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A CONTINUAL EVOLUTION: SOUTH PACIFIC POLICY

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The manner in which South West Pacific strategy has been implemented has varied considerably. Government policy has ranged from benign neglect in the 1970's and 1980's through to a full intervention in 1999 in the case of East Timor. Each method has attracted some form of criticism. Current Defence Policy as outlined in the Defence White Paper 2013 and 2016 has similarly attracted attention with a stated requirement for increased engagement in the region in order to counter external influence.

Australian engagement within the South West Pacific region should seek a more stable and reliable solution. This should include a greater willingness to engage with non-traditional partners in order to achieve stability in the region.

BACKGROUND

Since federation, Australia has viewed the South Pacific as vital to its national security due to a dependency on Sea Lines Of Communication (SLOC) and a notion that, if any of these land masses fell under hostile control, Australia could potentially face direct threat. Policies regarding how best to engage and approach relationships within the region in order to achieve stability have widely varied in their methods. Due largely to the influence and subsequent collapse of colonialism up until the 1970s, Australia initially adopted an approach of benign neglect. This form of engagement involved generous aid payments though minimal Australian involvement in political affairs due to an assumption that the region was functioning well. Such an assumption was flawed, with the subsequent lack of involvement coupled with a reluctance to intervene leading to greater instability in the region over the long term.

The increasing instability during the 1990s led to the region being dubbed the 'arc of instability' by Paul Dibb. This view was highlighted by a series of events beginning in 1999 with the Australian-led UN mandated intervention - International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) mission, and, continuing later in 2003, the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands

(RAMSI). Such interventions were employed within a 'risk management' approach to the region, and were adopted in order for Australia to actively securitise the perceived dysfunction. Framed differently, and noting the focus on global terrorism that was arising concurrently, Australia sought to be regarded as capable of managing unrest in its neighbourhood. Concern over failing or failed states was front and centre due to the acts of global terror occurring at the time, and had resulted in a fear that nations within the South Pacific could become a safe haven for terrorists or criminals. Given that the United States deems the South Pacific under the Australia's remit, additional pressure was applied by the US to stabilise the region in order to prevent further potential for failed states.

CURRENT POSITION

The two most recent Defence White Papers released in 2013 and 2016 continue to identify the same risks in the region: state fragility and instability. The 2013 paper lists the South Pacific region the second highest defence priority behind the defence of Australia against a direct armed attack. It states that Australia is to maintain security, stability and cohesion of the immediate neighbourhood in order to ensure that it does not become a source of threat to Australia. The 2016 paper lists the same risks, but looks at the region

more generally defining the nearer region as maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific, while also assigning no priority to each strategic objective. The current overarching [defence policy guidance](#) affirms that Australia must play 'a leadership role in our immediate neighbourhood' and 'continue to seek to be the principal security partner'. In ensuring this end state, there has been increasing concern surrounding the persistent presence of non-traditional partner nations within the region. With such broad guidance, the conditions are once again ripe for a continued state of flux.

ENGAGEMENT IN THE REGION WITH THE PRESENCE OF NON-TRADITIONAL PARTNERS

Despite an extant requirement for effective regional engagement; history suggests that there has been no effective long-term strategy, and that policy is largely reactionary. This criticism is supported by subsequent assessments made in the [Foreign Policy White paper](#) in which it was outlined that Australia needs to 'engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition, deliver more integrated and innovative policy and make further, substantial long-term investments in the region's development. Despite positive developments in the region over the last decade, including the conclusion of RAMSI, many states within the area are still viewed as having 'weak resilience', or '[high aid dependence](#)', thus less than equal partners. Although Australian engagement seeks to collaborate with and further strengthen the capabilities of Pacific island countries, it is not uncommon for government assistance (in the form of aid or military equipment) to be tied to a request for reform. For example, the [Australian and New Zealand aid](#) provided to Fiji is tied to a requirement for democratic governmental reforms. In this regard, while well intentioned, Australian support can appear patronising to the recipient. Such engagement generates conditions where South Pacific countries look elsewhere for support – mainly economically but also at times strategically for security.

The acknowledgement of an increased presence from non-traditional partners (and an acceptance of its permanency) presents another complication in defining how to generate the most effective policy. The 2016 Defence White Paper is not overly specific, but notes that 'countries from outside the South Pacific will seek to continue to expand their influence in the region, including through enhanced security ties.' Recent public discussion by think tanks such as [ASPI](#) and the [Lowy Institute](#) specifically highlight concerns relating to China. These concerns are generally linked to China, and specifically, their [Belt and

Road initiative. Concerns are generated through China being the largest aid provider to Samoa and Tonga, but also militarily through the development of specific defence agreements with Fiji. Further concerns bought to light in the public arena include the possible establishment of a military base in Vanuatu; although this was subsequently disproven.

