

Lending a Fist? Australia's New Interventionism in the Southwest Pacific

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2003 marked a significant change in Australia's relations with the island Pacific, including Papua New Guinea. The "hands off" approach of the past three decades has been replaced by a more robust and interventionist stance with a major emphasis on security. The two principal manifestations of this new approach have been the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in mid-2003 and the proposed Enhanced Cooperation Package (ECP)¹ in Papua New Guinea. While Australia's renewed focus on the island Pacific is to be welcomed, questions arise as to what lies behind this seemingly abrupt change of direction and its likely impact in the recipient countries. Calls for a change of policy toward the Pacific have come from several Australian policy 'think tanks', such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Centre for Independent Studies, as well as a number of journalists with long experience in the region.²

Australian academics with experience in the Pacific islands have remained surprisingly quiet in the face of what appears to be a momentous shift in our foreign policy. There are a number of possible explanations for this relative silence. It may be, in part, a reflection of the diminishing critical mass of scholars engaged in the study of the contemporary Pacific and the decline in Pacific studies at Australia's universities. Such a state of affairs is, indeed, regrettable at a time when our engagement with the region is expanding and sound knowledge of the Pacific island countries is critical to the formulation of appropriate policies.

Critical voices may also have been muted as a result of the success of the first phase of the Solomon Islands mission. RAMSI has been welcomed by the majority of Solomon Islands' citizens and has restored security successfully in a remarkably short period time. There also appears to be high levels of popular support for the proposed Enhanced Cooperation Package in Papua New Guinea. The criticisms around issues of sovereignty voiced by some political leaders do not appear to be shared widely among the grassroots constituency. While some of my colleagues - myself included - might baulk at the naming of John Howard as 'Pacific Man of the Year' in a leading regional magazine,³

¹ Sometimes referred to as the Enhanced Assistance Package.

² These would include Rowan Callick (Financial Review), Graham Dobell (ABC), and Mary Louise O'Callaghan (The Australian).

³ Rowan Callick, 'Pacific Man of the Year - John Howard: The Big Man of the Islands', Pacific Islands, 8 December 2003.

renewed Australian engagement has met with a positive reception among many in the larger Pacific community.

The full implications of these changes in Australian policy remain to be seen. Its still early days and considered assessments of their longer-term impacts in Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and beyond will have to wait. Canberra's approach is also more *ad hoc* than often presented. Graham Dobell, the ABC foreign correspondent, has suggested that it is essentially policy "made on the run".⁴ This quality, and the pace at which events are unfolding, complicate the task of evaluation. What is not in doubt, however, is that there has been a decisive move away from the time when sensitivities to issues of sovereignty and charges of neo-colonialism were paramount in Canberra's thinking. Beneath these concerns, of course, there usually lurked more pragmatic considerations about becoming sucked into difficult and potentially dangerous engagements with no obvious 'exit strategies'. This approach was exemplified in Canberra's repeated refusal to intervene in the Solomons in the face of a series of requests for assistance prior to mid-2003. The standard response at the time was to urge beleaguered authorities in Honiara to resolve their own problems using indigenous solutions.

The deployment of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in July 2003 was greeted in the regional and international media as a bold new departure in Australia's relations with the region. Writing in *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan referred to "a historic turning point in the way we relate to our neighbours",⁵ while his colleague, Paul Kelly, stated that a "NEW phase of Australian policy has begun with the end of our 30-year hands-off approach to the Pacific region and the assumption of a role as the metropolitan power".⁶ RAMSI represents a significant change in Canberra's thinking and one with no obvious precedents in our past dealings with the independent states of the southwest Pacific. It signals a more pro-active approach that challenges established notions of sovereignty and seeks to re-define relations between Australia and the island Pacific. Development assistance is being re-shaped to calibrate more closely with Canberra's strategic agenda.

