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Walking the Talk: Is Australia's Engagement With the Pacific a 'Step Up' or a Stumble?

By Tess Newton Cain

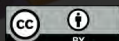
Cairns
Singapore
Townsville

 JAMES COOK
UNIVERSITY
AUSTRALIA

Contact details

The Cairns Institute – Building D3
James Cook University Smithfield QLD 4870
PO Box 6811 Cairns QLD 4870 Australia
Phone: +61 7 42321888
Email: cairnsinstitute@jcu.edu.au
Web: www.cairnsinstitute.jcu.edu.au
Twitter: @CairnsInstitute

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Walking the talk

By Tess Newton Cain



Tess Newton Cain

Tess Newton Cain is a dual citizen of Vanuatu and the United Kingdom. She has a degree in Law and a PhD in Law and Criminology, both from the University of Wales (Cardiff).

Tess is a former Lecturer in Law at the University of the South Pacific and has lived and worked in the Pacific islands region for over 20 years, with most of those spent living in Vanuatu. She is a recognised expert in Pacific politics, policy and development with a particular focus on governance issues and the mechanics of Pacific regionalism.

With an extensive network of contacts and associations throughout the region Tess is often called on to provide research, analysis and strategic advice to policy makers, regional organisations and development partners. Her clients have included the Office of the President of Vanuatu, the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the World Bank, the UN, the Asian Development Bank, and DFAT.

She has an extensive record of academic research and publications, including as co-author of *Introduction to South Pacific Law* (1999), co-editor of *A Kind of Mending* (2010) and *Passage of Change* (2010), contributing author to *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (2015) and several articles for peer reviewed journals. She is a regular contributor to the *Devpolicy* and *Interpreter* blogs and is often asked by national and international media outlets to provide expert commentary.

Executive summary

- The Foreign Policy White Paper is notable for its inclusion of a chapter dedicated to engagement with the Pacific
- The White Paper has a strong security focus and this extends to the material that is presented in relation to the Pacific island region
- Pacific island countries are under-represented in key diplomatic initiatives such as the New Colombo Plan
- Australia's choice of representation in the region is often mismatched, leading to squandered opportunities to establish and develop key relationships



Pacific island countries are under-represented in key diplomatic initiatives such as the New Colombo Plan



Executive summary

- Proposals that support integration of Pacific island states with Australia should be treated with caution, given experience of pooled service delivery and sovereignty concerns in the region
- Assumptions that New Zealand will maintain a lockstep with Australia in relation to Pacific -focused policy are likely to prove flawed
- An improved political engagement strategy in and with the Pacific island region is required in Australia

Proposals that support integration of Pacific island states with Australia should be treated with caution

1. Introduction

The release of Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper¹ late last year had been much anticipated, not least because it was the first such paper in over a decade. Notable was that the Pacific island region (including Timor-Leste) had been accorded a chapter of its own. Responses to this chapter have been mixed. Here, I present my analysis. However, I have extended the lens beyond the 'Pacific chapter'² to a consideration of some of the material that appears in other parts of this document. Given that the White Paper is now approaching its first birthday, I have also been able to examine the nature of Australia's engagement with our region since its publication to see what its impact may have been so far.

There are two primary aspects to this analysis. The first is that an entrenched approach of Pacific exceptionalism leads to engagement that is of a secondary and, often, inferior nature. Secondly, I identify two assumptions that appear to underpin the 'Pacific chapter' of the White Paper, which may prove to be flawed. If this proves to be the case, there may be a cause for more missteps for Australia, in a region where political and diplomatic performance are already often lacking.



Given that the White Paper is now approaching its first birthday, I have also been able to examine the nature of Australia's engagement with our region since its publication to see what its impact may have been so far

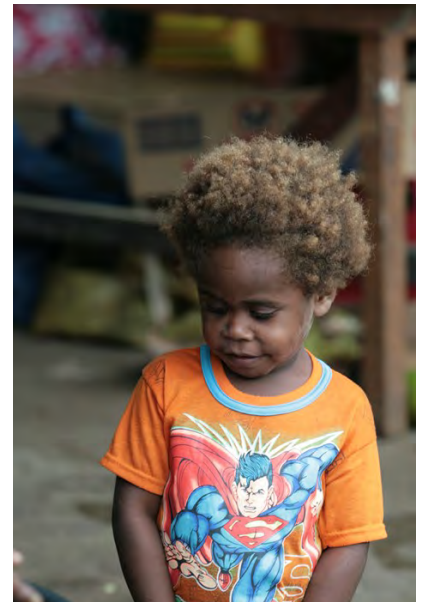
¹ Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs. (2017) *Foreign Policy White Paper 2017*. Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Retrieved from <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/> – referred to hereafter as 'the Foreign Policy White Paper'.

