Security through a Pacific lens

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Introduction

The security challenges affecting the Pacific island region are steadily mounting, most recently the combination of COVID-19 and Tropical Cyclones Harold and Yasa have strained health systems, economies and services to near breaking point. In the words of the current Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Dame Meg Taylor:

> For the Pacific, COVID-19 amplified the persistent vulnerabilities that continue to challenge our resilient development and our security. Therefore, far from being the cause of current social, economic and political challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, in some cases deepening and broadening them, and in other cases accelerating their arrival.[1]

The interplay of different security challenges has long been appreciated in the Pacific. Recently, it was highlighted by Pacific island leaders' 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*[2] which defined an 'expanded concept of security'. Climate security was recognised as the primary threat to regional security, but other security concerns were also noted – human security, environmental/resource security, traditional security (transnational crime, cyber security, and border protection). The complex interplay between these security challenges and limited resources raises the need for regional and national cooperation to build resilience.

Some persistent and pervasive security threats, such as climate change, require commitment at multiple scales. International action is a necessity for effective mitigation and adaptation, and national and local action are required for adaptation and sustainable development. Resources for both are inadequate. Even prior to the harsh economic hit of COVID-19, financial and mitigation commitments to address climate change impacts required 'scaling up' to adequately address small island state vulnerability (Watson and Schalatek 2020) and meet global financial commitments.[3] Resources are likely to decline or be diverted now with the mounting COVID-19 induced financial woes of donors and Pacific governments.

The urgency for action across a range of security issues remains a consistent theme in leaders' statements, but also consistent are differences over priorities in a very diverse region with competing interests both within the region and between regional players. Donors often focus on traditional security issues such as border security and political stability, partially to protect their interests and to deter foreign powers perceived to have competing priorities in the region (Hunt 2017; Fry 2019:167–189). Climate and human security issues get donor attention, but often in an uncoordinated manner that is not systemic and enduring. The Boe Declaration is an effort to get a better balance of attention between different forms of security. In particular, there is a push by the Pacific island governments for stronger global action on climate change consistent with their primary security concern, and their disillusionment with the commitments of the global community, including Australia.

Advancing security issues of high priority to the Pacific often require coalition diplomacy and advocacy on the international stage – and those coalitions need to reach beyond traditional partners, evident from the Pacific's demands for climate and environment protection action, and their leveraging of likeminded nations such as those in the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). But there are also considerable security challenges at home. Conflicts over resources and land, tension among ethnic groups and power elites and corruption have destabilised governments around the region. Human security issues related to health, education, livelihoods and equity also pull at the social fabric and can be destabilising.

With limited government reach and resources, but strong subsistence and traditional communities, cultural integrity and traditional ways remain key to the

Pacific security agenda. The 'Pacific Way' (Mara 1997) reflects a commitment to cultural values and relationships that can lay the foundation for social stability, a view reiterated in the published National Security Strategies of Samoa and Vanuatu. Fiji's Prime Minister Bainimarama projected the importance of culture and traditional approaches onto the international stage when he introduced the Fijian concept of 'Talanoa' to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP23) (Talanoa Dialogue 2017). This initiative, and the 'Blue Pacific' reframing of Pacific security and development issues put a high value on narratives that convey security issues and approaches through a Pacific lens.

This article analyses some of the prominent issues and concerns that are shaping current security discourses and their practical implications. What is revealed is a stronger Pacific framing of security issues, but the security agenda is often not well coordinated between sectors and levels of government. Pressing domestic security issues related to human security (e.g., health and gender) struggle to get policy and practical traction. The predominantly state-centric approach to security can exclude key community groups from shaping the agenda and contributing to resilience. Stronger domestic action, more diverse partnerships, and new or reinvigorated platforms that support collaborative action can all help create a more stable and resilient future.

