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Counterinsurgency
in a Test Tube

Analyzing the Success of the
Regional Assistance Mission
to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)

Russell W. Glenn

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Summary

Background

Her Majesty’s Australian Ship *Manoora* broke the horizon just as the first C-130 aircraft loaded with Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) personnel landed on July 24, 2003, at Henderson Field, the airport for that nation’s capital, Honiara. The perfect timing was not accidental. It was meant to demonstrate to any who might consider resisting that RAMSI was a force to be reckoned with. Nor was the posture of the soldiers who exited the aircraft any less calculated. Armed, poised, and ready for any eventuality, they nonetheless waved to the many citizens happy to see the arrival of men and women who would free them from the threat of militias, criminals, and the violence that those groups had for years imposed on the innocent.

The years prior to the July 2003 arrival had seen tribal differences and simple criminal violence tear the islands’ society apart. Ethnic antipathies and greed blossomed into violent atrocity in 1998. Militias, gangs, and an ever more corrupt police force (the Solomon Islands have no military) used rape, murder, theft, and destruction to intimidate opposition or achieve retribution. An International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) of 49 people from neighboring island nations proved unable to halt the violence permanently in 2000. Nor did elections in 2001 restore order and the rule of law. By 2003, the situation had deteriorated to the point that both the nation’s Prime Minister Sir Allen Kemakeza and parliament members sought outside assistance. Five nations provided military capabilities; ten sent law enforcement officers. The force that arrived consisted of some 1,800 soldiers, fewer
than 300 police personnel, and members of participant nations' foreign affairs organizations. Despite the relative numbers, it was Australia's senior Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) representative, Nick Warner, who was in overall charge. Police, not soldiers, dictated matters at the tactical level. In short, the army, navy, and air forces were in a supporting role at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Warner set policy and worked diligently to ensure a unity of message within and beyond the theater of operations. On the ground, RAMSI police conducted combined patrols with Solomon Islanders who were kept on the force. The mission's soldiers were also granted full powers of arrest. They never exercised the privilege as they protected the law enforcement officers, however, choosing to instead remain visible yet always in a supporting role. Any Solomon Islander approaching a soldier with a formal complaint was rerouted to a member of the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), and eventually it was the police to whom the people would once again have to turn in times of need, and it was thus the RSIP in which all members of RAMSI wanted to instill renewed public confidence.

RAMSI proceeded according to a three-phase plan. The first phase, commencement, was to last approximately six months. The objectives were to restore stability by disarming the population, reestablish law and order, capture militant leaders and criminals, and strengthen the police force. Phase two, consolidation, was to begin in January 2004 and end a year later. Emphasis would be on institutional reform: eliminating the corruption that ran rife through all aspects of the Solomon Islands government and training officials so that they could provide the services the citizens of the country so badly needed. The final phase, sustainability and self-reliance, was to start in January 2005. Its focus was the development of indigenous self-reliance and the solidification of governmental and social reforms.

RAMSI was initially funded through June 2008. However, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard, other participating nations' heads of government, and leaders at all echelons consistently emphasized that the mission was seen as a long-term one that would very likely extend well beyond that. Assistance would not cease until the
nation had attained the end state collectively sought by its population, elected government officials, and members of RAMSI.

The many individuals interviewed in support of this study differed in their views regarding whether the pre-arrival situation in the Solomon Islands constituted an insurgency. Current doctrine and other readings regarding what constitutes an insurgency were often unhelpful. Most definitions, from U.S. and other sources, emphasize the political nature of insurgencies and require that the insurgents’ ultimate goal be the replacement of a national government. Perhaps applicable to many insurgencies in the middle of the 20th century, this conceptualization is less helpful in the dawning years of the 21st and attendant insurgencies, which are at best superficially political and demonstrate little interest in governmental overthrow at a national level. As such, two alternative definitions serve the analysis here:

- **Insurgency**: an organized movement seeking to replace or undermine all or part of the sovereignty of one or more constituted governments through the protracted use of subversion and armed conflict
- **Counterinsurgency**: an organized effort to preclude or defeat an insurgency.

