

Inquiry into Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade - Defence Sub-committee

Submission

Richard Herr OAM PhD

In addition to a large volume of academic research in, and on, the Pacific Islands region, I have had an opportunity over more than four decades to serve the Governments of the region (including Australia) in a variety of capacities and over a range of issues. My primary field of expertise has been in the development and reform of the regional architecture. However, due to the nature of the regional membership and the reach of Australian security interests much of my work has involved explicitly or implicitly a concern for Australia's defence relationship with the region. Indeed, the matrix below both demonstrates the correlation between Australian security and Pacific Island regionalism and its evolution over time.

View Era	External View of Pacific Islands	Perceived Nature of risk	Regionalist Security Response
1944 - 1976	Security risk	Invasion route through Islands	ANZAC Pact / ANZUS
1976 - 1989	Security liability	Fear of Soviet "breakout"	"Strategic Denial"/ Pacific Patrol Boats
1990 - 2001	Financial liability	"Pacific Paradox" (what does aid achieve?)	"Constructive Commitment"
2001 – 2011	Failed state incubator	Threat from non-state actors	RAMSI / "Pacific Plan"
2011 – present	Geo-political rivalry	Political realignment (to PRC?)	PIDF/New Regional Framework

This matrix looks at these correlations through an Australian lens largely because the policy responses to manage the potential risks that might involve the small Island states of the region for Western security interests have been largely led by Australia since 1944. Public fears (more often than public interest) have created peaks of public awareness of the region within a particular geostrategic era but this perception rarely drove any policy changes. Rather, as with so much of external affairs policy, narratives are created opportunistically to explain and defend Government responses to changing threat perceptions.

I would note that I initially developed this "big picture" matrix to help explain the Australian perspective on this historical evolution to my Pacific Island classes. It is not necessarily one they would have constructed from their experience. Their matrix would identify different security eras (including start and end dates) and, depending on the country, would be less likely to result in regionalist policy outcomes. Decolonisation, neo-colonial dominance, nation-building, marine resource security, the rise of China and climate change are some of the likely general themes that would be nominated by many Pacific Island countries but not

all or with equal conviction across all the independent states. The assumption is that the region shares, or should share, a common interest with Australia should not be a starting point for any defence review.

As a region, the Pacific Islands have generally been consumers of security rather than producers. There are no direct defence treaties between the Islands within the region or by regional states with an external power (except for the non-reciprocal security arrangements between the US and its compact states). The ANZAC Pact (1944) and the ANZUS Treaty (1952) extended defence coverage to the region, but the islands are not parties to these agreements. Nor were they ever invited to accede to ANZUS after their independence although their independence removed them from the treaty defence coverage. Only four of the fourteen independent Island members of the Pacific Islands Forum (Forum island countries, or FICs) have any indigenous defence capacity. PNG, Fiji and Tonga have formal military establishments. Vanuatu's police force maintains a paramilitary unit which has some security functions. Basically, since independence, virtually the entire region was advised that its members did not have to provide for their own defence nor did they need a formal external guarantee.

The initial belief that an underlying Western alignment with, rather than an overt alliance for, shared security interests with Australia would be adequate was based on two mutable perceptions. There was an absence of recognised external threats to these emerging states which was buttressed by the view that the general protection of the international system would suffice for their security. These comfortable assumptions have been challenged repeatedly over the passage of time. However, these subsequent adjustments to a changing security environment have generally been more hortatory with the intent of enabling action rather than creating binding commitments for collective defence.¹ Although rarely noted, it is significant that all these agreements arise in the post-Cold War era when the geopolitics of the region had changed. Support for containing the USSR was no longer a valid organising principle for regional security (from an Australian perspective) but there was a need to manage more pragmatic concerns such as resource security, internal stability and non-governmental threats.

