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Unipolar Anxieties: Australia’s Melanesia Policy after the Age of Intervention

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Abstract

As a consequence of its membership of a US-centred global alliance network, Australia’s regional obligations in the South Pacific are as pertinent to Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands’s drawdown as they were to its inception. Canberra’s imperatives in the Pacific have been stabilization and the exclusion of hostile interests. Three challenges—the rise of China, the Islamic State insurgency, and the democratic discontinuities in key regional players—have undermined interest in interventions in both Australia and the US. The growing influence of Asian powers in the Pacific has given rise to new exclusion concerns in Australia, and to a greater degree in the US. Rather than retreat from the South Pacific, Canberra has an opportunity to re-conceive the Pacific as an arc of opportunity, particularly in developing new forms of engagement with rising regional powers.

Key words: Alliance, intervention, strategic exclusion, stabilisation, risk management

It is in the South Pacific that Australia’s foreign policy mostly resembles the global challenges and frustrations of its closest ally, the United States. In the South Pacific, Australia is the resident superpower: it represents 94.5 per cent of the gross domestic product of Oceania; 98 per cent of the region’s defence and security spending; 60 per cent of the region’s population; and contributes 60 per cent of all development assistance to the region. But, in ways all too familiar to their counterparts in Washington, policy-makers in Canberra often find that Australia’s sphere of interest in the South Pacific does not always coincide with a meaningful sphere of influence. Despite the huge disparities in power and wealth between Australia and its South Pacific neighbours, Canberra often fails to achieve its objectives in the region, finding that coercion, persuasion or inducement can strike resistance or result in unintended consequences.

This parallelism is one reason why we argue that the global context is a major, but often overlooked, shaper of Australia’s approach to order in the South Pacific. Most accounts of Australia’s policies in Oceania factor in two variables—events and dynamics in the South Pacific, and Australia’s enduring foreign policy interests—without including the crucial global context, and in particular how Australia is contributing and responding to its major allies’ approaches to global order. Australia’s alliances, first with the United Kingdom and later with the United States, form the animating thread of its foreign policy, and hence

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Australian foreign policy will always be affected by changes in its major allies’ foreign policy.

Due to its unique strategic geography Australia has always been influenced by the foreign policy priorities of its major allies, on which it has relied for its security. To the north and east of Australia lies the South Pacific, which reaches over 30 million square kilometres, 98 per cent of which is ocean, through which cross the air and sea approaches that link Australia to vital trading and security partners in North America and Northeast Asia. Moreover, although there is presently no external power that is likely to use the region to launch a direct attack on Australia, the Japanese advance during World War II graphically illustrated Australia’s vulnerability to this scenario.

Australia’s vulnerability was evident even before federation, and it consequently encouraged its then colonial power (and later major ally), the United Kingdom, to colonise key South Pacific territories in order to exclude potentially hostile powers from the region. Indeed, it could be said that Germany’s arrival in what is now Papua New Guinea marked the start of Australian foreign policy. Once financial and military constraints necessitated the United Kingdom’s gradual withdrawal from its colonial assets, as a local franchisee of the Western brand, Australia increasingly came to be seen as having a special responsibility for Britain’s colonies in the South Pacific. This responsibility was taken seriously; at federation the Australian Constitution included a specific clause, section 51(xxx), specifying that the parliament had power to make laws with respect to ‘the relations of the Commonwealth with the islands of the Pacific’. This was in addition to the more general power under section 51(xxix) to make laws with respect to ‘external affairs’.

