

This year's review focuses on Australian policy toward the Pacific Islands, as there were important developments concerning Canberra's role in regional security and in the Pacific Islands Forum. Because Australia is the region's primary aid donor and leads in setting the political agenda, shifts in its national policy warrant careful consideration. In 2003 Australian Prime Minister John Howard took unprecedented interest in the region. He became much more assertive in pursuing Australia's agenda for the microstates, notably with regard to intervening in Solomon Islands, advocating good governance, and taking measures against terrorism. This review explores the shifts in rhetoric, policy, and processes, and weighs their impact for Australia's relations with the region. To establish the context for policy shifts, it is useful to begin by examining a recent, wide-ranging, and timely report on relations with the region by an Australian Senate committee.

In August 2003, the Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Trade References Committee produced a comprehensive 312-page report on Australia's relations with the region. The committee reviewed the performance of past policies, made recommendations for improvements in current practices, and proposed innovations. In the political domain, the committee repeatedly alluded to the need for Australia to relate to the region on the basis of an "equal partnership"

and thereby dispel concerns about a "big brother syndrome" (FADTR 2003, 156, 158). The current government was criticized for its inattention to the region and its disregard for cultivating relations with Pacific leaders. In this respect Howard's absences from the Forum early in his tenure were noted. Overall the report reflected a perceived need for greater engagement with the region on the part of Australian ministers and parliamentarians.

Australia's policy of processing asylum seekers in the microstates, otherwise known as the Pacific Solution, also came under fire (see von Strokirch 2002). It was argued that this policy "feeds the perception within the region that Australia's domestic political considerations are more important than broader regional issues" (FADTR 2003, xxvii). Questions were also raised about the strategy's lack of transparency, its effect on political stability, and its long-term social impact (FADTR 2003, xxvii). The committee recommended that the policy be terminated. Another example of Australia's apparently uncaring attitude toward its neighbors was its refusal to countenance Tuvalu's request to consider accepting environmental refugees as a result of rising sea levels associated with climate change. The committee suggested that Australia give assurances to Tuvalu that assistance would be forthcoming (FADTR 2003, 170).

In the economic domain, the Senate committee made several practical recommendations including reduction of non-tariff barriers to regional trade; a long-term plan for regional cooperation to promote tourism; and a pilot program allowing Pacific Islanders to undertake seasonal work in Australia. With regard to good governance and development policy, the committee emphasized that Australia must be better informed about country-specific culture and politics in order to tailor policies accordingly. Indeed, the report set an example by devoting a substantial section to country case studies. The need for local consultation and participation in aid planning and delivery was stressed. The tendency for Australian aid to be crisis driven was also criticized for distorting and skewing priorities. Aid should not be diverted from long-term development strategies to address periodic crises; instead, an emergency fund should be set up for this purpose. The committee noted Australia's preoccupation with reform of central governments in the Pacific. It observed that this was occurring at the expense of equally important rural development programs (FADTR 2003, xv–xxi).

The Senate committee believed that many of the weaknesses in the relationship stemmed from widespread ignorance and lack of interest in the Pacific Islands on the part of Australians (including politicians and media) and an overall neglect of bilateral, people-to-people links. The committee recommended the establishment of an Australia-Pacific Council to enhance awareness, interaction, and understanding between Australia and the region. The functions of such a

council could include promotion of visits and exchanges; institutional links in the areas of politics, culture, commerce, and media; and Pacific studies in Australian schools and universities. The committee also suggested the development of stronger people-to-people links by drawing more on the expertise of Australian volunteers, businesses, public service departments, and Parliament (FADTR 2003, xxix–xxx).

