

Kickstarting Australia's Pacific Step Up: *Taking the next logical step.*

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Introduction

"Australia is one of the most secure countries in the world". Dibb (1986) made this observation in his review of Australia's defence capability in 1986ⁱ and at the time was a reasonably accurate assessment. However in that same report he notes that "It would take at least 10 years and massive external support for the development of a regional capacity to threaten us with substantial assault."ⁱⁱⁱ Now approximately 34 years later, the strategic environment in which Australia as a nation exists has changed extensively and such regional capacity exists making Australia less secure than we were three decades ago.

That is not to say that Australia is under any direct or current physical threat, but the geopolitical environment has changed substantially. Growing economic power along with the military power that then affords is being brought to play in the region which means Australia must look at new policy to counteract or balance this.

Other than times of extreme crisis, (eg World War II), Australia or the surrounding South Pacific region has never been threatened but with changes in capabilities, and postures, it is timely that Australia has again pivoted towards the Pacific. As many commentators have rightly said, the Pacific will not accept a paternalistic approach by Australia but the concept of a 'Pacific Family' resonates at a cultural level.

This paper looks at the geostrategic context in which Australia and Pacific find themselves and puts forward a policy that builds on existing institutions to better integrate the Pacific Family.

Historical context

The Pacific has always played a role in Australia's geostrategic past. From potential threats from France and Russia in the late 19th century, to occupation by Japan in World War II, to misconceived threats from neighbours in the 1960's, to policing and peacekeeping actions in our immediate vicinity, the Pacific has always been important to Australia. Its land and maritime geography provide both natural defence for Australia but also potential advance basing for expeditionary forces threatening Australia.

Other than during World War II Australia's capability and posture traditionally has focussed less on its own territorial defence but more on overseas missions. Historically, Australia's defence posture has been built around providing expeditionary forces to support campaigns

by allies in various parts of the world. Despite Defence White Papers highlighting the importance of defending Australia's north little was done about it (Dibb, 2019)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Then Defence Minister, Kim Beazley, commissioned an external review to break a deadlock between the Chief of Defence Force and the Secretary of the Department of Defence over basic principles for force structure priorities. That review undertaken by external consultant, Mr Paul Dibb, also known eponymously as the 'Dibb Review', noted that "It would take at least 10 years and massive external support for the development of a regional capacity to threaten us with a substantial assault. (Dibb 1986)^{iv} This review and the subsequent 1987 Defence White Papers has led to changes in capability and force structures that provide improved defence for Australia's north. It wasn't until then that the defence of Australia's north and its maritime approaches became defence policy.^v

Historically, threats to Australia were perceived to potentially arise from crises such as, Japan (post WWI), Communism (post WWII – Malaya Emergency) or a potential failed neighbouring state (eg East Timor or Papua New Guinea). From the 1950's until the sometime before the turn of the century Indonesia had the world's third largest communist party and was armed by the Soviet Union^{vi} giving rise to the potential capability to threaten Australia, even if it didn't have any intent. Indonesia's military invasion of East Timor in December 1975 showed territorial ambition, but it has also been argued that Australia's interest was better served by this than the formation of a weak state. (Wallis 2014)^{vii}.

Some of these concerns were to be well founded. Often dubbed the “Arc of Instability” (Ayson 2007^{viii}, Wallis 2014^{ix}) Australia’s immediate vicinity experienced a number of incidents that helped shape our strategic position. From the ‘Coconut War’ in Vanuatu, the 1987 Fijian Coups D’état (as well as 2000 and 2007), to the Bougainville ‘Sandline Crisis’ in the 1990’s, to leading the UN’s INTERFET mission in East Timor, to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003 Australia played an increasing role in helping stabilise the region. The New York terrorist attacks in 2001 further heightened awareness that ‘weak states’ were a risk necessitating a ‘new interventionism;’ in the region. (Wallis 2014)^x

Through the 2009 and 2013 Defence White Papers Australia identified that the ‘security, stability and cohesion’ of the South Pacific was of strategic importance. The 2016 White Paper has gone further declaring that our second most important Strategic Defence Interest is a secure nearer region^{xi}. (Commonwealth of Australia 2016, Defence White Paper, (DOD) Department of Defence.)

