



Navigating ‘Flexible, Responsive and Respectful’ Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: A 2022 Workshop Report

Henrietta McNeill, James Batley, Anna Powles, Hidekazu Sakai, Alan Tidwell and Joanne Wallis

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Introduction

On 23 and 24 November 2022, the University of Adelaide Stretton Institute and the Australian National University (ANU) Department of Pacific Affairs co-hosted the Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands workshop in Canberra. One hundred representatives from academia, civil society and the governments of Australia, New Zealand, the United States (US), Japan, Samoa and several European states attended. The workshop was the culmination of our three-year Australian Department of Defence Strategic Policy Grant project that analysed how Pacific security cooperation can best be orientated to address current and future regional security challenges.

The workshop analysed **current developments in Pacific security** — such as COVID-19, the Tongan volcano and tsunami response and China’s proposed economic and security pacts — and **the future of Pacific security cooperation** — what ‘fit-for-purpose’ regional architecture would look like, how partners can increase cooperation in areas such as maritime domain awareness and how security cooperation can be meaningfully facilitated among the local, national and regional levels. It concluded with reflections from early career researchers. Audio recordings of the panels can be found [here](#).

Through the project, we found that security cooperation in the Pacific is a ‘patchwork of agreements, arrangements and activities between Pacific Island states and territories and their security partners that reflects differing priorities and geopolitical dynamics’ (Wallis et al. 2021:1). The workshop was an opportunity to bring Pacific Islanders and partner states together to discuss how security cooperation works in practice. Key themes that arose included:

- Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) want to be taken seriously as security partners and for their priorities — notably, climate change — to drive regional security cooperation.
- There are examples of productive security cooperation between external partners and PICTs

across several domains, but there is scope for deeper engagement.

- While there is an aspiration among PICTs for strengthened regional approaches to security cooperation focusing on the role of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), it is not yet possible to discern the shape and dimensions of a future regional security architecture.
- There are hesitations about developing new architecture, particularly architecture that is not Pacific-led. Externally developed labels and initiatives such as Indo-Pacific, AUKUS and Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) are not well understood or accepted in the region.
- The internal human and financial resources available to PICTs do not yet match their aspirations, meaning that external security partners will continue to play essential roles in regional security cooperation.
- A gap remains between the assessments of many PICTs and those of their traditional security partners concerning the significance of Chinese intentions and activity in the region in recent years. Traditional partners argue that Chinese behaviour raises genuine issues for their national security, whereas Pacific Islands participants at the workshop tended to see China as a development partner.

The workshop began with Paul House, a Ngambri-Ngunnawal custodian of the Canberra region with Walgalu, Ngunnawal and Wiradjuri ancestry, welcoming participants to country. He reminded participants of the philosophy of *yindumara*: ‘It means to go slow, be patient, polite, be gentle, take responsibility’ — in particular responsibility for the past, the present and the future. His words resonated with Pacific participants, who often returned to this philosophy throughout the workshop.

The first panel provided an overview of and reflection on the project from the research team. Project leader Professor Joanne Wallis of the University of Adelaide explained that she instigated the project in 2019 in response to Australia seeking to deepen regional cooperation with its partners,

New Zealand, Japan and the US. As the project developed, it expanded to analyse not only how the partners cooperate with each other, but also how they cooperate with PICTs and how PICTs cooperate regionally. Wallis pointed participants to the project outputs, including two policy papers (Wallis et al. 2021, 2022a) and an academic article (Wallis et al. 2022b). She foreshadowed that an edited book based on papers presented at a workshop held in November 2021 (Wallis et al. 2022a) is due to be published in late 2023.

Henrietta McNeill from ANU reflected on the wide engagement the project had, from academia to government officials, regional representatives, civil society and Pacific Island students. She highlighted the changes to regional dynamics that had occurred since the project began, with the expansion of new initiatives such as the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHoPS); shifts in the use of fora for security discussions, such as the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL), which previously had not been a site for security discussions; and the interests of new or re-engaged actors, including the US, South Korea and the European Union, against the background of geopolitical competition with China. McNeill concluded that regional security cooperation is 'dynamic, active, ever-changing' and that partners should pause to consider potential saturation and/or duplication.

James Batley from ANU highlighted Australia's dual role not just as a partner with shared values and objectives in security cooperation (although issues like climate change remain) but also in seeking actively to shape the Pacific security environment within a broader geostrategic context. Batley argued that this tension between shared values and seeking to shape the security environment is not irresolvable and that the patchwork nature of regional security cooperation means that Australia can work simultaneously at both the bilateral and regional levels in the Pacific, with the capacity to mount region-wide initiatives such as JHoPS, the Pacific Fusion Centre (PFC) and the Australia Pacific Security College. Batley argued that the fundamental drivers of Australia's policy approach, including its strategic assessment of China's role in the region, have remained consistent over successive governments.

Dr Anna Powles from Massey University discussed Aotearoa New Zealand's recalibration of its Pacific policy since 2018 and highlighted the 'contest between values, interests and identity'. Powles observed that New Zealand's strategic assessment of the region has sharpened and is increasingly aligned with that of Australia, as New Zealand also seeks to deepen its relationships in the Pacific. She noted that there are questions about New Zealand's ability to resource its increased efforts in the Pacific. Like Batley, Powles considered that the patchworked and ambiguous nature of security cooperation has advantages for New Zealand.

Professor Alan Tidwell from Georgetown University acknowledged the US's increased Pacific engagement over the course of 2022 but concluded that, as a global power, 'its view on strategic cooperation is global', not Pacific-focused. To cooperate with PICTs, the US has had to recalibrate and adapt its legislation, remits and security cooperation infrastructure to work with states that are without militaries and facing non-traditional security issues.

Professor Hidekazu Sakai from Kansai Gaidai University spoke about the historic relationship between Japan and the Pacific, the shared Japan-Pacific Island Leaders Meeting (PALM) that have occurred since 1987 and the defence cooperation talks in 2021. He explained that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe began engaging more with the Pacific under a comprehensive understanding of security (inclusive of development and traditional security) in which he had perceived an increased threat to the three island chains by China.

