Introduction

In 2012, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) describes itself as being in a period of transition, or change, as it enters its next phase. The appropriateness of the timing for this transition, as well as the plans for the transition, is considered in this paper.

In September 2011, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, made a historic visit to Solomon Islands. It was only the second visit by a serving UN Secretary General to the Pacific Islands, and the first ever to Solomon Islands. His visit included a meeting with members of RAMSI, during which views were exchanged on the challenges of peacekeeping missions. Discussion centred on the two principal risks: the risk of leaving too soon, and the risk of staying too long. Too soon would be characterised by a return to violence, or at least to the systematic demanding (with menace) of compensation. Too late would be characterised by a dependency on donors, a lack of national self-confidence, and a self-interested political elite operating on the basis that responsibility for the core functions of government — law and justice, economic management and the machinery of government — is conveniently subcontracted to outsiders.

Even when we have regard to these risks, the timing of RAMSI’s transition is a matter of fine judgement; separate judgements have been made about its civilian, police and military components. These judgements, and the implications for RAMSI’s next phase (2013–17), will be described in the second half of this paper. The first half will assess the extent to which the factors that contributed to the tensions have been addressed.

Is Solomon Islands ready for RAMSI’s transition? In early April 2012, rumours spread briefly but quickly in Honiara of a return to tensions-era conflict. The rumours were that members of the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM, the Guale militant group during the 1998–2003 period of civil unrest) were threatening to chase out Malaitans in communities around the Guadalcanal plains.

These rumours were quickly dispelled. The 5 April 2012 Solomon Star cover story reported that former IFM and Malaita Eagle Forces (MEF) members had issued a joint statement denouncing the rumours as false. A spokesman from the former IFM was quoted as saying ‘we want to assure the people in this nation that nothing as such is going on’. A former MEF member was quoted as saying ‘former MEF militants have no intention to regroup’. A photograph of former members of both groups standing together accompanied the article (Marau 2012).

What the rumours show is not so much the fragility of the peace, but the fragility of confidence. The willingness of so many people to believe the rumours and accept that tension-era behaviour could return is one reason why most Solomon Islanders want RAMSI to stay.

The People’s Survey 2011 surveyed around 5,000 adults — more than one per cent of the entire adult population — and it shows that only 19 per cent of those surveyed thought Solomon Islands was ready for RAMSI to scale back its activities, and 86 per cent supported the presence of RAMSI. Focus group discussions sought to get a better understanding of why people supported RAMSI and wanted RAMSI to stay. In 2011, for the first time, they were asked ‘What more does RAMSI need to do before it is ready to leave?’. The range of responses covered both social needs and infrastructure requirements. According to the Survey, it included some suggestions that reflected...
a lack of understanding of RAMSI’s mandate. In addition to wanting RAMSI to maintain law and order, some discussants wanted RAMSI to resolve land disputes, build more schools and clinics, provide financial assistance to rural people, and provide advice to farmers. The focus group discussions reflect a very mixed understanding of RAMSI’s mandate and work program and, with the range and depth of socioeconomic challenges facing Solomon Islands, it is not surprising that respondents see RAMSI as their best chance for addressing these and favour RAMSI’s continued presence (ANU Enterprise 2012, 93–96).

RAMSI, however, is not the ideal means for assisting the Solomon Islands Government address the full range of development challenges facing the country: it is a short-term intervention, while development challenges require long-term assistance; its mandate is limited and was never intended to cover all of the major challenges that the nation faces today; and it is an expensive model of assistance. The more relevant consideration is whether RAMSI has fulfilled its original mandate.

**RAMSI’S Mandate**

RAMSI’s mandate was initially outlined in the Framework for Strengthened Assistance to Solomon Islands: Proposed Scope and Requirements, a document that was provided to prime minister Sir Allan Kemakeza on 5 June 2003 (SIG 2003a). This document constitutes the ‘package of strengthened assistance’ that was endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum foreign ministers on 30 June 2003 and discussed in the Solomon Islands cabinet, and also between the cabinet and a high-level delegation of Australian officials (all before RAMSI arrived). The Frame-work was subsequently incorporated in the publicly released Solomon Islands Government Policy Statement on the Offer by the Government of Australia for Strengthened Assistance to Solomon Islands 2003 (SIG 2003a). The mandate covered both civil order and the economy.

Under civil order, the main task was to re-establish security in Honiara, enabling government, business and the community to operate free of intimidation. Improved security would then be extended beyond Honiara. Key elements were to:

- reform the RSIPF, introduce expatriate police personnel into line positions and provide increased resources
- launch a new effort to locate and confiscate illegal weapons
- investigate and prosecute new criminal offences vigorously
- strengthen the courts and prison system, protect key institutions, such as the finance ministry, courts and their personnel from intimidation.

The first task in relation to the economy was to stabilise government finances and balance the budget. The key elements were to:

- secure revenue collection and control outlays
- strengthen administrative safeguards in government financial systems, including by deploying expatriate personnel in key positions
- obtain donor, international financial institution and technical support.

The second economy-related task was to promote longer term economic recovery and revive business confidence, building on better civil order and the stabilisation of government finances. In this regard, the Framework said it would be important to pursue economic reform policies to regain credibility with the international donor community, and to rebuild the essential machinery of government to support stability and the delivery of services. There was to be a focus on dealing with corruption, a cleansing of the government payroll and improved debt management.

