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## AUSTRALIA'S PACIFIC 'STEP-UP': A LEGITIMATE ENGAGEMENT?

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**Australia's Pacific 'Step-Up':  
A Legitimate Engagement?**

Since the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP), a new set of discursive frames have emerged from within the Australian government and mainstream media regarding Australia's relationship with Oceania. Catapulted into prominence by sensationalised fears of a proposed Chinese naval base in the Pacific, such framings have manifested themselves in a growing body of high-profile public commentary and government rhetoric on the importance of a 'step-up' in Australia's engagement with Pacific island states. Emerging from think tanks, academic blogs and opinion pieces, the mainstream media, and ministerial addresses, this growing discussion of Australia's place in the Pacific is dominated by iterative articulations of the need for, and importance of, a renewed commitment to the region. Striking in its homogeneity, this 'step-up' discourse constructs a series of ideas about Australia and the Pacific to sell a (supposedly) new approach to engaging with the region, ideas that also establish the need for a specific set of actions.

Directing critical attention to the relational framings inherent in these fundamental ideas, this paper argues that such framings and the unacknowledged, unquestioned assumptions from which they are developed are symptomatic of historical continuities in Australia's understanding of and approaches to the Pacific. Such continuities are associated with a "chequered history" in Australian regional engagement and are implicated in the long-standing challenge of gaining political legitimacy for Australia's Pacific policies, understood here as "establishing political acceptance of [a] project by those affected by it" (Fry 2008, 84). As such, this paper also examines the extent to which Australia's 'step-up' can be considered a politically legitimate engagement with the region. It argues the fundamental ideas developed within the 'step-up' – as contemporary manifestations of historically continuous assumptions – have important implications for the political legitimacy of Australia's 'step-up' and thus its efficacy. This argument is developed from the premise advanced by Fry and Kabutaulaka (2008) that political legitimacy is critical to the effective implementation of Australia's Pacific policies.

Political legitimacy in the Pacific turns on "how Australia is seen carrying out [its] role and how it relates to, and compromises, the needs of Pacific countries." (Fry 2008, 84). Today, a substantial and growing Australian involvement in the economic, security, and development agendas of Pacific societies demands a renewed attention to the question of political legitimacy at a national and regional level. The "shared agenda for security and prosperity" outlined in the FPWP has been met with a flurry of policy formulations aimed at developing the "intensity and

ambition” of Australia’s regional engagement (DFAT 2017, 99 & 101). This enhanced engagement seeks to expand Australia’s ability to “identify and implement practical responses to... economic, security and development challenges” (DFAT 2017, 99). However, attempts to develop the capacity of a state to deliver essential services to its citizens, enhance economic resilience, address issues of human security, and create safer communities in the face of environmental change can only be realised effectively if the mode of engagement and the models of development it promotes are seen as legitimate by the populations of these societies, especially indigenous elites (Fry and Kabutaulaka 2008). This is equally true of Australia’s visions for regional economic and security frameworks all of which require at least bilateral but predominantly multilateral agreement, support, and cooperation in their conceptualisation, establishment, and operation.

At first glance the ‘step-up’ appears to have a strong claim to developing political legitimacy among Pacific states. The discourse it has generated contains nothing explicitly controversial in its framing of the Pacific relative to Australia; the language among political actors, analysts, and media appears to be inclusive – there is talk of the Pacific “family” and enduring “partnerships” between Australia and Pacific states. Moreover, policy formulations are claimed to balance the needs and aspirations of Pacific societies with Australian interests in the region. Yet, upon closer examination, the ideas promulgated under the ‘step-up’ discourse and unquestioned assumptions on which these rest reveal significant issues for the legitimacy of the ‘step-up’ engagement into the future.

Interrogating three interrelated ideas at the heart of the ‘step-up’ and its discourse, this paper exposes a series of problematic relational framings within the objectives, model, and implementation of this latest form of regional engagement. The first of these fundamental ideas is that the Pacific is critical to Australian national security by virtue of its geography. This idea holds that the geo-strategic value of the Pacific rests on the internal security of the Pacific Islands as well as the degree to which they can remain secure from foreign influence. Foreign influence in this context refers almost exclusively to a growing Chinese economic and diplomatic presence in the region. The second idea follows. According to proponents of the step-up discourse, China’s growing presence represents a credible threat to Australian security on the basis of Pacific Islands’ assumed (in)ability to effectively manage Chinese development assistance, in particular Chinese concessional loans. Both preceding ideas are mobilised in the context of a third and final idea, that Australia has a ‘special

relationship' with the Pacific, one that demands closer accommodation of Australia in matters of economic, security, and development sectors. Such an assumption is underpinned by the idea that Australia has 'right to lead' in the Pacific a 'special responsibility' to manage the region (Morgan 2019).

For each idea, the way in which Australian interests and actions are constructed relative to the Pacific states and their own interests and actions is critically analysed. The extent to which the 'step-up' is driven by Australian security concerns; emphasises Australian understandings of regional integration; and assumes an Australian 'right to lead' in the region are all carefully analysed. Importantly, these analyses are situated in a discussion of the assumptions behind such framings and the extent to which they represent the most recent iteration of historical continuities in Australian framings of the Pacific.

