

1. Introduction

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The ocean is critical to the lives and livelihoods of Pacific people, and Pacific Island countries manage more than ten percent of the earth's oceans,¹ because more than 30 million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean² falls within the Exclusive Economic Zones of these 'large ocean island states'.³

The concept of the 'Blue Pacific Continent' adopted by **Pacific Islands Forum** leaders captures the 'shared stewardship' of the ocean by Pacific Island countries and peoples.⁴

But the ocean ecosystem and its resources face multiple challenges, and many challenges traverse or emerge from the ocean. This project analyses how Pacific Island countries and their partners are seeking to respond – both individually and collectively – using the lens of maritime security. It stems from our concern that, as the range of partner countries seeking to provide maritime security assistance in the region grows, there is the risk that partners and their Pacific counterparts will 'talk past' each other, assuming shared understandings that may not exist. There is also the risk that new players do not have expertise or developed relationships both in the region and/or with other partners. These factors may, in turn, lead to poorly coordinated, duplicative assistance that overwhelms the absorptive capacity of Pacific countries and regional institutions.

Pacific leaders have repeatedly identified poor partner coordination as undermining maritime security.⁵ While focused on the maritime domain, our project will offer lessons for other forms of assistance being offered in the region.

Therefore, as our project develops over the next two years, it will answer four key questions:

1. What is maritime security?
2. What maritime security mechanisms already exist and what forms of assistance are partner countries providing?
3. What are the maritime security priorities of Pacific Island countries?
4. How can Pacific Island countries and their partners best target and coordinate maritime security assistance?

These papers begin to answer the first two questions. This paper proposes working definitions of two key terms: 'maritime security' and 'maritime security cooperation'. The papers that follow provide primers on key issues relating to the maritime domain: fisheries, the legal and regulatory environment, maritime-based transnational crime, managing geopolitical tensions, humanitarian and disaster relief, and search and rescue. They also provide background on the maritime security activities of established partners Australia, New Zealand, the United States (US), and France, and new partners China, India, Japan, and South Korea, including a paper specifically focused on non-sovereign territories.

What is the Pacific Islands region?

For simplicity, we define the **Pacific Islands region** as the island membership of the Pacific Community: American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn

Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna. We have chosen the membership of the Pacific Community, rather than of the Pacific Islands Forum (the region's preeminent political and security focused multilateral institution), because it captures many of the non-sovereign territories in the region. For the same reason, we deliberately refer to **Pacific Island countries**, rather than *states*.

Our use of the collective expression 'Pacific Island countries' should not be read as implying that all Pacific Island countries are alike, have the same priorities, or experience the same challenges. Pacific Island countries are highly diverse and range from the 'comparably populous and linguistically diverse' Papua New Guinea, with over ten million people, to Niue, with a 'culturally and linguistically homogenous' population of approximately 1400





people.⁶ As our project develops we will explore the differences between Pacific Island countries and their maritime security priorities, opportunities, and challenges in greater detail, but given their introductory nature, for simplicity we use the term in these papers.

We acknowledge that definitions of the Pacific Islands region are contested. The region is home to a range of different organisations, each with differing memberships, and which sometimes include countries on the region's geographical fringes, such as Timor-Leste.⁷ The region is also often divided into three geographical and cultural sub-regions: Melanesia,⁸ Micronesia,⁹ and Polynesia.¹⁰ While these sub-regions are also contested,¹¹ they have been broadly adopted for political purposes by Pacific Island countries, which have created sub-regional organisations to represent their membership.¹²

The role of metropolitan powers raises questions, especially Australia and New Zealand, which are the only metropolitan members of the Pacific Islands Forum, and members of the Pacific Community along with France, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US. France, New Zealand, the UK, Chile, and the US also all maintain non-sovereign territories in the region,¹³ and Hawai'i is a constituent state of the US. New Zealand and the US also have relationships of free association with several Pacific Island countries.¹⁴ Reflecting that these metropolitan powers frequently have different interests to Pacific Island countries, and that significant power asymmetries (particularly measured in material terms such as economic weight, military power, and population and geographic size) exist between these powers and Pacific Island countries, in our project we treat them as **partner countries** of the region, rather than as 'part' of the region.

What is maritime security?