This mandate was closely linked to Solomon Islands’ national priorities, which were reaffirmed in 2003 in the National Economic Recovery, Reform and Development Plan 2003–2006 (SIG 2003). While the mandate has remained unchanged, the focus of RAMSI’s activities has evolved in tandem with changes in the country context. The focus of RAMSI’s activities has been developed over the years and, particularly since 2007, in extensive consultation with Solomon Islands Government officials and ministers and other stakeholders. The RAMSI Medium Term
Strategy 2007 (RAMSI 2007) and the Partnership Framework Between Solomon Islands Government and Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (endorsed by the Pacific Islands Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on 15 May 2009), thereby also helped define RAMSI’s mandate (SIG and RAMSI 2009). These documents were self-characterised as intending to be flexible or ‘living’ documents, responsive and adaptable to changing circumstances.

The Causes

It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a comprehensive survey of the literature on the causes of ‘the tensions’. However, some general understanding of the causes is necessary in a discussion of the timing of RAMSI’s drawdown. It could be argued that in addition to re-establishing security, RAMSI should ensure that the set of circumstances that caused the Solomon Islands Government to seek external assistance will not present themselves again.

The literature identifies a range of so-called underlying causes of the 1998–2003 tensions. In a report that proved to be a catalyst for action, Wainwright attributed the civil unrest of that period to ‘introduced institutions of the modern nation-state’ that had been ‘overlaid on top of a multiplicity of indigenous political structures’. She argued that the crisis in Solomon Islands was less about the collapse of a coherent, functioning state, and more about ‘the unravelling of the apparatus of colonial rule’ (Wainwright 2003). Moore (2004) argues that the causes are principally related to inequitable economic and political development, and to ethnic tensions or separate insurgency. According to Moore, economic downturn was a substantial factor in the violence of 1998–2003, but must be viewed alongside political ineptitude, corruption and manipulation, and the long-term consequences of unequal development on Malaita and Guadalcanal.

Fraenkel argues that high population growth, a stagnant economy and weak social services ‘fostered the emergence of a footloose, underemployed generation that had little loyalty to the established order. Land disputes on Guadalcanal associated with a large-scale influx of migrants from Malaita added to this potential for instability’ (Fraenkel 2004, 10). However, he assesses that these factors alone do not explain the social and political crisis of 1998–2003. He argues that during the timber export boom of the 1990s, a culture of cronyism took hold of Honiara’s political elite, benefiting the insiders and their wantoks, but marginalising outsiders. Fraenkel concludes that it was ‘fading politicians in Honiara and their methods for seeking redress for what were often genuinely felt and readily comprehensible popular grievances that were ultimately responsible for the plundering, internal discrediting and withering away of the Solomon Islands state’. Fraenkel says the Guadalcanal and Malaitan militants were ‘stage-armies used by marginalised elites in pursuit of political and financial objectives, both rallied a disenchanted and under-employed generation to serve as the rank-and-file and both unleashed forces that proved subsequently difficult, even ultimately impossible domestically, to control’ (Fraenkel 2004, 79–80).

Braithwaite et al. (2010, 18–19, 113, 128–129), drawing on previous research and their own extensive research, note that the problem in Solomon Islands was ‘not only slow development, but resentment over uneven development. The people of Guadalcanal came to view Malaitans as disrespectful guests on their land.’ They identified ‘a failure of land law combined with rapid population growth putting pressure on land’ as one root cause of the conflict. The displacement of Malaitans was ‘a grievance rooted in the failure of Solomons land law to give them certainty of tenure on leased land’. Resentments over the scramble between different ethnic groups for very limited employment opportunities in the formal economy were also a root cause. In some parts of the country during the period of the tensions, it was ‘a society that had a virulent problem of violent organised criminal gangs’.

According to Braithwaite et al., the proximate factors in the conflict were ‘the actions of certain politicians who, recognising how deep were the structural factors … and how deeply felt were the grievances associated with them, sought political
advantage by encouraging a politics of ethnic resentment’. For their part, young men ‘mostly joined up to defend their people, but prospects of excitement and loot for unemployed youth were probably in the mix’. And a history of compensation payouts by the state to those who threatened violence based on ethnic grievance ‘possibly made both mobilisations more attractive ploys than they otherwise might have been’.

Allen (2011) identifies an important structural cause of the conflict as the spatial inequality in socioeconomic opportunities brought about by longstanding patterns of uneven development and, related to that, the migration of people from the densely populated and historically undeveloped island of Malaita to Honiara and its environs. Other structural factors identified include: the weakness and widely perceived illegitimacy of the postcolonial state; the ongoing strength of localism and corollary calls for greater devolution and provincial autonomy; the presence of large numbers of poorly educated and underemployed young men; and the chronic instability, and close ties with the corrupt logging industry that have characterised national-level politics since independence.

Allen argues that the expected collapse of the logging industry by 2015 will place pressure on local patronage networks and exacerbate existing socioeconomic grievances, thereby partly recreating conditions that contributed to the original outbreak of violence in the late 1990s. And other economic developments, such as mining, will further entrench historical patterns of inequality. He concludes that RAMSI will need to provide a ‘security guarantee’ for the next 10–15 years to create the space for local, home-grown processes that have the best potential to address some of the underlying causes of the conflict. It should be noted that this call for RAMSI to provide a security guarantee is a stronger undertaking than envisaged in RAMSI’s mandate, which was to restore security.

The drivers of conflict described in the academic literature on Solomon Islands are not dissimilar to the factors identified by the World Bank as present in most of the world’s conflicts. The World Development Report 2011 notes that a perceived (as much as a real) sense of social injustice and exclusion, whether in respect of security, services or economic outcomes, is the common cross country theme driving violent conflict (World Bank 2011, 82).

**Solomon Islands Today**

Some of the causes of, or factors contributing to the tensions have been addressed. With assistance from RAMSI and its Participating Police Force (PPF), the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) has been cleaned out and rebuilt, and law and justice is being delivered — certainly for the more serious offences. The widespread demanding (with menace) of compensation has stopped and the breakdown of government systems and processes has been rectified. And, also with the benefit of considerable assistance from RAMSI, the country’s finances are now back in shape, much debt has been paid off and the economy is growing strongly. Reforms in telecommunications, state-owned enterprises and public finance management are seeing improved service delivery.