The United Kingdom was replaced by the United States as Australia’s major ally after World War II. Under its alliance with the United States, Australia is still regarded as having a special responsibility for the South Pacific. For example, a specific connection between American grand strategy and Australia’s policies toward the region is that Canberra has long been accorded ‘responsibility’ for the South Pacific and Southeast Asia under the terms of the ‘five eyes’ intelligence and strategic partnership among the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand forged at the end of the Second World War. The Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty (ANZUS Treaty), which forms the bedrock of the America–Australia security relationship, also specifically identifies the Pacific region as the area of common concern in which America, Australia and New Zealand would respond to ‘common danger’. This idea was repeated in the Radford–Collins Agreement, in which America, Australia and New Zealand agreed that their navies would share responsibility for protecting sea lanes of communication in the South Pacific and Eastern Indian Ocean. Be it the containment of communism, checking Libyan adventurism or rebuilding failed states, a worthy ally in Canberra has always had to demonstrate to Washington that it is pulling its weight in its particular regions of responsibility.

In particular, Australia has traditionally been expected by its more powerful allies to ensure two conditions in its region of special responsibility. The first is to ensure order in the South Pacific, in terms of the political and social stability, economic viability and compliance with regional and global order norms of the states in that region. The second condition is to ensure that no power hostile to western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region from which it could launch attacks on the Australian mainland or threaten allied access or sea routes through the region. These are the persistent policy imperatives that have shaped Australian foreign policy in the South Pacific from the 19th century to the present day (Halvorson 2013).

A combination of this global context and Australia’s alliance obligations form a crucial part of the explanation for Australia’s own ‘age of interventions’ in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific after 1999. In the next section, we briefly review Australia’s policy towards the South Pacific during the colonial period. We then consider the way in which Australia’s
policy towards the South Pacific was shaped by American and European approaches to global order at the end of the Cold War, and interpreted in terms of Australia’s particular order responsibilities in the South Pacific, ultimately resulting in the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention in 2003. This is followed by a discussion of how the evolution of American and North Atlantic Treaty Organization thinking on global order has brought to an end the age of state-building interventions, and where this leaves Australia in relation to the South Pacific. It is here that the differences between Iraq and Afghanistan, on one hand, and Solomon Islands on the other, start to become apparent. Australia has begun to draw down its intervention, but with none of the debate or contention that characterizes Iraq and Afghanistan. We conclude by discussing the dilemmas faced by Australia in Solomon Islands and the region more broadly, posed by the arrival of new great power interests in the South Pacific, and the resulting tension between its ally’s approach to global and regional order and its own pragmatic need to move beyond the securityization of the Pacific to begin to engage pragmatically with new actors while addressing the underlying causes of instability and insecurity in the region.

1. The Securitization of the Pacific

After federation Australia increasingly accepted its special responsibility to the South Pacific and filled the gap created by the United Kingdom’s gradual withdrawal from its colonies. The collapse of colonialism in the South Pacific in the 1960s and 1970s occurred in parallel to a decline in Australia’s own security interests in the region. While there were strident anti-colonial movements in several territories, the end of colonialism in the South Pacific was more of a reflection of the global abandonment of colonialism as an acceptable policy than a result of concerted independence campaigns; there was certainly little anti-colonial violence of the type seen in Asia or Africa.

During the 1970s and 1980s, although global attention was focused at more critical flashpoints of Cold War hostility, Australia remained concerned about its vulnerability to attacks from or through the South Pacific, particularly as both the Soviet Union and Libya made overtures to regional states. Australia consequently adopted a policy of ‘strategic denial’ to attempt to exclude external powers from gaining influence. Australia accordingly provided South Pacific states with generous aid and economic guidance in order to advance their development and to encourage them to open up their economies according to neoliberal principles, and defence assistance to establish an Australian military presence. However, as Australia had little appetite for intervention, it chose to assume that South Pacific states were functioning well and required minimal Australian involvement in their political affairs. This assumption was shaken by the Santo Rebellion in pre-independence Vanuatu in 1980. It was shattered when Fiji experienced its first two coups in 1987—a self-determination conflict began in the Bougainville region of Papua New Guinea in 1989—and several other South Pacific states were weakened by political, economic, environmental and law and order challenges. However, with the exception of the continuing Bougainville conflict, the situation in the South Pacific calmed during the early 1990s, and Australia’s policy of relatively benign neglect continued.