Ewen McDonald, head of the Office of the Pacific within the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, gave the keynote address. He noted that this is a critical time for Australia in the Pacific region, taking into account the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (PIF 2022) (hereafter the 2050 Strategy) and the pace and scale of change in the Pacific region. McDonald identified a range of security threats facing the region, including economic shocks from the Russian invasion of Ukraine; disruptions to supply chains; threats to the international rules-based order; cyber threats to business and critical infrastructure; increasing transnational organised crime; and the impacts of climate change. He noted that the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related natural disasters, alongside escalating strategic tensions, have set back development gains and contracted economies. McDonald raised concerns about the risks to sovereignty if PICTs commit to unsustainable levels of debt, observing that 'too often, the choices made available to the countries at the time are set by the lender, which can be out of step with international standards'. McDonald stated that Australia sees the PIF as the premier institution in the Pacific regional architecture, in contrast to alternative policing architectures that do not include 'all our Pacific family'. To this point, he indicated that Australia will seek to ensure that the PFC and the JHoPS have decision-making structures within the PIF's architecture. He argued that there are currently no PIF-based operational agencies that address regional security in a holistic sense (as there are for climate, fisheries and economic development), complicating how regional security is approached. He noted potential options, including a regional mechanism to 'match members' capability needs against capability solutions'; a dedicated regional mechanism for crisis response; enhanced institutionalised information-

sharing; and joint operations in disaster response. McDonald highlighted that Australia's relationships in the region go 'beyond strategic contest and go beyond a traditional development or a traditional security focus', drawing on history, geography and a shared future. He reiterated that Australia will remain steadfast in its support for Pacific security.

Current developments in Pacific security cooperation

COVID-19

COVID-19 has been a defining security challenge since early 2020. Distinguished Professor Steven Ratuva of the University of Canterbury, Georgia Tiaono Whitta of the University of Auckland and Terio Koronawa of the PIF discussed the role of regional organisations in managing the COVID-19 response in the Pacific Islands. Ratuva emphasised the intersection of human security and strategic security in the case of COVID-19, wherein narratives of securitisation and militarisation were used to frame a human security threat from the virus as the enemy (Ratuva et al. 2021). This played into larger geopolitical framings of China as a threat and characterisations of the Global South as weak and susceptible to threat. However, Whitta reminded participants that Pacific peoples saw the virus as the enemy, not individuals or states.

The pandemic also highlighted global inequalities, with wealthier states like Australia and New Zealand able to access vaccines earlier and PICTs relying on vaccine donations. Pacific states fared relatively well during COVID-19, having closed their borders almost immediately (although territories had challenges in doing so, to their detriment). While this had a significant economic impact, particularly in tourism, PICTs saw a revival of what Ratuva described as the social solidarity economy, wherein, for example, communities sustainably grow their own food and establish local barter economies. Whitta similarly discussed both the direct medical impacts of COVID-19 on Pacific populations and the indirect impacts from policy decisions — as well as the implications of intersecting 'twin crises': climate change and non-communicable diseases.

Whitta urged PICTs to continue to reinforce existing healthcare systems so that 'no matter what the threat is, we have an ability to adapt to it'. One clear challenge is having an appropriate healthcare workforce, including those who have been trained overseas and are able to return to their Pacific communities. This prompted discussion about the role of partners in training healthcare professionals. Samoan High Commissioner Her Excellency Hinauri Petana stated that due to long-term labour mobility to Australia, including of aged care workers, there are serious shortages of qualified healthcare workers in PICTs. The economic benefits offered by labour mobility schemes mean that many workers, including police, teachers and nurses, leave Samoa to access them (RNZ 11/10/2022). Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls similarly noted a

loss of community and first responders to disasters when workers were away on labour mobility programs, although seasonal workers have responded to disasters in Australia and New Zealand.

Whitta argued that the COVID-19 pandemic was a 'sharp reminder of the importance of regionalism in controlling disease outbreaks and preparing for future threats'. The Pacific Humanitarian Pathway — COVID-19 (PHP-C) was a core response, which Ratuva said showed the 'capacity and strength of regional organisations', in particular how they were able to continue working together virtually by adapting global protocols and resources from a large number of partners for Pacific communities. Whitta traced the PIF response through the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific (CROP) agencies, which 'highlighted the effectiveness of when we use scientifically backed information to deliver a regional response against a global challenge'. She argued that through this regional response, 'our Pacific values were demonstrated by our leaders when they chose to have an approach that was used to protect the health and livelihoods of our people', despite their understanding that there would be later social and economic impacts.

Koronawa provided a regional official's perspective on the importance of partnership in implementing the PHP-C. He noted that the PIF's comprehensive response to COVID-19 through the deployment of technical personnel and protocols was enabled by the 2000 Biketawa Declaration. The PHP-C was a trust-building mechanism, requiring political leadership from the PIF Secretary-General and political leaders, tracking systems and flexible networks of practice to share information. Tensions arose when it came to its implementation in member states and finding the common ground necessary to achieve the minimum standards for states to sign on. Compromises had to be made between national interests and the collective interest, but this was successfully achieved. The PHP-C continued through subsequent disasters such as Cyclone Surigae in Palau and the droughts in Kiribati. That said, if it were to be replicated or become an ongoing mechanism, it would require continued financial backing. Koronawa argued that many of the lessons learnt from the implementation of the PHP-C would be useful in a renewed Pacific humanitarian strategy and regional human security framework and would be discussed as part of review of regional architecture within the 2050 Strategy.

Lessons from the Tongan volcano and tsunami response

Secretary General of Tonga Red Cross Sione Taumoefolau, Air Commodore David Hombsch from Australian Defence Force Headquarters Joint Operations Command (JOC) and Miranda Booth of Charles Darwin University sought to draw out lessons from the humanitarian assistance and disaster response (HADR) in the wake of the January 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption in Tonga and subsequent tsunami. The 2022 Tongan situation was

unique as it was made up of three parts: the volcanic eruption, which broke underwater communications cables and spread ash around Tonga, affecting people and surveillance flights; the tsunami, which took both houses and lives and damaged ports and airfields, hindering the response; and the COVID-19 pandemic, which had already economically affected Tonga, closed borders and meant that the provision of any assistance or supplies during the response had to be contactless.¹

Disasters are not new to the Pacific region. Taumoeofolau stated that Pacific Islanders have shared knowledge on previous disasters affecting the region through the Red Cross for decades. However, Tonga did not have the capacity to respond to the scale of this disaster and relied on international partners such as Australia, New Zealand and Fiji for assistance. Taumoeofolau gratefully acknowledged that partners had listened to Tongan needs before acting. In addition to partner assistance, there was international and private sector support from the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and telecommunications provider Digicel, which assisted Tonga Red Cross to rebuild houses after the disaster. Civil society worked closely with the Tongan Government, hiring boats to get food and supplies to the affected outer islands.

Taumoeofolau described how Tonga Red Cross had already pre-positioned disaster relief supplies such as blankets and emergency kits on-island, but these were insufficient, and they relied on partners to replenish their supplies. He noted, however, that coordination needed to occur in advance of supplies arriving in Tonga, as there was not enough storage space, and many containers of supplies were kept on the wharf for long periods. There were also challenges getting supplies to affected communities, who had no water, boats or wharves — or means of communication. Communities, who are the first responders, worked together to clear debris, get relief supplies onshore and distribute them. One of the challenges was how local politics became involved in the response. Tonga Red Cross had to continue advocating for the most vulnerable after the disaster, such as women, children, the elderly and those with disabilities. Taumoeofolau argued that disaster and human security responses must target the most affected groups.