Today, with donor support, there is an improved capacity in the Solomon Islands Government to deliver services. That is, the apparatus of government which one study said had ‘unravelled’ has largely been rebuilt; the economy that was stagnant is booming; the social services that were very weak have improved; and the culture of cronyism, while an ongoing challenge, has been curtailed somewhat and is no longer so blatant.

Some reconciliation among former tension militants and between militants and victims has taken place and more is continuing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has completed its five-volume, 1,500 page report. It remains to be seen what will become of it and whether it will achieve widespread and true reconciliation. True reconciliation puts an end to residual tension between parties and enables both sides to ‘move on’. It can play a very important role in Solomon Islands culture and society.

The removal of weapons from the community is one of RAMSI’s early and most significant achievements. During its first year, RAMSI
collected and destroyed some 3,700 weapons and over 300,000 ammunition rounds. This represents between 90 and 95 per cent of all the weapons stolen from police armouries. Some weapons remain unaccounted for: they could be stashed away or buried, maybe out of a fear at the time that, notwithstanding RAMSI’s arrival, they might be needed in the future; they could have been traded into Papua New Guinea or to loggers; or they could have been disposed of by owners who failed to comply with the initial amnesty and subsequently feared the consequences. We will never be able to account for every missing weapon, but we can say Solomon Islands today is close to weapons-free compared with the tensions period, when weapons were the lingua franca of those possessed by greed or grievance.

More important than the number of weapons in the community is the incidence of crimes involving the use of firearms. If there were weapons readily available and functioning in the community, especially if held by former militants, we should expect evidence of weapons being used for hunting, killing crocodiles or in the commission of crime. At the very least, we would expect some former militants, disgruntled at the absence of compensation payments or the non-fulfilment of some favourable clause in the Townsville Peace Agreement, to use or hire out their weapons.1

But we don’t. In both relative and real terms, Solomon Islands has an extremely low rate of crime involving the use of firearms. Since RAMSI’s arrival on 24 July 2003 up until the end of January 2013, there have been only eleven confirmed reports of incidents involving firearms.2 This is highly unusual for a post-conflict society. In other post-conflict jurisdictions, one of the major challenges is that large quantities of weapons typically remain in communities, and in use.

Unfinished Business

Some of the factors that contributed to the tensions remain present. Clearly, the ‘poorly designed institutions of statehood’, although no longer ‘unravelling’, remain in place. There is ongoing discussion of constitutional change, but no clear consensus yet on a path forward. It is hard to measure the level of discontent that might be caused by the system of government introduced in 1978. The Solomon Islands’ model of government is similar to other postcolonial parliamentary democracies. The peaceful experience of these newly independent countries is evidence that there is no automaticity or linear relationship between the introduction of a new, alien system of government and community and political breakdown leading to internal disorder.

Inequitable economic development also remains, and seems stronger than ever. Honiara and its environs are booming and Gizo, Munda and Noro are doing well. However, there is little evidence of broad-based economic development, including on the isolated Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. Economic growth in Malaita Province is unlikely to be strong enough to stop Malaitans emigrating for work. Auki, the largest town in the country’s second most populous province (SIG 2012),3 has a new market and a new jetty, both of which will contribute to economic development by providing better livelihood opportunities for farmers and middlemen, and lowering the cost of doing business. Both projects were delayed for years by land disputes. The airport for Auki (Gwanaru’u airport) was closed for over a year from June 2011 for similar reasons, and the planned construction by RAMSI of much-needed new police houses has also been delayed for many years because of an inability to find a suitable and uncontested area of land. The contesting of land ownership and use is the main obstacle to development, and yet land is the key ingredient in broad-based or village-based economic development. It is hard to imagine where growth will come from, other than through higher valued uses of land. That is the quandary.

On much of the Weather Coast, economic opportunities are more limited than in other parts of the country, largely for geographic and demographic reasons. The access by communities to government services, and some commercial opportunities, would be enhanced by better road transport along the coast. The terrain, including the large
number of river crossings, makes this a difficult and expensive undertaking. Notwithstanding the difficulty, it is important that feelings of isolation and neglect are addressed for Solomon Islands to avoid another cry for attention from the impoverished residents of the Weather Coast.

Unequal economic growth seems likely to be an enduring feature of Solomon Islands. However, this doesn't mean militancy will return. Unequal economic development is a fact of life in all economies, including among Australian states today. Indeed, most economic growth in low income economies comes from the movement of resources (primarily people) from low productivity uses to higher productivity uses — from subsistence agriculture to employment in the towns and cities. It is axiomatic that growth will be unequal, and this will generate social pressures. What is most important is that there is strong national income growth, that the government captures a share of the rising national income, and uses its enhanced resources to deliver services throughout the country ('horizontal fiscal equalisation' in the language of economists). The efficient and effective delivery of services throughout the country is important for its own sake, and to alleviate feelings of social injustice and exclusion.

**The Movement of People**

The movement of people primarily from Malaita Province to Guadalcanal Province in search of employment is often identified as one of the causes of the tensions, and has led many to label them as 'ethnic tensions'. Unskilled work in Honiara and in the oil palm plantations on the Guadalcanal plains added to the attraction of internal migration. Malaitans, in particular, have a longstanding experience of travelling for work and remitting funds to their families. From the late 19th century, most of the labour on the copra and the oil palm plantations in Solomon Islands was from Malaita. Guale people’s resentment grew at the success of the Malaitans in getting jobs in government, the RSIPF and in the oil palm plantations east of Honiara. On Guadalcanal, this became a source of resentment, particularly by the Guale people who considered Malaitans to be aggressive and dominating the economic opportunities in Honiara.

