

Securing the South Pacific

Making the most of Australia's renewed regional focus

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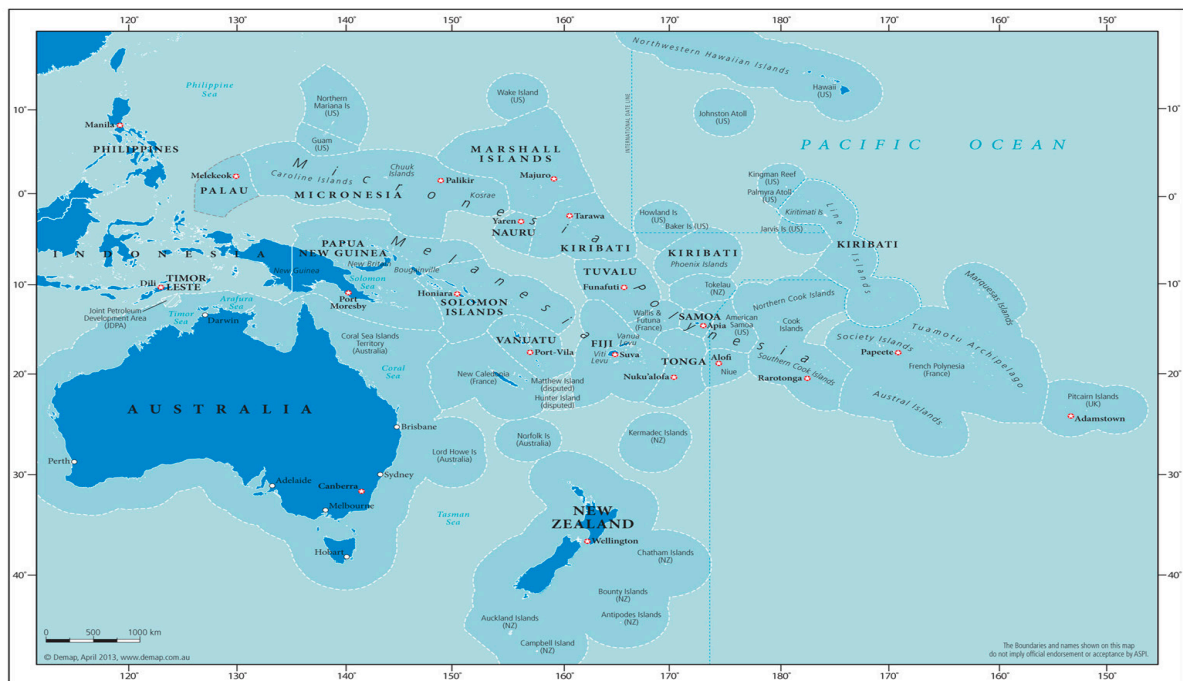
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Executive summary

A decade after the invasion of Iraq, the 10-year-anniversary of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) later this month will mark an equally significant juncture in Australia's strategic policy.

The new *Defence White Paper 2013* declares that the ADF will be structured around just two of its principal tasks: preventing attacks on Australia and promoting stability and security in the South Pacific and Timor-Leste.

But fostering South Pacific security is as difficult as it is important, especially in the large, sometimes volatile, states of Melanesia. It's getting harder, too, as regional partners explore fresh ways to meet familiar but deepening challenges.



The white paper also flags a *return* of Australian interest that had waned—partly because Canberra was focused on the Middle East and North Asia but also because of difficulties encountered last time it emphasised regional security under the 2003–07 'more interventionist approach'.

Given how fast major crises can arise, Canberra should continue to enhance the ADF's capabilities for regional intervention. That suggests against cutting the Army's regular infantry battalions. To help avoid such crises (and to prepare the ADF and partner forces for them) we should vigorously pursue the white paper's focus on deeper regional defence relationships. A crucial but as yet unfunded element of that engagement is the Pacific Maritime Security Program, which would preserve the ADF's strategic presence across the region and help partner countries police a vast area Australia would otherwise have to patrol itself. Canberra should also renew its investment in Pacific policing because of the extent of regional criminal threats and the crucial role of the Australian Federal Police in stabilising crises.

If Australia wants partner countries to go along with its desire to lead, it will need innovative approaches as well as improved security tools. New ADF capabilities to project power into the region will give Canberra better options but also greater scope for missteps. Australia should use its whole-of-government procedures to explore such matters in advance.

