

# National Security and the Failed State in Remote Australia

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## Introduction

Michael C. Dillon, Australian policy analyst, writes that, "the implications for national security which flow from policy outcomes in the Indigenous domain in Australia, particularly in remote Australia, are more significant than generally recognised." This is true in both positive and negative terms. Dillon argues that negative impacts for Australian national security derive from the "longstanding economic and social disadvantage faced by Indigenous citizens" and "the apparent incapacity of governments to both address the disadvantage and effectively ensure order and good governance." In important respects, the "'failed-state' policy-set" that Australian governments have applied to the Pacific is in fact relevant to the Indigenous domain, with significant implications for national security policy. "Such an expanded policy framework would include addressing the under-investment in the Indigenous-owned estate."

## Essay - National Security and the Failed State in Remote Australia

The implications for national security which flow from policy outcomes in the Indigenous domain in

Australia, particularly in remote Australia are more significant than generally recognised. Because these national security implications are indirect and intangible, they have received limited attention in both the national security and Indigenous affairs literatures. Des Ball's edited volume *Aborigines in the Defence of Australia* is a notable exception though now somewhat out of date (Ball 1991).

This paper explores a number of related themes. First, what are the links between the policy outcomes in Indigenous Australia and national security, both positive and negative? Second, what are the parallels which exist between the stability and governance issues confronting a number of weak states to Australia's north, and the social dysfunction and human security issues confronting Indigenous citizens in many remote communities within Australia? Third, is there in effect, a failed state within Australia? And fourth, what are the implications both for Indigenous affairs and national security policy makers.

### **Indigenous affairs and national security: how are they linked?**

It is clear that over recent decades, the general consensus regarding how national security should be conceived and defined has expanded beyond a narrow definition conceptualised solely as military threats by other nation states. Thus threats of terrorism by non-state actors are now centre stage in all assessments bearing on national security.

There is an increasing focus in the national security literature on human security (Mack 2004). The potential threats of disease such as avian flu, HIV and SARS, and issues relating to the consequences of climate change are now much more prominent in government calculations relating to the national interest and increasingly have the potential to be conceptualised as threats to national security.

As a consequence, the traditional elements of the national security apparatus are increasingly being utilised outside military arenas. Thus, intelligence services report on commercial and food security issues (amongst others) in nations identified as having a potential impact on national security and/or national interests. The ADF is increasingly utilised in non-traditional roles such as naval patrolling to protect fish stocks in the Australian maritime zone, and to interdict refugees and unauthorised entrants.

In this context then, it is not unreasonable to explore the link between Australia's Indigenous affairs policy outcomes and national security, particularly if one is adopting a medium to long term perspective with an increasing focus on human security issues.

In a very real sense, Indigenous affairs policies (and perhaps more importantly their outcomes) are iconic, and have a subliminal yet pervasive influence on the way Australia is perceived by the rest of the world.

While Australia's national reputation has value in its own right, it is the consequential constraints on the capacity to exercise diplomatic and foreign policy influence which are of most concern. In situations where Australia wishes to persuade other nations to adopt particular policies, be they about increased liberalisation of international trade, access to international forums such as ASEAN, social policies to minimise infectious disease transmission, or improved human rights policies elsewhere, credibility on domestic policy becomes crucial.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) promoted Indigenous iconography internationally. Most Australian embassies prominently display excellent examples of contemporary Indigenous art, and DFAT regularly promotes exhibitions of Indigenous art in countries where Australia has important economic or policy interests. Just as the benefits of doing this are largely intangible, but intuitively known, so too are the diplomatic and national interest costs of policy

failure in the Indigenous affairs policy arena. Moreover, the costs of sustained policy failure in Indigenous affairs would be seen in many international quarters as a twenty first century variant of the white Australia policy, which has proven to have a very long 'half-life', and has diluted Australia's influence and 'soft' power for decades after its formal abolition.

