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RECONCILING REGIONAL SECURITY NARRATIVES IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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Reconciling Regional Security Narratives in the South Pacific

Abstract:

The emergence of China as a regional power in the South Pacific has led to a new era of geopolitical rivalry in the region, with the US, Australia, Japan and New Zealand, among others, launching major policy initiatives for the Pacific islands. The security narrative that underpinned this enhanced engagement reflected a traditional geo-strategic view of security. These shifts in regional geopolitics coincided with the emergence of a more assertive, independent and innovative diplomacy by Pacific island states. This paradigm shift in Pacific diplomacy positioned the region to advance a quite different regional security narrative focused on climate change. The aim of this article is to explore areas of convergence and divergence in these contending security narratives. It asks whether, within the context of a contested regional order, there is potential for Pacific island states to leverage the security interests of major external powers to drive their own security agenda. While focusing on the area of climate security, the analysis draws on past examples of security cooperation that ‘succeeded’ despite divergent security perspectives of the major players.

KEY WORDS: Pacific islands; geopolitics; regionalism; security narrative; climate change

Introduction

For much of the post-colonial era the Pacific island region has effectively been under Western hegemony (led by the US, France, Australia and New Zealand, depending on the particular sub-region). Other Western allies, such as Japan and the EU, have bolstered this regional hegemony. In the decade since 2009 this regional order has been in transition, as new, emerging powers have gained influence in the region – the principal new power being China. The emergence of China as a regional power in the South Pacific has ignited renewed geostrategic rivalry in the region, with the US, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, among others, announcing major new political, economic and security initiatives in recent years (Morgan, 2019, 2020; Wallis et al, 2019).

Shifts in regional geopolitics have occurred against a backdrop of significant change in Pacific regional diplomacy. What has emerged in the decade since 2009 is a more assertive, independent and innovative diplomacy by Pacific island states (Fry and Tarte, 2015). This new Pacific diplomacy has positioned the region to push back against prevailing narratives of geostrategic rivalry and related threat discourses, to advance a quite different regional security narrative; based on an expanded concept of security and focused on climate change. This is captured in the Boe Declaration on regional security adopted in 2018 (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018a).

These regional developments have been framed as a contest between divergent security paradigms: between the so-called Indo-Pacific security narrative with its China-threat focus and the human-security and environment focus of the so-called Blue Pacific narrative (Fry, 2019, p.270). Underpinning such a framing is the question of whether one or other will eventually prevail. But such representations also highlight the problem of how to ‘bridge the divide’ (Newton Cain, 2020) and to ensure these narratives ‘don’t talk past each other’ (Wallis, 2019). This reflects the broader significance of contending security narratives, which expose tensions in regional foreign policies and potentially undermine strategic interests and partnerships (O’Keefe, 2020; Morgan, 2020).

The main purpose of this paper is to explore areas of convergence as well as divergence in regional security narratives. The analysis draws on past examples of security cooperation to show how complementary security interests may be advanced despite the presence of divergent

perspectives on regional security. These examples include the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone of 1985 and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017, described as the region's major security achievements (Taylor, 2018a). The paper highlights potential common ground in regional security discourses. It also argues that, within a contested regional order, there are greater prospects for Pacific island states to advance their own security priorities within a cooperative security framework.¹

This paper is divided into five parts. The first section will describe the changing geopolitics of the Pacific islands region and the security narrative that has accompanied this development. The second part examines the counter narrative of regional security that the Pacific islands have articulated – individually and collectively – in the context of the new Pacific diplomacy. The third section highlights past evidence of compromise and cooperative security, demonstrating that common ground is possible despite divergent security interests. The fourth section examines the possibilities of cooperation arising from the Boe Declaration adopted by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2018. By advancing an expanded concept of security, it highlights that some degree of convergence has taken place at the declaratory, if not conceptual, levels. The final section focuses on climate change, described by the Pacific Islands Forum as ‘the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific and one of the greatest challenges for the entire world’ (Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership, 2014). It can thus be considered the ‘ultimate test’ for regional security cooperation and action in the contemporary era.

The Geopolitical Security Narrative

Changing geopolitics in the Pacific can be understood as a function of the growing influence of China and the responses of traditional powers (namely Western allies) to this development. Other non-Western actors who also have growing interests in the Pacific form part of this power shift (namely Russia, India, Indonesia, and countries of the Middle East). China is the focus however because it is the only non-Western power present in the region that is capable of posing a significant and long term challenge to Western dominance in the Pacific.