² Dobell, G. (2017). Foreign policy white paper 2017: Integrating the South Pacific. Retrieved from <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/foreign-policy-white-paper-2017-integrating-the-south-pacific/>

C.f. Maclellan, N. (2017). Dodging the hard questions in the Pacific. *The Interpreter*, 5 December. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/dodging-hard-questions-pacific>

2. The Foreign Policy White Paper: An assessment

In the Australian context, foreign policy does not receive a great deal of attention and within that, the amount of bandwidth accorded to engagement with the Pacific is extremely narrow. In the period during which submissions were invited, there was public expression of the importance of the Pacific island region³. There was legitimate concern that issues such as the advent of the Trump administration in Washington, the South China Sea disputes, and rising tensions on the Korean peninsula would crowd the policy space, leaving little room for adequate attention to be paid to Australia's nearest neighbours.



³ Wesley, M. (2016). *Australia's future foreign policy*. Retrieved from <https://soundcloud.com/policyforumpod/australias-future-foreign-policy>



3. Security, security, security

The overall tone of the White Paper is one of how best to counter threats and mitigate risk. Some may consider it somewhat surprising that the White Paper has such a focus on threat, given the recent release of a Defence White Paper⁴. However, the means by which this paper was written may go some way to explaining this. At a Senate Estimates hearing in March of 2018, Frances Adamson⁵ advised that the White Paper was compiled by a Whole of Government task force and made particular reference to the very close cooperation the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) had with the Department of Defence⁶.

The pre-eminence of 'security' is a motif that runs throughout most of the White Paper, and is mentioned several times in the Pacific chapter. It is not surprising that the discussion of 'tackling security challenges' in the Pacific chapter⁷ makes Australian strategic interests pre-eminent and it would be quite odd if it did not. It forms part of a re-orientation towards security as the primary lens through which Canberra's policy makers view relationships between Australia and Pacific island countries which has been in train for the last few years.

This threat-countering tone brings back memories of the 'bad old days' when the Melanesian states were crudely lumped together as 'an arc of instability':

Stability in Papua New Guinea, the wider Pacific and Timor-Leste, for example, is vital to our ability to defend Australia's northern approaches, secure our borders and protect our exclusive economic zone (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2017, p. 107).

In the 1990s and 2000s the fixation on this 'arc of instability' was in part a reflection of the concerns that Australia's pre-eminence would be costly in the event that one or more Pacific island countries became 'failed states'. The more recent

⁴ Australia. Department of Defence. (2016). *Defence White Paper*. Canberra: Department of Defence. Retrieved from <http://www.defence.gov.au/WhitePaper/>

⁵ Secretary to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

⁶ Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee. (2018). *Estimates*. Retrieved from <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Festimate%2F3e631323-961d-4a11-8400-3b8c26a885b2%2F0002%22>

⁷ See p. 111 of the Foreign Policy White Paper.

preoccupation with the Pacific island region as a source of security concern is almost the inverse. It is driven by a concern that Australia's influence in the region has waned and that China's growing presence in Pacific island countries is one that needs to be countered in order to safeguard domestic security. This geo-strategic anxiety is evident in the underpinning of the White Paper, including the Pacific chapter. It has become ever more strident in the months since its release.

However, this does not align with a 'stepped up' engagement; in fact it is essentially business as usual. An exception is this announcement:

Australia will work with Pacific partners to establish an Australian Pacific Security College to deliver security and law enforcement training at the leadership level⁸.

As James Batley has noted⁹, this is one of a very few new elements of 'stepping up' contained in the White Paper, with most other things referred to in the document being announced previously. We have yet to see any detail about this college including, quite importantly, where it will be located. If this initiative can accommodate the security risks that are important for Pacific island countries (such as mitigating the effects of climate change, reducing gender-based violence, food security, and addressing security issues related to internally displaced persons) then it should be welcomed. However, if its agenda is focused only on those security concerns that affect Australia, it could prove to be yet another distraction for members of the law enforcement leadership in the region. Not to mention that 'leadership training' for senior police officers in the Pacific is already a highly congested space.

