

Listening to Pacific Security Practitioners: Determination, skills and diversity

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Overview

The Boe Declaration provides an important catalyst for Pacific Island conversations on key security issues. This paper provides an example of a collaborative conversation that encouraged frank discussion on the priority security challenges across the region including how Pacific people prefer to address their security risks and how they perceive future security in the Pacific.

In 2019, the newly formed Australia Pacific Security College (PSC) had an open conversation with Pacific security practitioners on the region's security risk profile. The Pacific practitioners expressed a shared determination to take agency over their own security risks and build their capacity to respond – regardless of the threat. As a result, there was high interest in having the right human capital and skills mix available, whether that was within the national and regional institutions or through the relationship between formal and customary governance structures.

The conversation was strongly focused on human security issues, including health and gender which were given particularly high emphasis as nationally destabilising and less well addressed and climate and environmental security as magnifiers of human security issues. The levels of harm arising from traditional security concerns were difficult to quantify.

Setting up the conversation

Between July–December 2019, the PSC leadership team conducted a series of conversations with 107 Pacific security practitioners to understand their security priorities in greater detail. All of the practitioners held formal roles as: government officials; leaders of regional organisations; political advisers; leaders of uniformed forces; leaders of non-government organisations; officials from multilateral organisations; and academics. The PSC directly consulted with leaders in seven Pacific Island countries, seven regional organisations, and with a number of Australian and New Zealand officials. Approximately 40 per cent of consultation participants were women.

The objective of the conversations was to:

1. identify the norms that govern behaviour and security activity;
2. illuminate the way that Pacific security systems are governed; and
3. identify opportunities for collaboration (Jenz & Wofford, 2008).

Pacific leaders engaged in the conversation to shape the suite of activities that would form the PSC's 2020 work plan, rather than as a research activity. This paper considers the aggregated messages from across the region rather than those from specific practitioners. The picture generated through

these conversations was partial. Our highest volume of engagement was with Melanesia, some engagement with Polynesian states, and limited engagement with the small island state members of the Pacific Islands Forum. The limited reach was due to the travel disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The PSC will progressively fill the gaps in this picture, as travel and digital engagement permits, to deepen its contribution to the Pacific security conversation.

Determination to seize the agenda

The first striking insight from our conversations was the determination to assert Pacific agency despite the complexity of the security environment.

At an individual, institutional and national level, Pacific security practitioners reflected on the broader paradigm shift that Fry and Tarte (2015) have labelled 'new Pacific diplomacy' – the confident assertion of collective Pacific identity and interests on the global agenda. It is reflected in the way Pacific leaders have used the Boe Declaration as an instrument to shape the narrative on what can legitimately be construed as 'security' in the Pacific region. It is echoed in public messages by senior Pacific leaders on the importance of the Pacific asserting its shared interests in a contested environment (Tuilaepa 2020; Taylor 2019).

Confidence at the regional level is percolating down to the national and institutional level. For individual practitioners, the Boe Declaration was seen as a source of legitimacy, authority, and pride in a distinctly Pacific tailoring of security. Despite the complexity of the security environment, a number of confident practitioners also saw the geopolitical competition of the moment as an opportunity to leverage in negotiations with larger partners. This view aligned with the strong public messages from regional leaders about the opportunities that competition can provide to the Pacific (Taylor, 2019).

While striking, there are some caveats to Pacific intent. The absorptive capacity of Pacific states for enhancing security capability was at – or in some cases beyond – limits. Some small island states with limited bureaucratic capabilities discussed feeling overwhelmed by security challenges that required sustained focus, coordination or high levels of multilateral collaboration. Indeed, the conversation with all Pacific security practitioners quickly turned to the skills and capabilities they needed.

The priority is skills

The second striking insight from our conversation is that Pacific leaders consistently focused on capability over threats/issues. The uncertainty and volatility of the security

environment combined with the limited human capacity of governments are driving an increased appetite for skills development. If Pacific countries are to assert their own agency in addressing security challenges, they need to develop sovereign capability.