¹ The term cooperative security is used here to refer to states working together to make themselves more secure, in the face of common as well as complementary threats or challenges. For various discussions of the term see Mihalka, 2005.

The emergence of China as a regional power has been underway for some time (see Wesley-Smith and Porter, 2010), but has accelerated with the presidency of Xi Jinping since 2013. That year marked the launch of a strategy of global engagement, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and a shift by China to a more assertive and active engagement with the developing world including the Pacific (Meik et al, 2018).

The growing presence and power of China in the Pacific has triggered significant policy responses from traditional Pacific powers, beginning with the US. In 2011, then President Obama announced a rebalance of US forces to the wider region. A key feature of the US approach has been the framing of the wider region as Indo-Pacific (as opposed to Asia-Pacific). This is seen as an important feature of the new geopolitics of the Pacific and aims to unite key allies in the region. From the US point of view, Indo-Pacific strategy is ‘about competing with the Belt and Road Initiative, pushing back in the South China Sea, and negotiating or renegotiating bilateral trade deals’ (Poling, 2019).

The response of Australia to China’s emerging power in the Pacific has mirrored to some extent that of the US – although it appeared to lag somewhat behind. According to some commentators, Australia had initially ‘sought to calm US anxieties about China in the Pacific’ (Wesley and Wallis, cited in Morgan, 2019, p.15). This changed in 2017, when Australia’s relations with China entered a ‘new troubled phase’, a reflection of China’s activities in Australian domestic affairs, as well as assertiveness internationally (Medcalf, 2019). Australia’s Pacific ‘step up’, announced in 2017 (as part of the 2017 Foreign Policy White paper), mobilized major new political, economic and security investments in the region. In terms of Australia’s economic investment, at the APEC meeting in 2018 in Port Moresby, the Australian Prime Minister announced a \$2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific. Key initiatives in the security and defense area include 19 new patrol boats to 12 Pacific island countries and a new Pacific Support Force – described as ‘a new expeditionary training force to work with key regional neighbors’ (Packham, 2019).

New Zealand launched its own ‘step-up’ to the Pacific, labeled ‘Pacific re-set’, in 2018. This included a boost in its aid and diplomatic presence in the region. This policy coincided with the release of the Government’s Strategic Defence Policy Statement, which highlighted amongst other things the perceived challenge from China’s growing influence in the Pacific (NZ Government, 2018). Meanwhile Japan signaled its concern about the rising power of

China in the Pacific by elevating its diplomatic, political and security cooperation with the region. The first visit to the region by a Japanese foreign minister in more than 30 years took place in 2019. In a speech at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, then foreign minister Taro Kono announced, as part of Japan's 'renewed commitment to the Pacific island region,' a number of initiatives to support maritime law enforcement capacity building, infrastructure development and people to people ties (Kono, 2019).

The security narrative that has underpinned and framed these initiatives essentially reflects a 'traditional geopolitical view of security' (Fry, 2019, p.268). China is perceived as a 'strategic competitor', aspiring to 'regional hegemony' in the Indo-Pacific. With the Administration of President Donald Trump, China's challenge to 'American power, influence, and interests' is also viewed as an attempt 'to erode American security and prosperity'. (He et al 2020 p.2). A prevailing argument is that China poses a threat to the liberal rules based global order. Evidence used to support the claim that China is a 'revisionist' power includes China's use of military force to assert its interests in the disputed South China Sea. Another argument stems from China's political system and values. New Zealand's Ministry of Defence reflected this view in its Defence Policy Statement: 'China holds views on human rights and freedom of information that stand in contrast to those that prevail in New Zealand' (NZ Government, 2018, p.17).

This security narrative heavily emphasizes the importance of 'upholding a rules-based international order' – the so-called Free and Open Indo Pacific (US Government, 2019). From the US perspective this requires that the 'balance of power remains in our favor' – particularly in order to safeguard freedom of navigation and overflight for the US and its allies. Highlighting the rising power of both China and Russia, the US DoD bluntly declared that 'a negative shift in the regional balance of power could encourage competitors to challenge and subvert the free and open order that supports prosperity and security for the US and its allies and partners' (US Government, 2019, p.16). Increased US engagement in the Pacific islands aims to 'preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific, maintain access, and promote our status as security partner of choice' (US Government, 2019, p.21). Pacific island states should therefore be encouraged to remain wedded to traditional partners; and by implication to exclude China. This recalls the 'strategic denial' posture of the Cold War era (Fry, 2019, p.265; 268).

