


# ‘Blue boats’ and ‘reef robbers’: A new maritime security threat for the Asia Pacific?

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**Abstract:** Vietnamese ‘blue boats’ – small wooden-hulled fishing boats – are now entering the territorial waters of Pacific Island countries and illegally catching high-value species found on remote coastal reefs. Crossing several international boundaries and traversing a distance of over 5000 km, these intrusions have alarmed Oceanic countries, including Australia. Lacking administrative capacity as well as jurisdictional authority to effectively control the vast stretches of island coastlines individually, governments and intergovernmental bodies in the region have called for strengthened coordination of surveillance efforts while also pressuring Vietnam diplomatically. This paper reviews these latest developments and is the first to provide a focused assessment of the issue. Through the lens of Copenhagen School of securitisation theory, we analyse responses of national and regional actors and their portrayal in online media to understand how blue boats are constructed as a security threat within a narrative of maritime, food and human security. Arguably, Australia together with the Forum Fisheries Agency, who advise on the governance of offshore tuna resources, have so far acted most decisively – in a way that might see them extend their strategic role in the region. We propose a comprehensive empirical research agenda to better understand and manage this nascent, flammable and largely unpredictable inter-regional phenomenon.

## Introduction

For the people of the Pacific Islands, fishery resources found in reefs, lagoons and coastal sea areas are a crucial part of their sustenance, contributing to their food and livelihood security as well as being a central element in the Pacific way of life (Johannes, 1978; Gillett *et al.*, 2000). Spanning over a 6000 nautical mile stretch of the western and central Pacific Ocean, the remoteness of these islands, together with the small land mass and the predominantly coastal-residing populations further accentuate the central roles of fish and the ocean. In recent

years, several sightings of poaching fleets from outside the region have alarmed coastal communities, national governments and inter-governmental organisations. Referred to as ‘blue boats’ (or ‘reef robbers’), a flotilla of small-to-medium-sized fishing boats from Vietnam has made what must be a long, arduous journey to target coastal reefs in Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and other Pacific countries and territories to collect high-value species of sea cucumber and giant clam. Potential impacts of this foreign fishing intrusion are forecast to be acute and multidimensional, eliciting widespread attention and a call for

urgent action by the mainstream media as well as in the speeches of national and regional actors. At the local level, poaching of sea cucumber would directly deplete the inshore resources and deprive the communities of an export-based, income-generating opportunity. Such illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is also an affront to the efforts communities and national governments have made towards the management and recovery of these resources, many of which are now under national bans and/or international protection (Anderson *et al.*, 2011). In addition, the occurrence of blue boats glaringly exposes the difficulty of national governments to monitor and patrol the vast stretches of coastal waters in the Pacific (e.g., Aqorau, 2000; McNulty, 2013). Pacific countries, many of whom qualify as small island developing states, are typically equipped with scarce surveillance capacity (Govan, 2014). Beyond detection, the apprehension and the subsequent legal-administrative treatment of these boats and the crew can also take several months and be a resource-intensive operation for Pacific Island countries (PICs).

Up until now, this emerging Asia Pacific issue has been mostly reflected in increasing media attention. While analysis of occurrences and handling of blue boats have been presented in a rather bite-sized manner, their media portrayal has nonetheless resulted in effective issue-making. This is typical of a nascent and data-poor phenomenon; however, there is now a need for a more reflexive and coherent interpretation given the varied repercussions the issue could bring to the region. Such interpretation would 'turn circumstances into a situation that is comprehensible and that serves as a springboard to action' that is, 'sense-making' (*sensu* Taylor and Van Every, 2000: 40; Weick *et al.*, 2005). We take a discursive point of view to delineate a narrative about the nature of the threat the incursions of blue boats pose and the meanings they generate, in order to inform regional identity and action. Approaching blue boat incursions as a maritime security issue, this paper draws on the constructivist analytical framework of the Copenhagen School of securitisation theory (Wæver, 1995; Buzan *et al.*, 1998) and evaluates how the acts of fishing incursion and the responses of various Pacific actors have been packaged from the perspective of online media, what purposes these measures

serve, and what (geo)political trends these developments hold for the future. Overall, we argue that this issue is en route to being securitised such that urgency is raised and emergency measures are legitimised to bolster multilateral cooperation on maritime monitoring and surveillance. In doing so, we also highlight the political nature of this process, whereby potential for asserting one's influence or sovereignty is gained or lost among various Pacific actors.

