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National Security Strategies in the Pacific — Some Challenges

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This In Brief is based on a paper presented at the 2022 State of the Pacific conference held at the Australian National University, Canberra.

All Forum Island Countries (FICs)[1] are encouraged to develop a national security strategy (NSS) under the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security and the Boe Declaration Action Plan 2019, although so far Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are the only FICs to have done so. The Boe Declaration is notable for its emphasis on non-traditional security such as human security and climate change. In this In Brief, I discuss some key challenges for FICs in developing and implementing NSSs, including the need for clear strategic regional direction under the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (PIFS 2022).

Five Key Challenges

1. To draft an effective NSS it is necessary to undertake an effective security assessment, yet FICs have limited capacity to do so (George 2021:14).[2] Such evaluations involve an open-source intelligence assessment, hazard scanning for threat analysis and strategic assessment, monitoring threats and risks, and strategic analytical reporting.[3] Aside from the recently established Australia Pacific Security College and the Pacific Fusion Centre, a number of regional organisations have been building the security capacity of FICs at the regional level for a long time. These include the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, the Pacific Islands Development Community, the Oceania Customs Organisation and the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, of which the Australian Federal Police and New Zealand Police are part. The security areas under the Boe Declaration these law enforcement agencies address are transnational crime, cyber security, human trafficking, money laundering and border management.

These bodies are increasingly talking to each other and working to avoid duplication and strengthen coordination. Pacific law enforcement agencies at a regional gathering in August 2022 in Nadi, Fiji, recognised the need for better coordination and collaboration, which is just one element of improving regional security. Efforts should also focus on human security and humanitarian assistance, and resource and environmental security. Security cooperation in the Pacific has been described as 'a patchwork of agreements, arrangements and institutions'[4] (Wallis et al. 2021:13), which begs the question, can the regional organisations work together to support and strengthen NSS capabilities?

Yes, it can be done and has been undertaken by like-minded organisations such as the heads of fisheries meeting led by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Regional leadership, collaboration and security discourse from regional organisations working on environmental and resource security, humanitarian and disaster relief and cyber security are other important strands that could collaborate in a similar way to that of regional law enforcement organisations for regional security cooperation, and which contribute to building NSS capability. On humanitarian and disaster relief, for example, regional collaboration could see the Melanesian Spearhead Group Secretariat's Humanitarian and Emergency Coordination Centre, the annual US-led Pacific Partnerships mission, the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp, and the Pacific Islands Emergency Management Alliance, including Pacific defence ministers meetings and the Pacific Tsunami Centre, collaborating to support and strengthen capacity of NSSs.

2. Bureaucracies in many FICs need to overcome the culture of working in silos, share information and cooperate. Ineffective inter-agency collaboration within FICs, and a failure to integrate key stakeholder participation, including that of the private sector, are real constraints. They impact the processes of well-informed, nationwide consultations towards the development of NSSs, and subsequently impede effective policy coordination, as has been reported in the case of Papua New Guinea.[5] Rather, a whole-of-government and community approach can support the implementation of NSSs. The lack of inter-agency coordination in Solomon Islands has become such a serious impediment to implementing the NSS that security strategy legislation was proposed, with the assumption that it would help enforce cooperation between implementing agencies (Government of Solomon Islands 2020).

However, legislation does not necessarily enforce better cooperation and coordination. It must be accompanied with supporting resources, both financial

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and human. It must also be backed by political and bureaucratic will. Furthermore, competing budgetary demands means it is necessary to ensure a sustained, long-term allocation of resources to effectively implement NSSs.

3. National security strategies need to be socialised as an important national socio-economic development narrative. A country's political leaders can champion the security-development narrative as part of high-level political discourse. For example, in Papua New Guinea, senior officials responsible for coordinating the country's NSS have struggled to elevate the security-development narrative against other development priorities at the political level.[6] Part of the problem is that the regional security agenda may not necessarily align with national development priorities, meaning FIC leaders have to work to promote regional priorities at the national level.

4. NSSs are highly sensitive and are considered sovereign matters. Australia's support to implementing the Boe Declaration through the Australia Pacific Security College has experienced some resistance at both the regional and national levels. Even the word 'Australia' in the name of the Australia Pacific Security College itself challenges Australia's support to the Boe Declaration. And while McTavish and Conley Tyler (2022; also see AP4D 2022) say that many donors are keen to provide help, consultations regarding assistance should be navigated sensitively and respectfully. Moreover, external security advisers must avoid dominating the outlook of NSSs, including learning to accept the priorities identified by FICs as security issues. Papua New Guinea, which has arguably been the most sensitive to sovereignty concerns, drew on its national security experts and academics to emphasise that ownership and development of NSSs ought to be wholly led by nationals.[7]

5. FICs need clear regional direction on the role of NSSs in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, specifically under the peace and security thematic area.[8] At present the 2050 Strategy, which 'builds on a number of regional agreements and declarations' (PIFS 2022:11), including the Boe Declaration, is silent on NSSs. On the issue of regional security, the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' 51st Forum Communique called for a 'flexible and responsive' security mechanism 'to address traditional and non-traditional security issues' and for the 'development of a Security Policy Roadmap' (paragraph 25) to support alignment to the 2050 Strategy. But what does this mean for the Boe Declaration and Boe Declaration Action Plan?

Like other Pacific Islands Forum regional security declarations, both the declaration and the plan are alive and active, as they have committed FICs to developing NSSs. Both will operate in conjunction with the 2050 Strategy. But clarity is needed on the place of NSSs under the 2050 Strategy and therefore the role of NSSs must be clearly articulated in the forthcoming plan and the evaluation framework.

Will these NSSs make FICs more secure? Yes, according to Tim George, who has advised a number of FICs on their security strategies. But only if the strategies are designed effectively, implemented strategically, prioritised and resourced, and when security decision-making is supported by a strong coordination mechanism, and good quality and reliable data are available for making sound decisions (George 2021:14). Perhaps it is idealistic in a developing FIC context, and not inexcusable, if FICs have difficulty satisfying these requisites of successful and effective NSSs to secure the Pacific. Achieving these high expectations depends on negotiating sensitivities around sovereignty, finding the political and bureaucratic will, combating the culture of working in silos, ensuring whole-of-government approaches, and elevating security as pivotal for development.

Author Note

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Endnotes

1 Full members of the Pacific Islands Forum are Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.
2 Officials from FICs, personal communication.
3 I acknowledge invaluable insights from Mark Crosweller, APSC consultant working on the Cook Islands national security policy.
4 Perhaps an appropriate Pacific metaphor is the woven mat. As it ages with use, new strands are woven in to hold it seamlessly together, with each strand contributing to the structure of the mat; in this case, the introduction of new organisations enhances the security architecture of the region.
5 Senior official in the PNG Department of Prime Minister and National Executive Council, 2021, personal communication.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 The seven thematic areas of the 2050 Strategy are political leadership and regionalism, people-centred development, peace and security, resource and economic development, climate change and disasters, ocean and natural environment, and technology and connectivity.

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