

Finding a Regional Process to Address the Primary Security Threats to the South Pacific due to Climate Change

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Overview

This Policy Brief explores the nexus between climate change and security in the South Pacific. It defines security within a broad range of concepts while focussing primarily on a traditional concept of security relating to international conflict. The brief explores some key climate change-related trigger points that are driving security concerns in the Pacific. The combined effects of these trigger points are likely to drive displacement and forced migration away from Pacific Island countries. Some commentators even suggest that people from particular Pacific Islands may become stateless due to the impact of sea level rise. Regional security is further heightened by tensions between the US and China and their interests in protecting or exploiting fisheries resources in the region. Current regional organisations do not appear well placed to create an effective dialogue to resolve these climate change-related tensions, due to inherent biases. This Policy Brief explores the option of new collaborative arrangements between the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Pacific Small Island Development States (PSIDS) as a means of creating a higher political authority to consider the threats posed by climate change and the opportunities to address these threats.

Climate Change and Insecurity

The current rate of climate change effects—higher seas, decreased ice in the Arctic, melting glaciers, extreme rainfall variability, and more frequent and intense storms—are scenarios that settled human societies have never experienced before. These impacts are already

contributing to increased state fragility and security problems in key regions around the world.¹ All of these issues are making the Pacific region a centre of growing insecurity.

For the purposes of this Policy Brief, the notion of “security” can be considered with respect to national security, intra-regional security and international security of particular interest to defence forces and the broader community.

Key Security Trigger Points

Climate change is creating a series of cascading effects that are affecting the livelihoods of Pacific Island Countries and Territories.

There are a number of key trigger points that are likely to drive security risks. These include:

1. Climate change population displacement
2. Fisheries decline and competition for dwindling fisheries stocks
3. Impacts on foreign military facilities in the region

Each of these climate change trigger points will be discussed separately, although they are closely interrelated and are also linked to broader security concerns associated with transnational crime and the strategic interests of major global military powers.

1. Climate change population displacement

Changes in availability of food, loss of land, loss of access to freshwater, and loss of economic income cascade to create local instability. This may drive displacement of people within their own country or across borders to other countries. The displacement of people due to climate change is likely to be a trigger point for security issues at the national, regional and international levels. Inter-island migration in the 1990s, while not related to climate change, led to outbreaks of violence in the Solomon Islands. This led to the deployment of a regional security force known as the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in 2003.² It is not inconceivable that climate change-related impacts could be a driver of further tensions in this country and elsewhere in the region. Some suggest that climate change impacts may lead to the “the spectre of statelessness”.³ In this context, it has been speculated that climate change-induced sea level rise may make some countries uninhabitable with a consequent loss of sovereignty over territory. A recent study by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank suggests that the Republic of the Marshall Islands faces a potential long-term threat from permanent inundation and wave-driven flooding, and that many of its low-lying islands will become uninhabitable within the 21st

¹ Caitlin E. Werrell and Francesco Femia, 2018, “Climate change raises conflict concerns”, *The UNESCO Courier*, 2018-2.

² Sally Andrews, 2015, “Can the Solomon Islands Reform? *The Diplomat*, February 28.

³ Ken Conca, Joe Thwaites, Goueon Lee, 2017, “Climate Change and the UN Security Council: Bully “Pulpit or Bull in a China Shop?”, *Global Environmental Politics*, 17: 2, May pp. 1-20

century.⁴

Climate change is already starting to affect food security in the region and driving population displacement. After Cyclone Pam in 2015, over 40 families were forced to leave their island of Nui in Tuvalu as a consequence of the cyclonic storm surge which sent waves across the entire island, destroying infrastructure, contaminating freshwater and poisoning crops.⁵ In the future, climate change is likely to be a major threat to the existence of numerous populations in the Pacific. As populations are displaced, this is likely to drive a variety of local and international security threats. The impacts of climate change in the Pacific are manifested in numerous ways:

1. Droughts
2. Declining freshwater supplies
3. Pest outbreaks due to irregular weather patterns
4. Storm surges
5. Declining fish stocks
6. Sea level rise enhancing the danger of nuclear contamination

Droughts

Droughts in water-limited Pacific Island countries, particularly coral atolls, are likely to have a significant impact on livelihoods. Studies suggest that the lack of water availability for local crops will drive the need for more food imports. This is likely to exacerbate nutritional and health issues in some island countries or communities, leading to displacement of populations.

