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THE QUESTION OF 'FAILED STATES'

Australia and the Notion of State Failure

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During the 2004 Federal election campaign, the Australian Government flagged for the third time in as many years the idea of a 'preemptive' – or more accurately, 'preventative' – military attack against an anticipated threat to Australia's security. On previous occasions, the public had been largely hostile to the idea of a unilateral invasion of Iraq. But now the US-led invasion is tragic history, its consequences have left many Australians questioning some of the primary assumptions in the anxious rush to war, particularly the notion of 'rogue states' and the potential threat these states pose to Australia's security interests.

In the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, the concept of 'failed states' is becoming fashionable among government and private security analysts in Australia. Failed states are said to be the new challenge for the new century and, whereas threats to world peace once came from strong tyrannical ('rogue') states, the post-cold war challenges now originate mainly in failed states. Since mid-2003, the concept has supplemented, if not supplanted, rogue states, while the spectre of an 'arc of instability' has replaced the 'axis of evil'.

Even though no one in Government can precisely name an example of a failed state in the region, this did not stop the Australian Prime Minister from enlisting this elusive concept in his attempt to sound tough on terrorism. Even conservative and security thinktanks have jumped on the conceptual bandwagon in labelling a number of Pacific states from Papua New Guinea to Nauru as 'failing' in their call for economic restructuring and rationalisation in those countries.

Although widely referred to, the concept of failed states is not only indistinct; it is highly controversial because of the political and security implications of labelling a state as having 'failed'. A state that has been declared as having failed becomes a candidate for intervention in its internal affairs by another state or international organisation, or worse still, marked for a preventative military invasion.

This research paper attempts to explain the origins of the concept of failing or failed states and to assess the popular claim that these states pose a security threat for Australia and Western interests.

Origins of the concept

While talk of preventative military action may be in vogue, the idea is hardly novel. The US Government considered such a policy "morally corrosive" during the height of the Cold War but despite its unpopular origin, the idea of prevention resurfaced as a mainstream government policy following September 11, 2001. The document that entrenched the idea in US foreign policy, the *National Security Strategy* of September 2002,¹ from its very first pages drew a connection between the idea of prevention and the apparent dangers posed by failed states. "America is now threatened less by conquering states than [it is] by failing ones", the paper says.

Government officials and security think-tanks in Australia soon followed the US lead. In Australia, the concept of failed states was introduced to popular acclaim with the release of the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) 2003 policy report, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands*,² which argued the case for intervening in the troubled Solomon Islands, during the Government's deliberations over the issue.

Although scholars have been debating the concept of state failure for over a decade, as an actual phenomenon, what is now known as 'failed states', has been part of the political reality for as long as the international system of states has existed.³ Historically, the notion of state failure was a colonial preoccupation. At the zenith of European expansion, the failure of Pacific indigenous efforts at self-government had frequently provided the opportunity and justification for great power interventions. Powerful states often intervened in weaker states to quell social disorder that threatened their security and trade interests.⁴ "At other times," Robert H. Dorff, a US Army scholar noted, "the weak state provided an opportunity for territorial expansion by the great power."⁵

It is often forgotten that the Solomon Islands has been at the receiving end of intervention by a more powerful state not once but twice. In 1893, at Australia's urging, British forces landed on the Solomon Islands "to curtail what we would now call transnational crime, especially blackbirding, and to ensure that no other imperial power established a presence there."⁶ Over a century ago, the Solomon Islands thus provided one example of a great power intervention in what today might be considered a failing state.

Contemporary interest in state failure re-emerged as a humanitarian concern in the early 1990s shortly after the collapse of the Soviet alliance. The present post-Cold War period is another historical phase characterised by rapid change in the international system. Pressure for change followed decades of relative stability and conceptual certainty under the bipolar system in which superpowers competition for third world patronage ensured that international relations and state borders remained relatively rigid.

With the end of the Cold War and the acceleration of globalisation, a wave of state formation and disintegration pushed the issue of failing states to the forefront of the international political and human rights agenda. International relations scholars invariably employed different terminology and definitions to describe one of the apparent 'negative' symptoms associated with international

¹ *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.

² Elsinia Wainright, *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the Future of Solomon Islands*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 2003.

