

Fortress or Partner?



Analysing regional insecurities and Pacific militarisation
through regional compacts

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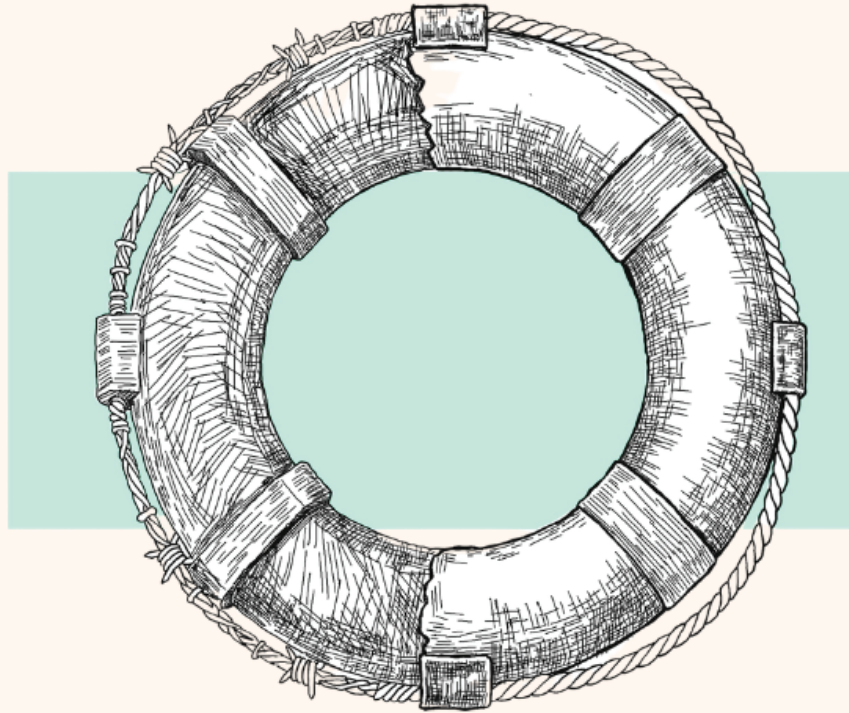
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The question is not whether the Pacific needs security. It is who defines it, who controls it, and who bears its consequences.

INTRODUCTION

This critical analysis by the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) warns that these legal structures risk entrenching foreign military access and conventional militarisation while remaining dangerously silent on demilitarisation, autonomous weaponry, and nuclear non-proliferation

The Pacific is experiencing a rapid build-up of overlapping, uncoordinated security frameworks driven by intense geopolitical competition. Rather than introducing brand new concepts, the proposed Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Regional Security Treaty (BPOPRST) and the Regional Operations Deployment Framework (RODF) seek to formalise a heavily militarised architecture that has already been deployed. This includes standing forces, bilateral security treaties, and operational bodies heavily funded and influenced by external metropolitan powers like Australia.

This critical analysis by the Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) warns that these legal structures risk entrenching foreign military access and conventional militarisation while remaining dangerously silent on demilitarisation, autonomous weaponry, and nuclear non-proliferation. To prevent the erosion of regional sovereignty, Pacific Leaders must establish strict political control and comprehensive civil oversight before signing permanent international agreements.

This analysis concludes that Pacific Leaders should, at minimum:

- not authorise treaty negotiations for either BPOPRST or the RODF at this Palau meeting;
- commission a genuine, consolidated assessment of how BPOPRST, the RODF, the SPDMM SOFA work, the Integrated Regional Response Mechanism and the proposed Pacific Peace Institute actually relate to each other, rather than letting five processes proceed on five separate tracks; and
- ensure that if treaty negotiations do eventually proceed, Forum-level political oversight, real and ongoing civil society participation, and explicit limits on militarisation are built into the text from the start, not added afterwards.

A push to formalise what's already built. A strategic move for who?

Australia and New Zealand are re-securing the Blue Pacific through a parallel, fast-moving architecture of bilateral treaties, defence initiatives and now Forum-endorsed institutions. There are also proposals by the Solomon Islands and the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHoPS), seeking permanent legal form in the regional architecture. This is not a future risk to be debated in the abstract. It is already being built, and Leaders convening in Palau for the 55th Pacific Islands Leaders Forum are being asked to formalise it.

This is not simply an argument that Australia is imposing a security order on passive Pacific states. The evidence gathered here resists this reading on its own terms: the Pacific Police Support Group's (PPSG) first deployment operated under Samoan direction and Papua New Guinean operational command, even as external financing and infrastructure remained decisive throughout. The central issue is not whether these initiatives are genuinely Pacific-led or externally driven. Elements of both are present. The problem is the sequence in which the architecture has developed: operational capabilities, financing arrangements and bilateral security commitments have advanced ahead of the regional legal and political framework now being proposed to govern them. The Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Regional Security Treaty and the Regional Operations Deployment Framework therefore need to be assessed less as new initiatives than as attempts to formalise a security landscape that has already changed. The question that runs through what follows is not simply who is in charge today, but what exactly is being made permanent, under whose authority, and with what limits.

The Pacific Security Outlook 2026 warns that this competition is already drawing attention away from Boe Declaration priorities and driving an appetite for new defence agreements and parallel security mechanisms, while Australia and New Zealand are expanding defence interoperability, combined operations and regional security mechanisms across the Blue Pacific.¹

The recent Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting took the view that the regional peace and security architecture responds to both traditional and non-traditional security concerns. A closer look at the draft Action Plan 2026-2030 suggests otherwise: it reads as heavily weighted towards traditional security.² Independent policy recommendations feeding into the same process have separately called for a dedicated climate-peace agenda to be built into the Action Plan, a sign that this integration is still a work in progress rather than something the draft already delivers.

These proposals reach Leaders at a genuinely awkward moment for Pacific regionalism. The Review of the Regional Architecture is still mid-course, the placement of new Forum Dialogue Partners remains unresolved, and implementation of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent continues to lag behind a growing backlog of regional priorities. Foreign Ministers acknowledged this on 7 August 2026, noting “the importance of strengthened coherence between sub-regional, regional and international initiatives” and flagging declining Official Development Assistance as a live constraint on the region’s capacity to absorb new commitments.³ Both are hardening in the middle of that unfinished reform cycle, not after it.

What two proposed security instruments would formalise what’s already built?

There are two security instruments moving toward the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ meeting in Palau this year. The Solomon Islands government has proposed a Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Regional Security Treaty that would consolidate the Biketawa, Boe and Ocean of Peace Declarations into a binding international instrument, a proposal Forum Foreign Ministers considered at their August meeting and referred on for further consultation.⁴ The Joint Heads of Pacific Security have developed, since 2022, a Regional Operations Deployment Framework, setting the legal terms under which police and military personnel deploy across the region, and in April 2026 recommended that Leaders approve treaty negotiations for it.⁵

On their own, both look modest and technical, concept notes awaiting further study. But measured against what has already been built in the region since 2019- the standing forces, the funding, the meetings, the bilateral treaties signed alongside them- they look like the last formal step in a process that is largely finished already. This analysis sets out that process first, because neither proposal can be assessed honestly without it, and then reads BPOPRST and the RODF against it.