The ECP in Papua New Guinea has been read in a similar light, as another manifestation of this alleged paradigm shift in our relations with the Pacific. Whether or not Canberra's new approach amounts to a paradigm shift, the renewed focus on our Pacific island neighbours is something that most experienced observers would welcome. This is particularly so if it entails a commitment to engage on a significant scale and long-term basis. The Pacific islands have all too often been relegated to the outer perimeters of Australia's foreign policy agenda despite the mounting evidence of serious challenges facing a number of these countries.

Renewed engagement provides a rare opportunity to assist Pacific island countries address such challenges. Indeed, if the level of commitment is sustained, it provides the

⁴ Graeme Dobell. Correspondents Report, ABC Radio National, 21 March 2004.

⁵ *The Australian*, 1 July 2003.

⁶ *The Australian*, 3 July 2003.

most significant opportunity for effecting positive change since the era of decolonisation in the 1970s. Of course, much depends on what kind of ‘change’ is being proposed and who is making the decisions. A fundamental question is the extent to which Australia’s new policy agenda coincides with the interests and priorities of the countries being addressed. Clearly, the success and sustainability of these engagements depends, in large part, on their acceptance and active ownership by the governments and peoples in the countries concerned. While the re-appearance of the island Pacific on the Canberra radar screen is one thing, how this translates into effective and enduring reform on the ground is quite another.

The renewed interest in building the capacity and extending the role of regional governance, notably through the Pacific Islands Forum and Secretariat, is an important aspect of the emergent policy. Having been criticised for not attending previous Forums, John Howard has become a strident advocate for strengthened regional governance and has, among other things, called for the pooling of resources in areas such as airlines and police training. At the Forum in Auckland in August 2003, Canberra went to great lengths to get its preferred candidate, a retired Australian diplomat, appointed as the next Director-General of the Forum Secretariat. This move reversed a longstanding convention that only Pacific islanders were eligible for appointment and, in the process, upset a number of Pacific island leaders. The attempt to reform the machinery of regional governance has attracted less attention in Australia than the high-profile engagements with Solomon Islands and PNG.

Few observers would dispute the limited impact of the Forum in the past. Since its inception, it has been an observer of events rather than a leader and shaper of regional developments. In theory, a reinvigorated vehicle of regional governance can assist the Pacific island countries, not least in their dealings with their larger and, at times, overbearing neighbours. Regional governance is a fact of political life in many parts of the world and there are obvious advantages of moving in this direction given the challenges of location, geography, scale and diversity in the Pacific islands region. We’ve seen a lot of discussion about strengthened regionalism over the past year. Many ideas were floated in the Australian Senate Committee Report - *A Pacific Engaged* – published in August of last year.⁷ These included recommendations that the Pacific island countries explore the possibility of a shared currency and, significantly, a common labour market. The report also called for a common budgetary and fiscal discipline through the region and so on. Many of these ideas are not new and have been around, in one form or another, for years. In the current context of renewed engagement, they merit thorough examination by all stakeholders in terms of their respective strengths and weaknesses. What is important is the opportunity for Pacific islanders to take an active role in building a more effective regional voice for managing domestic challenges and relations with the wider world.

⁷ *A Pacific Engaged – Australia’s relations with Papua New Guinea and the island states of the south-west Pacific*. Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2003.

While they provide important opportunities for the Pacific, Australia's changing relations with the Pacific are also susceptible to a number of criticisms and potential difficulties. Some of these relate to the style and tone of the messages and prescriptions emanating from Canberra. At worst, these can come across as condescending and arrogant. There is often little understanding of the particular histories and social complexity of the Pacific countries. For example, Australia's role as former administrator of PNG and the character of its colonial legacy are rarely acknowledged in the consistently negative assessments of that country. There are also issues about the adequacy of consultation and negotiation processes with those identified as the prospective recipients of enhanced assistance. It is unfortunate that Canberra's lack of sensitivity can, on occasion, generate resistance to proposals that might otherwise be well received. The friction between Canberra and Port Moresby over the review of the Australian aid program late last year is a case in point. More substantive concerns relate to Australia's diagnoses and prioritisation of problems in the region and the kinds of remedial strategies these suggest. These can be summarised as follows:

- The *centrality of security considerations* in Canberra's current perspective of the Pacific islands and, in particular, the implications of viewing these countries through the lens of the Washington-led 'war on terror'. Looked at in this way, the focus is squarely on the alleged threat (actual and potential) posed to Australia by our nearest neighbours, particularly those states that are deemed to be failing or at risk of failing. The issue of what precisely 'failure' means, what is failing, or why it is failing (e.g. the internal dynamics of crisis in the countries so labelled) is rarely addressed in any depth.
- Not surprisingly, this viewpoint tends to privilege solutions aimed at enhancing security particularly in relation to the perceived threats of international crime, people smuggling, border and customs control, and, of course, terrorism. While these and other potential risks cannot be ruled out, the question is how real and pressing are they for countries facing a range of profound, and largely internal, development issues? The prospect of Islamic terrorists establishing themselves in either Solomon Islands or PNG is, to say the least, remote. Superimposing an external security agenda on the island Pacific risks obscuring more pressing domestic challenges, such as growing levels of inequality and impoverishment, as well as PNG's potentially catastrophic AIDS/HIV epidemic. At worse, there is the prospect of a progressive *securitisation of aid*, whereby the priorities of donor assistance are increasingly shaped by an external, and questionable, security agenda, rather than by domestic priorities.
- A further concern relates to the *state-centric character* of the assistance being offered under the auspices of these engagements. While state-building remains a priority throughout Melanesia, it is important to appreciate the historical and broader context of state weakness in countries where the socio-political realities remain relentlessly local. The post-colonial states in the Pacific have very different and much shorter histories to those of their more developed counterparts. State-building in these countries is still at a relatively early stage. There are challenging questions about the appropriateness of many aspects of the formal

systems of government inherited at independence and the manner of their articulation with the broader society. Greater appreciation is needed of the central role of non-state and sub-national institutions in the daily lives of most citizens. Appropriate and sustainable approaches to state building need to be grounded in the socio-political realities of these particular countries and not simply derived from global templates.

- The limited degree of consultation and negotiation with local stakeholders in the shaping and implementation of the new assistance programs is another area of concern. High levels of *understanding, ownership and participation* among both governments and local communities are critical to the longer-term success of these programs.
- Obvious questions of *sustainability* are raised by the new programs. Assistance is increasingly delivered through the placement of significant numbers of Australian officials in line positions in state institutions. What happens when these officials leave? Will the recipient country be in a position to sustain the benefits derived from these programs?

Before examining some of these issues in the context of the engagements in Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, let me return briefly to the character of Canberra's new approach. As mentioned earlier, the unfolding policy appears to be more *ad hoc* than its proclamation as a major paradigm shift suggests. Although media and other commentaries have conflated the engagement in Solomon Islands with that proposed for PNG as illustrative of the same approach, there are, in fact, important differences between the two. Likewise, while there is much that is new, there are also continuities with past policies.

The regional assistance mission to Solomon Islands is certainly new in terms of its scale, regional character, and the sheer ambition of its stated objectives. While clearly driven by Canberra, it is the first example of regional assistance to a member state conducted, albeit retrospectively, under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum and its Biketawa Declaration. For Alexander Downer it is an example of 'cooperative intervention', undertaken at the request of the Solomon Islands government with the participation of Forum member states - a regional variation of George Bush's 'coalition of the willing'. It is also new in terms of being a police-led intervention. The significant military component was provided as back-up to the police and as a reminder to former militants and gunmen of RAMSI's potential muscle. At the same time, important antecedents are to be found in Australia's role in East Timor, Bougainville, and, more recently, in the successful collaboration between Australian and Indonesian police in the investigation of the Bali bombings. These engagements have clearly boosted Australian experience and confidence in external interventions. In addition, as Greg Fry has pointed out, the decision to intervene in the Solomon Islands was, in many ways, a return to the policy of the former Hawke government of the late 1980s.⁸ Under the so-called Evans doctrine,

⁸ See Greg Fry, "The 'War Against Terror' and Australia's New Interventionism in the Pacific". Unpublished paper, 2004.

there was a commitment to intervene on behalf of a legitimate government of a Pacific island state, if requested, and where there existed an appropriate exit strategy.