³ See Jon Fraenkel, "Political Instability, 'Failed States' and Regional Intervention in the Pacific", paper presented at conference *Redefining the Pacific: Regionalism – Past, Present and Future*, Dunedin, New Zealand, 25-28 June 2004, www.otago.ac.nz.

⁴ Robert H. Dorff, "Addressing the Challenges of State Failure", paper presented at Failed States Conference, Florence, Italy, 7-10 April 2000, www.ippu.purdue.edu.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wainright, op. cit., p.19.

system's reshuffle: the 'failed' or 'collapsed' state, which is primarily the fate of those states that are thought to be 'weak', 'fragile' or 'decaying'.

Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner were among the first commentators to use the term 'failed states' in a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article.⁷ They were concerned about "a disturbing new phenomenon" whereby a state was becoming "utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community." They were concerned that a failed state would "[imperil] their own citizens and [threaten] their neighbours through refugee flows, political instability and random warfare".

Box 1: Defining state failure – the theory

What is a state?

There are subtle differences in the usage of the terms 'state', 'nation' and 'country' even though they are often used interchangeably. Some commentators would distinguish between territorial 'country' and 'nation', the latter usually refers to a tightly knit group of people with a shared identity, culture or religion. A 'state', on the other hand, is often defined by its place and nature in the international system.

In international law, a given 'state' is often said to exist when a political entity is *recognised* by other states as the highest political authority in a given territory and is treated as an 'equal' among the international 'community' of states. Statehood does not require diplomatic recognition by other states, but rather a recognition that it exists. Another popular definition in international customary law says that statehood exists only when a given political entity possesses a permanent population, a defined territory, a government, and the capacity to enter into relations with the other states. This definition suggests that statehood is independent of recognition by other states.

However, the 'state' can also be defined in terms of its internal political characteristics, particularly its domestic authority and legitimacy. This means that even if a given political entity is recognised as a state under international law, it cannot be considered a state unless certain domestic political conditions are met. Political philosophies differ in their interpretation of these conditions.

A narrow interpretation, first proposed by Niccolò Machiavelli, emphasises the use of force, and force alone, as the basic constituent element of the state. As elaborated by the German sociologist Max Weber, the state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory", even when "the right to use physical force is ascribed to other institutions or to individuals only to the extent to which the state permits it".⁸ "If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence," he said, "the concept of 'state' would be eliminated".

A broader understanding of the state, often referred to as the 'social contract' theory, emphasises the relationship between the state and its citizens. As early as the 17th century, English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that individuals living in a state without a government – without law and "a coercive Power to tye [sic] their hands from rapine, and revenge" – are in a war of all against all in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". His proposal was for individuals to make a social contract with an absolute sovereign government – the state – by surrendering some of their freedom in exchange for guaranteed peace and security.

⁷ Gerald B. Helman and Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States", *Foreign Policy*, no.89, Winter 1993.

⁸ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation", speech at Munich University, 1918.

The social contract view of the state implies not only submission of all members of society under its authority, but also extends to the rights and responsibilities between a state and its citizens. For the state, this includes the provision of security for its citizens (which implies an ability to maintain a monopoly of the use of force) but it might also include the delivery of public goods and other forms of collective consumption and, more recently, the respect of human rights.

Source: Wikipedia, "State" and "Social Contract", en.wikipedia.org, accessed 7 February 2005

What is state failure?

How one defines the state will determine how one understands state failure. Michael Ignatieff adopted a more Machiavellian or narrow understanding of state failure, which for him occurs when "the central government loses the monopoly of the means of violence".⁹ Ignatieff argued that the ability to monopolise the use of force is the basic constituent element of a functioning state for which all other conditions, such as the respect for human rights and delivery of social services, will depend.

In the broad sense of state failure, William Zartman offered an arguably 'social contract'-based definition of state failure for whom state failure is said to occur when "the basic functions of the state are no longer performed".¹⁰ But it is "a deeper phenomenon than mere rebellion, coup, or riot. It refers to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart", he added.¹¹

Whether narrowly or broadly defined, the blame for state failure are many, ranging from European colonialism to what the colonial successor regimes or external agents did to that legacy.¹² In many places like East Timor, colonialism left behind little that the local population could build upon. In other places colonialism had created artificial borders and unviable social structures prone to ethnic conflict. Burma, where a civil war has been fought for nearly half a century, is a reminder of a complex colonial legacy of differing treatment for different ethnic groups that became an impediment to creating a unified sense of nationhood following independence.

