

## **Strategy sound so far: now to finish shaping a nation**

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A national election will take place early next month in Solomon Islands, the tiny nation to Australia's northeast. A successful ballot which produces an effective government in Honiara would be a great national moment for Solomon Islanders, illustrating that normality reigns across their archipelago. It would provide a striking contrast to the troubled period of 1998-2003, when tensions between the peoples of the two main islands, Guadalcanal and Malaita, generated violence, criminality and thuggery which held the whole country hostage.

Developments in the Solomons are also important for Australia and the international community. They matter to Australia because since July 2003 we have led a huge state-building effort in the country, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. At one stage it consisted of more than 2000 people. It has drawn down significantly since then but the intervention is still costing Australia up to \$250 million a year.

The Solomons matters to the international community because, after the deeply troubled exercises in Afghanistan and Iraq, the world is looking for examples of successful state-building, even if the successes are early and incomplete. State failure is a first-order international issue, causing human misery and generating security threats in the form of illegal people movements, organised crime, weapons and drug trafficking, and even terrorism.

In the lead-up to this election, then, we need to consider what can be gleaned from the RAMSI experience and where Australia's involvement should go from here.

The model that officials in Canberra developed for the intervention was innovative and pragmatic. It had eight key features.

First, it was preventive: Solomon Islands was in a parlous condition at the time of RAMSI's deployment, but the state had not yet failed. Usually political will on the part of wealthy and powerful states fails to coalesce until it is too late.

Second, it was permissive. The intervention took place with the consent of the local government and parliament so, contrary to some hysterical claims, it bore no resemblance to the war in Iraq. RAMSI is all about regime maintenance, not regime change.

Third, it is regional in nature, initiated under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum and endorsed by regional leaders.

This increased the mission's perceived legitimacy and brought operational advantages due to the familiarity of RAMSI's Pacific personnel with Melanesian ways.

Fourth, it is nationally led. Canberra undertook the planning, provided most of the mission's personnel including its leaders, and has borne the lion's share of its cost. This has brought efficiency advantages compared to some UN missions, in relation to speed of deployment, co-ordination, financial resources and the quality of personnel. The domination of the mission by Australia (and to a lesser extent New Zealand) has not drained the operation of legitimacy, either: if anything, RAMSI has too much legitimacy, as measured in the regular calls for it to do more and stay longer.

Fifth, although no blue helmets were deployed in support of RAMSI and it was not the subject of a Security Council resolution, there was a laying-on of hands by the UN in the form of statements of support from the secretary-general and the Security Council president.

Some critics use RAMSI to argue that the UN is superfluous — a claim which is ahistorical given that the UN charter contemplates exactly this kind of regional action so long as it is consistent with its purposes and principles.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer mischievously dubbed the mission a "coalition of the willing" and used its deployment to put a stick in the UN's eye. However, as he well knows, RAMSI's design is entirely compatible with UN principles.

Sixth, unlike some UN interventions, RAMSI did not usurp any of Honiara's formal authority. It is an assistance mission, not a de facto government. This keeps it above politics, preserves the credibility of the Solomons' own institutions, and cuts the risks and costs of the operation for its main sponsor, Australia.

Seventh, RAMSI was led by police, but they operated under the cover provided by a large military force — "Australian shock and awe", as one local described it.

Finally, the mission has been comparatively light in touch: the main contingent is based out near the airport, with no sight lines to the road, and the dreaded four-wheel-drives are parked out of sight.

This is a powerful combination of attributes, one which other capitals and international organisations should examine closely. RAMSI has made good progress. It has arrested the Solomons' perilous decline and placed the country on a new trajectory. Law and order was quickly restored in 2003 and it remains the mission's strong suit. RAMSI is also active in rebuilding the country's institutions and reforming its economy, although we do not yet have enough evidence to be confident about the sustainability of this success if RAMSI were to leave.

This is the real challenge for the mission. From the beginning, Canberra has stressed that RAMSI is a long-term commitment — an assurance both rare and welcome. However, an open-ended commitment would not be in anyone's interests: not Australia's, and not the Solomons', which needs to return to a self-sustaining state at some point.

The mission needs to focus intensely, therefore, on two tasks where insufficient progress has been made to date: building indigenous capacity so that responsibility can be handed back within a reasonable time frame; and setting public goals by which its performance can be measured. Identifying the end game is the first step towards completing it.

Australia was right to take the lead in rebuilding Solomon Islands. No one else was prepared to step up. The result, though, is that the accountabilities are clear: our credibility in the Pacific is linked to RAMSI's success in the Solomons. Having devised a new kind of model for intervention, Canberra and its partners need to ensure it succeeds.

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