

## **Australia – A Hegemonic Power in the Pacific Region**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*“The Australian colonies displayed expansionist tendencies almost from the beginning” is a pointed statement, and there is evidence that Australia exerted its influence on and expanded its spheres of interest to neighbouring territories in Melanesia and in the Pacific region as a whole almost from the beginning of its existence. This article gives an overview about Australia acting as a hegemonic power in the Pacific Islands before World War I, its engagement in the decades afterwards, and its regional political involvement recently, perceived and interpreted from a European viewpoint.*

**Keywords:** *History, colonialism, expansionism, hegemonial influence.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The newly created state, Commonwealth of Australia, called Australia for short, a product of the European policy of colonial settlement, in its relatively brief modern history had not yet been consolidated to become a single state, when already the autonomous administrative districts or colonies started to exert their influence on and expand their spheres of interest to neighbouring territories in Melanesia and the Pacific region as a whole. To put it in a nutshell: “The Australian colonies displayed expansionist tendencies almost from the beginning” (Kuhn, 2011, p.2). This statement, which originally applied only to the Australian continent trying to put a stop to the attempts by France and Germany to settle this continent, must be re-defined so as to apply to the neighbouring Oceanic region as a whole. Australia, as a rising state, did not shirk from confrontations with other European powers (except Great Britain) to stop them establishing colonies in the Pacific region.

After Australia had been founded, its administration considered it legitimate to exert influence on the Pacific Islands by means of some kind of “sub-imperialism”. The current political relations between Australia and the Pacific Islands must be regarded as a direct consequence of this, with Australia acting both in a benevolent paternalistic and a strategic hegemonial way. Ever since Australia has existed as a state, there has been an understanding about the Pacific region that: “This is our part of the world ... this is our patch”, as Prime Minister John Howard once said in 2003 on the occasion of the military intervention on the Solomon Islands (RAMSI, Regional Assistant Mission to the Solomon Islands) led by Australia (Thornton/Bloodworth, 2003, p.1). History over time until today shows that a number of key-factors ruled Australia’s ambitions to exert an influence in the Pacific region, and they all concerned the safeguarding of their economy and of their security: 1) preventing or impeding Germany and France from acquiring colonies in the region; 2) colonial annexation of New Guinea so as to secure the northern flank of Australia and to control New Guinea’s resources; 3) securing the exploitation of resources in the Pacific Island region for Australian enterprises, 4) reducing Soviet and more recently also Chinese influence in the region; and 5) increasing regional stability by intensely supporting the policy of developing the Pacific Island states. The most important historical aspects of the relations between Australia and selected island states of Oceania are described below in order to show that Australia has been playing an important and evolving role as a “regional player” in the Pacific Island world.

## **THE QUEENSLAND LABOR TRADE AND AUSTRALIAN SUB-IMPERIALISM IN THE PACIFIC**

In the 1870s, Australia still consisted of various colonies which united on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1901 to become the so-called Commonwealth of Australia. However, although some of the colonies, the future federal states, were still in the constitutive phase, they had already shown an interest in regions beyond the Australian continent. The reasons, first of all, were economic considerations; these were closely linked with the recruitment of labourers from Melanesian islands to Queensland, the so called “blackbirding”. Tracey Banivanua-Mar explained in her influential study about the indentured labour trade to Queensland that in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, these labourers provided the essential cost-neutral, coercible, and coloured labour that was deemed

essential to the economic viability of white settlement in the tropical belt of Britain's Australian colonies (Banivanua-Mar, 2007, p.1; see also: Wawn, 1973, p.XIX; Graves, 1993, 8pp)

When plantation agriculture was intensified in the middle of the 19th century especially in Queensland, Australia, and simultaneously in Fiji and New Caledonia, the plantation companies investing in those regions had an increased demand for labourers. Since either not enough labourers could be recruited from among the local indigenous populations, or they refused to submit to this kind of dependency model and to the pressures of the money based market economy, the plantation managers had to find other solutions to this problem. The solution seemed to be to hire labourers in those relatively nearby Melanesian islands, which had had only very little contact with western civilization; labourers who were thought could be motivated to do this kind of work for the remuneration offered (often in the form of consumer goods, for which there was a great demand). These practices of recruiting labourers were not confined to Melanesia, and eventually spread to Polynesia with severe consequences for the whole region. One of the darkest chapters in the history of Oceania has to do with this so called 'blackbirding', which was the forcible recruiting or even kidnapping of natives of the Pacific Islands, who then had to labour under extremely difficult conditions for low pay (compared with white man's wages) on the sugar-cane- or cotton plantations, mostly under very questionable conditions. Queensland first imported labourers from the Melanesian islands, in particular from the Solomon Islands and the New Hebrides (Vanuatu today). The potential laborers were lured to the ships with mostly empty promises or with gifts and were talked into signing three-year labour contracts, or were forced to do so. They were conscripted by means of a finger print on the labour contract, as most of the people hired were not able to read. This was practised mainly between 1863 and 1911. Altogether about 62,000 labourers thus came to the Australian colony of Queensland (Queensland South Sea Island Indentures Labourer Records 1863-1908), and only after intensive criticism by human rights activists, and by the so-called 'Pacific Islanders' Protection Act of 1872' could it be controlled at least to some degree. The organized labour trade to Queensland, the so-called 'indentured labour', developed its own dynamics with regard both to the labourers on site as well as their fate after their labour contract had expired. In due course, in the interest of the labourers the regulations were improved step by step. The recruiting practice of sailing to the islands to hire labourers was a profitable business which was boosted by the fast development of the agrarian economy and especially the expansion of the sugar-cane industry in Queensland. The escalation of this business is evident from the number of steamers which left the port of Mackay in Queensland: in 1880 two steamers were involved in the labour trade, in 1890 as many as 30 chartered or locally owned steamers were operating (Andrew/Cook, 2000, p.31). Numerous publications have dealt with this subject in recent decades (see Scarr, 1968 and 1973; Wawn, 1973; Moore, 1979; especially Banivanua-Maar, 2007 and Quanchi, 2009).