Since the publication of the White Paper, there have been extensive consultations with Pacific Islands Forum members in relation to a revised regional security arrangement—Biketawa Plus¹⁰. These consultations have largely been welcomed by the political and bureaucratic leaderships of Pacific island countries although there have been numerous concerns expressed about whose security concerns this agreement was intended to address. The revisions of the draft text that resulted from a recent meeting of the region's foreign ministers may have gone some way to alleviate these:


The current draft version of the text indicates some robust engagement on the part of the region's foreign ministers. This has led to (among other things) an elevation of climate change as the "single greatest threat" our region faces and a reduced emphasis on cyber security. The draft text's reference to a "recalling" of the principles of good governance, democracy and the rule of law is certainly a marked improvement on what was previously in place. However, it remains to be seen if this will be sufficient to quell the concerns of many in the region about where, if at all, democratic norms fit within a security-driven debate.¹¹

⁸ DFAT. <https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/foreign-policy-white-paper/chapter-seven-shared-agenda-security-and-prosperity/stepping-our>

⁹ Batley, J. (2017). Keep calm and step up: The White Paper's message on the Pacific, *The Interpreter*, 27 November. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/keep-calm-and-step-white-paper-message-pacific>

¹⁰ This regional security agreement is expected to be signed at the meeting of Pacific Islands Forum leaders in Nauru in September 2018.

¹¹ Newton Cain, T. (2018). New faces and absent friends in Pacific diplomacy. *The Interpreter*, 28 August 2018. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-faces-and-absent-friends-pacific-diplomacy>



... leadership training' for senior police officers in the Pacific is already a highly congested space

4. Pacific exceptionalism—a step too far?



On reading the whole of the White Paper, I was struck by the number of times there appears to be one approach for regional partners such as Indonesia, Vietnam or Korea and another for Pacific island states. This manifests in a number of ways and, again, is not commensurate with a 'stepped up' mindset.

Looking at the whole of the Foreign Policy White Paper, it is clear that there has been one approach for establishing and maintaining relationships with some partners (most notably the states of south and east Asia) and another for the Pacific island region. And, almost without exception, this translates to a watered down, deprioritised diplomatic approach for our part of the world.

Take, for example, the New Colombo Plan (NCP). This is often touted as a 'signature' initiative. The NCP commenced in 2014. By the end of 2018, the government of Australia will have supported more than 30,000 young people to study or work (using internships with public and private organisations) in the Indo-Pacific region¹².

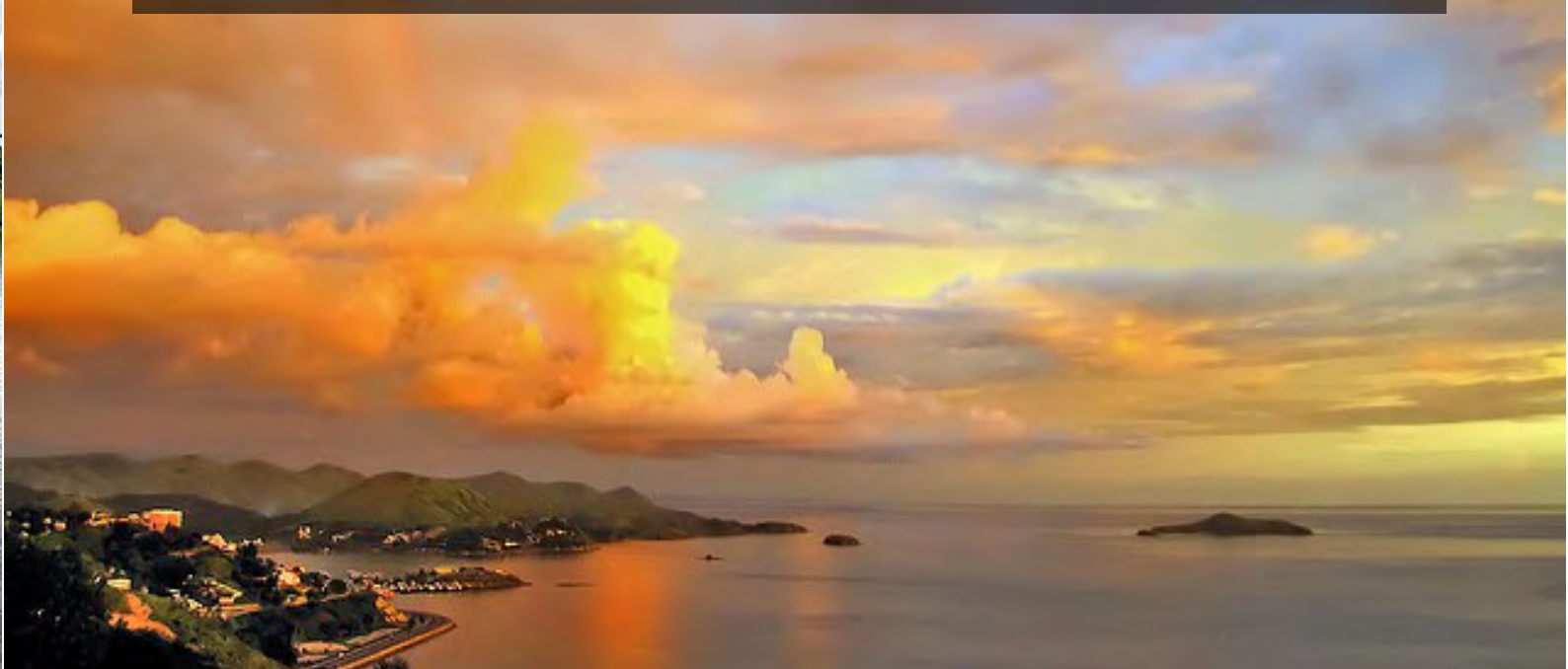
The overarching foreign policy objective for the NCP is highly aspirational:

The NCP is a practical manifestation of Australia's commitment to learn from our neighbours, just as we know students from our region benefit from their experiences in Australia¹³.

¹² Foreign Policy White Paper

¹³ Foreign Policy White Paper, p. 112.

Of particular concern is the lack of NCP activity in Papua New Guinea, Australia's nearest neighbour



So, how has this high profile, very well resourced program¹⁴ been used to increase Australian knowledge and understanding of the Pacific island region? There were no NCP participants in Pacific island countries until the scheme's second year of operation, 2015. The White Paper includes data on how many NCP participants have spent time in which countries in the period 2014-2017 and details of the 2018 scholars appear on the DFAT website¹⁵. Of 28,669 participants, 2,886 have spent time in a Pacific island country or territory¹⁶: 10.1%¹⁷. Of particular concern is the lack of NCP activity in Papua New Guinea, Australia's nearest neighbour. Here, I compare the NCP engagement in Papua New Guinea with that in relation to Bhutan:

Bhutan	Papua New Guinea
Population: <800,000	Population: c. 8,000,000
Value of trade: \$1, 672 million ¹⁸	Value of trade: \$5,977 million ¹⁹
Bilateral aid (2018/19): \$2.1 million	Bilateral aid (2018/19): \$519.5 million
<i>Bilateral NCP participants: 208</i>	<i>NCP participants: 128</i>

¹⁴ Scholarship benefits comprise payment of tuition fees, allowances to cover language training, travel, establishment, living costs while overseas (\$2,500 monthly stipend) and provision of health and travel insurance. These are capped in most cases. There are also costs to cover administration of the NCP, including a high profile publicity campaign.

¹⁵ *New Colombo Plan 2018 Scholarships*. Retrieved from <http://dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/scholarship-program/Documents/new-colombo-plan-scholars-2018.pdf>

¹⁶ In 2018, New Caledonia and French Polynesia were added to the list of available host locations.

¹⁷ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2018). *Papua New Guinea fact sheet*. Retrieved from <https://dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/Documents/png.pdf>

¹⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2018). *Bhutan fact sheet*. Retrieved from <https://dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/Documents/bhut.pdf>

¹⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2018). *Papua New Guinea fact sheet*. Retrieved from <https://dfat.gov.au/trade/resources/Documents/png.pdf>



PACER Plus ... was marketed, over a very long time, to Pacific island states as something more than a standard Foreign Trade Agreement (FTA). However, from a technical point of view that is exactly what it is.

It would be going too far to describe this as a double standard. However, there does seem to be a twin-track approach, the effects of which are to undermine not only Australia's commitment to deeper engagement with the Pacific island region, but also the underlying objectives of the NCP.

Another illustration of this twin-track approach is provided by the way the [Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations](#) (PACER Plus) is presented. This trade agreement was marketed, over a very long time, to Pacific island states as something more than a standard Foreign Trade Agreement (FTA). However, from a technical point of view that is exactly what it is. So it is not unreasonable to expect that the diplomacy and messaging associated with signing such agreements would demonstrate some consistency across the board. However, this is not the case. Chapter four of the White Paper is entitled 'Our Agenda for Opportunity' and page 61 lists a number of FTA, which Australia has signed. PACER Plus does not appear in this listing.

PACER Plus was signed in Nuku'alofa, Tonga in June of 2017. High-level ministerial representatives of several Pacific island countries attended the signing ceremony, although there were some notable absences. However, Australia was represented by Keith Pitt, the then Assistant Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment. Why was such an important event delegated to such a junior member of the Australian government?

