

## Pacific Security in an Age of Great Power Rivalry

Wednesday 21 August 2019

Hyatt Hotel, Canberra

### Summary of Proceedings

On Wednesday 21 August, the Australian Institute of International Affairs hosted an event on “Pacific Security in an Age of Great Power Rivalry.” The event consisted of two sessions, the first a breakfast session for guests invited from the diplomatic community, government departments and academia. After welcoming remarks by AIIA National President Allan Gyngell, Sonoura Kentaro, a special advisor to Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, delivered a keynote speech. Australia’s former Ambassador to Japan John McCarthy then gave a response highlighting the close relationship between Japan and Australia and called for the two countries to work even closer together in fields like security, development and aid. AIIA National Executive Director Dr Bryce Wakefield then moderated a discussion between Sonoura and McCarthy on Japanese and Australian approaches to the Indo-Pacific.

After breakfast, proceedings continued with a roundtable, held under the Chatham House rule. Speakers from Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands were asked to consider Pacific security within the context of three issue areas: 1) Security and Geo-politics in the Pacific; 2) Environment and Climate; and 3) Governance, Domestic Political Stability and Development. Strong themes that emerged over the course of the day were:

- The emergence of the Pacific as a field of contestation between China and the United States;
- The need to understand that Pacific Island countries view security through the lens of climate and food security and are less interested in Australian and Japanese concepts of geopolitics;
- The importance of language and tone in discussions with Pacific Island countries—Pacific Islanders are particularly keen to preserve their dignity and autonomy in discussions that concern development;
- Pacific Island leaders are searching for platforms through which they can promote their own security and development agendas, rather than having to adhere to rules established by foreign parties;
- Climate change is already having a serious impact on Pacific economies, and thus there is little sympathy in the Pacific for Australian arguments that reducing coal exports would harm the Australian economy;
- While Japan’s economic assistance to the region has decreased in recent decades, this has produced innovation in other areas like security assistance and the strengthening of human resources and good governance;
- Good domestic governance in the Pacific is linked to protection of the rules-based international order—not only does good governance allow Pacific Island nations to better enforce the rule of law at home, better capacity will allow them to contribute to international normative frameworks abroad.
- Care needs to be taken in the promotion of democracy in the region. There is need for holistic approaches to the promotion of democracy that are not just aimed at the leadership structures in the region, but take into account culture and other institutions;
- Despite a growing partnership in the security sphere, aid coordination between Japan and Australia needs to be developed more strongly.

What follows is a summary of proceedings of the three panels of the roundtable.

*Panel 1: Security and Geopolitics in the Pacific*

Participants expressed concern about the erosion of the rules-based international order and its effects on the Pacific. They were particularly concerned that the cause of much of this erosion was an evaporation of US support for multilateral diplomatic and trade initiatives that had been in place for decades, though Chinese behaviour in the region was also a cause for concern. One participant noted that some of the current erosion of international order stemmed from US “toleration” of a lack of Chinese adherence to international norms since the 1970s. The United States may have adopted a more critical tone towards China of late, but it is one that came along with a lack of respect for the international order that Washington had earlier done so much to promote.

While China’s military expansion was a cause for concern, some speakers in the first panel noted that much of the international discussion around geostrategic competition between China and the United States focused on tension in maritime East Asia. Issues such as the nuclearization of North Korea and the attempt by Taiwan to “figure out where it sits between the US and China,” as well as China’s occupation and reinforcement of maritime features in the South China Sea, meant that, for example, the United States, Japan and Australia were focused much more on security issues in that region. Meanwhile Japan was much more concerned about the stability of the US-Japan alliance, than it was interested in events in the Pacific.

Within that context, China has in recent years been able to fill a void in the Pacific left by US inattention to the region and the willingness of Australia and other states to take the Pacific for granted. China has managed to establish long-standing aid arrangements and to lock some Pacific Island nations into relationships of dependency and debt. One Japanese speaker noted that China under Xi Jinping had been much more focused on controlling public and academic opinion at home through surveillance activities. The speaker noted that there was a danger that the Chinese government would exert pressure on its diaspora throughout the region to conform to official positions: “immigration from China comes at the cost of self-censorship.” It was imperative that other countries in the region, particularly Australia and Japan, understood the need to engage responsibly with the people and governments of Pacific Island nations.

