

One year, three agreements: shaping thinking on regional security

by James Batley

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Penny Wong arriving in Port Vila in December 2022

Photo Credit: Penny Wong – Senator for SA/Facebook

It's been a busy 12 months for security negotiators in DFAT's Office of the Pacific. The last year saw the signing – although not yet the ratification; that's another story – of bilateral security agreements with Vanuatu (December 2022), [Tuvalu](#) (November 2023) and [Papua New Guinea](#) (December 2023).

Each of these agreements is specific to the relationship it covers. Even so, it can be instructive to set them side by side. This piece is not intended as an exhaustive comparative analysis; rather it draws attention to a specific motif that recurs in the preambular language of all three agreements, and considers its significance.

Consider the following extracts from the agreements.

- [Australia-Vanuatu Bilateral Security Agreement](#): “RECOGNISING that challenges to the security of one Party can affect the security of the other Party due to their proximity and close bilateral ties”
- [Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union treaty](#): “RECOGNISING that as Pacific countries the Parties’ interests are intertwined and decisions taken by one Party affect the interests of the other”
- [Australia-Papua New Guinea Agreement on a Framework for Closer Security Relations](#): “RECOGNISING that because their security interests are shared, including by virtue of geographic proximity, decisions taken in one country affect the security of the other”

Of course, the mere fact of signing a bilateral security agreement already implies an acknowledgement of shared interests at some level. But the parallels between the three texts are striking and suggest, to this reader at least, that this language is more than simple diplomatic filler, and that Australia – as the common party to all three agreements – has been keen to make a point.

What is that point and why, from Australia's perspective, is it needed? The point seems to be that, while Australia remains by any objective measure by far the largest security partner in the region (and does so in whatever ways "security" is defined), it nevertheless perceives a gap when it comes to the security policy-making and strategic calculations of individual countries in the region.

It's a point that comes into particularly sharp focus when set against the background of Solomon Islands' still-secret security agreement with China, signed in the first half of 2022. And it provides a rationale for Australia's response to, and concerns about, that agreement. Australia has never questioned Solomon Islands' sovereign right to enter into a relationship of its own choosing; but it has reserved the right to point out to Solomon Islands that the agreement impinges directly, and detrimentally, on Australia's own security interests. From Australia's point of view, Solomon Islands' apparent failure to take this into account – or even to acknowledge it – was a key missing factor in its decision-making around the agreement.

More broadly, the ideas expressed in the three statements quoted above should be seen as part of Australia's efforts to shape thinking on evolving regional security doctrine and architecture, in the context both of the implementation of the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 [Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), and of China's ongoing attempts to develop its role as both a bilateral and regional security partner in the region.

The language is suggestive of an effort to normalise the idea of a regional security community grounded in the acceptance of shared, indeed reciprocal, responsibility for security. It might be linked to ideas set out in the [Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' Communiqué](#) in 2022 which "reaffirmed the concept of regionalism and a family first approach to peace and security".

It might be noted that, for many years, Pacific Island countries have argued that Australia's domestic climate change policy impinges directly on their interests, and that Australia's policy settings should take their interests into account. Australia does not dispute that this is a shared challenge even if, in practice, Pacific Island countries have continued to press successive Australian governments to pursue more ambitious policies in this area. Even so, the extracts quoted above from the three bilateral security agreements follow the same logic as Pacific Island calls for Australia to respect, and to take into account, their interests in this particular area.

Much more has, can and will be said about these three agreements, both individually and collectively, and about Australia's efforts at shaping its region. For instance, one intriguing aspect of the Vanuatu and PNG agreements is the inclusion of detailed provisions for the sharing of classified information, suggesting that this is

an emerging area of security cooperation between Australia and Pacific Island countries.

In her [address to the National Press Club](#) in April 2023, Foreign Minister Penny Wong spoke of “how we shape a region that reflects our national interests and our shared regional interests”. While security cooperation in the Pacific Islands region is extensive and multifarious, the idea, architecture and shape of a [regional security community](#) remains [elusive, and contested](#). Even where it is possible for members of that putative security community to declare that they have “shared interests”, in practice policies implemented at the national level may not reflect shared priorities. Ideas contained in the three security agreements signed over the past year give us a glimpse into at least some of the ways that Australia is seeking to implement the objective outlined by Penny Wong in her April speech.

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