Unfortunately, this is part of a pattern in terms of how Australia currently engages at ministerial level in the Pacific islands region. In 2018, the then Treasurer, the Hon Scott Morrison did not attend the Forum Economic Ministers' Meeting²⁰ and the then Foreign Minister, the Hon Julie Bishop was absent from the Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting²¹. These are the two standing ministerial meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum and on each occasion someone other than the holder of the relevant ministerial portfolio represented Australia. In early September, Senator Marise Payne on being appointed as Foreign

²⁰ Wallis, J. (2018). Australia needs to reset its Pacific policy. *East Asia Forum*, 1 June. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/06/01/australia-needs-to-reset-its-pacific-policy/>

²¹ Newton Cain, T. (2018). New faces and absent friends in Pacific diplomacy. *The Interpreter*, 28 August. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/new-faces-and-absent-friends-pacific-diplomacy>



Minister for Australia announced that she would attend the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, rather than the newly elected prime minister, the Hon Scott Morrison. This came despite a very clear expression of President Hilda Heine's wish to meet with Mr Morrison in Nauru.

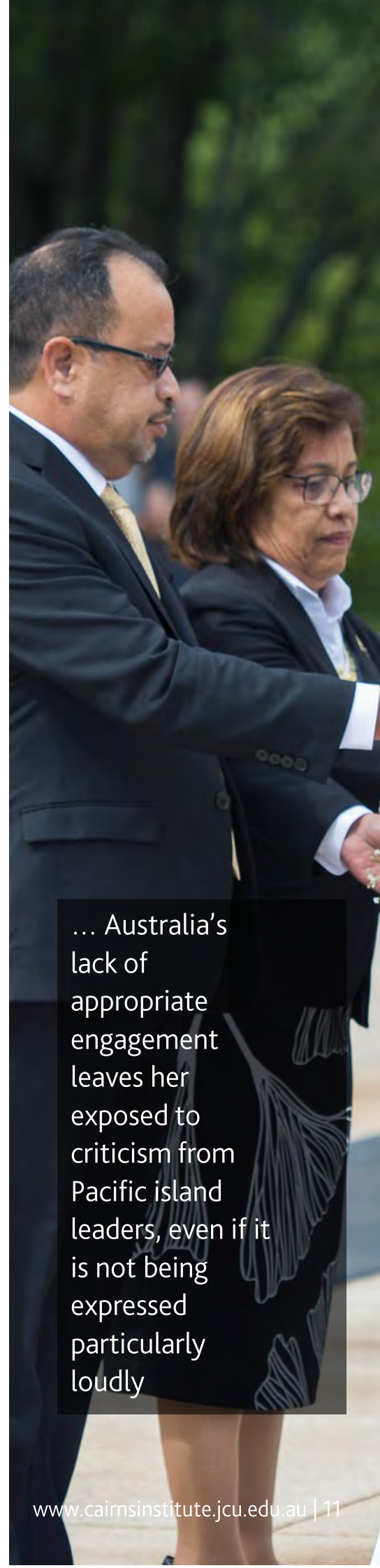
How does this equate with a deeper engagement with the region? Why are these opportunities to develop key relationships with Pacific leaders

squandered? This is an area in which Australian diplomacy can and should be significantly improved. It speaks to the manner in which Australia and her representatives conduct themselves in our region and how this is perceived. This de-prioritising of regional engagement undermines Australia in two ways. First, it adds to a sense of disappointment (and sometimes worse) on the part of Pacific island leaders about the lack of cultural nuance and respect with which Australian politicians and bureaucrats behave. Secondly, it contributes to a narrative in which other partners are perceived as being preferable and easier to deal with because they do a better job of behaving respectfully and in ways that have greater cultural resonance. Historically, this has worked to the benefit of New Zealand in the perceptions of Pacific island leaderships and populations and this continues to be the case²². Increasingly, it is becoming a point of comparison²³ with the way Chinese diplomacy operates in the region, with its very clear focus on fostering positive relationships with political elites²⁴. Here, as in other spheres, Australia's lack of appropriate engagement leaves her exposed to criticism from Pacific island leaders, even if it is not being expressed particularly loudly.

²²Radio New Zealand. (2018, August). *MP upset at Australian advisors in Bougainville*. <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/programmes/datelinepacific/audio/2018659292/mp-upset-at-australian-advisors-in-bougainville>

²³ McGarry, D. (2018). Australia is not part of the Pacific conversation. *Vanuatu Daily Post*. August 4. http://dailypost.vu/news/australia-is-not-part-of-the-pacific-conversation/article_b0419f64-6e3a-5a95-8140-f30dd01ed2ee.html

²⁴ Custer, S., Russell, B., DiLorenzo, M., Cheng, M., Ghose, S., Sims, J., Turner, J., & H. Desai. (2018). *Ties that bind: Quantifying China's public diplomacy and its "good neighbor" effect*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William and Mary. <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/ties-that-bind>



... Australia's lack of appropriate engagement leaves her exposed to criticism from Pacific island leaders, even if it is not being expressed particularly loudly

5. Assumptions make for faulty stepping stones



There are two significant assumptions contained in the Foreign Policy White Paper in relation to a 'stepped up' engagement with the Pacific island region. The nature of documents such as this means we do not know what the bases for these assumptions are. However, there is good reason to think that an over-reliance on these assumptions would lead to sub-optimal outcomes.