The first focus beyond the Australian continent was directed at its south eastern neighbour, New Zealand. Way back in 1791 seal hunters from New South Wales (NSW) had set up a station in New Zealand and under the NSW governor King there existed for a short time the idea of recruiting Maori for sheep rearing in Australia. This would have been the first attempt at labour trade to Australia. At the beginning of the 1830s, there were still Australian ambitions to put New Zealand under the control of New South Wales (see Tapp, 1958). New Zealand had

definitely become a British colony only when a British Resident (corresponds to a diplomatic representative) was installed in 1832 and when a fairly large British contingent of troops was deployed in New Zealand, and subsequently when the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by various Maori chiefs from the North Island in February 1840.

The next Australian ambitions were directed at Fiji. This archipelago bordering on Melanesia and Polynesia, began to interest Australian enterprises, because it was a relatively large island group in the Pacific Ocean and because it provided ideal conditions for cultivating cotton and sugar cane. In 1859 the legislative assembly of New South Wales voted to request the British to annexe Fiji, a wish that Great Britain refused to fulfil at that time. As a consequence of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the cotton production in the USA came to a halt and Fiji gained more and more significance because cotton was already cultivated on the islands and could be sold at a good price. Australian settlers and investors who came to Fiji in large numbers in those days were described as “the great Fiji rush” (Young, 1967, pp.83ff), and together with German businessmen and settlers, they made up the largest segment of white foreigners in Fiji. Some of the reasons for this were six years (1864-1870) of severe economic problems in Australia, the decline of the price of wool, several years of drought and the burst of stock market bubbles in Sydney and Melbourne through dubious enterprises. All these caused many Australians to turn to the Pacific region, with a hope to make their fortune. The Polynesian Company, founded in Melbourne, Victoria, at the end of 1868, was one of the enterprises that became active in Fiji, however, it did not exist for a long time because its business philosophy was to gain quick profits by questionable speculating. In contrast, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), which was also founded in Melbourne and is still active today, which also settled in Fiji and intensified the cultivation of sugar cane and promoted the annexation of Fiji, was much more successful. In an article published in the Melbourne newspaper “The Age”, it was speculated that it should be possible to claim colonial status for Fiji even without British support: “...if England refuses to interfere, Austeralia (sic!) will do well to discuss the advantages or disadvantages of stepping into the breach... Since England can rule India, why should not Victoria make the experiment of trying to rule Fiji?” (The Age, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1869).

Although the fears by some Australians that France might annex Fiji after Tahiti had become a French colony in 1842 and New Caledonia, situated very close to the north coast of Australia had become a French convict colony were indeed unfounded, quite a few powers still had designs on Fiji. Some Americans made claims on the then commanding chief Ratu Seru Cakobau in Fiji, which were based on a fabricated cause, and also Germany might have been expected to show an interest in Fiji on account of its significant economic activities there. The Australian CSR paid the “debts” claimed from Cakobau by a blackmailing US citizen and was in return able to strengthen its commanding position in Fiji. Around 1900 the CSR exported about 88 % of the Fijian sugar (Lowndes, 1956, pp.31-34, pp.299-301). The Polynesia Company tried to motivate the governments of both Victoria and New South Wales to annex Fiji. The British government, which had adopted Fiji as a British colony after all in 1874, immediately and drastically wiped out the then existing German claims and interests in an uncompromising way: the suspension of all land sales to Germans, and none or very little compensation for the expropriation of German farmers who were forced to sell their land. These actions caused an atmosphere of friction

between Britain and Germany. This incident finally caused the German Chancellor, Bismarck, to give up his negative attitude towards creating German colonies in the Pacific region to safeguard German economic interests in the islands. The British authorities in Fiji acted at least partially at the instigation of those representing Australian interests. The Australians can be seen as the direct opposing competitors against the Germans in the Fiji Islands in those times (see Mückler, 2012, p.170). In other words we might say that the British and the Australians themselves triggered German colonial activities in the Pacific region on account of their expansionist policies, and thus laid the foundations for potential confrontations. The decision by Britain to annex Fiji as a colony was not primarily influenced by Australian ambitions, but still at first, as long as a legislative assembly did not yet exist, the laws of New South Wales were applied (Mückler, 2009, p.283).

The next focus of Australian expansionists was on New Guinea. Some people thought they could effectively meet Queensland's need for labourers by importing them from New Guinea. Once more Great Britain was expected to take the initiative, this time to annex all the eastern part of the island of New Guinea that was not yet subject to Dutch administration. Britain, however, was more hesitant after the massive German protests in connection with the handling of Fiji's colonisation. The pressure was increased by Australia's supporters of colonisation, but Great Britain did not want to give cause for more confrontations with the German empire. Because German enterprises had very successfully expanded their activities in the Pacific region, especially the trading companies Hernstein and Godeffroy so that the safeguarding of trading interests had gained major importance, fears were raised in Australia that Germany might try to consolidate its interests in the Pacific region and especially in nearby New Guinea by establishing a protectorate. The Australian proponents of colonial expansion in the Pacific region hailed from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1883 Queensland on its own authority, without having consulted the British government, and on the instigation of Queensland's Prime Minister, Thomas McIlwraith, annexed the south coast of New Guinea with the help of a group of activists led by a police magistrate who hoisted the Queensland flag in Port Moresby. The strategic considerations why the Queensland Prime Minister acted this way were that many more steamers were now passing the Torres Straits, and he wanted to be able to control this. Great Britain under Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone, promptly annulled this annexation and on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1883 prohibited Queensland from colonising New Guinea.