Security through a Pacific lens

The Boe Declaration provides a succinct overview of security challenges affecting Pacific islands forum countries, but rather than breaking new ground, it reasserts the security issues which have long been of concern in the region as reflected in previous Declarations (Box 1). The Pacific narrative and lens on security have been remarkably consistent across the full range of security issues since independence. A range of human security topics have been raised in past Declarations, but often left to nations to deal with the delicate issues of sovereignty, services, and equity. New issues such as cyber security are emerging but do not yet rival more enduring security concerns on the policy agenda. Quantitative analyses, such as presented in Box 1, while informative, still require a closer look at the trends and the socio-political dynamics that drive security agendas. In the subsections to follow, four key security issues are explored in more detail: regional collaboration, climate change, human security and geopolitics.

Regional collaboration: The ideal and the reality

Approaches to Pacific security are still predominantly top-down – from international and regional declarations to national and local actions. They often become 'lost in translation' when regional priorities transition to the local level (PIFS 2013). Competing priorities and the advancement of vested and elite interests are national security stumbling blocks, particularly evident in fishery, forestry and mining sectors where granting licences can benefit a few at the cost of community and environmental security, as appears to be occurring in PNG's MOU with China for a fishery industrial park in Western province (Smith 2020).

National action on regional security issues falters if there are perceived threats to sovereignty resulting in a reluctance to share national information and data to address trans-boundary security challenges, for example sharing data about oceanic resource exploitation across sectors. The need for regional cooperation is a recurring theme in the Pacific island security narratives since the establishment of the Pacific Islands Forum. The *1992 Honiara Declaration on Law Enforcement Cooperation* called for a more 'comprehensive, integrated and collaborative approach to counter transnational crime threats'. Later in 2016 the *UN Transnational Organised Crime in the Pacific* report again noted that cooperation among PICs would help to develop more robust collaborative and independent efforts to fight transnational crime and cross-border threats (UNODC 2016:77–81). Recent research has highlighted that when law enforcement agencies collaborate across jurisdictions progress is possible, such as the recent successful drug seizures in Tonga and the French Pacific, and the progress of the Asia–Pacific Group on Money Laundering; and when security responses are 'networked' across formal and community sectors systems, such as police, private security and village leaders, resilience is enhanced (Walton and Dinnen 2020).

While coordinated regional action on security issues raises delicate sovereignty issues, it is not an insurmountable challenge. The *2000 Biketawa Declaration* enabled the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a collaborative effort across Forum island countries, led by Australia. There is no doubt the collective action had a significant impact on the security of Solomon Islands and the policing capacity of the region (Putt et al. 2018), but the power balance between Pacific island and Western influences on security framing and interventions was raised (yet again) by a Pacific Island Forum review:

> Though RAMSI is often seen as a stellar example of regional cooperation, the mission might have been better served by drawing more constructively on that regional element, not simply in terms of personnel, but also as regards command structure (Fraenkel et al. 2014).

Resource constraints at the national level often make support from regional and donor agencies a necessary, though not sufficient, measure. The PIF Forum Officials Sub-Committee on Regional Security provides a platform for dialogue among Forum security agencies and stakeholders to work together. It is also a means to encourage joint training and capacity building across security agencies dealing with law and order, customs and immigration. While this has value, well-coordinated action, information sharing and strategic analysis across countries remains weak with some notable exceptions such as the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, and the Pacific Islands Forum's Fisheries Agencies' Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre.

The *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and its Action Plan attempts to bridge the regional–national security space, recognise the growing geopolitical stresses, and reiterate the need for collaboration driven by Pacific states. The commitment by all nations to implement national security strategies has the potential to achieve multiple objectives that often undermine regional initiatives: nations

translate regional security priorities into national security strategies tailored to place and values (to date through intense community consultation). Leadership and commitment is advanced through a multi-agency national security secretariat; and, national security strategies can better shape donor engagement and link to budget and policy priorities.

To date only two national security strategies have been produced and published in response to the Boe Declaration – Samoa (2018) and Vanuatu (2019) – both give high priority to issues related to climate security, human security, cyber security/safety, and border security (Figure 1). More strategies are forthcoming in 2021. They have the potential to provide a more assertive shaping of the security agenda by PICs.

