

Foreign Affairs and Aid Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Aid Inquiry into Strengthening Relationships in the Pacific region

Background to this Submission

This submission principally addresses issues on measures to ensure Step-up initiatives reflect the priority needs of the governments and people of Pacific island countries.

Last November the latest Guardian-class patrol boat was handed over by Australia to Solomon Islands. It was the fifth of 21 Guardian-class boats to be gifted to 12 Pacific Island nations and Timor-Leste. This year Fiji, Palau, Kiribati and Tonga will receive their boats. Following this, a new patrol boat will be delivered approximately every three months until 2023. Australia has committed \$2bn to the program over the next 30 years. This Australian maritime program is now needed more than ever.

Pacific Island countries are now facing increasing maritime security challenges.

The estimated cost of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing within the western and central Pacific Ocean is over \$US616.11m per year.

Climate change-enhanced storms, rising sea levels, and coastal flooding are disproportionately affecting many island nations.

Much of the transnational crime reported to occur in the region has a maritime dimension.

There has been a dramatic expansion in the number of boats carrying cocaine and methamphetamine from Latin America intended for Australia that is causing problems for the islands that straddle the drug highway. In the last three years, there have been six major seizures of drugs in French Polynesia.

There is evidence of the illegal entry of people into the Pacific from Asia by fishing vessels or fisheries support vessels.

Yachts often make illegal calls to outer islands and are involved in smuggling of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.

Human trafficking is now a concern in the region. The UN recently assisted Vanuatu with the deportation of around 100 Bangladeshis who had been lured there with promises of jobs by people traffickers.

Acts of sea robbery in the region are not uncommon. There have been incidents of armed attacks on small craft at sea carrying betel nut in various locations along the north coast of Papua New Guinea.

Threats to the islands' marine environment are rising. Last year a significant oil spill occurred off Rennell Island, part of Solomon Islands. Rennell Island is the first natural site that is customarily owned to be listed as a World Heritage site.

There's the problem of thousands of World War II shipwrecks around the Pacific that are ticking timebombs. Their metal walls are now corroding, posing a significant threat of oil spills.

Marine plastics from states not in the Pacific are ending up in the region. Plastic pollution contributes to the degeneration of coral reefs and affects tourism.

There is a vast range of marine species carried in ships' ballast water. The introduction of harmful species through ballast water discharge could wipe out the marine life in the island waters.

Maritime safety is a growing problem. There have been numerous ferry disasters in the region. Last year 95 people were killed in such a disaster in Kiribati.

The increased presence of smaller eco-tourism vessels in remote locations poses risks of shipping accidents. Small vessels are used extensively in the Pacific and are often over-loaded. Most small craft do not carry locator beacons.

Submarine cable networks are being developed across the region to provide the backbone telecommunications needs for the islands.

But the protection for submarine cable infrastructure in the Pacific is inadequate. Any breakage or damage can have serious consequences for islands' communications. The tasks of securing the Pacific Islands' maritime domains have never been more difficult than they are today.

There are operational gaps in the current lack of maritime patrolling by many islands.

Air surveillance of remote areas, offshore zones and adjacent areas of high seas is only conducted on a limited basis. A more integrated approach is required by the islands to the conduct of surveillance and enforcement operations, including the collection, analysis and dissemination of data related to maritime security and safety.

A Pacific Fusion Centre will be located in the region this year to inform both strategic and operational responses to issues like illegal fishing and drug trafficking. Maritime security operations are crucial for safe and effective commercial ocean industries in the Pacific Islands.

These maritime security challenges in the Pacific are set out in greater detail in a December 2019 ASPI report. The title of the report is *Ocean Horizons: Strengthening maritime security in Indo-Pacific Island states*.

