

Turning the tide together

Proposing a regional summit to confront
the Pacific methamphetamine crisis

Authors: Dr Nicholas Thomson and Virginia Comolli

In conversation with:
Lautoa Faletau
Dr Audrey Aumua
Ross Ardern



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ORGANIZED CRIME

About the authors



Dr Nicholas Thomson
Fellow, Pacific Security College

Dr Nick Thomson is a public health and human rights trained epidemiologist who has spent the past 20 years living and working across the Indo-Pacific.

Initially his focus of work was on HIV prevention among at-risk groups in Southeast Asia, before specialising in the intersection between security sectors, public health and civil society. His PhD explored the health and security implications of the surge in methamphetamine trafficking and use in Southeast Asia.

Nick is the Senior Health Adviser at the Pacific Security College and has an interest in multi-agency approaches to non-traditional security threats such as climate, food security, water and biological threats. He also has ongoing interest in the role of disinformation as a threat to health.



Virginia Comolli
Head of Pacific Programme,
Global Initiative Against Transnational
Organized Crime

Virginia Comolli is a security and development expert with two decades of experience leading research and policy initiatives on transnational organised crime, conflict, and violent extremism. She currently serves as Head of the Pacific Programme at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, an independent, non-profit think tank. In this role, she leads the organisation's work across Oceania, overseeing regional projects, conducting research on criminal markets, governance and resilience, and building partnerships with law enforcement agencies, government ministries, regional organisations and international institutions.

In parallel, Virginia is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

About the Pacific Security College

The Pacific Security College serves members of the Pacific Islands Forum through learning and training, policy engagement and regional collaboration.

We have a holistic approach to Pacific security, encompassing traditional and non-traditional security issues, taking our lead from the Forum's *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and the *Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration*.

We work in a spirit of service and collaboration with our Pacific stakeholders in national governments, universities, civil society organisations and regional institutions.

About GI-TOC

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) is a global network with more than 750 Network Experts around the world. It provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organised crime.

Disclaimer

The Pacific Security College Policy Papers reflect the views of the authors alone, and aren't official statements on behalf of the College, its funders, or the Australian National University. The papers aim to contribute a diversity of views and ideas to the regional conversation about the journey to 2050.

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- The surge in the trafficking, availability and use of methamphetamine across Pacific Island countries is explosive, fuelling an escalating epidemic of HIV, and undermining human, national and regional security.
- Tackling transnational organised crime and rapidly scaling up HIV surveillance, prevention, treatment and care are regional and national priorities for law enforcement and public health.
- There is a pressing need to design, trial and implement community-based harm reduction approaches that are Pacific-informed and draw on cooperation between health, law enforcement, community leaders and civil society organisations.
- A 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led regional summit, bringing together ministers, the health sector, law enforcement, civil society, community, and religious and traditional leaders, would align national efforts and support the development of an integrated Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy, for Leaders' endorsement.





Executive summary

The surge across the Pacific

The Pacific region is experiencing a severe and rapid escalation in methamphetamine trafficking and domestic use, transforming from a transit zone into a significant consumer market and, to some extent, a site for local production.

This surge, driven by transnational organised crime syndicates, has created a public health and security crisis. Fiji, Tonga and Papua New Guinea face acute challenges, while all Pacific Island countries are experiencing emerging and interconnected impacts.

At the local level, methamphetamine use is compromising the health and wellbeing of individuals, driving crime and violence, and disrupting the social cohesion of communities. Local leadership structures are being challenged, and health and law enforcement infrastructure severely tested.

Turning the tide together

The methamphetamine crisis has clear implications for health, safety and security. It touches both the non-traditional and traditional security domains. An effective response will require coordinated leadership across health, security, civil society and traditional governance structures.

There is precedent for these regionally led efforts in response to a crisis impacting all Pacific Island countries. In 2020 the Pacific Islands Forum invoked the *Biketawa Declaration* to establish the regionally coordinated Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19. This necessitated high-level political leadership that resulted in the implementation of coordinated health and security sector partnerships and protocols.



