

Staying the course: Australia and maritime security in the South Pacific

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The Pacific Patrol Boat (PPB) Program has been a highly successful contribution to maritime security in the South Pacific over the past twenty-five years or so. It's assisted the Pacific island countries (PICs) to develop their capacity to protect their maritime resources, which are in most cases the major component of sustainable economic development for those countries. The PPBs have also been used for a range of other important tasks beyond fisheries law enforcement, including search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and medical evacuations from outer islands.

The program has also served Australia's regional interests well: it's been a tangible demonstration of our interest in the South Pacific and a prominent contribution to the region's ability to deal with maritime security issues. These matters are a common concern of both Australia and the PICs.

The twenty-two PPBs gifted to the island nations will start reaching the end of their service lives from 2018, but Australia's future plans for South Pacific maritime security assistance remain opaque. We need to develop a coherent plan for our long-term



Palau's Pacific Patrol Boat, PSS President H.I. Remeliik, 14 May 2008. © Defence Department.

contribution to South Pacific maritime surveillance and enforcement.

While there has been criticism that many PPBs fail to achieve the requisite number of sea days, that does not detract from the overall success of the program. It's been the cornerstone of Australia's strategic influence in the region. As we plan for what might follow the PPB Program, we need to think strategically and not become bogged down in operational considerations.

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The Australian Defence organisation is best placed to ensure that there's the necessary strategic perspective in our future contribution to Pacific maritime security. It needs to take the lead in planning that contribution. This includes working with the US, New Zealand, France, Japan and China to address Pacific maritime security concerns through the creation of a regional maritime coordination centre, which will collect, fuse and analyse data and coordinate responses from regional and national assets.

Maritime aid

Between 1987 and 1995, Australia supplied twenty-two PPBs to twelve island countries: Papua New Guinea (4 boats), Vanuatu (1), Cook Islands (1), Kiribati (1), Palau (1), Tonga (3), Fiji (3), Solomon Islands (2), Federated States of Micronesia (3), Republic of the Marshall Islands (1), Samoa (1) and Tuvalu (1).

They're owned, operated and maintained by the PICs. Technical and operational support is provided by twenty-five in-country Royal Australian Navy (RAN) maritime surveillance

advisers (MSAs) and technical advisers. The PPB Program has been mainly, although not solely, focused on fisheries enforcement activities, but in most recipient states the boats and the MSAs have been assigned to the police, rather than fisheries agencies. In only three countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga) are they operated by the defence force. Over recent years, increased operating costs and budgetary constraints have resulted in the patrol boats falling well short of their potential capacity.

Defence provides funding for infrastructure and logistics, training and skills support, and general assistance to support the PPB capability. A five-year contract valued at \$49.5 million for ongoing support and third refit costs for the PPBs was awarded in October 2010.¹

In addition to the PPB Program, Australia also makes other contributions to maritime surveillance and enforcement in the South Pacific. In 2009–2010, Australia supported seven successful regional multilateral maritime surveillance activities in the area. Defence continued to coordinate aerial maritime surveillance support to those activities with Australia's security partners in the South Pacific (the US, New Zealand and France) through the regular Quadrilateral Defence Coordinating Group talks.² The Australian Federal Police has also been involved in maritime security assistance, providing small craft for local policing to some regional countries.³

Operation Solania, covering South Pacific maritime surveillance patrols by Australian Defence Force (ADF) units, has been in place since 1988. The planned Royal Australian Air Force contribution is two P-3 deployments per year, consisting of six sorties each, of which only one occurred in 2009–10.

In addition, RAN vessels operating or transiting the region provide surface

reporting under Operation Solania. Nine RAN ship deployments provided reporting to Operation Solania during 2009–10⁴, although the RAN hasn't been given authority to undertake actual boardings, inspections or other enforcement activities.⁵

Due to ADF commitments elsewhere, particularly in the Middle East and to Operation Resolute to secure Australia's own maritime approaches, the contribution by the ADF to maritime surveillance in the South Pacific, both air and surface, has declined over recent years.

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Capability gaps and delays

A previous contribution to an ASPI report on the South Pacific drew attention to major gaps in the capabilities available to the PICs for maritime surveillance and enforcement.⁶ They were the lack of both a dedicated aerial surveillance capability and a surface response capability to operate at an extended distance from base. That report identified the provision of a follow-on capability for the PPBs as a vexed issue for Australian defence cooperation policy.⁷

It's disappointing that over three years later, when the maritime surveillance and enforcement needs of the island states have become more pressing, there's no hard evidence of any significant progress towards addressing Australia's future material contribution to maritime security in the South Pacific.