The purchase or occupation of land on Guadalcanal by Malaitans fuelled this resentment. So too did the acquisition of land through marriage (Guadalcanal is traditionally matrilineal and Malaita patrilineal, so a Malaitan man who marries a Guale woman acquires land through both channels, while a Guale man who marries a Malaitan woman has no land rights) (Braithwaite et al. 2010, 19). This resentment made it easy for politicians and militants to manipulate Guale communities for their own advantage. And when more than 20,000 mostly Malaitans were displaced from the Guadalcanal plains with violence and without assistance for repatriations or compensation, many young Malaitans identified readily with calls to defend themselves (Fraenkel 2004, 55 and Braithwaite 2010, 35).

Ethnic differences are a characteristic of Solomons' society. With at least 64 living languages of many dialects (Tryon and Hackman 1993), nine provinces plus Honiara City, six large islands and hundreds of others, and identity traditionally centred around one's extended family or village, it is difficult to build a strong and unified sense of national identity. Most of the country is Melanesian, but there are also Polynesian, Gilbertese, Chinese and European peoples with differences evident in linguistic diversity and physical appearance. Even within a province, such as Malaita, there are distinct communities with a sense of ethnic difference.

That said, for the most part, Solomon Islanders from different provinces (and different parts of a province) live and work together amicably. This is especially evident in Honiara and among politicians, many of whom marry women from another province (possibly resulting from time together at high school or university). Almost half the members of parliament are married to a woman from another province, and half the permanent secretaries have a partner from another province. This suggests a well-integrated society, at least at the all-important leadership level, and one not defined by the visceral hatred of the neighbours...
seen in countries with volatile ethnic tensions. The People's Survey 2011 asked respondents what the main causes of conflict and problems were in Solomon Islands today. By far the most common response was land disputes (61 per cent), followed by alcohol and drugs (40 per cent) and arguments outside and within the family (21 per cent). The Survey commented that 'it is notable that less than 10% mentioned tension between ethnic and provincial groups, migration or illegal settlement' (ANU Enterprise 2012, 90).

While linguistic and ethnic diversity are permanent features of Solomon Islands (as they are elsewhere in the Pacific), they are not manifesting themselves today in serious ethnic tensions. Today there is not the concentration of Malaitan employees on the Guadalcanal plains that was evident in the 1990s. Nevertheless, diversity in Solomon Islands remains exploitable (including against Chinese businesses). It is this — the exploitability of the people and the willingness of some people to exploit others — and not ethnicity per se that means we cannot permanently rule out future civil disorder. The significance of provincial identity is that it creates a prism through which events are viewed, increasing the risk of discrimination and the misinterpretation, manipulation and escalation of events.

Internal migration and Honiara’s urbanisation are both likely to continue. Honiara’s population reduced markedly during the tensions, but with the arrival of RAMSI in 2003 many returned and the population of Honiara and its environs grew sharply. It is difficult to be precise about the pace of Honiara’s urbanisation. The National Census doesn’t capture yearly changes, and part of the population of Honiara — those who reside outside the boundaries of Honiara City Council — is counted in the figure for Guadalcanal Province. However, if we add the population of urban Guadalcanal to the population of Honiara city we get a population for greater Honiara of over 80,000 in 2009 (SIG 2012, Sect.A, Tble 1).

The growth of Honiara and its peri-urban settlements, especially at White River (two kilometres west of Honiara’s central business district) and Burns Creek (10 kilometres east of Honiara’s central business district) present their own set of challenges. The settlements, where much of the population growth is concentrated, have limited or uneven access to town water, sanitation, grid power and sealed roads. Land tenure arrangements are mixed, although most settlement communities have either settled illegally on alienated lands, or on crown land reserved for common use. Many Honiara settlement residents are Malaitan migrants. The People’s Survey 2011 notes that:

In urban settlement communities around Honiara built on unregistered land, people are often in conflict with the governments and with the original land owners. These squatters are likely to become involved in further disputes over the use of garden land, expanding boundaries of the urban slums and harvesting resources without permission. Some of these disputes may be internal to the settlement, as well as with outside groups. These issues are aggravated by population increase and the internal migration of residents of outer provinces who come to Honiara in search of work, medical care or education. Overcrowding also contributes to internal family conflicts (ANU Enterprise 2012, 92).

People in most rural areas exist through subsistence agriculture and make a small cash income on the side, sufficient only for basic needs. The lack of services, remoteness, and limited economic and social opportunities result in people choosing to move to Honiara to have better access to health and education services, more skilled and better paid work and economic opportunity.

Honiara is the principal point of entry for those leaving the land and the existence of family and village networks facilitates a chain migration path. The presence of wantoks in greater Honiara provides a basis for survival after arrival, and connections that for some become a pathway to employment and income. Urbanisation is happening, notwithstanding government polices — such as regional growth centres — designed to reduce the push from rural areas. The limited provision of basic services to
Honiara’s settlements is also accepted as it is feared that a better functioning Honiara would only make the capital more attractive.

The recent influx of people into Honiara needs to be managed and planned because urbanisation is an opportunity. The World Bank’s World Development Report 2009 concluded that the most effective route to poverty reduction and economic growth is to encourage the highest possible urban population density through migration, provided there is an accompanying strong investment in services and infrastructure (World Bank 2009). The concentration of people in urban areas such as Honiara lowers the per capita cost of basic service provision.

The movement of outsiders onto Guale land, resentment at their success and presence, and the manipulation of those feelings for political or personal gain were among the main strands in the tangle of causes of the tensions. Measures to stop the movement of people are unlikely to be successful (unless draconian) and this makes the management of urbanisation an essential ingredient in efforts to minimise the possibility of a return to tensions. Acceptance and management of urbanisation distinguishes those cities that have prospered from the influx of people from those that become breeding grounds for violence and revolution (Saunders 2010).

