

Pacific Island security: What role can national security strategies play?

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years the majority of countries globally have developed their own national security strategies or policies. But this has not been the case in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) with the exception of Papua New Guinea, which completed a National Security Policy in 2013 and Fiji, which undertook substantial work on a policy over several years. Now, with gathering momentum, national security strategies are part of the Pacific regional agenda. In 2018, Samoa and then Vanuatu, commenced work on their strategies completing them in 2018 and 2019, others are forthcoming in countries such as Solomon Islands, Tonga and Cook Islands. The concept of such strategies received a major boost from regional leaders in 2018, who, in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, committed to ‘strengthening our respective national security approaches by developing our national security strategies’ (PIFS 2018).

This position was reinforced the following year in the Boe Declaration Action Plan, agreed to by leaders at the 2019 Tuvalu Forum, which foreshadowed ‘supporting Forum members, as may be required, in the development of national security strategies/policies’ (PIFS 2019:21). A number of development partners have provided support for the development and implementation of national security strategies, and a new source of such support is the Australia Pacific Security College. Several Pacific Island countries are now well advanced in the development of national security strategies, with more countries proposing to do so.

Typically, a national security strategy provides an overarching framework that outlines the nation’s strategic context, identifies security challenges and opportunities, articulates the nation’s vision and agenda, sets priorities for coming years, and sets in motion reforms to strengthen the national security community. Can such strategies better equip governments to handle national security issues? The answer is a strong yes – providing the strategy is realistic, the product of widespread consultation, and effectively implemented.

The expanded concept of security is now widely accepted

Historically, national security has tended to be viewed principally in terms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and defense of the homeland including maintenance of internal stability through prevention of major civil unrest, terrorist acts or other significant breakdowns in law and order. An expanded concept of security has, however, received widespread acceptance in recent years. Firstly, there is the realisation of the gravity of the global threats posed by ‘problems without borders’ – such as climate change, the spread of infectious diseases, and cyber attacks. Secondly,

there is recognition that human security and a just society are fundamental to national security.

Pacific Island leaders have been forthright in articulating the main security priorities for the region. In the Boe Declaration, they affirmed an ‘expanded concept of security which addresses the wide range of security issues in the region, both traditional and non-traditional, with an increasing emphasis on:

- human security, including humanitarian assistance, to protect the rights, health and prosperity of Pacific people;
- environmental and resource security;
- security from transnational crime; and
- cybersecurity, to maximise protections and opportunities for Pacific infrastructure and peoples in the digital age’ (PIFS 2018).

The priority given to human security in the Boe Declaration was prescient – the COVID-19 crisis represents the gravest security challenge to the region in the post-independence era.

What does a national security strategy look like?

Globally, national security strategies vary considerably in scope, length, focus, and level of ambition. Pacific Island nations too each have their own distinct characteristics, and there is no single framework that could be applied across the region. Nevertheless, the countries of the Pacific region face many of the same challenges, such as:

- climate change and natural disasters;
- the vastness of the region and its huge exclusive economic zones (EEZs), sparsely populated by mostly small island states remote from each other;
- small formal economies a great distance from major markets, with high costs and heavy reliance on development assistance;
- resource constraints and depletion of natural resources;
- illegal fishing and weak borders; and
- increasingly sophisticated transnational crime.

In addition, the Pacific region faces, to varying degrees, major human security challenges such as rising inequality, expanding and restive youth populations, and gender based violence. Health security is a particular challenge – not just because of the threat of the COVID-19 virus and other infectious diseases – but also an alarming non-communicable disease crisis in much of the region. So it makes sense for countries of the region to work together, and share their experiences and goals as they develop their

national security strategies. The starting point is the Boe Declaration Action Plan 2019, which states that:

A national security strategy or policy is an adaptable framework for a country to meet the basic needs and security concerns of citizens (human security) and address external and internal threats to the country. National security frameworks will enable Members to coherently and holistically identify their national security priorities and what they require (capacity and capability) to address them. In addition to this, reflecting key issues such as human security, oversight and accountability, human rights and gender ensures relevance, legitimacy, ownership, and sustainability thus improving the efficiency of how security is provided (PIFS 2019:21).