The Department of Defence has conducted several studies over the years on what might

follow the PPB Program and how Australia might continue to provide maritime security assistance to the PICs. However, there's no evidence of any concrete outcomes from those studies. Indeed, surprisingly, Defence no longer has the leading role in determining what assistance might succeed the PPB Program. That responsibility has been passed to the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (ACBPS).

No plan has yet been developed to show exactly how this capability gap will be filled. A Defence submission to the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (FADT) inquiry into the main economic and security challenges facing the South Pacific in 2008 was reported to have stated that rising fuel costs and a lack of assistance from partner states have made the PPB Program too expensive to sustain, and that Defence recommended that the Australian Government consider cancelling the program or phasing it out from 2017 as the boats end their lives.⁸

The media report on this matter was picked up around the South Pacific and in Timor-Leste. It contributed to a perception that Australia lacked commitment to regional maritime security in general and the PPB Program in particular.

The statement in the Defence submission to the FADT inquiry was that 'Defence does not intend to recommend a Defence-led follow-on PPB program in the options available to Government.'⁹ This apparent lack of support for the program was later corrected in an addendum to the Defence submission: 'The reference in the Defence submission to the committee relating to a follow-on Pacific patrol boat capability was inappropriate.'¹⁰ But the damage had been done.

In an apparent attempt to shift regional views on Australia's ongoing maritime commitments, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in his speech at the

Pacific Island Forum plenary opening ceremony in Cairns in August 2009 stated that:

As part of Australia's ongoing commitment, Australia will provide continued support for the Pacific Patrol Boat Program and in consultation with our Pacific partners work towards a new maritime security program to follow it.¹¹

The report from the Senate FADT Committee deals extensively with maritime security issues. It noted the difficulties of monitoring the movement of vessels in the islands; the vulnerability of the PICs to criminal activity and transnational crime; and the problems of policing exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) submission to the inquiry described the PPB Program as 'the centrepiece of Australia's Defence engagement in the Pacific'.¹²

The committee made two recommendations relating to regional maritime security:

Recommendation 3

The committee notes that the *Defence White Paper 2009* indicates that Australian government departments are developing a framework for enhancing regional maritime security. The committee sees potential for other donors to make a valuable contribution in this area. It therefore recommends that, in developing this framework, these departments consider the advantages of elevating the Pacific Patrol Boat Program into a regional initiative, supported by the Pacific Islands Forum and other donors.¹³

Recommendation 4

The committee has noted the limited maritime surveillance capability of Pacific island states. It therefore recommends that the Australian Government give

specific attention to the way the region could improve information sharing and develop a 'supra-national' enforcement capability through, for example, the proposal for a Regional Maritime Coordination Centre. In so doing, the committee suggests that the government give particular attention to the ability of states to maintain and contribute to such a facility, as well as the importance of avoiding duplication in Australia's security assistance initiatives.¹⁴