Promoting partnerships, interoperability and 'burden sharing' is a key component of this strategy. Since 2017 major Western allies with interests in the Pacific – the US, Japan, Australia

and New Zealand – have strengthened their joint security dialogues and cooperation with respect to the island states. This has served to reinforce and reaffirm common security concerns and priorities within a shared security discourse and paradigm. Key forums that have provided avenues for this cooperation include the Japan-Australia Foreign and Defense Ministerial consultations; Australia-US Ministerial; Japan-New Zealand Foreign Ministers meeting and the Australia –New Zealand – United States Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue, inaugurated in 2018.

Within this narrative, security threats to the Pacific islands have been defined in terms of their vulnerability to economic and political influence from China. This is seen to arise in the context of increasing Chinese loans to support infrastructure development in the Pacific. Alluding to this concern, the New Zealand Ministry of Defence stated: ‘Steep debt burdens associated with infrastructure projects have potential implications for influence, access and governance’ (New Zealand Government 2018, p.24). China’s aid diplomacy in the region has been labelled by some commentators in Western countries as ‘debt trap’ diplomacy – aimed at ensnaring countries in a web of dependence (Mantesso, 2018). Portraying Chinese loans as a potential threat to Pacific islands’ sovereignty feeds into the narrative of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy, which is aimed in part at ‘preserving small states’ sovereignty’ (US Government, 2019, p.41).

Controversies such as the 2018 allegations that a wharf in Vanuatu (funded by a Chinese loan) would be turned into a naval base by China, underscore the point made by Morgan that the Pacific islands matter most when they are seen to pose a risk to Australia and other western powers. In this context, the declared concern about debt burden and risks to sovereignty (such as through potential debt for equity swaps) masks a more compelling concern that Chinese aid and particularly infrastructure projects might constitute dual use investments, useful for both commercial and strategic goals. These in turn could threaten Australia’s national security and that of its allies (Morgan, 2019; Fry 2019).

In this context, the purpose of regional security cooperation with the Pacific island countries is two-fold: to bolster Pacific island states’ defense and law enforcement capabilities and therefore sovereignty; and to shore up Western influence as security partners of choice. Security cooperation between the Pacific and the US, Australia, New Zealand and, increasingly, Japan, has focused on building and strengthening national and regional capacity

to counter cross border threats from transnational crime, illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and terrorism. Security dialogues have focused on strengthening port security, enhanced information sharing, and building institutional collaboration and military-to-military cooperation (see Australia New Zealand United States Inaugural Pacific Security Cooperation Dialogue, 2018).

It is notable that these dialogues have also included climate change, disaster risk reduction and sustainable development: issues that form part of the broad-based security agenda highlighted and promoted by Pacific island states. This provides a basis for some convergence between the security agenda of major partners and that of the Pacific island states. The next section explores the Pacific island response to these new geopolitical dynamics and the counter narrative of regional security that has been advanced. This is analyzed within the context of the new Pacific diplomacy.

The ‘Blue Pacific’ Security Narrative

The above shifts in global and Pacific geopolitics have coincided with a period of significant change in Pacific regional politics and diplomacy. The decade since 2009 has seen a ‘paradigm shift’ in the way the Pacific engages both at the regional and global levels. This shift began, in part, as a response to discontent with the way traditional partners (Australia and New Zealand in particular) dominated regional forums and imposed their own agendas on the region (including trade, climate, decolonization, and oceans). An important catalyst was the suspension of Fiji from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009, which triggered a move at the UN for Pacific island missions to organize and caucus through the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS) group, as well as leading Fiji to reinvigorate the sub-regional Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and establish the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF). Also critical was the move by some ‘tuna rich states’ to implement a new fisheries management approach through the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) Group. This has yielded unprecedented financial returns for its members (Tarte, 2014).

