

The Melanesian Spearhead Group: testing Pacific island solidarity

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8 February 2011

The year 2010 saw a series of complex and sometimes contradictory shifts in relations between the members of the island Pacific, centred on the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) and its members' attitudes to the regional status of Fiji—which was suspended from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009 but has remained a member of the MSG. In 2010 the outgoing chair of the MSG, Vanuatu's Prime Minister Natapei, called off a meeting of the MSG Leaders' Summit that would have seen Fiji's Commodore Bainimarama succeed to the chair. The Fijian leader countered by organising what was initially referred to as an 'MSG Plus' meeting (later rebadged as 'Engaging Fiji'), with funding from China, to which non-MSG Pacific leaders were invited—prompting some commentators to accuse Bainimarama of attempting to 'hijack' the MSG and weaken the Pacific Islands Forum. In December, MSG leaders achieved a reconciliation between Vanuatu and Fiji, and Bainimarama was confirmed as chairman.

With a meeting of the MSG due to be held in Fiji in the first quarter of 2011, this paper reviews the recent history of the MSG and considers the possible implications of events for Australia's role in the region.

What is the Melanesian Spearhead Group?

The MSG is a subregional grouping of Melanesian countries—Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji—that are members of the Pacific Islands Forum, plus the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), a coalition representing the pro-independence Melanesian population of New Caledonia.¹

In terms of population, land and resources, the Melanesian countries—particularly Papua New Guinea—are the dominant forces in Pacific island politics and economics, and have been largely responsible over recent years for the growing Chinese and European interest in the Pacific.

The initial agreement between the Melanesian countries—the Agreed Principles of Co-operation Among Independent States of Melanesia, signed in Port Vila, Vanuatu, in 1988—appears to have been motivated primarily by a wish to assert Melanesian support for Kanak demands for independence, reflecting the perception that the Pacific Islands Forum's former colonial powers, Australia and New Zealand, and some Polynesian countries had

been failing to take up the issue with sufficient vigour at the Forum. The later Agreed Principles of Co-operation Among Independent States in Melanesia, signed in Kiriwina, Papua New Guinea, in 1996, placed rather more emphasis on the promotion of economic cooperation between MSG members, but retained a focus on subregional solidarity and 'respect for and promotion of its Melanesian cultures, traditions and values and for its defence and promotion of independence as the inalienable right of indigenous peoples of Melanesia and the promotion of their human rights'. These principles were reiterated in a revised agreement in 2005 and embodied in the Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group, which was signed by the five parties in 2007. The new agreement gives the MSG standing in international law and details its organisational structure. It also provided for the creation of an MSG secretariat.

The structure and objectives of the MSG

The MSG operates at five levels.

The pre-eminent decision-making body of the MSG is the Leaders' Summit, comprising the head of government of each member country (or their nominee) and the authorised representative of the FLNKS (and any other organisation that may be admitted). The summit meets biennially, on a rotational basis, but may hold a special session at any time if requested by its chair (a position that also rotates biennially). The agreement provides that all decisions taken by the Leaders' Summit will be by consensus.

A Foreign Ministers' Meeting is held annually, although special sessions may be called by the Leaders' Summit or the chair of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting (who is also appointed on a rotational basis). The Foreign Ministers' Meeting is responsible, among other things, for 'determination of the general policies of the MSG' and approval of the annual budget. Decisions of the Foreign Ministers' Meeting are also by consensus, but between sessions the chair has authority to make decisions on behalf of the MSG on urgent policy matters, after consultation with MSG members. The Foreign Ministers' Meeting reports to the Leaders' Summit.

A Senior Officials' meeting is also held annually, in conjunction with the Foreign Ministers' Meeting, or as requested by the Leaders' Summit or Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Its role is to give policy directions to the MSG Secretariat and to make reports and recommendations to the leaders. The Senior Officials' Meeting reports to the Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

A Trade and Economic Officials' Meeting is held concurrently, or as requested, to provide technical advice and assistance on the implementation of the MSG Revised Trade Agreement and make reports and recommendations. The Trade and Economic Officials' Meeting reports to the Senior Officials' Meeting.

