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The security outlook for Melanesia

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Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, Australia's highest ranking serviceman, was Commander-in-Chief, Allied Land Forces, South West Pacific Area, in World War II. This review of the strategic outlook for Melanesia in the Asia-Pacific century perpetuates his memory.

Key words: Melanesia; strategic outlook; Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey.

It is an extraordinary honour to have been invited to deliver this year's Blamey Oration, not least because of the eminent orators who have preceded me in commemorating the remarkable contribution that Sir Thomas Blamey made as a strategist and soldier to the security of Australia.

The decision of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales to embed the Blamey Oration in a broader review of Australia's changing strategic environment adds significance to the Blamey Oration. The Oration does not stand alone today but is part of a more intensive review of the strategic outlook for Australia's immediate neighbourhood. Thus, the Institute's Dialogue format not only extends the Oration's purpose to foster debate on key military and strategic issues, it follows very much in the path trod by Field Marshal Blamey himself. In the 18 months leading up to the Second World War, Blamey delivered weekly radio commentaries on international affairs to promote public debate on the increasing threats to Australian security.

I want to thank the organisers for inviting me to address you in my role as the Honorary Director of the Centre for International and Regional Affairs at the University of Fiji. More than four decades of scholarly and practical engagement with the regional system has made me acutely aware that the regional perspective can look radically different, depending on the lens through which it is viewed. And recently, the regional vista as seen from the veranda of the Defence Club in Suva does not appear to be the same vista as seen from the windows of Russell or Barton in Canberra.

I will argue that the strategic picture for Australia's immediate neighbourhood is losing the element of "common" in our mutual perceptions of security. The regional arrangements that have been a key aspect of Australia's strategic thinking for nearly 70 years are under stress. The Pacific Plan has lost its way; sub-

regional arrangements are emerging to challenge the Pacific Islands Forum; and regional associations that exclude Australia have grown in prominence and in support. It is in Australia's strategic interests to make the regional mechanisms for security cooperation more inclusive. This is especially vital in the Melanesian arc. By improving the shared responsibility for our strategic environment, the security of both Australia and its immediate neighbours will be enhanced.

Melanesia in Regional Context

The Pacific Island region covers a vast and diverse area. The standard definition for this region is the ambit of the Pacific Community (the erstwhile South Pacific Commission or SPC). It is composed of 22 states and territories all of which were under the control of five Western allies at the end of World War II. Today, 14 of these are independent or self-governing in association with a former administering power. The other eight territories have varying degrees of autonomy but have not crossed the political threshold to join the region's premier political association – the Pacific Islands Forum. All together there are approximately 10 million people living in thousands of islands covering an area more than twice that of Australia.

Melanesia is not only the part of the Pacific Island region closest to Australia; it is also the most substantial in many important respects. The four states and one territory of Melanesia hold more than 95 per cent of all the land within this region. It is also the most populous sub-region with 88 per cent of the region's inhabitants. Polynesia is second (7 per cent) and Micronesia the smallest (5 per cent).

The natural resources of Melanesia are of global significance. Indeed, except for tuna, all the internationally important natural resources of the region are located in Melanesia. This is not to minimise the importance of the rest of the region. They have noteworthy communications, transport, and environmental values as well as potential marine resources yet to be commercialised. Nevertheless, it is the resources and potential of Melanesia that generate the economic,

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foreign policy and strategic interest in the Pacific Islands region in the Asia-Pacific century.

Of course, it must be noted that Papua New Guinea (PNG) is an exceptional influence within Melanesia. PNG has more than 85 per cent of the land of Melanesia and perhaps 83 per cent of its people. Its resources alone are of a magnitude as to make them a subject for 'strategic competition', a point Hillary Clinton made to the United States Congress in 2011.

The population of Melanesia is young and growing fast. There is an urgent need to develop the capacity of the Melanesian states to provide education, health care and shelter for a combined population of young people under the age of 15 nearly equal to that of Melbourne. This will continue to be a monumental challenge notwithstanding Melanesia's vast resources. Failing to meet this challenge could have serious implications for Australia in terms of the social stability of these neighbours. Historically, immigration has played a substantial role in managing population growth in both Polynesia and Micronesia. Population movements on the same scale would have enormous consequences for their neighbours if Melanesians adopted the same strategy.

