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Strategic Evaluation Public Summary: “Analyzing Department of Defense Security Cooperation in Concert with Allies and Partners in Oceania”

Department of Defense
 OFFICE OF PREPUBLICATION AND SECURITY REVIEW

The Department of Defense (DoD) periodically sponsors strategic evaluations of security cooperation (SC) programs and activities pursuant to 10 U.S.C. Section 383 and DoD Instruction 5132.14, “Assessment, Monitoring, and Evaluation (AM&E) Policy for the Security Cooperation Enterprise.” This research was motivated by a recognition that Oceania is an increasingly contested region with powerful countries vying for influence, and the United States, which is already the security guarantor of Compact of Free Association (COFA) states, has been seeking to expand its engagement more broadly within the region.

DoD commissioned the RAND Corporation, a federally funded research and development center, to conduct this formative strategic evaluation to assess DoD efforts to engage in *combined security cooperation partnering*, and therefore undertake SC activities jointly with U.S. allies and partners for the benefit of a third country in Oceania. This evaluation focuses on ongoing, rather than completed, programs. The evaluation scope covered DoD SC activities in Oceania in concert with U.S. allies conducted from 2017 to 2023.

The main research question was: How can the United States work more effectively with its allies and partners in Oceania to build relationships and address the security concerns of PICs? The research team broke down this overall question into four sub questions:

- 1) What are Pacific Island Country (PIC) characteristics and interests, and what do they mean for U.S. engagement in the region?
- 2) What are U.S. strategic objectives for SC in Oceania, and how are DoD and key interagency partners pursuing these objectives?
- 3) What are allies and partners involved in Oceania doing in the space that could be leveraged to advance U.S. strategic objectives?
- 4) What are the pros and cons of leveraging allies and partners’ activities rather than going it alone?

Geographic Scope:

All the members of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), except for Australia and New Zealand, are identified as PICs for the purposes of this evaluation. This list includes the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. Where mentioned specifically, the COFA states—FSM, Palau, and RMI – are discussed as a subset of PICs that have a special defense relationship with the United States.

To capture the PIC perspective, RAND examined the security challenges cited by local and external officials or sources. RAND also analyzed the strategic orientation of each PIC as of early 2023—including, in many cases, a stated desire not to be seen as aligned with either the

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United States or China, and considered some of the diplomatic, economic, and security levers that China has been using to influence Oceania.

Understanding the U.S. perspective prompted RAND to consider the following questions:

- 1) Who are the key DoD stakeholders and interagency partners in Oceania?
- 2) What are their priorities, strategic objectives, and perceptions of the strategic environment?
- 3) What are relevant authorities, resources, and planning approaches?
- 4) What SC activities has the United States conducted in Oceania?
- 5) Are there existing constraints to implementing SC in this region, and, if so, what are they?

To gather ally and partner perspectives, RAND identified their approaches, authorities, processes, and organizational constructs for delivering SC to Oceania, as well as the constraints under which they conduct SC activities. RAND highlighted the comparative advantages that these countries might have in specific domains or with certain PICs. RAND also characterized the willingness of allies and partners to work with the United States in the region.

RAND conducted over 200 interviews and held two virtual, structured workshops with U.S. government interagency stakeholders including the DoD, the Department of State (DoS), the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Commerce officials with direct experience working in Oceania, to achieve three purposes:

- 1) Validate research outputs (best practices, SC approaches, and recommendations);
- 2) Gather additional insights to refine their findings and recommendations;
- 3) Socialize and validate the recommendations with stakeholders.

RAND's analysis included:

- Observations on issues with the way the United States executes SC in concert with its allies and partners;
- Best practices for conducting SC in Oceania;
- Risks and benefits of doing combined SC partnering in Oceania;
- Recommendations for DoD to work better with U.S. allies and partners in Oceania.

Key Findings:

1) What are U.S. strategic objectives for SC in Oceania and how are DoD and key interagency partners pursuing these objectives?

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), in force during the time of the study drafting, focused on countering Chinese efforts at “regional hegemony” and prioritized maintaining a “free and open Indo-Pacific” under international law. Maritime security, cyber, institutional capacity building, and development of human capital in the PICs were areas of emphasis.

