

How Does the ‘Pacific’ Fit into the ‘Indo-Pacific’? The Changing Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands: Workshop Report

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Executive summary

- On 6 and 7 June 2019, speakers from Australia, New Zealand and across the Pacific Islands convened at a workshop at the ANU to use the question of how the Pacific fits into the Indo-Pacific as a starting point to analyse the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands and their implications for both the region and Australia.
- The discussions revealed that Australians, New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders are concerned about the implications of the changing geopolitics of the region, but that they do not always share the same geopolitical perspective.
- The workshop discussions also highlighted the priority placed on non-traditional security issues in the Pacific Islands, and particularly the nexus between security and development. This raises a risk for Australia: that, by using the Indo-Pacific framing, it could be perceived — whether rightly or wrongly — as primarily focused on traditional geostrategic concerns at the expense of non-traditional security issues.

In the 2013 Defence White Paper, the Australian Government identified its zone of strategic interest as the ‘Indo-Pacific’, which it described as ‘connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans through Southeast Asia’ (Department of Defence 2013:7). That formulation was repeated in the 2016 Defence and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Papers (Department of Defence 2013; DFAT 2017) and is increasingly used by the United States, India, Japan and Indonesia.

While academic and policy debate about the Indo-Pacific concept has been voluminous (see, for example: Medcalf 2014:470–83; Scott 2013:425–48), the question

of how the Pacific Islands fit into this strategic region has been overlooked.

This changed when Dame Meg Taylor, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, emphasised during her keynote address to the State of the Pacific conference held at the Australian National University (ANU) in September 2018 her concern about the ‘recasting of geostrategic competition and cooperation under the rubric of the “Indo-Pacific”’ (Taylor 2018). A week earlier, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi delivered a speech in which he highlighted the ‘real risk of privileging Indo over the Pacific’ (Malielegaoi 2018). Both were concerned that the Indo-Pacific formulation encouraged external powers to overlook the particularities and interests of the Pacific Islands and to see the region primarily through the lens of geostrategic competition between major powers.

Over recent years, Pacific Islands’ leaders have developed and advanced the concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’. This formulation is intended to encourage Pacific Island states to act as a ‘Blue Continent’ based on their ‘shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean’ (PIFS 2017). Taylor has argued that this could see Pacific Island states ‘exercising stronger strategic autonomy’, ‘understanding ... the strategic value of our region’ and ‘maintain[ing] our solidarity in the face of those who seek to divide us’ (Taylor 2018). While the ‘Blue Pacific’ concept originally developed independently of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ formulation, the evolving geostrategic situation in the Pacific Islands has nevertheless raised the question of how the two concepts might relate to each other: should they be seen as visions in opposition to each other, as simply inconsistent with each other, or even as potentially compatible with each other?

In June 2019, speakers from Australia, New Zealand and across the Pacific Islands convened at a workshop at the ANU to use the question of how the Pacific fits into the Indo-Pacific as a starting point to analyse the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands and their implications for both the region and Australia. They also asked whether the Blue Pacific concept has the potential to advance Pacific Islands' regional cooperation in pursuit of their strategic interests. The workshop featured keynote speeches by Collin Beck, Permanent Secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, and Ewen McDonald, Head of the Office of the Pacific in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as six panels that explored how Australia and the Pacific Islands viewed their security and strategic interests in the context of the changing geopolitics of the region.

Keynote 1: Collin Beck, Permanent Secretary of the Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade

The keynote speech by Collin Beck crystallised one of the main questions facing the workshop: whether Australia's security and strategic priorities aligned with those of Pacific Island states. Beck's overview of how the region's changing geopolitical landscape was affecting Solomon Islands' security and development priorities made clear that, while cognisant of the changing geopolitical context, Pacific Island states were primarily occupied with non-traditional security challenges, particularly climate change. Indeed, Beck spoke passionately about the impact of climate change on Solomon Islands and other Pacific Island states. He observed that, for his nation, the Paris Agreement was not a symbolic gesture; the Pacific Islands were 'on the front line' and the agreement was the 'first and last line of defence'. In his words, when major contributors to climate change failed to meaningfully address their greenhouse gas emissions, 'you basically know that people are going to die, but you allow that to happen. The science is very clear on that'. Consequently, Beck called on Australia and other partners to both meet and beat their Paris Agreement targets and to address rising sea levels, population relocation and ocean acidification.

