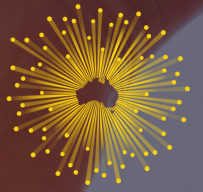


YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



ESTABLISHING AN INDO-PACIFIC YOUTH IDEA EXCHANGE PROGRAM

POLICY BRIEF - CAMERON FENNER, BLAKE CAMPBELL,
AND MADDISON CREAMER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Indo-Pacific is a geo-strategic grouping of states encompassing multiple cultures, ethno-linguistic groups, and political ideologies. This makes inter-state communication challenging, especially when policy makers and state leaders cannot empathise with one another. This has been identified as a key issue in the region. A program that seeks to create inter- and intra-state connections between young people throughout the Indo-Pacific could help alleviate these issues of social and cultural disconnect. This is achieved through the creation of a pen-pal system otherwise known as Indo-Pacific Youth Idea Exchange Program. This program will focus on inter-cultural education and information sharing. Furthermore, the program will encompass a series of National and Intra-State hubs supported by universities and governments, enabling young people engaged in the program to come together and share what they have learnt from one another. Finally, the program will look to expand into other areas and formats in the future once it has an established platform and engagement model.

BACKGROUND

The Indo-Pacific as a politically recognised region is a relatively novel concept. The Quad agreement between Australia, Japan, India, and the US is credited with normalising the use of the Indo-Pacific and also the concept of the 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'. [1] This is an attempt to shift the focus of the region away from anti-western powers such as China towards more friendly states such as India, Indonesia, and other ASEAN states. [2] Despite its geostrategic framing, much of the rhetoric surrounding the Indo-Pacific has been defined by its potential for positive change. The Pacific Islands Forum has championed this humanised re-framing of the Indo-Pacific concept, and the Boa Declaration articulates it in the context of the humanisation of security and an opportunity for greater cooperation. [3] Its potential as a mechanism of cooperation and interconnection has been acknowledged by influential multilateral organisations such as ASEAN. [4]

Furthermore, the intersection between the Indo-Pacific and the goals of the democratically aligned Pacific actors has been consistently demonstrated through policy rhetoric. Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the US, the European Union, the United Kingdom, South Korea, and India have all codified some form of regional (re)engagement, all with significant reference to the Indo-Pacific. [5] More specifically, policy trends within these actors' trends toward matching a unified 'Free and Open Pacific' ideal. [6]

THE PROBLEM

A major issue facing the states of the Indo-Pacific is feeling a sense of community or connection. Unlike regions such as Europe or South America, the political boundaries of the Indo-Pacific spent the better part of a century in a state of flux, and this made it very hard to develop regional connections and ties. [7] Contrasting this with regions such as Europe which have benefited from burgeoning connections and affirmed multilateral institutions further evidences the potential for stronger regional connections in the Indo-Pacific.

This is compounded by the introduction of a diverse set of languages, political systems, and religions that have led to disunity in the Indo-Pacific. [8] Although a great strength of the region, this diversity creates the potential for disconnection, misunderstanding and insensitivity between the myriad of unique cultures and peoples who call the Indo-Pacific home. This could lead to miscommunications and disagreements on pertinent inter-states issues such as climate change, international development, and conflict mitigation. [9]

This policy brief seeks to address the social and cultural disconnect present between state leaders and policy makers in the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific has the potential to be a fractured region of the world due to the sheer variety of cultural groups, ethnicities, and religions, but we could help foster a generation of compassionate and culturally sensitive leaders who would help improve interstate cohesion on pertinent issues.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Establish a Pen-Pal system

The Pen Pal system will be designed to connect young people from across the Indo-Pacific and further abroad with a peer from another culture, ethno-linguistic group, or religion.

- Pen-Pals would be encouraged to communicate on issues relevant to themselves and young people in general. Through this, they can impart to each other new ways of perceiving issues and solutions that will hold distinctly unique cultural interpretations and viewpoints.
- This will also challenge preconceived stereotypes of outgroups and help develop participants' world views. A short pre-program ethics and tolerance training course will be held to ensure all discussions and correspondence is respectful, productive, and insightful.

- A set of diverse template questions would be issued periodically to provide the participants with a set of ideas and problems to respond to in their pairings/groupings. This will allow the conversation to remain in keeping with the ethos of the program while also promoting free thinking and critical analysis.
- Concurrent language classes will focus on basic language skills and relevant subject matter, as this will allow participants to communicate on a deeper cultural level.

