

Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations

A Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade

World Citizens Association (Australia)

The Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC, has asked the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade - Defence Subcommittee to inquire into and report into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific island nations.

Regarding the terms of reference for the inquiry, this submission will address in general 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;

Abstract

The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has recently announced a 'step up' in Australia's relations with our neighbours in the Pacific Islands Forum, to counter increasing Chinese influence in the region. In a companion submission to a related inquiry, we review the case for deepening integration in the Pacific to form a Pacific Islands Community, as the next step beyond the Pacific Islands Forum. On the security side, we here discuss ideas for a Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol, and a Pacific Islands Regiment.

Introduction

In recent times there has been widespread concern in Australia over the increase of Chinese influence in the Pacific region, brought to a head by the possibility that China might even try to set up a military base in Vanuatu. The Chinese government has been suspected of using 'debt-trap' diplomacy, offering large loans to countries in the region under their 'Belt and Road' initiative, which the recipients may have trouble repaying, thus being forced to offer concessions or facilities to the Chinese in return for forgiveness of the loans.

There is a perceived need for Australia and New Zealand to counter this influence by forging closer relations with our neighbouring Pacific island states in the Pacific Island Forum. The Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has announced a 'step up' in our relations with the Forum, and paid several recent visits to other members of our Pacific 'family'. This year will see our largest ever development assistance to the region of \$1.4 billion, despite the decline in our overall aid budget. We will also be spending \$500 million to ameliorate the effects of climate change in the region [Hawke 2019].

In these circumstances, the time seems ripe to revisit ideas for closer integration in the region, and more specifically, proposals for developing the Pacific Islands Forum into a *Pacific Islands Community*. Objectives of the Community would include:

- Improved collective security for the Pacific region, to counter any perceived security threat from China or other external powers;
- Greater cooperation in commercial enterprises, such as protection of the fishing industries of the Pacific island states;
- Greater cooperation in the distribution of aid and development funds to the island states;
- Closer participation by the island states in the formulation of regional policy in general.

Background

Integration in the Pacific has been proceeding by fits and starts ever since the former British colonies in the region attained their independence. It is obvious that the smaller island states cannot provide all the facilities of modern living for themselves, but must rely on co-operation with their neighbours if they are to have any hope of moving beyond a subsistence lifestyle. The South Pacific Forum was established in 1971 to foster co-operation between them, as an alternative to the old South Pacific Commission of colonial days, and in 1999 its name was changed to the Pacific Islands Forum to reflect a wider geographic reach.

The heads of government of the Pacific Islands Forum currently hold an annual meeting to discuss matters of common interest in the region. There are eighteen members, consisting of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Western Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands, Cook Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Palau, and Niue, plus recent new members New Caledonia and French Polynesia. There is enormous variation in size and resources between them, ranging from Australia with 25 million inhabitants to tiny Niue with 1600.

The main focus of the Forum hitherto has been on trade and economic issues, such as regional air and shipping services, and the fisheries in the surrounding

seas. The day-to-day activities are carried out by the Forum Secretariat [PIF Secretariat] based in Suva, Fiji, with around 100 staff members. The Secretary-General currently is Dame Meg Taylor from Papua New Guinea. The current annual budget is around A\$30 million, of which Australia and New Zealand contribute about 60%. The main aims of the Secretariat are to provide economic and policy advice to the members of the Forum.

A number of crises have occurred in the region over recent years, including uprisings on Bougainville, Fiji and the Solomon Islands. The Regional Assistance Mission Solomon Islands (RAMSI) arrived in Honiara in 2003 to help restore order there, with the consent of both the Solomon Islands parliament and the Pacific Islands Forum. It included personnel from many of the island states, giving RAMSI a truly Pacific face as representing the Forum as a whole.

Forum leaders have always endorsed ideas for greater cooperation and integration in the Pacific. A wide-ranging “Pacific Plan” for the future development of the Pacific region was drafted a decade ago [Pacific Plan 2007], but implementation of the Plan was stymied by the 2006 military coup and interregnum in Fiji (the headquarters of the Pacific Islands Forum), led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama. Fiji was suspended from membership in the Forum in 2009, and this suspension was not lifted until after a measure of democracy was restored, and a Fijian general election was held in September 2014.

In 2013 a Review of the Pacific Plan was commissioned, led by Sir Mekere Morauta, former Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea. The Review expressed disappointment with the pace of regional integration under the Plan. Its central conclusion was that “what is needed to progress regionalism is not a revised list of priorities, but an overhaul of the processes, institutions, and governance of the Plan” [Pacific Plan Review 2013]. In particular, the Review suggested that the Pacific Plan Action Committee (PPAC), which is charged with oversight of the implementation of the Plan and is mainly staffed by bureaucrats, had largely failed to drive progress in regional integration. It should be replaced by a smaller Board for Pacific Regionalism including representatives of civil society and the private sector.

