

Behind the Solomons intervention: Australia stakes out its sphere of influence in the Pacific

The Editorial Board
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The illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq by the United States has ushered in a new period of conflict between the major powers for spheres of influence. Having functioned as a loyal junior partner in the Bush administration's "coalition of the willing," Australia, a third rate imperialist power, has lost no time in prosecuting its own neo-colonial agenda in the South Pacific.

Just months after the seizure of Iraq, a force of Australian-led troops and police has landed in the Solomon Islands in the name of establishing law-and-order and preventing the "failed state" from becoming a haven for transnational criminal operations and terrorism. While the Solomon Islands government continues to function, Canberra has appointed senior diplomat Nick Warner to oversee the operation and act as political adviser to Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza. Australian bureaucrats are in the process of taking over the central functions of state, including finance, police, prisons and the judiciary.

It has already become evident that the Solomons intervention, cynically named Operation Helpem Fren (Help a Friend), is no one-off affair, but the model for a more far-reaching agenda throughout the region. While not a major power on the world stage, Australia is a relative giant among the tiny island states of the South Pacific. The Howard government had made crystal clear that it intends to use its economic and military clout to dictate terms to its smaller neighbours.

The official send-off for the troops in the northeastern Australian city of Townsville on July 24 revealed the new set of relations that the government wants to establish. Australian Prime Minister John Howard assembled the leaders of his "coalition of the willing"—New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga—to give a veneer of legitimacy to the Solomons exercise. New Zealand Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark backed the operation—albeit with minor misgivings—viewing it as an opportunity to further New Zealand's own interests. The leaders of PNG, Fiji and Tonga, each of whom confronts major economic, political and social problems, were not prepared to risk the danger of Australian reprisals if they refused to take part.

Howard told his captive audience that the involvement of other Pacific nations was "a wonderful piece of symbolism," which "adds to the impact it is going to have." He also pointed to the government's broader ambitions, declaring: "I believe the mission will not only be successful for the Solomon Islands but very importantly it will send a signal to other countries in the region that help is available if it is sought."

The following day, expanding on the theme, Howard told the media that the Pacific was "very much our patch". "Australia is the largest and strongest country in the region, and, quite properly, the countries around the world expect Australia to shoulder the burden, and we do. We're not saying in advance that we're going to intervene whenever we're asked. But what I was signalling was that Australia has changed its policy," he said.

That Canberra's claims to be helping its Pacific neighbours are a total fraud was underscored by Howard's deliberate refusal to countenance an

offer of assistance from France. Australian and French interests have been in competition in the Pacific for more than 100 years—starting with the scramble for colonies in the late nineteenth century. As far as the Australian government is concerned, any French involvement would undercut the fundamental strategic aim of Operation Helpem Fren: to consolidate Australia's position in the southwest Pacific.

For its part, France is also making a bid for influence. At the very moment Howard was launching the Solomons operation, French President Jacques Chirac was touring France's colonial possessions in the Pacific. Significantly, this was the first trip to the region by a French head of state since 1995, when Chirac ordered the resumption of nuclear testing in French Polynesia—a decision that provoked widespread protests that were seized upon by Canberra to promote anti-French sentiment. During his latest visit, Chirac defended the testing and bluntly pointed to the reasons for his visit: "Without Polynesia, France would not be the big power that it is, capable of expressing an independent respected position in the concert of nations."

At the end of July, Chirac convened a "France-Oceania" summit in Pape'ete, the capital of French Polynesia, to make his own pitch to "revitalise dialogue and cooperation" with Pacific Island states. With the notable exception of Australia, all the regional states attended—with the leaders of Fiji and Papua New Guinea flying straight from Townsville for special one-on-one talks with the French president. Chirac announced a 50 percent increase in aid, the use of French military resources for disaster relief, the construction of a museum dedicated to Pacific cultures in Paris and pledged to act as a mouthpiece for Pacific concerns in the European Union.

Australian intervention

The SouthPacific is once again becoming the focus for inter-imperialist rivalry. The policy shift signalled by Howard in Townsville is the culmination of a lengthy debate within Australian ruling circles over a region that has traditionally been regarded as Australia's "sphere of influence". Ever since the small southwest Pacific states were granted independence—Fiji in 1970, Papua New Guinea in 1975, the Solomons in 1978 and Vanuatu in 1980—questions have been raised about their viability.

Each of these tiny economies has been wracked by crisis, particularly following the 1997-98 Asian financial collapse and the insistence by Canberra and Washington that draconian IMF economic restructuring measures be implemented. The resulting social and political tensions have seen the fall of Suharto in Indonesia in 1998, coups in Fiji and the Solomons in 2000 and political volatility in Papua New Guinea. With increasing anxiety, Australian commentators have pointed to the "arc of

instability” to the north of Australia.

