

*Australian Foreign Policy and the RAMSI
Intervention in Solomon Islands*

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The Australian government's 5 June 2003 decision to lead a Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) regional intervention into Solomon Islands marked a dramatic change in Australian policy toward the Solomons in particular and the Pacific Islands region in general. It demonstrated Canberra's willingness to play a more assertive role in the domestic affairs of Island countries. Prior to June 2003, Australian authorities had ruled out any possibility of deploying military or police to help Solomon Islands subdue the civil unrest that has affected the country since late 1998 and they had ignored requests for assistance from two previous Solomon Islands prime ministers. Canberra's June 2003 decision reflected a fundamental change in the global security environment following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States; it also illustrates the perception (held particularly by some western countries) that international terrorism has made it difficult to separate external and internal security.

To understand the change in Australia's policy, one must examine not only events in Solomon Islands but also the nature of Anglo-American security policies, as well as Australia's collaboration with the United States and Great Britain in the war against international terrorism. Anglo-American security discourse in turn has influenced the approach of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), especially its focus on strengthening a "failed" state to prevent terrorists from manipulating it and threatening Australia.

The state is important in the context of global security. But the effort to build sustainable peace in Solomon Islands raises other questions: Who controls the state? Can a strong state apparatus alone create a stable nation committed to a shared identity and mission among its peoples? And is the state the only institution that can facilitate peace building and national reconstruction?

To achieve sustainable peace and rebuild Solomon Islands, I argue that both state and non-state entities must be strengthened there. This is especially important in a plural society where the state will always share and compete for power with other organizations. Furthermore, the Regional Assistance Mission must not become so dominant that it creates dependency—as illustrated by the local saying, “Weitim olketa RAMSI bae kam stretem” (Wait for RAMSI to come and fix it)—or is perceived as an occupation. If Solomon Islands stability is important for global (and Australian) security, then it is vital that the intervention enhances rather than undermines local capacity for change.

SOLOMON ISLANDS CIVIL UNREST: A BACKGROUND

To understand what happened, it is valuable to briefly outline the issues and events that engendered the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission. Detailed discussions of the civil unrest are covered elsewhere (eg, Nori 2001; Kabutaulaka 2001, 2002; Bennett 2002; Dinnen 2003).

Canberra’s decision to lead a Pacific Islands Forum intervention came exactly three years to the day after a coup forced then Solomon Islands Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa’alu out of office, and also three years after the PIF countries signed the Biketawa Declaration, which facilitates cooperation among member countries on issues of security.

The coup was the culmination of violent civil unrest that began in late 1998 when some young men from the island of Guadalcanal—where the capital, Honiara, is located—started a campaign of harassment and intimidation targeting settlers from other islands, especially those from the neighboring and populous island of Malaita. The group was formerly known as the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army, then as the Isatabu Freedom Fighters, before settling in with the name the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM). In the months that followed, the IFM campaign became violent and involved murders, rape, and the forceful eviction of thousands of settlers. The movement raised various issues, including allegations of disrespect by settlers, claims for rent for the use of Honiara as a national capital, and demands for a federal system of government—known locally as the “state government system.” The demands were laid out in a document that the Guadalcanal Provincial Government submitted to the Solomon Islands central government in February 1999 (GPG 1999).

By mid-1999, IFM activities had become overtly violent. For example, an IFM member noted in his diary on 12 June 1999: “About 300 armed

malahai [warriors] marched to CDC5,¹ attacked the area around 3 PM. About 6 people from Mala [Malaita] died right on the spot. Three police trucks arrived and a helicopter. The chopper sprayed bullets on us. Thousands of people evacuated from [the] CDC [area]" (confidential source). By July 1999, an estimated 20,000 people—mostly Malaitans—had been evicted from settlements on Guadalcanal. Over time the effects of the unrest were more widespread: The closure of major industries like the Gold Ridge gold mine and Solomon Islands Plantation Ltd on Guadalcanal negatively affected the economy; many Guadalcanal people left Honiara and either went back to rural Guadalcanal or to their spouses' villages; the large number of people returning to villages placed heavy pressure on village resources and services; and relationships between people of different provinces was generally tense.

The Ulufa'alu-led Solomon Islands Alliance for Change government set up a task force and attempted to negotiate with the Isatabu Freedom Movement and address the plight of the displaced people. The government requested help from the Commonwealth Secretariat, which subsequently appointed former Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka as the secretariat's special envoy to assist with the negotiations. A small contingent of unarmed police officers from Fiji and Vanuatu was also deployed.

Rabuka facilitated a number of meetings between the Solomon Islands central government, the Guadalcanal Provincial Government, and IFM leaders, which resulted in the signing of the Panatina Agreement, the Honiara Peace Accord, and the Buala Agreement. These documents committed the government to recognizing and addressing the issues raised by the Isatabu Freedom Movement, and required the movement to give up arms—but they never did so, and the government, despite setting up a task force to address the issues surrounding the civil unrest, never addressed them before being deposed in June 2000.