It is an interesting irony of fate that Australian ambitions to annex parts of New Guinea were justified by their argument that Germany might set foot in the region, but this very development was actually accelerated by Australia acting in this imperialist fashion. The feelings in Australia ran high when in return Germany hoisted its flag in the north eastern part of New Guinea and placed New Guinea under its protection on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1884 in order to protect its own trading interests from the obvious aggressive expansionist Australian policy. Only three days later, on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1884, Great Britain declared south east New Guinea to be its protectorate and called it the Territory of British New Guinea. Britain had difficulty curbing the excessive hegemonic ambitions of her Australian colony; thus, for example, on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1883 the Government of Victoria suggested that all territories of Melanesia not yet occupied by other colonial powers should be annexed (Thompson, 1980, p.66). In 1885 the British and Germans came to an

understanding about the exact course of the border in New Guinea. Many Australians would not forgive the British for a long time as they had allowed a German colony to be established in the north eastern part of New Guinea (Gordon, 1951; Young, 1967). The only part of the population who mostly reacted in a positive way, were those entrepreneurs from New South Wales, who were hoping for an increased trading volume with the Germans – a hope which indeed was fulfilled. Many Australians from the other colonies, however, did not understand why the chance had been forfeited to annex the whole eastern part of New Guinea. But Great Britain had other geopolitical priorities and these concerned Egypt in the first place, which played a decisive role in providing the passage to India. For this reason too, Great Britain was interested in reaching a settlement with Germany. The fact that to the north east of the Australian continent there was New Caledonia in French possession, blocking access to the central Pacific region, did not make things any easier. It was on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1906 that Great Britain transferred the administration and control of British New Guinea to the dominion of Australia (a dominion was a self-governing territory of the British Empire). The colony in New Guinea now administered by Australia was called (Australian) Territory of Papua. It thus was, as it were, the colony of a colony. But by law the Territory of Papua (after 1914 and 1942: Territory of Papua and New Guinea) remained a British colony until 1975.

Subsequently, the eastern part of New Guinea, which was split up between Germany and Australia, developed in extremely different ways. While Germany set out to develop an infrastructure in the north east by building roads and ports and by gradually developing the yet unknown back country and the highlands, the south eastern part under Australian administration by and large remained undeveloped. Until World War I much more scientific exploration took place and many more research expeditions were undertaken in German New Guinea than in the southern Australian part. (see Mückler, 2012, p.186-200) Only missionaries and dedicated individuals contributed to the development of the infrastructure to any major extent. The reason so little was done was attributed to the limited financial resources which Australia was prepared to invest in this first colony outside the Australian continent. Australian influence in this colony which had changed its name from British New Guinea to Territory of Papua as of 1906, led to a kind of “gold rush” (just as previously in Australia itself ) for the exploitation of resources, with the discovery of gold in effect speeding up this development. When World War I broke out, Australia at long last managed to take possession of German New Guinea and in addition occupied the island of Nauru in Micronesia, which was of importance because of the guano-phosphate deposits there. Australia took great care not to be missed out when the mandates were allocated at the Versailles peace negotiations after the war (see Mackenzie, 1939, p.347-350). Expropriation with or without minimum compensation, displacement and assaults on Germans marked this era of expansion of Australian hegemonic claims in that region after the German colonies had been taken over (see Rowley, 1958).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century besides New Guinea, Australia wished to possess mainly the New Hebrides, Vanuatu today. The Australians mainly hoped to recruit labourers from there, but they also wanted to cultivate fruits, spices, coconut oil, sugar and other products there. After the initiative by McIlwarith to annex New Guinea had failed in 1883, his supporters immediately called for the annexation of the New Hebrides. This idea was triggered because in 1882 the French

Compagnie Caledonienne des Nouvelles Hebrides was founded with its headquarters in New Caledonia which had begun to buy large areas of land on a number of islands belonging to the New Hebrides, planning to introduce cattle breeding and to grow plantations. In 1889, in order to coordinate the Australian economic activities in the New Hebrides, the Australasian New Hebrides Company with headquarters in Victoria was founded, which even issued its own stamps for the island. This company however did not exist for long and was merged with the Australian Burns Philp & Company in 1897, founded by James Burns and Robert Philp. Mainly the Presbyterian missionaries demanded annexation by Australia, since they wanted to push back the catholic mission which had to come to the island with the French. The Australian colonies, the future federal states, at first acted in coordination and concertedly in favour of annexation. But South Australia and Tasmania soon veered off. Also New South Wales, which profited most from trade with the French and therefore preferred a strategy of free trade among and with the Pacific islands, after a short time did not support the plans for annexations in the Pacific region any more. Victoria, where the powerful Presbyterian Church engaged in missionary work in Oceania had its headquarters, saw things differently: The Presbyters kept a jealous watch on the growing French influence in the west Pacific region because this would lead to an increase in the activities of the Catholic mission. An Australian Presbyterian missionary, Daniel McDonald, had a vision for the New Hebrides: “to become the Australian Indies” (Kuhn, 2011, p.2). Eventually the New Hebrides, without Australian involvement, were split between Great Britain and France and became a Condominium under the joint administration of the two colonial powers until they became independent in 1980 (see Belshaw, 1950; Brookfield, 1972).

The Australians were also focussing on the Solomon Islands as a potential source of labourers for their plantations in Queensland, and as early as 1901 the idea was first created to annex the Solomon Islands, but they became the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) under British administration. In spite of this the Solomon Islands, so rich in raw materials, were dominated by the Australian enterprises and interests; the Australian pound was the currency at that time and the transport facilities were primarily in Australian hands (see Bennett, 1987). In principle this situation did not change when the Solomon Islands became independent in 1987: The Solomon Islands’ economy has continued to depend mostly on Australia, always centred on cutting down and exporting tropical timber and this led to mutual dependencies and relations with Australia which eventually enabled RAMSI and which continue to this day.

Australian “foreign relations” were repeatedly dictated by some individuals, often influential opinion leaders. The lack at first of adequate institutions and of exact guidelines for dealing with matters of foreign policy in the years before 1901, were the reasons why in the Australian administration of the colonies and later the federal states, and the personal preferences of each Prime Minister could be the decisive factor influencing political decisions. Private interests, misjudgement of a situation, narrow-mindedness and megalomania were often character traits of the leaders in politics who, as a consequence, did not hesitate to get involved in domestic and international confrontations and were not able to comprehend the international diplomatic and above all supra-regional geopolitical implications of their decisions (Thompson, 1980, p.7). Added to the fears that Germany and France might gain a foothold in Australia were apprehensions that the US Americans, Germans, French and, after the Crimean War (1853-

1856), even the Russians might want to establish colonies in the Pacific region. “Russophobia” as it existed for some time especially in New Zealand and which also spread to Australia (see Barrat 1981 and 1988) as well as some steadily increasing “Germanophobia” (see Tampke, 2006, pp.117-120) which reached a climax in World War I are terms describing aversions mentioned in the Australian news coverage and found among the population in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (see Alomes, 1988; Knapman, 1993). It is obvious that these fears were not totally unfounded since both the German empire and France were expanding their spheres of influence in the Pacific region at that time. So, militarisation, which had become a determining factor in all European societies, was applied also to the Pacific region and this was looked upon with great suspicion by Australia (see Moses, 1991).