However, as much as these political agreements have enhanced Island regional security aims, they do not provide the linkages of traditional defence cooperation. From an Australian defence perspective, the absence of formal defence counterparts throughout most of the region presents difficulties with military-civilian coordination. As raised in our 2011 ASPI report, *Our near abroad: Australia and Pacific islands regionalism*, the protocols to share sensitive information with most of the FICs is a source of annoyance for them.²

¹ Major agreements include:

1992 Honiara Declaration on Law Enforcement Cooperation;
1992 Niue Treaty on Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement;
1997 Aitutaki Declaration on Regional Security Cooperation;
2000 Biketawa Declaration;
2002 Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security;
2014 Framework for Pacific Regionalism; and
2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security

² *Our near abroad: Australia and Pacific islands regionalism*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Strategy Report, November 2011 (with Anthony Bergin).

This annoyance was still in evidence in my 2019 ASPI report on Chinese soft power in the region³ Many Island officials felt that sharing intelligence with Australia was a one way process – information went in but there was too little feedback on how the information was used or how useful it might be to the FIC that provided it.

The purpose of this historical scene setting is to make a few points about defence relations with the region at a time where some Governments and many commentators seem to believe there is a new cold war emergent with China – possibly a new strategic era. I read even well-meaning individuals in public life suggesting Australia should use the current pandemic as an opportunity to limit or isolate China from the region. There are many reasons why a repeat of the old Cold War with the PRC standing in for the USSR is highly improbable. It is clear that the USSR implicitly “cooperated” with the American policy of containment. The PRC has not only become more broadly engaged with the global economy for more than a generation, under President Xi, China has more aggressively defended its expanded role. Moreover, unlike the ideological proselytising of the USSR, the PRC has been largely pragmatic in its international posture. States align with the PRC on economic grounds rather than ideologically.

Thus, in terms of containing the USSR and its putative interests in the Pacific Islands, there was no real contest for the hearts and minds of the newly independent states. The USSR had nothing that attracted them – least of all its godless ideology. Some FICs played the “Russia card” almost as a sport in the 1970s and ‘80s. The diplomatic risks were low and the aid rewards fairly high. Some might see an echo of this today in the FICs relationship with China but there is a genuineness in playing the “China card” that belies the sport of toying with Moscow in earlier years. A political alignment, much less an alliance, by the FICs against Beijing is highly implausible. Even the debate, as in Australia, as to where to find the balance with China as a “frenemy” is not being entertained, because the idea of China as an overt physical threat is not seen widely as credible whatever the economic fears amongst many FICs.

Perhaps this is the key to the adoption by some FICs of the manipulative tactics of the old Cold War. There appears to be a competitive market for the affections of the region and neither of the contesting parties are “flight risks” through disappointment if the FICs choose one over the other in any particular instance. The FICs are certain that Australia will not abandon the region for all the reasons routinely made in national white papers. On the other hand, China’s interests for all their newness are accepted as solid and enduring. But what might the FICs do if faced with a breakdown in Australia’s relationship with the PRC?

The possibility is already being flagged that Australia is becoming a proxy arena in a global struggle between the US and China for economic dominance. Perceptions that trade is being used as levers to impose reprisals on Australia as a surrogate for US policy support this view. Cyber attacks and fifth columnists undermining the national will to resist Chinese influence feed into this line of conjecture. Is it likely that the FICs would rush to take

³ Richard Herr, *Chinese influence in the Pacific Islands: the yin and yang of Soft Power*, ASPI Special Report, April 2019.

Australia's side? The evidence to date is that more probably the FICs would remain on the sidelines if the attempt is made to force a binary choice.

I have found it intriguing that when I ask fellow Australians if it is possible for the PRC to give genuinely "humanitarian" aid (i.e. without a geostrategic agenda) the usual answer is, "yes . . .but". My Island interlocutors respond without the qualifying "but". The downside of this development is that attempts to portray Chinese aid as politically driven only serves to reinforce local perceptions that no country gives humanitarian aid without an agenda. This cynicism is far more damaging for Canberra than for Beijing given Australia's much longer and closer relationship with the region. Thus, the pursuit of aid-based soft power with the intent of strategic goal of a strengthened regional alignment with Australia may well be a political chimera. Cold War strategic denial is not a practical option today. To repeat what I noted in my 2019 ASPI special report, Australia has to resolve its strategic relationship with the PRC, including the nature and extent of any perceived threat in the region, before it can credibly advise the FICs on their security *vis a vis* the PRC.