Declining Freshwater Supplies

Declining freshwater supplies are not only caused by droughts; they are also linked to other climate change-related events that are already creating significant difficulties for a number of Pacific Island countries, particularly the coral atoll nations. In Tuvalu, for instance, waves overtopping due to storm surges have had significant implications for freshwater supplies in a number of Tuvalu's outer islands. Cyclone Pam caused considerable loss of freshwater supplies due to overtopping.⁶ Saltwater intrusion is causing similar problems in the Marshall Islands.^{7 8}

⁴ Anon, 2021, Climate Risk Country Profile: Marshall Islands, The World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank., pp27, URL: https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/15817-WB_Marshall%20Islands%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf

⁵ Personal observation

⁶ Personal observation

⁷ Ingrid Ahlgren, Seiji Yamada and Allen Wong, 2014, "Rising Oceans, Climate Change, Food Aid, and Human Rights in the Marshall Islands", *Health and Human Rights*, 16: 1, 69-80

⁸ United States Government Accountability Office, 2019, *Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration*, https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/gao-climate-change-and-migration_01_2019.pdf, January 2019, , GAO-19-166

Pest Outbreaks due to Irregular Weather Patterns

Studies in the Solomon Islands have suggested that irregular weather patterns have resulted in the outbreak of pest species which are affecting crops and food security.⁹

Storm Surges

Recent studies by the United States Geological Survey suggest that most coral atolls will be uninhabitable by the mid-21st century due to wave driven flooding and damage due to storm surges.¹⁰

Sea Level Rise Enhancing the Danger of Nuclear Contamination

Nuclear tests by the US in the Marshall Islands and the British on Malden Islands, Kiribati and the French in French Polynesia have left a legacy of nuclear contamination. Concerns have been expressed that sea level rise due to climate change may lead to enhanced contamination of these sites, which may in turn affect the safety of fish stocks in the region.¹¹ ¹² ¹³ For instance, an estimated 85,000 cubic metres of radioactive waste is buried on Runit Island in the Marshall Islands¹⁴ and a US Department of Energy study found that radioactive materials are leaching out.¹⁵ This situation can only get worse with rising sea levels.

The combined effects of these climate change impacts are likely to drive displacement and forced migration away from Pacific Island countries, particularly the coral atoll nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands. These threats were recognised by the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, when he visited Tuvalu in 2019, leading him to establish a Climate Security Project for the three Pacific atoll nations using the UNSG's Peacebuilding Fund.¹⁶ The Secretary General suggested that the region has the potential for a myriad of cascading fragility and instability risks and identified displacement and forced migration due to irreversible degradation of livelihoods, food sources and coastal erosion, all of which are due to climate change, as one of the primary threats.¹⁷ While the region faces

⁹ Dana MacLean, 2014, "Food Security and Solomon Islands" *The Diplomat*, September 03

¹⁰ Curt D. Storlazzi, Stephen B. Gingerich, Ap van Dongeren, Olivia M. Cheriton, Peter W. Swarzenski, Ellen Quataert, Clifford I. Voss, Donald W. Field, Hariharasubramanian Annamalai, Greg A. Piniak and Robert McCall, 2018, "Most atolls will be uninhabitable by the mid-21st century because of sea-level rise exacerbating wave-driven flooding", *Science Advances*, 4:4

¹¹ United States Government Accountability Office, 2019, *Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration*, https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/gao-climate-change-and-migration_01_2019.pdf, January 2019, , GAO-19-166

¹² Tilman Ruff, 2015, "The humanitarian impact and implications of nuclear test explosions in the Pacific region", *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97: 899, 775-813

¹³ Christine Parthemore, Francesco Femia & Caitlin Werrell, 2018, "The global responsibility to prepare for intersecting climate and nuclear risks", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 74:6, 374-378

¹³ Patrick Kaiku, 2019, The Blue Pacific and the legacies of nuclear testing, *The Strategist*, 1 May, URL: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-blue-pacific-and-the-legacies-of-nuclear-testing/>

¹⁴ Patrick Kaiku, 2019, The Blue Pacific and the legacies of nuclear testing, *The Strategist*, 1 May, URL: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-blue-pacific-and-the-legacies-of-nuclear-testing/>

¹⁵ Mark Willacy, 2020, A poison in our island, *Foreign Correspondent*, ABC TV, 27 November, URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-27/the-dome-runit-island-nuclear-test-leaking-due-to-climate-change/9161442?nw=0>

¹⁶ Sanya Ruggiero, 2020, United Nations launches pioneering Climate Security Project in the Pacific supported by the UN SG's Peacebuilding Fund, UNDP Media Release, 8 September, URL: <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/un-launches-pioneering-climate-security-project-in-the-pacific.html>

¹⁷ Sanya Ruggiero, 2020, "United Nations launches pioneering Climate Security Project in the Pacific supported

its own unique concerns with climate change migration within the Pacific region, it is likely that people will be forced to move from adjoining regions into the Pacific, further exacerbating issues of climate change related migration.

