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First Nations' perspectives on national security

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IMAGE 1: BRONZE STATUE OF MATTHIAS ULUNGURA ON BATHURST ISLAND, NORTHERN TERRITORY. SOURCE: MATT POLL

In 1942 Mr Ulungura captured the first Japanese prisoner of war taken on Australian soil. Mr Ulungura and his family were camped on their country on the Tiwi Islands when a Japanese fighter plane crashed nearby. Finding the pilot who had left the crash site and was holding a Tiwi child, Mr Ulungura snuck up behind him and pressed a tomahawk axe into his back, pretending it was a gun. Mr Ulungura thus disarmed the pilot, tied him up, and transported him by canoe to the nearest settlement. During World War II at least two Japanese pilots were captured by Tiwi Islanders, the other by a gentleman now known as “Stick-em-up Louie”.¹

¹ Source: story as told to the author by Mr Ulungura's grandson from Tiwi Islands, 28 June 2025, image by Places of Pride

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pascale Taplin is an anthropologist and PhD candidate at the Australian National University National Security College (NSC) with more than 20 years' experience working with First Nations communities in the Northern Territory and Queensland. Her research draws on her expertise in applied anthropology to understand the intersection of disinformation and accelerationism in Australia. Pascale serves on the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee, helping guide ethical standards in research involving people and communities.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper was produced as part of the landmark Community Consultations initiative, which has seen nationwide outreach and engagement to better understand Australians' perceptions on national security, risk and resilience. The NSC publishes peer-reviewed research and analysis concerning national security issues at the forefront of academic and policy inquiry, designed to stimulate public discourse and inform policy solutions. The author thanks both the reviewers and many colleagues consulted for this project but remains solely responsible for the views expressed and any errors contained therein. The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol H/2024/1083).

ABOUT THE COLLEGE

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following report summarises discussions with several First Nations people of northern Australia, including the Torres Strait, about their attitudes towards national security. Participants were broadly positive and favourably disposed towards considering issues of national security. Participants put forward a view that Australian national security and the security of their own communities and Indigenous nations are two sides of the same coin. Most participants say national security outcomes can be improved if the Australian Government and First Nations work together to enhance mutual accountability, and in this way build relationships of trust.

Key findings in relation participant attitudes towards national security are summarised below.

1. History underscores participants' relationships with the Australian Government, their attitudes towards the security of the Australian nation, and, by extension, their own security as individuals living here. Any meaningful account of participant attitudes to national security will necessarily consider their perspectives on sovereignty.
2. First Nations peoples hold unique connections to land² that some extend to a commitment to the defence of Australia. Participants consider national security a joint responsibility. First Nations people value their contributions to defence, and the economic and social resilience of Australia's most remote areas. In the far north, including the Torres Strait, participants are cognisant that their occupation of remote communities plays an important role in Australian border security.
3. In the north, First Nations communities experience the porosity of active international borders. Participants from northern communities are concerned about illegal foreign incursions into their lands and seek improved partnerships between local communities and government agencies to enhance local surveillance and defence capabilities. Participants observe that their position exposes them to heightened risks associated with illegal movements of people, fishery resources, drugs, and weapons through their regions.
4. While many participants want to contribute more to Australia's national security, their involvement is frustrated by fraught relationships with government.
5. Northern Australian First Nations communities are exceptionally socially resilient but navigate threats and vulnerabilities that put this resilience at risk. Participants described external pressures, including a changing climate and demographic change, which they say compromise their capacity to manage their communities and country and sustain their laws and cultures. Participants cast these pressures as key threats to the resilience of their communities.
6. Participants consider a range of influences in the information environment to be potentially harmful, including social media, which some say is detrimental to community resilience and individual wellbeing. Many report that they understand risks associated with mis- and disinformation, but find it difficult to know who to trust.
7. Some participants are concerned about a growing sense of disaffection amongst some of their countrymen, which they say leads to criminality and hyper-incarceration. Some worry this may leave vulnerable people susceptible to malign influence.

² Land should be read as inclusive of and land waters throughout this report. The nature of these unique connections is explained more fully in the sections entitled "Sovereignty" and "Protection of sacred sites, maintenance of laws and customs".

2. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to inform the National Security College (NSC) Community Consultations project (2025).³ The data and analysis presented here are based on discussions with 63 people about northern Australian First Nations' attitudes to national security. These discussions included one-on-one interviews and small group discussions with 28 First Nations participants from mainland northern Australia, and 25 people of the Torres Strait. This is explained in detail at Appendix 7.1 (Methodology) and 7.2 (Engagements).

Participants are affiliated with various communities and organisations across northern Australia, and their traditional countries are in the Torres Strait, Far North Queensland (near Cairns), the Northern Territory (near Gove, Darwin, Tiwi Islands and in Central Australia), and northwestern Australia (near Broome). A brief explanation of the methodology is provided at Appendix 7.1.

Much participant feedback was provided using language and ideas likely to be quite foreign to many in a national security audience. In this report I provide a summary of participant feedback in terms relevant to national security researchers and policymakers. The analysis informing my observations is methodologically valid but subjective. For transparency, I have included numerous verbatim excerpts of the interview discussions throughout the report. Participants are anonymised throughout except where express permission has been provided to identify them. I cite participants with reference to the approximate region of their community (e.g. 'north Queensland') and the date. Where I consider a participant's contribution may expose them to heightened risk, I simply cite those participants as anonymous to limit the risk of them being re-identified.

There is much diversity of views within and between First Nations and Torres Strait communities. This report does not attempt to represent the views of any cultural or demographic group. It is best understood as providing some northern Australian perspectives and participant attitudes towards national security. In future it may, along with other resources, usefully inform discussions about national security in northern Australian communities, including in the Torres Strait.

3. Findings Part 1: matters relevant to social resilience

3.1 Sovereignty

In discussions with and about First Nations issues within the Australian nation, it was necessary to establish how participants conceptualise the Australian nation and its relevance to them. In response to this question, participants of mainland communities invariably invoked the security of their indigenous systems of law as a first order issue in their thinking about Australian national security. In response to a question about his thoughts on national security, one participant said:

“They took away people’s security. They weakened people. Because people had their own security over the land; their security came from their tribal law.” **(Central Australia, 27 August 2025)**

While sometimes articulated using different terms, participant responses ultimately raise questions of sovereignty because participants assert that their own systems of law continue to delegate authority within their respective societies, including in relation to interests in land. Regardless of whether First Nations claims to sovereignty are resolvable in Australian law and politics, it is impossible to analyse these participants’ accounts of their attitudes toward national security meaningfully without considering their perspectives on sovereignty.

Appendix 7.3 provides a distilled transcript of an interview with Walpiri Elder and Ceremony Man Ned

Jampijimpa Hargraves, and I have included relevant excerpts on page 13. Mr Hargraves responds to a question about national security with a description of how authority is delegated, and accountability achieved, in Walpiri law. He argues that national security is a responsibility shared by the Australian Government and Aboriginal people, and that the sharing of responsibility is dependent on mutual accountability and information-sharing. He argues that such information-sharing must be underpinned by acknowledgment of Walpiri law by Australian policymakers. Mr Hargraves says that absent such acknowledgement, Walpiri people cannot trust or ally with the Australian Government.

Reasoning like this shapes many participants’ attitudes towards Australian nationhood, and the relevance of Australian national security to themselves and their communities. It also underscores their reflections on their own position and personal security as individuals living within Australia.

“I love this country. But it could be better. And when you think about it, ‘Advance Australia Fair’, that’s what we’re aiming at; for it to be fair. We want to be recognised, for there to be Treaties, for there to be ... more options for Aboriginal people to take control and be really a part of this nation. We feel like we’re on the outer. We feel like we’re a minority group, not listened to, not cared for, and not really –not a part of the whole story.” **(Northern Northern Territory, 31 July 2025)**

“The language, the culture. How we keep it safe ... We’re talking about our health, our healing. It’s all on that country. ...That’s why a lot of us, we do these rallies, try to talk to the government, but the government doesn’t listen. They got to come sometime, come and meet us halfway ... It’s not being heard ... Australia has never been safe as far as I can see and heard.” **(Central Australia, 22 August 2025)**

⁴ Participants of the Torres Strait were more consistently focused on border security, further explained in Part 2 (Matters related to border security), and climate change, further explained in the section entitled “Climate change” below. This should not be taken to imply that the people of the Torres Strait are not concerned with sovereignty; the Zomered Statement (2017) was discussed with one participant as articulating Torres Strait concerns in relation to sovereignty.

IMAGE 2: NED JAMPIJIMPA HARGRAVES AND THE AUTHOR IN YUENDUMU



The participants quoted on page 12 explain that in the absence of recognition and acknowledgement, they feel excluded, and unsafe, in Australia. In a similar vein, the issue of sovereignty also underscored participants' characterisations of risks and threats to their respective communities and the Australian nation, which I explain in more detail in following subsections.

“[R]ight now I am explaining something to you [about national security]. I'm not going to explain to you about militaries and policeman and whatever. ... [Because] that is not included in my Jukurrpa [Dreaming], my Kuruwarri [Law]. I don't want to know about that. All I want to know is how to protect my land. How to protect my culture, my law, my Jukurrpa, my Kuruwarri. ... [T]hat is what we want.

“You got security on certain things. We have security on certain things. And that's a line there that cuts us off. Cut us off there. ... You're talking about security. Well, we feel [strongly] about our security too! ... [T]he Land is our security.

“[The land] has got [embodied within it] significant information ... We protect it. We have that authority.

“Secure Australia – it is our land. It's our land, but it's all of us, that are here today. We want to tell it to you, to give that [significant information] to you. And for you to come ngampani-ngampani kujarni-kujarni [so we help each other, we become allies]. I tell you something, you tell me something. So we go along the road, we walk on the road, footsteps.”
(Ned Jampijinpa Hargraves, Yuendumu, 25 August 2025)

3.2 Australian identity, values, and an Aussie “way of life”

Discussions about Australian identity were difficult and at times confusing or frustrating for participants. This was a particularly challenging topic at the time of research because in April 2025 some ‘Welcome to Country’ ceremonies were booed by non-Aboriginal members of the audience at Anzac Day memorial services.⁵ I only posed questions about Australian identity and values to those participants who were familiar enough with me to redirect the discussion if it made them uncomfortable. I did not explore this issue in discussions in the Torres Strait or Central Australia, where participants tended to direct conversations to other issues.

Those few participants who did address this question were generally cynical about the suggestion that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians share an ideologically meaningful set of mutual Australian values. One participant cited experiences of systemic disadvantage and the wealth gap as evidence of the absence of an Aussie “way of life”. Some cited their experiences of racism as evidence of the absence of shared values. Some participants related tensions in social cohesion, and concerning rates of violence and crime in their local towns to (their perception of) recent high levels of immigration. Participants said that a demonstrable lack of shared values, and their experiences of socio-economic exclusion, are reasons for not identifying with an Australian identity.

“I’m not Australian. I’m Aboriginal. That’s the sense. It’s still like that. ... I don’t feel Australian yet. Why would we feel Australian? Because we don’t feel on par with everybody else and, because, like, you know, just simple things like Australia Day. We’re still celebrating one little part of history.” **(Northern Northern Territory, 31 July 2025)**

Informants tie their experiences of exclusion from an Australian citizenry to the contemporary socio-economic disadvantage of Aboriginal people. They also explain that the celebration of Australian identity (especially around Australia Day) celebrates selectively an occasion most relevant to non-Aboriginal people. Following this logic, several participants linked the possibility of their inclusion in an Australian national identity to an imperative to engage in truth-telling.

The term truth-telling has been defined by Reconciliation Australia as “activities, initiatives and processes that enable a fuller and more accurate account of Australia’s history, an account that recognises the strength and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples”.⁶ In the interviews informing this report, reference to truth-telling was often invoked in relation to historical acts of violence (such as massacres and the forcible removal of people to missions), and contemporary violence experienced by Indigenous people (such as police shootings). Specific local instances of these types of violence were invoked from time to time during discussions.

Interviewer (I) with participant (P16), anonymous

I: Do you think there’s an Australian identity that includes First Nations and non-aboriginal people?

P16: An identity?

I: An Australian cultural identity.

P16: What is an Australian identity?!

I: Like, what makes us all Aussie?

P16: It’s a hard question to answer, I think.

I: It’s a hard one, isn’t it?

[extremely long pause ...]

P16: I mean, how can we have an identity if we’re not accepting our history?

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-25/melbourne-anzac-day-welcome-to-country-hecklers/105215124> Participants also reported booing of Indigenous presence or Welcome ceremonies at Memorial services in Alice Springs and Cairns in 2025. I have not verified those accounts.