The Enhanced Cooperation Package in Papua New Guinea is different to the RAMSI exercise. It is not a regional initiative but has occurred under the longstanding bilateral relationship between Papua New Guinea and Australia. The mistaken, and misleading, view that it is essentially a RAMSI Mark II aimed at rescuing PNG's 'failing state' has contributed to recent tensions between Port Moresby and Canberra. As its title implies, the ECP is essentially an enhanced form of the assistance that PNG has been receiving from Australia over many years. Over the years, the development assistance program has covered various sectors of government and, in the case of the police, has involved a major capacity building project dating back fifteen years. While the proposed method of delivery will be new, involving the placement of Australian officials in key government agencies including the police, the capacity building objectives of the ECP are by no means radical departure from past practice. Likewise, many older ideas are being recycled in the case of the renewed focus on regional governance.

What is new is the placing of Australian officials, including police officers, in line positions where they will operate as employees of government agencies and, in many cases, for longer periods than short-term advisors and consultants. This is viewed by Canberra's decision makers as a more effective way of achieving change in the organisations and bureaucracies concerned. It is also an approach that unless handled with sensitivity and skill could quickly generate resentment and resistance among local officials. From an Australian perspective, there are also considerable challenges associated with the 'whole of government' approach involved in these engagements. Many different bits of the Australian government are now involved in the development game. In addition to the Australian Federal Police (and probably members of state police forces in the case of PNG), there might, for example, be officials from Defence, Treasury and Customs. Issues of coordination are clearly critical, not least to avoid reproducing Canberra's bureaucratic rivalries in Port Moresby or Honiara. At the Canberra end, it is also apparent that the Prime Minister's Office has adopted a lead role in the formulation and steering of Australia's new policy engagement with the island Pacific. This is likely to create tensions with the lead agencies in development assistance, notably DFAT and AusAID. It also means that key decisions are being made increasingly by those lacking extensive regional and development experience, while Canberra's traditional repositories of development expertise are relegated to the outer circle.

The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands was deployed in July 2003 in response to an appeal from the Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Sir Allan Kemakeza. It comprised initially around 1,800 military personnel, mainly from Australia, but also smaller contingents from other member states of the Pacific Islands Forum. The police component consisted of some 330 police officers, again mainly from Australia.

According to the agreement signed by participating governments, the objective of the intervention was “to assist the effective functioning of government, the restoration of confidence in law and order, and the economic recovery of Solomon Islands”. Restoring law and order was the immediate priority to be followed by a longer-term and comprehensive strengthening of the law and justice sector, including the police, and key financial agencies, as well as implementing broader economic reforms.

Was the intervention necessary?

There were compelling reasons for the Australian-led intervention. It was clear that the Solomon Islands government was no longer in control. The Prime Minister was unable to govern. Ministers and treasury officials were intimidated routinely, often at gunpoint. The Royal Solomon Islands Constabulary (RSIC) was hopelessly fractured and significant elements corrupted. Government services had collapsed and revenues siphoned off. Many public servants had abandoned work and those who remained were not being paid regularly. The compensation process set out under the Townsville Peace Agreement had been corrupted by former militants and political leaders. The government itself was deeply compromised with some Ministers actively engaged in corrupt and criminal activities. Guns stolen from police armouries had been dispersed widely and presented a major threat to security in Honiara and parts of Guadalcanal and Malaita. Faced with the collapse of the political centre, a number of island provinces were demanding greater autonomy and, in some cases, independence. With the closure of businesses and large commercial enterprises and a drastic fall in revenue collection, the country was effectively bankrupt.

What began as an ethnic conflict degenerated into the effective capture and paralysis of the SI state by a small cohort of armed ex-militants, including renegade police officers, and corrupt leaders. This process of criminalisation of state had deepened under both the Sogavare and Kemakeza governments and had, in some respects, been facilitated by the provisions of the deeply flawed Townsville Peace Agreement. ‘Authorities’ in Honiara were simply incapable, in some cases unwilling, to break the ensuing deadlock. An external circuit-breaker was thus necessary. For most Solomon Islanders, the issue was not whether external intervention was necessary but, rather, why it took so long in coming.