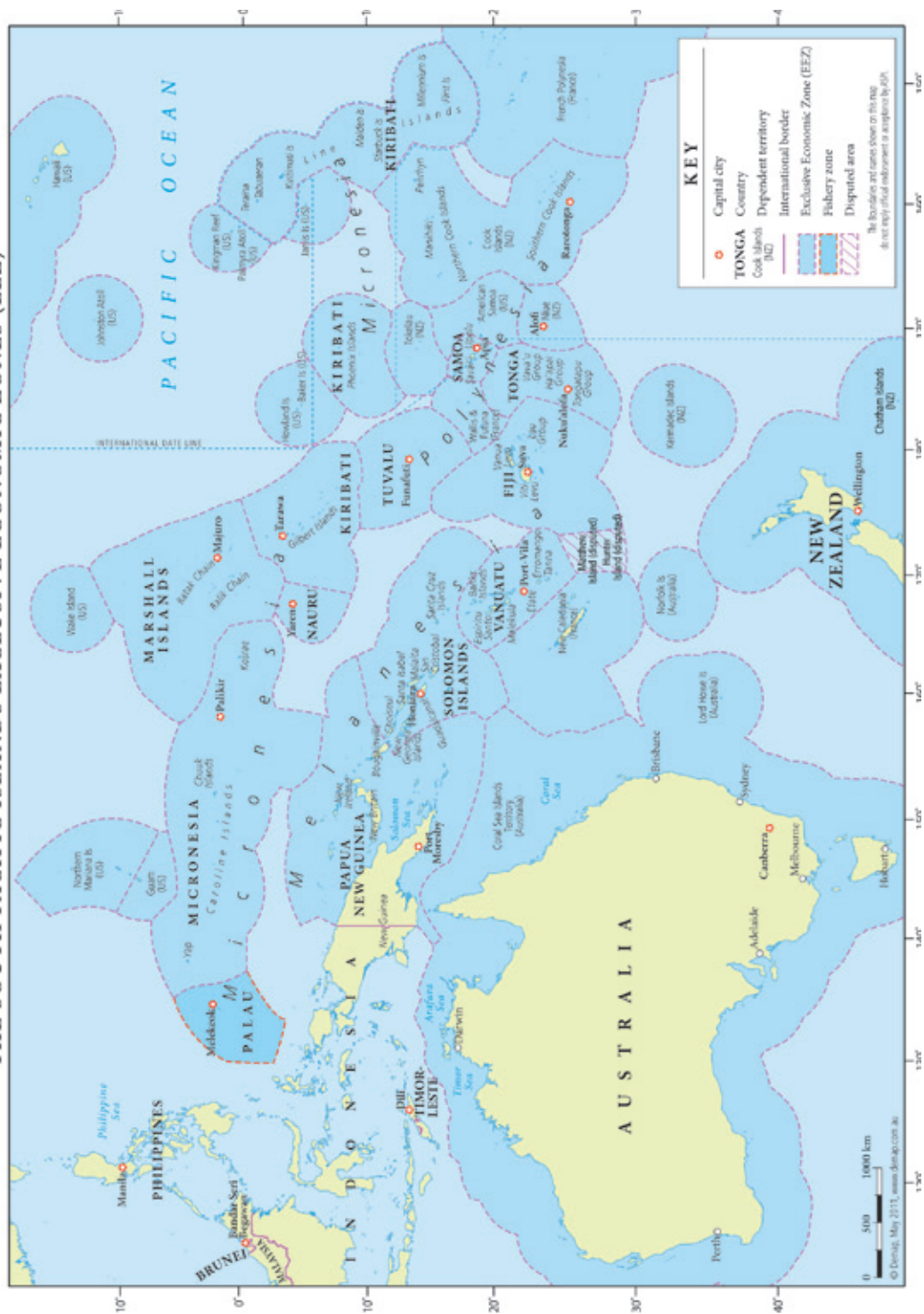
The Gillard government has yet to respond to these two critical recommendations.

A maritime experts workshop was convened in Canberra in July 2010 by the ACBPS to examine a broader and common regional approach to maritime security in the Pacific.¹⁵ It was attended by regional experts in transnational crime, border protection, fisheries compliance and maritime law enforcement. The workshop was held in conjunction with a meeting of Pacific Islands Forum law enforcement and fisheries ministers.

The workshop's recommendations to the concurrent joint ministerial meeting included the need for a strategic audit of maritime security threats in the region and an examination by the Forum Regional Security Committee and the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) of options for information sharing and integrated coordination of enforcement operations against fisheries crimes and other crimes at sea.¹⁶

This Canberra workshop gave the impression to participants from the South Pacific that, by transferring the work on the future directions of the PPB Program from Defence to the ACBPS, Australia was in effect starting with a clean sheet of paper in determining Australia's plans for maritime security assistance to the island states.

THE SOUTH PACIFIC ISLANDS EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONES (EEZ)



Trends in maritime security

The threats of terrorism and transnational crime have led to a reappraisal of the concept of maritime security, including in the South Pacific. Maritime security is becoming more civilianised, and many non-military agencies are now involved in providing some dimension of it, including in cooperation with neighbouring countries. Civil law enforcement has become an important element of maritime security. This trend is reflected in the way civil maritime security forces, such as the Japan Coast Guard and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency, have expanded and become more active in recent years.

Civil law enforcement has become an important element of maritime security.

In Australia, the civil agencies involved with maritime security include the ACBPS, the Australian Federal Police, the Office of Transport Security, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority and the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. Those agencies undertake their regional maritime security responsibilities primarily at an operational level, while strategic and foreign policy oversight remains with Defence and DFAT.

Regional maritime security

The regional maritime security environment of the South Pacific has become more volatile and complex. There have been major strategic developments in the region that make plans for Australia's future involvement all the more urgent. The South Pacific is no longer a strategic backwater: competition is becoming evident in the region between the US and to some extent Japan on the one hand, and China on the other.

The maritime threat perceptions of the island countries are changing as they become more sensitive to their vulnerability to many forms of illegal activity either at sea or originating from the sea. While illegal fishing continues to be of most concern to the PICs, there's been growing awareness of other security threats in the maritime domain.