The first is the apparent wholesale acceptance that integration with Australia is the obvious and most acceptable way forward for future relationships with Pacific island countries. This appears to stem, in part, from a focus on economic growth as the pre-eminent objective for all Pacific island countries. This is illustrated by it being the first of three priorities that the White Paper presents as the focus for more and better engagement with the Pacific²⁵. Elsewhere it is articulated plainly:

Economic integration within the region and with Australia and New Zealand is *vital* to the economic prospects of the Pacific (p. 107, emphasis added).

Later in this section of the White Paper there is a reference to another type of integration; one of pooled service delivery:

Australia and the Pacific can also share institutions and systems to help bring efficiencies and economies of scale. As a first step, we will facilitate access for Nauru, Tonga and Tuvalu to use Australian testing services to improve the quality and reliability of pharmaceuticals (p. 107).

This item is noteworthy for two reasons. First is that the use of the phrase 'as a first step' seems to indicate a denial or lack of knowledge of the extent to which pooled service delivery already exists within the Pacific island region in many spheres such as education, audit services, support for national statistics machinery, and more. Secondly, this assumption that pooling resources and sharing institutions will automatically lead to the positive outcomes envisaged appears overly simplistic. In a 2013/2014 study of 20 initiatives designed to share service delivery, most were found to have failed to live up to expectations²⁶. Primarily, the obstacles to success in this area were found to be reasons of political economy, with

²⁵ Foreign Policy White Paper, p. 107.

²⁶ Dornan, M., & Newton Cain, T. (2014). Regional service delivery among Pacific Island countries: An assessment. *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, 1(3), 541-560.

reluctance on the part of Pacific island states to cede sovereignty being a key factor. There is no reason to think that this has changed significantly since this study was undertaken.

Whilst some commentators have welcomed this suggestion of integration with open arms²⁷, it is notable that there has been nothing said by Pacific island leaders to indicate that this is something they seek at this time. And this is not surprising; as Powles and Powles have noted²⁸, this (apparently one-sided) talk of integration smacks of some sort of re-colonising agenda. It certainly appears to be wilfully ignorant of the very significant and assertive 'New Pacific Diplomacy'²⁹ exhibited by many Pacific island states, both individually and collectively in recent years:

...the new Pacific diplomacy is creating opportunities and avenues for island countries to influence the regional order, in line with their own interests and aspirations. This will perhaps have most impact and resonance on future efforts to shape an approach to regional integration and diplomacy that will deliver fully on the expectations of the people of the Pacific (pp. 15-16).

A second and related assumption that underpins the positions put forward in the Pacific chapter of the White Paper relates to the position of New Zealand:

New Zealand will remain an essential partner in support of the economic growth, stability and security of the region. Australia and New Zealand will align our approaches to the Pacific (p. 108).

There is certainly reason to think that in terms of what might be termed traditional security, Wellington and Canberra are and will remain very closely aligned. In 2017, New Zealand forces participated in Talisman Sabre, which is a joint Australian-US military exercise, held bi-annually. This may indicate a possible appetite for re-joining the ANZUS alliance on the part of Wellington³⁰. And, of course, there is no reason to expect that New Zealand is going to withdraw from the FRANZ partnership, which has been in place since 1990 as a mechanism for coordinating disaster response in the region. The recent Strategic Defence Policy Statement³¹ certainly contains language that makes it clear that China constitutes a threat and that countering adverse Chinese activities is a central plank of New Zealand's