Whether RAMSI confronted an insurgency, and was therefore a counterinsurgency undertaking, is addressed in the concluding pages of this study. That the mission was initially so successful and continues to be so—the occurrence of occasional demonstrations notwithstanding—makes it an undertaking worthy of study for anyone confronting or likely to confront stability operations of any character.

Three primary areas of notable performance underlie that success:

- effectively orchestrating interagency capabilities
- capitalizing on multinational resources
- gaining the moral and operational high ground.

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1 The author thanks David Kilcullen for suggesting that the definition apply to “one or more” versus exclusively a single government (Kilcullen, 2006b).
Interagency cooperation was exceptional despite the very short preparation time for RAMSI due to the limited duration between the decision to undertake the mission and deployment. Participants stressed a “whole of government” approach during planning and execution, one in which foreign affairs, police, military, aid agencies (several of which were already in the Solomon Islands at the time of deployment), and other organizations sought to capitalize on the synergies of mutual cooperation. The somewhat unusual command relationships between RAMSI forces and RSIP reflect a subordination of traditional methods (e.g., the agency with the greatest strength in theater leads) to ultimate ends sought. The cooperation among the initial “Big Three” representatives from the lead nation—the senior representatives from DFAT (Nick Warner), the Australian Federal Police (Ben McDevitt), and the Australian Defence Force (Lieutenant Colonel John Frewen)—exemplified a dedication to mission that permeated RAMSI at all echelons. This trio presented a unified face to Solomon Islanders, their own subordinates, and, with rare exceptions, Australia’s capital, Canberra. They thus avoided internecine struggles and the related tensions that can undermine focus on the tasks at hand. The exceptional cooperation was maintained even as the military members rotated out of theater (their tours of duty being approximately four months while those of Warner and McDevitt were one year). Personalities played a significant part. They were characterized by a desire to emphasize the common good before individual or bureaucratic interests. The result was a striking achievement: unity of message and effort. This consistency allowed RAMSI to communicate its objectives through word and deed and to accomplish them with minimal disruption.

Similar teamwork exemplified the relationships between the ten participating nations’ members in the multinational realm. Disagreements were kept to a minimum, as was largely the case in the interagency realm. National contingents were not assigned areas of responsibility. Units and individuals instead worked together to take advantage of cultural and language similarities and maintain consistent standards
in police development, population interactions, and recovery assistance. Intelligence matters caused some early problems (as they did in the interagency relationships), but these frustrations were worked out over time. Cooperation among military personnel benefited from one advantage that was less evident in nonmilitary interactions. Many of the leaders of the five participating countries’ armed forces had worked together during previous operations or international exchanges. These personal relationships and related common understanding of doctrine and professional language quickened the maturing of working relationships to the advantage of mission collaboration.

This willingness to work together was fundamental to taking the moral and operational high ground. The immediate objective—one served by the coordinated appearance of sea and air capabilities—was to demonstrate overwhelming force to communicate to militants the futility of resistance. At the same time, RAMSI’s participants at every level remembered that it was the people they had come to serve: thus the deliberate portrayal of a capable-but-nonthreatening force, beginning with its exit from the aircraft at Henderson Field and its effort to ensure that there was a highly visible police patrol on the streets of Honiara the very afternoon of the mission’s arrival, one with both Solomon Islander and RAMSI participation. There was no let-up in the reinforcement of the message that RAMSI was there to help and that it would not leave until the job was done. The Big Three maintained a routine of extensive travel from the start, visiting villages throughout the islands to communicate their messages to the people personally, explaining why RAMSI was in their country, what it would do for the population, what Solomon Islanders could do to assist in bringing about a better way of life, and willingly answering questions to address the inevitable misunderstandings and rumors that either arose inadvertently or were planted deliberately by foes of any counterinsurgency or other stability operation. Patrolling soldiers carried cards that emphasized one or two points that were currently most important to overall RAMSI objectives, the goal being consistency in public interactions throughout the islands. These messages were coordinated with the police so that military and law enforcement information was mutually supportive. Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s declarations
of intent to stay the course provided strategic reinforcement of the mes-
 sage at every echelon below, down to and including that of the police 
and soldiers on patrol. The messages, from on high or via the street, 
were kept simple and thus as free of misinterpretation or deliberate 
 misconstruing as possible. The battlefields of counterinsurgency and 
stability operations are more often the human mind and social orga-
nizations than physical terrain. An intelligent enemy or other savvy 
group looks for seams between motivations. Interested parties seek to 
capitalize on bureaucratic jealousies and assail any available rift in their 
efforts to separate supposed allies, sow distrust in the population, or 
achieve other goals. An organization that tolerates such seams, or whose 
members put individual interests before collective ones, aids and abets 
the adversary it must eventually defeat to be successful. Nick Warner, 
Ben McDevitt, John Frewen, and those serving with and after them 
understood this. They were committed to minimizing the interagency, 
multinational, and other bureaucratic rifts through which divisiveness 
could seep and thereafter undermine mission success.

