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THE TRANSNATIONAL REVIEW

Rule Britannia?

Miles Kitts and James Snell on the state of Britain ahead of the UK general election

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While Australia's political class continue its descent into petty animosity ahead of the unveiling of the federal budget, the Motherland goes to the polls to decide (or, judging by current polling, not decide) who will goverrn Downing Street for the next five years. With Labour and the Conservative Party neck and neck in the polls, it looks increasingly likely that another coalition government awaits the UK after May 7.

In Yemen, the regional battle between the Sunni states of the Persian Gulf, and the Islamic Republic of Iran has escalated immensely, with the Saudis leading their own Coalition of the Willing against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels; a heterodox form of Shia Islam. The Saudi reaction to events on their doorstep is strikingly similar to Russia's after the toppling of Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine last year: great powers are always hyper-sensitive to meddling in their own spheres of influence. Sadly for the Yemeni people, this outside interference threatens to transform a historically domestic conflict into a regional one.

Continuing on Iran, the permanent five members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Germany (the P5+1), came closer to a comphrensive agreement with Iran on the latter's nuclear program. A deal being reached by June 30 hinges on the approval of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khameini. There's already clear ambiguitiy between the releasing of details between Washington and Tehran, with Dr. Javid Zarif writing off Washington's release as "spin" on Twitter.

Moving closer to home, Australia recalled its ambassador to Indonesia after the excecution of the Bali 9 ringleaders, sparking an avalanche of outrage and commentary between both countries. As a post-colonial nation, Indonesia can be extremely stubborn when confronted by outside interference in its own internal affairs, particularly when the interference comes from wealthy developed nations like Australia. Indonesian President, Joko Widodo, defended the executions, proclaiming that he was upholding Indonesia's national sovereignty.

Lastly, I'd like to welcome the 18 (!) new interns who have begun the semester one internship with the AIIA Queensland. Some of their work is readable in the forthcoming pages. The other internship supervisors and I are very, very excited for the rest of 2015, given the very high calibre of interns we've managed to secure for the rest of this semester.

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Rule Britannia?

Crippling defence cuts will remove Britain from the world stage

Miles Kitts

History is a funny thing. The past can serve as a guide when making choices about one's future. It can also show how we can become imprisoned by it. This year marks the 33th anniversary of the Falklands/Malvinas War between Britain and Argentina over control of a collection of disputed islands in the South Atlantic.

The conflict began with the Argentine invasion of the islands on 02 April 1982, and ended on 14 June 1982 with the surrender of the Argentine ground forces located on the islands. This conflict is one of the most interesting conflicts of the modern era. However, what makes this conflict particularly interesting for current events is the lessons it holds for the funding and structuring of defence forces. In particular, how countries can cut their defence budgets only so far before they constrict their ability to act with military force in a meaningful way. Britain went through large defence cuts before the war in 1982. What is worrying is that it is going through large defence cuts now, and regardless of who wins government in Britain's general elections in May, it seems likely that the cuts will continue .

In the 1982 war for the Falklands, Britain's two aircraft carriers proved to be crucially important. Without these carriers, Britain would not have been able to provide air cover to their task force and would most likely have suffered intolerable casualties and military defeat as a result. However, these two carriers had been slated for retirement due to the defence cuts which had been occurring before the war. Had Argentina waited only several more months then Britain would not have had the capability to retake the islands. This war shows that there are limits to cutting funding to defence and downsizing military resources before a country's ability to be an international security actor of importance becomes inhibited.

The current cuts to British defence do not occur within a vacuum, but within the context of the international security environment. The challenges in the realm of international security are sizeable and only growing in number and intensity. The post-Cold War détente with Russia has ended. Russia is now making concerted efforts to challenge the post-Cold War expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the European Union, and the wider community of Western liberal democracies. The conflict in Ukraine is the most pronounced evidence of this. The rise of Islamic State and Iran in the Middle East, and the push back by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has contributed to instability in that already troublesome region. The cyclical tendencies of history are made more apparent by recent Argentine agitation over their claim to the Falklands/Malvinas . The world is a dangerous place, and it is becoming even more dangerous. Britain needs to do its part for its own security and that of its allies and friends throughout the world.

