If there is one lesson for national security policy that we should learn from September 11 and the Bali bombings, it is a quite fundamental one: that threats to national security often come as a surprise, but that, after the event, are also rather unsurprising. This lesson is particularly important at the moment. With our attention firmly focused on terrorism, the risk for our national security planning is that we will downgrade or overlook other risks.

Papua New Guinea is a good example of this danger. As noted in Beyond Bali (a recently released report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute), PNG is an obvious launching pad or conduit for terrorist or transnational crime activity directed against Australia, given the growing political and institutional instability in that country. While this is the obvious security threat from PNG, the real security threat from PNG is likely to come from internal developments in PNG and a continued failure of Australian aid policy, rather than from external agents such as Muslim terrorists or transnational criminals using PNG as a base.

To most Australians, to identify PNG as a major threat to our national security in its own right would seem nonsensical: how could a small, developing country pose an independent threat to a country such as Australia? This perception is reinforced by the fact that for many Australians, PNG is viewed through the prism of the Kokoda Track, fuzzy-wuzzy angels, mountainous jungle and an environment relatively unspoilt by modern society. Within this perception, PNG is also seen as a part of the geographic isolation that adds to, rather than detracts from, our security.

The reality is dangerously different from this out-of-date perception. Although PNG is indeed rich in natural and environmental resources, it is also beset by endemic official corruption and political instability in that country. While this is the obvious security threat from PNG, the real security threat from PNG is likely to come from internal developments in PNG and a continued failure of Australian aid policy, rather than from external agents such as Muslim terrorists or transnational criminals using PNG as a base.

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The decline in PNG is also accelerating. In 1999–2000, GDP contracted by 1 per cent. This financial year, PNG’s GDP is forecast to decline by 3 per cent. In real per capita terms, incomes in PNG have probably contracted by around 20 per cent over the last five years. Unemployment is high and rising, particularly among the young, lawlessness is out of control and, as a state, PNG is dysfunctional: outside the capital (and even within Port Moresby) most basic services such as police, transport, education and health have collapsed.

This has direct security implications for us. As can be seen from a decent map of the area, Australia shares extensive island and seabed borders with PNG. Within the Torres Strait, there is also freedom of movement of Torres Strait islanders of either nationality between both countries. These movements have increased significantly over the last few years and were estimated at over 50,000 movements in 2001. As the disintegration of the PNG state accelerates, we can expect to see these movements increase further as more and more Papua New Guineans come to rely on Australian facilities in the Torres Strait for basic services. In the case of health services, this is already happening, with the...
Queensland Government requesting increased federal health funding to compensate for the drain on its health services by PNG nationals.

From the national security perspective, while large, uncontrolled movements of PNG nationals across our borders presents serious risks in its own right, the nature of those movements is also of concern. In PNG, for example, AIDS infection is running at nearly one per cent of the adult population. This compares to an infection rate of 0.1 per cent in the Australian adult population. As a result, a large influx of PNG patients into the Torres Strait health system brings with it the increased risk of AIDS transmission into the Australian health system, particularly given that most health services in the Torres Strait region are delivered through relatively unsophisticated facilities. Although this risk may be unintended by those seeking health care, the result would be the same as intentional exposure by terrorists.

The bottom line of the foregoing is that we need a fundamental review of Australian policy towards PNG. Unless we do, we will continue to waste tens of millions of dollars in aid each year while at the same time exposing ourselves to serious security risks—risks potentially far more serious than, say, bombings in Bali. We will also be letting PNG down. While the memory of the Kokoda Track may not be relevant to where PNG is today, it is relevant to where we should want it to be tomorrow. Nor is it the fault of ordinary Papua New Guineans that our aid and their politicians have failed them.

NOTE

1 A readily accessible one may be found at: [http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/torres_strait/map.html](http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/torres_strait/map.html)

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