The Strategic Value of Melanesia to Australian Security

Field Marshal Blamey, as Allied land commander in the Southwest Pacific, was critically aware of the importance of the arc of Melanesian islands to Australian security. He saw this sweep of islands to the immediate north and east of Australia essentially as a bulwark to protect against an extra-regional threat. Melanesia itself only became a threat when the enemy secured bases there from which to attack Australia.

His view is still recognisable in the perceived contemporary strategic relevance of the Pacific Islands for Australia. The 2009 Defence White Paper noted that: "... from a strategic point of view, what matters most is that they are not a source of threat to Australia, and that no major military power that could challenge our control of the air and sea approaches to Australia, has access to bases in our neighbourhood from which to project force against us" (Department of Defence 2009, p. 42, paragraph 5.7).

While the strategic value may have remained the same, the modern political and geo-strategic circumstances of this area are quite different from the Pacific that Blamey knew. Politically, the majority of countries in the Melanesian arc are independent and so have formal responsibility for their own affairs, including their internal and external security. The absence of a broadly accepted consensus on a national identity, however, has been an underlying social fault line. It has seriously destabilised state-building in all four countries. Internal order has been problematic for Melanesia with secessionist movements, rebellions, and coups affecting all of the Melanesian states at some time since independence.

Melanesia is bookended by two colonial era "hold-over" territories with putatively unresolved sovereignty issues. The Indonesian territory on the island of New Guinea and the French territory of New Caledonia constitute "Melanesia irredenta" for many Melanesians. This constitutional circumstance continues to pose foreign policy challenges for the independent Melanesian states and at times for Australia.

Assessments of external threat have changed significantly since Blamey's day as well. During World War II, the Chinese were allies against the Japanese while the Americans, British, Dutch and French had friendly military assets in the region. Today, the Chinese and Japanese are major trading partners for Australia and all the Pacific Island states. The British and Dutch military presence is gone, while the Japanese navy conducts joint exercises with the United States navy and China's navy makes friendly port visits across the Pacific.

Blamey was keenly aware of the importance of the support of the local population in the Southwest Pacific area for the defence of Australia. During the Pacific War, the people of this area from East Timor to the Solomons suffered heroically for supporting the Allied cause against Japan, although it was not their war. Recognition of the contribution made by Islanders supporting coast watchers, rescuing service personnel, aiding the wounded and even serving in combat during the Pacific War, contributed significantly to the warmth of Australian attitudes toward the Pacific Islands long after the war was over.

A comparatively benign decolonisation process added to assumptions of a near identity of security interests between Australia and the Islands. This innocence did not survive intact very long following independence. There was, in truth, very little basis for any genuinely mutual strategic interests among the Islands especially during the Cold War era. State-based threats and responses were outside the Island states' capabilities. Indeed, few Pacific Island states even attempted to provide militarily for their own defence.

Independence and Cold War tensions opened the opportunity for asserting foreign policy autonomy or simply playing the "ANZUS card". Resource disputes in the 1980s, exacerbated by changes to the law of the sea, sharpened post-colonial perceptions of divergent interests between the Islands and Western powers. More important divergences of security perceptions have appeared in the two decades since the end of the Cold War. For virtually all the Island states, realistic threat assessments have tended to focus on non-state dangers. In this sense, Field Marshal Blamey would feel more at home in his Victorian Police Commissioner's tunic than his soldier's uniform if he were advising the Islands today on strategic threats. From the perspective of the Islands, transnational criminal activities have always posed far greater risks to the political stability or the economy of the regional states than physical threats from other countries.

Western threat assessments have refocused on these non-state dangers after “9/11”² and the subsequent “war on terror”, but from a different perspective. Notwithstanding the 2009 Defence White Paper’s view, there is an implication that the Melanesian states themselves can pose a threat to Australia. Flags of convenience, poorly regulated offshore banking, and the sale of passports are examples of where the misuse of sovereignty by some Island states has endangered core interests of extra-regional powers. New threat scenarios range from havens for terrorists and transnational criminals smuggling drugs, guns and people, to the suborning of politicians and officials, leading to a downward spiral of expanding corruption in the targeted countries and ending, potentially, in a fully failed state.