The changing geopolitics has provided an enabling environment for this new diplomacy. New development partners such as China have been willing to facilitate the establishment or reinvigoration of Pacific island-led regional bodies such as PIDF and MSG. They have also provided alternative sources of security and development cooperation and opportunities to

access more markets. This is empowering, politically and economically. As the PIFS Secretary General stated: ‘Forum Island countries have been excluded from the sorts of financing, technology and infrastructure that can enable us to fully engage in a globalized world. Many countries see the rise of China and its increasing interest in the region as providing an opportunity to rectify that’ (Taylor, 2019a). China is also viewed as a more amenable development partner, with ‘less stringent processes for getting large infrastructure projects implemented’ (Regenvanu, 2019).

Within the context of the new geopolitics and new Pacific diplomacy, Pacific states have become more assertive, confident, independent and innovative in their foreign policies. They are increasingly willing to push back on initiatives emanating from traditional development partners and leverage their combined political, economic and moral weight to influence international and regional arrangements (especially on climate and oceans). The more prominent international role being played by Pacific island states has been recognized and acknowledged by major partners (see for example Foreign Minister Kono’s remarks in Suva in 2019).

To strengthen regional solidarity and to amplify the region’s voice and influence, the Pacific Islands Forum has adopted a collective identity known as Blue Pacific. The Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Malielegaoi first alluded to the Blue Pacific at the UN Oceans Conference in June 2017, co-chaired by Fiji and Sweden. The Blue Pacific then received the endorsement of the Pacific Islands Forum leaders at their annual summit in 2017 (chaired by Samoa). The main driver of the Blue Pacific concept has been the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.

If there is an agenda behind the Blue Pacific identity it is about empowerment. There has been a very deliberate attempt to challenge notions of small, vulnerable and fragile – as the dominant characterizations of the island states – with a counter narrative emphasizing the collective strength of ‘large ocean states’. As described in an Oxfam Report, the Blue Pacific formulation ‘captures the growing geostrategic and economic significance of the region, and cements a powerful narrative of self-determination based on Pacific values’ (Oxfam Australia, 2019, p.5).

The Blue Pacific narrative also challenges the portrayal of the Pacific islands as ‘passive collaborators or victims of a new wave of colonialism’ (Taylor 2019a). In this context, the security lens adopted by metropolitan powers has been described as ‘distorting’, with

Vanuatu's Foreign Minister declaring: 'There sometimes is a perception that Vanuatu is "taking sides"' (Regenvanu, 2019). Instead, a 'friends to all approach' has been advanced by the Pacific Islands Forum as the 'accepted modality for engagement and for building relationships and partnerships' (Taylor, 2018b; Pratt, 2019).

While the new geopolitics provides opportunities for Pacific island foreign policy and diplomacy, there have been concerns expressed about the potential adverse impact of increased military competition and insecurity (Malielegaoi, 2018). This has led to calls for a more coordinated and proactive role by the Pacific Islands Forum in defining its security and strategic interests. According to the then Fijian Foreign Minister: 'Given the current fluidity of the geopolitical environment, the Forum will need to be able to de-conflict the growing strategic competition and cooperation that is already taking place'. He continued: 'We need to be able to demonstrate what our strategic interests and objectives are, in the face of competing external interests, which may or may not be complementary to the achievement of our vision for our Region' (Kubuabola, 2018). This view echoed that of the PIFS Secretary General who earlier asked: 'How do we ensure that we play a part in shaping and determining the regional security ocean-scape, rather than being spectators on the sidelines?' (Taylor, 2017).

The vision of the region is set out in the Pacific Islands Forum's Framework for Pacific Regionalism; that is 'a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018a). This vision forms an integral part of the Blue Pacific identity and frames the Pacific's own security narrative and agenda. Within this narrative, security is, by definition, broad, comprehensive and multi-dimensional. This is captured in the discourse around climate change.

The Majuro Declaration for Climate Leadership, adopted by the Forum in 2014, described climate change as 'the greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and well-being of the peoples of the Pacific and one of the greatest challenges for the entire world'. This continued a long history in the region where environmental threats – and specifically climate change – are seen as integral to Pacific island security. In 1997, the Smaller Islands States group within the Pacific Islands Forum declared, in respect to climate change, that 'the avoidable destruction of entire communities and countries and their cultures contravenes the basic right of every state, large and small, rich and poor, to exist' (Greenpeace, 2005, p.8).