A 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led regional summit would underscore the threat of methamphetamine trafficking and use to human and regional security. It would be consistent with Forum Leaders' holistic approach to security set out in the *Boe Declaration*, the *Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy* and the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

The summit would bring stakeholders together to develop a Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy for consideration by heads of government at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting later in 2027.





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Director's introduction

I am delighted to launch the next Pacific Security College policy paper on a particularly critical issue before the region.

As I've visited members of the Pacific Islands Forum, I've been struck by how the methamphetamine crisis has moved to the centre of the conversation about security threats before the region – in a way that wasn't true just a few years ago.

But what to do?

Forum Leaders invoke the *Biketawa Declaration*, agreed by the Forum in 2000, only in responding to the most serious regional threats and challenges.

In 2020, Leaders decided the COVID-19 crisis justified a shared regional response through the *Biketawa Declaration*.

There's a strong case that the methamphetamine crisis now also justifies regional measures under the *Biketawa Declaration*.

But one of the challenges in tackling the crisis is that the solutions don't sit neatly within any single portfolio or sector.

It begins at sea, where vessels move through the region in search of lucrative markets. And it reaches deep into communities, where drug use is having devastating effects on individuals and families.

This latest release in our Pacific Security College policy paper series, published in collaboration with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), proposes a holistic response.

Authors Dr Nicholas Thomson and Virginia Comolli suggest a summit, building on past regional efforts to work collectively on complex health and security issues.



While a summit is envisaged for 2027, the authors identify opportunities for early action that could help align thinking, build partnerships, and lay the foundations for meaningful dialogue.

The College presents these policy recommendations to support regional discussion and collaboration. In that spirit, I extend my appreciation to the three regional experts who have shared their insights on the methamphetamine challenge in the Pacific: Dr Audrey Aumua, Lautoa Faletau and Ross Ardern.

Their responses reflect the wide-ranging effects of this issue and underscore the importance of cooperation across sectors and borders.

Through this paper and other releases, the Pacific Security College's policy paper series seeks to encourage informed debate, support policy development, and bring diverse perspectives into regional conversations. As such, the views in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent an official position of the Pacific Security College, our university, GI-TOC, or our funders.

Our policy papers do reflect our deep conviction that we get to good policy from listening to a diversity of views, and from asking questions about how we might work together to realise the hopeful vision our Forum Leaders gave us in the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*.

Professor Dave Peebles
Director, Pacific Security College



The Pacific's methamphetamine crisis

A regional health and security challenge

Located between two major methamphetamine-producing regions – Southeast Asia and the Americas – the Pacific Islands have become both a strategic transit corridor and an emerging consumer and production zone. The exponential increase in methamphetamine trafficking, availability and use throughout the Pacific Islands has become a major security and public health crisis for the entire region.

The impacts permeate all levels of society, undermining local, national and regional security, as well as community safety. Additionally, the integrity of law enforcement, economic stability, governance and public health are all challenged.

Methamphetamine use is disrupting social cohesion and challenging the capabilities of community-level leadership, policing and health sectors to manage and respond. Methamphetamine use is linked to:

- escalating outbreaks of HIV linked to drug injection and the sharing of needles among users.
- violence and criminality at the community level.
- a growing number of users, whose physical and mental health have been compromised.



Crisis overwhelming frontline systems

Despite significant increases in resources and cooperation, national and regional law enforcement interdiction efforts have not been able to disrupt the increasing connection between transnational organised crime and domestic criminal gangs. Consumption has risen with the increase in the trafficking and availability of methamphetamine. Governments and communities are increasingly stating they are overwhelmed.

Pacific public health systems of hospitals and community health centres don't lack for caring, dedicated staff; but they struggle with the number of people presenting with complex psychoses, often accompanied by violent behaviours. Without dedicated methamphetamine treatment facilities and rehabilitation programs, many users are arrested and enter the justice system. Reports from across the region suggest courts and prisons are struggling to cope with the sheer number of drug-related cases and detainees.

Additionally, the region is grappling with the need to ramp up HIV prevention, testing, and treatment services, including needle syringe exchange programs. There is an urgent need for additional Pacific-informed and evidence-based community education and peer-based harm reduction strategies.