Unfortunately, Britain is not stepping up to the plate to do its part for international security. The cuts are already aiming to reduce the size of the British army to around 80,000 personnel, and could end up reducing down further to around 50,000 men. The latter number would make the army the smallest it has been in 250 years. A small army of this size is impractical for today's and tomorrow's world. With the growth in number and intensity of challenges throughout the world, now is not the time to be reducing Britain's military capacity. Furthermore, the growth of urban populations throughout the world means that more ground forces are required to operate within these environments, not less. As such, Britain needs to be increasing the size of its army and other service branches, not reducing them.

Current cuts raise questions over Britain's current and future ability to be an important international security actor. These current cuts speak directly to Britain's role in the world. The cut to defence spending is Britain's decision to assume a smaller role in world affairs. Britain has chosen a path whereby it will no longer be a powerful player at the decision-making table. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that problems of internal social cohesion account for, at least in part, this shrinking from the realm of international security. Specifically, though defeated at last year's referendum concerning independence for Scotland, continued opposition from within the Scottish population to continuation of the United Kingdom holds the prospect of being a continuing source of obstruction. Furthermore, there are issues of integration and terrorism by immigrant groups in general, and Muslims in particular. Internal problems are contributing to Britain's introspective focus, to the detriment of their preparedness to deal with external developments. Instead, Britain will be like the rest of Europe and outsource the heavy-lifting for its military security to the United States. It is not at all clear though for how much longer the United States could serve as the leading military power of the liberal international order without the robust support of its single most important ally, Britain. Nor is it clear for how much longer the United States would be willing to listen to an ally who is unwilling and incapable of performing the military tasks of an ally. The current cuts to defence risk undermining Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States, which is central to Britain's international security.

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Whenever there is disconnect between pressing threats and insufficient military resources there is the increased risk of strategic disaster. Luck with timing saved Britain in the 1982 war over the Falklands/Malvinas. Specifically, had Argentina waited a number of months, Britain would not have had their carriers, and therefore, would not have been able to retake the islands by force. Such good fortune may not save Britain again in future. For the good of the 200 year old Anglo-American international order, Britain needs a bigger defence budget and a larger military in order to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow. Britain needs to learn from the past and make the right choices for its future. Otherwise, Britain risks a disastrous future, one to which it will find itself imprisoned.

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The Closing of the British Mind

Britain should assume a more assertive posture in the world

James Snell

The British General Election campaign is in full swing. Parties and personages, many of whom have waited over five years for this opportunity, have kicked their campaigns into gear in preparation for the contest to come.

British elections are, in general, fairly complicated affairs. Not only are there more parties seemingly in contention for office than is usual – the two party system of the post-war era has fractured, and five parties now feature in election debates and regular news coverage – but voters also have to contend with detailed policy proposals and their rebuttals. (Compare a speech by Ed Miliband or David Cameron – both frequently saturated with detail – to Hillary Clinton's announcement of her intention to run for President of the United States, which consisted of empty promises and even emptier smiles). Say what you like about British politics, but at least it has some collective substance.

It is therefore surprising that the campaign thus far has featured such little discussion of foreign policy matters. The usual domestic concerns predominate, and that is no surprise, but beyond a few token remarks about the need to reform the European Union, and the low-wattage flickering of a small debate about the possibility of an EU referendum, there has been little said about anything outside of the British Isles.

British politicians used to derive great pleasure from the opportunity both to invoke and to dominate the world stage. Winston Churchill made his most famous post-war speech in Fulton, Missouri, and he went on to win the Premiership a second time; Margaret Thatcher relished the Soviets calling her the 'Iron Lady', and she used the sobriquet for domestic effect; Tony Blair outlined the foreign policy doctrine which bears his name in a 1999 speech in Chicago, and many British commentators were delighted at his international standing and internationalist thinking.

More recently, however, these indicators have begun to reverse course. Phillip Hammond – the Foreign Secretary, who was, perhaps ironically, Secretary of State for Defence before his elevation – is said to have declared that there are 'no votes in defence'. That even rather parochial aspects of foreign affairs are being ignored by those running for office is indicative of two things: first, a lack of interest among the powerful; and second, a perception that voters too will share the apparent apathy. When the electorate cannot be counted upon even to care about issues of national security, what hope can there be for more complex and geographically distant matters, crucial and imperative though they are?