This study relied on publicly accessible secondary sources from 2015 to 2018 and informal discussions with key informants to conduct a critical textual analysis (Vaara and Tienari, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). English language articles that emanated from the various media outlets of PICs as well as Australia and New Zealand represented material used to assemble region-relevant perspectives. Articles were searched periodically between December 2017 and October 2018 using an online search engine with a combination of keywords, including but not limited to 'blue boats', 'Vietnamese', 'Pacific Islands', 'poaching', 'sea cucumber' and 'illegal fishing'. All results were initially retained and reviewed. Because the coverage of the same event is often reproduced by more than one media outlet, any repetitive reports were omitted from the final set of articles. We also examined Vietnamese language articles to gain a preliminary understanding of how the issue is framed and dealt with at the 'source' location. Eighty-two articles were collected in total (55 in English; 27 in Vietnamese) in order to reach saturation (see Table S1, Supporting Information, referenced at the end of this paper, for a complete list). From this, we identified key actors and events while extracting statements and quotes particularly useful for representational purposes, as they are also in line with the sentiments found throughout the reported material more generally. Informal discussions with those in various professional circles encompassed both open-ended chance conversations and pre-scheduled chats but with no strict data collection agenda. The broad understanding gleaned from these discussions helped contextualise the analysis of the media articles. This work also benefits from our diverse and extensive research experiences on coastal, offshore and transboundary fisheries in the Asia-Pacific, including Vietnam and PICs. We are open-minded about the blue boat incidents and have no conflict of interest.

The paper proceeds with a brief synopsis of the evolving concept of maritime security. Next, the history and the traditional content of maritime security concerns and actions in the Pacific are presented. Against this broad context, we then situate the blue boat incursion and the threats it would pose to the region. The subsequent section describes the occurrences of the blue boats and the regional and national reactions taken and claimed so far. We then explain this development through applying the securitisation framework of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and colleagues. Finally, we highlight the implications of the securitisation narrative surrounding this phenomenon and situate them within the broader understanding of maritime security. The paper concludes by proposing a future research agenda, which can help better prepare Pacific actors for the likely prospect of continued threat construction on blue boats.

### Maritime security in the Pacific Island region

While it is difficult to achieve a consensus over definition, maritime security is increasingly important to international relations and ocean governance. According to Bueger (2015: 159), the growing incidence of piracy in the past decade together with the build-up of blue water navies of emerging powers such as India and China and inter-state hostilities in regions such as the South China Sea have moved maritime security to the global consciousness and to high-level policy agendas (see also Ross, 2009). Traditionally, maritime security has been associated with military threats and sovereignty violations of sea-based territory. A greater range of defence and safety-related goals are now part of its lexicon including the protection of the freedom of navigation and the flow of international trade as well as averting dangers of terrorism, drug trafficking, piracy, people smuggling and other forms of transnational crime (Klein *et al.*, 2010: 5). Further, threats to a state's security are closely linked to environmental, economic and social conditions. For example, in the 2008 Report on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, the Secretary-General of the United Nations identified seven specific threats to maritime security, which included IUU fishing ([N08/266/26/PDF/N0826626.pdf\). Recognising food insecurity as a major risk to international peace, of which fisheries form a vital supply in many parts of the world \(Cohen and Pinstrup-Andersen, 1999; Pomeroy \*et al.\*, 2007\), this particular threat also invites human security concerns affecting the vulnerability and resilience of coastal populations as well as the welfare of seafaring fish workers \(Adger, 2010; Bueger, 2015; Macfarlane, 2017\). Likewise, intentional and unlawful damage to the marine environment and climate change uncertainty are also key parts of the maritime security discussion, for their potential to destabilise social and economic interests of coastal states through, for instance, creating environmental refugees or derailing the pursuit of the 'blue economy', which requires secure and well-managed marine environments as a precondition to ocean-based sustainable development \(Klein \*et al.\*, 2010; Duarte, 2016; Barnett, 2017; Voyer \*et al.\*, 2018\).](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/</a></p>
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For the 22 PICs and Territories that comprise the Pacific Island region in the Western and Central Pacific, the ocean remains a source of life and prosperity that has sustained Pacific peoples for generations. Maritime issues for these countries frequently focus on the health of the marine environment including coastal resources that provide food and tourism earnings, the sustainability of offshore fishing stocks for national income generated from licence fees, marine pollution from shipping and land-based activities, the introduction of marine invasive species, and the social and ecological impact of climate-change-induced sea-level rise and destructive weather events. Hence, concerns about maritime security have mainly reflected these environmental and resource-related matters rather than the naval, defence-oriented concerns more prominently discussed in larger, more developed states (Firth, 2003; Bateman and Mossop, 2010). Similarly, analysts have noted that the PICs do not necessarily prioritise the risk of maritime terrorism and piracy (Fletcher, 2004; Fortune, 2006; Jones, 2009). This has meant that counter-terrorism measures have been at times exaggerated or even imposed by others at the expense of greater attention to the issues the PICs themselves deem more urgent (e.g. PICs having to respond to the UN Security Council resolutions that address terrorism and strengthened container and port security

measures). In this regard, Bateman and Mossop (2010: 101) observed that, 'increased port security has had a social cost, as local people are now denied fishing or other recreational access to wharves and jetties used by international shipping.'