## **The Step-Up Discourse**

*"To pursue common interests and respond to the region's fundamental challenges, Australia will engage with the Pacific with greater intensity and ambition..."* – Foreign Policy White Paper, 2017

At the 2016 Pacific Island Forum Leader's Meeting, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull promised there would be a 'step-up' in Australian engagement with the region (DFAT 2019). A year later the first of these initiatives were announced (Fox 2017). The motivations for this initial shift are clear; Australia's Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was drawing to a close and questions over the future of Australia geo-strategic interests in the region were beginning to intensify (Wallis 2017; Batley 2017). These questions centred on a supposed decline in Australian influence in the region and the parallel growth in Chinese economic and diplomatic ties with Pacific states (Batley 2017; Brant 2018; Morgan 2019). Credence was given to the possibility of this situation leading to a potentially hostile foreign power gaining critical strategic influence in the region (a development explicitly addressed in the 2016 Defence White Paper) and the idea became an increasingly common feature of foreign policy analysis and media reports on the Pacific. Of particular concern among commentators and the government was the potential for Chinese development assistance (provided in the form of 'no-strings-attached' concessional loans) to adversely affect the internal stability of Pacific states (Morgan 2019). Debt-distress became the most cited symptom of Chinese aid and the notion was used to strengthen arguments that infrastructure projects provided by China might

be ‘dual-use’ investments, at once commercially and strategically useful (Fox and Dornan 2018; Morgan 2019). Calls among the media, foreign policy analysts, and regional pundits for Australia to follow through on its ‘step-up’ ambitions became increasingly vocal.

The release of the FPWP in November 2017 gave new impetus to this growing discourse. The Pacific was identified as one of Australia’s five top foreign policy priorities and there was a chapter dedicated to it and its “fundamental importance to Australia.” Titled “A shared agenda for security and prosperity”, this chapter and its subsection, “Stepping up our engagement in the Pacific”, outlined the various ways in which Australia would pursue common interests in the Pacific with “greater intensity and ambition” (2017, 99-101). Three key priorities were identified:

- Promoting Economic cooperation and integration within the Pacific and with Australia and New Zealand;
- Tackling security issues, with a focus on maritime security; and,
- Strengthening people-to-people links, skills and leadership in the region.

These priorities were explicitly built on the assumption that development challenges in the Pacific threaten Australia by compromising the role Pacific states play in Australia’s “ability to defend [its] northern approaches, secure [its] borders and protect [its] exclusive economic zone.” (2017, 99) References to “increasing competition for influence and economic opportunities” in the Pacific, as well as “growing aid and loans from other sources” also revealed the serious consideration given to the impact of foreign influence on the stability of the region (2017, 100). Comments made by former minister for international development and the Pacific, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, on China’s “roads to nowhere” and “useless buildings” in the Pacific capture these anxieties well (McGarry 2018; Bergin and Herr 2019); as do the remarks made by the former foreign minister, Julie Bishop, that Chinese loans might undermine Pacific states’ sovereignty (Wroe 2018b).

Concerns over Chinese intentions in the Pacific and the need for an Australian ‘step-up’ in response reached a new climax in April 2018 when Fairfax media ran a front-page story detailing the potential establishment of a Chinese military base in Vanuatu (see Wroe 2018; Morgan 2019). Although vehemently denied by both China and Vanuatu (McGarry 2018a; O’Keefe 2018), the story ushered in a wave of China-centred Pacific discourse and renewed

calls for an Australian ‘step-up’ among the media and foreign policy analysts. On both sides of politics, there was a rush to articulate the Pacific’s importance to Australia and the need for a deeper engagement with the region. Richard Marles (2018), shadow minister for defence, called for the Australian government to remember the importance of the region and to “articulate direction and a way forward for the Pacific”. For Marles, there was not only a need for Australian leadership in the Pacific, but and “an appetite for [it]...” Julie Bishop (2018), meanwhile, talked of the Pacific’s “enduring partnership with Australia”, at the heart of which lay a “common vision” and a “shared agenda for security and prosperity”. Her successor, Marise Payne, took this one step further. For her and the current Morrison government, Pacific states are “more than partners by choice” they are “family” (Morrison and Payne 2018). In this context, “stepping up in the Pacific is not an option for Australian foreign policy” but rather “an imperative.” (Payne 2018).

Policy thinking under the Morrison government was rapidly converted to policy action with this new-found sense of urgency. At his address to the Lavarack Barracks in November 2018, Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced “a new chapter” in Australian engagement with the Pacific and with it a suite of policy initiatives (Morrison 2018). Five new diplomatic missions, a new infrastructure bank, and efforts to provide Australian media content to the Pacific through commercial operators, joined the ranks of the rapidly growing portfolio of Pacific policies (Morrison 2018; Morgan 2019).

However, there are important questions to be asked regarding the Morrison government’s invigorated ‘step-up’ engagement and the growing discourse surrounding it. Morrison and his colleagues continue to invoke notions of Pacific ‘partnerships’ and a Pacific ‘family’, claiming they are the “real ties that bind us [Australia and the Pacific]” (Morrison 2018). Yet, the rate and fervour with which the ‘step-up’ has proceeded appears to have left little space for perspectives from the Pacific itself (McGarry 2018; Morgan 2019; Talyor 2019). The clamour of commentators and foreign policy analysts amidst ministerial addresses has become an echo chamber of Australian understandings of appropriate and effective engagement with the Pacific.