Those threats include climate change, transnational crime, and border protection against the illegal entry of people, drugs, small arms and other contraband.¹⁷ As with illegal fishing, these threats vary around the region in both location and intensity. Many of them are interrelated, and there's potential for them to increase with inadequate law enforcement and coordination at both the national and regional levels.

The PICs have two major maritime security concerns. The first is the protection of the fishing industry from high levels of IUU fishing. It's been estimated that the economic loss to the PICs due to IUU fishing is around \$1.7 billion annually, equivalent to about 40% of the annual catch in the region.¹⁸ The US State Department has estimated that Kiribati alone probably loses millions of dollars each year from unauthorised fishing.¹⁹ Those losses can only increase if the PICs don't have adequate capabilities for maritime surveillance and enforcement.

Due to the decline in fish stocks elsewhere in the world, distant-water fishing fleets are looking more towards the Pacific. Large, modern purse-seine vessels flagged in the European Union and in Latin American countries have increasingly been observed fishing in the western and central Pacific Ocean.²⁰

The second major maritime security concern is the possibility of transnational criminal activities at sea. The PICs need to be able to conduct surveillance and enforcement across their very large EEZs (see map p. 5).



Two Philippine-flagged purse seiners and the fish carrier Queen Evelyn (DUL6696). The fishing vessels are registered with Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, but the Panama-flagged Queen Evelyn appears not to be. © Greenpeace / Brent Balalas

This includes policing the activities of fishing vessels in their maritime zones and adjacent areas of the high seas to prevent IUU fishing and to monitor the activities of vessels while they are operating around remote islands. A recent study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that fishing vessels are often involved in criminal activities, including the smuggling of migrants, illicit trafficking in drugs and illicit trafficking in weapons.²¹

The vulnerability of the fishing industry to transnational organised crime is exacerbated by the global reach of fishing vessels; their legitimate presence at sea; the distribution network for fish and fish products; a general lack of governance and rule of law in the fishing industry, including a lack of transparency of the beneficial ownership of a vessel; and the inability or unwillingness of some flag states to enforce their criminal jurisdiction.²²

Fish carriers and bunkering vessels may pose an even greater risk of criminal activity than fishing vessels because of their greater range of operations. Such vessels are

invariably flagged in open registry countries, particularly Panama.

Other players

The 2010 New Zealand Defence White Paper noted that:

Many more outside countries and non-governmental organisations are now involved in the South Pacific. This trend is likely to continue. Much of this involvement is constructive and co-operative, but it may test our continuing ability, alongside Australia, to remain at the forefront of international efforts to support Pacific Island states.²³

As more countries become actively involved in the region, competition is becoming evident in the delivery of assistance to the PICs, including maritime security assistance. While Australia coordinates with its quadrilateral partners in this regard, it would be beneficial for China and Japan, both major aid donors, to also be brought into the loop.

China

China has become a major provider of financial assistance to the PICs. In 2009, Beijing contributed over US\$200 million in aid to Pacific Islands Forum members (about \$27 million in grant aid and additional soft loans of \$183 million). That made it the third largest provider of financial assistance to the PICs after Australia and the US.²⁴ This figure is even more impressive when it's considered that much of the aid donated by the US, which contributed only about \$20 million more assistance to Pacific Island Forum members in 2009 than China did, is concentrated on the Micronesian countries, and that China only provides assistance to the countries with which it has diplomatic relations.²⁵ Some individual countries, notably Tonga, the Cook Islands and Samoa, have become heavily indebted to China.²⁶

China appears to have limited military objectives in the region.

China appears to have limited military objectives in the region. It has some military ties with regional defence forces, but so far hasn't provided any direct assistance to maritime security. However, China has funded some maritime-related projects, including building a new police headquarters in the Cook Islands, and building or refurbishing inter-island vessels in several countries.²⁷

France

France conducts maritime surveillance around its own islands in the Pacific and occasionally provides surveillance assistance to adjacent independent countries. It also conducts occasional naval exercises in the region, involving units from Australia, New Zealand and some PICs. The 1992 FRANZ agreement between Australia, France and New Zealand commits the parties to exchange information

to ensure the best use of their assets and other resources for relief operations after cyclones and other natural disasters in the region.

Japan

Japan has a major stake in the region through its fishing interests, but until recently it hadn't shown much interest in contributing to regional maritime security. Since 2008, the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation of Japan have sponsored a project to strengthen the maritime surveillance capacity of the Micronesian region, along with the governments of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Australia, Japan and the US. Despite the obvious relationship of this project with PPB Program follow-on activity, Australian participation has been carried forward by DFAT, not the ACBPS.