Displaced Malaitans in Honiara formed a committee to pressure the government to deal with their plight. Many had lost property and had relatives murdered, harassed, or raped, and they wanted the government to help them rebuild their lives (Nori 2001). By the beginning of 2000 some displaced Malaitans, frustrated with the government's perceived inaction and its inability to apprehend Guadalcanal militants, formed their own rival militant organization, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF). Located in Honiara, this group was supported by some prominent Malaita leaders and business people such as Andrew Nori, Alex Bartlett, and Rolland Timo. The Malaita Eagle Force, in collusion with Malaitans in the Royal

Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), began attacking Guadalcanal villages and IFM strongholds on the outskirts of Honiara.

On 5 June 2000 the Malaita Eagle Force, with the support of elements of the police, took over the RSIP armory in Honiara and forced the resignation of Prime Minister Ulufa'alu, himself a Malaitan from Langa-langa. The main reason given for the "takeover" was the government's perceived delay in "seriously and urgently" addressing the ethnic uprising. The Malaita Eagle Force claimed that the prime minister seemed to have done little to stop the conflict (Fugui 2001). On 30 June 2000, the national parliament was summoned under duress, and Manasseh Sogavare from Choiseul was elected prime minister, beating a fellow Choiseulese, Bishop Leslie Boseto, 23 votes to 21. In the weeks that followed, the confrontation between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and the Malaita Eagle Force intensified and an unconfirmed number of people were killed.

Despite this, local civil society organizations such as the Solomon Islands Christian Association, Women for Peace, and the Tasiu (Melanesian Brotherhood), a religious order belonging to the Church of Melanesia (Anglican Church), continued to facilitate negotiations between the conflicting parties. The Australian and New Zealand governments assisted these efforts by sponsoring the venues for negotiation on board their warships. On 2 August 2000 a ceasefire agreement was signed aboard an Australian Navy ship, the HMAS *Tobruk*. Less than twenty-four hours after it was signed, however, the ceasefire agreement collapsed when a MEF member was killed at Kakabona, a periurban village west of Honiara. Despite this, negotiations continued under the auspices of the Australian and New Zealand governments, leading to the signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement on 15 October 2000.

As I elaborate in a later section, the peace agreement, while providing a ceasefire between the two major conflicting parties, did not solve many of the problems emanating from the civil unrest nor address the underlying causes (see also Kabutaulaka 2002).

During the height of the unrest, the Solomon Islands government requested assistance from Australia and New Zealand. In 2000, for example, Prime Minister Ulufa'alu asked for armed police and military assistance to handle the law-and-order problem because of concerns that the Royal Solomon Islands Police was compromised by ethnic divisions. His successor, Manasseh Sogavare, made a similar appeal in 2001. Both requests were ignored.

Australian authorities insisted that although they were willing to provide advice and financial support, the deployment of Australian police and military personnel was out of the question. For example, Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer stated:

Sending in Australian troops to occupy the Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme. It would be widely resented in the Pacific region. It would be difficult to justify to Australian taxpayers. And for how many years would such an occupation have to continue? And what would be the exit strategy? The real show-stopper, however, is that it would not work . . . foreigners do not have answers for the deep-seated problems afflicting Solomon Islands. (*The Australian*, 8 Jan 2003, quoted in Wright 2003)

This position of principle changed dramatically six months later, when the Australian government decided to sponsor and lead a regional assistance mission to Solomon Islands. Downer retracted his earlier statement and said that the Solomon Islands civil unrest had “forced” Australia to produce a new Pacific policy involving “nation rebuilding” and “co-operative intervention.” He also stressed, however, that the initiative was built on the spirit of the Pacific Islands Forum’s Biketawa Declaration and the need to cooperate on matters of regional security: “This is much more the implementation of the Biketawa Declaration under what I call the heading of co-operative intervention, than being something completely new. It’s evolutionary, not revolutionary” (ABC Radio 2003b).

To appreciate *why* Australian policy changed, it is useful to discuss the Solomon Islands civil unrest within the context of the Anglo-American–led war against international terrorism and the kind of discourses and imageries associated with it.

CONCERNS FOR INTERNAL INSTABILITY AND EXTERNAL THREATS

Following the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, Anglo-American–led discussions of security shifted from a concentration on inter- and intra-state conflicts (which had characterized the previous era) to threats from non-state terrorist organizations. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, for example, stated that “the threats we face are no longer from known enemies, nations that have fleets or missiles or bombers that we can see come to the United States, nations

that can be deterred through previous notions such as mutually assured destruction or any other previous defence notions” (ABC Radio 2002b). It was also recognized that while terrorist organizations might not necessarily have formal relationships with conventional states, they could exploit unstable and vulnerable ones as well as those controlled by extreme religious fundamentalist organizations such as the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The targets of terrorist attacks are predominantly, but not exclusively, western democratic countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Spain, and Australia. For these countries, the security challenge is not only to prevent attack within their territories, but also to ensure that terrorists do not manipulate internal instabilities and ineffective states to target their interests abroad.

