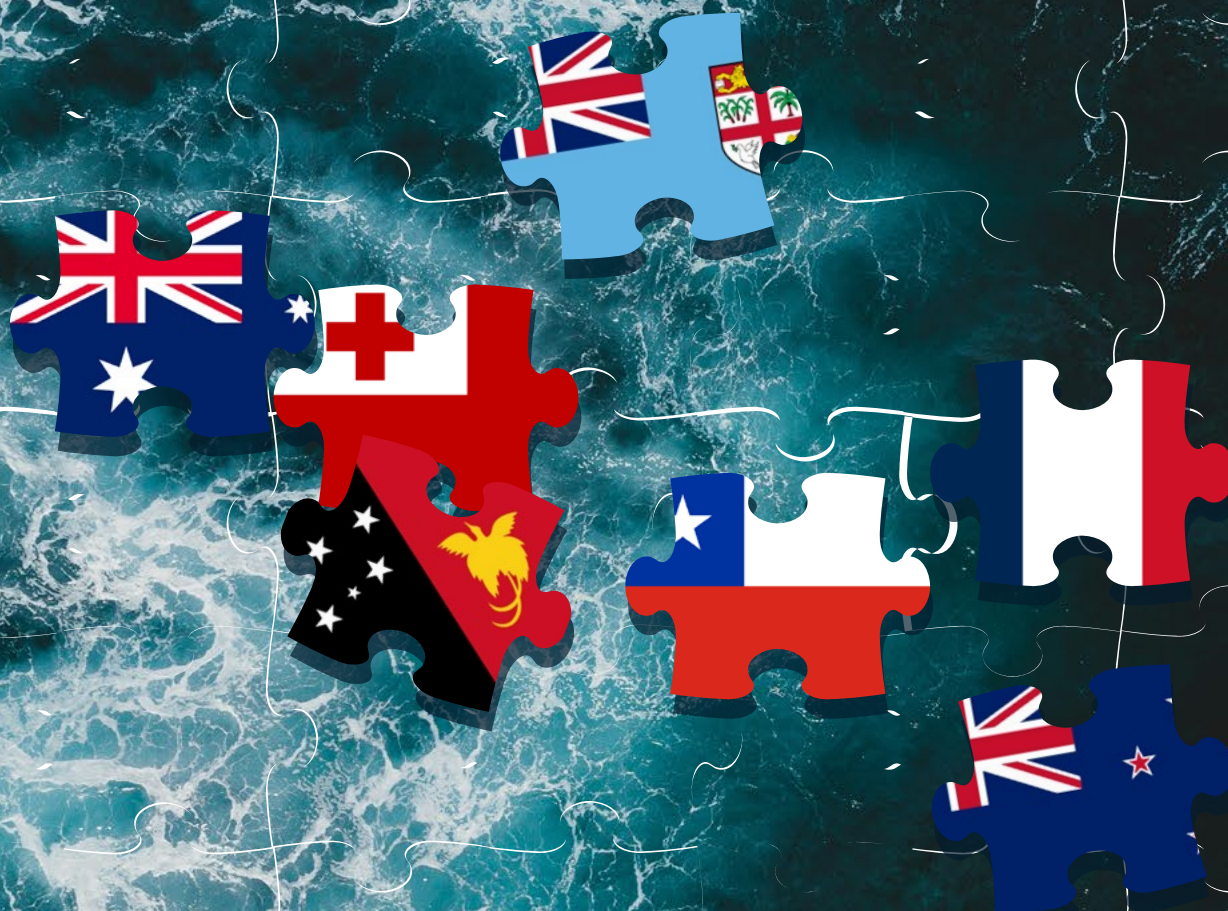


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SPDMM 2025: VISIONS FROM AUSTRALIA, CHILE, FRANCE, AND NEW ZEALAND ON THE SOUTH PACIFIC



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VISIONS FROM AUSTRALIA, CHILE, FRANCE, AND NEW ZEALAND ON THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Céline Pajon
Anna Powles
Paul D. Pelczar
Juan Pablo Toro

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Introduction

In recent decades, the geopolitical landscape of the South Pacific has established itself as a laboratory where the main challenges of the contemporary international order converge: competition between powers, the protection of global commons, and the pursuit of cooperation-based maritime governance. This collection of articles explores, from diverse perspectives, the processes that are shaping this strategic region and the responsibilities that fall upon the coastal states. Together, they confirm that the South Pacific is not a peripheral or passive territory, but a fundamental axis in the redefinition of global balance, especially given its connection to Antarctica, maritime security, and the ocean routes that connect the southern hemisphere with the rest of the world.

For this reason, we asked the specialist in maritime security Paul P. Pelczar to share his perspective on the topic and to enlighten us regarding the Austral Entente. This agreement is a values-based maritime framework for cooperation between Australia, Chile, the French Pacific forces, and New Zealand. It was created as a Defense-led initiative, but enjoys broad government support, as maritime presence is insufficient without alliances. From his perspective, Commander Pelczar invites us —the four countries—to share a coherent strategic vision for the South Pacific and the Southern Ocean, and urges us to pursue unrestricted coordination, especially looking toward Antarctica, a territory increasingly exposed to subtle strategic competition.

Our executive director Juan Pablo Toro warns us about the dispute between powers to gain influence over the South Pacific and presents a perspective from Chile. He emphasizes the necessary commitment of its members and effective participation in the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM), which allows for the articulation of collective responses to the region's shared problems, coordinating maritime security efforts in the Pacific Ocean, given that it already serves as the center of gravity for global affairs.

On her part, Céline Pajon, coordinator of the Pacific Program at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), discusses the key role France plays in strengthening the SPDMM's operational relevance in the region. She also underscores the optimization of French initiatives within regional security architecture. At the same time, she stresses that this meeting of ministers needs to demonstrate its importance, as the region faces growing geostrategic rivalry and intensifying competition for influence. In addition, she argues that the Pacific is becoming more vulnerable to natural disasters and extreme weather events.

Anna Powles of Massey University in New Zealand explains the importance of the Pacific Response Group, endorsed at the 2024 SPDMM, as it is the first formal multinational military asset in the region for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions in the Pacific Islands, a region highly vulnerable to disasters and where such operations play an increasingly strategic role.

Finally, in this document, researchers from Australia, Chile, France, and New Zealand present positions that share a common goal: safeguarding the connectivity, stability, and sustainability of the ocean that unites us. They also support the idea that the SPDMM forum be tasked with strengthening cooperation in both maritime security and humanitarian assistance activities, including military deployments in the context of these operations.

Vice Admiral (R) Ignacio Mardones Costa
Head of Development and Strategy, AthenaLab

Austral Entente Revisited: Securing the Maritime Mind in the Southern Oceans

Paul D. Pelczar, OAM RAN

In the evolving strategic landscape of the South Pacific, the southern oceans are no longer peripheral; they are central to regional security. Sovereignty, sea lines of communication, and infrastructure now intersect with influence, legitimacy, and cognitive resilience. Maritime security has expanded to encompass not just platforms and patrols, but perception and partnership.

This paper revisits the concept of an Austral *Entente*:¹ A flexible, values-based maritime framework for cooperation among Australia, Chile, the French Pacific Forces, and New Zealand. Conceived as a Defence-led, whole-of-government initiative, it draws on operational credibility, planning discipline, and established coordination mechanisms. Defence leadership ensures the framework is embedded into exercises, deployments, and operational planning, delivering outcomes aligned with the realities of maritime security in the southern oceans.

The proposal does not duplicate existing alliances or replace institutional mechanisms; it complements them, offering visible coordination among like-minded maritime nations committed to rules-based norms. Pacific Island Forum (PIF) nations remain central, ensuring sovereignty, perspective, and legitimacy, with momentum sustained by Defence's ability to act decisively in contested environments.

A COMMON STRATEGIC ARC

Australia, Chile, France, and New Zealand share a coherent strategic outlook for the South Pacific and Southern Ocean. Each has enduring maritime traditions, relies on sea-based trade, and faces similar challenges: illegal fishing, coercive investment, cyber vulnerability, and disinformation.

These challenges are immediate. Subsea cables link South America and Australasia. Maritime patrols from Hobart, Nouméa, Punta Arenas, and Auckland increasingly encounter contested information environments. Infrastructure projects across the Blue Pacific, often linked to influence campaigns, demand coordinated responses. The imperative is shared: uphold a peaceful, open, and resilient maritime region, with South Pacific nations at its core.

COORDINATION WITHOUT CONSTRAINT

The Austral Entente would not require treaty structures. Its strength lies in close, demonstrable coordination, similar to how European Naval Forces achieve operational coherence without a standing alliance.

For Australia and Chile, there is scope to deepen cooperation across the Southern Ocean: coordinated environmental stewardship, shared responses to maritime incidents, and integrated planning for resilience in the information environment. Practical cooperation could include:

- Shared maritime domain awareness using space-based and open-source tools;
- Interoperable disaster response, especially for HADR in the Southern Ocean;

1 For an earlier articulation of the Austral Entente framework, see: Pelczar, Paul D. (2024). 'Austral Entente': a Southern Seas Arrangement. *Australian Naval Review*, Issue 1, pp. 139–148 or Pelczar, Paul D. (2024). *Entente Austral: una propuesta de cooperación marítima en el Pacífico Sur*. AthenaLab, Santiago de Chile

- Coordinated influence activities to counter misinformation and strengthen governance.

The Entente would consolidate existing activity, making cooperation more consistent, visible, and strategically aligned — anchored in Defence-led coordination that turns policy intent into operational effect.

SPACE AND MARITIME RESILIENCE

Maritime operations increasingly depend on space-based systems, a dependency acute in the South Pacific and Southern Oceans. Space assets are vulnerable to opaque ownership and interference.

Australia, Chile, and New Zealand are advancing sovereign space initiatives; France adds launch capabilities, polar logistics, and European expertise. The Entente could:

- Share satellite data for fisheries protection and environmental monitoring;
- Establish secure downlink and ground infrastructure at trusted locations;
- Develop regional policies for dual-use space systems.

A working-level forum — anchored in Defence and supported by space and maritime agencies — could exchange in-country reporting, select a priority joint project, and analyse outcomes to guide future cooperation.

SECURING THE MARITIME MIND

Influence is now a decisive factor in maritime strategy. Strategic messaging, social media distortion, and historical reframing are used to undermine transparency and legitimacy. Pacific nations often face these challenges first, particularly where aid, infrastructure, or naval presence are misrepresented. The Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu already shows how shared analysis and open-source intelligence can strengthen resilience.

The Entente could formalise cooperation by:

- Pre-emptive narrative planning with Pacific partners;

- Media literacy training for deployed personnel;
- Support to PIF nations in building strategic communications capacity;
- Investment in open-source intelligence and narrative analysis.

Embedding these measures in Defence planning ensures they are exercised, integrated into operations, and assessed for effectiveness.

INCLUSION BEYOND CAPABILITY

Australia, Chile, and New Zealand operate blue-water capable fleets that deploy well beyond their immediate regions but are primarily region-focused. The French Pacific Forces, part of a global blue-water navy, are configured for operations from New Caledonia and French Polynesia. Many PIF members maintain constabulary forces, often relying on gifted patrol vessels and external support.

Capability is not the only currency. Pacific nations bring legitimacy, perspective, and enduring connection to their maritime domains. The Entente could formalise inclusivity through:

- A core planning group for operational and capability development;
- A consultative tier open to all interested PIF nations;
- Rotating leadership to maintain equity.

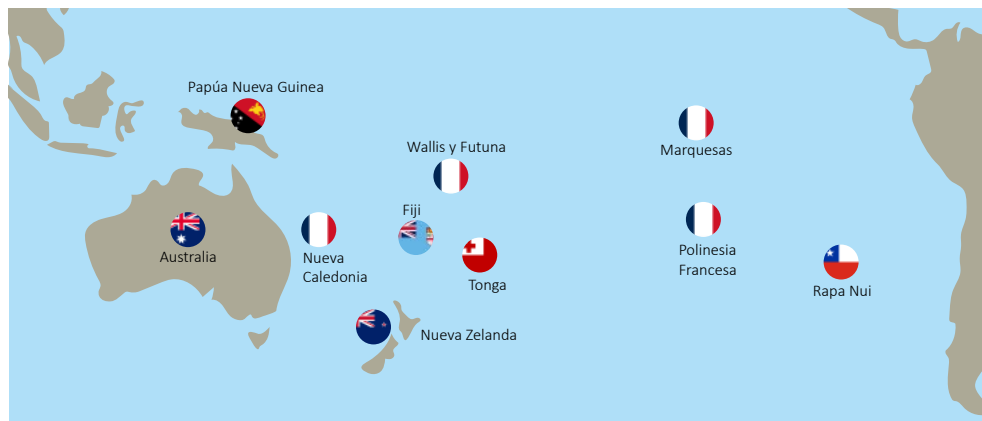
EARLY ACTION PROPOSALS

1. Annual Table-Top Exercises on grey-zone maritime challenges, rotating hosts and ensuring Pacific participation.
2. Shared Maritime Influence Training via regional defence academies.
3. Cable and Orbital Infrastructure Security Working Group to coordinate protection of subsea and space systems.

SOUTHERN RESPONSIBILITY AND ANTARCTICA

No southern initiative can ignore Antarctica. Long a zone of peace and science, it is increasingly subject to quiet strategic competition. Some instal-

SOUTH PACIFIC DEFENCE MINISTERS' MEETING (SPDMM)



AUSTRALIA	27° 00' S, 133° 00' E	7.7 mill. km ²	26.4 million inhabitants
FIJI	18° 00' S, 175° 00' E	18,200 km ²	951,000 inhabitants
NEW CALEDONIA (FRANCE)	21° 30' S, 165° 30' E	18,500 km ²	30,000 inhabitants
PAPUA NEW GUINEA	6° 00' S, 147° 00' E	462,000 km ²	10 million inhabitants
FRENCH POLYNESIA	15° 00' S, 140° 00' W	4,100 km ²	303,000 inhabitants
RAPA NUI (CHILE)	27° 9' S, 109° 25' W	163.7 km ²	8,800 inhabitants
NEW ZEALAND	41° 00' S, 174° 00' E	268,000 km ²	5.1 million inhabitants
TONGA	20° 00' S, 175° 00' W	747 km ²	104,000 inhabitants
WALLIS AND FUTUNA	13° 18' S, 176° 12' W	142 km ²	15,900 inhabitants

lations may host dual-use capabilities; others act as springboards for orbital or logistical ambitions, linking Antarctic governance with Southern Ocean stewardship and resilience in space and information domains.

Austral Entente members are long-standing Antarctic actors. They could lead on:

- Coordinated inspection and reporting under the Antarctic Treaty;
- Transparency standards for infrastructure;
- Reinforced messaging on peaceful use and environmental protection;
- Coordinated HADR training in sub-Antarctic environments.

CONCLUSION: PURPOSEFUL PARTNERSHIP

Maritime presence without partnership is insufficient. Defence-led coordination offers operational credibility, responsiveness, and the ability to act decisively in complex environments. The Austral Entente provides a practical mechanism to reinforce cooperation among trusted maritime democracies, complement PIF frameworks, and advance Pacific priorities. Australia and Chile, by deepening operational ties, can anchor this initiative in the South Pacific and Southern Ocean, demonstrating that regional security is best served when capability, legitimacy, and shared purpose converge.

Commitment and effective participation: SPDMM, a perspective from Chile

Juan Pablo Toro, AthenaLab

Chile's participation in the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) cannot be understood without the territorial depth afforded by its westernmost possession: Easter Island or Rapa Nui. Annexing this territory almost 140 years ago was a geopolitical decision made for several reasons: to avoid a potentially threatening occupation by foreign powers; its proximity to the trade route that would later extend to Australia and New Zealand once the Panama Canal was opened; its agricultural potential; and its international prestige.²

Although the assumptions of the time did not entirely pan out, an updated analysis of the dynamics that define the South Pacific today allows us to revalidate the legitimacy of this strategic decision: even in times of economic scarcity, Chile should commit efforts to organizing and financing tasks such as the meeting of armed forces from Oceania.³

A review of recent publications on the South Pacific reveals consistent interpretations of a struggle between powers to gain influence, with the United States and China being the main players,

and, to a lesser extent, Australia.⁴ These countries are attempting to strengthen their position by providing developmental aid and signing security agreements.⁵

The importance of this region is explained, on the one hand, by the availability of natural resources: fish in the exclusive economic zones created by the islands, minerals in the seabed, and timber. On the other hand, it is also explained by its usefulness in installing shipping or digital infrastructure, which provides greater resilience to maritime and data communication lines.

Since Rapa Nui came under Chilean sovereignty (1888), the island has been put at Washington's disposal on several occasions, as an observation site for the movement of enemy fleets (World War II), a satellite monitoring station (1960s and 1970s), and a possible landing strip for space shuttles (1980).⁶ It would seem, then, that for US strategists this territory can be integrated as part of a southern line of defense in the Pacific when

2 Valenzuela, Renato (2019). *Génesis y desarrollo del pensamiento marítimo en Chile*. Santiago: Centro de Estudios Bicentenario, pp. 252-253.

3 El Mostrador (August 10, 2025). "Civiles y militares, persistencia de prejuicios y desconocimiento", by Gabriel Gaspar. At <https://www.elmostrador.cl/noticias/opinion/columnas/2025/08/10/civiles-y-militares-persistencia-de-prejuicios-y-desconocimiento/>

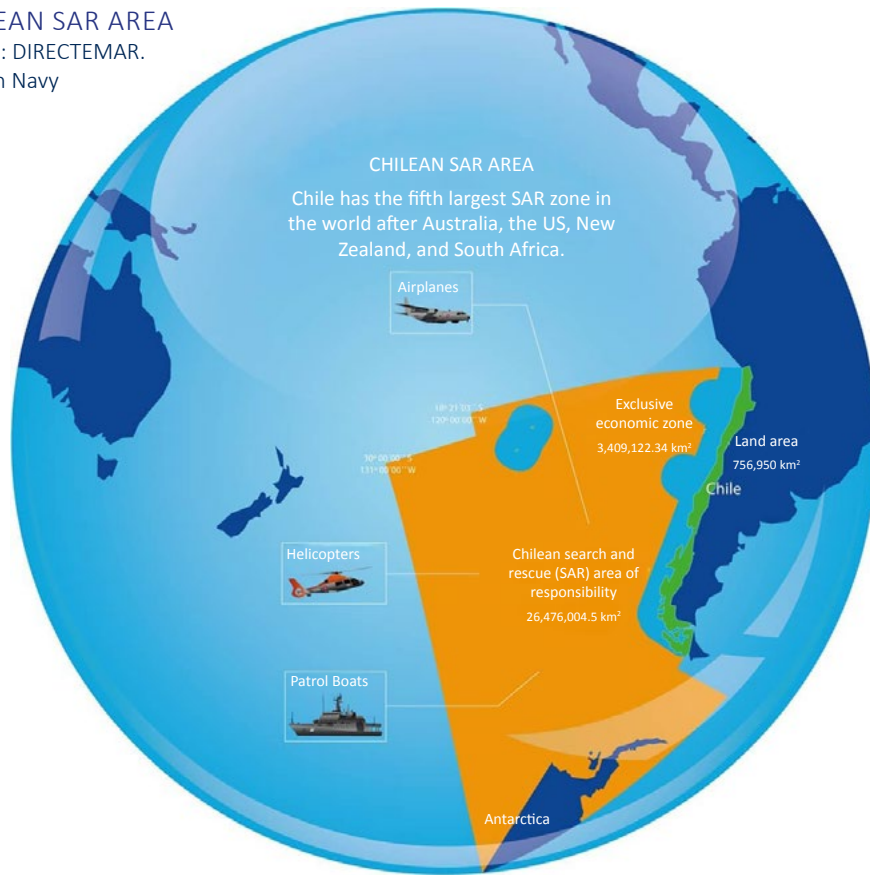
4 Newsweek (April 16, 2025). "Exclusive—How China's Military is Quietly Gaining Control of the Pacific," by Didi Kirsten Tatlow and John Feng, at <https://www.newsweek.com/china-south-pacific-strategic-dual-use-infrastructure-us-military-2059048>; Center for Strategic and International Studies (April 8, 2025). "China's Power Play Across the Pacific," by Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik, at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-power-play-across-pacific>; War on the Rocks (March 26, 2025). "The South Pacific Is the New Frontline in the Rivalry with China," by Christopher K. Colley, at <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/the-south-pacific-is-the-new-frontline-in-the-rivalry-with-china>

5 The Economist (September 9, 2025). "A giant 'knife-fight' in the Pacific," at: <https://www.economist.com/asia/2025/09/09/a-giant-knife-fight-in-the-pacific>

6 Fisher, Steven Roger (2011). *Isla del fin del mundo*. Viña del Mar: Rapa Nui Press, pp. 238, 261, 277 and 280.

CHILEAN SAR AREA

Source: DIRECTEMAR.
Chilean Navy



deemed necessary, which could occur in the event of a clash with China. This year, the commander of the Pacific Fleet, Admiral Steve Koehler, included the island territory on a visit to the country.⁷ In other words, the interest of the powers subsists over time.

While there is currently no trade route near Rapa Nui, it is interesting to note that it was conceived early on as part of an interconnected maritime system. In the case of Beijing, there now seems to be a desire to consolidate a “Southern Link”, connecting Asia and South America through infrastructure in the South Pacific, aimed at guaranteeing

the flow of raw materials.⁸ The island does not appear to be part of this project, but other island territories in the region undoubtedly are. It is telling that the current route of the Chinese “Peace Ark” hospital ship includes ports in these two regions.⁹

Ultimately, the value of this territory to Chile is now seemingly determined by the exclusive economic zone it creates, abundant in fishing resources. This explains the presence of foreign fleets in its

7 US Pacific Fleet Public Affairs (March 24, 2025). “READOUT: Pacific Fleet commander’s travel to Chile, March 16-19, 2025.” At <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/4131674/readout-pacific-fleet-commanders-travel-to-chile-march-16-19-2025/>

8 Anne-Marie Brady (September 18, 2025), “Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping”, at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>; “How New Zealand Could Connect Latin America with China”, Biz Latin Hub, July 17, 2023, at <https://www.bizlatinhub.com/new-zealand-connect-latin-america-china/>

9 Newsweek (September 8, 2025). “China Sends Navy Ship to America’s Doorstep,” by Ryan Chan. At: <https://www.newsweek.com/china-sends-navy-ship-america-backyard-2126157>

vicinity, which requires constant monitoring by the Chilean Navy – a complex task given its breadth.

In addition to the aforementioned challenges in the South Pacific, we must also consider natural disasters, the impact of climate change, and the resulting rise in sea levels, which threaten the existence of some of the islands.

With this in mind, the SPDMM offers Chile the opportunity to articulate its own—as well as collective—responses to shared problems in a region of which it is part, and which requires special attention. Despite the asymmetries among members in the face of a more assertive China and an increasingly isolationist United States, this forum presents an opportunity to coordinate efforts in maritime security that will allow for a better understanding of the overall scenario. It proposes to do so through information-sharing agreements and by establishing concrete and effective responses in the event of emergencies, involving democratic countries that respect international regulations. Just as there is awareness of the importance of humanitarian and disaster relief operations, issues such as submarine cable surveillance should certainly be updated on the agenda.

However, when establishing commitments within the framework of the SPDMM, Chile must be willing to honor them, which is where the availability of resources becomes critical. The downward trend in military spending in recent years, coupled with greater demand on the armed forces for internal security tasks, creates a scenario where Chile's oceanic region receives significantly less state attention than its continental and Antarctic territories. At the very least, partners should be aware. Aside from the voyage of the training ship *Esmeralda*, Chilean gray hulls rarely sail beyond the 160° west meridian (Hawaii), despite having the capacity to do so and constant invitations from countries such as Australia and France to participate in naval exercises. All of this results in lost opportunities to exercise an effective presence in the so-called “interaction space”¹⁰ beyond the continental shelf of

Rapa Nui, including the Polynesian triangle (which includes Fiji, French overseas territories, New Zealand and Tonga) and the “development space” that continues to the west (Australia and Papua New Guinea), as defined by Martínez Busch (1993) in the articulation of his *Oceanopolitics* vision. In his opinion, Chile should reestablish its historical influence that began in the late 18th century and continued through the early 19th century.

While it serves a collective purpose, the fact that Chile is hosting this forum of South Pacific defense ministers from October 22 to 24 should impact, first and foremost, national decision-makers: both those tasked with designing the country's international integration strategy and those who allocate the related budget. It should also serve to better understand the country's “absolutely privileged” geographic position overlooking this ocean, which already serves as the center of gravity in world affairs, as General Cañas Montalva foretold¹¹ in the 1950s. Finally, it will be the moment to remind them that the Navy currently has, for example, Australian frigates, French submarines, and New Zealand armored vessels.

It is quite a paradox that what many thinkers have been clear about since the dawn of our independence bears repeating today. The visit of representatives from Australia, Fiji, France (Polynesia), Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and Tonga is neither an anecdote nor an accident, but rather an expression of Chile's inescapable oceanic reality.

10 Martínez Busch, J. (1993). *Oceanopolítica: una alternativa para el desarrollo*. Santiago: Editorial Andrés Bello.

11 Cañas Montalva, R. (2024). *Pionero de la Geopolítica*, J. Griffiths y M. Masalleras, ed. Santiago: AthenaLab, p.155.

Expanding SPDMM as a pivotal institution in the Pacific – A French perspective

Céline Pajon, Institut Français des Relations Internationales

The South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) is the only forum that brings together defense ministers from the wider South Pacific — including Chile, which is hosting it for the first time. This heterogeneous group of countries with varying resources, capacities, and interests — Australia, Chile, Fiji, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea (PNG), and Tonga — are united by their shared determination to strengthen cooperation on maritime security and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) activities.

PRESSURES AND CHALLENGES FACING THE SPDMM

The SPDMM faces growing pressure to prove its relevance, as the Pacific becomes increasingly vulnerable to natural hazards and extreme weather events intensifying under the effects of climate change. At the same time, the region is confronted with mounting geostrategic rivalry, marked by sharper competition for influence — including through military deployments carried out under the banner of HADR operations.

In this context, the SPDMM's future will largely depend on its capacity to strengthen both its effectiveness and legitimacy. This will hinge on fostering a stronger civil–military dimension and adopting a more Pacific-led, recipient-driven approach, while advancing interoperability, lessons learned, training between armed forces, but also the empowerment of local authorities. Enhanced coordination with regional institutions and multilateral frameworks, along with people-to-people exchanges and a greater emphasis on prevention, will also be essential. France is playing a significant role in supporting these efforts.

STRENGTHENING THE CIVIL-MILITARY DIMENSION

As Pacific Island Countries (PICs) push back against the growing militarization of their region — with HADR operations increasingly recognized as instruments of both soft and hard power — the SPDMM has begun working to strengthen a more balanced civil–military dimension. At its 2024 session in Auckland, the forum endorsed Australia's initiative to establish the Pacific Response Group (PRG), supported by a multinational Pacific Special Advisory Team (PSAT) — which includes a French officer — based in Brisbane during the high-risk weather season. This team is designed to be rapidly deployable to assist civilian authorities in an affected country with disaster response planning and reconstruction efforts.¹² The PSAT has participated in key planning and interoperability exercises across the region, including the French-led multilateral exercise Croix du Sud,¹³ held in New Caledonia in April–May 2025, as well as the Long Reach 2025 tabletop exercise hosted by Tonga in August.

ENHANCING REGIONAL COORDINATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

With a view to strengthening civil–military coordination, the PRG could consider expanding its cooperation to non-SPDMM members. While only

12 South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting- Joint Communique, 3 October 2024 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communique>

13 «Croix du Sud 2025 : coopération et engagement humanitaire dans le Pacifique », French Ministry of Armed Forces, 7 May 2025, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/terre/actualites/croix-du-sud-2025-cooperation-engagement-humanitaire-pacifique>

three Pacific Island Countries maintain standing armed forces, others such as Solomon Islands and Vanuatu rely on police or paramilitary units to carry out domestic HADR tasks, offering opportunities for meaningful and complementary cooperation.¹⁴

To further ensure smooth implementation and coordination of assistance, as well as the sharing of best practices, some in-depth studies recommend that stakeholders develop a “Pacific Islands–centric handbook on disaster management”.¹⁵ This handbook would outline disaster risk profiles, national frameworks and key actors for disaster management, procedures for requesting assistance, and approaches to civil-military coordination across different countries.

INTEGRATION WITH THE BROADER REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE

Another key question, related both to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the SPDMM, is its ability to be articulated and coordinated within the broader regional security architecture, with particular priority given to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the primary regional multilateral political organization. At the 2024 SPDMM in Auckland, the Forum was represented for the first time with observer status by Baron Waqa, Secretary-General of the PIF.

Obvious synergies exist between a number of regional settings, and efforts should be made to streamline activities, avoid duplication, and enhance effectiveness – objectives that lie at the very core of the SPDMM’s original mandate. One approach is closer coordination with the PIF’s Pacific Disaster Risk Reduction Ministers Meeting, the Pacific Community’s Regional Disaster Managers Meeting, and the United Nations-led Regional

Consultative Group on Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination for Asia and the Pacific.¹⁶

In the meantime, the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHoPS) is working on drafting a Regional Operations Deployment Framework, aimed at establishing a regional governance mechanism for civilian, military, and police deployments.¹⁷ This framework seeks to provide a common mechanism to support Pacific-led responses to regional security challenges, including through the Pacific Response Group and the Pacific Police Support Group, with a view to embedding and streamlining these initiatives.

FRANCE’S MILITARY PRESENCE AND REGIONAL ROLE

France’s military forces, based in New Caledonia and French Polynesia play a key role in regional cooperation initiatives, supporting Pacific Island countries in monitoring their EEZs and providing logistics for HADR. Beyond being a major security actor in the region – serving as a key member of the FRANZ arrangement, the Pacific Quad, and holding annual multinational HADR-focused exercises – France has gradually strengthened its capacity to enhance its role as a regional security provider, including through the modernization of its overseas-based military assets.

At the 2023 SPDMM in Noumea, France agreed to adjust its shipriding practices and enter into agreements with SPDMM partners and other countries, including Vanuatu. Since then, inspectors from partner countries have been able to embark on French military vessels, facilitating monitoring and procedures in their EEZs.

France’s Pacific Academy in Noumea has expanded its training programs in civil-military crisis planning and management, helping to strengthen the expertise of regional defense and security forces. In coordination with partners and under the Povai Endeavour framework, the Pacific Academy

14 Blake Johnson, Adama Ziogas, “Stepping up military support to humanitarian assistance in the Pacific Recommendations for the Pacific Response Group”, Special Report, ASPI, 10 October 2024, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/stepping-military-support-humanitarian-assistance-pacific-recommendations-pacific-response/>

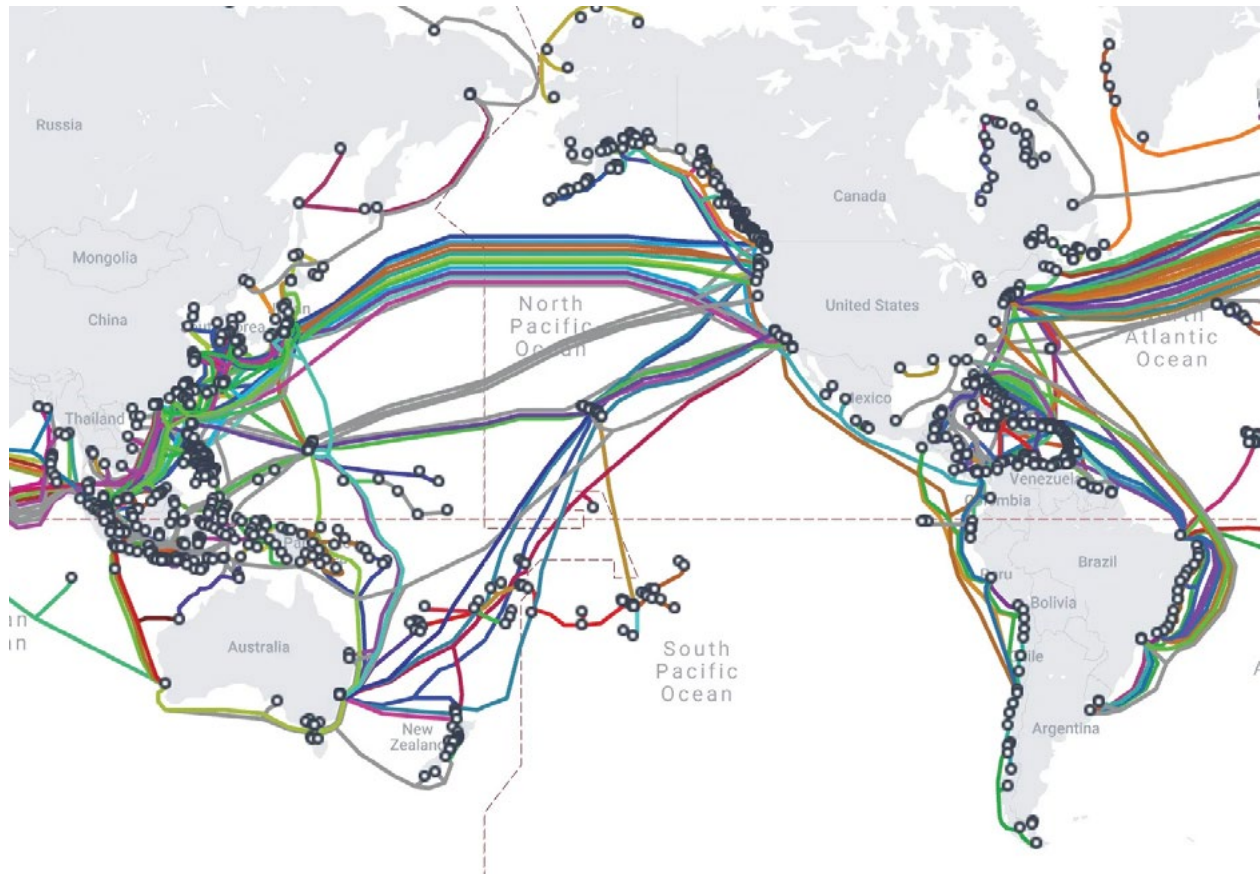
15 “Pacific maritime security cooperation: partnerships, priorities, and possibilities”, Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security, February 2025 <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/834/pacific-maritime-security-cooperation-policy-paper-february-2025.pdf>

16 Op. Cit., p. 7.

17 Joint Communiqué of the Seventh Annual Joint Heads of Pacific Security, 21 March 2025, <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2025-03-21/joint-communique-seventh-annual-joint-heads-pacific-security>

SUBMARINE CABLES

Source: <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/>



seeks to complement existing training offerings in the Pacific on HADR and civil security, focusing on practical skills and technical areas with direct utility for partner forces.

Since 2021, France has organized an annual South Pacific Coast Guard seminar aimed at enhancing regional coordination. The training catalog developed through this seminar could serve as a useful foundation for a tailored offering to benefit Pacific Island countries. The third Coast Guard seminar took place in Papeete in December 2024¹⁸.

Hence, France plays a key role in strengthening the operational significance of the SPDMM in the

region and streamline its initiatives within the regional security architecture. It should also ensure that these efforts receive political endorsement by maintaining consistent, high-level French representation at the meeting. This year's SPDMM will be of particular importance as the US under the Trump II administration is stepping back from multilateral cooperation. Moreover, with Chile hosting the meeting for the first time, it presents an opportunity for France to engage on shared challenges and interests, and to sustain efforts toward deepening cooperation—particularly on maritime security—in the Pacific.¹⁹

18 Séminaire international des garde-côtes du Pacifique, 30 Decmeber 2024, <https://www.polynesie-francaise.pref.gouv.fr/Actualites/Communiques-de-presse/2024/Seminaire-international-des-garde-cotes-du-Pacifique>

19 Céline Pajon, « Volver A Situar A América Del Sur En El Mapa Francés Del Indo-Pacífico », in Documento Especial, Athenalab, April 2024 https://athenalab.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/DOC_ESPECIAL_INDOPACIFICO-Abril-2024.pdf

The SPDMM's Pacific Response Group: A Critical Explainer

Anna Powles, Massey University

The Pacific Islands region has a long history of collective action in response to disasters and crises. The Pacific Response Group (PRG),²⁰ endorsed at the ninth South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) held in 2024 in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, is the region's first formalised multinational military asset in support of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions in the Pacific.

The PRG's stated purpose is to "provide a Pacific-led, integrated and rehearsed military Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief capability to support the region's response to crisis."²¹ In this respect, the PRG aims to fill a critical gap in one of the world's most disaster-vulnerable regions. The 1997 Aitutaki Declaration²² made explicit the link between disasters and security and called for strengthening current mechanisms for cooperation and coordination among Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) member states. The 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security²³ advanced an expanded concept of security inclusive of human security, including humanitarian assistance, and committed PIF member states to strengthening regional security cooperation. Most recently, the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent²⁴ called for a responsive regional security architecture which aligns with regional priorities.

The PRG seeks to reflect these ambitions. Its six core principles²⁵ consist of respect for sovereignty, supplementing civilian-led disaster response, building on the record of Pacific-led regional responses, strengthening regional security cooperation and collective action, avoiding duplication of effort, and the promotion of greater transparency, predictability, and certainty. The PRG's stated commitments, three of which overlap with the aforementioned principles, also includes a commitment to improving the effectiveness of military deployments²⁶ through the pooling of "Pacific military resources and personnel in a coordinated fashion."

To that end, the PRG is fulfilling the ambitions of Pacific militaries to develop their capabilities and collaboration on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief while, as Keen notes,²⁷ simultaneously strengthening defence ties and enhancing regional interoperability. This signals a shift from Pacific states as recipients to responders. In the aftermath of Cyclone Pam in 2015, the Tongan patrol boat Voia Neiafu was dispatched to Vanuatu to assist with the distribution of relief supplies; and was one of the first assets to reach Vanuatu. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) sent a contingent of engineers and medical staff to Vanuatu. Fiji was also a member of the Australian-led International Coordination Cell activated in response to the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano eruption on 15 January 2022.

20 <https://www.pacificresponsegroup.com/>

21 <https://www.pacificresponsegroup.com/about>

22 https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/1997_AITUTAKI%20Declaration.pdf

23 <https://forumsec.org/publications/boe-declaration-regional-security>

24 <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>

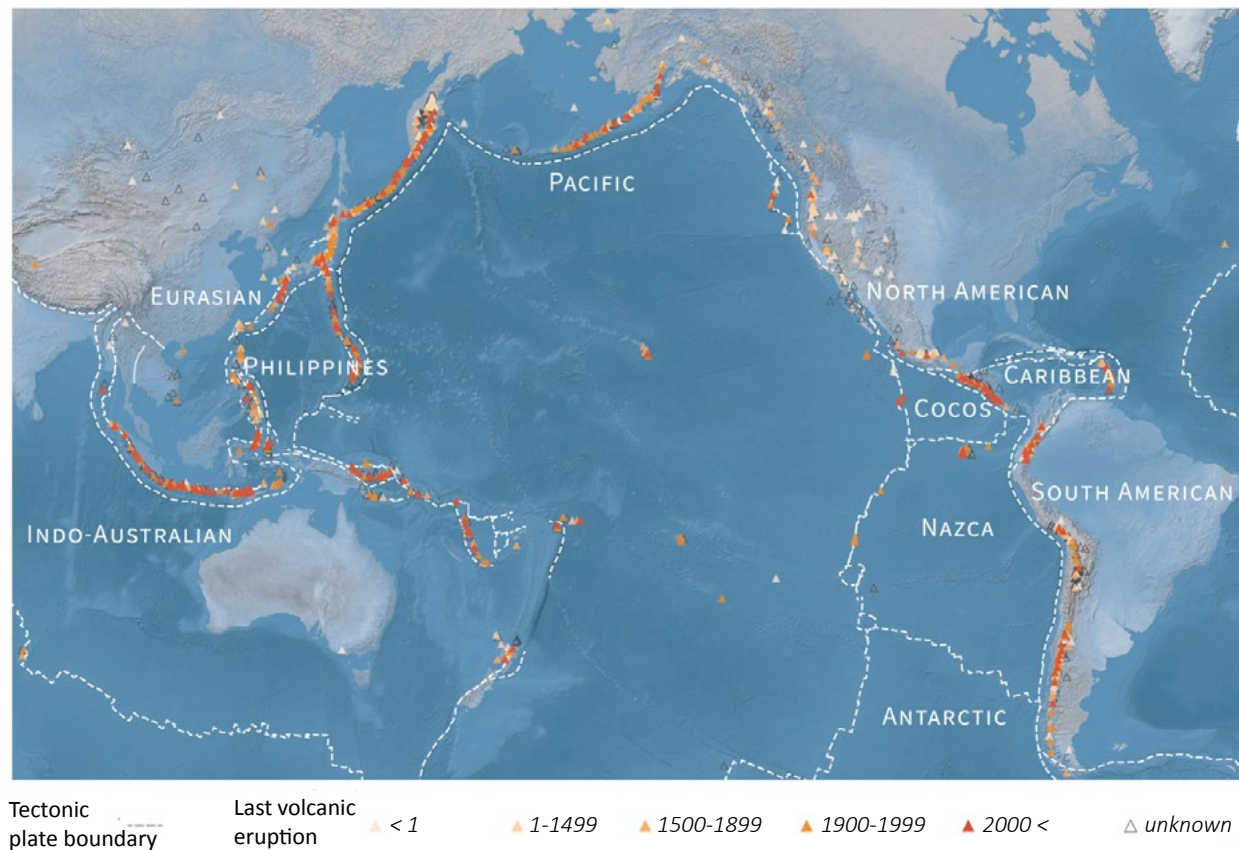
25 <https://www.pacificresponsegroup.com/about>

26 *Idem*.

27 <https://www.routledge.com/Security-Cooperation-in-the-Pacific-Islands-Politics-Priorities-and-Pathways-of-the-Regional-Security-Patchwork/Wallis-McNeill-Batley-Powles/p/book/9781041011125?srsltid=AfmBOostETS7yfnPewl-NA7a2LUHxKhds9Pa528rDsJBjNZZvKFe1aAZ>

PACIFIC RING OF FIRE

Sources: USGS, Natural Earth, Smithsonian Institution. AFP.



Regional responses to disasters have been critical opportunities to reset regional cooperation.²⁸ In response to Cyclone Pam, Fiji's then National Disaster Management Minister Inia Seruiratu (current leader of the opposition) told the Fiji Times that, as a key player in the Pacific Islands Development Forum and the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Fiji had a responsibility to its Pacific neighbours especially on humanitarian grounds. The RFMF contingent deployed to Vanuatu were transported on a New Zealand C-130 Hercules which provided an opportunity for positive collaboration²⁹ between

Fiji and New Zealand less than a year after the two countries resumed diplomatic and military engagement. This collaboration was further strengthened in response to Cyclone Winston which caused widespread devastation in Fiji in 2016 but proved to be a catalyst for better relations between Fiji, New Zealand and Australia. Understanding the ways in which disasters have impacted and influenced cooperation and conflict in the Pacific are critical to understanding the trajectory of regional security cooperation.

Notably, it has not been formally endorsed³⁰ by the Pacific Islands Forum unlike the Pacific Policing In-

²⁸ <https://www.inclinenz.com/home/disaster-diplomacy-cyclone-winston-and-regional-preparedness?view=full>

²⁹ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/nz-boasts-vanuatu-aid-contribution-to-35m/PWLEI2TKIONRZFP2BH4ADLT72Y/?c_id=2&objectid=11421719

³⁰ <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/529793/pacific-defence-ministers-approve-creation-of-disaster-response-group-for-region>

initiative (PPI)³¹ which was endorsed by the region³² at the 2024 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting. The PRG's governance and coordination is nested in the SPDMM and it is headquartered in Brisbane. To shift toward a genuinely regionally-led model, relocating the PRG headquarters to the Blackrock Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Assistance & Disaster Relief (HADR) Camp in Fiji would be a powerful and symbolic step. Housing the PRG at Blackrock could enable increased oversight by the Pacific Islands Forum, which would in turn align operational control with the PRG's stated aims of responding to regional priorities. This move would signal a commitment to Pacific leadership, strengthen ownership, and enhance legitimacy and trust.

The PRG's providence can be found in the ad hoc FRANZ Arrangement (France, Australia and New Zealand) which has served as the primary mechanism³³ to coordinate disaster responses in the Pacific Islands since 1992. For example, when the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted on 15 January 2022 the FRANZ mechanism was activated to coordinate³⁴ the response. Reflecting the limitations of the FRANZ mechanism, the Australian Headquarters Joint Operations Command established – in coordination with the FRANZ Arrangement – the Humanitarian and Disaster Relief International Coordination Cell³⁵ comprising of defence personnel from defence personnel from Tonga, Fiji, Japan, France, New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom and the United States.

Headquartered in Brisbane, Australia, the PRG comprises of defence forces from Australia,

France, Tonga, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. At its core is the Pacific Special Advisory Team (PSAT) – a small, rapidly deployable team³⁶ designed to enhance the capacity of civilian authorities and partner organisations in the affected state through the facilitation of coordinated disaster response planning and the systematic identification of follow-on operational requirements.

The emphasis on the PRG being Pacific-led³⁷ reflects two key dynamics within Pacific regionalism. The first relates to the articulation and assertion of Pacific agency, while the second reflects the strategic appropriation of the 'Pacific-led' discourse as a mechanism for framing, contesting, and ultimately denying China's activities and ambitions within the region. Indeed, the establishment of the PRG cannot be divorced from the heightened geopolitical interest in the Pacific. As Jose Sousa-Santos and I argue, HADR has become a vector for geopolitical competition³⁸ in the Pacific. China's emergence as a HADR actor in the Pacific reflects its broader ambitions to position itself as both a normative humanitarian responder and a central stakeholder in regional disaster governance. Through the establishment of alternative institutional mechanisms – such as the China-Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism and the China-Pacific Island Countries Center for Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation in Guangdong in early 2023, alongside the proposed Sub-Center for Marine Disaster Risk Reduction Cooperation – Beijing is actively driving the development of competing regional architectures for disaster response.

The international response to the Tongan disaster in 2022 also revealed a critical structural feature of HADR operations in the Pacific: the problem of operational overcrowding. Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and other partners coordinated their efforts through the ad hoc HADR Interna-

31 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-10/australia-opens-400-million-pacific-policing-initiative/104708312>

32 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/pacific-leaders-endorse-pacific-policing-initiative>

33 <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/c3f803f9-c177-44a7-aaa9-3f69d4a028ea/content>

34 <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/tonga/article/emergency-humanitarian-assistance-to-tonga-joint-statement-from-franz-31-jan-22>

35 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2022-02-02/coordination-crucial-tonga-mission#:~:text=2%20February%202022,and%20effort%20isn't%20duplicated.>

36 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communique>

37 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communique>

38 <https://pacificdynamics.nz/chapter-13-climate-crisis-geopolitical-vulnerability-transnational-crime-and-mitigating-responses/>

tional Coordination Cell. China, however, opted to remain outside this mechanism and mounted an independent response. This refusal to cooperate has the effect of “turning an initially cooperative field of action into a competitive one.”³⁹ The result was heightened competition for scarce operational resources⁴⁰ - including pier-side access, tarmac space, and flight scheduling - as well as poorly coordinated equipment donations, ultimately undermining the overall coherence of the response effort.

The PRG forms part of a broader effort to deepen collective defence cooperation in the Pacific. The participation of observers such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan in the 2024 SPDMM reflects the growing external strategic interest in Pacific regional security. In this context, the 2024 SPDMM communiqué⁴¹ frames the PRG as a mechanism intended to ‘drive Pacific-led responses to shared regional security challenges,’ signalling both a regional consolidation of security governance and an effort to shape the discursive terrain of strategic engagement in the Pacific.

The extent to which the PRG can navigate and adapt to the geopolitical dynamics shaping HADR in the Pacific remains uncertain. Its first operational test took place in December 2024, following a magnitude 7.3 earthquake in Vanuatu. At the invitation of the Vanuatu Government, PRG specialists were deployed to support the Vanuatu Mobile Force and the National Disaster Management Office in planning and liaison roles. In liaison with the Vanuatu Government, it was determined that military forces were not required. This minimalist posture functioned as a strategic signal: it positioned the PRG as a facilitator rather than a dominant actor, aligning with regional narratives of Pacific leadership and sovereignty. At the same time, it underscored the delicate balance the PRG

must maintain between operational effectiveness and the competing discursive and geopolitical logics that shape HADR in the region. In 2025 the PRG participated in Exercise Croix du Sud,⁴² the French-led humanitarian and disaster relief exercise conducted across New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna.

Within the evolving Pacific security architecture, the PRG occupies a niche at the intersection of soft and hard power. On the one hand, it is framed as a humanitarian mechanism but in practice, it is a military instrument embedded in regional defence cooperation, and it cannot be entirely disentangled from geopolitical dynamics. The PRG has strategic value as it enables access, presence and visibility and it provides for strategic signalling both in the region and beyond. The SPDMM is itself becoming a central node in regional security cooperation. By situating PRG under SPDMM, its proponents aim to legitimise the group as a Pacific-led mechanism. However, the presence of observer states like the U.S., U.K. and Japan at SPDMM increases the risk that PRG becomes entangled in extra-regional strategic competition.

The PRG underscores the potential complexities and tensions inherent in collective approaches to disaster response. While it seeks to leverage regional solidarity and capability to deliver coordinated military support in disaster contexts, the realisation of this ambition will require careful strategic calibration. The PRG must preserve its regional legitimacy and avoid perceptions that it contributes to the militarisation of the Pacific. Its inaugural deployment in Vanuatu was operationally modest but symbolically significant, functioning as a low-intensity test of rapid mobilisation and interoperability. However, as the frequency and severity of disasters increase, the PRG is likely to confront more demanding challenges relating to operational scale, overlapping mandates, coordination mechanisms, and political optics. If it can consolidate its role as a genuinely regional asset, the PRG has the potential to evolve into a stabilising element within the Pacific security architecture.

39 https://nsc.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/Changing%20tides_China%27s

40 https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2023-05/SR191%20Smooth%20sailing_0.pdf?VersionId=

41 <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/statements/2024-10-03/south-pacific-defence-ministers-meeting-joint-communiqué>

42 <https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2025-05-14/debut-regional-emergency-response-group>

Authors

CÉLINE PAJON

Is Head of Research on Japan and the Indo-Pacific at the Center for Asian Studies of the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), which she joined in 2008. She also coordinates the Pacific Islands research program, established in 2022.

ANNA POWLES

Is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at Massey University. Her research focuses on the geopolitical dynamics of the Pacific, the Pacific security architecture and security cooperation in the region, as well as New Zealand's foreign and defense policy.

PAUL D. PELCZAR

Has written predominantly on maritime security and operations in the information environment, drawing on decades of naval experience. His work examines how alliances, cognition, and technology shape defence strategy, introducing ideas that connect strategic thought with the human and informational dimensions of warfare.

JUAN PABLO TORO

Has been the Executive Director of AthenaLab since 2019. He is also a member of the Foreign Policy Advisory Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, a columnist for the newspaper El Mercurio, and a professor at the Faculty of Communications at the Pontifical Catholic University.

Av. El Bosque Norte 0177, oficina 1101, Las Condes, Santiago, Chile
www.athenalab.org | contacto@athenalab.org

