

8. Australia's involvement in maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

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- Australia seeks to be viewed as a partner of choice for Pacific Island countries and institutions when responding to maritime security issues.
- As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum and most key regional organisations, Australia is intimately involved in responding to opportunities and challenges in the maritime domain.
- Australia is engaged in extensive maritime security assistance provision and cooperation, but there is scope for better coordination with other partner countries and deeper cooperation with Pacific Island countries, particularly via Pacific-led mechanisms.

Australia has long been the most active partner providing maritime security assistance in the Pacific Islands region, which it delivers both cooperatively and bilaterally. Australia provides approximately 40% of all aid to the region,²²⁹ which includes efforts to address maritime opportunities and challenges, and is also the major provider of humanitarian and disaster relief (HADR), particularly in the Melanesian and Polynesian sub-regions. In the context of rising concern about China's activities and intentions, since 2018 Australia has increased its focus on the region, including with respect to the maritime domain, as part of its efforts to be seen as Pacific

Island countries' 'partner of choice'.²³⁰ But at times Australia faces the challenge of balancing its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific with its relationships in the Pacific Islands region, particularly as it is a member of the Pacific Islands Forum and many other key regional organisations.

Australia's interests in the Pacific Islands region

The Pacific Islands region lies across some of Australia's most important sea and air lanes of communication. As a result, Australia has long pursued a policy of strategic denial, which attempts to position Australia as the primary regional power and to exclude potentially threatening powers.²³¹ The 2024 **National Defence Strategy** specified that Australia pursues a 'Strategy of Denial' that aims to prevent and deter coercion, bolster security, and uphold a strategic balance favourable to Australia in the Indo-Pacific region (which Australia defines as including the Pacific Islands region).²³²

In the context of strategic competition between China and Australia's ally, the United States (US), in the Indo-Pacific,²³³ Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong has observed that Australia is 'in a state of permanent contest' with China in the Pacific Islands region.²³⁴ This encouraged the Coalition government to pursue the 'Pacific step-up' policy implemented from 2018. The Labor government elected in May 2022 continued this focus on the region through its 'Plan for a Stronger Pacific Family'.



Australia's strategic interest in the maritime domain in the Pacific Islands region has sharpened since reports in April 2018 that China was in talks to build a naval base in Vanuatu. Although this did not occur (and was denied by both governments), Australia's anxieties grew after Kiribati and Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition to China in 2019, and then China attempted to lease a Second World War-era Japanese naval base in Solomon Islands and to update strategically located airstrips in Kiribati. Australia's anxieties grew acute after Solomon Islands and China signed a security agreement in April 2022, which several Australian commentators interpreted as paving the way for a Chinese naval presence in the region (although this has not occurred).²³⁵

Australia's Pacific policy in the maritime domain

Several key initiatives under Australia's step-up had a maritime dimension. In 2019 Australia created the **Pacific Security College** at the Australian National University in Canberra to strengthen the capacity of Pacific officials, including with respect to maritime security issues. It also created the **Pacific Fusion Centre**, initially in Canberra and then later in Vanuatu, to promote regional maritime domain awareness by facilitating research, information-sharing, and coordination between Pacific Islands Forum members. The **Australian Defence Force** (ADF) now also maintains a 'near-continuous presence'²³⁶ in the region, including through **Royal Australian Navy** survey ships, patrol boats, and large-hulled vessels such as Canberra-Class Landing Helicopter Dock. The dedicated **ADF Pacific Support Team** is involved in HADR, stabilisation, and other security operations.