Climate security: Falling short globally and at home

Pacific leaders frequently express frustration about the lack of responsiveness to their calls for action on climate change, an existential threat to many Pacific communities. The urgency for action is increasing as recent research suggests that climate change may be occurring more rapidly than previously assumed (Cheng et al. 2019). At the most recent UN annual climate change conference, COP25, the former Tuvaluan Prime Minister lamented ongoing 'climate denialism', and still more explicitly, the 2019 Pacific Island Forum *Kainaki II Declaration* didn't mince words with its clear title "Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now", calling for international action on emissions reductions, climate finance, and mechanisms for loss and damage compensation.

The PICs have played a strong and assertive role in international climate forums. They have leveraged international groups to project their voices beyond what their relatively small political/economic heft would predict. The UN Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) group has leveraged resources and carefully coordinated negotiation strategies to magnify influence. Strategic alliances have also helped to project their concerns and preferred solutions onto the global stage, including AOSIS, the G77 plus China, and the UN Asia Pacific Group.

These non-traditional (or perhaps more correctly, post-colonial) alliances are deemed to be necessary when security interests diverge from more traditional partners. While PICs have increased their influence on climate negotiations, frustrations remain at global outcomes and the increasing climate impacts on national security and development prospects. The ADB (2013) estimates that by 2100 in a business-as-usual scenario, climate change will cost the Pacific 12.7 per cent of GDP each year, dwarfing any economic growth – the human toll is incalculable. Predicted sea level rises threaten the very existence of atolls.

But challenges are not all on the global stage. Domestic action to improve climate security has been mixed in its efficacy. Sea walls have shifted impacts, not always eliminated them (Piggott-McKellar et al. 2020); rapid urbanisation without strong planning is creating more climate vulnerability (Connell and Keen, 2020); and water, sanitation and food security are being adversely affected by

the interplay of population pressures, resource limitations and climate change (PIFS 2018a). As climatic events get more severe, they will continue to magnify existing security and development deficits. Much more political, human and financial investment will be required to build local resilience.

With few resources, PICs are tapping into global climate funds and donor supported programs to enhance local action, but resources continue to fall short of needs. At the national level, disaster risk reduction policies and funds are reducing damage costs and providing a means to build resilience (PIFS 2018a), but future prospects still look grim. The interaction of climate, human and resource strains are likely to result in destabilising trends, including a decline in coastal fisheries productivity, rising costs of extreme climate events, and exacerbation of health challenges (PIFS 2018b). Making better progress locally will require a transformation of resource management practices and far better engagement with community groups able to enhance social connectivity, sustainability and action.

Human security: security for whom?

Human security issues are pressing in the Pacific, and predominantly left for national action, particularly in the areas of health, gender inequality, urbanisation, and informality/social exclusion, to name only a few. On the health front, activities to address COVID-19 and other infectious diseases are increasing, but health issues related to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) remain poorly addressed although they too are at epidemic levels. NCDs – heart disease, cancers, respiratory diseases and diabetes – cause up to 80 per cent of deaths in the region (The Lancet 2019), and the trends are moving in the wrong direction, or improving too slowly.

Gender security also poses significant and persistent challenges despite occasional regional and national commitments, for example, the *2012 PIF Gender Equality Declaration*, and national support for the international *Conventions on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW). Gender-based violence and inequality remain at globally high (and unacceptable) levels. Greater security will require systemic change affecting values, leadership and economic opportunities for women. There are some inspiring activities such as the UN Women's work with market vendors and action against gender-based violence, but we have not yet tipped the scales to transformational change.

All these human security issues are related to another concerning trend that has the potential to be destabilising – growing inequality in the region. Limited economic opportunities constrain the ability of households to respond to external shocks and invest in health, education and shelter (Dornan 2020). Social protection measures in the Pacific are few, with most reliant on customary networks and social capital, yet recent research has questioned how strong and enduring these more traditional safety nets are in the rapidly urbanising Pacific (Mecartney and Connell 2017). Following COVID-19, more social protection programs are emerging (ESCAP 2020), but fine tuning is

still needed given that access can be limited for those without formal employment or land titles, or who are among the growing youth bulge.