The chair of the Leaders' Summit, with the consent of the country concerned, may appoint a special mission to mediate and promote reconciliation where a dispute has arisen between members of the MSG or between a member of the MSG and a consenting third party. Such missions 'may ... be guided by' the Biketawa Declaration of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Other ministerial meetings and technical and advisory subcommittees may be established from time to time.

In 2005, MSG leaders called for a review of MSG goals and objectives and initiated moves (mooted as early as 2001) for a formal constitutional structure and the establishment of a permanent secretariat. The Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group was eventually signed in 2007. The secretariat, established with Chinese funding and located in Vila, opened in 2008. Headed by a director general appointed by the Leaders' Summit, it's responsible for the

administration and management of the affairs of the MSG, provision of policy advice, and coordination and assistance in implementing the decisions of the constituent bodies of the MSG. The director general and other staff are appointed for three years and, although eligible for reappointment, may not serve more than two terms. China is funding the salary of the director general for an initial three years. The European Union has also provided funding for the MSG Secretariat.

Rima Ravusiro, a former adviser to the Papua New Guinea Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Immigration and a former member of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, was appointed as the first director general in 2008.

As stated in the 2007 agreement:

The purpose of the MSG is to promote and strengthen inter-membership trade, exchange of Melanesian cultures, traditions and values, sovereign equality, economic and technical cooperation between states and the alignment of policies in order to further MSG members' shared goals of economic growth, sustainable development, good governance and security.

The MSG Preferential Trade Agreement and economic cooperation

A key element of the MSG initiative is its commitment to economic cooperation and the promotion of harmonious economic development between the member states. A central pillar of the economic relationship is the MSG Trade Agreement, initially signed in 1993² but revised in 2005 and 2009, which seeks to establish free trade in goods produced by member countries. However, trade and investment between the member countries aren't extensive, in large part because the Melanesian countries produce broadly similar exports. In addition, relations have been marred in the past by restrictions on trade. In 2005 Vanuatu banned the import of biscuits, which resulted in Fiji placing an embargo on imports of kava from Vanuatu and threatening a total commercial embargo, and in 2006 Fiji refused to accept shipments of corned beef from Papua New Guinea, prompting Papua New Guinea's Minister for Trade and Industry to threaten sanctions against Fiji.

Among other economic initiatives, a Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Goroka in 2005 endorsed a proposal to allow the spouses of professionals from MSG countries working in other MSG countries to take up employment in the host country. The MSG has also held several conferences on international shipping in the region and has established a subcommittee on mining.

The Fiji issue

Articles 5 and 6 of the Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group affirm the members' commitment to the principle of dialogue, sustainable development and human rights, and the rule of law and good governance—including 'democratic principles'. Article 6(2) states:

Respect for human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law shall underpin the domestic and international policies of the parties and constitute the essential elements of the contractual nature of the relations between the parties to this Agreement.

However, notwithstanding the Fiji coups of 1987, 2000 and 2006 and the intransigence of the present military government, which led to its suspension from the Commonwealth and from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009, Fiji has remained a member of the MSG.

In 2008, Vanuatu's foreign minister was reported as saying that the MSG encouraged Fiji to comply with a timetable for elections in March 2009. The elections weren't held in 2009, but in that year a special meeting of MSG leaders

endorsed the 'Strategic Framework for Change' of Fiji's 'interim prime minister', Commodore Bainimarama—which in effect extends his office until 2014—and reportedly resolved to ask the Pacific Islands Forum, due to meet in Cairns, Australia, in August 2009, to lift the suspension of Fiji. In the event, the reported initiative of the MSG didn't eventuate and the Forum voted unanimously to maintain Fiji's suspension.

In 2009, chairmanship of the MSG and the Pacific Islands Forum passed to Vanuatu, whose prime minister, Edward Natapei, had been critical of Commodore Bainimarama's leadership of Fiji and his failure to hold elections in 2009. In July 2010, in what was described as a collective decision of MSG leaders, Natapei, as the outgoing chair of the MSG, postponed a scheduled meeting of the MSG Leaders' Summit in Fiji, at which the chair would have passed to Fiji and Commodore Bainimarama. Vanuatu wasn't opposed to Fiji's membership of the MSG, Natapei said, but thought it inappropriate that a leader who had violated the MSG's commitment to democracy and good governance should chair the group and that Bainimarama posed 'a threat to the organisation's values'.

The governments of Australia and New Zealand, although not members of the MSG, clearly approved of Natapei's stance, but the prime ministers of Papua New Guinea (Sir Michael Somare) and Solomon Islands (Derek Sikua) were reportedly critical of his actions. Bainimarama reacted by expelling Australia's acting high commissioner, who was alleged to have encouraged MSG members not to attend a meeting in Fiji.

Unperturbed, Bainimarama went ahead to organise a meeting in Nadi in July 2010—initially labelled 'MSG Plus' but subsequently called the 'Engaging Fiji' meeting—to which he invited not only the members of the MSG but also other members of the Pacific Islands Forum, including Australia and New Zealand. Funding for the meeting was provided by China.

Some commentators described the move as an attempt by Fiji to 'hijack' the Pacific Islands Forum's agenda and perhaps exploit resentment among some Forum countries of the dominating roles played by Australia and New Zealand in Pacific island affairs and fragment the Forum. Initially, reports suggested that the meeting would be poorly attended (among others, the northern Micronesia states had other commitments, and Samoa supported Australia and New Zealand in not attending), news which Australian sources received gleefully. In the event, however, the leaders of Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Kiribati and Tuvalu attended, along with representatives from Vanuatu, Tonga, Nauru, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Timor Leste—prompting Commodore Bainimarama to comment that Australia had 'egg on its face'. The group attending 'Engaging Fiji' broadly endorsed Bainimarama's strategic framework, but at a subsequent Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Vila in August, chaired by Natapei, they supported an extension of Fiji's suspension from the Forum (although there was support for the possibility of including Fiji in an enhanced Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations, or 'PACER-Plus').

Bainimarama responded by suspending Fiji from all MSG formal meetings; however, efforts were made by MSG members to keep negotiations with Fiji open. In October, following a meeting of MSG leaders during a UN General Assembly meeting in New York, newly elected Solomon Islands Prime Minister Danny Phillips proposed a reconciliation meeting in Honiara to be attended by MSG members, but both Bainimarama and Natapei declined the invitation. In December, Natapei lost a parliamentary vote of no confidence. Following the change of government in Vanuatu a further attempt was made to achieve a reconciliation, this time successfully. Vanuatu's incoming prime minister, Sato Kilman, accompanied by traditional chiefs from Vanuatu, met with Fiji's foreign affairs minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, in Honiara, where the two exchanged apologies and took part in a

traditional reconciliation ceremony moderated by the speaker of the Solomon Islands Parliament and attended by representatives from Papua New Guinea and the FLNKS. Fiji was then confirmed as the new chair of the MSG.

Several commentators have criticised Australia and New Zealand for attempting to isolate Fiji and have urged the two countries to review their position, arguing that their strategy hasn't produced results and that a fractured MSG isn't in anyone's interest. Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, has also urged Australia and New Zealand to stop shunning Bainimarama. China's engagement with the MSG and growing US, European Union and even Arab League interest in Melanesia and initiatives to promote dialogue with Fiji give added weight to the argument that Australia's failure to engage with Fiji may well be a counterproductive policy.

Other political and security issues

West Papua

For a number of years, West Papuan leaders have sought, largely unsuccessfully, to enlist the support of Pacific island nations, and especially the members of the MSG, for their demands for a free West Papua. Vanuatu has been the only country to show sympathy for the West Papuan case. In 2005, West Papuan spokesman and Vanuatu resident John Otto Ondawame was included in the Vanuatu delegation to the MSG meeting in Goroka, but was asked by Somare to leave, and West Papuan activists were refused permission to present a petition on West Papua.

The same year, Indonesia's ambassador to Vanuatu, observing that Indonesia contained a larger Melanesian population than all the MSG countries combined, reportedly suggested that Indonesia should be a member of the MSG, or at least be granted observer status. Indonesia has pressured Vanuatu to withdraw its support for West Papua. Vanuatu has not only resisted that pressure but has opposed suggestions that Indonesia might be given observer status at MSG meetings.

In June 2010, following receipt of a petition from ni-Vanuatu citizens calling for a clear foreign policy on West Papua, the Vanuatu Parliament passed a motion, with bipartisan support, resolving to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the legality of the 1962 agreement between Indonesia and the Netherlands on the status of West Papua and the legality of the 1969 'Act of Free Choice', with the aim of having West Papua relisted with the UN Committee on Decolonization as a non-self-governing territory. Prime Minister Natapei also undertook to support the granting of observer status to West Papua at the MSG Leaders' Forum and the Pacific Islands Forum, both of which were chaired by Vanuatu in 2010.

To the surprise and disappointment of West Papua supporters, however, the issue wasn't mentioned at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting hosted by Vanuatu in Vila in August (and attended by some twenty Indonesian observers), or at the UN General Assembly meeting in October. West Papua supporters blamed Papua New Guinea, Australia and Indonesia for Natapei's inaction (which probably contributed to the vote of no confidence against him in December). The issue is unlikely to go away.

Kanak independence

Kanak independence was a formative issue for the MSG, and the FLNKS has been a longstanding member of the Group. In 2003 the Leaders' Summit in Gizo, Solomon Islands, was briefed on the implementation of the Noumea Accord on New Caledonia's future political status, and the FLNKS president voiced his concerns about France's failure to ratify certain provisions concerning voting in elections and the scheduled referendum on the future status of New Caledonia

in 2014, and about new directions in French regional policy in the South Pacific. Shortly before the MSG meeting, a Ministerial Committee Meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum, with membership from Fiji, Solomon Islands and Nauru, had visited New Caledonia. The MSG noted a lack of solidarity within the FLNKS and urged all signatories to the Noumea Accord to respect their obligations.

In June 2010, following a visit by a group of senior MSG officials, a mission led by Prime Minister Natapei as the MSG Leaders' Summit chairman expressed continuing concern at the slow rate of implementation of the Noumea Accord. Reportedly, Natapei also declared his support for New Caledonia becoming a member of the Pacific Islands Forum.

Solomon Islands and RAMSI

The MSG has supported the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), and in April 2006 sent a mission, headed by Papua New Guinea Foreign Minister Sir Rabble Namaliu, in response to civil disturbances in Honiara following national elections. This was followed by a special meeting of the Leaders' Summit in Nadi, Fiji, in October, which expressed serious concern at a raid on the office of the Solomon Islands prime minister by the Participating Police Force under RAMSI.

In 2009, a mission comprising senior MSG officials visited Honiara and Canberra in an attempt to mediate a diplomatic stand-off over the 'Moti affair' between the Solomon Islands Government and the Australian Government under Prime Minister John Howard.

A regional security force

At the fifteenth Leaders' Summit at Gizo in 2003, members considered a proposal by Papua New Guinea for the establishment of a regional rapid response security force to deal with potential security threats and natural disasters in the region. Proponents of a regional security force have pointed to the success of the regional Peace Monitoring Group in Bougainville and RAMSI, as well as to the Papua New Guinea Defence Force's early intervention to end the Santo rebellion in Vanuatu in 1980. The proposal was endorsed at the sixteenth Leaders' Summit in Goroka, Papua New Guinea, in 2005 and has been revisited at subsequent meetings, but has yet to be made operative.