### **Positive contributions to national security**

Indigenous residents of remote Australia have long been an opaque presence, effectively invisible to mainstream policymakers focussed on development and defence. In the earlier part of the last century, the near-ubiquitous view that the Indigenous population was dying out, combined with colonial notions of white supremacy and the necessity of maintaining a 'white Australia' served to lay the foundations for the myth of the empty land which must be populated and developed if Australians wished to retain sovereignty over the continent (Price Conigrave 1936, Kirwan 1934).

By the mid-sixties, the public debate on northern development began to acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal people. Bruce Davidson, a sceptic on the merits of northern development notes that Aboriginal development was 'the least discussed reason' for northern development (Davidson 1965:7). Jack Kelly, a proponent of developing the north noted that

one of the most obvious myths about northern Australia is that it is unpopulated; that therefore, it cannot be developed until immigrants can be attracted there. In truth, the North has always contained thousands of Aboriginal inhabitants and their numbers have been growing steadily.... (Kelly 1966:120).

While modern Australia has gone a long way to rectify the consequences of past dispossession by recognising land rights and native title, Australia is yet to fully integrate the Indigenous presence in remote Australia into policymaking on northern development and defence.

Nevertheless, it is now widely accepted that settlement of northern Australia is a necessary component of an effective continental defence strategy, and that Indigenous citizens are an integral part of human settlement in north Australia.

Positive impacts on national security arising from the Indigenous presence in remote Australia can be ascertained in Indigenous land use strategies, in settlement patterns and infrastructure networks, strengthened by the expanding and more youthful Indigenous population of remote Australia.

Indigenous interests formally hold title to approximately 20 percent of the Australian landmass. There are increasing numbers of land use activities which have positive impacts both on national security and economic development on Indigenous land.

Innovative land use strategies based on the 'hybrid economy' involving a mix of customary and modern activities (Altman 2005) have in recent years taken a substantial hold across northern Australian Indigenous communities, and offer considerable potential for expansion. Continuing subsistence activities such as early season burning of country to prevent late season 'hot' fires harvests carbon abatement credits. The monitoring of coastal waters by Indigenous rangers helps prevent illegal fishing, breaches of quarantine and customs laws and aids in the detection of refugees or illegal migrants. Indigenous rangers (often funded under the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) program) also contribute to bio-diversity conservation, feral animal control and exotic weed management.

Indigenous settlement patterns are extensive, with most remote regions on and off Indigenous land

hosting significant communities (and sometimes substantial townships) combined with a surrounding network of outstations and homeland settlements.

These outstations are serviced by a network of maintained roads and bush tracks, and often have access to permanent housing, reticulated water, solar power supplies and telecommunications. Much of this infrastructure has been established and maintained by an important network of regionally based outstation resource agencies funded by Commonwealth Indigenous-specific funding including under the CDEP program.

While the prospect of direct military threat to the Australian continent is generally perceived to be minimal, the situation may look quite different in fifty years. A substantial component of our defence force structure is designed to defend the continent in the event of a direct territorial threat. Infrastructure developments (roads/bridges/power supplies) are a crucial element in Australia's continental defence strategy, and cannot be put in place or upgraded overnight (Ball 1991).

Thus, the continuously expanding network of basic infrastructure throughout northern and remote Australia, based largely on Indigenous settlement patterns, combined with an expanding set of innovative land use activities based on the unique intellectual capital of remote Indigenous communities, double as crucial defence assets for the nation.

The accumulation of an effective network of essential defence infrastructure would be extremely expensive if only used for a single, low-probability / high consequence purpose such as defence of the continent.

Surprisingly, there is relatively little focus on these potential national security benefits in the policy decision processes which determine resource allocations for infrastructure investment and maintenance in remote Australia (the Adelaide - Darwin railway was perhaps an exception in this regard).

The third factor contributing positively to national security is that the Indigenous population of remote Australia, numbering in the order of 100,000 people, is growing extremely rapidly (ABS 2003). Like the overall Indigenous population, the remote population will remain relatively youthful due to high fertility and premature mortality. These demographic trends are reinforcing existing settlement patterns, more than offsetting the ongoing reduction in the non-Indigenous population in remote Australia. The population decline of rural towns found elsewhere in Australia is not duplicated in remote Indigenous Australia (Taylor 2006).