In other instances 'third world colonialism' has been blamed. In Indonesia (although rarely considered a failing state) the largely Java-centric project to expand, unify and create a nation out of diverse cultures and faiths has been progressing from the moment Indonesian independence was declared. Indonesia, which initially covered no more than the island of Java, expanded to subsume the former kingdom of Aceh to the east and as far as East Timor and Papua to the west. Not surprisingly the greatest unrest has occurred and is occurring at these peripheral regions.

Besides historical factors, there are contemporary internal and external factors. Internal factors include economic maladministration, corruption and general failure at self-governance – local successors squandering their colonial inheritance. Certainly these are factors in many instances of state failure but, as the late UN official Sergio Vieira de Mello noted, "it would be hard to imagine a case of extreme poverty, underdevelopment, inequity, or armed conflict in which none of the complex causal factors originated outside the affected country". At the core of state failure is also a combination of "direct armed aggression, covert military intervention, encouragement of proxy warfare, exploitative multinational trade and business practices, or reckless economic destabilization", he argued.¹³

⁹ Michael Ignatieff, "Intervention and State Failure", *Dissent*, Winter 2002, p.118.

¹⁰ William Zartman, "Introduction: Posing the Problem of State Collapse", in William Zartman (ed) *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Colorado and Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 1995.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ignatieff, op. cit., p.118.

¹³ Sergio Vieira de Mello, "The Pillars of Human Security" *Global Agenda*, 2003.

A security threat?

It is no coincidence that the proliferation of international terrorism, transnational criminal activities and Western interests in failing states are all occurring at the same time in history. There are obvious examples where state failure had intermeshed with the covert world, for example, in Somalia and past and present Afghanistan. This said there is always a tendency to generalise the dangers of state failure to the extent that any state considered failing or failed is potentially a 'basket case' of international criminal activities and terrorism.

According to former US president Jimmy Carter, failed states "can become havens for terrorist ideologues seeking refuge and support. Failed states are the breeding grounds for drug trafficking, money laundering, the spread of infectious diseases, uncontrolled environmental degradation, mass refugee flows and illegal immigration."¹⁴ No matter how fashionable it is to demonise failed states, such an alarming assessment paints a misleading picture of the phenomenon and can lead to an unhealthy policy obsession with state failure and militarism.

International terrorism

A popular concern is the idea of 'saving' failed states in order to fight international terrorism. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the revelation that the terrorist network Al-Qaeda operated training camps in Afghanistan, conventional wisdom has linked international terrorism with failing or failed states. The fear among Western policy makers is that state failure is fomenting security threats that could have ramifications not just locally but across globe.



Child soldier in Rwanda 1998

Photo: Mark Raper SJ, Jesuit Refugee Service

"[W]e have come to understand better", the Australian Government said in a ASEAN Regional Forum report, "the impact weak and failing states can have on global security. Afghanistan illustrated the role such states can play in providing shelter for terrorist networks."¹⁵ Apart from sheltering terrorists, it has also been claimed that failed or failing states can become terrorist 'breeding' grounds as "young people with ineffectual government, few jobs, little or no education ... find strength and security within terrorist organizations."¹⁶

Despite the view that a direct link exists between state failure and international terrorism, recent evidence suggests that such a link cannot be assumed. Using evidence from a study by Ulrich Schneckener,¹⁷ German researcher Daniel Lambach argues that effective terrorist networks have requirements that are not always well served in failed states – communications technology and human and financial resources for recruitment, training, planning and logistics purposes, for example. The September 11 attack is a reminder of an act of terrorism that, although conceived and planned in Afghanistan and other 'failing states', relied on many developed states for its

¹⁴ Jimmy Carter, "The Human Right to Peace", *Global Agenda*, 2004, www.globalagendamagazine.com.

¹⁵ Commonwealth of Australia, "Annual Security Outlook 2004," ASEAN Regional Forum, 2004, www.dfat.gov.au.

¹⁶ "Preventing State Failure to Combat Terrorism," Background Guide, Stanford Model United Nations Conference, 2004.