The plan to implement the project from the 2011 fiscal year was approved at the third meeting of the participants in Palau in November 2010. It comprises the following elements:

- a coordination centre for the Micronesian region to improve law enforcement coordination and share vessel monitoring system data
- the provision of small craft approximately 10 metres in length for local law enforcement duties
- fuel and maintenance support for small craft and fuel support for the existing joint operation
- a vehicle and trailer for the small craft
- the construction of boat ramps
- upgrading communication capabilities
- providing emergency power generators
- conducting a feasibility study and environmental assessment for the construction of a fuel tank at Kapingamarangi Atoll.²⁸

The total cost of these contributions hasn't been stated. It's probably less than \$2 million in initial outlay, leaving aside the fuel tank at Kapingamarangi Atoll, and perhaps \$500,000 at the most in annual costs. This cost is significantly less than the \$2.4 million or so in annual support to be provided under the Australian defence budget to the Micronesian countries, but the project has the potential to produce a lot of goodwill for Japan.

New Zealand

New Zealand's 2010 Defence White Paper gives priority to defence tasks in and around New Zealand and the South Pacific.²⁹ It goes on to note that it's in New Zealand's interests to 'play a leadership role in the South Pacific for the foreseeable future, acting in concert with our Pacific neighbours'.³⁰

New Zealand's defence policy accords greater priority to the South Pacific than does Australia's. This is understandable given geographical proximity, the strong cultural links, and New Zealand's constitutional obligation to provide defence support to the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau. As a consequence, the PICs and the FFA tend to regard New Zealand

as being more responsive to requests for surveillance assistance than Australia. Although Australia contributes much more to the costs of FFA than does New Zealand, New Zealand has urged Australia to boost efforts to stop illegal fishing in the Pacific.³¹

New Zealand's direct aid to the PICs in 2009 was just under US\$100 million, or less than half of China's aid and a little less than Japan's.³² New Zealand makes a significant contribution to regional maritime security through funding to relevant regional bodies, periodic surveillance flights by Royal New Zealand Air Force P3 aircraft, and occasional patrols by Royal New Zealand Navy (RNZN) ships. It also provides a technical adviser for the PPB Program in the Cook Islands.

A recent parliamentary inquiry into New Zealand's relationships with South Pacific countries recommended that New Zealand's funding for surveillance flights over the region be increased to ensure more effective coverage.³³ The RNZN's two new offshore patrol vessels, HMNZS *Otago* and *Wellington*, are ideally suited for maritime surveillance and enforcement in the region.



HMNZS OTAGO, sailed on 10 May 2011 on its inaugural deployment to the South Pacific where it will work with Pacific Island nations for mentoring and training with government personnel and the Pacific Patrol Boats. © New Zealand Defence Force MC 10-0106-022.

United States

The US has markedly increased its level of involvement in regional maritime security in recent years. This is at least partly in response to the inroads that China's been making in the region, as well as to a possible perception that the US could no longer leave security in the region to Australia and New Zealand. In a recent statement to the US Congress, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned of the 'unbelievable' competition with China for influence in the Pacific islands.³⁴

The US Navy and US Coast Guard provide assistance with air surveillance in the region and the Coast Guard's highly successful 'ship-rider' program, in which visiting Coast Guard cutters embark authorised fisheries officers from the PICs. The program has been expanded from 2010 to include ship-riders on US Navy vessels. During the first two years of the program, there were ten joint patrols and forty-four boardings, resulting in the detection of seventeen serious violations.

Such operations are an important demonstration of US support for the region.

They're regarded as the most effective surface surveillance and response activity conducted by an external player. The US is planning to expand this program as part of strengthening its efforts to address non-traditional security threats in the Pacific, particularly transnational crime.³⁵

The way ahead

A previous ASPI study on the South Pacific noted that one size doesn't fit all when determining the optimal maritime surveillance and enforcement capabilities for the PICs.³⁶ Countries with very large EEZs require better national capability than those with smaller areas of maritime jurisdiction.

The smaller island states, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru and Niue, lack the capacity of the larger countries and are likely to require greater outside assistance in maintaining security in their maritime zones. The US, for example, has taken particular note of Kiribati's needs, given that country's large EEZ (and its proximity to US territories).



Dash 8 surveillance aircraft operated under charter by Australia's Coastwatch organisation. Picture courtesy Australian Customs and Border Protection Service.

