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The Implementation of Australia's "Stepping-Up Engagement" with the Melanesian States as the Defense Strategy of Australia to Respond to the Rise of China in the South Pacific Region (2013-2018)

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SUBMISSION TRACK

Received : 18 June 2020
Final Revision : 06 Nov 2020
Available Online : 30 November 2020

KEYWORD

The Rise of China, Australia, Threat Perception, National Interest, Australia Stepping-Up Engagement.

KATA KUNCI

Kebangkitan Cina, Persepsi Ancaman, Kepentingan Nasional, Langkah Lanjutan Australia

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ABSTRACT

The rise of China in the South Pacific region indicates China's growing political-diplomatic, economic, and the possibility of military presence within the region. Accordingly, it develops Australia's threat perception and affects Australia's national interest. This research discussed Australia's "Stepping-Up engagement" as the defense strategy of Australia to strengthen its bilateral defense relations with the Melanesian states as the response to the rise of China. In addition, the research is constructed by using the concept of national interest, threat perception, defense strategy and bilateral defense relations through qualitative research method. This research finds that there are four ways of implementation of Australia's Stepping-Up engagement" with the Melanesian states as the defense strategy of Australia to respond to the rise of China in the South Pacific region; Enhancing military training and course of PNG defense personnel as well as monitoring the post-stabilization operations in Bougainville, restoring bilateral defense relations with Fiji, enhancing security cooperation with Vanuatu and regional assistance mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)'s support to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

ABSTRAK

Kebangkitan China di wilayah Pasifik Selatan mengindikasikan pertumbuhan politik-diplomatik, ekonomi, dan hadirnya militer di wilayah tersebut. Oleh karena itu, penulis membahas langkah lanjutan Australia dan strategi pertahanannya untuk memperkuat hubungan pertahanan bilateral dengan negara-negara Melanesia sebagai respon terhadap kebangkitan China. Selain itu, penelitian ini disusun dengan menggunakan konsep kepentingan nasional, persepsi ancaman, strategi pertahanan dan hubungan pertahanan bilateral melalui metode penelitian kualitatif. Penelitian ini menemukan ada empat cara implemmentasi langkah lanjutan Australia memperkuat hubungan dengan negara-negara Melanesiasebagai strategi pertahanan Australia untuk merespon kebangkitan Cina di kawasan Pasifik Selatan; Meningkatkan pelatihan militer dan kursus personil pertahana PNG serta memantau operasi paska- stabilisasi di Bougainville, meulihkan hubungan pertahanan bilateral dengan Fiji, meningkatkan kerjasama keamanan dengan Vanuatu dan dukungan misi bantuan regional ke Kepulauan Solomon untuk Kepolisian Kepulauan Kerajaan Solomon.

Introduction

China's rapid development to a great-power during President Xi Jinping administration has generated the rise of China and managed to attract worldwide attention by establishing a presence in several parts of the world.¹ The rise of China in the South Pacific can be considered as a way to broaden its markets and gain access to raw materials and resources to develop economic growth as a necessary way to strengthen diplomatic legitimacy of China as a global power.² China's political interest is related to China and Taiwan rivalry over diplomatic recognition in the South Pacific region as the main factor that affect Chinese aid in the South Pacific.³

This issue is very interesting to be taken into account due to the "expansion" of China's influence to South Pacific as a new arena for great power politics. As we are aware, South Pacific has become the playing field of many great powers during the second World War and particularly in the post Cold War era.

China's economic interests are related to Belt and Road Initiative to generate cooperation opportunities between China and Pacific Island countries.⁴ China continuously provides aid that has welcomed by the South Pacific states along with China's win-win principle by providing aid to be exchanged with things that support China's national interests from the South Pacific states, such as access

toward ports in the region.⁵ Obtaining access and influence is considered as China's security and defense interest to support its economic development within the region.⁶

Several improvements toward infrastructures supported by China, as well as the access toward some ports in the region, had developed Australia's threat perception to the rise of China due to the possibility of China builds military base in the South Pacific.⁷

Accordingly, China's growing interests give a consequence for Australia to remain cautious about China's growing presence in the South Pacific region. Australia cannot be secure if its immediate neighbor becomes a source of threat to Australia. The security threat includes growing influence of foreign military power with hostile intentions aims to establish bases in Australia's immediate neighborhood that are capable to challenge Australia's national interests.⁸

Instability leads to possibilities of any security challenges toward Australia came from weak and fragile states of the South Pacific. Therefore, stability and security of the South Pacific region are important to Australia's security and prosperity.

Australia's national interests to the South Pacific region consist of political, economic, security and defense interests. Maintaining Australia's presence as the leading power through foreign aid can be considered as Australia's political

¹ Bijian, Z. (2016). China's "Peaceful Rise" to Great-Power Status. New York: Oxford University Press, p.20.

² Webb, G. C. (2015). China's South Pacific Expansion and the Changing Regional Order: A cause for concern to the regional status quo? Australian Defense College, Centre for Defense and Strategic Studies, p. 2, 12.

³ Yang, J. (2011). The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 130.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Webb, G. C. (2015). p. 10.

⁸ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 25.

interests.⁹ Australia's economic interests is promoting the economic development in the region, meanwhile preventing any major power with hostile intentions that could project force against Australia is the security and defense interest of Australia.¹⁰

Australia's defense strategy aims to assure that defense is capable enough to respond if the government determines to pursue Australia's interests through the use of military force.¹¹ In accordance with the fact that both Australia and China have growing interests in the South Pacific, especially to the Melanesian states, Australia's response to the rise of China is by strengthening its bilateral defense relations with the Melanesian states consist of Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands through stepping-up engagement including military training, security cooperation and regular exercises. Australia's stepping-up engagement with Melanesian states includes improving Australia's defense relationship with PNG by providing constant support for the development of PNG Defense Force.¹² Furthermore, Australia aims to restore its defense relations with Fiji to maintain its presence in the region.¹³

Australia enhances its bilateral defense relations with the Vanuatu Government through improving the capacity and professionalism of the Vanuatu Police Force in terms of security

services.¹⁴ Additionally, Australia continues to support the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force through Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) that focused on security support and primarily capacity building includes training and advisory assistance.¹⁵ This research focus on the second strategic defense interests of Australia which is a secure nearer region with the case study of the rise of China in the South Pacific that can potentially affect Australia's national interest in the region.

Research Method

In line with the Neo-Realism theory, it explains that states will keep seeking power in the international system. Neo-Realism theory explains the intentions and interests of Australia and China to obtain access and influence as a major power in the South Pacific region. The stability and security of the South Pacific state especially the Melanesia sub-region is very important for Australia's security. The growing interest from external powers in the region can influence the stability and security of the region which is capable to directly affect Australia's national interest.

Therefore, Australia's vital interests in the South Pacific region, its security and survival are being threatened by the rise of China in the South Pacific. Any assertive behavior pursued by China in the South Pacific region including China's plans to build a permanent military base in the South Pacific is enough to create threat perception for Australia toward China in the South Pacific region.

Both Australia and China are having their own national interests in the South Pacific region. China's growing interest in the South Pacific, especially in the Melanesia

⁹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 67.

¹² Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 64.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 64.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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sub-region influence Australia’s national interest which perceived the rise of China in the South Pacific as a threat to Australia’s security. China’s national interest in the South Pacific region consists of political, economic, security and defense interests.

Furthermore, Australia’s national interest in the South Pacific consists of political interest to maintain Australia’s presence as the leading power in the region through foreign aid, economic interest to promote economic development, and preventing any major power with hostile intentions that could project force against Australia is the security and defense interest of Australia within the region. Australia’s defense strategy to respond to the rise of China can be considered as an approach to protect Australia’s national interest for the security and stability of the South Pacific region.

In the case of Australia, the security and stability of the South Pacific, especially in the Melanesia region, can affect Australia’s defense awareness. The rise of China and its growing interests in the South Pacific generate Australia’s threat perception. Defense strategy or policy aims to defend and secure the national interests of states as well to respond to the threat perception which could affect the Australia’s national interests.

Further, this study employs qualitative method. It uses data from books and journal articles written by experts or scholars, officials published reports such as The Australian Government’s first National Security Strategy 2013, Australia Defense White Paper 2013 and 2016, as well as an official statements or documents from the official website of the government of Australia as the basis to bolster its bilateral defense relations with South Pacific countries.

Result and Discussion

Result of this study shows that there are four ways implementation of Australia’s “Stepping-Up engagement” with the Melanesian states as the defense strategy of Australia to respond to the rise of China in the South Pacific region, it can be seen from the figure below:

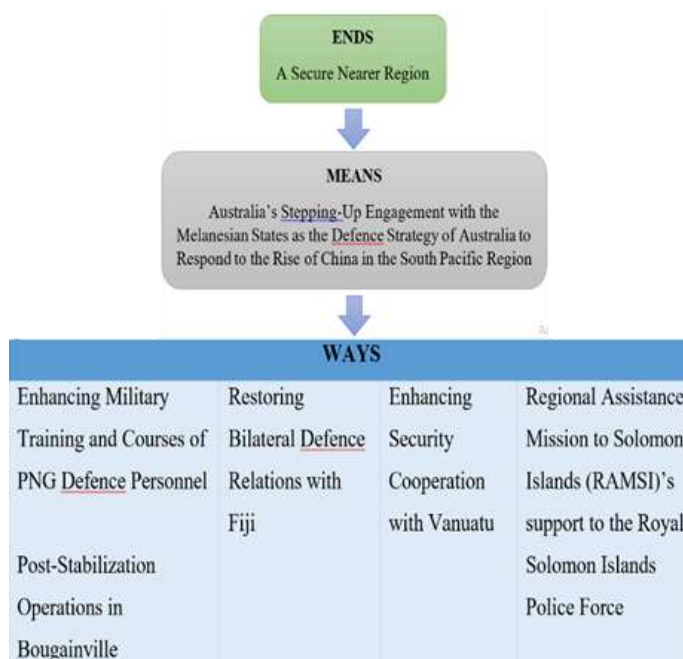


Figure 1. Australia’s Stepping-Up Engagement with the Melanesian States
Source: Compilation by the authors

The Rise of China in the South Pacific Region

China and Taiwan's diplomatic rivalry started in 1971 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) officially replaced the Republic of China (ROC) in the United Nations.¹⁶

China and Taiwan rivalry over recognition is the political interest of China to strengthen its political-diplomatic presence in the South Pacific region. China aims to future reunification with Taiwan and accept only formal singular recognition

¹⁶ Yang, J. (2011). *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 51.

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by other countries known as "One-China Policy" to contain Taiwan globally.¹⁷ China and Taiwan approached the South Pacific governments with aid and other beneficial supports.¹⁸ As a result, most countries do not pay attention to who the "real" China is and rather build relations with both if possible.¹⁹

The South Pacific states perceived China-Taiwan diplomatic rivalry as an opportunity to gain political and financial benefits by mobilizing aid to fulfill their own political and economic interests.²⁰ Accordingly, there is a possibility of the South Pacific states decided to switch their recognition between China and Taiwan depending on which country is capable to provide more benefits. Recently, two of the South Pacific states which are the Solomon Islands and Kiribati have decided to switch their diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China.²¹ In consequence of the Solomon Islands' decision to recognize China, all of the Melanesian states currently are having diplomatic ties with China.

China's economic interest is related to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the Chinese government action plan and economic vision with a purpose to promote trade and investment with China's foreign partners.²² China's diplomatic efforts in the South Pacific region focus on deepening

the bilateral relations and strengthening its engagement with each of the South Pacific states by carrying out several infrastructure projects.²³

In order to support infrastructure projects, China provides loans to the local governments or private companies through the BRI with lack of transparency and official information.²⁴ Accordingly, China's deepening engagement with the South Pacific states particularly in the economic sectors could increase the South Pacific states' indebtedness to China and decided to take China's side in the international system.²⁵

China has become one of the major financiers in the South Pacific by providing loans to Pacific governments under the BRI.²⁶ There are six Pacific governments which currently indebted to China and had signed up to the BRI such as PNG, Vanuatu, Fiji, Cook Islands, Samoa, and Tonga.²⁷ Accordingly, China has successfully attracted the Pacific governments as a development partner by operating differently from the traditional development partners.²⁸

Chinese assistance to the Pacific governments is known to be more responsive and faster to the needs of local political elites with fewer requirements attached.²⁹ Chinese financial support to the South Pacific region is dominated by infrastructure development which is mostly based on loans rather than grants.³⁰ Therefore, BRI for China is an opportunity to escalate Chinese involvement and control in the South Pacific region by

¹⁷ Yang, J. (2011). p. 52, 62.

¹⁸ Atkinson, J. (2010). China-Taiwan Diplomatic Competition and the Pacific Islands. *The Pacific Review*, Routledge Journal, p. 408.

¹⁹ Yang, J. (2011). p. 54.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hoadley, S. (2019, September 25). Two Pacific states drop Taiwan for China. Retrieved from Newsroom: <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/ideasroom/2019/09/23/823559/two-pacific-states-dump-taiwan-for-china>

²² Oosterveld, W., Wilms, E., Kertysova, K. (2018). The Belt and Road Initiative Looks East: Political Implications of China's Economic Forays in the Caribbean and the South Pacific. *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, p. 46-47, 57-58.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rajah, R., Dayant, A., and Pryke, J. (2019). *Ocean of Debt? Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific*. Lowy Institute, p. 2-5, 20.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

strengthening its bilateral relations with the South Pacific states.

Furthermore, Vanuatu has become one of the countries in the world that heavily indebted to China and both PNG and Fiji show the rising debt as China borrowers.³¹ The bilateral relations between China and the Solomon Islands are getting stronger proven by its decision to switch their diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China. Overall, it shows China's growing interests and constantly trying to strengthen its bilateral relations with Melanesian states through the implementation of BRI.

The South Pacific can be seen as one of the secluded regions, however, it starts to be the subject of great power interest. According to China's Military Strategy 2015, China considers the South Pacific region as an instrument for its future military ambitions and security interests. China's military posture in the South Pacific aims to develop its maritime infrastructure and support increasing power projection operations in the region.³²

China continuously providing aid and loans for the South Pacific states with a principle of 'win-win', which is by providing aid to be exchanged by something that contributes to China's national interests such as access toward ports in the region.³³ Obtaining access and influence in the South Pacific region can be considered as China's security and defense interest to support its economic development within the region.

The more China's loans increase across the South Pacific will offer China an

opportunity to gain access and achieve its national interest in the South Pacific region due to its win-win principle. The sphere of China's influence across the South Pacific mostly regarding access toward ports and infrastructures. The South Pacific states indebtedness to China is probably being used as an instrument to obtain concessions on military cooperation such as to gain docking rights for its navy.³⁴ Accordingly, it increases the possibility of China's plan to build a permanent military base within the South Pacific region.³⁵

Australia's Threat Perception toward China's Growing Interests in the South Pacific Region

Australia's threat perception toward China's growing interests started since 2013 due to the possibility of China builds military base in the South Pacific region. The possibility of China builds military base in the South Pacific resulting Australia pays more attention to the rise of China and takes primary responsibility for securing the South Pacific region as well as protecting Australia's national interests.

China's growing economic and political-diplomatic presence in the South Pacific has generated China's involvement in the region. China's interest to gain access and influence lead to the possibility of having a military presence in the South Pacific region. Among all of the South Pacific states, Tonga, Fiji, and Vanuatu have frequently been considered as a potential place for China's military base in the South Pacific region.³⁶

Under those circumstances, China's military presence in the South Pacific region could affect Australia's security and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Oosterveld, W., Wilms, E., Kertysova, K. (2018). *The Belt and Road Initiative Looks East: Political Implications of China's Economic Forays in the Caribbean and the South Pacific*. The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, p. 46.

³³ Webb, G. C. (2015). p. 12.

³⁴ Oosterveld, W., Wilms, E., Kertysova, K. (2018). p. 7, 58.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Oosterveld, W., Wilms, E., Kertysova, K. (2018). p. 55.

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national interest because all of those states are located close enough to Australia's territory. Australia considers the South Pacific region as a peaceful region, but the possibility of China builds a military base for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ships develop Australia's threat perception toward China.

In 2013, the issues regarding the possibility of China having a military base in Tonga arose because of Tonga's inability to pay off China's loans.³⁷ Tonga is one of those countries in the world that heavily indebted to China. Tonga's indebtedness to China could provide access and influence to ports or infrastructures due to China's win-win principle.

Accordingly, there is a possibility that the Government of China and Tonga are having a discussion to host a military base or at least access to obtain docking rights for China's navy.³⁸ Furthermore, China and Fiji are having a stable bilateral relationship as the aftermath of the Fiji coup in 2006 which had loosened the relations between Fiji and Australia as one of the traditional powers in the South Pacific region.³⁹ The possibility of China builds a military base in Fiji arose in 2015 because Zhang Ping as the Chinese Ambassador to Fiji proposed regarding the possibility of a Chinese naval base in Fijian territory.⁴⁰

The latest issues regarding the possibility of China builds a military base in the South Pacific was reported in 2018. At that time, Australian media claimed that China and Vanuatu government are

discussing to establish China's military presence in Vanuatu.⁴¹ China's spending for wharf redevelopment in Vanuatu including the construction of a new wharf in Luganville which is the country's main export port shows the possibility of China's plan to build a permanent military presence in Vanuatu territory.⁴² Furthermore, Vanuatu is one of those countries in the world that heavily indebted to China.

Access toward infrastructures especially port facilities give benefits for Chinese commerce and the long-range deployment of China's navy.⁴³ Having a naval base in Vanuatu would provide China the ability to project its naval power throughout the Indo-Pacific region.⁴⁴

There are some reasons why China's military base in the South Pacific would be a serious concern for Australia's security and national interest. The South Pacific region is located between significant trade routes and easily approaches the Australia's east coast, where most of Australia's main population centers took a place.⁴⁵ Accordingly, if there is a potentially hostile power were to possess a military base in the South Pacific region especially in the Melanesian states, it would considerably

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 7.

³⁹ Wang, Z. (2014). China's Bilateral Aid to the South Pacific Region, p. 46.

⁴⁰ Doviverata, R. (2015, November 06). China Happy To Help Fiji Set Up A New Navy Base. Retrieved from Fiji Sun: <https://fijisun.com.fj/2015/11/06/china-happy-to-help-fiji-set-up-a-new-navy-base/>

⁴¹ Lee, J. (2018, November 09). Australia's plan to challenge China in the South Pacific. Retrieved from

CNN:<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/08/australia/australia-china-south-pacific-analysis-intl/index.html>

⁴² Wang, Z. (2014). China's Bilateral Aid to the South Pacific Region, p. 41.

⁴³ Manthorpe, J. (2019, June 08). China Targeting Pacific Isles for Strategic Bases. Retrieved from Asia Times: <https://asiatimes.com/2019/06/china-targeting-pacific-isles-for-strategic-bases/>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dibb, P. (2018, April 14). If China Builds a Military Base in Vanuatu, what are the Implications for Australia's Defense Planning? Retrieved from The Strategist: Australian Strategic Policy Institute: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-builds-military-base-vanuatu-implications-australias-defense-planning/>

increase the power capacity to use military force against Australia.⁴⁶

A significant threat to Australia's national security would be possible only by forces with access to facilities and bases within Australia's immediate neighborhood.⁴⁷ Issues regarding the possibility of China builds a military base in the South Pacific constantly arises between 2013 and 2018. China’s power projection in the South Pacific aimed at the Melanesian region. Given these points, Australia will obviously develop a threat perception toward the rise of China in the South Pacific region.

Australia’s Triangle of Threat Perception towards China

The speech delivered by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull shows that Australia would react seriously to any potential adverse military developments within Australia's neighborhood. It expressed 'great concern' of Australia's interests to prevent any external actors to establish a military base in the South Pacific region. The South Pacific region could be an important area for China to spread its influences, to gain new allies, and to examine its growing ability and strength to command allegiance in the region.⁴⁸

Lack of transparency between China and recipient governments regarding China’s activities and the possibility of China builds a military base keeps Australia on guard and develops the threat perception toward the rise of China.

The concept of threat perception between states and other states can be from different factors. Therefore, states tend to influence each other through the relations

between threat perceptions, values or national interests, and approaches of any particular states. Furthermore, the linkage between threat perception, values or national interest, and approaches called as the Triangle of Threat Perception on how those three concepts influence one another. In the case of Australia's threat perception to the rise of China in the South Pacific, the linkage between the three variables can be seen in the figure below:

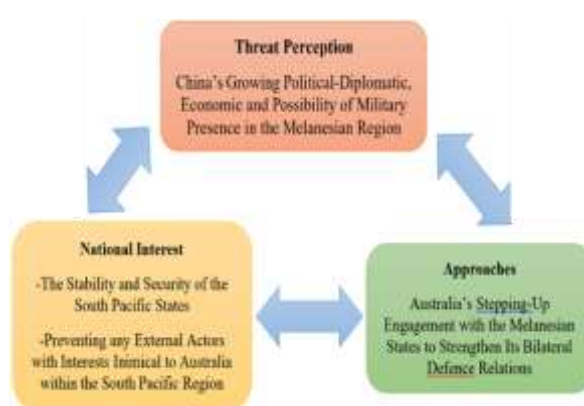


Figure 2: Australia’s Triangle of Threat Perception toward Rise of China
Source: compilation by author (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016)

According to the figure above, threat perception influenced Australia’s national interest and affected approaches directed to the Melanesian states. Australia pays more attention to the growing political-diplomatic, economic, and the possibility of China’s military presence in the Melanesian region. Furthermore, the possibility of China builds a military base in the South Pacific region developed Australia’s threat perception toward the rise of China.

In order to respond to the rise of China in the Melanesian region, Australia strengthened its bilateral defense relations through the implementation of Australia’s “Stepping-Up Engagement” with the Melanesian states. Australia’s approaches toward the Melanesian states are expected

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Connolly, P. J. (2016). Engaging China's New Foreign Policy in the South Pacific. Australian Journal of International Affairs, p. 5.

to be able to limit the influence of any external actors with interests inimical to Australia and maintain the stability and security of the South Pacific region.

Australia's National Interests in the South Pacific Region

Australia is the main aid provider and the South Pacific states consume the biggest proportion of Australia's aid budget.⁴⁹ Australia has long been the dominant regional power and constantly maintain its engagement to protect Australia's national interests in the South Pacific region.⁵⁰ Accordingly, Australia increased its political-diplomatic presence by providing aid supports, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance toward the South Pacific region. Australia's aid supports aims to promote prosperity, reducing poverty, and enhancing the stability of the South Pacific region.⁵¹

Australia's aid tends to focus on the Melanesian states consist of PNG, Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. Australia's aid to PNG is regarding the long-term project to improve health services and education including HIV prevention in PNG.⁵² Australia's aid to Fiji is regarding the long-term education project with a purpose to make education more accessible for low-income families as well

as humanitarian support due to cyclone Winston in 2016.⁵³

Australia's aid to Vanuatu is mostly regarding humanitarian assistance and disaster relief such as for the long-term cyclone recovery package to rebuild infrastructure after 2015's Tropical Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu.⁵⁴ Furthermore, through the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), Australia assisted the Government of the Solomon Islands in maintaining security, law and justice as well as improving the machinery of government.⁵⁵ Australia's constant aid supports strengthened Australia's political-diplomatic presence especially with the Melanesian states for the sake of stability, security, and prosperity in the South Pacific region.

Furthermore, Australia increased its economic presence in the South Pacific region by promoting economic development to overcome the South Pacific's economic growth challenge and reduce poverty within the region. Major challenges encountered by the South Pacific states including unemployment and ineffective governance had resulting in the rapid increase of violence and crime followed by political and economic instability.⁵⁶ Accordingly, supporting the development of national resilience to minimize the likelihood of instability in the South Pacific region is important for Australia's security environment.⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Colton, G. (2018). Stronger together: Safeguarding Australia's Security Interests through closer Pacific ties. Lowy Institute, p. 5-6.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Australian Government. (n.d.). Aid Investment Plan Pacific Regional: 2015-16 to 2018-19. Retrieved from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-investment-plan-aip-pacific-regional-2015-16-to-2018-19>

⁵² Georgeou, N. and Hawksley, C. (2016, July 26). Australian Aid in the Pacific Islands. Retrieved from Australian Institute of International Affairs: <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australian-aid-in-the-pacific-islands/>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 141.

⁵⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 37.

⁵⁶ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 48.

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In order to support the economic development of the South Pacific states, Australia carried out the Pacific Regional Program to complements Australia's bilateral program to the South Pacific states.⁵⁸ Accordingly, it enhanced attempts at the bilateral level to overcome the South Pacific's economic growth challenge as well to reduce poverty.⁵⁹

The South Pacific region could facilitate both the entry of threat and beneficiaries to Australia. The possibility of any security challenges for Australia that came from weak and fragile states of the South Pacific could affect Australia's national interest.⁶⁰ Therefore, the stability and security of the South Pacific region are significant to Australia's national interest in the region.

The rise of China in the South Pacific region generates China's economic and political-diplomatic presence within the region. The sphere of China's influence in the South Pacific region mostly about access toward ports and infrastructures. The lack of transparency between China and the recipient governments regarding China's activities followed by growing interests and presence in the region could influence Australia's national interest.⁶¹

Aside from economic and political-diplomatic presence, there is a possibility of China's growing military presence due to several infrastructure improvement in the

region which is provided by China.⁶² The possibility of China having a military base in the South Pacific region could threaten Australia's security and national interest. Australian Defense Force (ADF) must be prepared to collaborate with the South Pacific states to carry out disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, security, or stabilization operations within Australia's immediate region.⁶³

Furthermore, Australia strengthened its bilateral relations with the Melanesian states by implementing stepping-up engagement to maintain security and stability of the South Pacific region. Australia's stepping-up engagement includes enhancing military training and courses of PNG defense personnel as well as monitoring the post-stabilization operations in Bougainville.⁶⁴ Australia put a high priority regarding the defense relationship with PNG as Australia's closest neighbor.

Furthermore, Australia aims to restore its bilateral defense relations with Fiji by establishing relations between the ADF and the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) as the aftermath of the lifting of sanctions against Fiji in 2014.⁶⁵ A constructive bilateral defense relationship between Australia and Fiji is expected to be able to support a secure immediate region as Australia's national interest.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Australian Government. (n.d.). Aid Investment Plan Pacific Regional: 2015-16 to 2018-19. Retrieved from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-investment-plan-aip-pacific-regional-2015-16-to-2018-19>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 15.

⁶¹ Colton, G. (2018). Stronger together: Safeguarding Australia's Security Interests through closer Pacific ties. Lowy Institute, p. 10.

⁶² Webb, G. C. (2015). China's South Pacific Expansion and the Changing Regional Order: A cause for concern to the regional status quo? Australian Defense College, Centre for Defense and Strategic Studies, p. 10.

⁶³ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 74.

⁶⁴ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

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Aside from providing an important contribution to support disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, Australia enhances security cooperation with Vanuatu.⁶⁷ In addition, Australia supports the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force through RAMSI and provide training as well as advisory assistance by having regular exercises in the Solomon Islands.⁶⁸ Accordingly, it is expected to limit the influence of any external actors with interests inimical to Australia’s national interests within the South Pacific region.

Australia Defense Strategy

Australia’s defense strategy aims to assure that defense is capable to respond when the government determines to pursue Australia's interests with the needs of using military forces.⁶⁹ Australia's national security interests aim to protect Australia's sovereignty that includes freedom from coercion by other countries, people and assets, constructing sustainable security in our region as well as establishing a favorable international environment.⁷⁰ Australia's efforts are concentrated on decreasing the risk of conflict by establishing trust and partnerships through regular interaction with other states.⁷¹

Each of Australia's strategic defense interests is interconnected and contributes to Australia’s security. The table below provides Australia' strategic defense interests according to Australian Defense White Paper 2013 and 2016:

Table 1. Australia’s Strategic Defense Interests

	Australian Defense White paper 2013	Australia Defense Wite paper 2016
Strategic Defense Interest	1. A Secure Australia 2. A Secure South Pacific and Timor-Leste 3. A Stable Indo-Pacific 4. A Stable Rules-Based Global Order	1. A Secure, Resilient Australia with Secure Northern Approaches and Proximate Sea Lines of Communication 2. A Secure Nearer Region Encompassing Maritime South East Asia and the South Pacific 3. A Stable Indo-Pacific Region and A Rules-Based Global Order

Source: Compilation of two documents by the author

According to the table above, “A Secure South Pacific” remains as the second most important priority of Australia’s strategic defense interest. Given these points, Australia seeks to ensure that no major power with hostile intentions establishes bases that it could project force against Australia within its immediate neighborhood.⁷² Australia cannot be secure if its immediate neighborhood becomes a source of threat to Australia including the threat of a foreign military power with

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 77.

⁷⁰ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 23-24.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 25.

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growing influence that able to challenge Australia's security and interests.⁷³

The strategic defense objectives aim to support the development of the future force to ensure the necessary force structure and force posture to achieve Australia’s strategic defense interests.⁷⁴

The table below provides Australia' strategic defense objectives according to Australian Defense White Paper 2013 and 2016:

Table 2. Australia’s Strategic Defense Objectives

	Australian Defense White Paper 2013	Australian Defense White Paper 2016
Strategic Defense Objectives	1. Deter and Defeat Armed Attacks on Australia 2. Contribute to stability and Security in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste 3. Contribute to Military Contingencies in the Indo-Pacific region, with Priority Given to Southeast Asia 4. Contribute to Military Contingencies in Support of Global Security	1. Deter, Deny and Defeat Attacks on Threats to Australia and Its National Interest and Northern Approaces 2. Make Effective Military Contributions to Support the Security of Southeast Asia and Support the Governments of Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and of Pacific Island Countries to Build and Strengthen their Security

Source: Compilation of the two documents by the author

According to the table above, an effective military contribution to support the government of the South Pacific states and strengthen their security through

⁷³ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 69, 71.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

deepening security partnerships is the second priority of Australia’s strategic defense objectives. Australia cooperated with the South Pacific states to strengthen their capacity and ability to respond effectively to any security challenges through contributions to bilateral and multilateral activities including exercises and training.⁷⁵ It includes activities to limit the influence of any external actors with interests inimical to Australia's national interests.⁷⁶

Australia’s Stepping-Up Engagement with Papua New Guinea (PNG)

Australia and PNG signed Joint Declaration for the Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership in 2013 that consists of their commitment to strengthening ties and deepening cooperation in the bilateral relationship.⁷⁷ In terms of strengthening the bilateral defense relations between Australia and PNG, both countries are committed to robust cooperation in training and capacity building of defense to enhance military training and courses of PNG defense personnel.⁷⁸ Australia continues to provide assistance to the Papua New Guinea Defense Force (PNGDF) in the field of professional skills development, mobility, defense planning and management.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Commonwealth of Australia. (2016). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 74.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Australian Government. (n.d.). Joint Declaration for a New Papua New Guinea-Australia Partnership. Retrieved from Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/Pages/joint-declaration-for-a-new-papua-new-guinea-australia-partnership>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 64.

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Furthermore, an annual bilateral military exercise called the Exercise Olgeta Warrior was conducted with a purpose to share knowledge with the PNGDF that involves infantry, engineers, logistics, and aviation troops.⁸⁰

The largest Exercise Olgeta Warrior was conducted in 2015 featured with more than 1,000 ADF and PNGDF personnel.⁸¹ The exercise included developmental programs to the ADF and PNGDF relations as well as enhanced the ADF and PNGDF interoperability.⁸² The Exercise Olgeta Warrior consists of five component exercises such as Wantok Warrior, Puk Puk, Gudpela Plan, Kumul Exchange, and Logi Tuna.

The exercise Puk Puk aimed to upgrade soldiers and working accommodation that involved more than 150 troops from the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment with more than 200 PNGDF soldiers from 1st Battalion of Royal Pacific Islands Regiment and the PNGDF's Engineering Battalion.⁸³ Furthermore, the exercise Wantok Warrior focused on the profession of arms training such as patrolling, evasion, search, and rescue serials in an uncertain setting. It involved soldiers from 1st Battalion of Royal Australian Regiment with the PNGDF counterparts from 2nd Battalion of Royal Pacific Islands Regiment.⁸⁴

The exercise Kumul Exchange and Logi Tuna were concentrated on developing conventional war-fighting and logistics capabilities.⁸⁵ Those exercises involved PNGDF personnel within 1st and 3rd Battalions and the 3rd Combat Service Support Battalion along with the 3rd Combat Engineer Regiment of Royal Australian Regiment that further conducted logistical planning activities, engineering courses as well as infantry skills training.⁸⁶ The exercise Gudpela Plan was led by the 3rd Battalion of Royal Australian Regiment concentrated on enhancing the PNGDF's operational and tactical-level planning skills.⁸⁷ The Exercise Olgeta Warrior maintained the ADF presence in PNG through constant deployment of the ADF to facilitate an effective engagement program to develop professionalism, leadership, discipline, and military capability.⁸⁸

Bougainville shared a long and complicated relationship with Australia as part of PNG.⁸⁹ After the conflict between PNG and Bougainville took place, a ceasefire was achieved due to a recognition of Bougainville as an autonomous region within PNG.⁹⁰ As part of the Bougainville Peace Agreement, it guarantees that a referendum for independence in Bougainville would be conducted between 2015 and 2020.⁹¹ The aftermath of the

⁸⁰ Macdonald, E. (2013, September 28). Troops to PNG for Training Exercise Olgeta Warrior. Retrieved from PNG Attitude: Townsville Bulletin: <https://www.pngattitude.com/2013/09/troops-to-png-for-training-exercise-olgeta-warrior.html>

⁸¹ Australian Department of Defense. (2016). Defense Annual Report 2015–16: Volume One: Performance, Governance and Accountability. Retrieved from Australian Government: https://www.defense.gov.au/annualreports/15-16/Downloads/DAR_2015-16_Vol1.pdf

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Australian Department of Defense. (2016). Defense Annual Report 2015–16: Volume One: Performance, Governance and Accountability. Retrieved from Australian Government: https://www.defense.gov.au/annualreports/15-16/Downloads/DAR_2015-16_Vol1.pdf

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Bohane, B. (2019). The Bougainville Referendum and Beyond. The Lowy Institute, p. 14.

⁹⁰ Ellwood, B. J. (2014). Understanding the Neighbourhood: Bougainville's Referendum for Independence. The Centre for Defense and Strategic Studies, p. 3.

⁹¹ Ibid.

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Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001 requires PNG and Bougainville to negotiate an outcome after the conclusion of the referendum.

The referendum for independence consists of high stakes, it would provide long-term peace and prosperity on Bougainville if it successful, on the other Australia stepping-up its engagement as well to consider further policy approaches to Bougainville for the stability and security of the Melanesian region as the post-stabilization operations in Bougainville.

Bougainville possesses a variety of mineral resources such as copper, gold, and silver that could lead to disputes and conflict over mining rights as well as enhance tensions between PNG and Bougainville over the referendum.⁹² Consequently, Bougainville would require substantial assistance from PNG, Australia, or other external partners for the transition to independence and fiscal self-reliance.⁹³ Therefore, Australia commits to maintain the role as a trusted partner to both PNG and Bougainville to assure a peaceful transition of Bougainville to either greater autonomy or full independence as the aftermath of the Bougainville Peace Agreement.⁹⁴

Australia's Stepping-Up Engagement with Fiji

Australia's sanctions to Fiji as the aftermath of Fiji's coups in 2006 had successfully worsen the bilateral defense relations between Australia and Fiji.⁹⁵ Accordingly, Australia continuously limits its engagement and the Australia-Fiji relations were badly affected by High

Commissioner in Suva, James Batley was expelled in late 2009.⁹⁶ Furthermore, the sanctions were finally being lifted in 2014 after Fiji's election was held successfully as the starting point of restoring relations between Australia and Fiji.

Fiji is the strategic hub of the South Pacific and the growing interest of external actors in the region could affect Australia's national interests.⁹⁷ Australia builds strong personal links with the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) by exchanging personnel between the ADF and RFMF.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Australia takes a leading role in facilitating procurement and enhancing the capabilities of the RFMF and the Fiji Police to ensure interoperability between the militaries.⁹⁹ Accordingly, to strengthen Australia's bilateral defense relations with Fiji after the lifting sanctions in 2014, Fiji became part of Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour in 2018.¹⁰⁰

Australia's Indo-Pacific Endeavour is one of the most important ADF's annual activities to strengthen military-to-military engagements through joint training activities to develop shared understanding, trust as well as the capacity to respond to events within the region.¹⁰¹ There are around 700 ADF personnel conducted joined training with the RFMF with activities including disaster assistance planning, security training, and community

⁹² Bohane, B. (2019). The Bougainville Referendum and Beyond. The Lowy Institute, p. 13-14, 16.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Kelly, A. (2015). p. 3.

⁹⁶ Merritt, C., & Waters, P. (2009, November 04). Fiji Expels High Commissioner. Retrieved from The Australian.

⁹⁷ Powles, A. and Sousa-Santos, J. (2016). Principled Engagement: Rebuilding Defense Ties with Fiji. The Lowy Institute, p. 9, 11, 13.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Australian Department of Defense. (2018). Defense Annual Report 17-18. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁰¹ Australian Department of Defense. (2018). Defense Annual Report 17-18. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

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engagement to develop the ability of the ADF and the RFMF to operate together.¹⁰²

Australia's Stepping-Up Engagement with Vanuatu

Australia commits to enhance security cooperation with Vanuatu support by the fact that Vanuatu located close enough with Australia and defense engagement with Vanuatu is important for Australia's security as well as the bilateral defense relationship.¹⁰³ Vanuatu has no defense force but it has two police wings such as the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) and the paramilitary Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF).¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, Australia and Vanuatu are having long term police-to-police relationships between the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) through capacity building including policy development, training, and access to the specific skills.¹⁰⁵

In 2018, the ADF and the VPF conducted joint training to strengthen the bilateral defense relations that aimed to escalate shared understanding, trust, and the capacity of conducting respond to events within the region.¹⁰⁶

Australia's Stepping-Up Engagement with the Solomon Islands

The Solomon Islands has no defense forces and the security is

maintained by the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF).¹⁰⁷ The ADF involvement through RAMSI has been the main focus of Australia's defense engagement with the Solomon Islands to maintain the ADF presence through the conducts of exercises, training and supports the development of RSIPF.¹⁰⁸ The police development assistance provided the RSIPF with the skills and competencies required to accommodate core policing and some specialist functions.¹⁰⁹

In 2013, the new police act had been launched officially to support RAMSI's main objectives on helping the RSIPF to maintain law and order to promote long-lasting peace and stability in the Solomon Islands.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, it delivers the commitment of the Solomon Islands Government for the development and modernization of the RSIPF to provide a professional policing service to the people of Solomon Islands.¹¹¹

Given these points, the Solomon Islands Government and RAMSI agreed on Drawdown Strategy 2013-2017 that provides capacity development assistance planning for the RSIPF including training and equipment support aims to develop the RSIPF into an effective, modern, and professional police force.¹¹² Furthermore, The Drawdown Strategy 2013-2017

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Bateman, S., Bergin, A., and Channer, H. (2013). *Terms of Engagement: Australia's Regional Defense Diplomacy*. Australia: The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, p. 48.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Australian Government. (2014). *Policing and Justice Support Program (Vanuatu)*. Retrieved from Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/policing-justice-support-program-vanuatu-pjspv-design-document.pdf>

¹⁰⁶ Australian Department of Defense. (2018). *Defense Annual Report 17-18*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

¹⁰⁷ Bateman, S., Bergin, A., and Channer, H. (2013). *Terms of Engagement: Australia's Regional Defense Diplomacy*. Australia: The Australian Strategic Policy Institute, p. 48.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Australian Government. (n.d.). *Solomon Islands Police Development Program*. Retrieved from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/sipdp-design.pdf>

¹¹⁰ RAMSI. (2013). *SIG and RAMSI Jointly Sign Strategy for Next Four Years of Assistance to RSIPF*. Retrieved from <https://www.ramsi.org/sig-and-ramsi-jointly-sign-strategy-for-next-four-years-of-assistance-to-rsipf/>

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

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consists of the project to enhance community engagement through community policing initiatives and the project to develop infrastructures and equipment to improve the RSIPF ability and national security capabilities.¹¹³

Accordingly, the project improved the RSIPF ability and the national security capabilities in the Solomon Islands.¹¹⁴ The Drawdown Strategy is expected to be able to support RSIPF on responding to existing and emerging community-based crime threats effectively and efficiently.¹¹⁵

Furthermore, the Government of Australia continues to support the development of the RSIPF through capacity building including training and advisory assistance to prevent any potential threat that might lead to conflicts as well as protecting the security and stability of the Solomon Islands.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

China's growing political-diplomatic, economic, and the possibility of military presence in the Melanesian region develops Australia's threat perception to the rise of China. All of the Melanesian States are currently having diplomatic ties with China and have continuously received China's aid and financial support to achieve their interests.

In order to achieve "A Secure Nearer Region" or "A Secure South Pacific" as the Australia's strategic defense interests, Australia implemented stepping-up engagement with the Melanesian states to strengthen the bilateral defense relations and maintain Australia's position as the leading power in the region as well to respond to the rise of China in the Melanesian region.

Australia's stepping-up engagement with PNG including enhancing military training and courses of PNG defense personnel as well as monitoring the post-stabilization operations in Bougainville. Furthermore, Australia restores its bilateral defence relations with Fiji and enhance the security cooperation with Vanuatu. In order to strengthen its bilateral defense relations with the Solomon Islands, Australia supports the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force through Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and the Solomon Islands police development program.

¹¹³ Press Release, RAMSI Public Affairs. (2014, August 21). RAMSI Reports on Progress of Drawdown Strategy. Retrieved from Solomon Times:

<https://www.solomontimes.com/news/ramsi-reports-on-progress-of-drawdown-strategy/8262>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Commonwealth of Australia. (2013). Australian Defense White Paper. Canberra: Department of Defense, p. 64.

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