Australia cannot be secure if our immediate neighbourhood including Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Pacific Island Countries becomes a source of threat to Australia. This includes the threat of a foreign military power seeking influence in ways that could challenge the security of our maritime approaches or transnational crime targeting Australian interests. (DOD 2016. p69)

China’s 2015 Military Strategy^{xii} (PRC 2015) outlined that its maritime capability is of growing importance to its defence strategy while its 2019 Defense White Paper: “China’s

National Defense in the New Era”^{xiii} (PRC 2015) mentions Australia strengthening its military engagement in the Asia Pacific.

In February 2020 while addressing a joint sitting of the Australian Parliament, Indonesian President Joko Widodo (2020) declared “Indonesia and Australia are destined to be close neighbours. We cannot choose our neighbours. We have to choose to be friends. Australia is Indonesia's closest friend.”^{xiv} With statements as strong and as clear as that, not to mention the closer economic and diplomatic ties, Indonesia cannot be seen as a threat to Australia in any light. In fact closer military ties with Indonesia are a policy area that requires more attention.

Australian Government policy in recent times has always had clear and strong focus on the Pacific. The changing circumstances in our geostrategic environment means Australia must again look to the Pacific as a part of the strategic defence of the nation and its interests. This was the impetus behind Prime Minister Morrison announcing Australia’s Pacific “step up” in a speech in 2018 where he said “A strong, stable region keeps us more secure and enables our economies to grow and for our peoples to prosper.” (Morrison, 2018)^{xv}

The Pacific’s Strategic Importance to Australia’s Security

According to Dibb (2012), Australia’s area of direct military interest covers ten per cent of the Earth’s surface^{xvi}. This provides enormous challenges to our policy makers and the Defence personnel (uniformed members and civilians) that advise them. The vast area of

interest tied with a complex array of nations making up that area all with strong national identities, needs and interests add to that challenge. That said given the geostrategic importance of our northern approaches and an “increasingly crowded and complex geopolitical environment in the South Pacific”^{xvii} (Wallis 2017) Australian policy makers must do as much as possible to strengthen our position in the area.

Our alliance with the United States is as strong as ever and will remain so but its dominance in the region is being challenged by other powers. The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper states that trends are converging to create an uncertain outlook for Australia^{xviii}. However, the rise of China economically, politically and militarily has changed geopolitics in the region and as such Australia.^{xix} (Benvenuti 2015)

While the 2016 Defence White Paper doesn't name China directly sets out a key threat to Australia:

While it is natural for newly powerful countries to seek greater influence, they also have a responsibility to act in a way that constructively contributes to global stability, security and prosperity. However, some countries and non-state actors have sought to challenge the rules that govern actions in the global commons of the high seas, cyberspace and space in unhelpful ways, leading to uncertainty and tension.^{xx}

That Defence White Paper also says that Australia's strategic circumstances can change quickly and Dibb and Brabin-Smith go on to list what they observe as circumstances that changed between February 2016 and November 2017 through “developments as:

- the continuing shift in the balance of power in the region in favour of China and that country's military build-up and use of military coercion in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea and along its border with India
- the election of President Donald Trump in the US at a time of a perception of declining American power and concern about a more inward-looking and protectionist US that is less interested than before in Asia and in defending its allies
- the rapid acquisition by North Korea of a deliverable nuclear weapon capability based on long-range ballistic missiles that seems already to be capable of targeting parts of the US and Australia
- a Southeast Asia that appears to be drifting into the orbit of China and whose regional security organisation, ASEAN, has proved incapable of protecting its territorial interests in the South China Sea
- a pattern of competitive arms acquisitions, in which regional countries acquire advanced conventional weapon systems with greater range and accuracy, supported by increasingly sophisticated intelligence and surveillance systems
- increasing challenges to the so-called 'rules-based global order', which is mentioned over 40 times in the 2016 DWP."^{xxi}

Australia's longstanding policy of 'strategic denial' is roused whenever a threat, perceived or real, occurs. Australia has been "among the most fervent opponents of China's territorial claims to the South China Sea" ^{xxii} (Schleich, 2018) This is despite not being a claimant to those disputes but, is in line with our long standing view that the current rules based order is the system that best serves Australia's national interests.

