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Pacific maritime security cooperation: partnerships, priorities, and possibilities

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1. Introduction

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Pacific Islands Forum members have made clear their desire to broaden and deepen the region's security agenda in their *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* (2018) and *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific* (2022).¹ In parallel, both longstanding and new partner countries have sought to become more active in the region, in the context of geopolitical competition in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Our project focuses on how these developments present both opportunities and challenges for the Pacific Islands region and its partners to address maritime security issues in the region.

We begin from the observation that the recent proliferation of maritime security initiatives by partner countries offers opportunities for responding to Pacific priorities, improving coordination and synergies, addressing missing links, gap-filling, and force multiplication. But it also poses risks of conflict, duplication, poor targeting, and overwhelming regional coordination and oversight capabilities. This suggests that the priority should be to enhance, streamline, and harmonise existing maritime security initiatives rather than to create new ones.

These dynamics underscore the critical need for improved maritime security coordination. This paper outlines initial policy proposals by our project experts that address key thematic issues and provide recommendations for the region's major partner countries. As our project

develops, we anticipate that we will build on these proposals and develop new ones.

This paper should be read in conjunction with our previous paper, *Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners*.² That paper provided background and 13 policy primers on key maritime security issues in the region and partner countries' cooperation to address those issues.

1.1. Understanding key terms

One challenge in a region as large and diverse as the Pacific Islands is that both Pacific Island countries and their partners can have a range of differing understandings of key terms. This can generate richer and more nuanced definitions of these terms, but it also raises the risk that people may 'talk past' each other, assuming shared understandings that may not exist.

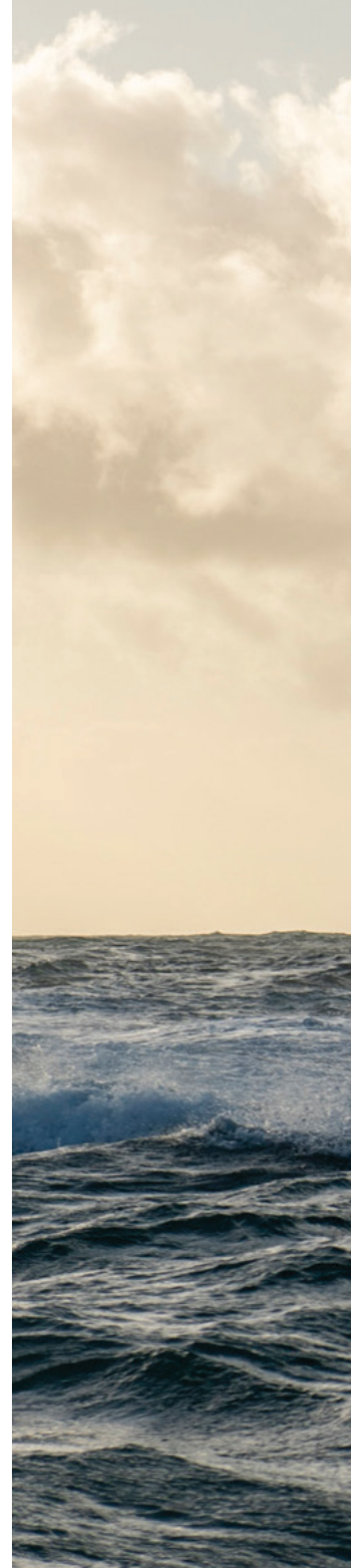
To help avoid this risk, our project has adopted working definitions of two key terms:

Maritime security: pursuing opportunities and responding to challenges that occur in, or are linked to, the maritime domain.

This definition reflects the expanded concept of security adopted by Pacific Islands Forum leaders in their *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* (2018),³ which, in addition to recognising climate change as the 'single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the people of the Pacific', included:

1. Human Security, including humanitarian assistance, to protect the rights, health and prosperity of Pacific people;
2. Environmental and resource security;
3. Transnational crime; and,
4. Cybersecurity, to maximise protections and opportunities for Pacific infrastructure and peoples in the digital age.

Maritime security cooperation: The formal and informal, bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral, mechanisms, institutions, meetings, dialogues, and other processes used by countries to coordinate their maritime security assistance across local, national, regional, and international levels.





