

Australia's military contribution to UN peacekeeping missions are too small to be meaningful. Discuss.

Introduction

Australia is the twelfth largest contributor to the United Nations (UN). It also has a long history of involvement in UN peacekeeping operations going back 70 years and has contributed approximately 65,000 military and peacekeeping personnel to 62 UN multilateral security missions since 1947 (Thakur, 2012; Islam, 2004). At present, it is currently contributing peacekeeping forces to the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Middle East and the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Australia has also been a prominent advocate for the implementation of the United Nations Responsibility to Protect (R2P) program. This refers to an obligation on the part of states to protect their populations as well as members of other states within their territory from genocide and other forms of mass atrocities. It is considered to be one of the most fundamental responsibilities of sovereignty, and the principle also dictates that a state's unwillingness to fulfil this responsibility will justify "coercive intervention for human protection purposes" (Gagro, 2014, p.64).

It can be argued that some states participate in peacekeeping or humanitarian interventions for altruistic and idealistic reasons in that they genuinely believe security and peaceful co-existence can be achieved through international cooperation. For others, peacekeeping can often serve instrumental purposes that are in accordance with the international relations theories of realism or neorealism. Therefore, the use of peacekeeping forces can often be a tool for the promotion of either common or national interests. Consequently, for countries such as the United States, "multilateralism is a tool to be used when it can support the achievement of American interests or support US idealism" (Islam, 2004, p.35). Research by Neack on UN peacekeeping operations between 1948 and 1990 shows that western states and non-western states who have enjoyed prestige in the international status quo have dominated these operations. Her data also demonstrates that realist-oriented self-interest gives a better explanation for the involvement of these countries than idealism (Neack, 1995). Australia has arguably adopted a similar realist driven approach to the United States. Consequently, it can be argued that the issue is less about the size and effectiveness of its contribution to any given

peacekeeping operation, but rather the extent to which its vital national interests are at stake. This will essentially determine the extent of its contribution and its ultimate effectiveness.

Australia's intervention in East Timor is a prime example and was neither small nor benign. The number of killings by General Suharto of Indonesia in East Timor was proportionately greater than the numbers killed by the notorious Pol Pot in the killing fields of Cambodia. Western states including Australia were keen to appease Suharto because of East Timor's oil and gas reserves. Australia was primarily responsible for training Indonesia's special forces, the Kopassus who were responsible for mass executions. Pilger has termed Australia's intervention in East Timor as a betrayal and notes, "In the 17 years since East Timor won its independence, the Australian government has taken nearly \$50 billion in oil and gas revenue — money that belongs to its impoverished neighbour (Pilger, 2016, n.p.). Australia has since been called the United States' "deputy sheriff" in the South Pacific" (Pilger, 2016, n.p.). The UN intervention force in East Timor in 1999 named the International Force for East Timor or Interfet was the first time such a multinational force was organised and led by Australia which contributed half the military manpower. It was aimed at protecting the people of East Timor from the attacks of pro-Indonesian militias (with the support of Indonesian security forces) that resulted from a vote for independence. Indonesia finally recognised East Timor's independence in October 1999, and Australia continued a peacekeeping presence there until 2012. However, this peacekeeping initiative must be placed in the overall context of Australia's past actions and objectives where East Timor is concerned. As Anderson states,

Having abandoned the East Timorese people to invasion and genocide for a quarter of a century, a bewildered Australian government was forced into military intervention in late 1999, just as the little nation began its final race towards independence. However, the post-colonial friendship was undermined by Australia wearing the clothes of an aid donor and benefactor while taking most of its little neighbour's most valuable assets (2003, p. 113).

This peacekeeping presence, however, facilitated Australia's ongoing efforts to undermine the government of East Timor in its quest for access to its mineral wealth. This, for example, included the bugging by the Australian Secret Service of the Timor-Leste Cabinet so that the Australian government could remain apprised of all decisions being made by the executive (Knaus, 2018). This allowed Australia to have an advantage in negotiation over Timor-Leste's oil and gas fields.

Apart from East Timor, Australia has been involved in a wide range of UN peacekeeping missions in the past war years. These have included missions in Korea 1950; the Middle East

1956 to the present; Cyprus 1964-2017; Israel/Syria 1974; Pakistan/Afghanistan 1989-1993, Somalia 1992-1993 and India/Pakistan 1965-1966 amongst a range of others. In most if not all of these instances Australia's actual contribution has been small to modest. In no instance (apart from arguably in East Timor) has its contribution been sufficient to have a meaningful impact on the situation. However, this is arguably not the real significance of Australia's participation in peacekeeping operations. Instead, its utility has been as a reliable ally in the maintenance of America's and by extension the West's global power and hegemony. Also, its readiness to be a reliable ally has allowed it the benefit from being part of a select group that has priority access to important US intelligence via Echelon, the Five Eyes group and the Korajena and Pine Gap intelligence facilities (Schaefer, 2018). This is especially true as the US is often reluctant to act unilaterally in the pursuits of its national interest. It instead prefers to have the aura of legitimacy that comes from having allies become part of a multinational coalition. This is perceived as obviating the fact that some actions are contrary to international law. The extent to which this is seen as important by the US can be demonstrated in the example of Vietnam. The Johnson administration was so desperate for the added psychological importance of having Britain as an ally in the Vietnam war that a request was made in 1964 that even the despatch of a platoon of bagpipers would be sufficient as it was the British flag on display that was needed" (Prenderghast, 2015, p.114). It is within this context that the true value of Australia's contribution to peacekeeping can be viewed.