Security Outlook

In the future, Solomon Islands is likely to experience further stress from the eventual decline in logging, continued unequal economic development, further urban drift, high levels of youth unemployment, and the proliferation of settlements in and around Honiara. These stresses are not dissimilar to the stresses experienced in many developed and developing countries. They, in themselves, do not signal the return to militancy and the civil unrest of the kind experienced in 1998–2003. Today, there is no evidence of subversive ideology or ideologues, martyrs or militias, training camps or markets for weapons, and no organised mobilisation of people or resources intent on challenging the state. Nor are there large heroin, marijuana or other illicit drug markets, illicit gambling or prostitution markets that have attracted organised crime groups (Braithwaite 2010, 128). The absence today of militant intent and capability and of organised crime is mostly a reflection of the state of Solomon’s society and the improved strength of its institutions.

There is a significant difference between militant conflict and civil disorder, which can occur in the most ordered of countries — for example, Paris (2005), Sydney (2005), London (2011), Rome (2011), and Athens (2012). While the possibility of civil disorder in Solomon Islands cannot be ruled out, we can be more confident that militancy is much less likely as there is neither no longer evidence of it nor an appetite for it.

Today’s security challenges in Solomon Islands are about law and order. These include petty crime born out of poverty, corrupt practices born out of greed, and civil disorder that involves the easy mobilisation of vigorous young urban males impatient and bored with their destitution. In Solomon Islands, there is an ‘everyday’ (front-line) policing task, and a potential for spontaneous civil disorder, especially at times of political change. Both challenges call for a capable local police force — a force as capable as others in the Pacific.

How well is the RSIPF performing everyday policing and managing civil disorder? In The People’s Survey 2011, respondents said they sought help from the RSIPF for disturbances (38 per cent of the requests), violence or assault (28 per cent) and theft (26 per cent). Focus group discussion participants said that the main problems in communities relate to alcohol consumption, including over-consumption of beer, home-brew, and the side effects of alcohol abuse, including domestic conflict, assaults, misuse of family money and disputes when families are left with no money to buy food.

Forty-four per cent of respondents were satisfied with the help received from police and 55 per cent said they were not satisfied. Most dissatisfaction was because the police did not do anything to help (82 per cent) or were too slow to respond (16 per cent). Twenty-four per cent of respondents thought the RSIPF had improved in
the past five years, while another 24 per cent said it had improved in some ways (40 per cent said it had not improved). Focus group discussion participants reported that police were unwilling to leave police posts. They said they were ineffective when they did, and village people, especially women and youth, were reluctant to report crimes to the police because they feared them. However, they also reveal that the community has a growing awareness that in many cases it’s the limited resources of the RSIPF that cause the police to fall short of community expectations.

RSIPF officers interviewed for the survey provided more details of these constraints, emphasising just how discouraging it was to be unable, due to a lack of resources, to deliver the level of policing to which they aspire.

On the other hand, the recent performance of the RSIPF in handling major events has been very good. Crowds can mobilise quickly in Honiara, as they did on 16 November 2011, when Gordon Darcy Lilo was elected the nation’s new prime minister. A crowd of around 500–600 people, mainly young men, gathered around the Point Cruz area in the centre of town, moved towards the prime minister’s office, and then headed for the governor general’s residence in an attempt to prevent the swearing in of Mr Lilo. They carried makeshift banners demanding the prime minister’s resignation and stayed for several hours at Government House. There was a sizeable RSIPF presence at Government House and the crowd, while throwing the odd rock, remained largely under control. The crowd eventually split into two groups, with one group moving towards rocks at the prime minister’s office and then towards the governor general’s residence. The RSIPF and RAMSI’s Operational Response Team dispersed the crowd without loss of life, no arson and no looting.

Local journalist Koroi Hawkins witnessed the events first-hand. In a feature article in Islands Business he wrote:

The skill, professionalism, coordination and courage which the local officers displayed that day, ignited within me a spark of confidence in the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force and a glimmer of hope for the future of national security and a safe and peaceful environment. The police acted quickly and efficiently to prevent the situation from getting out of control. There were no reports of violence, no property damage, and no arrests were made.

The RSIPF also took the lead in planning and providing security during the Oceania Football Confederation Nations Cup (1–10 June 2012) and the Festival of Pacific Arts (1–14 July 2012). These were major public events involving large crowds of up to 26,000 people, both over a two-week period. Football games, wherever they occur in the world, have the potential for unruly and drunken behaviour and outbreaks of civil disorder. The RSIPF and RAMSI worked closely together to ensure law and order was maintained.

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provincial court system is also contributing to the public not having full confidence in them at the provincial level. In contrast, we are now seeing increased confidence in national level policing and responses to major public order management incidents. Improved levels of confidence flow from observed improvements in performance. Honiara is the key to maintaining security in Solomon Islands, but improving police performance in the provinces will be key to building community confidence as measured in national surveys.

Maintaining the Peace

RAMSI has restored law and order, but has it also improved the chances of lasting peace? The experience from other peacekeeping missions is that peacekeeping missions do work to keep the peace. A recent study by Fortna (2008) identified a number of causal mechanisms through which the presence of peacekeepers might:

- change the incentives of recent belligerents, making peace more desirable or war more costly
- reduce the uncertainty and fear that drive security dilemma spirals
- prevent or control accidents or the actions of rogue groups that might otherwise escalate back to war
- prevent political abuse by one side that might cause actors losing the peace to take up new arms.

Applying this framework to the case of Solomon Islands, we can observe that RAMSI has increased both the economic and political incentives for peace. The restoration of government functions, government finances and governance arrangements were good in themselves and also boosted economic growth. This ‘peace dividend’ has created business opportunities for former militant leaders helping to keep them out of trouble, and political leaders have been able to capitalise on the improved economic performance. Peace has provided a number of former militant leaders the opportunity to become legitimate political actors. Several are currently members of parliament, and this valued status has given them an incentive to maintain peace and not return to violence.