Why did Australia decide to intervene when it did?

Prior to the intervention in mid-2003, Canberra had declined several requests for assistance from Honiara. Right up to the beginning of 2003, Alexander Downer was claiming that it would be “folly in the extreme” to send Australian troops to “occupy” the country. According to the Australian Foreign minister “it would not work” because “(f)oreigners do not have answers for the deep-seated problems affecting the Solomon Islands”.⁹ Less than six months later, Australia mobilised and led the largest deployment of external security personnel to SI since World War II.

⁹ ‘Neighbours cannot be Recolonised’, *The Australian*, 8 January 2003.

There is probably no single reason for the abrupt turnaround in Canberra's approach to Solomon Islands. It more likely reflects the coalescing of a number of factors and considerations. Despite its protracted adherence to the older strategy of non-intervention, there had been longstanding concerns in Canberra about regional instability. The 'coups' in Fiji and Solomon Islands in 2000, and continuing problems of law and order, economic dysfunction and political instability in PNG, provided the basis for the extension of the regional 'arc of instability' to the Melanesian states. Canberra was not only concerned about this situation but parts of the policy-community were beginning to actively press for a new approach.

An important contribution to this process of re-evaluation has been the emergence of a forceful critique of Australian development assistance. This has focused in particular on Australia's substantial aid programme in Papua New Guinea. Its most vocal and influential proponent has been the conservative economist Helen Hughes working out of the private Sydney-based 'think tank', the Centre for Independent Studies. Despite its inaccuracies and polemical tone, her widely publicised 2003 report, *Why Aid has Failed the Pacific*, struck a chord with senior government figures in Canberra. Ironically, many on the receiving end of Australian aid have also been arguing for a long time that it was failing to deliver on its stated objectives. Hughes' report went further and argued that Australian development assistance was implicated in the dynamics of regional political and economic dysfunction through fuelling corruption and engendering dependency among recipients. In reality, the potential link between aid and government corruption has diminished significantly with the bulk of Australian aid now being tied to particular projects and programs and usually administered by private managing contractors. The critique of Hughes and others has nevertheless helped place the review of development assistance high among Canberra's new priorities.

As mentioned earlier, Australian deployments in East Timor, Bougainville, and Bali, and, more recently, in Afghanistan and Iraq, have also served to bolster confidence and experience in external interventions. Many of the Australian police and military personnel involved in RAMSI have served with previous international missions.

The most significant influence on Canberra's thinking was, of course, the dramatically changed international strategic environment post-9/11 and Bali, and, in particular, the ascendancy of the 'war on terror' as the principal lens for viewing issues of domestic and international security. Having aligned itself closely with George Bush's administration, Canberra has become acutely sensitive to security threats in what it regards as its own backyard (or "our patch" as the Prime Minister puts it). Within this expanded concept of security, the notion of 'failed' or 'failing' states has become pivotal to the identification of perceived threats and the justification of preventive responses.

The case for intervention in the Solomon Islands set within this broader strategic framework was articulated most clearly by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), a government-funded think tank, in an influential report published in June

2003.¹⁰ Launched by Foreign Minister Downer, the report identifies Solomon Islands as a failing state and warns of its reversion into "a kind of post-modern badlands, ruled by criminals and governed by violence" (ASPI 2003:13). State failure in the Solomons would, according to the Report, open it up to the predatory activities of transnational crime syndicates and maybe even terrorism. This would not only destabilise vulnerable Melanesian neighbours but would, if left unchecked, pose a direct threat to Australia's own security interests. State failure is presented as the new policy paradigm and explained as follows:

The phenomenon of state failure represents a spectrum from weak states to states in total collapse. But the security challenges posed by a teetering state are often as grave as those posed by a failed state. Characteristics of state failure include economic deterioration, dramatically falling living standards, declining governance, failing institutions, and an incapacity to deliver services to citizens... Law and order breaks down, the state loses control of armed force, and groups look to their own kind to provide security. (*ibid*)