Pacific practitioners identified the key challenge for addressing complex security risks as a lack of government collaboration and coordination. The desperately needed skills outlined by Pacific security leaders were leadership, deeper analytic capacity, security policy development skills, and international engagement capacity across government. Core public service skills and capacity such as writing, communication, and data management, were also identified. The priorities are captured in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Skill requirements identified by Pacific security practitioners



The call by Pacific security leaders for improved collaboration and coordination resonates with the ‘Blue Pacific’ framing. As Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi described, the Blue Pacific is about more than healthy oceans; it is a regional narrative on the importance of connectedness, stewardship and taking responsibility (Tuilaepa, 2017). Collaboration is critical if Pacific security leaders are to address the complex security issues the region faces, but there is widespread recognition that the siloed operations of governments are inhibiting their ability to respond to threats or seize opportunities, particularly in relation to the development and implementation of their national security strategies.¹

Many of the practitioners saw the commitment by Pacific Island Forum countries to develop a national security strategy (under the Boe Declaration) as a useful mechanism to drive whole-of-government collaboration on security. There is a difference between developing a strategy and implementing with impact. All countries still appear to be searching for the commitment, authority and supporting institutions needed to drive multi-agency collaboration and inclusion, such as National Security Committees (which allow ministers to integrate and align a

whole-of-government security effort). While we heard strong interest in national security decision-making structures internationally, most felt that any architecture needed to be adapted to Pacific contexts in order to be useful and sustainable.

Several security leaders noted their communities would be safer and stronger if governments could coordinate with customary authority structures such as chiefs, churches, and women’s associations. Many practitioners saw customary structures as having the potential to play a powerful role in responding to domestic security issues, e.g. health, food, and community-based law enforcement. However, there was frustration with getting very different social and authority structures to align. One example of success we heard in Fiji was the appointment of the *Turaga Ni Koro* (village headmen) as primary search and rescue (SAR) coordinators for incidents at sea, with the authority to report and initiate SAR activities (Fiji Government 2019).

The most common direct request for assistance that PSC received from practitioners was to strengthen the national capacity to conduct strategic analyses. Pacific countries want to be able to say with confidence what their own security concerns are, rather than have someone external define them. They also want to engage decision-makers and develop a shared picture of security threats between the political class and other relevant stakeholders.

Several Pacific countries have ambitions to establish or enhance dedicated analytic capacity. Fiji established the National Integrated Coordination Centre (NICC) in October 2019 to ‘contextualise risks that may develop into a national crisis and recommend mitigating measures ... to manage ... and allow for a better situational awareness’ (Kumar 2019). Importantly, the view from several security leaders was that analytic skills would only be developed and sustained through the creation of a career pathway for analysts.

Policy development was a conversation that covered the design of new security policy and the challenges of implementing whole-of-government policy. We heard some examples of practices that appear contrary to effective policy development, including security policy proposals being presented to Cabinet for decision with no form of costing, and no requirement for proposals to consider or align with policies/responsibilities already in place. We also heard examples of strong policy processes and Pacific countries forming and driving partnerships to achieve their policy development goals. Several donor countries are active in this space, providing training and partnering to support the development of key pieces of national security policy. Indeed, the PSC has subsequently begun a dialogue with the Fiji Government to identify and reflect on the strengths of Fiji’s ‘home grown’ solutions to national security policy challenges (Sovasiga 2020).

Leadership was seen as a key requirement for Pacific countries and communities to secure their interests, although the characteristics of leadership required at the national level were not always clearly expressed. Pacific security practitioners explained that leadership development was a fiercely contested area, as regional donors see it as an

opportunity for access to and collaboration with current and emerging decision makers. The loudest voices on the need for leadership were the regional organisations, with most offering some form of leadership training.

There are a number of characteristics of leadership that practitioners believe are required to improve overall security outcomes: leaders need confidence and judgment in the face of political pressures; they need a vision for modernising operations and to be champions of change; and they need to plan, mentor and develop their replacements to ensure the strengthening of security capacity over time.

There was a persistent sense that something was missing from the current capacity development offerings on leadership, but it was difficult to identify the gaps without wider consultations about needs. PSC in partnership with lead agencies in-country ran the facilitated multi-agency workshops to identify security priorities. In these workshops, Pacific practitioners identified that they wanted to strengthen their leadership capacity by improving their ability to facilitate a shared security conversation and their skills to provide their own strategic analyses.

Practitioners also frequently raised the need for improved international engagement skills to meet the demands of a contested international environment. Practitioners noted that their countries could get more of what they need if their public services could better handle international engagement, diplomacy, and foreign policy. Some practitioners mentioned examples of where donors had negotiated projects directly with line agencies to take advantage of the limited understanding on the ground of strategic implications or broader national interests. One practitioner envisioned building a small cohort of policy advisers with the skills to engage donors and assess the risks arising from all new proposals.