There is also a need to plan for possible future impacts, including the emergence of new substances and changing patterns of drug use, as well as shifting trafficking routes.

The case for a regional response

The surge in methamphetamine trafficking, availability and use across the Pacific has been recognised as a crisis affecting all Pacific countries. Leaders at the 54th Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Honiara in 2025 cautioned that “if left unaddressed, [the methamphetamine issue] would undermine the wellbeing of Pacific youth, erode family and community structures, and deepen vulnerabilities across the Blue Pacific”.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has called for a coordinated, robust regional response to the rapid escalation of methamphetamine trafficking and consumption.

Importantly, the region has a strong track record of coming together in times of crisis, including to respond to health challenges. The Pacific Islands Forum invoked the *Biketawa Declaration* in 2020 to establish the regionally coordinated Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19. The resulting high-level political leadership response prompted coordinated, robust regional action, and the implementation of coordinated health and security sector partnerships and protocols.

Similarly, the drugs crisis needs to be met with a large-scale regional response. The convening power of the Pacific Islands Forum – in bringing together member governments, regional agencies, civil society, churches and traditional leaders – is vital.

The need is urgent. But a successful summit will depend on a body of evidence and a body of work developed at the local, national and regional levels. We therefore suggest a summit early in 2027, leading to the drafting of a regional strategy for consideration by heads of government at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting later in 2027.

But first, what needs to happen to pave the way for a 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led regional summit?



The road to a 2027 summit

The proposed 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led regional summit on the health and security implications of methamphetamine use and trafficking should be understood not as a standalone event, but as the culmination of a structured regional preparation process. Activities undertaken throughout 2026 and 2027 will be critical to building the evidence base, partnerships and policy alignment required to inform a coordinated regional response to synthetic drugs.

Several parallel streams of work can help ensure the summit is both well-informed and action-oriented.

Strengthening the regional evidence base

Across many Pacific Island countries, systematic data on the scale, patterns and impacts of methamphetamine use remain limited. To inform policy responses, rapid national or sub-regional assessments should be undertaken to better understand:

- the prevalence and patterns of methamphetamine and other synthetic drug use.
- trafficking routes and the evolving role of Pacific countries as transit, consumption or potential production sites.
- links between methamphetamine use and emerging public health risks, including HIV transmission.
- impacts on communities, policing, justice systems and health services.
- the availability and effectiveness of prevention, treatment and harm reduction responses.



These rapid assessments should be designed to generate practical insights within a short timeframe. Partnerships between governments, regional organisations, research institutions, civil society organisations and community leaders will be essential to ensure the resulting evidence reflects the realities faced by Pacific communities. The findings would provide a Pacific-informed evidence base to guide national discussions and inform deliberations at the 2027 summit.

Supporting national multisector policy dialogue

The emergence of national taskforces and cross-government initiatives in several Pacific countries presents an opportunity to strengthen whole-of-society responses to methamphetamine. In the lead-up to the summit, countries could be supported to convene national consultations, bringing together health authorities, law enforcement agencies, education systems, civil society organisations, churches, youth groups and traditional leaders.

These dialogues would help identify priority policy responses, strengthen coordination between sectors, and ensure that national experiences and community perspectives shape the regional agenda.

Testing and documenting Pacific-informed responses

Communities across the Pacific are already developing locally grounded approaches to prevention, treatment and harm reduction. Supporting pilot initiatives and documenting lessons from these approaches will be critical to building a Pacific-informed evidence base.

Examples may include community education programs, peer-based harm reduction initiatives, culturally grounded rehabilitation approaches, and partnerships between policing, health services and traditional leadership structures. Capturing lessons from these initiatives will ensure that future regional policy responses draw on practical experience and culturally relevant models.

Leveraging upcoming regional meetings

Planning for a 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led regional summit would allow key meetings such as the May 2026 Australian Federal Police and Fiji Police Force-led regional Organised Crime Summit, the August 2026 meeting of the Pacific Heads of Health, and the August 2026 Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police annual meeting to have considered discussions and to plan possible activities to inform the regional gathering.