There's a tendency to regard air surveillance as a complete solution to maritime surveillance requirements, but that isn't the case. Any solution must also include a surface response capability. Air surveillance, together with an effective command, control and intelligence system, provides the capability to detect, identify and track a suspicious contact, but that's not where it ends. The system must also include the capability to intercept a suspicious vessel, board and inspect it and, if necessary, arrest it and take it into port.

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On the material side, an effective maritime surveillance and enforcement system for the South Pacific comprises three basic elements: an air surveillance capability, a surface response capability, and a regional facility to collect, fuse and analyse data and coordinate a response from regional and national assets.

Air surveillance

Of the three elements, air surveillance is the easiest to provide. Australia, France, New Zealand and the US make some contribution using military or coast guard aircraft, but there's a need also for a dedicated capability responsive to regional requirements on a regular basis.³⁷

The feasibility of such a system was confirmed in 2008 in a trial using a Reims-Cessna F406 twin turboprop aircraft fitted with a range of surveillance equipment.³⁸ While this aircraft would be suitable for operations in countries closer to Australia (that is, Papua New Guinea,

Solomon Islands and Vanuatu), its potential transit costs made it unsuitable for operations further afield. A second, comprehensive trial was to be conducted in 2009 using aircraft more suitable for working over longer distances and in remote operating areas to further test the concept of commercial aerial surveillance for the region³⁹, but the trial hasn't yet been conducted.

Air surveillance for the PICs should be mainly provided by civil aircraft working under a contractual arrangement similar to that used by Coastwatch Australia. The program for the aircraft should be managed and programmed centrally by a regional maritime coordination centre (see p. 13). Where possible, maritime law enforcement officers from the PICs should fly on patrols.

Surface response

Contributions to surface surveillance and response by surface forces of the major players (such as the ship-rider programs of the US Navy and US Coast Guard) and occasional patrols by RAN and RNZN vessels are useful supplements, but dedicated regional surface response capabilities are still required. Two types of patrol boat should provide those capabilities: coastal patrol vessels (CPVs) and larger offshore patrol vessels (OPVs).⁴⁰

The CPVs would be operated by the PICs at a national level. Two or more might be required by PICs with larger EEZs, and they would be strategically based around the islands. Their role wouldn't be to undertake patrols as such, but to respond to particular incidents. Their operations within national EEZs would be managed by national maritime surveillance centres. The patrol boats being provided by the Sasakawa Foundation to the Micronesian countries are an example of this capability, although a slightly larger vessel would be preferable. The estimated project costs for acquiring twenty 15-metre CPVs so that each

non-Micronesian country receives at least two such vessels are \$50 million.

The OPVs would fill the offshore capability gap identified in this paper. Even the existing PPBs have proven to have inadequate range and sea-keeping qualities to patrol some EEZs. As well as the direct costs of operating the PPBs, some PICs have experienced administrative and logistical difficulties in supporting these relatively large craft.

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The RAN maritime surveillance and technical advisers have been essential, but there's a limit to how much they can assist if the basic wherewithal of national infrastructure isn't in the country. Hence, if larger vessels are to be available, they should be a regional asset, funded under a centralised arrangement (perhaps similar to the Aids to Navigation Fund set up for the Malacca and Singapore straits).⁴¹

The OPVs should be operated regionally and programmed in response to bids from individual PICs. They would be manned by civilian crews, and law enforcement teams would be embarked as required from relevant island states. Their role would be to undertake regular patrols through the high seas and EEZs of the island countries, often in conjunction with scheduled air patrols.

Contractual arrangements for the vessels could be similar to those for the chartered vessels operated by the ACBPS. These

proposed arrangements accord with the recommendation by the Senate FADT Committee that, in developing a regional maritime security framework, departments should consider the advantages of elevating the PPB Program into a regional initiative, supported by the Pacific Islands Forum and other donors.

Based on a usage rate for each vessel of 250 sea-days per year, three OPVs would be required to ensure that two are on task in the South Pacific at any one time. The proposed characteristics of these vessels are set out in Box 1. The possible costs per ship are based on estimates from STX Canada Marine, the company that designed the RNZN OPVs.

The costs for a baseline 85-metre vessel with a maximum speed of 20 knots are estimated at \$65–70 million per ship, an additional \$10 million to make each ship helo-capable, and other costs as required for weapons and sensors above the basic commercial fit.⁴² Speed is the main driver of vessel cost: an additional \$10–12 million per ship would be needed to increase the maximum speed to 23 knots.

The total costs for the surface response capabilities listed here are therefore about \$305 million. This is well below the approximately \$550 million required to replace the existing twenty-two PPBs with similar vessels.

