

Navigating Security in the Pacific

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Abstract

This article examines how New Zealand has framed recent security dynamics in the region and asks how this framing aligns with the priorities of Pacific partners. There are some indications of increasing alignment with 'like-minded' partners such as the US and Australia, prompted in part by increased concerns about Chinese engagement in the region. However, New Zealand has also been circumspect in seeking out opportunities to continue to engage with China and, perhaps most importantly for its Pacific partners, has increasingly responded to regional concerns about understanding climate change as an existential security threat. Recent uptake of Pacific imagery and narrative in the Ministry of Defence's *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* policy document is particularly evocative in suggesting a more genuine recentring of Pacific priorities, although enduring engagement is needed to support rhetorical commitments (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018). Here relationships with diasporic populations, youth and women, in particular, should be more strongly pursued as New Zealand navigates its way in and through the Pacific and its politics into the future.

Keywords: Regional geopolitics, framing, recentring, Pacific politics, youth, diaspora, women

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Introduction

“We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood”.
– Teresia Teaiwa (2017: 133)

In the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* document, New Zealand suggests that New Zealand and its Pacific partners are ‘he waka eke noa’ (all in this together) (New Zealand Ministry of Defence (NZ MoD), 2019). In this article, we consider how New Zealand has been framing and navigating security dynamics in the region and ask how this approach aligns with the priorities of Pacific partners. Although New Zealand has taken some care to not designate the region as necessarily being one of great power competition, observing, in particular, how New Zealand has responded to increasing engagement by China by emphasising more general concern about ‘external actors’, there are indications of stronger alignment with ‘like-minded’ partners such as the US and Australia. However, New Zealand has also increasingly responded to regional concerns about climate change, and New Zealand’s recent uptake of Pacific imagery and narrative is a particularly important development. Overall, we promote a recentring of Pacific priorities, suggesting that the recent rhetorical emphasis on furthering relationships must be matched with enduring engagement, and asserting that there are some relationships, with diasporic populations, youth and women, in particular that could be more strongly pursued as New Zealand navigates its way in the Pacific¹

Framing Security: Indo Pacific, Geopolitical Competition, and Climate Change

In this article, we begin with a consideration of how New Zealand has framed security issues in the region, and then ask how that interpretation maps alongside the direction of Pacific partners. We then consider how frames such as ‘Indo Pacific’, ‘great power competition’ (particularly China as a perceived negative influence), climate change as the existential security threat and the relevance of the ‘Blue Pacific’ have been discussed, deployed or discarded by New Zealand as it claims to align itself with Pacific partner priorities.

Echoing the sentiment of Fry’s (1997) seminal work ‘Framing the Islands: Knowledge and Power in Changing Australian Images of “the South Pacific”’, when thinking about security in the Pacific the first question that comes to mind is: whose framing of ‘security’ are we prioritising? As Fry, 1997 noted in the late 1990s, the images that dominate imaginations “do not simply provide interesting insights into the Australian [and Kiwi] imagination; they affect the lives of the people they depict” (Fry, 1997: 306). Fry’s 2019, book on the topic further entreats us to ask questions such as ‘whom should Pacific regionalism serve’, asking how metropolitan powers like New Zealand have responded to Pacific-centred priorities when faced with other pressures (Fry, 2019).

New Zealand, like others in the region, have had to identify just how to respond to recent US-led efforts to relabel the very name of the broader region away from ‘Asia Pacific’ towards ‘Indo Pacific’ (US Department of Defense, 2019). This relabelling seeks to reinvigorate the centrality of the US’s existing hubs-and-spokes system of alliances in the region and to draw India more strongly into that system (Panda, 2019) – an effort reinforced by initiatives such as the ‘Quad’ which connects India with the US, Australia and Japan through high-level security dialogues and exercises (Ayers, 2018). Yet this attempt to remake geostrategic terrain has not been without controversy.