Geopolitics: messy, but not a sea-change

In 2017, the PIF leaders added a new perspective to the security narrative with their commitment to the 'Blue Pacific' to advance future prosperity and wellbeing through a stronger collective vision and action agenda. The PIF Secretary General, Dame Meg Taylor (2019) applied the concept to the geopolitical competition between Western countries and China. She observed that prosperity and security was about balancing external engagements, the right to be 'friends to all' and to nurture genuine relationships with those countries that offer development and economic opportunities. China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) is particularly appealing with its promise of large infrastructure investment, but it will not be free from external influence, elite capture or corruption.

Western jitters about the loss of influence and the growing reach of China in the region, has resulted in accusations of 'strategic denial' (Herr 1986; Fry 2019). Critical assessments of Chinese engagement in the region have urged more evidence-based analysis – with Fox and Dornan (2018) arguing that fears of the China debt trap may be overblown, though the trends are concerning. Those chasing economic development through loans and debt could contribute to national instability if elite interests, accountability frameworks, and resource exploitation activities are not well managed, as Pala (2020) argues in the case of Chinese investment in Kiribati. The switch to recognise China over Taiwan in September 2019 by Solomon Islands also posed political and security divisions reminiscent of the ethnic tensions that proceeded the Tensions (Cavanough 2020).

The Blue Pacific concept brings the security of the vast ocean spaces of the Pacific islands to the fore, along with resource contestation. The Blue Pacific covers more than 98 per cent of the region. Many tuna rich countries of the Pacific islands will find their revenues dropping sharply as climate change forces fish to migrate to cooler waters, and unregulated and unreported fishing persists – currently draining over US$100 million per annum from Pacific island countries (MRAG 2016). Many PICs look to their traditional allies to help manage resource contestation and degradation through regional and bilateral assistance, such as the Pacific Maritime Assistance program (patrol boats and aerial surveillance to protect ocean spaces).

Partnerships can help enhance security and balance geopolitical pressures. The Pacific island countries have proven adept on the international stage, particularly on climate and ocean security. Partnerships with traditional partners have remained strong and productive, but on occasions also strained. Australia remains the primary development partner and an enduring friend with historical and cultural ties. But differing priorities and perceptions can boil over, as evident from the Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele's (2018) reflections on Western analyses of Pacific island relations with China:

> …some might say there is a patronising nuance, believing Pacific nations did not know what they were doing, or were incapable of reaping benefits of close relationships with countries that will be in their region for some time to come.

Stronger security outcomes could emerge if there was better cooperation between those with common interests. There are a few good examples which have yielded positive security outcomes, including multi-nation ocean surveillance exercises, the recent COVID-19 response under the Pacific Humanitarian Corridor, and the successful collaboration of fisheries rich nations under the Parties to the Nauru Agreement. But much more needs to be done to maximise security dividends from regional efforts through stronger regional architecture that is well linked to national institutions.

Security reflections

The concept of security in the Pacific has always been broad and even prescient about the complex interplay between different drivers of instability. There has been a consistent desire by PICs to enhance security across environmental, human and traditional areas, and to tap into genuine and enduring partnerships that can support national efforts. While regional initiatives are important, the main action on security will occur at the national level and the success of regional initiatives will depend on buy-in from national leaders and strong national integration.

What appears to be persistently weak at all levels are the collaborative platforms that are trusted and can support security cooperation between national and local levels in ways that are inclusive of non-government and community groups, and can coordinate action between regional and national levels. There is some promising movement with greater inclusion of community and non-government groups in priority setting by the Pacific Island Forum, and in responses to major climatic events through the multi-stakeholder national disaster response systems that span global to local.

It is not possible to devise the 'perfect' security system which can act on every security threat, but the broader definition of security under the Boe Declaration and the emerging national security strategies are a positive step forward. Creating documents will not be enough, there also needs to be the institutional architecture and policy support to translate the words to action, and boost accountability. There have been some exemplary first steps in relations to Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Response, Pacific Transnational Crime Units, and Pacific Fisheries Surveillance Centres – we just need to get better at sharing the positive lessons, working together, and leveraging efforts for transformational change.