The strategic value of the Indigenous human resource network in remote Australia has long been recognised. The ADF's current successful efforts to engage Indigenous communities in the Army Reserves can be traced back to the Indigenous units based in northern Australia led by Bill Stanner and Donald Thomson during the Second World War (Thomson 2003, Powell 1983: 208/217). Later came research by Maj. Les Hidden ('the bush tucker man') aimed at utilising Indigenous knowledge to strengthen the ADF's institutional capacity to train soldiers in bush survival. More recently, Indigenous community sea rangers have been playing an active part in monitoring incursions which threaten to breach Australia's customs, immigration, maritime protected areas and quarantine laws. For example, at Maningrida, the community's Djelk Rangers, which have been in existence for fifteen years, detected more than 20 foreign fishing boats over the last year operating off the region's coastline (BAC 2006: 30).

To sum up so far, there are strong grounds for concluding that the ownership, settlement and active land use of a significant proportion of remote Australia by a substantial and growing Indigenous population along with the infrastructure networks which accompany this population, contributes in

multiple ways to the strengthening of the nation's security.

### **Negative contributions to national security**

The major negative impact on national security of Indigenous policy settings, and particularly policy outcomes, arises from the ongoing failure to address economic and social disadvantage in remote Indigenous communities.

It is the extraordinary disparities between first world Australians and the plight of remote Indigenous citizens and the consequential ramifications for all citizens in remote Australia which is of most concern in national security terms.

There are a number of factors contributing to this negative impact. Within the 86 percent of the Australian continent classified as 'remote' and 'very remote' (ABS 2003) are located some 1200 Indigenous communities. In remote Australia, the combination of extreme Indigenous disadvantage including poor health and educational outcomes, substantial backlogs in provision of basic infrastructure, and ongoing Indigenous population growth has serious consequences for human security (SCRGSP 2005).

Australians are familiar with regular media reports of crises in particular communities: Balgo one month, Wadeye the next, Palm Island the next. Conditions in particular communities fluctuate from time to time, depending on a diverse range of internal and external factors, for example, the quality of elected officials, the enthusiasm and commitment of a local police officer, or the scope for residents involved in social conflict to move away.

The regular crises which occur in remote communities are a reflection of the reality that the underlying systemic trends and social conditions across remote Australia are extremely problematic. The quality of life in many of these communities has declined over the past thirty years, and human security is regularly placed at risk across the board. Social indicators have lagged behind improvements in living standards in the general community, creating a widening gap between expectations and the reality of daily life for the rapidly expanding youthful Indigenous population.

The epidemic of petrol sniffing, excessive alcohol consumption, drug use and other anti-social behaviours is highly visible within remote communities (while also being present within the non-remote Indigenous population as well as segments of the mainstream population). Government responses have been reactive and incremental, reflecting the significant challenges facing governments in understanding the nature of the problems they are facing and devising appropriate solutions.

What is clear is that the long-standing under-investment in community facilities (such as public housing and essential services) along with ineffective service delivery and in many cases the deleterious effects of social and political dysfunction has reduced the quality of life in many remote communities for Indigenous citizens. Along with these push factors, pull factors associated with access to sporting events, health services, alcohol, shopping and social interactions not available in remote communities are important attractions for remote Indigenous citizens. As a consequence, they are voting with their feet and moving to, or spending more time in, larger regional centres (Taylor 2006).

Projected changes in temperatures, rainfall and sea levels across northern Australia arising from climate change over the next fifty years (Green 2006) will only exacerbate the challenges facing small remote communities, and may reinforce the current trend for large numbers of Indigenous citizens to gravitate to larger centres, undermining the positive benefits for national security of a

remote population.

Thus, as well as the progressive emergence of a multitude of dysfunctional communities across remote Australia, centres such as Port Augusta, Alice Springs, Port Hedland, Tennant Creek, Halls Creek, Katherine, Cairns and even Darwin have all experienced a range of problems arising from an influx of permanent and semi-permanent residents from outlying communities. As a consequence state and territory governments are struggling to maintain the economic viability and quality of life for all citizens in many of these regional centres.