Over time, climate change has come to be defined as posing an existential threat, leaving no doubt what action was needed: ‘The survival of vulnerable small island developing states can only be guaranteed if there is concerted global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to maintain the temperature increase below 1.5 degree Celsius’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2015). In this context, the large polluters are seen to be responsible for the principal threat to the region. In 1997, the above Smaller Islands States group condemned Australia for opposing strict reductions of greenhouse gas emissions. This position has gained strength over time. Indeed, a defining feature of the new Pacific diplomacy has been the willingness of Pacific leaders to speak truth to power – in calling out political leaders of their much larger developed partners, and Australia in particular. The 2019 Pacific Leaders Forum provides a number of examples of this (Bainimarama, 2019; Newton Cain, 2019).

Despite this history, it was not until recently that climate change was officially included on the regional security agenda. In fact, the Forum Regional Security Committee – which met between 1992 and 2016 – explicitly excluded climate change, focusing instead on other ‘non-traditional’ security threats arising from transnational crime, terrorism, cybercrime, small arms trade, as well domestic crises, human rights issues and gender-based violence. This agenda was, to a large extent, influenced by Australia and New Zealand, as well as other development partners such as the European Union (Tarte, 2018).

Pacific states have gradually succeeded in pushing climate change to the forefront of the regional security narrative and paradigm, where it is now defined both as an existential threat and as a threat multiplier. It is exacerbating, amongst other things, the damage and risks caused by nuclear waste; and adversely impacting fisheries and agriculture and thus food security. Significantly the major traditional partners of the region (including New Zealand, Australia, the US and Japan) also now define climate change in security terms. New Zealand’s Ministry of Defence described it as a ‘complex disruptor’. (New Zealand Government, 2018, p.24).

The above discussion points to evidence of common ground and of some convergence between the two prevailing security narratives. But this also raises key questions for the region, such as how the Pacific’s regional security priorities on climate change (and human security more broadly) can be advanced rather than diverted or diluted? To what extent can the region leverage the security interests of major external powers, while managing the potential risks of

increasing geopolitical competition in the region? Examples from the past provide some insights into these questions, where regional agreements were adopted against the backdrop of divergent security narratives and perspectives.

Reconciling Contending Narratives: Evidence from the past

Pacific island states count as their major regional security achievements the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone of 1985 and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017 (Taylor, 2018a). The Multilateral Fisheries Access Agreement between the United States and Pacific Islands countries adopted in 1987 – that ended the so-called ‘tuna wars’ between the US and the region – can also be counted as a key security achievement (Tarai, 2015). What is significant about these is that they ‘succeeded’ despite divergent security perspectives and imperatives of the major players. Contending narratives on security, in other words, did not preclude cooperation to achieve common or complementary objectives.

The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (Treaty of Rarotonga) adopted in 1985 is regarded as one of the key regional security achievements in the Pacific – a contribution to global as well as regional nuclear non-proliferation. But it was also a compromise; the product of competing interests and priorities of Forum member states. While some Forum member states were staunchly anti-nuclear (including New Zealand in the mid-1980s) others sought to balance their opposition to nuclear testing and waste dumping with their relationships with the US (these states included Fiji and Tonga). The main architect of the Treaty was Australia, who proposed a limited nuclear free zone; one that it believed would not conflict with the strategic interests of its ally (the US) by not proscribing nuclear armed vessels transiting the region or visiting ports. This proposal was initially opposed by four Pacific island countries (PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Nauru), who advocated a more comprehensive nuclear free zone. But in the end consensus prevailed and the treaty adopted (Fry 2019, pp.181-82).

It could be argued that the Treaty met the minimum requirements of a nuclear free zone, thus to some extent defusing regional anti-nuclear pressures. US fears and concerns that it would encourage anti-nuclear feeling in the region were largely dispelled. While the US refused to accede to the Treaty’s protocols (a situation that continues to this day) it nevertheless respected them. French nuclear testing continued, intermittently, for a further 11 years. But France eventually acceded to the Treaty protocols – joining China and Russia.