⁶ <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/our-work/truth-telling/>

3.3 The contribution of First Nations to national security

Several participants reported a deep sense of pride in the contemporary and historical military service of First Nations people. Several participants pointed out that First Nations people have inalienable ties and responsibilities to their traditional countries within Australia, which manifest as a personal imperative to contribute to the securing of Australian land. These responsibilities are described in religious and ideological terms, which are robust and committed. Communicating the power of Indigenous connection to country, one participant from north Queensland said: “You know the strength of your relationship in the hard times, sticky times. Our mob got generational obligations to that country.”

IMAGE 3: CARMEL JOYCE, 1989



“I’m trying to think of where that service comes to me. It’s through my ethos on the connection to country. And that’s why I served. I was willing to do anything. ... And it’s just that. Obviously, protecting country.”

“My ancestors have been doing it for thousands of years, and so what I’m doing is just an extension of that.” (Veteran Carmel Joyce, 19 July 2025)

‘Norforce’ (a reserve unit of Defence’s Regional Surveillance Force Group) was familiar to, and viewed positively by, almost all participants,⁷ several of whom explicitly requested more Norforce recruitment in their communities. People who had direct or familial experience of Norforce spoke of it as a positive life-changing experience. One participant had been a Norforce Foreman in a prison program while incarcerated. He explained that having the opportunity to use his nine languages to lead men inspired him to change his outlook and behaviour. Now released, he dedicates his time to cultural leadership and helping youth understand the dangers of drug and alcohol addiction.

Participants highlight that their contribution to national security extends beyond service in Australian defence forces. As residents of small remote communities, many participants have played an active role in emergency services and disaster preparedness and response. For example, one participant had formerly served two Aboriginal Shire Councils, during which local government council had responsibility for disaster management planning. Others with similar roles told of their experience of the gradual absorption of local delegations of responsibilities and resources into regional or state-based authorities. These participants reported that the regionalisation of services eroded the agency and personal investment of local people in disaster response and preparedness.

“The number one issue I encountered was actually inclusion. There’s still a pervading thought that not everybody has a part to play.” (North Queensland, 23 June 2025)

⁷ With the exception of two who consider the Australian Government and Defence Force entirely untrustworthy. One of them considers the Government an illegitimate corporation in same way many Sovereign Citizens do.

3.4 Resilient communities

“Resilience is actually about the adaptive capacity of an ecosystem to bounce back – we have seen that over the last 250 years, where our mob [Aboriginal people] have started to bounce back. ... When mob have a say, they step up.” (North Queensland, 24 June 2025)

Participants describe themselves and their communities as uniquely resilient to external shocks, so long as they can live on their country, and maintain their respective laws and cultures. To ‘live on country’ is to reside either in, or close to, the defined area of land to which a person is connected and for which they have rights and responsibilities in customary law (typically through descent). Participants of the Torres Strait highlighted the ongoing work of local leaders, through schools, formal programs and as a regular part of daily life, to teach young people their language, dance, laws and customs.

‘Maintaining law and culture’ refers to the maintenance of religious and normative systems that regulate behaviour and delegate authority in First Nations societies. Participants described these two related factors as fundamental to the resilience of their communities. The social dimensions of the relationship between resilience, living on country and maintaining law and culture is explained further in the following section entitled “Protection of sacred sites, maintenance of law and culture”. One participant pointed out communities where cultural resilience is compromised may be susceptible to malign influence and interference in relation to negotiations around commercial and land interests.⁸

Participants linked community resilience in very practical terms to traditional subsistence, living on country and maintaining law and culture. For example, to explore local perceptions of community resilience, I asked a group of women in northern Northern Territory (21 July 2025) how

people in their community responded to a cyclone event. Participants said that strong community relationships and their capacity to access the resources of their country helped them stay safe during and after the cyclone. They said, “we all gather each-other”, explaining that community members worked together to ensure that everybody was in a safe location. They said that when the road was cut by flooding and food ran out at the single local shop “we don’t [ever] have to stay hungry because there is bush tucker”. The importance of passing these cultural resources onto their children was also emphasised: “we always go out hunting during the weekends and take the kids”. These observations reflect positively on cultural and individual resilience, but poorly on infrastructural resilience and preparedness, which affect community resilience over long periods of disruption.

3.4.1. Demographic challenges

A key threat to community resilience is said to be the migration of young people out of remote communities and into town centres. Participants attributed this to a variety of factors including:

- the lack of meaningful employment opportunities on country
- the absence of educational opportunities on country
- the absence of health services on country, so young people are required to go to town centres as carers for senior family members needing treatment
- the cumulative effects of socio-economic disadvantage on individual wellbeing, including alcoholism, drug use, crime, incarceration, and early death
- the influence of social media on the cultural values and aspirations of young people.

Explaining the systemic issues affecting resilience and depopulation in terms also relevant to remote communities across north Australia, one participant said:

⁸ Other First Nations persons have made similar suggestions to me over the course of my work in the remote north, in other roles.

“The population is low because people have moved offshore ... Overcrowded housing, no jobs. People can’t live here in overcrowded housing in order to work ... So, there’s a lot of the people have left the islands to work, to live. Some of them live interstate for work. They’ve had to make those sacrifices. ... That’s why you don’t see many Saibai people.” **(Torres Strait, 10 October 2025)**

Participants from the north coast of the Northern Territory independently identified a potential future national security vulnerability associated with large expanses of an unpopulated northern coastline, which in their experience is readily accessible from neighbouring countries. Participants suggest that this risk manifests a shared imperative and government responsibility to sustain a population and workforce with regulatory powers in remote northern Australia. For example, one participant from northern Northern Territory said (17 June 2025):

“The kids want to go to town, spend their time in [town centres]. Who will be here? There is no-one there to look after the old people. I think about this. We are so remote here. Who will be here? We need a better border force, and we need to pay them properly.”

3.4.2. Protection of sacred sites, maintenance of law and culture

Participants described their ability to manage their own country, protect sacred sites, and maintain their laws and cultures as interrelated and foundational to community resilience. This is because law is embodied in land and underscores their knowledge and kinship systems.

Yinija Mark Guyula provides a more detailed explanation from a Yolŋu perspective at Appendix 7.4.⁹ Law and kinship systems are critical to resilient communities because these interrelated systems legitimise cultural authority and leadership (among other things). Law and kinship systems also vest members of the community with responsibilities and obligations toward other members of the community, such that they underscore the teaching of young people, the disciplining of misconduct, and care for the elderly and vulnerable.

One participant equated the desecration or destruction of sacred sites with pulling down Parliament House and the destruction of western systems of government, to make the point that failure to protect sacred sites has catastrophic cultural and societal impacts on First Nations.

Several participants from mainland northern Australia described being locked out of their traditional country by pastoralists,¹⁰ which has the flow-on effect of limiting their capacity to pass on law to younger generations. In Alice Springs, some participants reported that being locked out of a sacred site that is inside the Pine Gap restricted area had detrimental impacts culturally and on individual wellbeing of some Traditional Owners.¹¹ In the Northern Territory, participants also described recent reforms to the Northern Territory Sacred Sites Authority, and recent changes to the regulation of burials on country, as detrimental to the security of their law and culture and damaging to community resilience. In the Torres Strait, the recent and worsening inundation of sacred sites and burial grounds in which their forebears and ancestors rest was raised consistently as a particularly heartbreaking effect of sea level rise.

9 The embodiment of law in land, and the delegation of authority under this law is also explained from a Walpiri perspective by Mr Hargraves at Appendix 7.3.

10 In some of the locations mentioned, participants have Native Title rights to access their country, but do not exercise these rights because they fear violent reprisals or are unable to navigate access conditions. This issue was not raised by participants from Tiwi Island or the Torres Strait.

11 I did not ascertain whether this loss has been acknowledged or compensated.

3.4.3. Changing climate

Participants across northern Australia raised concerns in relation to a changing climate and community resilience. Here, I closely consider the experience of participants from the Torres Strait as a case study given the particular vulnerability of low-lying islands¹² and recent history of court proceedings relevant to the issue in this region. I note that other First Nations communities in northern Australia may be vulnerable to the effect of a changing climate.

People of Torres Strait were particularly concerned about changes in their physical environment that they consider inimical to their way of life, their economic well-being and the futures of their descendants. Participants attribute these impacts, which they experience as real and material, to human-induced climate change. Their experience of a changing climate underscores participants' attitudes to their own security, to Australian governments and, by extension, to national security. My sense is that mitigation of the effects of environmental change such as sea level rise is a sine qua non of an effective community-based national security policy in this region.

In 2022, residents of the Torres Strait¹³ brought a proceeding before the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which found that the Australian Government is violating its human rights obligations to Torres Strait Islanders by failing to act on climate change. The responsibilities of the Australian Government to people of the Torres Strait were also argued in a proceeding before the Federal Court of Australia (*Pabai v Commonwealth of Australia*) in 2025, leading to the Wigney judgement cited on page 19.

While the proximate and ultimate causes of climate change will continue to be debated, the relevant point here is that participants attribute the real harms they are suffering to human-induced climate change. They feel isolated and to some degree abandoned by the Australian Government. Their concerns have been reinforced by the findings of Justice Wigney that the Australian Government does not currently have a legal duty of care to protect Torres Strait people from harms associated with human-induced climate change.

Discussions about attitudes to national security were particularly difficult with participants on Boigu and Saibai islands, who imagine a future in which their homes, communities, traditional lands, burial grounds and sacred sites are under the sea. Most participants evoked the (already occurring) tidal inundation of their homes and community infrastructure, depleted fisheries, and destroyed garden plots as immediate concerns. They called for increased investment in infrastructure such as seawalls to maintain their islands and communities.

Participants also described cumulative systemic effects on their communities, exacerbated by a changing climate. Food security was described as a critical issue by many participants. Several pointed out that their local gardens, from which they traditionally harvested staples such as cassava, yam, pumpkin, and other perennial vegetables, could no longer be sustained – due in part to changing lifestyles, but more so due to the salinisation of previously fertile soils. For example, participant (P38) on page 20, who is both a traditional owner of land on a Torres Strait island and a health worker, said that land previously used for local subsistence gardens has been rendered unusable by salinisation.

¹² The average elevation of both Boigu and Saibai is around one meter above sea level, including at the location of community infrastructure. Boigu's highest point may be three meters above sea level, Saibai is five meters above sea level.

¹³ Those who brought the claim are known as the "Torres Strait Eight".

Justice Wigney of the Australia Federal Court this year provided a description of harms associated with a changing climate:

“3 The Torres Strait Islands have in recent years been ravaged by the impacts of human-induced climate change. Rising sea levels, storm surges and other extreme water level events have resulted in flooding and seawater inundation on many of the islands. Trees are dying and previously fertile areas have been adversely affected by salination and are no longer suitable for growing traditional crops. Rising sea levels and storms have led to the erosion and the depletion of beaches and the salination of wetlands. Warmer ocean temperatures and ocean acidification have caused coral bleaching and the loss of seagrass beds. Totemic sea creatures like dugong and turtles, once abundant in the region, have become scarce. Seasonal patterns have changed, as have the migratory patterns of birdlife.

“4 The impacts of climate change on the land and marine environment of the Torres Strait Islands have had a profound impact on the customary way of life of the inhabitants and traditional owners of the Torres Strait Islands. They are finding it increasingly difficult to practise and observe the body of customs, traditions and beliefs, known generally as Ailan Kastom, which has sustained them for generations. Sacred sites, including burial and ceremonial sites, have been damaged and are constantly at risk of further inundation. The traditional owners who reside on the islands are increasingly unable to source traditional foods or engage in certain cultural ceremonies, particularly those involving hunting and gathering. Changing seasonal, migratory and stellar patterns make it increasingly difficult for elders to pass-on traditional knowledge to the next generations.

“5 Climate change poses an existential threat to the whole of humanity. The wellbeing and way of life of many, if not most, communities in Australia are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The Torres Strait Islands and their inhabitants are, however, undoubtedly far more vulnerable to the impacts of climate change than other communities in Australia. The many low-lying islands in the Torres Strait are particularly prone to damage and destruction caused by rising sea waters and extreme weather events. The region’s ecosystems are also far more prone to damage and destruction caused by increasing ocean temperatures and ocean acidification. To make matters worse, most Torres Strait Islanders and their communities are socially and economically disadvantaged, at least compared to other Australians and their communities, and often lack access to appropriate resources, infrastructure and services which would enable them to protect themselves from, or adequately adapt to, the impacts of climate change. They understandably feel powerless when it comes to protecting themselves against climate change and its impact on their islands and traditional way of life.”¹⁴

14 Pabai v Commonwealth of Australia (No 2) [2025] FCA 796 <https://www.judgments.fedcourt.gov.au/judgments/Judgments/fca/single/2025/2025fca0796>

P38: And our parents used to eat a lot of coconut – any garden food. Roast them on the fire or boil it. They used a kap murri with the hāngī, which is natural. So, they never had diabetes. They never had hypertension. You can see the photo of [our] great grandparents, match it with the people here now. They were muscled, they were strong. ... But you look these days – diabetes, hypertension. So, it's because we are eating the wrong food. ... But before, we used to drink coconut milk, and there was coconut everywhere. And we ate mangos off the tree. ... And used to have pineapple growing, and they would grow taro.