RAMSI, as a legitimate outside party, was able to provide the neutral force required to convince the criminals and belligerents that the time for violence was over — a view held by the majority of Solomon Islanders. It was also able to remove and destroy most weapons, and to reassure each side that the other was acting in good faith. This, as well as their presence, reduced fear, mistrust and uncertainty. The speed with which the rumours of early April 2012 were dispelled indicates that there has been a reduction in (but also not an elimination of) fear, mistrust and uncertainty in communities. This, as much as the removal of the weapons themselves, has contributed to the sustainability of the peace and avoidance of a perceived need for weapons re-emerging.

RAMSI’s presence and sizeable development assistance program has helped to shift power from those who held weapons to those who uphold good governance and the rule of law. RAMSI has also made the resumption of conflict less likely by dealing with serious offences through the Solomon Islands law and justice sector and, through its strong presence, by preventing criminal elements from intimidating and menacing government, businesses and communities in a way that might otherwise escalate back to the tensions period. By rebuilding the RSIPF and effective institutions in the law and justice, economic governance and machinery of government sectors, RAMSI has helped reduce the opportunity for state power to be systematically abused or manipulated in ways that make the resumption of conflict more likely. These civilian tasks of multidimensional peacekeeping — law and justice, good governance, economic management — are all aimed at establishing a system in which political conflict can be managed peacefully (Fortna 2008, 101). RAMSI’s presence has helped prevent misbehaviour that could become the spark for a more serious outbreak of violence.

A recent comparative study of peacekeeping missions notes that a strong predictor of the stability of peace is militant access to contraband financing (drugs, diamonds or other illicit trade).
Other predictors are the duration of conflict and the intensity of conflict. The longer the conflict the longer the peace, while the more deadly the conflict the more likely peace will falter. And the longer peace lasts the more likely it is to continue. That is, if peacekeepers can help belligerents get over the early, most difficult stages of avoiding conflict, peace takes on some momentum and becomes easier to maintain over time (Fortna 2008, 117–19). Solomon Islands experienced a low-intensity conflict (an estimated 200 fatalities over a five-year period) which, together with all the other indicators, suggests that the prospects for the peace of the past nine years continuing are good.

It is against this background that the transition of RAMSI is underway. Transition refers to the changes that are planned to take place in RAMSI’s next phase. It is proposed that each of the mission’s civil, military and policing components will change in a different way. It is a process endorsed by the Solomon Islands Government, most recently in a November 2011 cabinet decision. RAMSI contributing countries, Solomon Islands Government and the Pacific Islands Forum have discussed plans for RAMSI’s development assistance programs to be absorbed from 1 July 2013 into AusAID’s bilateral development assistance program and the programs of other donors; for funding for RAMSI’s PPF to continue for at least another four years with the task of building the capacity and capability of the RSIPF; and for the possibility of RAMSI’s military component leaving in the second half of 2013.

**Transition — Development Assistance**

RAMSI’s civilian development program is in three areas (referred to as ‘pillars’): Economic Governance, Machinery of Government, and Law and Justice. The pillars support the core functions of central agencies in the Solomon Islands Government, including the Ministry of Finance and Treasury, the Ministry of Public Service, the Auditor General, the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission, the National Judiciary, Correctional Services Solomon Islands, the Public Solicitor and the Director of Public Prosecutions.

RAMSI’s development program support to these agencies has been a vital component in the country’s overall recovery from the tensions. The program’s achievements include stabilising the government’s budget and cash position, improving the country’s sovereign debt rating, and strengthening the parliament. Elections have been held successfully, the Office of the Auditor General is functioning after being defunct during the tensions, backlogs in the court system have been cut, and significant tension-era trials have concluded. Prisons now meet UN standards and prison administration has improved such that most advisory support to Corrections has been able to be withdrawn.

RAMSI was never intended to be a long-term mission. Now that Solomon Islands Government central agencies and the law and justice sector are stable and functioning at a basic level, development activities can and should be transferred to traditional donor programs that operate under time horizons that permit extended planning. From 1 July 2013, RAMSI will not be funded for this type of development assistance and the programs will be absorbed into Australia’s growing bilateral aid program and the development assistance programs of other donors, including New Zealand, the EU, World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Assistance will support Solomon Island Government defined strategies in mutually agreed areas of assistance, and will involve a smooth transition from RAMSI to longer term development support mechanisms.

There are several reasons for making changes to RAMSI’s development assistance program. RAMSI has always been a short-term intervention, and yet assistance in areas such as law and justice and economic governance will be required for the medium- to long-term. Moving the management of these programs to long-term development partners enables longer term planning and commitment. It also signals that the programs have changed from those appropriate in a post-conflict stabilisation intervention to those found in a more normal development assistance environment. The change is a clear statement of the progress that has been made, it helps build the nation’s confidence in itself and it signals to foreign investors and visitors that
Solomon Islands is a safe place in which to do business and visit.

Transition in the area of development assistance is not an entirely new development. RAMSI has been learning, changing and adapting since 24 July 2003. For example, RAMSI’s assistance to Correctional Services Solomon Islands has already transitioned. At one point there were over 50 RAMSI personnel working in the organisation, including the position of commissioner. The prisons were run by RAMSI officials. This is not the case today: Correctional Services Solomon Islands is headed by a Solomon Islander and there are now only around ten advisors, none of whom hold positions in the organisation. All five of the operating correctional centres have been rebuilt or refurbished and meet the UN minimum standards for detention of prisoners. Support to Correctional Services has transitioned successfully from intensive intervention needed in the immediate post-conflict period to low-key advisor support with budget support to ensure sustainability.