2. Initial policy proposals

2.1. Responding to geopolitical competition

Theme lead: Maima Koro

To ensure that the Pacific Islands Forum-led regional security architecture can respond to the current geopolitical environment, the Forum has commissioned a Review of the Regional Architecture,⁴ alongside implementing its **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**.

A key question for the review is whether and how the Forum can bring Pacific leaders together to respond to geopolitical developments at the regional level, and how that interacts with, and translates to, the national and local levels. The diverse issues confronting the region and the number of regional and partner country meetings that take place puts an extraordinary burden on Pacific governments and communities.

The 2014 **Framework for Pacific Regionalism** sought to begin to address this problem with a transparent process and an avenue for direct input from the community via the Forum priority setting process.⁵ But in this heightened climate of geopolitical competition it is crucial to have honest internal discussions about its implementation.

This suggests that **Review of the Regional Architecture** should consider trying to:

- Make the regional architecture more internally accessible and transparent;⁶
- Make Forum decision-making as transparent as possible;
- Provide more mechanisms for cooperation with non-state actors, including community and non-government organisations;
- Introduce a community leaders' retreat ahead of the Pacific Islands Forum, allowing the community to forward their ideas into the annual decision-making process;
- Create and simplify mechanisms that ensure that members can access and engage with regional institutions effectively;

- Recognise the unique contributions and practices of individual Pacific Island countries; and
- Improve awareness of radical, innovative, and influential regional maritime security innovations, such as the 2023 **Declaration on the Continuity of Statehood and the Protection of Persons in the Face of Climate Change Related Sea Level Rise** and world-leading fisheries cooperation, surveillance, and management.⁷

Partner countries should learn from ancient and long-standing regional practices and contemporary innovations. The success of the **Mota Lava Treaty** and the **Tirvau Agreement** on maritime boundaries between Solomon Islands and Vanuatu stand as examples of peaceful culturally informed ways to resolve border disputes.⁸ Partner countries should recognise and support innovations from the Pacific, such as the 2021 **Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise**, as important to the state practice that influences international legal norms.

Partner countries should be cautious about their pursuit of bilateral security agreements and treaties, which have proliferated over the last decade. There is a risk that these bilateral arrangements may undermine or sideline Pacific regionalism by creating networks of parallel security initiatives and obligations. Partner countries should instead seek to work with Pacific Island countries, where possible, to collectively respond to maritime security opportunities and challenges under the auspices of existing regional institutions.

2.2. Legal and regulatory environment

Theme lead: Margret Joyce Kensen

The existing legal and regulatory architecture for maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Islands region is composed of a patchwork of overlapping regional, sub-regional, and national security

arrangements.⁹ In the context of the Forum's ongoing **Review of the Regional Architecture**, there are opportunities to consider how the region can address the maritime security challenges by:

- Conducting a stocktake of how regional security arrangements are being implemented to ensure coherence between available resources and capacity and to contribute to ongoing monitoring and evaluation under the **2050 Strategy Implementation Plan** and **Boe Declaration Action Plan**;¹⁰
- Supporting national stocktakes of how security arrangements are being implemented to assist Pacific Island countries to develop their foreign policy white papers and national security strategies;
- Identifying feasible solutions to maritime security challenges that recognise the region's resource and capability limitations;
- Building on functional, established arrangements, rather than creating new ones;
- Working with trusted partners countries and agencies;
- Striking a balance between mitigating external influence and attracting adequate external support to execute maritime security operations;
- Addressing both immediate and regional long-term strategic interests;
- Prioritising Forum-led strategies and fostering regional solidarity to mitigate external influence;
- Enhancing mechanisms for the enforcement of relevant maritime laws, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, regional fisheries agreements, and transnational crime conventions; and
- Supporting, when appropriate, the strengthening and development of national maritime security legislation to ensure uniform application of relevant maritime laws across Pacific Island countries.

Pacific Islands Forum members should also focus on implementing the **Forum Partnership Mechanism** approved at the 2024 Forum leaders' meeting,¹¹ and partner countries must respect it.

This mechanism creates a tiered system that grants access to the Forum's strategic discussions based on demonstrated alignment with the Forum's *2050 Strategy* and capacity to dedicate resources to supporting Pacific priorities. Partner countries will be classified as Tier 1 'Strategic Partners' if their activities in the region address all seven thematic areas identified in the *2050 Strategy*, or Tier 2 'Sector Development Partners' if their activities are limited to specific areas. To help manage how Forum members engage with the growing number of Forum Partners, Tier 1 partners will be given access to the annual leaders' dialogue with partners, ministerial meetings, and officials/technical meetings. Tier 2 partners will be given more limited access to relevant Ministerial meetings and officials/technical meetings. To improve the transparency and accountability of partners, they will be required to submit annual reports about their commitments, to ensure alignment with the *2050 Strategy*. Partners will also enter into agreements that set the agenda for their political and development cooperation in the region.