¹Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat / Pacific Fusion Centre, The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2026, 27 March 2026, https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2026-03/Pacific%20Security%20Report%202026_0.pdf, noting that competition between China and the United States and its partners in the Pacific is “driving an increasing appetite for security and defence agreements” and that Boe Declaration priorities “may face stronger competition for global political attention and resourcing”; Australian Government and New Zealand Government, Operationalising the Australia-New Zealand Alliance: Anzac 2035 - Closer Defence Relations Statement, 17 March 2026, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2026-03-17/operationalising-australia-new-zealand-alliance-anzac-2035-closer-defence-relations-statement>, especially Line of Effort Six, which commits to increased Pacific defence-force interoperability, expanded combined operations and activities in the Pacific, and greater use of the South Pacific Defence Ministers’ Meeting; Australia-New Zealand Foreign and Defence Ministerial Consultations 2+2, Joint Statement, 17 March 2026, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2026-03-17/australia-new-zealand-foreign-defence-ministerial-consultations-22>.

²“Pacific faces ‘Polycrisis’ as Security pressures intensify — Forum report”, PINA, 25 March 2026, <https://pina.com.fj/2026/03/25/pacific-faces-polycrisis-as-security-pressure-intensify-forum-report>, reporting the recommendation that the Pacific Islands Forum integrate a dedicated regional climate-peace agenda into the Regional Peace and Security Action Plan 2026–2030; “Pacific Foreign Ministers back regional security plan as threats grow more complex”, PINA, 12 August 2026, as above (n. 3).

³Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, PIFS(26)FFMM.Outcomes, Suva, Fiji, 7 August 2026, paras 6–7.

⁴Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, PIFS(26)FFMM.Outcomes, Suva, Fiji, 7 August 2026, para 15(vii); “Pacific Foreign Ministers back regional security plan as threats grow more complex”, PINA, 12 August 2026, <https://pina.com.fj/2026/08/12/pacific-foreign-ministers-back-regional-security-plan-as-threats-grow-more-complex/> 2w

⁵Joint Heads of Pacific Security, Drafting Instructions and Guiding Principles for a Regional Operations Deployment Framework, and the JHoPS public FAQ, as at 29 June 2026; Joint Communiqué of the Eighth Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Meeting, Brisbane, 28–30 April 2026.

1. THE FORCES THAT ALREADY EXIST

Pacific security is being operationalised before it is being governed.

Before any treaty is signed, two operational capabilities are already deploying. The Pacific Response Group (PRG), a multinational military body for humanitarian and disaster response, was endorsed not by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders but by the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM), in Auckland in October 2024.⁶ Its first deployment came two months later: a six-person planning team sent to Vanuatu after the December 2024 earthquake.⁷ The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's own analysis of that deployment noted a specific problem: because the PRG is multinational, it does not fall neatly under any existing status-of-forces or bilateral agreement that would let its personnel enter a Pacific country efficiently on request, and it recommended the group prioritise establishing legal mechanisms to fix this.⁸ This recommendation, published in May 2025, describes exactly the gap the RODF is designed to close. The RODF is not a proposal developed ahead of operational needs. It is being drafted to legalise a force that is already deploying without settled legal status.

The Pacific Police Support Group is the deployable arm of the Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI), a three-part programme, comprising regional training centres, the PPSG itself, and a coordination hub at Pinkenba in Brisbane, which Australia is funding at approximately AUD 400 million over five years.⁹ The Pacific Policing Initiative, under which the PPSG sits, was endorsed by Forum Leaders at their 2024 meeting in Tonga, and its deployable force sits within the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police structure, not under Forum Leaders' direct oversight. Its first deployment was in October 2024, providing security alongside naval vessels and police and military personnel from twenty-one countries at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa, not at a disaster.¹⁰ Prime Minister Anthony Albanese marked the occasion by saying the initiative was "about Pacific security, delivered by the Pacific, in support of Pacific sovereignty."¹¹ Commentary on the same event was blunter about what the framing avoided, characterising the initiative as a rapid-deployment force built, in substance, to keep China out of Pacific policing.¹² Both readings can be true at once. A "Pacific-led" force's first real-world outing was providing security cover at a diplomatic summit, funded and headquartered by one external power, at the same moment that power's leader was using the occasion to make a point about a rival.

The Pacific Fusion Centre, the region's intelligence and strategic-assessment body, offers a useful comparison to both. It was established in 2019 under the Boe Declaration and moved its permanent headquarters to Port Vila in 2024.¹³ Its Charter requires the Director to be a national of a Forum Island Country and answerable to the Forum Subcommittee on Regional Security, not to any single funding partner.¹⁴ The Centre is still substantially funded by Australia and the European Union, and by design produces only open-source assessments rather than operational

⁶ "The Pacific Response Group is making pleasing progress but needs more buy-in", The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 6 May 2025, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-pacific-response-group-is-making-pleasing-progress-but-needs-more-buy-in/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Shared security in the Pacific", <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/shared-security-in-the-pacific>.

¹⁰ "Australia backs 'Pacific-led and delivered security' under Pacific Police Support Group", Defence Connect, 28 October 2024, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/geopolitics-and-policy/14990-australia-backs-pacific-led-and-delivered-security-under-pacific-police-support-group>; "First deployment under Pacific Policing Initiative begins", Solomon Star News, 3 November 2024, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/first-deployment-under-pacific-policing-initiative-begins/>.

¹¹ First deployment under Pacific Policing Initiative begins", Solomon Star News, 3 November 2024, as above.

¹² US-backed Pacific Policing Initiative directed against China", World Socialist Web Site, 31 December 2024, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2024/12/31/jsmy-d31.html>.

¹³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, "BLOG: Security: Pacific Fusion Centre, Vanuatu sign formal host country agreement", 23 February 2024, <https://forumsec.org/publications/blog-security-pacific-fusion-centre-vanuatu-sign-formal-host-country-agreement>

¹⁴ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Directorship, Pacific Fusion Centre", position description, November 2024, <https://ausconnect.dfat.gov.au/node/4224>; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, announcement on the appointment of Mr Viliame Bovoro as Director of the Pacific Fusion Centre, <https://forumsec.org/publications/announcement-pif-sg-appointment-mr-viliame-bovoro-director-pacific-fusion-centre>.

intelligence, which limits what it can do.¹⁵ But its governance shows that requiring a Pacific-national director and Forum-level accountability was possible when the Charter demanded it.

The PRG and the PPSG were not built to the same standard, which suggests the weaker governance around them is a choice rather than an inevitable feature of regional cooperation. The clearest explanation may be individual rather than structural: James Movick, the Centre's inaugural director and a Federated States of Micronesia national with decades of Pacific regional experience, was in place from the Charter's founding, a leadership factor the PRG and PPSG's design processes did not have in the same way.¹⁶

“The RODF is not a proposal developed ahead of operational needs. It is being drafted to legalise a force that is already deploying without settled legal status.”

2. WHO IS AT THE TABLE? WHO DETERMINES PACIFIC SECURITY?

Different starting points, arriving at the same effect.

Two bodies have built most of this architecture so far: the Joint Heads of Pacific Security and the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting.¹⁷ The two have different lineages. SPDMM was established in 2013, six years before JHoPS, and its early agenda centred on practical disaster-response cooperation rather than strategic competition; its more recent turn toward that framing looks more like the repurposing of an older body than the deliberate creation of a new one. JHoPS sits closer to the latter, a body that emerged directly from Australia's post-2017 Pacific “step-up” in foreign policy. Different starting points, arriving at the same effect.

JHoPS itself is a case study in how far an operational body can build ahead of political direction. Established in 2019, it held its eighth annual meeting in Brisbane in April 2026, hosted by Australia and co-chaired by the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, the Commissioner of the Australian Border Force and the Commissioner of the Aus-

¹⁵ “The Pacific Fusion Centre: the challenge of sharing information and intelligence in the Pacific”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 14 December 2024, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/pacific-fusion-centre-challenge-sharing-informa->

¹⁶ “Pacific Fusion Centre leadership”, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 23 December 2021, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/pacific-fusion-centre-leadership>, on James Movick's appointment as the Centre's inaugural Director; “Who We Are”, Pacific Fusion Centre, <https://www.pacificfusioncentre.org/who-we-are>, on the Forum-endorsed Charter and its accountability provisions; for a fuller account of how Movick embedded these Pacific-led governance features in practice, see p.8 of the McNeill, H., Batley, J., Powles, A., Sakai, H., Tidwell, A. and Wallis, J. (2023). “Navigating ‘Flexible, Responsive and Respectful’ Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: A 2022 Workshop Report.” Working Paper 2023/1. Canberra: Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU, 24 March 2023, <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/052acd12-1c28-4ff8-b819-4a8560f9871f/content>.

¹⁷ “About Us”, South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, <https://spdmm.org/about>, on SPDMM's establishment in 2013; “South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting”, Australian Defence Ministers, 7 December 2023, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-12-07/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting>, on its early focus on climate-induced disaster response and humanitarian assistance.

tralian Federal Police.¹⁸ The pattern has a precedent elsewhere in the region's architecture. Australia runs the Bali Process the same way, as permanent co-chair alongside Indonesia, co-manager of its Regional Support Office, and its largest funder, all within a forum still described as member-led. Structural control of that kind does not require exclusive authority. Holding the chair, the secretariat and the purse strings is generally enough.¹⁹ Japan and the United States attended as observers.²⁰ Delegates were given tours of Gallipoli Barracks and the Pinkenba Hub to see the PRG and PPSG in person.²¹ At that meeting, JHoPS members agreed to ask Leaders to formally bring JHoPS into the Pacific Islands Forum's own architecture.²² A body of police, military, customs and immigration chiefs, not ministers, not an elected body, not open at any point in its eight-year history to public submissions, is asking to be institutionalised inside the Forum on the strength of work it has already done, including the RODF itself. Forum Foreign Ministers have since acted on exactly that request. On 7 August 2026, they agreed in principle to formally recognise JHoPS within the Forum's Peace and Security Architecture, and separately agreed in principle to institutionalise the Pacific Police Ministers Meeting as a ministerial decision-making mechanism inside that same architecture, with both proposals now going to Leaders in Palau for a final decision.²³ What was, in April, a practitioners' body asking for a seat is now, four months later, most of the way to getting one.

The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting matters even more to the shaping of the RODF, and its membership deserves more attention than either treaty proposal gives it. SPDMM has seven full members: Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga.²⁴ Three of those seven, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga, are Pacific Island countries that maintain standing militaries of their own. The other four, Australia and New Zealand, the region's two largest metropolitan powers and Forum members in their own right, together with France, which still administers New Caledonia and French Polynesia, and Chile, which administers Rapa Nui, do not have a defence ministers' body in which the Pacific Island states with militaries are outnumbered four to three by their larger metropolitan and colonial-adjacent partners. The pattern is not a new one. The South Pacific Commission was founded in 1947 by six administering powers with Pacific territories entirely unrepresented, and only began to change after Pacific delegates forced the issue at the 1965 Lae Conference; equal voting rights for all members were not reached until 1983. A defence forum where the Pacific Island states with militaries are outnumbered four to three by their larger partners is not identical to that history, but it rhymes with it.²⁵ Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States sit as observers.²⁶ This body, meeting in New Caledonia in 2023,²⁷ and taking "our region in 2050" and strategic competition as its explicit themes of discussion in 2024,²⁸ endorsed the PRG's establishment.²⁹ At its 2025 meeting in Chile, it endorsed a France-led Information Sharing Framework that formalises intelligence exchange among members, the Secretariat, observers, and unnamed third parties, and asked to be

¹⁸ Joint Communiqué of the Eighth Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Meeting, Brisbane, 28–30 April 2026, reported at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/australia/2026/australia-260430-audod02.htm>; "Pacific headsof security advancing collective action", Australian Border Force, 27 April 2026, <https://www.abf.gov.au/newsroom-subsite/Pages/-Pacific-heads-of-security-advancing-collective-action.aspx>.

¹⁹ "Combating Transnational Crime", The Bali Process, <https://www.baliprocess.net/about-the-bali-process/>, on Australia and Indonesia as permanent co-chairs; "Regional Support Office", The Bali Process, <https://www.baliprocess.net/about-the-regional-support-office-rso/>, on the RSO's Australian and Indonesian co-management and Australian funding.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Joint Communiqué of the Eighth Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Meeting, as above.

²³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, as above (n. 2), para 15(ii)(a)-(b); "Pacific Foreign Ministers back regional security plan as threats grow more complex", PINA, 12 Augus 2026, <https://pina.com.fj/2026/08/12/pacific-foreign-ministers-back-regional-security-plan-as-threats-grow-more-complex/>.

²⁴ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting Joint Communiqué, Viña del Mar, 22–24 October 2025, Australian Department of Defence, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2025-10-25/joint-communique-south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting>.

²⁵ "History", The Pacific Community, <https://www.spc.int/about-us/history>, on the South Pacific Commission's 1947 founding by six administering powers; "Pacific Community", Oxford Public International Law, <https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law-epil/9780199231690/law-9780199231690-c679>, on the 1965 Lae Conference "rebellion" and the equalisation of voting rights in 1983.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting statement, New Caledonia, 4–6 December 2023, Australian Department of Defence, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2023-12-07/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting>.

²⁸ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting Joint Communiqué, Auckland, 1–3 October 2024, Australian Department of Defence, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communique>.

²⁹ "The Pacific Response Group is making pleasing progress but needs more buy-in", The Strategist, as above (n. 5).

kept updated specifically on the RODF.³⁰ The forum most directly tracking and shaping the RODF's development is one in which the Pacific Island states with standing militaries are outnumbered four to three by Australia, New Zealand, France and Chile, and where a French-led information-sharing arrangement, rather than a Pacific Islands Forum process, sets the terms for what gets shared with whom.

“A body of police, military, customs and immigration chiefs, not ministers, not an elected body, is asking to be institutionalised inside the Forum on the strength of work it has already done.”

3. THE BILATERAL DEALS ALREADY SIGNED

A regional treaty negotiated afterwards does not start from a blank page.

While JHoPS and SPDMM were building this architecture at the regional level, Australia was signing a parallel set of bilateral security treaties with individual Forum members, each publicly linked by Australian officials and independent analysts to efforts to counter China's regional presence.

Tuvalu's Falepili Union, signed in November 2023 and in force from August 2024, provides under Article 4(4) that Tuvalu “shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence related matters,” alongside access, presence and overflight rights for Australian forces.³¹ Simon Kofe, then Tuvalu's foreign minister, told Tuvalu's parliament in November 2023 that this clause compromised Tuvalu's sovereignty; a subsequent legal analysis in the American Journal of International Law concluded the clause is designed to accommodate Australian concern at China's growing security presence, while arguing the treaty's own text preserves Tuvalu's underlying legal sovereignty.³² Whether or not sovereignty is preserved in a strict legal sense, the clause narrows Tuvalu's room to manoeuvre on security.

Naoero's treaty with Australia, signed in Canberra on 9 December 2024, extends a similar mutual-agreement mechanism to Naoero's security, banking and telecommunications sectors, with consultation only for other critical infrastructure, in exchange for AUD 100 million in budget support and AUD 40 million for policing over five years.³³ Multiple outlets reported this plainly as a veto Australia now holds over Chinese involvement in those sec-

³⁰ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting Joint Communiqué, Viña del Mar, 22–24 October 2025, as above (n. 20).

³¹ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Treaty text, Falepili Union between Tuvalu and Australia, Article 4(4), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/tuvalu/treaty-text-falepili-union>; Explanatory Memorandum, Falepili Union between Tuvalu and Australia, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/australia-tuvalu-falepili-union-treaty/explanatory-memorandum-falepili-union-between-tuvalu-and-australia>.

³² “Tuvalu's parliament debates the Falepili Union”, Devpolicy Blog, 5 December 2023, <https://devpolicy.org/tuvalu-parliament-debates-the-falepili-union-20231129/>; Green and Guilfoyle, “The Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty: Statehood and Security in the Face of Anthropogenic Climate Change”, American Journal of International Law, Cambridge Core, 2024, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/australiatuvalu-falepili-union-treaty-statehood-and-security-in-the-face-of-anthropogenic-climate-change/8507F3DC6E01DB1D2156FC6EB98AEC4E>.

³³ “Nauru-Australia Treaty”, joint media release, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 9 December 2024, <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/pat-conroy/media-release/nauru-australia-treaty>.

tors,³⁴ and the Lowy Institute's Meg Keen described it as "a move by Australia to limit Chinese reach and influence" in the region.³⁵ In 2026, Australia opened an inquiry into whether a proposed billion-dollar Naoero deal with a Chinese state-linked firm breached the treaty's terms.³⁶

Papua New Guinea's Pukpuk Treaty, a full mutual defence alliance, Australia's second only since ANZUS, was signed in Canberra on 6 October 2025 after months of delay.³⁷ Unlike Tuvalu's and Naoero's treaties, PNG's own Department of Foreign Affairs states plainly that "the proposed Treaty does not have exclusivity clauses to sovereign and commercial presence," and PNG maintains shiprider and defence-cooperation arrangements with France, the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan alongside it.³⁸ Reuters nonetheless reported the treaty in the context of Australia's effort "to block China from expanding its security presence in the Pacific."³⁹

Fiji signed two instruments with Australia on 6 July 2026, at the State House in Suva: the Vuvale Union, upgrading a 2023 partnership into an economic and security union, and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, also called the Veitacini Treaty, a mutual defence pact that is Fiji's first alliance of any kind and Australia's fourth.⁴⁰ Australia's own government describes the two treaties as "the first treaties to give practical effect to the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration."⁴¹ The Alliance itself provides for other Pacific states to be invited to join it, and Prime Minister Rabuka told reporters other Pacific leaders were already interested: "The more, the stronger, the better."⁴² Independent reporting has read this as the template for a wider, Australia-anchored security coalition operating under the Ocean of Peace's own name, noting Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga as states Albanese met with in the days immediately following the Fiji signing.⁴³

The treaty establishes a mutual-defence commitment without making that commitment automatic. Article 6 commits each party to "act to meet the common danger" of an armed attack on the other in the Pacific, but only "in accordance with its domestic processes", a qualification analysts have compared unfavourably to NATO's founding treaty, where an attack on one member is automatically treated as an attack on all.⁴⁴ The obligation also sits alongside an older one: Australia is bound by both the new alliance and the seventy-five-year-old ANZUS treaty, and it is not yet clear how the two would interact if an attack on a US base in the Pacific, Guam's Joint Region Marianas

³⁴ "Nauru agrees to give Australia veto rights over pacts with third nations including China", CNN, 9 December 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/09/australia/australia-nauru-agreement-veto-intl-hnk>; "Nauru gives Australia a veto right over a range of pacts with other nations including China", Associated Press via The Seattle Times, 9 December 2024, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nauru-agrees-to-give-australia-a-veto-right-over-a-range-of-pacts-with-third-nations-including-china/>.

³⁵ "Nauru agrees to give Australia veto rights over pacts with third nations including China", CNN, as above.

³⁶ "Australia probes Nauru's USD 1 billion deal with Chinese firm over possible security treaty breach", The Tribune, citing The Epoch Times, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/australia-probes-naurus-usd-1-billion-deal-with-chinese-firm-over-possible-security-treaty-breach>.

³⁷ "Papua New Guinea cabinet approves defence treaty with Australia", Reuters via Al Jazeera and AOL, October 2025, <https://www.aol.com/articles/papua-guinea-approves-defence-treaty-070720266.html>; "Australia, Papua New Guinea sign mutual defence treaty", Al Jazeera, 6 October 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/6/australia-papua-new-guinea-sign-mutual-defence-treaty>.

³⁸ "Press release: Papua New Guinea – Australia Mutual Defence Treaty also to be known as the 'Pukpuk Treaty'", PNG Department of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.dfa.gov.pg/press-release-papua-new-guinea-australia-mutual-defence-treaty-also-to-be-known-as-the-pukpuk-treaty/>; "Foreign Affairs Secretary clarifies PNG's proposed Pukpuk Treaty with Australia", NBC PNG, 29 September 2025, <https://www.nbc.com.pg/post/27013/foreign-affairs-secretary-clarifies-pngs-proposed-pukpuk-treaty-with-australia>.

³⁹ "Papua New Guinea approves defence treaty with Australia", Reuters, as above (n. 32).

⁴⁰ "Fiji and Australia Sign the Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance, Marking a Historic Achievement", Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, 6 July 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/fiji-and-australia-sign-the-vuvale-union-and-ocean-of-peace-alliance-marking-a-historic-achievement/>; "Australia and Fiji sign historic Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance", Australian Department of Defence, 6 July 2026, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2026-07-06/australia-fiji-sign-historic-vuvale-union-ocean-peace-alliance>.

⁴¹ "Australia and Fiji sign historic Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance", Australian Department of Defence, 6 July 2026, <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/media-releases/2026-07-06/australia-fiji-sign-historic-vuvale-union-ocean-peace-alliance>.

⁴² "Prime Minister Anthony Albanese signs Ocean of Peace Alliance with Fiji", ABC News, 6 July 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-07-06/albanese-signs-major-new-treaty-fiji/106882252>. The article reports the Alliance's accession provision, Rabuka's remarks on other states' interest in joining, and Albanese's planned meetings with the Papua New Guinean and Tongan leaders in Brisbane in the days following the Fiji signing.

⁴³ "Prime Minister Anthony Albanese signs Ocean of Peace Alliance with Fiji", ABC News, 6 July 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-07-06/albanese-signs-major-new-treaty-fiji/106882252>. The article reports the Alliance's accession provision, Rabuka's remarks on other states' interest in joining, and Albanese's planned meetings with the Papua New Guinean and Tongan leaders in Brisbane in the days following the Fiji signing.

⁴⁴ Wallis, J. & Tagivakatin, S. (2026, 7 July), "Australia and Fiji sign a new defence pact as China launches a ballistic missile test in the Pacific. What does it all mean?", The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/australia-and-fiji-sign-a-new-defence-pact-as-china-launches-a-ballistic-missile-test-in-the-pacific-what-does-it-all-mean-286845>.

among them, drew Australia into a response of its own. Article 10 acknowledges the possibility of conflicting obligations. Where either party identifies an inconsistency with an existing agreement, the answer is consultation, leaving the consequences for the two governments to work out. This is a real safeguard, and an unresolved one, since neither government has said publicly how such a consultation would actually play out, or what it would mean for Fiji if Australia's other alliance obligations pulled in a different direction.⁴⁵ The comparison with the Nakamal Agreement between Australia and Vanuatu is instructive rather than identical: Nakamal is legally binding and establishes a committee that must meet at least every six months, but disputes are still resolved through bilateral consultation or negotiation rather than independent adjudication.⁴⁶

China underlined what was at stake within hours. On 6 July, hours after Albanese and Rabuka signed the alliance, a Chinese submarine test-fired a long-range ballistic missile into the Pacific, the first such launch from a submarine in over forty years, landing near Tuvalu's exclusive economic zone.⁴⁷ Acting Prime Minister Richard Marles called the test destabilising and said Australia was "very concerned"; Foreign Minister Penny Wong confirmed Beijing had given advance notice but declined to say whether the timing was deliberate, telling reporters "I'll leave China to speak to its intent."⁴⁸ Pacific minister Pat Conroy drew the conclusion the timing invited, saying the test showed that "Pacific security can only be provided from within the Pacific", precisely the argument for the treaty architecture this section documents.⁴⁹ Whether or not Beijing intended the message, Australia's own ministers read it as vindication for the security build-out this analysis is examining.

Vanuatu's case shows that this is not simply a story of small states gradually losing ground. In September 2025, hours before Prime Minister Albanese was due to sign a AUD 500 million, ten-year agreement in Port Vila, Prime Minister Jotham Napat delayed it, telling reporters he worried the pact could restrict Vanuatu's ability to secure critical infrastructure funding from other countries.⁵⁰ Vanuatu signed a revised Nakamal Agreement in Canberra nine months later, on 29 June 2026, committing only to consult, not agree, with Australia on third-party engagement in its critical infrastructure, and barring any foreign military base on its own soil.⁵¹ But an adviser to the Vanuatu government wrote afterwards that Australia had pressured Vanuatu to sign by withholding routine sectoral funding, delaying an announced renewable energy programme, and downgrading diplomatic contact, and that the ten-year, AUD 500 million package announced alongside the signing was, in real terms, a continuation or reduction of Vanuatu's existing aid allocation rather than new support.⁵² Vanuatu also committed to prioritise Pacific Islands Forum members for policing cooperation and to call on Australia, New Zealand and France first for disaster response, while separately negotiating a differently named agreement with China that Napat said would be released once Beijing cleared it for publication, a pointed contrast with the secrecy that has surrounded Solomon Islands' own 2022 pact with China.⁵³ The lesson is not that resistance fails. It is that even the clearest case

⁴⁵ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Ocean of Peace Alliance (Veitacini Treaty), signed Suva, 6 July 2026, arts 10-11, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/fiji/ocean-peace-alliance-veitacini-treaty>.

⁴⁶ Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Vanuatu-Australia Nakamal Agreement, signed Canberra, 29 June 2026, arts 9-10 and 12, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/vanuatu/vanuatu-australia-nakamal-agreement>.

⁴⁷ "China's Pacific missile test sends message to U.S. allies, analysts say", Radio Free Asia, 7 July 2026, <https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2026/07/07/china-missile-test-pacific-fiji-australia/>; "China's Pacific ballistic missile test – Views from ASPI analysts", The Strategist, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 7 July 2026, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/chinas-pacific-ballistic-missile-test-views-from-aspi-analysts/>.

⁴⁸ "Australia, Fiji seal new mutual defense pact in push to counter China in the Pacific", Associated Press via ABC News, 6 July 2026, <https://abcnews.com/International/wireStory/australia-fiji-seal-new-mutual-defense-pact-push-134508688>.

⁴⁹ "Destabilising' Chinese ballistic missile test in Pacific prompts government concerns", ABC News, 6 July 2026, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-07-06/china-test-ballistic-missile-south-pacific/106885076>.

⁴⁹ "China's Pacific SLBM Test Near Tuvalu Triggers Australia-Fiji Mutual Defence Pact And Pacific-Wide Security Alarm", CDM, 12 July 2026, <https://cdm.press/news/asia/2026/07/12/chinas-pacific-slbm-test-near-tuvalu-triggers-australia-fiji-mutual-defence-pact-and-pacific-wide-security-alarm/>.

⁵⁰ "Vanuatu delays \$330M Australia security pact over Chinese funding concerns", Associated Press via Yahoo/MarketBeat, 9 September 2025, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/vanuatu-delays-330m-australia-security-065617125.html>.

⁵¹ "Vanuatu and Australia sign Nakamal Agreement", Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, 29 June 2026, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/vanuatu-and-australia-sign-nakamal-agreement>; "A long-awaited Australia-Vanuatu pact blocks China from building a military base", Associated Press via ABC News, 29 June 2026, <https://abcnews.com/International/wireStory/long-awaited-australia-vanuatu-pact-blocks-china-building-134300351>; "Australia and Vanuatu sign deal to block foreign military bases", Al Jazeera, 29 June 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/29/australia-and-vanuatu-sign-deal-to-block-foreign-military-bases>.

⁵² McDonnell, Siobhan. "The Nakamal Agreement has been signed, but at what cost?", Devpolicy Blog / PINA, July 2026, <https://devpolicy.org/the-nakamal-agreement-has-been-signed-but-at-what-cost/>.

⁵³ "Vanuatu and Australia sign Nakamal Agreement", Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, as above (n. 46); "A long-awaited Australia-Vanuatu pact blocks China from building a military base", Associated Press via ABC News, as above (n. 46), reporting Prime Minister Napat's statement that Vanuatu's separate agreement with China would be released once Beijing granted clearance.

of a Pacific state holding out came at a measurable cost, and produced a narrower legal concession rather than a better deal overall.

By the time either BOPRST or the RODF reaches a negotiating table, five of the Forum's members will already have settled, on five different sets of terms, how much control over their own security relationships they are willing to trade to one external partner. A regional treaty negotiated afterwards does not start from a blank page. The Ocean of Peace Alliance already shows what that looks like in practice. It has an accession clause, but the terms of accession were set by Australia and Fiji before anyone else was in the room. A state that joins later does not get to negotiate those terms; it accepts them.

“By the time either BOPRST or the RODF reaches a negotiating table, five of the Forum’s members will already have settled... how much control over their own security relationships they are willing to trade to one external partner.”

4. WHOSE OCEAN OF PEACE?

A Pacific-wide treaty proposing to consolidate the region’s declarations is entering a field where a bilateral alliance already carries the same name.

Australia and Fiji’s bilateral defence pact, signed weeks before the Solomon Islands tabled its own treaty proposal, is officially named the Ocean of Peace Alliance, with Veitacini as its subtitle.⁵⁴ This is no coincidence. Australia’s own Department of Defence describes the Alliance and the Vuvale Union as the first treaties to give the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration practical effect, the exact claim BOPRST would need to make for itself if it is ever negotiated.⁵⁵ A Pacific-wide treaty proposing to consolidate the region’s declarations is entering a field where a bilateral alliance already carries the same name and has already claimed to have done the consolidating.

A third body now carries the name as well. Alongside the Vuvale Union’s roughly AUD 1 billion in funding over ten years, Australia is also funding an Ocean of Peace Centre for around AUD 22 million.⁵⁶ Australia’s High Commissioner in Suva described this as Fiji and Australia “supporting the establishment of the Ocean of Peace Centre, in close cooperation with the Pacific Islands Forum.”⁵⁷ Cooperation with the Forum is not the same as creation

by the Forum. This Centre should not be confused with the Pacific Peace Institute proposed separately in the draft Regional Peace and Security Action Plan 2026–2030, which the Pacific Regional Non-Governmental (PRN-

⁵⁴ “Fiji and Australia Sign the Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance, Marking a Historic Achievement”, Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, 6 July 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/fiji-and-australia-sign-the-vuvale-union-and-ocean-of-peace-alliance-marking-a-historic-achievement/>.

⁵⁵ “Australia and Fiji sign historic Vuvale Union and Ocean of Peace Alliance”, Australian Department of Defence, 6 July 2026, as above (n. 35).

⁵⁶ “Has the Pacific’s Ocean of Peace concept been hijacked?”, RNZ Pacific, 17 July 2026, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/pacific/728499/has-the-pacific-s-ocean-of-peace-concept-been-hijacked>.

⁵⁷ “Has the Pacific’s Ocean of Peace concept been hijacked?”, RNZ Pacific, as above (n. 51), quoting Australian High Commissioner to Fiji Peter Roberts.



GO) Alliance’s June submission already flagged as tasked with implementing the Ocean of Peace Declaration and consolidating the region’s declarations into a rules-based order.⁵⁸ One is a bilateral institution branded regional; the other is a Forum-track proposal that does not yet exist. Both now compete for the same name and the same claimed mandate.

The Alliance compounds this by design, not by accident. It provides for other Pacific states to join, and Prime Minister Rabuka has said other leaders are already interested. Australian officials met with the leaders of Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga in the days immediately following the signing in Fiji.⁵⁹ A bilateral alliance with an accession clause can grow into something that looks, from the outside, like a regional security bloc, one government joining at a time, under Australian and Fijian terms set before anyone else was in the room, without ever passing through the kind of Forum-wide negotiation and consultation that BOPRST is supposed to represent. It is also already well ahead in every practical sense: signed, funded, and operating, while BOPRST is a concept note

⁵⁸ Pacific Civil Society Organisations/PRNGO Alliance, Pacific Peace and Security submission, 18 June 2026.

⁵⁹ “Prime Minister Anthony Albanese signs Ocean of Peace Alliance with Fiji”, ABC News, as above (n. 37).

awaiting further analysis.

None of this is a fringe concern. Reporting in July 2026 asked directly whether the Ocean of Peace concept, first proposed by Rabuka himself in speeches in 2023, before it became a Leaders' Declaration in 2025, had been taken over by exactly this kind of bilateral activity. A Lowy Institute analyst quoted in that reporting said Australia sees clear value in these arrangements for keeping China out of the region and holding its position as the dominant security partner.⁶⁰ The concept began as a Pacific state's own vision for the region. Whether it still is one now depends on which of these three Ocean of Peace bodies ends up doing the actual work.

5. WHERE THIS ACTUALLY LEAVES US?

Two institutions are now building overlapping legal architecture for the same problem.

The Pacific Policing Initiative that BOPRST would eventually have to answer for sits institutionally with the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, at least on paper: the thirty-year-old body agreed to house the PPI, but has in practice been largely excluded from running it,⁶¹ not with Forum Leaders, who currently have no direct political oversight of it.⁶² This is accurate, and it is also a smaller ask than it sounds: fixing it would mean giving Leaders oversight of a programme that is Australian-funded, Australian-headquartered, and was first used to deliver a message about China at a Commonwealth summit. BOPRST proposes a new Pacific-wide legal ceiling atop this architecture. It does not propose changing SPDMM's membership, JHoPS's composition, or the PPI's funding structure.

The RODF is not a treaty inventing new deployment powers, but rather it is a treaty catching up to forces already in the field. The PRG deployed to Vanuatu and the PPSG deployed to Samoa before any framework existed to govern the legal status of the personnel involved. JHoPS's own communiqués describe the framework as closing a gap in the existing architecture, language that matches, almost point for point, what ASPI's independent analysis said the PRG needed.⁶³ The sequence matters: operational capability first, funded and hosted substantially by one external partner; multilateral endorsement second, through a defence ministers' forum where the Pacific Island states with militaries are outnumbered by their larger partners; legal architecture last, arriving now under the banner of Pacific-led deployment. That sequence is also less tidy than a single legal fix would suggest. Since ASPI identified the PRG's status-of-forces gap, SPDMM has moved on two fronts at once: New Zealand took over command and hosting of the PRG headquarters from 1 July 2026, and SPDMM separately tasked its Secretariat with consulting on a standalone SPDMM Status of Forces Agreement, covering immigration, customs and logistical support for deployments, due to report back in 2026.⁶⁴ The RODF addresses the same underlying gap from JHoPS's side of the table. SPDMM is pursuing its own answer from the other. Two institutions are now building overlapping legal architecture for the same problem, which looks less like a single coordinated project and more like a region hardening its security law on several uncoordinated tracks at once.

Both proposals arrive, too, from a government moving in the same direction. Solomon Islands Prime Minister

⁶⁰ "Has the Pacific's Ocean of Peace concept been hijacked?", RNZ Pacific, as above (n. 51), quoting Lowy Institute's Connor Graham; "Fiji's 'Rambo' PM calls for Pacific to become ocean of peace", BenarNews/Radio Free Asia, 18 October 2023, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2023/10/mil-231018-rfa02.htm>, on Rabuka's 2023 origination of the concept.

⁶¹ Joint Heads of Pacific Security, Joint Communiqué of the Eighth Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Meeting, as above (n. 15): the meeting was co-chaired exclusively by the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, the Commissioner of the Australian Border Force and the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, with the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police Secretariat attending at the same observer level as other technical CROP agencies, and JHoPS Principals "received briefings on" the Pacific Police Support Group rather than from it. Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Shared security in the Pacific", as above (n. 8).