As part of the traditional ocean-going activity, fishery and fishing vessels provide a salient entry point to maritime security discussions in the Pacific Island region (Martin, 2005; UNODC [UN Office on Drugs and Crime], 2016). In addition to being a main conduit for illegal fishing, the possibility that fishing vessels could be involved in the trafficking of weapons and drugs and people smuggling has been long noted. While the security of air access points has seen significant improvements over the years (Bateman and Mossop, 2010), control of seaborne activity is understandably challenging due to the geographical expanse of the region (spanning over a marine area of 30 million square kilometres). This challenge is exacerbated by difficulties of inter-country and agency coordination, which is needed to compensate for the limited domestic capacity (e.g. shortage of patrol vessels, surveillance aircraft and operating costs relative to the size of national maritime jurisdictions). Nevertheless, significant collective efforts have been mustered to address IUU fishing in the region. Since 1999, the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) has played a key role in managing and supporting member countries in the implementation of a satellite-based Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) to track the movement of large-scale tuna-catching vessels in their exclusive economic zones (EEZ). FFA also administers and provides support for multilateral treaties that aim to set up a cooperative framework for region-wide surveillance. For instance, the 1992 Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region (and the 2012-finalised Agreement on Strengthening Implementation of the Niue Treaty, i.e. the Niue Treaty Subsidiary Agreement), contains provisions on the sharing of resources and data as well as procedures for flexible cooperation in monitoring, prosecuting and penalising illegal fishing vessels. Having the potential to extend its scope to cover a broader range of suspicious activities beyond fisheries, the Treaty also has the means to facilitate improved coordination of air surveillance, regarded by some commentators as the most pressing operational requirement

for regional maritime enforcement (see Aqorau, 2000; Bateman and Mossop, 2010).

The implementation of the Niue Treaty, however, has been slow and intermittent at best, marred by complex factors such as a sensitivity to national sovereignty, particularly when foreign (or regionally managed) vessels are allowed to conduct enforcement operations in national areas of jurisdiction (Bateman and Mossop, 2010; see also Radio New Zealand, 2017a). PICs have only gained independence from Western colonial powers in the second half of the 20th century, and some only as recently as the 1990s (e.g. Palau). Hence, willingness to cooperate closely with other actors can be affected by 'a perception that the state is giving up something seen as a sovereign right, or natural sphere of influence' (Bateman and Mossop, 2010: 111). Concerns about sovereignty have also influenced the relationship of PICs with Australia and New Zealand – the two larger, more advanced 'metropolitan' states in the region (e.g. see Murray and Overton, 2011). Australia and New Zealand, in part driven by their own national interests to secure a 'peaceful' Pacific (i.e. free of resource depletion, transnational crime and terrorism risks) have identified a need for improved maritime security and devoted significant resources to increase the infrastructural and bureaucratic capacities (e.g. patrol boats and training of government officials) of the PICs to respond to ocean-based threats (Rolfe, 2003; Fortune, 2006; Hayward-Jones, 2015). However, the sense that metropolitan countries are at times 'seeking to impose their will and to establish arrangements that suit them rather than the PICs' has not gone unnoticed in the region (Bateman and Mossop, 2010: 111), with Fortune (2006: 59) also stating that 'most PICs are uncomfortable addressing what New Zealand and Australia regard as the most serious security challenges'. This antagonistic dynamic that exposes differences of priorities has been similarly observed in the western Indian Ocean, where national Somalian actors have tended to attach more importance to the aspects of blue growth and human security while external donors have stressed anti-piracy or counter-terrorism activities (Bueger and Edmunds, 2016).

Such challenges are reflective of the general problem of coordination and cooperation that

needs to be addressed in order to institute an effective maritime security regime (Bueger, 2013). In the following section, we explore how blue boats are providing additional impetus for strengthening regional security and interdependence. More specifically, we analyse the ways in which the nascent phenomenon of the blue boat incursion is subject to processes of 'securitisation', enrolled to promote added urgency to bolster the security rationale.

## Blue boats in the Pacific

### *Blue boats and their operation*

Blue boats are a label given to fishing boats from Vietnam that have been spotted poaching high-value sedentary species in the remote coastal reefs of the Pacific Islands. Blue simply because of the painted colour of the hull which is in fact very typical of fishing boats in Vietnam, these are relatively small boats of 10–15 m in length, which can carry 10–17 crew onboard. First making headlines in 2015, the blue boats have now been sighted (and apprehended) in the waters of many PICs including Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia as well as Australia. They travel more than 7000 km and stay up to three months at sea, allegedly enabled to stay those durations by the suspected logistical arrangement of transshipment carriers arriving to receive the caught fish and provide fuel in the course of their trip (Blaha, 2016). Between December 2014 and September 2016, the FSM seized more than nine Vietnamese vessels and arrested approximately 169 crew members (Carreon, 2017a). In Australian waters, according to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority, the number of foreign fishing boats caught operating illegally is reported to have increased from six in 2014 to up to 20 in 2016 with most originating from Vietnam and Indonesia (Field, 2017).

