

18th February 2020

Submission to the Inquiry into Strengthening Australian Relationships in the Pacific

Introduction

I commend the government for their increased engagement in the Pacific region with Pacific Island nations. The Pacific Step-up is a significant program addressing many of the opportunities and risks Australia has in the Pacific region. Australian foreign policy is grounded in our identity as part “Pacific Ocean family of nations.”¹ We “share the responsibilities and challenges” of achieving a “region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity.”² The relationship between Australia and Pacific island nations is based in a common belief in “good governance, ... liberty of the individual under the law, [and] upholding democratic processes.”³ This provides a good foundation for regional cooperation. There are many problems and challenges facing the region. It is evident that any issues that affect one nation will soon affect others, as “national security impacts on regional security.”⁴ There are also many opportunities for strengthening our defence, economic and social ties, and working together for human and environmental wellbeing.

Australia has committed to implement “more integrated and innovative policy” with more “substantial ... investments,” including the Pacific Step-up program.⁵ States working by themselves have “limited capacity” to respond to major “security challenges such as transnational crime, natural disasters, climate change or outbreaks of infectious diseases.” But

¹ Australian Government, “Australia and the Pacific - Supporting Sustainable Oceans and Livelihoods,” 1, <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/Documents/supporting-sustainable-oceans-and-livelihoods.pdf>>.

² “Sustainable Oceans,” 1.

³ Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* 2018.

⁴ *Boe Declaration* 2018, 8.

⁵ Australian Government, *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 101.

these issues can be managed with “close bilateral and regional cooperation.”⁶ The Pacific Step-up is aimed at strengthening the partnerships between Australia and the Pacific Island nations. The program is aimed at responding to the that “broad-ranging challenges of our region” as “identified by Pacific leaders and communities themselves.”⁷ Australian policy also emphasises supporting the development of “innovative, Pacific-led solutions.”⁸ Australian leadership, expertise and development assistance is important, but even more so is helping Pacific Islanders to develop the capacity and skills to find solutions to regional problems. This will help develop stronger partnerships to deal our environmental and security challenges. Pacific Islanders have a more intimate knowledge and experience of the Pacific environment and the challenges they face. Australian Government Minister Alex Hawke set the right tone when he said to Pacific leaders, “the Australian Government is here to listen.”⁹

Responding to the Terms of Reference:

1. Implementation^[SEP]

The Pacific Step-Up program involves many initiatives that strengthening our engagement in the Pacific region. Australia has a strong role to play in supporting regional security. This includes the Defence Cooperation Program aiming to strengthen our “security partnerships” with Pacific Island countries. Australia wants to be the “principal security partner for Pacific Island Countries,” as well as East Timor and Papua New Guinea.¹⁰ This includes the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) gifting 21 Guardian Class Patrol Boats to 13 nations.¹¹ This provides replacements for boats provided by the Pacific Patrol Boat Program during 1987 to 1997, which gave 24 patrol boats to 13 Pacific Island nations.¹² Two Guardian Class Patrol boats have already

⁶ *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 103.

⁷ Australian Government, “Stepping Up Australia’s Engagement with Our Pacific Family,” <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/engagement/Pages/stepping-up-australias-pacific-engagement.aspx>>.

⁸ “Sustainable Oceans.”

⁹ “Stepping up.”

¹⁰ Australian Government, *Defence White Paper* 2016, 74.

¹¹ *Defence White Paper* 2016, 74; *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 103; Australian Government, “Shared security in the Pacific,” <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/Pages/shared-security-in-the-pacific.aspx>>.

¹² *Defence White Paper* 126-127; Auditor-General, *Major Projects Report* 2020, 322.

been gifted to Tuvalu and Tonga in 2019.¹³ The Patrol boats, along with an auxiliary "regional surveillance capability," will help Pacific Island nations to "protect their maritime environment, resources and security."¹⁴ This includes common security issues such as transnational crime, illegal fishing and disaster relief and rescue.¹⁵ Regional cooperation is also underpinned by sharing Australian expertise through the Australian Pacific Security College and the Pacific Police Development Program, among other programs. Such "security and law enforcement training" helps build up the skills and capacity of Pacific Islander police and defence personnel.¹⁶ Pacific Islander police and defence personnel have already demonstrated their capability and willingness to address security problems, including with the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI).¹⁷ These defence programs help build the capacity of Pacific Island nations and strengthen cooperation between Australia and the region.