One of the biggest challenges for Tonga Red Cross was the containers of donations that arrived, including unwanted or unnecessary items that required storage, such as water bottles that needed to be transferred back to Australia for recycling.² He observed that 'if you are going to donate to the islands, please call us first' so that the items donated are actually required and do not distract or detract from the response.

In addition to activating the FRANZ mechanism, the Australian Defence Force (through the JOC) led the international response (involving Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, France, the United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and the US), establishing an international coordination cell (ICC) near Canberra. The first Australian and New Zealand flights conducted reconnaissance and airfield reconstruction in Tonga within 48 hours of the

disaster. One of the first vessels to arrive in Tonga was a US Coast Guard Cutter, which undertook immediate communications and surveying activity. In terms of cooperation, Australia boarded Fijian military personnel onto Australian naval vessels as part of the broader response, Tongan technicians onto Chinook helicopters to repair the radio mast and Japan's Air Self-Defence Force onto C-130s to dispense humanitarian supplies. Hombsch detailed the assets each partner brought to the response, from Japan's modern technology to New Zealand's knowledge and understanding of the region and diving teams for clearance activities. Australia acted as a base for international relief flights, as refuelling was difficult in Tonga. Hombsch spoke about both the international and inter-agency cooperation required for a good disaster response. With communications cables broken, international government communications were limited to satellite phones held by the Australian High Commission, providing one direct line of communication with Tonga. The High Commission coordinated with the Tongan Government on their requests and communicated them back to JOC, who either facilitated the requests or shared them with partners housed within the ICC annex at JOC. Requests included aluminium boats, outboard motors, water tanks, water purification equipment and medical support. According to Hombsch, 'that coordination was vital to be able to deliver a maximum amount of humanitarian assistance in a short amount of time'.

China also provided a HADR response, although this was a unilateral effort based on China's decision to coordinate bilaterally with the host government. According to Hombsch, this resulted in 'an element of competition for pier-side support and access to tarmacs and flight scheduling, and it also meant that the type of equipment that came in from China wasn't able to be properly coordinated'. China's unilateral supply delivery processes contrasted with the quality control the internationally coordinated JOC response provided, including checking for banned substances. Competition in HADR worldwide has seen states rushing to be first on the ground with military assets rather than considering the humanitarian needs of the affected state. Booth suggested that the 'lack of a regional coordination mechanism and miscommunication do risk effective humanitarian response', as was seen with Cyclone Harold, when an Australian plane carrying humanitarian supplies was unable to land, as a Chinese plane had not finished unloading its humanitarian supplies (see Yeo 16/4/2020). Booth focused her remarks on the future of partner HADR coordination with China, which is currently 'cooperative, complex and at times, competitive'. However, in future, 'cooperation needs to be maintained to enhance coordination while mitigating the risks that are emanating from geostrategic competition'. HADR competition is visibly increasing, with China refusing to participate in a Japanese-led HADR exercise at Rim of the Pacific in 2014 and reports that the annual Disaster Management

Exchange between the US and China was suspended after 2020. China has increased its interest in disaster management in the Pacific Islands, establishing a disaster management cooperation mechanism for PICTs, launching the China–Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation and proposing a China–Pacific Island Countries Sub-Center for Marine Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation. Even so, its refusal to take part in established patterns of HADR coordination poses a challenge for both existing security partners and PICTs alike.

Hombsch noted the importance of prior joint training exercises, such as Croix du Sud and Operation EQUATEUR, both which were sponsored by the French Armed Forces and helped prepare for regional responses to natural disasters (along with Australia’s Operation KAKADU and New Zealand’s Operation TWILIGHT). These exercises, which included PICTs, generated strong relations between states for when an actual response was required. However, the difference between the exercises and the Tongan response was that the coordination of the Tongan disaster HADR was undertaken in Australia due to the multiplicity of challenges (not least that Tonga’s communications were disconnected). Hombsch highlighted that, in future, it would be desirable for an ICC to be established in the country affected by the disaster. However, a representative from the Australian Civil-Military Centre questioned whether Australia had invested sufficiently in National Disaster Management offices in the region to support locally based ICCs. In addition, the UK and Japan were more involved in the Tongan response than they were in prior exercises. In 2023, EQUATEUR will include Indonesia, although this raised some Pacific participants’ eyebrows. Booth suggested that exercises should be expanded to include medical assistance to encourage shared responsibility and a more effective humanitarian response and provide a venue for cooperation if geostrategic competition worsens and military-to-military cooperation is not possible.

Booth also proposed a non-competitive PIF HADR coordination centre under a regional HADR doctrine, wherein the initiatives and agreements do not reflect the interests of great powers but the security interests of PICTs affected by disasters (see Booth and Bachmann 8/2/2023; Powles et al. 2016). This independent regional centre could complement Fiji’s Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp³ by jointly hosting exercises and implementing HADR mandates from the South West Defence Ministers’ Meeting. However, as Tess Newton Cain of Griffith University raised, it is important to highlight the non-military elements of HADR coordination by public servants and civil society. Booth suggested that a Pacific-led centre could host exercises and workshops for military, police, civil society and civilian elements between PICTs and partners. Notably, a proposed HADR regional centre is under discussion as part of the 2050 Strategy review of regional architecture.

China’s proposed regional economic and security pact

In April 2022, China signed a security agreement with Solomon Islands⁴ that accentuated geopolitical interest in the region, with other partners quickly responding. From 26 May to 4 June 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi toured eight PICTs and held virtual meetings with three others; his purpose was to co-host the second China–Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, sign a series of bilateral agreements and spruik a regional economic and security pact. The latter, which proposed a ‘Common Development Vision’ and sought to align China’s Belt and Road Initiative with the PIF’s 2050 Strategy, was rejected by Pacific leaders, with Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata’afa recommending that the agreement be discussed at the PIF (Zhang 22/6/2022).

Deputy director of the Australia Pacific Security College Dr Henry Ivarature, Peter Connolly of ANU, Dr Joseph Foukona of the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and Dr Anna Powles of Massey University provided their assessments of recent events. Ivarature began with an apology to his Melanesian *wantoks* (‘one talk’, those with shared Melanesian values), as ‘we generally refrain from commenting on our Melanesian *wantok* states and their internal sovereign affairs’ according to the principle of non-interference on sovereign matters; he noted, however, that the Solomon Islands–China deal has implications for the wider region and is therefore worthy of discussion.