Apparent within this discourse are three foundational ideas: that Pacific states’ primary value to Australia is the role they play in ensuring Australia’s national security; that this role is challenged by a growing Chinese economic and diplomatic presence which threatens to

potentially destabilise the regional security order; and finally, that a ‘special relationship’ exists between Australia and the Pacific that demands closer cooperation and integration with Australia under Australian leadership. These ideas are underpinned by assumptions regarding the Pacific’s relationship with Australia and both are important factors in the political acceptance of the ‘step-up’ and its multitude of policies, projects, and partnerships. These ideas and the assumptions on which they are built are examined below.

## **The Security Assumption – Australian strategic anxiety in the Pacific**

*“China’s island-grabbing campaign is getting close to home. But Australia’s begun pushing back.” – Queensland Times, 2018*

In considering the political legitimacy of Australia’s ‘step-up’, the extent to which it is driven by Australian security concerns demands critical attention. The securitisation of Australia’s relationship with the Pacific in response to a perceived Chinese threat sends a particular message about Australia’s place and priorities in the region, one pushed upon Pacific states many times before.

Australia’s ‘step-up’ is characterised, first and foremost by the emphasis its proponents place on the geo-strategic value of the Pacific to Australia’s national security. From its first articulations, the ‘step-up’ has represented a reorientation toward security as the “primary lens through which Canberra’s policy makers view relationships between Australia and Pacific Islands.” (Newton-Cain 2018, 6). ‘Security’ was a preeminent and recurring motif within the FPWP’s chapter on the Pacific and in Scott Morrison’s “new chapter” in Australia’s relationship with the Pacific he stated the region is “where it should be”: “front and centre of Australia’s strategic outlook” (Morrison 2018; Newton-Cain 2018). While such comments are also made with references to the importance of the security of Pacific states themselves, this importance is almost “invariably measured against the backdrop of strategic concerns...” (Pan et al. 2018). Australia needs a Pacific region that is “secure strategically, stable economically, and sovereign politically” (in that order) (Morrison 2018).

The intensity of Australia’s security focus “reveals a truism of international affairs in the region: Pacific islands matter most to powers on the Pacific Rim as a source of potential



threat...” (Morgan 2019, 11). Australia has always been concerned with the Pacific being a vector for or source of threats to its national security and has long held a policy of ‘strategic denial’, also known as the ‘Australasian Monroe Doctrine’ (Tate 1961; Fry 1991; Morgan 2019). Aimed at limiting potentially hostile states’ access to the Pacific, this policy and the overarching security imperative in which it sits, have meant in times of heightened regional strategic anxieties Australia seeks to fortify its regional position (Fry 1991; Shultz 2014; Morgan 2019). Manifestations of this approach are generally an attempt to seek “ascendancy or prime influence in the Pacific islands region...” (Fry 1991, 126). Recent history is littered with examples of Australia imposing a policy of ‘strategic denial’ in the Pacific, often under the rhetoric of complementary or shared security interests with the region.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Australia’s understanding of and approaches to regional security repeatedly invoked the ‘Australian Monroe Doctrine’. The view promulgated by Australian foreign affairs officials in 1954, that Australia must “exert dominant political influence in the area with a view to maintaining Australian security behind a peripheral screen of islands”, is echoed by successive Australian governments throughout the Cold War (cited in Morgan 2019, 13; Fraenkel 2018). Fuelled by reports of Soviet fishing vessels concealing elaborate surveillance equipment (Kristof 1987), as well as the possibility of a Soviet military base being established in the Pacific (Rubenstein 1988), Australian policymakers in the 1970’s and 80’s sought to develop a coherent policy of regional and bilateral funding to maintain “a favourable strategic posture in the face of Soviet and Chinese approaches to the new states of the region” (Fry 1981, 480). More recently, the Australian policy of ‘Constructive Commitment’ (1989) promoted the view that Australia’s regional security interests were inextricably tied to the “internal problems in South Pacific states” (Fry 1991, 129). Australia’s objectives under this doctrine were to achieve regional consensus on what *it* defined as a security issues and the appropriate responses - this included the possibility of military intervention (Fry 1991).

Stronger steps were taken to influence the regional security environment in the early 2000s when Australia announced a policy of “Cooperative Intervention” (2003). Mobilised by an understanding that an “arc of instability” to Australia’s north and east would affect its ability to “protect large and significant approaches to Australia”, the policy of ‘Cooperative Intervention’ saw Australia commit to extended police and military deployments in Bougainville, Timor, and the Solomon Islands (Ayson 2007; Fry and Kabutaulaka 2008;

Dobell 2012). In justifying ‘Cooperative Intervention’ in the Solomon Islands, the then prime minister, John Howard, was explicit in his reasoning. “Not only is it good for the wellbeing of the... Solomon Islands, but it’s important... for the long-term stability and security of the [the] whole region. And in the end, *that’s* in Australia’s interests.” (Cited in Fry 2008, 75; emphasis added). These historical examples demonstrate a remarkable continuity in Australia’s overarching security goals and actions in the region, one that continues to manifest itself today.