I: Before, the people had their own garden patches?

P38: Yeah, they had a big garden patch. Now they say; “where are you going to grow a garden?” There is already salt. You can't grow [anything], I'm telling you. I've only got a strip of land inside my gate. I might have about less than seven trees of cassava. That's all I have. It's not gonna last me for a month.

(Torres Strait, 8 October 2025)

Sea level rise also affects other resources on which communities rely. For example, Boigu Rangers¹⁵ said that the annual community harvest from the Boigu swamp, during a seasonal time of plenty (particularly for prawn and barramundi) has failed in recent years – a result they attribute to saltwater intrusion.

Disruption of natural sources of nutrition is seen as having wider ramifications for the sustenance of local communities. Some participants reported that environmental changes have left people increasingly dependent on local supermarkets for basic foodstuffs.

Several noted the high cost of buying fresh food, and the consequent turn to processed foods that are often more affordable.¹⁶ Boigu and Saibai each have only one small local store, supplied weekly by barge. While participants supplement their diets with garden foods and harvest from their country, these staple resources are in decline. One participant said these changes to the economic and subsistence practices of local people had contributed to health disorders such as diabetes and hypertension. Several participants said young people increasingly suffer chronic health disorders. Complex health disorders are not treatable at remote Torres Strait Islands clinics. Sufferers must relocate to Cairns, along with their carers, and often for long periods, contributing to the depopulation of these communities.

I asked residents of Boigu and Saibai islands about their plans for the future. Most participants said that they could not imagine relocating away from their island communities and traditional lands. One person declared that they would live on stilts above the sea or die before abandoning their homeland. One participant said that he was not sure he himself would relocate, but that he encourages young people of his community to invest in land in mainland Australia. Several participants anticipated they would not be welcomed in Australian communities, perhaps reflecting a cultural sense of ‘disconnection’ with mainland Australian society. One participant pointed out that sea level rise will also impact the coastal Queensland communities such as Cairns, in which most Torres Strait Islands people have existing social connections, and where they are most likely to feel supported should they need to relocate.

15 The Boigu Rangers (officially the Malu Kiai Rangers) are Indigenous land and sea rangers from Boigu Island who work under the Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA).

16 The affordability and regular supply of fresh food at remote local stores is a ubiquitous issue affecting the security of all remote communities discussed herein.

3.4.4. The information environment

The internet and social media influences the resilience of communities. Participants reported the common use of TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube (in that order). Some participants were positive about media technology, which enables access to local and international news. Women in Yuendumu said they use social media to keep track of the whereabouts and activities of young and vulnerable family members and to share and gather local intelligence on potentially dangerous events. In the Torres Strait, one participant reported that in the last few years, with the development of technology such as Facebook and Instagram, national security has “jumped from a top 10, to a top five” of topics discussed on social media.

Participants also associated social media with social harms. Several informants reported that inflammatory posts on social media have triggered instances of group violence. I was told that cultural protocol and privacy was compromised by an Aboriginal person inappropriately sharing footage of a law ritual on social media. Two said the police and intelligence agencies invade their privacy by using social media to investigate or spy on them. One person shared with me voluminous inauthentic content that targeted a specific First Nations language group to promote gambling.

Older participants are very concerned that young people consumed with social media become alienated from their kin, lose interest in their culture, and become impossible to control. The causal links driving this process are addressed in the words of Mr Guyula provided at Appendix 7.4. On Saibai Island, one participant said that social media changes the way young people behave, and that they sometimes copy violence or poor behaviour they see on social media. Several participants said these processes increase youth criminality and incarceration and some said the criminalisation of certain forms of cultural discipline exacerbates the problem.

Many raised concerns about American cultural influences. One young person in Alice Springs raised the potential spectre of American-inspired youth gangs like Bloods and Crips.

Others observed the large volume of content characterised by a mix of conspiracy theories and religious fundamentalism “of the Wieambilla type”.¹⁷ I was informed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, fundamentalist and anti-vax content was “being beamed straight into” some communities in the Top End.¹⁸ I was also informed of disinformation targeting political sensitivities in the Torres Strait. The website “Cairns News”, which also promotes conspiratorial antigovernment content, has published articles which incorrectly report that some leaders in the Torres Strait are aligning with Chinese interests.¹⁹ One such article implicated the Gur A Baradharaw Kod (GBK) Chair, which is reported to have caused considerable concern to GBK constituents.

This information environment leads some to worry about the risk of online radicalisation. One participant said “it all happens in cyberspace. People can build up hatred sitting in the bedroom. When they went in there normal, come out with hatred”. However, First Nations communities do have access to potentially powerful cultural defences. In the face of technological drivers of social change, programs that buttress cognitive security such as bilingual education programs, were volunteered as potential solutions to these problems.

Participants are aware of malign actors in the information domain, but many said the bigger issue in assessing information is knowing who to trust. One person explained that while they do not believe much social media content, they are equally sceptical of information produced by the Australian Government.

¹⁷ This person refers to the 2022 shooting of police officers in Wieambilla Queensland.

¹⁸ I have not verified these accounts.

¹⁹ See for example <https://cairnsnews.org/2024/10/09/labors-cynthia-lui-caught-out-flogging-off-land-to-china-in-the-torres-strait-while-accusing-the-1np-of-selling-assets/> and <https://cairnsnews.org/2025/06/19/torres-strait-melanesian-islanders-look-to-separate-from-australia-with-the-backing-of-china/>

“I also watch news about Parliament House in Canberra. [When they are] arguing [in Parliament] and deciding to accept their laws [i.e. pass legislation]. And, for me, that is still not real. They are having a conversation behind [closed] doors.” **(Anonymous)**

Participants are aware of mis- and disinformation, but many also assume that the Australian Government curates information to advance its own political agendas. The perspective that Australian Government policy agendas do not align with the interests of their communities (explained in the section above entitled “Sovereignty”) leads some participants to the logical conclusion that some information produced by Australian governments is, for their purposes, mis- or disinformation.

Interviewer (I) with two participants (P30 & P31), Yuendumu, 26 August 2025

I: Do people at Yuendumu worry about what happens [overseas]?

P30: Some worry about overseas, they talk [about] World War III. That [gets them] panicking as well, some of our people. Some Kardiya [white people] too, you know? And people – like from rumours – they’re talking of the KKK and ... they’re thinking about all type of things they hear and see on TV or YouTube, you know?

I: Do they worry that KKK – like the racists – will come here, affect them?

[Both answer the affirmative]

I: Do you see it on the news or on the social media?

P31: Yeah.

P30: Some people get frightened of it.

[P31 shows a TikTok post on his phone featuring American fundamentalist Christian/QAnon content]

P31: Some people might be thinking about this one [when] they watch TikTok – news tape [from] all over the world. For me, [the TikTok video is] not real. It’s only [what] he thinks is real.

I: Yep. Kardiya have this word “conspiracy theory”. Do people here talk about conspiracy theories?

P30: Yuwayi [yes]

I: Is there a Walpiri word for this, like ‘fake information’?

[A discussion in Walpiri ensues including P30 and P31’s spouses]

P30: Walpiri word is “Manyuwarnu”

P31: “Manyuwarnu” or “jirrilyi”*

*Author’s note: “Manyu” may connote playfulness. “Jirrilyi” is stupid, crazy, mad or funny (Swartz 2012). Why the group settled on words that do not represent intentional deception causing harm remains unclear but is potentially relevant to their attitudes to disinformation.

3.4.5. Disaffection

“To the government, people are expendable. We are just goods. We have been invaded by Americans.

“Our enemy is the government. Fuck the government. You notice they ban grog sales, but they allow it on payday because it maximises profit for the grog companies.

“They tried to breed out the black.”

(Anonymous)

A small number of participants²⁰ raised the issue of disillusionment amongst some of their countrymen as a national security issue. They said that political, cultural, economic and social marginalisation have cumulative effects on individual well-being (including alcoholism, drug use, crime, and incarceration), which ultimately alienate people from Australian society and foster anti-government sentiment.

Participants also say that acute poverty and an inability to meet basic needs such as food and housing is a causal factor. Many point out that the influences driving this process come from outside their communities. A small number of participants worry that this situation may make vulnerable people susceptible to malign influence or radicalisation, as one person explained “because they’ve been disempowered that much that [they may think it’s] the only way they are going to get power”. Ultimately, many participants see the underlying factor driving this issue as the failure to recognise Aboriginal law. One person explained:

“These youth don’t recognise authority because the [non-Indigenous] authority from yesteryear didn’t recognise their [Indigenous] Elders as authority, and they didn’t give them power – as a matter of fact, they took it away. So, when kids grow up, they have thought; ‘oh, these people don’t respect our old men [why should we] respect them?’ That was created by something as simple as not including or trying to have the two laws work together.

“God damn it, everybody. There’s rules, there’s protocols, there’s restrictions, there’s consequences. That created a society that lasted 60,000 years. Whereas this one [non-Aboriginal law], a lot of our people say it goes like a snake. It goes this way, it goes that way, it changes directions. Our law is straight down the line. And it’s been like that since it was laid out in the dreaming.” **(Anonymous)**

IMAGE 4: GRAFFITI IN ALICE SPRINGS 2025



²⁰ Not all from the same community or region.

4. Findings Part 2: matters relevant to border security

The findings reported in Part 1 are largely salient across the interview data, thus relevant across the geographical spectrum of communities engaged. Part 1 thus provides some contextual insights into the unique challenges and opportunities presented to national security policymakers in relation to northern Australia. Now in Part 2, I examine in some detail the issue of border security, with a focus on the Torres Strait in section 4.2.

4.1 Attitudes to border security in mainland north Australia

Many participants describe their occupation of Australia's remote regions, particularly the northern coastline, as contributing to the security of Australia. They say their presence on their traditional country protects remote areas from incursions that may otherwise go undetected or be unregulated. In describing the security imperative to occupy the remote north, participants regularly pointed out the need for further investment in sustaining this presence.

“My personal opinion is that [government agencies responsible for border protection] need to engage more with Indigenous people. It's a two-way street. We can protect our land and country and the coast ... right around Australia. Especially in the Indigenous communities, [including by] promoting Indigenous Rangers to do more work. Like the government is saying, 'Indigenous people are the eyes and ears of the Australian coastline'. Not only on Tiwi, but right across the Top End.”
(Northern Northern Territory, 28 June 2025)

Some participants suggested that vulnerabilities or failures in the critical infrastructure, health services and critical supply chains threaten their continued occupation of the remote northern coastline. Some of these issues are also identified in the section below entitled “Resilient communities”. Notably, even in discussions about these concerns, which are often considered primarily a government responsibility, participants often cast sustaining remote communities as a shared responsibility. One participant from northern Northern Territory said “it's not only government, communities have got to pull their finger out too”.

In discussions about border security, participants from the north coast fondly recalled trading and cultural relationships with Asian neighbours (Macassans) that pre-date colonisation. Their attitudes towards people entering Australian waters from the north today are more complex. Some were concerned that fishery resources on which they rely may be overfished by illegal foreign fishers. Others reported that they are open to continuing trade and cultural relationships that are deeply rooted in history. One participant related:

“We are not worried about it too much. It’s only a problem when we talk about what kind of foreign diseases they are going to be bringing, or what they are going to be doing. But up here in the territory, Macassans used to come here and do fishing. It doesn’t really worry us if the fishing boats are here so long as they come through and ask for permission. ... And Yolŋu here always want to welcome people. Whether from overseas, or from communities around this country.”

Participants are aware of the biosecurity risks associated with illegal foreign visitation. The risk of illegal entrants into Australia introducing disease or pest flora and fauna was mentioned by several as a key reason to enhance the capabilities of local Aboriginal Ranger programs to contribute to continuous coastal surveillance.

North coast participants reported a recent increase in the number of illegal vessel incursions into remote northern waters, and some reported the establishment of ‘camps’ of illegal foreign people in remote coastal locations. They reported more than one instance in which local people were aware of the presence of foreign boats and/or camps on their coastal countries before regulatory authorities seemed to know.²¹ Participants requested improved working relationships with agencies responsible for coastal surveillance and border control. They were frustrated that agencies with responsibilities for border protection do not capitalise on local capabilities and suggested that communication with local communities could be improved.