Counter-measures to address the strategic risks of a failed state over the past decade have had an unfortunate effect on a number of Australia’s near neighbours. Demands for compliance with good governance, including greater state responsibility in human rights, economic integrity and aid efficiency, have generated an important but inchoate sense of grievance. There is a belief, in some quarters, that these constitute an unwarranted intrusion into their internal affairs; a form of state-based threat to their sovereignty. Heightened sensitivity amongst the Melanesian states has been at the heart of the many of the recent disagreements with Australia. Suspicions about the activities of Australian agencies or programmes in all the Melanesian states have been openly expressed in recent years resulting in court challenges and the expulsion of personnel.

Island critics sometimes complain that Australian aid is used to enforce compliance with Western values rather than meeting their legitimate development aspirations. One does not need to support such concerns to recognise that their increasing visibility is an indication of diminished synchronicity of security perspectives. Alternative values in governance are a principal reason why China has been a game-changer geo-politically for the region. Awareness of a broader range of “values” has translated into greater foreign policy flexibility. This has been most evident in the Melanesian arc where three of the four Melanesian states have now joined the Non-aligned Movement. Foreign policy flexibility in itself does not pose a direct threat to Australia, of course. Nevertheless, it has weakened the value to Australia of the security community sentiment that has been central to the regional security strategy.

Regional Security

As a long-time advocate of Pacific Island regionalism, it came as something of a disappointment to learn that Field Marshal Blamey had strong

reservations regarding the regional security approach. It appears that he advised against the regional defence alliance proposed in the 1944 ANZAC Pact³. His qualms were shared, albeit for different reasons, by the other Western allies. As a result, the ANZAC Pact’s regional security alliance died stillborn. Nonetheless, a regional humanitarian association, also proposed by the ANZAC Pact, did eventuate and this became the South Pacific Commission (SPC) in 1947 laying the foundations for the contemporary Pacific Island regional system. ANZUS⁴, a more limited defence pact, was concluded soon afterwards and provided much of the regional defence coverage over the Pacific Islands that Australia wanted.

However, ANZUS was shaken when the tiny Kingdom of Tonga established relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1976. Stunned by the strategic implications of an ocean full of independent microstates serving as little “Cubas” to the Soviet navy, ANZUS reviewed options for maintaining a Western alignment across the Pacific Islands. Amongst other measures, the 1976 ministerial meeting explicitly identified the potential security benefits of a politically coherent and cohesive Pacific Island region. Thus, regionalism came to have geo-political value in Australian strategic thinking. The strategy was to promote a regionally shared outlook amongst the newly independent states that would diminish their likelihood of foreign policy “adventurism”.

Oddly, awareness of the ANZUS strategic objective seems to have been less confronting than empowering in some ways for the independent Island countries. They had a high level of trust in their traditional friends and knowledge of their strategic importance made the sport of ANZUS-baiting mildly profitable on occasion. Moreover, the increased support for the work of regional organisations promoted the Islands primary national interest – economic development. Regionalism also provided credible mechanisms for addressing such strategically important issues as resource security and managing the nuclear weapons issue. Regionalism therefore afforded a mutually acceptable soft power vehicle for promoting a coincidence of defence interests between the ANZUS states and the Islands.

This was most spectacularly demonstrated through the 1980s Pacific Patrol Boat programme. The 22 vessels gifted to 12 members funded by Australia under the Defence Cooperation Programme, addressed the genuine felt needs in the recipient states. The ancillary technical advisers and intelligence-sharing network added greatly to the capacity of the Forum Island Countries (FICs)⁵, and Australia, to

²The attacks on New York and Washington by Islamist militants on 11 September 2001.

³An agreement between Australia and New Zealand to maintain and strengthen their close relations.

⁴The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty signed on 1 September 1951.