Confronting a deepening social and political crisis within its own borders, the Australian government has sought to exploit this growing regional instability. In 1997 it intervened in Australia’s former colony, Papua New Guinea, to block a threat to Australian financial interests in the huge copper mine on the island of Bougainville, off the northern PNG coast. The Howard government decided to publicly expose a secret deal between the PNG government and the Sandline company—involving British and South African interests—to send mercenaries to the island to put an end to its civil war. Under the deal, the copper mine would have been reopened under new management—with Australian interests bought out. The plan’s exposure triggered a political storm, which culminated in the bringing down of the PNG government. The following year, the Howard government, in league with New Zealand, engineered its own peace deal on Bougainville, dispatching Australian troops to the island.

In 1999, Australia stepped up its “engagement” with the region—this time in East Timor. While the Howard government insisted it was intervening for humanitarian purposes—to protect the East Timorese people—the real reason behind the deployment of troops was to counter renewed Portuguese claims over its former colony and to secure Australian interests in the Timor gas oil and gas fields. Although he subsequently denied the remark in the face of trenchant criticism throughout Asia, Howard, buoyed by his East Timor success, began to expound a new role for Australia as “deputy sheriff” for the US within the Asia-Pacific region.

Despite its increasingly aggressive stance, the Howard government nevertheless remained careful not to breach national sovereignty—in form at least. Its interventions in Bougainville and East Timor, for example, were carried out under the auspices of the United Nations. In 2000, Canberra responded to fighting between ethnic-based militia in the Solomons with a mixture of bullying and bribery, aimed at bringing the warring factions to Townsville and imposing a peace deal. Only a few police were dispatched as peace monitors, and Howard openly eschewed any wider involvement.

As recently as January 2003, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer emphatically ruled out military intervention. Writing in Murdoch’s *Australian*, he warned “Sending in Australian troops to occupy the Solomon Islands would be folly in the extreme. It would be widely resented in the Pacific region. It would be difficult to justify to Australian taxpayers. And for how many years would such an occupation have to continue? And what would be the exit strategy? The real show-stopper, however, is that it would not work—no matter how it was dressed up, whether as an Australian or a Commonwealth or a Pacific Islands Forum initiative.”

The abrupt change in policy came in the wake of the US occupation of Iraq. As a resolution unanimously adopted by the *World Socialist Web Site*-Socialist Equality Party public conference in Sydney on July 4-5, explained: “It is no accident that the Howard government has been the most vociferous peddler of the Bush administration’s lies and deception. Its motives for joining the war on Iraq had nothing to do with fabricated claims of Iraqi ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and links to Al Qaeda. It sent troops to lend credibility to Bush’s threadbare ‘coalition of the willing’ and strengthen the Australian-American military alliance as a quid pro quo for establishing its own sphere of influence in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Australia’s economic and strategic interests

As far as the Australian government is concerned, the US-led war on

Iraq has legitimised the doctrine of “preemptive strike”, providing the justification for military intervention in the Solomons and, more fundamentally, a far-reaching revision of Australian policy towards the Pacific. Despite a complete lack of evidence of any terrorist link in the Solomons or any Pacific country, Howard insists that these “failed states” present a dangerous breeding ground for crime and terrorism and a future threat to Australia.

The new thinking is summed up in a document, prepared just months after the invasion of Iraq, by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI). Entitled *Our Failing Neighbour* and launched by Downer on June 10, the report outlined the prerequisites for a military intervention into the Solomons: a formal invitation from the Solomon Islands government, the support of the Pacific Islands Forum, and details of the costs, personnel and other requirements for an effective Australian take-over lasting 10 years.

The ASPI report also laid out the rationale for a broader shift in policy towards the Pacific states. In the past, it declared, Australian governments “worked hard to avoid becoming too closely involved in their internal affairs, and have bent over backwards to avoid being seen as infringing upon their sovereignty.” But now that “policy paradigm” was under pressure and new steps had to be considered, even at the risk of being seen as “neo-colonial”. To justify trampling on national sovereignty, the report cited a number of precedents.

“[T]he good news is that we are not the only ones who have been wrestling with [these] questions.... In fact over the past decade there has been a worldwide reexamination of these issues as the international community has come to terms with the challenges posed by failed and failing states, and more recently by the need to respond to the risks posed by rogue states like Iraq.... The doctrine of humanitarian intervention has been developed, refined and implemented in many different situations from Bosnia and Kosovo to Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and of course East Timor.”

The report makes clear that the real motivation behind an Australian intervention in the Solomons has nothing to do with humanitarian concerns or the alleged threat of terrorism. “Like every aspect of Australia’s international posture, our policy toward Solomon Islands must be designed with the aim of serving our national interests.... In examining new policy approaches we must weigh the costs and risks of different options against the significance of the national interests involved,” it stated.

Our Failing Neighbour unambiguously sets out the Australian interests at stake in the Solomons and, by implication, throughout the rest of the southwest Pacific.

The first is economic. While the Pacific Island states are not the largest arena for trade and investment, Australian capital nevertheless has a significant stake in them. Political instability not only endangers specific business interests but threatens to undermine Australia’s dominant economic position in the region. Canberra has been increasingly concerned about moves by Pacific governments, desperate for finance, to turn to Asia for investment and aid.

