Who shoots the sheriff?

Tim Lindsey and Jeremy Kingsley

The wake of calls for Papuan independence, Australians need to think carefully about whether we want another new state in our neighbourhood.

Over the past decade, the ADF and Australian Federal Police have worked hard to bail out failed or fragile states in our region, facing violence and civil chaos.

This has confirmed our unfortunate reputation as a self-appointed regional sheriff, and it has cost us a lot of money and resources.

Take our role in Timor for the UN, which has required 1000 service personnel since 2002. And the cost? A colossal $1.1 billion was allocated in the 2000-2001 federal Budget alone. And don’t forget the “one-off” tax surcharge we all had to pay.

Today, Timor is still in trouble, with army mutinies and rioting in Dili.

Our contribution to Bougainville for several years involved 50 staff for UN peace monitoring forces. This mission ended in 2003 with Bougainville calmer, but still a mess.

In the same year, we sent 600 ADF personnel to the Solomon Islands. This was the largest component of a 2000-strong police and military force drawn mainly from Australia and supplemented by other Pacific neighbours.

Numbers decreased, but then increased after the rioting in the capital of Honiara.

UR commitment goes beyond these well-known hot-spots. Take Papua New Guinea, for example, a bucket case in spite of decades of Australian engagement.

In 2004, we pledged more than 200 federal police to support PNG’s Enhanced Assistance Co-operation Program. And then there are our better known overseas obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The result is that Australia’s army of 23,000, plus 17,000 reserves, is constantly stretched.

Just compare it with the NYC police department of more than 39,000 members, and Indonesia’s military of about 250,000, and the Chinese military of more than three million. Although proportionate to population, in absolute numbers the ADF is tiny. That matters if we want to be regional sheriff.

And what about the aid bill? We have committed more than $1 billion to Indonesia over five years on top of our existing aid budget of $501.3 million a year.

We also spend $160 million annually on aid in PNG and $42 million in East Timor.

So, let’s be blunt about this. Could we handle it if Papua became independent and we had another chaotic, poor and politically dysfunctional state on our doorstep?

Probably not. So why are so many of us so convinced the solution for the problems faced by Papuans is self-determination?

Issues of ethnicity and nationalism in our region often seem simple viewed from armchair Australia. It’s about small ethnic groups, one by one, freeing themselves from rule by other, bigger ethnic groups to create new mini-states.

But in our neighbourhood, self-determination rarely results in states that survive on their own or deliver prosperity or peace for the unfortunate citizens who fought for them.

So we need to be careful about the popular idea that all ethnic minorities should automatically be entitled to their own states.

And we also need to care we aren’t helping to foster the common gut reaction is that any group that asserts ethnic or religious difference should get a referendum on independence.

UT how does this sit with our strong, continuing support for multiculturalism at home?

Most modern nation states contain ethnic and cultural difference within their boundaries. We are a society that takes pride in the idea that different ethnic groups and cultures live side by side within our boundaries, usually accepting difference.

And we think all ethnic groups in Australia should accept our secularist, tolerant, multi-ethnic nation state and its system.

Go home if you want sharia law, says Peter Costello.

But we don’t apply the same values to groups in other countries that want alternatives to other secularist, multi-ethnic states.

Somehow, that’s OK in someone else’s country. What we forget is that is possible to improve the conditions under which ethnic minorities live without creating more underfunded and struggling micro-states and then coping with the bill to keep them afloat.

Australians should be more concerned about improving the living conditions and human rights of Papuans than about whether they are independent.

And Jakarta is more likely to listen to us if we are not suspected of being indiscernate supporters of universal self-determination, always ready for another taxpayer-funded intervention we can ill afford.

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The cost: Australian troops combat violence and civil chaos in Honiara