Pacific partners have expressed concern about this relabelling; pointing out that the terminology was not generated by Pacific needs and concerns and raising concerns that it might both diminish Pacific regionalism and that it could set the region up against other key partners (Powles, 2019). And New Zealand’s response to

¹ “As per conventional publishing practice there are direct quotes from various websites in this article that are absent page numbers. Please note that each of these sources are of limited length so these references are still easy to locate”.

this broader reframing has, by-and-large, walked alongside these concerns by not jumping wholesale to accept this move. The Defence Minister, Ron Mark, thus stuck exclusively to the phrase ‘Asia Pacific’ in his 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, although in 2019, as the term gained momentum, Mark did include references to both ‘Asia Pacific’ and ‘Indo Pacific’ in his speeches to that same forum just a year later. The phrase Indo-Pacific is now more common within New Zealand circles, finding its way into Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (NZ MFAT) speeches and policies, for example (NZ MFAT, 2019; Pongsudhirak, 2019). But this framing has also not been taken up wholesale – and a similar claim can be made with regards to the overarching notion that the region is beset by strategic competition.

This explicit attempt at relabelling the region has been prompted by an even more general framing of the current strategic situation: one that asserts that the region is beset by other external powers seeking to abuse their positions and relationships. Contemporary commentary often dubs the current situation as one of geopolitical manoeuvring by certain outside powers (particularly China, but also Russia) for nefarious influence in the region. Chinese interest in stronger engagement in the region, in particular, is commonly presented in academic and media commentary as necessarily a) impinging upon existing relationships and b) as a cause for concern. A frequent phrase used to describe China in the region is that of ‘strategic competitor’, with many assuming China has a strong ‘will-to-power’ and desire for regional hegemony (Roy, 2019). Concerns are regularly voiced by commentators about debt trap diplomacy or the possibility of a Thucydides Trap unfolding between China and the US or similar (O’Keeffe, 2018).

Pacific views as to how to understand and frame increased Chinese engagement are nuanced and differ from state to state. Although some, such as President of Palau Tommy, clearly express the view that there is a need to “counter Chinese expansionism and its militarization of islands in the region”, many others continue argue that China is a valued friend to the region (Rasou, 2017; Remengesau, 2019; Ah-Hi, 2018). With recent developments such as Kiribati and Solomon Islands recently switching allegiance from Taiwan to Beijing, there are rising costs for outside powers that might insist that Chinese engagement in the region is necessarily or automatically problematic. And, moreover, many have suggested that framing the situation as one of great power competition acts to obscure the real security threats in existence.

Rear Admiral Viliame Naupoto, the commander of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces, thus recently asserted that there are ‘three elephants’ fighting for influence in the region: China, the US, and climate change. He argued that “of the three, climate change is winning - climate change exerts the most influence, if you like, on the countries in our part of the world” (Sachdeva, 2019). This emphasis on climate change as an existential threat, one far more serious than geopolitical jockeying between great powers, is also clearly expressed in formal terms in the *Boe Declaration*: the latest Pacific-generated policy that seeks to enunciate the region’s primary security concerns (Pacific Island Forum Leaders, 2018).

Climate change has been clearly identified as an existential threat. The *Boe Declaration 2018*, provides the most recent, and startlingly clear, statement of this and other Pacific security interests and concerns (Pacific Island Forum Leaders, 2018). In this document, Pacific Island Forum leaders clearly state that “climate change remains the single greatest threat to the livelihood, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific” (Pacific Island Forum Leaders, 2018). The declaration also more broadly focuses on human security issues, the prioritisation of environmental security and regional cooperation in building resilience to disasters and climate change as Pacific priorities for action. Cyber-crime and transnational crime (illegal fishing, narcotics, people smuggling) as well as the “dynamic geopolitical environment”, which was leading to “an increasingly crowded and complex region”, are also noted as key regional challenges (Pacific Island Forum Leaders, 2018).

With regards to these interrelated issues of a ‘crowded and complex region’ and the possibility of centring discussion instead on an alternative focus on the existential threat of climate change, New Zealand has thus far generally been quite measured in its discussions about geopolitical competition, particularly in relation to climate change and human security concerns. This apparent caution in avoiding framing the current situation as necessarily being all about geostrategic manoeuvring is important if New Zealand is to be able to claim a degree of alignment with Pacific partners as it seeks to increase its engagement in the region through the

MFAT-led 'Pacific Reset' and the Ministry of Defence-led *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* strategy (NZ MoD, 2018).