Coherence and diversity: Security threats

The third striking insight from our conversations was how Pacific security practitioners defined the boundaries of security and what they identified as pressing threats. The security threats raised by practitioners reinforced the Boe Declaration categories of human, climate/environment, and traditional security. The conversations helped us to unpack how these high level categories were understood in the Pacific.

Human Security: Human security was the biggest focus, even if practitioners were unclear on the definition. Human security coalesced most acutely on the issues of health security, gender, and youth. Some Pacific practitioners made passing references to economic security and even labour mobility as human security issues, but those ideas were not further developed in our conversations. Given the anticipated impact of COVID-19 on Pacific economies, we will be listening for a shift in the dialogue and whether Pacific security leaders consider economic resilience an element of human security.

During the 2019 consultations – even prior to the 2019 Samoan Measles Epidemic and COVID-19 Pandemic – health security was already the most prominent single

security issue raised in all country consultations. Rather than infectious disease, practitioners prioritised Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease and cancer as primary health security threats. Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers and chronic respiratory diseases account for more than 80 per cent of all deaths in the region, 50 per cent of all premature mortality (those under 70 years of age), and impose heavy costs on economically constrained Pacific governments (World Health Organization, 2014; Magnusson and Patterson 2015).

NCDs also have a direct impact on the capacity of security services to address national security risks. Practitioners noted that long serving staff are often taken out of the promotion stream early due to NCDs (e.g. gout and diabetes) at a time when they could be making a significant contribution. In 2019, Fiji Police identified that 77 per cent of officer deaths from 2014–19 were from NCD-related illnesses (Chaudhary, 2019).

When gender-based violence was raised in our consultations, most security practitioners described it as a characteristic of their environments that needed attention, but not specifically as a security challenge of focus. Samoa is one country that has explicitly addressed gender-based violence as a security threat, noting it has reached the point where the volume of violence is having a ‘serious impact on development’ (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018:12). However, gender was also raised in a number of conversations as a solution to security challenges, namely the need for women to take an increasing role in security leadership. The Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police have identified ‘diversifying their workforce’ as a key action needed to improve operational policing (Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, 2020).

The youth bulge was considered a human security issue of high concern in Melanesia. The effects of low youth engagement/education/unemployment on law and order are strongly on the minds of some leaders, though practitioners from other parts of the Pacific did not raise youth as a security issue.

Climate/Environmental security: In the view of Pacific security practitioners, climate/environmental security covered a cluster of issues including climate resilience, disaster relief capacity, food security, and natural resource security (including fisheries). There was also widespread recognition of climate change as a systemic magnifier that is compounding a number of security issues in the domains of human and traditional security.

The Boe Declaration states that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific. Climate resilience was raised only a small number of times as a stand-alone issue. This was not because climate change is not inherently important, but because it was seen as a pervasive variable affecting all security issues. The low profile of climate security in our discussions also appears to reflect the significant amount of donor activity already occurring in this space. A number of security practitioners noted Pacific governments were experiencing ‘engagement fatigue’ on climate risk.

For a number of security practitioners, the focus was beyond climate risk to the vulnerability that a lack of humanitarian relief and disaster response (HADR) capacity has created for Pacific countries. Some practitioners noted the challenges of coordinating joint disaster relief/recovery efforts between an increasing number of actors, including police, defence, border services, health, agriculture, rural affairs, as well as some NGOs. Several practitioners noted that the combination of high vulnerability and coordination requirements had resulted in establishing the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster, a unique United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)–coordinated system that operates on a ‘permanent standby’ basis rather than only activating in disasters. Practitioners across the Pacific also emphasised the need – but also the challenges involved – to bring civil society into disaster relief efforts. At a regional level, the PICP Secretariat has identified HADR response capability in the 2020–24 PICP Strategic Plan as critical for implementing stronger security policy.