It would elevate voices from civil society, churches and communities that seek to build Pacific-informed evidence. Given the nature of this rapidly escalating issue, understanding the impact of policies and programs in response to a surge in methamphetamine availability and consumption is crucial.

Together, these preparatory activities would ensure the 2027 Pacific Islands Forum-led summit is informed by emerging evidence, national experiences and community perspectives from across the region. Rather than beginning the conversation, the summit would consolidate these inputs and elevate them to the highest political level, enabling ministers, regional organisations and community leaders to agree on shared priorities for a coordinated regional response.



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Shaping Fiji's Health



The post-summit process

Developing a Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy

The 2027 summit should mark the beginning of a structured process to develop a Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy for the Pacific. While the summit would provide political recognition of the scale and urgency of the methamphetamine crisis, its lasting impact would lie in establishing a clear mandate for coordinated regional action.

Following the summit, a formal drafting process could be established under the joint leadership of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. A regional taskforce or technical working group could be convened to develop the strategy, drawing on members from the Forum Subcommittee on Regional Security and the Pacific Community's Heads of Health meeting and other experts.

The drafting process would synthesise the evidence and consultations generated during the preparatory phase, including findings from rapid national assessments, outcomes of national dialogues, and recommendations emerging from the summit discussions. Contributions from regional organisations, civil society groups, faith-based organisations and community leaders would help ensure the strategy reflects both regional priorities and local realities.

Importantly, the strategy should reflect the Pacific's integrated approach to security and development. The synthetic drug challenge intersects with public health, law enforcement, youth wellbeing, social cohesion and economic stability. As such, the strategy would need to promote coordinated action across sectors, recognising that effective responses require cooperation between health systems, policing and justice institutions, education sectors and community leadership structures.

Once developed, the Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy could be presented to Pacific Islands Forum Leaders for endorsement. The strategy would provide a shared framework to guide national policies, strengthen regional cooperation and coordinate support from international partners.



It should also include mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and periodic review. This would help ensure the region remains responsive to the evolving synthetic drugs landscape, including the emergence of new substances, shifting trafficking routes and changing patterns of drug use.

In this way, the 2027 summit would serve as a catalyst for a longer-term regional process: translating political recognition of the methamphetamine crisis into a coordinated and sustained regional response capable of protecting the health, safety and resilience of Pacific communities.





In conversation with...



Ms Lautoa Faletau International development consultant

The proposal for a regional summit to confront the Pacific methamphetamine crisis is timely and requires urgent consideration at the highest political levels. The authors have highlighted the changing nature of the drug trade in the Pacific, and the link between the exponential escalation in methamphetamine trafficking and local consumption and the unfolding public health and security crisis gripping some countries in the region.

The expanded focus of the proposal to include non-traditional security domains is consistent with the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* endorsed by Pacific leaders in 2018. It also delivers on the Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy 2024-2028, which recognises that the current regional response efforts are “law-enforcement centric” and that other important agencies and stakeholders can play a critical role in prevention and harm reduction. The far-reaching impacts of this methamphetamine crisis necessitate regional leadership that is informed by different sectors including health, law enforcement, government and non-government organisations, faith-based organisations, traditional leaders and communities.

An important feature of this proposal is the summit being seen as the “culmination of a structured regional preparation process”. National or sub-regional assessments in the lead-up to the summit provide each country with an avenue for domestic discussions, enabling a diversity of perspectives and data to be included. Such assessments are also an opportunity for all stakeholders – government, non-government, academic institutions, and the private sector – to inform national discussions and deliberations at the 2027 summit.

This consultative process will foster and strengthen interagency partnerships between regional organisations. In 2018, the Oceania Customs Organisation, Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police and Pacific Immigration Development Community signed a Declaration of Partnership to enhance cooperation between the three agencies. This partnership can be used as a model for the inclusion of other organisations responding to the crisis and replicated to include all national and regional stakeholders.