Strategic interests and Cold War geopolitics were more explicitly evident, and effectively utilized by the Pacific, in the context of the 1987 Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island Countries and the Government of the USA. The significance of this Treaty was that it successfully addressed very different yet complementary security agendas of the US and the Pacific island states. The so-called ‘tuna wars’ of the early to mid-1980s had been fueled by US refusal to recognize coastal state sovereign rights to tuna occurring within Exclusive Economic Zones. This led to some Pacific island states apprehending and confiscating US tuna boats caught fishing within their waters without a license; action that triggered retaliatory measures by the US Government. It was not until two Pacific island states (Kiribati and Vanuatu) concluded bilateral fisheries access agreements with the Soviet Union, in 1985 and 1986 respectively, and several others (Fiji and Papua New Guinea) mooted the possibility of doing the same, that regional negotiations with the US made any significant progress. With US Government funding, the 1987 Treaty secured unprecedented financial returns for the region, and guaranteed fishing access to the US tuna fleet. It also greatly enhanced maritime surveillance and enforcement. Meanwhile neither bilateral access agreement with the Soviet Union was renewed (Tarai 2015; Tarte 1998, pp. 101-103).

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) is held up as the most prominent example of regional security cooperation – encapsulating a ‘truly Pacific approach’ to restoring law and order, peace and stability. But its genesis lay not in the deterioration of security in Solomon Islands *per se*, but in Australia’s assessment of the global security context – namely the War on Terror. Indeed, it is possible RAMSI – which relied on Australian leadership and resources – may never have happened had the international situation been different. Two earlier requests to Australia for assistance had in fact gone unheeded. RAMSI was a product of Australia’s strategic interests in stabilizing a ‘porous and undeveloped region’. This in turn formed part of its contribution to the US-led War on Terror. The use of regional multilateralism (RAMSI) rather than a unilateral intervention was due in part to the influence of other Forum members (most notably New Zealand). This intervention was legitimized by the request from the Solomon Islands Government and carried out under the mandate of a regional mechanism known as the Biketawa Declaration. RAMSI thus became a ‘Pacific-model’ of cooperative intervention, based on a regional mandate and formal legal agreement of the elected Government (Baker 2015, pp.142-43; Fry 2019, pp.258-59; Ratuva 2019, p.80).

The above examples point to the way different security narratives and agendas came together to deliver outcomes broadly acceptable to all regional parties. Can the same occur with the Boe Declaration?

The Possibilities of the Boe Declaration

In 2017, Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers recommended to Leaders that a new regional security declaration be drafted, based on ‘comprehensive consultation (with) a wide range of stakeholders’ taking on board ‘their concerns about the regional security environment, and their expectations and ambitions for regional action on security issues’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018b). The immediate catalyst for this initiative was the end of the 14-year regional intervention mission in Solomon Islands - RAMSI – and a call to build on its lessons and successes. This was to ensure ‘the momentum gained from RAMSI in terms of regional cooperation, coordination and interoperability is not lost’ (Taylor, 2018a). But it was also a response to calls for a more coordinated and proactive role by the Pacific Islands Forum in defining its security and strategic interests, in the context of the ‘current geopolitical environment’ (see comments above by Fiji’s Foreign Minister).

The outcome of this process was a security declaration – the Boe Declaration – adopted by Forum leaders at their summit in Nauru in 2018. It took as its starting point ‘an expanded concept of security’. In keeping with the priorities of the Pacific states, the declaration ‘reaffirms that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific’ and reaffirms the region’s ‘commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2018a).

Defining climate change as ‘the single greatest threat’ provides significant weight to the Pacific in shaping the security narrative in the region (Fry, 2019, p.271). It also provides leverage to the Pacific island states in their efforts to influence the policies and actions of the world’s largest emitters of greenhouse gases (and those of their fellow Forum member Australia). Dialogue partners are expected to align their security engagement around the priority areas of the Boe Declaration (Taylor, 2019b).

At the same time, this initiative provides an opportunity to advance the geopolitical agenda of Western powers. Some commentaries in fact framed the Boe Declaration explicitly as an Australian and New Zealand initiative: describing it as a ‘wide ranging security agreement with Pacific island nations that should be used to limit the military involvement of non-signatories such as Russia and China in the region’ (Pacnews, 2018).

Significantly, this was not the narrative that prevailed at the subsequent Pacific Islands Forum held in Tuvalu in 2019. There, leaders endorsed the ‘Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now’ – described as the ‘strongest collective statement on climate change made by Leaders’. Amongst other things, it called for the UN Secretary General to appoint a special advisor on climate change and security and for the UN Security Council to appoint a special rapporteur to provide periodic reviews of reports related to climate change and security (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019a).