Australia entered the post-Cold War era in lock step with America’s ‘new world order’ foreign policy, sending Australian naval vessels to the Gulf to take part in Operation Desert Storm, and peacekeepers to Somalia to help avert an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe there. As the United Nations dispatched peace-building missions across the globe to help end Cold War conflicts, Australia took the lead in Cambodia, playing a crucial role in brokering an end to the civil war and providing the leadership of the peace-building mission. It was over the war in Bosnia, however, that America’s New World Order project of peace building evolved into peace enforcement. Frustrated alike with its European allies and
the recalcitrance of the belligerents in Bosnia, the United States resorted to strategic bombing to bring the parties to the peace table. It was a repertoire it would return to as Saddam Hussein began to buck UN conditions in Iraq in 1998, and as Kosovo slid towards genocide in 1999. Later that year, as militias conducted a murderous rampage following an independence vote in East Timor, Canberra began frantically assembling a multinational peace enforcement mission to restore order in a province just 200 km off its northern coast.

The close coincidence of the Kosovo and East Timor interventions reinforced a meeting of minds between Washington, London and Canberra. The advent of a Republican White House in January 2001, committed to the neo-conservative ideal of using American power to make the world safer and more democratic, coincided with a post-Asian Crisis, post-East Timor mood of confidence and willing international activism in Canberra.1 Such was the meeting of minds that Prime Minister John Howard immediately invoked the ANZUS Treaty after the September 11 attacks on the United States, and Australia joined the coalitions invading Afghanistan and Iraq. The ethos of the era was one of muscular order building: powerful countries had a responsibility to use their power to intervene and re-shape states falling short of their standards of stability, human rights or responsible international behaviour.

The new interventionist mood, with its heightened intolerance of instability within developing states, brought new attention in Canberra to its special order responsibilities in the South Pacific. In the late 1990s Australia’s perception of the South Pacific changed, with the term ‘arc of instability’ (Dibb et al. 1999, p. 18), assuming common usage in government and media discourse to describe the securing challenges facing the region. This term had its roots in the geographic school of Australian strategic thinking, which holds that Australia’s main strategic priorities lie in its immediate neighbourhood; the ‘area from or through which a military threat to Australia could most easily be posed’ (Dibb 1986, p. 4).

There was a perception that unstable or weak South Pacific states could pose a risk to Australia, particularly if they fell under the influence of a hostile power (Commonwealth of Australia 2000), with the Japanese advance during the Second World War illustrating this possibility. The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks added impetus to Australia’s concerns about instability in the South Pacific, as the international community became concerned about the threat posed by dysfunctional states, with ‘failed’ states identified as a major threat to international order and security (United States 2002). Australia actively securitised the perceived dysfunction of South Pacific states, which was seen as making them vulnerable to terrorists or transnational criminal groups (DFAT 2004; Wainwright 2003). Consequently, Australia adopted a ‘risk management’ approach (Hameiri 2008) and saw itself as responsible for ‘securing’ the region via a sometimes controversial policy of ‘new interventionism’ (Dinnen 2004).

Australia’s risk management approach crystallised in RAMSI. From 1998 Solomon Islands had been gripped by a low-intensity civil war, which culminated in a coup in June 2000. Following the coup the conflict continued, particularly around the capital Honiara. Australia helped to negotiate the Townsville Peace Agreement in October 2000 as a response to the crisis. However, its implementation was largely unsuccessful and law and order further broke down. The continuing deterioration of security led several commentators—and the Australian government—to diagnose Solomon Islands as a ‘failing’ state that posed a potential transnational security threat to Australia (Wainwright 2003).

