

# Submission in relation to the Foreign Policy White Paper

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## About the author

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## Summary of key points

- Australia's engagement with Pacific island countries needs to be a central and high priority focus of the Foreign Policy White Paper
- How Australia develops and implements foreign policy in the Pacific island region is a key determinant of how Australia is viewed as a global citizen
- Australia and Australians are well regarded by the peoples of the Pacific island region. This provides a platform for future endeavour
- The development and implementation of foreign policy requires a basis in knowledge and research. Successful policy development and implementation in the Pacific requires investment in sourcing knowledge from a wide range of sources rather than reliance on the 'usual suspects'
- Relationships with Pacific island countries require further development, including and especially at the highest political level (head of government)

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<sup>1</sup> The views contained in this submission are mine alone. They do not represent the views of the Development Policy Centre or the Australian National University

- Australia should look at developing an exchange scheme between government ministries and agencies that are of most significance in developing and implementing foreign policy
- DFAT needs to invest more in the preparation and training of A-based staff so that they are properly equipped to operate effectively and appropriately in Pacific island contexts
- DFAT needs to give appropriate recognition to the value of O-based staff and ensure that their skills and expertise are appropriately utilised within the policy work of the department
- The public diplomacy programme should be reviewed and revised so that its delivery is appropriate to the context in which it is delivered and to ensure it does not remain the tail that wags the foreign policy dog.

## 1. Introduction

This submission is focused entirely on the importance of the Pacific island region in the context of Australian foreign policy. It examines options for future engagement with our region in relation to diplomacy, security, people to people links and development assistance.

The importance of the Pacific island region to Australian foreign policy is hard to overstate. This White Paper presents an opportunity for the Australian government to make it clear to domestic and international audiences that it views relationships with Pacific island states as of equal significance as relationships with countries that are further away.

Recent global events such as Brexit in the UK, tensions in the South China Sea and the change of administration in Washington are crucial and likely to use up large amounts of policy energy at this time. This creates a risk that Pacific-focused policy will be overlooked. If this were to happen, Australia's position as a regional partner and global citizen will be seriously undermined, possibly to the point of being irretrievable.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Building on success

Australia and Australians are, by and large, well regarded in the Pacific island region. Pacific island people have a good general knowledge about Australia, and are often surprised to learn that the reverse is far from true. There are several strands of strong people to people links, including by way of tourism,<sup>3</sup> investment, study and

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Michael Wesley, Director of the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Studies (ANU) has also highlighted the importance of the Pacific for Australian foreign policy in the future (<https://soundcloud.com/policyforumpod/australias-future-foreign-policy>).

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank has determined that in 2014, there were 1.37 million visitors to 11 Pacific island countries, with two-thirds of those originating from Australia and New Zealand. For Fiji and Vanuatu,

sport. Whilst the Seasonal Worker Program has been slow to get going, there are signs that this will add another means by which Australians and Pacific island people will spend time together, learn about and from each other and develop connections.

In terms of development and humanitarian assistance, Australia has over many years generated a large amount of diplomatic and political capital. Whilst the development assistance landscape is certainly changing,<sup>4</sup> it remains the case that for a number of Pacific island countries, financial and technical support from Australia will remain an important part of development planning for some time to come, and possibly forever in some cases. In relation to disaster response, Australia will continue to be at the forefront of providing international assistance, including (but not limited to) by way of participation in the FRANZ partnership.<sup>5</sup>

Australia is an established source of foreign direct investment (FDI) into a number of Pacific island countries, particularly in the Melanesian region. Australian owned businesses are providers of employment, especially in urban centres. Even where a proportion of profits are repatriated to Australia, these businesses contribute to domestic economies in the region by way of employment, local procurement, taxation and licensing.

Australia is a member of key regional organisations, including the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Community and the University of the South Pacific. At the wider international level, Australia is a member of the Commonwealth along with several other Pacific island countries. The same is true of United Nations membership.

Australia has a well-developed diplomatic presence in the region with embassies and high commissions in many Pacific island countries. In a number of these countries, the Australian diplomatic presence is the most significant in terms of size and levels of activity.

All of these components should form a firm foundation for more and better engagement in our region whether bilaterally or regionally. In order for this improved engagement to occur, a number of themes need to inform how Australian foreign policy is developed and implemented. These themes are identified and discussed below:

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50% of the 2014 overnight visitors were Australian. (*Pacific Possible: Tourism*  
<https://soundcloud.com/policyforumpod/australias-future-foreign-policy>).

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the seven years to 2013, Chinese development assistance to Fiji exceeded that provided by Australia to the tune of \$110 million (*The Guardian*, 02/03/2015  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/02/china-increases-aid-contribution-pacific>).

<sup>5</sup> The recent admission to the Pacific Islands Forum of New Caledonia and French Polynesia as full members would appear to further entrench the significance of this grouping in the region, albeit indirectly.

## 2.1 Invest in knowledge

The 'blunt force' obliteration of AusAID has left DFAT stripped of Pacific expertise and specialists. The number of diplomats who have made the Pacific their career in recent times is dismally low. The knowledge base, even within the Pacific division, is based on too narrow a range of experience, insufficient engagement with Pacific island people, including senior officials and inadequate investment in research and analysis. This needs to be rectified in order to avoid some very basic missteps and errors, including those made at ministerial and cabinet level. Beyond that, it is only by developing a nuanced understanding of the region and appreciating the diversity and complexity it encompasses that Australian foreign policy can hope to be meaningful and beneficial in the future.