Within this paradigm, the focus is on the catastrophic manifestations of state failure rather than the internal dynamics of failure. Likewise, the resultant security threats are conceived of as primarily those presented to neighbouring states. The report presents a regional perspective and notes that while the Solomon Islands state is closest to the "total collapse" end of the spectrum, some of its Melanesian neighbours are not that far behind. (*ibid*:7)

There are considerable difficulties with concepts of 'failed', 'failing' or 'collapsed' states and attempts, such as in the ASPI report, to apply them to the Melanesian countries. Not least is the failure to ground them in the particular histories and socio-political contexts of the post-colonial Melanesian states. It is a model that tends to privilege conceptual neatness over detailed analysis of specific case studies. More generally, the notion of a failed or collapsed state implies that at one point it functioned effectively, presumably in a manner similar to the 'successful' states of, say, Australia or New Zealand. A cursory reading of modern Solomon Islands history undermines this assumption. The Melanesian state has never operated effectively in that sense. To put it crudely, the real problem of state in the Solomon Islands and some of its neighbours is not that it has collapsed but that it has yet to be properly built. We are still talking about the very early stages of state formation in countries with short experiences of centralised administration, acute levels of internal fragmentation, and little sense of common identity or 'nation'. In addition, the challenge of state building is not to simply rebuild that which has 'collapsed'. To do so might be inviting another 'failure' further down the track. What is needed is a fundamental re-thinking of the kind of state best suited to the circumstances of these

¹⁰ *Our Failing Neighbour - Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*. Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 2003.

countries. The most significant opportunity presented in the new policy climate is to do things differently and learn from the mistakes of the past.

How has RAMSI fared so far?

Available evidence indicates that the intervention has gone extremely well to date, particularly in disarmament and restoration of security. By January 2004, approximately 3,800 firearms had been collected by RAMSI and the National Peace Council (Radio NZ 19 January 2004). As well as homemade weapons, these include a significant proportion of the high powered guns and ammunition stolen from police armouries during the conflict. Key militia leaders have been arrested and await prosecution on a range of serious offences. A notable early success was the surrender of renegade Weather Coast leader, Harold Keke, within a month of RAMSI's deployment (*New Zealand Herald* 14 August 2004). In its first 200 days, RAMSI made 860 arrests and laid over 1400 charges (RNZI 4 February 2004)

RAMSI police have moved quickly on the difficult task of cleansing the ranks of the Solomon Islands police of its militant and criminal members. By February 2004, over 50 police officers had been arrested and charged with 285 offences. In addition, over 400 officers – approximately 25% of the workforce - have been removed from the police (ABC Pacific Beat 19 February 2004). There has also been progress in the larger task of rebuilding the law and justice sector with strategic assistance to the legal offices, courts and prison service. Control has been re-gained over government finances and longer-term governance and economic reforms have commenced. The remarkable turnaround on the security front is testament to the effectiveness of the RAMSI police component. It is also, in no small part, a reflection of the overwhelming support provided by ordinary Solomon Islanders.

Outstanding challenges facing RAMSI

The restoration of law and order in those parts of the country most directly affected by the conflict is a significant achievement. There nevertheless remain significant challenges as RAMSI moves into its second and more ambitious phase with a focus on governance and economic reform. Although popular support remains high, there are signs of some concerns that, unless addressed, could lead to future difficulties. These can be summarised:

- There is a growing perception among many Solomon Islanders that while RAMSI has moved effectively against the former militants and gunmen, it has not pursued corrupt leaders with the same vigour. Questions are raised regularly in public forums about this apparent failure to move against the 'big fish'. The latter, according to local critics, committed serious crimes and played leading roles in manipulating, and profiting from, the disorder that preceded the intervention. As yet, most remain at liberty and some occupy high offices. This apparent failure to move against the so-called 'big fish' has fuelled a perception in some quarters that RAMSI is providing a cloak of legitimacy for leaders, and a government, that has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many Solomon Islanders. For its part, RAMSI officials have expressed frustrations at the lack of evidence on which to base prosecutions in these cases and

have called regularly for members of the public to provide relevant information. Whatever the reasons may be, this perception of an uneven administration of justice could lead to growing levels of popular frustration.