Sea cucumber appears to be the main target of blue boats. Two blue boats intercepted in the waters of New Caledonia in November 2017 were found to be carrying on board 10 tons of gutted and salted sea cucumber in 58 barrels (Carreon, 2017b). As sea cucumber is a culturally

important delicacy in many parts of East and Southeast Asia including Hong Kong and mainland China, its harvest and export to these Asian markets are integrated into an efficiently operated market chain (Purcell, 2014; Barclay *et al.*, 2016; Fabinyi *et al.*, 2017). Concurrently, notable patterns of over-exploitation similar to boom-and-bust cycles followed by harvest or export bans in countries such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have been evident (Anderson *et al.*, 2011; Hair *et al.*, 2016). Tropical sea cucumber species can retail (as a dried or processed product called *bêche-de-mer*) at AU\$150–300 per kg in Hong Kong and Chinese markets (Purcell *et al.*, 2018) providing a considerable financial incentive for blue boats operators whose wooden-hulled boats represent a relatively small investment (reportedly costing around AU\$15 000–35 000 each) (Blaha, 2016). Furthermore, consumer demand in China is expected to rise in line with the growing middle class (Fabinyi *et al.*, 2017).

The growing encroachment of blue boats into the Pacific may also be driven by depletion of fish stocks in waters nearer to Vietnam in the South China Sea (Pomeroy *et al.*, 2009). In addition, fishing in these traditional fishing grounds has been made more problematic by Chinese political and para-military interferences (Dupont and Baker, 2014; Zhang and Bateman, 2017). Since the late 1990s, the Vietnamese Government has implemented strategies that encourage outward expansion of its fishery by limiting nearshore fishing and subsidising construction of bigger vessels capable of venturing to offshore waters (Pomeroy *et al.*, 2009). In searching for new areas to operate, the intrusion blue boats intrude into the waters of the Pacific Islands and Australia; this is part of the wider trend that sees them also in the waters of neighbouring countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Blue boats purportedly travel through unpatrolled marine routes whenever possible, and look for uninhabited islands to scour the surrounding area for sea cucumber; the boats then move further towards inhabited islands in search of more (Phòng, 2017, translated). Collection of sea cucumber in foreign waters is apparently easier and less dangerous in operational terms, too, since sea cucumber is still found 6–7 m deep, whereas one must dive 60 m, and even 80 m in

waters near Vietnam in the South China Sea (Voice of America, 2017a, translated). Mr Phan Huy Hoàng, President of Fisheries Associations of Quang Ngai Province, from which the highest incidence of blue boats originate, has portrayed the operation thus: 'with a small wooden fleet, fishers turn off communication equipment and turn off the lights as well. They keep moving quietly. No one monitors, no means can detect them ... People are willing to be hung to get the 300-time higher profits, just like drug trafficking' (in Hoàng, 2017, translated). Participating in such a journey is a precarious undertaking with potentially dire consequences. Crews reportedly have no contract of employment and no insurance; and when there is a problem such as occupational accidents or arrests, the owner assumes no responsibility and even cuts off all ties with the fishers (Voice of America, 2017b, translated). It is also possible that some of the crew are victims of human trafficking conducted by the owners of the blue boats, although such claims remain unsubstantiated at time of writing (Buchanan, 2017).

### *Impacts and responses*

Poaching of coastal marine resources, such as sea cucumber, can directly endanger the livelihood security of coastal communities and a significant source of national export revenue in the Pacific (Gillett, 2009). Sea cucumber fisheries are estimated to be the second-most valuable export fishery for the PICs after tuna, and more live tonnage in sea cucumbers is extracted and traded annually than all other reef fisheries combined (Carleton *et al.*, 2013; Gillett and Tauati, 2018). Sea cucumber are often a primary source of income for the fishers who participate in the fishery; for instance, sale of fresh and dried white teatfish (*Holothuria fuscogilva*), respectively, can fetch an average fisher-to-buyer price of AU\$31 per piece and AU\$61 per kg in Fiji (2014 data) and AU\$9 per piece and AU\$39 per kg in Kiribati (2011 data) (Purcell *et al.*, 2016). Other livelihood options available in rural areas may be relatively more stable (e.g. production of copra), but are a far less lucrative source of income. Hence, when sea cucumber stocks collapse or the fishery closes (in many instances, swiftly and without much

warning), this sudden loss of livelihood can lead to a considerable hardship for many island inhabitants (Koczberski *et al.*, 2006; Christensen, 2011).

As well as jeopardising resource management and income generation efforts, controlling the incidence of blue boats has also inflicted large financial and administrative burdens on PICs. The essential procedures for achieving border-, human- and biosecurity would entail activities pertaining to monitoring, capturing and the sanitary disposing of the boats as well as fair and humane prosecution, detainment and repatriation of the crew. For instance, Suzanne Lowe-Gallen, Chief of Compliance and Technical Projects for the FSM, stated that surveillance and arrests of nine blue boats that had been illegally fishing in FSM waters during the past three years had cost the government over AU\$250000 (in PNA, 2016a). Similarly, French authorities estimated US\$1.5 million (~AU\$2.1 million) as the total cost of handling the November 2017 infraction in New Caledonia, with New Caledonia's representative to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Manuel Ducrocq being quoted as saying:

'For 12 crew members, we are obliged by the French law to see that they are accompanied by 15 police officers ... So not only do we have the cost of surveillance, the interdiction and then their accommodation but in addition we must pay 15 return airline tickets for our police to ensure these people arrive in Vietnam. That is a huge cost which is borne by the government and cannot be recovered' (in Rika, 2017).