The new Forum Partnership Mechanism is also intended to promote transparency and mutual accountability through an annual reporting system that aims to assess partner countries' commitments and pledges against their deliverables.¹² This system aims to improve Pacific oversight, prevent partner countries from re-packaging and re-advertising existing support announcements, and foster more appropriate and cohesive partner country support. Partner countries should ensure that they fully engage with this oversight system.

2.3. Fisheries cooperation

Theme leads: Transform Aqorau, Quentin Hanich, and Kamal Azmi

The Pacific is a global leader on fisheries governance through its Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMO),¹³ regional coordinating bodies such the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency**

and the **Parties to the Nauru Agreement**, treaties, and international leadership and advocacy.¹⁴ Partner countries, other regional fisheries management organisations, and regional advisory bodies have much to learn from fisheries management expertise in the region.

Nevertheless, there is scope for Pacific Island countries and their partners to continue to innovate their fisheries security initiatives, through:

- Sharing Pacific expertise on effective conservation and management measures through an exchange and training program to showcase best practices for other fisheries advisory bodies and RFMOs. This could occur through the joint Tuna RFMO mechanism, **Regional Fisheries Secretariat Network** (RSN), or project-based initiatives through Pacific and partner countries' summit outcomes; and
- Sharing Pacific expertise on effective coordination and diplomatic

collaboration to enhance global fisheries management practices and foster stronger international partnerships.

There is also scope for the region to address less well-regulated maritime security challenges, such as **transshipment**. Transshipment involves a fishing vessel and a refrigerated cargo vessel meeting at sea to transfer catch, to allow the fishing vessel to continue fishing and return to port less frequently. Transshipment can also involve the transfer of crew, supplies, fuel, and spare parts. While these purposes are legitimate (with some restrictions), they can provide a cover for criminal activities, facilitating trafficking of people, drugs, weapons, and other illicit goods.

The monitoring of transshipments is reasonably strong for some fisheries (purse seine), but it is poorly regulated for others (longline).¹⁵ This is consistent with the overall weaker monitoring of longline fisheries compared to purse seine in the region.



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Encounters between fishing vessels, including transshipment, are not rigorously monitored, but these events can be detected if the vessels transmit publicly available data from Automatic Identification Systems (AIS). To date, calls for stronger monitoring of transshipments have been resisted by distant water fishing nations that benefit from these operations. Given the rise in fishery-related crime, it is important to:

- Rigorously monitor the interactions between fishing vessels;
- Ensure transparent reporting on the contents of transshipments; and
- Consider developing regional mechanisms to regulate transshipment activities.

2.4. Transnational crime

Theme lead: Henrietta McNeill

In the Pacific Islands region, maritime-based transnational crimes include: illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; drug, wildlife, firearm, and human trafficking; and forced labour. Notably, while the region was primarily a transit zone for drug trafficking, it is increasingly a destination for drugs and their precursors.¹⁶ Criminal actors are sourcing new drug trafficking mechanisms like narco-sub, although transshipment and movement via small craft remains prevalent.¹⁷

Regional law enforcement agencies, including the **Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO)**, **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police (PICP)**, and the **Pacific Immigration Development Community (PIDC)** have an agreement to cooperate. The **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA)** joined in 2024, which should increase the union's effectiveness. Together, they contributed to the development of the **Forum's Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy 2024 – 2028**¹⁸ to manage the impact of transnational crime in the Pacific Islands region. To implement this new approach, the region will require resources, capacity building, and expertise, including to strengthen linkages among the key organisations and develop robust and secure communication systems:

- Partners should support Pacific-led institutions dealing with transnational crime. The proliferation of 'new'

meetings or organisations can disrupt regional approaches and create unnecessary duplication;

- Maritime and aerial surveillance of transnational criminal activity should increase, utilising Pacific patrol vessels, FFA targeted surveillance, partner operations, and the OCO Small Craft App. Increased open source and digital surveillance and intelligence-sharing would also be beneficial; and
- This surveillance and intelligence should be effectively shared between partners and all regional agencies targeting transnational crime through existing regional intelligence-sharing mechanisms such as the PTCCC, to encourage joint operations and increase the likelihood of prosecution.

