Australia and security in the Pacific Islands

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The Pacific Islands have traditionally been seen as impinging on Australia's national security in two distinct but intertwined ways: first by serving (potentially or actually, willingly or unwillingly) as a platform or vector through which hostile external parties might threaten Australia; and second, by engaging Australian interests because of their own internal instability and vulnerability. Against this background, Australia faced a range of commonly-cited challenges in the region in 2020, including policy gaps that exist between Australia and many Pacific Island countries on issues such as climate change, and the role and influence of China in the region.

The Australian government's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper set out a vision of 'helping to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions', something it described as 'essential to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific'. More recently, Australia's 2020 Defence Strategic Update outlined Australia's aim not only to work with its neighbours and partners, but to 'shape our environment' and to 'deter actions against our interests' against an array of threats and potential threats.[1] While in no way suggesting that these statements represent the totality of Australia's current approach in the region, it is nevertheless helpful to consider them as part of Australia's broader approach for enhanced engagement with the Pacific Islands region, or its 'Pacific Step-up'.

Both sets of statements are consistent with long-standing Australian anxieties about the ways in which the Pacific Islands bear on Australia's national security that are noted above. Even so, both also suggest a change of *tone* – at least – compared to the way the Pacific islands region has traditionally been considered in Australian policy statements. Both statements come against the background of a changing strategic environment in the region and in particular the rise of China: the Strategic Update is notably frank in describing the 'deterioration' in Australia's strategic environment in recent years (The Pacific chapter of the Foreign Policy White Paper, drafted in less strident times, referred rather more coyly to 'increasing competition for influence' in the region). At the same time, it would be a misreading of Australian policy to see the language in either of these two key statements as driven solely by China's rise in the region; both the Foreign Policy White Paper and the Strategic Update explicitly describe ways in which the internal stability and development trajectories of Pacific Island countries (at least those closest to Australia geographically, in particular) continue to have implications for Australia's national security and to demand policy responses.

Challenges

It has become a commonplace observation that Australia's relations with the Pacific have come under stress in recent years due to a range of factors. The issue of climate change is an obvious starting point; although there have been tensions between Australia and its Pacific neighbours on this issue for many years, it is clear that they have become much more acute of late. The Pacific Islands Forum's 2018 Boe Declaration, which describes climate change as 'the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific', is often held out as emblematic of, and even in some senses as bringing to a head, the gap between Australian and Pacific island perceptions and policy in this area (see for instance Fry 2019). Differences over the issue of climate change at the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting were particularly acute, and received widespread media coverage at the time.

Equally, many Pacific island countries do not share Australia's geostrategic outlook or anxieties, or at least aren't prepared to say so publicly. For some, this is a matter of foreign policy doctrine as a number of Pacific island countries explicitly espouse 'friends to all, enemies to none' foreign policies. Three countries of key interest to Australia (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji) are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, underlining their desire to be seen as independent actors internationally.

Some leaders, such as Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa, have expressed scepticism over the relevance of concepts that are important to Australia, such as the Indo–Pacific, arguing that such constructs simply miss the point in the Pacific, and do not reflect Pacific Island priorities. In a 2018 speech, Tuilaepa declared:

> under the flagship of our Blue Pacific identity, we are building a collective voice amidst the geopolitical din on the existential threat of climate change that looms for all of our Pacific family.… The renewed vigour with which a 'Free and Open Indo–Pacific strategy' is being advocated and pursued leaves us with much uncertainty. For the Pacific there is a real risk of privileging 'Indo' over the 'Pacific' (Tuilaepa 2018).

Tuilaepa has also spoken on behalf of many Pacific Islanders in expressing concern that they were being asked to choose sides in the burgeoning strategic contest between the United States (and its allies) and China, and in doing so risked impairing their autonomy and agency as sovereign states. He was quoted in a 2019 interview as saying 'Their [i.e. Australia and its allies] enemies are not our enemies.' In a similar vein, Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor stated in early 2019:

> I reject the terms of the dilemma which presents the Pacific with a choice between a China alternative and our traditional partners. Unfortunately, this framing remains the dominant narrative in the public debate about our region in the context of today's geostrategic competition… In general, Forum members view China's increased actions in the region as a positive development, one that offers greater options for financing and

> development opportunities – both directly in partnership with China, and indirectly through the increased competition in our region (Taylor 2019 (I)).