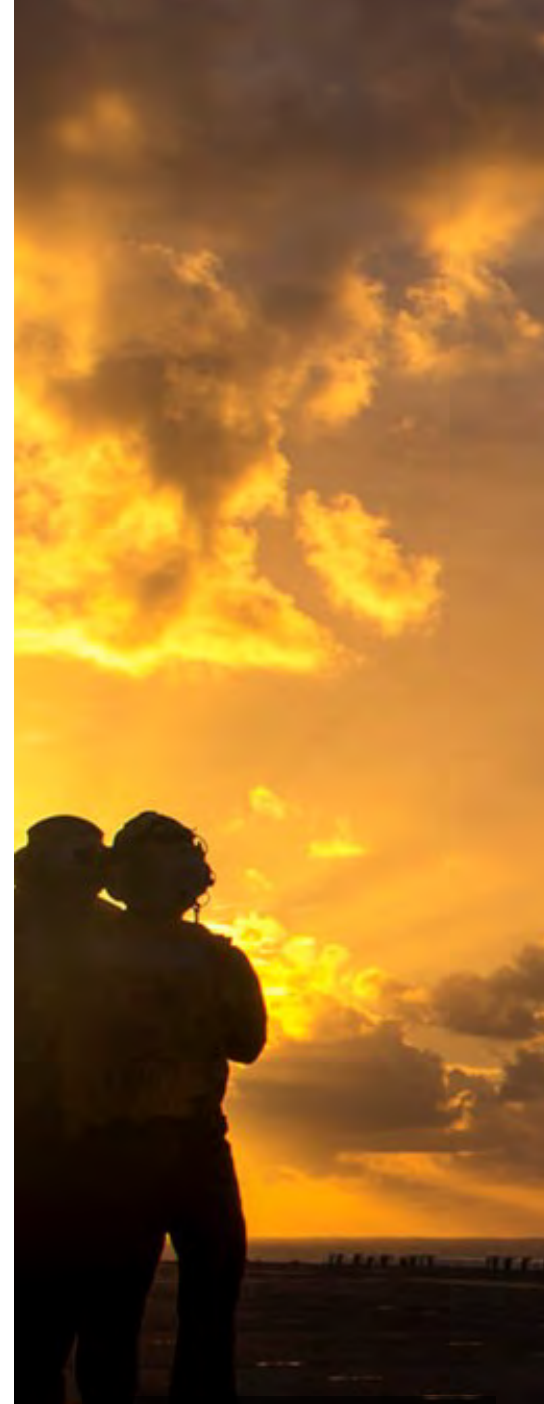
²⁷ Colton, G. (2017). Time for Australia to forge free compact agreements in the Pacific. *The Interpreter*, September 4. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/time-australia-forge-free-compact-agreements-pacific>; Dobell, G. (2018). Australian ambition and aspiration for a South Pacific community. *The Strategist*, January 29. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australian-ambition-aspiration-south-pacific-community/>

²⁸ Powles, M., & Powles, A. (2018). Recolonising the Pacific would be a step too far. *The Dominion Post*, January 26. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/comment/100879332/recolonising-the-pacific-would-be-step-too-far>

²⁹ Fry, G., & Tarte, S. (Eds.). (2015). *The new Pacific diplomacy*. Canberra: ANU Press.

³⁰ Colton, G. (2017). Australia, US and NZ military co-operation augurs well. *The Interpreter*, August 4. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-us-and-nz-military-co-operation-augurs-well>

³¹ New Zealand Government. (2018). *Strategic defence policy statement*. <http://www.nzdf.mil.nz/downloads/pdf/public-docs/2018/strategic-defence-policy-statement-2018.pdf>



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This 'Pacific reset' on the part of Wellington should not be seen as some sort of catch up but rather a statement of intent to forge a separate path if and when required

strategic agenda for the future³². Here, the lockstep envisioned by Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper appears evident. That is not to say that there aren't potential stumbling blocks along the way. The Australia- Pacific Security College envisaged by Australia's White Paper is viewed with a degree of uncertainty by the New Zealand leadership, in the midst of a wider concern about the potential for a militarisation of the region. This may have been fueled by Washington's declaration of support for this initiative at the recent AUSMIN talks (although we have no idea what that support might actually look like if and when it materialises)³³.

In other areas that are significant for Pacific engagement, there are very clear signs that New Zealand is prepared (and possibly at pains) to establish that its approach differs from that of Australia. Even before the change in government in Wellington and the elevation of Jacinda Ardern to the office of Prime Minister, there were indications that New Zealand policy makers were starting to see the maintenance of a lockstep position with Australia as a liability rather than an asset, when it came to relations with Pacific states. Unlike in Australia, what happens in the Pacific is significant for domestic politics in New Zealand and, in general, engagement with the region is given a much higher priority in Wellington than it is in Canberra. More recently, we have seen significant indications that New Zealand may be ready to diverge from the alignment that Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper envisages. Examples include an announcement of a climate refugee visa³⁴, an offer to take refugees from the processing centres established by Australia on Nauru and Manus island, in PNG³⁵, and an increased investment in aid spending in the most recent budget, which would have significant implications for development assistance in the region³⁶. This 'Pacific reset' on the part of Wellington should not be seen as some sort of catch up but rather a statement of intent to forge a separate path if and when required³⁷.

³² *The 2018 Strategic Defence Statement: Ten different views from Massey scholars*, <https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/13613>

³³ Minister for Foreign Affairs. (2018). *Joint statement: Australia-US Ministerial Consultations*. Retrieved from https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2018/jb_mr_180724a.aspx

³⁴ Cole, L. (2018). Changing climate: New refugee visa? *Geographical*, January 20. <http://geographical.co.uk/people/the-refugee-crisis/item/2539-changing-climate> (accessed 6 February 2018)

³⁵ Holmes, O. (2017). Turnbull avoids sit-down meeting with Ardern on refugee offer. *The Guardian*, November 15. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/nov/15/malcolm-turnbull-jacinda-ardern-talks-refugee-offer>

³⁶ Radio New Zealand. (2018, July 16). *NZ's increased Pacific aid given focus*. <https://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/361906/nz-s-increased-pacific-aid-given-focus>

³⁷ Radio New Zealand. (2018, March 6). *Peters expects Canberra to 'pick up game' in Pacific – expert*. <https://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/morningreport/audio/2018634850/peters-expects-canberra-to-pick-up-game-in-pacific-expert>



6. Conclusion

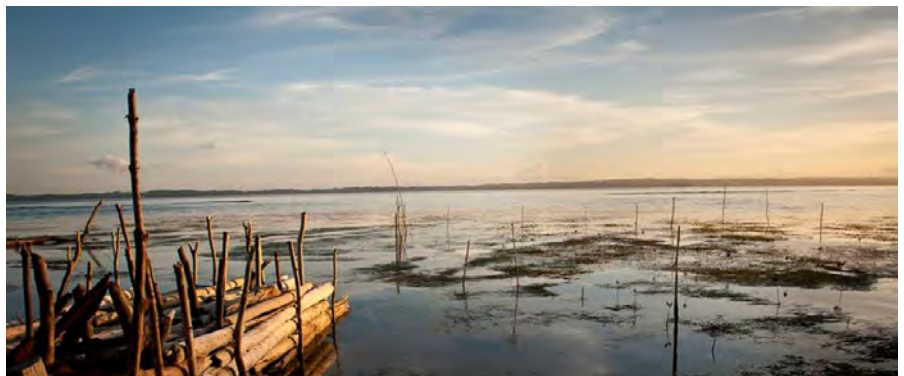
It is important not to overstate the significance of a white paper, regardless of what area of policy it addresses. Whilst it may be an enunciation of policy intention, it does not bind government in terms of implementation or funding. However, it is reasonable to see it as an indication of the current state of thinking and analysis that is likely to inform future policy directions. Indeed, since the White Paper was published, we have seen it referenced on several occasions within the context of Pacific focused announcements and engagements by Australian policy makers.

On the other hand, the importance of the Pacific island region to Australian foreign policy is hard to overstate. This White Paper presented an opportunity for the Australian government to make it clear to domestic and international audiences that it views relationships with Pacific island states as of equal significance as relationships with countries that are further away. Whilst a dedicated 'Pacific chapter' goes some way to achieving this, it is insufficient when viewed with a wider lens.

What is presented in this White Paper, both in the Pacific chapter and elsewhere reveals a lack of in-depth, informed, and nuanced knowledge of the countries that are closest to Australia.

Those who formulate and implement Australian foreign policy in the Pacific islands region need to develop a 'listen and learn' approach that includes actively engaging with people from a range of sectors beyond the 'usual suspects' whether in Canberra or elsewhere. In particular, Australian politicians and officials should be making more and better efforts to be listening to (rather than just hearing) the concerns of Pacific island people whether voiced by politicians, policy makers, members of civil society (including members of the Pacific diaspora communities) or others. This will and should include listening to conversations about topics that do not sit easily with other areas of Australian policy.

An improved political engagement strategy requires many facets and here I identify two that I think are required and have the potential to be the most meaningful. The first is that the political leaders of Australia need to make and then act on a full commitment to engaging with Pacific island countries on a like for like basis. This starts with the Prime Minister who, at the very minimum, must attend Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meetings. And the same applies to all regional ministerial meetings. The practice of using the Minister/Assistant Minister for International Development and the Pacific as the 'go to' substitute for the Treasurer, the Foreign Minister, or anyone else should be discontinued as a matter of priority.



Secondly, there are significant opportunities for the states of Australia to progress their own relationships with Pacific island countries and these should be encouraged and supported. If, as is envisaged by the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Australia Pacific Training Coalition, we are to see an increase in the number of skilled Pacific island migrants coming to work in Australia, state level engagement can provide important opportunities for governments, the private sector, and the wider communities. Queensland is the state that should look to be first cab off the rank in this regard, and there are opportunities for the other states to follow over time.

What is needed for Australia to step up engagement in the Pacific island region is a sure-footed approach; one that is based on a firm footing of mutual respect and true partnership.

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