It is no coincidence that Roger Thompson (1980) called the period of Australian imperialism in the Pacific region between 1820 and 1920 which culminated in the annexation of the German colonies, “The Expansionist Era”. Australia’s interest in its neighbouring regions and in all the region of Oceania is understandable and stands to reason: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century most European steamers had started their voyages of discovery or commercial journeys to the Pacific region in the rapidly expanding town of Sydney. More or less all the powers engaged in this region and their business companies called at Australian ports for ship repairs and for loading provisions either at the start or during a stopover. It appears quite reasonable that Australia wanted to have a “slice of the cake” when it came to the development and control of the Pacific region.

## **THE DECADES AFTER WORLD WAR II: A NEW ERA**

During World War II, Australia was not immediately involved in the war, except when Darwin was bombed. However, from 1942 to 1945 heavy fighting went on in the Coral Sea, in New Guinea and in the whole West Pacific, in an attempt to jeopardize any plans by Japan of advancing towards Australia and presumably becoming a threat to it. In actual fact Japan most likely did not have any concrete plans for invading Australia (Griffiths, 1990, 31ff cited in Kuhn, 2011, p.3). The Japanese soon drove the Australian troops out of the islands north-west of New Guinea, the contingent of 1,500 men in Rabaul (the so-called Lark Force) was quickly wiped out by the Japanese and the Australian soldiers were killed, exposed to bullying in prisoner-of-war camps and left to die, or they were driven into the dense jungle of New Britain, where many of them died of tropical diseases or of their injuries. The Australians were able to hold the line only along the south coast of the Territory of Papua and New Guinea near Port Moresby (Gamble, 2006; Collie/Marutani, 2009). Australia soon realized that the United States had a military potential that their motherland Great Britain could not come anywhere near. So it was only natural that even while the war was still going on, Australia turned away from Britain, which was already worn out by the war, and which had lost its reputation in securing its colonies and supporting its dominions. Australia turned towards the United States. Ever since, Australia has been acting as the deputy, as it were, of the United States in the Pacific (even if Australia’s political administration does not like this description) and is enforcing regulations to safeguard western security interests in the Pacific region, which are laid down, among others, in the so-called ANZUS pact between the United States, Australia and New Zealand as well as in other regional agreements (see Frame, 1993; Rumley, 2001).



Although ANZUS primarily deals with security interests in east and south-east Asia, the Pacific Islands are also part of the overall strategy. For Australia, mainly the islands of Melanesia form a cordon sanitaire in the north, a buffer zone and a deployment zone (see Livingston/Louis, 2011). Australia's continuing direct and massive influence on Papua New Guinea (PNG) after this former Australian administered territory had become independent in 1975, speaks for itself. Next to its significant economic interests especially in the exploration and exploitation of resources, PNG's performance as part of the triangle formed by Australia-PNG-Indonesia and in connection with the long, largely uncontrollable border between PNG and Indonesian West Papua, is closely watched by Australia (see Mair, 1970; Johnson, 1983; May, 1986; Ball/Wilson, 1991). Australia's relationship with Indonesia has long been a tense one especially on account of the East Timor question, but also because of Indonesia's dubious role in West-Papua, highly criticized by Australian Human Rights NGO's since the 1960s and some parts of the Australian population as well as parts of its political administration.

Vis-à-vis the Pacific island states, Australia plays the part of a cooperative helpful partner and thus disguises the hegemonic ambitions of being a regional regulatory force. When PNG was granted independence in 1975, Australia too went through a partly painful process of de-colonization as other colonial powers had previously done (see Denoon, 2005; Mückler, 2013). Australia's wish to continue to exert a decisive influence on its neighbours was more than the wish to uphold the existing trade agreements and keep open commercial access; strategic considerations were a core issue and included the control of the region of the Torres Straits (Thompson, 1994). In addition, the official Australian representatives had to alter from colonial lords over subjects to partners in a partnership, who were in fact not on equal terms, but who enjoyed equal rights by law. Since the Australian colonial administrators for a long time had mostly acted in a racist way (see Wolfen, 1975), this indeed meant some change. The first Prime Minister of PNG, Michael Somare, gradually tried to become emancipated from the former colonial power. This inevitably led to numerous conflicts, which the Australians always tried to solve in their own interests by means of a combination of political pressure and the promise of more development aid. This same strategy was also applied to other Pacific island states. Various agencies acted as sub-contractors in realizing projects with development aid. The well-known AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development) although an independent agency, is subject to the control of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and thus is a direct instrument of Australian foreign politics in Oceania. For example, by means of leading projects that went on for many years, it successfully extinguished polio-myelitis in PNG. The benefits of Australian aid and development programmes are indeed remarkable and have led to marked improvements in a number of the small Pacific island states, especially in the fields of medicine, education and job training, as well as in technology. This kind of aid was sometimes linked to open or hidden terms and conditions, on the one hand in order to make sure Australia remains the primary trading partner of the island states, and on the other hand to obtain their support for Australian foreign politics (Brown, 2012, pp.23–28; see also Hayward-Jones, 2013).

The Pacific Islanders keep a close watch on Australia's attitude towards them. A yardstick in this context has always been which socio-political developments in Australia influenced the relations between the white majority and the native population, the Australian Aboriginals. The conclusion

by analogy, viz that the way the white Australians deal with the Aboriginals might be the same as the way they deal with the Pacific Islanders, may seem far-fetched, but progress achieved in sociological and political acceptance of the Aboriginals (e.g. settlement of the questions of land rights) is indeed registered by the Pacific Islanders. The mutual exchange of information and cooperation among indigenous associations took place not only between the New Zealand Maori and Australian Aboriginals, but also in respect of the Kanaka of New Caledonia and the Maohi of Tahiti, amongst other things within the framework of the Indigenous Rights Working Group (IRWG) of the regional Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (PIANGO) founded in 1997.