Step-up aims to help countries achieve economic prosperity and become resilient to environmental challenges. Economic initiatives include infrastructure spending and labour mobility programs.¹⁸ The Pacific Labour scheme aims to "fill labour shortages in rural and regional Australia" while providing "employment opportunities for Pacific Islanders to develop skills and earn income."¹⁹ This interchange of labour would benefit both Australia and the Pacific island nations. Investments in infrastructure includes a coral sea cable between Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to improve telecommunications and internet access, enabling greater technological innovation.²⁰ Australia has an interest in promoting "sustainable development" in the region.²¹ Providing economic opportunity can lead to better stability and security, and help them better prepare for and manage future challenges.²² Environmental pressures under climate change could severely constrain "future economic prosperity," which

¹³ *Major Projects Report 2020*, 70.

¹⁴ *Defence White Paper 2016*, 74; "Shared security in the Pacific."

¹⁵ "Shared security in the Pacific."

¹⁶ *Foreign Policy White Paper 2017*, 103.

¹⁷ "Shared security in the Pacific."

¹⁸ "Stepping up."

¹⁹ Australian Government, "Economic Prosperity in the Pacific,"

<<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/Pages/economic-prosperity-in-the-pacific.aspx>>.

²⁰ "Stepping up."

²¹ *Foreign Policy White Paper 2017*, 87.

²² *Foreign Policy White Paper 2017*, 87, 94.

underscores the need for sustainable development and adaptation now.²³ Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) can be used to build up climate change and disaster resilience.²⁴ Any funded infrastructure will also be “built to withstand the impacts of climate change and natural disasters.”²⁵ This includes safeguarding Pacific food security with sustainable management of coastal water fish that are “critical to the food and nutritional security of rural Pacific Islanders.”²⁶ Hence Australia is supporting regional organisations, communities and national fishery agencies to develop ways to “manage coastal fisheries sustainability and share learnings” between nations.²⁷ There is also security cooperation to tackle “Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing,” including with the new Patrol Boats provided by Australia.²⁸ Climate change will have dramatic impact on land boundaries, food sources and the occurrence of extreme weather phenomena. Pacific Island nations will need to prepare and adapt to these changes, with Australian assistance, to best preserve their way of life.

2. Broadening Australian engagement^[SEP]

There is also tremendous opportunity to deepen engagement in the Pacific amongst the Australian public and civil society. There are already significant personal connections between Australians and the Pacific islanders. Our engagement is built upon “deep personal, historical and cultural ties.”²⁹ Pacific Islanders are remembered in the Anzac legend, such as the Papua New Guinean “fuzzy wuzzy angels” in the Kokoda campaign. The Pacific Step-up program will “strengthen and celebrate these personal connections,” including sport, church and education partnerships.³⁰

Sport diplomacy enables Australia, itself a “high performing and passionate sport nation,” to

²³ *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 94.

²⁴ *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 18; Australian Government, “Pacific Regional – climate change and resilience”, <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/development-assistance/Pages/resilience-pacific-regional.aspx>>.

²⁵ “Climate change and resilience.”

²⁶ Australian Government, “Sustainable Oceans,” 4.

²⁷ Australian Government, “Sustainable Oceans,” 1-4.

²⁸ Australian Government, “Sustainable Oceans,” 1.

²⁹ “Stepping up.”

³⁰ “Stepping up.”

form connections with “people and institutions around the world.”³¹ Australia and the Pacific Islanders have a common passion for sport and the benefits of sport in “improving people’s health and wellbeing.”³² The PacificAus Sports program is developing “ambitious sports partnerships” between Australia and the Pacific to share expertise and deepen relationships.³³ There is opportunity here to engage Australian sport clubs and organisations to deepen their engagement in the Pacific region. This could include participating in regional tournaments; exchange programs for athletes or coaches between Australia and the Pacific and scholarships; and recruiting programs for Pacific Islanders to play in domestic Australian sport.

Educational links are also important. The Australian Government has sponsored 190 scholarships since 2007 for Pacific Islanders to study “environmental related issues including fisheries, marine science, climate change and environmental management.”³⁴ Pacific Step-up promises to support more secondary students study in Australian connections, allowing for more educational and cultural exchange.³⁵ It also wants to deepen the connections between Australian and Pacific Islander teachers, allowing for exchange of ideas and best practice learning.³⁶ As an anecdote, my high school Carey Baptist Grammar regularly send a group of students to Nauru to volunteer with painting and music concerts and to learn about Nauruan culture. There could be more done to educate Australian students about the importance of the Pacific region. This could include learning about Pacific geography and the issues facing Pacific islands (such as rising sea levels and fishery management). It could also include learning about the history and various cultures in the region. This could promote knowledge and interest in the region amongst Australian students. Today’s Australian youth will be the leaders of tomorrow, tasked with supporting the stability and prosperity of our shared region.

³¹ *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 114.

³² Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, *Pacific Island Forum Communiqué* 2019, 11; *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 114; Australian Government, “People Connections in the Pacific,” <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/people-connections/Pages/people-connections-in-the-pacific.aspx>>.

³³ Australian Government, “PacificAus Sports,” <<https://dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/people-connections/Pages/pacificaus-sports.aspx>>.

³⁴ Australian Government, “Sustainable Oceans,” 2.

³⁵ “People Connections.”

³⁶ “People Connections.”

3. Reflecting Priority Needs ^[1]_[SEP]

I believe the Pacific Step-up is a commendable policy that seems to have been developed and implemented with considered dialogue with the Pacific Islanders. There should continue to be dialogue between Australia and the Pacific island governments and people to ensure that the Step-up program and other policy initiatives are meeting their needs and priorities.

Regional agreements provide an important guideline for the challenges and aspirations of the Pacific Island people. Regional security cooperation has been strengthened by discussions in the Pacific Islands Forum and other regional meetings, including Australian participation.³⁷ These avenues provide Pacific Island countries with a place to “discuss and agree how to respond to regional security threats,” such as the Biketawa Declaration of 2000 authorising regional intervention to resolve security crises.³⁸ Issues of concern outlined by the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* and the latest *Pacific Island Forum Communiqué* include cybersecurity, humanitarian relief, sustainable management of natural resources (such as fisheries), transnational crime and climate change.³⁹ Such guidelines provide important clarity to Australia about the priority security concerns of the Pacific Islands and how we should intervene, including with peacekeeping missions. The *Boe Declaration* calls for “continuing regular Leaders level discussions” on security issues in the Pacific.⁴⁰ The involvement of Australia in regional forums and agreements enables a more intimate engagement with the region than is possible for us elsewhere. There are many areas of common interests, where addressing the issues critical for the security and prosperity of the Pacific Islands will also help Australia.

3A. Climate change

The predominant issue for the Pacific Islands, as emphasised by various communiqués, is climate change. Climate change is clearly described as the “single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.”⁴¹ This is an existential issue for the Pacific islands, with some of them threatened to lose some or all their territory under rising

³⁷ *Defence White Paper* 2016, 55.

³⁸ *Defence White Paper* 2016, 55.

³⁹ See *Boe Declaration* 2018; *Pacific Island Forum Communiqué* 2019.

⁴⁰ *Boe Declaration* 2018, 10.

⁴¹ *Boe Declaration* 2018, 1.

sea levels. Sea water inundation on fertile land and changing fish migration patterns could also affect their access to food resources, severely affecting their food security.⁴² Given the emphasis among on climate change by the Pacific island neighbours, this could be an area of greater involvement for Australia. Australia has promised to help “strengthen the capacity of the Pacific” to adapt to climate change and build resilience, including the most vulnerable “low lying atoll states.”⁴³ Pacific Islanders also believe strongly in emissions reduction under the Paris Climate Agreement to suppress global temperature rises.⁴⁴ Australia should show leadership on mitigation efforts with strong domestic action and global advocacy in supporting cooperative solutions (such as at the upcoming 2020 Glasgow Conference). Securing an effective agreement and action would reduce the deleterious impact on our Pacific Island neighbours, contributing to regional security and prosperity.

Conclusion

The Pacific Step-up includes many great initiatives to deepen Australia's engagement with our Pacific island neighbours. Pacific island nations will be essential partners in responding to regional security and environmental challenges, such as food security and migration flows. Preparing now in building up resilience and bonds of friendship will enable more effective regional cooperation on future challenges. The Pacific Step-up is a tremendous policy approach that will help meet many regional needs. However, greater engagement in the Pacific should not be financed by withdrawing from other critical engagement areas. We have an interest in supporting the “stability and security in our wider region” of the Asia-Pacific, including “major powers” and “fragile states.”⁴⁵ This can include defence cooperation and providing ODA. Recommitting to 0.7% GNI toward ODA would enable Australia to promote more programs in a broader region, including but not limited to the Pacific. Indeed, many security issues impacting on Australia and the Pacific, particularly climate change, will require broad regional and worldwide cooperation. This inquiry will have an important job in examining in greater detail how the program is being implemented, and where there could be further progress and policy needs.

⁴² Cambridge University Press, *Garnaut Climate Change Review* 2008, 225.

⁴³ *Foreign Policy White Paper* 2017, 104

⁴⁴ *Boe Declaration* 2018, 1; *Pacific Island Forum Communiqué* 2019, 14.

⁴⁵ Australian Government, *Defence White Paper* 2009, 96.

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Thank you for considering my submission.

Kind Regards,

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