In New Zealand circles, mentions of Chinese involvement in the region are typically carefully pitched. Reservations about China tend not to be voiced explicitly but rather are subsumed by more general mentions about the threats posed by new external interests. This choice of a more ambiguous approach has been explained by some as being due to New Zealand's small state status, and, in particular, its reliance on trade, though in this paper we would suggest that this is also due to an attempt to calibrate policies with Pacific partners too (Kollner, 2019). NZ MFAT's *Strategic Intentions* document thus argues that "growing interest from actors from outside the region brings a wider donor base, but also strategic competition and exposure to a broader set of risks that may also affect New Zealand interests (NZ MFAT, 2018: 11). Winston Peters' 'Pacific reset' speech in March 2018 noted the "changing [of] New Zealand's relative influence" in an "increasingly contested strategic space" (Peters, 2018).

However, the Strategic Defence Policy Statement more assertively states that China has sought to increase engagement in the Pacific through an alternative model of development "absent liberal democracy", and that the Chinese government "holds views on human rights and freedom of information that stand in contrast to those that prevail in New Zealand" (NZ MoD, 2018: 17). And the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* strategy, though not specifically pointing to China per se, emphasises "the pace, intensity and scope of engagement by external actors, who may not always respect our values" (NZ MoD, 2019: 7). As Professor Ayson from the Centre for Strategic Studies exclaims, who else but China can "fit the bill" of such an external power that could potentially "establish a greater regular presence" which "could materially affect the Pacific and our own strategic circumstances." (Ayson, 2019). This more expressly stated evidence of concern about the nature of Chinese engagement in the region is particularly relevant when these same documents elevate New Zealand's operations in the Pacific to the same status as operations within New Zealand.

Yet even after the release of the unprecedentedly strong statements, it is also important to note that a number of engagements with China are still being actively pursued. In June 2019, the Minister of Defence signed a new Memorandum of Arrangement Concerning Defence Cooperation with China's Minister of National Defence, General Wei Fenghe, stating an intention to maintain dialogue, to build understanding and to promote positive links, noting a strength of relationships in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and international peace cooperation activities. This sentiment was then reinforced by substantive Chinese engagement in the NZDF's table-top Exercise (TTX) *Cooperative Spirit* held in Auckland in late August 2019. Focusing on HADR and WPS, the TTX provided a safe space for defence diplomacy between New Zealand and China as well as other invited actors. This pushes back against the idea that New Zealand is shying away from engaging with China, as well as suggesting that HADR activity in the region will not necessarily be an expression of American soft balancing against China (Newby, 2019).

Some care has therefore been taken in both New Zealand rhetoric and actions so as to not cast the current security situation as being necessarily one of competition where sides must be chosen; indeed this sentiment of not wanting to ever be placed in a situation of having to 'pick sides' is longstanding (Steff & Dodd-Parr, 2019). Moreover, it leaves room for a different framing of the contemporary security environment to prevail. Ayson (2019) has therefore asserted that New Zealand needs to rethink how to better advance New Zealand's values and interests outside of the frame of competition that is seeping into recent policy. In particular, he seems to suggest that New Zealand should promote itself as a "Pacific partner of choice that supports a resolute approach to climate change" (Ayson, 2019). It is therefore significant that the climate change / human security focused framing of the *Boe Declaration* is also increasingly represented in national policies. Indeed, the *Boe Declaration* is explicitly referenced in the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* strategy, as is the concurrent narrative of the 'Blue Pacific' and the deeper emphasis it brings on a shared identity.

Framing identity too: the importance of the ‘Blue Pacific’ narrative

In 2017, the Samoan government hosted the Pacific Island Forum with a theme of ‘Blue Pacific: Our Sea of Islands’. In discussing what this meant, some suggested that the Blue Pacific idea:

calls for inspired leadership by the Forum and a long-term commitment together as one Blue Continent, has the potential to define a Blue Pacific economy, ensures a sustainable, secure, resilient and peaceful Blue Pacific, as well as strengthens Blue Pacific Diplomacy to protect the value of our Ocean and peoples (Malielegaoi, 2017).