While most of the Senate report's analyses and recommendations were constructive and worthy of consideration, there were deficiencies. For instance, the committee deliberately omitted discussion of the situation in West Papua, instead forwarding the matter to a Senate enquiry on Indonesia. The omission was ill advised in view of West Papua's historical association with the other Pacific Islands and the serious concerns of many Forum leaders over human rights and self-determination in the territory. It was also inconsistent, as two other dependencies, New Caledonia and the Northern Marianas, were included in the report's terms of reference. Also, although the committee acknowledged communal land rights as significant in Pacific Island society and approaches to development, the report treated this topic only superficially and ultimately relegated it to the "too difficult" basket, without making any recommendations. This failure to grapple with a sensitive topic was unfortunate, given the prominent role of land rights disputes in regional conflicts. While the committee advocated that conceptions of good governance must be adapted to political and cultural contexts, there was no parallel consideration of the

merits or shortcomings of western economic models for microstates.

The most radical recommendation of the Senate report was a proposal for a formal Pacific Economic and Political Community, along the lines of the European Union. The committee envisaged this including a common currency (the Australian dollar), labor market, standards for democratic governance, and fiscal and legal policies, as well as shared defense and security arrangements. The report recommended establishing a group of eminent persons, with experts drawn from all the Forum member countries, to explore the scope and feasibility of this concept. The group would tour the region and meet with governments to ascertain support for the idea (FADTR 2003, XIII). In fielding this proposal, the committee could have given greater recognition to the fact that the Forum and associated agencies are already pursuing regional cooperation in many areas. There is scope to broaden and deepen existing cooperation before proceeding to a formal union. Indeed, there is likely to be resistance to a formal union, especially among Melanesian states, due to sensitivities about sovereignty and perceptions of neocolonial motives on Australia's part. As a result, the Senate's proposal is unlikely to even be considered in the foreseeable future.

Concerns about neocolonialism are genuine for Pacific Island microstates as they seek to protect their sovereignty. These are relatively young states, having obtained independence in the last major wave of decolonization in the 1970s and 1980s. Older generations thus have a living memory of colonialism. In most cases the

colonial experience in the Pacific was not as exploitative or painful as elsewhere. Nevertheless, colonial powers still exercised absolute control over Pacific dependencies. These nations are also aware that many challenges they face today are rooted in colonialism. For example, arbitrary national boundaries, patterns of migration, privatisation of land, poorly planned exploitation of natural resources, and lack of preparation for independence all planted the seeds for contemporary tensions and conflicts. In view of historical experience, it is not unreasonable for Pacific Island leaders to be sceptical, and at times resistant, to the imposition of externally generated policy agendas.

Conservative Australian policy-makers and commentators on Pacific Island affairs, including the current prime minister, have largely displayed indifference to such historic legacies and resulting Island concerns. Instead they blame microstates for their current problems and assert that Australia has a right, if not a duty, to call the shots and impose radical policies for reform on the microstates. The effective collapse of the Solomon Islands state added grist to the mill of conservatives seeking much tougher conditions on aid, or a cessation of aid altogether (Hughes 2003). The Australian prime minister did not agree with the notion of cutting aid to the Pacific. Yet the tone of public debate following the Solomon Islands intervention enabled Howard to drum up domestic support and wear down Islander opposition to his new "hands-on" approach and agenda for the region. To this end he joined forces with the mainstream media in evoking doomsday visions of the

Pacific Islands: “We’re in an era now where these countries are just going to disappear in chaos and ill-governance if we don’t intervene” (*The Australian*, 13 Aug 2003).

As noted by the Senate committee, the Australian media is, with a few notable exceptions, woefully ill informed about the Pacific. As a result, representations of the Pacific Islands are riddled with references to the arc of instability, coups and ethnic conflict, failed states, crime, and lawlessness. Even Greg Sheridan, the foreign affairs editor of the national daily, engaged in inaccurate and alarmist generalizations about the region: “While the Solomons is the worst case . . . the whole region is suffering from similar problems. . . . The South Pacific has among the worst development records in the world” (*The Australian*, 7–8 Jun 2003). In fact, these extreme problems are limited to the subregion of Melanesia, notably in recent times to Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. While Fiji and Vanuatu have experienced coups or violent challenges to elected government in the past, they are currently stable. The remaining micro-states in Polynesia and Micronesia have for the most part enjoyed levels of peace, stability, democracy, and respect for human rights unknown in much of the developing world. There is thus much cause for resentment at the revival of the discourse of doom-saying and belittlement of the Pacific Islands.

