

Let's hear it for the Boe

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Let's Hear It for the Boe

Tess Newton Cain

The Boe Declaration on Regional Security was signed by all members of the Pacific Islands Forum during the 49th Leaders' meeting in Nauru. It has been introduced and socialised during a period of heightened geopolitical uncertainty. How it has been referenced and articulated has varied as between different actors and this reflects competing priorities as between domestic, regional and international policy. The Boe Declaration is premised on an affirmation that climate change remains the single biggest threat to the signatory countries. This highlights significant cleavages among signatories. We have yet to see how the implementation of this Declaration will work to remedy those or entrench them further.

The Boe Declaration on Regional Security¹ was signed by all members of the Pacific Islands Forum at the 49th Leaders' meeting in Nauru in 2018. The Pacific Islands Forum is the peak political decision-making body in the region. It comprises eighteen members, including Australia and New Zealand. Its Secretariat is housed in Suva and the current Secretary-General is Dame Meg Taylor, from Papua New Guinea. An annual meeting of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders is hosted by a different member each year. There are two other standing meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum—the Forum Finance and Economic Ministers' Meeting and the Forum Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

The Boe Declaration builds on and effectively supersedes the Biketawa Declaration which was signed by Forum Leaders at the 31st Forum meeting in 2000.² The text of the Boe Declaration captures a revised and expanded picture of security in the Pacific context.

The road to Boe was a long one; the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat conducted numerous consultations in member countries with political leaders and other stakeholders as part of the process to develop the text. This sets it apart from other items on the agenda of recent Leaders' meetings that have been through the processes for regional policymaking that are envisaged by the Framework for Pacific Regionalism (FPR). The FPR processes for identifying items of regional policymaking importance are generally considered to be more inclusive as they involve an open call for submissions. However, these processes have not been embraced by governments or political leaders, although they have been popular with civil society organisations, academics and some regional organisations. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat has indicated that the process for developing the Boe Declaration—with its meetings in member countries with political actors and key people from other sectors—has been more meaningful and conducive to promoting

1 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, 5 September 2018, <www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/> [Accessed 14 July 2019].

2 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Biketawa Declaration*, 28 October 2000, <www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BIKETAWA-Declaration.pdf> [Accessed 14 July 2019].

political buy-in. It is likely that a similar process will be adopted to develop the '2050 strategy' further to Leaders having agreed to this piece of work at the recent Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Tuvalu.³

Nonetheless, some of the most significant developments in relation to the Boe Declaration occurred in what were the final stages of the drafting process. The draft text that emerged from the meeting of the Forum Foreign Ministers was significantly different from what was submitted to that meeting by Forum officials.⁴ A particularly notable example of the change to the text was the promotion of climate change impacts as a threat to security in the region and a deprioritisation of cyber security concerns. Further significant amendments were made by Forum Leaders when they met in retreat resulting in the final text, which Leaders went on to endorse.

One of the most significant changes that was made to the text was the restatement of a commitment by Forum members to principles of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and good governance. This was absent from earlier versions of the text. This was problematic, not least because these principles were what constituted the entirety of the Biketawa Declaration. Several commentators and analysts were concerned that if an explicit commitment to democratic government and the rule of law was not captured in the document that was to replace the Biketawa Declaration, there would be no such normative statement operative at the regional level. In addition, given the Boe Declaration's focus on an expanded concept of security (see below for more on this) it is only appropriate that these principles be carried forward as integral to the future security of our region.⁵

As has already been mentioned, the main thrust of the Boe Declaration is to set down the parameters of an expanded definition of security: one that reflects the concerns and priorities of Pacific peoples. The Boe Declaration recognises that there are issues of geostrategic concern at play and that they have an impact on what happens in the region. However, when it comes to security priorities, the main focus is on issues of human security, including food security, water security and protection of valuable ocean resources. A very clear example of how this plays into the refinement of the Declaration was that in earlier texts 'cybercrime' appeared first in the list of threats facing the region, which may have created the impression that it was the most important priority for regional security or, at least, somehow first among equals. The work of the Forum Foreign Ministers resulted in the listed threats being reordered, with cyber security coming further down the list.

The most significant amendment to the draft text of the Boe Declaration was made by Leaders and is the one that has become its defining feature. It is the statement that the parties to the Declaration 'affirm' that climate change remains the single biggest security threat to the region. This should not come as a surprise, given that this has

3 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Fiftieth Pacific Islands Forum, Funafuti, Tuvalu, Forum Communiqué*, 13-16 August 2019, <www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/50th-Pacific-Islands-Forum-Communique.pdf> [Accessed 16 September 2019].