The growing risk of blue boats has been met in the region with strong rhetoric and swift action. Vietnam is being diplomatically pressured by the PICs to 'to do more to prevent this illegal activity' (see PNA, 2016b). This issue has been raised at the annual WCPFC meetings (in both 2016 and again in 2017) where the Vietnamese delegate was directly confronted and asked to provide a response. The FFA has also requested an update on the implementation of the Vietnamese Prime Minister's official directive issued in May 2017, which specified a range of (Vietnamese) domestic actions to control the behaviour of its fishing vessels (see WCPFC, 2018). The WCPFC Executive Director,

Feleti Teo, confirmed the adversarial sentiment among the PICs, 'in the context of the [WCPF] Commission there has been attempt to link (blue boats to membership) because, as you know, most of the blue boats originate from Vietnam and Vietnam is a cooperating non-member' (in Carreon, 2017c), implying that the continued poaching by blue boats could have an effect on the success of Vietnam's application to be a member of WCPFC.

Countries within the Pacific region appear keen to apply a coordinated approach to the surveillance and apprehension of blue boats. Operation Rai Balang is an annual 10-day maritime surveillance sweep led by the FFA's Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre and joined by nine Micronesian and Melanesian states as well as the aerial and maritime defence assets of the 'QUADS' (Australia, New Zealand, France and the US); it conducts unannounced patrols in the EEZs of the PICs and the high seas (i.e. areas beyond national jurisdiction) to detect and seize IUU fishing vessels. Expanding from the primary target of large-scale distant-water fleets such as purse seiners or long-liners, the 2017 operation was the first of any FFA surveillance operation to support a secondary mission of searching for, and reporting, blue boats via air surveillance sorties in the 14.7 million km<sup>2</sup> wide patrol area (FFA, 2017a). Three blue boats were pursued out of the Papua New Guinea EEZ, which supplemented the results of the 2016 exercise, in which the detection and arrest of three blue boats was achieved within the waters of Palau and FSM (FFA, 2016).

The capture of three blue boats in March 2017 near Indispensable Reef, 50 km south of Rennell Island in Solomon Islands, provides an example of a coordinated, multi-agency approach to conducting surveillance and detection, and ultimately arrest. After receiving a report of blue boat sighting from a registered commercial fishing vessel operating in the area, the FFA, which is headquartered in Honiara, alerted the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, who dispatched a patrol boat the following day. The French Government also provided aerial support upon request of the FFA by deploying an aircraft from New Caledonia to Solomon Islands on an emergency basis. With an updated report from the police and fisheries authorities based in Santa Ana Island, the

French aircraft was able to locate the boats, which enabled the patrol vessel to overtake and board the blue boats. This case has been heralded regionally as a successful illustration of multiparty cooperation among local, national and international actors, as it led to pinpointing and ultimately apprehending the blue boats and their crew (Movick, 2017). Since then, FFA convened a special meeting in Brisbane in May 2017 attended by the senior officials of the PICs to collectively develop a strategic response to address the broad consequences of border and resource violations from blue boats as well as to plan a concerted diplomatic action directed towards the Vietnamese Government (FFA, 2017b). Two key outcomes explored were the 'draft Blue Boat Strategy' and the expansion of FFA's mandate to include coastal inshore areas (Tauafiafi, 2017a). Regarding the latter, with a region-wide surveillance system already in place for offshore oceanic fishery resources, this consolidation of mandate within FFA is expected to enable a more effective coordination of blue boat surveillance – a significant proposition we further elaborate in the subsequent section as part of the nascent securitisation narrative.

### Securitisation of blue boats

Offering a concept of security that is broad and generic enough to encompass different sectors of security (military, economic, societal and environmental) at the individual-, state- and international-level, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver have argued that there is a genuine logic to how an issue becomes understood as a security threat. Constructionist in its epistemology, their 'securitisation framework' enables an analysis of the political process by which threats are constructed and issues are elevated on the security agenda (Bueger, 2015: 161). According to this Copenhagen School of thought, securitisation implies that a particular issue is successfully claimed as an existential threat (e.g. a matter of survival) to a certain referent object (e.g. state sovereignty or community livelihoods). Such claims (i.e. 'speech acts') are made by 'securitising actors', who typically represent political elites empowered or authorised to speak about security (e.g. governments,

bureaucracies, lobbyists and pressure groups). In turn, if accepted by a relevant target audience (e.g. international community), these claims as a 'securitising move' will lead to legitimising special or 'emergency' measures that would not have otherwise been possible had the discourse not taken the form of existential threats. Hence, securitisation is about the discursive process that justifies taking actions outside the normal bounds of politics in order to avert what is perceived as a threatening development (Buzan *et al.*, 1998).