Foukona argued that China’s diplomatic presence in Solomon Islands (since 2019) and contribution of funds is influencing government decision-making. Ivarature raised concerns about the secrecy of the Solomon Islands–China deal, as it creates suspicion and distrust in government rather than openness and transparency. Foukona argued that this secrecy can be seen as part of a broader pattern of government opacity, including the suspension of section 73(3) of the Constitution of Solomon Islands through 2024 (affecting the dissolution of parliament and postponing the elections), clientelism within the budget and the limiting of media freedom. Connolly noted internal division in Solomon Islands about the security agreement with China and suggested that it could cause a rupture in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), which is a concern, as the RSIPF is ‘the most important element of maintaining stability in Solomon Islands’. Powles also noted that Solomon Islands Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary Collin Beck justified Solomon Islands signing the agreement by referring to the development–security nexus, including the risks of having 80,000 unemployed youth in a country that had so recently experienced instability. Foukona described how since the agreement was signed, China has been training local police and children in kung fu — a way of gaining influence through soft power, as many Solomon Islanders have long had an interest in Bruce Lee’s martial arts films.

Powles argued that the Solomon Islands–China security agreement has led ‘very clearly to Solomon Islands becoming a site of strategic competition’, as there are now two security stakeholders — Australia and China — competing to arm and train the RSIPF, a move that is concerning for stability given the role the RSIPF played during the Tensions. Ivarature considered that the China–Solomon Islands agreement was ‘unfinished business from RAMSI [Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands], particularly around capacity-building for law enforcement’. Foukona agreed that many of the provisions of the China–Solomon Islands agreement are similar to those of RAMSI, with an additional sentence that China may, in accordance with its own needs and agreement from Solomon Islands Government, bring ships to Solomon Islands.

All panellists noted examples of Chinese military bases in Asia and Africa, which have heightened geostrategic concerns. Ivarature noted that it seems like all ports between Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Kiribati are now under suspicion of being potential military bases for China and that Western leaders appear to be very suspicious of Pacific Island leaders regardless of their statements that there will be no such bases. He cited Chinese projects in Luganville and Daru as examples where bases did not eventuate, but these concerns remain in other areas where increased geostrategic interest could be expected, such as with the recent sale of the Conflict Islands in PNG and the potential emergence of Bougainville as a new state. Connolly noted that in the last eight years, China has been ‘actively looking for access in the Pacific’ — not via military bases as currently understood but instead with the intent of developing access, influence and potential dual-purpose facilities. He noted that this is currently being undertaken through tools of ‘security statecraft’ (also see Connolly 2023), such as Chinese defence attachés being posted to PNG, Fiji and Tonga. This statecraft has also led to further Chinese police involvement, including a Chinese police liaison officer in Suva and a Chinese police liaison team in Solomon Islands. Powles suggested that by expanding its policing footprint, gifting resources and offering training programs, China is presenting itself as a ‘security stakeholder’ in the region.

Ivarature also suggested that bilateral deals shift PICT leaders away from the multilateralism of the PIF and questioned whether the PIF has the capacity to collectively manage the sudden foreign interest in this region. Powles argued that the proposed regional economic and security agreement reflects China’s shift towards a multilateral approach to the Pacific reinforced by bilateral arrangements. Ivarature described the Pacific response to China’s proposed regional pact as ‘a display of regional leadership by the Pacific to look at it and make the decision to decline it’. Federated States of Micronesia President David Panuelo wrote a letter to all PIF members about the proposed regional pact, expanding the discussion

from 10 individual states (which had been interacting bilaterally with China) to the entire region. Samoan Prime Minister Fiamē similarly argued that the PIF needed time to consider such a proposal collectively.⁵ Ivarature urged PIF leaders to continue to engage on a regional basis in managing their relationships with China. He proposed that the Biketawa Declaration (underpinned by the principle of non-interference) can be used to support ongoing regional security discussions. He also suggested that even though Solomon Islands had *tok storj*⁶ with PIF leaders about the Solomon Islands–China security agreement, this was ‘after the fact’. He argued that Solomon Islands needed to *tok save*, that is, to inform PIF leaders about what was going to happen, particularly as its decision to enter the agreement with China had the potential to cause regional instability.

Connolly argued that the Solomon Islands–China agreement represented a shift by Solomon Islands towards a form of ‘limited alignment’ in their national interest. This contrasted its past approach of ‘strategic hedging’, which a number of Pacific states do through ‘friends to all, enemies to none’ foreign policies. Powles argued that regional agreements (proposed by any partner) should not force PIF leaders to make a geostrategic choice, particularly when these leaders have been so clear about not wanting to make that choice. However, Melissa Conley-Tyler of Asia–Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue (AP4D) pointed out that within this geopolitical environment, even choosing what technology to purchase implies choosing a side. Connolly agreed that there have been examples in the region of technological decisions causing geopolitical ‘tussles’, such as the undersea cables to PNG. Powles warned that partners must be careful that ‘in the pursuit of strategic objectives in the region ... it doesn’t actually destabilise and result in disruptive diplomacy that undermines the very objectives that Australia, New Zealand and the US purport to be upholding in the region’. Dame Meg Taylor stated that any choices had to be those of PICTs and not ‘drummed up by a lot of other parties’.

Future of security cooperation

The future of regional maritime security cooperation

The largest panel involved government officials from partner states and a regional organisation: Dr H  l  ne Goiran-Ponsard, advisor to the commander of the French Armed Forces in New Caledonia; Vice Admiral Tomohiko Madono from the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force; Dr Liz Brierley, director of the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) within the Australian Department of Defence; Commander Michael Collinson of the Royal New Zealand Navy; James Ink, deputy director of the Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF West) based in the US Indo-Pacific Command; and James Movick, director of the PFC. Each panellist described their state’s contributions to regional maritime security and the benefits and challenges of cooperation.

Goiran-Ponsard highlighted the expansiveness of France's search and rescue zone in the Pacific region. She described France as 'a Pacific nation and responsible partner' and highlighted its long-standing involvement in regional maritime security cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally, including through joint exercises. For 30 years, the French Armed Forces in New Caledonia have conducted aerial patrols of the maritime zones of Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu. France is a member of the Pacific Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Pacific Quad) — France, Australia, US, and New Zealand (with Japan and the UK as observers) — which supports the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) in fisheries and maritime operations. France is also active in the South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces, JHoPS, Western Pacific Naval Symposium, Oceania Directorates of Military Intelligence Meeting and South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting, which will be hosted in Nouméa in 2023. France has a Maritime Coordination and Rescue Centre in Nouméa and a Joint Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Tahiti that support search and rescue efforts and have specific assets to deal with maritime oil spills. France indicated that it is almost ready to share information with the PFC and is considering other information-sharing options through the European Union.