- There also appear to be limited opportunities for ordinary Solomon Islanders to participate in, and influence, the work of RAMSI. This raises broader issues relating to ownership and the scope for local initiative. The scale of RAMSI and scope of its activities underlie its popular image as the dominant force in post-conflict Solomon Islands. Without the active participation and engagement of Solomon Islanders in the processes of recovery and reform, there is also a real risk that the RAMSI exercise will simply reinforce dependence on external assistance. Solomon Islands' academic, Tarcisius Kabutaulaka, points out that RAMSI's dominance could lead to either a debilitating dependency or, alternatively, a perception of foreign occupation (Kabutaulaka 2004)¹¹. He notes the common saying "*weitem olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem*" (wait for RAMSI to come and fix it), as an expression of this growing dependency.

- There is a thin line between RAMSI's dominant position in post-conflict Solomon Islands and perceptions that it is actually the 'real' government and actively controls political and economic decision-making. This line was clearly crossed when both the Special Coordinator and Australian High Commissioner publicly opposed a pay increase awarded by the Solomon Islands government to public servants. As well as undermining the authority of the domestic institutions of governance they are trying to build, such actions are likely to lead to growing distrust of RAMSI among significant constituencies.

- The scope for popular misunderstanding of RAMSI's role and work is very high. Understandings on the street and in the village differ markedly from those expressed in policy documents and official circles. RAMSI has a sophisticated communications strategy but there is always room for improvement in a country where many people have little access to the media and where rumours are a significant part of daily life. Ensuring that rural villagers are well informed on this matter is a challenging but critical task.

- RAMSI's post-conflict recovery work has understandably focused on key state institutions such as the police and the finance departments. In the longer-term, however, it is critical to also engage with non-state entities that continue to exercise more influence over the daily lives of most citizens than does the Honiara-based state. As Kabutaulaka puts it, "To achieve sustainable peace and rebuild Solomon Islands there is a need to strengthen both state and non-state entities. This is especially important in a plural society where the state will always share power with other organisations" (2004:2).

- Related to this, is the need to complement state building work with the larger task of nation building in a country where lack of a sense of national identity continues to present major difficulties (Wielders, 2004).¹² Such a task cannot be undertaken by the state alone.

¹¹ Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, "Failed State" and the War on Terror: Intervention in Solomon Islands". Honolulu: East West Centre, Asia Pacific Issues Series, No.72, March 2004, 1-8.

¹² Iris Wielders' paper of January 2004. Reference???

- The question of what kind of state is most appropriate to Solomon Islands' present and future needs is clearly critical. The highly centralised model inherited at independence is deeply implicated in recent problems. While there are serious flaws in current proposals to establish a federal system, reform of the existing framework of government, in particular, relations between the political centre and island provinces, needs to be prioritised.
- It is also important to ensure adequate levels of consultation and debate about the significant economic and public sector reforms being implemented under the auspices of RAMSI. Reforms that accentuate existing divisions between regions and individuals and that fail to improve access to services and economic opportunities among the bulk of the rural population will lead to growing levels of discontent.
- Finally, there is the obvious question of sustainability. What happens when RAMSI's considerable presence and resources depart? This is a question being asked a lot among Solomon Islanders and some indication of how this issue will be addressed is needed.

Papua New Guinea and the Enhanced Cooperation Package

Australia's proposed Enhanced Assistance package in Papua New Guinea is informed by many of the same considerations as the Solomon Islands intervention. Both the manner in which it has been presented and the substance of its provisions reflect Canberra's new approach. PNG is viewed as manifesting many symptoms – particularly lawlessness and economic dysfunction - that if left unchecked might ultimately lead to state failure. That, in turn, would render PNG susceptible to transnational crime and terrorism. Unlike in Solomon Islands, Canberra's attempt to position PNG within the failed state paradigm has caused great offence to many Papua New Guineans and contributed to recent friction between the two governments.