Part of that responsibility lay in dealing with the Pacific on its own terms. For example, over the course of the day, several speakers noted that Australia, Japan, New Zealand and other countries need to take note of Pacific cultural norms when forging relations with Pacific Island countries. One area where this was particularly relevant was in the provision of aid. The centrality of a norm of reciprocity in many Pacific Island societies complicates aid provision policies of donor countries. It is important to note that Pacific Islanders do not envisage this norm of reciprocity always playing out in terms of an economic exchange—Pacific Island cooperation in forming regional dialogues on security, for example, can be one such form of reciprocity. Yet all too often, aid provision can create an implied relationship of the superiority of the donor vis-à-vis the inferiority of the recipient. Pacific Islanders often want to discuss environment, governance and security issues within the bounds of a relationship where they can offer solutions to problems that all parties have. Language is important, and the framing of policies in a way that implies that Australians and others are the active parties in a relationship with Pacific Islands nations does not sit well with Pacific Island notions of reciprocity.

As well as observing cultural norms, Australia and others needed to understand that the language they used to frame their own activities in the Pacific matters to Pacific Island nations. The various ways in which Australia, New Zealand and other countries frame their ongoing relations with Pacific Island countries—variously in terms of a “Pacific Step-Up,” a “Pacific Reset” or a “re-engagement” with the region—invite questions in Pacific Island countries about the nature of their relationship with these “other” nations outside the context of emerging bilateral friction between China and the United States. Pacific Island states do not see themselves as third parties in an unfolding geopolitical drama or as “problems” within that context, but as responsible actors that can work both together and with outside partners to establish solutions to security problems in the region. Several Pacific Island leaders are searching for a security dialogue that they can define, that is, a platform that belongs to the Pacific. As noted in later panels, Pacific Island leaders saw security as closely related to issues such as climate and domestic governance, not simply as the outcome of a zero-sum game between two powers jostling for position in their region.

Indeed, there may even be reason to question whether security cooperation between China and the United States in the Pacific is as intense as it is often portrayed in the Australian media. The much-touted trope of debt trap diplomacy is a concern in the Pacific, but one Australian commentator noted that it is unlikely that China will leverage that debt in order to place military bases in the Pacific, a concern that is often expressed in Australian newspapers. In contrast to the South China Sea, where there are significant geostrategic interests at play, China has never expressed any clear desire to maintain a forward military presence in the South Pacific. Maintaining a base in the Pacific, moreover, would be a costly exercise and it would outrage some potentially friendly nations in the region for little strategic benefit. Certainly, there are geostrategic games afoot in the Pacific, over, for example, the recognition of Taiwan, but accusations that China is attempting to establish a military foothold in the region might be viewed with a degree of reticence.

#### *Panel 2: Environment and Climate*

Indeed, several of the Pacific Island speakers noted that their engagement with China was not a two-way street, with many noting that it is better to engage with China on a range of issues including Pacific development to keep lines of dialogue open on other issues. For the Pacific, many speakers agreed that no topic was more important than climate change. On that issue, Pacific Island leaders were aware that China was the leading global greenhouse gas emitter. Nevertheless, they felt that China’s leadership acknowledged the issue and was attempting to address its carbon emissions. According to these speakers, it was therefore helpful to engage China in dialogue in order to shape its choices on the issue and prioritise Pacific concerns.

Pacific Island participants in the discussion were therefore much more critical of Australia, noting that Pacific Island leaders were stunned by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s moves to water down the 2019 Pacific Islands Forum joint communique on climate change and refusal to rule out the opening of new coal mines. One Australian participant suggested that some of the criticism did not consider the fact that Australian emissions were comparatively low and Australian livelihoods and economic growth were dependent on carbon intense extractive industries. Pacific participants acknowledged that there were domestic pressures on Morrison when it came to climate policy and that they were committed to dialogue with Australia on climate. However, they also noted that the tone the Australian delegation to the

Pacific Islands Forum had adopted made such dialogue more difficult. Australia spoke as though it were a family member of the Pacific and yet, in Pacific Island eyes, failed to make concessions out of a duty of care for family members when those concessions might impose an economic cost on Australia.

Indeed, Pacific Islanders are themselves bearing the economic burden of climate change. Through tourism and fisheries, the Pacific Islands are reliant on the environment for their economic wellbeing. However, many roundtable participants noted that in the Pacific, climate change is not merely an argument about economics but about security, survival and identity. Food security is a major issue in the Pacific, and the most pressing problems are related to changes in ocean and weather patterns. Pacific tuna and other fish stocks are suffering and will likely suffer more as a result of the changing ecosystem, while rising sea levels are damaging shorelines and crops. However, a more immediate problem is extreme weather events creating havoc in island nations whose infrastructure is not designed to withstand them. With the discussion in developed countries often focused on economic impacts of climate change, there is a feeling in the Pacific that Australia, Japan and other developed nations do not understand what is at stake for Pacific Islanders.