Australia's soft power may prove just as important as its capability clout. Getting that right requires a nuanced understanding of individual countries, so the government would benefit from a deeper, more sustained, conversation between Pacific and security scholars and officials.

It might also be best to take a soft power approach to evolving Pacific regionalism. Instead of trying to shape Melanesian Spearhead Group initiatives in order to preserve Australian security leadership, Canberra may get the best results on difficult security issues (such as West Papua) by giving regional leaders as much room and responsibility as possible.

Finally, Canberra should be in no hurry to draw China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) into military cooperation in the South Pacific—there are better locations elsewhere for that important task.

Indications and drivers of growing interest

The ADF passed a milestone with the end of Operation Anode, the military component of RAMSI, on 1 July 2013. Of its other two significant local interventions, Operation Astute in Timor-Leste concluded in March, and Operation Bel Isi in Bougainville ended in August 2003.

Canberra might have been expected to draw a line under such long-running commitments. An appetite for risky, costly¹, new operations is unlikely under deficit budgets when there's no local crisis brewing.

Yet January's national security strategy identifies enhanced regional engagement as one of just three main priorities for the next five years.² The region features in Foreign Secretary Varghese's 6+2+N formulation of Australia's international priorities, in which N is for neighbourhood.³ Investing to shape a favourable strategic environment is a bipartisan priority, too.

Although there's a gap 'between the strategic theology of the initial chapters of the white paper and the wish list of equipment projects further in'⁴ (and the other two principal tasks of contributing to Indo-Pacific and global security, as well as factors such as the US rebalance, are obviously significant too) its regional focus is real. South Pacific countries contain fewer than 10 million of the half a billion people between Australia and China, but they sit astride Australia's near lines of communication and it's considered essential no major military power establish bases in the area. That's why every defence white paper since 1976 has included the South Pacific as a main focus, even at the height of ADF operations and major strategic developments elsewhere.

Some areas serious violence could emerge quickly

All Australia's Melanesian, and most Polynesian and Micronesian, partners confront serious, mainly internal, security challenges:

- Papua New Guinea (PNG) ended its year-long constitutional crisis with the 2012 election but only after 'muddling through' had been stretched to near breaking point. As Australia's chief diplomat in PNG at the time diplomatically put it, 'for a moment, there appeared to be a real risk that PNG would walk away from its proud democratic record.'⁵
- Mining and fishing won't fully fund Solomon Islands' budget shortfall, sustain neo-traditional patronage networks, soak up labour from the country's youth bulge, or help balance uneven rural-urban development exacerbated by the near exhaustion of unsustainable logging.
- There's potential for renewed tension ahead of Bougainville's referendum or if the PNG Government refuses to ratify a possible vote for full independence (as it could under the 2001 peace agreement).
- Indonesian President Yudhoyono now lacks spare political capital to invest in Aceh-type concessions to reduce rural Papuans' growing sense of relative deprivation, and it's uncertain whether this will be a priority for his successor.
- In Tonga, as elsewhere, past tensions, such as those behind the 2006 riots in Nuku'alofa and Honiara, could reignite with little warning.
- As the International Crisis Group recently pointed out, although Timor-Leste (which regards itself mainly as an Asian country) is growing strongly, its fragile stability remains vulnerable to convulsions in the patronage networks underpinning recent progress.

Canberra's renewed attention mainly reflects concerns that security in the near neighbourhood could deteriorate quickly in the face of persistent development and security challenges, requiring the ADF to conduct stabilisation missions. The challenges include fast-growing populations, youth bulges, high unemployment, periodic political instability and poor governance. Given this scope for trouble (see box), Australia might need to deploy a brigade-sized force into the near region again with little warning.⁶

The 2013 white paper's regional focus is also partly cost-driven.⁷ Put simply, an ADF designed around protecting the continent and regional stabilisation operations will be less expensive than a force designed for future high-end war-fighting in Northeast Asia. The focus on regional security gives the ADF a coherent foundation for force structure planning based on 'credible contingencies' that are actually likely, and provides opportunities to retain useful and interesting roles after Afghanistan.⁸

The regional focus reflects slight anxieties about local ripples from China's rise too.