It's important to note the important differences between the PNG and Solomon Island cases. The proposed engagement in PNG will not take place in a post-conflict situation. PNG's law and order problems are complex and longstanding and are not the result of a major internal conflict.¹³ PNG has been long been the largest single recipient of Australian development assistance and a significant amount of this has gone to the law and justice sector and, in particular, the police. The apparent failure of assistance to the PNG police over a period of almost 15 years ago has been an important influence in the formulation of the ECP.

Australia approached PNG with its new proposals late last year and these were agreed to by both governments at the Australia-Papua New Guinea Ministerial Forum in Adelaide in December 2003. The package includes inputs to policing, law and justice, border management (eg immigration, customs, transport security), as well as economic and public sector management. New expenditure will cover the additional assistance to the police, while other components will come from the existing aid program.

¹³ I am excluding the case of Bougainville.

Police

Up to 230 Australian police officers to be deployed in Port Moresby, Lae, Mt Hagen, and along the Highlands Highway, as well as up to 20 officers deployed in Bougainville.

Law and Justice

Up to 18 Australians working in (non-policing) law and agencies. Positions will include that of Solicitor-General, 3 litigation lawyers in the Solicitor-General's Office, 5 prosecutors in the Public Prosecutor's Office, 2 Correctional Service Managers, 4 expatriate judges, as well as further specialists in other key law and justice agencies.

Finance

Up to 36 Australian officials will work in key economic, finance, planning and spending agencies. These will be drawn largely from Australian Departments of Treasury and Finance and Administration.

Border Control

10 Australian officials will work in PNG's immigration services, border and transport security and management, and aviation security.

The first group of civilian officials were deployed in early 2004. A dispute over the granting of legal immunity to Australian police personnel has held up their deployment, although there are signs that a compromise may soon be reached.

Many of the concerns raised in respect of the post-stabilisation work of RAMSI apply in the case of the ECP. These would include:

- Threats of international crime and terrorism in PNG are dwarfed by more pressing internal challenges and the external security agenda sits uncomfortably with local socio-political realities.
- PNG's 'law and order' problems are complex and diverse. They are not simply the reflection of the weakness of the law and justice system. Many are symptoms of larger processes of social and economic change. While law and justice performance needs to be improved, and the ECP can certainly contribute to this, many other issues need to be addressed before we are likely to witness long-term improvements in law and order.
- PNG is already engaged in an ambitious program of reform in the law and justice area and there are likely to be difficulties integrating the new package with the domestic reform agenda.
- The law and justice component of the ECP is highly state-centric while a major dimension of PNG's National Law and Justice Policy emphasises the need to mobilise and strengthen community-based resources in order to build peace at local levels. There is a real risk that the significant role – actual and potential - of non-state entities in the maintenance of peace and good order will simply be ignored.
- How will the economic and other non-law and justice assistance address growing levels of impoverishment and marginalisation contributing to current law and order problems?
- The large number of Australian officials to be placed in line positions raises major issues of long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the renewed engagement by Canberra with our Pacific neighbours is a welcome and timely development. A major window of opportunity has opened. There is a significant role for external assistance in helping address many of the difficulties experienced in parts of the region. The success to date of the Australian-led intervention in Solomon Islands provides ample evidence of what can be achieved. At the same time, assistance needs to be grounded in a thorough understanding of the socio-economic and political complexities of the recipient countries. The outstanding challenges of governance require sustained engagement and are not susceptible to quick or easy solutions. Many aspects of the fragility of the post-colonial Melanesian state reflect its particular history and the weakness of its articulation with the wider society. Current problems cannot simply be reduced to the mendacity of a handful of incompetent or corrupt leaders. Nor can they be resolved through an exclusive focus on strengthening the principal institutions of state. Non-state resources also need to be acknowledged and, where appropriate, mobilised in the larger processes of building state and nation. This requires that greater weight be given to local circumstances, knowledge and expertise. The most difficult challenge of all remains that of long-term sustainability.