An increasingly assertive Chinese presence in the Pacific has prompted the most recent iteration of Australia’s attempts to shore-up its influence in the region. The 2016 Defence White Paper sets out a “quasi-Monroe Doctrine in the Pacific” (Batley 2018b) in which Australia will work “to limit the influence of any actor from outside the region with interests inimical to our own” (DOD 2016, 48). There is a tacit understanding that ‘any actor’ refers largely to China alone. Proponents of the ‘step-up’ discourse from every quarter reveal renewed Australian interests are in response to the “disruptive emergence of China” or “anxiety over Chinese intentions in the region” (Batley 2018). Analytic publications from leading think tanks, such as Joanne Wallis’ “Crowded and Complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific” (2017) or Greg Colton’s “Stronger together: Safeguarding Australia’s security interests through closer Pacific ties” (2018) demonstrate a preeminent concern with the “influx of aid and investment from non-traditional external powers” and the implications this has “for Australia’s strategic interest in ensuring stability, security and cohesion in the region.” (Wallis 2017, 5).

Perhaps most telling of the assumptions underpinning Australia’s current relational framing of the Pacific in matters of security are the vocal concerns over the possibility of China getting a “strategic foothold” (read military base) in the region (Morgan 2019). Rumours of a potential Chinese base have not been limited to Vanuatu (Wroe 2018). The spectre of a Chinese investment-cum-base has been raised in as diverse locations as Papua New Guinea<sup>1</sup>, the

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<sup>1</sup> Maley, Paul and Primrose Riordan. 2018. ‘PNG port plan stokes fears of China military build-up’. *The Australian*. August 28, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/png-port-plan-stokes-fears-of-china-military-buildup/news-story/f0fa6fc36a1dbfc8d8acfe2bb4ea2907>

Solomon Islands<sup>2</sup>, Fiji<sup>3</sup>, Samoa<sup>4</sup>, and French Polynesia<sup>5</sup> (see Morgan 2019). These claims have elicited a strong response from the government, evidencing, yet again, the deeply held concern that Australia's priority is to maintain its strategic and security primacy in the region. In response to the fictitious claims of a base in Vanuatu, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stated, "We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases in those Pacific island countries and neighbours of ours" (ABC News 2018).

The 'step-up' discourse gives a clear sense that "Australia's deep strategic denial instinct" has been "roused" and that "Canberra...worries that [its] central role and leadership in the region are being tested" to the detriment of regional security (Dobell 2019, 4). However, the extent to which Australian security interests are prioritised in response to an increasingly assertive Chinese presence are best demonstrated by the policy formulations that have followed this discourse. In a series of reactive decisions, Australia has partnered with states such as the US, Japan, and New Zealand, to "outcompete Chinese investment in strategic infrastructure." (Morgan 2019, 18) Following the Vanuatu incident, Australia blocked Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from building an undersea cable linking PNG, the Solomon Islands and Australia with its own bid for the work (Pan et al. 2018; Morgan 2019). The drive came from national security concerns over Huawei who had already been banned from the tender process for Australia's National Broadband Network in 2012 (Morgan 2019). This was followed by more attempts to outbid the company for national networks in the Solomon Islands and PNG (Pan et al. 2018).

Other instances in which Australia sought to head off Chinese investment include the construction of several military bases, including a naval base on Manus Island. The

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<sup>2</sup> Riordan, Primrose and Rowan Callick. 2018. 'China's Pacific investment push lands in the Solomon Islands'. *The Australian*. May 1, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/chinas-pacific-investment-push-lands-in-solomon-islands/news-story/9c85024e3245ed8e163763c15ab0d812>

<sup>3</sup> Riordan, Primrose. 2018. 'Australia beats China to Fiji base', *The Australian*. September 7, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/australia-beats-china-to-funding-fiji-base/news-story/60d05ca8eb2bec629080c2c844255bbd>

<sup>4</sup> Callinan, Rory. 2018. 'China's Samoa plan a concern', *The Australian*. September 7, 2018. Accessed online: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/chinas-plan-to-develop-samoan-port-a-regional-security-concern/news-story/ede01bfe7ac23d97e2872a3ff6a07368>

<sup>5</sup> Wroe, David. 2018a. "China Casts Its Net Deep into the Pacific with \$2b Fish Farm." *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2018. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-casts-its-net-deep-into-the-pacific-with-2b-fish-farm-20180518-p4zg69.html>.

possibility of China funding a port on the Island raised the “disturbing” prospect of “a Chinese military presence on the Island” (Bergin 2018). This, and the “fine strategic location” of Manus prompted a pre-emptive response from Australia and the US to construct a joint naval base in partnership with the PNG Defence Force (Bergin 2018; Dziedzic 2018; Murphy 2018; Remeikis 2018). Later in the year, Australia once again came “out on top over China” with claims that it had “outbid” China to fund the construction of the Black Rock military base in Fiji (Mudaliar 2018; Morgan 2019).

Although these developments come under the rhetoric of a “shared agenda for stability and prosperity” and the belief that Australia is acting on “common security interests” historical precedents and unacknowledged assumptions paint a more complex picture (DFAT 2017; Bishop 2017; 2018). The very public justification for Australia’s ‘step-up’ has been greatly infused with the rhetoric that Australia is defending its national interests from the threats posed by state instability and predatory foreign powers, and at the same time ‘securing’ the Pacific for its own good. These ideas are clearly mapped out in Australia’s policy actions and have resulted in a false dichotomy between China and ‘traditional partners’ in which Pacific states are haplessly caught (Taylor 2018a; 2019). This elision of agency is greatly aided by the pervading silence in news items, analytic articles, and ministerial addresses on Pacific perspectives (McGarry 2018). Instead of careful attention being paid to the Pacific’s security needs and aspirations there is an understanding that security speaks for itself, and that Australia’s concerns and responses should be the Pacific’s too. Never mind that Pacific leaders have long been “debating regional security without putting defence of Australia at the heart of the discussion.” (Maclellan 2018a); that the regions pre-eminent security declaration puts climate change and stewardship of the Pacific Ocean ahead of any traditional security structures (PIFS 2018); or that that the leader of region’s pre-eminent regional organisation, Dame Meg Taylor, is concerned for the region’s strategic autonomy in the face of “aggressive pursuit of bilateral interests” from both traditional and non-traditional partners (2018a; 2019). Or even that many regional leaders, including the prime ministers of Samoa, New Zealand and Vanuatu are stringently opposed to militarisation in the region (Melielegaoi 2018, Regenvanu 2018).