Pacific Island Forum leaders later endorsed the idea that the Blue Pacific concept is “about all Pacific peoples comprising our ocean of islands” (Malielegaoi, 2018). In terms of what this concept means in practice, Tukuitonga (2018), Director General of the Pacific Community (SPC), noted – “this [Blue Pacific] narrative highlights the importance of the Pacific taking ownership of its future” (Tukuitonga, 2018). The concept of the ‘Blue Pacific’ echoes the words of Hau’ofa’s (1994) ‘sea of islands’ refrain – it seeks to replace external views of the Pacific as a place of small and isolated entities with images of vastness and connectedness through the medium of water. The ‘Blue Pacific’ idea is strongly linked to identity, it emphasises Pacific states as ‘large ocean states’ with its peoples claiming a special relationship to that ocean. This is an idea that the Honourable Cook Islands Prime Minister, highlights as an enduring feature in the Pacific, noting that Pacific peoples have been stewards of the Pacific Ocean Continent for generations (Puna, 2018). This particular narrative and framing also inherently supports both a regional and environment-centric approach to thinking about security and responses to security concerns.

Importantly, then, the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* (2019) expressly references the ‘Blue Pacific’ narrative and seeks to underscore New Zealand’s identity as a Pacific nation. The symbolism in this document is significant. It depicts the idea of ‘vaka tahi’ or ‘one canoe’, symbolising a collective approach to contemporary challenges. The document also emphasises New Zealand’s Pacific connections through common language, values and relationships, making explicit connections between Pacific and Māori worlds, indeed the policy document purposefully references Māori and Pacific concepts such as *kotahitanga* (togetherness) and *talanoa* (inclusive dialogue). Some of this approach is not unprecedented, in launching New Zealand’s new ‘Pacific Reset’, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, emphasised that one in five New Zealanders have Māori or Pasifika connections through their whakapapa (genealogy), before stating how the reset would focus on understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective ambition and sustainability (Peters, 2018).

However, there are some tensions inherent in the fact that the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* document is a Defence document – and only Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga have military forces, Vanuatu a ‘Mobile Force’. This emphasis on defence connections therefore limits the reach of this approach, and / or prompts militarisation concerns. That is, the Mutual Assistance Programme (MAP), has similarly sought to support military professionalization and defence diplomacy with partner states in the Asia Pacific region (New Zealand Army, 2018). Yet at times this resulted in a lack of fit, with rumours of Samoan police personnel, for example, being sent on military training courses.

In terms of what the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* seeks to do, the document outlines three key areas of engagement (NZ MoD, 2019). One is focused on a multisector engagement with Fiji, but the other two are broader. The launching of a Pacific Defence Gender Network seeks to provide support to women serving in their armed forces. This speaks to broader objectives such as the Women Peace and Security agenda’s focus on increasing female participation, and is admirable, although it underscores the parallel need to continue to support peacebuilding efforts undertaken by civil society actors too. The second initiative, the Leader Development Programme aims to provide training opportunities across various ranks to help further professionalise forces in Fiji, Tonga, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. Unsurprisingly, this initiative comes with infrastructure goals attached, adding to the rush to build infrastructure as solid evidence of engagement and potentially increasing the feeling of yet more ‘bidders’ in an auction for influence.

So though appealing to the Blue Pacific narrative, the material evident within the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* concept could potentially have been more useful outside of a Defence construct. And, moreover, some of the more general foreign affairs statements about relationships in the Pacific still fall short of reflecting Pacific priorities. Winston Peters' 'Pacific Reset' speech is a useful example (Peters, 2018). Despite the emphasis on relatedness, the speech nonetheless slipped into a deficit framing of the Pacific being populated by "small, and disparate and isolated" and poverty-stricken states (Peters, 2018). There is, therefore, some room for improvement if New Zealand is seeking to demonstrate how well it aligns with Pacific partner priorities – and there are some particular areas where policy-makers could usefully place their efforts.

Centring Pacific priorities

Changing mindsets and acknowledging local regional priorities is key to becoming a more valued partner in the region. For example, Pasifika and Kiwi attendees at a workshop on security and climate change held in Wellington in May 2018 emphasised the need to change what they saw as a patronising mind-set in New Zealand. Notably, this was emphasised by a negative comparison with China. These attendees suggested that, in the Pacific, it is *widely believed* that China has approached the issue of aid and engagement differently. That is, at the Workshop it was suggested that "New Zealand comes with good ideas about what is best for the Pacific but China comes and asks the Pacific Islands: what do you want from us?" (*He Waka Eke Noa* Workshop Report, 2018: 2). Although difficult to accept, there is some evidence for this belief that New Zealand may seek to dominate interpretations of what is good for the Pacific. MFAT's *Strategic Intentions 2018-22* document, for example, seeks to create a working environment in the region whereby "Decisions by Pacific Island countries align with New Zealand interests in regional and international fora" (NZ MFAT, 2018). But what if we were to re-centre Pacific voices in this discussion of security and seek to align New Zealand more closely to Pacific interests instead?

