

# The Institute for Regional Security

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Australia's Future in Solomon Islands  
Matthew Clarke and Simon Feeny

## **The Institute for Regional Security**

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## About the Institute

We promote the peace, stability and prosperity of the peoples of the Indo-Pacific region through policy research, policy advice and advocacy, international dialogues, and the professional development of policy-makers.

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# Background

In November 2021, Australian troops and federal police officers returned to Solomon Islands for the first time since 2017 in response to a request made by Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Prime Minister Sogavare sought this assistance in response to violent unrest spreading across the capital city of Honiara. This deployment was approved within 24 hours with Australian boots on the ground within 72 hours. This was the first time Australian troops and police officers had been in Solomon Islands since 2017 after the Regional Assistance Missions to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) ended after 14 years. As with RAMSI, regional neighbours, including Papua New Guinea, Fiji and New Zealand have since joined Australians in Honiara.

The primary purpose of RAMSI and that of the current deployment has been the same – to assist Solomon Islands government manage public unrest and restore law and order.

Political, economic, and social insecurity in the Pacific region are not in Australia's national interest (Kabutaulaka 2005). This is particularly true in the case of Solomon Islands given its very strategic location within the Coral Sea and the importance of this stretch of water in terms of seaborne shipping trade as well as naval movements around Australia. As such, Australia's willingness to provide military and policing support to Solomon Islands demonstrates our interest in maintaining regional security. Whilst it is unlikely that the civil unrest in Solomon Islands would threaten free movement within Coral Sea, Australia is unable to risk such an outcome.

Australia's very quick response to provide military and policing support to the Solomons indicates that such a request was not unexpected and that contingencies were in place for such an occurrence. Immediately following the end of RAMSI in June 2017, an agreement was reached between the Australian and Solomon Islands governments that would provide legal protection for Australian troops, police officers and other civil personnel undertaking future deployments within Solomon Islands. This agreement – the *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of Solomon Islands Concerning the Basis for Deployment of Police, Armed Forces and Other Personnel to Solomon Islands* – came into effect in October of that same year. It was deemed

necessary following a national interest analysis highlighting the risks posed should events in Solomon Islands give rise to a security vacuum. These risks included increased drug trafficking, illegal fishing, health pandemics, and irregular people movements.

## The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

Civil unrest in Solomons that led to RAMSI (also known as *Operation Helpem Fren*) occurred over an extended period of five years resulting in Solomon Islands almost becoming a so-called ‘failed state’ (Moore 2007). The community violence at this time was largely based on disputes between those from Guadalcanal and Malaita. These disputes are based on long-held grievances around perceived social, political, and economic inequities, with both sides believing they have been mistreated by the other. Political and economic power within the capital city of Honoria came at the expense of other provinces. As a result of this centralisation, there has been high levels of migration from peripheral areas to the centre. With limited economic resources, allocation within such scarcity not unexpectantly gives rise to competition and resentment by those that feel they have unfairly missed out. Within Solomon Islands these tensions ran mostly along ethnic lines between those from Guadalcanal and Malaita.

This situation did not occur in an historical void, with many of the circumstances arising out of unresolved problems held over from colonisation and through the early period of Independence, achieved in 1978. Over the period 1998 to 2003, prolonged civil unrest was violent with an estimated 200 deaths and tens of thousands left displaced.

In 2003, Australia and 14 other regional neighbours responded to the situation and undertook what became a 14-year deployment. Australia contributed the largest number of personnel and the greatest level of funding, estimated to be over AUD 2.5 billion. This deployment was about maintaining regional security but was also a humanitarian response in the context of significant community violence.

Such involvement was not unexpected given Australia's history as the largest aid donor to the Pacific. During RAMSI, 3,700 guns were surrendered or confiscated, deescalating the propensity for civil violence.

Whilst initial assessment of the current deployment and RAMSI suggests they are quite similar, there are distinctions between the two that are important.

## The November 2021 Australian Intervention

This current deployment is occurring in a much more complex geopolitical context. It was announced very quickly with Australian troops and Federal police on the ground in Honoria within days of violence erupting. Indeed, the number of numbers of Australians in the Solomons has increased since this initial deployment and effective control of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force has been ceded to a high ranked Australian Federal Police Officer who was immediately sworn in as acting Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) Deputy Commissioner.

Australia's quick response to Solomon Islands could be seen as a response to the rise of China within the Pacific as much as by concern of civil unrest within the capital city. Unlike RAMSI, that was pre-empted by five years of violence, 200 deaths and tens of thousands displaced, the current deployment occurred after just a few days of protests. Whilst three people were reportedly killed in the violence and infrastructure was burnt down, the level of deaths, violence and destruction was not comparable to the situation prevailing from 1998 to 2003.