The ASPI report explains that turmoil in the Solomon Islands is “depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities, which, though not huge, are potentially valuable”. In 1997-98—that is, prior to the 2000 coup—bilateral trade amounted to \$A106 million, which halved to \$56 million in 2000-01 before recovering slightly. Over the same period, the number of Australian companies operating in the Solomons has slumped from about 100 to around 30. “This amounts to significant economic loss in Australia,” the document emphasises.

The second is strategic. Canberra has an interest not only in keeping economic competitors out of the region but potential military rivals as well. “Concern for the stability and security of the islands that surround our continent was the earliest—and has proved the most enduring—of

Australia's national security concerns. It was the subject of our first substantial strategic policy initiative, when in 1887 Alfred Deakin took Australian worries about French intrusion in Vanuatu to London and made them listen," the report explains.

Following formal independence for the Pacific states, successive governments in Canberra have attempted to maintain the southwest Pacific as part of Australia's extended sphere of military influence. The Australian military has had the closest of contacts, including joint operations, training programs, intelligence and the supply of military hardware. But these relationships, carefully nurtured over decades, have come under threat as political instability undermines the state apparatus itself.

The Solomons provides perhaps the most graphic example. As ethnic fighting intensified in the late 1990s, the police force virtually disintegrated. Its members deserted—taking their arms with them—to rival militias. Following the Townsville agreement in 2000, the situation changed only superficially. The government and largely Malaitan police remained in charge of the capital Honiara, while rival militia remained in control of other parts of the main island of Guadalcanal.

The ASPI report argues that such power vacuums pose a direct threat to Australia's strategic monopoly in the region. "Since our island neighbours became independent, we have aimed to develop and sustain a strong sense of shared strategic interests with them, in order to ensure they do not allow unwelcome forces to intrude into our immediate region.... The fact that the Solomon Islands Government is bankrupt means that it is vulnerable to external influence—both state and non-state actors.... Any power that wanted to operate forces in Solomon Islands might find it easy to secure ready acquiescence at a low price. If Australia is not robustly engaged in Solomon Islands, others may fill the space."

The report emphasises the point by warning that Australia has "a major and unique stake" in the Solomons. "We have security interests in many parts of the globe, but only in the Southwest Pacific are they our interests alone. Only in the Southwest Pacific do we have to take the lead in helping these island states. If we do not, others might move in to exploit the situation, to our detriment."

A broader strategic issue is also involved. If the Howard government wants to aspire to being Washington's deputy sheriff, it has to deliver the goods. Or as the ASPI explained more obliquely: "In a subtle but important sense, state failure in the Southwest Pacific reflects badly on Australia. Other countries, including major allies and friends, expect Australia to take a leading role in this part of the world, and judge us in part on how well we discharge what they tend to see as our responsibility here. Australia's standing in the wider world—including with the United States—is therefore at stake."

Broader ambitions

While *Our Failing Neighbour* sets out specific plans for the Solomons, the implications for the rest of the Pacific are unmistakable. "While Solomons Islands is the most acutely troubled of our neighbours, most countries in the Southwest Pacific face major problems of political and economic viability, and some of them could go the way of Solomon Islands. What we decide to do about Solomon Islands will shape Australia's overall approach to the problem of maintaining stability among the island states in our immediate neighbourhood," it asserts.

Accordingly, in announcing the Solomons operation, Australian Foreign Minister Downer also enunciated the government's new doctrine. "Sovereignty in our view is not absolute," he declared. In late July, Howard elaborated further, outlining a broad plan for what he called

"pooled regional governance" throughout the Pacific. Many of the countries of the Pacific were simply "too small to be viable," he opined. "It's just not possible if you've got an island state of fewer than 100,000 people to expect it to have all the sophisticated arms of government."

While details of Howard's proposal are yet to be spelled out, there is no question but that his plan will entail major encroachments into the sovereign rights of Pacific Island states. Any "pooling" will, of course, take place under the auspices of Canberra. Howard has specifically called for the island states to begin to "pool" their airlines and police. He is calling for in principle endorsement at the Pacific Island Forum gathering underway in Auckland.

Broader proposals for the incorporation of the Pacific states into an economic union are also being floated. ASPI director Hugh White told the *Bulletin* magazine that "the hardest question... is whether we seriously believe that in 100 years each of these island states will still be operating as independent sovereign states." Pointing to the European Union, he raised the possibility that the Pacific could "pool parts of their sovereignty, with free movement across borders, a single currency and similar regulations governing their behaviour."

Any such union under the dominance of the regional imperialist powers—Australia, with New Zealand as its junior partner—would inevitably lead to greater demands for economic restructuring, intensified exploitation of the local population and the spread of more direct and oppressive forms of neo-colonial rule throughout the region.

The WSWS and SEP uphold the right of the people of the Solomons and throughout the Pacific to oppose and resist Operation Helpem Fren, as well as the attempts of the Australian government to subjugate the entire region. The basis for such political opposition, however, cannot be to maintain the outmoded and arbitrary divisions carried out by the colonial powers of the nineteenth century. The only progressive solution to the deepening cycle of poverty, violence and repression is for working people throughout the Pacific to unify their struggles with those of the working class in Australia, New Zealand, Asia and internationally to put an end to the profit system and establish societies based on genuine social equality.



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