This perspective is not new and was most associated with the Australian National University’s Pacific 2010 research project in the early 1990s. However, its origins date back to colonial-era attitudes of superiority

toward the Pacific. The discourse generalizes on the basis of worst-case scenarios while ignoring achievements in national development and regional cooperation. It also fails to acknowledge the scope for indigenous creativity in coming up with solutions and assumes that these can only come from the outside. This discourse has been comprehensively criticized and discredited by scholars such as Greg Fry and Epeli Hau’ofa, not to mention a host of nongovernment agencies. It is unfortunate that the Australian prime minister appears to have adopted this perspective and accompanying rhetoric, with damaging consequences for Australia’s relations with the region.

A brief report by Australia’s official overseas aid agency, AusAID, provided a welcome corrective to public commentary on the Pacific, which it summed up as “simplistic” and lacking in objectivity (AusAID 2003, ii). The report took issue with three key misrepresentations of the Pacific by the media, namely that: “since independence development has gone backwards; corruption, poor leadership and lawlessness are endemic, and aid has failed and has promoted rent seeking and fiscal indiscipline” (AusAID 2003, 1). Instead, it argued, “The region is confronted with significant challenges and seemingly intractable problems. But it is not homogenous and there are strong examples of where countries have had success that need to be considered alongside failures. There have been substantial improvements in social indicators, particularly life expectancy. . . . Corruption and weak adherence to the rule of law are significant problems. But poor economic and financial

management, again stemming from weak capacity, is arguably a greater source of wastage and inappropriate use of resources" (AusAID 2003, ii).

The Pacific Islands are painfully aware of their dependence on aid, notably from Australia, and of their obligation to submit to reasonable conditions on such aid. However, the extent of their dependence makes them even more inclined to resist perceived acts of neocolonialism, whether these be substantive or symbolic in nature. Prime Minister Howard made the claim that the concept of neocolonialism is no longer relevant in Australia's relationship with the Pacific Islands: "Neo-colonial is old jargon. We've passed through that" (*The Australian*, 13 Aug 2003). This attitude is dangerously dismissive of genuine Islander concerns. The need for sensitivity on this score was emphasized in the Senate committee's report and by another analyst advocating the Solomon Islands intervention: "Any policy approach to the problems of the Southwest Pacific must avoid the perils and mistakes of neo-colonialism" (ASPI 2003, 9).

Notwithstanding regional ambivalence toward Australia, its involvement is clearly desired, and arguably indispensable, as the major aid donor to individual states and also for the diplomatic energy and resources it contributes to regional organizations. The microstates positively encourage Australia's continuing engagement with the region, albeit with abiding concerns about the need for balance and mutual respect in the relationship. In recognition of Australia's central role in regional affairs, Pacific leaders cautiously welcomed the new level of commitment to the region evi-

dent in Howard's rhetoric and policy in 2003. The substance of Australian engagement has been evident in several significant ways: leading the Solomon Islands intervention, prime ministerial involvement in the Forum, funding of initiatives in regional cooperation, an invigorated campaign to tackle corruption, and a series of measures to counter terrorism.

Australia's response to Solomon Islands Prime Minister Kemakeza's request in April 2003 for an intervention force in his country cannot be faulted in terms of legitimating the exercise and thus removing grounds for charges of neocolonialism. The Australian government went to great lengths to ensure that this new form of "cooperative intervention" was properly authorized. First it obtained endorsement by the Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers on 30 June, thus activating the Forum's year 2000 Biketawa declaration on regional security. Thereafter came a formal invitation from the Solomon Islands governor-general on 4 July and unanimous passage of enabling legislation in the Solomon Islands Parliament on 11 July (Howard 2003). The exercise was further legitimated by support from the secretaries-general of both the United Nations and the Commonwealth. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) also avoided the appearance of unilateral action on Australia's part, as it included personnel from Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga.