These concerns engendered the Bush administration’s doctrine of “pre-emptive strike” and provided the impetus for foreign intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Solomon Islands. Although the nature of these conflicts, the contexts in which they occurred, and the issues involved might have differed greatly, the objectives and rationale for intervention were similar. In Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, the purpose was to get rid of an existing regime and replace it with one friendly to—if not controlled by—the intervening power. The removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein’s administration in Iraq was justified by the argument that these regimes not only repressed their own people but also collaborated with international terrorists. In the case of Iraq, Hussein was also alleged to have possessed weapons of mass destruction that could potentially have been made available to terrorists.

In Solomon Islands, intervention was justified by perceptions that internal instability could pose a threat for Australia (ASPI 2003). To understand why Canberra changed its policy in relation to the Southwest Pacific in general and Solomon Islands in particular, we need to examine Australia’s alliance with the United States and Britain in the war against terrorism. Following the attack on the World Trade Center, Australia played an active role in the war against Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaida terrorist organization in Afghanistan. It later participated as a member of the US-led “Coalition of the Willing” in the war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and as a committed ally of the United States in the broader western war against terrorism.

While there is no evidence to suggest that Washington dictated Can-

berra's policies toward the Pacific Islands, it would be fair to say that those policies were influenced by the Bush administration's agenda. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, for example, stated that he would launch a preemptive strike against terrorists in another country if he had evidence they were about to attack Australia, because "it stands to reason that if you believed that somebody was going to launch an attack against your country, either of a conventional kind or of a terrorist kind, and you had a capacity to stop it and there was no alternative other than to use that capacity, then of course you would have to use it" (ABC Radio 2002a). He went on to say that international law could no longer cope with the changed circumstances confronting the world, where the most likely threat to any nation's sovereignty was non-state terrorism. He asserted that weak states that cannot impose order over their societies could be vulnerable to terrorist manipulation (ABC Radio 2002a).

When asked whether his statement implied his government's willingness to mount military attack (or preemptive strike) against its Southeast Asian neighbors, Howard said that "it related to the determination of this government to take legitimate measures if other alternatives were not available, if there were a clear, precise, identifiable threat" (Australia 2002, 9260).

Such statements attracted widespread criticism across Asia and added to discontent associated with the so-called "Howard Doctrine," which was first articulated in late 1999. The Howard Doctrine suggests that Australia has a new role as the United States' peacekeeping "deputy" in the Asia-Pacific region. As Howard said, Australia "has a particular responsibility to do things above and beyond in this part of the world" and was prepared to take a role as the "deputy" of the United States in the region. (It should be noted, however, that Howard did not actually use the term "deputy sheriff" for the United States—that was journalist Fred Brenchley's interpretation of what Howard said in a 1999 interview for the *Bulletin*.) In referring to Australia's role as leader of the multinational force into East-Timor, Howard said:

Despite the inevitable tensions that are involved in East Timor and some of the sensitivities, this has done a lot to cement Australia's place in the region. We have been seen by countries, not only in the region but around the world, as being able to do something that probably no other country could do, because of the special characteristics we have, because we occupy a special place—we are European Western civilization with strong links with North

America, but here we are in Asia. . . . In foreign policy we spent too much time fretting about whether we were in Asia, part of Asia, or whatever. We should be ourselves in Asia. (*Scoop NewsAgent*, 23 Sept 1999)

The Howard Doctrine, like the idea of preemptive strike, attracted much criticism from Southeast Asian leaders concerned about Australia's assertive role in the region, claiming that it smacked of arrogance. In Malaysia, the international affairs bureau chairman of the youth wing of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad's United Malays' National Organisation Party reportedly said: "It only confirms our earlier stand that Australia is a stooge of the United States. What moral right do they have to claim the position as the policeman for Asia?" (*Asia Times Online* 1999).

Malaysia Deputy Home Minister Azmi Khalid observed that the peacekeeping mission in East Timor was an isolated case and Australia's role there could be assumed to apply to the larger picture: "We are actually fed up with their stance—that they are sitting in a white chair and supervising the colored chairs" (*Asia Times Online* 1999).

Despite widespread skepticism in Southeast Asia, most Pacific Island leaders were relatively less critical of Australia's assertive role in the region. At the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in August 2003, Howard was able to influence the PIF agenda and have an Australian elected as secretary-general of the Forum Secretariat. It seemed Island leaders had accepted that Oceania was Australia's "patch" in global security. The only criticism of this doctrine came from PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare, who expressed concerns about Australia's desire to have more control over how its aid money was spent in that country (Chin 2003). The absence of a critical reaction to Australia's assertive role might be partly because many Island leaders wanted Australia to have more visible presence in the region, after it was criticized in previous PIF meetings for neglecting the Pacific Islands in the disbursement of its aid and in trade relations.

Washington, on the other hand, openly welcomed Australia's leadership in the Oceania region, and its willingness to carry out preemptive strikes. The White House saw Howard's position as reflective of US policy, and spokesman Ari Fleisher said that the non-state nature of the enemy "requires a fresh approach to protect the country. Other nations think it through as well, and come to similar conclusions. Australia has been a stalwart ally of the US in the war on terror" (ABC Radio 2002b).