This approach is rendered all the more myopic by a simple glance at world events. Russia has invaded Ukraine – this particular fact cannot be stated enough – and is, in conjunction with unpleasant proxy forces currently in action in the east, using Vladislav Surkov's concept of 'non-linear war' to destabilise the region, imperilling the European status quo and the stability of the vital NATO alliance. Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin personally allies with and funds the European far-right, and finds willing partners in Egypt's military junta under General Sisi and Greece's anti-European Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras.

Elsewhere Iran, whose nuclear programme remains fundamentally unrestrained, is on the verge of achieving the status of a regional power, interfering intimately in the affairs of at least four other Middle Eastern nations – Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Furthermore, ISIS persists, adding to Syria's vast humanitarian disaster with its unceasing brutality; Shia militias, many of them aided and assisted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), under the command of Major-General Qassem Soleimani, have committed what are parallel atrocities. The Assad regime remains (however tenuously) in power, and is more than prepared to use barrel bombs and poison gas on civilian populations in order to maintain its grip on the country.

These are not unimportant issues – in fact, the Syrian situation has been described in the gravest terms for several years – yet Britain and her politicians seek to remain aloof and detached from potentially momentous events as they unfold.

If this state of affairs is confirmed in the coming election, the effects could be great indeed. Britain has already seen a decline in her relative importance of late – when the French and German leaders went to Minsk to negotiate with Putin, David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, was nowhere to be seen. Expect this event to metamorphose into a trend, and then into national policy.

"Europe is disunited and economically vulnerable. Without strong British influence it could soon feel the effects of more Russian geopolitical manoeuvring, perhaps in the Baltic States, or in Poland."

These potential circumstances are not just bad for Britain, which has managed to punch above its national weight for many years on the back of an engaged and decisive influence in matters international. If implemented they would also be, I would argue, profoundly detrimental to the wider world. Europe is disunited and economically vulnerable; without a strong British influence it could soon feel the effects of more Russian geopolitical manoeuvring – perhaps in the Baltic States, or in Poland.

At a time when the United States has begun to withdraw from its customary international primacy – with the much-vaunted "pivot" to Asia and President Obama's pledge to end wars rather than starting them – the world needs strong, determined leadership. And if this leadership does not come from a democracy, those who are intent on destroying the present international economic and political set up will take the initiative.

This is not a call for another Pax Britannica. We are very far indeed from those much mythologised days; and I would not bring them back even if I could. Rather, I can only hope for an engaged, internationalist Britain – one which does not shy away from confronting the opponents of Western democracy and those who seek to derail the prosperity and freedom which that system has sought to guarantee. Only when Britain once again seeks to influence events – through increased support of NATO and the EU, and a genuine willingness to act on the global stage – can she truly reassume that much-needed position. And with voters adopting ever more parochial positions, and politicians gamely giving in and making no attempt to raise truly urgent issues of international importance, it looks as if this sad status quo will be with us in the long term.

James Snell is a British journalist who has written for publications in his native country and worldwide, including The American Spectator, the New Humanist and Free Inquiry magazine. He is a Huffington Post UK blogger.

The rise of Europe's far-right

Extremism is gaining traction on the continent

Laure Fournier

At a time when the Front National in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, Dansk Folkeparti in Denmark, FPÖ in Austria, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Jobbik in Hungary, among other extremist political parties are gaining ground at each election in Europe, one is entitled to wonder what is happening to Europe, the cradle of liberal democracy and human rights.

While parties on both the Left and Right have major differences in their perspectives, they both share the same values concerning basic democratic principles. Extremist parties are dangerous for human rights. With such a rise in the popularity of radical parties, the threat of open extremism is real, and a threat to Europe's democratic stability.

The large number of seats that the far-right is currently occupying in the European Parliament, which they use to describe the European Union as an open door for the creation of a supranational authority and the silencing of the state, is one example of the materialisation of this threat to Europe's stability.