The two larger island countries with military forces (Papua New Guinea and Fiji) may, however, wish to make their own capability arrangements, including acquiring patrol boats from other foreign sources. However, it's important that they should still be plugged into regional coordination and information-sharing arrangements.



Royal Australian Navy Officer and a Solomon Islands police officer track the movements of registered fishing vessels in the region from the new Solomon Islands Police Force Maritime Unit Operations Centre, 15 October 2008. © Defence Department.

Box 1: Characteristics of the proposed offshore patrol vessels

- Commercial design using off-the-shelf systems
- Long range (at least 5,000 nautical miles) and endurance
- Helicopter landing deck and hangar
- Able to launch and recover small craft in most sea states
- Maximum speed 20 knots
- Possible hybrid propulsion system to allow for low-speed loitering
- Approximate length 80 metres
- Accommodation for crew and PIC ship-riding teams
- Modest armament—no major deck gun
- Possible cost per unit: A\$85 million.

Characteristics based on presentation by David McMillan, 'The changing face of OPV designs and principal cost drivers', STX Canada Marine, OPV Asia–Pacific 2011 conference, Singapore, 6 April 2011.

Regional coordination facility

A coordinated regional approach to the collection, analysis and dissemination of information is required to enable countries to evaluate risks and assign priority to law enforcement tasking. We stand by the recommendation in ASPI's 2008 report, subsequently endorsed by the Senate FADT Committee, that a regional maritime coordination centre (RMCC) be established.⁴³ Such a centre is essential at a regional level for the effective appreciation of maritime security threats and coordination of regional responses.

The two main RMCC elements would be a management group and an operations centre, which should ideally be co-located. At least in the initial years, it may be preferable to build on existing regional arrangements and accept some separation between the two elements. In that case, the operations centre could be co-located initially with the FFA in Honiara by expanding the FFA's fisheries surveillance centre. The management group may be better co-located in Suva with regional agencies concerned with maritime security.

The FFA has been exploring regional surveillance coordination as a possible role, although how that might operate or integrate with broader maritime law enforcement, search and rescue, and natural disaster support hasn't been considered in detail.

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While there are benefits in initially building on the FFA's surveillance centre, the FFA will always be viewed as having a fisheries focus, given its location. The RMCC would need to have a wider appreciation of suspicious activity and possible maritime security threats in the region.

Planning Australia's future assistance

Australia appears to be moving towards a civil model for maritime security assistance to the South Pacific. Responsibility for planning that assistance now rests with the Maritime Capability Development Branch of the ACBPS. The branch has to raise, train and sustain domestic Customs surveillance and response capabilities. However, buying capabilities for Customs means that it's not ideally placed to focus on regional maritime security.

The ACBPS is an agency within Home Affairs, which in turn is part of the Attorney-General's portfolio. It isn't the appropriate agency to lead Australia's contribution to South Pacific maritime security because that's not part of its core business: the ACBPS is principally focused on Australian border security and, particularly over recent years, people smuggling in northern waters. It has limited resources and other priorities. It lacks the broad strategic knowledge and experience of the region necessary for leading what will

undoubtedly be Australia's major contribution to regional maritime security.

The shift of responsibility to the ACBPS isn't strictly in accordance with the 2009 Defence White Paper:

The Government has directed Defence, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and other Australian Government agencies to develop an approach to regional maritime security that reflects Australia's commitment to assisting our neighbours in these areas in future. In particular, working with regional stakeholders, we will seek measures to enhance the capacity of regional countries to enforce their sovereignty, protect their resources and counter transnational crime.⁴⁴

The latest annual report of the ACBPS states, 'This year, we commenced a project to identify possible options for replacing the Pacific patrol boats, with a follow-on program beyond 2018, when these vessels reach the end of their planned life.' The report notes that this program involves 'Customs and Border Protection leadership of a whole-of-government initiative to improve Pacific maritime security. Engagement with Pacific Island countries and regional forums has commenced to ensure analysis is suitably targeted.'⁴⁵

A whole-of-government approach to the issue is important, but strong and experienced leadership is required and interagency competition must be avoided. The ACBPS, along with the Australian Federal Police and other agencies, has an operational involvement in regional maritime security. The ACBPS, in particular, might play an important role in planning operational capabilities, but it shouldn't be leading a project that has such significant defence and foreign policy implications for Australia.

Allocating leading responsibility for planning Australia's future maritime security assistance

to the South Pacific to the ACBPS downgrades the strategic and foreign policy significance of the project. This is despite the shift in focus of regional maritime security to transnational criminal activities rather than illegal fishing.