Direct influence in the Pacific was kept low by Australia in the decades after World War II, in spite of the fact that in 1954 representatives of the Australian foreign ministry explicitly spoke out in favour of an active expansionist policy in the Pacific. The natural firewall of the islands situated in Australia's neighbourhood was to be dominated by Australian influence in the interest of national security. The reason was that all the communication channels with Australia's most important trading partner, Japan, are running through the South Pacific, so that Canberra's security interests would be affected in these regions in a most direct way (Goldsworthy, 1995, p. 356; quoted by Holtz 2006). Nevertheless, Australia acted in a relatively moderate way. In the meantime two incidents have led to the policy of 'hands off' by a well-meaning hegemon having been replaced by a policy of intervention by means of 'hands on'. First, in the year 2000 there were two coups d'état within short intervals, one in Fiji and the other in the Solomon Islands. It was typical of both these island states, to have had years of structural deficits, inefficient and corrupt politicians as well as social fault lines, all of which led to these coups (see Finn-Wesley-Smith, 2000; Karle, 2005). Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea were also considered to be fragile states, governed by political minority interests, and classified as 'weak states' heading for a status of 'failing states'. For Australia the instability of the Melanesian island states was a direct threat for which the term 'arc of instability' was readily coined (May et al., 2003; Rumley et al., 2006). Australia feared that Fiji and the Solomon Islands might have set a precedent and, following the domino theory, could lead to instability in the whole region. The second event was 9/11, the terrorist attacks on the New York World Trade Center in 2001, which led to the so-called war on terrorism. The fear that unstable Pacific Island states might develop into a refuge for terrorists, from where they would organize their world-wide activities (the example of Afghanistan plays a role here) was used as an excuse for exercising a more active influence in Oceania, especially by the conservative Australian government under John Howard.

Many commentators consider the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), led by Australia, in which military contingents and experts from a number of island states participated and which has been going on since 2003, the turning point and climax of Australian policy vis-à-vis the Pacific Island states. The reason for this intervention was the de facto breakup of the Solomon Islands caused by an ethnic conflict between the people of the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita. This would have resulted in a civil war and a fragmentation of the whole state leading to uncontrollable violence, with regional warlords acting in their own minority interests. Although RAMSI had not been the first Australian intervention – on the island of Bougainville (part of Papua New Guinea), which had been acting in a separatist way, Australia

had become engaged some years ago in the local (civil) war (see Wehner/Denoon, 2001) – , this intervention had a new sort of quality (Glenn, 2007). The political expert Andreas Holtz commented in an analysis of the Australian Pacific policy, that the main proponent of RAMSI was the Australian Foreign Minister at that time, Gareth Evans, who, later on, was largely responsible for formulating the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ report (R2P) by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty for legitimizing humanitarian interventions, and whose approach to foreign politics also included interventionist components (see Holtz, 2011, p.163). RAMSI played a decisive role in saving the Solomon Islands from falling apart, by disarming the combatants of all the parties involved, stabilizing their economy and successfully initiating the setting up of well-functioning political and institutional structures. Australian provision of resources was considerable, the engagement a long-term one, and, in contrast to similar interventions in other parts of the world, altogether successful (Fullilove, 2006; Braithwaite et al., 2011). It can generally be said that Australia’s handling of the situation in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands can be seen as examples of relatively circumspect exertion of influence, accompanied by numerous non-military- and awareness-raising measures. With the aid of social programmes, models for re-integration, projects involving infrastructure and the opening up of economic perspectives, Australia has set an example for similar situations, which quite rightly earned Australia international recognition. A contrasting view of the intervention on the Solomon Islands is that it was not a successful nation-building project, but active power politics like the United States’ anti-terror campaign. It was considered less a change away from Australia’s policy of intervention in the Pacific, but rather the expression of a more rigorous Australian policy vis-à-vis the Pacific states, which nowadays does not even shy away from the sovereignty of these states, as for example, the political observer Andreas Holtz (2006, pp.113–114) is interpreting it.

## **REGIONAL CO-OPERATIONS**

Australia’s ambitions to reorganize the regional economic and security-related structures in the Pacific to suit its purposes, however, go back to the early 1990s, when Australia succeeded in having the so-called Honiara declaration adopted within the framework of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 1992. This document permitted its members for the first time to intervene in one another’s internal affairs for security reasons, if a danger of regional destabilization came from them. In the Aitutaki-declaration adopted in 1997 and named after one of the Cook Islands, mechanisms for intervening within the framework of preventive diplomacy were discussed. Finally in 2000 the Biketawa declaration re-organized the PIF and turned it into a powerful regional organization. To this end the principle of unanimous consensus was replaced by one of adequate consensus (see Holtz, 2011, p.164). It must be called to mind that Australia and New Zealand are each contributing 37.16 % to the finances of the PIF, so that the vote of these two countries (New Zealand almost always acts parallel with and loyal to Australia) is of decisive influence on the opinion of the rest of the small Pacific Island states, whose life line often are the generous donations in the form of development aid. The Nasonini declaration adopted in 2002 was a reaction to the new situation in respect of security after 9/11, and in the Auckland Declaration of 2004, the issues of security and good governance were explicitly emphasized as having to be considered in addition to issues in the economic and social fields. The Pacific Plan for strengthening Regional Cooperation and Integration also adopted in Auckland was intended

to serve as a guideline for more cooperation and integration between the Pacific nations and Australia. It was adopted in 2005 and focussed on four topics: economic growth, sustainable development, good governance, and security (see Holtz, 2011, pp.164,167). Andreas Holtz (2011, p.165) emphasized that for Canberra security was more important than for the island states, while in contrast the island states granted top priority to social welfare. Although joint governmental responsibility was to be demonstrated here, the measures implemented as a consequence of the declarations – in particular the creation of a multilateral police force – showed that to all intents and purposes Australia has in fact prevailed. Holtz put it concisely, that in view of the imbalance of power within the PIF the declarations following the asymmetrical debates in fact are a legitimization of the unilateral Australian strategy, disguised as a multilateral process. The ‘Pacific Plan’ for the island states raised the question of the interrelationship between sovereignty and regional cooperation: strengthening one element meant weakening the other one (see Aqorau, 2006, p.216 ff). In actual fact the declarations and the ‘Pacific Plan’ of the PIF led to a reduction of the sovereignty of the individual Pacific island states and granted Australia the option to exert more influence.