Some said they and others in their communities are fearful that some illegal visitors may be involved in criminal activity such as drug smuggling and be armed, or may have objectives that are otherwise detrimental to Australian national interests. These participants report feelings of acute vulnerability in relation to the security of the Australian border. In this regard, it is worth noting that First Nations people of the Top End retain oral histories from the generation of their grandparents which tell of encounters with hostile enemy soldiers during

World War II. One example is the story about Mr Ulungura’s taking of a Japanese prisoner of war presented on the title page – one of a few such stories that are well-known across the Top End.

“There’s been a lot of refugees coming past around [Tiwi Islands] and you know, you never know what they’re doing there. They might be spying on what’s going on here in the Northern Territory. Sending everything back to where they come from.

“This is what we keep saying: ‘When you go out hunting, you see something, you must report it to the authorities.’ Because you never know there might be criminals there, maybe [they will] set up a camp. Or they might bring a gun. They might shoot us Mob. People worry they might get shot by them.”

“There is no war going on now. But you never know.” **(Northern Northern Territory, 28 June 2025)**

4.2 Attitudes to border security in the Torres Strait

The Torres Strait presents a geographical environment attended by unique cultural and regulatory concerns, and an equally unique threat environment that warrants detailed examination. In the Torres Strait, participants maintain that Australia’s northernmost communities negotiate extraordinary security risks associated with their remote location and proximity to active international borders. Participants of the Torres Strait suggest that improved dialogue between national security policymakers and people of the Torres Strait, and a locally empowered regulatory presence in Torres Strait communities, will advance the interests of Torres Strait Islanders and outcomes beneficial to Australian national security.

²¹ I have not verified these claims, but at least one instance was reported by ABC news.

An understanding of participant attitudes on national security in the Torres Strait hinges on an understanding of this region's unique geography, and proximity to active international borders. Participants expressed grave concerns about the safety and sustainability of their communities given their experience of illegal movements of people, drugs and weapons through the region and communities, and the illegal over-exploitation of the fisheries upon which they depend. Participants report that non-local factors – such as international markets, population growth and relative poverty in Papua New Guinea (PNG) – drive the most concerning illegal cross-border movements, which also implicate and affect Torres Strait Islanders. There is a relevant body of academic literature on maritime security in this region.²² I have not engaged with this literature in this report on community attitudes to Australian National Security, but find that an account of local's concerns requires some description of their experience and knowledge of illicit activity in the region, which I provide in sections 4.2.2 on illegal movements across the border and 4.2.3 on fisheries and resources.

Participant aspirations to protect Torres Strait fisheries subject to overexploitation for large Asian markets align with national security concerns about foreign interests in this region. For national security policymakers, this may create opportunities to consider measures which have the dual benefit of better supporting Torres Strait communities and addressing issues of regional strategic relevance.

Torres Strait Islanders have unique connections to their traditional countries,²³ which manifest cultural and practical imperatives to secure their traditional lands and natural resources. Participants want to contribute to national security, and argue that the delegation of appropriate powers to local Torres Strait Island employees and effective engagement of local organisations would enhance their capacity to contribute meaningfully to national security.

22 By way of example I refer the interested reader to Bergin, Anthony. "Papua New Guinea's maritime security challenges: building capabilities as an archipelagic state." *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2025): 124-139 and Anere, J.A. and Canyon, D. "Maritime Piracy, Fisheries Crime and Drug Smuggling in Papua New Guinea" in Canyon, Dean. (2022) *Strategic Competition & Security Cooperation in the Blue Pacific*.
23 Inclusive of land, waters and sea throughout.

Most interviewees are Traditional Owners of lands and waters of the Torres Strait and have customary rights and interests in their lands and waters recognised under the Australian Native Title Act (1993).²⁴ While in the Torres Strait, I interviewed three individuals who are not Australian, but Papuans who visit Australian communities in the Torres Strait under the provisions of the Torres Strait Treaty (this is explained in the section entitled "The region"). Where I cite the views of a participant who is not Australian in this report, I have been explicit as to their nationality.

The research presented here would not have been possible without the guidance and local introductions of the Board and Chair of Gur A Baradharaw Kod Native Title Service Provider (henceforth "GBK").

"[GBK] represents the collective interests of the [Torres Strait] region's Traditional Owners, and provides an avenue to respond and have input into policy and program development."²⁵

Due to logistical and budgetary constraints, fieldwork in the Torres Strait was limited to video and telephone discussions, email, and fieldwork on Thursday Island, Boigu Island, and Saibai Island (see Map 1). The issues described in this section should not be taken to represent the entirety of issues facing the communities of the Torres Strait. There is much diversity of views within and between people of the region.

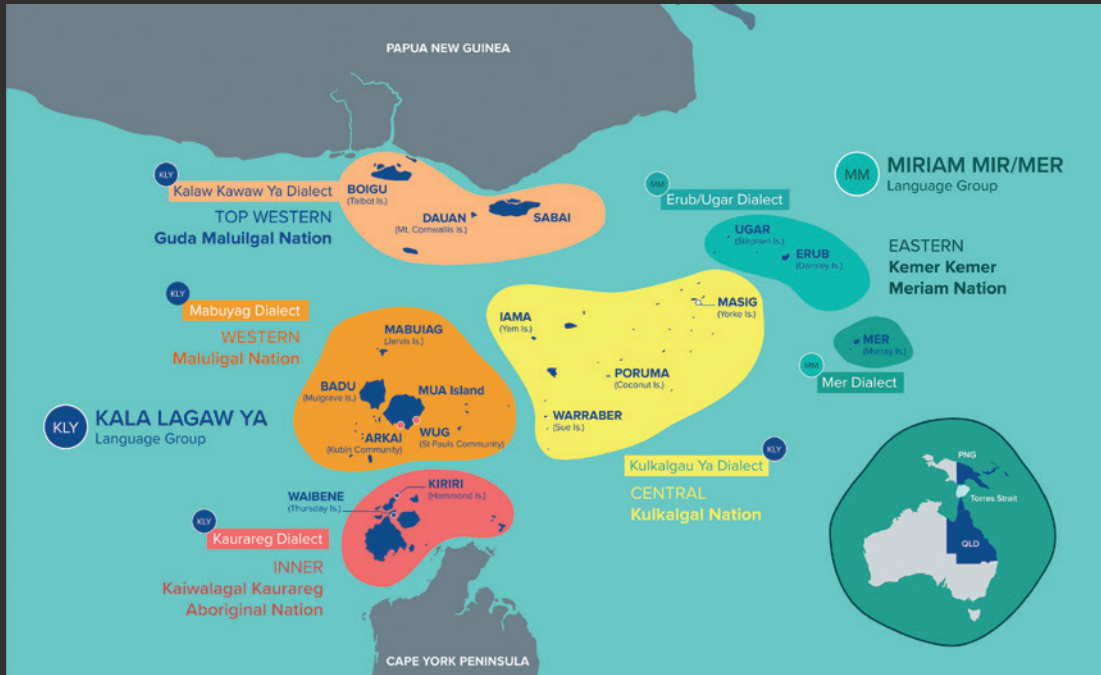
The Torres Strait includes approximately 274 islands, 15 of which are inhabited, between the tip of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, Australia and the south coast of the Western Province of PNG. The Torres Strait is culturally diverse, with five Indigenous nations,²⁶ two language groups, and six dialects (see Map 1).

24 Torres Strait communities also include residents who are not Native Title holders or Traditional Owners of country in the Torres Strait. Many hold traditional connections to communities and land in PNG and are Australian citizens because their forebears were resident in Torres Strait and granted Australian citizenship when PNG achieved independence.

25 <https://www.gbk.org.au/our-story/>

26 In this context, the term "nation" refers to distinct cultural, linguistic, and political groups of Indigenous peoples, representing groups of peoples associated with defined areas of land ("country"), and societies with unique systems of culture, law and governance. This term helpfully conveys that Indigenous peoples should not be understood as a homogenous group.

MAP 1: ISLAND CLUSTERS AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE TORRES STRAIT. FIELDWORK SITES ARE CIRCLED RED.
SOURCE: GUR A BARADHARAW KOD



The islands of the Torres Strait were legally annexed by Queensland in two stages; those within 60 nautical miles of the Australian mainland in 1872, and the remainder in 1879. In 1906, Australia formally took control of British New Guinea (a British protectorate in southern PNG). PNG achieved Independence in 1975, with the Torres Strait Treaty signed three years later in 1978, and coming into force in 1985. The Treaty sets out a framework to manage the region.²⁷ Article 2 of the Treaty recognises Australian sovereignty over certain islands of the Torres Strait, including Boigu and Saibai islands, which feature in this section.

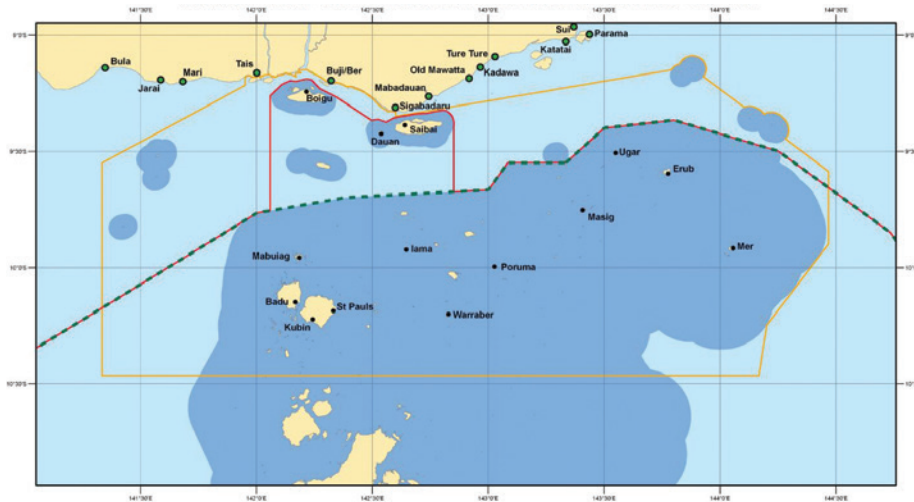
Waters within three nautical miles of these islands are part of Australia's Territorial Seas; beyond three nautical miles the seabed is within PNG's jurisdiction (see Map 2).²⁸

Importantly, the Treaty defines a Protected Zone to "acknowledge and protect the traditional way of life and livelihood of traditional inhabitants including their fishing and free movement". The Treaty and associated formal agreements allow traditional inhabitants of 13 PNG villages (Treaty villages) and specified Torres Strait Islands to travel within the Protected Zone and to treaty villages in PNG for traditional purposes without passports (see Map 3).

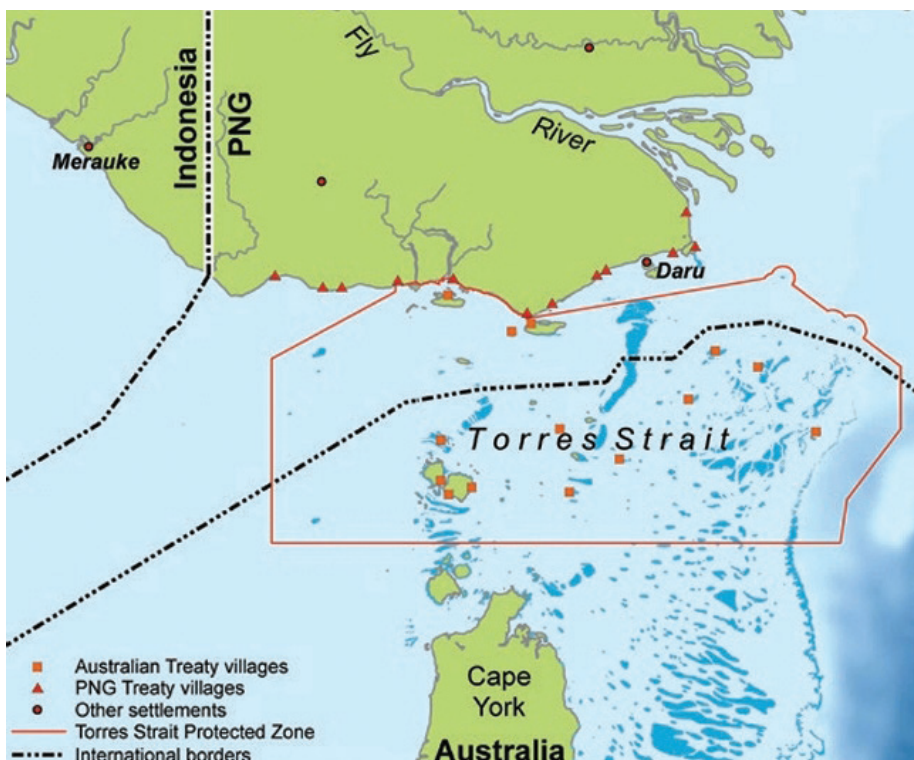
²⁷ Full text of the treaty is available here: <https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1985/4.html>

²⁸ The Treaty defines both the Seabed Jurisdiction Line and the Fisheries Jurisdiction Line.