The 2019 Forum also endorsed the Boe Declaration Action Plan – which aims ‘to positively and proactively’ shape the regional security environment. This includes the establishment of the Forum Officials Committee sub-committee on regional security (FSRS). The inaugural meeting of the FSRS took place in Suva at the PIFS headquarters in October 2019. This meeting endorsed a number of priority actions, for the first 12 months, under each of the Boe Declaration’s strategic focus areas. The number one strategic focus area is climate security. The agreed priority action was developing a ‘climate security narrative’, through producing climate security assessments and evidence based knowledge products. For this, a ‘Blue Pacific analytical framework for climate security risk assessments’ would be developed. The aim is to help articulate and contextualize the impact of climate change on human security and conflict in the region. This will be critical to supporting the region’s advocacy ‘for greater ambition on climate action’ (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019b).

As noted above, the Boe Declaration can also serve the geopolitical interests of Australia and New Zealand (as well as those of other Western allies). This is through the commitments made under the Boe Declaration for stronger regional security architecture; for improved coordination among existing security mechanisms; and for shared security analysis, assessment and advice. For Australia and New Zealand, in particular, this presents an opportunity to bolster their influence over regional security cooperation. Both Australia and New Zealand are members of the FSRS – and Australia funded the attendance of Pacific island delegations to its

first meeting. Australia is also funding related security initiatives and seeking Forum endorsement of these (such as the Pacific Fusion Centre and the Australia Pacific Security College). Although not stated explicitly, it is understood that by strengthening – if not cementing – their place in the regional security architecture Australia and New Zealand can minimize, or control, the influence of China. They can also ensure the Pacific remains tethered to Australia, New Zealand and other traditional security partners.

Climate Change: Towards a Cooperative Security Framework

As stated earlier, the Pacific Islands Forum now expects partners to align their security engagement around the priority areas of the Boe Declaration. This puts climate change as the ‘single greatest threat’ and it is the leading strategic focus area in the Boe Declaration action plan. Key priorities include advocating for ‘*greater ambition on climate action*’ by traditional regional powers (US and Australia) as well as by non-traditional partners such as China (emphasis added).

Australia, being a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, has come under particular pressure. As the former Tuvalu Prime Minister declared: ‘We cannot be regional partners under this step up initiative – genuine and durable partners – unless the Government of Australia takes a more progressive response to climate change’ (Dziedzic, 2018). This point was underscored by Oxfam in its background briefing report to the 2019 Forum summit: ‘If Australia is to remain a valued and trusted member of the Pacific family, and with that retain the ability to have a say in the region’s future, then it must begin responding to the number one priority of Pacific island countries – climate change’ (Oxfam Australia, 2019, p.5).

The approach and response of Australia and other traditional partners has been to align their security engagement not around climate change but around another component of the Boe Declaration, the strengthening of national security capacity. This is evident through the maritime surveillance efforts of the US, Australia, New Zealand and also Japan – such as US Ship-rider agreements and Australia’s Pacific patrol boat programme. There has been a focus on strengthening port security, enhanced information sharing, and building institutional collaboration and military-to-military ties. This approach corresponds with the geopolitical narrative and agenda of shoring up the so-called rules-based order: capacity building serves to bolster Pacific island states’ defense and law enforcement capabilities, and therefore

sovereignty and territorial integrity. This approach also has the underlying objective of maintaining (or reclaiming in the case of Fiji) their position as security partner of choice.

There is evidence that Pacific island states have taken advantage of this geopolitical imperative to drive their own (broad-based) security agenda. Enhancing the capacity of national maritime, defence and law enforcement agencies provides the islands states with the ability to counter cross border threats from transnational crime and IUU fishing, as well as to respond to climate change threats – namely humanitarian and disaster response. This is one dimension of climate security.

An example of complementary security agenda at work is the Black Rock training camp in Fiji. Australia is providing assistance to develop the former Fiji military forces camp into a regional training centre – dedicated to peacekeeping, disaster preparedness and humanitarian response. For Australia, this development is seen as a ‘symbol of our partnership, a long-term and enduring commitment ... (It aims) to increase the interoperability between our militaries as well as our police forces’ and build people-to-people ties (Morrison, 2019).

Fiji’s ambitions are to provide a regional training facility for other Pacific island states, but also to develop its own capacity to be a ‘security partner of choice’ in the region. (Pers. Com; Fiji Ministry for Defence 2019). While it has turned to Australia for support, Fiji remains open to overtures from other willing partners, including China and Indonesia (One PNG News Online, 2019).

