

Pacific Power? Australia's Strategy in the Pacific Islands

Joanne Wallis

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Reviewer: Stewart Firth

Any student of the Pacific Islands or of Australian foreign policy should welcome this new study. Joanne Wallis covers the key issues in Australian policy towards the Pacific comprehensively and meticulously. She examines, among other things, the Defence Cooperation Program, the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, disaster relief, policing assistance, cooperation in countering transnational crime, seasonal labour schemes, the aid program and the lesser known 'interventions' by Australia such as Pacific Regional Assistance to Nauru. She points to the changing geopolitical scene in the region, with China's presence growing and that of the United States faltering under the Trump administration, and to a changing regional order which exhibits a new independence on the part of Pacific Island governments in regional affairs and international diplomacy. She concludes that Australia's influence in the region is diminishing.

"Why is Australia at times unable to influence Pacific Island states effectively in pursuit of its strategic interests?", Wallis asks, and she finds part of the answer in the limits to external influence created by sovereignty—the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands, for example, which was never surrendered by its government during the fourteen years of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI). A second limitation, she suggests, is simply Australia's willingness to exercise influence, and a third the increasing independence of the region at a time of geopolitical change. She is particularly critical of the impact of Australian asylum seeker policy on Papua New Guinea, Nauru and the Pacific region in general. Climate change is another issue that divides the Pacific from Australia.

Sovereignty matters, and especially to small states. The influence of the superpower of the region, Australia, is more constrained than one might imagine. Even small countries are affected by powerful political dynamics that cannot be altered from outside. When an army colonel called Sitiveni Rabuka led a military coup against the democratically elected government of Fiji in May 1987, military intervention by Australia to restore democracy was

out of the question, in part because of limited Australian capabilities but far more importantly because of its fateful consequences for relations with Fiji. Like all sensible people in Canberra, the prime minister Bob Hawke and the ADF chief General Gration could not contemplate sending Australian troops to fight those of the Fiji Military Forces, many of them soldiers with whom they had trained.

Fiji, as Joanne Wallis shows, demonstrates the limits of any Australian strategy of intervention in the affairs of its Pacific Island neighbours. Australia's reaction to a succession of coups in Fiji has been confined to sanctions and diplomacy, and necessarily so. And Australia's involvement in the peace process in Bougainville, in the form of the Truce Monitoring Group and the Peace Monitoring Group after 1997, was far more significant than any military role played in the crisis. Australia's interventions, then, must be of the kind that preserves Island sovereignty, that is, they must be at the invitation of an Island government, as was the case with RAMSI. The jury is out on the long-term success of RAMSI. For the moment we can note that the people of Solomon Islands welcomed its coming and lamented its departure, surely an unusual outcome for an international intervention in any country. As for Fiji, she rightly notes that the 2006 coup presented Australia with a foreign policy conundrum. As the key supporter of democracy and the rule of the law throughout the region, Australia could hardly extend an understanding hand to the Bainimarama military regime until it was clear that elections would be held. Yet at the same time, Fiji's diplomatic isolation opened the way for other external players, especially China.

Wallis seems less certain in her analysis of the Australian aid program, providing one ranking of the five major donors that includes France (p. 182) and excludes China and another (Table 8.1) that excludes France and includes China. And she falters in suggesting that for "the first few decades after Federation, Australia did not give substantial aid to the Pacific Islands, beyond its territories of Papua and Nauru" (p.184). In fact Australia offered no aid as we understand it today until after World War Two, when the Marshall Plan in Europe ushered in a new era of global development, and Australia began to spend on development in the territories of Papua and New Guinea. Before World War Two colonies were expected, by and large, to pay for themselves and the poor of the world were seen as remaining that way indefinitely.

Wallis also finds the "return Australia gets for its significant aid investments in the region" to be "questionable" (p. 196). Yet, as she also concedes, Australia has never been able to impose its will on Pacific Island states. In recent decades that will has been directed at changing the way Pacific Islanders act politically by extending the reach of good governance. The objective is unarguably desirable, but threatens the power and resources of the most powerful Pacific Islanders, who can always appeal to 'culture' in their defence. That is why constituency development funds paid by

governments directly to politicians in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands are likely to remain part of their highly adapted Westminster systems, whatever Australia says.

Here as elsewhere Wallis calls for Australia to re-characterise the Pacific Islands region as an 'arc of opportunity' and to emphasise Australia's place as a Pacific partner rather than a Pacific power. The language of partnership between Australia and its Pacific neighbours is not new, nor is Australia's respect for their sovereignty, but Wallis does an excellent job of explaining the policy context in which these ideas deserve to be reaffirmed.

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