¹⁷ Daniel Lambach, "Failed States and Perceptions of Threat in Europe and Australia, Paper for the Conference", paper presented at the New Security Agendas: European and Australian Perspectives conference, London, 1-3 July 2004, www.staff.uni-marburg.de/~lambach.

operation, including recruitment in Germany and Spain and the "extensive use of banks in the United States."¹⁸

Richard Devetak has argued that a hospitable environment for terrorist groups is more likely to be "poorly governed, corrupt or sympathetic states like Afghanistan under the Taliban, Yemen and Kenya, but also Pakistan and Indonesia among others."¹⁹

Illegal migration

In the last few decades, the world has witnessed increasing flows of cross-border migration, with a substantial number of illegal immigrants being assisted by people smugglers.²⁰ People smugglers supply sophisticated false documents and use clandestine, often dangerous methods of transporting people while exploiting the desperation of those willing or forced to migrate. Ever since the large wave of Afghani and Iraqi refugees and migrants arrived on Australia's shores in the late 1990s, it has often been assumed that most illegal migrants originate from failing or failed states – people desperately searching for a better life in the West, or people enlisting the service of people smugglers operating in failed states. However, as with international terrorism, the evidence for this is only partial.

Studies into this area suggest that international migration occurs greatest in countries that are emerging from extreme poverty, that are building infrastructure and accumulating savings. Research by Ronald Skeldon prepared for the International Organisation for Migration²¹ has found that "the principal reasons for the illegal migration are not to be found in absolute poverty but in the increased knowledge of opportunities available elsewhere – the very product of development", which is hardly a description of a failing or failed state.

China is an example of a poor but fast developing country. China is also the source of the largest group of unauthorised entrants (both economic migrants and refugees) to Australia until the year 2000.²² The US State Department has pointed out that Chinese illegal migrants tend to come from developed areas that have the infrastructures needed to provide required communication and transportation to the West.²³ They must also have access to significant funds (usually through loans), as fees for people smugglers or 'snakeheads' can be quite significant.

In contrast, most citizens in failed states will have less exposure to the 'lures' of the West, and will be more concerned with escaping immediate violence or scraping together a living than occupying their time thinking about a better life in the West. They may also be "too ignorant of other opportunities, and too far removed from transportation and communications networks [to] initiate, facilitate and sustain international migration", according to former Australian Federal Police adviser, John McFarlane.²⁴

¹⁸ 9-11 Commission, *9-11 Commission Report*, 2004, www.9-11commission.gov.

¹⁹ Richard Devetak, "Globalisation's Shadow: Political Violence in a Global Era," *Around the Globe*, 1(2), August 2004.

²⁰ Alexander Downer, "Australian Aid - Investing in Growth, Stability and Prosperity", Eleventh Statement to Parliament on Australia's Development Cooperation Program, September 2002, www.ausaid.gov.au.

²¹ Ronald Skeldon, "Myths and Realities of Chinese Irregular Migration," IOM Migration Research Series, no.1, International Organization for Migration, Geneva, 2000.

²² Ibid.

²³ US Department of State, "Why Do They Leave Their Homes?" *US Department of State website*, www.state.gov.

²⁴ John McFarlane, "People Smuggling: a Serious Issue in an Unstable Region," *Platypus Magazine – Journal of the Australian Federal Police*, October 1999, www.afp.gov.au. Citing research by Jack Goldstone, "A Tsunami on the Horizon? The Potential for International Migration from the People's Republic of China" in Paul Smith (ed.), *Human Smuggling: Chinese Migrant Trafficking and the Challenge to America's Immigration Tradition*, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 1997.

War and civil strife can increase cross-border migration as people attempt to escape danger and violence, particularly given that refugee movements are now "central to the objectives and tactics of war", a major UNHCR report says.²⁵ Cross border migration can also be indirectly promoted by political uncertainty as territorial borders become porous with the increasing loss of central control.²⁶

Although the evidence suggests that failed states can potentially create internal displacement and refugee outflows, there is little evidence of a direct link between state failure and illegal migration except that some refugees might be desperate enough to seek the services of criminal gangs. Yet since the 2001 Tampa crisis and September 11, connecting dots between failed states and illegal migration and people smuggling has also become popular.