The proposal’s suggested approach positions each Pacific Islands Forum member with evidence to actively contribute at the summit and participate in the implementation of a Regional Synthetic Drugs Strategy. This paper also goes one step beyond promulgation of the regional strategy as the measure of success to include the development of mechanisms to aid implementation – including monitoring, evaluation and learning processes. This additional step will ensure that this strategic regional vision will result in a coordinated regional response to this crisis.



Dr Audrey Aumua Chief Executive Officer The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ

This paper is an important contribution and framing of a rapidly evolving public health and security crisis in our Blue Pacific – one that is challenging the livelihoods, wellness and future of so many of our Pacific families.

There are real people with lived realities that sit behind all of this. The regional summit proposal gives a tangible way forward that recognises the multi-dimensional aspects of this crisis. High-level, meaningful and sustained collaboration across law enforcement, public health and community is the only approach that can be considered in response to what is fast becoming a regional human security issue.

Health systems are overwhelmed and short on both evidence and approach. We have rising methamphetamine use, increasing HIV risk, and more people presenting with complex mental health needs. Not only are these clear signals of systems under strain, they also reveal gaps in prevention, early intervention, and community-based care. In the Pacific, those gaps are not abstract – they are felt directly at a community level. More often than not, that gap is shouldered by families.

Women are caring for family members experiencing addiction. They are managing the social and economic fallout, and in many cases, they are holding communities together as social cohesion strains. I welcome the paper's emphasis on scaling up harm reduction, treatment and care. But the critical question is: how do we do that?

Public health responses are most effective when they are designed with communities, not delivered to them. Across the region, communities are already responding – through churches, women's groups, youth networks, and local leaders. They are providing informal care, creating safe spaces and supporting behaviour change, often with very limited resources.

A key priority should be ensuring that these community-led responses are not seen as peripheral, but as central to the health system approach. We must collect and build evidence of these responses to inform how we invest in:

- community health workers and community leadership.
- peer-led harm reduction.
- culturally grounded approaches to prevention and rehabilitation.

If we focus too narrowly on enforcement without strengthening accessible, trusted health services, we risk pushing people further away from care – and that has direct consequences for HIV transmission, mental health outcomes, and long-term recovery. The balance the paper is calling for is absolutely right – but it will require sustained investment in public health systems that are close to communities and responsive to their realities.



And so how do we get there? The proposed 2027 summit is a valuable opportunity for regional alignment. But its impact will depend on whether the process leading up to it genuinely captures community-level evidence and lived experience, and whether that translates into resourced, practical support for community-led action. From a public health perspective, turning the tide will depend on regional coordination and whether communities are equipped, trusted and supported to lead prevention and care where it matters most.

There is value in leaders across health, community and regional security elevating this discussion at a regional summit. This will enable real consideration of a collective and united approach to the development of a Pacific-led Regional Synthetics Drug Strategy embedded in community knowledge.

I urge you all to give this proposal your highest consideration.



Mr Ross Ardern Former senior diplomat and police officer

I am an enthusiastic supporter of the regional summit on methamphetamine that has been proposed by Dr Nicholas Thomson and Virginia Comolli. We do not always avail ourselves of the opportunities presented to us in law enforcement and that is a pity. This is one opportunity that we cannot let pass us by.

In 2010 I had the privilege of being based in Samoa as New Zealand's Police Liaison Officer for the South and South West Pacific, and since then I have witnessed first-hand the disastrous consequences of drug and precursor importations into some Pacific countries.

At that time, both New Zealand and Australia were heavily impacted by precursor chemicals for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine crossing their borders and causing immeasurable harm in the community. They were fighting back but with limited success.

Seeing what was emerging, Pacific law enforcement agencies had every opportunity to disrupt an emerging supply chain before it took root and before communities bore the cost of methamphetamine use as it proliferated at an alarming rate across Pacific communities.

The opportunity was not taken and that window closed.