Key factors complicating the regional security focus

Some of the trends that have sharpened Australian interest in the South Pacific make promoting regional security harder. For all its clout, Canberra has never had, nor really sought, tight local control. It aspires to great influence, reaching towards a loose dominance, but has only ever fitfully devoted the sort of attention that would give it anything like hegemony—loose or tight. The international setting's now more competitive, and local leaders are ever less receptive to perceived pushiness, so it's uncertain whether Canberra's renewed inclination to exercise leadership is matched by the neighbours' readiness to offer what Graeme Dobell calls 'followship'.⁹

Growing diplomatic attention and economic growth give regional states new models and options. The white paper doesn't assert that Australia must remain the region's 'security partner of choice' as early drafts reportedly did¹⁰, but it notes that 'the growing reach and influence of Asian nations opens up a wider range of external players for our neighbours to partner with.'

Beijing probably isn't pursuing a grand design to supersede Australia in the region's aid, trade and strategies or displace the US as the South Pacific's dominant military power, and there's little evidence that it's actively seeking to project hard power into the region.¹¹ However, its increasing presence and weight in the neighbourhood complicate Canberra's strategic calculus even when it isn't trying to. The sale of Chinese patrol boats to Timor-Leste in 2008 for murky but apparently mainly commercial reasons is a case in point.¹² Signs that PNG considered seeking a large Chinese loan to recapitalise their defence force¹³ (Beijing apparently responded cautiously¹⁴) had potential to ruffle feathers, too. And regional countries' indebtedness to Beijing probably doesn't buy the sort of influence that's sometimes fretted about but may have growing potential to spark acute violence.

Strong economic figures give some countries new confidence to resist traditional donors' advice. High growth in Timor-Leste enabled Dili to refuse to host a regional asylum-seeker processing centre in 2010 and to take an assertive stance on disputed maritime boundaries in the Timor Sea.

Development, political and security pressures complicate Canberra's efforts to lead on regional security. The challenges include population pressure, environmental degradation, natural disasters, rapid social change, crime, poverty, urbanisation, unemployment, gender inequality and maladministration. Strong growth in some countries is off a low base, unevenly spread, and vulnerable to commodity price and investment fluctuations. Even in PNG, where real GDP grew by 7.7% last year, revenues from liquefied natural gas won't offset declines in other areas until 2018—raising the spectre of unsustainable borrowing.

Although Australia shares fundamental strategic interests with its neighbours, their different histories, circumstances and outlooks create divergent security priorities and approaches. For example, although Fiji, Tonga and PNG all contribute to international peacekeeping, the ADF's integration into US alliance commitments elsewhere gives Canberra different imperatives from theirs.

Individual leaders' sectional interests are much closer to the surface in countries with less bureaucratic and more personal governance. This produces local scandals and uneven policy decisions and can lead to messages and assumptions that seem entirely clear to one defence force being lost on another. Differences in perspectives and priorities

The Fiji question

With the sort of military and economic sanctions required to bring the Fijian regime to its knees seeming disproportionate or draconian, Australia's carrots and sticks have so far bounced off Commodore Bainimarama as easily as the phrase 'creative middle power diplomacy' rolls off the tongue.¹⁵ When Canberra has tried to negotiate a compromise, he's made it clear it would have to capitulate on election timing and modalities to really re-engage.¹⁶ All that Pacific Islands Forum members have been able to do is offer support for a 2014 election under rules that can be regarded as 'democratic'.

The standoff continues to hurt the Forum and Australia's place in it, since Canberra has to corral members to stay resolute. The Fijian regime has turned angrily and noisily to other sources of support. That mainly means Beijing, but also involves states such as North Korea and Iran. And although the impacts of Fiji's estrangement can be overstated, Suva has succeeded as a spoiler against some Forum initiatives it's barred from and has boosted forums that exclude external powers.

are evident even with our most trusted defence partners, as was shown by Canberra's caution on Port Moresby's plans to increase the size of, and refocus, the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF).¹⁷

Suva's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum in 2009 for ditching scheduled elections and for low-end human rights abuses leaves a conspicuous hole in a regional organisation built on consensus to provide a unified regional voice, but which currently looks a bit 'like ASEAN without Indonesia or Thailand' (see box).¹⁸

Future directions

How then should Canberra make the most of its renewed focus on South Pacific security?