⁶² Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Shared security in the Pacific", as above (n. 8).

⁶³ Joint Communiqué of the Seventh Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security Meeting, Port Moresby, 18–20 March 2025, Australian Department of Defence, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2025-03-21/joint-communicue-seventh-annual-joint-heads-pacific-security>; "The Pacific Response Group is making pleasing progress but needs more buy-in", The Strategist, as above (n. 5).

⁶⁴ South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting Joint Communiqué, Viña del Mar, 22–24 October 2025, as above (n. 20); "NZDF to take over leadership of Pacific Response Group", New Zealand Defence Force, 1 July 2026, <https://www.nzdf.mil.nz/media-centre/news/nzdf-to-take-over-leadership-of-pacific-response-group/>.

“The concept began as a Pacific state’s own vision for the region. Whether it still is one now depends on which of these three Ocean of Peace bodies ends up doing the actual work.”

Matthew Wale took office on 15 May 2026 and flew to Canberra as his first overseas trip less than three weeks

later, on 3 June, telling reporters “the Solomon Islands is Australia’s friend, has always been and always will be,” and agreeing with Prime Minister Albanese to negotiate a comprehensive bilateral strategic treaty.⁶⁵ He also announced a review of the 2022 China security pact.⁶⁶ Within days, Wale acknowledged he had only seen the full text of that pact shortly before travelling, and by mid-June said its contents could not be made public because of a confidentiality clause agreed by the previous government, the same transparency he had demanded from opposition.⁶⁷ The Solomon Islands proposal for BOPRST followed two months later.

6. WHAT THIS MEANS?

The shift is significant: from earlier demands to restrain militarisation to a framework largely concerned with managing it.

Regionalism. SPDMM’s own membership list is the clearest evidence available that “Pacific-led” security cooperation, as currently practised, is not led by a majority of the Pacific Island states with militaries in the room where many of the real decisions are made. JHoPS’s bid to be absorbed into the PIF architecture would carry that same imbalance into the Forum’s own institutional core: a body co-hosted by Australian security agencies, observed by Japan and the United States, rather than corrected first.

Demilitarisation. The PRG’s first deployment was, in substance, its stated purpose: a six-person planning team responding to the Vanuatu earthquake. But a six-person team is a modest test of a capability built for humanitarian crises at scale, and its most attention-getting appearance to date has been a facility tour in Brisbane, not a field deployment. The PPSG’s mismatch is starker: its first deployment secured a diplomatic summit, not a disaster. Both deployments also reflect Pacific operational leadership worth stating plainly rather than erasing. The CHOGM deployment operated under the direction of Samoa Police and was operationally led by an officer of the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, and the PPI’s own design process was led by RPNGC Commissioner David Manning, working with the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police.⁶⁸ None of this changes who pays for the infrastructure or hosts the coordination hub. It does mean the honest description is not that Pacific agency has been erased, but

⁶⁵ “New Solomon Islands leader reviews security pact with China, seeks treaty with Australia”, Reuters, 3 June 2026, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2026-06-02/australia-solomon-islands-agree-to-negotiate-comprehensive-treaty>; “New Solomons PM seeks treaty with Australia, rethinking pact with China”, Bangkok Post, 3 June 2026, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/3265288/new-solomons-pm-seeks-treaty-with-australia-rethinking-pact-with-china>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

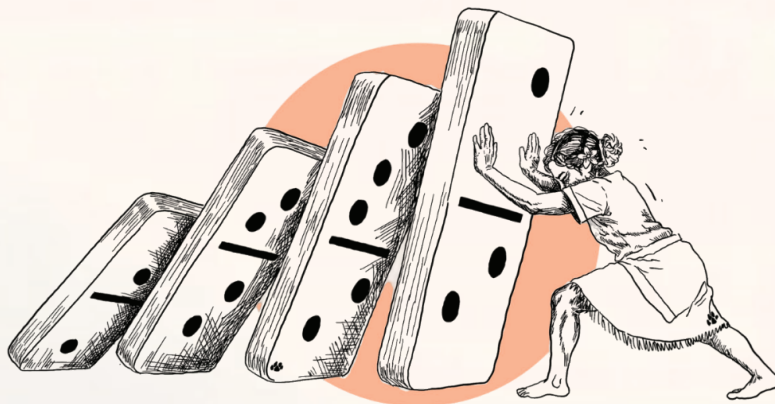
⁶⁷ “Solomons PM says China security pact must stay secret despite review pledge”, Pacific Media Network, 11 June 2026, <https://pmn.co.nz/read/pacific-region/solomons-pm-says-china-security-pact-must-stay-secret-despite-his-earlier-pledge-for-a-review>.

⁶⁸ Australian Federal Police, Annual Report 2024–25, pp. reporting on the first Pacific Police Support Group deployment under the direction of Samoa Police, operationally led by an officer of the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary, https://afp.gov.au/sites/default/files/2026-01/AFPAAnnualReport2024-25_0_0.pdf; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “Shared security in the Pacific”, as above (n. 8), on the Pacific Policing Initiative’s design process being led by Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Commissioner David Manning with the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police.

isters welcomed progress on an independent review of nuclear contamination at Runit and on a joint approach to the Marshall Islands' unresolved claims against the United States over its nuclear testing programme.⁷⁴ Ministers also, separately, spent part of the same meeting discussing recent intercontinental ballistic missile tests in the region and tasked Senior Officials to draft a Leaders' Statement on the matter for Palau, evidence that the region takes this question seriously even as neither BPOPRST nor the RODF engages it at all.⁷⁵

“A security architecture built to manage great-power competition, and largely silent on the wars that competition is already producing, is not the neutral technical exercise either proposal presents itself as.”

Geopolitics. This is no longer a matter of inference from unnamed language in a concept note. Albanese's own remarks at the PPSG's first deployment tied Pacific-led security explicitly to Pacific sovereignty, in the words already quoted above. The “keep China out” reading came from commentary on the same event, not from Albanese himself, though nothing he or his government said afterwards discouraged it. Wale's pivot to Canberra, and his government's near-immediate discovery of a confidentiality clause limiting how far his promised transparency could go, both predate the Solomon Islands' BPOPRST proposal by weeks. The RODF's own language about closing gaps and enabling flexible, responsive architecture has already been used once by JHoPS and once, in a different treaty, by Australia and Fiji, to justify harder security instruments within weeks of each other. None of this requires assuming coordination. It only requires reading the public record. The same period gave the region a live demonstration of how directly outside conflict now reaches Pacific institutions. In May 2026, Forum Leaders invoked the Biketawa Declaration, ordinarily reserved for coups and civil unrest, for the first time over an economic and energy crisis triggered by the war between Israel, the United States and Iran, establishing a new Regional Response Mechanism to coordinate the region's response.⁷⁶ A war on the other side of the world produced a new standing Pacific institution within weeks. A security architecture built to manage great-power competition, and largely silent on the wars that competition is already producing, is not the neutral technical exercise either proposal presents itself as.



⁷⁴ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, as above (n. 2), para 13(viii)–(xii).

⁷⁵ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, as above (n. 2), para 11 and para 13(vii).