Taylor's studied even-handedness in the face of rising geostrategic tension in the region has led her to be more than obliquely critical of aspects of Australia's approach in the region, as in another 2019 speech where she declared:

> we continue to observe a multitude of security measures and initiatives introduced in the region, including the expansion of the naval bases at Lombrum on Manus Island and in northern Australia. Reportedly, there is also a proposal for a naval base at Stirling Island in Western Solomon Islands. Perhaps, an apt observation is that of Vanuatu's Foreign Minister the Honourable Ralph Regenvanu who has questioned this 'increasing militarisation of the (Pacific' (Taylor 2019 (II)).

This survey of Pacific views is cursory and selective at best but it nevertheless illustrates a gap that undoubtedly exists between Australia's security perceptions and ambitions and that of key Pacific Island countries and regional leaders. Indeed, some (e.g., Fry 2019) have even argued that Australia's policies have been counterproductive, driving countries such as Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Samoa into even closer engagement with China. So is this gap unbridgeable? To what extent does it diminish Australia's ability to pursue its security interests in the Pacific Islands, and in particular, its objectives of integration, shaping and deterring?

Challenges in context

The first answer to this question should be to note that disagreements and tensions between Australia and countries in the region are hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, for those with long enough memories, this might almost be seen as situation normal as there never was a golden age of perfect comity between Australia and its Pacific Island neighbours to contrast to today's state of affairs. Noisy headlines have long been a staple in the region's relations with its large neighbour. Disagreements should not necessarily be seen as undermining key relationships or put forward as definitive indicators of declining influence.

Second, while Pacific Island countries may be united at a regional level on the question of climate change, it is much less clear that this issue is a deal-breaker in Australia's bilateral relationships with Pacific Island countries. Indeed, there would seem to be little evidence to support the case that climate change stands in the way of productive bilateral relationships. If much of the region's talking is done at the regional level, much of its business is done at the bilateral level.[2]

In addition, not all Pacific Island countries adopt a tone of moral equivalence on the question of China's role in the region. As has been noted by more than one commentator, Palau's former President Remengesau has explicitly emphasised that his country's:

> steadfast reliability makes Palau and the other Freely Associated States natural allies in the Pentagon's new Indo–Pacific strategy, a plan to counter Chinese expansionism and its militarisation of islands in the region' (Quoted in Firth 2020).

In September 2020, Remengesau was reported (PACNEWS 2020) as calling for the United States to establish 'a regular US military presence' in his country (one wonders what the Forum Secretary General made of this). Former PNG Prime Minister Rabbie Namaliu was recently asked whether PNG might ultimately have to choose between Australia and China. His response, while emphasising his country's traditional 'friends to all' foreign policy, was that in the end 'he did not believe it would be difficult for [PNG] to make that choice' (Nicholson 2020).

Third, while it is true that Australia's broader geostrategic interests in the Pacific are not explicitly addressed in the Boe Declaration, at the same time, they are not necessarily inconsistent with it. The Declaration acknowledges 'a dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region' but it does not take an overt position on that other than in carefully-worded language (e.g., respecting 'the sovereign right of every Member to conduct its national affairs free of external interference and coercion'; reaffirming 'the right of Members to individually and collectively address security issues and concerns'; and reaffirming 'the importance of the rules-based international order founded on the UN Charter, adherence to relevant international law, and resolution of international disputes by peaceful means'). To acknowledge that Australia has different security interests or priorities compared to those of Pacific Island countries (whether considered individually or expressed collectively in statements such as the Boe Declaration) is not to deny the legitimacy of either set of interests or priorities. So it would be an over-reading to see the Boe Declaration as antithetical to Australian interests in the region, or to the pursuit of those interests.