The 10 policy recommendations here all build on activities partly underway. The first, third and fifth could be applied cost-neutrally against forward estimates but would preclude future cost-cutting. The fourth involves a significant future cost that's recognised but not yet budgeted for.¹⁹

1. Keep enhancing the ADF's capabilities to operate in the region

Australia's nearest neighbours are a long way from key ADF and commercial fuel, supply and logistic hubs across a region that encompasses a quarter of the world's ocean. Even a permissive ADF intervention, actively supported by neighbours, could soak up a lot of troops and supplies in this environment.

After more than a decade in the Middle East, the ADF is seasoned by combat and led by junior officers and NCOs with operational experience in allied enterprises, but also in stabilisation and nation-building roles close to home—especially leading INTERFET from 1999.

With the exception of Bougainville in 1998, 'the rapid insertion of overwhelming force in a context where the political ground had been very carefully prepared'²⁰ helped the ADF talk softly and generally avoid using its big stick. That suggests Australia should further enhance the ADF's ability to deliver a degree of 'shock and awe' to sustain local overmatch in all likely regional tasks and avoid cutting the Army's regular infantry battalions—expanded from just six to eight in 2006—when the next Treasurer asks Defence to help bring the budget back to surplus.

Given the region's susceptibility to natural disasters, Canberra should also enhance the ADF's humanitarian assistance capacity. Exercising this capability regularly with neighbouring militaries and agencies helps to provide a rationale for the force's enduring regional presence and boosts its welcome and familiarity.

Some formidable new tools for such operations are in the pipeline. They include the Navy's two new Canberra class amphibious ships, the Army's Plan Beersheba to create three multi-role combat brigades, the RAAF's C-27 tactical airlifters, and a partly marinised deployable Joint Force Headquarters.

It will take time and effort to build the amphibious capabilities required to evacuate Australians and others during a regional crisis, let alone restore stability after a major breakdown of order.²¹ For now, the ADF is starting by creating an Amphibious Ready Element drawn from a single battalion.²²

2. Think carefully about how to use those LHDs

While ADF planners are focusing on new capabilities and the region, the political and policy implications of Australia's growing ability to project power need more whole-of-government attention.

For example, Australia might need to rescue citizens from a neighbouring state without active support from that country's authorities and in the face of organised opposition.²³ Better tools, such as embarked Tiger helicopters, will give the government unprecedented *technical* ability to deliver force 'directly against strong opponents in well-defended positions'.²⁴ And Graeme



HMAS *Tobruk* at anchor near Vanimo in Papua New Guinea whilst deployed on Pacific Partnership 2013, an annual humanitarian aid mission. Image courtesy Defence Department

Dobell suggests public satisfaction with recent regional stabilisation operations has quietly transformed impulses implicit in Australia's history, national psyche and instinct for strategic denial, into a *de facto* regional security guarantee.

The issues could be even thornier if Australian citizens aren't directly imperilled. Around 200 people died before Australia ultimately intervened in the Solomons but, as Timor-Leste showed in 1999, there's an unquantifiable threshold beyond which nearby civilians being massacred with impunity creates a public clamour to 'do something' that overtakes ordinary diplomatic and cost imperatives.

The future amphibious capability will offer ways to do something about a wider range of ills, but acting on this may not always be such a good idea. In the Middle East, Canberra's re-learning that it's easy to get into overseas adventures but harder to get out²⁵, and that the tools to win every encounter don't guarantee strategic success. It could then be useful for ministers and department heads to consider what extra reach the new capabilities will and won't deliver, and the broader consequences of this, well before quick decisions need to be made.

3. Tighten the ADF's day-to-day enmeshment with regional forces

The *Defence White Paper 2013* commits the ADF to greater regional engagement to prepare it for potential evacuation and stabilisation operations, ensure that it can cooperate well with partners, and reduce the likelihood that such operations will be required. The government has increased military cooperation with the South Pacific and PNG by 14% in the very tight 2012–13 Defence budget and by nearly 30% in the 2013–14 budget.

Defence Minister Smith's trip to Tonga for the first South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting (SPDMM) on the eve of delivering his white paper resulted in a joint communique committing to stronger interoperability, information sharing, disaster relief, maritime security and joint exercises.²⁶

The signing of the Australia–PNG Defence Cooperation Arrangement a week later also emphasised regional security cooperation.²⁷ A new regional exercise framework²⁸ provides scope to develop interoperability, regional capabilities, and (subject to regional agreement) opportunities for regular rotations of US Marines to train and exercise with local partners in Darwin or overseas. It should also help keep potentially idle hands busy following the end of RAMSI's military mission.