Longstanding Australian programs also have a maritime dimension. Australia's support for Pacific police forces, both bilaterally through the **Pacific Community for Law Enforcement Cooperation Program** through the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police**, and regionally through the **Pacific Police Development Program**, both enhance the capacity of Pacific police forces to respond to challenges both on land and at sea, particularly transnational crime (which is also aided by Australia's support to the

Pacific Transnational Crime Network (through the **Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police** and the **Transnational Serious Organised Crime Pacific Taskforce**). The **Pacific Policing Initiative** endorsed at the 2024 Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting will also provide police training and capability to respond to regional crises. Australia also supports the **Oceania Customs Organisation** (OCO) and **Pacific Immigration Development Community** (PIDC), which both respond to the challenge of managing Pacific Island countries' borders in a region dominated by the ocean.

Guided by its intent to be the region's security partner of choice, Australia has pursued bilateral security agreements with Pacific Island countries which can be activated to respond to maritime security challenges. Australia agreed on: a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017; a *vuvala* (friendship) partnership with Fiji in 2019; a comprehensive security and economic partnership with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 2020 and a security agreement in 2023; a security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022; an economic and security focused memorandum of understanding with Kiribati in 2023; an economic and security focused bilateral partnership agreement with Samoa in 2023; and the *Falepili Union* security treaty with Tuvalu in 2023.

Under its longstanding **Defence Cooperation Program**, Australia has funded an increased number of major defence infrastructure projects over the last decade. Several of these projects have a maritime security dimension, including the construction of the Maritime Essential Services Centre in Fiji and the redevelopment of the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Camp for the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (which was completed in early 2022).

Protecting the marine environment

Australia contributes to protecting the marine environment by investing in the **Office of the Pacific Ocean Commissioner** (OPOC). The OPOC coordinates regional ocean governance and advocacy, recently shaping influential international norms under the ocean Sustainable Development Goal (SDG14) and the High Seas Biodiversity Treaty.²³⁷

Climate change is already having a profound impact on the marine environment, including through ocean warming and sea level rise. Consequently, in 2018 Pacific Islands Forum leaders made the **Boe Declaration on Regional Security**, which identified climate change as the 'single greatest threat' to regional security. As a member of the Forum, Australia was a signatory to that declaration, and it has announced several policies to respond to the impacts of climate change in the Pacific Islands region. But several Pacific Island countries have concerns about whether Australia's domestic climate policy is sufficiently ambitious, particularly as Australia is not on track to meet its 1.5-degree emission target under the *Paris Agreement*.²³⁸ Australia is likely to face greater scrutiny of its poor record on managing its greenhouse gas emissions²³⁹ following the May 2024 International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) Climate Change Advisory Opinion, which directly linked greenhouse gas emissions to marine pollution duties under the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea**.²⁴⁰ This opinion had been sought the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law, initiated by Vanuatu, Niue, Palau, Tuvalu, and several Caribbean countries.

Maritime surveillance and support

Since the 1980s Australia has bilaterally provided patrol boats to Pacific Island countries to help them secure their massive Exclusive Economic Zones. This initially manifest in the **Pacific Patrol Boat Program**, which ran between 1987 and 1995, under which 22 boats were donated to 12 Pacific Island countries. The replacement **Pacific Maritime Security Programme** (PMSP) is providing 24 Guardian-class patrol boats (21 have been delivered), three landing craft, and a small loan fleet, to 16 Pacific Island countries (including Timor-Leste).²⁴¹ The PMSP also includes contracted aerial ocean surveillance and the secondment of personnel to the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) to help enhance regional coordination. Australia and the FFA increasingly cooperate with Canada and other national agencies and non-government organisations to access satellite monitoring and surveillance platforms.

Pacific Island countries have used the Australian-donated patrol boats primarily for fisheries enforcement, although most boats are used by the police rather than fisheries agencies, and in Fiji, PNG, and Tonga they are operated by the defence forces. They also use the boats for search and rescue, HADR, and medical evacuations. The local crews are brought to Australia for training under the **Pacific Maritime Training Services Program**.