MAP 2: AUSTRALIAN JURISDICTIONS WITHIN THE PROTECTED AREA. SOURCE: GEOSCIENCE AUSTRALIA FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



MAP 3: INTERNATIONAL BORDERS, TREATY VILLAGES, AND THE PROTECTED ZONE. SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN FISHING MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY



4.2.1. Neighbours and kin

To understand participants' attitudes toward border security, it is necessary to appreciate their lived experience of proximity to PNG. I provide the following to give a sense of this contiguity. At their closest points, the landmasses of PNG and Saibai Island are less than four kilometres apart. A PNG citizen advised that it takes five to 10 minutes to travel from Sigabaduru in PNG to Saibai in Australia (Image 5). An Australian participant said that in certain conditions, deer from PNG swim across the channel to feed on Saibai. One informant reported that asylum seekers found clinging to mangroves on the Boigu coastline claimed to have "swum across the river"—referring to the Strait of about five kilometres (Image 5). That is perhaps unlikely, but it is a scenario this local informant did not discount.

Familial, cultural, and economic relationships connect Australian residents of Torres Strait Islands and the Papuans of the adjacent villages. Some participants noted that certain clans²⁹ of Saibai hold totemic³⁰ associations with species that do not occur on the island, but only on the PNG mainland (such as the cassowary, and certain species of yam). Many participants trace descent from Papuan forebears who migrated to the islands before European colonisation. As a child, one Australian participant spent school holidays each year with family members in Sigabaduru (PNG). One Australian participant, also a Native Title holder, introduced me to his "full blood uncle"³¹ from PNG, who explained that his nephew is renowned in Sigabaduru for his skill hunting deer and pig in the swamps and bushland surrounding the village.

"There's no such thing as this border. Yes, it has been impacted for 50 years, the border. But that's just a garfish, feeding on the surface. You haven't found the trout and snapper yet. ... Underneath. You go deep." (Anonymous)

Economically, some participants highlighted the historical reliance of islanders on resources that can only be sourced from the PNG mainland. Such resources included hardwood for the sea-faring canoes once necessary for subsistence hunting, and the palm trees once used to build traditional shelters, neither of which grow on the islands. One participant from Saibai said that as a child they had travelled far inland in PNG by canoe for trade. Participants reported that today many residents of Boigu and Saibai rely on Papuan labour. The older residents of Boigu are reported to have Papuans do their gardening and build traditional shelters for cultural celebrations. An Elder on Saibai was waiting for a Papuan friend with mechanical skills to visit and fix his car, a service for which he exchanged goods. Another participant says in the ageing, and increasingly quiet community of Saibai, visiting Papuans "liven the place up".

With the benefits of development, today's residents of Boigu and Saibai are less dependent on Papuans than they once were. In contrast, many PNG villagers remain highly dependent on access to Boigu and Saibai for their livelihoods and basic needs.³² The villages of Buzi and Tais in PNG have an inadequate local food supply, and residents source staples such as rice and flour from supermarkets on Boigu and Saibai islands in Australia.³³ Some PNG villagers rely on the Australian cash they make through trade and labour to pay school fees and remittances. The health clinics of Boigu and Saibai provide critical emergency care to people of the Papuan coastal villages.

29 Clan groups are comprised of persons related by filiation or descent, and jointly own defined areas of land and sea of the Torres Strait (members are also recognised Native Title holders in this area).

30 A religious association between something (often a particular plant or animal species) and a group of people, which embodies the connection between their customary land and personal and group identity.

31 I did not ascertain whether this was Mr Warusam's mother's brother or father's brother.

32 Dr Kevin Murphy's (2013) doctoral thesis well explains this situation.

33 There is an active trade route on the PNG coastline from which locals can also source some goods.

IMAGE 5: GOOGLE EARTH IMAGE SHOWING AUSTRALIAN ISLANDS BOIGU AND SAIBAI AND THE PAPUAN COMMUNITIES OF BUGI (BUZI) SIGABADU (SIBABADURU) AND MABADUAN. SOURCE: GOOGLE EARTH

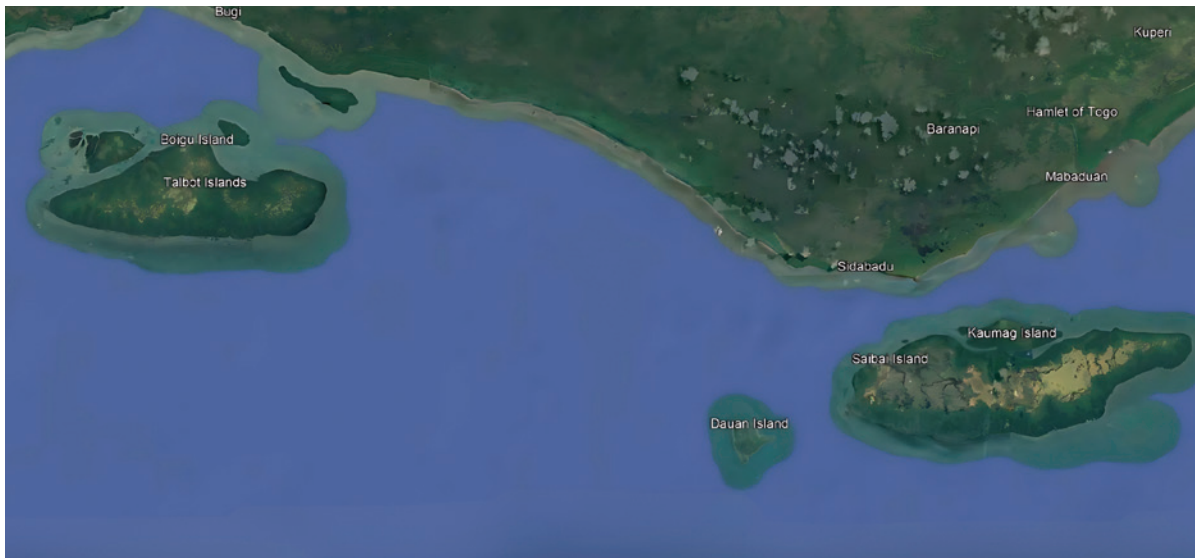


IMAGE 6: A BANANA BOAT FROM A PNG COASTAL VILLAGE ARRIVES AT SAIBAI.



IMAGE 7: TRADITIONAL MARKETS OF PNG VILLAGERS AT BOIGU.



4.2.2. Illegal movements across the border

Participants of the Torres Strait reported that they do not consider their communities safe because of illegal and unregulated movements across the border. Below I summarise the issues raised by participants in order of my impression of their priorities.

1. Illegal fishing leads to the depletion of fisheries on which Torres Strait Islanders rely for subsistence and could potentially lead to local conflicts over fisheries and resources escalating into violence.
2. Criminal activity has potential to trigger armed violence in local communities. Several participants suggested that they have knowledge of people, drugs and weapons being smuggled into Australia through the Torres Strait.³⁴
3. Biohazards.
4. Arrival of international asylum seekers risks violent incidents. Several participants had witnessed, or had family members who had witnessed, the arrival of asylum seekers in their communities.

Participants expressed a view that they are left to deal with these threats with inadequate support from regulatory agencies. For example, one person said: “We still act as the line of defence for our country [Australia].” In a later section entitled “Fisheries” I deal specifically with participant concerns in relation to fisheries. Here I initially set out in brief the local cultural and economic factors that make the regulatory environment more complex. Below, I provide excerpts of interviews that illustrate common concerns of participants in relation to criminal activity in the region.

Interviewer (I) with participants (P43 & P37), Torres Strait

P43: Well they say the gateway [is] the northern islands, the Torres Strait.

P37: They say we are the gateway, we get the asylum seekers.

I: Where are they coming from?

P43: I think from that side Merauke. They come this way from West Papua, but sometimes they travel through this village here – Buzi. ...

I: Does that bring worry to members of the community?

P43: Yeah we are worried!

I: What do you worry about? What is the risk?

P37: What kind of people are these? ... In our community, we know everyone. We don't lock our doors. We don't lock our cars. We don't know who these people are. They could be carrying guns, they could be carrying weapons, you know. We have no way of protecting ourselves from harm. ...

P43: They got no security at night. Like Border Force, they only work from 8am–5pm, even the Boigu [Indigenous Land and Sea] Rangers.

P37: There's no one to look out for us.

P43: Even the police. At the moment police are not working at night, I don't know what their hours are.

P37: What if it's somebody come with gun. We can wait 24 hours before the police can come. What if, in that time, something happens. [What if a] community member got shot? ...

P37: Otherwise it is going to be too late. If something happens. Trading guns, or ...

³⁴ I have not attempted to verify the accuracy of these accounts, but they do have bearing on participant attitudes to national security. There is publicly available information that lends weight to a conclusion that illegal smuggling does occur in the region, see <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-centre/media-release/third-man-charged-relation-110kg-cocaine-import-plot> and <https://www.cdpp.gov.au/news/png-national-gets-five-years-people-smuggling-and-four-years-drug-and-drug-precursor-importation>

Interviewer (I) with participant (P52), Torres Strait

P52: The biggest risk for Torres Strait is the drugs coming through the area. ... Drug trafficking, and we're really scared because –how are we going to defend ourselves if they come with the ammunition?

I: With firearms?

P52: Firearms. And in Australia –only licenced gun [owner] people have guns. What about the rest of the community. Who is gonna come?

I: Where do you think the drugs are coming from?

P52: It's been trafficked from that way all the way to Port Moresby, right along the coastline, but they swap it around different people pick it up. ... Bring it down, then they swap with the ammunitions. People who have licenced guns, they [criminals] steal them [the guns].

Importantly, most participants attribute illegal cross-border activity to international networks driven largely by non-local interests. Some participants noted that when local PNG villagers cannot access Australian markets under provisions of the Treaty, those villagers (sometimes referred to as “our brothers and sisters”)³⁵ may be more likely to engage with the informal and illegal trading and smuggling networks in the region. One participant explained:

“Because they need to make a living, to feed their children, like everybody else. So, they have a choice to make. Meanwhile, we must strengthen our friendship.” **(Anonymous)**

In the final sentence, this person implies that close social and cultural ties provide some mechanisms to manage criminality in the region. This view is fleshed out in the section on “Government and governance”.

³⁵ A regular referent denoting familiarity and care, for example Stanely Marama said “sneaking in from PNG –our brothers and sisters –they come across at night. Look around look for crabs and sell the crabs for the buyer in their area”.

In each of the PNG treaty villages, delegates have responsibilities for managing the movement of villagers into Australia for customary purposes, in accordance with Treaty provisions. These delegates sign off on permits and oversee local compliance. I interviewed one of these delegates, who explained that the delegates’ capacity to monitor and influence the movements of villagers is enhanced when PNG villagers can practice customary trade with Torres Strait Island people.

When these arrangements fail (for example, through COVID-19 border closures or when local councils on Boigu or Saibai island limit visitation to the islands), the needs of the villagers do not change. This leaves villagers open to exploitation by illegal operators who (I am told) value the locals’ knowledge of their lands and waters and their established familial networks in PNG and Australia.

Some participants pointed out that it is not surprising that Papuan villagers pursue all options to meet their needs and, as a corollary, that the receptiveness of local villagers in PNG to the opportunities provided by illegal networks depends in part on what other options are available to them to meet their needs legally. In this way, local resilience and receptiveness to malign influences are affected by the day-to-day operation of the Treaty.

4.2.3. Fisheries and resources

Many participants of the Torres Strait considered the exploitation of local fisheries to be among their most pressing security concerns. Several participants reported that foreign entrepreneurs enlist locals to supply large Asian markets from Australian fisheries. This exploitation depletes the fisheries upon which participants rely. There appear to be market-driven fluctuations in the specific fisheries targeted over time. One participant said that sandfish³⁶ populations at Warrior Reef are recovering, but remain depleted after overexploitation in the early to mid-1990s. At present, participants reported heightened exploitation of Jewfish for swim bladders, and I was also told of non-Australians taking shark fin, barramundi, turtle, and dugong.

³⁶ *Holothuria scabra*.

I am reliably informed that barramundi, turtle, and dugong are sold in Daru, while shark fin, sandfish, and swim bladder go to Asian markets.

**Interviewer (I) with participant (P55),
Torres Strait**

P55: Jewfish sell them balloons. Belly part – they call them “balloons.”

I: Oh, the swim bladder?

P55: There. There, that’s the one. Then they sell it for them, ah, China, Chinese people.

I: They are selling the swim bladder to the Chinese market?

P55: Yeah, big money. That’s what they told us. Everybody who has a fishing boat [catches] Jewfish.

I: Are there less Jewfish now?

P55: Yeah. They know what time they [are] out, the Jewfish. They look at the tide too, the current.