ASPI is about to offer recommendations for updating defence engagement in the South Pacific and further afield. As that report will show, it's better to shape a positive setting and prevent threats emerging than to respond once problems are gaining momentum.

4. Renew support for regional maritime security coordination

Given the importance of fishing to local economies and the region's small populations and vast exclusive economic zones, the SPDMM also focused on how to modernise cooperative efforts to protect marine resources, enforce sovereignty and counter transnational crime.

The Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) estimates that illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing plunders a billion dollars from the South Pacific every year.²⁹ This is mainly due to misreporting and transshipment, which is exacerbated by weak physical surveillance capacity and limited policing and patrolling. Some fishing vessels allegedly also traffic in humans and smuggle weapons, narcotics and other contraband.

Australia's renewed regional security focus should encourage Navy to increase its commitment to the Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) as an unexciting but valuable asset rather than an orphan program. Although every agency regards the PMSP as a useful successor to the Pacific Patrol Boat program for promoting Australian national and regional interests, none has particularly wanted to pay for it, and it's been passed back and forth between Defence and Customs since 2009. The PMSP could build on institutions such as the FFA's Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre in Honiara and Niue Treaty subsidiary arrangements for tracking and hot pursuit of suspect vessels across maritime jurisdictions, as well as mechanisms for coordinating aerial maritime surveillance. It also offers a way to more deeply engage military assistance from the US and France, probably Japan³⁰, and possibly Indonesia.

Modern best-practice military options for the PMSP may challenge some partners. Leasing platforms, pooling regionally owned capabilities, and sharing responsibilities and information could all be sensitive for recently decolonised countries. Some face inter- and intra-governmental rivalries and capacity constraints that would make intricate multiagency tasks or information sharing costly and tricky. Maintaining autonomy from the Anzac 'big brothers' could also be a higher priority than efficiency and effectiveness, despite the revenue lost to weak maritime capacity. And some regional leaders benefit personally from that weakness.

Such issues should be manageable, but as the PMSP sponsor Canberra will need an uncommonly deft touch. For example, it may need to bite its tongue about any equipment that regional countries manage to acquire independently of the program. PMSP won't be cheap (requiring up to a billion dollars new investment beyond current forward estimates but starting before 2019) but being as flexible as possible about integrating regional preferences would help to build neighbours' capabilities to police an immense area Australia would otherwise have to monitor, while promoting the continuing acceptance of the ADF's permanent strategic presence across the region.

5. Renew Australia's commitment to Pacific policing

While the ADF's regional footprint is expanding, the presence of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) is shrinking in some areas.

Law enforcement emerged as an increasingly important ingredient in Australia's national security mix after 9/11 and the 2002 Bali bombings. The 'policing the neighbourhood' approach found form in RAMSI in mid-2003 and the establishment of AFP's International Deployment Group (IDG) in early 2004 to provide for police deployments to stability, security and peacekeeping operations. It received a half billion dollar boost in August 2006 to move towards 1,200 staff, including the rapidly deployable 150-member Operational Response Group, following urban rioting in the Solomons and Timor. Other elements of the 'new interventionism' included the attempt to put 210 Australian police on the beat alongside PNG police (and embed 65 senior officials in other agencies) under the \$800 million Enhanced Cooperation Program. There were also efforts to strengthen the Pacific Islands Forum, second AFP officers to head several Pacific police forces, expand the AFP's Law Enforcement Cooperation Program, and provide financial and technical help for struggling Nauru.³¹ Australia's decision in 2005 to double and better target its aid, after this had fallen to a 30-year low, was also shaped by concerns about fragile states on its periphery.³²

While the IDG still uses 20% of AFP resources, its prominence waned as the national security decade wound down.³³ By April 2012, it was down to 315 staff deployed overseas plus 40 staff in Australia's external territories.³⁴ Recently announced initiatives, such as the rollout of the third phase of the 23-person Australia–PNG Police Partnership, are increasingly sophisticated and won't be cheap, but include almost no increased resources. Elsewhere, there have been cuts to the AFP network after difficulties gaining the robust legal immunities the AFP demands before conducting community policing overseas, and due to frustration at apparent political interference when regional police services that it's partnering are closing in on well-connected leaders suspected of corruption.