It is impossible to predict how this situation will play out or to fully comprehend the potential ramifications of a failure to rein in the ongoing decline in social cohesion across remote Australia. However it is likely that current problems will continue and worsen for at least a number of years given the underlying social, economic and demographic forces determining current outcomes.

The risks are that there will be a progressive expansion of social dysfunction and the extent of governmental incapacity beyond remote communities and into larger centres such as Tennant Creek and Halls Creek.

To the likelihood of an expansion of the current high levels of ad hoc and opportunistic violence within Indigenous communities in remote Australia must be added the possibility of increased communal violence within major centres in remote Australia in reaction to the Indigenous 'incursions', and in the longer term opportunistic subversion and violence directed against government institutions. While these possibilities appear remote and in some respects unthinkable, they deserve serious attention from policymakers (just as defence planners would be foolish to reject the hypothetical possibility of a future military invasion in determining defence force structure).

Although there is virtually no prospect of organised violence emerging, there is the potential for this decreasing governmental capacity combined with rapid population growth, poor education outcomes, and increased social dislocation and poverty to progressively lead to the emergence of 'zones of violence and disorder' (akin to the current state of parts of the highlands in PNG). Such an eventuality would adversely impact on Australia's international reputation.

In summary, notwithstanding the positive benefits to national security of the Indigenous presence in remote Australia, it is clear that offsetting these are serious and negative impacts on national security broadly defined. These impacts derive from the substantial and longstanding economic and social disadvantage faced by Indigenous citizens, the increasing threats to human security for remote citizens and the apparent incapacity of governments to both address the disadvantage and effectively ensure order and good governance. These negative elements are all being exacerbated by the strong growth in the Indigenous population in remote areas, and the continuing and long term consequences of poor education outcomes.

This raises the question whether the governance problems in remote Indigenous Australia are of a similar nature, or share similar causes, to those in the so-called 'arc of instability' such that it is worth comparing policy approaches to the two domains - Australia's domestic Indigenous policy framework and its external 'failed state' policy set.

### **A failed state within?**

Australia's foreign policy has in recent decades intensified its focus on a set of 'weak states' - almost all with melanesian populations - located in the so-called 'arc of instability' to Australia's north. Since the advent of the Howard Government in 1996, Australia has shown a greater willingness to intervene (when requested) in these nation-states to re-establish political and economic stability

following breakdowns in governance and social unrest.

Susan Rice and Stewart Patrick of the Brookings Institution recently devised a 'Weak States Threat Matrix' (Rice 2006) aimed at establishing clear and transparent criteria for identifying weak states. The matrix defines weak states as economically poor states that suffer from significant gaps in three fundamental government functions: security, performance and legitimacy.

The matrix utilises four overarching criteria which are themselves based on multiple, diverse and methodologically rigorous indexes and data sets to determine inclusions in the weak state category:

- World Bank data on national per capita gross income to assess whether states are poor;
- the Uppsala Conflict Database to assess security based on whether at least 25 conflict related deaths occurred since 1990;
- the UN Human Development Index (HDI) list of countries with 'low human development' based on achievements in three basic dimensions of human development - life expectancy, adult literacy and school enrolment, and per capita GDP - as a proxy for government performance in meeting basic human needs; and
- the World Bank Institute's Governance Matters IV database rating of governance quality to identify states in its bottom two quintiles as exhibiting a 'legitimacy gap' between the assertion made by sovereign states of the right to govern and the reality of governance quality. This database is compiled by World Bank staff from several hundred individual variables measuring perceptions of governance, drawn from 37 data sets compiled by 31 different organisations (Kauffman et al 2005).

Utilising these indexes, under what she terms a 'comparatively restrictive definition', Rice identifies 52 weak states across the globe. Included in this group are Timor-Leste, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (Rice 2006:5).

In order to compare the two domains, and examine whether they share similar characteristics, the approach adopted here is to apply similar criteria to those utilised in the Brookings matrix. While it is not possible to directly compare remote Australia against these data bases, it is feasible to make a qualitative assessment against the four criteria: income, security, low human development/ government performance and legitimacy of governance.