The breeding ground for radical political parties are Europe's middle and working class. These parties are populist movements, they claim to speak in the name of the people, to represent them and to translate their aspirations into action. This is contrary to the "big bad wolf" of traditional, mainstream parties that are in power without answering or even listening to the requests of the people.

Extremists play on common and collective fears and offer global and easy-to-understand solutions: these are your pains; these people are responsible – immigrants, Muslims, the Roma, or other minorities who don't share a nation's common heritage – and the only way to remove these pains is to get rid of those people entirely.

Populist parties have another thing in common: a charismatic leader, who plays on his proximity with ordinary people, and also on a reflexive, total rejection of the traditional bipolar political landscape, that they treat like great elitist families, far away from reality. Common to rhetoric is the idea that only corrupt elites, living in a bubble cut off from the real world, have been governing.

Far-right parties declare that they are not elites: they are ordinary people, living in the real world, and therefore capable to defend it, or so they claim. This defence is embodied by the charming leader, posing as the saving commander of these lost troops constituted by the people.

Thus, extremists are against the elites but "for" the people, against the European Union but for the nationalist sovereignty, against the globalisation but for capitalism and lament over the so-called perdition of democratic values while what they stand for goes against the fundamentals of a democratic society, starting with human rights.

For instance, many of these parties support the reinstatement of the death penalty. After the terrorist attacks which took place in Paris in January, Marine Le Pen, president of the Front National, has unabashedly entered the realms of political exploitation by stating her party wanted a popular referendum on the death penalty. And forget about the immortal memory for crimes against humanity and genocide. In a gesture of vile anti-Semitism, her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the same party, has called, for the second time in his political career, the gas chambers "a detail in the history of the Second World War" while the leader of Golden Dawn took it a step further in 2012 by affirming in a despicable way that gas chambers and crematoria had never existed, calling into question the death of more than six millions Jewish people.

But what also gathers the extremist parties is their targeted audience. Indeed, traditionally, the electorate of far right parties is constituted of people who lack education, have little political commitment, and are deprived of higher income brackets.

While looking at these discourses, the ideas and the projects defended by far-right parties and the popularity that they have been enjoying lately, it becomes necessary to include them as a complete part of the political landscape and to target them as they have been targeting their voters in order to be able to fight against them in a more effective way.

The discourses of extremists cannot be erased, but their target can be removed; no more target means no more votes. Of course, this is far easier said than done, especially considering that the economic crisis and the general impoverishment in Europe has brought voters to extremist parties. While focusing on re-establishing a better social and economic balance, I also think Europe's governments should focus on the education of people, especially of the youth. If extremists seduce masses with a lack of education, then a concentration on the development of learning, culture, and knowledge also seems necessary.

> ***"There is a true lack of professional ambition within the young Europeans. They need to blossom, intellectually, personally, and professionally."***

In France, access to secondary education is almost free in public universities, some of them being the best ones in France and in Europe. However, a great number of young people choose not to follow the educational path and begin to work when graduating from high school. However, in France, lower-skilled jobs usually go hand in hand with low salaries.

There is a true lack of professional ambition within the young Europeans. They need to blossom, intellectually, personally, and professionally to develop themselves and to demonstrate initiative and leadership. Education needs to become a centre of interest for the European youth. This is, in my opinion, an enriching challenge for the current European governments.

Last but not least, a lack of education usually goes hand in hand with a lack of interest for politics which leads to abstention during voting opportunities. Therefore, in a more technical way, while it is of course notably the work of institutions to condemn breaches to human rights and to frame these extremist parties, it is also, today more than ever, the work of an educated youth to enjoy their right to vote and to defend the basic rights which form our democratic values and excellence as well as the heritage of the Enlightenment in Europe. But for this vote to be appropriate, it needs to be done by an ambitious and knowledgeable youth.

Laure Fournier is an intern with the Australian Institute of International Afffairs Queensland, and a columnist for The Transnational Review, specialising in human rights and the political climate in Europe. Views are her own.

Can the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union become friends?

Can Brussels and Moscow overcome the Ukraine crisis?