I: Okay, so they [local fishers] know how to get them [Jewfish]?

P55: And they use the live bait, they come here Saibai, throw the nets.

Traders from Merauke (Indonesia) visit villages to buy the product, and local fishers also supply Asian markets through Daru in PNG.³⁷ The product is reportedly flown from Daru airport to Port Moresby and from there disbursed to foreign markets. I spoke to one PNG villager who transports product to Daru by boat; a distance of just over 70 kilometres east-northeast of Saibai. Those participants who flagged the illegal exploitation of Australian fisheries for these markets said that Chinese entrepreneurs foster this trade by sending dinghies to the villages to buy product or supplying necessities such as fuel to transport the product to Daru. Some of these entrepreneurs now live locally in PNG, running local community stores.

³⁷ The last census at Daru in 2011 found a population of just over 15,000. Local accounts suggest that number has grown rapidly in recent years. Current population is unknown, but estimates range between 20,000 and 40,000 people.

A changing climate may exacerbate issues associated with the overexploitation of fisheries by illegal fishers in the Torres Strait. Villagers from the PNG village of Tais (Map 2 above) visiting Boigu for traditional trade told me that rising sea levels had already affected their garden plots and village, and that their communities had “no idea” how they would adapt to worsening inundation of their villages, croplands and hunting grounds should that occur.³⁸ These people said they increasingly rely on cash earned by selling fish and shark fin in Daru. They explained this is not ideal, because of the risks and high cost of fuel required to travel to Daru.³⁹ Ultimately, changing pressures on neighbouring villages in PNG impacts their exploitation of local fisheries, which in turn affects Torres Strait Islanders reliant on the same fisheries.

While I could not confirm it, I was informed that Chinese interest in these fisheries has been particularly active since the COVID-19 pandemic. I was also told that PNG villagers became destitute and ‘thin’ when their access to Australia was effectively shut down during the pandemic by border closures enforced actively by the Australian Defence Force. One informant said that during this period, PNG villagers increased supply to Chinese markets;⁴⁰

³⁸ They said that they had made several reports to the government of PNG and received no response or support. I have not verified this.

³⁹ A Papuan fisher from a treaty village said it took him more than 200 litres of fuel to travel from his village to Daru, which may cost him between \$A200 and \$A400; it was explained that he had no income outside of the sales he makes in Daru.

⁴⁰ I am reliably informed this supply began several years before COVID-19.

“Through COVID, the Chinese, their fishing industry boomed. Boomed. From zero to, oh, thousands. ... they’re buying swim bladders from fish. ... A huge percentage goes to Port Moresby. Through Daru, there’s an airport there. ... They fly it out. Every fisherman has been night and day fishing since COVID. Honestly. ... We need to reaffirm our traditional ties ’cause young people don’t know. serious business, we need to tell him, your grandfather, that’s his totem, my grandfather, they were friends. We need to revisit this properly ... If we can work through them challenges in that way, we can reverse that ... because we need each other. But now they [are] embracing more through fishing industry Chinese people.” **(Anonymous)**

This person points out that investment in strengthening traditional relationships between the affected Australian and PNG communities can provide a robust cultural framework within which Traditional Owners are empowered to negotiate the protection of their resources.

Participants also said that many fishermen enter Australian waters directly from Daru to exploit Australian fisheries. One participant noted that vague definitions under the Treaty further complicate enforcement:

“Daru’s meant to be off that list [of treaty villages]. But this is all technical now because a lot of people that live on Daru, they come from those villages. And I don’t know who polices it, you know? Who’s going to go; ‘Sorry, which village are you from? Where’s your ID?’ So that is another one of those confusing arrangements in terms of compliance.”

4.2.4. Participant perspectives on the regulatory environment in the Torres Strait

Participants expressed the view that their security vulnerabilities are not a priority for policymakers and politicians who (they say) are more interested in mainstream political imperatives.

“The PM of our country has never been vaguely interested to hear nor witness first-hand the porous nature of our border ... The frequent changes in political leadership and the constant shuffling of positions within [the Commonwealth] parliament have hindered progress on this important issue. Despite continuous efforts from concerned individuals and organisations, it seems that the government’s attention and resources are divided amongst various issues, making it difficult to prioritise the security of the Torres Strait. This leaves the region and its people on the frontline vulnerable to potential threats and highlights the need for consistent and committed action to strengthen national security in this area.” **(Anonymous)**

Some participants expressed a view that they are treated as “collateral” in policymaking concerned with foreign policy objectives in PNG and Indonesia. Several participants pointed out that while there is local enthusiasm to be actively engaged in national security, Australian Government engagement with communities on these issues remains ineffective. It was suggested that often government agencies visiting the straits travel only to Thursday Island and fail to engage adequately with other Torres Strait Island communities. On Boigu Island, one person said:

“We need government, not to visit Thursday Island. We need government to visit Torres Strait. To see themselves what happens. What the things we facing every day. ... They reckon that Thursday Island is Torres Strait. No! [laughs] Torres Strait is out here!”

One said: “We live on the last final frontier of this nation” adding that these communities “sit between two sovereign nations”. This being the case, he noted that “there is an appetite in the region to look at the management of national security from a community perspective” and suggested that the North Australian Quarantine Strategy⁴¹ provides an effective model for community engagement in security.

Many participants expressed the view that empowered local cultural governance is necessarily part of the solution to the security vulnerabilities faced in the region. One said:

“The answer is we coming together. The answer is the councillor going from here [Saibai] to there [PNG] ... I have been trying to tell my people that the way is to sit down on the mat together. ... To manage it, you need real family people. Reaffirming the family ties again.”

While most agree there is a need to improve local governance, others are of the view that this should not be at the cost of the regulatory hard power necessary to keep the communities of the Torres Strait safe. One participant (P50) suggested that local communities presently bear an unreasonable burden in the administration of the Treaty and the regulation of the Australian/PNG border, because the Australian Government’s current approach is too “hands off”.

P50: Those people who say: “Skip the white people for a while,” we can’t really do that. What funds do we have to run the border ourselves? ... We have no money. We have no oil [to run boats].

I: There’s a balance for the white man to walk, right? Because they have [resources] but you have the cultural connections. So how do governments strike the right balance to support you, culturally?

P50: They come out here and they discuss the issue and see what the black man says, because most of the time the weight is on the black man, so we got to balance it for him [the white man].

Many people expressed a view that there is inadequate presence of regulatory agencies outside of Thursday Island. Several people said that a multi-million dollar Community Island Community Safety and Security Facility built on Saibai as a joint initiative of the Queensland and Federal governments regularly stood empty. It symbolised what they saw as tokenistic, ineffective, and unsustainable investment in Torres Strait security.

I did see local Torres Strait Islanders employed in regulatory roles with government agencies including the Australian Border Force, the Police Force and Biosecurity. I spoke to one Commonwealth Government employee outside of work hours on the telephone. From this and broader discussions, I garnered there is a pervasive sense of frustration amongst local people with regulatory roles in the Torres Strait. I am told that this is because their employers and their policies fail to account for social and cultural dimensions of their work and fail to delegate the authority they need to do their work.

41 Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity-trade/policy/australia/naqs>

Explaining that following directives from head office can create live tensions when such regulation offends cultural protocol and local understandings of the Treaty provisions, one person said: “We are in the middle! We play the two games. It’s very important – we need power, we need support. ... [We] pay the consequence.” When I asked what is needed to improve the situation, this person said: “They need to give us that power. So that we can monitor these areas properly in power and authority.” One participant argues that there are operational benefits to such culturally appropriate governance.

“I think the best [regulatory] model, would be ideally, [policed by] someone from here, who knows the people here, who knows the people across the Strait. We know the families, we can communicate. Communication! We have the respect, which they’ve earned. We can send strong messages [to Papuans] around the border and other stuff. That is the best model.

“We have had too long [an arrangement where workers] fly in and fly out. He comes, and he goes. When we talk about self-governance determination. We got local Border Force officers ... and Boigu [Land and Sea] Rangers are our eyes and ears for now. We have been pushing and pushing for them to have the regulatory powers. Security – surely should be giving those [regulatory] powers to people here. Local Border Force [officers], should be able to say no, I will arrest [illegal entrants].”

The aspirations of participants to work in partnership with their Papuan neighbours to protect the cultural and natural resources of the Torres Strait are well aligned with the concerns of national security policymakers, particularly in relation to countering the illegal exploitation of fisheries for foreign markets. Participants put forward the view that effective measures to advance national security outcomes in this region will hinge on an appreciation of the unique geographical and cultural context of the Torres Strait, and effective engagement with traditional owners, communities and regional organisations beyond administrative centres.

5. Final observations and participant perspectives on government and governance

There is appetite in communities and enthusiasm among participants for continued engagement on matters relevant to national security. In my view, this is cause for optimism and points to the possibility of building productive dialogues to advance national security. Participants link their capacity to contribute to national security outcomes to local and regional governance.

“How can we better design a regional governance framework that allows ... a greater sense of investment and return for a very resource-rich country, [a] very diverse cultural group, a greater sense of unity and purpose? ...

“If there was a kind of partnership arrangement on a regional basis that looked at discrete policy for northern Australia that was predicated on investment, development and growth and that identified appropriate governance structure with local Aboriginal communities ... Why wouldn't you want to create a regional governance framework allowing them to make local decisions?”
(Professor Peter Yu, 3 September 2025)

Many participants report that their capacity to contribute to national security is constrained by unproductive relationships with government agencies and service providers, which ultimately threatens the adaptive capacity of communities.

A lack of trust in First Nations' governance capabilities is seen to create reluctance in government to delegate meaningful governance responsibilities to local or regional Indigenous bodies. Participants said that First Nations are excluded from the shaping of governance

solutions to national security problems. This is a particularly vexed issue at a time when funding of Aboriginal affairs has been politicised in the media. Several participants raised concerns that politics impedes genuine engagement with the security and governance issues negotiated by First Nations communities.

“Consecutive governments just operate in the now; there is no long-term strategy to lift the conditions for First Nations communities.

“There was the [Northern Territory-Commonwealth] Intervention, then [introduction of] the super-shires, where they removed Local Government Councils. Now workers go into a community, and it is not clear where they should go. For example, Yuendumu has many committees but no front door.

“You need regional authorities – to hold cultural authority, and to enable program delivery and funding delivery. But this doesn't work because the government doesn't trust Aboriginal people.” **(Les Turner 28 August 2025)**

Several participants reported rapidly diminishing investment in local programs, such as language and art programs. Some participants reported a view that too much Aboriginal affairs funding is tied up in government departments that act as contract managers and are thus buffered from local accountability. Several held the view that investment decisions are made by bureaucrats with a vested interest in advancing their careers and little stake in local outcomes. Some participants said that resources are predominantly diverted to tokenistic projects and appointments with no meaningful local engagement.

The solutions participants offered to these challenges typically turned on enabling and resourcing local and regional authorities to shape local and regional governance with reference to First Nations' systems of law and custom. They argue this would ultimately improve adaptability and improve local accountability.

**The author in interview with Ned David,
Thursday Island (7 October 2025)**

PT: You have some people overharvesting fishery resources, but there's also these cultural and family connections. How can government address this issue in a culturally appropriate way?

ND: They've got to give us more authority and proper recognition. That's how it got to work.

PT: Who do they have to give authority and recognition?

ND: Traditional Owners ... All we ever get are the excuses as to why that can't happen. This is a distinct, unique patch of the Australian footprint. It's gonna need unique, distinct set of rules, strategies, solutions that can only work here. That's how we've got to treat this area. It can't be what happens elsewhere. People just need to understand that.

PT: What's the front door for working with Traditional Owners here? If you are a bureaucrat from Canberra and someone says: "Work with the Traditional Owners," you might ask, "How do I know who that is? How do I contact them?"

ND: We [GBK] have already got a relationship with the Commonwealth. They now recognise us as the Native Title Service Provider. We've got [Native Title] determinations in all our lands, most of our seas. We've got enough runs on the board where we are delivering ... I guess you could consider all the bases loaded, just need to hit a home run.

Several participants independently offered their own suggestions to improve national security outcomes. The list below is a potentially useful indication of what type of policy interventions participants think are likely to improve national security outcomes and is largely consistent with the broader dataset. The various suggestions are not actionable in their present form and each presents its own stand-alone policy challenges. It should be noted that some suggestions were more topical in certain regions than others, for example police weapons in communities was a predominant concern in Central Australia, while local works to remediate effects of a changing climate were more topical in the Torres Strait. The top four suggestions were salient throughout all regions. These suggestions are abbreviated below in my words for concision and ordered according to the regularity with which they were proposed. I have not included suggestions that were mentioned only once.

TABLE 1: SUGGESTIONS BY PARTICIPANTS TO IMPROVE NATIONAL SECURITY OUTCOMES.