Whilst the recent violence was again based primarily along the same ethnic lines as previous periods of unrest, it is not simply a rehashing of historical grievances. This is despite perceived inequalities likely to have been exacerbated by COVID-19 which resulted in the closure of borders and reduced income earning opportunities. Increasingly, the disputes between the Gaule people of Guadalcanal and the Malaitans have been

complicated by the recent rise of China as a presence in the Pacific region and its growing influence, including within Solomon Islands.

In 2019, Solomon Islands government severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, developing diplomatic allegiances with China instead. This ended a 36-year relationship with Taiwan. This new relationship with China was accompanied by a significant increase in assistance and investment in the country through China's One Belt One Road program.

Whilst this recognition caught many, including Australia, off-guard it was also not universally accepted within the Solomon's, with the leader of the Malaita province publicly rejecting the recognition of China and seeking to maintain relationships with Taiwan. Support for Taiwan from Malaita's leaders continues today.

## Geopolitics in the Pacific

In recent years, Chinese assistance and investment has been increasing at a rapid pace across the Pacific. The Lowy Institute (2018) estimate that China's future commitments of international assistance to the Pacific will make it the largest donor in the region in the coming years, replacing Australia which has historically held this position. China has funded large infrastructure projects including roads, airports, and ports. Concerns have been raised by communities across the Pacific as to the long-term consequences of this Chinese assistance and the implications of long-term debt. There is limited transparency related to much Chinese assistance. In contrast, Australia's aid meets the criteria for Official Development Assistance set out by the OECD and has traditionally supported programs focussed on health, education, and other social programs. There is also concern that assistance from China is more corruptible than that from Australia, to the advantage of local leaders seeking to cement their patronage within their communities and thus less likely to be solely directed to initiatives aimed at enhancing community development outcomes. Indeed, media reports suggest that Prime Minister Sogavare paid Government MPs cash from the Chinese-funded National Development Fund to shore-up support ahead of a no-confidence motion following the eruption of violence (Packham 2021).



This soft diplomacy has given rise to a contest for power and influence within the region between China and Australia (acting in both its own interests and as a proxy for Western powers). There is no doubt that the Pacific has now become a region in which China is seeking to increase its political influence. Both Australian and Chinese national interests are well served by securing political influence in the region. As a close neighbour, Australia requires political and military stability in the region. For China, while countries of the South Pacific have small populations and economies, as members of the United Nations they vote in international fora and China's political interests in the region are still challenged by a small number of Pacific countries recognizing Taiwan (Nauru, Marshall Islands, Palau and Tuvalu).

Any increase in Chinese influence in the Pacific is likely to come at the expense of Australia's own influence. Australia's ability to secure its national interests in this region may be tested in this new environment as this shift in dominant donor/partner may lead to changes in the political influence Australia currently enjoys in the South Pacific. The balance of power in the South Pacific is therefore at a critical juncture. China presents itself as a different type of development partner than traditional OECD donors, such as Australia, arguably with fewer conditions attached to its assistance. Traditionally, Australia has had a long history with the South Pacific through political engagement, trade, investment, migration and through colonial administration. However, an increasing number of Chinese migrants in the region together with higher levels of Chinese investment and development assistance is rapidly altering the political landscape. Indeed, media speculation in 2018 that China was providing development assistance to Vanuatu to develop a wharf of a size that could accommodate large Chinese navy vessels drew a quick response with the Australian government warning Vanuatu against any moves to allow a greater Chinese military presence in the Pacific. Indeed, it appears that Australia's influence is already waning in some countries.

Research undertaken in Vanuatu, for example, shows that whilst local community members hold Australia's aid program and assistance in high regard, these same community members believe China has greater influence within their country (Clarke and Feeny 2019). Nearly three quarters of respondents (female and male community members from both urban centres and provinces) believed China had the most influence in Vanuatu compared to other countries. Less than

one-quarter said Australia had this pre-eminent position in terms of foreign influence. Influence though is not necessarily considered a positive. Just under 30 percent of respondents thought China's economic and political influence was very positive. This compares to nearly 60% of respondents who considered Australia's influence as having a positive impact on the country. When considering the impact of development assistance, Australian aid was viewed more favourably than Chinese assistance, with nearly two-thirds of respondents believing Australia's economic development assistance does a 'very good' or 'somewhat good' job and just under 40 percent of respondents this way about China's assistance.

Australia's traditional approach to building and exercising influence within the Pacific appears to be losing efficacy with the rise of China. No longer does the provision of large amounts of development assistance appear to confer influence. Indeed, as recent (mis)handling of climate change discussions with Pacific leaders demonstrates, Australia is increasingly appearing out of step with the region.