Part of recentring Pacific voices would entail acknowledging the diversity of Pacific perspectives. Each Pacific nation or territory has their own diverse spectrum of perspectives, from their leaders down to the local people. There are always challenges to ensuring efficiencies in shaping policies, priorities and implementation of regional frameworks within any region. Within the region itself, regional frameworks are often seen as more of a guide to action rather than a one size fits all. Metropolitan powers such as New Zealand could therefore more usefully acknowledge the utility but also limitations of regionalism. For example, when trialling initiatives in bigger islands, such as Papua New Guinea, at times these fail but this can result in an assumption that these initiatives will therefore not work for the rest of the Pacific, when perhaps some initiatives unworkable in large contexts could be applied more successfully in smaller islands. This 'not one size fits all' approach can be applied to thinking about the roles played by external partners (interview, June 2019).

However, this said, clearly some issues, such as climate change are cross-cutting concerns that do benefit from more broad-brush regional approaches. Clearly climate change is unequivocally the most important security priority. It is important, therefore, that MFAT will seek to "Advocate for greater international action on climate change, including support and finance that delivers for the Pacific" (MFAT, 2018: 25), and such sentiments are also echoed in a 2019 Cabinet document. Words need to be followed by deeds, but the passing of the Zero Carbon Bill in Wellington in November 2019 suggests a seriousness in tackling some of these issues, committing New Zealand as it does to a zero carbon target by 2050 or sooner. Such concrete actions will help to reassure Pacific partners that New Zealand is taking such concerns seriously. This also helps to provide set standards for others, such as the US and Australia, to consider as they similarly claim to be engaged in some form of regional 'step-up'.

Another important related issue is that of migration management in the light of climate change. Some recent policy initiatives have shown promise – the temporary migrant workers schemes in New Zealand, for example, have had some positive effects. But even in these cases there remain concerns about prospects, parity and cycles of poverty associated with seeing Pacific Island people as sources of cheap, unskilled labour in adopted lands, even when offered permanent residency (Tolley, 2019). And although the New Zealand

government has been considering visas for climate change refugees, there are frustrations over the mere existence of this very label at all. Some in the Pacific are seeking to reclaim a proud history of migration, and argue that this label disempowers migrating individuals and simultaneously diminishes others' responsibilities for climate change impacts (Farbotko and Lazrus, 2012). Policy initiatives that seek to help respond to migration in such a way that retains the mana of migrants will be important, and this simply requires ongoing discussions with climate change affected populations.

Similarly, continuing on with a nuanced approach to great power interest in the region is important. As some suggest, there is "only so much oxygen to go around the region, and there was a risk the US and China would consume it all" (Sachdeva, 2019). Assuming problems exist can be unhelpful. Research into China's 'debt trap' diplomacy, for example, has found no significant change in terms of debt distress (Fox and Dornan, 2018). Instead, attempts to maintain a tempered approach and maintaining a degree of openness of interpretation are helpful. It avoids offending Pacific governments in that it does not assume that "they have no discernment or agency in relation to their decisions" about issues such as whether or not to accept Chinese loans, and it therefore also does not prevent those Pacific partners from accessing vitally needed resources (Fry, 2019: 269). Emphasising great power competition only removes initiative and potentially invites increased militarisation, and Pacific leaders are facing more pressing day-to-day concerns about issues such as migrating tuna stocks and drug trafficking which could provide areas for increased engagement.

Recent data has confirmed fears that climate change might force tuna stocks to migrate out from Pacific EEZs. Modelling undertaken by the SPC suggests that there will be a strong eastward shift in the distribution of skipjack and yellowfin tuna, and a weaker shift in the distribution of bigeye tuna, such that there is reduced abundance of these species in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Pacific Island countries and territories west of 170E in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (FAO, 2019). Ongoing attempts to protect those fish stocks that remain in Pacific Island state EEZs will therefore become even more important. Similarly pressing is the increasing presence of illegal narcotics. Recent research has suggested that the Pacific is becoming a drugs 'highway', with large shipments of cocaine and methamphetamine making their way from the US and Latin America through to Australia and New Zealand where prices are high (Lyons, 2019). These are areas where New Zealand already makes some contributions, particularly through the Customs/Fisheries programme Te Vaka Moana, and through formal bi-lateral policing relationships, but given their significance to Pacific partners, New Zealand could arguably do more as Pacific Island authorities struggle in a 'David and Goliath' struggle with porous borders and limited resources (Tupou in Lyons, 2019).