Box 1: Pacific Voices – Security Issues in PIF Leaders' Declarations

Over the last 50 years, the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Declarations have dealt with a wide range of security themes (see chart below). The most recent Declaration dealing directly with regional security, the Boe Declaration, explicitly recognises the 'expanded concept of security', but this is not new. The Pacific security lens has always been 'expanded' and reached far beyond issues of national border protection, law and order, and geopolitics.

Climate change has been recognised as a major security challenge for over three decades. Since it was first mentioned in the 1988 PIF Leaders' Declaration, climate change has been high on the security agenda, when it was noted that 'The Forum expressed concern about climatic changes in the South Pacific and their potential for serious social and economic disruption in countries of the region'.

Unsurprisingly, resource and environment security have consistently been raised in Leaders' Declarations given the strong cultural associations with land and water, and thriving subsistent economies. Similarly, the desirability of collective action has also been regularly recognised, if not always translated into action. Even geopolitics and donor engagement/external relationships have figured large – but in recent times the challenges of balancing external and internal agendas have been far more assertively advanced.

New security issues are creeping into the Declarations in recognition of a globally connected and digitised world that is reaching its tentacles into the Pacific, creating development opportunities but also new security challenges (e.g. cybersecurity and transnational crime).

Chart: Security References in PIF Leaders' Declarations
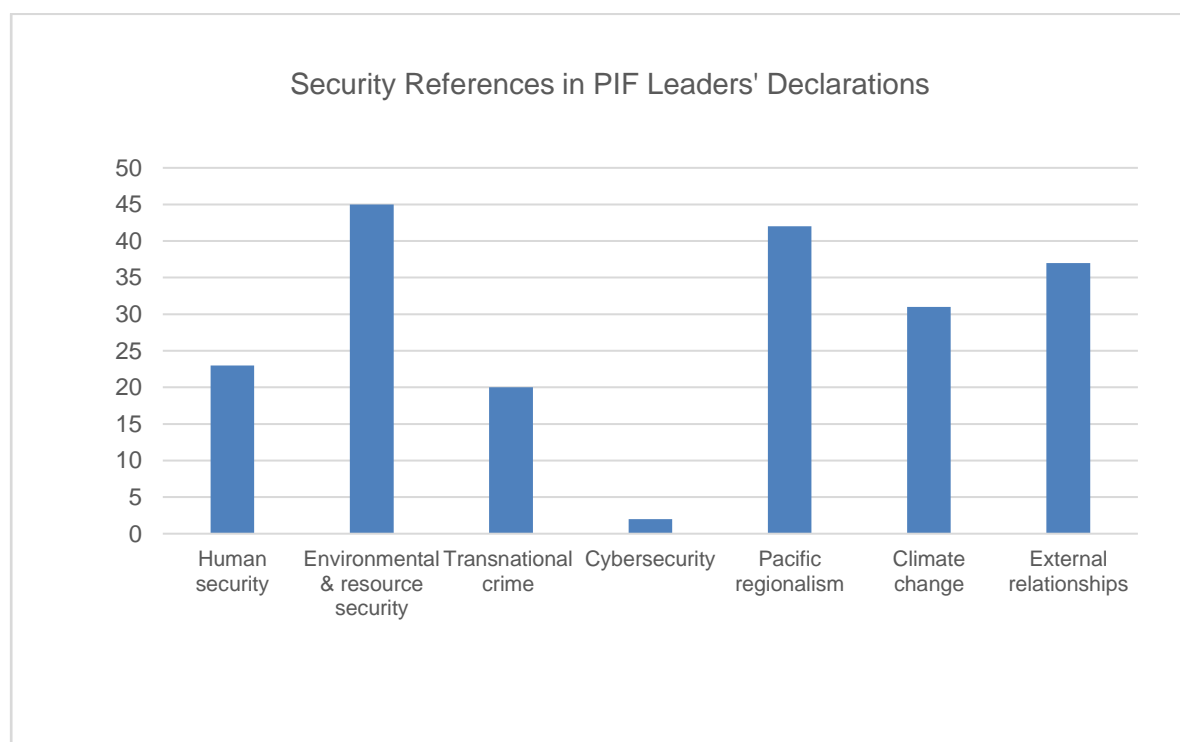
Note: Only themes that had significant text were recorded in this rapid assessment, not those security issues merely in a list, or just mentioned in passing.