In the case of blue boats, alarmist language has already been used to depict the boats themselves, the impact of their activities and the broader dangers they pose. The Director General of FFA, James Movick, preferred to call them 'reef robbers' (Movick, 2017). Blue boats have also been compared to a 'thief in the night', who enters the home and steals the most precious possessions (Carreon, 2017a). Another FFA official remarked, 'When they go to a reef, they don't catch a few [sea cucumbers], they catch them all. Sea cucumbers need a certain amount of number to reproduce. Blue boats will obliterate them from the reefs. They [sea cucumbers] will never grow there again' (in Tauafiafi, 2017a). In this discourse, the imperative to control the incursions of blue boats is thus conspicuously linked to the referent objects- that is, the status of the marine resources as finite and under threat- and then the survival of the coastal communities who depend on those marine resources for their livelihood and food security (see Cullwick, 2016; Tauafiafi, 2017b).

Forming part of the speech act, blue boats are also spoken about in the same breath as maritime border security and associated transboundary crimes such as drug trafficking. Papua New Guinea Fisheries Minister Mao Zeming stated, 'It is not just an illegal fishing matter to be addressed by the [PNG] National Fisheries Authority. It is a national security issue which must be raised at the highest diplomatic levels' (in Albaniel, 2016). Similarly, Viliame Wilikilangi, a regional security advisor to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, confirmed the disruptive role of blue boats in preserving territorial control of member countries:

'Our focus on maritime security, which is something we've identified across a number of

countries in the region, is around the issue of border security and being able to have enough maritime domain awareness regarding the movement of small craft vessels, fishing vessels in and out of our various economic exclusion zones ... [For example], Vanuatu has had issues in the past with yachts coming in with drugs and you know it is along some of the transshipment routes from the US to Australia and also to New Zealand. So, these are concerns we are really trying to look at and have these reflected in the policy' (in Cullwick, 2018).

As such, the sovereign control of maritime domain has effectively been elevated as another referent object.

In the current shaping of the blue boat discourse, FFA appears to be one of the most vocal securitising actors, if not the most dominant. FFA's core mandate is to assist member countries to sustainably manage offshore fishery resources such as tuna and other pelagic fish stocks located in their EEZs. FFA's operations, therefore, do not extend into coastal waters where the risk of blue boats appears to converge the greatest. Then, why is FFA visibly active in intervening in the operations of blue boats? James Movick of FFA explained in a media interview,

'We do have a very effective tool in place [referring to the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre] and we do need to use it, as these are problems affecting the sovereignty of our countries, the livelihoods and opportunities that exist for our own people to harvest these resources ... So we have the responsibility but also the opportunity of using the regional MCS [monitoring, control and surveillance] framework' (in Tauafiafi, 2017b).

Probing further, in representing FFA's position, Movick was clear on the new direction required to ward off blue boat intrusion that centres on aerial surveillance. He was quoted as saying,

'They [blue boats] are a particular concern because they are small wooden vessels that are not easily detected by our day-to-day activities and the traditional [radar] tools that we have built around the industrialised tuna fishery ... Moving forward, this new form of threat will require us to evolve tools and practices crafted to local conditions. Aerial surveillance will



become more vital and be utilized more broadly than for just enforcing tuna fisheries alone' (FFA, 2016).

FFA's deputy Director General at the time, Wez Norris, also elaborated on the broader vision of this strategy,

'It [aerial surveillance] means we will be able to deploy it around the region in support of when our members have their patrol boat out at sea and that is when we get the best value out of combining that capability ... The increased aerial assistance capacity will broaden our scope and the impact that we have on a whole range of issues from the detection of sort of non-tuna illegal fishing like the blue boats that we have seen from Vietnam, but also allowing us to over time and as the members get more comfortable to move into looking at broader trans-national crime risks that are not necessarily fisheries specific ... This is where the future I see us having to move. To understand that there are other border control issues where our regional [MCS] framework can play a role' (in Tauafafi, 2017c).

Encouraged by the effective response demonstrated in the capture of blue boats in Solomon Islands in 2017, the intent of the FFA is reportedly to seek a full mandate from the member countries to expand its operation to coastal waters (see Tauafafi, 2017a, 2017b). Such an extension, if approved, would enable the agency to monitor the territorial waters of PICs with greater frequency and intensity and even deploy foreign aircrafts into the country on an emergency basis. While this would be a highly sensitive proposal from a sovereignty perspective, if not an outright aberration, it likely builds on a precedence called the 2000 Biketawa Declaration in the Pacific, which sets out a regional framework that allows a collective intervention into domestic affairs in times of political or security crisis and gives the extra power to the Pacific Island Forum (the preeminent inter-governmental body made up of heads of state) in determining when and how that takes place (Frazer and Bryant-Tokalau, 2006).

