

Solomon Islands: One Deployment Too Many?

Background

Australia is leading a 2200-person strong mission to restore law and order in the Solomon Islands. While the operational focus is, rightly, on the force's police component, the force also includes 1500 Australian military personnel as well as 300 military personnel from Pacific island states. All but a couple of hundred are logistic support troops. The Australian Government has intimated that the combat elements are likely to be home by Christmas. But when will the logisticians be home?

The Solomon Islands is not facing an insurgency or a guerrilla war, even though there has been ethnic strife between people on the islands of Malaita and Guadalcanal. The problem in the Solomon Islands is essentially one that involves a break-down of law and order and a propensity for armed gangs to act in a lawless manner. The 350-strong police element – drawn from Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific – will for the most part be unarmed but backed up by the equivalent of a police special response capability.

The criminal groups operating in the Solomon Islands have little or no formal tactics or weapons training, so these criminals are unlikely to be a match for trained police. The presence of armed soldiers as backup will ensure that, should any criminals or militia think of resisting, they will have a poor chance in a fight.

In preparation for the deployment of police and military personnel, the

Solomon Islands Parliament passed new laws in mid-July conferring on all intervention force members the equivalent status of Solomon Islands police officers with all their powers of arrest. Furthermore, the new laws now impose a fine of SI\$25 000 per person and/or a prison term of up to ten years on individuals who wish to continue moving about society illegally armed.

The challenge for the Australian-led intervention force is not likely to be one of imposing its authority, but rather the ongoing sustainment of initial successes without creating severe dislocations to the Solomon Islands economy and political system. To put the impact of this intervention in context, it would be the same as if some 88 000 troops had landed in Australia, each extraordinarily wealthy, and operating with immunity from our legal or political system.

Military consequences for Australia of intervention

But what is the impact on Australia if the logistic forces – largely Australian and consisting of troops, aircraft, ships and other military support equipment – deployed to the Solomon Islands need to remain for longer than anticipated? To answer that question, we need to analyse three issues: What forces do we have for military operations generally? What impact is the intervention in the Solomon Islands likely to have on our military? And what options might need to be considered if the military commitment in the Solomon Islands lasts for more than one year?



Australia's current forces

Australia has a land combat force of around 25 company-sized infantry and Special Forces combat troops. Each of these companies is around 100-persons strong. As of late July 2003, eight of these 25 companies are deployed in operational tasks. Supporting these 25 combat companies is a similar number of logistic elements; groups providing engineering, supply services, transport, and communications for the combat troops.

What this current level of military commitment suggests is that Australian Army combat forces will be able to meet the requirements of the Solomon Islands deployment for its expected duration.

Rotation for logistic troops is a different issue. Normally, when any company or element is deployed, another begins training to replace the deployed unit. And if rotation of forces is already occurring (such as in East Timor), then a third unit is recovering from having recently been deployed. This process applies to companies and elements whether they are combat or logistics units in the Army. It also applies to any resources of the Navy and the Air Force (the RAAF) when deployed.

The Navy has to manage the rotation of ships, and with commitments to the War on Terror and to interdiction patrols to the North of Australia, there are already substantial standing commitments of ships across all classes. The RAAF and Army aviation, because of the nature of their commitments, rarely deploy squadrons (the groups of 10-18 aircraft that are the operational units), but they do deploy flights (groups of two to four aircraft, drawn from the squadrons). Day-to-day peacetime patrol and supply activities soak up many flights of available aircraft.

The impact of intervention

The RAAF medium and tactical aircraft units, RAAF maritime patrol units, and the Army's troop lift and reconnaissance helicopter units are all formations that have only six to eight 'flights' or 'troops' of aircraft that can be tasked for operations in a place like the Solomon Islands. If two simultaneous operations lasting more than six months require a flight or troop of deployed aircraft on each operation, there is little capacity to provide resources for other military contingencies.

Australia has only three amphibious support ships that can support operations in a country with the sort of sparse infrastructure found in the Solomon Islands. One ship (HMAS KANIMBLA) has just returned from six months war duty in the Persian Gulf. A second vessel (HMAS MANOORA) is now deployed in the Solomon Islands. The third (HMAS TOBRUK) is much smaller and less capable of supporting a detachment of this nature. Any long-term commitment to the Solomons will tie up at least two vessels, leaving only one for operations elsewhere, and no capacity to rotate in a second deployment.

In aviation and supply assets, between ten and fifteen percent of most categories of people and

equipment will be deployed in the Solomon Islands. Any deployment beyond six months will require rotation and that will absorb another fifteen to thirty per cent of available forces. This leaves little for other contingencies of a similar size to the Solomons deployment, and presents particular challenges if the need for any large deployments arise whilst Australian forces remain in the Solomons. The same problem with numbers arises with military engineers, communication troops, as well as the transport and warehouse resources needed to sustain the intervention.

Options for a protracted military commitment to the Solomon Islands

The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has four broad options to provide long-term logistic support for any intervention force staying more than twelve months:

Option 1: It can rotate existing military forces but this will impact on the ability of the military to logistically support other combat operations.

Option 2: The ADF can seek help by calling up the Reserves (as it did in East Timor in early 2003 when one of three companies deployed was an Army Reserve combat company). However, the Australian economy and the tax payer will have to absorb the extra costs of doing so.

Option 3: To deploy military forces initially but immediately set in train a contract process allowing transfer of logistic responsibility to civilian firms. US contractors undertook this role for the UN in the warlike conditions of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s.

Option 4: The Australian Government can agree to pay all, or the majority of costs involved in using Solomon Islands people and equipment in logistic roles, replacing intervention force personnel after the first rotation ends. Whether trained persons and

sufficient functioning equipment is available may constrain this option.

Commentators at a recent symposium indicated that the problems in the Solomons require the current logistic capability of the intervention force to remain on the ground for at least twelve months, with some limited but continued logistic support for at least five years¹. Australia is still involved in East Timor with 1000 troops there, four years after intervention. It is very unlikely that the intervention in the Solomon Islands will be any less of a challenge. It is worth noting that whilst militarily successful, Australia failed at a political level in Somalia arguably because the deployment was limited to only six months.

As things stand, the intervention in the Solomon Islands is not one deployment too many for the ADF, provided no other crisis of this size emerges whilst our logistic support is there. Nevertheless, our military logisticians are likely to have to remain in the Solomons for some years to come.

¹ 'Stress-testing Solomon Islands Peace Operation Scenarios', Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, Australian National University, 17 July 2003

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