A copy of the ASPI report is available at <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/ad-aspi/2019-11/Ocean%20horizons.pdf?gM3NpsCPHNIM6P.eC96xJFYLWfwyR4tV>

This submission's recommendations are broadly based on work undertaken by us in connection with the ASPI report. The report provides a list of detailed recommendations that relate to the Pacific's maritime security requirements and how Australia can assist. The authors would be willing to provide evidence to the Committee on this submission.

The ultimate objective for Pacific island states should be a regional maritime security and safety regime that provides for law and order at sea, the free and safe movement of shipping and seaborne trade, and the ability of countries to pursue their maritime interests and use their marine resources in accordance with agreed principles of international law.

The successful economic development for the island states depends on their ability to provide maritime security.

This dimension of national security is important for both nation-building and national pride.

Pacific island states' international and regional image will suffer if their maritime areas are seen to be porous and their countries become havens for many forms of transnational crime, as well as a transit route for illegal trafficking in drugs, arms and people.

At the policy level, maritime security should be seen in whole-of-government terms. It isn't an abstract notion, but a clear national regional requirement for Pacific island states that has much wider dimensions now than it had in the past.

Managing maritime risks puts a premium on cooperation with neighbouring countries, but international cooperation is also important for setting the necessary standards and best practices for dealing with those risks.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow aren't listed in any particular priority order, as they're essentially interlinked.

1. *All Pacific island states should develop and implement national maritime security strategies that reflect their own specific needs and circumstances.*

The strategies should include a framework for measuring the effectiveness of actions taken to deliver maritime security objectives. They should set out the island's approach to maritime security, how the country will deliver those objectives through its various agencies, assess maritime security risks and set out future directions. The implementation and updating of the strategies will require monitoring and regular updates to the assessment of maritime risks and

threats. Australia should offer to assist the Pacific islands in developing their maritime security strategies.

2. *Develop a formal tasking program for the patrolling of remote islands and coastal areas*

Remote island and coastal areas should be patrolled regularly to protect sovereignty, prevent illegal activity and support nation-building. Australia should assist the islands to identify key areas and work with islands for a schedule to be drawn up to state how frequently each should be visited.

3. *Build national maritime domain awareness systems*

Australia should assist the Pacific island states to build national MDA systems, starting with effective coordination and information sharing among their own national agencies (such as coastguards, police and fisheries regulators) as well as private organisations (for example, tourism operators and fishers) and local communities.

Island states that don't already have a single national maritime surveillance coordination centre should be encouraged by Australia to establish one to improve information sharing with neighbouring countries.

In developing the new Pacific Fusion Centre, which will inform both strategic and operational responses to challenges such as illegal fishing, people smuggling and drug trafficking, the emphasis should be on collecting, fusing and analysing all sources of data to produce and disseminate strategic assessments. The Pacific Fusion Centre will need to bring together a number of separate 'empires' and overcome some significant national sovereignty instincts.

4. *Review interagency operational and staff training for maritime security*

Australia should assist Pacific island states review their training systems for maritime security. They should aim to build a single institution for learning and development for maritime security across all agencies.

5. *Collate relevant maritime laws and ensure that they are easily accessible and understood*

Australia could assist with this task through the Attorney-General's department. This task should be undertaken before considering any comprehensive overhaul of maritime legislation.

6. *Build capacity for the blue economy*

Building the blue economy is about exploring opportunities for using and linking with the marine domain. It's likely to be specific to each island state.

Australia have much to offer in helping to develop the blue economies of Pacific island states through capacity building (human, social, physical, natural and financial) in specific areas such as management, monitoring, aquaculture and renewable energy, as well as through the translation of outcomes.

Australia has recently established the Blue Economy Cooperative Research Centre. The centre could play a useful role in capacity building with Pacific island states in policy and management, aquaculture species development and renewable energy converters to provide energy and fresh water (desalination). The centre could determine whether there's the potential for a trial or demonstration site where multiple island countries could learn.

Australia should convene a regular forum of Pacific island states to exchange ideas on identifying potential areas of cooperation on the blue economy.

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