Money laundering

Drug, terrorist and criminal money laundering have also been linked with state failure. Australian commentaries on this topic have often focused on the Pacific islands as an example of failing states providing opportunities for money laundering, tax evasion and fraud. "When you have a failed state, it's a state that can be exploited by people such as money launderers ..." Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said shortly before the deployment of troops to the Solomon Islands in 2003. According to the Federal Police Commissioner Mike Keelty, "The activity is fostered by island countries with few resources to sell other than their financial names."²⁷



Refugees in Albania 1999
Photo: M Almeida, Jesuit Refugee Service

Yet despite the textbook example of the Pacific island Nauru – which until recently was a regional financial centre for money laundering and identity fraud – there is little else to suggest a connection between state failure and money laundering. Using a number of political and economic indicators, one of the most comprehensive empirical studies on international money laundering was unable to establish a nexus with state failure.²⁸ Only 18 states were classified as 'failed' or 'failing' out of the 90 alleged money laundering states surveyed, according to the study. The explanation for this is hardly surprising, "money launderers or their clients attach high importance to keeping their money safe and like to exploit legal protections to do so, which is no easy task in politically or economically failing or failed states."²⁹

Narcotics

Mick Keelty and others have pointed out that an estimated 80% of heroin trafficked illegally into Australia is sourced from the Golden Triangle region, most of it from Burma.³⁰ The link between state failure and the cultivation and processing of narcotics seems more evident than that with international terrorism, illegal migration or money laundering, particularly in the example of the

²⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of the World's Refugees: 50 Years of Humanitarian Action*, UNHCR, 2000, www.unhcr.ch.

²⁶ McFarlane, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Mick Keelty, "Transnational Crime, Police Peace Operations and Asia-Pacific Security," Meeting of Australia CSCAP, University House, 8 February 2001, www.afp.gov.au.

²⁸ Peter Reuter and Edwin M. Truman, *Chasing Dirty Money: The Fight Against Money Laundering*, Institute for International Economics, 2004.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Adam Graycar et al, "Global and Regional Approaches to Fighting Transnational Crime," International Policing Conference, Adelaide, 6 March 2001, www.aic.gov.au.

three major drug producing countries, Afghanistan, Burma and Colombia. All these states are attempting to deal with significant insurgency groups and all have significant drug production and trafficking records.³¹

Providing the land and climate are suitable, failed and failing states create an ideal political environment for the cultivation, production and transportation of illicit drugs. "[A]narchy and lawlessness is *good* for business", Antonio Maria Costa, the Executive Director of UN Office on Drugs and Crime, said of the drug trade.³² The drug trade provides easy cash for both desperate farmers trying to live off their war-ravaged land and local warlords and gangs eager to enlarge their military capability. This could be seen in today's Afghanistan, "with lawlessness rising, the farmers are finding it more and more attractive to sow poppy all over the country."³³

Box 2 – Background to the Solomon Islands intervention

The vast majority of Solomon islanders are ethnic Melanesians, but there has been intense and bitter rivalry between the Isatabus on Guadalcanal and migrant Malaitans from other islands. In the late 1990s, tension between the Isatabus and the Malaitans escalated on the main island of Guadalcanal. Armed Isatabus militants, many who were unemployed youths, drove out of the rural areas people from the neighbouring islands, accusing them of taking land and jobs. Thousands of Malaitan families were forced to abandon their homes and villages and flee to Honiara. The Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) was formed in retaliation.

Large quantities of weapons were transferred from the police (the majority of whom are Malaitans) to the MEF. In June 2000 the MEF seized control of the capital, forced Prime Minister Ulufa'ulu to resign and parliament to form a new government with Sogavare as the interim Prime Minister. A new Parliament was elected in December 2001 and Sir Allan Kemakeza appointed Prime Minister.

The armed conflict between Malaitan and Isatabus militants led to a serious deterioration in security. Violence and crime increased. The political institutions were weak, political leaders felt obligations to the conflicting parties, and some parliamentarians took sides. The police were implicated in the violence and exploitation while the judiciary was hampered by threats against judges and prosecutors. The ineffectiveness of the justice system contributed to a climate of impunity.

Efforts occurred to resolve the conflict and in November 2000 many committed themselves to the terms of the *Townsville Peace Agreement*, an agreement brokered by Australia involving a formal ceasefire between the Malaitan and Isatabus populations. It was significant at the time and delayed further Australian assistance. However by 2002, despite the efforts of an international observer team that arrived following the *Townsville Peace Agreement*, the security situation had worsened.

With the breakdown of law and order, the formal sector of the economy was on the brink of collapse. The Government was insolvent and most commercial export activities ceased to operate. Hospitals and schools ceased to function while public servants were not paid and many did not turn up to work. Roads fell into disrepair especially during the wet season.

