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Australia – the indispensable power in a congested sea: foreign policy implications of Australia’s strategic outlook

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Ms Hayward-Jones examines Australia’s enduring position as the dominant power in Melanesia, a region in which other international players are increasingly active, and the foreign policy choices and obligations that this position entails. Fiji is a particular challenge. While its influence may fluctuate, Australia remains indispensable to the region.

Key words: foreign policy; Australia; Melanesia; Pacific Islands; Fiji.

In this paper, using Australia’s National Security Strategy released in January to set the context, I will analyse Australia’s influence in the Pacific Islands region, and suggest measures Australia could take to respond to future challenges. I will use the term ‘Pacific’ to describe the entire Pacific Islands region and will use the term ‘Melanesia’ when I refer to Australia’s near neighbourhood.

Australia’s National Security Strategy

The National Security Strategy identifies Australia’s enduring interests in the Pacific as the “security, stability and economic prosperity” of the region (Australian Government 2013: 38). It names “economic, gender, social, security and governance issues” as ones which hamper sustainable development and potentially undermine stability. It identifies key priorities as “supporting the transition of [the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands], encouraging Fiji’s return to democracy and the rule of law, and working with Papua New Guinea to secure development gains”. Australia’s regional focus, therefore, is rightly absorbed with the region’s three biggest countries, all three in Melanesia.

The Strategy points out that: “Australia seeks to shape the international environment, both to prevent the emergence of security threats and to achieve broader benefits for Australia (such as trade and economic benefits)” (Australian Government 2013: 5). Risks identified include: espionage and foreign interference; instability in developing and fragile states; malicious cyber activity; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; serious and organised crime; state-based conflict and coercion significantly affecting Australia’s interests; and terrorism and violent extremism (Australian Government 2013: 10).

Of these, instability concerns Australian security strategists most. While there is credible evidence of serious crime in the bigger countries, particularly Papua New Guinea and Fiji, there is also good police and

customs cooperation underway to address it. Instability, however, is not so easy to manage.

It is difficult to see state-based conflict arising in the Pacific. A more likely risk is “another state seeking to influence Australia or its regional and global partners by economic, political or military pressure”. While influencing countries this way is a central feature of international relations, Australia has a clear interest in ensuring that no other major power, whose interests may be different to Australia’s, puts undue pressure on small countries where Australian influence is dominant. Australia will manage this risk by “maintaining strong relationships with countries in the region through strategic, economic and people-to-people links”.

The Strategy names eight pillars of national security. The pillar most relevant to Australia’s foreign policy engagement with the Pacific is “understanding and being influential in the world, particularly the Asia-Pacific”. This pillar, ‘being influential’, is the focus of this paper.

Australia’s Regional Influence

Australia has been the dominant power in the region, particularly Melanesia, for at least three decades by dint of geography, trade and investment links, tourism, aid, defence assets, and sport. Australia is the region’s primary trading partner. Its merchandise trade with the region is worth over \$7.5 billion; and Australia is the region’s most prominent investor, and biggest source of inbound tourism. Australia is also the region’s primary aid donor, providing more than 50 per cent of all donor funds flowing to the region. Its annual aid programme in the Pacific amounts to US\$1 billion; \$857 million of this in Melanesia alone.

According to OECD² statistics, the next biggest OECD donors are the United States (\$204.6 million) and France (\$127.6 million), predominantly in its colonial possession, Wallis and Futuna.

China’s influence is on the rise. It is difficult to measure the full extent of its aid, but we can surmise from

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²Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

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