Indeed, Pacific Island tradition is very much bound to the land. It is hard, therefore, to see how many in the Pacific will deal with the loss of culture and identity as the result of reduction of habitable land and displacement. Even if the displaced are relocated permanently, there is an inherent loss of dignity in “climate migration.” But there is also often a loss of dignity in terms of supposed solutions offered to Pacific peoples. Coordination of development aid to encourage resilience in the region, for example, is poor and often led by state parties from abroad with conflicting agendas. Current developmental models are therefore problematic. To fund aid projects, foreign donors often require the drafting of proposals that is beyond the capability of time- and resource-poor agencies in the region. They also favour projects more in tune with what foreign providers can deliver or what has been proven to work elsewhere rather than what is needed on the ground. There is also little understanding of whether the plethora of adaptation and mitigation approaches is working in the Pacific Island context. Cultural interpreters may therefore be needed to enhance the understandings between Pacific Island nations and donors from larger economies. Ultimately, however, there is a need for regional platforms that can coordinate development independently of the outside agencies that fund them.

### *Panel 3: Governance, Domestic Political Stability and Development*

A point consistently mentioned in the third panel was the interaction between domestic governance and the stability of the rules-based international order. In an international order where the United States is no longer the strategic regional hegemon, but where recent Chinese behaviour could be seen as derived from a sense of insecurity, it is reasonable to expect that neither the United States nor China will sustain the regional order alone. In a sense then, nations in the region need to step up to support and proactively help define the international rules-based order in a way that they have never done before. The future agency of states in the Asia Pacific region depends to a large extent on the way they are willing to act now. This is highly relevant to many South Pacific states, which, because of their fragile governments, are highly susceptible to outside influence. Development activities, and activities like enhancing South Pacific capability to respond to transnational crimes are not only an attempt to shore up domestic political viability, but allow like-minded smaller countries in the region to strengthen

their international commitments to the rules-based international order through adhering to those rules at home. Meanwhile, investing in domestic political institutions in the Pacific Islands may mean that in future they will have the capacity to more proactively act as partners on the international stage to maintain the international rules-based order.

Japan has been something of a quiet, but key player in the region, traditionally acting as a donor to South Pacific Island nations. However, Japan's aid to the Pacific has diminished in recent decades and is not likely to recover. Japan has thus shifted its focus from economic assistance towards security and governance, recognising human capacity rather than goods as a key resource in the region. Also, Japan now tends to highlight shared security interests with the recipients of its aid. Moreover, Japan also realises that democratic and transparent governance in recipient countries is crucial to the economic stability that promotes sustainable infrastructure investment. Rewarding good governance also acts as an incentive for others in the region to maintain their own good governance practices. In the end this can only benefit Pacific Island nations, as good governments are more resilient to natural disasters, transnational crime, corruption and external political influence.

Nevertheless, care needs to be taken in democracy promotion. Democracy is never a one-size-fits-all proposition. An approach which preaches democracy in the region may thus be read as patronising and may encourage Pacific Island nations to turn to non-democratic actors like China for development assistance. Promotion of democracy also needs to be holistic and consider a complex array of institutions and practices rather than focusing narrowly on leadership.

There are several areas where Australia and Japan can enhance their cooperation. For example, Japan and Australia are enhancing their mutual role as defence partners, but this has not translated into more consolidated aid programs. Greater dialogue between Australia and Japan needs to occur on the question of aid priorities and cooperation. Also, in the area of security, as already stated above, Australia and Japan need to work together to understand that security needs to be framed in the context of the individual Pacific Island states concerned. Indeed, there are a number of factors behind shifting political loyalties in the region, with some Pacific Island leaders seeing China as not interested in the Pacific for maritime access per se, but because a number of Pacific Island nations recognise Taiwan over the People's Republic. Many Pacific Island nations, viewing climate and food security as their primary security concerns, are thus less interested in geo-strategic contests between great powers and their allies. That means that when discussing issues like development, but also on issues like the rule of international law, Pacific Island nations need to be involved in the process to dispel the notion that aid efforts "come from the outside."