In 2014 the Pacific leaders replaced the Plan by a *‘Framework for Pacific Regionalism’*, setting up a process by which proposals for regional integration could be reviewed and implemented. At the same time, a measure of democracy has been restored in Fiji, and elections have been held for a new Fijian Parliament, so the time has clearly come to reconsider further steps in regional integration. Scott Morrison has paid two recent visits to Fiji, and formed a good relationship with the Fijian leader, Frank Bainimarama.

The challenges facing the Pacific region were discussed in the *State of Pacific Regionalism Report 2017*. The report emphasized a growing sense of uncertainty

due to shifting global and regional geopolitics. Some of the specific challenges mentioned include climate change, ocean management and conservation, and regional conflict. All of these challenges demand a collective regional response, and they cannot be addressed by one nation acting alone. The Framework for Pacific Regionalism declared as one of its principal objectives “Strengthened governance, legal, financial, and administrative systems” in the region. The more recent *Blue Pacific communique* committed Forum Leaders to “strengthen regional architecture” [Blue Pacific 2017]

The most recent *State of Pacific Regionalism Report 2019* from the Forum Secretariat offers an ambitious *Vision for a Blue Pacific Continent* in 2050. The Secretary General, Meg Taylor, in her foreword quotes the 2014 Framework document:

“Our Pacific Vision is for a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy, and productive lives.”

She goes on to say that “the fundamental proposition underpinning the report is that ‘deepening regionalism’ requires the implementation of a long-term roadmap towards a Blue Pacific continent. That is, Pacific regionalism will be best advanced through the realization of the Blue Pacific Continent.”

Our submissions will discuss a possible first step in such a process, namely the upgrade of the Forum into a Pacific Islands Community.

Suggestions for Change

a) Governance

The 2013 Review advocated a “new framework for Pacific regionalism”, and imagined a possible future path for the region leading all the way to a Pacific Union, or even a Pacific Federation. These developments will only occur decades into the future, if they occur at all. But the immediate next step is very obvious, namely the formation of a *Pacific Islands Community*, as an extension of the present Forum.

The details of our suggestions for changes in governance mechanisms will be set out in a companion submission to the inquiry on “*Strengthening Australia’s relationships with countries in the Pacific region*”. Suffice to say here, we advocate these step towards closer regional integration in order to strengthen the sense of common citizenship and joint partnership in, and ownership of, community institutions between the present Forum members, which in turn would be a very important counter to any malign foreign influences in the region.

Here we restrict ourselves to some remarks on security issues. This is a sensitive topic which goes to core issues of national sovereignty, but the Blue Pacific communique noted a call by the Forum Foreign Ministers to expand and strengthen collective action for regional security, and called for consultations on a new 'Biketawa Plus' declaration at their next meeting. There is an obvious need for some mechanisms of regional common security, namely:

- A *Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol* to combat illegal fishing, piracy, drug smuggling and similar problems in the region. Such a force would need to involve both seaborne and airborne elements, and to make use of resources such as satellite data, and the Jindalee over-the-horizon radar installation in Australia.
- A land-based security force, perhaps a *Pacific Islands Regiment*, to carry out peacekeeping duties both within and outside the region, and if necessary to intervene in "extra-constitutional crises" in the region. Interventions by such a force would carry much greater legitimacy than a similar intervention by (say) Australian or New Zealand forces, which are always subject to charges of paternalism or neo-colonialism. It could also provide a significant source of employment for some of the smaller islands.

The principle should be that the Pacific islands take collective responsibility for maintaining peace and security in their own region. Their responsibilities would include

- Monitoring and patrolling the exclusive economic zones of the PIF members, and preventing illegal fishing
- Monitoring and preventing illegal logging activities in the PIF member states
- Contributing to international peacekeeping missions undertaken by the UN
- Maintaining peace and security within the region, including Intervention to restore peace and order in one of the Island nations, if authorized to do so by the Forum assembly itself.

The first responsibility could be undertaken by a *Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol*. The means exist already in the shape of the Pacific Patrol Boat Program [McCann 2013]. Using patrol boats, aircraft and retired frigates from the Australian navy, and satellite reconnaissance data supplied by Australia, the PIF already maintains a fairly sophisticated surveillance of the fishing zones from headquarters located in Honiara. Fishing is a major economic resource of the island nations, and the industry needs effective protection against illegal fishing by foreign vessels. The operations of the Pacific Patrol Boat Program should be placed under the control of the PIF or the new Community, if this is not already the case.