It is obvious that climate change is creating a cascading effect in other regions of the world and the global threat of the resulting population displacement and migration cannot be overstated. Already the US Department of Defense has identified the impacts of climate change as a cause of instability in other countries by impairing access to food and water, damaging infrastructure, spreading disease, uprooting and displacing large numbers of people, compelling mass migration, interrupting commercial activity, or restricting electricity availability.¹⁸ According to data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, 54.5 million people were displaced by weather-related natural disasters across Southeast Asia between 2008 and 2018. While these are defined as “natural disasters”, new climatic conditions caused by climate change are likely to cause widespread permanent displacement that transcends national borders and increases the likelihood of regional instability.¹⁹ A 2018 World Bank study projects nearly 40 million climate migrants in South Asia by 2050 in a worst-case scenario.²⁰

The intensifying climate change migration in South Asia is both a humanitarian crisis and a regional stability risk.²¹ And some of these displaced people from other parts of the world might even find their way into the Pacific region. The establishment of detention centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru are potential early indicators of international tensions around climate change displacement. While most of the detainees in Papua New Guinea and Nauru are likely to be classified as refugees or asylum seekers as a consequence of political persecution, some may not fit into either category and may have been displaced from their homelands due to the impacts of climate.

As noted by the former Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Enele Sopoaga, at the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, people displaced across national borders as a consequence of climate change are not defined as refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention and therefore are not given the same level of protection and rights as refugees.²²

by the UN SG’s Peacebuilding Fund”, *UNDP Media Release*, 8 September,
URL: <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/un-launches-pioneering-climate-security-project-in-the-pacific.html>

¹⁸ Department of Defense, 2014, “Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Installations and Environment (Science & Technology Directorate).

¹⁹ David Deninis, 2020, Southeast Asia’s Coming Climate Crisis, *New Perspectives on Asia*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 22, URL: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/southeast-asias-coming-climate-crisis>.

²⁰ Alexander Carius, Noah j. Gordon and Lauren Herzer Risi (eds), 2020, *21st Century Diplomacy: Foreign Policy is Climate Policy*, Wilson Center and adelphi research gGmbH, pp228, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/21stCenturyDiplomacy-040121.pdf>

²¹ Ibid

²² Maina Talia, 2019, Migration is a definite no, but rather a matter of choice, *Academia*, URL: https://www.academia.edu/41666751/MIGRATION_IS_A_DEFINITE_NO_BUT_RATHER_A_MATTER_OF_CHOICE_

2. Fisheries Decline, competition for dwindling fisheries stocks and related regional tensions

Various studies suggest that warmer ocean temperatures, reduced oxygen levels, ocean acidification, coral bleaching, and loss of mangrove ecosystems will affect the availability of fisheries in the Pacific region.^{23 24 25 26} These effects will vary across the region. As fish protein makes up a significant proportion of the diet of many Pacific Island communities, the decline in fisheries will have a significant effect on food security. This has the potential to be a further driver of population displacement as people are forced to find nutritional alternatives.

Competition for dwindling fisheries resources is beginning to be seen as an international trigger point for security issues. Furthermore, studies suggest that climate change increases the risk of fisheries conflict.²⁷ Distant water fishing nations are likely to contest access to diminished fisheries resources. China has already acknowledged that the squid stocks in the Pacific are already overfished and has announced a temporary ban on squid fishing in parts of the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.²⁸ Overfishing has begun to be a major source of regional and international tension. Already numerous fishing nations are positioning themselves to enhance their access to declining fish stocks in the Pacific.

Compounding the problem of overfishing is the increasing threat of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. This is considered by some to be the biggest security threat to the sustainable management of coastal fisheries in the Pacific. In recent times, Vietnamese fishermen have intruded into the exclusive economic zones of several Pacific islands in search of sea cucumber, giant clams, trochus, lobster and fish. IUU products worth over US\$142 million are trans-shipped yearly in the Western Central Pacific.²⁹

Illegal fishing activities also appear to be linked to organised crime in the region. There is speculation that a proposed Chinese-built fisheries plant in Papua New Guinea could be used by transnational organised crime networks to smuggle drugs, weapons and people.³⁰

²³ Rebecca G. Asch, William W.L. Cheung, Gabriel Reygondeau, 2018, "Future marine ecosystem drivers, biodiversity, and fisheries maximum catch potential in Pacific Island countries and territories under climate change", *Marine Policy*, 88, 285–294