Madono spoke about Japan's role in ensuring a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' (FOIP) through contributions to peace, stability and building trust. This has involved establishing a 'persistent operational role' for Japan in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea; this role has also recently expanded to the Pacific Ocean. He noted particular port visits and engagements with Palau, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, New Caledonia and PNG. Japan has fostered personal connections between Japanese and Pacific military officers for over 20 years. He similarly noted contributions to exercises in the region and multilateral frameworks such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium. In the future, Madono hoped for a coordinated system to deal with non-traditional security threats such as illegal activities at sea and HADR — both areas in which Japan could contribute expertise. He also highlighted the need for cooperation against threats that might undermine peace and stability in the region, such as Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. He suggested that in order for the oceans to be open for all to enjoy, market stability and regulatory frameworks for cooperation need to be strengthened, including through the Quad (Japan, Australia, the US and India).

Brierley noted that regional security cooperation is 'multifaceted, ever-evolving, and it needs to take into account the very real sovereignty issues that exist in the region'. Australia's PMSP has existed for 30 years and was described by Movick as 'one of the best support programs that we have in the region'. The PMSP provides maritime patrol boats (and now 22 replacement Guardian-class patrol boats (GPBs)), ongoing maintenance of the GPBs, naval advisors, aerial surveillance (where the FFA owns the

intellectual property),⁷ capacity building and training. Brierley noted that there was a review of the program to ensure it is fit for purpose for the needs of Pacific large ocean states, consistent with the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security (hereafter the Boe Declaration). She highlighted that through the PMSP, 'we [Australia] work with the nations as trusted partners; we collaborate respectfully to achieve our common goals'. She noted that the new GPBs improved HADR capacity in PICTs, demonstrated by Tonga's use of their GPB in the response to the 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami. Brierley highlighted that the underlying purpose of the PMSP is to build sovereign capability without creating a burden, although there are some challenges in differing maintenance and safety cultures.

We need to be mindful of the absorptive capacity of our partners, to not overwhelm them with the next good idea. Sometimes this requires listening and patience. In my experience in the Pacific, it's often what is not said that is the telling thing.

-Dr Liz Brierley

Australian Department of Defence

Brierley also highlighted that even though there is sometimes overlap in an increasingly complex geostrategic environment, there is a role for each of the actors and fora to play, 'provided that coordination and cooperation can be key'. She noted that partners 'need to ensure that we are delivering results that the Pacific want and need and have the capacity to absorb ... and that engagement is tailored, specific and coordinated' through meaningful connections guided by the Pacific. Existing member-owned and member-driven neutral institutions such as the PIF, FFA, Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre (PTCCC), Oceania Customs Organisation and PFC all play key roles in convening regional maritime security. Brierley stated that new bodies may create an additional burden and increasing complexity. As such, the PMSP will work with existing regional bodies to foster coordination and ensure equitable support for PICTs.

Collinson began by highlighting that 'New Zealand is a Pacific country and shares strong cultural and historical ties with the Pacific, including constitutional commitments to the Pacific Realm countries'.⁸ Collinson stated that New Zealand's immediate interest is in 'having a Pacific Islands region that is secure, stable, prosperous and resilient' — noting that the two major threats to New Zealand

and the region are climate change and geostrategic competition. Like Powles, Collinson spoke about New Zealand's Pacific Resilience policy (which builds upon New Zealand's 2018 Pacific Reset), which is explicitly partner led and people centred. Collinson asked what constitutes a partner, questioning whether the label applied to members of the PIF or like-minded states who seek to engage with the region. He urged the latter to engage through the PIF and its regional bodies such as the FFA, as 'the Pacific should look within the region to meet its security needs'. For example, the Pacific Quad supports the work of the FFA — although Collinson noted New Zealand's view that the Pacific Quad should not expand its scope but instead seek to strengthen its current collaboration and coordination activities.

Ink asserted, 'Make no mistake, the US is also a Pacific nation' by virtue of Hawai'i, Guam, American Samoa and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands and focused on regional partnerships for a FOIP. Ink described the work of JIATF West in countering illicit drug trafficking and transnational criminal activity in the Indo-Pacific and the Coast Guard's efforts to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing through shiprider agreements. JIATF West supports PICTs on individual cases regarding the increasing prevalence of narcotics in the region. Ink suggested that what used to be the 'Pacific highway' for drugs from the US to Australia, New Zealand and Asia now involved drugs stopping or being used as payment in PICTs with 'deleterious effects on governments and nations' linked to transnational crime and money laundering. He argued that a unified approach to regional security is required, including through information sharing, which has its own challenges due to the multitude of governmental agencies working in each country and the resources necessary to access or maintain technology for information sharing. He highlighted the work of regional bodies such as the FFA and PTCCC in coordinating information for regional benefit.

Movick showcased the work of the PFC since its establishment by Pacific leaders in 2018. Based in Vanuatu, the PFC's objective is to provide security assessments to high-level decision-makers in the region so that security decisions are made with Pacific national interests in mind. Movick described the governance considerations during the establishment of the PFC to ensure it remained Pacific-led regardless of the fact that it is funded by Australia: governance of the PFC comes through the PIF structure, including the Forum Officials Committee and the Forum Sub-committee on Regional Security; a Pacific Islander has to head the organisation; it must be permanently headquartered in a Pacific state; all security assessments sit under the Boe Declaration; and it must facilitate information sharing in the interests of the region. This 'network of networks' includes many regional bodies such as JHoPS, Oceania Customs Organisation, Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (and the PTCCC) and the Pacific Immigration

Development Community taking a regional approach by using existing platforms to minimise information-sharing platforms that may not be interoperable. Movick also noted that there have been varying levels of interest in particular security areas — geopolitical competition makes PICTs and leaders uncomfortable and political views can change quickly; assessments cannot include defence or military due to the limited military institutions in the region, and fisheries is an area where there is a lot of agreement, whereas trade has been less of a focus.

A 'fit-for-purpose' regional architecture

The PIF's 2050 Strategy described a 'fragmented regional architecture with different levels of engagement between non-state actors and development partners' and established a strategic pathway to 'ensure an effective regional architecture and invest in leadership capacity and relationship building to support accountable and unified regional leadership to drive the implementation of the 2050 Strategy' (PIF 2022:17). A PIF review of regional architecture is underway. Associate Professor Sandra Tarte of the University of the South Pacific, Dame Meg Taylor, who introduced herself as a citizen of the Blue Pacific, Dr Wesley Morgan of the Climate Council of Australia and Distinguished Professor Steven Ratuva of the University of Canterbury discussed the future of the regional architecture and how it can be 'fit for purpose'.

Tarte argued that 'there is no future for the PIF if it is not part of a fit-for-purpose architecture' and that it must remain relevant to its members. She saw 'relevance' as being flexible, responsive and respectful of members' sovereignty. PICTs will continue to act both collectively and individually, and the PIF has to accommodate this on a global and regional scale. Positive regional negotiations affirm the PIF's value, and if members see the PIF as responsive, it will be utilised. The PIF has promoted national priorities at the regional level to development partners, including unexploded ordinances, fixed maritime baselines, the legacy of nuclear testing in the region and criminal deportees. This points to a responsive PIF. During COVID-19, regionalism and support from traditional partners demonstrated that 'in times of severe stress, we turn to our neighbours for help' — and in the Pacific, neighbours tend to be part of the Pacific family. However, Micronesian states leaving the PIF (although subsequently reversed) was a 'wake-up call' for the region and underscored that commitment to PIF membership should not be taken for granted.