This is a common theme in the literature. Indeed, the Australian Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee in 2010 called for “[*elevating*] the Pacific Patrol Boat Program into a regional initiative, supported by the Pacific Islands Forum and other donors” [Senate Committee 2010], and the Australian government promised to carry out an assessment of this idea. The Committee also called for a Regional Maritime Coordination Centre, which has come into being with the Honiara facility. A strategy paper by Herr and Bergin of the Australian Security Policy Institute [ASPI 2011] discussed the regional arrangements in considerable detail. The authors called for a “Regional Maritime Coordination Centre”, and noted that “*the success of Australia’s increased investment in combating illegal unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in northern Australian waters should now allow us to move some assets to help combat IUU fishing in the Pacific. The work would be a complementary component in support of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency Regional Monitoring Control and Surveillance strategy.*”

Satellite and aerial reconnaissance could also be used to detect illegal logging activities in the PIF member states. Again, this is a very serious problem, affecting a major industry in the Melanesian states. There were claims in 2008 that the forests of the Solomon Islands would be exhausted in five to seven years, at the then current rate of illegal logging [Skehan 2008], and a joint report from the University of Papua New Guinea and the Australian National University estimated that the PNG forests would be exhausted by 2021 at the current rate [Perry 2008]. Corruption at the political level also contributes to the problem: Sir Michael Somare, former Prime Minister of PNG, reportedly admitted to having financial links to logging companies [Roberts 2007].

Satellite reconnaissance data could easily be analysed to reveal the extent of logging activity in the Melanesian forests, and a Forum (or Community) agency could compile the data, and compare it with estimates of what a sustainable logging regime would allow. It would then be up to the individual Forum members to act to protect their own resources.

The onshore security responsibilities could be undertaken by a *Pacific Islands Regiment*, again using equipment, training and facilities largely supplied by Australia and New Zealand. Such a regiment could undertake peacekeeping missions for the UN, earning income and providing employment for some of the island people. It would also be capable of spearheading any intervention to restore law and order in case of a breakdown of order in one of the island states, at the behest of the PIF (or Community) council. It would thus act as guardian of their own peace and security, and would carry authority and legitimacy as embodying the collective response of all the PIF members.

We remark in parenthesis that the Regiment (and indeed the ADF) should also be trained and equipped to help undertake disaster relief in the region. The damage done by hurricanes, floods and bushfires is only likely to get worse as

time goes on, exacerbated by climate change, as exemplified by the recent bushfire season in Australia.. This would give the Regiment an important extra function in times of peace, and add greatly to its good relations and reputation with the community in general.

In fact a Royal Pacific Islands Regiment already exists, set up in Papua New Guinea during World War II to help fight the Japanese, and incorporated into the PNG Defence Force after independence in 1971. It has already taken part in missions to Vanuatu, Bougainville and the RAMSI mission in Solomon Islands. This regiment could perhaps be recommissioned as part of a security force for the whole Pacific Islands Forum; or else a new force might need to be raised. This would require further consideration by the experts.

Very recently, the Fijian Defence Minister, Inia Seruiratu, has indeed suggested that Australia should revisit the idea of a Pacific regiment in the Australian army [Seruiratu 2019], and the Australian Minister for the Pacific Alex Hawke has responded positively, raising the possibility of a 'Pacific Support Force' [Lewis 2019], so ideas of this sort should be well received.

Arguments for the Proposal

We have given general arguments for two major defence-related initiatives related to this inquiry. We are not competent to advise on the detailed measures required for their implementation, and would have to defer to more expert advice on those aspects. But the general argument is that we need to embrace our Forum partners more closely at the regional level, to build a closer sense of community and partnership between ourselves and the other Forum (or Community) members. This would provide a major bulwark against any malign influence from China or any other foreign state.

As part of this program, these initiatives should be placed under the supervision of, and funded through, the new Pacific Islands Community which we are advocating.

a) Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol

At the practical level, the need for this program is very obvious, and the functional arrangements needed are mostly in place already. As part of its responsibilities, we have suggested that the central surveillance centre should also monitor and produce regular reports on logging activities in the region. As noted above, we argue that this program should be explicitly placed under Community control and supervision, and funded also through the Community. This would be an important step towards that objective of building a closer sense of community and partnership between ourselves and the other Community members

b) Pacific Islands Regiment

One possible element of this program is already in place, namely the Royal Pacific Islands Regiment in PNG. Most of the program would have to be newly created and funded, however. To reiterate, the major advantages of this program which we have identified are:

- The regiment could undertake peacekeeping missions for the UN, earning income and providing employment for some of the island people and Community.
- It would also be capable of spearheading any intervention to restore law and order in case of a breakdown of order in one of the island states, at the behest of the PIF (or Community) council.
- It would thus act as guardian of their own peace and security, and would carry authority and legitimacy as embodying the collective response of all the PIF (or Community) members.
- Finally, if it were trained and equipped also to deal with disaster relief, this would give the Regiment an important extra function in times of peace, and add greatly to its good relations and reputation with the community in general.

