

# The Manipulation Of Custom: From Uprising To Intervention In The Solomon Islands



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Special Issue

## Beyond Life Support? Reflections on Solomon Islands after the Regional Assistance Mission

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### Abstract

*The Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands was conceived in the 'state-building moment' that informed Western responses to 'state failure' over the past two decades. That moment has now passed with renewed fiscal austerity, growing scepticism with interventionism, and shifts in Australia's regional policy priorities. The decade-long mission, which has recently begun to drawdown, was successful in restoring security to Solomons but less so in its more ambitious state-building efforts. Among the key constraints has been the mission's inability to influence a more inclusive political settlement. We highlight inherent tensions between instrumentalised approaches to state building and more organic processes of state formation. Looking forward, we consider how external assistance can contribute to state formation while retaining a focus on the 'life support' objectives of state building. We sketch some possibilities for hybrid forms of institutional development that might combine strengths from both local and liberal orders.*

**Key words:** intervention, state building, Solomon Islands

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### 1. Introduction

This article reflects on the origins and efficacy of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and canvasses some broad options for on-going regional and bilateral assistance to Solomon Islands in the post-RAMSI period,<sup>1</sup> with a particular focus on the governance of security in rural areas and its implications for peace and stability. These options are discussed against the backdrop of anticipated economic and security scenarios in Solomons and changing fiscal conditions and development assistance priorities in Australia as well as at the regional and global scales.

We see RAMSI as having been conceived in the global 'state-building moment', as accentuated by the events of 9-11, 2001, when there were palpable concerns about the security threats posed by 'weak' and 'failing' states, and fiscal capacity was no object—certainly not the constraint that it is in the contemporary climate of austerity. The intervention had all the hallmarks of a classic liberal peace intervention and was cited as the exemplar of Australia's 'new interventionism' in the western Pacific, in the heart of the so-called 'arc of instability'. During its 10-year tenure, and since the commencement of its drawdown in 2013, the mission has been extensively appraised,

1. RAMSI's development programs were concluded on 30 June 2013 and 'transitioned' to bilateral and multilateral development partners. However, RAMSI is still in operation with a pared-down police mission and special coordinators office. The conclusion of these remaining operations is the subject of on-going discussions, with the current police mission likely to conclude in 2017.

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