⁵The island countries (as opposed to Australia and New Zealand) of the Pacific Islands Forum.

protect their strategic interests both individually and through a regional network. Because the programme is primarily for maritime resource protection, it is not a comprehensive defence or law enforcement system. The Pacific Patrol Boat programme enabled new regional mechanisms for fisheries protection to be developed. Some of these have been truly innovative.

The first real attempt to develop a comprehensive regional response came in 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the establishment by the Pacific Islands Forum of a Regional Security Committee (FRSC). The FRSC has developed over the past two decades as the focal point for collecting, assessing and disseminating information on the broad suite of potential threats to law and security across the region. It is also the vehicle for briefing the Pacific Islands Forum leaders on these matters. The FRSC, however, has not proved to be the panacea for achieving effective cooperation between Australia and its neighbours on regional security.

The FRSC excludes important strategic assets such as France and the United States with a chilling effect on intelligence sharing and threat assessment. Intelligence classification protocols put limits on what can be shared through the FRSC. This in turn provokes criticism from the region that the process is a one-way street. The FICs make inputs but, critics complain, nothing comes back. Even at the highest levels of regional planning there are articulation issues. The Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group (Australia, France, New Zealand, United States) does not appear to have an agreed mission nor do the FICs make any direct inputs into its activities. For more on these issues see Herr and Bergin (2011).

The Asia-Pacific century is just beginning and the Pacific Islands will have to adjust to a range of new security challenges in the decades ahead. These include the strategic realignment of a United States pivoting to Asia and the novelty of China as a major influence in the region. Inclusive and practical regional security cooperation will be the only way most FICs will have a direct say on how these changes affect them. Thus, I argue, the regional system needs reform to make its security-related processes more inclusive and so more effective – for both sides.

The Strategic Challenge of Melanesian Sub-Regionalism

This brings me to my second theme. Melanesia is the Pacific Islands region as far as the Asia-Pacific century is concerned. The primary economic, geopolitical and strategic interests in the Pacific Islands are focused on the Melanesian states, which are increasingly self-conscious and active as a collectivity. Their shared interests are expressed through the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)⁶. If the MSG develops its institutional capacity in the way that its members now clearly intend, the MSG will become the

principal regional organ for the vast majority of Pacific Islanders and the portal of choice for the new, mainly Asian, interests in the Pacific Islands.

When formed a quarter century ago, the MSG was regarded primarily as a “ginger” group within the Pacific Islands Forum. It even described itself officially as “a sub-regional organisation”. Yet the MSG has no parent regional body to which it reports nor any formal obligations to any other organisation. Its agenda is not articulated to the broader regional system in any meaningful way. In 2007, the MSG became a fully-fledged inter-governmental organisation with its own treaty giving it legal personality. The MSG has a permanent headquarters and secretariat located in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Importantly, the MSG is not a participant in its own right on any of the regional security co-operation mechanisms.

Melanesia is one part of the region where a traditional defence capacity does exist. Excluding the small defence force of Tonga, the region’s indigenous military capacity is located entirely in Melanesia. All four of the independent states of the Melanesian arc have maintained some capacity to provide for their own national defence. The Republic of Fiji Military Force is the largest with some 3,500 serving personnel and nearly as many reservists. PNG’s Defence Force of 2,100 personnel was once much larger and apparently will be so again. Recently, PNG’s Defence Minister, Dr Fabian Pok, announced that the Defence Force would be increased to 10,000 over the next decade. Of the remaining Melanesian states, Vanuatu maintains a 300 strong paramilitary unit under police command, while the paramilitary elements of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force were temporary disbanded in 2003 with the RAMSI⁷ intervention.

Virtually every scenario liable to give rise to Australian Defence Force intervention in the region outside humanitarian missions involves Melanesia. These range from defence of PNG’s border or intervening in a Bougainville-type rebellion, to responding to civil disturbance in any one of these countries. Many of these situations are likely to be resolved bilaterally. However, as RAMSI demonstrates, regional responses can be appropriate and even necessary. Presently, any multilateral mechanism likely to be used is located in the Pacific Islands Forum and its processes. Australia is a founding member of the Forum; it is not a member of, nor is it associated in any formal way with, the MSG.