The Regional Assistance Mission, otherwise known in Pidgin as Operation Helpem Fren, was duly deployed in late July. The operation was judged a great success in gaining overwhelm-

ing community support and an immediate improvement in law and order, notably with the removal of 3,000 weapons in the first three weeks. Key individuals involved in perpetrating violent crimes were apprehended. Australia contributed approximately 1,500 defence personnel, over 200 federal police and protective services personnel, as well as officials from government departments to assist in reform of the public service. The operation is costing Australia an estimated A\$200 million in the first year (Howard 2003). However, concerns have been expressed by nongovernment organizations over the narrowness of “RAMSI’s stated focus on law and justice problems, the shortcomings of public institutions and economic imperatives” (Oxfam 2003, i). The intervention runs the risk of neglecting long-term causes of conflict relating to internal displacement and migration, land rights, alienated youth, uneven development, and poverty. Arguably, the same charge could be leveled at Australia’s current policy priorities in the Pacific Islands as a whole.

Australia and the Forum have also been criticized for not acting sooner in Solomon Islands. Australia was asked to intervene in Solomon Islands in April 2000, before the June coup that ousted the elected government. This request was legitimate as it was made by the Solomon Islands prime minister with bipartisan support (Kerr 2003). But at that time Australia refused to countenance direct intervention, as did the secretary-general of the Forum. Instead, Australia facilitated the Townsville Peace Agreement in October 2000, which brought about a tentative ceasefire and the

surrender of many weapons. However, the peace process stalled, militants retained many weapons, and lawlessness continued. As a result the Solomon Islands government, economy, and internal security suffered massive damage, to the point of being labeled a failed state. Experience elsewhere in the world suggests that it is cheaper and more effective to assist a weak state than to revive a failed state (ASPI 2003, 29). However, as late as January 2003 Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer stated that it would be “folly in the extreme” for Australia to intervene in Solomon Islands, mainly because “it would not work” even if it was “dressed up” as a multilateral initiative (*The Australian*, 3 Jan 2003). The reasons for Australia’s about-face on this matter are explored later.

Notwithstanding its delayed response, Australia received much credit for leading, and to a large extent financing, a major regional security initiative in Solomon Islands. It is thus unfortunate that Howard somewhat squandered the resulting plaudits and goodwill by stating that he regards RAMSI as a template for Australian-led intervention in other island microstates should the need arise. This pronouncement unnecessarily alarmed Pacific leaders, who harbor concerns for sovereignty in the face of external intervention to rectify internal governance or security problems. A state’s sovereignty could not be more compromised than by an external force taking control of its affairs, regardless of that force’s credentials, multilateral or otherwise.

In 2003, Howard demonstrated an unprecedented level of involvement in the Pacific Islands Forum. This con-

trusted starkly with the prime minister's actions during the early years of Australia's Coalition government when he missed three annual meetings of Forum leaders. The new hands-on approach was coupled with a series of proposals for regional cooperation. Two initiatives unveiled by Howard at the Forum were proposals to pool regional resources in policing (cosponsored by Fiji and New Zealand) and aviation, in order to benefit from economies of scale, to share expertise, and to improve the quality of service in these areas. Forum island leaders also proposed to investigate the pooling of resources for shipping beyond those offered by the existing Pacific Forum Line. Australia agreed to fund studies to explore all three areas slated for regional cooperation, including A\$15 million for the regional policing project and an additional A\$12.5 million for the Pacific Region HIV/AIDS project (PIF 2003). Clearly these are areas in which Forum island members welcome input, and even leadership, from Australia, by virtue of its size and resources.