A national security strategy will typically include the following:

- a vision and objectives for national security;
- an outline of the security environment – national, regional and global – prioritising threats and opportunities;
- an outline of the capabilities needed to meet challenges and maximise opportunities;
- an action plan for specific initiatives, and a more general statement of directions the government proposes to take to reinforce national security over the short and long term; and
- a description of the government machinery and other measures proposed by the government to implement the strategy.

Strategies should take full account of the nation's governance and development context, be fully aligned with national, regional and international goals and commitments, and not duplicate or seek to replace existing plans, strategies and machinery in the different areas of government.

Finally, strategies should be clear, concise and readable documents – well understood and disseminated both within government and the wider community.

Developing a strategy – consultation is the key

An effective process for the development of a national security strategy firstly requires strong whole-of-government leadership and direction, and secondly, a comprehensive program of consultation. Wide consultation is essential to gain a full understanding of the most pressing security issues across the nation, and to strengthen national ownership of the strategy. Consultations – and the lively debates often produced – are also a valuable awareness raising mechanism, whether on discussions of cyber security, gender-based violence, illegal fishing, or other national security issues.

Samoa and Vanuatu provide two examples. In the development of Samoa's National Security Policy and the accompanying Implementation Strategy, the Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Prime Minister and Cabinet oversaw all stages of the project, keeping the Prime

Minister regularly updated, and led the community consultations on the two main islands, Upolu and Savai'i. In addition, more than 60 consultations were held with stakeholders in ministries and other government bodies – and with representatives of village councils and other community leaders, the churches, civil society and the private sector.

In the case of Vanuatu, the Prime Minister and several ministers kept abreast of the development of the National Security Strategy throughout the process. The consultation process was led by the Director General of the Ministry of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Director General of the Interior Ministry and the Acting Police Commissioner/Commander of the Vanuatu Mobile Force. In addition to individual consultations, a number of major seminars were held, involving civil servants, police, the *Malvatumauri* (advisory body of chiefs), and representatives of churches, other community organisations, civil society and the private sector. Consultations were held on the islands of Santo and Tanna, as well as in Port Vila.

Best practice demands that national security strategies be treated as live documents which remain under regular review. It is important that strategies be updated as circumstances and perceived risks change, and that the nation's security institutions retain the flexibility and resources needed to respond quickly to new challenges as they arise.

Values and institutions

Security strategies typically set out a vision for a safe, stable, sustainable and prosperous nation, based on the foundation of the nation's constitution, culture, traditional knowledge, and – in the case of many Pacific Island countries – Christian principles. Security strategies also address the attributes and capabilities nations need to safeguard national security, ranging, for example, from strong and effective institutions; to political stability and good governance; justice and human rights for all; a strong, well-managed and resilient economy; and an effective promotion of the nation's external interests.

An additional need in some countries is stronger due diligence to weed out foreigners involved in transnational crime or those seeking to exploit offshore financial centres, citizenship schemes, and other areas. A fundamental requirement for security forces, whether they are police, armed forces, border protection, or other front line officials, is that they be professional, well trained and equipped, and accountable.

In the case of PICs, there is a particular institutional need for resilient national systems for disaster preparedness, response and recovery, and climate change adaptation. Countries of the region are well served in this regard and natural disaster relief mechanisms, involving declarations of states of emergency are generally well practiced, effective, and enjoy widespread public support. Such mechanisms are now being utilised in managing the COVID-19 threat, where the region overall has had conspicuous success to date in keeping the pandemic at bay.

Tradition and culture play a key role in underpinning social cohesion

Communities and traditional institutions in the PICs – to an extent not widely appreciated outside the region – play a strong role in maintaining social cohesion, security and harmony. Their representatives normally would have a prominent role in the consultation process as a security strategy is developed. A priority is to find the right balance between traditional values and the requirements of the formal justice system, as well as between economic development and land use. This will be increasingly challenging in our globalised and modern world.

