STEPPING-UP AUSTRALIA’S PACIFIC ENGAGEMENT

Australia’s step-up in engagement with the Pacific is one of the highest priorities of the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, launched on 23 November 2017.

The White Paper commits Australia to a more ambitious and intensified engagement in the Pacific to support a more resilient region.

Reflecting the White Paper’s ambition, Australia committed at the 2017 and 2018 Pacific Island Forum Leaders’ Meetings to a range of measures which will strengthen Australia’s engagement with the Pacific, including:

- stronger partnerships for economic growth
- stronger partnerships for security
- stronger relationships between our people.

Speaking at the Australian National University’s State of the Pacific Conference on 10 September 2018, Foreign Minister Payne said “Stepping up in the Pacific is not an option for Australian foreign policy — it is an imperative”.

The Step-up responds to the significant long-term challenges faced by our partners in the Pacific, including: climate change and responding to natural disasters; sustaining economic growth and boosting education, developing skills and jobs for growing populations; pursuing gender equality and recognising the essential role of women in achieving better development outcomes; preventing major disease outbreak and tackling transnational crime. Australia’s Step up in engagement builds on our development assistance to the region of $1.3 billion.

On 8 November, Prime Minister Morrison announced Australia would be “taking our engagement to a new level” in what would be a “new chapter in relations with our Pacific family”. In line with this, he announced Australia would establish five new diplomatic missions in the Pacific, extending our presence to every Pacific Islands Forum member.

To support our deepening engagement with the Pacific, the Foreign Minister announced on 15 November the establishment of the Office of the Pacific within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Office of the Pacific will enhance whole-of-government coordination and support Australia’s efforts to develop even closer ties with the Pacific.

Stronger economic partnerships

Supporting infrastructure in the Pacific

Australia’s ability to help address the infrastructure needs of the Pacific region was strengthened by two major infrastructure initiatives announced by the Prime Minister on 8 November: a $2 billion Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) and a proposal that Australia’s Parliament approve additional resources and powers for Australia’s Export Finance and Insurance Corporation (Efic) to support investments in the Pacific.

On 17 November at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the leaders of Australia, Japan and the United States announced the signature of a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on a Trilateral Partnership for infrastructure investment in the Indo-Pacific.
Under the MOU, the three countries will work together to mobilise private capital and deliver principles-based, sustainable infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific.

At APEC on 18 November, the Prime Minister joined leaders from PNG, Japan, New Zealand and the United States to announce the **Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership**. It aims to provide access to electricity for 70 per cent of Papua New Guinea by 2030.

**Labour mobility**

The **Pacific Labour Scheme** commenced on 1 July 2018 following a successful pilot program in northern Australia and building on the success of the **Seasonal Worker Programme**. The Scheme will help meet business demand across all sectors in rural and regional Australia. Workers from Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu are currently able to apply for low and semi-skilled employment in Australia under the Pacific Labour Scheme.

On 15 November, Foreign Minister Payne announced an **expansion to the Pacific Labour Scheme** to all Pacific island countries as well as an announcement to uncap the Scheme. Uncapping the Pacific Labour Scheme will help fill labour gaps in Australia’s towns and on our farms, boosting economic activity and competitiveness in rural and regional Australia.

**PACER Plus**

The **PACER Plus** agreement will better integrate Pacific economies, facilitating the flow of goods, capital, and people across signatory countries.

PACER Plus is a development focused trade agreement signed by Australia, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Ratification by eight signatory countries is required for the agreement to enter into force (expected in 2019). PACER Plus focuses on:

- Facilitating trade in goods and service;
- Promoting investment into the Pacific; and
- Providing a framework for Aid-for-trade assistance to signatories.

Australia and New Zealand have committed over $33 million in aid for trade assistance to help Pacific island countries fully benefit from the agreement. Australia also continues to work across government, international organisations, and the Australian financial sector to reduce the cost of sending money to the Pacific.

**Stronger security partnerships**

On 5 September 2018 in Nauru, Pacific Islands Forum Leaders adopted the **Boe Declaration on Regional Security** to guide future regional responses to emerging security issues. The new declaration recognises an expanded concept of security, inclusive of human, cyber and environmental security.

To support implementation of the Boe Declaration, and as announced in our Foreign Policy White Paper, we will establish the **Australia Pacific Security College (College)**. The College will make a valuable contribution to regional security cooperation by bringing together officials from across countries and agencies for training and professional development opportunities.
The College will also establish an active alumni network of Pacific security decision makers to strengthen networks across Pacific Island countries and agencies to facilitate closer collaboration on cross-border issues.