It is likely therefore that within this shifting environment and uncertainty about its own position within the region, Australia's immediate response to the request for support by Solomon Islands government very much reflects Australia's determination to maintain influence within the Pacific. Whilst the level of violence within Solomon Islands that ultimately led to a 14-year deployment of Australian personnel does not seem to be as intense now as then, the risk of mission escalation and longer-term commitment appear to have been ignored against a determination to be the first responder. Formally, Australia is clearly marking out its role as first friend to Solomon Islands and assuming the roles and responsibilities this requires in terms of responding to a request for assistance.

Of course, the Pacific is not a homogenous set of nations with singular global outlook or domestic political environments. Across the region, there are particular histories, geographic peculiarities and economic differences that will shape how each Pacific nation engages with Australia and other nations. In this instance, the internal divisions within Solomon Islands regarding recognition of Taiwan that reflect historical ethnic tensions underscore the difficulties in maintaining Australia's influence in this environment.

While it is not currently conceivable that a Pacific neighbour, such as Solomon Islands, would seek to have Chinese military and police deployed to assist secure community peace, Australia clearly cannot allow a situation in which this might be countenanced by Solomon Islands government. Australia had no choice but to immediately respond to Prime Minister Sogavare's request to provide troops and police officer to restore law and order. What remains unknown is how long Australia will be required to stay in Solomon Islands to quell community unrest and how sustainable it is for an Australian police officer to hold day-to-day command of the RSIPF.

Given the current contest for soft power being played out across the Pacific and within Solomon Islands, Australia finds ways of remaining the partner of choice in order to secure its longer term security interests. Australia cannot stop Solomon Islands or other Pacific nations seeking to benefit from this competition for influence. Indeed, community leaders in Papua New Guinea identified this opportunity to strengthen their own agency as they play these two aid donors off against each other (see Pan et al. 2019). If China were requested to provide onshore support by Solomon Islands government, it would cause enormous concern to Australia and its international security partners. Indeed, given the Taiwan versus China tensions within the Solomon's, this would only inflame the unrest and may see a new conflict that may well have global consequences. Australia must continue to be the first responder to Solomon Islands and continue to be available to provide support when civil unrest invariably flares.

While this current deployment is unlikely to last 14 years and cost over AUD 2.5 billion as did RAMSI, securing Australia's national interest may require a sporadic (through regular) presence in Solomon Islands. Australians might expect rapid deployment to Solomon Islands to be a regular occurrence.

The underlying grievances between the Guale and Malatians leading to the recent violence are unlikely to end anytime soon. Similarly, Australia's influence in the region is not something it will willingly cede, but nor is it something that it can expect not to be challenged by others with similar goals. As such, it would be reasonable to expect those Australians now arriving in the Solomons to not only be there longer than we might initially expect but potentially to grow in number.

# Conclusion

The lessons from RAMSI demonstrate that a regional response is important in assisting with conflict in Solomon Islands (Hayward-Jones, 2014). The recent deployments by Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji reflect support for this principle although the response is, once again, clearly Australian led. The current deployment of Australian personnel raises three important challenges. Firstly, support for the foreign intervention within Solomon Islands is likely to wane with time, particularly if opposition to Sogavare grows and there is no end game with a specified time period or specific goals to be achieved prior to the departure of foreign personnel. In order for Australia to not 'outstay its welcome', it should develop these metrics as well as closely monitor local knowledge and support for its interventions. This must include the perceptions of people in communities outside of Honiara and Guadalcanal.

Secondly and relatedly, Australia should be very wary of any scope creep and avoid undertaking any actions that local communities might perceive as non-neutral. As discussed, the current tensions are largely driven by the perceived unequal distribution of resources and development gains that can be exacerbated by clientelism. However, improving these issues lies outside the remit (and capabilities) of the Australian personnel deployed to Solomon Islands.

Thirdly, Pacific Island Countries are sovereign states. They will form partnerships with other countries that they perceive will be to their benefit. It is entirely unsurprising that Pacific governments have engaged with, and accepted assistance from, China (and other countries in the region). Given that Pacific governments will work with multiple partners for their own benefit, Australia needs to develop a greater knowledge and understanding of how it can best engage with Solomon Islanders and others to protect and strengthen its interests in the region. This needs to be achieved at the local as well as at the political level.

A glaringly obvious and prevailing constraint to Australia's soft power in the region is its lack of action on climate change (Smith, 2019).

Since climate change poses an existential threat to Pacific nations, Australia's refusal to phase out coal and do more to reduce carbon emissions have already damaged relationships across the Pacific. Australia will have to demonstrate real action on this front or risk losing its friends and influence as the devastating impacts of climate change worsen in Solomon Islands and across the Pacific region.

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