With regard to the first criterion, income levels for Indigenous citizens in remote Australia are extremely low. Nationally in 2002, mean gross weekly income for Indigenous people (adjusted for family composition) was \$394 compared with \$665 for non-Indigenous people. Across geographic regions, Indigenous income levels were highest in the cities and lowest in very remote areas (SCRGSP 2005, 3.43-4). While extremely low compared to mainstream Australian incomes, these income levels are high compared to the per capita incomes in the Pacific states. Nevertheless, the high costs of living in remote communities and low levels of asset and wealth accumulation, and low levels of saving lead to widespread financial hardship amongst remote Indigenous communities. Seventy three percent of remote Indigenous citizens (compared to 14% of non-Indigenous citizens nationally) were unable (in 2002) to raise \$2000 within a week for something important (Hunter 2006, tables 8.1, 8.2). The impact of these income disadvantages is magnified as low income status has adverse impacts on health status, employment status and mortality (SCRGSP 2005:3.39/40).

In relation to the second criterion, security, while there have been no recent organised conflicts leading to deaths within Indigenous Australia, the levels of intra-communal and domestic violence are extremely high.

In making a comparison between a nation state's incapacity to maintain order and good government by virtue of the existence of at least 25 deaths related to organised conflict (as Rice does in utilising the Uppsala Index), and Australia's incapacity to prevent homicide rates more than twenty times the rate in the general community for the relevant age groups, a value judgement is being made. The assumption is that extreme levels of systemic violence, whether conflict related or 'homicide' in an identifiable part of the community, is of itself an indicator of a lack of order and good government.

In the period 1999 to 2003, homicide death rates for Indigenous people in the five states/territories for which data is available were between six and ten times higher than those for other Australians. Mainstream community homicide levels in each state and territory ranged between 1.0 and 2.3 homicides per 100,000.

States and territories with large areas in remote Australia were at the higher end of the spectrum, with Indigenous homicides in WA exceeding 10 per 100,000, and Indigenous homicide rates in the NT were 23.9 per 100,000. Between 1999 and 2003, homicide rates for Indigenous citizens in the NT between the ages of 25 and 34 were around 48 per 100,000 (SCRGSP 2005:3.65-67). While these levels of violence can not be characterised as 'conflict related', they are clearly systemic in nature, and reflect a much more significant challenge to human security in these communities than is implicit in the criminological concept of homicide with its normal connotations of deviant criminality and out of the ordinary occurrence.

In relation to the third criterion, governments' performance in meeting basic needs for education, health and basic standards of living in Indigenous Australia, key indicators suggest Indigenous citizens are extremely disadvantaged. The HDI is not calculated for Indigenous Australia, nor remote Australia. In terms of its key components, while statistics on adult literacy in remote Australia are not available, the available data on the outcomes of Indigenous education and in particular on literacy and numeracy benchmarks in remote schools 'reveals levels far below commensurate age levels in the mainstream'(Kral & Schwab 2003:2). School attendance for Indigenous youth nationally is well below non-Indigenous rates, and this trend is exacerbated in remote regions (Biddle et al 2004:6-10).

The proportion of Indigenous people in 2002 who had completed year 12 schooling in remote Australia was only 13.7 percent, compared to 43.5 percent in the non-Indigenous community nationally (SCRGSP 2005:3.15). In the NT in 1999, less than 4 percent of Indigenous students in remote areas achieved the national reading benchmark as against 92 percent of students nationally (SCRGSP 2005:6.9).

Life expectancy for Indigenous citizens nationally is around 17 years lower than for non-Indigenous citizens. Data for remote Australia is unavailable, but those states with large remote populations have lower Indigenous life expectancies (SCRGSP 2005, 3.2-5).

In relation to the fourth criterion, whether government suffers a 'legitimacy gap' in remote Australia, there are no Australian equivalents to the World Bank Governance Matters index. Nevertheless, it is clear that the provision of services and the quality of governance in remote Australia is on average extremely poor.