The Pacific Fusion Centre (Centre), announced by Foreign Minister Payne in Nauru in September 2018, is another initiative supporting implementation of the Boe Declaration and our Foreign Policy White Paper. The Centre will work with Pacific countries and regional organisations to aggregate and analyse security information, and through improved information sharing, support informed responses to security challenges across the region.

On 8 November, Prime Minister Morrison announced further Defence and Home Affairs initiatives in the Pacific. These include a dedicated vessel to deliver support, including for Pacific humanitarian and disaster relief and response; an annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Forces event hosted in Australia; an Australian Defence Force Pacific Mobile Training Team; and the Pacific Faculty of Policing at the Australian Institute of Police Management.

On 16 November 2018, the Foreign Minister announced that Australia would spend $9 million over four years to expand our Cyber Cooperation Partnership with the Pacific, working with New Zealand to strengthen the region’s cybercrime prevention and enhance its cyber incident response.

These initiatives build on Australia’s long-standing security cooperation with the Pacific. In 2017, Australia signed bilateral security partnerships MOUs with Tuvalu and Nauru, and a bilateral security treaty with Solomon Islands Australia has committed $2 billion to the Pacific Maritime Security Program over the next 30 years, with support to provide 21 replacement patrol boats across the Pacific and Timor-Leste and an aerial surveillance capability to bolster Pacific island maritime security. The Australian Federal Police has an active law enforcement role in the Pacific, including through the Pacific Transnational Crime Network. The Australian Fisheries Management Authority supports efforts through the Forum Fisheries Agency to improve fisheries management in the Pacific and combat illegal fishing.

To enhance regional health security, Australia is providing Pacific island countries with access to Australia’s Therapeutic Goods Administration’s world-class pharmaceutical quality assurance systems. The four-year pilot Pacific Medicine Testing Program gives participating countries at least five medicine quality tests per financial year.

Stronger people-to-people links

In November this year, the Prime Minister announced further initiatives to enhance Australia’s long-standing social, educational and cultural links with the Pacific. These programs all build on Australia’s enduring people-to-people ties.

On 18 November 2018, Mr Morrison announced a new education package, including secondary school scholarships for Pacific students to study in Australian secondary schools. We will also increase the number of vocational education and training scholarships for Pacific islanders under the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (formerly called the Australia Pacific Technical College); and expand Pacific teacher training through an expanded Australia-Pacific Schools Partnerships (BRIDGE) between Australian and Pacific high schools.

The two-year Australia-Pacific Schools Partnerships pilot program commenced earlier in 2018, starting with schools in Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Solomon Islands. In 2019, it will be expanded to include schools from Fiji, Nauru, Tonga and Vanuatu.

These initiatives complement the Government’s existing Australia Awards and New Colombo Plan programs, which focus on tertiary education.
Over the past decade, more than 9,300 students from the Pacific have received Australia Awards for study in Australia or in the region. Since its 2014 launch, the New Colombo Plan has supported mobility grants or scholarships for more than 2,400 Australian students to study in 12 Pacific island countries. This includes support for 1,100 participants in the region in 2018. These international students and the talented Australians who study overseas, including through the New Colombo Plan, make up Australia’s Global Alumni Community.

On 18 November, the Prime Minister also announced a new Church Partnerships Program with the Pacific, building on links between Australian and Pacific churches, recognising that religion is an integral part of Pacific life.

Sport is a great equaliser, for which Australians and Pacific peoples share a common passion. On 8 November, the Prime Minister announced a new Australia Pacific sports linkages program, a grants program to strengthen sporting links between Australia and our region. The program will bring new and diverse talent into our sporting codes and will encourage the development of elite sports in the Pacific.

The Pacific Sports Partnerships (PSP) Program continues to deliver positive outcomes in leadership, gender equality, health and improving the lives of people with disability through sport, while building lasting relationships between Australia and Pacific countries.

To improve the travel experience of visiting Pacific leaders from political, business and sporting spheres, Australia will introduce a new Pacific-Australia Card (PAC), which will offer eligible applicants priority visa application processing, and recognition at Australian airports.

The Pacific Research Program began in October 2017 to foster a strong and vibrant Pacific-Australia-New Zealand-wide network of research on the Pacific to support better policy and development program design outcomes.

Another recent initiative, the $10 million, three-year Australian Aid: Friendship Grants program, commenced in 2018. The program will engage a diverse group of Australian community organisations in the delivery of Australia’s aid program.

On 8 September 2017, the Pacific Connect program was announced. It is now underway, to forge stronger, relationships between Pacific and Australian leaders across the public, private and community sectors.