

Joanne Wallis (2017). *Pacific power? Australia's strategy in the Pacific Islands.* Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press. xvii + 400pp, ISBN: 978-0-522-87224-8 (hbk, A\$69.99); ISBN: 978-0-522-86822-7 (pbk, A\$49.99).

Pacific power? provides an engaging and comprehensive account of Australia's strategic engagement with Pacific island nations. The strength of the book lies in its rich and detailed historical analysis: Wallis traces key events that mark this engagement, from the nineteenth century to the present day.

The book attempts to explain why Australia's preponderant power has not always translated into strategic influence in the Pacific Islands. Specifically, the author asks: why have the Pacific Islands been able to resist or limit Australia's influence, despite their power disparities?

In tackling this question, the book is structured across three main sections. Part 1 offers a detailed historical account of the changes and continuities in Australia's strategic policy towards the Pacific Islands. The reader is introduced to a number of key terms, such as 'benign neglect', 'constructive commitment' and 'partnership and engagement'. This concise overview of terms is useful in two main ways: they are useful insights into the strategic use of language in policymaking; and they enable such terms to be contextualised against actual policy practices and the political and strategic interests facing both Australia and the Pacific Island states at a given time.

In Part 2, the author takes the reader through the main 'levers' of Australian influence. These levers are identified as: military intervention; defence assistance; state-building assistance; economic tools; and diplomacy. The application and choice of these levers are shown to vary with the ebb and flow of Australia's strategic interests in the region.

Critical engagement with the limited effectiveness of these tools, especially state-building assistance and economic aid, remains both commendable and inadequate. For instance, the effectiveness of state-building assistance is often checked in relation to local socio-political practices, and gaps between Australia's goals, the reality on the ground and the desires of the recipient states. The problematic moral dimension of such aid and assistance is also briefly acknowledged by the author: aid packages often imply transmission of "superior Australian values to save Pacific souls from corruption, inefficiency, instability and poverty" (p. 172). The book would have benefitted from a more substantial engagement on this issue.

The author identifies the limits of using economic aid as a lever of influence to get Pacific Island states to accept neoliberal and 'good governance' reform. The reason for this, however, is identified as the gap between what Australia thinks are 'issues', versus the main security concerns of recipient states; these are generally better met by local socio-political institutions and communities than "distant state institutions" (p. 195). The main critique against this assertion is that the deliberate use of development aid and trade agreements to primarily fulfil the strategic and political agendas of *donor* states is well documented. It raises the question of whether the limits of effectiveness of this lever are due to a genuine misapprehension of the local context or a sustained hierarchy of strategic priorities of donor states that downgrades the interests of recipient state development, maintaining patterns of dependency.

In the last chapter of this section, the author takes us through Australia's missed diplomatic opportunities, particularly in relation to two key issues: climate change, and asylum seeker processing and resettlement. Their strategic and normative implications for Australia's image and influence on Pacific Island states is a highly topical issue of certain interest to most readers.

Part 3 guides the reader through the limits of Australia's levers of influence in the Pacific Islands. Specifically, this relates to how geopolitical developments – such as the involvement of other external powers in the region as aid donors and diplomatic partners – limit the monopoly of influence that Australia has traditionally exerted. Most importantly, the increasing diplomatic activism of Pacific Island states on the international stage is shown to temper Australia's clout. This includes the creation or strengthening of alternative regional and subregional institutions that exclude not just Australia, but other traditional external players as well, and allows the Pacific Island states to operate within these 'larger' powers' spheres of influence. While it is likely beyond the scope of the book, it must be said that a more localised account of everyday resistance, beyond the black box of the state, is lacking. This inevitably takes away from a more thorough account of how small jurisdictions are able to resist the influence of states with greater material power.

In the final chapter, the author commendably acknowledges that the book's advocacy of viewing the Pacific Islands region as an "arc of opportunity" (p. 332) is problematic for two main reasons: it implies that Australia has the right and the responsibility to exercise strategic influence in these regions; and carries the danger of perpetuating existing structures of power and the self-image of these 'smaller' states being amenable to 'influence' by larger powers like Australia. The author responds to this in a rather limited way, by suggesting that the opportunities available to the island states should also enter Australian political discourse, thereby shifting the discourse towards a 'de-securitised' view of the region. Again, how this can be done (despite the clear power disparities) is not sufficiently articulated, especially with reference to the fact that the Australian state is not a monolithic, homogeneous actor. The author does acknowledge the complexity also within the Pacific Island states – in spite of their small size – but, here too, it is not so clear how this complexity will impact the ability of these states to charter their own national and local interests.

The main value of this book lies in its historical account of Australia's strategic engagement with its Pacific island nations. It provides valuable insights, obtained through archival research and interviews with key decision makers, of the limits of preponderant power capabilities in exerting influence on smaller states. It provides a valuable addition to the scholarship on resistance and autonomy by small states in the international system, and will be valuable to scholars researching this topic.

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