Technical and operational support is provided by in-country Royal Australian Navy maritime surveillance advisers, who have patrol boat experience, and technical advisers, who are senior sailors with marine engineering or electrical specialisations.²⁴² Australia also provides support for maintenance and sustainment of the boats and is upgrading wharf infrastructure in 13 Pacific Island countries to ensure that they can safely operate and maintain the new, larger Guardian-class patrol boats. The most well-publicised upgrade is of Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island in PNG, on which Australia is partnering with PNG and the US.

The **Australian Federal Police (AFP)** has also been involved in maritime security assistance, providing small craft for local policing to Vanuatu, as well as support to the **Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre** and **Transnational Crime Units** through the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police.

Support to the Forum Fisheries Agency

Australia is a major donor to the FFA, which coordinates policy advice and provides expertise and technical support to PIF members. To support regional approaches to fisheries surveillance Australia supports the **FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre** and annual regional maritime law enforcement operations such as Operation Kurukuru. This inaugural operation focused on countering illegal fishing was first conducted in 2004. The operation has continued, with its scope being expanded to maritime law enforcement more broadly and participation enhanced by whole-of-government contributions.

Australia is also a party to the 2017 **Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement**, under which some members of the FFA agree to engage in cooperative surveillance and enforcement activities through sharing

of research and information and joint operations. As noted above, Australia also funds the Pacific Fusion Centre to help share maritime domain awareness information. Australia has also supported Pacific Island countries integrating their maritime law enforcement activities by funding in-country training, workshops, consultations, and legislative reviews.

Maritime surveillance cooperation with partners

Since 2018, under the Pacific step-up, Australia has extended maritime surveillance cooperation with partner countries. Australia, France, New Zealand and the US coordinate their maritime surveillance support through the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (the 'Pacific Quad').²⁴³ The purpose of the Pacific Quad is to 'promote security and stability through multilateral activities' including regional surveillance operations on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, supporting the work of the FFA, transnational crime maritime interdictions, and coordinating maritime security assistance and humanitarian assistance.²⁴⁴

Since 2022 Australia has also been a member of the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** initiative. This informal mechanism brings together Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US (Germany, Canada, and South Korea later joined) with the intention of 'harness[ing] our collective strength through closer cooperation' in the region.²⁴⁵ When announcing the initiative, the partners identified 'maritime security and protection' as a priority issue identified by Pacific Island countries.²⁴⁶ In January 2023 the partners held a workshop on 'Strengthening Shared Understanding Among the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) and Pacific Islands: Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUUF) and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA)' that brought together Pacific and partner officials to discuss Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) and maritime domain awareness.²⁴⁷ At their first foreign ministers meeting in September 2023, the partners announced several programs related to maritime security: the **Pacific Humanitarian Warehousing Program**, to pre-position humanitarian and emergency supplies in Pacific Island countries; funding towards a **Pacific Fisheries and**

Oceans Science Research Vessel to conduct research about climate change impacts on oceans and fisheries; further support to better coordinate IUU fishing and maritime domain awareness cooperation; and support for the **Pacific Climate Change Centre** within the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme.²⁴⁸

Humanitarian and disaster relief

Australia is the major provider of HADR in the Pacific Islands region, particularly in the Melanesian and Micronesian sub-regions. When providing HADR, Australia cooperates with France and New Zealand under the longstanding **FRANZ Arrangement**,²⁴⁹ and the 2012 **Joint Statement of Strategic Partnership between Australia and France**.²⁵⁰

Australia has recently sought to expand its cooperation on HADR. In January 2022 it established ad hoc **International Coordination Cell** at the ADF's Headquarters Joint Operations Command to coordinate the response to the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha apai eruption and tsunami. This cell involved Australia, New Zealand, France, the UK, the US, and Fiji. In 2023 Australia proposed the creation of a **Pacific Response Group (PRG)** at the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**,²⁵¹ which was endorsed at their 2024 meeting. The PRG will seek to improve how Pacific and partner defence forces coordinate to respond to natural disasters and other crises.