There is, understandably, a growing sentiment among Pacific leaders that it is impossible to “engage in meaningful dialogue over relations with China” (Taylor 2018a) and that “the security lens often adopted, can be distorting of what we perceive as the reality...” (Regenvanu 2018). These various strands contribute to a “pervasive and deeply pernicious perception in the

foreign policy establishment that Pacific voices don't count" (McGarry 2018) with important implications for the legitimacy of Australia's 'step-up' into the future.

## **The Regional Integration Assumption – Australia's integration agenda**

*The promise of integration with Australia and New Zealand is the offer of a stronger, richer region—because poor and weak states can't be truly independent.* – Graeme Dobell, 2018

Legitimacy concerns regarding the overwhelming security focus of the 'step-up' are echoed in Australia's attempts to foster closer cooperation with and integration of the Pacific. In analysing the discourse surrounding integration and its myriad policy formulations, it is important to interrogate on whose terms integration proceeds (Maclellan 2018). To what extent do Australia's discussions and actions regarding regional integration in the context of a 'step-up' reflect perceived or actual Pacific needs and aspirations? And the cognate, to what extent do these formulations reflect Australia's perceived and actual needs and aspirations in the region?

According to the FPWP, Australia's 'step-up' "recognises that... helping to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions, is essential to the long-term stability and economic prospects of the Pacific." (DFAT 2017, 8). Building from the 2016 DWP's promise that Australia would be the Pacific's principal security partner, the 'step-up' program of integration provides a complementary economic and social guarantee (Dobell 2017; 2017a). Indeed, there appears to be a "wholesale acceptance that integration with Australia is the obvious and most acceptable way forward." (Newton-Cain 2018, 12). This thinking draws on a long history of Australian attempts to promote regional integration on both economic and security fronts.

Since the early 1970's, notable integration efforts have included attempts to impose a new regional security order in the region from 1984-1989, with Australia and New Zealand both promoting "a joint foreign policy orientation among Pacific island states around the notion of the 'strategic denial'" (Fry 2005, 116); as well as visions for "Pacific Political and Economic Community" (2003) (Dobell 2019). Both attempts, among many others<sup>6</sup>, demonstrated a

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<sup>6</sup> Fry (2005) describes five phases from 1971 to 2003.

preoccupation with integration as means to overcoming Pacific states' perceived economic and security constraints resulting from their small size and (assumed) lack of capacity (Fry 2005). Moreover, both have proceeded on the assumption of Australian leadership and vision and both put forward very "particular notions of regional community" (Fry 2005, 118).

Such continuities are demonstrably present in Australian integration discourse and policy action. Though an emphasis on integration *with* Australia marks an important inflection in Australian foreign policy (Batley 2017), many of the assumptions regarding regional engagement remain the same.

Integration under the 'step-up' is twofold: access and participation in the Australian economy and security frameworks, and a closer accommodation of Australian security interests in the region. Already there has been a strong commitment to expand the Pacific Labour Scheme: the current cap of 2000 places has been lifted and the government has pledged to progressively open the program to all Pacific island countries (Morrison and Payne 2018). This is coupled with the development of the Pacific Labour Facility to better support workers and connect them with employers and training institutions (Morrison and Payne 2018; Dobell 2019). Furthermore, though the agonising PACER Plus negotiations led to an agreement without Fiji and PNG, efforts will continue in trying to build even 'closer economic relations' (Dobell 2019). According to the FPWP "economic integration within the region and with Australia is *vital* to the economic prospects of the Pacific" (DFAT 2017, 107: emphasis added).

Attempts to promote economic integration pale in comparison to the myriad policy formulation aimed at fostering closer security relations between Australia and the Pacific. Building on claims of a "deep and abiding protection and connection" between Australia and the Pacific, Morrison made several notable commitments toward "much closer integration in the security sphere" (Colton 2018; McDougall 2019). These included a 'Pacific Fusion Centre' aimed at developing maritime domain awareness (MDA) through a need-to-share basis (Morrison 2018; Payne 2018); and an 'Australian Pacific Security College' for senior-level training and support for policy development (Batley 2018; Morrison 2018; Payne 2018).

Both policies give credence to the idea that in the Pacific, Australia needs to "uphold the region by holding it closer" (Dobell 2019, 4). The Fusion centre in particular brings the Pacific closer. Collating information from across the region, the centre effectively extends the scope of Australia's own MDA far into the Pacific Ocean (Morgan 2019). This enhanced regional

surveillance is complemented by a \$2 billion ‘Pacific Maritime Security Program’ boasting 21 new patrol boats and an “aerial surveillance package” (Morrison and Payne 2018). While there are also concurrent initiatives such as a ‘Transnational, Serious and Organised Crime Pacific Taskforce’ (between Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and Tonga) in which Pacific states will work closely with the Australia government and defence force (Colton 2017; AFP 2018).

