

19 June 2020

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Inquiry into Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations

Dear Committee Secretary,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Defence Sub-committee inquiry on Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations.

The following submission addresses Australia's Defence relationships with Pacific Island nations with regards to engagement and support towards their deployment on UN peacekeeping operations. Specifically, it draws on some of the preliminary findings emerging from an ongoing project being undertaken by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in cooperation with the Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC). At present, the project examines the different priorities and objectives of countries in the region when it comes to deploying personnel to UN peacekeeping missions, with a particular focus on seven case study countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu). The complete findings of the project will be available towards the end of 2020.

This submission is made in our personal capacity and not on behalf of any organisation.

Yours sincerely,

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Australia has long history of working with countries in the Pacific to deploy to and cooperate in peacekeeping missions. Working with other countries in the Pacific, Australia has contributed to and in some cases led peacekeeping missions hosted in the region. Australia worked in cooperation with New Zealand, Fiji and Vanuatu to deploy the Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville from 1997 to 2003. At the request of the Solomon Islands government, the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was deployed from 2003 to 2017, led by Australia and with contributions from 15 other Pacific Islands Forum countries. Several countries in the Pacific also contributed personnel to the UN peace operations that were deployed in Timor-Leste from 1999 to 2012, recognising the importance of supporting regional security.

Pacific contributions to UN peacekeeping

Over the last forty years, countries in the Pacific have also deployed to peacekeeping missions in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean. Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Samoa and Timor-Leste¹ currently have personnel deployed to range of UN peace operations including: UNAMID (Darfur), UNMISS (South Sudan), UNTSO (Middle East), UNDOF (Golan Heights), UNMHA (Yemen), UNISFA (Abyei), UNIFIL (Lebanon), UNAMI (Iraq), and UNFICYP (Cyprus), demonstrating the breadth of Pacific peacekeeping efforts. Fiji in particular is a significant contributor to UN missions, with 344 personnel currently deployed to eight different missions, making it the 41st largest troop and police contributing country (as at 31 May 2020). A Fijian also currently serves in a senior UN leadership role as the Police Commissioner in UNMISS. Several countries have previously contributed but have stopped contributing despite an interest in remaining engaged in UN peacekeeping. In some cases, this has been due to a lack of compliance with UN requirements.

Countries in the South West Pacific have also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions across the globe in Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, Cote d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Most Pacific Island countries have deployed to English-speaking countries, but in some cases, such as Vanuatu, they have deployed to Francophone mission environments drawing on their French language skills.

Australia has a long history of contributing to UN peacekeeping missions although remains a modest contributor (currently the 79th largest troop and police contributor according to the UN). Australian Defence personnel are currently deployed to four UN peacekeeping missions (as of 31 May 2020), with 17 in UNMISS (South Sudan), 12 in UNTSO and 1 in UNDOF (Middle East) and 3 in UNFICYP (Cyprus). Australia's Major General Cheryl Pearce currently holds the role of Force Commander in the UNFICYP in Cyprus.

Preliminary research findings

From our conversations with various government officials and former peacekeepers across the region in Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga and

¹ Timor-Leste is one of the case study countries that forms part of this project and therefore has subsequently been included as part of our discussion of the South West Pacific in this submission.

Timor-Leste, there are several preliminary findings that have started to emerge from our research which may inform or guide Defence cooperation in the region.

The motivations and rationale for countries in the region contributing to UN peacekeeping missions vary and may include a combination of different factors:

- UN peacekeeping offers an important vehicle to 'give back' to the international community and support multilateralism, the UN and the rules-based global order. In the case of Timor-Leste, this was a motivation that resonated strongly, given the support the Timorese received previously as a host country of UN peace operations. Similar sentiments were expressed by some officials in the Solomon Islands, which benefited from the deployment of the regional peacekeeping mission RAMSI.
- Peacekeeping missions offer an opportunity to deploy to operational environments, which are otherwise limited. Such experience may support the professional development of military (and police) forces in a multinational and civil-military operating environment.
- Deployments may offer financial benefits and incentives for peacekeepers and sending governments. The information on the benefits received is relatively opaque and can be a sensitive topic to discuss, but several former peacekeepers noted that one of the reasons they were keen to deploy to UN peacekeeping missions was due to the financial benefits they received individually.
- Decisions by many Pacific countries are unlikely to be made guided by the geographic location of current peacekeeping missions (largely in Africa and the Middle East at present) and whether they engage with other bilateral strategic interests. Rather, language considerations and the presence of regional neighbours or partners may guide decisions to deploy to certain missions. For instance, Vanuatu has deployed personnel to several francophone peacekeeping missions (Cote d'Ivoire, Haiti, Democratic Republic of the Congo), whereas most other Pacific countries have deployed to missions where English is the primary language of operation (e.g. South Sudan). Similarly, police personnel from Timor-Leste were deployed to a peacebuilding mission in Guinea-Bissau because of the Portuguese language connection.