The partnership between Canberra and Washington was further cemented in early May 2003 during Howard's visit to the Bush family

ranch in Texas. Following that visit, Howard signaled his readiness to involve Australia in further “coalitions for action” to confront global security threats: “Our participation as a US ally in the War on Terror might attract some criticism. But a weaker or equivocal response to this threat would not serve Australia well, or decrease our vulnerability. And this would not reduce the prospect of US and other foreign interests being targeted in Australia, with the inevitable loss of Australian lives, or of Australians abroad being incidental victims of terrorism” (Australia 2003). Claiming an “immense moral and humanitarian dividend” from the US-led war on Iraq, and citing Australia’s proposal for armed intervention in Solomon Islands, Howard said that Australia was now enjoying “unparalleled world respect” for its willingness to take a stand (Howard 2003).

Solomon Islands, therefore, became important for Australia only when it was seen that terrorists could use the instability to build bases, create alliances, and pose a threat for Australia, Australian citizens, and their interests (ASPI 2003), as was tragically demonstrated by the Bali bombing of October 2002, where eighty-eight Australian citizens were killed. This brought home to Australians the threat of terrorism and explained in part why Australia chose not to intervene in the Pacific until 2003. The Howard government was quick to capture this Australian realization, saying “the terrorist attacks in the US and Bali, and the arrests in Singapore, Indonesia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia demonstrate the reach of terrorism and show that our region is no longer immune”; it was also quick to highlight the links between Jemaah Islamiah and Al-Qaida (Australia 2003, 18).

The importance of restoring stability in Solomon Islands also came to the fore because of allegations that Indonesia—with a huge Muslim population and home of Jemaah Islamiah—offered to provide military assistance to Solomon Islands (SBS TV 2003). Although it is unclear whether the Solomon Islands government ever asked Indonesia for police or military assistance, it would not be surprising if that possibility influenced Canberra’s decision to intervene.

THE “FAILED STATE” OF SOLOMON ISLANDS

Australia’s concern about internal instability in Solomon Islands and the potential for terrorists to exploit the situation was compounded by what was perceived as the increasing failure of the Solomon Islands state. This “failure” assumed that earlier the Solomon Islands state had been func-

tioning effectively but suddenly failed as a consequence of the civil unrest. This, of course, is debatable, because one could argue that it was the ineffectiveness of the state that caused the unrest. Here, however, I concentrate on why the Solomon Islands state was said to have failed.

The signing of the Townsville Peace Agreement ended the overt violence between the Isatabu Freedom Movement and Malaita Eagle Force by creating a permanent albeit imperfect ceasefire. As required under the agreement, an International Peace Monitoring Team was deployed in 2001 to impound weapons surrendered under the disarmament program. The team consisted of Australians, New Zealanders, Cook Islanders, and Ni-Vanuatu. Its local counterpart, the Peace Monitoring Council, was assigned to “monitor and enforce” the agreement, by having a presence especially on Guadalcanal and Malaita and encouraging communities to reconcile and former militants to hand in their weapons.

However, by the time the Townsville Peace Agreement expired in October 2002, the weapons surrender was only partly successful. In April 2001 it was estimated that about 500 high-powered guns remained in the communities, in the hands of “former” militants (Hegarty 2001). Criminals continued to operate with impunity in a situation of fragile peace and latent war, where general law-and-order problems continued. There was violence, not necessarily between the original parties to the conflict, but within the society at large. With the signing of the peace agreement, conflicts emerged within Guadalcanal and Malaita communities, making the situation complex because it could no longer be described as a conflict between two island groups.

The civil unrest set in place a structure and culture of violence that permeated even the highest institutions of the state. In some cases, former militants teamed up with corrupt politicians, police officers, and public servants to commit crimes and extort millions of dollars from the government in the guise of the local custom of compensation. Individuals and non-state groups subverted and used state infrastructure to build and cultivate cliental relationships that facilitated and sustained vibrant and often financially lucrative arrangements to benefit themselves and chosen associates. It was a situation in which state structures never completely collapsed but were subverted and utilized to serve the interests of a self-defined and privileged few. Some people in the government, the police, and the public service in general increasingly cultivated cliental relationships, used state institutions to serve their interests, and extorted money from the state coffers (Kabutaulaka 2002; ASPI 2003).

The capacity of the state to effectively and efficiently manage the economy, provide basic services, and create a situation of respect for law and order was dramatically weakened. The country's economy deteriorated further, undermining the government's ability to provide and maintain adequate social services. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell by 14 percent in 2000 and 10 percent in 2001. Between 1996 and 2001 exports had declined 60 percent and GDP per capita had halved in real terms since independence in 1978 (ASPI 2003, 5).

The performances of successive governments were poor, creating a situation in which people no longer trusted governments. In 1998 a local nongovernmental organization, the Solomon Islands Development Trust, conducted a survey in which more than 2,500 citizens nationwide were asked to assess the performance of successive governments in four major areas: health services, education opportunities, resource assistance, and the availability of income-generating opportunities. Table I shows that in all cases, none of the governments received an approval rating higher than 61 (out of 100) for their performance in any of these categories.