4 Tess Newton Cain, 'New Faces and Absent Friends in Pacific Diplomacy', *Lowy Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 23 August 2018.

5 Tess Newton Cain, 'Commentary on the Boe Declaration', in Anna Powles (ed.), *The 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security: Ten Different Views from Pacific Security Commentators* (Hamilton, NZ: Security, Politics, and Development Network, Massey University, 6 June 2019), pp. 4-5.

been the position of Pacific Island states for a number of years. This has been reflected in successive communiqués of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders' meetings since 2015, notwithstanding efforts by Australia to water down texts,⁶ including most recently at the meeting of Leaders in Tuvalu.⁷

Since the Boe Declaration was adopted, a number of significant threads have emerged that are instructive about where the Declaration sits within the regional architecture and the wider geopolitical context. How it has been referenced (or not) by signatories provides important illustration of the depth of commitment to Pacific regionalism, over and above employed rhetoric.

The Boe Declaration includes a very clear statement as to the awareness and understanding of Pacific leaders of the challenging geopolitical environment in which their countries are placed:

We recognise an increasingly complex regional security environment driven by multifaceted security challenges, and a dynamic geopolitical environment leading to an increasingly crowded and complex region.⁸

However, the emphasis of the text as a whole on human security represents a continuation of the efforts of Pacific leaders to tell their partners, near and far, what their concerns are in terms of safeguarding the current and future wellbeing of their peoples.⁹ This does not necessarily sit easily with narratives that emanate from Canberra and Washington which focus more on geostrategic competition. Leaders from the Pacific have made it clear that they do not wish to be viewed as pawns on some sort of geopolitical chessboard. Neither do they see value in being forced into a situation where they are expected to make a choice between 'traditional' partners, including Australia, and China. As Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor said in a February 2019 speech:

Forum Leaders have made it clear on a number of occasions that they place great value on open and genuine relationships, and inclusive and enduring partnerships within our region and beyond. A 'friends to all approach' is commonly accepted, while some have made a more formal commitment to this principle through their non-aligned status.¹⁰

How this declaration has been represented and referenced in the Australian discourse merits further consideration. It is important to locate this analysis within the wider discourse surrounding the 'Pacific step up'. Although this 'step-up' may be most closely associated with the period since Scott Morrison became Prime Minister, it originated in a

6 Stephen Dziedzic, Michael Walsh and Jack Kilbride, 'Australia Signs Declaration on Pacific Climate 'Threat', Islands Call on US to Return to Paris Deal', *ABC News* (online), 7 September 2018.

7 Stefan Armbruster and Tess Newton Cain, 'Trying Times in Tuvalu', *DevPolicy Blog*, Development Policy Centre, Australian National University, 20 August 2019.

8 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Boe Declaration*.

9 Tess Newton Cain, 'Australia Shows Up in Tuvalu and Trips Over', *East Asia Forum*, 30 August 2019.

10 Dame Meg Taylor, Keynote Address to 'The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands', University of the South Pacific, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 8 February 2019, <www.forumsec.org/keynote-address-by-dame-meg-taylor-secretary-general-the-china-alternative-changing-regional-order-in-the-pacific-islands/> [Accessed 17 September 2019].

2016 announcement by then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull¹¹ followed by its inclusion in the Foreign Policy White Paper that was published in November 2017.¹² As I have discussed elsewhere,¹³ one of the key features of the White Paper was the use of a security lens to frame discussions of policy in relation to the Pacific Islands region. Since then, the persistence of security as a framing concept for Australian policymakers when talking with or about the Pacific has remained.

However, there has been and continues to be a significant divergence in how security is discussed as between Canberra and Pacific states. The most notable point of divergence arises in relation to what is the basic premise of the Boe Declaration—that climate change poses the single greatest security threat to the countries of the Pacific Islands region. This is an area characterised by what might be described, at best, as political ambivalence on the part of Australian leaders. This has a domestic aspect, particularly with regard to a refusal to move away from fossil fuels as a source of energy and revenue. It can also be seen as having a foreign policy aspect beyond the Pacific as Australia signals its continuing (and possibly increasing) commitment to the US alliance, and other strategic groupings such as the Quadrilateral partnership with the United States, India and Japan.