Tarte also posed five potential situations that could play out in the future in regards to Pacific regionalism:

1. A retreat from regionalism, with weak political commitment to regional institutions and actions and a stronger emphasis on national positions and bilateral partnerships facilitated by geopolitical competition, which provides heightened opportunities for leverage.

2. A coalescing of subregional entities, with a deepening of subregional cleavages based on strong subregional identities and institutions, as well as political commitment to subregional action to influence the wider regional context driven by external powers who seek to dominate in subregional fora.
3. Sectoral regionalism, with selective engagement by members based on their national interest in sectors such as health, education and deep-sea mining. This would become a transactional approach to regionalism, and relationships with external partners would be generated by the benefits in each sector.
4. Securitised regionalism, where there is a strong political commitment to regionalism as a counter to threats and challenges, such as climate change. In exchange for external partners' support to combat these threats, PICTs would become more embedded in security partnerships, creating a closed regional order that deepens geopolitical competition.
5. Blue Pacific regionalism, where a strong political commitment to regionalism is driven by shared challenges, including climate change and geopolitical tensions. This would be 'Islander-driven regionalism' based around strong regional institutions and frameworks and an open and inclusive regional order, which would promote the 'friends to all' narrative, helping the US and China move beyond the paradigm of geopolitical competition.

Morgan highlighted how climate change is central to regionalism (for more details, see Morgan et al. 2022). He explained that:

Australia is used to thinking of itself as the leader in the regional order, but when it comes to climate change, Pacific Islands are global leaders and Australia is a global laggard that has been isolated from the global consensus on climate change.

He further highlighted the influential role of PICTs in multilateral climate change negotiation fora, demonstrating that with climate change, the power dynamic is 'in reverse', as Australia is being led by global frameworks, which themselves are led by PICTs. Australian and Pacific views on climate change, and thus on security threats, differ — PICTs see climate change as a threat to their survival, whereas Australia sees climate change as a threat multiplier that exacerbates other threats. Instead of looking to military action against such threats, PICTs have used multilateral diplomacy to combat climate change. Morgan questioned whether Australia would shift its priorities to meet the needs of the Pacific region on climate change in the next four years, as this is when Australia is bidding to co-host the UN climate talks with Pacific countries.

Ratuva raised several questions about a 'fit-for-purpose' regional architecture, including how such an

architecture could be built that creates a constellation connecting countries and islands and centres people and communities through civil society rather than prioritising bureaucratic mechanisms. He also asked for whom does 'fit for purpose' refer to — whose 'purpose'? Does 'fit' mean everyone is satisfied? How is it flexible enough to facilitate the interests of all members? How far should regional integration go, and should it extend to sharing currency or other forms of deep integration? Ratuva asserted that a regional architecture must centre the strategic interests of the Pacific rather than external powers. He noted how the influence of colonial powers was managed by previous regional reforms and commented that the influence of Australia and New Zealand affects power dynamics and subtly shifts discussions within the PIF. Regarding climate change, he highlighted issues of sovereignty within regionalism, in particular the impact of rising sea levels and sovereign territory. Nayahamui Michelle Rooney agreed and asked if resettlement and relocation should be incorporated into the regional architecture.

Dame Meg led participants through the establishment and evolution of the PIF and its current structure with CROP agencies. This structure has remained a challenge, mostly because foreign governments are involved in technical organisations, for example, the Pacific Community, which has representation from states that were interested in the Pacific during World War II. She highlighted the excellent work CROP agencies have done around maritime boundaries, but from a political perspective, questioned whether PICTs should be conducting technical work without involvement from foreign governments. She noted that in some spaces, partners and PICTs work together well, such as in the Secretariat for the Regional Environment Programme (SPREP); in others, PICTs are able to govern alone, such as in the FFA. She suggested that the PIF is complex, with Australia and New Zealand's representation, French representation through New Caledonia and French Polynesia and a new discussion about Guam wanting to join the PIF — which would only occur with the agreement of Pacific leaders. While many leaders see the PIF's purpose as a political organisation for independent states, only allowing fully independent states would have consequences for Cook Islands and Niue. The PIF faces challenges at the United Nations (UN), where Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) is the regional body (notably, Australia and New Zealand are not part of PSIDS). Leading issues like climate justice is easier through PSIDS than it might be within the constraints of consensus required by the PIF fora. This raises questions about states that do not have representation at the UN level. Dame Meg reminded participants that there have been issues that would never have generated traction if they had not been committed to and negotiated regionally, such as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone.

Bringing the ‘local’ into regional security cooperation

One aspect often missing from security cooperation discussions is representation at the different levels involved, particularly the local (which the authors acknowledge is a loaded term and often feels external to those who are local). Sharon Bhagwan-Rolls from the Shifting the Power Coalition, Dr Kenneth Kuper from the University of Guam and Dr Nayahamui Michelle Rooney from ANU passionately highlighted the local issues that need to be addressed in security cooperation.

Bhagwan-Rolls noted that ‘Pacific security cooperation must start and work in our homes, villages [and] intensely populated urban and rural communities’. She spoke about intersecting and intergenerational crises. She centred women who are teaching children about peace following the Bougainville referendum and women who brokered peace in Solomon Islands, highlighting the important role of civil society, churches, peacebuilders and activists. These active members of civil society should not be homogenised; rather, each should have their views recognised in security discussions for their diversity in contributing to human security outcomes. This builds upon Dame Meg’s points about the importance of inclusivity through involving civil society, private sector partners and citizens in regional architecture. Bhagwan-Rolls highlighted that the Women, Peace and Security agenda is an accountability tool for human rights and remains important because women are part of society. Romulo Nayacalevu of ANU also highlighted that climate change and gender-based violence are underpinned by human rights and that this intersection should be central in security conversations.

Bhagwan-Rolls reminded participants that ‘the drivers of insecurity can often be the very institutions of governance and protections which may not be fit for purpose’ and may require reform to meet human security needs. She criticised the greater militarisation and securitisation of non-traditional security threat responses, such as to disaster management and humanitarian action. Disasters widen inequalities, which need to be addressed, and traditional security responses will not fill this gap. Rooney also noted that, at times, partners have been seen to instrumentalise gender in security and warned against this: women are not just gender statistics within security forces.

