

This *In Brief* examines the securitisation of civil aviation in Australia after 9/11 (2001) and its impact on South Pacific civil aviation regulatory outcomes. Post-9/11 Australia's strategic influence in the South Pacific region saw the civil aviation regulatory focus shift from safety to security. However, the lack of regional support for initiatives such as the establishment of the Pacific Aviation Safety Office (PASO), as well as the subsequent near-collapse of the organisation, suggests that the shift was reflective of Australia's strategic priorities more than it was reflective of Pacific interests in this sector.

Background

In 1998 the Pacific Islands Forum published its Forum Aviation Action Plan, which included provision for the establishment of a regional aviation safety oversight program. The plan explained that regional safety regulatory oversight services could be managed more effectively if they were coordinated at the regional level through a new organisation that would be called PASO (PIFS 1998).

Three years later, at the third Forum Aviation Ministers meeting (and one week after 9/11), research into the establishment of PASO was considered. Although there were concerns about PASO's financial viability an in-principle agreement was reached, with PASO due to commence operations in 2003 with a loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Its responsibilities were expanded to include security oversight.

In 2006 ADB outlined its expectation that regulating civil aviation regionally would decrease the individual financial burden to governments, airlines and airport operators once PASO began operating independently (ADB 2006); however, the *Pacific Regional Transport Study* published a little earlier saw things differently. It argued that the major impediments to the efficient operation of regional air services were not related to regulation of the industry. Rather, these included government involvement in commercial activities, infrastructure decisions made with incomplete information, service pricing that failed to cover service delivery costs, inadequate capitalisation of commercial entities and lack of financial expertise to manage commercial enterprises owned in whole or part by Pacific governments (PIF 2004).

Importantly, the study highlighted the increasing level of external pressure on Pacific countries to

comply with international civil aviation safety and security standards. The study noted the risk that in an international climate of heightened sensitivity to these issues, compliant states would stop traffic to and from non-compliant countries (PIF 2004). It noted the influence that Qantas and Air New Zealand exercised over Pacific affairs.

The study team outlined some caveats to their expectation that PASO could provide a useful regional service. These included clarity regarding its scope (PIF 2004) and concerns that PASO's establishment would raise compliance costs for member states.

The existence of this study at the time of PASO's establishment is suggestive of an underlying awareness that the South Pacific region's most pressing priorities in the aviation sector were not related to regional regulatory outcomes or influenced by international security concerns aside from the emphasis placed on these issues by the region's external donors. Interestingly, member state failure to pay for PASO services and lower than expected interest in membership are reasons that have since been cited for PASO's near collapse, suggestive of the failure of the organisation to reflect Pacific priorities or the capacity of Pacific countries to pay for its services.

Post-9/11 Securitisation of Australian Civil Aviation

The case for the securitisation of Australian civil aviation was made swiftly after 9/11. Cabinet released a statement outlining the government's intention to treat 9/11 as an attack on Australia. In his 2001 election speech, Prime Minister John Howard said:

The tragic events of the 11th of September have ... caused us to ... think about the values we hold in common ... with free people around the world. That was an attack on Australia as much as it was an attack on the United States ... a military response and wise diplomacy ... are needed to guide Australia through those ... difficult circumstances. (Howard 2001)

In the context of the government's declining popularity prior to 9/11 its federal electoral win was something of a surprise, indicative of the public's receptivity to its stance on national security (Farnsworth 2001; Green 2004). Civil aviation regulation, which was the purview of the Department of Transport and

Regional Services (DOTARS, now the Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development), was now addressed through a counter-terrorism framework. Within DOTARS responsibility for compliance, the prevention of transport security incidents in Australia and the improvement of Australian transport security interests overseas rests with the Office of Transport Security (OTS) (DITRDLG 2009). OTS was instrumental in PASO's development, suggesting a link between Australia's strategic priorities in the transport security domain and the incorporation of an aviation security mandate in PASO's post-9/11 project concept documentation. Despite this, PASO's success was dependent on the patronage of Pacific states.

The Impact of Australian Civil Aviation Securitisation on the South Pacific Regulatory Model

In its research into telecommunications regulatory industries, a 2006 working paper by the World Bank found that over the preceding decades many developing countries had established regulatory agencies on the advice of international financial institutions without consideration of the cultural, political or social particularities within which these organisations would operate. The result was that regulatory agencies in developing countries struggled to operate in sociopolitical climates they were ill suited to. Citing the World Bank's failure to develop technical assistance plans longer than five years as a primary reason for these challenges, the report highlighted the inability of host governments to support the organisations once the technical assistance projects drew to a close (Gasmi et al. 2006).

This was also true of PASO. The expectation that member payment for services would support PASO's operation was undermined by the fact that utilisation of its services was significantly lower than projected and that loans to the organisation were therefore depleted significantly faster than expected. The ADB 2009 *Midterm Review Mission Report* flagged the concern that the organisation was not sustainable without this support (ADB 2009). This has proven to be the case, raising the question of whether the organisation could have been established on a model that better reflected Pacific needs, capacities, priorities and socio-politico-cultural concerns.

Reflective of this, in 2005, The Wheeler Review, undertaken on behalf of the Australian Government, noted:

Aviation and issues surrounding it have a place conspicuously more prominent in Australia than is the case in smaller countries or in those whose closest cultural and economic ties are with their nearest neighbours. (Wheeler 2005)

Unable to fulfill its mandate, PASO failed to support the strategic priorities of all parties involved, particularly its South Pacific members. The lack of clarity during its establishment regarding the strategic outcomes PASO would contribute to reduced its effectiveness and ability to function in the South Pacific civil aviation sector thereafter.

Author Notes

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