In addition to DoD's primary efforts to gain access and basing in the region to strengthen deterrence against the PRC and contain its influence, the Department's Oceania work includes prioritization and planning of exercises with either militaries or police; conferences and workshops; information sharing; engineering and infrastructure support (usually focused on

training or centered on exercises); and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) support. However, PICs' security needs often do not align with DoD's military-focused comparative SC advantages and traditional approach to SC, limiting DoD's cooperation efforts. With only three PICs possessing armed forces, DoD's relationship-building is hampered by Title 10 restrictions that preclude, in many cases, engagement with nonmilitary actors. This restricts DoD's assistance, mainly focusing it on maritime security, domain awareness, and counter-drug operations. The findings emphasized the importance of baseline assessments of PICs' ability and willingness to accept and absorb U.S. capacity-building efforts.

DoD is just beginning to grapple with how it can support the PICs with such endeavors from a security standpoint and within the bounds of its authorities. RAND assessed that although DoD remained a relative newcomer to the varied strategic, political, economic, and cultural foundations that underlie the interests and challenges that these small island nations face, it employed a somewhat disjointed approach to SC in the region. RAND also found that the United States has limited experience with combined SC partnering in Oceania—but so do many of its allies and partners.

It is important to note that there are key distinctions between the island nations of Oceania in terms of how the U.S. government, in general, and the DoD, in particular, can engage with them. The United States controls the security and defense of the U.S. territories of Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and has full responsibility for COFA States' security and defense, receiving basing rights in return.

2) What are PIC characteristics and interests and what do they mean for U.S. engagement in the region?

RAND's analysis indicated that PICs' perceptions of their security threat environment differed. However, strategic competition, specifically between the United States and China, was not at the top of their list of security threats. RAND recommended that the United States, along with allies and partners, seek ways to better connect with the PICs outside of the context of strategic competition, while relying heavily on regional organizations that have legitimacy in the region, such as the PIF and the Foreign Fisheries Agency (FFA). Although at the time only some of the PICs hosted U.S. embassies in their capitals, preventing the possibility of U.S. security cooperation officers (SCOs) work on the ground, the DoS and DoD are working to remedy this gap by opening new embassies and assigning SCOs to the PICs.

3) What are allies and partners involved in Oceania doing in the space that could be leveraged to advance U.S. strategic objectives?

According to RAND, DoD would benefit from a deeper knowledge of U.S. allies and partners' history in the region, ties to specific countries, and capabilities when planning SC, particularly because almost all U.S. allies and partners are seeking to increase their presence and activities in Oceania.

4) What are the pros and cons of leveraging ally and partner activities rather than doing it alone?

Key risks included divergent strategic interests, liability due to ally/partner involvement, delegating U.S. policy, losing the "U.S. brand," and logistics/authorities' complexity. Key

benefits included leveraging the comparative advantages of allies and partners, boosting engagement with them, and allowing the U.S. and its allies and partners to carry out activities that neither one could (or would want to do) independently.

RAND Suggested Best Practices:

For SC in Oceania:

- Pacific voices included in the design, planning, and implementation of programs;
- Programs support existing regional initiatives and declarations, and involve PIC officials throughout the planning phases;
- Partner absorption and sustainment capacity is fully considered and discussed;
- Focus of the engagement is limited (geographically, functionally), clear and bounded;
- Approach is executed in a whole of government manner and includes civilian expertise;
- Timely follow through, and the approach is solution-based and outcome-oriented.

For combined SC partnering:

- Coordination mechanisms are formalized and action-oriented;
- Allies and partners leverage each other's comparative advantages and unique approaches.

The research team generated three approaches in relation to combined SC partnering to support the DoD planning process. The United States can:

- 1) Support an existing program run by one of its allies or partners,
- 2) Create its own program and ask allies and partners to participate, or
- 3) Seek opportunities to engage bilaterally (without allies and partners).

Recommendations: Based on the findings above, RAND developed recommendations that fall into three broad categories: 1) knowledge building and outreach; 2) planning and assessment; and 3) guidance, authorities, and resources.

The recommendations included:

- Increase U.S awareness of how allies and partners engage in SC, while seeking opportunities to share information on how DoD engages in the region.
- Build and sustain DoD and interagency Oceania expertise and institutional memory.
- Ensure that partner capacity is assessed prior to program design and that programs are regularly monitored, evaluated, and adapted as needed. An example of a specific action could include conducting combined partner assessments with U.S. allies or partners or seeking insights from their experiences to include in U.S. assessments.
- Include Pacific voices and solutions to solve Pacific problems as programs are planned; ensure Pacific "ownership" of the implementation approach.
- Consider opportunities to integrate combined SC partnering into USINDOPACOM planning and AM&E processes.
- Ensure all relevant interagency stakeholders are included in SC planning, e.g., increasing interagency participation at major USINDOPACOM SC planning events.