Kuper suggested that US engagement with Micronesia is a ‘litmus test’ for how serious it is about engaging with the rest of the region: ‘We have dealt with that global beast [the US], and you can learn from us’. He acknowledged tensions between Micronesia and the rest of the region but said that regionalism should not be fractured or divided by external partners. Micronesia is living in ‘turbulent waters of a violent geography’, with an ever-present potential for conflict due to tensions between the US and China (also see Kuper 2023). Kuper demonstrated how climate change threats intersect with these traditional security issues, defining the security landscape and providing a ‘warning sign if further militarisation of the regional is

allowed’. He also asserted that Guam is ‘one of the most militarised places on the planet’, a sharp contrast to the proposed ‘FOIP’ that the US claims it wants: Guam’s colonised territorial status is its biggest security threat, as it intertwines with land occupation and increasing environmental degradation. Kuper warned that the US would not hesitate to use Micronesia, through the Compact of Free Association or their military base in Guam, in the face of a threat. He urged Pacific peoples to track geopolitical movements and not buy into strategic ‘sabre-rattling’, because ‘when two elephants fight, the grass gets stomped on, and we are the grass’. He highlighted additional challenges for the colonised ‘non-sovereign Pacific’ without a voice and wanted to ‘dissuade the rest of the Pacific that we are not puppets of our powers’. He spoke about Guam, where they cannot vote for the US president and more than a quarter of the land has been occupied by the US military, and yet are a microcosm of US–China tensions — including in war games regarding Taiwan, ‘where Guam is always the first one to go’.

Also discussing the consequences of partners’ use of land in PICTs, Rooney highlighted the case of Manus Island (PNG), where gender-based violence has increased around Australia’s Regional Processing Centre for refugees and asylum seekers (see also Rooney 2023). She highlighted that Australia’s discourse around Operation Sovereign Borders and the Pacific Solution is often distanced from its discourse around Pacific security issues but overlays concerns about instability and violence in the region. Because of the perceived violence against women in PNG, only men were sent to Manus Island, whereas refugee families were sent to Nauru. Importantly, Rooney highlighted that the issue of violence against women has not been included in Australian security dialogues over the last 10 years. She noted the contradiction of Australia’s investment in preventing violence against women while investing heavily in securitised masculinised facilities such as the detention centre, which perpetuates insecurity and exacerbates violence against women, subjugating the local population. There are also examples of Australia’s increasing weaponisation of alleged gender-based violence by residents of the detention centre as reasons why asylum seekers would not be welcome in Australia (Rooney 2022).

Reflections

To conclude, three emerging scholars with strong credentials in the Pacific region provided their personal reflections on the workshop: William Waqavakatoga of the University of Adelaide, Soli Middleby of the University of Adelaide and Teddy Winn of James Cook University.

Waqavakatoga highlighted the importance of identity to Pacific Islanders — who you are, who you come from and where you come from — in orientating relationships. He suggested that these concepts should be incorporated into security cooperation, with partners acknowledging their past colonial harms in each PICT. He asked partners to introduce themselves

in this context. He also asked partners to identify from outside *with* Pacific Islanders on these past wrongs by partners during colonial periods in order to re-establish trust and respect in their relationships.

Middleby noted the different perspectives and worldviews shared during the workshop. She appreciated that Pacific agency in reconceptualising security was highlighted and stated that the Pacific needed the right people setting the security agenda: Pacific Islanders who are protecting Pacific livelihoods. However, partner resourcing is still required, 'and it's very difficult to drive an agenda without your own resourcing'. While she praised the diversity of the presenters and the workshop for centring Pacific voices, she wondered whether the diversity of views was in fact representative of Pacific security cooperation itself, wherein many people have different ideas and conversations, some which come together and some which do not. She said Australia did not seem willing to engage in self-reflection, critique or humility — all which are necessary for security cooperation in the future. Middleby suggested that if Australia lived by the values that Paul House mentioned in the opening, 'then we would be a very welcome member of the Pacific family'.

Winn added another confronting security issue not previously discussed, which was governance and corruption. He argued that the Pacific cannot see peace and prosperity until there are strengthened, resilient institutions in place. He also highlighted the need to translate words like 'capacity building' and 'skills' into precise, meaningful actions for everyday Pacific Islanders. In relation to geopolitics, he noted the customs of Sepik Province in PNG, where if your enemy comes to fight you, you sit down with some coconuts and talk first, before asking if they still want to fight. He used this to demonstrate the Pacific values of community, coming together and true family — not seeking conflict but rather talking through issues. He suggested that external partners are not taking Pacific values, cultures or subregional dynamics into account in their policies.

Key themes

The key issue raised by Pacific participants was the need for partners to listen to Pacific voices, interests and concerns — and shape their actions accordingly. Movick detailed that PICTs want to build their sovereignty and national capabilities and do not want to miss out on opportunities to do so as partners work 'over' PICTs. Waqavakatoga stated that cooperation will only occur 'when you [partners] master the art of listening respectfully and see Pacific Islanders as equal in their words and actions'. Ratuva also highlighted the importance of Pacific agency and the need to foreground Pacific interests in negotiations. It was recognised that Australia is listening in areas like the PMSP and has provided a model program on this basis — but on wider issues like geostrategic competition and climate change, its interests still differ from those of PICTs, and further

Listen to us, engage with us. Don't make grand pronouncements and have programs developed in the name of partnership that don't include us. This is one of the galling aspects about some of the announcements that have been made ... these are partnerships of the outside partners, but they are not necessarily partnerships with us, the Pacific Island countries.

-James Movick
Pacific Fusion Centre

listening is required. The importance of silence, not as acquiescence but as disagreement, was emphasised by Pacific participants.

The diversity of views on China, both between Pacific states and partners and within the Pacific region itself, was a clear theme throughout the workshop. Petana stated that 'Pacific states see things differently' to Western states when it comes to China and that engagement with China 'is about our survival', given development needs. Dame Meg noted that 'many of us don't see that [China] as a threat', and Ivarature observed that China is seen as a development partner in many parts of the Pacific, particularly in areas of infrastructure and education. Ivarature argued that, despite China's regional economic and security pacts being rejected, China will remain in the region; therefore, 'everybody has to learn to work with China'. He suggested that most Pacific states (with some notable exceptions) are seeking to tread a 'diplomatically neutral' line within the wider geopolitical competition. Petana suggested that Australia had not shared critical information about China with PICTs and reiterated that if there are serious threats from China to the Pacific, then the Pacific should be made aware of these.

Connolly noted that the history of Chinese engagement in the region is long and complex and generally not well understood by traditional partners. He argued that when local people feel the need to protect their micro-economy, there is a particular risk for Chinese people living in the Pacific and their small businesses. This is entirely different to the geopolitical issues, but often becomes conflated externally. Powles added that the local Chinese-Solomon Islands business association has claimed that having a Chinese police team patrolling in Solomon Islands has made Chinese living and running businesses there feel safer.