Attempts to integrate the Pacific into Australian security frameworks are matched by efforts to chart an Australian security presence into the region. In addition to the bases detailed earlier, there are plans to operate a large naval vessel semi-permanently in Pacific waters and develop a new ‘Australian Defence Force Pacific Mobile Training Team’ (Grattan 2018; Morrison 2018).

The ambitions to bring geopolitics and geo-economics together under the rhetoric of integration supposedly responds, “to all the economic, social, and security needs of the South Pacific.” (Dobell 2019a). Indeed, the language surrounding Australia’s integration imaginings centre on the “expanding opportunities” for Pacific states and the offer of a “stronger, richer region” (Dobell 2018; 2019). While it may ask the Pacific to “compromise, even cede, sovereignty” integration is inevitably a good thing, one that requires “trust [in] Australia’s economic and security leadership.” (Dobell 2017a).

The invocation of historically informed assumptions regarding regional integration and its benefits for the Pacific (read Australia) could have important implications for the ‘step-up’s legitimacy. “What happens if Pacific island citizens reject the underlying premise of our renewed engagement” – that an Australian vision for regional integration is in their best interest? (Maclellan 2018). Political authority of integration has long been “tied directly to the legitimacy, among Pacific islanders, of the particular notion of regional community that is being promoted.” (Fry 2005, 118). The ‘step-up’s constant reiteration of economic and security integration appears to avoid reflexive critique of Australia’s previous presence and policy in the region, and may flounder in the face of the Pacific’s actual needs and aspirations. History has demonstrated numerous examples where attempts at “pooled regional governance”, “collective diplomacy”, or the “harmonisation of national policies” – all policies of integration under a different name– have failed because of an assumed Australian leadership and their visions for the region.

There are already a number of points on which Australia's visions for integration differ markedly from the Pacific's. These include the continued frustration of Pacific Islanders regarding ordinary access to Australia (McDougall 2019). Many islanders, particularly among the Melanesian states, denounce the injustice of Australian immigration processes. They wonder "why... rich Australians [can] enter [the] Solomon Islands without a visa while poor Solomon Islanders must pay high fees and wait long periods to visit Australia..." (McDougall 2019). The Vanuatu minister for foreign affairs, Ralph Regenvanu (2018) pointedly remarked on a maturation in their relations with China thanks to a mutual waiving of visas. This, he says, "remains a significant missing part of our longer-term relations with other key Pacific partners."

### **The 'Right to Lead' Assumption – Australia's concern with Pacific pre-eminence**

*"This is our patch. This is our part of the world. This is where we have special responsibilities. We always have, we always will."* – Scott Morrison, 2018

Discussions of 'strategic denial' and Australian visions of regional integration are not complete without a thorough examination of Australian ideas of a 'special relationship' with the Pacific. Here questions arise over the unacknowledged, unquestioned assumption of a right to lead that stems from such ideas.

The 'step-up' has been largely justified by claims to a 'special relationship' between Australia and the Pacific, one that naturally touches on the long history of connection between the two (Newton-Cain 2018; McDougall 2019; Morgan 2019). While this is captured in passing comments by analysts and the media it manifests itself most strongly in the rhetoric of political actors. In her keynote address on Pacific Partnerships and the 'step-up', Julie Bishop (2018) spoke of an "enduring partnership" with Australia having "long supported issues of deep importance to the Pacific Islands..." Such issues included the decolonisation agenda of the 1950s, the fight against nuclear testing, and efforts to combat climate change. This long history of Australian support, means, according to Bishop and other proponents of the 'step-up', that Australia the Pacific are "natural partners." Richard Marles (2018) concurs; "as long ago as the 1890s...it was understood that our relationship with the Pacific was special." In its most recent iteration, the step-up discourse has taken the relationship a step further. In his Lavarack Barracks address, Morrison (2018) refers to the Pacific as "family", stating the "familiarity and



appreciation” between Australia and the Pacific are the “real ties that bind us”. For Morrison, this kind of relationship “goes beyond economics, it goes beyond trade, it goes beyond everything.” Even, it would seem, beyond the history of paternalistic and at times outright hegemonic machinations of Australian policy regarding the region.

Contrary to Bishop’s belief, Australia was extremely reluctant to proceed with the decolonisation agenda post-WWII (Maclellan 2017; Morgan 2019). Successive governments through the 1950’s and 60’s actively took a “stand against” the process and even considered expanding their control of colonial territories (Waters 2013; Morgan 2019). Bishop’s understandings of Australian efforts to “fight” nuclear testing are similarly misguided. Australia in fact supported the UK’s nuclear testing in Australia and the Pacific and continued to allow the mining of uranium for the manufacturing of the bombs themselves (Maclellan 2005). Furthermore, Australia lobbied for a weakening of South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (1985) on behalf of the US (Maclellan 2005). As for climate change, it is no secret that Australian self-interest has repeatedly resulted in efforts to block or otherwise undermine the Pacific’s position on climate action (Maclellan 2017; Morgan 2017). This has occurred at domestic, regional and international contexts (Morgan 2017). At regional and global summits, Australian diplomats “often oppose Pacific island policies on loss and damage, [and] greenhouse emission targets...” (Maclellan 2017) while domestically, Australia is the world’s largest coal exporter and explicitly makes increasing its “exports of high-quality coal and LNG” to Asia a part of its foreign policy (DFAT 2017, 33).