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The project should be led at the strategic policy level by a major department of state, while the operational and capability development levels can be delegated down the line. There must be a policy leader for the project, and the ACBPS is not well placed for that role.

Having the ACBPS as the project leader is equivalent to the US allocating Pacific maritime security to the Department of Homeland Security because the US Coast Guard is located within that department. By having our customs and border security agency take the lead on South Pacific maritime security, we risk sending a message to the region about our lack of priority for the project: responsibility for the future direction of the project should be with the Department of Defence.

There are other considerations that point to the importance of Defence leadership. Regional maritime security will always be an important component of our defence cooperation with the PICs, even though only three PICs actually maintain defence forces. Similarly, the Department of Defence has a central role in our multilateral and bilateral security engagements in the region. Royal Australian Air Force maritime surveillance flights and occasional patrols by RAN

warships, including a ship-rider program similar to that of the US, are likely to be important elements of our ongoing maritime security assistance to the region.

Finally, the RAN maritime surveillance advisers have been significant symbols of Australia's security interest in the region and central to the access Australia has enjoyed as a result of the PPB Program. Many of those benefits would be lost if the MSAs were replaced by civilian officers.

The need for action

While there have been numerous studies about what might come after the PPB Program, along with recommendations by a parliamentary committee and undertakings of action to regional forums, little progress has been made.

Our reputation in the region will suffer if action isn't taken to redress the situation. For better or worse, there are expectations among the PICs and the other stakeholders in Pacific maritime security that there will be a follow-on of some sort to the PPB Program.

Maritime security in the South Pacific is a vital issue for Australia. Determining what material assistance we might offer after the PPB Program is a significant task. It requires an appreciation of the full implications of the program, and of the importance of extensive liaison with all relevant stakeholders. It requires in-depth understanding of the region, of the policies and interests of the twenty or so sovereign stakeholders, and of the relevant legal frameworks, as well as of the strengths, weaknesses and costs of possible air and surface capabilities. It requires a much greater commitment of resources and effort than is currently being allocated to it.

Urgent action is required by Australia to catch up on lost ground in developing a plan for the material assistance Australia will contribute to

regional maritime security following the PPB Program. Our procrastination has contributed in no small way to our loss of strategic influence in the South Pacific in recent years.

It's no good waiting for ideas to come out of the Pacific. Australia has the necessary knowledge and expertise, the issue has already been sufficiently studied for a plan to be developed, and the PICs now expect Australia to take the lead.

An interagency taskforce led by the Department of Defence should be established to develop costed proposals for the provision of Australia's future contribution to maritime security in the South Pacific. The proposals should recognise the capability options discussed in this paper and the recommendations of the Senate FADT Committee.

Representatives of the taskforce should consult as necessary with other possible contributors of material assistance to the maritime security needs of the PICs, including France, Japan, New Zealand, the US and China. This isn't just about replacing boats: it's also about developing the supporting legislative, governance and management architecture that's going to be needed.

The next meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum Regional Security Committee will be held in Suva in early June 2011. The agenda for that meeting should include discussion of maritime security priorities, including the possible coordination of information requirements and enforcement operations as recommended by the maritime experts workshop in Canberra in July 2010.

The next annual Forum Leaders' meeting is scheduled to be held between late August and early September 2011. The pre-Forum Officials Committee will be held three weeks beforehand.

As noted above, in September 2009 Prime Minister Rudd announced a study of options in consultation with PICs. Australia should have something to report at this year's meeting of Pacific island leaders. The deadline for the initial report from the interagency taskforce should be set with that objective in mind.

With the end of the PPB Program looming, Australia now has the opportunity to work with key stakeholders to build a maritime surveillance and enforcement regime in the South Pacific.

With the end of the PPB Program looming, Australia now has the opportunity to work with key stakeholders to build a maritime surveillance and enforcement regime in the South Pacific. If that doesn't occur over the next few years, it probably won't be possible for a long time: the history of the PPB Program has shown that it's difficult to reshape regional surveillance arrangements after boats have been donated.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ACBPS	Australian Customs and Border Protection Service
ADF	Australian Defence Force
CPV	coastal patrol vessel
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
FADT Committee	Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
FFA	Forum Fisheries Agency
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated
MSA	maritime surveillance adviser
OPV	offshore patrol vessel
PICs	Pacific island countries
PPB Program	Pacific Patrol Boat Program
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RMCC	Regional Maritime Coordination Centre
RNZN	Royal New Zealand Navy

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