In fact the evidence suggests that the Boe Declaration has helped to provide a common language and vocabulary that Australia is able to use in its already extensive dealings with Pacific Islands countries. Australia now routinely references the Boe Declaration in its official documentation. The delegate handbook for the first Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting (hosted by Australia on 9–10 October 2019 in Brisbane) carried the Boe Declaration in full. The Strategic Update cites the Boe Declaration, as does the PNG–Australia Comprehensive Strategic and Economic Partnership concluded in August 2020. The recently-established Australia Pacific Security College (PSC) states that its 'activities will be guided by the expanded concept of security under the Boe Declaration, and will seek to make a meaningful contribution to its implementation'. Australia does not deny climate change in the Pacific, that it is an issue of 'greatest concern' (DFAT 2020) to Pacific Island governments and people, or that climate change risks becoming increasingly a source and driver of instability in the region (Australian Government 2016). Given Australia's abiding anxiety about instability and vulnerability in the Pacific, it could hardly do otherwise.

Critics object that Australia's domestic policies on climate change mean that such references merely pay lip-service to the Boe Declaration (see for example Kabutaulaka

and Teaiwa 2019), or that there is an irreconcilable incoherence between Australia's positions domestically and externally. Even if that were true in the case of climate change, the Boe Declaration is about more than climate change. Its description of 'an expanded concept of security' includes reference to areas such as humanitarian assistance, health security, resource security (e.g., fisheries), transnational crime and cybersecurity. This range of security concerns is, in turn, reflected in the national security strategies that have been issued by Pacific Island countries (Samoa and Vanuatu) in the past two years (and in Papua New Guinea's earlier national security strategy, issued in 2013). These are all areas where Australia remains deeply engaged, at both the bilateral and regional levels, as the Pacific's leading partner through security agencies such as the ADF or AFP or through the regular aid program. Indeed, COVID-19 has reminded Pacific Island countries of their stake in Australia's role as a key partner in the areas of health security. Australia is also easily the region's major partner in another critical area of human security – gender – even though the Boe Declaration is notoriously silent on this issue.

Australian assets and initiatives

Before noting recent initiatives, it is worth recalling the extent of Australia's existing assets in the region. This is as much a matter of relationships and networks as it is of financial resources. Those assets include the most intense personal investment by an Australian Prime Minister in his regional counterparts at any time in the post-colonial period. They include by far the most extensive diplomatic network across the region, with resident Australian Embassies and High Commissions established in every Forum member; defence representation and cooperation programs in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Kiribati, RMI, FSM, and Palau; and Australian Federal Police (AFP) representation and/or police development programs throughout the region.[3] Those assets also include Australian membership of key regional organisations and networks including the Forum itself, the Pacific Community, the Forum Fisheries Agency, the South Pacific Regional Environment Program, the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting, the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, and the Pacific Immigration Development Community, to name the most prominent. To be sure, this catalogue does not tell us anything about the *quality* of Australian engagement with those institutions and individuals in Pacific Island countries that are relevant to Australia's security concerns and objectives, nor indeed about the quality of coordination among the various Australian agencies involved. Even so, it does underline, at the very least, the extent of Australia's engagement and reach in the region, something that is unmatched by any of the region's other development partners, whether traditional or 'emerging'.

That said, in considering Australia's assets in the region, it is also worth recalling the significant roles played by its allies and friends including New Zealand, the United States, France, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Each country is working to increase its presence and activity in the region in ways that are mostly consistent with Australia's interests.

Australia's Pacific Step-up has seen a range of new policy measures in the area of security that can be seen as answering the imperative of integrating and shaping the region. These include the Pacific Fusion Centre, announced in 2018 (Payne 2018) and aimed at providing a more robust and integrated flow of information to Pacific governments, particularly in supporting maritime domain awareness; the aforementioned Australia Pacific Security College which, apart from building capacity, aims to build and strengthen networks among officials responsible for security policy across the region; and the Joint Heads of Pacific Security meeting which met for the first time in October 2019 and was hosted by Australia (Defence 2019). The latter initiative brought together police, border management, customs, immigration and defence organisations from Forum member countries (and Timor-Leste) for the first time to consider the range of security issues facing the region.