FFA's aspiration is in some ways also tied to a securitising move of Australia, who as a metropolitan partner and the largest donor of foreign aid to the Pacific region launched a plan to boost the aerial surveillance capacity of FFA in

2017. This support, for the first time, added a (civilian) patrol aircraft under the direct operational control of the FFA, who will have year-round access to the feature with FFA members determining surveillance priorities (see Brady, 2017; Radio New Zealand, 2017b). It is also aimed at strengthening the 'communication and cooperation' capability in addition to the original objective of surveillance and monitoring (see Tauafafi, 2017c). For Australia, this initiative represents a new model of support with an estimated annual cost of AU\$10–15 million being funded as part of the new AU\$2 billion Pacific Maritime Security Program supported by the Australian Department of Defence (Brady, 2017; Department of Defence, 2018). In this way the initiative would allow the programme to formally link with Australia's Defence Cooperation Program, which is responsible for the security and stability of a larger geographical area that comprises not only the Pacific Islands region, but also Southeast Asian nations such as Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines and Timor Leste (see Tauafafi, 2017c).

Though inconclusive at time of writing, there are indications that PICs are accepting the new reality of their coastal waters as being under threat from blue boats, a reality that is socially constituted by the speech acts of various regional and national actors in the last few years. Following the well-publicised incident in their waters last year, the Solomon Islands Government, for instance, formed a high-level cross-sectoral task force to deliberate on the ways to enhance interagency cooperation and coastal community alertness. A national strategy to deal with blue boats is also being led by the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources together with other ministries (R. Masu, pers. comm., 2018). In countries where no official sighting of blue boats has yet been documented, there is an admission that this issue requires close watch. Tokelau's fisheries officer, Feleti Tulafono, cautioned, for example,

'Whilst their transgressions may be occurring half a world away from Tokelau, our immediate neighbours Samoa, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Cook Islands are now concerned with this new threat that a strong and vigorous public awareness campaign should be developed' (Tauafafi, 2017a).

## Discussion: Wider implications and research agenda

In many PICs, customary marine tenure provides the foundations for the rights that coastal people have in deciding how their marine resources are used and managed. It is these foundations upon which community-based forms of management have persisted and gained traction as the principal mode (and scale) in which coastal fisheries should be governed in the Pacific region (Johannes, 2002; Govan *et al.*, 2006; SPC, 2015). Yet, there are some enduring and emerging issues that community-based management alone may not be able to address. In the face of globalisation and increasing demand for resources, it is useful to examine one such governance challenge and its intricate connections with larger political-economic and geographical trends (Howitt *et al.*, 2013), which we illuminate using the case of 'blue boats' in the Asia Pacific.

This paper has analysed some of the early speeches and actions of national and regional actors visible in the public communicative domain to explore how the recent phenomenon of blue boat incursion is being positioned within the maritime security discourse in the Pacific Island region. Based on the initial evidence gathered for this purpose, we posit that blue boats and their poaching activities are being devised as a fresh means to strengthen regional awareness, cooperation and capacity for maritime security. The main novelty of blue boats arguably stems from their small, rudimentary and even ungovernable characteristics. Such attributes pose a different set of security challenges compared to large-scale industrial fleets, who tend to be technically more detectable (via VMS and on-board observers), administratively traceable (via vessel registration, catch reporting and audit trails) and politically recognisable (via ties to lobbyists, industries and high-level diplomacy). The incursion of blue boats thus invites a new way of approaching the topic of maritime security in the region. Spatially, it adds a coastal dimension that represents a vast shore-based area nearly impossible to oversee using centralised means and conventional radar. There is also a degree of informality and randomness associated with these boats and their crew. In order to respond to the

changing conditions of threats that demand finer resolution yet broad coverage, the regional dialogue has so far emphasised multilateral aerial surveillance capacity together with the involvement of fishers themselves, community-based actors and provincial authorities to report local sightings (see Fig. 1; also Song, 2015 on the idea of 'civilian scouts'). Blue boats are therefore bolstering the need for closer cooperation not only among governments and agencies but also including the dispersed, informal actors residing at lower and resource user-levels to create a greater network of interdependencies.

From this, we aver that tackling blue boats is becoming the newest extension of the regional maritime security apparatus. Aside from the added security challenges, its securitisation (as with any intentional political endeavour) would also present opportunities for increasing influence for those willing to act vocally and decisively to negotiate the risks. The recent activities have shown that FFA and Australia, in particular, have swiftly (and in part jointly) engaged with the issue – a securitising move from which these actors may derive certain organisational and strategic benefits in years to come. Both the Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, which reaffirm enhanced commitment to safeguarding maritime security in the Pacific, as well as the latest consensus among PICs to expand the Biketawa Declaration to incorporate the non-traditional security topics including fisheries and human and environmental security (i.e. a Regional Security Declaration to be known as the Boe Declaration), provide a wider political backdrop which would favour the continued salience of blue boats in the security discussion.