There's some merit in the idea of building regional capacity to respond to domestic or inter-state security threats and natural disasters in the region—as recognised in the Pacific Islands Forum's Biketawa Declaration—but issues of funding and logistics seem to make a permanent regional security force unlikely.

Torres Strait autonomy

At a meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum in Cairns in 2009, a protest by members of the People's Movement for Torres Strait Autonomy sought MSG support for Torres Strait statehood. MSG leaders, however, declined involvement in the issue, suggesting that the issue of self-determination be left to the Australian Government.

Concluding remarks

Although much is made of the MSG's promotion of economic cooperation between member countries and the establishment of a subregional free trade area, there's little doubt that the primary significance of the MSG as a subregional grouping isn't economic but political. The MSG had its origins in a broad sense of Melanesian cultural solidarity and a desire to assert a Melanesian voice among the members of the Pacific Islands Forum, which some island countries perceived to be dominated by Australia and New Zealand. That perception probably reached a peak in

the early to mid-2000s, as relations between the Australian Government under John Howard and the governments of both Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands deteriorated.

Within the Pacific Islands Forum, the Melanesian countries' reluctance to support sanctions against the military regime of Commodore Bainimarama has created tensions in relations between MSG members and some non-MSG countries, particularly Australia, New Zealand and Samoa—although there's little evidence, either, that the Melanesian alternative of 'constructive dialogue' with Fiji has achieved anything.

In 2009 and 2010, some commentators were concerned at the possibility that differences between the Melanesian states and the other members of the Pacific Islands Forum could split the Forum, and saw Bainimarama's 'MSG Plus' as an attempt to challenge the influence of the Forum and specifically to undermine the influence of Australia and New Zealand.

However, such a view almost certainly overestimates the extent of Melanesian solidarity. Despite the rhetoric, the interests of the Melanesian countries aren't identical. This was clearly evident in the stand-off between Bainimarama and Vanuatu's Prime Minister Natapei, and also in the associated tensions between Natapei on the one hand and Somare and Sikua on the other. Even within Fiji, many Fijians do not appreciate the MSG's apparent tolerance of the Fijian military regime's denial of democratic government. More significantly, Vanuatu's support for West Papuan separatism, and its opposition to granting Indonesia observer status within the MSG, isn't shared by Papua New Guinea.

It therefore seems unlikely that the MSG, or some sort of MSG Plus grouping, poses a serious challenge to the Pacific Islands Forum. Nevertheless, in the Pacific as elsewhere, things change: China, which now has substantial investments in Papua New Guinea and has become a significant source of aid to the island states, seems set to play a larger role in the Pacific; the US and EU are showing renewed interest; and even the Arab League has initiated engagement.

A unified MSG, backed by China, could provide a counterweight to the strong influences exerted by Australia and New Zealand through the Pacific Islands Forum. As the 'big brothers' in the island Pacific, Australia and New Zealand are always likely to be viewed with some suspicion by their smaller neighbours. At the same time, as countries with the greatest stake in maintaining a prosperous and peaceful Pacific, Australia and New Zealand can't afford to isolate themselves from Pacific island states and territories, even intransigent ones.

Endnotes

- 1 The Agreement Establishing the Melanesian Spearhead Group, signed in 2007, says 'The MSG comprises the Republic of Fiji Islands, Independent State of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the Republic of Vanuatu and FLNKS of New Caledonia', although in an earlier MSG trade agreement the FLNKS is accorded 'permanent observer status'. The assumption underlying FLNKS membership seems to have been that in due course 'Kanak independence' would be achieved in New Caledonia. New Caledonia—still a French colony, albeit one with substantial self-governing powers—isn't a member of the MSG but has recently expressed an interest in membership and has been encouraged in this by Vanuatu. It's not clear, however, that the FLNKS would wish to cede its MSG membership to New Caledonia at this stage, or that the other MSG countries would accept the alternative of both the FLNKS and New Caledonia being members.
- 2 The 1993 trade agreement was signed by Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; Fiji became a signatory in 1998.

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