Regional collaboration is fundamental

Many national security challenges are obviously global issues. For example, climate change, pandemics, transnational crime, cyber security, all of which demand international and regional collaboration. At the same time Pacific Island countries share many similar security challenges and values. They have a strong network of development partners and regional organisations to work with – notably the Pacific Island Forum. The case for very close regional collaboration on security issues is compelling and should be highlighted in security strategies, particularly as most island countries are small with limited resources.

In an increasingly contested and complex region, it is more important than ever for member nations to be able to promote and defend their interests abroad. Small island countries need strong foreign ministries and networks of missions abroad, although the cost of such networks is often prohibitive. Pacific Island countries have successfully pooled resources at their diplomatic mission to the United Nations in New York, and it would be opportune to examine such pooling models in other capitals of regional importance.

Implementation of a strategy will determine its success

The most important outcome of a national security strategy developed by a Pacific Island nation will, in many cases, be the implementation measures – notably those dealing with new or strengthened government machinery. Most nations of the region currently have only a very modest national security system, or not one at all, and only few personnel specifically assigned to cover national security issues.

The key element of government machinery likely to emerge from a security strategy is a senior level national security committee or council, with the authority to take decisions and make recommendations to Cabinet. The essential requirement is that all relevant agencies be represented on such a body. A widespread problem in the region is poor collaboration and information sharing between government agencies on national security issues, and more generally the absence of a deeply rooted ‘whole-of-government’ culture.

Samoa and Vanuatu have opted for slightly different models in their national security machinery, although both

nations have preserved the essential requirement of a whole-of-government body.

In early 2019, Samoa established a National Security Committee, comprising representatives of relevant government agencies, at the level of chief executive officer or equivalent. The Committee meets regularly and has been playing a valuable role in coordinating advice and action on a range of security issues. In Vanuatu, a Bill for the establishment of a National Security Council, comprising specified ministers and agency heads, was passed in Parliament in December 2019. Work is now well advanced for the establishment of a National Security Council Secretariat and appointment of a National Security Adviser.

National assessment capacities need boosting

An important element of a national security strategy concerns a nation’s assessment capability. The Pacific region is weak in this regard, with a number of countries lacking capacity for their own independent assessment – essential for sound decision making on national and regional security issues. More generally, the lack of good quality data is a widespread problem in the Pacific region, whether related to crime, socioeconomic issues and livelihoods, the economy, health, or climate change. Now is the time to boost national assessment capabilities, drawing on the growing amount of information and analysis available from open sources, as well as from regional organisations and trusted bilateral partners.

One encouraging development is the establishment in 2019 of the Pacific Fusion Centre. Australia is working in the Centre with regional security agencies and governments to strengthen information sharing and maritime domain awareness in relation to some of the threats outlined in the Boe Declaration, such as illegal fishing, drugs trafficking, and other transnational crimes. The Centre is also proving valuable in strengthening analytic practice and policy decision making processes within Pacific Island governments.

Working together is the way forward

Pacific Island nations have only limited scope to influence global trends. However, the region has shown that on some fundamental questions of human security, such as climate change, and the future of small islands states, it can have a strong voice globally. Pacific Island nations have also shown the world an innovative example of collective action, with the decision by Forum Foreign Ministers in April 2020 to establish the ‘Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19’ under the Biketawa Declaration (PIFS 2020).

In 2018, Forum leaders took the far-sighted step of embracing the concept of national security strategies. The COVID-19 crisis has generally reinforced the importance of sound decision making as nations face the plethora of security challenges ahead. National security strategies, if effectively implemented, will be a major boost to governments in dealing with the tough and finely balanced decisions that are becoming all too common in this complex world.

Notes

- ¹ Tim George assisted the Government of Samoa develop its National Security Policy and Implementation Strategy in 2018, and the Government of Vanuatu develop its National Security Strategy in 2018/2019. A former Australian diplomat, he was Special Coordinator to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2006 to 2009. These are his personal views.

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