These arrangements have the potential to create instability a number of ways. First, through a recipient nation's economic fragility - an inability to repay debt, or through internal ethnic divisions – infighting over access to funds. Second, there is the potential for ethnic tensions between the local population and Chinese workers.

Separately, Australia may perceive greater instability in the region due to an inability to gain conclusive evidence as to how Chinese influence will impact its relationships with PIC, and whether or not it will maintain its leadership role in the region. Understanding the motivations of non-traditional regional actors is challenging; the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade specifically noted in a parliamentary inquiry that it is difficult to assess the success of those efforts, such as the encouragement of good governance as 'sometimes we do not find out about activities that have gone on until after they have happened.'

While the exact nature of instability and causes of uncertainty will continue to remain present, the acknowledgement of external influence in the region does provide an opportunity to develop a more stable and measured approach to policy; one that is not set and forget, and takes a longer-term approach. Should a stable and measured approach not be adopted, the risk of geostrategic competition will increase, and Australia's regional power will decrease.

PROPOSED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

First, a greater level of detail must be provided by formal policy in order to inform how Defence engagement can best serve the needs of South Pacific nations. While there is a general understanding that greater engagement is required in order to shape the environment, a one size fits all approach does not apply. When compared to the 1980's and 1990's, there is a great deal less instability in counties such as Timor-Leste. While still facing certain developmental challenges, Timor-Leste has made significant progress since 2002. Likewise, targeted bilateral security arrangements have been established with Solomon Islands, Nauru and Tuvalu in order to protect the region against transnational organised crime, improved border security capability, and the establishment of greater protection against health threats.

In developing policy, it should support a developmental rather than security framework. This form of engagement focuses on fostering a consistently stable environment rather than the crisis management approach which requires a significant increase in funding and support just moments before complete civil collapse.

Practically, this may mean a greater (but tailored) commitment in order to ensure longevity. Potentially this could include increasing the Australian Maritime Border Force footprint to include the north of Papua New Guinea (PNG) - through engagement with Pacific Islands Forum. Use of such assets would ensure a physical and obvious presence, as well as a practical service to PNG's maritime domain awareness. Importantly, whatever basing solution is implemented, it must be considered permanent in order to demonstrate a lifelong commitment, not just one that serves the purpose of looking better than China in 2018. This could also be done through training PNG personnel in the capacity of boarder protection with the aim of permanent employment within a PNG detachment.

Second, Australia should actively engage and collaborate with non-traditional partner states in order to achieve long term stability within the region. China will continue to provide unconditional economic assistance and infrastructure in order to gain greater influence. Regardless of whether China intends to improve trade or create strategic partnerships, their external aid undermines Australian objectives. I refer back to the Fijian example in which attempts by Australia and New Zealand to tie aid to reforms for a democratically elected government were complicated due to Chinese financial support being unconditional.

Australia too should focus on new and innovative ways to engage China. This policy would assist in preventing instability while also developing a new status quo on its own terms, rather than wait for tension to build. Although Australia is an influential regional power and has increased funding to the region, Australian support is limited. Australia should work with China from a position of greater experience for the sake of good developmental outcomes, as well as an opportunity to strengthen its bilateral relationship with China. This region offers an opportunity unlike anywhere else in the world because Pacific islands countries offer a low-risk and relatively straightforward case for co-operation. Australia and China have a healthy but largely transactional relationship focused on trade, so collaborating in a region where they share common interests could add real substance to bilateral ties between the two countries.

This is not a wildly radical idea. There are already a couple of opportunities that Australia could use as precedence and further build upon to create more policy change. Australia already works with China in a [trilateral aid project](#) regarding humanitarian assistance in PNG (China-Australia Memorandum of Understanding [MoU] on development) as one such example. Building on this example, China and Australia could use a combination of military personnel and assets – the Chinese Hospital ship and Australian medical personnel for instance, to show increased co-commitment to the region.

Another example outlined by ASPI's Anthony Bergin is in the field of regional law enforcement. In a recent example, Fiji deported 77 Chinese online scammers in a [joint operation](#) with Chinese law enforcement. This is another possible avenue for Australia and New Zealand to generate a mutually beneficial agreement. Using these agreements as a basis, Australia could also work to develop a specific MoU's surrounding the demilitarisation in the region (outside of individual nation sovereignty considerations). In doing so, concerns over the military basing in Vanuatu would be alleviated.