

SUMMARY

RAMSI and Australia's South Pacific Policy Change

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In July 2003, Australia led the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and intervened in the state whose community, economy and governance had deteriorated between 1998 and 2003. RAMSI was a response to the request of the Solomon Islands government, and it aimed to restore law and order, rebuild governance and reform finance and economy in the country. Conventionally, Canberra's approach towards the South Pacific nations had been to provide them with aid and advice, but not to intervene in the sovereignty issue. Therefore, RAMSI was perceived as a dramatic change in the Australian policy towards the region.

There have been various analyses of factors and motives that brought the RAMSI intervention. A general interpretation is that the war against terrorism after 9/11 influenced the Australian approach, and encouraged Canberra to prevent its neighboring "failing" states from becoming a safe haven for terrorists who might threaten security in Australia and the region. Most of the analyses give credit to the report "Our Failing Neighbour", released by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) in June 2003, for providing the Australian government with the rational and justification for its intervention. Moreover, some researchers view that RAMSI was a good excuse for the government to not send more troops to the Iraq war. These studies, however, do not fully account for the reason why Canberra intervened in mid-2003 while it could have done so on several occasions; for instance, when the Solomon Islands asked Australia to intervene in 2000 for the situation in the state was getting out of the government's control.

This article aims to explain the reason why RAMSI took place in mid-2003 from non-conventional perspectives. By examining the Canberra's South Pacific policy under the Howard administration and transition of its engagement in the Solomon Islands leading up to the intervention, this paper demonstrates that two factors played a major role in Canberra's policymaking. First, a shift in the Australian policy had burgeoned in 2000 when the government decided under which conditions it would choose to intervene. The reason for this burgeoning was a growing concern towards instability and fragility of its geographically important neighbors. Second, the conditions had not yet been right for intervention until mid-2003. In addition to ASPI's initiative to form the government's course of action, an affirmation, which John Howard gained from George W. Bush, that Australia did not need to send additional troops to Iraq after the war encouraged Canberra's decision to intervene. This made it possible for Australia to deploy redundant force to the Solomon Islands.