³¹ Mick Keelty, op. cit.

³² Original emphasis. Antonio Maria Costa, "Drugs: Cash Flow for Organized Crime - The Economic Addiction to Illegal Drugs," address to the Diplomatic Academy, Warsaw, Poland, 1 February 2005.

³³ Arif Jamal, "Opium Production Resumes In Afghanistan," *Eurasianet*, 12 March 2002, www.eurasianet.org.

On 10 June 2003, the ASPI released *Our Failing Neighbour*, a report which served as an important catalyst to mobilise support for the intervention in Canberra and amongst the Australian public. *Our Failing Neighbour* argued that the process of state failure in the Solomon Islands was "far advanced." The prospects of a "failing state on our doorstep engages Australia's interests at many levels, from short-term economic, consular and humanitarian concerns to our most enduring strategic imperatives", the report says.

In July 2003, a multinational force arrived at the formal invitation of the Solomon Islands Government and under conditions that were "acceptable to Australia".³⁴ Their task was to assist the Government in restoring law and order and in rebuilding the country's institutions. The Regional Assistance Mission for Solomon Islands (RAMSI) known as "Helpum Fren" (helping a friend) had a number of broad functions.

It included a military arm to win and keep the peace. 1,700 troops arrived from nine countries in the region. Guadalcanal rebel leader Harold Ke'ke and other militants surrendered within weeks of their arrival. Under an amnesty, over 3,700 weapons including about 700 high-powered military-style weapons were removed from circulation. Now that the initial function of restoring law and order has been a success, RAMSI is turning its attention to the more difficult and controversial task of restoring the prison and judicial systems, and building economic and institutional capacity.

RAMSI has been enjoying enormous popular support so far, but as the operation approaches its second year anniversary, there are some signs of growing tensions on the Islands about its ongoing role. Among the government ministers, the former Finance and Treasury Minister Francis Zama has been the most critical of RAMSI, accusing the operation of interfering in the country's sovereignty.

Mr Zama argued the Solomon Islands did not know the full magnitude of the RAMSI package, elements of which are dictated from Canberra. While acknowledging the positive improvements in law and order, he thought that the operation was an "overkill" and a possible "liability" for the country. He has also accused Australia of running a parallel government in his former department and of interfering with the state's judicial independence.³⁵ A day after making his concerns known in Parliament, Mr Zama was sacked from his ministerial position.

With an election looming in the Solomon Islands, the Australian Government will be keen to duplicate the public relations successes of the Iraqi and Afghani elections in showcasing the experiment in intervention as a triumph. However, despite measures to discipline dissent on the Solomon Islands, the debate over RAMSI's role will surely continue as the long-term implication of the package becomes apparent to the local population.

Source: adapted and updated from Peter Hosking SJ, *View on the Solomon Islands*, Uniya View on the Pacific Series, 2004, www.uniya.org/research

How the concept is applied in practice

The concept of 'failed states' for Australia was not shaped by the September 11 attacks, unlike the US and the UK, but by the Solomon Islands intervention in 2003. Before that, and despite the war against Afghanistan, the Government said little about failing or failed states let alone the idea of intervening in a failed state to fight terrorism.³⁶ As late as January 2003, Mr Downer was

³⁴ Prime Minister John Howard, quoted in "Solomons MPs Say Yes to Intervention Force", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 July 2003.

³⁵ Robert L. Iroga, "Independency of judiciary questioned," *Solomon Star*, www.solomonstarnews.com.

³⁶ See Lambert, op. cit.

dismissing the idea of intervening in the Solomon Islands as a "folly in the extreme". "It would not work," he said, "no matter how it was dressed up".³⁷ In case the point was missed, a major Government policy paper added a few weeks later, "Australia is not a neo-colonial power. The [Pacific] island countries are independent sovereign states".³⁸

Six months later, it seems Mr Downer discovered a way to 'dress up' Australia's new-found foreign policy assertiveness. With the release of the ASPI report on the Solomon Islands, the concept of failed states apparently gave the Government the rhetoric it needed. As Tony Wright of *The Bulletin* explained, "It was not so much that the Solomon Islanders should have assistance foisted upon them – it was a matter of Australian security. A failed state such as the Solomons could become a danger to Australia".³⁹