The 2011 annual performance report on RAMSI, conducted by an independent experts team, finds that the challenges under these three programs have been, for some time, long-term ones that are better addressed through broader development partnerships at a more realistic pace (AusAID 2012). Moving RAMSI’s development programs to bilateral aid arrangements from 1 July 2013 will allow longer term planning and funding, as well as more flexible support than is possible under RAMSI which is constrained by the uncertainty of four-year budget cycles.

**Transition — Policing**

The Solomon Islands’ security environment has changed dramatically for the better since RAMSI arrived in 2003. Today, the security challenges faced by Solomon Islands are the same as those faced in other countries in the region. They require a well-run, modern police force capable of a strong policing response governed by a contemporary police act. This is where RAMSI can most effectively target its capacity-building efforts during its next phase (2013–17).

The policing support provided by RAMSI’s PPF has also been transitioning for some time. RAMSI police have stepped back from everyday policing. Between August 2011 and May 2012, they withdrew from ten provincial police posts and are now concentrated in Honiara with a presence in Auki (Malaita Province), Gizo (Western Province) and Lofung (Shortland Island, Western Province). In Honiara, they no longer patrol the streets or respond to calls for assistance — these are tasks for the RSIPF. Instead, the role of RAMSI police is to train the RSIPF and provide support to its senior leadership. RAMSI police also maintain a public order management capability and can be called to backup the RSIPF in management of a major incident if required.

RAMSI police continue to support provincial police posts through the provision of leadership and mentoring programs, communications and logistics support, and station refurbishments. RAMSI is now focused on building RSIPF capabilities, especially in leadership development, public order management and the crucial logistics, human resources and administrative functions needed to support frontline RSIPF officers. This transition strategy was developed jointly by RAMSI and the RSIPF, and agreed in November 2011.

Current planning is that RAMSI’s PPF, including police from throughout the Pacific, will stay in Solomon Islands and continue to support the RSIPF for at least another four years.

**Transition — The Military**

RAMSI’s military component includes soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Tonga and, accordingly, is referred to within RAMSI as the Combined Task Force. The military strength has varied over the years, but since the elections in 2010 it has been around 170 personnel, comprising a company (three platoons) and a headquarters element. One platoon is always from Australia, another alternates between Australia and New Zealand, and the third alternates between Papua New Guinea and Tonga. All Pacific Islands countries with a military force, except Fiji, participate in RAMSI. Since 2007, Australia’s
contribution has come from the Reserve Force.

Up until the first half of 2012, there hadn't been much public commentary on the continued presence in Solomon Islands of RAMSI's military component. For many years, their role was twofold: to provide backup security to RAMSI's police when needed, and to provide additional perimeter security at Rove Correctional Centre. They also undertook patrols across the country, but these ceased in October 2010. In mid-2011 they also ceased providing perimeter security at Rove Correctional Centre. The last time the Combined Task Force was formally called upon to assist the PPF to restore public order was in 2006, and it ceased routine joint patrols with RAMSI's PPF in early 2010. Throughout, however, the military has been a backup capability available to support the PPF if required.

In early 2012, a few suggestions appeared in the media to the effect that it was time for RAMSI's military component to leave. The reports were not critical of the military, which retains the support of the majority of the people (76 per cent of the adult population support the presence of the military (ANU Enterprise 2012, 98–99).

In a letter to the Solomon Star on 27 February 2012, Terry Brown, the retired Anglican Bishop of Malaita Province, questioned the need for retaining a military component within RAMSI (Brown 2012). He acknowledged that the military were needed at the outset of the mission and had performed their role well. Now, however, he saw no good reason for them to stay, and argued that their presence may instead serve to deter visitors and frighten investors. He concluded that the withdrawal of the military would send a positive signal to the outside world that the country had stabilised.

Bishop Brown's letter was followed on 5 April with a full-page opinion piece in the same paper written by a local journalist, Robert Iroga (Iroga 2012). In his article, Mr Iroga said ‘perhaps it's now time for Solomon Islanders to ask some very serious questions on whether the military component of RAMSI should stay or pack up and leave as their job is done’. He was not critical of RAMSI, which he described as ‘an answer to our prayers’, but was now concerned that the continued presence of the military ‘sends a wrong signal to the watching world’.

On 6 April 2012, this theme was echoed by Professor Clive Moore in an interview broadcast on Radio Australia (Moore et al.). Professor Moore said the military were unlikely to be needed in the near future and noted that the RSIPF had effectively handled the disturbances in November 2011 surrounding the election of Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo, without having to call on the army.

On 25 April 2012, Australia’s Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith, accompanied by Secretary of Defence Duncan Lewis, visited Solomon Islands and met Prime Minister Gordon Darcy Lilo. The visit had been planned for some time, and followed a number of ministerial visits and visits by parliamentary secretaries. It should be seen in this context, and it would be a mistake to make some connection or causality between the remarks on the military in the media and the visit. Mr Smith told Radio Australia in two separate interviews that they had a ‘very important and substantive conversation’ about RAMSI’s transition (Smith 2012). Article 3.2 of the RAMSI Treaty states that ‘The Assisting Countries may at any time withdraw any or all their Visiting Contingent ...’, and a significant withdrawal ‘will only take place after consultation with the Government of Solomon Islands’.

Mr Smith said the time had come to start a conversation about the drawdown of RAMSI’s military component. He said they had come to a shared analysis that RAMSI’s focus had shifted to police, law and justice and public order, with a heavy emphasis on the training and capability of the RSIPF. They had come to the conclusion that it was now time to start talking about the orderly withdrawal of the military while committing to support policing for the foreseeable future.