²⁴ Johann D. Bella, Joelle Albert, George Amosd, Christopher Arthur, Michel Blance, Don Bromhead, Scott F. Herong, Alistair J. Hobday, Andrew Hunte, David Itanom, Philip A.S. James, Patrick Lehodeyn, Gang Liug, Simon Nicolo, Jim Potemrap, Gabriel Reygondeau, Jason Rubanie, Joe Scutt Phillips, Inna Seninan, William Sokimie, 2018, "Operationalising access to oceanic fisheries resources by small-scale fishers to improve food security in the Pacific Islands" *Marine Policy*, 88, 315-322.

²⁵ Quentin Hanich, Colette C.C. Wabnitz, Yoshitaka Ota, Moses Amos, Connie Donato-Hunt, Andrew Hunt, 2018, "Small-scale fisheries under climate change in the Pacific Islands region", *Marine Policy*, 88, 279-284.

²⁶ U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2018: *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment, Volume II*, Reidmiller, D.R., C.W. Avery, D.R. Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, K.L.M. Lewis, T.K. Maycock, and B.C. Stewart (eds.), Washington, DC, USA, 1515 pp.

²⁷ Elizabeth Mendenhall, Cullen Hendrix, Elizabeth Nyman, Paige M. Roberts, John Robison Hoopes, James R. Watson, Vicky W.Y. Lam, U. Rashid Sumaila, Climate change increases the risk of fisheries conflict, *Marine Policy* 117 (2020) 103954

²⁸ Anon, 2021, China to pause squid fishing in Pacific, Atlantic breeding grounds, *Phys.Org*, 29 June, URL: <https://phys.org/news/2021-06-china-squid-fishing-pacific-atlantic.html>

²⁹ Joeli Veitayaki, 2021, Saving coastal fisheries in the Pacific, ANU Policy Forum, April 1, URL: <https://www.policyforum.net/saving-coastal-fisheries-in-the-pacific/>

³⁰ Joshua McDonald, 2021, Fisheries plant on Australia's border could be used as cover for drug and people

Certainly, fisheries-related crime is well known in the region and throughout the world. Pacific Island countries, such as the Marshall Islands, have been caught up in money laundering activities linked to fisheries-related crime.³¹ Even the tiny Pacific nation of Niue fell afoul of money laundering activities associated with the discredited Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca.³² These criminal actions particularly linked to illegal fishing, human trafficking and money laundering heighten regional tensions. In 1998, banks in Nauru are reported to have helped launder around \$70 billion of illicit proceeds from Russian criminals.³³ These actions, while not linked to climate change, show that Pacific Island countries are highly vulnerable to unscrupulous entrepreneurs. As fisheries resources decline due to climate change, these tensions are likely to rise.

The tension over access to fisheries resources manifests itself in competition for development assistance and other diplomatic endeavours. The US Director of National Intelligence claims that “China is currying favour with numerous Pacific Island nations through bribery, infrastructure investments, and diplomatic engagement with local leaders.”³⁴ While these claims could be questioned, it highlights growing tensions within the region between major powers. Perhaps this concern is exacerbated by the fact that Fiji has recently been given a hydrographic and surveillance vessel by the Chinese government.³⁵

The increased presence of various surveillance vessels and aircraft supported by the military of Australia, New Zealand and the United States’ governments and reported mass surveillance of Pacific Island countries by the New Zealand government tends to suggest heightened international security tensions in the region.^{36 37} This appears to be a reaction to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative which includes support to Pacific Island countries, notably Papua New Guinea, for the development of ports and fish-processing plants.³⁸

smuggling, experts say, *The Guardian*, 11 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/11/fisheries-plant-on-australias-border-could-cover-drugs-weapons-and-people-smuggling-experts-say>

³¹ Emma Witbooi, Kamal-Deen Ali and Mas Achmad Santosa, 2020, *Organised Crime in the Fisheries Sector*, World Resources Institute, Washington DC, pp34, URL: <https://oceanpanel.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/Organised%20Crime%20in%20the%20Fisheries%20Sector%20Full%20Paper%20Final.pdf>

³² Martha M. Hamilton, 2016, Panamanian law firm is gatekeeper to vast flow of murky offshore secrets, *Investigations*, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, URL: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/20160403-mossack-fonseca-offshore-secrets/>

³³ Etannibi E. O. Alemika, Berit Bliesmann de Guevara, Lorenzo Bodrero, Edgardo Buscaglia, Ignacio Cano, John Christensen, Charles Goredema, Wolfgang Hees, Wolfgang Hetzer, , Christin Jojarth, Marco Lara Klahr, Florian P. Kühn, Arun Kumar, Claudio La Camera, Ivana McIlwiane, Vincenzo Militello, Christoph Reuter, José Reveles, Aurélio Rios, Jürgen Roth, Steffen Salvenmoser, Regine Schönenberg, Ingrid Spiller, Yama Torabi, Tatiana Tropina, Annette von Schönfeld, Verena Zoppei, 2013, *Transnational Organized Crime Analyses of a Global Challenge to Democracy*, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung and Regine Schönenberg (eds.) Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, pp 308.

