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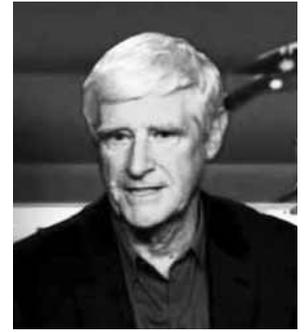


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The strategic outlook for Papua New Guinea

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Dr Ronald May, who has had a career-long research interest in Papua New Guinea, reviews the external and internal security threats facing Papua New Guinea. He perceives that Papua New Guineans are more preoccupied by the internal threats; and that Australia's influence in Papua New Guinea now is limited.

Key words: strategic outlook; Papua New Guinea; security threats.

Security relations between Papua New Guinea and Australia have a long history, dating back to Queensland's attempts to annex what became British New Guinea in the late nineteenth century. They remain an important element in relations between the two countries, *but* the security interests and security priorities of the two countries do not necessarily coincide, and in both countries security priorities are subject to the changing external and internal environments in which they operate (May 2012).

Most people in Australia tend to think of *security* in terms of external threats. I will argue that in Papua New Guinea people are more preoccupied with internal threats.

External Security

Papua New Guinea's external security environment has been generally benign, but not without challenges. The three main challenges are: the border with Indonesia to the west; the border with the Solomon Islands to the east; and incursions of foreign fishing vessels into Papua New Guinea's territorial waters.

The Indonesian border

The border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea has not been in serious dispute and Papua New Guinea has always accepted Indonesian sovereignty in West Papua. But relations with Indonesia over the border have been strained by:

- activities of the Organisasi Papua Merdeka (OPM), which has from time to time established camps in the jungle on the Papua New Guinea side of the border;
- border crossings following repressive actions by the Indonesian military against OPM supporters and West Papuans generally;
- border incursions by the Indonesian military – as recently as last February there were claims that the Indonesian military had established a forward base

camp and jetty on the Torasi River inside Papua New Guinea territory; and

- wildlife poaching by Indonesians in the southern border area.

In 1984, some 10,000 – 12,000 border-crossers crossed into Papua New Guinea to escape Indonesian military reprisals over a flag-raising incident; and there were repeated border incursions, denied by the Indonesian military, to the extent that Papua New Guinea took its grievances to the United Nations General Assembly. Relations improved in the second half of the 1980s, and a Treaty of Mutual Respect, Friendship and Cooperation was concluded (though it did not say anything not set out in earlier agreements), but problems remain.

Despite initial Indonesian concessions (name, flag, autonomy, *etc.*) and the commencement of a dialogue with West Papuans after the fall of Soeharto, concessions were generally wound back, autonomy provisions were not implemented, repression increased, and Papuan leaders (including the president of the Papuan Praesidium) were murdered by the military. Continued migration from other parts of Indonesia into West Papua, exacerbating tensions over business activities and religion, and continuing military repression (including torture), have ensured that West Papuan separatist demands will not go away and border incidents will continue. Recently, there have been clashes at several points along the border and in mid-February the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF) was deployed to the border. But Papua New Guinea's capacity to monitor the border is limited.

The Solomon Islands border

The border with the Solomon Islands became an issue during the Bougainville rebellion, when the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (sometimes with overt or covert support from the Solomon Islands government) used the Solomons as a conduit for arms and medicine, and a location for 'R&R'. The PNGDF – mirroring the situation on the Indonesia–Papua New Guinea border – made incursions into the Solomons, on one occasion 'annexing' a small island within Solomon Islands

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jurisdiction. These problems ended with the Bougainville Peace Agreement, but, with no effective border control, there are still reports of weapons coming into Papua New Guinea through the Solomon Islands. In late January, there were reports that Bougainvillian criminals had raided a logging camp in the (Solomons) Shortland Islands. With the vote on the future status of Bougainville coming up between 2015 and 2020, the Papua New Guinea–Solomon Islands border may still bear watching.

Illegal fishing

The problems of illegal fishing have already been discussed in this Dialogue by Richard Herr (Herr 2013). Suffice it to say, illegal fishing, especially in the ‘Dogleg’ area of the Papuan Gulf, is an important issue for Papua New Guinea, which has limited capacity to police its extensive exclusive economic zone. Assistance has come from the Forum Fisheries Agency and the Australian government, particularly through its Pacific Patrol Boat Programme [though the last time I looked only one of the four boats was in the water], but the problems are probably intractable.