Possible Objections

A likely objection to both initiatives would be the cost, in the fact that Australia would be transferring unilateral control of the funding required into the hands of the new Community. We would argue that the cost would be very well worthwhile in terms of the great benefits to common security in our Pacific region which we have outlined above, and also relatively small compared to the overall defence budget, which has been increased significantly in recent times.

a) Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol

Most of the functional elements of such a scheme are already in place. The major difficulties would involve transferring administrative control to the new Community, along with funding and personnel. The Department of Defence would have to consider how to implement such arrangements. These should not present any insuperable obstacle. As noted above, similar arrangements have already been discussed at official levels.

b) Pacific Islands Regiment

In this case, the practical difficulties in implementing such a scheme are more difficult. We understand that some discussions have already taken place in Defence circles. Where would the elements of the Regiment be located, and

what facilities would they need? Where would its personnel be trained? How much extra funding would be required? What transfers of funding and personnel from DOD would be required? What would be the relationship between the new Pacific Islands Regiment and existing national defence forces? These are difficult questions, which would require the advice of experts, but again the obstacles should not be insuperable.

Such a scheme would transform the Forum into a genuine security community, a concept which is only now being seriously discussed within the European Union. But we have given what we believe are very important reasons to consider such a scheme. It would signal that Australia is seriously embracing a role as a genuine partner, albeit inevitably a senior partner, in its regional community.

Summary and Conclusions

Maintaining and deepening the regional integration between the members of the Pacific Islands Forum brings obvious benefits, and can do much to promote peace and prosperity in the region. The smaller island states simply cannot provide all the benefits of modern life for themselves, and must rely on help and co-operation from the larger states to provide higher education, technical skills, industrial goods and employment for their people. Trade, investment and transport are best co-ordinated at the regional level, as also is the supervision and conservation of natural resources such as the fish stocks in the ocean and the tropical forests on land. Regional organizations can help maintain stable governance in fragile member states, as exemplified in the RAMSI mission, and can help counter any undue influence from outside, foreign states. Much has already been achieved in these areas, but much more remains to be done in the future.

Australia and New Zealand have generally adopted a sensible and bipartisan approach to the development of the Pacific region. The two governments between them provide the lion's share of the funding for regional organizations, and they are generally in favour of greater integration, as exemplified by the Australian joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in 2003 [Senate Committee 2003], the Labor Party policy discussion paper '*Towards a Pacific Community*' [Sercombe 2005], or the recent statements of Scott Morrison and Alex Hawke [Hawke 2019]. But their attitude has been that it must be for the Pacific Islands themselves to determine the costs and benefits of the Framework for Pacific Regionalism, and they have taken something of a back seat in its implementation. Recent developments should impel them towards playing a more active role, perhaps, which ought to be well received by other Forum members.

Australia and New Zealand (to a lesser extent) have also played an active role as 'deputy sheriff' for the region on several occasions, such as the military interventions in East Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands. These actions

were successful and well justified, being sanctioned by the United Nations and the Forum, respectively. There is always a danger, though, that such actions will be seen as paternalism and 'gunboat diplomacy', and arouse resentment among the smaller island states. Far better would be a collective response to such emergencies, carried out by regional security forces.

The obvious next stage in the integration process is the upgrading of the Pacific Islands Forum into a Pacific Islands Community. This would not actually require huge changes in the regional architecture, or involve huge additional expenditure. Most of the elements have already been suggested in the Pacific Plan.

Here we have proposed strengthened regional security systems, including a Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol, to regulate a sustainable fishing industry in the region, and a Pacific Islands Regiment, to restore order in case of a breakdown in one of the island states, and also to carry out peacekeeping duties and provide some employment for the island people. The Community would also provide new mechanisms for arriving at collective decisions on defence and security issues for the region as a whole, which would do much to counter the fears of increasing Chinese influence in the Pacific.

In any case, the Forum's members are already firmly launched on a path towards greater integration. If wisely managed, this course will indeed lead to a Pacific region "of peace, harmony, security and economic prosperity, so that all its people can lead free and worthwhile lives."

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