Other notable instances in which Australia has been out of step with the region include its predatory deal with Nauru over the off-shore processing of Australia-bound refugees and its continued silence over the fate of non-self-governing territories in the region (Maclellan 2017; Wallis 2017a; Dobell 2019).

Importantly, these are not isolated incidents of hegemonic tendencies, but rather a pattern of such behaviour located firmly in Australian foreign policy regarding the Pacific. Taking the two most recent iterations of such policy, ‘constructive commitment’ (1989 – 2003) and ‘cooperative intervention’ (2003 – 2007) it is clear that an assumed right to lead is a marked continuity in Australian relationship with the Pacific (Fry 2005; Fry 2008). In the former, concerns over the economic growth among Pacific states lead to increase in Australian involvement in the internal affairs island countries and a diminished respect for their

sovereignty (Fry 1997; Fry 2005). Drawing heavily on generalised “doomsday scenario”, Australia and its donor-led agenda for regional economic restructuring were positioned as the Pacific’s salvation from probable economic, social, and environmental demise (Fry 1997; Fry 2005). With this, Australian economic and governance principles were foisted upon the Pacific with little concern for cultural practices, economic loss, political costs or the problematic “exercise of power inherent in this latest Australian representation of the Pacific” (Fry 1997, 1; Fry 2005).

‘Cooperative intervention’ was equally problematic in many respects (Fry 2008). Finding expression in major engagements in the Solomon Islands, Nauru, and Papua New Guinea, ‘cooperative intervention’ proved to be yet another expression of Australia asserting its right to take what it saw as appropriate “remedial action and take it now” (Howard 2003; quoted in Fry 2008). The speed of such actions is notable; When the government announced its Australian-led mission to the Solomon Islands to parliament it had not yet consulted any other Pacific country save New Zealand (Fry 2008). This self-appointed position of regional leader was further developed with references to “our patch” and the “special responsibility” of Australia to manage regional security on behalf of the international (read western) community (Howard 2003; quoted in Fry 2008).

Aspirations to set the regional security structures and agenda according to its own interests or the interests of the West more broadly has seen Australian leadership challenged by Pacific Islanders on a number of occasions. And though the jury is still out on the ‘step-up’, there are reflections of these historical continuities underpinning current approaches. Consider Morrison’s attempts to articulate the need for an Australia ‘step-up’ in the region. Addressing members of the Australian military, at an Australian army base, Morrison (2018) stated, “This is our patch. This is our part of the world. This is where we have special responsibilities. We always have, we always will.” And consider, again, the Australia’s Pacific fusion centre. Although the initiative is meant to “reflect Australia’s commitment to implement the new Boe... Declaration” (information sharing and coordination among security mechanisms were highlighted), it better reflects Australian attempts to define appropriate regional action on its own terms (Payne 2018). Announced by the Morrison government at the 2018 Pacific Islands Forum, it was only after the project was revealed to the Pacific that consultations for the project were actually commenced (see Freakes, John (@AusHCFJ), November 26, 2018) a result that

gives weight to the sentiment among Australian analysts that ‘sharing’ is “a polite way of saying Australia can do stuff on behalf of island governments.” (Dobell 2017a).

Needless to say, there are important implications for the ongoing legitimacy of the ‘step-up’ if Australian leadership is perceived to reflect historical trends. The Pacific won’t settle for hegemonic aspirations, however subtly they are mobilised. Already Pacific states have distanced themselves from Australia on critical subjects such as climate change, nuclear disarmament, and decolonisation. In fact Nauru, Tuvalu and Kiribati have used various groupings on the international stage to advance policies “to advance policies in direct opposition to those of Australia.” An assumption that the rhetoric of family alone will advance Australian interests in regional cooperation is sorely misguided. Leadership requires listening, and on that front, Australia has a long way to go.

### **Conclusion: A return to the question of legitimacy**

This paper has interrogated the discourse and policy initiatives emanating from the Australian government’s recently articulated ‘step-up’ engagement with the Pacific. In particular, it has centred critical attention on three fundamental ideas within the ‘step-up’ engagement and the assumptions these are developed from: that Pacific states’ primary value to Australia is the role they play in ensuring Australia’s national security; that this role is challenged by a growing Chinese economic and diplomatic presence which threatens to potentially destabilise the regional security order; and finally, that a ‘special relationship’ exists between Australia and the Pacific that demands closer cooperation and integration with Australia under Australian leadership. In analysing these ideas and the assumptions from which they are developed, a series of problematic relational framings within the objectives, model, and implementation of this latest form of regional engagement have been exposed. These are demonstrably tied to historical continuities in Australia’s approaches to and understandings of the Pacific and its place in the region. In the past such approaches and understandings have had important impacts on the political acceptance of Australia’s Pacific policies among Pacific Islanders, in particular the regional indigenous elite (Fry 2008). Thus, it is believed that the ideas and actions promoted under an Australian ‘step-up’, as contemporary manifestations of these historical continuities, will continue to have important impacts on the process of gaining political acceptance among Pacific states.