By mid-2003, the country's debt was registered at A\$352 million, more than three times the country's annual budget. The governor of the Central Bank, Rick Hou, issued a statement reporting that since 1999 the government had defaulted on all interest as well as some principal payments, and had failed to bring spending under control (ABC News, 10 June 2003).

This situation was described vividly by the Central Bank of Solomon Islands: "Since 2000, the Solomon Islands economy had severely contracted causing a fall in incomes, increased unemployment and widespread poverty, and the poor delivery of social services, particularly in the education and health sectors. In fact, without the goodwill of the donor community, services in these two important sectors would have discontinued early in the year" (CBSI 2003, 6).

Government employees were regularly either paid late or not paid at all, causing widespread frustration among them. The deteriorating economy and weakening ability of the state to deliver goods and services affected the lives of Solomon Islanders in both rural and urban areas. Contrary to assertions that life in rural areas continued undisturbed (Field 2003), many village communities suffered from the inability of the state to provide education, health, transportation, and other social services. Furthermore, in the period after the Townsville Peace Agreement, many of the murders, intimidations, and related criminal activities were committed in

Table 1: Report Card of Successive Solomon Islands Governments
(Percent Approval)

	Mamaloni 1989-1993	Hilly 1993-1994	Mamaloni 1994-1995	Mamaloni 1995-1996	Ulufa'alu 1996-2000	Kemakeza 2001-2003
Health Services	47	59	53	53	59	41
Education						
Opportunities	48	55	53	55	60	39
Resource						
Assistance	57	55	58	53	61	39
Availability of						
Money	40	46	44	48	47	37
Average Rating	48	54	52	52	57	40

Source: *Roughan 2004, 3.*

remote rural areas such as the Weather (south) Coast of Guadalcanal and north Malaita.

These situations led to the description of Solomon Islands as a “failed state.” The term was first applied to the Solomons by John Roughan, technical advisor to the Solomon Islands Development Trust, who stated, “Solomon Islands’ lack of national security for its people guarantees it the distinction of being the Pacific’s first failed state” (Roughan 2002, 1). The term and the argument were both later adopted by the *Economist*, which concluded, “The Solomon Islands faces the prospect of becoming the Pacific’s first failed state” (Feb 2003, 39).

Australian authorities similarly took on the notion of the “failing state.” The influential report from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, for example, noted that “Solomon Islands, one of Australia’s nearest neighbors, is a failing state” (ASPI 2003, 2) and said that Australia should be proactive in order to prevent it from being used for transnational crimes such as money laundering, drug trafficking, people smuggling, and terrorism. Similarly, when announcing the proposed Solomon Islands intervention, Australian Prime Minister John Howard told Federal Parliament that it was not in Australia’s interest to have a number of failed states in the Pacific, because “If we do nothing now and the Solomon Islands becomes a failed state, the challenges in the future of potential exploitation of that situation by international drug dealers, money launderers, international terrorism—all of those things, will make the inevitable dealing with the problem in the future more costly, more difficult” (ABC Radio 2003a). About six months into the intervention, the retrospective report of RAMSI Special Coordinator Nick Warner expressed similar reasoning for the continuing work of the intervention force. At the National Security Australia 2004 Conference in Sydney, Warner observed that the collapse of state institutions in the Solomons posed not only internal but regional problems:

From Australia’s perspective, intervening to ensure Solomon Islands did not descend into chaos was now an imperative. Plainly, a dysfunctional Solomon Islands held long term dangers for Australia and the region. A country beholden to armed thugs is a recipe for chronic instability. Such instability is an invitation to transnational crime. Experience elsewhere shows that weak states are also attractive as havens for money laundering, people smuggling, drug smuggling and terrorism. And while there was no evidence that transnational criminals were targeting Solomon Islands, there was no point waiting for this to happen. (Warner 2004, 2)

The Howard government's rationale for intervening in Solomon Islands because of the imminent failure of the state closely echoed the Bush administration's National Security Strategy, which in turn drew attention to failed states as not only a problem for humanitarian activities, but also as a security concern of major proportions: Bush stated that "poverty, weak institutions and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders. . . . America is threatened less by conquering states than by failing ones" (quoted in Underwood 2003, 4).

Similarly, conservative think-tank organizations like Australian Strategic Policy Institute that had influenced the Howard government's foreign policies increasingly warned of the collapse and failure of neighboring states Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (Windybank and Manning 2002; ASPI 2003). So, late in 2003 Australia committed US\$325 million and 250 Australian police officers to addressing law-and-order problems in Papua New Guinea (*PIR*, 2 Dec 2003).