Often it is not so much the content of Australia's agenda for the Pacific that is objectionable as the attitudes underpinning it and the way the message is delivered. In 2003 Howard adopted an aggressive style in his pronouncements on the region to the media and in his direct dealings with Pacific Island leaders. In terms of promoting good governance, Howard's heavy-handed approach diverted attention from the merits of proposals, rendering them controversial. Prior to the Forum meeting he engaged in a process of agenda building for his campaign to stamp out corruption in the islands by overtly threatening to

cut off aid to states that did not comply with Australia's increased conditionality (*The Australian*, 26–27 Jul 2003). The message was repeatedly driven home by reference to the Solomon Islands crisis and how this fate awaited other microstates if they failed to get their act together by embracing Howard's reform agenda. Adoption of the Forum Principles of Good Leadership was clearly designed to reinforce the Australian focus on fighting corruption (PIF 2003, Annex 2).

The Australian prime minister's new assault on corruption among aid recipients closely mirrored the approach adopted by the United States a year earlier and was no doubt inspired by that precedent. In March 2002 President George W Bush had announced a new US\$5 billion development package to assist developing countries, to begin in 2004. It features strict conditionality, whereby countries can only qualify for aid from the newly created Millennium Challenge Account if they demonstrate that they are governing justly, investing in people, and promoting economic freedom. Minimum requirements have been set for governing justly with reference to civil liberties, political rights, accountability, rule of law, and, at the top of the list, control over corruption (Bush 2002). Australia's approach has not been codified as systematically as the new US policy, yet aid conditionality relating to good governance was certainly increased in 2003 with regard to Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. A key condition of aid to both countries was that they allow an influx of Australian police and public servants to facilitate Canberra's

desired reforms. In September, PNG Prime Minister Michael Somare attacked this aid conditionality as an assault on sovereignty, but he had little choice, and by December the first of an estimated 230 police and 60 administrators arrived in Port Moresby (*PM*, Jan 2004).

Concerns about Australian neo-colonialist tendencies are not limited to safeguarding national sovereignty but extend to maintaining the integrity and regional identity of the preeminent intergovernmental organization, the Pacific Islands Forum. Indeed, the Forum was founded in 1971 because the South Pacific Commission was accurately viewed as the creature of the colonial powers. The commission was also unsatisfactory from an Islander perspective because it prohibited discussion of “political issues” of profound concern for the Pacific Islands, including nuclear testing and decolonization. Islanders were understandably apprehensive about the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand in the Forum, but they believed that the benefits outweighed the potential costs. To some extent, their concerns have been vindicated. On many occasions Australia has reined in regional antinuclear and anticolonial initiatives. Since John Howard’s coalition government came to power, it has toned down regional statements concerning climate change, nuclear waste shipments, and West Papua.

In 2003, Howard’s aggressive approach was further evidenced in his flouting of two long-standing traditions in the Forum. First, he put forward an Australian candidate for the position of Forum secretary-general. It has been an established and cher-

ished convention, at least for Island members, that this office be filled by a Pacific Islander. The second break with tradition was precipitated by the first, because Howard was unable to gain a consensus agreement in support of his candidate, former diplomat Greg Urwin. New Zealand then lent support to Australia’s campaign and their combined lobbying brought enormous pressure to bear on Island leaders. As a result, an unprecedented secret ballot determined the Australian as the winning candidate. This move was coupled with an agreement to review the Forum and its Secretariat, the results of which would be implemented by the new secretary-general in 2004 (PIF 2003, paragraphs 58–59).

After the Forum meeting Howard added insult to injury by proclaiming, “This body is seen as having new authority, new relevance and everybody will go from this meeting feeling that they’re part of something that will punch even harder and more effectively in the region than before” (*IB*, Sep 2003). The less-than-diplomatic implication of his statement was that Pacific Islanders had been incapable of running the Forum effectively and that Urwin’s undertaking a shake-up of the Secretariat would remedy the situation. Howard also proclaimed triumphantly that this meeting of the Forum was a “watershed,” with the subtext that Australia had succeeded in imposing its agenda (*IB*, Sep 2003). Regional responses to Howard’s domination of the Forum were summed up in the headlines of Islands Business magazine: “Australia’s Regional Push Risks a Backlash: Pacific Way Kicked to a Side Street called History”; “Howard Hits with

