



Australian Government
Department of Defence

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

Inquiry into opportunities for advancing Australia's strategic interests through existing regional architecture

Department of Defence
Submission

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The Indo-Pacific region is in a period of significant transformation, and Australia increasingly sits at the epicentre of a complex, contested and challenging geostrategic environment. The 2020 Defence Strategic Update makes clear that Defence planning will focus on the Indo-Pacific as Australia's area of most direct strategic interest and that, within it, we must be capable of building and exercising influence in support of shared regional security interests. Australia therefore remains a steadfast supporter of existing regional security architecture; our active participation in multilateral and minilateral fora is a foundational element of Defence's international engagement and posture. Collaboration and cooperation is required to respond effectively to the region's shared security challenges. In parallel with the whole-of-government Pacific Step-up, existing regional architecture allows Australia to enhance our security cooperation, working together with our partners to support a sovereign, stable, prosperous and rules-based Indo-Pacific.

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is the heart of the Indo-Pacific and forms part of Australia's near region. Our economic and security interests are inextricably linked to the region. Australia is a strong supporter of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led regional architecture, which facilitates regional dialogue and cooperation. ASEAN and its forums amplify Australia's voice to the region, provide regular opportunities for Ministerial and Leader-level engagement and help enforce rules and norms of behaviour in our region. A strong, resilient, and united ASEAN supports Australia's own peace, security, and prosperity. In 1974, Australia became ASEAN's first dialogue partner, with the relationship being elevated to a strategic partnership in 2014. Last year, ASEAN and Australia agreed to hold annual leaders' summits.

The ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the membership of which mirrors that of the East Asia Summit, plays a central role in facilitating dialogue on security issues in the region. Defence's engagement in the ADMM-Plus aims to deepen regional engagement in support of a peaceful, inclusive and resilient region of sovereign states, by ensuring regional countries are able to engage equitably in dialogue on the region's security. The ADMM-Plus forms part of broader ASEAN-led regional architecture, which includes the East Asia Summit as the Indo-Pacific's premier forum for strategic dialogue. Australia has participated in all ADMM-Plus meetings since its inception in 2010.

The first ASEAN-Australia Informal Defence Ministers' Meeting in Hanoi in February 2020 provided a forum for direct engagement with ASEAN Ministers on strengthening Australia's defence cooperation with the region. Australia released at the meeting its 2020 Vision for Defence Engagement with ASEAN. Prime Minister Morrison announced at the 2020 ASEAN-Australia Summit \$104 million to boost defence cooperation in Southeast Asia, as part of a broader package of economic, development and security measure to support the region's recovery from COVID-19.

Defence also contributes actively to the ADMM-Plus' Experts' Working Groups (EWGs), which aim to strengthen practical military cooperation in the region. Australia participates in the seven EWGs covering a range of thematic issues: Peacekeeping Operations; Counter Terrorism; Cyber Security; Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief; Humanitarian Mine Action;

Military Medicine; and Maritime Security. Australia is the only Plus country to have co-chaired an EWG in every cycle since their inception, and is currently the co-chair with Brunei of the EWG on Military Medicine. This working group has a strong focus on strengthening regional military medicine organisations' cooperation on, and contribution to, health security in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Defence also participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Defence Officials Dialogue and the Security Policy Conference. These engage a broader group of 27 countries on regional security challenges. The ARF Security Policy Conference reports to the ARF through the ARF Senior Officials' Meeting.

The Five Power Defence Arrangements is an important part of our regional security architecture. It is our longest-standing regional security mechanism, and the only multilateral security arrangement of its kind in Southeast Asia. The FPDA supports habits of cooperation and practical interoperability between the five powers: Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, the UK and New Zealand. The FPDA underpins the presence of our Australian personnel in Singapore and Malaysia, including at Royal Malaysian Armed Forces Base Butterworth. Australia actively supports the FPDA by providing staff to its headquarters and contributing assets and personnel to FPDA exercises.

South Pacific

The South Pacific is an increasingly contested space, with competing domestic and regional interests. COVID-19 has accelerated the drivers of change that are converging in the Indo-Pacific and further complicating the operating picture. The long-term impacts are still unclear. What is clear is that enhanced regionalism and greater cooperation will help mitigate the security challenges compounded by the pandemic and weather future crises.

Under the Pacific Step-Up, Australia has enhanced engagement with our Pacific neighbours. The enduring Defence Cooperation Program (DCP), which has provided security engagement opportunities with Pacific Island Countries for more than 30 years, has stood Defence in good stead to deliver expanded relationships and activities under the Step Up. In response to COVID-19, Defence temporarily diverted DCP funding to assist partner nations to plan, prepare and implement security forces' responses.