For the majority of Pacific security practitioners, food security was an element of climate resilience, disaster response, livelihood security, or biosecurity. A minority linked food security and food quality to the broader issue of health security. Fisheries is a crucial part of the security conversation given its place as a crucial source of national revenue for a number of Pacific states (primarily offshore fisheries) and food security (primarily coastal fisheries). However, there was limited discussion on fisheries in isolation during our consultations. Similar to climate security, the assumption is that fisheries are an environmental, transnational and livelihood security issue where Pacific countries are asserting their interests and are well served by extant partnerships to address and manage risks (Aqorau 2019).

Traditional Security: The Boe Declaration lists transnational crime and cyber security as traditional security challenges in need of attention. The additional high priority issue raised during the 2019 consultations by Pacific practitioners was border security. Rather than as a specific security challenge, geopolitical contest was commonly referred to as the increasingly difficult context for pursuing security and an opportunity to be leveraged.

The two pervasive transnational crime focal areas for practitioners were drug trafficking and human trafficking. Our conversations echoed academic concerns about the lack of quality data to measure the scale or impact of transnational crime in the Pacific (Chelliah and Prasad 2017; UNODC 2016). Practitioners in several Pacific states prioritised drug smuggling as a focus for law enforcement cooperation, however it was unclear what level of harm Pacific Islands states experienced as a result of the domestic spill over of trafficked drugs. A practitioner from an NGO working to counter people smuggling admitted the organisation has a number of programs in place in the Pacific that are based on anecdotal evidence, with limited understanding of the true drivers of human trafficking in the region. Despite these concerns, there was still confidence in regional agencies such as Pacific Transnational Crime

Coordination Centre, Forum Fisheries Agency, and the Pacific Community to address transnational crime.

Cyber security was regularly raised in consultations, but the capacity needs in this area were unclear. The recent or forthcoming connection of undersea cables to Pacific states were a major driver of cyber risk perception. Security practitioners considered the Pacific’s cyber security risks to be: financial crime and identity fraud; sexual exploitation; risks to large financial organisations; and political/social defamation via social media. Notably, practitioners focused their attention on the cyber risks facing the community (cyber safety) and not state sponsored cyber risks. One Pacific academic working on technology issues considered that the size of Pacific states and institutions, the limited ability to support national Computer Emergency Response Teams (CERTs), and limited computer science capabilities created a sustained vulnerability for the region. As a relatively unformed area of security response, cyber security may be an area ripe for regional cooperation and further assistance from donors.²

Pacific countries are approaching maritime and land border security with a range of objectives, including: asserting sovereignty and territorial integrity; addressing migration risks; mitigating transnational crime; managing health and biosecurity risks; and collecting revenue. Practitioners noted maritime and border security are issues of high donor interest and come with a volume of training/education offerings. Practitioners appeared to have a degree of confidence that these partnerships offered Pacific countries some of the resources needed to strengthen border capacity. However, there was some concern that having multiple partners could contribute to fragmentation, disconnect in systems, and conflict over access.

A stronger Pacific security agenda

The Pacific is a crowded and complex space, but Pacific countries want to make the most of this moment of focus. The confidence from regional successes has percolated down to the individual security practitioner, resulting in an assertive security agenda. The uncertainty and volatility of the security environment has focused the conversation on skills development, particularly the soft skills of coordination and collaboration, combined with leadership in a time of uncertainty, and deeper analytic capacity.

There is a coherent conception of ‘Pacific security’ captured in the Boe Declaration. But the coherence should not be overstated as it butts up against national level diversity and complexity. Human security caused the most concern for practitioners, with climate/environmental security considered a pervasive and systemic driver of risk. Traditional security issues were of concern to Pacific leaders, but the level of harm arising from traditional security threats was difficult to quantify and there appeared to be greater confidence that these risks could be managed through partnerships.

Pacific Island countries and leaders were remarkably open and candid during PSC’s initial consultations. It is yet another example of the willingness of Pacific practitioners

to take charge of the conversation and shape the environment towards their interests and security outcomes. The security conversation will need to be sustained as a growing range of threats emerge in the Pacific, some of which are existential. Through the conversation, the people of the Pacific are shaping the response to their security challenges, and building the tools and relationships for a more resilient future.

Notes

- 1 It was not all gloom on coordination. Pacific practitioners welcomed the re-establishment of a coordination mechanism at the regional level with the Pacific Islands Forum Official Sub-committee on Regional Security that was reactivated in 2019.
- 2 There are a number of donor initiatives already underway, such as Cyber Safety Pasifika funded by the Australian Federal Police <https://www.cybersafetypasifika.org/>

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