Bureaucratic and administrative barriers create ongoing challenges for deployments to UN peacekeeping missions, as do the small numbers of personnel in the respective military and police forces across the Pacific Islands.

- Most Pacific Island countries have a very small number of staff working in their permanent missions to the UN in New York. They are expected to cover an ever-expanding number of issues, including peacekeeping. Only Fiji and Papua New Guinea have a dedicated military or defence adviser working in their permanent mission in New York. Information sharing with capitals on developments and opportunities in UN peacekeeping may therefore be more limited.

Despite an interest in UN peacekeeping, several countries are limited by the size and capacity of their military and police forces, and whether they have some of the unique skill sets required in current UN peacekeeping missions.

- There has been some exploration of options for the deployment of a regional peacekeeping unit abroad, such as through the Melanesian Spearhead Group

(MSG). The MSG commenced a discussion with the UN on opportunities to deploy a unit in 2013, however these discussions are moving forward slowly.

Similarly, there is a very limited amount of information available publicly about the history or current contribution of countries in the Pacific to UN peacekeeping, despite the breadth and significance of these contributions to efforts to maintain international peace and security. These are important stories that need to be shared, particularly as they reflect upon the challenges and sacrifices made by many personnel and their families when they have deployed overseas to UN peacekeeping missions, where deployments can exceed a year or longer.

Opportunities and challenges for closer coordination

There is interest across Pacific countries in exploring opportunities for further engagement in UN peacekeeping missions, given many of the potential benefits that such deployment offers for individuals and the wider security sector. This offers an opportunity for Australia to consider how it might cooperate and collaborate with countries in the South West Pacific to further their engagement in UN peacekeeping.

Australia's Defence Cooperation program has and continues to offer critical support to facilitate the development of basic skills training, English language training and pre-deployment training to support countries in the Pacific to deploy to UN peacekeeping missions. In some cases, this has been supplemented by training programs offered by the Australian Peace Operations Training Centre (POTC) in country, or with the attendance of future potential peacekeepers from the region on courses in Australia.

Australia is not the only country engaged in supporting countries in the Pacific in terms of their engagement in UN peacekeeping, with New Zealand, the United States, China and Portugal (in the case of Timor-Leste) actively supporting either the delivery or development of training courses, or the attendance of military personnel on training courses, which facilitate their ongoing engagement in peacekeeping.

It is also important to recognise the key role of the Australian Federal Police in developing Pacific security forces as many nations do not have defence forces. Much of the peacekeeping training undertaken by Pacific peacekeepers is conducted in Canberra by the AFP. While close collaboration between Defence and the AFP is already underway, considering the nature of security forces in the region, this relationship is crucial.

While our project is not focused exclusively on Australia's cooperation to support Pacific engagement in UN peacekeeping, it is an aspect that has emerged from discussions with governments in the region, given Australia's sizeable Defence Cooperation and policing programs in the region. Some possible areas for future support to facilitate the engagement of countries in the Pacific in future UN peacekeeping missions may include:

- Continuing to support ongoing training needs to deploy to UN peacekeeping missions, including basic skills, English language training, pre-deployment training (including for staff officers and experts on mission) and specialised training to support the delivery of different aspects of UN peacekeeping mission mandates. The Australian-sponsored redevelopment of the Blackrock facility in Fiji offers an example of cooperation, whereby on completion it has the potential to be a leading regional hub for peacekeeping training.

- Supporting engagement within the UN system, particularly through the Office of Military Affairs and Police Division in the Department of Peace Operations in New York with regards to deployment requirements and opportunities, as well as engaging in policy forums and other UN bodies where there is an interest in addressing systemic challenges and peacekeeping reform initiatives.
- Identifying potential opportunities for co-deployments to UN peacekeeping missions. Australia has announced it will deploy alongside Fiji in the UN Disengagement Observer Mission (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights, for instance. Such opportunities enable the development of important working relationships and further professional development in operational contexts.
- Facilitating increased women's participation in future peacekeeping deployments. Where it has occurred, peacekeeping has allowed women to take on significant, operational roles and support their professional development. This also remains an ongoing priority for the UN as part of its Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy.

While there is scope for more strategic and comprehensive cooperation in the Pacific to engage in and support UN peacekeeping, this support needs to be guided by the needs and objectives of the countries themselves. With all overseas engagement, Australia's approach should seek to identify and minimise any detrimental impacts from its efforts. An increase in overseas deployments may lead to staffing and resource shortages back home, which should be minimised to avoid strain to any under resourced security forces.

Ultimately, any Australian government initiatives or engagement activities, including through Australia's Defence Cooperation program, will need to listen carefully to the needs of our Pacific counterparts and recognise potential limits.