While no decisions have been made, Mr Smith said the withdrawal of the military would not occur before mid-2013. He said he had spoken to both the defence and foreign ministers of New Zealand, who had agreed that this would be the sensible thing to do. The next step would be to have formal dis-
cussions with the Pacific Islands Forum. In a Radio New Zealand interview on 27 April 2012, New Zealand’s Minister for Defence, Jonathan Coleman, said RAMSI’s military had ‘probably been there a bit longer than they really need to be’ and ‘longer than we intended’ (Coleman 2012).

The Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on RAMSI held its annual meeting in Honiara on 18 May 2012. Australia was represented by Richard Marles, the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs. In an interview with Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service following the meeting, he explained that a withdrawal of troops in the second half of 2013 would reflect the ‘radically different’ security environment in Solomon Islands and, secondly, that the guarantor of peace was now the police force (Marles 2012). He noted that the RSIPF had performed ‘admirably’ in maintaining public safety and public order during the protests at the time of the change in prime ministers in November 2011. He said RAMSI would continue to support the RSIPF for many years to come. At the Forum Ministerial Standing Committee, ministers discussed and noted the planned withdrawal of the military in the second half of 2013 (PIFS 2012).

Conclusion

There were proximate and underlying causes and key players in both the tensions and peacemaking. Many things have changed in the past nine years, but it is also true that it is not possible to eliminate all the factors that contributed to the tensions. Many of them require long-term measures and commitment from the Solomon Islands Government and civil society. A functioning law and justice sector, including a strongly performing RSIPF, and better planning and management of Honiara’s urbanisation are essential. Improved access to other government services is also important to alleviate feelings of social injustice and exclusion that are the common drivers of conflict worldwide. Particularly important will be access to universal basic education that gives every citizen a chance to escape the social, economic and political limitations of village life. In the face of RAMSI’s transition and drawdown, the key question is not whether all the proximate and underlying causes have been addressed, but whether there are incentives to maintain peace and oppose the resumption of violence, and how robust the critical institutions of the state, especially the RSIPF, are.

In future People’s Surveys, it would be useful to probe further the community’s attitudes to the RSIPF. In particular, it would be interesting to know the people’s views on delivery of other government services — such as health and education — to establish if there is a general problem with service delivery in the provinces, whether policing services delivered are any better or worse than other government services, and, as Solomon Islands is a low-income country with a very real budget constraint, if the people prefer any extra income to be spent on policing, schools, health clinics or roads.

The key to a successful transition will be the maintenance of confidence in both the security environment and management of the economy. Transition must not undermine confidence. Success to date and in the long-term is dependent on government, business, investors, the people and donors all feeling safe and able to operate free from intimidation. This means continued support from RAMSI for the development of capacity and capability in the RSIPF, and continued support through other donors for sound economic management and further reform. The proposed withdrawal of the military would also help restore a positive image of the security outlook among overseas investors and visitors, and help restore self-confidence among Solomon Islanders.

Transition does not mean RAMSI will be leaving Solomon Islands completely. Transition is about the next four-year phase of RAMSI to start on 1 July 2013. It is proposed that RAMSI’s main role in that phase will be to work with the RSIPF to strengthen its capacity and further develop it as a modern and effective police force. It will remain a partnership with the people and government of Solomon Islands, and a regional mission drawing police from all Pacific Island Forum countries. Close consultation with Solomon Islands Government, the Pacific Islands Forum and all
other stakeholders will remain central to the way RAMSI operates.

Solomon Islands has improved greatly over the past nine years. Transition is the way to recognise these improvements. Transition is providing the opportunity for Solomon Islanders to step forward, as RAMSI steps back.

**Author Notes**

Nicholas Coppel is RAMSI's Special Coordinator, a position he has held since March 2011. He is a senior Australian career diplomat with previous postings to Papua New Guinea (Deputy High Commissioner), the Philippines (Deputy Chief of Mission) and the United States of America. He has held a number of senior positions in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, including Executive Director of the Economic Analytical Unit. Unit publications produced under his overall leadership include *Solomon Islands: Rebuilding an Island Economy* (2004) and *Papua New Guinea: The Road Ahead* (2004). He has a Bachelor of Economics degree from the Australian National University and Master of Business Administration degree from the London Business School. The views expressed in this paper are his own and not necessarily those of the contributing countries to RAMSI.

**References**


Endnotes

1 Under the Townsville Peace Agreement (signed 15 October 2000) the MEF and IFM agreed to renounce violence, forsake ethnically based complaints and demands and surrender weapons to an International Peace Monitoring Team. The Agreement also provided for an amnesty for members of both groups.

2 These incidents do not include occasions on which either the PPF or the Combined Task Force have discharged weapons in the course of duty. In addition to these incidents, there have also been numerous unconfirmed reports of weapons being sighted or gunshots being heard. Rumours of weapons stockpiles also circulate from time to time.

3 While the official statistics indicate that Guadalcanal Province, including the population of Honiara, is the most populous province, Malaitans are the largest ethnic minority.

4 Unpublished survey conducted by RAMSI in early 2012.

5 A series of soccer games between eight national teams.

6 Agreement Between Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Tonga Concerning the Operations and Status of the Police and Armed Forces and Other Personnel Deployed to Solomon Islands to Assist in the Restoration of Law and Order and Security. (Townsville, 24 July 2003). Often referred to simply as the ‘RAMSI Treaty’.

7 The Forum Ministerial Standing Committee on RAMSI was established by decision of the thirty-seventh Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting in Nadi on 24–25 October 2006. It was established as
a consultation mechanism between the Government of Solomon Islands, RAMSI and the Pacific Islands Forum and involving representatives of the past, present and incoming Forum chairs. It is not involved in operational decisions but acts as a high level reference group, discusses the broad policy directions of RAMSI and progress achieved, and reports to Forum Leaders.
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