⁷⁶ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “Release: Special FFMM Session Endorses Regional Response Mechanism under the Biketawa Declaration”, 25 May 2026, <https://forumsec.org/publications/release-special-ffmm-session-endorses-regional-response-mechanism-under-biketawa>; “Forum Leaders invoke Biketawa Declaration”, PINA, 11 May 2026, <https://pina.com.fj/2026/05/11/forum-leaders-invoke-biketawa-declaration/>.

Pacific agency. Forum Foreign Ministers, in the outcomes of their own August meeting, could only note the Solomon Islands proposal and acknowledge that further consultation was still needed before it goes to Leaders, a concession that the process so far has not reached the whole Forum, let alone its people. JHoPS has consulted extensively among security officials and has not once, in eight years, opened its work to the public it would eventually deploy into. The PRG was endorsed by a body where the Pacific Island states with militaries are outnumbered by their larger partners. Civil society appears in none of these processes. Vanuatu's experience should settle any assumption that resistance is cost-free: the clearest case of a Pacific government pushing back still ended in funding pressure, curtailed diplomatic access, and a package that added little to what was already committed. Nothing in either BOPRST's or the RODF's current timeline indicates that such resistance is likely to occur anywhere before Palau, and even where it has occurred elsewhere, it has not come cheap.

WHAT SHOULD HAPPEN INSTEAD?

This section answers two different questions. First: what should Leaders actually do in Palau? Second: if treaty negotiations eventually proceed regardless, what must the resulting treaties contain?

What should Leaders actually do in Palau?

- Leaders should not authorise treaty negotiations for either BOPRST or the RODF at this meeting.
- The Forum Secretariat should publish or otherwise disclose the current draft architecture for both instruments, so that consultation is possible on an actual text rather than a concept.
- Neither BOPRST nor the RODF should be authorised by Leaders at Palau without wider consultation, and through the Regional Peace and Security TAG, run with the same seriousness as the consultation already given to security officials and the Forum Troika.
- The Forum Secretariat should assess, before Palau, how BOPRST, the RODF, SPDMM's own initiatives and the draft Action Plan's proposed Pacific Peace Institute would interact, rather than allowing four processes to harden independently. This assessment has still not happened. The 7 August FFMM discussed the RODF alongside a newly named Integrated Regional Response Mechanism, and treated the Solomon Islands proposal as a separate line item entirely, noting only that further consultations were needed on each.⁷⁷ Five processes, now including the IRRM, remain on five separate tracks heading into Palau.
- Any further mandate on either instrument should require an accounting of who funds, hosts and directs the PRG and the PPSG now, and on what terms Forum Leaders, not JHoPS and not SPDMM, would gain actual oversight of them.
- Both instruments should be measured against the same standard PANG set in June: no codification without naming the core harms it must prohibit, without the consent of Pacific peoples rather than leaders and donors alone, and without a formal or informal role for powers outside the Pacific in deciding what "Pacific-led" is allowed to mean.

If treaty negotiations eventually proceed, what must the treaties contain?

Answering only the first question leaves the second one to be settled later, inside whatever treaty text eventually gets negotiated, by whoever is in the room at the time. Given how much of this analysis has been about permanence, arriving without an answer to this question is itself a risk. Any BOPRST or RODF text should be required, at minimum, to address:

- **Demilitarisation:** define what an Ocean of Peace actually means for foreign basing, military exercises, access arrangements, interoperability and military build-up, rather than leaving militarisation entirely outside its scope.

⁷⁷ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2026 Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting Outcomes, as above (n. 2), para 15(vi)–(vii); "Pacific Foreign Ministers back regional security plan as threats grow more complex", PINA, as above (n. 3).

- **Nuclear obligations:** explicitly protect and operationalise the Treaty of Rarotonga, rather than building new military-mobility arrangements around it while staying silent on nuclear propulsion, AUKUS and related questions.
- **Autonomous systems:** state plainly whether uncrewed and autonomous military systems fall within deployment and access rules, rather than leaving a personnel-centred framework silent on machines.
- **Political control:** deployments should ultimately be answerable to Forum-level political authority, not simply to security chiefs or defence-minister groupings such as JHoPS and SPDMM.
- Funding and hosting transparency: “Pacific-led” cannot be treated solely as a question of who commands personnel on the day of deployment. Funding, infrastructure, data, logistics and institutional location matter just as much, and should be disclosed on the same terms.
- **Civil-society participation:** a durable role in ongoing review and oversight, not a one-off consultation before signing.
- **Periodic review:** this analysis has repeatedly noted that these legal frameworks are being built once and made usable indefinitely. If permanence is the concern, the treaties themselves should not become open-ended legal channels immune from periodic political review and possible renegotiation



**Solving One crisis
Does not Fix the rest**

CONCLUSION

On their own, BOPRST and the RODF look like two more proposals on an already crowded regional agenda. Put them alongside the Pacific Response Group, the Pacific Police Support Group, JHoPS, SPDMM, the expanding set of bilateral security treaties, the Veitacini Treaty and Ocean of Peace Alliance, and the Ocean of Peace Centre, and a broader pattern becomes harder to ignore. The region is acquiring more security institutions, more agreements and more standing arrangements for deployment. Much of this has happened incrementally, through separate decisions taken in different forums.

There is no need to assume that all of this follows a single plan. In many cases, each initiative has its own rationale and can be defended on its own terms. The concern is what they amount to together. Structures created for disaster response, policing, defence cooperation and regional coordination are beginning to overlap, while the rules governing them are still being worked out. BOPRST and the RODF would enter that landscape after much of the infrastructure is already in place.

“Without an answer, BOPRST and the RODF risk formalising a security architecture that is becoming easier to use, while leaving unresolved how far militarisation in the Pacific should go.”

Pacific governments have not been passive in this process. Some of these initiatives were proposed by Pacific states, and Pacific officials have played important roles in designing and commanding them. The PPSG deployment to CHOGM, for example, operated under Samoa Police and was led operationally by a Papua New Guinean officer. Fiji itself developed and promoted the Ocean of Peace idea and later chose to enter a defence alliance with Australia that now carries the same name. These facts matter and so do the material arrangements around them. The PPSG is supported by an Australian-funded coordination hub in Brisbane, while Australia remains a major source of the money, infrastructure and logistical capacity behind several of the initiatives discussed here.

Pacific leadership can therefore be genuine while still operating within arrangements in which resources and institutional capacity are unevenly distributed. This imbalance will matter when decisions are made about how these mechanisms grow, who can use them and how much political control Forum members retain over them.

This is where the discussion returns to BOPRST. The proposal does not arrive before the regional security architecture has been built. It arrives after an Australia-Fiji defence alliance has already been presented as giving practical effect to the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration, and after an Australia-funded Ocean of Peace Centre has been established alongside a separate proposal for a Forum Pacific Peace Institute. At the same time, the region still has not agreed on what an Ocean of Peace should mean for military expansion, foreign access, exercises, or the movement of armed forces.

This leaves Leaders in Palau with a fairly basic question. If the region is going to make deployment easier and give these arrangements a more permanent legal footing, what limits will come with that? Without an answer, BOPRST and the RODF risk formalising a security architecture that is becoming easier to use, while leaving unresolved how far militarisation in the Pacific should go.