Regarding the economy, Australia has seen to it that its exclusive commercial access rights to the island states remain unimpaired. In the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) of 2001, which soon followed the Pacific Islands Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), the trade relations between the Pacific states and Australia were regulated. PACER granted Australia (and New Zealand) the option to conclude free trade agreements with individual island states if these were to conclude such agreements with other countries outside the region. Australia’s reaction here must be seen as a reaction to such negotiations between the Pacific Island states and the European Union. Since these have led to agreements, an equivalent free trade agreement has now been defined in the so-called PACER-plus negotiations between Australia and the island states (see Peebles, 2005). Australia is here trying to influence the Pacific Island states in the pursuit of their goals of obtaining more economic convergence and an institutional evolution in such a way as to retain its own key role (Scollay, 2005, p.132 ff; Powell, 2005, p.218 ff).

It is understandable that a number of island states are uneasy about the Australian dominance, since some of the measures that have in the meantime been implemented will have an influence on the national sovereignty of the small island states. Vanuatu has always been skeptical of, or even negative towards Australian ventures in the PIF. As mentioned above, until recently PNG had a critic of Australia in the person of Prime Minister, Sir Michael Somare, who used to go in for confrontations with ‘Big Brother’ and stuck the Australian leaders out as well. Particularly during the eleven years of the Australian Howard administration (1996 – 2007), the relationship between PNG and Australia was somewhat marred. The so-called ‘shoe incident’ in 2005, when Prime Minister Somare was expected to take off his shoes at Brisbane airport on a transit flight, because the metal detector had gone off when he passed the security check, was a diplomatic affront and for many Papuans and other Pacific Islanders, this snub confirmed their view that obviously very little was thought of policymakers of the small Pacific Island states. A case in point was the secret flying out of Julian Moti, who hailed from the Solomon Islands and was politically active there, and was to be put on trial in Australia for sexual assault. Although he was briefly held in custody in PNG, against Australia’s will he was not delivered to Australia but

transferred to the Solomon Islands instead; this put a strain on the relations. So these incidents must be seen as a form of retaliation, as a 'pay back'. Only under the Labour government of Kevin Rudd did the relations with PNG and other Pacific states return to normal in 2007; this was demonstrated by a symbolic act, viz. that the new policy of Australia's social democratic government in dealing with Oceania was announced in the capital of PNG and is known as the Port Moresby Declaration.

## **FIJI AND AUSTRALIA – CHINESE INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA**

Fiji's Prime Minister Commodore Bainimarama emancipated himself the most from Australia. The conditions governing Fiji's dependencies changed completely after Bainimarama had seized power following a coup d'état in 2006, which swept away a corrupt and racist, and unconstitutionally acting government. Australia (and New Zealand) implemented massive sanctions against Fiji and pursued a policy aimed at isolating the island state. Australia wanted to force Bainimarama to return as soon as possible to western style democratic conditions by holding elections, but he refused with reference to the specific situation in Fiji. He insisted that he would first have to solve the basic structural problems of the country before a new constitution could be worked out to form the basis for general elections. Finally in September 2014 the long announced democratic elections took place and Bainimarama won with his newly founded party "Fiji First", which was established in March 2014. The party had its first batch of 21 candidates released on July 25, 2014 with Frank Bainimarama heading the list. As a result of the 2014 Fijian General Elections, the party won 293,714 votes, 59.2% of all those who voted (495,105 voters), giving the party a clear majority with 32 of the 50 parliamentary seats. On 22 September 2014, Bainimarama was sworn-in as the Prime Minister of Fiji by the President, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau.

Initially the economic situation in Fiji deteriorated dramatically because Australian tourists amongst others were an important source of income for Fiji and also Australian investments came to a halt. Nonetheless, against all odds and the opinion of many diplomats and political observers, and much to the displeasure of Australia, Bainimarama managed to create internal stability, and to ease the fragile ethnic relationship between indigenous Fijians of Melanesian-Polynesian origin and Indo-Fijians of Indian origin, and actually, even if only to a limited extent, to be successful in combating corruption and mismanagement.

Bainimarama knew how to enhance Fiji's prestige on an international level by engaging in a number of international organizations, even attaining the chairmanship in some institutions and whilst there, to represent the interests of the small Pacific states as a whole instead of acting only at a regional level. Therefore, Australia began to feel uneasy. Fiji caused quite a stir and gained sympathetic approval among other Pacific Island states in 2010 with the 'Engaging the Pacific' meeting (two more have followed since); some people saw this event as a counter-event to the annual meeting of the PIF dominated by Australia. In 2011, Fiji was successful in bringing the annual meeting of the regional intergovernmental organization 'Melanesian Spearhead Group' to Fiji's capital Suva, where many Melanesian island states expressed sympathy for Fiji. The Polynesian counterpart, the 'Polynesian Leaders Group' founded in 2011, in this same year invited Fiji to become a member and thus, also indirectly supported Fiji's interests. All these activities were not explicitly but implicitly directed against Australia's attitude towards Fiji.