In April 2003, then Solomon Islands Prime Minister Sir Allan Kemakeza wrote to request Australian assistance. Following consultations between the governments of Solomon Islands, Australia and New Zealand, RAMSI was unanimously endorsed by the Solomon Islands Parliament and Pacific Islands Forum. RAMSI was also welcomed by the President of the

1. A good example is Foreign Minister Alexander Downer’s speech to the National Press Club on 26 November 2003, titled ‘The Myth of “Little” Australia’.
United Nations (UN) Security Council, commended by then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and supported by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and then Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Don McKinnon. RAMSI represented a significant change in Australian policy, from ideas of non-intervention and respect for state sovereignty (DFAT 2003), to ‘cooperative intervention’ to prevent state failure (Dobell 2003). It also represented a greater Australian acceptance of the necessity of engaging in lengthy engagements in the region in order to conduct effective state building, which differed to the more optimistically hasty approach that America initially adopted with respect to Iraq.

RAMSI was police led, with the initial deployment consisting of over 2000 personnel from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Fiji, although the majority were from Australia. Indeed, RAMSI was the largest armed intervention undertaken by Australia in the region since the Second World War. Rather than merely being a mission to restore law and order, RAMSI was intended to be a long-term state-building mission aimed at re-building the Solomon Islands’ economy and the political and administrative functions of the government. RAMSI later expanded to include personnel from all Pacific Islands Forum member countries, making it an ostensibly regional mission.

The RAMSI intervention provided an excellent opportunity to burnish Australia’s credentials in Washington as an Anglosphere power that understood the risks of the post-9/11 world—in contrast to the carping allies in ‘Old Europe’—and that was prepared to act decisively to address the risks of a failing state on its doorstep. Not only did RAMSI help move Australia to a position of trust and access to the inner sanctums of United States foreign and security policy rivalled only by Great Britain, it allowed Prime Minister Howard to costlessly demur from contributing Australian troops to the messy Phase Four state-building phase in post-invasion Iraq. This was a genuinely new experience for Australia: where its actions in the South Pacific were instrumental to its global strategic ambitions and positioning.

2. Evaluating Interventions

The post-intervention violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention scandals over the non-existence of weapons of mass destruction and the operations of the Australian Wheat Board, were to prove domestically costly for governments in Washington and Canberra. The explosion of violence in Honiara in 2006, following Solomon Islands’ first post-RAMSI general election, and in East Timor the same year, only contributed to the gloom about the prospects of state-building interventions. A new government was elected in Australia in 2007 after campaigning on the withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq but staying the course in Afghanistan; a new president was elected to the White House the following year on a similar platform. But the continuing violence in Afghanistan tested the patience of these new administrations, both of which began to signal a drawdown from that country; and when long-standing regimes collapsed in chaos across the Middle East, no country stepped forward to offer a peace-building intervention. The age of intervention was over as scholars and commentators lined up to critique the conceptual and practical failures of the previous decade’s interventions (Patrick 2011; Betts 2012; Mazarr 2014; Schear & Mazarr 2014).

In the United States, the foreign policy of restraint and engagement of the Obama administration was beset from both sides: on the one side by demands for a reassertion of American resolve and power (Brooks et al. 2013); on the other hand for a withdrawal from America’s ‘global cop’ role (Betts 2012; Mazarr 2014; Schear & Mazarr 2014). Australian policy lurched between different multilateral initiatives, unable to find a unifying thread or logic to Canberra’s objectives or actions. At the same time, both Washington and Canberra were confronted by three simultaneous challenges to their conceptions of international order and their sense of pre-eminence: for
America globally; for Australia in the South Pacific. The first of these was the challenge of China, which by 2012 had grown into the world’s second largest economy, largest trading economy, second largest defence spender, and increasingly a consequential source of investment, infrastructure and development funding in Asia and the Pacific. As the Atlantic economies struggled with the aftermath of the global financial crisis, China began to develop a more assertive foreign policy: critiquing the shortfall between emerging powers’ economic heft and their lack of voice in global institutions; objecting to American alliances and security presence in the Pacific; asserting territorial claims around its maritime periphery; and proposing a range of alternative institutions to cater specifically to Asian or emerging economy needs. Neither the United States nor Australia could long ignore the growing Chinese influence in regions where their power had previously gone unchallenged: in Asia for America; in the South Pacific for Australia.