On the Indigenous side of the legitimacy equation, culture and kinship permeate social relationships, and are embedded 'not only in private relations, but also in economic and social and political relations' (Martin 2006:5). There is, from the start, less space for government agency in remote communities. Moreover, traditional Indigenous societies frame their relationship with government as one of reciprocal obligation. Thus, Fred Myers, writing of the Pintubi of central Australia noted,



On the whole, Pintubi understand the Australian Government and its representatives as largely autonomous 'bosses', to whom deference and obedience is owed. In turn, the government is obliged to 'help' and 'look after' the Aborigines (Myers 1986:282)

On the government side of the equation, high levels of effective disengagement characterised by poor policy and program implementation, and a fundamental absence of institutional substrate create a governance vacuum. Thus, in remote Australia, government officers such as police, nurses, and teachers are present in only the larger communities, turnover is high, and professional focus is narrowly functional. In the NT, outside major towns and cities, local government operates in only around 60 of the most significant communities, and is widely acknowledged to be systemically ineffective, with large numbers of councils at risk of failure at any one time. The vast bulk of smaller remote settlements are not included in any formal local government system.

Governments over many years have been able to justify these levels of structural disengagement by reference to policies of 'self-determination', 'self-management', and more recently 'outsourced' or 'shared responsibility' service delivery arrangements.

Thus, in remote Australia, many government services are outsourced to Indigenous organisations, and there is increasing acknowledgement by governments and senior officials that many Indigenous communities and organisations are chronically dysfunctional (AhKit 2002, Henry 2006). Nevertheless, there is a tendency in much of the mainstream policy discussion to avoid holding the governments which outsource these service delivery functions accountable for this state of affairs. In contrast, Indigenous citizens in remote communities see these organisations and their funding arrangements (correctly) as imposed from without, and are quick to blame 'government' for any failures in performance.

Clearly however, the expectations of traditionally oriented Indigenous citizens such as the Pintubi in Fred Myers study mentioned above, and the expectations of governments and their staff, do not match. In these circumstances, policy and program implementation failure by governments will be interpreted by Indigenous citizens as a failure of political responsibility. The legitimacy gap facing governments in remote Australia is real, and is increasing.

In summary, the Indigenous citizens of remote Australia confront substantial poverty, a performance gap in terms of the provision of services to meet basic human needs, a legitimacy gap in that standards of governance (particularly by governments) are deficient, and a security gap in that ongoing levels of violence and homicide are extremely high. In qualitative terms, the suggestion that remote Indigenous Australia is conceptually equivalent to one of the 52 failed states identified by the Brookings matrix is not an unrealistic one.

It seems clear that in aggregate, remote Indigenous Australia meets many of the accepted criteria for a weak state. In addition, remote Australia and the Pacific nation states are similar in that they are both built on customary societies with kin-based political and social dynamics.

Accordingly, we might provisionally hypothesise that the social and political weaknesses which are present in both domains might have similar causes based on these shared societal characteristics.

However, there is an objection to the hypothesis which carries weight. The hypothesis compares sovereign nation states with remote communities which are sometimes exercising delegated sovereign powers. Both domains are subject to societal norms and values derived from relatively small kin based societies. Yet this is not the appropriate comparison to make.

Indigenous communities (sometimes) exercise delegated responsibilities for service delivery, they are not sovereign entities. The appropriate comparison is between the weak nation states and the Australian governments with jurisdiction over remote Australia. These Australian governments reflect and operate on the basis of 'western' values and norms and are based on western institutions.

While the proximate cause of the social and political weakness evident in remote Australia might be the incompatibility between the demands of a modern nation state and the existence and resilience of Indigenous cosmologies and ways of interpreting the world, the ultimate cause resides elsewhere.

An essential pre-requisite for the legitimate (and effective) assertion of sovereignty is the responsibility for ensuring safety and good order. It is this responsibility which appears not to have been implemented by governments of all persuasions over many years. The reasons lie not with problems in governance within Indigenous communities (which are nevertheless real and worthy of policy attention), but in the incapacity or unwillingness of governments, which are not subject to the cultural imperatives operating within Indigenous societies, to address fundamental structural issues in remote Australia (Westbury and Dillon 2006).