³⁴ Daniel R. Coats, 2019, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community*, January 29, Director National Intelligence, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

³⁵ Ankit Panda, 2018, China to Gift Hydrographic and Surveillance Vessel to Fiji
The transfer marks growing ties between Beijing and Suva, *The Diplomat*, July 18

³⁶ Charlotte Greenfield, 2018, “New Zealand to Buy Boeing P-8 Patrol Planes to Boost South Pacific Surveillance” *U.S News*, July 8, 2018

³⁷ Ankit Panda, 2015, “New Zealand’s Mass Surveillance of Pacific States Exposed
New Zealand’s Government Communications Security Bureau conducts mass surveillance of several Pacific states”, *The Diplomat*, March 06

³⁸ Yang Jingzhong, 2018, “Interview: PNG’s active participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative to bring enormous opportunities for int’l, regional cooperation: ambassador”, *Xinhua News*, 27 May. URL: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/27/c_137209225.htm

According to the former General Secretary Hu Jintao, China is envisaging itself as a “great maritime power” with one aim of this initiative to “exploit ocean resources”.³⁹ This competition for fisheries resources in the Pacific Island region and growing threats of IUU fishing is driving greater surveillance by the allied powers of Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Inevitably, these tensions will rise as climate change forces a further decline in fish stocks.

Realising the significance of the South Pacific Ocean as a major fisheries resource, Pacific Island countries have created an identity known as the “Blue Pacific”. In doing so they have identified themselves as “large ocean states” rather than “small island states”.⁴⁰ Identifying the Pacific Island Countries as large ocean states also creates further tensions around access to fisheries. A number of Pacific Island States have expressed concern about the impact of rising sea levels and the legal implications this has for losing large areas of exclusive economic zones. Losing land area also means a theoretical loss of maritime zones and hence access to crucial fisheries.⁴¹ The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea does not have any provisions relating to sea level rise and loss of maritime zones. This has led Pacific Island nations to seek legal views on this matter. In 2019, the then Prime Minister of Tuvalu called on the International Law Commission to provide “legal clarification of the implications of sea-level rise with respect to the determination of baselines and hence territorial sea and exclusive economic zone” generated by those baselines under UNCLOS.⁴² As a means of enhancing customary international law on this issue, Pacific Island leaders, in 2021, proclaimed a declaration stating that they intend to maintain maritime zones without reduction, notwithstanding climate change-related sea level rise.⁴³

Responding to greater tensions over access to fisheries resources and broader regional concerns over the competition for influence from outside the region, the Pacific Island Forum established a Forum Officials Subcommittee on Regional Security.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Australia has initiated its “Pacific Step Up” programme which includes the creation of the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, to provide “strategic assessments”. The Australian Pacific Security College and a specific Pacific unit of the Australian Defence Mobile Training Team are all manifestations of Australia’s military presence in the region.⁴⁵

³⁹ Liza Tobin, 2018, “Beijing’s Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power” *Naval War College Review*, 71:2, Spring, 17-48.

⁴⁰ Grant Wyeth, 2018, “Paying Attention to the Blue Pacific”, *The Diplomat*, October 30

⁴¹ Joshua McDonald, 2021, “Rising sea levels threaten Marshall Islands’ status as a nation, World Bank report warns”, *The Guardian*, 17 Oct.

⁴² UN-OHRLLS, 2019, “Climate Change, Conflict Prevention and Sustainable Peace”, *Perspectives from the Pacific Workshop Summary and Recommendations*, 6 May 2019, New York URL https://dppa.un.org/sites/default/files/climate_security_workshop_report_7_june.pdf

⁴³ Pacific Island Forum Secretariat, 2021, Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-Level Rise, 6 August 2021, URL: <https://www.forumsec.org/2021/08/11/declaration-on-preserving-maritime-zones-in-the-face-of-climate-change-related-sea-level-rise/>

⁴⁴ Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, James Batley and Anna Powles, 2021, Mapping Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands, *Research Report*, Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU. URL: http://dpa.bell-school.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/2021-06/mapping_security_cooperation_in_pacific_islands_dpa_research_report_2021_joanne_wallis_henrietta_mcneill_james_batley_anna_powles_updated.pdf

⁴⁵ Ibid

This is in addition to Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program which includes the provision of Guardian-class patrol boats to twelve Pacific Island countries. The programme effectively places Australian military officials in all of these countries.