The other main topic of focus for Beck was Pacific regionalism and, in particular, the importance of strengthening the role of the Pacific small island developing states (PSIDS) bloc to represent the island states of the Pacific at the United Nations. However,

Beck lamented that the proliferation of regional organisations — there are now nine major agencies — had contributed to the Pacific becoming the 'most workshopped region in the world' and cautioned that this era of renewed regional cooperation was costly and had not alleviated previous challenges to interstate diplomacy. Further, the diversity of Pacific Island states (particularly in terms of population and development status) meant that 'bringing everyone together can lead to lowest common denominator' solutions. Beck argued that Pacific Island states should be more ambitious in order to recapture the 'spirit of regionalism' — meaning fewer formal agendas and more open discussions.

Beck outlined three specific suggestions for improving the effectiveness of regional cooperation. First, the Pacific's regional architecture should be reformed to address the differing concerns of Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian states, as pressing issues in regional giant Papua New Guinea were not necessarily the same as those in much smaller Niue. Second, the concept of equity in regional organisations should be rethought, with allocation of roles and influence based on state population. Third, responsibility for ocean management and regulation should be better coordinated and targeted, instead of being spread across the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), University of South Pacific (USP) and the Pacific Community (SPC).

Panel 1: How do the Pacific Islands fit into Australia's region of strategic interest, the 'Indo-Pacific'?

The first panel, chaired by Dr Joanne Wallis from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC) at the ANU, examined the origins of Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy and its implications for the Pacific Islands as part of a larger strategic system. Captain Sean Andrews, Director of the Royal Australian Navy's Sea Power Centre, focused on the maritime aspect of Australia's Indo-Pacific framing. He drew historical parallels between Australia's strategic interest in ensuring that European powers were excluded from the Pacific Islands at Federation with its interest in excluding potential hostile states today. Andrews argued that Australia's current support for the 'two-ocean' concept implied by the Indo-Pacific framing was a reversion to the norm of a maritime perspective after a generation of focus on the primarily continental Asia-Pacific.

Professor Brendan Sargeant from SDSC was the principal author of the 2013 Defence White Paper. Sargeant noted that the Indo-Pacific was still being formed as a geographical and political concept and argued that Pacific Island states need to participate in shaping and structuring it. While Australia's strategic policy towards the Pacific Islands in the past had largely been instrumental, Sargeant argued that this approach was no longer sustainable. Instead, Australia needs to treat Pacific Island states as participants, rather than pawns, in its strategic planning to build a regional community based on common interests.

Graeme Dobell from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) focused on the 'value-laden and politically-charged' nature of the Indo-Pacific concept, which implied 'controversy and competition'. Dobell argued that the concept was synonymous with United States' (US) strategy, particularly as a response to China's rise as a global power, noting that it was striking how quickly Australia and Japan had adopted it. Dobell drew parallels between the Pacific Islands Forum and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both of which were concerned that the Indo-Pacific framing would be used to force them to choose between partners; although how long they could resist making that choice was uncertain.

As New Zealand is Australia's major ally and partner in the Pacific Islands, Dr Anna Powles from the Centre for Defence and Security Studies, Massey University, provided a perspective from across the Tasman. She observed that, although Australia's 'step-up' (DFAT 2018) and New Zealand's 'reset' (Peters 2018) policies towards the Pacific Islands seemed to be running in parallel, there were significant differences between them. According to Powles, the Ardern government's reset was primarily focused on issues of influence and identity; both strengthening the bond between the people of New Zealand and the Pacific Islands and on redefining New Zealand's identity as a Pacific state with a large Pasifika population. Neither priority had a clear equivalent in Australia's step-up. And while New Zealand broadly supported increased US activity in the Pacific Islands, it remained more sceptical than Australia about the values underpinning the Trump administration's international agenda and concerned about potential militarisation in the region (Wallis and Powles 2018).