Heavy Hands;” and “Lording Over the Pacific: Australia’s John Howard’s Push into the Region” (*IB*, Sep 2003). Moreover, Island leaders warned the incoming secretary-general: “You must focus your approach on making sure that . . . the developmental aspects of the region remain the priority and not Australia’s programmes” (*IB*, Sep 2003). The Australian prime minister’s rhetoric and disproportionate influence on Forum decisions are significant as they indicate that Pacific Island members are losing control of their Forum. The Forum may also lessen its clout on an international level if it loses its regional identity and is perceived as a vehicle for Australian foreign policy.

This begs the question of why Howard has adopted an aggressive interventionist approach to the region after showing such indifference in the late 1990s. When Howard came to power in 1996 he expressed relatively little interest in the Asia Pacific region in general, much less the Pacific Islands, but this changed with the 1999 Australian-led international peacekeeping operation in East Timor (*INTERFET*). Howard’s interest then broadened to a global perspective following the terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001 and the ensuing “war on terror.” The Bali terrorist attack in 2002, which resulted in the deaths of eighty-eight Australians, prompted greater attention to islands in the Pacific. The close alliance with the United States also inspired Australia to play “deputy sheriff” in the Asia-Pacific region. While this self-appointed role did not wash with Southeast Asian states, Pacific Islands had little choice but to accept it. Prime Minister Howard

was emboldened by Australia’s role in East Timor, Bougainville, and even Iraq, as well as by the invitation to lead a force in Solomon Islands. However, being invited to intervene in a state in crisis does not mean that Australia is welcome to dictate the future of other microstates, much less the region as a whole.

Australia and the United States currently share a preoccupation with the threat of terrorism. In turn, their newfound concern with weak states stems from the belief that these are vulnerable to exploitation by international criminals, notably terrorists. Australia’s 2003 white paper on foreign policy highlighted security concerns in the Pacific. Under the heading “The South Pacific Matters to Australia,” the report stated: “Instability in the South Pacific affects our ability to protect large and significant approaches to Australia. . . . transnational crime in and through the region—terrorism, drug trafficking, people smuggling, illegal immigration and money laundering—is a growing threat to Australia and the South Pacific countries themselves” (*DFAT* 2003, 93). Solomon Islands in particular was portrayed as a “petri dish in which transnational and non-state security threats can develop and breed” (*ASPI* 2003, 13). This concern was highlighted by Prime Minister Howard: “We know that a failed state on our doorstep will jeopardise our own security” (*The Australian*, 2 Jul 2003). In a reflection of shared concerns, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage praised Australia’s intervention in Solomon Islands, noting that “We realise that failed states can reach out and touch us badly” (*The Australian*, 13 Aug 2003).

Whereas the end of the cold war signaled the declining strategic relevance of Pacific microstates for great powers, the “war on terror” has reversed this trend.

Apart from propping up weak states, this interest in bolstering Pacific Islands’ security against terrorism has focused on money laundering, identity fraud, flags of convenience for ships, and border protection. In March 2002 Australia, with the United States and New Zealand, sponsored a counter-terrorism workshop for the Pacific Islands. The year before, the international community launched measures to combat the financing of terrorism, notably United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 (UNSC 2001), and the eight special measures recommended by the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering (FATF 2001). In keeping with these initiatives, the Forum adopted the 2002 Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security (PIF 2002, Annex 1) and subsequently began to develop a regional framework featuring model legislative provisions to address terrorism and transnational organized crime (PIF 2003, paragraph 17). At the 2003 Forum, leaders also agreed to explore the scope for Forum members to join the international Identity Fraud Register project (PIF 2003, paragraph 25).