Policy makers could usefully better recognise diversity in the region, continue to respond to climate crises and deescalate framing the security environment as being one of geopolitical strategic competition to instead focus on day to day human security issues. Perhaps most importantly, however, the emphasis on relationships that is expressed so strongly in the *Advancing Pacific Partnerships* needs to be backed by enduring efforts across a range of sectors both at home and abroad.

Building stronger relationships

One key way to ensure that government policies reflect a renewed approach towards the Pacific is to 'reset' institutional structures at home. Government institutions in all three countries – the US, Australia and New Zealand – are, to differing extents, saturated with Euro-centric values. Purposefully enabling and fostering a diverse range of perspectives would assist in strengthening a deeper and more trustworthy engagement with the Pacific.

Finding diverse voices to contribute to making structural changes within government departments and across government policy should be straightforward. New Zealand has large numbers of Pacific diasporic populations who have their own perspectives on key issues impacting the Pacific. Admittedly, these views are not always consistent with perspectives of those living in the islands, but Pasifika populations could be

engaged with too much greater effect – both within government institutions and without. Fraenkel, 2018 highlighted in an analysis piece for *Incline* in March last year that, “Resetting New Zealand’s Pacific policy is not only about aid or its governance. It is also about responsiveness, respect and greater familiarity with pressing issues” (Fraenkel, 2018). Damon Salesa’s book, *Island Time* asserts that ‘Island Time’ is now, a claim reinforced by recent statistics that demonstrate that Pacific peoples are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in New Zealand (Salesa, 2017), with approximately two thirds that are New Zealand born and a median age of 22 (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). This is an opportune time for New Zealand to engage with Pacific diaspora and to utilise the knowledge and expertise that they hold.

Moreover, considering the voices of young people should not be overlooked or underestimated. They provide another layer of perspective and innovation, inclusive of differing generational contexts in response to pressing issues. The Pacific Youth Leadership and Transformation Council, a charitable trust based in Christchurch, New Zealand, run a number of events such as iSPEAK and Pacific Youth Parliament resulting in written submissions on an array of topical issues (Community Matters, 2019). These events enable Pacific youth voices from Christchurch to be represented and heard by key decision makers locally and nationally. By allowing young people to be part of discussions on pressing issues makes for a more informed, engaged and confident population of young people. Importantly too, most Pacific countries are experiencing a youth bulge. This provides challenges as such youth demand jobs and a decent standard of living, but also new opportunities within and without the Pacific as generational change helps to shift cronyism, to provide fresh leadership options and as some of these young people seek employment and other opportunities offshore.

And, lastly, the role of women has been recognised in some contexts but ongoing and increased engagement will deliver strong returns. The election of women into parliament in a number of countries in the region are at record highs. In the 2018 Fiji elections a record of ten women were elected to Parliament, Solomon Islands have recently elected two female MPs, and in the 2017 New Zealand elections, 46 women were elected to Parliament with five that are of Pacific ethnicities (Graue, 2018; McDonald, 2019; New Zealand Parliament, 2018). While these milestones have been welcomed at a Parliamentary level, there is still a long way to go for representation of women at all levels. Not only might some of the human security concerns be best addressed through engagement with local women, but multi-disciplinary research is increasingly emphasising that investing in women has ongoing long-term positive effects across a wide range of security and development issues (True, 2018).

Conclusion

New Zealand is feeling its way forward in terms of how best to navigate security issues in the Pacific at a time when there are more choices of willing and interested partners available to Pacific leaders. The situation is ‘crowded and contested’ in terms of actors engaging in the region with different approaches to that engagement, but this has also helped to prompt an unprecedentedly strong regional response. The creation of the Boe Declaration and the Blue Pacific narrative provide clear indications as to what priorities are important for Pacific Island partners. These ideas are increasingly reflected in recent initiatives coming out of Wellington, though more can be done to enact change within government bodies themselves, to find other initiatives outside of a defence-centric approach, and to extend relationships within and across diasporic communities, women and youth.

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