Figure 1: The Pacific Island 'Expanded Security Concept' and issues highlighted in National Security Strategies
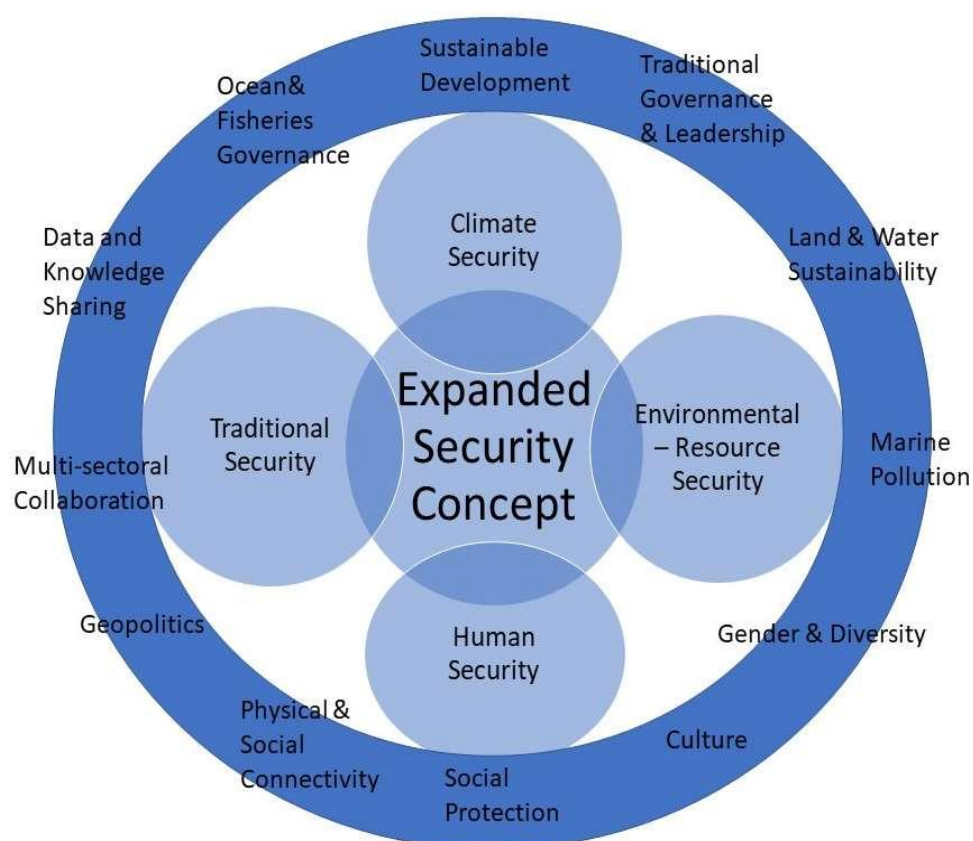
Note: The graphic is an adaptation of the Expanded Security Concept from the Pacific Islands Forum Boe Declaration on Regional Security. The outer circle provides examples of issues given prominent attention in the published National Security Strategies of Samoa and Vanuatu which were written in response to the Boe Declaration.

Notes

1 Meg Taylor 2020, Introductory Remarks by the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum at the 2020 Forum Economic Ministers Meeting (FEMM). 11 August 2020. Available at: https://www.forumsec.org/2020/08/11/introductory-remarks-by-the-secretary-general-of-the-pacific-islands-forum-dame-meg-taylor-at-the-2020-forum-economic-ministers-meeting/

2 Available at: https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/

3 See WRI, Global Climate Fund tracker at: https://www.wri.org/resources/data-visualizations/green-climate-fund-contributions-calculator-20

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