Those who formulate and implement Australian foreign policy in the Pacific islands region need to develop a 'listen and learn' approach that includes actively engaging with people from a range of sectors beyond the 'usual suspects' whether in Canberra or elsewhere. In particular, DFAT should be making more and better efforts to be listening to (rather than just hearing) the concerns of Pacific island people whether voiced by politicians, policy makers, members of civil society or others. This will and should include listening to conversations about topics that do not sit easily with other areas of Australian policy, domestic and foreign. These include, for example, self-determination for the people of West Papua and the fight against climate change. It was clearly demonstrated during 2015 that these issues are ones that are of key importance to Pacific island leaders:

*Of the five priorities discussed by Leaders (and identified through the new processes established by the [Framework for Pacific Regionalism \[pdf\]](#)), two came to dominate the media coverage and commentary. Both of these issues were ones where the leaders of small island states were not necessarily looking for technical assistance or even financing from the larger metropolitan members; rather they were looking for political solidarity. They were 1) a unified position on a call for a global warming target of no more than 1.5 degrees be adopted at the Paris talks, and 2) a regional response to ongoing allegations of human rights abuses in West Papua.<sup>6</sup>*

Australia needs to have a stronger, deeper knowledge base about what is happening in the Pacific island region to enable meaningful participation in wider security and strategic partnerships, including 'Five Eyes'. Both the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the State Department have expressed (informally) levels of frustration at the quality of intelligence about the region that they receive from Australian agencies. They point to gaps in base knowledge about issues such as the work of the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the support for self-determination for the Papuan provinces of Indonesia.

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<sup>6</sup> Tess Newton Cain & Matthew Dornan 'A tale of two forums' on *Devpolicy* 11/09/2015 (<http://devpolicy.org/a-tale-of-two-forums-20150911/>)

## 2.2 Invest in relationships

Doing business (of any kind) in the Pacific island region depends on having good relationships. Longstanding relationships are likely to be more fruitful and so the agencies that prosecute Australian foreign policy need to cultivate a cadre of Pacific specialists who have extensive, multi-layered networks to draw on. These relationships can be developed in numerous ways and in different forums, in the region and elsewhere. Without them, Australia will find itself on the back foot more and more often whether in regional forums or globally as those that are presumed to be friends adopt positions that are unexpected or unhelpful.

This type of investment needs to start at the top. The prime minister of Australia must meet with his/her Pacific island counterparts on a regular basis and in meaningful ways. He/she should attend the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' meeting in full, not simply jet in for the leaders' retreat and leave as soon as it is finished. Requests for official visits to Australia by leaders of Pacific island governments should be welcomed and facilitated in a timely manner. The asymmetrical approach to ministerial visits is blatantly obvious and should be a cause for embarrassment in Canberra, as it is for DFAT staff located in country. Visits from Australian junior ministers are announced with minimal notice (e.g. 2 weeks) and the most senior people in the receiving country are expected to be available for meetings while requests for invitations to prime ministers to visit Australia are ignored or denied on spurious grounds.

Australia should consider convening a 'heads of government' symposium or colloquium on a bi-annual basis at which the Australian prime minister and his/her Pacific colleagues can discuss matters of regional importance and develop their personal and professional relationships.

There are opportunities to develop relationships that will improve the knowledge base of Australian officials who are responsible for developing and implementing foreign policy. When DFAT graduate (would be) entrants respond to the question 'what can you tell me about Australia's relationship with our nearest neighbour?' by talking about Indonesia, it is a clear signal that there is insufficient knowledge about our region at the heart of the Australian foreign policy machine.

Australia should look at developing an exchange scheme between government ministries and agencies that are of most significance in developing and implementing foreign policy. This will allow for officials to develop strong bilateral relationships and ensure that the Australian bureaucracy increases its knowledge about how things work in Pacific island countries. This will allow for a more informed and nuanced approach to developing and implementing foreign policy in our region.

### **2.3 Invest in people**

Those who are the face of Australian foreign policy in the countries of the Pacific island region need to be equipped with the appropriate knowledge base and skill set to undertake their roles effectively. In particular, they require more and better preparation and training in how to perform and behave in ways that actively promote and enhance the delivery of foreign policy in our region. This extends to language training, cultural appreciation, skills related to political economy analysis, risk appraisal and management and more. There is a lack of consistency in the practice of these skills, which requires rectification. This is exacerbated by a lack of corporate knowledge within DFAT partly owing to the loss of Pacific expertise that was held within AusAID and partly owing to Pacific work not being perceived as a meaningful long-term career option for many A-based DFAT personnel.

DFAT is fortunate to be able to attract some extremely high calibre local staff and much more needs to be done to capitalise on the opportunities that this presents. There is a problem with retention of these people, which is largely to do with their being insufficiently integrated into the policy work of the department. The O-based staff members are the ones who are equipped with the local knowledge and should be treated as expert resources. Often, they are the best repositories of corporate and historical knowledge, particularly in the field of development assistance. Failure to exclude them from key decision-making or to follow their advice leads to serious missteps and undermines the perception of the work of the department overall.

A particular area where the expertise of local staff should be maximised is in relation to the public diplomacy programme. This has been ramped up over the last year to the point where it often looks like the tail that is wagging the foreign policy dog. Much of it is heavy handed in a Pacific context and can come across as patronising and, at times, ill mannered. This would appear to be self-defeating. The public diplomacy programme needs to be tailored in each country in order to ensure that it will be appropriate in both content and form. This will make it more effective. The O-based staff members have much to offer in ensuring that these objectives are achieved and their advice and guidance should be prioritised. At present, the over-emphasis on public diplomacy (which appears to be driven by Canberra) is undermining other areas of work that are possibly more important. This should be reviewed and revised in the future so that it is more appropriate for the Pacific context.

### **3. Conclusion**

For too long, Australian foreign policy has misfired in relation to the Pacific island region. There is much to be done at bilateral and regional levels to improve the quantum and quality of engagement between Australia and her nearest neighbours. The formulation of a White Paper is a key opportunity to do just that.