalling the strategic engagement of external powers. In reference, the Committee should note the failed China-Pacific regional pact led by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi earlier this year. The failure to secure the partnership demonstrated that Pacific states demand and deserve appropriate consultation before considering complex, intergovernmental pacts and that Pacific engagement cannot compromise on diplomatic respect and validation of Pacific state-interest (ref. 6). In light of this, it is proposed that the Committee note and consider the Whitlam Institute's 2020 report *Pacific Perspectives on the World*, which identified that Australia's engagement with the Pacific is primarily delivered through unilateral initiatives and that Australia's Pacific literarily is insufficient, and consequently reflected in foreign policy (ref.7).

Reference 5 – Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative

- On 25 June 2022, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade released a joint statement on the announcement of the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative (PBP).
- The PBP is a joint initiative with Japan, New Zealand, the UK and the US, which is purposed to build on commitments to the Pacific and strengthen regionalism.
- The PBP core principles include:
 - Deliver results for the Pacific more effectively and efficiently;
 - Bolster Pacific regionalism; and

- Expand opportunities for cooperation between the Pacific and the world.
- The joint statement emphasises that the PBP is to be led and guided by the Pacific Islands.

Reference 6 – China-Pacific 2022 trade and security agreement failure

- On 30 May 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with foreign affair ministers and representatives from 10 Pacific Island nations.
- The purpose of the meeting was to seek the agreement of the attending Pacific nations to a draft communiqué and five-year action plan containing a comprehensive trade and security deal.
- The deal included agreements to expand law enforcement cooperation, introduce new training of Pacific police officers, conduct sensitive marine mapping and introduce Chinese involvement in cybersecurity.
- The participating Pacific Island countries did not agree to the deal and it was rejected.
- Samoan Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa stated that the deal was rejected because there had not been prior discussion and that the Pacific must be consulted as a region in order to agree to a pact of considerable consequence.

Reference 7 – Pacific Perspectives on the World

- In February 2020, the Whitlam Institute within Western Sydney University released a research report titled *Pacific Perspectives on the World: Listening to Australia’s Island Neighbours in order to build strong, respectful and sustainable relationships*.
- The research was conducted in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, and aimed to explore how Pacific people view Australia’s engagement in the Pacific, including the integrity of its interventions and diplomacy.
- The three key messages from the report include:
 - Quality relationships matter more than quantities;
 - Values, norms and ways of doing things matter; and
 - Australia is one of many potential relationships for Pacific islanders
- The report states that Australia does not perform engagement with the Pacific as well as it may consider, and more genuine consultation should be utilised.

West Papua Conflict

It is recommended that the Committee note the most critical and enduring democratic issue and human rights catastrophe in the Pacific, the West Papua conflict.

Background

In 1962, the Netherlands signed the New York Agreement and transferred administration of Western New Guinea to Indonesia. The New York Agreement mandated an independence referendum to be held. In 1969, pursuant to the New York Agreement, the ‘Act of Free Choice’ independence referendum was conducted and resulted in a unanimous vote for Western New Guinea to remain as a part of Indonesia. Following the referendum, the voting process was exposed as fraudulent through the Indonesian Government strategically selecting the voting pool and surveying the referendum through the threat of violence and bribery.

Issue

Since Indonesian-state control in 1969, ongoing conflict between the Indonesian Government and West Papuan independence groups over the military and legal subjugation of West Papua has perpetuated multifaceted breaches of democratic, land and human rights of the indigenous Papuan people.

Historically, Australia has infamously chosen to not respond to the military suppression of West Papua and has not engaged in an official intervention or denunciation of the human rights abuse or anti-democratic violations. It is recognised that Australia's precarious, yet strategically important, geopolitical relationship with Indonesia has prevented any formal policy response. However, it is noted that by pursuing this approach, Australia is actively ignoring the severe anti-democratic violations in West Papua and the consequential regional instability that has resulted from it. The West Papua conflict is a key priority of the Pacific Islands Forum and one of the most contentious independence disputes in the world. Whilst Australia remains divided from its Pacific partners on this issue, it exposes a dichotomy between the priorities of Australia and priorities of its Pacific neighbours.