Minilateral defence arrangements

Australia is involved in minilateral defence arrangements in the region that provide Australia an opportunity to express its support for Pacific Island countries and to 'identify how best to collaborate and coordinate our efforts' with them and other partners,²⁵² and which have a maritime security dimension:

- The **South West Pacific Heads of Maritime Forces Meeting**: an annual meeting to discuss maritime security.
- The **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**: an annual forum that provides an opportunity for Pacific defence ministers to discuss regional security challenges and share experiences.²⁵³

- The **Joint Heads of Pacific Security** meeting: an annual opportunity for the heads of Pacific defence, police, customs and immigration agencies to influence the regional security agenda.

Broader initiatives with implications for the Pacific

As part of its pursuit of a Strategy of Denial in the Indo-Pacific, since 2019 Australia has partnered with the US, India, and Japan in the **Quad diplomatic partnership**. Since 2022, the Quad joint leaders' statements have identified strengthening cooperation with Pacific Island countries as a priority, including efforts to 'improve their maritime security and sustain their fisheries'.²⁵⁴ In 2022 Quad leaders announced the **Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA)**, which provides maritime domain awareness data to the FFA (and its counterparts in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean).²⁵⁵ In 2023 Quad leaders committed to support a Pacific-led **Weather Ready Pacific initiative** to provide natural disaster early warnings in the region.²⁵⁶ In 2024 the leaders announced the **Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI)**, which is intended to help Pacific Island countries and other partners to maximise the benefits of the IPMDA and other Quad initiatives relating to maritime security, through legal dialogues, training, and collaboration.²⁵⁷ In addition, **Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Missions** are set to begin soon.²⁵⁸

A key element of Australia's Strategy of Denial is enhancing its naval capabilities,²⁵⁹ in part through the **AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) security partnership**.²⁶⁰ Under AUKUS pillar I Australia will acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines.²⁶¹ The AUKUS agreement will also bring UK and US submarines to Australia.²⁶² The AUKUS partnership had been controversial in the Pacific Islands region,²⁶³ particularly given sensitivities about nuclear technology due to the legacy of the catastrophic human and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons testing in the region. There are concerns that, while the submarines would not technically breach the 1986 **Treaty of Rarotonga** (to which Australia is a party) that created the **South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone**, they might set a 'nuclear proliferation precedent'.²⁶⁴ While

intensive Australian diplomacy has helped to quell some regional concern,²⁶⁵ other Pacific leaders remain sceptical.²⁶⁶

Pillar II of AUKUS is planned to involve shared development of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, hypersonics, quantum technologies, and undersea warfare. It also seeks to improve the collective capabilities in uncrewed and autonomous maritime operations through 'Maritime Big Play'.²⁶⁷ Therefore, pillar II has implications for the maritime security of Pacific Island countries, since much of this capability will likely be deployed in their region, given its strategic location. This has generated concerns in the Pacific about the region being caught up in strategic competition in which it has no interest and undermining Pacific regional priorities.²⁶⁸

Looking forward

While Australia is engaged in extensive maritime security assistance provision and cooperation in the Pacific Islands region, this project will explore scope for better coordination with other partner countries

and deeper cooperation with Pacific Island countries, particularly via Pacific-led mechanisms. This project will also consider how Australia can address tensions in balancing its broader strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific with its relationships in the Pacific Islands region. These tensions are exemplified by Australia's involvement in the Quad diplomatic partnership. On a generous reading, Quad initiatives relating to maritime domain awareness have the potential to enhance the efforts of the Pacific Quad, the FFA, and other regional initiatives. But a sceptical reading would argue that Quad initiatives risk overriding the priorities of Pacific Island countries and overwhelming the capacity of Pacific mechanisms. Similarly, the AUKUS security partnership is perceived to further Australia's Strategy of Denial, but potentially undermines Australia's relationships in the Pacific Islands region through its emphasis on nuclear technology and potential to exacerbate the effects of strategic competition on the region.



Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners