

The Strategy-Execution Gap in Pacific National Security Planning

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Introduction

Keen observers have noted that national security planning in Pacific Island countries (PICs) has been challenging to translate into practical actions due to a “strategy-execution gap” (George, 2021; Ivarature, 2023). This strategy-execution gap purportedly arises from a variety of factors, including lack of consultation, lack of regional collaboration, and limited national assessment capacity—to name a few. Indeed, many strategy execution processes fail because “new strategies” are often not strategies at all, lacking a clear set of choices that define what the country is going to do and what it’s not going to do (Vermeulen, 2017; Martin, 2021).

In addition, the National Security Strategies (NSS) developed by PICs to date, commonly adopt a threat-based focus in contextualizing their strategic environments. In complex environments, a threat-based focus lacks the context necessary to understand detrimental effects in time and space, and plan effectively for their mitigation under uncertainty. Hence, translating national security planning into a coherent suite of strategic actions is proving problematic in PICs.

Effective national security planning is further constrained by the rapidly growing complexity in the strategic circumstances embracing the Pacific region. The regional security environment confronts complex

security challenges framed by an expanded concept of security, within a dynamic geopolitical environment (Boe Declaration Action Plan, 2019). The need for action by PIC governments is palpable and time constraints are having perverse effects on the form and formulation of NSS.

Suggested Shifts in Approach

Ideally, NSS provide an overarching framework that outlines a PIC’s strategic context, identifies security challenges and opportunities, articulates the nation’s vision and agenda, sets priorities for coming years, and sets in motion reforms to strengthen the national security enterprise (George, 2021). Four broad shifts may be useful in closing the strategy-execution gap and achieving NSS aspirations:

1. Move the focus of planning from “threat-based” to “risk-based.”
2. Move the scope of planning from “sectoral” to “whole of government.”
3. Move the nature of policy from “declarative” to “operational.”
4. Move the formulation of policy from “directive” to “co-created.”

From “Threat-based” to “Risk-based”

Threat is the language of intelligence, grounded in the intent and capability of actors (Vandepeer, 2011). At higher levels of abstraction, threat lacks the context

necessary to understand detrimental effects in time and space. For example, the threat of transnational crime may manifest as particular crime types, at specified times, against specific targets with variable exposures and vulnerabilities. Managing threats—especially shaping a suite of coherent strategic actions across the threat landscape—requires greater precision.

Risk is the language of management, grounded in the context that shapes the likelihood and consequence of threat events (ISO 31000, 2018). Risk embraces causal factors and the impacts of a threat event, while noting the vulnerability of specific targets, their exposure, and the moderating influence of controls. These factors allow quantification of risk, prioritization, ownership, control effectiveness, and a sounder basis for resource allocation.

From “Sectoral” to “Whole of Government”

Traditional sectoral interests in government—such as the military and law enforcement—held sway in a world where there were clear distinctions between foreign and domestic security domains. At a time when these distinctions are blurring, national security planning should bring more non-traditional perspectives into the conversation. Greater communication, collaboration, and coordination is needed to match the growing complexity of the threat landscape.

Whole-of-government refers to coordination of various elements of government activity to achieve a shared goal (AP4D, 2023). In national security policy this includes efforts to provide overarching strategy, establish

effective coordination mechanisms, and build staff capability to support a coherent “all tools of statecraft” approach across government.

Beyond the immediate control of government, national security policy should involve the government engaging consistently and broadly with whole-of-nation capabilities—other levels of government, and non-government actors such as business, the tertiary sector, NGOs, community and diaspora groups, media, sports, and cultural organizations.

Likewise, national security cannot be separated from the public, and requires a new social contract to ensure national security planning reflects national interests, makes the most of community structures, strengths, and insights, as well as fostering public buy-in. Cybersecurity provides a good example, where building a society resilient to cyberthreats could prove more effective than chasing every cybercriminal through law enforcement means. The role of media in socializing national security concepts and strategies should be further explored.

From “Declarative Policy” to “Operational Policy”

The distinction between a nation’s words and actions has been characterized as “declarative policy” and “operational policy” (or signaling) (Nitze, 1956; Bell, 1989). Declarative policy is concerned with “where we want to go,” articulating broad principles, values, and goals that guide a government’s foreign relations, and are often expressed in speeches, official statements, and documents. It does not provide specific

instructions on how to achieve national security objectives.

Operational policy is concerned with “how we get there,” translating declarative policy into a coherent set of concrete actions and steps, involving decisions about specific tools and resources to be used, and drawing on all the elements of national power. A shift in emphasis towards operational policy improves the prospects of aligning ends, ways, and means—which is at the core of strategy (Israel, 2020).

From “Directive” to “Co-created”

In response to rapidly changing strategic circumstances, there is a natural tendency to exercise executive authority around narrowly conceived national security objectives, relying upon a few powerful voices in the room. This “directive” approach—which limits transparency in policy development—may make the rationale for national security planning ambiguous and limit unity of effort under changing conditions. In compressed timeframes without adequate socialization, the speed of the bureaucracy may be overtaken by the speed of relevance, adding further friction.

Co-creation of national security policy—emerging from extensive cross-agency socialization and collaboration—brings all the necessary and sometimes unfamiliar perspectives into the conversation. This deliberate and co-created approach to planning can employ process discipline to ensure enduring unity of effort founded on a coherent suite of strategic actions for national security planning. This approach is more likely to surface gaps in mandates, architecture, capability, and capacity across the national security machinery, which can

inform a future program of work in support of broader national security planning.

Conclusion

Closing the strategy-execution gap requires national security planning to embrace the necessary governance, processes, and tools to refine NSS. NSS must shift from listing a collection of high-level threats - which everyone acknowledges - to assigning executive oversight and developing concrete opportunities for mitigating actual risks to the achievement of national security objectives.

The development of a suite of coherent and complementary strategic actions must acknowledge that traditional narrow sectoral interests can no longer address the complexity of the security environment. Declarative forms of national security with their emphasis on achieving political and psychological effects do not offer actionable guidelines able to govern national decision-making in various contingencies. Finally, national security planning must go slow to go fast, taking the time to co-create and socialize national security planning for unity of effort.

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