Sixteen years on, the cost of that missed opportunity is very clear to us all. The evidence set out by Dr Thomson and Ms Comolli cannot be disputed. Our Pacific communities face the ever-growing prospect of serious harm from the illicit use of drugs and methamphetamine in particular. HIV rates are rising rapidly, causing a strain on health systems across the Pacific. There is evidence of local drug production, and courts and prisons are stretched beyond capacity. We are seeing an unprecedented merging of a transnational crime threat with a major human security threat.

To put it plainly, we have an illicit drugs epidemic on our hands and this is not a problem that can be resolved by law enforcement alone. We must look to those in the community that can offer support to law enforcement and work with them, including our traditional leaders and civil society. We have other tools that are available to us that demonstrate the depth of law enforcement cooperation. The Pacific Transnational Crime Network has gone from strength to strength in linking transnational crime units across 21 countries. Other countries have agreed to a cross-agency approach to address methamphetamine-related harm – and we can learn from those experiences. We can all do more, but the most important thing we can do is to trust each other and demonstrate a stronger willingness to share information.

The summit proposed by the authors is exactly what should be happening now. It presents the opportunity for a regionally led, multisector response to tackle the scourge of methamphetamine and drugs in the Pacific.

Another window has opened and it must not close.



Contributor profiles



Ms Lautoa Faletau
International development consultant

Ms Faletau is an international development consultant with more than three decades of experience supporting law enforcement cooperation and governance reform across the Pacific.

She has worked across national and regional institutions, beginning her career with Tonga Police before joining the Australian Federal Police (2006-2022), where she led the design and establishment of the Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation.

Ms Faletau worked in the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP) Secretariat, is a founding member of the PICP Women's Advisory Network, and has championed the integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion (GEDSI) principles in Pacific policing. She has also held senior consulting roles, including as a Specialist Associate Director with Deloitte (2022-2024). She has led capability reviews for police agencies and advised multilateral and bilateral partners on governance, accountability and GEDSI.

Ms Faletau is a member of the Pacific Security College Advisory Board.



Dr Audrey Aumua
Chief Executive Officer
The Fred Hollows Foundation NZ

Dr Aumua joined The Fred Hollows Foundation in January 2021. As a Pacific woman of Fijian descent, she has focused most of her career on improving the livelihoods of Pacific people and communities.

From March 2016 until late 2020, Dr Aumua led the Pacific Community (SPC) Suva office as Deputy Director-General. She was responsible for the executive leadership and management of all SPC Suva operations, including more than 600 staff and technical divisions focusing on the sustainable development challenges faced by Small Island Developing States.

Dr Aumua served as the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Representative, Solomon Islands, from 2013 to 2016 and was responsible for shaping the public health development dimensions of the United Nations' partnerships with the government of Solomon Islands.

Dr Aumua holds a PhD in Public Policy from Curtin University in Perth, Western Australia and a Master of Public Policy from Massey University, New Zealand.



Mr Ross Ardern
Former senior diplomat and police officer

Mr Ardern is a seasoned diplomat and former New Zealand police officer, having served with the New Zealand Police for 40 years. He has extensive experience and strong credentials in the Pacific, particularly in the security sector.

Mr Ardern was seconded from the New Zealand Police to serve as Chief of Police in Niue from 2005 to 2009. He then held the position of New Zealand Police Liaison Officer based in Samoa from 2009 to 2013, where he collaborated with most Pacific Island countries on policing and security issues. Following this, he was appointed New Zealand High Commissioner to Niue, serving from 2014 to 2018. In 2018, he was appointed to the position of Administrator of Tokelau.

His role as the New Zealand Police Liaison Officer in Samoa solidified his reputation for enhancing regional security through close collaboration with Pacific Island nations. As High Commissioner to Niue, he played a vital role in diplomatic relations and regional cooperation, fostering stronger ties between New Zealand and the Pacific.

In addition to his roles in policing and diplomacy, Mr Ardern is a member of the Pacific Security College's Advisory Board, contributing his extensive knowledge and experience to regional security initiatives. His involvement in the Advisory Board underscores his ongoing commitment to addressing security challenges in the Pacific.







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Pacific Security College
JG Crawford Building 132A
1 Lennox Crossing
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: psc@anu.edu.au

Website: pacificsecurity.net

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