The "failing state" discourse is not simply a description of what occurred in Solomon Islands. Rather, it reflects Australia's long-term perception of both the Pacific Islands and Australia's role in the region. It fits comfortably with the long-term tendency of Australian policy makers, bureaucrats, journalists, and academic political economists to represent the region with predominantly negative images (Callick 2001; ASPI 2003; Windybank and Manning 2003). At the forefront is the image of an "arc of instability" where "leaders are [generally] corrupt, . . . administratively incompetent, irresponsible, duplicitous, uncaring about their children's futures and that they have failed to deliver 'development'" (Fry 1997, 326). This is what, for an earlier episode of skepticism, Fry referred to as "framing the islands" with a "doomsday image": "The images are embedded in a forthright Salvationist message that describes a region in danger of 'falling off the map.' It warns of an approaching 'doomsday' or 'nightmare' unless Pacific Islanders remake themselves—just as Australians have had to do" (Fry 1997, 305). More recently, Ben Reilly pushed the discussion further when he referred to the "Africanisation of the Pacific" (2000)—comparing the problems confronting the Pacific Islands to those in sub-Saharan Africa. He later argued: "Weak governance, widespread corruption, economic mismanagement, rising crime, and violent ethnic conflicts are undermining the stability of the island nations of the South Pacific. As some countries assume the status of Somalia-like 'failed states,' the formerly benign South Pacific islands represent a growing threat to regional security" (Reilly 2003, 62).

One could argue that these kinds of descriptions reflect the realities in the region. Events such as the secessionist war in the Indonesian Province of Aceh, the troubles in West Papua (Irian Jaya), Papua New Guinea's law-and-order problems, the long and festering history of the Bougainville crisis, civil unrest in Solomon Islands, and the Fiji coups of 1987 and 2000 are manifestations of the region's instability.

The "failed state" discourse, and the parallel negative representation of the region, are not simply descriptions of actual situations—not neutral representations of realities—but are in addition a crucial justification for outside intervention and for Canberra's leadership. Such discourse also provides a prescriptive and normative statement about how states should be organized. As a desirable benchmark, it cultivates and perpetuates Australia's paternalistic and patronizing relationship with the Pacific Islands, reflected in often-unacknowledged thinking and practice that the region needs a stronger, wealthier, and democratically advanced country as its leader. For example, Alexander Downer stated: "Well, the problem here is that for Australia we are, perhaps not a problem, but the reality is we are by far the richest country in the region and therefore there isn't really any alternative but for Australia to take a leadership role" (ABC Radio 2003b). Similarly, Paul Kelly, the political analyst for the *Australian*, wrote that Australia's deployment of troops in Solomon Islands "is driven by the recognition that the prime source of instability today is the failed state and that only Australia can exercise the leadership role in the Pacific" (Squires 2003).

It was the combination of these factors—Australia's role in the war against terror, the failing Solomon Islands state, Australia's negative representation of Island countries, and its self-perception as leader and superior arbiter of regional affairs—that, together, contributed to Canberra's decision to intervene. Consequently, they were also the factors that influenced the approach employed by the regional assistance mission in its work in Solomon Islands.

INTERVENTION AND SOLOMON ISLANDS FUTURE(S)

Two of the major objectives of the RAMSI intervention were restoring law and order and rebuilding the nation. So far, there have been marked improvements in law and order. By November 2003, for instance, more than 3,700 weapons (including 660 high-powered military weapons) were removed from the community, and 733 people were arrested on 1,168 charges between 24 July and 24 December 2003 (SIBC News, 20 Nov,

24 Dec 2003). A review of the Royal Solomon Islands Police is aimed at building a professional police force. Rogue police officers have been removed from the force and a number of them have been arrested and charged with criminal misconduct.

The public service is being reviewed with the objective of curbing mismanagement, maladministration, and corruption, and improving efficiency and effectiveness. By early 2005, the economy showed signs of improvement—the country was servicing its loans and public servants were being paid on time. This was due partly to better management of the country's fiscal matters, but more to huge injections of aid. The Solomon Islands 2004 budget was funded largely by aid donors: they were estimated to contribute to 24.6 percent of revenue and 100 percent of the development expenditure (SIG 2003).

So far, much of the RAMSI focus has been on creating an effective and efficient state that would rebuild the nation, resolve the civil unrest, address its underlying causes, do a better job of delivering goods and services, and discourage (if not prevent) terrorists from using the Solomons. While the state-centered approach might be the most rational for both Australia and Solomon Islands, the questions raised at the beginning of this article, and more, must be considered: Who controls the state? Would the establishment of an effective state lead to a loyal nation—one with a collective consciousness, and in some way committed to a shared identity and mission? Is the state capable of restoring relationships between formally conflicting parties? How will the intervention affect the process of peace building and nation rebuilding? Will the intervention address the underlying causes of the civil unrest?

To answer these questions, the nature of the Solomon Islands state and its place in the local society must be examined. The Solomon Islands state has always shared and competed for control of society with other entities, including churches, nongovernmental organizations, traditional political organizations and leaders, and "special interest" groups such as women's and youth organizations. In what Joel Migdal refers to as the "state in society" relationship (2001), the state's authority over society is often measured relative to other entities by its monopoly over violence, its ability to impose order, and the nature and degree of its control over resources.

Since Solomon Islands independence in 1978, the state, while important, was often not the most influential institution in most people's everyday life, and its control over important resources has been limited. Eco-

nomically, for instance, the state has depended largely on harnessing natural resources, primarily from lands and nearshore areas owned by customary owners. Prior to the civil unrest, much of the state's revenue came from the exploitation of forests, minerals, fisheries, and estate crops. Except for fisheries, all these resources are drawn from land, around 87 percent of which is under customary ownership. It is unlikely that the traditional systems of land tenure will change dramatically in the near future. Consequently, it is likely that at the end of RAMSI operations the state will revert to depending on resources it does not own and has little control over.

Apart from economics, most communities usually mobilize their activities and achieve particular objectives around churches, local big-men, or women's organizations. These are often the basis for resolving conflicts and rebuilding group and personal relationships. Despite the law-and-order problems since 1999, many of these social agents of local mobilization have not disintegrated, although some have become dormant out of fear, frustration, and intimidation by those with guns. In actual conflict resolution in Solomon Islands, the state often plays a secondary role. For this reason, it is vital that other entities—churches, landowners, community leaders, women's organizations, youth groups, civil society—feature prominently in the complex processes of peace building and nation rebuilding. There is a need to look beyond the state for ways in which Solomon Islanders themselves could be involved, although state and RAMSI assistance would be helpful.

In the longer term, the question of who controls the state is vital. Despite the rhetoric about working in collaboration with the Solomon Islands government, RAMSI leader Nick Warner, a civilian, exercises significant control, which on some issues borders on pervasive. Furthermore, Australians have been placed in important line positions in such institutions as the police and justice, finance, customs and excise—in general, all of the public service departments responsible for revenue collection and financial management. At present, to a large extent, the Solomon Islands state is influenced, if not directly controlled, from Canberra.

Apart from the Australian focus, aid donors and international institutions such as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and European Union have the ability to impose a significant degree of influence through the conditions attached to their aid; the same is true for major overseas donor countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Japan.

The European Union, for example, has offered funds to the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), conditional on considerable restructuring. Because such restructuring has yet to be done, the European Union has withheld its funding. As a result, by May 2004 the college was not yet opened; the only SICHE school open was New Zealand-funded School of Education.

The state is also under the control of local politicians whose personal opportunism has resulted in questionable reputations and performance. For instance, Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza was implicated in a scandal when he was deputy prime minister in the previous government led by Manasseh Sogavare. At the time of Kemakeza's election as prime minister in 2001, his public declaration of being "friends" with militants raised concerns about the nature of his relationship with them and their criminal activities. The RAMSI intervention propped up his position and sheltered him from parliamentary and public challenges. At the time he requested intervention from Australia, there were rumors that former members of the Malaita Eagle Force—his "friends"—were about to request millions of dollars worth of "compensation" from the government, because their privileged relationship had deteriorated.

A second question is whether an effective and efficient state could invoke common symbols, heroes, memories, and myths among the culturally and ethnically diverse communities that constitute Solomon Islands and, more crucially, whether it is capable of creating what Benedict Anderson has called an "imagined community" (1991). The state-centered approach assumes that an effective state apparatus could not only impose order and deliver goods and services but also create a loyal nation and harmony among a body of people who feel they are its citizens. This assumption is evident from the RAMSI "nation-building" objectives and the way in which they carry out their operations.

This situation is not unique to Solomon Islands. On 22 October 2001, *Newsweek* published an editorial titled "Next: Nation Building Lite," in which author Fareed Zakaria expressed concern about the power vacuum being created in Afghanistan, while commending President Bush for shifting his position on nation building to support "the stabilization of a future government." Zakaria declared: "We have no option but to create some political order in that country. Call it nation building lite" (2001, 53). The goal, in both Afghanistan and Solomon Islands, was to turn these countries not into Jeffersonian democracies, but into at least quasi-functioning states where roads, bridges, and water supplies would be restored,

violent conflicts and law-and-order problems ended, and an institutional climate established to ensure that terrorists did not use failed states venues for launching attacks on western countries (Croucher 2003, 6).

Third, in order for real and lasting peace to be achieved—the absence of violence, the presence of justice, and the restoration of social relationships—there is a need not only to reinstate law and order but also to repair relationships between parties formerly in conflict. So far, the RAMSI focus on law and order favored retributive justice, hence the huge number of people arrested and charged. This creates a favorable impression in the short term, but in the longer term Solomon Islanders must consider the question of how the judicial system can cope with processing the huge numbers of cases, the price of keeping people in prison, and the more basic reality of people's relationships being extremely difficult to restore and repair. This is especially important in a society where wrongs committed are often perceived as not between two individuals, but between groups: families, lineages, and communities. Generally, Solomon Islanders do not see imprisoning one individual as a way of mending basic social relationships.

While Canberra's doctrine of the "failed state" focuses on state infrastructure, some Solomon Islanders consider that greater emphasis should be accorded to leadership. They argue that poor leadership, especially among those elected nationally, is one of the country's most serious problems. Central Bank Governor Rick Hou, for example, was reported to have stated that the country's economic problems could be attributed to the "rotteness" of leadership (SIBC News, 21 Nov 2003). He asserted that unless the crisis of leadership was addressed, Solomon Islands would continue to face serious socioeconomic problems.

