

“Policing the neighbourhood”—Australia’s new para-military police

Part 1

Mike Head
27 September 2007

This is the first in a two-part series on the Australian Federal Police.

At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit held in Sydney this month, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, initialled a highly significant agreement. Made under the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation signed by the two governments in Japan earlier this year, the agreement established that the Australian Federal Police would train Japanese police to serve in “international hot spots”.

The AFP’s training program highlights the growing interest in foreign capitals in a new model of para-military intervention, developed by the Howard government, around the AFP’s International Deployment Group (IDG).

The Japanese government’s interest in using heavily-armed police agencies in overseas operations is particularly noteworthy. Japan’s post-World War II constitution formally forbids the establishment of military forces, and there has been deep opposition within the population to the involvement of the country’s so-called “self-defence” military units in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

But interest in the IDG is not confined to Tokyo. According to a recent series in *New Matilda*, an on-line liberal magazine: “The expansion of the International Deployment Group will see the AFP operating significantly outside its original mandate—in areas that would seem to be a more natural fit for the military, NGOs or aid agencies—and is attracting considerable global attention as the first of its kind.”

The Howard government established the IDG in February 2004, seven months after sending more than 2,000 troops and police to the Solomon Islands in 2003. The specific role of the hundreds of AFP officers was to form the backbone of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which took control of key aspects of the small country’s administration, including the police, legal system, prisons and finance ministry.

The deployment marked an unprecedented new phase in the life of the AFP, which has traditionally been a small domestic force, primarily responsible for enforcing federal criminal law,

policing the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and guarding diplomatic and other official buildings. Under the Australian Constitution, the far-larger state police forces carry out most internal policing.

The AFP was only established in 1979, through a merger of the ACT Police and the old Commonwealth Police. The amalgamation resulted from the still-unexplained 1978 bomb explosion outside the Sydney Hilton Hotel, the venue for a Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting. The blast became the pretext for the conservative Fraser government to declare that the “age of terrorism” had arrived in Australia, requiring a dramatic boost to the size and powers of the federal police, intelligence and security services.

Today, the “war on terror” declared by the Bush administration after the September 11 terror attacks in the US, is being exploited by the Howard government to enlarge and transform the role of the AFP. By the end of 2008, the IDG will have grown to 1,200 members, equipped with advanced military-style weaponry, including armoured personnel carriers, and consuming one-third of the AFP’s annual budget. In 1979, the AFP’s personnel numbered some 2,952. By next year, the force will have more than doubled.

The IDG already has teams in 10 countries—Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Cyprus, Cambodia, East Timor, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru and Tonga. The AFP also has trainers or exchange personnel in other locations, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Micronesia.

To date, the IDG’s main operations are concentrated in the Solomons, where about 230 officers dominate RAMSI and the local police force. The next largest contingent of 60 is in East Timor, where some 200 police accompanied the hundreds of Australian troops deployed last year by the Howard government as part of its efforts to secure the removal of the Fretilin administration of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri.

The IDG is designed to provide a “rapid response” capacity to aid the military in the event of popular unrest. Its role as a regional policing agency was underscored last November, when 64 IDG members were sent to Tonga after riots in the capital

Nuku’olofa. Three AFP “advisers” are still there.

The AFP’s submission to a current Senate committee inquiry into “Australia’s involvement in peacekeeping operations” pointed to the neo-colonial character of these operations. It also outlined the rationale for police, rather than troops, to occupy the front line against the local population—at least after the initial show of military force, as happened in East Timor and the Solomons.

“Sovereignty, respect and understanding of host nation culture and laws will assist in the acceptance of police contributions. Sovereignty will however be used in a variety of circumstances to obstruct change which may reduce the benefits of police interventions or capacity building missions as they threaten the status quo enjoyed by local elites,” the submission stated.

In other words, paying lip service to “host nation culture and laws” helps legitimise the operation in the eyes of the local population, but “sovereignty”—i.e., national independence—remains a barrier to enforcing Australian interests. While the “police interventions” are presented as humanitarian or “capacity building” missions to assist impoverished populations, their real purpose is to assert Australian strategic, diplomatic and economic domination over the entire South Pacific region.

The submission said the AFP was “revolutionising its approach to offshore operations” for two reasons. One was a turn away from the “bygone era” of “traditional peacekeeping”, based on UN or multilateral operations—with the consent of warring parties—to unilateral interventions, often in so-called “failed” or “fragile” states.

This shift is bound up with growing conflicts between the major powers, particularly the US, Europe, China and Russia. In the Asia-Pacific region, backed by the US, Canberra is intent on establishing unchallenged hegemony, which means not only ousting regimes regarded as obstacles to its interests, but also combating the influence of rival powers, especially China.

The other reason given by the AFP was the need for a long-term presence, lasting well beyond the normal span of a military engagement. Although the submission’s language was cautious, it pointed to the need to establish new regimes—basically puppet administrations—which would require armed police backing. “In the power vacuum that frequently exists, the international community may be required to establish transitional administration authorities that provide traditional government functions including executive policing.”

Such “executive policing” would require a greater use of weaponry and lethal force than normally involved in Australian domestic policing. “These environments are volatile and have resulted in a shift, in the case of police, in the authority to bear arms and use deadly force,” the submission stated.

Drawing on the experiences of Timor and the Solomons, the AFP said the command of the intervention could fluctuate. During the initial stages, “an effective military response”

would be primary; followed by a policing focus, with the possibility of transferring back to military command “in certain forms of crises”.

As a result, the line between the military and the police is becoming blurred. A feature of the IDG is closer “interoperability” with the military, including the “embedding” of AFP officers in “Joint Operations Command and the Australian Defence Force Warfare Centre”. The submission predicted: “Joint operations with the Australian Defence Force as part of national offshore crisis response will become more frequent and increased interoperability will be necessary”.

Addressing the National Press Club in Canberra last October, AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty spoke of “policing in a new paradigm” in which the police became “the new deployable arm of Australian government policy”. “If a government wishes to intervene in the issues of another state, it has traditionally been achieved through the deployment of military force to deliver on the government’s objective,” he noted. But because of the political sensitivities involved, the AFP was being transformed into a “pseudo-gendarmerie”.

Keelty drew a parallel with the formation of “Special Weapons and Operation style teams in Australia”. Over the past 20 years, para-military police units have been established in every Australian state, operating with sub-machine guns, armoured vehicles and riot gear.

Among the witnesses testifying at the Senate inquiry was Flinders University law professor Andrew Goldsmith, the lead researcher in “Policing the neighbourhood”—a three-year Australian Research Council-funded study, in partnership with the AFP, of the AFP’s experiences in East Timor, the Solomons and Papua New Guinea. He emphasised the need for the “management of perceptions” in IDG operations to overcome local hostility.

“Australia faces an almost inevitable perception in the region of being a kind of symbolic big brother, and that poses a number of legitimacy problems,” he advised the senators. Later, he added: “Australia’s involvement in oil and gas with Timor has coloured our ability to operate as effectively as we would like in Timor-Leste.”

Goldsmith’s testimony illustrates one of the central preoccupations behind the Senate inquiry’s ongoing deliberations and the work of the IDG: how best to camouflage the underlying economic and strategic interests of the Australian political and corporate establishment, including control over the lucrative oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea, throughout the region.

To be continued



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