Suggestion in order of number of times mentioned
Treaties/acknowledgement of customary law / regional authorities
Empowered local community governance
Improved partnerships with agencies responsible for defence and security
Improved protections for sacred sites
Local works for remediation of effects of a changing climate
Bilingual education/community language programs
Truth-telling ⁴²
More Norforce/Regional Force Surveillance Group recruitment
Reform immigration policy ⁴³
Police cease carrying lethal weapons in remote communities
Community-led research on cyber-safety

42 This concept is explained further in the section entitled “Australian identity, values, and an Aussie ‘way of life’”.

43 This is only briefly discussed in the body of the report because I am not sure of its relevance to a national security audience. Several participants linked immigration to youth crime/youth gangs, their own marginalisation in rapidly growing towns, increasing racism, housing unaffordability, poor service delivery, and declining social cohesion.

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7. APPENDIX

7.1 Methodology

This paper is derived from two research reports authored to inform the National Security College (NSC) Community Consultations project, launched on 22 May 2025. I was engaged on the 16 June 2025 to consult with northern Australian First Nations communities and report the findings.

This report is based on ethnographically informed field research. Engagements drew heavily on my pre-existing relationships with northern Australian First Nations people. Those relationships influenced decisions on who was initially invited to participate⁴⁴ and shaped the way questions were framed. In the rare instance they had email access, prospective participants were emailed a copy of the NSC CC-published flyer. NSC CC material was reworked to render concepts accessible and relevant to participants. In discussions with participants for whom English is not a first language, concepts expressed in the plain language translation of the NSC CC flyer (provided by Yolŋu Radio; see Appendix 7.5) was used to guide interviews. I made use of the concepts communicated in the translation by use of the terms:

- i. 'worry' – in Top End Aboriginal English 'worry' can describe a concern of a personal nature but can also mean 'think about' or can refer to a particular interest in or want for something
- ii. 'big dangers' to open conversations about risks and threats
- iii. 'live well together', which can act as an entry point to discussions of social cohesion.

In engagements, the aim of the research and lines of enquiry were initially introduced along the same lines as detailed in outreach materials. I developed prompt questions based on key themes presented in the NSC CC discussion paper. Thereafter, small group discussions and one-on-one interviews were facilitated in a non-structured manner, prioritising exploration of the (relevant) stated views and interests of participants. Within the parameters of the research question, participants were encouraged to direct interviews and discussions to those topics they considered most important.

The following example illustrates the practical and analytical value of ethnographically informed methods in these discussions on national security. In Yuendumu, I was able to have sensitive discussions about emergent threats and risks in the community of great complexity. One person explained:

“Sometimes when I speak to some Kardiya [non-Walpiri people] I get [tongue-tied]. Like [I say] ‘Blahblahblah’. We don’t think really quick to speak [in English about these issues], because we take our time to think about the past and things like that.”

By “things like that”, I take this person to refer to Walpiri laws and customs that govern what they can say about others and about certain matters that do not sit comfortably within their own immediate frame of reference.

⁴⁴ Participants were also invited to nominate others they through may be interested contributing to widen the pool.

Outreach to Northern Australian (mainland) stakeholders, interviews and group discussions were held between June and September 2025. Some stakeholders did not respond to invitations to participate, which is relevant to an assessment of their attitudes to national security. Ultimately, 49 people were invited and 38 people engaged in discussions. Of those 38, 27 were engaged formally in interviews or small group discussions (for a full, anonymised list of engagements see Appendix 7.2). Seven interviews were conducted by phone or videoconference and 12 in person, while four small group discussions were conducted in townships in the Northern Territory.

In the Torres Strait, outreach to GBK Board members stakeholders, interviews and group discussions were held between June and October 2025. Ultimately, 27 people were engaged in discussions. Of those 27, 24 were engaged formally in interviews or small group discussions (for a full anonymised list of engagements see Appendix 7.2).

I retain fieldnotes and/or full transcripts of interviews in a Word document of fieldnotes.

GBK Chair and Board members greatly facilitated field research in the Torres Strait, and access to the island communities. Chair Ned David was particularly generous with his time, taking many hours over the course of several conversations to explain the issues and introduce me to residents of the Torres Strait. Board members extended invitations to visit, supported permit applications, and greeted me on arrival. On islands I was provided local guides who took time to show me relevant locations and introduce me to residents. These explanations of the geography and infrastructure of the island communities greatly assisted my understanding of the feedback I would then receive in interviews. This labour is typical of the services provided by Torres Strait Island community leaders to visitors to the region, and while often unrecognised and rarely rewarded, it is essential to the effective advocacy of the interests of these communities. My research was also informed by discussions with Dr Kevin Murphy and reading of his doctoral thesis. Dr Murphy also assisted by reviewing and commenting on a draft of the Torres Strait research report which informs this paper.

The analytical method herein is also ethnographically informed, insofar as my understanding of local context and participants' world views helped me translate the responses of some participants into analysis more understandable to a national security audience. This process may be somewhat arcane to a non-specialist readership, and so for accountability I have included as appendices or inserts verbatim records of participant feedback, which are either illustrative of data that inform key findings, or which build usefully on the observations I provide.

On drafting of this report, I confirmed the use of their quotes with those participants who have access to email or a phone. All participants with access to email were provided a copy of a draft report and invited to comment prior to the finalisation of the report. A few did so, only to clarify details of quotations attributed to them.

7.2 Engagements

TABLE 2: INTERVIEWS THAT GENERATED THE DATA USED IN THIS REPORT

Full transcripts of all recorded interviews and field notes of non-recorded interviews have been retained by the author.

Participant identifier	Recorded Yes(Y) No (N) Partly (P)	Date	Location Phone (Ph) Island (Is)
Participant 1	Y	23/6/2025	Teams (Cairns)
Participant 2	P	24/6/2025	Ph (Darwin)
Participant 3	N	27/6/25	Email
Participant 4	P	28/6/2025	Darwin
Group (participants 36, 37, 5, 6, 7, 8)	N	9/7/25	Teams
Participant 9	Y	17/7/2025	Darwin
Participant 10	Y	19/7/2025	FaceTime (Cairns)
Participant 11	N	25/7/2025	Darwin
Women's group (participants 12, 13, 14, 15)	N	31/7/2025	Belyuen
Participants 14 and 15	Y	31/7/2025	Darwin
Participant 16	Y	8/8/2025	Teams (Innisfail)
Participant 17	N	20/8/2025	Ph (Alice Springs)
Participant 18	N	20/8/2025	Ph (Alice Springs)
Participants 19 and 20	Y	22/8/2025	Alice Springs
Participant 21	N	23/8/2025	Phone
Group (participants 22, 23, 24, 25, 20)	N	23/8/2025	Alice Springs
Participant 26	Y	25/8/2025	Yuendumu
Women's group (participants 27, 28, 29)	Y	26/8/2025	Yuendumu
Participants 30 and 31 and their families	P	26/8/2025	Yuendumu
Participant 32	Y	27/8/2025	Alice Springs

Participant 33	N	28/8/2025	Alice Springs
Participant 34	Y	3/9/2025	Teams (ACT)
Participant 35	Y	10/9/2025	Ph (Arnhem Land)
Participant 36	P	7/10/2025	Thursday Is
Participant 37	N	8/10/2025	Boigu Is
Participant 38 (P38)	Y	8/10/2025	Boigu Is
Group (participants 39, 40, 41)	Y	8/10/2025	Boigu Is
Participant 42	Y	9/10/2025	Boigu Is
Participants 37 and 43 (P37 and P43)	Y	9/10/2025	Boigu Is
Boigu Rangers (participants 44, 45, 46, 37)	N	9/10/2025	Boigu Is
Participant 47	Y	9/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 48	Y	9/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 49	Y	9/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 50 (P50)	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 51	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 52 (P52)	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 53	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 54	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 55 (P55)	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Participant 56	Y	10/10/2025	Saibai Is
Number of engagements	40		
Number of small-group discussions	7		
Total number participants generating field data	56		

TABLE 3: ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

Additional discussions were held with 13 informants including anthropologists, linguists, residents of remote communities, and employees of community and development organizations, Aboriginal businesses and Land Councils. These discussions were informative and helped to shape my understanding of the issues. Some of these individuals may not identify as First Nations, but work closely with First Nations communities. I did not draw upon my notes of those discussions as field data informing the findings reported herein, and so have not included these additional discussions in the table above.

7.3 Interview with Ned Jampijinpa Hargraves on national security

The interview took place at Mr Hargraves' residence in Yuendumu on 25 August 2025. The interview was recorded and transcribed in full. In the edited transcript here, Mr Hargraves' responses are provided verbatim, but some parts have been redacted to improve clarity and reduce repetition. Orthography and footnoted definitions are taken from Swartz (2012) *Interactive Warlpiri-English Dictionary 2nd ed.*⁴⁵ Mr Hargraves was provided a copy of the edited transcript and clarified the spelling and meaning of some terms. He later confirmed it was “ngutju” [good].

45 <https://ausil.org.au/Dictionary/Warlpiri/aboutwarlpiri.htm>

Question: National security is about keeping the land and people of Australia safe. What does national security mean to Yapa⁴⁶?

Nguru – our land, our home. Within Nguru we have Walya. That sand, or the ground. In that Nguru, Walya. That is where we have the Australian security.

I would call it Puntu⁴⁷ Nguru Walalja⁴⁸ meaning my land: my belonging. And when you talk about that, Australian Nguru – meaning the land, and Walya – meaning the ground, that is significant. That has got [embodied within it] significant information. You see, it is all to do with the significant information. That is what you and I have to protect. Because when you talk about national security you are talking about protection.

And that is why Australia is protected. Why are we protecting it? Because it's the significance of the Kuruwarri – the law, and the Jukurrpa – the Dreaming.

Knowledge is pina⁴⁹; pina is knowing. Knowing what is yours. What is there in the land. What's in that Nguru, what's in that land, Walya.

When we talk about Jukurrpa [Dreaming] Kuruwarri [law]. We're talking about Kurdungulu – we're talking about a man who controls the Ceremony. He has a [responsibility/power to] demand what you can't do, and what I can't do. I got to listen to him. He's my Kurndungulu because I am the owner of the Jukurrpa, but he – he is the man who holds the knowledge.

46 Aboriginal people.

47 Jampijinpa described this as meaning connectedness. It also is described in the dictionary as subsection | family, relative, kin. I take all this to mean that he refers to living things which share the same fundamental essence or life force.

48 One's own things, kin, native, local to an area, owner.

49 Wise, knowing, experienced.

So, I'm Kirda. I'm the owner of that ceremony. I cannot disagree with him. [I cannot say] "No, I don't want to do that, it doesn't look right". That's his job. When we are doing Jukurrpa Kuruwarri, when we are doing the dancing [in Ceremony], there has to be no mistake. Because that Kurndungulu is an expert. He knows exactly what song lines goes with it. What decoration to put on me.

You see, right now I am explaining something to you [about national security]. I'm not going to explain to you about militaries and policeman and whatever. Because it's not included. That is not included in my Jukurrpa, my Kuruwarri. I don't want to know about that. All I want to know is how to protect my land. How to protect my culture, my law, my Jukurrpa, my Kuruwarri. All that. And that is what we want.

And right now, it is important that Kardiya⁵⁰ [non-Aboriginal people] don't mistake what I am saying. For Australia, the biggest thing that Australia is missing today, is this [interlocks fingers of both hands]. We are not connected. Yapa and Kardiya are not connected. Because we are going [our] own [separate] ways. We Yapa believe in this land. Because that tells us [information] and anything that I need, the land gives me. It looks after me.

That security holds something. It holds significant information. I want to share law, Jukurrpa, for the best of your knowledge. But there's not enough time. We are not talking to each other. We worry about this, and we worry about that. We go there, we go here. And nobody knows when to stop and think. Kuja [true].

Question: Do you think it's possible for Kardiya to really understand Yapa security, that idea of protection through connection, knowledge and belonging?

I'll tell you [the answer]: yes.

If only Kardiya understood the purpose. You know, it gives me joy and gives me the pleasure to be Yapa. Because Walya, the Nguru; he [the land] talks. Like I said, it provides food and all the bush tucker – kangaroo, emus.

We want Kardiya to know these things. Because we want to share it. But we are sharing it to people that that will join us and live in harmony, and to protect our country. Not to blow it up [in earthworks/mining operations]. Lawa! [no!] To protect it and to enjoy what's ours – not only Yapa. So, we want Kardiya to mingle with us and then share something with us.

You tell me – what do you know? We gotta get as much information as we can get. And share it with people – everybody. You just got to ask. That's all. That security, it belongs to us. The land, the Nguru, the Walya that is around us, it belongs to us. It really belongs to us.

That's why I'm sharing this – because I want you to get this and run with it. And share it.