One possible example can be found in Australia's peacekeeping mission to Iraq in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991. Realism contends that a powerful state such as the United States will choose to intervene in situations where its vital interests are concerned. This, for example, explains why it chose to intervene in Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait rather than the genocide in Rwanda. Australia made a modest contribution to Operation Desert Storm which drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. Australia concurred with calls by the United States for the Shia and the Kurds in Iraq to rise up and overthrow Saddam Hussein in the wake of his defeat in Kuwait. However, when they did this in the expectation of coalition support, the allies refused to intervene. The excuse was used that the United Nations had not sanctioned direct intervention in Iraq which lacked credibility as this has not in the past or since prevented the US from engaging in military actions where its security interests were concerned. Instead, the US-instigated a safe zone in northern Iraq termed Operation Provide Comfort, while Australia sent a modest contingent of 75 people in an operation called 'Habitat' to assist in a humanitarian crisis in which an estimated 4 million Kurds had been displaced (Corcoran, 2014).

Realists believe that powerful states can shape the international political economy in ways favourable to them. Iraq, therefore, represented the exercise of state power by the most powerful state and its allies to protect their economic interests, since the successful annexation of Kuwait enabled Saddam Hussein to control 20% of the world's oil reserves (Bayliss, Smith and Owen 2008; Krasner 1976). These actions in Iraq, therefore, had nothing to do with democracy and was only peripherally about human rights (given the ready abandonment of the Kurds and the Shia), but rather the exercise of power in securing vital oil interests. Once these had been secured, there was no longer any immediate need to intervene in Iraq directly. Therefore, the importance of Australia's contribution was not related to the number of soldiers or military material sent but rather the added legitimacy that came from American action being part of a multinational rather than a unilateral effort. Such actions are often couched in the term collective self-defence of the free world (Kagan, 2004). However, the efficacy of alliances addresses the self-same legitimacy crisis mentioned by Kagan (2004) that the United States faces when acting unilaterally. As Brands and Feaver argue, "The most direct and obvious advantages involve the way allies allow the United States to punch above its weight by augmenting US military strengths across a range of issues and contingencies. By binding itself to the defence of like-minded nations, the world's sole superpower makes itself all the more effective and influential" (2017, p.22).

This is evident in some other examples such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent peacekeeping mission. Australia's contribution was once again modest in comparison including contingents from the Australian Navy and Airforce and a 500-man special forces team. At the conclusion of conventional hostilities, Australian security and peacekeeping troops were deployed to Iraq in Operation Catalyst. The true importance of its contribution though lay in being a member of the 'coalition of the willing.' The insistence by President George W Bush that those who were not with the United States in invading Iraq was against it demonstrated the continued legitimacy afforded by allies in an increasingly unipolar world. As Ramatowski states, the so-called coalition of the willing was of little fighting value to the intervention, and yet "every release from the US Central Command during Operation Iraqi Freedom has begun with the words: coalition forces" (Ramatowski, 2003, p.3).

Australia's military contribution and peacekeeping role in Somalia highlights another problem with the way the US chooses to intervene. The decision to provide security and humanitarian aid to Somalia in 1992 was taken under the auspices of the United Nations in a bid to deal with

the famine and violence caused by the civil war. However, there was an evident lack of proper long-term planning to address the country's endemic problems, and too much emphasis on the immediate publicity bonus of the capture of warlords. While conducted under a UN Resolution, the problem lay in America's penchant for a quick fix to deep-rooted and intractable problems and the self-belief they could impose a solution rather than allowing the country to deal with its own problems. This led to an arrogant underestimation of the Somali fighters which would have disastrous consequences. Australia's contribution to UNOSOM and UNITAF operations were once again comparatively modest. However, it served the purpose of demonstrating to the Somalis that this was a UN-coordinated multinational relief effort rather than a solely US military intervention that had caused such violent opposition as per the Black Hawk down incident.

Conclusion

The data used in this paper demonstrates that on the surface, Australia has historically contributed too small a force to make a significant impact on conflict zones. However, size has not been the true measure of the utility of such operations. Instead, they have served the purpose of providing multinational legitimacy to peacekeeping operations. This has not always been successful as often chain-of-command problems have dulled the overall effectiveness of such peacekeeping operations. However, it can ultimately be argued that Australia has been compliant in acceding to US requests for being involved in intervention and peacekeeping operations to maintain its favourable access to US military, surveillance, and intelligence connections.

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