Australia has led these regional efforts, including a joint campaign by regional police chiefs to prevent money laundering and increase border protection. A four-day meeting on this issue was hosted and chaired by Australia in November. At that time Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty reiterated the risk that Pacific Islands could be used by

terrorists as “staging points to commit crimes not only in Australia, but in other countries” (*The Australian*, 25 Nov 2003). In addition, Australia has provided countries in the region with assistance including education in counter-terrorism investigation to improve their response during terrorist attacks; training to combat money laundering; and guidance in drafting counter-terrorism legislation (DFAT 2003, 39). Australian aid has also focused on strengthening law enforcement and border security.

Clearly, combating terrorism is of concern to the international community, not least the United States and Australia, which are prime targets for future attacks. The Pacific Islands share these concerns in a general sense and have agreed on measures to prevent terrorists from exploiting their weaknesses. However, terrorism is considered a more peripheral threat for most Pacific Island states and their inhabitants. It is hardly conceivable that terrorists could set up operations without detection in these small communities. Indeed, the only place where groups with terrorist links have taken up residence is in the Indonesian province of West Papua. Concerns over Laskar Jihad and its connections with Jemaah Islamiyah have repeatedly been voiced by Papua New Guinea but to date have not been heeded by Australia (*The Australian*, 8–9 Feb 2003). Instead, the main threat faced by the microstates in the current climate is that if they fail to comply with antiterrorist measures, they will incur sanctions including conditions on, or even cuts to, aid. This has already happened in the case of Nauru, which was placed under enormous pressure by the United

States to abolish its offshore banking and passport schemes in 2003 (*The Australian*, 2–3 Aug 2003).

Surely Pacific Islanders can be forgiven for being cynical about renewed interest in their region. Just as the cold war saw allies employing the policy of strategic denial in the Pacific, so too the new war on terror has seen external powers, notably Australia and the United States, seek to deny terrorists the use of this region for diverse illegal activities. Due in large part to its own national security concerns, Australia has deepened its engagement with the region and adopted a more assertive approach in pushing its agenda, both at the Forum and in bilateral relations. The key question for the Pacific Islands is whether the focus on a fairly narrow conception of security will detract attention from what the region perceives as paramount problems. Terrorism poses far less of a threat to livelihood in the Pacific (or elsewhere for that matter) than the projected impact of climate change, the depletion of fish stocks, or the inexorable spread of HIV/AIDS. By the same token, Islanders are concerned that donor preoccupations with narrow conceptions of good governance, currently focused on corruption, not be pursued at the expense of long-term strategies to promote sustainable development.

The Australian government should note the recommendations of its Senate committee and ensure that its Pacific policies reflect regional concerns and are not driven solely by Australia's national interest and current preoccupations. Australia should not be deterred from deeper engagement with the region for fear of being

charged with neocolonialism. Yet for its diplomacy to be effective, Australia must be mindful that the postcolonial states are sensitive to incursions on their sovereignty and, by extension, the hijacking of their Forum. John Howard's approach is thus counter-productive to his ostensible aims. An insensitive and domineering style alienates the leaders whose cooperation is needed to implement reforms. It is accepted wisdom in the aid community that if people are not consulted and involved in determining new policies, those policies will be resisted or simply ignored. In recent years Australia has repeatedly imposed its agenda concerning issues of good governance and security at the Forum by virtue of its status as the prime aid donor as well as by exploiting Pacific cultural protocols of seeking consensus. Howard may be able to coerce superficial acceptance of his agenda at the Forum, but it is doomed to fail if genuine support is lacking.

Albeit on a smaller stage, the Australian prime minister appears to be emulating President Bush's uncompromising unilateralist foreign policy infused with a heavy dose of realism. Just as the United States is ill served by the Bush administration's cavalier attitude toward multilateral institutions and international opinion, Australia's reputation and influence in the Pacific could also suffer due to Howard's heavy-handed treatment of microstates and the Forum as a whole. Both the US and Australian governments would do well to remember that lasting influence is derived from legitimacy and persuasive diplomacy. Regardless of the content of Australia's Pacific policies, if the process and

rhetoric are perceived as illegitimate, it will undermine their effectiveness in the region.

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