**Inquiry into Australia's defence relationships with Pacific Island nations**

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

This Committee held two inquiries in 2020 regarding Australia’s relations with its Pacific Island neighbours to which Pera Wells and I prepared submissions, one by the Defence Department and one by DFAT. The final report of the Defence inquiry appeared in April 2021, and may be found here, while the DFAT inquiry is not yet finalized.

Our main arguments in the Defence submission were for a Pacific Islands Maritime Patrol, and a Pacific Islands Regiment, as components of a new regional organization, a Pacific Islands Community. Our submission may be viewed here. A highly compressed summary of relevant items in the Final Report follows:

**The Boe Declaration on Regional Security (2018)**

Comment: “These terms of the Boe Declaration suggest that defence engagement initiatives will continue to benefit from being considerate of PIF states’ emphasis on maintaining sovereignty and control of their own destinies. As such, Defence policy and activity in the region should continue to be formulated and communicated so as to convey Australia’s interests as being based on equal-footed partnership with Pacific Island nations and to avoid any misperception of Australian dominance, paternalism or neo colonialism in the region”

“The current regional security architecture could be enhanced by additional focus on existing arrangements, but also by the establishment of new initiatives which may be leveraged so as to benefit Pacific Island nations and support their self-governance and sovereignty while continuing to deepen defence ties with Australia. The Committee heard that one possible means of increased engagement includes the raising of a **Pacific Islands Regiment** within the ADF”

“**Mr Chris Gardiner, CEO of the Institute for Regional Security**, proposes the establishment of a Pacific Islands Regiment within the Australian Army..

“The Committee also heard that The **World Citizens Association (Australia)** supports the establishment of a Pacific Islands Regiment as a means to deepen Defence ties in the region: …A land-based security force, perhaps a Pacific Islands Regiment, to carryout peacekeeping duties both within and outside the region, and if necessary to intervene in ‘extra-constitutional crises’ in the region. Interventions by such a force would carry much greater legitimacy than a similar intervention by (say) Australian or New Zealand forces, which are always subject to charges of paternalism or neo-colonialism. It could also provide a significant source of employment for some of the smaller islands” [Hearing 15 July 2020]

**The PIR concept already enjoys support from some Pacific states including Fiji.”**

“The Committee understands that establishing any military body would have associated complexities including (but not limited) to consideration of status of forces agreements, pay and conditions, and veterans affairs.”

**Recommendation 6**

“The Committee recommends that the Government consider innovative and practical means of actively deepening its defence relationships with Pacific Island states and other powers in the region. This could include increased and enhanced integration of Australian, Pacific Island and other military forces on combined training and operations.”

“In recognising the importance of collaborating with likeminded partners, the **NZ Government** underlines the need for regional players including Australia to work together:

Alongside our work with Pacific partners, prioritising cooperation with likeminded partners is fundamental to the Advancing Pacific Partnerships approach. We can achieve more together than any of us could on our own. We must work in concert, bolstering our coordination efforts, to provide good partner options to Pacific countries, maximise contributions to regional security, and encourage transparency from all partners engaged in the region.”

“An alternative view was expressed by Professor Blaxland who encouraged Defence to investigate the potential for a grand security compact to strengthen Pacific security ties: We need to do more. We need to be aiming towards the ‘grand compact’. I believe that if we were to engage constructively and have a plan to engage constructively over the next couple of years to socialise the idea and explore with these … states their appetite for this, what would be in in it for them and how we could make it work for their benefit and for ours, we would probably get there”

“Ms Leanne Smith said that: Instead of a Pacific regiment, there could be an opportunity to work with the militaries of the region to think about offering regional military or police contributions to Australia’s contributions to United Nations peacekeeping. This happens in many parts of the world – in Europe, Africa and the Americas. Countries of those regions join together with different assets, different capabilities and different training programs to provide regional contributions to multilateral efforts in peacekeeping. I think it might be one way that Australia could demonstrate real respect and co-operation with the countries of the region, rather than anything else.”

**Pacific Islands Treaty Organisation**

“ Mr Chris Gardiner submitted to the Committee that a longer term goal of establishing a Pacific Islands Treaty Organisation (PITO) would offer assured commitment of Australian military forces to the defence of member states, in return for those states precluding the establishment of foreign military bases or programs in their countries; including the prevention of the use of businesses and commercial assets for intelligence, influence or ‘immersion missions’.

The proposed PITO members would: …establish an integrated and jointly governed maritime and air operational command. Whilst Australia would contribute major assets and capabilities to the Command, the burden would be shared with other potential developed state members such as Japan, the US and France. The creation of a 21st century integrated command will also favour heavily the use of long range UAVs, UUVs, drones and satellites to provide effective but lower cost ISR and interdiction…They would also establish a PITO Information, Intelligence and Communications Command focused on effective political and cyber warfare in the region. PITO headquarters and bases would be based within the region and not in Australia.”

**Recommendation 8**

The Committee recommends that the Government and Defence expand existing programs (including the Defence Cooperation Program and Pacific Maritime Security Program, considerate of the need to maintain Pacific Island states’ sovereignty, with the aim of further deepening institutional and people-to-people links with Pacific partners.

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