



Australian Government

Defence

**Joint Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and
Trade**

**Australia's response to the priorities of Pacific Island
countries and the Pacific region**

**Department of Defence
Submission**

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Defence Response

The 2023 Defence Strategic Review and 2024 National Defence Strategy reaffirmed that the security of the Pacific is vital to the security and prosperity of Australia. Both called for Defence to deepen its regional security partnerships. Defence is delivering on this imperative by enhancing connections with security forces in the Pacific, investing in their capability and bolstering our ability to work together.

In support of whole-of-government outcomes led by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Office of the Pacific, Defence's decades-long engagement in the Pacific is designed with partner priorities front of mind. Defence's signature Defence Cooperation Program (DCP) marked its 50th anniversary in 2023. Across the breadth of engagement, Defence responds to priorities identified by Pacific partners, articulated as part of its regular interactions as well as through formal security dialogues.

Regionally, Defence's cooperation is designed to promote interoperability and enable Pacific-led responses to Pacific security challenges. This aligns with the direction provided by Pacific leaders in the 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. It is also consistent with the outcomes of the 2022 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, which determined that Pacific countries are best placed to meet their own security needs.

How does Defence support Pacific security priorities?

Defence participates in regular dialogues and consultation with Pacific partners to ensure cooperation remains responsive to Pacific priorities. These dialogues occur at all levels, from ministerial meetings to dialogues between the Secretary and Chief of the Defence Force and their counterparts, as well as annual Defence Cooperation Talks and other senior Defence interactions. Moreover, the defence attaché network and embedded military and civilian personnel work hand-in-hand with Pacific partners every day, providing unique insights and flexibility to adapt to emerging priorities.

Beyond the direction set by the Pacific Islands Forum, Defence also participates in the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM), through which the militaries of the Pacific drive practical initiatives to enhance collective action and interoperability. Defence participates in the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHoPS) meeting, a key gathering of national security agency heads from across the Pacific. Together, these security practitioners identify common operational challenges, promote understanding and shared learning, and enhance regional cooperation. Defence provides secretariat support to both the SPDMM and the JHoPS meeting.

The relationships built through Defence's deep and enduring connections with Pacific security personnel at all levels allow for open and honest conversations on the nature and substance of engagements.

The following selection of engagement activities in the Pacific highlight Defence's responsiveness to the security priorities of the region.

Pacific Maritime Security Program

Building on the highly-regarded Pacific-class Patrol Boat Program through which Defence delivered maritime assets across the Pacific in the 1980s and 1990s, the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) is a comprehensive partnership program to enhance maritime security in the Pacific. Alongside provision of Australian-gifted Guardian-class Patrol Boats (GPB), Defence delivers a comprehensive package of through-life maintenance and sustainment, enabling infrastructure and training to increase national and regional maritime resilience and security. As of July 2024, 19 GPBs have been delivered to Pacific maritime forces. The PMSP also delivers infrastructure for safe berthing of the GPBs, regional integrated aerial surveillance, safety and assurance, and regional coordination functions.

The PMSP is a unique investment in Pacific maritime security and the protection of the region's exclusive economic zones. Valued at \$5.9 billion over the life of the program, the PMSP remains the cornerstone of Australia's commitment to Pacific maritime security over the next 30 years.

Security infrastructure

Defence's Indo-Pacific Infrastructure Program (the Program) delivers security-related infrastructure for and in close consultation with Pacific partners. The Program includes 28 active projects and activities across the Indo-Pacific.

In the Pacific, Defence's infrastructure investments include upgrades to wharf infrastructure as well as large capital projects such as the redevelopment of the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp in Fiji (completed in 2022) and the Cook and Tiroas Police Barracks redevelopment in Vanuatu (in the final stages of completion). These projects not only enhance Pacific partners' capabilities but they also provide significant investment in local economies, creating skilled employment opportunities. A dedicated maintenance and sustainment sub-program ensures the realisation of the value of infrastructure assets.

The Program also comprises a suite of medium-scale projects, such as the Essential Services project at Goldie River Training Depot near Port Moresby, which will provide water treatment and distribution infrastructure to the on-base community, including Papua New Guinea (PNG) Defence Force personnel, spouses and children.

Defence delivers smaller-scale infrastructure upgrades in response to capacity building requests. For example, Defence is facilitating the enhancement of police outposts in the Solomon Islands and constructing boat storage and maintenance facilities across multiple provincial locations.

Securing the Pacific Games and Solomon Islands Election through the Solomons International Assistance Force

In 2021, Australia deployed personnel from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Australian Defence Force (ADF) under the Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF), following a request from the Solomon Islands Government. The SIAF, which also included personnel from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, New Zealand Defence Force and Royal PNG Constabulary, supported the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) to restore peace and security following civil unrest.