When the Pacific Island states joined forces at the United Nations to form the ‘Pacific Small Islands Developing States’ (PSIDS), replacing the hitherto informal agreements on the PIF level, this was a visible sign that Fiji, being the most influential state in the region, was still willing to lead the way for the other Pacific Island states and was doing this successfully, for everybody’s benefit. Among the regional groups at the United Nations, Fiji succeeded in having the particular regional group which includes the island states, to be renamed ‘Group of Asia and the Pacific Small Islands Developing States’ (Asia-Pacific Group for short); previously it had been just known as the Asia Group. Obviously Fiji’s neighbors, other Pacific Island states, appreciate such activities. Finally, Fiji’s application for membership in the United Nations Security Council in 2011 was the ‘icing on the cake’. Rarely has a small state of that tiny size ventured to apply for membership in the United Nations’ Security Council – so Oliver Hasenkamp stated in an excellent analysis of Fiji’s current policy (see Hasenkamp, 2012, pp.5–10). Even if Fiji later withdrew again this realistically hopeless candidacy for tactical reasons, this step had not only caused a sensation regionally and internationally, but also made it clear that Fiji’s new national identity could be a model for the activities of other small states, especially in the Pacific. The latest coup was that Fiji – on account of its nomination by the Asia-Pacific Group of the United Nations – has been since the beginning of October 2012, chairman of the influential ‘Group of 77’, (originally made up of 77 developing countries plus China, now 131 members) and is therefore, definitely not isolated any more. Even if some people rightly criticized Bainimarama’s foreign policy as being a distraction from internal affairs and accused him of megalomania, the tactics certainly proved successful: Fiji was able to break free from the isolation prescribed it by Australia and New Zealand and today is more active and more noticeable than ever before (see Hasenkamp, 2012). Fiji is openly challenging Australia’s hegemonic role in the region, an action which is being observed with malicious joy by the other small and very small states. Many Pacific Island states, above all Papua New Guinea, are looking upon Fiji’s activities with great sympathy. The opening of many new embassies in Fiji shows that Fiji is in no way isolated. On the contrary, Australia with its policy towards Fiji has maneuvered itself into a cul-de-sac in regional politics, for which it has even been criticized by the United States, which was pursuing quite a different policy. The United States inaugurated its biggest new embassy in Oceania in Fiji’s capital, Suva in 2012 (see Davis, 2011; Mückler, 2013, pp.105–107). Furthermore, the new US-Ambassador in Fiji called on Prime Minister Bainimarama in Suva immediately after he arrived in 2011, which the ambassadors of Australia and New Zealand had been failing to do ever since 2006.

The gentle rapprochement of Australia (and New Zealand) with Fiji in 2012 shows, that their policy of isolating Fiji had failed, and that the Australian political administration has indeed realized this. Amongst other things, Fiji managed to bring China into play, and thus, fanned Australian primal fears regarding Asian influence in the region. China’s influence on the Pacific Island states is viewed with great suspicion by Australia’s political administration. The Prime Minister of Fiji, Bainimarama, had invited Chinese investors to his country and so the alarm bells rang in Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Critics say that Fiji is allowing itself to be misused: ‘...Fiji is the political football in the geo-political contest between China and the United States... It is very much like the cold war. It’s an insult to Australia and New Zealand and it is also an insult to the Pacific Islands’; this is how the China specialist Anne-Marie Brady

put it (Taylor, 2012) and she was referring to the Chinese practice of lending Fiji money for road construction amounting to 127 million AUD in September 2012. Even if rumors that China might establish a military base in Fiji are a pure invention (at present), they still made the western powers change their mind, so that even the current hardliners can be seen to be modifying the way they are treating Fiji. If indeed China and Fiji were in future to also cooperate closely in military matters, the geopolitical and geostrategic balance in the region would be drastically altered and would lead to grave (and costly) consequences for Australia's defense strategy.

The doors to Fiji had not been completely closed, and this was emphasized by Australia and New Zealand in the second half of 2012, when it was promised that travel restrictions for Fijian politicians would be eased. At the end of July 2012 the resumption of diplomatic relations was agreed upon. In the meantime Fiji has been allowed to continue to participate in the Forum's deliberations on a regional trade agreement, regardless of its suspended membership. The question was how Fiji used the newly gained 'freedom of movement', which affected the relationship between Australia and Fiji. In 2012 it was said that "Fiji is no longer prepared to accept Australia's exertion of influence with Fiji being assigned the role of a pariah state" (Ratuva, 2011, p.23). Within the Pacific Islands region during the last decade, Australia has nurtured a rival that is challenging Australia's role and its national identity as a middle sized power. In 2015 the situation totally changed. Fiji has since a new democratically elected Prime Minister who is the same person as before: the long avoided Frank Bainimarama. Although formally readmitted to the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), Bainimarama tries now to turn the table. He wants Australia and/or New Zealand forced out of the Pacific Islands Forum that they chiefly fund, and new countries admitted. Some analysts believe that Fiji especially wants to invite China, which was a strong supporter of Mr Bainimarama during his eight years of military rule following his coup, to join the PIF, which is the paramount regional political body (Callick, 2015). The PIF, whose secretariat is based in Suva, is now headed by Meg Taylor from Papua New Guinea. It might be interesting to see who will attend the next planned annual summit. It is likely that this issue will be discussed at the next PIF Leaders' Summit in Port Moresby in mid-September, coinciding with the 40th anniversary of PNG's independence from Australian colonial rule.

The current dilemma of Australia's policy of exerting influence in the Pacific is that for decades it frequently linked its considerable sums of financial aid and investments in the Pacific Island states (which were of vital interest for the survival of these states), with progress to be made in developing good governance practices, a package deal which does not work out that way any longer. For a long time money was granted mainly if the island states were prepared to implement western political ideas of (censorship), free pluralist democratic parliamentarianism, and thus to be committed to this western model. If any one state deviated or veered from this consensus, it was 'penalized' by Australia's suspension or cancellation of the financial benefits, which had detrimental effects on the projects for which they were granted. In this way Australia was able to directly control the good conduct of a considerable number of small or very small states of Oceania, and to impede any other external influences on the island states by means of development aid as an effective international policy tool. Until 1991 this concerned mainly the Soviet Union's activities. In 1976 Australia suddenly multiplied by four the money invested in

the Pacific, after the Soviet Union and Tonga had started negotiations on fishing rights in that same year (Hameiri, 2012).

