



Cook Islands Regional Workshop on National Security Strategies Rarotonga Communique 26 - 27 June 2023

Kia orana

We gathered in Rarotonga in the Cook Islands to celebrate and congratulate the government and people of the Cook Islands on the launch of the inaugural Cook Islands National Security Policy 2023-2026.

The Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Henry Puna, welcomed the Cook Islands' initiative in addressing the crucial issue of national security, saying:

The Pacific region faces a unique set of challenges when it comes to security. As our Leaders highlighted in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, our nations are confronted with a range of threats, both traditional and emerging, that require a comprehensive and collaborative approach. The Cook Islands, by formulating this national strategy, has taken a significant step towards safeguarding the well-being and prosperity of its people.

The Cook Islands' Prime Minister and Chair of the Pacific Islands Leaders Forum, The Honourable Mark Brown, noted that:

... the delivery of national and regional aspirations ... cannot be divorced from the realities of international political and social dynamics ... It remains incumbent on us to ensure that our Pacific voice is clearly heard.

Over two days we also gathered to talk about the security challenges we face in our region and to share our experiences in developing our own national security strategies.

We acknowledge the Boe Declaration on Regional Security 2018, the Boe Declaration Action Plan 2019, the 2050 Strategy on the Blue Pacific Continent, and The Security Outlook Report 2022-2023.

We recognise that these documents form the basis for us gathering for the next two days to discuss efforts at the national level to make our region safe and secure for our people.

We heard from our regional organisations on how they can help us, and from experts who have travelled this journey with us. We confirmed that there is a wide network of partners, experts and organisations to whom we can reach out to for help.

We relied on the wisdom of our region's leaders and the security priorities they have identified for our region.

We are guided by their wisdom on an expanded concept of security, both traditional and non-traditional where they emphasise human security, environmental and resource security, transnational crime, and cyber security as our security priorities.

We also recognised that in addition to shared/common challenges, national security strategies will also reflect each country's unique context.

We recognise our leaders' wisdom in identifying climate change as the single, greatest threat to Pacific Islanders' livelihoods, security, and wellbeing.

We respect their call in the Boe Declaration to develop national security strategies. These strategies enhance regional transparency, strengthen our basis for new levels of cooperation in our region, and through greater clarity on our own priorities will better guide engagement with external partners. We affirm that our strategies must be nationally led, and nationally driven.

We congratulate and commend the Cook Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu—and soon, New Zealand—on developing their national security strategies.

We encourage and offer our help to those Forum members who have started (Fiji, Tonga, Niue), and those about to embark on this journey (Kiribati, Nauru, Republic of the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu) to develop and implement their strategies, recognising that collectively we secure our region by our work at the national level. We recognise the strong basis of support in our existing partnerships, call on our partners to assist with appropriate resourcing, and thank them for the solidarity they have shown.

We commit to ongoing and open dialogue, including in-person gatherings, to continue to share our experiences, maintain momentum, and help and encourage each other.

We noted that:

1. Strong and sustained political will is essential to support the process of developing and implementing a national security strategy. Leaders can help to maintain momentum by clearly allocating responsibility and accountability for the implementation of strategic tasks to identified positions and individuals. Annual reports, including reports to parliament, can support transparency. Consultation across political boundaries, for instance shared horizon scanning and risk assessments, can assist with smooth transitions from one government to another.

2. A meeting of national security officials such as this gathering of the national security coordinators and officials is critical in ensuring that the region maintains momentum on the development and implementation of national security strategies. It also creates spaces for regional discussions on national security challenges and opportunities, to promote shared understanding of security issues. We call on the Pacific Islands Forum to consider this in its Review of the Regional Architecture.

3. The sensitivity of national security information can present an obstacle to collaboration. We agree that better information sharing between and within nations is vital for the achievement of our regional and national security goals. We note improvements in information sharing among some regional organisations and look to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to provide guidance on appropriate frameworks to guide better information sharing at the regional and national levels. Moreover, improved regional capacity for analysis needs to be complemented at the national level. We note that several countries have formalised protective security frameworks, others are working on it, while the rest are encouraged to consider.

4. **Both traditional and expanded concepts of security require cross agency collaboration.** This means that **whole of government** approach is essential. This requires considerable cultural change and strong leadership.

5. **A whole of society approach recognises that our communities are critical to success.** We want their concerns about human security, climate change and other Boe Declaration priorities to be reflected in our strategies. Guidance on techniques for achieving productive consultations would be useful. Preparation of consultation strategies can help to focus discussions — but we must be open to conversations opening unexpected but important issues. For instance, men and women have different roles and life experiences. They will often have different but valuable perspectives on security issues.

6. **National security strategies need to be accompanied by implementation plans and risk analysis.** Priorities need to be identified and resources allocated for the 'end to end' capability. This means that our consultations and working groups need to include finance and planning colleagues.

7. **Security situations change** and so our strategies should be adaptable. Strong monitoring and evaluation processes will help to identify where change is needed. Regular horizon scanning and analysis can also play important roles.

We thank the Cook Islands for undertaking to present this Communique to the next meeting of the Forum Sub Committee on Regional Security for its consideration and decisions on next steps.

Finally, we commend our esteemed Cook Islands colleagues on their leadership in bringing us together from across the Blue Pacific Continent. We thank them for their generous hospitality and creation of a collegiate and supportive workshop.

Meitaki