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Security Challenges in the South Pacific and Australian Pre-emption Policy

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Not all is pacific in the Pacific these days, it seems. Not long ago Papua New Guinea faced a civil war in Bougainville. Three years ago a coup attempt took place in the Fiji Islands. The current political crisis plaguing the Solomon Islands is but the latest in a series of serious security challenges confronting the region. These now include ethnic tensions, poor governance, transnational crime, money laundering, illegal immigration, climate change, rising sea levels, environmental degradation, and the like. Such endemic problems have led pundits to employ terms like “failed or failing state” to describe the security situation facing some of the island nations of the Pacific. Moreover the catchphrase “arc of instability” has become a convenient label by the Australian press for the sub-region stretching from Indonesia through Papua New Guinea to the Solomons and Fiji, which has seen its fair share of violence, conflict and instability.

However, keepers of the region’s security have not been idle. Recently, senior officials from member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum (formerly known as the South Pacific Forum) met in Nadi, Fiji for the Forum Regional Security Committee (FRSC) meeting. Among the myriad issues on the agenda for this annual gathering of the FRSC, the crisis in the Solomons was clearly the most pressing. With minimal fuss, Forum officials concurred with the representative from the Solomon Islands that robust regional intervention in the Solomons crisis was necessary and timely. The proactive role of Australia in advancing intervention and cobbling together a consensus was enormously significant.

Regionalism in the Pacific

The consensus to intervene stands in contrast to the inability of the Forum to arrive at a common position on issues such as the recent Iraq war and other sensitive international concerns. Established in 1971 to manage “political” issues not dealt with by the South Pacific Commission, the Forum, had “a record of only partial success.”

The Forum’s Aitutaki Declaration on Regional Security Cooperation of 1997 was an implicit acknowledgement of the need for change. Recalling the region’s commitment to “regional and international cooperative security arrangements,” the declaration went on to “acknowledge that existing [institutional] arrangements have not provided explicit mechanisms to facilitate consultations...” The solution, it said, was to “further develop mechanisms for preventive diplomacy” and for the FRSC to be strengthened through supplementary consultations on broader security issues.

Not unlike how the “ASEAN Way” has operated in Southeast Asian regional cooperation, the

reliance upon “unanimous compromise”—the term devised in 1975 by then Cook Islands’ Prime Minister Albert Henry—by the Pacific Islands Forum has essentially meant that national interests superseded those of the region as a whole. By providing Forum members, with de facto veto powers, the unanimous compromise principle basically ensured that nobody was left out on “important” issues (important, that is, to the state concerned), and that no commitment would be made against any state’s wishes. Thus, Pacific regionalism has primarily been concerned with “the preservation and extension of state sovereignty rather than with the needs of the wider region.” And although the Forum’s Biketawa Declaration of 2000 deals with the highly salient matter of regional emergency management, it nevertheless gives the ritual bow to the needs of individual states: “while respecting the principles of non-interference in the domestic affairs of another member state.” In short, the so-called “Pacific Way” was a variant of the ASEAN Way in Pacific garb.

Like in Southeast Asia, regional cooperation in the South Pacific still has a great deal of unfinished business to deal with. According to another former Cook Islands premier, Terepai Maoate, Forum member countries need to talk about how best to improve their organisation so that the Forum’s declarations do not end up as “empty frameworks of cooperation.” For Maoate, Forum members “have to give them real meaning, otherwise they will remain totally ineffective.”

It was therefore significant that at the most recent Forum meeting in August 2002 in Fiji, member countries not only reconfirmed the Biketawa Declaration but also, (at Australia’s insistence), adopted the Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security, which acknowledges “the need for immediate and sustained regional action in response to the current regional security environment.” This last declaration also paves the way for the first direct intervention in the affairs of a member state, mandating “the Secretariat to mobilise regional action and funds to support the Solomon Islands,” where the state apparatus has almost disintegrated due to bitter fighting between rival elites based on different islands.

The Howard/Downer “Doctrine” of Cooperative Intervention

It remains to be seen whether the Nasonini Declaration would prove different compared to the Biketawa Declaration, which, though prompted by the acute political crises in Fiji and the Solomons, saw the Forum stopping short of intervention. Developments at the recently concluded FRSC meeting in Nadi concerning the Solomons crisis suggest it would.

A key part of the answer flows from the paradigm shift in Canberra’s strategic thinking, possibly since the terror attacks in the US on September 11, 2001, and most certainly since the Bali bombings on October 12, 2002, in which half of the 200 people killed were Australian. Moreover, the success of the Australian-led INTERFET operation in East Timor (now Timor Leste) doubtless played a part in fostering Canberra’s attitude change. (On 26 June, Australia announced that it would be sending military forces to the Solomons to restore peace).

An Australian White Paper on foreign affairs issued in February 2003 noted that, “Australia cannot presume to fix the problems of the South Pacific countries. Australia is not a neo-colonial power. The island countries are independent sovereign states.” More recently, a Canberra-based think-tank, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), released a report entitled *Our Failing Neighbour*, which Foreign Minister Alexander Downer has fully endorsed. According to the ASPI report, “Australia is the critical player. If we do nothing, no

one else will, because quite simply no other capable country has interests as direct and important as ours in what happens in this corner of the Pacific.”

Together, these arguments appear to provide the strategic rationalisation behind the Howard government’s notion of “cooperative intervention,” which sees Australia cooperating with a range of regional and other powers in response to an “authentic invitation” from a troubled state for assistance. The Solomon Islands case more or less satisfies this proviso. In this respect, the cooperative intervention in the Solomons can be interpreted as the first instance, where Canberra’s policy of pre-emption is realised in concrete terms. After all, failed states are the breeding grounds for transnational crime and terrorism, among other evils, according to the logic of the ASPI report.

This raises two points. On one hand, cooperative intervention can provide the much-needed teeth to the Nasonini Declaration, strengthening the Pacific Islands Forum process and, more importantly, its mechanisms for conflict management and resolution. On the other, the same principle, if unchecked, could end up being an Australian version of *a la carte* multilateralism, where multilateral collaboration serves as little more than a highly selective enterprise for advancing Canberra’s interests, quite possibly at the expense of those of the region as a whole. If so, the Forum process could well be undermined should Australia succumb to the temptation for which America, in its post-9/11 intolerance, seems to have fallen. In this regard, Australia’s announced intention to regard multilateral action as less effective than coalitions of the willing raises troubling questions. However, should Australia eschew some of the recent tendencies of America, and remain firmly committed to the regional process even as it stands by its own policy objectives, the Pacific could well be a pacific region in reality, and not just in name.

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