Participants also discussed the 'Pacific family' narrative that Australia uses to frame its engagement in the region. Tarte commented that 'family first

does not mean family only' and that being part of the Pacific family does not stop PICTs from looking outside of traditional partners for help. Petana observed that the concept of family is built on two things, trust and respect, and that:

when you come into a Pacific family, it's like a marriage, it's for life. And you treat each other like a member of a family, not like a pesky brother that you slap down and pick back up or a sister that is irritating and you turn your back. Oh no no ... you share.

She advocated for 'more collaboration than cooperation', as equal partners. She criticised the AUKUS partnership, which PICTs were only told about after it was announced,⁹ as going against the principles of the Pacific family — 'you say so much, and then you fall short of treating us respectfully and truthfully as members of the Pacific'. Waqavakatoga noted that even though Australia claims to be *vuvale* (family), 'we still need to RSVP via visas to come to Australia' due to Australia's restrictive migration regime.

Dame Meg raised concerns about an additional architecture like the Indo-Pacific and the PBP 'springing up' in potential opposition to the Pacific-led one. She made a strong statement that the Indo-Pacific concept, AUKUS and PBP are 'all definitions that had come through military alliances' and not well understood by Pacific leaders. She called for partners to 'just for a while, stop creating new bodies that we all have to try and understand'. She questioned the PBP, in particular Australia's and New Zealand's involvement, observing that it raises the question of whether they see themselves as members of the 'Pacific family' within the PIF or as partners. She also questioned whether the PBP is for the security of partners or PICTs. Waqavakatoga argued that these external labels 'present the region as a pet project by external actors, and I feel we are being colonised by new terminology; it fails to capture and respect the true essence of Pacific Islanders'. However, McDonald said that Australia's membership in the PBP is 'how we [Australia] are enhancing coordination with practical, tangible results, meeting Pacific priorities' in 'genuine partnership with the Pacific'.

Bhagwan-Rolls noted that gender equality had not been mentioned during the workshop, which reflected that there are no formal gender-inclusive regional mechanisms for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Indeed, women peacebuilders were able to brief the Forum Regional Security Committee in 2003, but these mechanisms have been lost over time. Regional approaches are needed to overcome the challenges and disconnection between UN country offices and silos between government agencies. Bhagwan-Rolls cited the COVID-19 PHP-C as a more recent example of civil society and women not having a formal voice.

Climate change was continually emphasised as 'the single greatest threat' to the Pacific. Tarte and Foukona both highlighted that climate change was very low on the list of shared principles in China's

proposed regional economic and security pacts and that there have not seemed to be any significant discussions with China about climate change (see Newton Cain et al. 2022 for more detail). Ivarature noted that many PICTs take issue with Australia over its climate policies and that while the relationships have warmed under the new Australian Government, climate issues remain vital. However, he suggested that such conversations can be had with Australia because of the countries' comfortable and historical relationships, but not with China, because the relationships are more sensitive, with little room for consultation. Morgan highlighted the tensions between 'national security' and taking action on climate change, particularly for partner states, even though 'the security impacts for Pacific people will be exponentially worse unless we take action against climate change'. Goiran-Ponsard noted that defence conversations between partners and within the region are now frequently about climate change, including the adaptations of fish stocks, HADR requirements and the defence infrastructure necessary to manage the effects of climate change.

Bhagwan-Rolls highlighted that 'Pacific security cooperation means listening [to] and understanding the wisdom of our communities, including our Indigenous peoples'. Participants promoted including Indigenous knowledge into ways of thinking about security — for example, Bhagwan-Rolls suggested incorporating PICTs' traditional maritime navigation boundaries into maritime security and using traditional peacebuilding practises. Waqavakatoga suggested that the preservation of cultural artifacts should be considered a security issue. They noted that these aspects of security are vital for the human, economic and health security of Pacific Islanders. Dame Meg also spoke about protecting Indigenous knowledge as security, the inspiration for the Blue Pacific narrative and how it was drawn from writers like Epeli Hau'ofa, who wrote about Pacific Islander identities. She noted that while she came from the highlands of PNG, in her youth she saw the trade 'from the highlands to the high seas'. She wants to inspire young people to know their own history and feel their Pacific identity: 'It's not imaginative, it's real'. McDonald noted Australia's Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda, which he said links Indigenous Australians and Indigenous issues in the region, providing opportunities for shared learnings, foreign policy alignments and Indigenous Australian leaders travelling in the Pacific.

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Author notes

Henrietta McNeill is a PhD candidate in the Department of Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University and a research associate at the University of Adelaide. James Batley is a distinguished policy fellow in the Department of Pacific Affairs at The Australian National University and a former Australian diplomat in several Pacific Island countries. Anna Powles is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at Massey University, New Zealand. Hidekazu Sakai is a professor in the College of Foreign Studies at Kansai Gaidai University. Alan Tidwell is professor of the practice and director of the Center for Australian, New Zealand and Pacific Studies at Georgetown University. Joanne Wallis is professor of international security in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide, Australia.

Endnotes

1. While there was no COVID-19 in Tonga prior to the disaster, unfortunately, the virus did enter Tonga during the disaster response, although Hombsch noted that it was not transmitted by the coordinated partners.
2. Other Pacific participants related to this experience after disasters, having received containers from the diaspora or civil society full of perished perishable goods or winter clothes in tropical climates.
3. McDonald mentioned the importance of Blackrock as a 'humanitarian warehouse' in which to store relief supplies and noted that more are required around the region.
4. The Solomon Islands–China security agreement, while signed, has only been leaked in draft form (apparently close to the final text), and all comments during the panel were based on this

draft. Foukona highlighted that the legal standing of the agreement (i.e. treaty or not) remains unclear, which raises questions about whether it is self-executing or requires a domestic legal framework.

5. Notably, many memorandums of understandings were signed during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's tour, many of which covered aspects of the 'common development vision' proposed regionally. Stating that PICTs needed time to consider the document(s) did not indicate dissatisfaction with the their content.
6. In Tok Pisin, 'to talk story; to share stories and discuss'.
7. During COVID-19, there were no inspections or boardings, and the ramifications of this will not be seen until the stock levels are checked in several years. Both Brierley and Movick highlighted that the biggest issue in the illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing space is unreported fishing, and PICTs are increasingly interested in using emerging technologies (including drones, satellites and artificial intelligence) to monitor fishing vessels and 'check the decks' of unreported fishing vessels without having to board ships physically. This would have to be cost effective and able to be managed by PICTs.
8. The Pacific Realm countries are Niue and Cook Islands, which are independent but in free association with New Zealand, and Tokelau, which is a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand.
9. McDonald stated that since then, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has had over 180 engagements with the Pacific on AUKUS. He also said that consultations would be ongoing.

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Department of Pacific Affairs

Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs
ANU College of Asia and the Pacific
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 2600

E dpa@anu.edu.au

W dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au

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