

Securing the potential and wellbeing of the blue Pacific

by Meg Taylor

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Unveiling of the RAMSI Monument at the Central Police Station cenotaph site, Honiara 2017 (Credit: Sean Davey)

Effective regional security underpins the vision outlined in the theme for this year's Pacific Islands Forum – *Building a Strong Pacific: Our People, Our Islands, Our Will*. The security of our people and their environment is crucial for sustainable growth and development, and the way we organise ourselves to protect and nurture our 'blue continent' must be something we decide for ourselves.

"Securing the wellbeing and potential of the blue Pacific is at the centre of the Forum agenda", said Forum Chair and Prime Minister of Samoa, the Hon. Tuilaepa Malielegaoi at the Korea-Pacific Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting in Seoul last December. "Protecting the blue Pacific will require a collective security architecture that recognises, promotes and provides security in the broadest sense of the term. There is commitment to working together to ensure the security of our shared ocean geography, resources and ecosystems therein, from unsustainable exploitation and illegal activities, including illegal fishing and transnational crime."

This is a time of profound change; and this change is taking place at an unprecedented pace. Geo-strategic competition between major world powers has once again made our region a place of renewed interest and strategic importance. Climate change increasingly affects our people in a variety of ways including increased severe weather events, scarcity of food and water, and displaced communities. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are burgeoning, and with them issues relating to cyber security and cyber enabled crime.

Within this context, at the Forum Leaders meeting in Apia last year, Leaders directed the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat to engage in consultations to refresh our existing security arrangements to meet the regions current and future security challenges. Forum Leaders saw the need to expand and strengthen collective action for regional security inclusive of human security, humanitarian assistance, prioritising environmental security and building resilience to impacts of natural disasters and climate change.

As a result, the Forum Secretariat has been working on a declaration which is currently dubbed Biketawa Plus and will be discussed by Forum Leaders when they meet in Nauru in September. The Biketawa Plus is an opportunity to build off the Biketawa Declaration and other existing security declarations for strategic responses to security issues and determine what the region's priorities and interests will be into the future.

In opening a recent Forum Members security meeting, Fiji's Minister of Defence and National Security, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, said *"At the heart of all this is ensuring that this new declaration will enable us to work better collectively to forge a secure and stable environment that will enable all our Pacific peoples to live free and worthwhile lives"*.

"Biketawa Plus should be about prevention as much as it is about response. How can we better monitor, assess and provide advice on addressing potential drivers and sources of conflict in our region? How do we build a better understanding of peace and security across our communities and countries? How can these regional approaches be linked to national security policies, plans or strategies?"

The Forum's reinvigorated security architecture must represent the security aspirations of all Forum members. The Forum Secretariat has undertaken a rigorous process of consultation to ensure inclusiveness and ownership. Consultations commenced with in-country regional policy discussions. The Secretariat engaged with the Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific and Regional Security Organisations for a Regional Security Information Sharing Workshop in Solomon Islands in April. Melanesian Spearhead Group Police Commissioners and Police Ministers were briefed on the work during their meeting in Kokopo, Papua New Guinea. In addition, the Secretariat maintained an online platform for public submissions and facilitated a security questionnaire for Members and regional organisations.

Based on the outcomes of these consultations, the findings were tested by a Reference Group before being considered at a special members security meeting in June. Participants at the meeting agreed that the new declaration should encompass a high-level political reassertion of the Pacific's regional security interests and need to be forward-looking, whilst acknowledging that wider agencies and organisations (health, environmental and social) may need to be part of security mechanisms, given the expanded concept of security.

While the Biketawa Plus work is focused on contemporary and future security challenges, members of the Pacific Islands Forum have a long history of working together on security arrangements and initiatives. When the Forum's founding

Leaders met in New Zealand in 1971, they discussed the negative impacts of nuclear testing. Our collective approach to addressing this issue culminated in the 1985 Rarotonga Treaty, which created a nuclear free zone across the EEZs of 13 Forum Member states who remain parties to this day. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) provides another strong example. Informed by the values of our own 'Pacific way', Forum countries worked side by side to help a neighbour in need to restore law and order, restore the machinery of government, bring perpetrators to justice, and rebuild the economy as the basis for sustained and genuine development.

Our region is blessed with many riches: our people, our cultures, our resources. Ensuring their potential and wellbeing will require strong collective action on regional security.

Author/s:

Meg Taylor

Meg Taylor DBE is Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum.

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