By Taru Leppanen

The new economic union between Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Belarus has faced challenges in its first months. The economic sanctions against Russia and the fall of the rouble have undermined trade relations within the bloc. Talk about a single currency and free trade zone negotiations with other countries show activity at the regional and international level. It remains to be seen whether the recently established union has the means to become a new regional player.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is an international organisation, which is focused on regional economic integration. The EEU was formally created on 29 May 2014 when Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan signed the Eurasian Economic Union Treaty. The press release stated that the union's objective is to create a 'common space where goods, services, capital and work force can move freely.' The EEU came into force on 1 January 2015. Armenia shortly followed, signing the Treaty on 2 January. The states collaborate on energy, industry, agriculture and transport policy. The union comprises 170 million people, has a combined gross domestic product of more than $4 trillion and, with the reduction of trade barriers, is the largest common market in the ex-Soviet space.

The idea of an economic union in Eurasia is not a novel concept. It was first proposed by Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1994. There have been other Russian-led integration projects before, most recently the Customs Union, which preceded the EEU. Theoretically any European or Asian country can become a member of the EEU. Kyrgysztan has signed the treaty but has delayed its entry until May 2015. Tajikistan has shown interest in joining the union but has yet to ratify the treaty. What makes the EEU different is the way it promotes itself as a regional power, countering the EU and the US influence in the region.

Trade within the EEU has been facing some problems due to the US and EU-led sanctions against Russia, the falling price of oil and the tumbling rouble. Furthermore, there is a chance that the EEU will experience problems with protection tariffs within the bloc similar to the Customs Union. At the political level, the sanctions against Russia have created tensions between the EEU countries. Belarus and Kazakhstan have not joined Russia in banning the import of EU products. The internal tensions taking place within the bloc undermine the unity required for smooth cooperation with other regions and states.

The EEU sees itself as a viable counterpart to the European Union. At the institutional level, the EEU is modelled on the European Union and features its own commission, development bank and court. However, its working structures seem to be more top-down, hinging on the power and domination of Moscow. Following the situation in Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan have been more assertive in emphasising the economic nature of the union and the respect for the sovereignty of each member state.

"The EEU sees itself as a viable counterpart to the European Union."

There have been talks about the benefits of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok. However, despite the calls from the EEU's side, the EU has been reluctant to show an interest to cooperate with the EEU. There is a concern that, rather than an economic union between member states, EEU foreign policy is largely dominated by Russia. Also, apart from Belarus and Uzbekistan, all former Soviet states already have strong commercial links with the EU, which might undermine the benefits of creating economic cooperation with the EEU.

At the EEU Summit in Astana in March, Vladimir Putin suggested that the EEU should adopt a single currency. He stated that a common currency would help member states to fend off the current economic crisis. Moscow's push to create a common currency would make the union even more like a Eurasian counterpart of the EU. Lately the responses of the other members have been less enthusiastic on the issue of the common currency. Kazakhstan's Deputy Minister of the Economy and Budget Planning stated that common currency is not something the bloc should adopt.

The new union is also looking for international partnerships. It has been undergoing negotiations with Vietnam about a free trade zone agreement. The negotiations are reaching the final stages and the leaders hope to sign the official agreement soon. The EEU is also currently in negotiations over free trade zones with India, Israel, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

The EEU is a new regional player in the Eurasian sphere looking to enhance its position in the area and will no doubt try to actively attract new members. The EEU might prove beneficial for the Eurasian countries that feel they have closer ties with Russia than the EU. But the Russian-led top-down hierarchy of the organisation might just give Russia more power in the region. The EU will most likely continue to observe the actions of the EEU, but economic cooperation in the near future is unlikely.

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Event Report: The Evolution of Boko Haram

A recap of Wisdom Iyekekpolo's presentation at Harris Terrace

By Elliot Dolan-Evans

The evolution of Boko Haram and the escalation of the terror that the group has wrought in Nigeria, shocking millions of people worldwide, was the topic of discussion at the latest Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) seminar on the 14th of April. The packed headquarters of the Queensland Branch of the AIIA were treated to the unique insight of Wisdom Lyekekpolo on the creation, propagation, and hopeful quelling of the extremist-Islamic militant group, Boko Haram. Through the knowledge gained in his PhD research, entitled 'the Responsibility to Protect and its mechanism for the prevention of Mass Atrocity: The case of Boko Haram in Nigeria', Wisdom stayed true to his name, and presented a fascinating overview on this current plague of violence in Nigeria.