Specifically, concerns centre on the securitisation of Australia's relationship with the Pacific in response to what *it* defines as a regional security threat (Maclellan 2018; Morgan 2019; O'Keefe 2019); the assumption that integration with Australia in matters of economics and security is the obvious and most appropriate form engagement with the region (Newton-Cain 2018; Morgan 2019); and, underpinning both of these, that Australia has a 'special responsibility to manage' the region for its own sake, the sake of Australian interests, and western interests more broadly (Newton-Cain 2018; Pan et al. 2018; Morgan 2019).

Political legitimacy in the Pacific turns on "how Australia is seen carrying out [its] role and how it relates to, and compromises, the needs of Pacific countries." (Fry 2008, 84). The way Australia is currently approaching regional engagement demonstrates an apparent difficulty among policy makers, commentators, and analysts to acknowledge the agency of Pacific Island leaders and listen to their expressed needs, desires, and aspirations. Australia might claim 'enduring partnerships' and familial ties with the region but both ideas are yet to develop credibility amidst broader discussions of the 'step up' and the actual policies implemented.

Of course, the 'step-up' has demonstrated that there is some capacity for Australia to listen and learn in the Pacific. On the matter of humanitarian assistance, in particular disaster relief, the relationship between Australia and the Pacific is particularly strong (Colton 2018; Dobell 2019). Efforts to increase disaster resilience and response are welcome and demonstrate an understanding of a willingness to respond to articulated needs and desires of Pacific Islanders. This is also true of the efforts to broaden and improve the Pacific Labour Scheme (Dobell 2019). Access to Australia's employment market has long been a desire of Pacific Island leaders (Dobell 2019; 2019a). Yet such efforts will continue to fall short of achieving the kind of regional standing Australia wishes to cultivate if it does not become part of a broader change in the way it acknowledges the agency and addresses the aspirations of Pacific states.

The state-centric "security imperatives driving a renewed interest in the region are not self-evidently the imperatives of island administrations." (Morgan 2019, 20; O'Keefe 2019). To Pacific leaders it is clear that aspects of Australia's 'step-up' are an attempt "to claim a jurisdiction [of the Pacific] under... a re-energised Pacific strategy." (Malielegaoi 2018). In an address to the Lowy institute Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi (2018) states, "we are again seeing invasion and interest in the form of strategic manipulation. The big powers are doggedly pursuing strategies to widen and extend their reach and inculcating a far-

reaching sense of insecurity.” His words are echoed in Dame Meg Taylor’s frustration with Australia’s “aggressive pursuit of bilateral interests” and the concern other leaders have had in being able to engage in “meaningful dialogue” with Australia over geostrategic developments (Regenvanu 2018; Taylor 2018).

Furthermore, there appears to be a “patronising nuance” (Malielegaoi 2018) underpinning Australia’s ‘step-up’ (McGarry 2018; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c; Morgan 2019). There is little acknowledgement that Pacific Island leaders are looking to assert their own common values and concerns under a regional vision of the “Blue Pacific” – all too often, the “agency of Pacific island nations themselves is conveniently overlooked.” (McGarry 2018b; Malielegaoi 2018; Taylor 2018). Indeed, while Australia might acknowledge the “Blue Pacific’ (Bishop 2018), its broader foreign policy outlook – a stable and prosperous “Indo-Pacific” – de-emphasises this regional framing (Morgan 2019; Taylor 2018; 2018a; 2019). Avoiding militarisation, nuclear disarmament, and decolonisation are a few of the issues being pursued collectively by Pacific states regionally and on the global stage, often in the face of Australian opposition (MacLellan 2017; MacLellan 2018; Taylor 2018; 2018a; Morgan 2019; O’Keefe 2019). However, the single biggest issue in achieving legitimacy for Australia’s ‘step-up’ remains Australia’s commitment to climate action.

Despite repeated professions that Australia is meeting its obligations under the Paris Agreement (Morrison 2018), there is a growing frustration among Pacific states that Australia is not taking the issue seriously enough. Moves to develop Australia’s biggest coal mine to date demonstrate a commitment to remaining the world’s largest coal exporter (DFAT 2017) and the refusal to join several Pacific nations (as well as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, France, and Canada) in the ‘Powering Past Coal Alliance’ sends a clear message that Australia is not part of the Pacific conversation on climate change.

The ramifications are clear. Pacific leaders want climate action and they want it as part of an Australian ‘step up’. In 2017, president of the Marshall Islands, Hilda Heine noted that, “Now is not the time to be debating the science, trashing solar power, or building new coal mines. I can assure you it does influence the way Australia is viewed in the Pacific.” (quoted in MacLellan 2018). Her words are supported by Tuvaluan prime minister, Enele Sopoaga, who stated, “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” (quoted in Dziedzic 2018).

As they continue to invoke visions of one big happy Pacific family, Australia would do well to remember that “families are rarely democratic structures.” (Herr 2019). A reflexive critique of the family history Australia brings to the table would go a long way in revealing some of the important and deeply problematic relational framings it has relied upon to engage with the Pacific. The current political and geostrategic climate represents a historic opportunity to engage with Pacific Island states on their own terms – Island leaders have said as much again and again (Taylor 2018; Morgan 2019). Yet, the reality is that at current, Australia’s Pacific policy is “ironically marked by the absence of the Pacific at its core.” (Pan et al. 2018). This shows. Pacific leaders have a “keen sense of the current historical moment and the opportunities it brings to realise better development outcomes for their country and its people.” (Taylor 2018). If Australia continues to ignore this agency and the aspirations it seeks to represent, the long-term sustainability of the ‘step-up’ and its efficacy are seriously in question.

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