At the request of the Solomon Islands Government, the SIAF remained active for an extended period to support security for the Pacific Games in 2023. The ADF deployed around 400 personnel in security, logistics and command roles. This included the deployment of HMAS *Choules* to support deployed ADF elements.

As part of the SIAF in April 2024, the ADF also supported the secure conduct of the Solomon Islands National General Elections through the deployment of 160 personnel. This included logistics support to the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission and security support to the RSIPF.

At all times, the SIAF was led and directed by RSIPF leadership. Following the conclusion of the SIAF and expected drawdown in 2024, Australia's DCP will continue to support Solomon Islands as the primary mechanism for defence partnership.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

In an increasingly disaster-prone region, Defence is often called to support civilian-led humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) in the Pacific through the deployment of Defence assets and personnel and the delivery of humanitarian stores prior to and following a crisis. This is often done alongside other regional military partners.

Defence has decades of experience supporting the Australian Government's response to requests for disaster assistance. Most recently, in response to the Enga landslide in PNG, ADF C-27J Spartan, C-130J Hercules, and C-17 Globemaster III aircraft transported PNG and Australian support personnel and officials, as well as humanitarian stores and relief supplies. Other notable recent examples include the assistance provided to:

- Vanuatu following Cyclone Lola in October 2023;
- PNG following the Mount Bagana Volcano Eruption in July 2023;
- Vanuatu following Cyclones Judy and Kevin in February and March 2023; and
- Tonga following the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcanic eruption and tsunami in January 2022.

To remain ready to respond, Defence continues to build sovereign and regional capacity to undertake HADR activities. Exercise LONGREACH is a whole-of-government cooperative table top series designed to enhance preparedness through planning and civil-military-police interoperability. LONGREACH is regularly conducted bilaterally with Pacific security partners; a regional iteration began in 2022 and occurs annually.

Pacific Response Group

At the 10th anniversary of the SPDMM in New Caledonia in December 2023, ministers from Australia, Fiji, France, New Zealand, PNG, Tonga and Chile agreed to progress planning to establish a Pacific Response Group (PRG). The PRG will refine the way Pacific defence forces come together to deliver rapid and effective HADR to Pacific island countries at times of need. Defence is working with SPDMM counterparts to develop a detailed concept of operations for review by ministers at SPDMM 2024. Defence expects the PRG to be operational for deployment during the high risk weather season at the end of 2024.

Defence Pacific Air Program

The Defence Pacific Air Program (DPAP) deploys Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) aircraft and military training teams to support the sovereign air lift and surveillance requirements of Fiji and PNG. The program was established at the request of both countries.

The DPAP's centrepiece is the rotation of air mobility detachments to PNG and Fiji utilising RAAF C-27J Spartan aircraft on a bimonthly basis. The first deployment to PNG in June 2023 supported government and defence force requests for air lift, aircrew mountainous-terrain flying training and planning to integrate PNG Defence Force elements into routine operations for future air mobility detachments. In July 2023, a C-27J Spartan aircraft supported PNG's response to the Mount Bagana volcanic eruption in Bougainville and was the first aircraft to deliver humanitarian supplies following that event. Six DPAP rotations have been completed as of July 2024.

In February 2024, the inaugural Fijian rotation supported a range of whole-of-government air lift and surveillance tasking, with two subsequent rotations undertaken in April and June 2024.

In addition to the C-27J Spartan air mobility rotations, the DPAP includes the refurbishment of the PNG Defence Force Air Training Wing hangar, enhancements to the PNG Flights of Excellence Program and dedicated training to grow aviation skills across the Pacific to facilitate effective integration into regional operations and exercises. This will include training positions for Pacific security forces and officials on Australian courses, and directly responds to a Pacific-identified need for increased aviation literacy.

Education and Training

Through the DCP, Defence provides training and education programs and military exercise cooperation that enhances people-to-people links with our Pacific partners. These include the Defence Cooperation Scholarship Program, positions at the Australian Defence College, single service training, joint training and secondment

programs, and our support for a wide range of bilateral and regional exercises. In particular, the Australian Defence College provides professional military education to senior Pacific officers, building enduring partnerships that continue for decades.

Regional Exercises

Defence's support for, and participation in, Pacific military exercises contributes to enhanced regional capability, in direct response to Pacific partners' self-identified security concerns.

Operation SOLANIA is Defence's contribution to maritime surveillance within the Pacific Region and supports Operations KURU KURU, BIG EYE, ISLAND CHIEF, TUI MOANA and RAI BALANG. These multilateral operations coordinate the maritime surveillance and patrol operations run by the Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency and aim to detect and deter illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing activity.

Operation RENDER SAFE is a unique activity that safely disposes of World War II explosive remnants across the Pacific. It involves annual activities in multiple Pacific countries and responds to urgent requests from Pacific partners.