There are two key reasons to expand rather than reduce the AFP's regional policing capability—both the IDG and the law enforcement network serving alongside regional police every day in line, advisory and liaison positions. First, it brings skills quite different from the ADF's to the crisis and post-conflict phases of stabilisation missions. That's why the AFP will continue to contribute to RAMSI now that the military mission is over. Second, complex domestic and transnational law and order challenges are generally of greater interest to regional governments and people than external aggression. They can contribute to the sort of insecurity that might need a stabilisation mission if left unchecked.

6. Keep refining mechanisms to harness all of Australia's national levers

The 2013 white paper recognises that 'security and development are two sides of the same coin—both are necessary for lasting stability and prosperity', and that agencies other than the ADF and AFP have roles to play in regional security.

Australia's crisis policymaking apparatus worked quite well in 1999³⁵, and since then Canberra has built on lessons learned about coordinating agencies. The establishment of the National Security Division in the Prime Minister's Department in 2003, expanded to a group headed by a National Security Adviser from 2008, also created a mechanism to elevate DFAT-led country strategies for consideration by the National Security Committee of Cabinet.

Still, other departments don't always share Defence's priorities or assumptions. Interdepartmental committees assembled to manage practical, cross-jurisdictional issues below crisis level, and guided by fairly broad government direction and their members' organisational aims, don't always work either.³⁶ Heads of mission coordinate security initiatives with other activities at overseas posts, especially during crises, but home agencies shape most big overseas spending programs with their ministers. And agencies' shares of each Budget reflect complex historical patterns, interests, debates and the different costs of doing business in particular fields that normally shift fairly slowly.

Continuing efforts in and outside Canberra to improve priority-setting and resource allocation, and foster a cohesive national security community culture able to go 'beyond coordination and committees'³⁷, will all help.

7. Develop trade and other tools to maximise Australia's soft power

Influence derived from business, public, personal and historical links is harder to steer than deliberate public relations tools, but at least as relevant. Australia needs to emphasise the breadth, depth and special history of its regional engagement in what's now a more competitive setting.

Canberra's position as regional superpower, indispensable donor and a former colonial power inevitably stokes 'perennial Pacific irritation'.³⁸ Power asymmetries—Australia's economy is 100 times the size of even PNG's—and different historical experiences and cultural expectations mean misunderstandings arise quite often. The slight compromise of sovereignty inherent in accepting any aid means that an insensitive act, such as subjecting a leader to a security check, can be escalated into a diplomatic spat and allegations that Australia's aid is paternalistic and self-serving.

Various bureaucratic levers are available to try to counter negative perceptions, demonstrate leadership credentials, set norms and present a coherent Australian narrative to the region.³⁹ They include alumni associations, arts outreach, sporting initiatives and public broadcasting.⁴⁰ DFAT also runs targeted engagement campaigns to cultivate positive attitudes towards Australia among emerging opinion-makers. All such public diplomacy tools need to be continually fine-tuned to stay effective.

A focus on promoting economic growth also plays well. Moving from the duty- and quota-free access to Anzac markets allowed since 1981 towards the single regional market under negotiation as the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER+) entails a painful transition away from tariff-based revenue.⁴¹ Yet initiatives to boost regional advantages in natural resources, tourism and remittances (such as the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme, Mining-for-Development initiative, and Pacific Horticultural and Agricultural Market Access program), and efforts to strengthen links between business councils, major companies, professional associations, and financial institutions and their regional branches, have shown some promise.

The tone and style of public discourse affect Canberra's influence, especially during ADF/AFP stabilisation missions. Whether such operations are requested (Timor-Leste and the Solomons) or only grudgingly allowed (the Enhanced Cooperation Program in PNG), inevitable strains are compounded by any conditionality-focused 'tough love' language, which regional leaders find patronising and demeaning.⁴² Dangerous crises were stabilised and valuable regional reforms begun last time Australia focused on regional security, but relationships had become so strained that partners were hardly talking to one another and essential further cooperation stalled by the end of the 2003–07 'more interventionist approach'.⁴³ Differences that might otherwise have been worked through spurred mutual frustration and claims that Australia was playing 'deputy sheriff'.⁴⁴

The subsequent 'partnerships for development' approach, which stresses shared interests and responsibilities, mutual respect and modernised cooperation⁴⁵, allows Canberra to mostly provide what aid it thinks its neighbours need while ceding sufficient priority-setting to make it valued by recipients.

8. Deepen the conversation between Pacific scholars and security planners

The effective use of soft power depends on a nuanced understanding of politics, economics, society and culture in the countries Canberra wants to influence.