2 Establish National or Intra-State Hubs

Regional Hubs will be virtual locations designed to bring together participants within areas of potentially high engagement. There is immense potential in the creation of a unique hosting software that could be specially tailored with modern translation capabilities to better serve the program's needs. Alternatively, pre-existing hosting software such as Zoom could also be used. There is also the potential for participants within these hubs to meet face to face depending on current circumstances.

- As these hubs will be set within states, the assumption will be made that people will be able to communicate in the same language, or similar dialects, but if this is not possible a professional network of translators will be available to assist in communication.
- The Hub activities would include gathering groups of students participating in the Pen-Pal system. This would allow for partners to 'compare notes' and have guided dialogues based on each other's diverse experiences. This would give participants further insight into the experience of other young people from many different nations.

3

Consider Future Possibilities

- An in-person cultural exchange that focuses on cultural immersion rather than academic learning. This cultural exchange will include a series of homestays and language and cultural lessons. This program is reliant upon the participating states' ability to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 and allow for international travel. It also requires participants to be in the position to host one another in their homes for an extended period of time.
- The extension of online and virtual classrooms. These would be similar to platforms such as Reddit, but with an inherently educational and communicative mission. This would allow for people to direct culturally sensitive and relevant questions to peers with lived cultural experience. This would remove learning from an entirely academic space and allow for it to be a more casual and engaging space.

CONCLUSION

These policy recommendations seek to demonstrate how an Indo-Pacific youth Idea Exchange Program will create a space within which young people from around the Indo-Pacific can create a generation of empathetic and culturally trained leaders and policy makers. This will greatly increase the ability of these states to work together on pertinent issues and will break down geo-strategic and cultural issues between these states. Finally, these policy recommendations will also provide the participating young people with the opportunity to learn relative information and skills surrounding cross-cultural communication and diplomacy, while also affording them the opportunity to create new relationships and connections around the region and its broader participants.



Cameron Fenner is studying a double degree in International Relations and Arts at the Australian National University. He is interested in Latin American Politics and International Development Studies.



Blake Campbell is studying a degree of International Security Studies at the Australian National University. He is interested in peace studies, the process of multilateral agreements, human security, and intelligence analysis.



Maddison Creamer is studying a double degree of Arts (Indigenous Studies & Politics) and International Studies at the University of Wollongong. She is interested in ongoing processes of decolonization, and the international response to refugee and internally displaced communities.

This Policy Brief has been published as a part of Young Australians in International Affairs and La Trobe Asia's *Emerging Leader's Dialogue on Australia and the UK in the Indo-Pacific*. Supported by the UK High Commission Canberra, the program brought together 30 young leaders from Australia and the UK. Over five weeks, participants engaged with diplomats, academics and industry experts on all things Australia and the UK in the maritime Indo-Pacific.

The views in this Policy Brief do not represent the views of any organisations.



REFERENCES

- [1] He K, Feng H. The Institutionalisation of the Indo-Pacific: Problems and Prospects. *International Affairs*. 2020;96(1):149-68.
- [2] Medcalf R. Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China won't Map the Future. Carlton: La Trobe University Press; 2020.
- [3] 49th Pacific Islands Forum: Boa Declaration 2018; Nauru.
- [4] Pulipaka S, M. In Defence of the 'Indo-Pacific' Concept. *Observer Research Foundation*. 2021;493(1):2-4.
- [5] Amt A. Germany – Europe – Asia: shaping the 21st century together': The German Government adopts policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region. German Federal Foreign Office.
- [6] Scott D. The Indo-Pacific in US Strategy: Responding to Power Shifts. *Rising Powers Quarterly*. 2018;3(2):19-20.
- [7] Fraenkel J. Political Instability, 'Failed States' and Regional Intervention in the Pacific. In: Bryant-Tokalau J, Frazer I,. *Redefining the Pacific? Regionalism Past, Present and Future*. 1 ed: Ashgate Publishing Ltd; 2006. p. 128.
- [8] Li H. The "Indo-Pacific": Intellectual Origins and International Visions in Global Contexts. *Modern Intellectual History*. 2020:1-27.
- [9] Morgan W. Oceans Apart? Considering the Indo-Pacific and the Blue Pacific. *Security Challenges*. 2020;16(1):44-5.



© **YOUNG AUSTRALIANS IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS**

POLICY@YOUNGAUSINT.ORG.AU