Human trafficking and forced labour

are known features of the fisheries sector, including in the Pacific Islands region, where migrant workers on fishing vessels are often exploited.¹⁹ The cases are often complex to manage in Pacific Island countries, requiring interpreters,

financial support for victims (for living costs during a trial), and the expense of a flight home. Therefore, they are often not taken up. In some countries, women are trafficked to fishing vessels for sexual exploitation outside the visibility of authorities.²⁰ While there are attempts to curb forced labour in the fisheries industry through supply chain management and labour standards,²¹ effective enforcement depends heavily on detection, strong national legislation for successful prosecution and financial support for a victim-centred approach throughout the process. This suggests efforts are needed to address this challenge through:

- Creating and enforcing national laws and regulations targeting forced labour, modern slavery, and exploitation within the fishing industry across Pacific Island countries; and
- Ensuring appropriate resourcing and training is available for Pacific Island law enforcement agencies dealing with seafarers to detect forced labour and exploitation.



2.5. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief

Theme lead: Miranda Booth

The increased engagement of Pacific and partner military and civil defence actors in humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR) highlights the growing gap between humanitarian needs after disasters, and available national and international civilian capacity.²²

Therefore, Pacific Island countries and their partners should consider enhancing preparedness for humanitarian, civil, military, and police interaction in disaster response. Key actions could include:

- Undertaking a survey to identify common training needs and existing training resources for humanitarian, civil, military, and police interaction across the region;
- Identifying anticipated humanitarian needs and requirements and possible relief tasks to be assigned to foreign military actors and designing

future HADR exercises around these projected scenarios; and

- Involving a diverse range of humanitarian, civilian, military, and police actors in HADR simulations and exercises, and in the development of HADR concepts. The collaborative testing of the draft Regional Military Interoperability guide through Australia's LONGREACH Table Top Exercise²³ and diverse participation in Exercise LONGREACH 24 in Fiji and Solomon Islands respectively, provide examples for future directions.²⁴

Partners and Pacific Island countries could also enhance knowledge and information-sharing to support predictability and efficiency during disaster response. Key actions could include:

- Developing a regional disaster relief handbook that includes Pacific Island countries' disaster risk profiles, disaster management arrangements, including processes for requesting external assistance, national actors' roles and responsibilities, and civil-military coordination arrangements, and key regional frameworks, institutions, meetings, dialogues, and other initiatives;
- In advance of the High-Risk Weather Season, sharing information about anticipated hazards, potential capacity gaps, and the possible external assistance to be requested, including possible tasks to be undertaken by foreign militaries, and potential, available foreign military assets that could be matched to anticipated tasks;
- As circumstances allow, this information-sharing could foster shared understanding and expectations, support planning by local, national, and international civilian and military agencies, and support the alignment between these plans; and
- Gathering stakeholders' perspectives on the potential benefits of information-sharing of available civilian and military assets through a central online platform, possibly revised and adapted from the discontinued central register overseen by the United Nations.²⁵

The **United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs** recommends that both assisting and affected countries should invest in civilian capacities, and that when foreign military

assets are used, they should be limited to the time and scale necessary to address a specific humanitarian need.²⁶ Key issues related to effective use of foreign military assets include: the timeliness and duration of their employment; appropriate use for the task; quality of humanitarian civil-military coordination and military-military coordination; and the absorptive capacity of host governments.²⁷ Nevertheless, there is a consensus that, in the Asia-Pacific, foreign militaries can play a valuable role in filling humanitarian gaps.²⁸

To improve the effectiveness of foreign military engagement in disaster relief in the Pacific Islands context, Pacific Island countries and their partners could:

- Host a multinational, multiagency forum to share common challenges and lessons-learned in humanitarian, civilian, military, and police interaction and military-military interaction from past exercises and operations and to develop recommended practices; and
- Examine the connections formed between different actors to strengthen functional relationships where required.

In the absence of a central HADR body responsible for information-sharing, coordination, and capacity building nested under the Pacific Islands Forum, these initiatives could be spearheaded by the **Forum's Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting**. To support alignment between the national and regional level, efforts could be supported by the **Pacific Regional Disaster Managers Meeting**, **Regional Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific**, and the **United Nations Office for the Pacific**.