The most significant question put to the panel related to concerns in Australia about the potential

of China establishing military bases in the Pacific Islands. Sargeant and Andrews outlined the potential consequences of a Chinese base in the Pacific, including: less time for Australia to respond to potential hostility; increased defence spending as a countermeasure; reduced capacity to exercise freedom of movement; and domestic political unease. However, they both observed that it would be costly and difficult for China to maintain a base in the region, particularly because its distance from China would make supply lines vulnerable and logistics difficult. Indeed, the question of whether potential Chinese bases in the Pacific Islands presented a genuine strategic concern for Australia was debated throughout the workshop.

The establishment of military bases was also discussed with reference to the redevelopment of the Lombrum naval base on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG). While some expressed concerns that this signalled Australia's attempts at militarisation in the region, it was noted that there was a history of Australian involvement with that base. Moreover, the redevelopment of the base is taking place in the context of Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program and is required to accommodate the new Guardian class patrol boats that Australia is donating to PNG to help it to protect its sovereign waters.

Panel 2: How do Pacific Island states define their strategic and security interests?

In the second panel, chaired by Associate Professor Meg Keen from the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA), the focus shifted from the security interests of Australia to those of Pacific Island states. The linchpin of this discussion was the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, issued at the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Meeting. In addition to affirming an expanded concept of security that emphasised human and environmental security, the Boe Declaration identified climate change as 'the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific'.

The session began by considering the intersection between security and democratic governance, outlined by Bal Kama from the ANU College of Law. Kama identified several factors affecting the integrity of Pacific Island states' democracies, particularly foreign influences, which could have an outsized effect on what he said were the Pacific's 'very dynamic but weakly regulated political systems'. Kama referred to the 2018

comments made by Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi that ‘strategic manipulation’ by great powers was cultivating a ‘far ranging sense of insecurity’ in the Pacific (Malielegaoi 2018). The emerging adversarial system placed a strain on what, it was argued, was the inclusive and open Pacific Way: to be friends to all and enemies to none. Kama advised that, to secure the region, Australia should help to address the domestic security concerns of Pacific Island states.

Perceptions, framing and ideas emerged as a key topic for debate regarding Pacific Island states’ security priorities. Salā Dr George Carter from DPA highlighted the current sense of uncertainty in the region concerning the nature and intent of Australia’s step-up and New Zealand’s reset, particularly whether they were long-term guarantees of commitment. Carter encouraged the Australian and New Zealand governments to involve Pacific Island states in decision-making about their policies.

Director of the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, Professor Steven Ratuva, commented that Australia’s past references to the Pacific Islands as its ‘backyard’ reinforced negative perceptions of the region, observing that, ‘the backyard is where you throw all the trash; the front yard needs to be clean.’ This contributed to Ratuva’s concern that Canberra — and, to a lesser extent, Wellington — saw Pacific Islands’ security as a ‘box-ticking exercise’ focused on their geostrategic interests, which diverted attention away from human security concerns. Contrary to this, Ratuva argued that Pacific Island states were not ‘docile and passive’, but were instead exercising their agency in increasingly creative ways to play more powerful states off against each other and to access benefits.

Former RAMSI special coordinator Tim George had been translating Pacific Island states’ perceptions and concerns into practical policies by working with Samoa and Vanuatu to generate national security strategies (NSS). Through consultation with government and non-government stakeholders, NSS aimed to identify threats, increase awareness and assist development partners in prioritising support. George identified border management, transnational crime, protection of EEZs (exclusive economic zones), climate change and cyber security as the top issues to emerge for Samoa and Vanuatu. However, some in the audience expressed reservations about the value and necessity of NSS, questioning whether Pacific Island states had been ‘forced’ into the NSS process; George rebutted this

point, responding that Samoa and Vanuatu had in fact requested assistance in the development of their NSS. Ratuva voiced concern about what he described as the ‘militaristic connotation’ of the NSS, noting that ‘the Pacific doesn’t need national security; it needs wellbeing’.

Questions focused on the platforms that Pacific Island states could use to engage partners on issues of concern to them. PNG’s hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in November 2018 was cited as an example of having a voice in larger forums, but for the smaller Pacific Island states, bilateral relationships and informal spaces in subregional organisations and the Pacific Islands Development Forum, which included both government and civil society organisations, were cited as platforms through which they could exercise their agency creatively.