The most commonly used definition of security is a negative one: 'freedom from threats to core values for both individuals and groups'.¹⁵ If applied to the maritime domain, this definition seeks to achieve the absence 'threats' such as 'maritime inter-state disputes, maritime terrorism, piracy, trafficking of narcotics, people and illicit goods, arms proliferation, illegal fishing, environmental crimes, or maritime accidents and disasters'.¹⁶ But this negative definition has been criticised as a 'laundry list' approach that does not provide space to debate which issues should be included, to prioritise those issues, find interlinkages between them, or to discuss how they can be addressed.¹⁷

An alternative positive definition of maritime security seeks to achieve a 'good' or 'stable order at sea'.¹⁸ An order exists when 'interaction among

states is not arbitrary but conducted in a systematic manner on the basis of certain rules.¹⁹ This approach tends to focus on the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS) and other international legal regimes that attempt to provide order in the maritime domain. Included in this definition is the concept of ‘maritime governance’, the ‘capacity to enforce the framework of laws, regulations, policies, and institutions generated both within the legal jurisdictions of states and the international community’ relating to good order at sea.²⁰ But this positive definition has been criticised for failing to specify exactly who gets to decide what this order should be, what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘stable’ order, and who should enforce it —although often this is implied within geopolitical discourse.²¹

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In their 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* the Pacific Islands Forum adopted an ‘expanded concept of security’ that included many issues relevant to ‘maritime security’: human security, transnational crime, cybersecurity, environmental security, and climate security. The *Boe Declaration Action Plan* highlighted the importance of resolving territorial boundary disputes in the region, safeguarding maritime zones in the face of sea level rise, disrupting criminal networks which facilitate the illicit movement of goods and people, and enhancing the safety and security of maritime transportation.²² As many of these challenges have a maritime and land dimension, this highlights the difficulty of drawing boundaries between challenges that happen on, in, or to the ocean, and those that relate to the land. Conversely, the breadth of challenges that have a maritime dimension can make addressing them difficult, particularly as many also have implications for development (raising, in turn, the question of whether development is a security issue). Notably,

when the Forum adopted its *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* in 2023, in part to operationalise the *Boe Declaration*, it did not refer to the term ‘maritime security’, although it did identify two relevant thematic areas:

- ‘Secure a future for our people’, by ‘deepen[ing] our collective responsibility and accountability for the stewardship of the Blue Pacific Continent and protect our sovereignty and jurisdiction over our maritime zones and resources, including in response to climate change induced sea level rise, and strengthen our ownership and management of our resources’.
- ‘Ocean and environment’, which it defined as relating to ‘safeguarding the integrity of our natural system and biodiversity through conservation action and by minimising activities that degrade, pollute, overexploit, or undermine our ocean and natural environment’.²³

These thematic areas provide us a valuable starting point from which to construct our project’s working **definition of maritime security**. Our working definition also attempts to capture both the negative and positive dimensions of security described above:

Pursuing opportunities and responding to challenges that occur in, or are linked to, the maritime domain.

In our project we recognise the complexity of the opportunities and challenges facing the Pacific Islands region, particularly in the maritime domain. We also recognise that these opportunities and challenges are frequently interlinked, either mutually reinforcing or undermining each other. Therefore, when understanding maritime security in the region, it is important to answer three questions:

1. Whose security is being analysed? (i.e. who is the referent object: a Pacific Island country? The Pacific Islands region? Other actors?)
2. What is the scope of security from? (i.e. what opportunities or threats are we interested in?)
3. What is the approach to security? (i.e. how can the referent object being analysed achieve security?)

Maritime security cooperation

In broad terms, security cooperation describes ‘common action between two or more states to advance a common security goal’.²⁴ As there is no formal regional collective security agreement in the Pacific Islands region, an earlier project²⁵ assessed the relevance of the major ways that security cooperation is conceptualised to the region – ‘security architecture’, ‘security complex’, and ‘security community’.²⁶ It concluded that security cooperation in the region consists of ‘a patchwork of agreements, arrangements and activities’ between Pacific Island countries and their partners ‘that reflect differing priorities and geopolitical dynamics’.²⁷

Guided by this understanding, and our definition of maritime security, in our project we adopt the following working **definition of maritime security cooperation**:

The formal and informal, bilateral, unilateral, and multilateral, mechanisms, institutions, meetings, dialogues, and other processes used by countries to coordinate their maritime security assistance across local, national, regional, and international levels.

The papers

As noted above, the papers that follow provide primers on key issues relating to the maritime domain and background on the maritime security activities of established and new partner countries. They are written by experts from across the Pacific Islands region and its major partner countries.