The United States has also enhanced its military presence in the region. According to reports, the US has seized on claims of illegal fishing to boost its military presence by deploying armed Coast Guard cutters to American Samoa and Guam to counter "Chinese activity".⁴⁶ As part of Operation Blue Pacific, in February 2021 the Coast Guard Cutter Kimball (WMSL-756) was engaged in "expeditionary patrol" in the Pacific in support of counter-illegal, unreported and unregulated fisheries enforcement.⁴⁷ Another US Coast Guard activity entitled Operation Southern Cross has been directed at Chinese fishing activities in the South China Sea. Apart from using Coast Guard cutters, this operation includes Coast Guard boarding teams on scientific vessels used by the National Oceanographic and Atmosphere Administration.⁴⁸

This military activity is also linked to other operations in the region, including exercise Sea Dragon in January 2021. This exercise saw the US Navy and partners from Australia, Canada, India and Japan undertake military operations around Guam.⁴⁹ This was followed by another operation out of Guam known as Cope North.⁵⁰ While not directly related to climate change, these sabre-rattling exercises highlight an escalation of tensions and a clear indication of allied allegiances directed against Chinese interests in the region.

The nuclear submarine deal signed between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US (known as AUKUS) in 2021 has further exacerbated tensions in the region. According to a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying, the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal harms innocent people in the South Pacific and is a reflection of an outdated Cold War mentality.⁵¹

It is evident that tensions over competition for fish stocks in the Pacific region are a growing regional security concern and are being used as one reason for a build-up of military activity in the region. These tensions can only become more heightened as dwindling fish stocks due

⁴⁶ John Braddock, 2021, Chinese fishing vessels seized in the Pacific, 2 February 2021, *WSWS Newsletter*, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2021/02/02/fish-f02.html>

⁴⁷ US Indo-Pacific Command, 2021, News - Coast Guard Cutter Kimball conducts patrol to increase maritime presence and support in Pacific, *USINDOPACOM News*, 25/2/21, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2515768/coast-guard-cutter-kimball-conducts-patrol-to-increase-maritime-presence-and-su/>

⁴⁸ Michael Sinclair, 2021, The national security imperative to tackle illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, *Brookings Institute Blog*, January 25, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/25/the-national-security-imperative-to-tackle-illegal-unreported-and-unregulated-fishing/>

⁴⁹ Glen Slaughter, Multinational exercise Sea Dragon concludes in Guam, Commander, *U.S. Pacific Fleet News*, 28/1/21, URL: <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130798>.

⁵⁰ Anon, 2021, US, Japan, Australia converge on Guam for Cope North 21, *Pacific Air Forces News*, 02 February, URL: <https://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2490797/us-japan-australia-converge-on-guam-for-cope-north-21/>

⁵¹ Anon, 2021, "AUKUS nuclear submarine deal harms innocent people in South Pacific again", *Global Times*, September 28, URL: <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2021/09/mil-210928-global-times01.htm>.

to climate change create greater competition for a declining resource. Pacific Island countries appear to be pawns in a great game of military power brokering.

3. Impacts on foreign military facilities in the region

Studies suggest that sea level rise and storm surges due to climate change may threaten the defence infrastructure on some Pacific Islands. The US in particular is concerned about the future of their defence and space infrastructure on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands and the Hawai'ian Islands.⁵² ⁵³ The Air Force is spending \$1.75 million to gauge the effects of future sea level rise at Wake Island Airfield. A Pentagon-backed study by the United States Geological Survey, completed in 2017, analysed risks of rising sea level to the Marshall Islands, which are home to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site. The study concluded that in the near term, those islands would be dealing with larger waves that crash farther inland. In the longer term, some islands could be permanently inundated.⁵⁴ The concern about the impacts of climate change on military facilities at the international level was highlighted in the World Climate and Security Report.⁵⁵

Any attempts to enhance the resilience of military facilities in the Pacific or to move them to other locations is likely to create tensions at the regional and international level.