Common Elements

Several elements are common to the three foundational components 
of successful interagency, multinational, and shaping operations that 
proved so important to RAMSI and the welfare of the Solomon Islands’ 
population. They offer lessons for COIN undertakings elsewhere:

- **Intelligence**: Effective, cooperative operations combined with an 
intolerance of intelligence empires facilitates the spread of informa-
tion to those who can make best use of it.

- **Leadership**: From the highest to the lowest echelons, successful 
leadership requires selecting the right men and women for the 
challenge, to include ensuring that they understand the need 
to balance the use or threat of force with restraint. Americans 
deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have described incidents in 
which members of newly arrived units expressed—verbally or 
through their actions—aggressiveness unsuited to their coun-
terinsurgency responsibilities. RAMSI personnel employed the threat of force so successfully that they never had to engage a threat with the intention of wounding or killing.

- **Control:** Mission members worked closely alongside government officials rather than replacing them outright, a key factor in rebuilding and maintaining Solomon Islands governmental legitimacy. Residents were always governed by their own leaders while RAMSI personnel assumed the roles of advisors and providers of assistance rather than that of occupiers. RAMSI did not replace the rule of law with one of its own making; it returned to that existent before societal breakdown. These and other actions reduced any potential conceptions of the international force as an occupying one. Yet mission leaders wisely kept control of the ultimate lever in a government reliant on graft: its funding. They also sought to ensure that those abusing the system most heinously were removed while others with promise were given the opportunity to change their ways. As the security situation improved, the mission executed a smooth and effective transition, increasing emphasis on aid, eradicating corruption, and bolstering Solomon Islanders’ self-sufficiency while reducing the number of personnel whose primary purpose was security maintenance.

- **Focus on the people:** The Big Three and their subordinates never lost sight of their primary concern despite the early priorities of disarmament and militia leader arrest: the welfare of the Solomon Islands citizenry and the essential support they offered the mission. The people supported RAMSI from the moment of arrival. None in the mission took the support for granted. There was no end to the “honeymoon period” because the good will was never permitted to lapse. The result was a continually supportive population, one whose faith and confidence in the foreigners and their promises increased as time passed. They did not turn against RAMSI as seeming occupiers. They increasingly become providers of intelligence and a collective mouthpiece that further disseminated RAMSI messages as confidence grew.
Additional Elements Underlying RAMSI’s Success

There are underlying reasons why RAMSI has been and continues to be successful in meeting the challenges related to interagency and multinational operations, maintaining the moral and operational high ground, and otherwise addressing its objectives. Despite the difference in scale, the nature of the foe, and other conditions, many of the reasons for RAMSI’s success apply to ongoing activities in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have pertinence for future counterinsurgency and other stability operations. Key elements in this regard include