The irony for Australia and its ally was that the arrival of China and other non-traditional powers in the South Pacific was in part a natural consequence of Canberra’s encouragement over decades for the countries of the South Pacific to adopt neoliberal economic reforms and cultivate new global linkages as a way of becoming more self-reliant. This encouragement coincided with many South Pacific states’ long-term instinct to ‘look north’ and engage with Asian powers as a way of allaying their dependence on and pressure from Australia and New Zealand. The difference in Asian powers’ engagement in the South Pacific over the recent decades has been delivered by three dynamics: the genuine economic heft these powers now command; the growing rivalries among them that often play out in competitive regionalism; and the deepening rivalry between the United States and China.

The second challenge came in the shape of a new form of transnational terrorist threat, marked by the sudden territorial gains in Syria and Iraq of a group variously known as Islamic State, ISIL or Da’esh. The challenges posed by IS to Australian–American conceptions of order were several. The first was an existential question it posed to state building: despite the expenditure of more than $13 trillion and thousands of lives in the attempt to build stable, effective states in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iraq now was the host to an even more lethal form of terrorism. Second, in proclaiming a territorially based caliphate stretching between Iraq and Syria and potentially into Lebanon, IS represented an insurgency against the very concept of the sovereign state, the bedrock of current international order. And perhaps most worrying, IS demonstrated an ability to radicalise, attract to its ranks and inspire violent acts in the West by citizens of Western countries in a way that no other terrorist movement has ever been able to. The rise of IS sent a confounding message to Washington, Canberra and other capitals: transnational terrorism and state dysfunction, although not infallibly linked, are close bedfellows; but the past decade had shown that the conceptual toolkit for dealing with dysfunctional states in the Middle East at least is empty. It is in this context that American perceptions of the success of RAMSI may become significant.

The third challenge came in the form of democratic disruptions to Washington’s and Canberra’s long-standing and pragmatic approaches to regional order. Canberra’s range of responses to the Fijian coup in 2006 were considerably constrained by the Biketawa Declaration, a regional agreement that challenges to democracy in the Pacific would be met by opposition and isolation. Biketawa meant that Australia no longer had the option of dealing pragmatically with coup-installed regimes, as it had previously in Fiji; and the ensuing isolation earned it the enmity of the Bainimarama regime in Suva. For Washington, the democratic challenge came with a series of popular uprisings that toppled long-standing dictators in North Africa and the Middle East. America’s self-image as the arsenal of democracy meant that it could no longer credibly support long-standing allies such as Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak in the face of popular demands for democracy; but as a consequence it had to contemplate the possibility of hostile groups
such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood taking power, as well as the scorn of long-time allies such as Saudi Arabia and real blows to its credibility as a reliable ally. These democratic disruptions meant that as the United States and Australia faced China’s challenge to their pre-eminence and the resurgent threat of transnational terrorism, their positions in their key regions of influence had been weakened.

Despite these broader challenges, RAMSI has successfully stabilised Solomon Islands; it ended the fighting and restored law and order through recovering and destroying weapons, arresting people involved in the violence and supporting the justice and prison systems. RAMSI’s Participating Police Force has also made progress cleaning up the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and training new recruits. RAMSI made some progress on improving the political and administrative functions of the government, focusing on public accountability, government functioning, the public service and electoral system. RAMSI has also achieved improvements in economic governance, including government revenue collection, taxation administration and encouraging foreign investment. However, these improvements have not funded a significant improvement in public goods provision, especially outside Honiara, which means that many Solomon Islanders have not received a peace dividend from RAMSI’s presence.

Moreover, the riots that followed the April 2006 national elections illustrated that RAMSI had made little progress resolving the underlying drivers of insecurity and state dysfunction. These underlying drivers are partly economic and are rooted in the underdeveloped and unevenly distributed nature of economic development and public goods provision. While law and order is an important public good, Solomon Islanders also want health care, education and a better standard of living. These drivers are also deeply political and have been exacerbated by the perceived illegitimacy and incompetence of state institutions.