There is potential to build a cooperative security framework around climate change by building on the narrative of national security and sovereignty. As stated earlier, major traditional partners of the region are beginning to define climate change in security terms – recognizing the potential for conflict and instability in the region to emerge from, or escalate as a result of, climate change events. This includes the extreme prospect of loss of territory and, potentially, of sovereignty. There is thus a security imperative to support the Pacific’s mitigation and adaptation efforts. This underpins one of Australia’s key justifications for aid to the region, which is the Pacific’s ‘high vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters’ (Ratuva, 2019, p.92).

There are indications that regional partners are now going further, by integrating climate change into their own defence planning and decision-making. New Zealand, under its Coalition Government, has taken significant steps towards aligning domestic and defence policies to the Boe Declaration's key priorities. The 2018 Strategic Defence Policy Statement for the first time recognized climate change as 'a major driver of military operations'. A follow-up Defence Assessment report released in December 2018, titled 'the Climate Crisis', described climate change as posing a significant threat to both national and regional security. New Zealand has thus taken 'a proactive approach in promoting global recognition of climate change as a security risk' (New Zealand Government, 2019).

Ultimately what will be important in terms of achieving 'greater ambition on climate action' will be the way in which climate change is perceived by regional powers – and especially major emitters – as a domestic priority, as well as a foreign policy one. It has been suggested, in the Australian context, that reframing climate change as a national security threat, rather than as an environmental issue, would be far more 'potent and effective' in driving domestic policy (Smethurst, 2020). At the same time, it is important to bear in mind the potential danger of 'overselling' the climate security discourse (Warner et al, 2019).

Writing from an Australian perspective, Hugh White noted that the consequences of Australia's climate policy 'go far beyond the problems it causes for our influence in the South Pacific' (White, 2019, p.144). Of far greater concern, he argues, are the effects climate change will have on Australian national life. The 2020 Australian bush fires provided a possible harbinger of such effects, underscoring Australia's own vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. Also significant, as a symbol of regional partnerships but also of the potential convergence around a cooperative security narrative, was the contribution of Fiji's military personnel, deployed to assist their Australian counterparts in combatting the bush fires.

Conclusion

Aligning national and regional security narratives will be crucial to shaping future outcomes under the Boe Declaration. The above discussion has described two broad contemporary narratives of security in the Pacific islands region. While this discussion has revealed competing and contrasting threat discourses and priorities, it has also illuminated potential points of convergence.

One point of convergence is in supporting Pacific island national security capacity – around maritime law enforcement, disaster response and border control. This reflects a shared interest in strengthening state sovereignty and territorial integrity. A related point of convergence derives from the security-related imperatives of responding to climate threats both within the region and beyond – what is now called a climate ‘crisis’ and ‘emergency’. These include threats to the stability and viability of Pacific island states and more broad-based and systemic crises impacting on the region’s partners and neighbors.

This discussion has suggested that the current geopolitical environment provides opportunities for the Pacific to drive their agenda by leveraging the ‘complementary’ security interests of the major external powers in the region – both traditional and non-traditional states. In this context it is significant that there has been no explicit or overt rejection of the climate security narrative by these external powers. Indeed, key partners, such as Australia and New Zealand, have endorsed the Boe Declaration that identifies climate change as the region’s ‘single greatest threat’.

How far this shifts the security paradigm in the region remains to be seen. There are no certainties that the perceived threats from climate change will eclipse the perceived geopolitical threats (such as from China); or that major powers (including China) will not pursue bilateral strategies in the Pacific to undermine and weaken the Pacific’s regional solidarity. But threat perceptions can and do change. The COVID-19 crisis may provide insights into this potential for change.

This pandemic has created an unprecedented crisis afflicting the full Forum membership. On the one hand this underscores the importance of a cooperative security approach. As with climate change, the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how ‘inaction on the part of one nation can create adverse consequences across the world’ and that to solve such global issues there is a compelling need for ‘pre-emptive global action’ (Joshi, 2019). On the other hand, the crisis has also exacerbated geopolitical fault-lines, including in the Pacific region, and tested regional solidarity (Powles et al, 2020). The unprecedented health and economic security shocks triggered by the pandemic may also shift threat perceptions and priorities, deferring and delaying commitments and actions on climate change.

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