- Collocation of key personalities and staff sections, the appointment of able and qualified liaison officers in sufficient numbers, and intolerance of personal and bureaucratic agendas are all hallmarks of RAMSI. The existence of a single point of contact in Canberra through which all issues are routed ensures that those on the ground in the Solomon Islands have a champion in the hallways of the lead nation’s capital. Misunderstandings regarding various agency planning methods or staff procedures sometimes hindered RAMSI’s effectiveness, but its members adapted and continue to adapt. They seek to institute academic and operational exchanges of personnel to reduce the likelihood of such issues during future RAMSI rotations or other operations. It is notable that U.S. Department of Defense schools and doctrine writers are incorporating lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq into curriculums and manuals more quickly and more effectively than ever before. There has been notably less progress in advancing interagency coordination and understanding or exchanges with nations emerging as those most crucial to future U.S. interests.
- RAMSI police and military personnel alike found many familiar faces among those from other nations as they prepared to deploy. That is, in part, explained by the number of recent regional operations in the southwest Pacific. It is also reflective of the commitment to developing professional exchanges that later can provide such payoff. Similar U.S. exchanges, with other agencies as well as nations, should favor those nations with which it is most likely
to work in future coalitions rather than traditional relationships more reminiscent of Cold War–era relations than reflective of current operations. (The two are not always mutually exclusive, the relationship with the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand being prime examples.) Personnel records should identify those who shared seminars with, sponsored, or otherwise established relationships with international or other agency representatives. (U.S. armed forces personnel files already include notations regarding international military exchange tours.)

- The presumption that each nation be assigned its own area of responsibility during operations merits reconsideration. Mission objectives might at times be better served were other agency, military, or indigenous personnel integrated with organizations on an individual or small-group basis rather than creating separate fiefdoms. The U.S.–Republic of Korea program for Korean Augmentation to the United States Army (KATUSA) potentially offers lessons in this regard.

- Unit leaders in the Solomon Islands reined in their soldiers’ and their own aggressive tendencies; they exercised patience without dulling the sharpness of organizational performance. These observations beg the question of whether the same qualities of leadership so appreciated in combat are best suited for counterinsurgency undertakings in which an enemy is of secondary rather than primary importance.

- Governmental aid representatives stayed the course during even the worst of the violence, then integrated themselves into the frequent meetings chaired by the Big Three—the better to orchestrate RAMSI’s diplomatic, police, military, and assistance capabilities. That such unity of message and effort has continued despite the transition from a mission dominated by security concerns to an aid-centric one speaks to the common dedication of leaders from all functional areas.

- The interagency cooperation, orchestration of multinational talents, and maintenance of unity of message that were so important in RAMSI’s first years are equally important now. They will remain so during the years of commitment that lie ahead. Partici-
pating nations’ leaders understand that diligence in selecting the right personnel for deployment and appointing others who support RAMSI within their governments is as vital now as it was in summer 2003.

- RAMSI has always been envisioned as a long-term commitment that will take years, perhaps decades. Consistency of support for this understanding ensures that Solomon Islanders are comfortable with continuing to demonstrate their support for change and that they need not fear for their welfare. They are confident that RAMSI will not abandon the country and its citizens.

**Conclusion**

Consideration of the challenges facing RAMSI in light of the proposed broader definition of insurgency results in the conclusion that the operation’s members may well have encountered a nascent insurgency on arrival. The evidence supports a conclusion that, if this is so, RAMSI’s operations interdicted the insurgency in its first stage, during a time when mission was just developing and when it was most vulnerable.

RAMSI leaders and those supporting them from participating nations’ capitals consciously maintained consistency of purpose, control of the operational environment, and dedication to a long-term commitment. The success of RAMSI owes much to these accomplishments, achievements that compare favorably with those of any operation in history. Unity of message, unity of effort, a focus on the population, a steady input of quality leadership: these and other factors so crucial to controlling the situation in the theater all rely on the interagency and multinational cooperation and the retention of the moral and operational high ground that have been hallmarks of the mission. Control has not been perfect. The Solomon Islands are not a laboratory in which RAMSI participants can influence every factor in the manner desired. Yet they have been sufficiently successful that RAMSI stands as a sterling example of success in interdicting an insurgency and moving toward a stable and secure nation in the South Pacific.