In coming years, the actual events of the blue boat incursion may cease due to the changing macro and micro economic conditions motivating the fishing trips as well as the controlling effort of the Vietnamese Government and/or the effective deterrence from the Pacific actors. For instance, the recent warnings of the European Union to ban Vietnamese seafood imports has prompted the Vietnamese Government to demonstrate some progress in curbing IUU fishing of its offshore fleets (L. Son, pers. comm., 2018). Yet, as long as the threat itself is maintained to persist, there will be a lingering appetite for a

**IF YOU SEE THESE BOATS  
CALL IMMEDIATELY!**

**Help the authorities to stop them  
Report all sightings to:**

**Ministry of Fisheries  
and Marine Resources**  
**39143**  
**7217907**  
**7492806**  
**7251057**

**Royal Solomon  
Islands Police Force**  
**7645426**  
**28327**  
**22566**  
**7479228**

**They are illegal boats  
stealing your resources!**

**Figure 1.** A 'blue boat' poster produced for the Solomon Islands in 2017, which can be replicated for other countries, and eventually in the local languages. *Source:* SPC (2017). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

security discourse and the ensuing surveillance practice. The nature of smaller fishing vessels is such that they are more difficult to track and account for, with a vast number of them originating from numerous landing sites stretched across the Asia-Pacific. Hence, it is perhaps not entirely unthinkable that there could be a 'Chinese version' of the blue boats appearing in the Pacific Islands at some point in time (see also Wong, 2016). In recent decades, influx of Chinese loans, aids and infrastructure development has been a noticeable trend in the region (Shie, 2007; Zhang and Lawson, 2017) and arguably a contentious topic for the metropolitan countries such as Australia and New Zealand in fear of losing diplomatic,

economic and even naval influence over PICs (Windybank, 2005). While how much of the Chinese influence should amount to a security concern is unknown (and in fact not directly essential for discussion in this paper), it might be worth keeping in mind the contemporary history of fishing boat expansion in China, their frequent incursions in the nearby seas of disputed or foreign jurisdiction such as the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea, as well as their alleged dual role as a para-military unit (Dupont and Baker, 2014; Zhang and Bateman, 2017). Thus, with potential to grow into a more flammable international relations issue, the threat the small transboundary fishing boats pose could be of enduring concern to those

addressing maritime security in the Pacific Island region.

Research on this topic would support the wider trends observed in maritime security studies. According to Bueger and Edmunds (2016), maritime security issues are increasingly characterised by interconnectivity across scales and sectors transcending traditional boundaries and jurisdictional responsibilities. This means that the future study agenda requires critical and expanded attention to the ways security cooperation have become more diffuse, complex and diverse involving state, private and other non-state actors, including local fishing communities, as well as a holistic approach to deal with different but interlinked forms of maritime crimes and risks. Furthermore, the issues of port security, illegal fishing or environmental degradation remain particularly underexplored. Calling for ongoing in-depth studies that employ more sociological and interdisciplinary observations (Bueger and Edmunds, 2016; Song *et al.*, 2017), the research on the blue boats and their security implications can represent a useful contribution to the maritime security praxis and debate that ultimately affects how we view and evaluate the oceans, and the transboundary performances within.

Our initial sense-making of the blue boat phenomenon raises a crucial set of questions for future empirical research, which include but are not limited to:

- What are the (geo)political, economic and historical developments including climate change that constitute domestic push factors that encourage or compel Vietnamese and other boats and crew to venture into the Pacific? Also, what are the fishers' internal logic and livelihood concerns that directly affect their motivations and agency with respect to transboundary fishing work?

- How has the Vietnamese Government's position on the blue boats evolved, what have been their stated responses and actions, what have they achieved and what are the opportunities and limitations of their control, if any?

- What are the perceptions of various regional actors in the Pacific and their organisational responses on this issue (including the national ministries of PICs and those of Australia as well as inter-governmental bodies and independent experts)? How do their

understandings and priorities vary in terms of its security implications, and why? What effect does this issue have on regional cooperation or the 'Pacific Regionalism' ethos?

- How can the claimed linkage of blue boats with larger-scale and arguably more sinister problems of corporate IUU fishing, transnational shipment of illicit goods and sea slavery and human rights violation be validated? What should be done to reduce such risks and make the undertaking of small fishing boats more governable? Should 'desecuritisation' be the goal (i.e., shifting of issues back into the mundane, normal bargaining processes without the need for emergency measures), and if so, how?

We anticipate all this should help gain a more accurate and comprehensive grasp on this relatively new and under-identified phenomenon. Identifying the sources of the issue, context and reactions and how these mesh into dominant narratives to produce the ongoing outcomes should be the collective endeavour of a wide range of actors in the region, namely all those concerned with the provision of food, identity, and sovereignty that coastal waters confer upon the people of the Pacific Islands.

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## Supporting information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/supinfo>.

**Table S1.** List of online media articles on 'blue boats' from the Asia-Pacific region (in chronological order)