The objection to the hypothesis is conclusive. There is a failed state in remote Australia, but its causes are not similar to those which apply in the weak states in the arc of instability, where Melanesian cultural values and norms permeate all levels of government. Suggestions that dysfunctional Indigenous communities, poor Indigenous governance practices, and poor community capacity are primarily responsible for the social crisis in remote Australia are ubiquitous. Yet such suggestions are an apparition, highly distracting, but without enduring substance.

In this sense, the failed state in remote Australia truly is a doppelgänger of the weak states in the arc of instability, producing similar outcomes, but derived from different causes.

## **Conclusion**

The patterns of Indigenous settlement in remote Australia have implications, both positive and negative, for national security broadly defined.

The existence of strong parallels between the poor governance, service delivery and stability outcomes of the weak states to Australia's north and east, and policy outcomes amongst Indigenous communities in remote Australia must be faced by governments and informed opinion-leaders alike. Remote Australia might legitimately be conceptualised as a 'failed state', and there are strong indications that the crisis conditions already apparent in remote communities will, over coming years, expand geographically as population growth and increased mobility occurs.

The causes of these parallel problems between the nation states of the Pacific and remote Australia are intuitively similar, based on commonalities such as small kin-based societies and traditional communal social values. Certainly, there are governance problems in many remote Indigenous communities. However, the failure of governance in remote Australia is ultimately a failure of governments to assert their own sovereignty effectively, in ways which address Indigenous disadvantage, engage constructively with Indigenous citizens, and promote national values.

Rather, governments have utilised their sovereign powers to maintain the marginal and largely invisible status of remote Indigenous communities within the Australian polity. These policies have been passive and reactive rather than intentional and pro-active. Yet they have strong resonance with earlier policy frameworks which first effectively ignored the existence of Indigenous people and later acknowledged their existence, but left them with lesser rights than other citizens until well within the living memory of many Indigenous citizens (Chesterman and Galligan 1997).

Notwithstanding that the population of remote Australia today is relatively small, the intensity of the ongoing human security impacts currently affecting remote Australia, the certainty that these trends will worsen over coming decades, and the fact that there are strong positive impacts for national security arising from Indigenous settlement patterns and infrastructure provision over one third of the continental landmass suggest that the effectiveness of Australia's Indigenous affairs policies should be of greater concern to national security policymakers than is currently the case.

The opportunities which an acknowledgement of these parallels would offer are greater sharing of policy learning in both directions, including the possibility of Australian foreign policymakers utilising experience in Indigenous Australia as a starting point for policy innovation aimed at institutional strengthening in the Pacific (and vice versa for Australian Indigenous policy makers).

As well, greater policy convergence would increase the likelihood of acceptance by policymakers (both in Australia and within the governments of neighbouring states) that the governance problems in each domain are deep-seated in nature and require more than 'better programs' or 'better co-ordination across government' to be resolved.

Perhaps the most important conclusion which flows from accepting that Australia has itself failed to ensure appropriate governance in remote Indigenous Australia and is itself a 'failed state' in relation to that region is that the solutions to these complex and deep-seated problems reside largely within the national institutional frameworks which operate in these domains (Westbury and Dillon 2006).

It is time Australia formulated national security policy on a broader foundation, to ensure the outcomes and policies in Indigenous affairs are taken into account. Such an expanded policy framework would include addressing the under-investment in the Indigenous-owned estate which is exacerbating the bio-diversity and conservation challenges facing the nation. It would involve more than a knee-jerk resort to increased 'law and order' resources in remote communities (though these resources may well be part of the solution).

In particular, what is required is a truly national commitment to addressing Indigenous disadvantage, sustained over time, and addressing the institutional constraints which currently impede the achievement of acceptable outcomes. Like Australia's commitment to supporting weak states in its region, such a commitment would have enormous payoffs, not least in reducing potential threats to national security broadly defined.

The alternative will be a progressive diminution in human security for many Australians in rural and remote Australia and a continuing and expanding constraint on Australia's capacity to engage effectively in international affairs. Neither is in Australia's national interest.

## **Information about the author**

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