Under Premier Hu Jintao, China set itself a path for a 'peaceful rise' but most commentators don't see Xi Jinping staying on that path. Well known realist, Mearscheimer (2006), is pessimistic about China's intentions saying that:

“China will want to make sure that it is so powerful that no state in Asia has the wherewithal to threaten it. It is unlikely that China will pursue military superiority so that it can go on a rampage and conquer other Asian countries, although that is always possible. Instead, it is more likely that China will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the United States makes it clear to other states in the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.”^{xxiii}

If China were to acquire a military base in the Indo Pacific region the strategic consequences for Australia would be serious^{xxiv}. (Dibb and Brabin-Smith, 2017). While the South China Sea region is not the South Pacific the lessons that may be learned are the same. While China’s use of economic and soft power is not the same as the coercion^{xxv} (Zhang 2019) used in the South China Sea they set the competitive foreign affairs context in which Australia currently finds itself.

Australia has always been invested in the South Pacific through diplomacy, aid, economic activity and disaster relief and humanitarian aid. How much effort has waxed and waned over decades usually based on where Australia’s focus has been required at any point in time. This has led to Australia building soft power in the region. According to Herr (2019) a state’s soft-power assets includes features another state finds attractive such as “values, stability, economic success, cultural attractiveness and shared experiences.”^{xxvi}

China has grown to be a direct challenge Australia’s interests in the region through its political and economic power.^{xxvii} While the China – Pacific dynamic was mostly seen

through the Beijing- Taiwan lens it seems that is no longer the case. ^{xxviii} (Dobell, 2019).

China has offered large amounts of financing to Pacific Island Countries via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which begs the question, could BRI be seen through the lens of Walt (1985) as bandwagoning?^{xxix} While much has been made of the potential threat to the region of China's 'debt trap diplomacy' some argue that the evidence suggests China has not been engaged in problematic practices.^{xxx} (Rajah, Dayant and Pryke 2019).

Australia should and does welcome all economic engagement activities including those by China, India and Japan. The need for infrastructure investment is enormous with the 2017 Foreign affairs White Paper citing a figure from the Asian Development Bank of \$26.2 trillion. No one country can or should carry that load alone.

Australia's development financing has mostly been provided to Pacific Island Countries in the form of grants rather than loans. While this changed with the 2018 Pacific 'step up' it meant that Australia's reputation was not challenged in the same way China's has been. However, Australia's aid has often been challenged as colonialism or paternalistic, claims which often diminished Australia in the eyes of the region. Australia is also often challenged by its Pacific neighbours for its stance on climate change as this is an existential threat to some Pacific nations. Interestingly, this author cannot find references to similar challenges to China despite China being the world's largest polluter.^{xxxi}

Time to rebalance

While the challenges and potential threats Australia faces in the South Pacific are real, the Australian Government's Pacific 'Step Up' has taken a real step towards meeting those challenges, however, more needs to be done. That 'more' is more integration between Australia and Pacific countries^{xxxii} (Dobell 2019). This work was started and articulated in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper^{xxxiii} which set out "three new priorities:

- promoting economic cooperation and greater integration within the Pacific and also with the Australian and New Zealand economies, including through labour mobility
- tackling security challenges, with a focus on maritime issues, and
- strengthening people-to-people links, skills and leadership."

While all of these are vitally important out of these the priority must be the people-to-people links if Australia is to finally put to bed the 'paternalistic', 'colonialist' criticisms. Obviously these are sometimes used as part of diplomacy and tradecraft and that will continue until there is such integration that there is no vestige of truth. Australia is and must continue to be aware that just because our intentions are good that they will always be read that way.

As the current Australian Government continues to emphasise "the best form of welfare is a job". This is as true for foreign aid as it is for unemployment benefits. Most Pacific island counties have little natural resources, growing populations and these lead to few opportunities to 'have a go'. The shorter term Seasonal Worker Scheme and the longer term Pacific Labour Scheme allow workers from Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea,

Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu to apply for short term, seasonal employment in Australia. This is vital for people to people links as well as providing vital income to families back in country.