This is not something that is confined to Australia. Among the wider membership of the Pacific Islands Forum, the extent to which this Declaration is centred within discussions about security varies. As with other regionalism projects, the implementation of the Boe Declaration will proceed where willingness is greatest and resistance is least. Pacific regionalism is based on voluntary participation and there are numerous political economy factors that have the potential to impede success.¹⁴ The recent decision by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders to endorse the Boe Declaration Action Plan¹⁵ is part of how this relatively new piece of regional architecture will become socialised and embedded alongside other pillars that are more established and familiar.

It is important not to overstate the significance of the Boe Declaration. It is not a treaty and it creates no legal obligations on the part of any of the parties to it. As with other aspects of Pacific regionalism, it is essentially voluntary in nature. And it sits within a wider framework of regional engagement, which is characterised by a commitment to consensus decision-making. Going forward, the development of the '2050 Strategy' as envisaged by the Forum Leaders at their 50th meeting in Tuvalu will include melding the Boe Declaration into the existing and emerging regional architecture.

During her speech to the State of the Pacific conference in September 2018, Dame Meg Taylor located the Boe Declaration within the wider conceptual framework of the 'Blue Pacific'.

11 Jenny Hayward-Jones, 'Turnbull's First Pacific Islands Forum', *Australian Outlook*, Australian Institute of International Affairs, 15 September 2016.

12 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper: Opportunity, Security, Strength* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017).

13 Tess Newton Cain, *Walking the Talk: Is Australia's Engagement with the Pacific a Step Up or a Stumble?* (Cairns: The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, 2017).

14 Matthew Dornan and Tess Newton Cain, 'Regional Service Delivery among Pacific Island Countries: An Assessment', *Asia and the Pacific Policy Studies*, vol. 1/3 (2014), pp. 541-60.

15 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *Forum Communiqué*.

This is the schema that was adopted by the Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2017:

In 2017 Forum Leaders endorsed the Blue Pacific narrative as the core driver of collective action for advancing the Leaders vision under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. The narrative explicitly recognises that as the Blue Pacific, we are custodians of some of the world's richest biodiversity and marine and terrestrial resources. Through our stewardship of the Pacific Ocean, we must do all we can to protect the wellbeing of Pacific peoples, and indeed Pacific nation-states and the ocean continent they inhabit.

To date, the Blue Pacific narrative has been successful in building solidarity and shifting the prevailing narrative of the region as small, dependent and vulnerable. Going forward, we need to build on this and develop concrete strategies that leverage the increased interest in our region and secure the future of the Blue Pacific.¹⁶

The members of the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia, are faced with numerous challenges and priorities when it comes to security. The Boe Declaration is a relatively new addition to the regional architecture and its full impact has yet to unfold. As things currently stand, there looks to be a great deal of work to be done if this mechanism can achieve meaningful cohesion within the Blue Pacific.

After the meeting of Forum Leaders in Tuvalu, some called for Australia to be excluded from the regional grouping because of its apparent intransigence when it comes to addressing climate change mitigation. However, the more likely future is that Australia will remain in the Forum and there will be further attempts by other members to use the levers of regionalism such as the Boe Declaration to nudge Canberra over time.¹⁷ It is hard to predict how successful this will be without a significant shift in domestic policy in Australia. However, the geostrategic anxiety that is driving Australia's 'Pacific step up' is shared by the United States and other partners with whom Canberra needs to maintain credibility and relevance. It is becoming apparent that a failure or inability to bridge what are quite significant divides between Australia (and, to a much lesser extent, New Zealand) and the Pacific has the potential to undermine key strategic relationships.¹⁸

The Boe Declaration will be an important feature of Pacific regionalism as we move forward and navigate a shifting strategic and security landscape. Its place in the regional architecture is now established and we have already seen indications of its significance at the most recent meeting of Pacific Islands Forum Leaders.

Tess Newton Cain is an established Pacific analyst with over twenty years of working in the region, mostly based in Vanuatu. She has written extensively on matters pertaining to Pacific regionalism and provides commentary and analysis to national and international media on Pacific politics and development. She is an adjunct Associate Professor at the Griffith Asia Institute.

16 Taylor, Keynote Address to 'The China Alternative'.

17 George Carter, 'The Pacific Should Persist with Australia on Climate Change', *East Asia Forum*, 16 September 2019.

18 Newton Cain, 'Australia Shows Up in Tuvalu and Trips Over'.