Panel 3: Why are the geopolitics of the Pacific Islands so ‘crowded and complex’?

The Boe Declaration declared that ‘multifaceted security challenges [and] a dynamic geopolitical environment’ had led to the Pacific Islands becoming an ‘increasingly crowded and complex region’. The third panel, chaired by George Carter, discussed the increased international interest in the Pacific Islands, and how this attention had altered regional security and development dynamics.

Dr David Envall from the ANU Department of International Relations began the session by outlining Japan’s ‘low-key approach’ to the Pacific Islands. He observed that Japan had been a ‘slow and steady’ donor and partner to the region, but that it was now attempting to redefine its role to align with its vision of a ‘Free and Open’ Indo-Pacific centred on maintaining a ‘rule-based’ order, including freedom of navigation. Envall argued that it was important for Japan to be seen as a strong proponent of the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy in order to dissuade US President Donald Trump from the possibility of strategically abandoning Tokyo.

Denise Fisher from the ANU Centre for European Studies then addressed France’s role in the Pacific Islands. She noted that France characterised itself as being ‘internal’, rather than ‘external’, to the region, given that it holds the collectivities of Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and New Caledonia, the latter two of which became members of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2016. While this signalled that France had been rebuilding its relations in the region, Fisher noted that recent elections and future referenda pointed to a ‘bumpy few years’ ahead in New Caledonia, particularly

since France had employed anti-Chinese rhetoric in the lead-up to the 2018 independence referendum in order to dissuade pro-independence voters. To minimise prospects of future tension, Fisher concluded that ‘any ongoing role for France in the region must be on the terms of Island states’.

The nature of China’s changing and growing presence in the Pacific Islands was a focal point for the duration of the workshop. Dr Graeme Smith and Dr Denghua Zhang, both from DPA, dissected the details of Beijing’s recent activity. Zhang argued that even though the Pacific Islands were far from the top of China’s agenda, the number of high-level bilateral visits between Chinese and Pacific leaders now dwarfed those between the Pacific region and India and Japan. Smith described the changing nature of China’s infrastructure investment in PNG, noting that improvements in quality were enhancing the reputation of Chinese companies. The Lowy Institute’s Jonathan Pryke questioned China’s potential to contribute to corruption in regional states; Zhang responded that there was a tendency within China to blame any corruption trends on recipient countries’ institutions, and not on Chinese practices.

Professor Stephanie Lawson from the Department of Modern History, Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University queried the implications of ‘rebranding’ Australia, Japan and the United States’ region of strategic interest as the Indo-Pacific, rather than the Asia-Pacific, drawing parallels with Pacific Island states’ recent adoption of the ‘Blue Pacific’ brand. Lawson was the only speaker to focus on the implications of the drawing together of the Pacific and Indian Oceans under the Indo-Pacific framing and identified potential synergies between small island states in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Island states, noting that the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the Pacific Island Forum shared similar values.

Keynote 2: Ewen McDonald, Head of the Office of the Pacific, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Ewen McDonald opened the second day of the workshop by outlining the various tasks that were being prioritised by Australia’s new Office of the Pacific. He emphasised the importance of fostering people-to-people relationships, vowing to ‘spend as much time in the Pacific as I do in Canberra’, and noting that the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Minister for

International Development and the Pacific, had all visited the Pacific Islands less than a week after the 2019 election. He also identified the importance of Australia speaking with a ‘common, respectful and coordinated voice’ about the Pacific Islands, with the whole-of-government nature of his office playing an important role in achieving this.

McDonald focused on the three pillars of Australia’s step-up: economic growth, people-to-people relationships and security. He noted that economic integration underpinned Australian initiatives such as the Pacific Agreement in Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus and the new Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), while people-to-people links would be enhanced by funding for education, sports and community projects. McDonald highlighted the Boe Declaration’s affirmation of climate change as the Pacific’s single greatest security threat and outlined a range of Australian initiatives in response, focused largely on adaptation and disaster response. He also outlined Australia’s efforts to enhance ocean security and to establish a Pacific Fusion Centre to aggregate and analyse security information from across the region.