However there are ways we can increase our ties even more with the Pacific family as Morrison says. Dobell (2019) puts it correctly by saying “Family feeds naturally into ideas of community, launching a discussion about a shared future, not dominance by Canberra.” (Dobell 2019)^{xxxiv} Family has to be more than football, foreign aid and in-fighting.

Policy Recommendation

Given the acknowledged changing geopolitical situation on our immediate region Australia must take every opportunity to strengthen ties in a truly meaningful way. There is an idea that is not new, nor originally mine, that I believe its time has come that singularly ticks the three priorities above from our 2017 Foreign Policy White paper. Australia needs to change our defence forces policy and invite Pacific Island country citizens to enlist in the Australian Defence Force. Security commentator, Anthony Bergin, raised this idea in 2019^{xxxv} and it received a positive response from Pacific Island leaders though has yet to be adopted by government.

This programme should not be a separate regiment as suggested by Fijian Defence Minister, Inia Seruiratu as reported in the Australian^{xxxvi} as that is not integration. Famously the

Ghurkhas were fierce regiment in the British Army which started when India was a British colony. The US Forces recruit from protectorates such as Puerto Rico and British armed forces have about 1500 Fijians serving. Australia already has selective intakes of military from friendly countries and we welcome elites from Pacific Nations in to ADFA and RMC. Fiji's Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama, attended the Australian Defence Force Warfare Training Centre located at RAAF Base Williamtown, NSW^{xxxvii}.

Former Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, had particularly strong connections with the Pacific through her extensive travel the region but also through her husband, Commander John W. Wells (RAN, Ret'd). Over 35 years, he too had spent time in the Pacific. The concept of in building stronger defence partnerships between Australia and Pacific nations was discussed with Pacific leaders and Defence officials, including greater security ties, training opportunities, humanitarian assistance and PIC citizens enlisting in the ADF.^{xxxviii}

The Australian policy should look identical to our current recruiting with the same standards and selection criteria, assessment and testing as an Australian citizen recruit would go through. The one exception that should be considered according to Bergin^{xxxix} is that recruitment, testing and even perhaps basic training should occur in the home countries. Certainly recruitment and testing makes sense but training may mean duplicating infrastructure and services already available in Australia.

Whilst there may be some resistance from Defence, as it is (rightly) conservative by nature, government should set out a clear policy path since there is enormous benefit to the Nation to be gained. Those gains include, inter alia, strengthened people-to-people links, tighter security relationships and closer integration. They also include diversity in the ranks, soft skills such as cultural awareness and languages, in country knowledge which is important for humanitarian aid and disaster relief (HADR) as well as militarily and a bigger, deeper recruitment pool. Imagine the benefit to a disaster response if the team responding had actual knowledge of an area when it comes time to try to land aircraft or ships when infrastructure has been swept away.

The benefits to Pacific Island Countries are almost endless: monetary remittance back home supports families and communities. ADF training would enable skills transfer back to country which will augment vocational and tertiary educational institutions. ADF training covers many disciplines that our Pacific family are likely to have to travel to another to learn including engineering, health, management, etc not to mention the leadership skills.

These skills are vital for nation building in developing countries. They improve health, education and infrastructure vital for small, poor nations as well as reduce the reliance on international aid and international non-government organisations. The 'teach a man to fish' proverb is often used but it is instructional in this circumstance. The more Australia can do to build self-sufficiency and resilience in our immediate neighbourhood the better. Having family help family build that capacity is long lasting and hard to forget.

The values and attributes our defence forces instil in our service people are essential to strengthen civil institutions. These institutions will act as a bulwark against corruption and foreign interference which will further protect Australia's national interest. In turn having strong nations as our neighbours makes Australia a stronger, more secure nation.

Conclusion

There seems little doubt that the entire Indo-Pacific region is somewhat in a state of flux. Whilst no one is suggesting conflict is likely, let alone imminent, the fact that there are tensions anywhere in our region means that Australian policymakers must turn their minds to any and all pieces of the geostrategic puzzle and look at ways we can strengthen both our strategic position and our sovereign capability in order to ensure we are as secure as it is possible to be. Closer military ties with all friendly nations helps this. Closer military ties with our family in the region helps strategically but also does so much more.

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