Addressing these drivers of insecurity and state dysfunction has been difficult for RAMSI. However, given that Australia spent $2.2 billion on law and order as part of RAMSI, and only $103 million on improving governance and $223 million on economic governance (Hayward-Jones 2014) suggests that Australia did not focus its efforts on the latter two priorities to the same degree. This probably reflected Australia’s pre-occupation with its own security interests, particularly its concern that Solomon Islands could become a haven for transnational crime, including terrorism, and consequent securitisation of state dysfunction in Solomon Islands. Yet despite Australia’s significant investment in law and order, there is concern that the eventual full drawdown of RAMSI could return Solomon Islands to violence and dysfunction. There is a risk that RAMSI has created levels of dependency within Solomon Islands that will see stability collapse once it draws down. Such an outcome is particularly likely given that the economy relies on finite logging resources and that the current transition from a reliance on logging to mining may generate further conflict. Tensions are also likely to be exacerbated by ongoing urbanisation placing pressure on customary land tenure, particularly around Honiara, and accompanying high levels of youth unemployment, as disenfranchised young people living in squatter settlements around the capital form a ready constituency for further violence.

3. The Drawdown Nobody Noticed

Despite the triple challenge to their notions of order and pre-eminence, a new mood of austerity has taken hold in Washington and Canberra. After over a decade of war claiming 6846 US combat deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq, opinion polls show that Americans are tired of war and opposed further interventions. The most recent Pew Poll found 60 per cent of Americans believe the United States should pay less attention to overseas problems and be more focused on problems at home (Pew Research Centre 2014). Less willing to spill blood, the United States has less treasure to spend in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The 8 per cent reduction in the US defence budget in 2013 was the largest drop since 1991, and included a 70 per cent reduction in funding for overseas
contingency operations from the level of 2008 (Walker 2014). Although the country was barely affected by the global financial crisis, Australia’s defence spending was cut by a similar percentage to America’s in 2012–13, although partly restored by the incoming Coalition government in the following year. Australia’s aid budget, however, was heavily cut by that government, having been slashed by one third over the forward estimates (Howes and Pryke 2014).

Consequently, and despite the risk of renewed insecurity and dysfunction, RAMSI has embarked on a process of drawdown, described as its ‘transition’, from 2010. Reflecting a desire to reframe Australia’s involvement in Solomon Islands as a ‘partnership’ rather than ‘intervention’, most of RAMSI’s development assistance has been absorbed into the bilateral programme run out of the Australian High Commission (Barbara 2014). The Australian Defence Force drew down on 1 July 2013. The Participating Police Force (PPF) has been transitioning from frontline policing to capacity development, as outlined in the PPF’s Drawdown Strategy 2013–17. Consequently, RAMSI has been a smaller, police-focused mission from July 2013.

Despite the scale, cost and length of commitment that Australia has made to RAMSI, the Australian government has said surprisingly little about RAMSI’s drawdown. Indeed, the government has said more about its activities in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the situation in Syria. For example, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop has issued eight media releases about Solomon Islands since she took office in September 2013, four of which were about the severe floods that hit the country in April 2014 and four of which were about RAMSI. This is in contrast to the 13 media releases she has issued about Syria, 9 about Iraq and 8 about Afghanistan. Similarly, when Bob Carr was Foreign Minister from March 2012 to September 2013, he issued four media releases about Solomon Islands, none of which specifically referred to RAMSI. This is despite the fact that the RAMSI drawdown was announced during his tenure. In contrast, he issued 35 media releases about Syria and 7 about Afghanistan.

When Kevin Rudd was Foreign Minister from September 2010 to March 2012, during which time the RAMSI drawdown was being planned, he mentioned Solomon Islands in his media releases twice, with only once specifically focused on RAMSI. He mentioned Syria eight times and Afghanistan nine times. Instead, most significant public statements about the drawdown and transition of RAMSI were made by Nicholas Coppel (2012), the RAMSI Special Coordinator from 2011 to 2013. While Solomon Islands media outlets have covered the drawdown extensively, Australian media coverage has been minimal, with little mention of the shift beyond single articles in the major newspapers and some coverage on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio and ABC website.