Dialogue could be established with other actors based on their areas of expertise and existing activities. For example, the Australian Civil-Military Centre may support education, training, and exercises to develop recommendations, and the **South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting** and **Pacific Response Group** could likewise provide feedback on initiatives for regional response to disasters.



3. Partner countries

3.1. Australia

Country lead: Joanne Wallis

The scope of maritime security issues to be addressed by the Pacific Islands region was expanded by the *Boe Declaration*. But this expansion has not been matched by increased resourcing and capacity within the regional security architecture.

To address this, as the major provider of maritime security assistance in the region, Australia has developed several new region-wide initiatives: the **Pacific Fusion Centre**, the **Pacific Policing Initiative**, and the **Pacific Response Group**. The Fusion Centre and Policing Initiative have been endorsed by the Forum, and the Response Group by the South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting. It will be important for Australia to ensure that these mechanisms are genuinely consultative, meet the priorities of Pacific Island countries, and are accountable to Pacific leaders. As a first step, these initiatives should report regularly to the **Forum Regional Security Committee**

to assist oversight of their work and help to ensure alignment between their activities and the Forum's *2050 Strategy*.

These initiatives exemplify the paradox Australia faces in the Pacific Islands region. Australia is by far the largest and richest member of the Pacific Islands Forum, and it is accordingly willing and able to provide funding for regional maritime security initiatives. However, island members of the Forum have long expressed concern that this funding meant that Australia gained undue influence over the Forum agenda and workings of the Forum Secretariat, and resolved in 2018 to move towards a model where island members provide 51% of funding for the Secretariat (although Australia and New Zealand continue to provide most project funding).

Nevertheless, addressing significant resourcing and capacity gaps is critical. Therefore, Australia should have conversations with its fellow-Forum members about the terms on which it could provide greater maritime security assistance to the Forum through:

- Providing direct investment to expand the number of personnel in the Forum Secretariat working on maritime security issues;
- Supporting a secondment and training program to enhance connectivity between the regional and national security architectures of Forum members; and
- Participating in collaborative conversations between Forum members about the scope and nature of specific maritime security issues, and how to address them.

To mitigate concerns amongst island members of the Forum, rather than funding these and other initiatives directly, Australia (and other partner countries) could donate to a **Forum trust fund**. This could provide some separation between the donation and the activity, and enhance transparency and Forum oversight of this funding.²⁹

Australia should also work to ensure that minilateral security initiatives in which it is involved maximise their engagement with Pacific Island countries to ensure that they meet Pacific priorities and are implemented in accordance with Pacific guidance, working with Pacific regional mechanisms and agencies as much as possible. For example, the **Pacific Quad**, a grouping under which Australia, France, New Zealand, and the US cooperate to advance maritime domain awareness in the region, could be expanded to more directly involve Pacific defence and security agencies. The Pacific Quad could then be the mechanism by which Pacific Island countries ensure that the **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness** created by the Quad security partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the US, aligns with Pacific interests and activities.³⁰

Similarly, as a member of both the Forum and the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** (PBP) initiative (involving Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, the UK, and the US), Australia should ensure that the PBP liaises closely with the Forum, to align its activities with Pacific priorities and provide avenues for oversight by Forum members.





The Australian government has constructed an Australia-centred security architecture in the Pacific via a network of **bilateral security and defence arrangements**, many of which have maritime elements. Australia signed a bilateral security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017, vuvale partnership with Fiji in 2019 (renewed in 2023), a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership in 2020 and then bilateral security agreement in 2023 with Papua New Guinea (with negotiations ongoing on a bilateral security treaty), a security agreement with Vanuatu (now under review) in 2022, the falepili union treaty with Tuvalu in 2023, and a treaty with Nauru in 2024. As noted above, these bilateral arrangements may sideline or undermine regional institutions and Australia should, where possible, prioritise regional approaches to addressing maritime security opportunities and challenges.³¹ This may mean that Australia will need to engage with partner countries with which it has tensions – particularly China – to help regional institutions access sufficient resources and support to deliver the best outcomes for Pacific Island countries. While Australia may find this difficult, it will demonstrate that Australia takes seriously the Pacific’s desire to be a ‘zone of peace’, and regional mechanisms are likely to achieve more buy-in by Pacific Island countries and their partners than bilateral ones.

3.2. New Zealand

Country lead:
Henrietta McNeill

New Zealand self-identifies as a Pacific country, given its large Māori and Pasifika population, geography, and history. It has traditionally had good relations with Pacific Island countries, although these may be under threat following recent public disputes with Cook Islands and Kiribati.³² There appears to also be contention with Samoa about compensation to communities for the *HMNZS Manawanui*, which recently sank on Samoa’s coastline—both creating environmental hazards and reducing New Zealand’s hydrographic capability and HADR response capability. While these disputes are unlikely to affect New Zealand’s long-standing regional maritime security programmes or search and rescue zone, they may affect New Zealand’s influence in the region.

New Zealand does not have the same assets or financial capacity as other larger partners, but has always leveraged the skills of its personnel to provide capacity-building, technical regulatory assistance, and legislative advice. This is often well-received in the Pacific Islands, with New Zealand lauded for listening and acting accordingly to Pacific Islands countries priorities.³³ New Zealand also aligns its programmes to the needs

and requests of the region, prioritising Pacific-led solutions and regionalism. In future New Zealand should:

- Continue to provide assistance to the Pacific Islands region through Pacific-led skills and technical support;
- Grow HADR assets to prepare for an increased frequency of climate-induced hazards in the region; and
- Focus on effective diplomacy with Pacific Island countries to improve relations.

3.3. The United States

Country lead: April Herlevi

Pacific Island countries are watching closely how the new Trump Administration approaches the region. Consistent with policies during the first Trump administration, in January 2025 the United States announced that it will be withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and has revoked the US International Climate Finance Plan.³⁴ This policy decision will create misalignment between Pacific Island countries and the United States for the duration of the second Trump administration.

In terms of regional coordination, Secretary of State Marco Rubio met with his Indian, Japanese, and Australian counterparts the day after Trump’s inauguration and the State Department



first Trump administration, the National Security Council (NSC) created a Director for Oceania and Indo-Pacific

released a joint statement indicating that the United States would continue to coordinate via the **Quad grouping**.³⁵

In terms of policies specific to the Pacific Islands region, none have yet been announced, and it remains unclear whether the US will maintain the **2022 Pacific Partnership Strategy**. During the

Security indicating a desire to engage with officials in the Pacific. As of this writing, there has been no announcement of a NSC Oceania Director, but we recommend monitoring NSC appointments as one indicator of future policy in the Pacific.³⁶ Moreover, the next **US-Pacific Islands Summit** is due in 2025, and whether it is held will



send an important signal about the US's commitment. Concerns were raised during the Biden Administration about the lack of delivery on announcements made at the first Summit and in the *Pacific Partnership Strategy*.³⁷

The Trump Administration should revisit the *Pacific Partnership Strategy*. To improve confidence in the US, any new Pacific policy should align with elements of the Forum's 2050 *Strategy* and should be matched by funding to reduce the gap between rhetoric and delivery. Relatedly, Pacific policymakers will need to monitor how US foreign aid is evolving to assess whether these changes are feasible.³⁸

Under the US's **Oceania Maritime Security Initiative** (OMSI), the US Navy and the US Coast Guard coordinate to support law enforcement operations in the Pacific Islands region and improve maritime domain awareness.³⁹ However, anecdotal evidence suggests that Pacific fisheries experts have, at times, found it challenging to get the US to investigate priority areas for fisheries violations under the OMSI because the US pursues its own priorities. This can lead to mistrust and questions about the purpose of US operations in the Pacific.



Clarification of the purpose, priorities, and operations of the OMSI are needed to build trust and ensure that the OMSI is aligned with Pacific interests.

3.4. France

Country lead: Céline Pajon

France has significant maritime security assets in the region and experience in managing its maritime domains across multiple oceans. As such, France could play a role in fostering exchanges and sharing lessons learned between its overseas island territories in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions, and the Pacific Island countries.

As an EU member state, France can act as a key facilitator for EU initiatives like **Crimario**, which is promoting the information-sharing IORIS system, and the **SHARE.IT framework**. SHARE. IT (Sharing and Enhancing Information and Technology) focuses on connecting existing information-sharing platforms (IFCs, ISCs) in a collaborative, needs-based manner.⁴⁰ This approach reduces duplication and strengthens regional information sharing and cooperation.