There are two main reasons for a drift away from the Forum, particularly since 2007. The smaller scale of the MSG makes reaching a consensus much easier, while

⁶The MSG’s members are Papua New Guinea, The Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, plus the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) of New Caledonia.

⁷Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands.

the size and resources of its membership permit economies of scale not available to the Forum. Indeed, the MSG is almost certainly the only Pacific Islands regional organisation that could be sustained solely by the contribution of its Island membership.

The second factor is Fiji. MSG dynamics here have changed dramatically since Fiji joined the MSG in 1997. Fiji was the “missing piece” in the Melanesian jigsaw puzzle. It completes the grouping in so many important ways. Fiji may be the catalyst for the practical success of the MSG’s free trade agreement. Fiji brings into the association the diversified and sophisticated economy necessary. Fiji has taken an active leadership role within the MSG especially since Fiji was unwisely suspended from the Forum in 2009. Consequently, the MSG has become Fiji’s regional lever to counter the Forum’s sanctions.

Fiji has always been the heart of Pacific Island regionalism. The Forum will not serve as an effective regional organisation until Fiji is again an effective member. At the moment, there is no guarantee that Fiji will return to the Forum even if invited back. In the interim, Fiji is excluded from contributing to the work of the FRSC, but is promoting alternative security arrangements through the MSG. These have included a regional defence capacity, mentoring PNG’s Defence Force in international peacekeeping, and staff training cooperation. If the MSG becomes the regional portal of choice for the Asia-Pacific century, Australia will only have the same access as any other extra-regional power.

Conclusions

When Field Marshal Blamey was commanding the troops in PNG and the Southwest Pacific, he was defending Australia by keeping the enemy out of these territories. Today, these areas are no longer colonial possessions but independent states liable for their own security. Although not responsible for their defence, successive Australian Governments have demonstrated that Australia wants to play a responsible role as a good neighbour and a trustworthy international citizen. This can never be totally altruistic, however. Every strategic assessment for the past six decades has shown that Australia will be threatened by anything that undermines the security of its Melanesian neighbours. This geo-political verity commits Australia to their security if only for its own safety.

The regional ties are integrally important to the effective security of the Pacific Islands. The relatively level playing field that the regional system offers the Pacific Islands is their best opportunity for active participation in protecting their own security interests, including resource protection, crime prevention and non-state threats to state stability. This is why it is so important that the deficiencies of the FRSC be addressed, the Pacific Patrol Boat programme be modernised and extended, and the Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group becomes more coherent

and inclusive, so that the FICs feel greater ownership of these processes than they do now.

The role of Australia within the present regional system is likely to become more formal and less based on comradeship than in the past. The fragility of the broader regional security arrangements makes understanding Australia’s relative neglect of Melanesia at the sub-regional level incomprehensible. The MSG should be treated as a regional organisation in its own right. Australia needs a “two regions” approach in the Pacific Islands. Managing multilateral interests in Melanesia through the Forum has worked in the Solomons, but has failed badly in the case of Fiji. Given the importance of Fiji to the MSG, the Forum seems increasingly less likely to be an effective interlocutor with Melanesia.

Fiji is essential to both regional systems – the broader region based on the Forum and the Melanesian one based on the MSG. Australian policy over the past seven years has made no impact on Fiji’s return to democracy in 2014. Repeating the same policies for another year will be equally fruitless. Worse, the current policy settings will almost certainly guarantee that Australia will not approve of the elections due before September next year. What then – another five years of ineffectual sanctions? I doubt that proving impotence will advance democratic values in Fiji or Australia’s influence in the region.

The Asia-Pacific century is changing the regional environment in Australia’s near neighbourhood. Old regional arrangements are under stress and new ones less connected to Australia are emerging. The regional approach is still valid for promoting security both for Australia and for its neighbours. Nevertheless, it does need to adjust to changing circumstances if it is to remain effective and this will require the development of a two-regions strategy to give proper weight to the importance of Melanesia in its own right.

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