The vulnerability of military facilities to the impacts of climate change in the Pacific is closely linked to the nuclear contamination caused by atomic bomb testing in the Pacific. The military powers which have created this legacy of contamination must accept their responsibility to address these significant hazards to the region which are being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change. Those nations with military facilities in the region must carefully consider the future of these facilities and negotiate a strategic approach to their future that will not inflame security tensions.

The legacy of nuclear testing in the region led to a number of Pacific Island countries being among the first to ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons when it was opened for signature in 2017. After the fiftieth ratification was received, it entered in to force in January 2021.⁵⁶

⁵² Department of Defense, 2014, *Climate Change Adaptation Roadmap*, Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Installations and Environment (Science & Technology Directorate), pp17, URL: <https://fas.org/man/eprint/dod-ccar.pdf>

⁵³ United States Government Accountability Office, 2019, *Activities of Selected Agencies to Address Potential Impact on Global Migration*, January, GAO-19-166, URL: https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/gao-climate-change-and-migration_01_2019.pdf

⁵⁴ Wyatt Olson, 2021, Air Force Wants to Know if Key Pacific Airfield Could Disappear Under Rising Sea, *Stars and Stripes*, February 11, URL: https://www.stripes.com/theaters/asia_pacific/air-force-wants-to-know-if-key-pacific-airfield-could-disappear-under-rising-sea-1.661775

⁵⁵ Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate Change and Security, 2020, *The World Climate and Security Report*, pp 149, URL: https://climateandsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/world-climate-security-report-2020_2_13.pdf

⁵⁶ United Nations, 2021, "Guterres hails entry into force of treaty banning nuclear weapons" *UN News*, 22 January, URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082702>.

Conclusion

The impacts of climate change on the Pacific are already being felt and inevitably will get much worse. This will lead to a cascade of problems threatening the livelihoods of many inhabitants of the region. Much of this can be prevented if sufficient action is taken to address these impacts.

Meanwhile, growing competition for dwindling fisheries resources in the Blue Pacific will be a major point of tension and is likely to escalate. As stated in the Boe Declaration on Regional Security: “We reaffirm that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific and our commitment to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement”.⁵⁷

The growing tensions between China and the US and its allies compound the security issues associated with climate change. While both nations are trying to address climate change within their own domestic circumstances, solutions to the growing climate change dilemma in the Pacific are unlikely to be resolved by one or other of these two factions as there is too much distrust between these superpowers.

The Pacific region needs to find an appropriate regional platform to consider the linkages between climate change, fisheries decline and security without being spectators in larger political agendas. Unfortunately, the Pacific Island Leaders Forum, which would appear to be the logical coordinator for climate change and security issues in the region, is heavily dominated by the influence of Australia and New Zealand. This was exemplified by the split in Pacific Island countries over the selection of the Secretary General of the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat after the retirement of Dame Meg Taylor. It was Australia and New Zealand’s choice that gave the former Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, Henry Puna, the necessary votes to be elected as Secretary General.⁵⁸ This is despite the fact that there was a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ that the next Secretary General would come from Micronesia, based on a regional rotation principle.

The dominant presence of Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific Island Forum, under the watchful eye and guidance of the US, is unlikely to engender regional cooperation on security issues that will lead to lasting solutions. It is clear that China would not accept security solutions proposed by Australia and New Zealand, particularly as they are seen as proxies for US foreign policy. Under this scenario, it is highly unlikely that the establishment of the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, with a significant Australian engagement, will lead to any meaningful reduction in security tensions in the region.

There have been ongoing tensions within the member countries of the Pacific Island Forum over who should be responsible for coordinating a response to climate change. There is considerable distrust in the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat because of the dominant role

⁵⁷ Pacific Islands Forum, 2018, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, URL: <https://www.fo-umsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

⁵⁸ Cleo Paskal, 2021, How the Pacific Islands Forum Fell Apart, *The Diplomat*, February 10, URL: <https://the-diplomat.com/2021/02/how-the-pacific-islands-forum-fell-apart/>

played by Australia. Australia's efforts to reduce its own greenhouse gas emissions and to cease the export of coal have been looked upon unfavourably in the region.⁵⁹ This in part led to the establishment of the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) as a grouping in climate change negotiations. Nevertheless, the ability of PSIDS to negotiate outcomes relating to climate change and security and the issues related to this nexus appear to be limited. While PSIDS are able to provide a relatively united voice in climate change negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, they do not seem to be well enough placed to provide a forum for discussing broader security and climate change concerns.⁶⁰ A broader regional body that includes Pacific Island nations and embraces some of the larger protagonists is needed.

Many of the issues discussed in this Policy Brief have links to climate change, but the means to address these concerns cannot come directly from the climate change regime. There are far too many factors at play which are beyond the mandate of Parties to the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. A new regional integrated approach must be taken to link the issues.

Recommendations for a Regional Approach on Climate Change and Security

Addressing the key trigger points that underpin the nexus between climate change and regional security requires a rethink and a reframing of the key issues. Current regional arrangements such as the Pacific Island Leaders Forum do not appear to be in a position to bring all the protagonists together in a meaningful dialogue to address the issues of climate change and security. Pacific Island nations cannot act on their own. They simply do not have the political leverage to bring about significant change. Furthermore, the current regional political forum, the Pacific Island Leaders Forum, appears to be too heavily biased with respect to the views of Australia and New Zealand (and hence the US).

The Pacific needs to embrace regional partners from outside the region to engender a broader, more comprehensive approach to addressing the impacts of climate change and security tensions that arise from these impacts. The closest inter-regional forum that may be able to engage in an effective dialogue with key players in the region could be the Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN) in collaboration with Pacific Small Island Developing States. This inter-regional collaboration may be able to bring two regional institutional dialogues together without the political and strategic distrust found in existing regional frameworks. This inter-regional collaboration could help to tease out some of the drivers of climate change impacts and hopefully find lasting solutions with these impacts and at the same time diffuse some of the security tensions associated with the climate change impacts.

The following represents possible actions that an ASEAN-PSIDS inter-regional collaboration could achieve:

⁵⁹ Personal observation

⁶⁰ Personal observation

- a. Establish an ASEAN-Pacific Small Island Developing States Leaders Roundtable on Climate Change and Security
- b. Establish an ASEAN-PSIDS Senior Government and Civil Society Officials Dialogue on Climate Change and Security

a) **ASEAN-Pacific Small Island Developing States Leaders' Roundtable on Climate Change and Security:**

To address the broader security issues in the region and to avoid the inherent biases in current regional institutions, it would seem imperative to establish a regional dialogue that has a more balanced perspective. This could be best achieved by creating an annual ASEAN and Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) Leaders' Roundtable on Climate Change and Security.

Establishing a Leaders' Roundtable with ASEAN in collaboration with PSIDS may help find a middle ground dialogue process, similar to that established to create the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.⁶¹ This dialogue could discuss the nexus between climate change and security and devise actions to temper growing tensions between major parties and formulate actions to address this nexus. ASEAN and PSIDS country leaders could make a commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance cooperation in efforts to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

It is important that such a Roundtable is not seen as simply a dialogue without real commitments to action.

b) **ASEAN-PSIDS Senior Government and Civil Society Officials' Dialogue on Climate Change and Security**

Establishing an ASEAN-PSIDS Senior Government and Civil Society Officials' Dialogue on Climate Change and Security could bring together senior government and civil society officials as a precursor to the Leaders' Roundtable.

While there may be reluctance to include senior officials from civil society organisations in a regional senior officials' dialogue, the importance of their input cannot be denied. Civil society organisations have access to data and information that is often out of reach of government officials, due to greater channels of communication that are not inhibited by national interests.

The Senior Officials' Dialogue could form strategic committees to discuss and formulate policy outcomes on issues linked to climate change and security. Such issues could include:

- a) Regional approaches to addressing greater cooperation in fisheries management including measures to address the impacts of climate change, overfishing and illegal,

⁶¹ Patpicha Tanakasempipat and Matthew Tostevin, 2019, U.S.- China tensions spur progress on giant Asia trade pact, *Reuters*, October 29, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-summit-analysis-idUSKBN1X80NY>

unregulated and unreported fishing. This should include greater regional cooperation to establish marine protected areas as an adaptation measure against the impacts of climate change;

- b) Developing a legal regime to give protection to people displaced by climate change;
- c) Developing a regional approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions including cooperative approaches to enhance the development and diffusion of renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies;
- d) Cooperating in the development of marine protected areas with and beyond the limits of national jurisdiction;
- e) Creating an independent scientific inspection task force to monitor radioactive contamination of past nuclear test sites and to monitor regular reporting of the status of military facilities affected by the impacts of climate change.

It is very clear that urgent attention is required to address the nexus between climate change and security in the region. A balanced approach must be taken whereby regional nations are able to address the impacts of climate change without enhancing regional security tensions. Establishing a formal process that links ASEAN nations and Pacific Small Island Developing States may be the most balanced approach to address the nexus between climate change and security and reduce some of the tensions between military superpowers and their allies.

These proposed actions address only some of the tension points; much more needs to be done to assist Pacific Island countries to adapt to the impacts of climate change and ensure their survival in a climate change-altered world.

The Author

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