On its own, France possesses valuable technical assets, such as UAVs⁴¹ that could support Pacific Island countries in monitoring their coastal environment and maritime domains. However, France should ensure that the equipment provided is durable, weather-resistant, easy to maintain, user-friendly, and tailored to the specific conditions of Pacific Island countries.

France has developed sophisticated mechanisms for interagency collaboration, encompassing maritime security, environmental protection, and resource management. It leads the **KIWA initiative** and engages with the **Pacific Community** (SPC) on a variety of marine scientific research and protection initiatives. In addition, France is eager to play a leadership role in ocean governance-building and is hosting the **UN Ocean Conference** this year.

France could therefore contribute valuable insights about enhanced maritime security assistance provision in the region through:

- Identifying lessons about coordination and communication within the security architectures of the different regions in which it is involved; and

- Contributing to capacity building in non-military maritime security areas, including marine protection, marine scientific research, and the blue economy;⁴²

France's new **Pacific Academy** initiative in Noumea aims to embrace a more inclusive maritime security mandate, involving multiple government ministries beyond just the military. This could help to encourage broader coordination in the region between civilian and military agencies involved in maritime security.

France's contributions to regional maritime security are overshadowed by the ongoing challenge of decolonization in its overseas territories, which remains a persistent vulnerability. Therefore, France must confront its colonial history in the region with honesty and transparency, as its legitimacy and credibility in the Indo-Pacific are closely tied to its overseas territories. France should also:

- Reassess the representation of its territories in regional organizations;
- Clarify the roles of local authorities versus the French government; and
- Empower New Caledonia and French Polynesia to strengthen their agency in the region.

3.5. Japan and South Korea

Country lead: Jiye Kim

Both Japan and South Korea are seeking to expand their maritime security efforts in the region as part of their broader Indo-Pacific strategies.⁴³ It will be important for both countries to ensure that their Pacific agendas respond to regional priorities by seeking to co-design and implement their initiatives with Pacific Island countries, regional agencies, and other partners. This will also help both countries ensure that they meet the criteria for Tier 1 partnership under the Forum's new Partnership Mechanism for Dialogue Partners. Japan and South Korea can enhance their strategic engagement in the Pacific by adopting the following measures:

- Strengthening Japan's and South Korea's cases as Tier 1 Strategic Partners by emphasising Pacific priorities in Leaders, Ministerial, and Official/Technical level agendas; and
- Developing the **Pacific Islands Forum Plus Two Framework** that

includes Pacific Islands Forum members, Japan, and South Korea to align regional initiatives.

Implementing these measures would yield bipartisan support in Japan and South Korea and drive impacts across three levels. First, regionally, Japan and South Korea will collectively build the East Asian regional perspective and approach towards Pacific priorities. The East Asian regional approach could guide other East Asian actors to engage in region-to-region cooperation spearheaded by both countries. Second, in terms of national impact, the governments of Japan and South Korea could align and harmonise their resources to better contribute to the crowded donor space of the Blue Pacific. Lastly, from the non-governmental point of view, these initiatives could mobilise non-governmental actors, including public and private entities, as well as individuals, to develop service and business models aligned with Pacific priorities.

3.6. India

Country lead: Premesha Saha

India's Indo-Pacific Strategy seeks to expand the geographic scope of India's maritime security operations to the region,⁴⁴ through increased naval visits, training missions, and disaster resilience efforts. There is also potential for India to leverage its naval capabilities and experience in responding to climate-related disasters in the region.

As a member of the Global South, India can play a unique role compared to other partner countries in moderating responses to geopolitical competition. For example, in the **Quad security partnership**, India has promoted efforts to seek to balance China through diplomatic rather than military means.⁴⁵ India is also a key driver of moderating military maritime initiatives by the Quad partners, including by delaying the implementation of hard maritime security strategies in favour of softer maritime security practices.⁴⁶ This approach aligns with Pacific interests in establishing a 'system and implementation processes that promote peace and ensure the Pacific can address traditional and non-traditional security issues in our region'.⁴⁷

India can also facilitate information sharing, exchange, and training between Pacific and Indian Ocean island countries

on issues of shared concern, such as: responses to climate change impacts; nature-based solutions for buffering the impacts of storm events; and best practice in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This could benefit island countries in both ocean regions, with Indian Ocean island countries also likely to learn much from the Pacific's leadership in integrated ocean governance⁴⁸ and fisheries surveillance.⁴⁹

3.7. China

Country lead: Joanne Wallis

China has stayed outside most regional maritime security cooperative mechanisms, preferring to advance its interests either bilaterally or via parallel regional initiatives based in China. For example, China has created:

- the **China-Pacific Island Countries Reserve for Emergency Supplies** in Guangdong Province, China, in 2021;
- the **China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center** in Shandong Province, China, in 2022; and
- the **China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction and Cooperation** in Guangdong Province, China, in 2023.