The complex interplay of micro-level cultural factors with national and global dynamics means Canberra must bring deep expertise to bear to address practical problems. For example, some suggest that Australia's simplistic understanding of

local cultural subtleties led to Canberra being caught off guard by, and possibly helping trigger, renewed violence in the Solomons and Timor in 2006.⁴⁶

An important conference at the Australian National University in February aimed to spark a dialogue between Pacific scholars, strategists and defence planners to help bridge the gap between policy and research.⁴⁷ If that dialogue could be sustained and widened to take in policymakers and officials, those deeper perspectives might have real impact informing Australian strategy (and offer the experts direct policy-relevance and exchange with well-informed practitioners in return).

AusAID's recent decision to boost funding for the university's State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program makes it more likely that such a dialogue will develop. Even if that doesn't happen, the program could help policymakers draw on fine-grained research.

9. Don't rush to refocus Australia's commitment to Pacific regionalism

Suva's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum accelerated a partial fracturing of South Pacific regionalism. The 'Pacific Way' consensus first articulated by Fiji's founding prime minister owed more to a hierarchical, elite-driven and conservative perspective of traditional Polynesian leadership⁴⁸ than to the highly competitive, personally focused, fragmentary and rough-and-tumble style of politics in Melanesian societies.⁴⁹

As economic, political and numerical weight in the Forum drifted towards Melanesia, Canberra hoped the 2005 Pacific Plan would focus the forum away from perceived grandstanding towards regional integration and more coherent, efficient and effective functional agencies.⁵⁰ Yet the plan highlighted the Forum's inconsistencies and created 'more cracks to paper over'.⁵¹ In the middle of the last decade, Australia–Solomons tensions over the direction of RAMSI, continuing fallout with PNG over the Moti affair and the Enhanced Cooperation Program, and the frosty response to Fiji's 2006 coup added more friction.

Sitting at the crossroads of Polynesia and Melanesia, Fiji didn't join the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) until 1996, a decade after its first coup. The MSG adopted a constitution in 2007 and established a secretariat in 2008.⁵² Richard Herr suggests that Australia should adopt a 'two regions approach' to the Pacific islands in case the MSG 'develops its institutional capacity in the way its members now clearly intend' as the 'principal regional organ for the vast majority of Pacific Islanders and portal of choice for the new, mainly Asian, interests in the Pacific Islands'.⁵³

However, Australia needn't abandon faith in region-wide regionalism just yet. The Forum's practical programs and partners improve health, education and economic outcomes, reduce poverty and raise living standards. While its political voice is a bit quieter, its region-wide perspective remains useful.

It's also uncertain whether the MSG has as much potential as hoped. The agencies that would form its disaster response force probably lack the funding, expertise, personnel and tools to create a viable unit, for example.⁵⁴ Although MSG countries are strengthening preferential trading arrangements, the modest commerce between them (only \$23 million a year between even Fiji and PNG) remains subject to a tariff list, and includes cross-investment in creaky national telcos and more diplomatically than commercially driven acquisitions.

There may also be a limit to how far the MSG, as an overtly anticolonial organisation, will welcome Australia's engagement. The differences in Australian and MSG approaches to West Papua illustrate this tension. Whereas the MSG is considering West Papuan membership, a condolence message for a West Papuan activist was voted down in the Australian Senate late last year, and Australia's ambassador in Jakarta offered commiserations for Indonesian soldiers killed by guerrillas early this year. If Australia did gain observer membership, it would be resented for having to moderate adventurous MSG positions.



Prime Minister Bainimarama of the Republic of the Fiji Islands, addresses the general debate of the sixty-fourth session of the General Assembly, 26 September 2009. UN Photo/Devra Berkowitz

Canberra's best hope for a productive relationship with the MSG may lie in not seeking formal ties but offering low-key support. If Canberra can bring itself to genuinely welcome Melanesian countries' desire to lead, give them as much space as possible, and make it clear it intends to hold them to a high standard, it might avoid provoking resistance and even forge a constructive partnership. For example, it's hard to imagine Australia could have expected a better outcome than the MSG Leader's Summit delaying a vote on West Papuan Membership and opting instead for renewed dialogue with Jakarta⁵⁵ if Canberra had been pressing hard for its own solution and getting in the way of Melanesian compromise.