By September 2003, Mr Downer was at the UN General Assembly saying that, "It is no longer open to us to ignore the failed states ... Old shibboleths – such as the excessive homage to sovereignty even at the expense of the preservation of humanity and human values – should not constrain us." This argument was reinforced in the aftermath of Prime Minister Howard's comment during the Australian Federal election period about the possibility of Australia launching a preemptive attack on foreign soil in the region against terrorists. Mr Downer quickly qualified the Prime Minister's comments so that it referred only to situations of failed or failing states rather than (presumably 'successful') states like "Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines".⁴⁰

"Imagine a situation", Mr Downer told ABC Radio, "it's not likely to be Indonesia or a country which has a strong counter-terrorism capability, but a failed state in the South Pacific, as the Solomons once was and is not now, and a situation where a terrorist was about to attack and the country involved either didn't want to or in their case couldn't do anything to stop it, we would have to go and do it ourselves".⁴¹

The Government has not accused any other state of failing. It has, however, referred to the Solomon Islands, Afghanistan and Iraq as former failed states. It is no coincidence all three states have been subjected to intervention with Australia's involvement in recent years, invited or otherwise.

Conclusion

The Government's approach to the idea of state failure suggests that policy precedes concept and not vice versa. It seems the Government is only willing to use the label, state failure, against a particular state, when it intends to intervene or has already intervened in that state.⁴² The use of the concept is therefore highly nuanced: a state is considered 'failing' only when Australia or another powerful (usually Anglo-Western) nation declares it to be so, and only according to set policy objectives. Similarly, the term 'failed state' has been applied after the fact to describe the former situation of a state in which intervention has already occurred.

It also appears from the evidence that Western leaders and commentators may have overstated or at best offered a misleading impression of the threats posed by failing or failed states. There does not appear to be a strong correlation between state failure and some of the worst forms of transnational criminal activity like terrorism and money laundering. Where there is a link, state failure by itself does not necessarily account for the activity. Other factors, such as corruption or poor governance – which exists in both strong and weak states – are also important considerations.

³⁷ "Neighbours cannot be Recolonised", *The Australian*, 8 January 2003.

³⁸ DFAT, *Advancing the National Interest*, Australia's Foreign and Trade Policy White Paper, 2003, p.93.

³⁹ Tony Wright, "High Noon in the Solomons", *The Bulletin*, 7 September 2003.

⁴⁰ Alexander Downer, interviewed by Matt Brown, ABC Radio's *AM*, 21 September 2004.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lambach, op. cit.

Despite this, the Government and some policy makers continue to make unqualified assertions about the security threats of failed states.

The widespread fear of a failed state at Australia's 'doorstep', coupled with the Government's readiness to exploit this concept makes the idea of state failure a potentially dangerous policy for Australia. For a start, the danger in treating state failure as an anomaly is that it absolves the West of any responsibility for its policies. The governments of failed states are often assumed to have brought failure on itself by its political and economic recalcitrancy.⁴³ In this blame game, even culture and religion have not been spared – one prominent Australian historian rebuked "victims of failed states" of the Middle East for clinging onto their "emotional idols and cherished ideas of Islam" instead of aligning themselves sooner to "Western capitalism and democracy [which] offers the best chance of a better life."⁴⁴

Such thinking leaves very little room for self-criticism and justifies even more intrusive forms of Western intervention in developing states.⁴⁵ In the worst case, as Prime Minister John Howard suggested during the 2004 election campaign, it can even lead to a US-inspired preventative military assault. Such thinking is only a step away from advocating a US 'deputy-sheriff' role for Australia in the region.

However, inventing more rights for Western intervention in developing states will not likely solve long-term regional and global insecurity, particularly if the concept of state failure is based on crude generalisations and questionable presumptions. It would be more constructive to talk less about 'our failing neighbour' and more about our failing neighbourhood, Australia included; less about interventions and more about conventions, both regional and international, and what Australia should do to contribute to them. This will not happen until Australia accepts that international terrorism and crime are not mere symptoms of state failure, but also of an unfair and unfettered international political economy that Australia must do more to help change.



⁴³ Adrian Hamilton, "The Idea of the Nation State is Fatally Flawed", *The Independent*, 19 August 2004.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Blainey, interviewed by Victor Davis Hanson, "After Iraq: The Road from Baghdad", *Policy*, Centre for Independent Studies, 19(3), Spring 2003, www.cis.org.au.

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