Other issues

I have not mentioned threats from terrorism, people smuggling or international crime. These, I consider, are primarily perceived as concerns by Australian security professionals and commentators. Terrorism does not have a constituency in Papua New Guinea and prospective terrorists would be conspicuous. Papua New Guinea does not seem to be regarded as a prime people-smuggler destination. There is an issue of illegal migration to Papua New Guinea – mostly from mainland China – which is being addressed by a government taskforce; and foreign crime syndicates are reported to be active in Papua New Guinea, although the much talked-about ‘guns for drugs’ trade seems to be small. For most Papua New Guineans, however, these are relatively minor concerns compared with financial pyramid schemes, bogus visa scams, shonky business deals, illegal logging, and dubious mining interests – which have often had Australian connections.

Internal Security

Law and order

The main factor generally listed under internal security in Papua New Guinea is ‘law and order’. This can be disaggregated into several elements:

Tribal (or intergroup) fighting. Intergroup fighting has been going on for millennia and did not cease under colonial rule, but it has been exacerbated in recent years by: the breakdown of traditional authority and dispute settlement mechanisms; increased scope for dispute due to growing land pressures, alcohol and motor vehicle accidents; and, the use of guns.

Raskolism is basically criminal gang activity, urban and rural, but compounded by urban drift of mostly young males who do not find jobs. Raskol activity has impacted heavily on business – many bank branches

and other businesses have withdrawn from rural areas – and the delivery of services (including health and education). Some raskol gangs have been linked to politicians.

Violence against women. A recent statement by the Papua New Guinea Minister for Health said that 68 per cent of Papua New Guinea women had suffered violence and 33 per cent had been raped. Not only are there immediate human costs; violence against women reduces women’s participation in education (parents fear sending their daughters away to high school and university), politics (the proportion of women in parliament increased in 2012 – to 3 out of 111 members of parliament!) and business.

Electoral malpractice, including fraud, coercion and violence (or the threat of violence) is widespread, especially in the populous highlands. In 2007, ‘failed elections’ were declared in six Southern Highlands electorates; and the provincial police commander said that police were outnumbered and out-gunned.

Threats to resource projects. The Bougainville rebellion demonstrated the capacity of disgruntled landowners to bring big resource projects to a standstill. Nearly all, if not all, other big mining and petroleum projects have experienced temporary stoppages due to landowner unrest. In recent days, the PNGDF has been deployed to the highlands to provide security for traffic associated with the development of the liquid natural gas project. High expectations of landowners and others have potential for further problems.

Anti-‘Chinese’ sentiments. Anti-Chinese sentiments are evident in response to illegal migration, foreigners moving into small businesses, *etc.* and could escalate (*cf.* the Solomon Islands).

All these problems are exacerbated by limited capacity, low morale and factionalism within the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (police) and the PNGDF. There is currently talk of increasing the force size of the PNGDF from around 2000 to 10,000 over ten years, but it remains to be seen if this will happen.

Other factors

Government service delivery. There has also been a general deterioration of service delivery, especially in remote areas, reflected in a number of social indicators and lack of progress towards meeting Millennium Development Goals. This is notably evident in relation to health and specifically HIV/AIDS.

Natural disasters. A particular aspect of government’s capacity concerns Papua New Guinea’s ability to cope with natural disasters. Papua New Guinea is susceptible to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, floods, mudslides, droughts and rising sea levels. Currently, floods in Morobe, Oro and parts of the highlands have caused loss of lives and infrastructure. The head of the National Disaster Centre has said that the Centre lacks the staff and logistic capacity to deal with the problems.

Governance. Collectively, these issues raise questions about good governance and political stability. The unprecedented events of 2011–2012, when Papua New Guinea had two claimant prime ministers, a critical ruling of the Supreme Court was defied by the *de facto* prime minister, and attempts were made to postpone the scheduled election in 2012, were resolved by the election, but were not reassuring.

Relations with Australia

Relations between Papua New Guinea and Australia have been generally good, but the relationship is not symmetrical and there will always be a tendency for Papuan New Guineans to resent Australia's role as the biggest and wealthiest country in the island Pacific.

The latter years of the Howard government demonstrated how easily relations could deteriorate to a low level. Following a change of government in Australia and the signing of the Port Moresby Declaration in 2008, there was something of a recovery. Now, though, Papua New Guinea has a 'Look North' foreign policy; and there are changing political dynamics in the region, exemplified by the growing importance of China² and Asia generally, coupled with the ongoing politics of the Pacific Islands Forum and Melanesian Spearhead Group discussed by Richard Herr earlier in this Dialogue (Herr 2013).

Given these trends, Australia needs to realize that its influence is limited, and that what influence it may be

able to exercise will depend on it having informed policies delivered with sensitivity.

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²For example, China recently gave PNG K4 million in support for the PNGDF.