When China presented itself as a generous money-lender and investor in the region, the effectiveness of Australia's policy of money-allocation underwent a radical change because China did not link its financial support to any direct influence on the internal affairs of the island states. China is focusing on long term goals when exerting influence in the region. The Australian model of social engineering which had worked well for a long time is nowadays accused of being culturally insensitive and neo-imperialistic. Today, Australia's development aid is facing the problem that the island states, although they still want and need money, no longer depend on this one source alone. The idea of being able to obtain money without having to fulfill conditions of good governance, seems much more compelling, so that China is gaining attractiveness, and Australia is losing influence: '...Australian aid in particular has been singled out as the most problematic, because it is based on the paternalistic assumption that it is possible to replicate Canberra-based models of governance and ethics around the Pacific by sending out 'experts' to change institutions and associated modes of behaviour' (Ratava, 2011, p.22). Added to this, 70% of Australia's development aid has been and still is returning to Australia like a boomerang, and only a very small share of it actually benefits local enterprises. This led to criticism of allegedly unselfish Australian aid, and renders null and void any justified criticism by Australia of China's engagement in the Pacific, that it was not transparent, was corrupt and prone to generating liabilities. A further point of criticism by the Pacific Island states generally concerns the anti-colonial attitude of Australia (and New Zealand). True, this is constantly reiterated by Australia, but at the same time Australia has for years successfully prevented the French colony of French-Polynesia from being re-entered on the United Nations list of countries yet to be de-colonized by thwarting any attempts of achieving a unanimous vote in the PIF in favour of this request to the United Nations (Gonschor, 2012, p.18). It is an example of a request supported by the non-aligned states. In 1947 France had arbitrarily cancelled French-Polynesia and New Caledonia from the list of countries to be de-colonized, but in 1986 under pressure from New Caledonian Kanaki-organizations, New Caledonia was re-entered on the list, following an initiative by the then unanimously voting PIF.

## **CONCLUSION**

What do the Australians think of their government's commitment in the Pacific? A country-wide opinion poll by the famous Lowy institute carried out in 2011 showed that 94% of the Australians considered the relationships with their nearest neighbours, and this includes the Melanesian islands, to be extremely important, while only 70% considered it important that Australia should apply for a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. The financial aspect is also important. More than 50 % of the aid granted to the Pacific Island region came from Australia. On an average this was about 1.2 billion Aus\$ per year in the past five years (Cave, 2012, part 2). There are no figures available (yet) of how much Chinese money goes into the region, since these figures are classified, but one observer (Hameiri, 2012) estimates it to be about 222 billion AUD per year. From another perspective, it might be concluded that many of the Pacific Island states are somewhat resentful because the Australian political administration



and population are focusing on their relationship with Asia, and they would wish for the same focus on their relationship with Oceania.

What is important for Australia's role in the Pacific today is access to and control of existing and presumed natural resources in the region. The race by the United States, Australia, China and some European countries for the raw materials in larger countries such as Papua New Guinea, as well as for unexploited mineral deposits in the deep ocean is under way. Australia and China are competing for licenses to exploit the resources in Papua New Guinea. In 2012 China obtained a license to exploit bauxite in Fiji in the region of Bua. The fishing grounds of the Pacific island region as a whole are of utmost importance for many countries engaged in fishing, such as China, Japan, South Korea, the United States and Canada, because of the large Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) surrounding the island states. In this context there is the dilemma for Australia that it is criticizing China's engagement in the region and at the same time it is entertaining close economic ties with China. The economic ties between China and Australia will be intensified even more in the years to come, according to all the predictions (see also Huang/Austin, 2011), with the result that Australia will have to accept China's policy in Oceania. Terence Wesley Smith appropriately put it the following way: 'Existing regional powers have no option but to accept that China is in Oceania to stay' (Wesley-Smith, 2007, p.28; Wesley-Smith/Porter, 2010). From this statement one deduces that Australia's back yard will become more diverse, more interesting, more competitive and marked by changing developments and alliances and that Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will merely be one among many players. Richard Allan Herr, a long-time advisor of the Australian government, defined the two main challenges currently to be the 'changing tectonics of the Asian century' and 'a bitter intra-regional dispute with Fiji' (Herr/Bergin, 2011, p.1). But it is more than that: the weights are shifting categorically. To mark this, at the meeting of the leaders of the Pacific Island states at the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) in the Cook Islands in August 2012, both the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and a large Chinese delegation were among those present. This reflects the increasingly competitive and many-voiced tendencies in the region, which has increased since (looking back from 2015).

In future Australia's reputation and influence in the Pacific Island states will depend on the extent to which it will succeed in respecting the political administrations of the island states, irrespective of their size, as serious partners, without exerting too much influence by attempting to interfere with their cultural traditions and individual strategies for organizing their local communities, to make them suit Australia. The so-called "Pacific Plan", endorsed at the 2005 Pacific Islands Forum meeting, was planned as a master strategy for regional integration and coordination in the Pacific. The plan, based on the four pillars; economic growth, good governance, security and sustainable development, showed how sensitively Australia had to act towards the Pacific Islands states. Their 'values' had to be considered in a proper way, a point which Australian foreign politics only partially fulfilled (Brown, 2012, pp.8-9). The situation is today even more aggravated because of the increasing involvement of China as a challenging strategic player in the region. Regarding this aspect Peter Brown drew attention to a statement of Paul D'Arcy: "(He) identified two possible scenarios for future Australian engagement in the region: increased Australian aid to Pacific island nations in an attempt to counter Chinese influence in the Pacific and persuade or influence Pacific island governments to adopt policies it sees as best for the region; or Australia seeking to work cooperatively with China and Pacific island governments to deliver development that benefits islanders and preserves all parties' national interests

through a degree of compromise” (cf Brown, 2012, p.20; D’Arcy, 2007, pp.1-9). The adopted way will lie somehow in between. An additional point which has to be constantly observed, will be the internal development of the political situation in China from an authoritarian to a more democratic order, as well as China’s slowly increasing tendencies for expansionism into the Pacific region.

The first step to recognize Pacific Islanders cultural traditions and individual strategies has already been done: Steven Ciobo, who was recently appointed Parliamentary Secretary to Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and the Trade and Investment Minister Andrew Robb, has returned from his first official visit to Suva, where he met Fiji’s Foreign Minister Inoke Kububola, and announced that “We hold the belief that ongoing dialogue is important, to which Fiji agrees” (Callick, 2015). It seems that cooperation instead of confrontation leads the way into a prosperous future based on partnership again.

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