Similarly, given the scale of Australia’s commitment to RAMSI, the parliament has also devoted surprisingly little time in discussing RAMSI. RAMSI has been mentioned six times in Hansard by the current Coalition parliament (five in the House of Representatives, one in the Senate). In each case RAMSI was incidental to the discussion. In the last Australian Labor Party Parliament there were 11 mentions of RAMSI (6 in the House of Representatives and 6 in the Senate). Only three were specifically related to RAMSI, including the report of a parliamentary delegation to Solomon Islands in late 2012. This is in contrast to 2003, when RAMSI was being planned. At that time, Solomon Islands was mentioned 83 times in the House of Representatives and 75 times in the Senate Hansard.

The fact that the Australian government has paid relatively little attention to RAMSI in its public statements or parliamentary discussion might reflect the fact that Australia had a seat on the United Nations Security Council from January 2013 to December 2014 and was therefore occupied by globally relevant issues such as Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, given the geographic distance of these conflicts from Australia and the comparatively small size of Australia’s involvement in them, these issues arguably engage Australia’s national interests in a less significant or direct way than RAMSI.
The fact that the Australian government has made so few statements about the drawdown of RAMSI is particularly surprising given that the cost of Australia’s contribution to RAMSI was $2.6 billion from 2003 to 2013, which represented 95 per cent of the total cost of the mission (Hayward-Jones 2014). The lack of attention paid by the government to RAMSI’s drawdown suggests that the security concerns that motivated RAMSI have diminished and that the government’s attention has instead focused on the cost of continuing the intervention. In particular, cuts made to the Australian Federal Police budget in 2012 have left the policing mission facing budget constraints. There has also been a shift to funding the other parts of RAMSI out of the bilateral aid programme, creating ‘RAMSI-lite’.

The considerable cost of RAMSI, both in terms of blood (two Australians died during RAMSI) and treasure suggests that the Australian government should be paying more attention to the RAMSI drawdown in order to protect its investment in Solomon Islands. As noted, there are serious concerns that the underlying causes of insecurity and state dysfunction in Solomon Islands have not been resolved and that conflict could recur following the full drawdown of RAMSI. Australia may find that it not only loses what it has already invested in Solomon Islands, but that it needs to invest significantly more in the future to respond to renewed conflict. Australia would do well to recognise the parallels between its benign neglect of the South Pacific following the end of colonialism and its drawdown from Solomon Islands, and the region more broadly. When Australia neglected the South Pacific during the 1980s and 1990s, the region experienced escalating instability, violence and political dysfunction. Given its perceived special responsibility for the region, Australia had to expend considerable energy and resources in response, leading interventions in Solomon Islands, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea and Nauru, as well as significant policing, governance, development and defence programmes elsewhere.

4. Conclusion: The RAMSI Dilemma

The ongoing drawdown of RAMSI has been relatively uncontroversial in policy circles (although the article by Dinnen and Allen outlines how academics have long raised questions about the sustainability of gains made by RAMSI). This is in a large part because RAMSI has restored law and order and, at least temporarily, security in Solomon Islands. Consequently, no one in the government has said anything substantive about the drawdown. This can be compared with the amount of attention paid to Australia’s drawdown from Afghanistan. It can also be compared with the fierce debate that has accompanied the United States’ drawdown from Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the United States is often perceived to have different responsibilities because of its ostensible position as a global superpower, Australia is effectively a superpower in the South Pacific, where it is by far the largest player. Given Australia’s geographic proximity to, and strategic interests in, the region, it needs to maintain its strategic influence in the region; it cannot afford to adopt a policy of retrenchment from the Solomon Islands or the South Pacific more broadly. However, as outlined in the article by Carter and Firth, Australia’s place in the region is increasingly precarious and its influence is potentially declining. This decline has been accelerated by the presence of new partners, such as China, that offer alternative sources of support to the region and by increasingly bold South Pacific states, led by Fiji. Arguably, as Australia’s order imperative in the South Pacific seems to be declining in political salience, its exclusion imperative, at least in the eyes of its ally in the context of its global alliance responsibilities, has been rising. It is no coincidence that Washington has been paying much greater attention to the South Pacific, as evidenced by the now-regular appearances of Secretaries of State at Pacific Islands Forum meetings and Washington’s new security rapprochement with New Zealand, just as evidence of growing Chinese influence in the region has been mounting.