Question: Are there dangers ahead for Yapa? What is putting your security at risk?

There's lots of dangers. The danger today, for our people, is the grog, and the drugs. And we cannot trust Kardiya that are violent. And doing this [hand gesture meaning violence/shooting/incarceration/suppression] to us. We can't trust them. We want to share this significant information we got with you, because we feel that we want to be able to go there and bring you [with us]: Bring you to sacred sites, bring you to campgrounds. Where we can do the dancing. The biggest danger is – we should not be fighting each other. We should be sharing significant information.

You're talking about security. Well, we feel [strongly] about our security too! Okay. Our security is our idea, right? But, the land is our security. We protect it. We have that authority to tell it [the information], and to show you.

But you come to me. You are asking me today ... Can I say this [difficult thing to you]?

Response: Yes

50 Non-Aboriginal people

You have no authority. No. Because you don't know about my Jukurrpa. You don't know about this land. For example, what is the Dreaming of the land right here? This place – Yuendumu is Yurrampi – Honey Ant's Dreaming. I am telling you because you need to tell it to other Kardiya. That this land, this Nguru, this Walya, has this [significance]. Yuwayi! [yes!] And they [non-Aboriginal people] keep destroying it! They keep destroying it. Hey! Stop! Let's think for a minute. Why do you want to destroy it?

You got security on certain things. We have security on certain things. And that's a line there that cuts us off. Cut us off there. You have to know. You have to know what you need to know to keep it secure.

See, if I want to go to the bank to get my money, I know that it is kept secure. And only one person has the keys. And that security is held by the person with the keys. I don't have that power. But my power is only my Jukurrpa and Kurruwarri my law. That's my security.

Question: Does that mean that, Yapa keeping Jukurrpa and Kurruwarri safe is keeping the whole of Australia secure? Like you are the bank?

Yes! There. You got it. Kujarnawu. See? Slowly, but surely, you are here. You know what I'm talking about. We are working it out [together].

Question: How can Kardiya help Yapa keep that security?

We need to fix this. Once upon a time, Yapa, we weren't allowed to buy grog. Because we weren't citizens. Lawa [nothing]. We weren't allowed to do that. But [what if we turned that logic] the other way around. Like, the other way around is saying; "Kuja [true], alright! What about nyuntu⁵¹? What about you?" I'm talking about [how] you, in my eyes, were not allowed to come to my land!

Because I can give you the [knowledge], and you can use it, because we want you to use it. We want you to get the knowledge and to know what you need to know. You got to know my security [law and Dreaming]. You got to know that. Because without knowing that, then I can't let you make rules. You can't make it secure.

51 You.

This is why we need many people, who we [can] share with. You need to go out there and tell them; "Hey! This land is for all of us. Let's go and mingle, and learn." [And] We [will] do the same thing.

[For example] Right now – what am I speaking? I'm talking in your language. So, I'm getting to know it better. I've got to talk to you, to make you understand, I've got to tell it to you. And you're going to try and [build] your understanding. You are understanding this and that, but you got to know more! And I got to know more. So we are on the same boat, trying to search for information. And the information is there. But my information is secure, because of this Nguru, the land.

This information. This one is really important [write this down]. It's Tarruku. Sacred. And murlparlu mardaka⁵², meaning – you look after this information. Don't lose it. Don't lose it. That's why our people taught us, our Elders taught us. We go to bush camp. We sing. Tell the stories. And they told us: "You hear this, you make sure you protect it, and you teach it to our young people. So that they can hold it and protect it, to tell it to their young people." Then we take them, and then they learn. That's exactly what I'm doing to you today. I want you to tell the story that I am telling you.

Secure Australia – it is our land. It's our land, but it's all of us, that are here today. We want to tell it to you, to give that to you. And for you to come. Ngampani-ngampani kujarni-kujarni⁵³. I tell you something, you tell me something. So we go along the road, we walk on the road, footsteps.

52 I cannot find this reference in the dictionary. Jampijinpa provided the orthography.

53 The closest terms I can find in the dictionary are; Ngampa-ngampa: Helpful, kind, concerned, benevolent, humane; one who will come quickly to the aid of another. And kujarni: towards speaker. I take them together to mean, we will help each-other, we will be allies.

If I give you this [knowledge] you can look at it. You can work on it. I give you the authority. That's why I'm saying – you come, and I'll give you something. That is the law of this land. The land is so much –very important. We got to protect it, we must protect it. You know? Not because of the king or queen or anything. Lawa! [no!] The land, the Walya, Kuruwarri, Jukurrpa, is in our hands. It's in our hands today. That's what I have been taught. Because Song Lines and everything –it's all in the palm of this hand. It's all here. We share it. Yuwayi [yes].

[Did] You see that picture, where that old man Gough Whitlam gave the sand to him [Vincent Lingiari]? To me, pouring that Walya was something very special. This is your land. You have it back. You know? But that's Nguju [good]. That's strong. That's powerful. Without that, we would be still struggling.

This must always happen when Kardiya comes. You [non-Aboriginal people] look at some mountains, and [consider] that mountains are significant because of the gold or diamonds and stuff. One of the things [you are] forgetting is getting that [law]. Hold it –then this is your land. Then you are protected.

This is your Jukurrpa. Nyuntu⁵⁴ nyan walya, Nyuntunyan kuruwarri. Your ground, your land. Belongs to you. You're keeping my authority for something. And I give you authority. You go out to this land, and you can see. But one thing you must do –do not destroy it. You look after it.

54 You.

7.4 Excerpts of Interview with Yinjiya Mark Guyula, Independent Member of the NT Parliament representing the seat of Mulka

The interview took place by phone on the 10 September 2025. The interview was recorded and transcribed in full. In the transcript excerpts provided here, Mr Guyulas' responses are provided verbatim, but some parts have been redacted to improve clarity and reduce repetition. My Guyula was emailed the transcript excerpt 14 September 2025 and provided clarifying edits 15 October 2025.

Question: What are the biggest threats, risks, or big dangers for people and country in your electorate?

Well, the danger [that] we see now is, we need to maintain who we are as a people, people of the land, and the land that we belong to. Because we connect to the land, the environment, exactly where we are. We don't choose where we want to stay, but we come from the land. It has history, and a knowledge system that we need to maintain. The sacred sites are the library. They are the universities. They are the parliament, and the history. They hold our history to create who we are.

When I go on to someone else's country, I learn about their life, country and style. But this is where we need to start from. Yolŋu or Aboriginal People, we should start on the ground. Learning on country. Learning languages, learning discipline, and learning through participating in ceremonies. [This is an] education in taking up leadership.

Question: What are the security challenges for Yolŋu people?

It makes it hard when we moved away from our land to another, to someone else's country. The land and country around East Arnhem Land are all related.

When we see land that is this destroyed to make roads, or when we see the mountains being moved because of mining, it makes us powerless. We feel powerless. We are losing power. We can actually feel it, when land is moved.

Question: Are you saying that for security, it is important for Yolŋu people to be able to protect their country and their sacred places?

Yes. Yes, sacred places. Ah, "sacred places" is funny language. I have been a lecturer at Charles Darwin University trying to teach Balanda [non-Aboriginal people] about Aboriginal language for the word like sacred site. And when you try and translate it, or interpret it, they [do] not exactly [have a] really close meaning. Sometimes we [have to] use another word that doesn't really mean exactly what we're talking about.

What I am trying to say is, "sacred sites" is Maḏayin law. Maḏayin in our Yolŋu culture means it's really strong law that you don't step into, you don't touch it. No children are allowed there. No women are allowed there⁵⁵. There are [different] sacred sites for women and young girls, where they take them on country to learn about life and who they are – mature life.

⁵⁵ Yinjiya clarified (15 October 2025) that some children aren't allowed and some women aren't allowed to certain sacred sites. He added that it is important to be clear that women have their own sacred sites, there are some sacred sites where both men and women can go.

And [when we say] “sacred sites,” what we’re really talking about is the parliament. It is the higher level of university study that needs to be kept safe. It is alive. If we pull it down, I as a leader feel it in my heart, and feel it in my body, that I’m losing a knowledge system. That’s how sacred it is. We’re talking about the history. It contains our story of the land, and it maintains our law of the land. That’s what we’re trying to do.

Really in our life, [the sacred site] is alive as well, it is an upper level of education where our people and senior Elders have learned to be doctors, learned doctrine to try and maintain the community. That is what we call the sacred sites.

Question: Do you worry about social media like TikTok or Facebook, or the kids on the phone getting different messages, you know, getting different information?

Yes, it is really a worry for the communities out here.

We used to live in bark huts which had a campfire, which don’t really have lockable private spaces so that people didn’t walk around and try and create their own pathway. But we have Elders and leaders sit at the campfire, and young people come and learn what they need to do, learn about language, culture, learn about history, learn about life, learn about respect. Understand what their grandparents, mum and dads, are trying to share so that they behave, to grow up to be, to be fair and respectable young people.

But as soon as social media came and houses are built with separate rooms, children can go into it, and just forget about what their parents and Elders have been thinking. And they switched on something funny like the social media, looking up all sorts of bad language, all sorts of different things that doesn’t really help them stay respectful.

They start to pick up rubbish stuff, and all of a sudden, you have children that don’t really have good respect for their parents and mum and dad. And we wonder, what’s going on with the social media? That needs to be taken away from our children. At the moment, they are undergoing education through the campfire of their leaders and Elders.

And this is what is happening through social media and other unwelcome interruptions. Unwelcomed government [people] who walk into our communities here, and they say, “No, you won’t be going to school out bush with your parents, you come to school here to read and write. And you’ll come and listen to our story, and we’ll tell you how we think we know what is best for you. So, you don’t have to worry about sitting at the campfire and listening to your old people or going out bush.”

That is where the confusion is being made in their minds, the children. And they run amok and they grow up to be disrespectful children and they do crime. This where undisciplined children don’t listen to and to Elders and leaders, because their minds are confused.

There are new things that are coming in and confusing minds of our children, but that is not our culture. Not Yolŋu culture from here. That is children being confused by social media, confused by the policies that the government made. The schools they created to teach the Western system of education. And that leaves the grandparents, the leaders and Elders, sitting at home. They haven’t got the reach to actually continue disciplining, continue showing them the pathway to respect and leadership.

Question: Whose responsibility is it to fix these problems, Yolŋu or Balanda? Or is it a shared responsibility?

Yolŋu responsibilities are responsibilities of Elders and leaders. And when it comes to working together with Balanda, let’s walk together. Let’s stand together, and let’s work to create this pathway so that they learn from the Balanda way, and they also learn from Yolŋu in bilingual education. Bilingual education is about learning leadership. Let’s be part of it together. Don’t take the powers away from us. Let us be part of that. We will start from a young child. We will train and teach until they grow up to be young leaders.

7.5 Outreach materials

Outreach materials 2: ARDS Translations

IMAGE 8: MAYALIL MARIKA ANNOUNCES NSC CC IN GUMATJ ON VOLNU RADIO 29/8/2025



English translation: Gumatj radio announcement

This is a story from the National Security College. It sits inside the Australian National University in Canberra. National Security College learns about better ways to look after Australia.

What is “national security”? The government spends lots of money looking after Australia, to protect Australian people and land from big dangers. But people might think about this in different ways. People might see different things that threaten/are dangerous for Australia.

Some people might worry when they see wars happening in other places. Some people might worry about the environment, about climate change. Other people might worry about things in their community, like looking after families and culture. There are lots of different things people might be worrying about for Australia. It is important for the government to hear people’s worries. Some people maybe feel very safe and happy. Maybe they are not worried about national security.

Workers from the National Security College want to talk to people all over Australia. They want to learn from us about national security. They want to find out: are we worried about national security, or not? What do we worry about? What do we think the government can do to look after Australia in a good way? What can the government do so the land/country is good and all the people here live well?

Do you worry about these things? Maybe you are happy with the government’s work. Or maybe you think they should do something different. Maybe you can share how you are already looking after Australia, like caring for country or doing Norforce work.

Researchers from the National Security College will go all over Australia, talking to different people. One researcher, called Pascale Taplin, wants to talk to us, to learn from us.

Pascale and other researchers will listen to everybody’s ideas, in different places in Australia. They will ask questions and write down our answers. Then, they will write a big report for the Australian Government. The Australian Government can read the report and learn what people are thinking about national security. Maybe the government can learn new ways to look after Australia in a good way.

IF YOU WANT TO SHARE YOUR IDEAS OR WORRIES ABOUT PROTECTING AUSTRALIA FROM BIG DANGERS, YOU CAN TALK TO PASCALE.

She can come and visit you in your community, or you can talk to her on the phone. Her number is 04** *** **. Or you can send her an email at pascale.taplin@anu.edu.au. Call Pascale to find out more, or to ask her to come to your community. Her number again is 04** *** **.



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