Existing regional architecture is integral to the success of the Step-up and Defence's enhanced engagement with the region, encouraging greater awareness and coordination in maritime security and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR). Frequent dialogue facilitates information-sharing and interoperability, and allows Australia to advocate for a rules-based international order which respects the sovereignty of all states, large or small. This includes support for laws and treaties, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, and international norms which encourage economic growth and patterns of cooperation.

Underwriting the security of the region is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which is the region's premier political and economic policy organisation. In 2018, through the enactment of the Boe Declaration, Forum Leaders affirmed a revitalised approach to regional security expanded to emerging and contemporary security issues such as climate security, human security, and environmental and resource security.

The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) is a defence-specific forum within the region's security architecture. The forum complements existing regional organisations, particularly the PIF. SPDMM is an important part of the region's security architecture, providing an opportunity for South Pacific Defence Ministers to discuss regional security challenges and global security developments of mutual interest.

The SPDMM membership includes Defence Ministers from Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, New Zealand, France, Chile and Australia. In the current strategic environment, SPDMM has become increasingly crucial to share experiences and address regional challenges with Pacific partners. SPDMM allows Defence partners to share views and shape solutions on existing and emerging threats in the region, contribute to key policy developments, and identify collective solutions. There is a strong focus on maintaining interoperability and strengthening capabilities, such as HADR support through this forum.

SPDMM underscores Australia's enduring commitment to our Pacific partners and our commitment to the region. The virtual 2020 SPDMM was an exemplar of virtual regional multilateralism. Partners discussed ways forward for regional security engagement and initiatives to support regional resilience. Agreement to develop a defence-specific regional HADR framework to complement the work of the PIF was an important outcome designed to address a key regional security priority in the region.

A range of multilateral agreements and exercises exist to support Pacific regionalism, including the France, Australia, New Zealand (FRANZ) agreement (concluded in 1992) to coordinate HADR efforts, and multilateral simulations and exercises like Exercises CROIX DU SUD, LONGREACH and SOUTHER KATIPO. These exercises contribute to ongoing improvements in HADR preparedness, help identify interoperability and capability gaps and ensure HADR efforts are coordinated and effective.

Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST saw Pacific regionalism on display, with partners across the Indo-Pacific offering support to Australia during the unprecedented bushfire season in 2020. Operation BUSHFIRE ASSIST demonstrated the strength in our longstanding defence partnerships in the region and our commitment to sharing skilled capabilities in times of need.

In response to Tropical Cyclone Harold (2020), Australia and New Zealand conducted aerial surveillance upon request from the Government of Tonga. This task was completed under the FRANZ humanitarian assistance framework and further reinforces the value of our Pacific partnerships.

Defence leads Australia's representation at the Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (Pacific QUAD). The Pacific QUAD brings together defence and security agencies from Australia, France, New Zealand and the United States in a mutual commitment to partner with Pacific Island nations to enhance regional maritime security. The Pacific QUAD seeks to better coordinate complementary defence and security activities undertaken by members in support of our Pacific partners' maritime security priorities. Since its establishment in the mid-1990s, the Pacific QUAD has coordinated maritime patrols and training and capacity building activities primarily focussed on regional fisheries surveillance and enforcement. More recently the Pacific QUAD has expanded its framework of action to respond to broader existing and emerging security challenges in line with the 2018 *Boe Declaration*.

The South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces (SWHPMF) meeting provides an annual opportunity for Heads of Maritime Forces throughout the Pacific to forge collective relationships and discuss matters of common interest such as maritime security and climate change. The meeting is one way in which the Royal Australian Navy affirms its commitment to maritime cooperation across the region. Cook Islands was scheduled to host the meeting in 2020, although it was unfortunately unable to go ahead due to COVID-19 travel restrictions; the meeting has been tentatively rescheduled for August 2021.

Defence also, as part of the whole-of-government's Pacific Step-up, facilitates the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHOPS) forum with the Australian Federal Police and Australian Border Force. The JHOPS forum engages with heads of Pacific security agencies (including police, military forces, customs and immigration) to help inform and shape the regional security agenda. JHOPS provides a forum for the Pacific's Heads of Security to proactively engage in security cooperation across the region. Discussions have focussed on security themes of enhancing maritime domain awareness, humanitarian and disaster relief, and responding to transnational crime.