This suggests that it might be time for Australia to move beyond its securitised view of...
the region, by reframing Australia’s political discourse to characterise the Pacific islands as an ‘arc of opportunity’ (Wallis 2015). This may change how Australia relates to the region by assisting Australia to work as a partner of South Pacific states in order to recognise and capitalise on the region’s potential and opportunities to improve stability and advance development. If it encourages Australia to desecuritise its policy approach to the region this may also diffuse concerns about continued Australian intervention by paving the way for a more cooperative approach. Julie Bishop’s new ‘economic diplomacy’ (Bishop & Robb 2014) represents the potential of this desecuritised approach to the region, as it seeks to encourage and capitalise on the region’s economic opportunities in order to encourage economic growth. However, although the Solomon Islands’s case illustrates that economic development is important, the challenge for Australia is to balance an emphasis on economic diplomacy with an equal emphasis on other regional priorities.

The South Pacific also offers Canberra an opportunity to explore new and creative avenues for partnering with China and other Asian powers in ways that bolster rather than undermine regional stability and cohesion. Australian officials have for some time tried to calm American anxieties about China in the Pacific, and this region, where Chinese attention seems still rather distracted and uncoordinated, offers a chance to work to help shape Beijing’s attention and presence in the interests of building order and stability.

A key aspect of a new Australian approach to the region exemplified by the transition to RAMSI-lite is its efforts to seek a middle way between retrenchment and re-assertion in the Pacific. This new approach accords well with Australia’s new austerity-governed approach to the region. The middle way is also evident in Australia’s attempts to engage with local partners to develop hybrid governance solutions that draw upon local expertise, practices and institutions and which are consequently often more legitimate and effective, and importantly, economical, than the approach initially adopted by RAMSI.4

The larger challenge for Australia, however, will be reconciling a new approach to Solomon Islands and the South Pacific more broadly with its ongoing pre-occupations with order and pre-eminence, both of which are deeply ingrained in its alliance dynamics with the United States. Both the United States and Australia suffer from what might be called a ‘unipolar anxiety’, whereby both understand that their global/regional pre-eminence is logically ephemeral, but neither can conceive of an alternative global/regional order that the end of their pre-eminence would entail. Policy elites in the United States, on both sides of politics, are convinced that the current neoliberal world order is the optimal form of order and that with some adjustments emerging powers should sign on to it as ‘responsible stakeholders’. Their counterparts in Canberra have a predisposition to be suspicious of new great power players in the South Pacific, believing that such new influences will be disruptive, or exploitive, or both.

Australia’s approach to order in the Pacific needs to be managed within the general context of alliance concerns about waning pre-eminence in the Asia-Pacific, as well as within the particular context of American suspicions that any decline in Canberra’s influence in the South Pacific constitutes a direct gain for China. While these perceptions remain in Washington, Australia’s actions in the South Pacific are an important strand of Canberra’s alliance management repertoire. But it also gives the antagonism of the newly democratic Bainimarama regime in Fiji towards Australia its strategic significance. Australia’s ability to experiment with new approaches to stability building in the Pacific will therefore remain hostage to ongoing Melanesian activism and

3. A similar sentiment was expressed by Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in September 1988 when he announced a policy of ‘constructive commitment’ towards the Pacific; see Evans 1989.

willingness to engage with non-traditional
powers, as well as sudden outbreaks of com-
munal instability.

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