In 2021 the first **China-Pacific Island Countries Forum on Fishery Cooperation and Development** was held in Guangzhou, China. In 2022 China also proposed to create the **China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism**, although there has been little progress on this.

There are concerns that China's establishment of these parallel mechanisms risks undermining the established regional architecture. This suggests that China should seek to:

- Integrate its initiatives within the Forum-led architecture to provide the opportunity for regional oversight and accountability, and to reduce overlaps, duplication, and contradictions;
- Align its interpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea with that of Pacific Island countries;
- Enhance its collaboration with Pacific Island countries, and where possible, partner countries, to ensure that

regional mechanisms are respected and utilised;

- Report to the relevant Forum and Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific agencies about the activities of its initiatives; and
- Align its activities with existing UN and regional disaster response mechanisms, such as the OCHA Office of the Pacific, the Forum's Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting, and the Pacific Resilience Facility.

China has also pursued bilateral security arrangements with Pacific Island countries, most notably a security agreement with Solomon Islands, which was signed in 2022. As mentioned, there is a risk that these arrangements sideline or undermine Pacific regional institutions and China should, as much as possible, work to address maritime security opportunities and challenges through regional mechanisms. China has traditionally been reluctant to take this approach, as it views many regional institutions—particularly the Pacific Islands Forum—as overly influenced by Australia and New Zealand, as well as complicated by the continued recognition of Taiwan by Tuvalu, Palau, and the Marshall Islands. But China should respect Pacific leaders' calls for Pacific-led regionalism and make efforts to build bridges with other partner countries, such as Australia, with which it has tensions.





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Photo acknowledgements

Inside cover: Solomon Island Election support (from plane looking at vessel), source: Royal New Zealand Navy

Page 3: A Rigid-Hulled Inflatable Boat (RHIB) heads and HMNZS Wellington, source: Royal New Zealand Navy

Page 5: Guy Sadler, (L-R) Papua New Guinea Defence Force officer Major Stephen Karuka, Commander 3rd Brigade, Brigadier Ben McLennan CSC and Bar, and Air Transport Wing Commander Lieutenant Colonel Doug Vavar discuss the joint capability within the Air Transport Wing in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, on 25 February 2025, source: Australian Department of Defence.

Page 6: LCDR Brenton-James Glover, Australian Defence Vessel Reliant is joined by the Republic of Fiji Navy Ship Savenaca in the waters off New Caledonia for Exercise Croix du Sud 2023, source: Australian Department of Defence

Page 8: LSIS Matthew Lyall, (L-R) Leading Seaman Musician Robin Murray, Able Seaman Musician Kelly Doddridge, Mr. Ramanlal Vallab and Leading Seaman Musician Joseph Wherrett before the Radio Nuku'alofa 88.6FM breakfast show during an official visit in Nuku'alofa, Tonga as part of a regional presence deployment, source: Australian Department of Defence

Page 9: Royal New Zealand Navy Haka, source: Royal New Zealand Navy

Page 10 French Polynesia patrol, source: Marine Nationale (French Navy)

Page 10 CAPT Annie Richardson, The Republic of Fiji Military Forces formally farewell the participants of Exercise CARTWHEEL 2024 during a ceremony at Black Rock Barracks, in Nadi, Fiji, source: Australian Department of Defence.

Page 12 CPL Miguel Anonuevo, Australian Army soldier Corporal Jack Preedy acts as a casualty during the culminating activity for Exercise Povai Warrior in Talia Military Camp in Tonga, source: Australian Department of Defence.

Page 13: (from left) Major Nathalie Sallaberremborde from the French Armed Forces, Corporal Sanilaite Uluheua from His Majesty's Armed Forces Tonga and Captain Savenaca Degei from the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, as members of the Pacific Special Advisory Team visit French Navy ship FS Vendémiaire in November, 2024, source: Australian Department of Defence.

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