Similarly, leading Solomon Islander academic Kabini Sanga argued: "The Australian-led and New Zealand-supported external armed intervention (called "helpem fren") in the Solomon Islands is dealing with a minor issue. The real crisis, the one requiring priority attention, is leadership" (2003, 5). He suggested, "The 'helpem fren' mission should quickly give way to a New Zealand-facilitated (not led) 'iumi wantok' (we are neighbours) strategy, aimed at supporting the strengthening of leadership capacity and a culture of leadership" (Sanga 2003, 7).

John Roughan, for many years a regular commentator on the Solomon Islands political economy, stated that the country's problems "show up our leaders' special talent for destroying the country by lining their own deep greedy pockets first" (2002, 2). Similarly, Transform Aqorau, the

first Solomon Islander to earn a doctorate in law and currently the legal advisor to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, stated that the problem in Solomon Islands lies in the “inept politicians it has had for the past twenty-five years. There is nothing wrong about the country and its people. The problem has been the failure of its leaders to rise to the challenge and responsibility which they carry. Unless there is a sea of change that is fundamental enough to ensure good, honest leadership at the highest echelons of government, Solomon Islanders will continue to suffer the consequences of poor leadership” (Aqorau 2003, 1). It is true that RAMSI leaders did say no person was above the law. On 18 November 2003, Daniel Fa’afunua, the minister for communication, aviation, and meteorology, was arrested and charged with a number of criminal offenses and later sentenced to three years in jail.

How can the crucial leadership problem be addressed? This is not an issue that outside intervention can resolve, nor is it one that can easily be addressed through institutional changes. It involves the more basic challenge of changing the culture of leadership over a long period of time.

CONCLUSION

Australia’s willingness to lead the Pacific Islands Forum regional intervention into Solomon Islands cannot be understood by looking at what happened in Solomon Islands alone. It is also necessary to examine changes in the global security discourse, especially approaches to the war against international terrorism. Australia became an important player through its partnership with the United States and Great Britain.

The decision to lead the regional intervention force into Solomon Islands was a “preemptive strike” to prevent the threat of terrorist attack on Australia, its citizens, and its interests in the region. Canberra became interested in Solomon Islands only when it became an important piece of Australia’s foreign policy “jigsaw puzzle.”

The intervention was justified by the “failing state” discourse, which argued that the Solomon Islands state was collapsing and prone to being used by terrorist organizations. The decision was made easier because of Canberra’s long-term negative representation of the Pacific Islands, and its perception of its role as leader, protector, and superior arbiter of regional affairs.

Foreign intervention, while useful in the short term, does not offer an easy solution to internal problems. It might create a quasi-functioning

state that is able to restore order and serve the interests of the intervening forces, but it often does not address the underlying causes of civil unrest, nor can it build long-term peace.

Moreover, in the Solomon Islands case, the focus on the state, while important, must not be allowed to overshadow other entities that could contribute positively to peace building and nation rebuilding. It is necessary to restore not only a functional state but also relationships between people.

Finally, for intervention to be successful it must cultivate a capacity for positive change within the country; otherwise it reinforces a culture of dependency. The role of the intervening force must be one of *facilitating* positive development rather than *dictating* it. In Solomon Islands, Australian interests and discourses must not be privileged over those of Solomon Islanders. If that happens Solomon Islanders will continue to say “*letem olketa RAMSI kam stretem*”—wait for RAMSI to come and fix it.

* * *

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Note

1 CDC stands for the “Commonwealth Development Corporation,” the British conglomerate that owns the oil palm plantation at the Guadalcanal Plains, which is managed by its subsidiary, the Solomon Islands Plantation Limited (SIPL). The numbers, for example CDC5, refer to the blocks.

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Abstract

The Australian government's decision to lead a Pacific Islands Forum regional intervention into Solomon Islands marked a dramatic change in Australian policy toward the Solomons in particular and the Pacific Islands region in general. It demonstrated Australia's willingness to play a more assertive role in the domestic affairs of Pacific countries. The decision also reflected fundamental changes in

the global security environment following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States and the perception that international terrorism has made it difficult to separate external and internal security. Canberra was influenced by the idea that terrorists could use “failed states” to pose security problems for Australia (and other western countries). While Australia’s concerns about its own security as well as the influence of Anglo-American security policies have led the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands to concentrate on rebuilding the Solomon Islands state, this paper argues that the post-conflict nation building process must include other institutions besides the state—such as churches, community leaders, nongovernmental organizations, women’s groups—that already have an influence on society. This is particularly important for Solomon Islands, a country where there have always been multiple centers of power, with the state not always the most important. Further, post-conflict nation building must also involve the mending and rebuilding of relationships between peoples while ensuring that foreign assistance does not create a culture of dependency.

KEYWORDS: conflict, peace, intervention, development, security, terrorism, leadership