McDonald also emphasised the importance of addressing regional gender inequality, a project which would be aided by Senator Marise Payne’s dual role as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women. In Fiji, for example, McDonald highlighted Australia’s ongoing support for organisations such as House of Sarah and the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre, which provide counselling for those affected by gender-based violence.

When discussing the changing geopolitics of the Pacific Islands, McDonald highlighted how Pacific Island states viewed their sovereignty with pride and voiced his strong support for the desire of regional states to set their own ambitions and priorities, highlighting the commitment in the Boe Declaration for states to conduct ‘national affairs without interference and threat to sovereignty’. McDonald applied this logic to the upcoming referendum on Bougainville’s political future, saying that ‘this is a matter for Bougainville’, but noting that Australia was engaging in regular dialogue with the relevant parties. When Anna Powles asked how the Office of the Pacific would support Pacific voices being heard across the Indo-Pacific architecture, McDonald responded that the office would employ a whole-of-government approach to reinforce Australia’s ‘good track record in

amplifying Pacific voices’ across multilateral forums. McDonald concluded by returning to the concept of Australia’s close and historical relationships with the region, observing that: ‘We have always engaged in the Pacific, we always will engage in the Pacific, because we are part of the Pacific’.

Panel 4: How should Pacific Island states advance their strategic and security interests?

Associate Professor Greg Fry from the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy chaired the fourth panel, which focused on the practical steps that regional states are taking to achieve their strategic and security interests. Richard Balkonan, Head of the Asia Pacific Division of the Vanuatu Ministry of Foreign Affairs, observed that the Indo-Pacific framing had not been met with much enthusiasm in Vanuatu, as there was uncertainty about what it entailed and whose interests it served. He noted that there had been an increase in high-level visits to Vanuatu, which he saw as promising manifestations of Australia’s step-up and New Zealand’s reset. Vanuatu’s prime minister had also just visited China and signed an action plan to implement its Belt and Road Initiative. Balkonan argued that national security was linked to development aspirations in Pacific Island states; the principles guiding Vanuatu’s security were outlined in its National Sustainable Development Plan, which shaped its approach to societal, environmental and economic issues. Balkonan also outlined the importance of a consultative and whole-of-government approach when developing new NSS, noting that capacity was somewhat restrained by resourcing issues.

The panel then examined how Pacific Island states were advancing their security interests through ambitious and assertive diplomatic and political initiatives. Fulori Manoa from the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at USP began by explaining how the Pacific Islands had successfully amplified their collective voice at the UN over the past decade. She described how these states had overcome resource and personnel constraints by organising as the PSIDS. Furthermore, by positioning themselves in roles through which they would be recognised and respected — especially relating to climate change diplomacy — PSIDS members had been able to strengthen their negotiating power. The need for regional voices to be heard on the global stage was imperative for Pacific leaders; as Collin Beck later

remarked, ‘If you’re not in the room, then someone else is in your chair and talking on your behalf’.

Dr Wesley Morgan from the Griffith Asia Institute at Griffith University emphasised the assertiveness of Pacific Island leaders in the face of geopolitical shifts, noting that regional states had been ‘shaping the response’ of international climate diplomacy since the early 1990s. He argued that the ‘Blue Pacific’ concept was a further step in a continuous campaign to move the narrative of Pacific livelihoods away from ‘small, isolated and fragile’ and towards recognition of a ‘pan-Oceanic identity’.

Dr Sandra Tarte from the School of Government, Development and International Affairs at USP highlighted the ‘new Pacific diplomacy’ being practised by Pacific Island states, which were exercising new-found assertiveness to act as more independent participants in global processes. She argued that this has positioned the region to both push back against ‘hegemonic security agendas’ and promote their interests through the Boe Declaration and via the concept of the Blue Pacific. Tarte also described the ability of Pacific Island states to resolve unique security and economic challenges by enacting innovative and homegrown policy agendas. For example, Pacific Island states had trialled new approaches to tuna management, and Fiji had become the first developing nation to introduce a sovereign ‘green bond’ to finance climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Despite this, questions were asked about the challenges in regional diplomacy and security cooperation, and the commitment to the Blue Pacific concept, with concerns that many of the gains made had primarily been attributable to individual leaders and might not be sustained unless they were more widely disseminated. Morgan also identified the tendency for states to go ‘forum-shopping’ to achieve outcomes when traditional forums — such as the PIF or Pacific Community — had failed to reach a consensus, which could challenge those traditional forums. This was especially the case on issues such as the West Papuan independence moment. Linked to this issue was the status of Indonesia in the Pacific, which Tarte described as an ‘elephant in the room’ due to its uncertain but potentially highly influential role with Melanesian politics.