There may be some concern at the regional level that these initiatives are not being undertaken under the direct aegis of the Forum, even if the Forum Secretariat has been engaged extensively on their design and work plans. There was also reportedly some concern at the bilateral level, over the course of 2019, that initiatives under the Step-up were being rolled out too quickly for Pacific administrations to absorb. If so, COVID-19 has served to slow down the pace at which initiatives such as these can be implemented and further developed. Even so, they are all tokens of Australia's aim to show ongoing leadership in the region. They illustrate Australia's convening power in the region, and its ability to resource initiatives both in financial and in personnel terms. None of them is focused explicitly on China or the broader geopolitical issues confronting the region: if there is a sub-text to these various initiatives, it is about fostering a regional community of policymakers, one in which Australia is deeply and naturally embedded.

Building such a community is necessarily a long-term endeavour and will require strategic persistence and patience. In the short term, though, recent history provides numerous examples to suggest that Australia is successfully prosecuting its 'traditional' security interests in the region, as seen in Australia forestalling a proposal for Chinese-owned company Huawei to build an undersea cable from Solomon Islands to Australia in 2017; heading off what may have been a Chinese attempt to establish a permanent base in Vanuatu in 2018,[4] securing Fiji's approval to redevelop Blackrock Camp into a regional training hub for police and peacekeepers, and (recent wobbles notwithstanding) Papua New Guinea's agreement for Australia to lead the redevelopment of Lombrum Naval Base in Manus. The 2019 diplomatic switch by Solomon Islands and Kiribati from Taiwan to China were more equivocal developments in terms of Australian interests in the region, though it should be acknowledged that Australia, unlike the US, did not set out to prevent Solomon Islands from making this switch. Kiribati's switch seems to have come as a surprise to Australia but it is more the surprise than the switch itself that might be seen as a setback for Australia.

It is of course artificial to think about Australia's 'hard security' agenda in the region in isolation from broader policy initiatives under the Pacific Step-up. The aid program as broadly conceived and the increasing number of Pacific Islanders taking opportunities to work in Australia both serve Australia's longer term interests in the Pacific as well as promoting development and building capacity in the region. And beyond this, non-government and people-to-people linkages and relationships between Australia and many countries in the Pacific remain robust and growing (Batley 2017). These too must count as assets in any accounting of Australia's ability to pursue its long-term goals in the region.

Conclusion

In the contemporary cliché, the Pacific region is clearly more crowded and contested. It can't be denied that significant gaps exist between Australian and Pacific Islands' understandings of and approaches to security in the region. Differences on climate change in particular remain serious. But those gaps and differences should be kept in perspective when considering Australia's place in the region. In recent times Australia has shown repeatedly that it is able to draw on its assets in the region to protect and to prosecute its security interests, and that those assets are being enhanced through new initiatives.

From a longer-term point of view, the work of integrating, of shaping and of deterring in the region remains a work in progress. It cannot be said, at this stage, that the region conceives of itself as a fully-fledged security community. In a dynamic region, Australian governments will need to continue to push the boundaries of existing policy settings. There is plenty of work to do.

Notes

1 The Strategic Update's geographic scope extends beyond the Pacific Islands, of course. As the Update makes clear, the Pacific Islands are a critically important part of that scope.

2 This appears to have been something of a concern to Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor during the COVID-19 pandemic. In August 2020 she was quoted as encouraging 'Forum members to looking beyond their national boundaries, and for development partners to think beyond bilateralism' (Magick 2020).

3 Specifically, these efforts include bilateral development programs in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, and Nauru, and regional development programs in Kiribati, Niue, Tuvalu, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Palau, Cook Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia.

4 While the details of this alleged arrangement remain obscure, it is surprising how ready many observers were to accept at face value denials issued at the time by both the Chinese and Vanuatu governments, as if that settled the matter.

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