Whilst an immediate reorientation of Australia's response to the conflict is logistically and politically unviable, considerable adjustments to the conflict is necessary for Australia to present itself as a purposeful Pacific ally and demonstrate its intention to protect democracy in the Pacific. Without intentional support, the people of West Papua will continue to sustain monumental democratic violations and human and land rights abuse, and Australia will continue to be exposed as a partial regional Pacific leader. The West Papua Conflict is an area of which Australia can clearly assist in a regional objective, and it is strongly urged for the Committee to note this issue in its report.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Improve the quality of Pacific-based consultation for future Pacific step-up initiatives through improved engagement with both Pacific governments and a wide range of domestic interest groups to ensure that development includes an emphasis on co-design.

Recommendation 2

The Commonwealth Government increase its domestic engagement with Pacific interest groups in Australia, including community groups, Australia-based Pacific organisations, grassroots organisations and Pacific diaspora.

Recommendation 3

In 2023, the Commonwealth provide a report to the Pacific Islands Forum on its current and planned actions and initiatives that support the regional implementation of the *2050 Blue Pacific Continent* and how Australia will support the democratic growth of the region to support the strategy.

Recommendation 4

The Committee note the Whitlam Institute's *Pacific Perspectives on the World* report and consider its findings and recommendations when developing its final report for the Inquiry.

Recommendation 5

The AEC increase their electoral-strengthening exercises throughout the Pacific, with particular concentration in Melanesia.

Recommendation 6

Building off of this Inquiry and the 2020 Joint Standing Committee inquiry into *Australia's relationships with the Pacific*, the Committee commence an additional targeted inquiry into democracy in the Pacific, which includes a focus on:

- Australia's foreign policy efforts in supporting democratic growth in the region;
- the existence, and contemporary impact of, neo-colonialism in the Pacific;
- the impact of non-sovereign states upon regional development and regional independence from external states; and
- the risk of anti-democratic practices and outcomes from external state intervention.

Recommendation 7

The Commonwealth Government conduct a research project into Pacific literacy and Pacific-communication to assist with Australia's intergovernmental relations and engagement. This research should include a focus on the value of improved communication to improve Australia's ability to engage as a true democratic ally. This should include extensive consultation with Pacific-based cultural groups, advocacy organisations, individuals and academics from Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. The report should produce training guidelines to inform and instruct government departments and agencies on best practice communication centred on respect and authenticity that recognises state-agency.

Recommendation 8

The Commonwealth Government discuss initiatives to support the democratic growth, independence, and agency of Pacific states with the US at the Australia-US Ministerial Consultations 2023.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recognise the West Papua conflict, the anti-democratic violations occurring in the province, and Australia's inaction in the final report for the Inquiry.

Recommendation 10

The Commonwealth Government identify and engage in the security issues of West Papua with the Indonesian Government through the 2023 Indonesia-Australia Ministerial Council on Law and Security. This does not have to include an initial, forthright denunciation of the Indonesian action, but a discussion towards the domestic stability and security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. This will provide an opportunity for an acknowledgment of the West Papua conflict and a reorientation for Australia to address the anti-democratic crisis.

Recommendation 11

The Commonwealth Government support motions in the Pacific Islands Forum to address human rights abuse in West Papua.

Recommendation 12

The Commonwealth Government maintain critical oversight of the training and strategies of Australian counterterrorism unit Detachment 88 (D88) in response to West Papua independence groups. Australia must continuously monitor and assess D88 activity to ensure that its practices are not enforcing anti-democratic military control.

List of References

Below is a list of sources that refer to the content included in the reference boxes throughout the submission. It is included to direct to sources and not an academic-standard reference list

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Reference 4 - North Korea missile strike threat

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Reference 5 - Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative

9. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Joint Statement on the Announcement of the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative', 2022, (accessible:

<https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/joint-statement-announcement-partners-blue-pacific-initiative>).

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Reference 6 - China-Pacific 2022 trade and security agreement failure

11. Al Jazeera., 'China, Pacific islands fail to reach consensus on security pact', *Al Jazeera*, 2022 (accessible: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/30/china-pacific-islands-fail-to-reach-consensus-on-security-pact>).

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Reference 7 - Pacific Perspectives on the World

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