Panel 5: How can Australia ensure that its 'step-up' advances its strategic interests in the Pacific Islands?

This panel was chaired by James Batley from DPA and began with panellists providing insight on areas where Australia could enhance its step-up, before transitioning into a discussion on the intersection between the practical and normative aspects of Australia's strategy.

Anthony Bergin from ASPI outlined future opportunities for Australian businesses in the Pacific. While Bergin applauded initiatives such as the AIFFP, he noted that the step-up had missed some opportunities to build links between the Australian and Pacific Islands' private sectors, such as the decision not to invite businesses on Prime Minister Scott Morrison's first trip to the Pacific Islands. Bergin made three recommendations: extend the labour visa class to skilled positions; invite Pacific Islanders to partake in placements in Australian agencies; and bolster volunteer schemes to enable young Australians to gain work experience in the region, particularly in the medical sector.

Marion Crawshaw from the Centre for Strategic Studies at Victoria University made the case for Australia and New Zealand to work together more proactively in the region. Crawshaw began by remarking that Australia and New Zealand's respective actions in the Pacific Islands reflected their existential strategic anxieties: for Canberra, it was a fear of military attack left over from the bombing of Darwin; for Wellington, it was the fear economic abandonment by its key partners. However, Crawshaw encouraged both states to step back from their individual strategic concerns and instead focus on whether their policies aligned with the interests of Pacific Island states.

Associate Professor Quentin Hanich from the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security at the University of Wollongong then outlined issues of governance and sustainability in Pacific fisheries. Hanich noted the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea gave Pacific Island states extensive exclusive economic zones; Kiribati became the 12th largest country in the world if its maritime territory was taken into account. The value of the tuna stocks in these waters was between US\$5 and 7 billion per year, and 87 per cent of total catches were taken from waters under national jurisdiction. However, climate change

might move fish stocks out of national waters, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing challenged the ability of Pacific Island states to get the full benefit of this resource. Although Australia did much to assist Pacific Island states to secure and manage their fisheries, Hanich recommended that it should be a stronger global advocate for sustainable fishing and related issues such as ensuring food security and climate justice.

The panel then analysed the nature and intent of Australia's new regional policies. Dr Tess Newton Cain from the Griffith Asia Institute detailed the concept of capacity constraints; rather than focusing on Pacific Island states, Newton Cain flipped the agenda to highlight the limits to Australia's capacity to engage in regional affairs. Newton Cain argued that Australia's step-up was fundamentally hindered by constraints in its capacity to listen to Pacific concerns, to understand the region's culture, and to engage its citizens in Pacific affairs through quality education and media reporting.

Michael O'Keefe from the Department of Politics at La Trobe University argued that Australia's Indo-Pacific strategy was causing a clash between regional human security concerns and Australia's global military threat perceptions. O'Keefe's sentiment — supported by Newton Cain and audience members Steve Ratuva and Wesley Morgan — that Australia's step-up had a 'distinctly khaki tinge' initiated the workshop's most lively debate. Bergin countered that characterising Australia's actions as supporting a 'militarisation' agenda in the Pacific Islands was a misrepresentation, because even its defence-related initiatives primarily supported Pacific Island states' security priorities. For example, Bergin argued that the proposed Pacific Fusion Centre would contribute to maritime safety, not military intelligence; the Australia Pacific Security College would focus on Pacific Islands countries' priorities such as transnational and human security; and the Lombrum Naval Base would primarily support PNG's maritime resource protection capabilities using the new Australian-donated Guardian class patrol boats.