On the Fiji question, Richard Herr worries that Canberra has painted itself into a corner against a military likely to remain a feature of politics, and that onerous conditions for lifting sanctions⁵⁶ will prolong the impasse. Where, he asks, will Canberra go when elections are held 'under a constitution it regards as flawed by a process it deems biased?'⁵⁷ Well, Australia's strong support for PNG's election suggests it could accommodate some pretty wild procedural irregularities⁵⁸, as long as ballots aren't systematically rigged to deliver a particular result. Bainimarama's lack of a natural constituency beyond the military means he mightn't prevail even if he goes to the polls on a fairly uneven playing field. If he does win an unfair election, Australia will have to decide whether to treat a 'New Order' Fiji as it did Suharto's New Order Indonesia. Graeme Dobell suggests Canberra would probably grit its teeth and get on with it.⁵⁹ But that bridge can be crossed if we come to it. In the meantime, Canberra should make clear that it's prepared to provide any reasonable assistance to ensure the regime doesn't feel it needs to cling to power at all costs, since it's hard to see how Australia could avoid imposing harsh sanctions if the regime walks away from elections entirely.

10. Don't hurry to welcome the PLA

Finally, what should we make of suggestions that aid projects and military exercises with South Pacific countries offer a relatively low-risk opportunity to encourage cooperation with China?⁶⁰

Beijing's diplomatic efforts in the South Pacific over the past 30 years, mainly to block Taiwan, haven't always been helpful, and Australian and local officials are likely to be fairly cautious. There are few signs that Beijing wants to use its growing influence to carve out a strategic presence so far from its shores and close to Australia's, but the risks for Canberra won't be low if one day it does.

Although the SPDMM envisages inviting 'new partners' to observe regional military exercises, Jenny Hayward-Jones seems close to the mark recommending that future collaboration with China occur in areas that support Pacific island economic development priorities and avoid focusing too much on security.

Australia can't prevent China playing important roles in the South Pacific, and shouldn't try to. Globally, it's essential that China not be excluded from normal and normalising military engagement in every theatre. But encouraging a PLA that doesn't seem in a rush to operate in Australia's immediate approaches to do so would be something else altogether. China is too much stronger than other countries in this region, and the region's too vital to Australian interests, for that. Instead, Canberra should use its evolving strategic partnership with Beijing to try to help integrate PLA military engagement into structures and activities where other participants have sufficient weight to accommodate it. And even in that, Australia's guiding principle should be 'first do no harm'.

Notes

- 1 ADF aspects of the interventions in Bougainville, Timor and the Solomons cost \$109 million, \$4.3 billion and \$350 million, respectively.
- 2 Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), *Strong and secure: a strategy for Australia's national security*, January 2013.
- 3 Daniel Flitton, 'Chief diplomat spells out Australia's rules of engagement', *The Age*, 29 January 2013.
- 4 Mark Thomson, 'The Defence White Paper—Between the Lines' in *The Strategist*, 14 May 2013.
- 5 Ian Kemish, 'Papua New Guinea: Australia's closest neighbour in transition', 2012 Fernberg Lecture, Brisbane, 10 December 2012.
- 6 Peter Jennings, 'National security: the decade after the decade before', *The Strategist*, 25 January 2013.
- 7 Michael, L'Estrange, 'International Defence Engagement: Potential and Limitations', *Security Challenges*, 9 (2), 2013, pp. 23-34.
- 8 Peter Jennings, 'Parties flying blind on cash for their hardware hopes', *The Weekend Australian*, 25 May 2013.
- 9 Graeme Dobell, 'From arc of instability to arc of responsibility', *Security Challenges*, 8(4), 2012, pp. 33-45.
- 10 Cameron Stewart, 'White paper draft warns of China influence in Pacific', *The Australian*, 25 January 2013.
- 11 Jenny Hayward-Jones, *Big enough for all of us: geo-strategic competition in the Pacific islands*, Lowy Institute, 16 May 2013.
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Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
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| ADF | Australian Defence Force |
| AFP | Australian Federal Police |
| DFAT | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade |
| FFA | Forum Fisheries Agency |
| IDG | International Deployment Group (AFP) |
| MSG | Melanesian Spearhead Group |
| PLA | People's Liberation Army |
| PMSP | Pacific Maritime Security Program |
| PNG | Papua New Guinea |
| PNGDF | PNG Defence Force |
| RAMSI | Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands |
| SPDMM | South Pacific Defence Ministers Meeting |

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