

This brief examines the possibility of Australia recruiting from the island nations of the South Pacific and East Timor for service in the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

### ***Why recruit from the Pacific Islands and East Timor?***

Recruiting personnel from the island nations of the South Pacific and East Timor for service in the ADF would:

- Boost ADF numbers at a time when recruiting and retention are making it difficult to maintain – let alone expand – the size of the force.
- Improve the prospects of individuals from the countries involved and thereby forge a greater sense of cooperation and friendship between Australia and those countries.
- Provide national capacity building through the repatriation of nationals at the end of their engagement (if they choose to, and depending on the details of the program).
- Provide an, albeit small, economic boost to the countries involved through remittances and pensions that could offset aid spending.
- Create a greater sense of shared security in Australia's strategically vital near-region.
- Increase the language and cultural skills of the ADF in key areas.

Note that the last five benefits derive specifically from recruiting from the South Pacific and East Timor as opposed to foreign nationals more broadly. For this reason we will assume henceforth that if foreign recruitment were to be pursued, that it would be restricted to our near neighbours.

In fact, irrespective of the recruiting situation faced by the ADF, such a program stands alone as a credible move towards closer strategic engagement with our near-region.

### ***Historical***

During World War II, both Fiji and the territories of Papua and New Guinea (PNG) provided troops to the allied effort. PNG provided four battalions that saw action on home soil and Fiji provided five battalions that fought in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville. These units were disbanded at the end of the war.

In 1951, the *Pacific Islands Regiment* was formed in PNG with two battalions. This Regiment was part of the Australian Army until independence in 1975 when it became the core of the new PNG Defence Force as the *Royal Pacific Islands Regiment*.

### **Current international practice**

The practicality of recruiting military personnel from the island nations of the South Pacific is best appreciated by looking at how Australia and similar countries handle the recruitment of non-citizens and non-residents.

The **United States** has a policy of only recruiting military personnel who are US citizens or foreigners legally resident in the US. However, military service can lead to expedited naturalization (i.e. awarding of US citizenship) which then allows individuals to bring non-citizen family members into the US. Moreover, the US is very active in recruiting personnel from its Pacific Island Trust Territories like American Samoa, Micronesia, Guam and Saipan. Meagre economic prospects in these territories makes military service attractive resulting in the US's highest per-capita enlistment rates.

In addition to its own citizens, **Canada** will 'in exceptional circumstances' consider enlisting foreign nationals who have permanent resident status when a Canadian citizen cannot fill the position.

**Australia** recruits both citizens and permanent residents and, in specific areas, foreign serving and ex-serving military personnel. In practice, this usually amounts to recruiting from the UK and New Zealand, with the largest range of positions being in the officer ranks. The situation is similar in **New Zealand**, which largely restricts its foreign recruitment (with the exception of doctors and engineers) to serving or ex-serving members.

In contrast, the **United Kingdom** makes extensive use of foreign recruitment. Since 1814 the Brigade of Gurkhas has recruited Nepalese citizens for service in the British Army. Currently, there are around 3,500 Gurkhas stationed in the UK and, to a lesser extent, Brunei. They receive equal take-home pay to British soldiers and receive 'indefinite leave to enter' UK after a qualifying period of service. Although Gurkhas are increasingly represented in the officer ranks, the norm is to have British officers in charge. The Indian army and the Singapore police force also employ Gurkhas.

The **United Kingdom** now also recruits citizens directly into the British military from Commonwealth nations including Fiji and various Caribbean nations. Although preference is given to individuals already resident in the UK, recruitment directly from Commonwealth countries has become routine. As of July 2004, there were 5,620 foreign soldiers in the British Army from 42 Commonwealth countries (not including Gurkhas). This represents 7.5 percent of its 110,000 permanent members. There are currently 2,000 Fijian citizens serving in the British Army as a result of recruiting that began in 1998 and which now entails regular recruitment drives in the islands.

Thus, while most nations take a restricted approach to foreign recruitment, the UK shows that a properly managed scheme of foreign recruitment is feasible.

### ***Models for overseas recruitment from the Pacific***

Based on British experience, there are two possible models for foreign recruitment from the Pacific Islands and East Timor we might consider:

#### **The Gurkha model**

This would involve the creation of units made up predominately of foreign citizens with Australian officers and senior non-commissioned officers. The unit(s) would probably be located on Australian territory although this would not necessarily be the case. In many ways, this would mirror the arrangement in place for the PNG based *Pacific Island Regiment* up until 1975.

This approach has the disadvantage of creating distinct roles for Australian and Islander personnel that harken back to colonial times. It would also raise very sensitive issues when the time came to choose between sending units into harm's way. Moreover, such an arrangement would almost certainly require a series of treaties with the contributing nations, just as the UK has a tripartite agreement with Nepal and India covering the Gurkhas.

On balance, the time for this sort of model has long passed. The explicit master-servant relationship entailed in such an arrangement would be at odds with Australia's current cooperative partnering approach to the region.

#### **The integrated model**

The simplest approach would be to directly recruit Pacific Islanders and East Timorese into the ADF for employment in existing units. This could be done under one of two possible arrangements: Either by giving the individuals some sort of 'guest worker' status, or by treating them akin to skilled migrants who are eligible for permanent residency or citizenship after a qualifying period of military service.

Aside from boosting personnel numbers in the ADF (and avoiding the pitfalls of the Gurkha model) this approach would have the big advantage of enriching the language and cultural expertise of the ADF as a whole, rather than in one or several isolated units.

Thus, of the two models, the integrated approach is clearly preferable.

### ***Implementation & challenges***

Implementing an integrated approach would need to take account of a number of issues:

- It would be important to consult closely with the countries involved to ensure that they saw their interests respected, and hopefully, enhanced through the process. The key concern would be that we might poach too many individuals with the necessary educational skills. Boosting assistance to primary and secondary education in the countries could mitigate this. Given the differences in educational opportunities between Australia and the region, this may place a natural limit on the scale of the program, especially as the ADF becomes more reliant on high technology.

- In principle, the implementation of the scheme would be straightforward because it relies on bilateral agreements between individuals and Australia. However, if the countries have legislative or constitutional prohibitions on foreign recruitment (as Australia itself has) an inter-state agreement might be necessary.
- An issue to be considered carefully would be whether to require individuals to return home after discharge or to allow them to stay in Australia. The former option would benefit the donor nations while the latter would make recruitment more attractive.
- It would be important to situate the recruitment of South Pacific and East Timor citizens in the context of our ongoing engagement and partnership with those nations. Consistent with this, the scheme should not be pursued as a stopgap measure, but rather, as a long-term commitment to provide opportunities for military service on an ongoing basis.
- Care would also be needed to ensure that the initial influx of foreign individuals was kept to manageable proportions so as to achieve a truly integrated mix of personnel. In the case of the Gurkhas, the UK only recruits several hundred persons per year. This could be easily achieved through routine recruitment mechanisms that limit the intake to ensure a smooth flow of people through the training system.
- Although there appears to be no legislative impediment to the recruitment of foreign nationals into the ADF within the Defence Act, some legislative change may be necessary if the scheme did not align fully with the existing skilled migration regime.

### ***Prospects***

Properly handled, the recruitment of personnel from the South Pacific and East Timor would benefit all involved. Indeed, with an aging Australian population and a looming ‘youth bulge’ in the near-region with little prospect for employment growth, it exploits the complementary demographics of Australia and its close neighbours. And, given the comparative economic prospects of Australia and these island nations, there is no doubt that recruitment would be successful.