Bergin's point raised the issue of communication and signalling: even if Australia's step-up was supporting human security initiatives, this was often not the rationale that was foregrounded by government and the media. Morgan noted that Scott Morrison had given his 'step-up' address at a military barracks in Townsville, while the Lombrum base was often referred to as a US-Australian naval base. This discussion

highlighted the difficulty of untangling what Brendan Sargeant described as ‘the divergent discourses of defence and human security’. The panellists concluded by agreeing on the importance of open debate across sectors and professions, particularly in order to prevent oversimplification of issues in the media and in academic commentary.

Wrap-up panel

The final panel, chaired by Joanne Wallis, provided an opportunity to reflect on the implications of the workshop discussion. Collin Beck began by observing that the Pacific Islands ‘can’t divorce’ Australia and New Zealand, as they are permanent neighbours, ‘connected at the hip by geography’. Beck re-emphasised the nexus between security and development in the Pacific Islands, reminding Australia that it needed to keep the priorities of Pacific Island states in mind when making its regional policies.

Meg Keen then posed several questions that Australia needed to keep in mind when making regional policies. First, what role could Australia play in establishing platforms from which Pacific Island states can engage in geostrategic debates about the Indo-Pacific? Second, what would a ‘blue economy’ in the Blue Pacific look like, and does the current rules-based order advocated by Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United States help, or hinder, its formation? Third, how can Pacific Island states strengthen their own regional autonomy, including how can they make their friendships with China work? Fourth, how can Australia deal with rising demand from the region for migration pathways to Australia? And, finally, how can Australia coordinate with partners in the region, particularly now the United States and the United Kingdom are taking a more active role?

Professor Rory Medcalf, head of the ANU National Security College, cautioned that the strategic dynamics of the broader Indo-Pacific might be unavoidable for Pacific Island states, and that they should seek their own advantage when they could. Indeed, he noted that the Indo-Pacific was not only about the United States and China; strategic interaction was occurring across a large maritime space, so the great powers would need small states to cooperate with them, a situation which Pacific Island states could work to their advantage.

Steven Ratuva concluded the panel by reflecting on how the Indo-Pacific concept could be perceived from different perspectives. Ratuva was concerned that

it implied securitisation of the region, which he said was represented not only by military hardware, but also by changes to ideas and behaviour. He observed that Australia’s decision to process and resettle asylum seekers in Nauru and Manus Island represented how Australia is using the Pacific Islands to address its own border security concerns at the expense of the human security priorities of the region.

Concluding remarks

The workshop constituted a valuable, but surprisingly rare, opportunity to bring together scholars and practitioners working, on the one hand, on Australia’s strategy and defence and, on the other hand, on the interests of the Pacific Islands. The discussions revealed that Australians, New Zealanders and Pacific Islanders were concerned about the implications of the changing geopolitics of the region, but that they did not always share the same geopolitical perspective. While the concept of the ‘Indo-Pacific’ is often interpreted in Australia to imply an effort to draw in states such as the United States, Japan and India to counterbalance an increasingly assertive China, some Pacific Island states welcome China’s increased activity in the region (Taylor 2019). Prominent Pacific Island leaders have said they are concerned that the Indo-Pacific framing potentially drags the region into a geopolitical competition which they do not want to be a part of. According to the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Dame Meg Taylor, a “‘friends to all approach” is commonly accepted’ in the Pacific (ibid.), although it is questionable whether this is sustainable, should tensions between great powers harden. It might be noted that one theme hinted at in Collin Beck’s keynote address, which was not taken up in any depth at the workshop, was the question of the extent to which Pacific Island states all share the same security interests and perceptions, and whether (over)use of the collective expression ‘the Pacific Islands’ might pay insufficient respect to individual Pacific countries’ interests and concerns, and might indeed mask tensions between regional and bilateral approaches to managing their security interests.

The workshop discussions also highlighted the importance of non-traditional security issues in the Pacific Islands, and particularly the nexus between security and development, and the risk that, by using the Indo-Pacific framing, Australia could be perceived to be primarily focused on traditional geostrategic

concerns at Island countries' expense. Concerns about Australia's commitment to meet its Paris Agreement commitments crystallised these concerns. Indeed, while Australia's efforts at climate adaptation in the Pacific Islands are significant, it was noted that there has been less emphasis on climate mitigation, which is a priority in the region.

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