Boko Haram has had a complicated and multifactorial development between the 'early years' of their growth of 1995 and 2002. Mohammed Yusuf, a Nigerian Muslim sect leader, has been attributed as the founder and spiritual leader of the group prior to his death in 2009. Through a fundamentalist interpretation of the Muslim faith, Yusuf spent years preaching his message of jihad across Nigeria, especially targeting the Northern areas of the country that are predominantly Muslim. From these relatively inconsequential beginnings, Boko Haram has evolved to be notorious worldwide as a violent militant group, and Wisdom emphasised at the seminar that the unique conditions found in Nigeria provided the spark for this unprecedented growth of fundamentalist violence.

Although holding the largest economy in Africa, Nigeria has had a chequered history of political corruption, civil violence, and widespread poverty. Indeed, Wisdom identified that the major aspects of Nigerian life that has allowed it to become a breeding ground for Boko Haram recruitment has been the poor economic conditions; the political instability and corruption; along with many citizens being heavily religious. Such are the economic conditions in Africa that it is a (more than) viable alternative for a citizen to be employed by Boko Haram rather than beg in the street; Boko Haram militants are comparatively well paid, they can feed their family, and are generally treated well – joining Boko Haram is a way out of hardship, and potentially even a lucrative path for Nigerian citizens who are surrounded by poverty. Approximately 10 million children are Islamic scholars in Nigeria, a majority of whom are extremely poor and need to beg to survive, which creates an easily accessible pool of young, suggestible people for potential radicalisation.

"Already, Boko Haram have bombed a United Nations building, infamously kidnapped over 200 girls from secondary school, and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State."

Despite the constant concerns of greed and corruption tainting politics in Nigeria, arguably enough to encourage insurgency on its own, politicians have turned to Boko Haram in order to further their own political goals. Such is the power Boko Haram has built up quickly, especially in North-Eastern Nigeria; politicians have reached out to the group for political support and access to their followers. In turn, this also increased the power of this militant group to assert their socio-political and religious goals; and this corruption is also a major factor as to why the military has had such a difficult time in containing the Boko Haram threat. Further to these economic and political conditions that have created a breeding ground of Boko Haram followers, religion is also evidently a catalyst in the rise of this group's international profile.

Already, Boko Haram have bombed a United Nations building, infamously kidnapped over 200 girls from secondary school, and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State terrorist group. Boko Haram have been attributed to displacing 1.6 million people, killing over 15,000 with weapons ranging from machetes to suicide bombs carried by girls as young as nine years old. What Wisdom made clear to the captivated attendees of the AIIA seminar was that the Nigerian government must assert their power and authority over this militant group; and not so much through a show of military strength, but through actually addressing the factors that have contributed to the group's meteoric rise. The government must present a clear economic plan to the people, stem the tide of administrative corruption, and enhance the living conditions of the millions who suffer. Nigeria now has a chance to do this, following the democratic election of a new President who has promised to address Boko Haram definitively. The world will continue to watch on, as will all of us at the AIIA, as to the development of this significant international issue.

Elliot Dolan-Evans is a reporter for The Transnational Review, and an intern with the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Queensland. Views are his own.

What is Boko Haram?

A brief history of one of the world's most brutal and infamous terror groups

By Emily Lighezzolo

This week marked the first anniversary of the kidnapping of 219 schoolgirls by the terrorist group Boko Haram. There is also real concern about the spread of Boko Haram beyond Nigeria's borders, which begs the question: What is Boko Haram?

Even fourteen years after 9/11, the West is faced with the unwelcomed fact that the threat of violent terrorism and Islamic extremism are not going away any time soon. Thus, it has turned its attention to one of the newest strands of radicalism, Boko Haram, which is currently breeding fear in Nigeria. The militant Islamist group claimed international press infamy a few years ago, with its suicide bombing of the United Nations office in Abuja and the subsequent kidnapping of over 200 school girls. Yet, the group became a more timely concern with the recent democratic elections that occurred in Nigeria.

Last week Nigeria made international headlines as the democratic torch was passed to a new president for the first time in the country's history. Millions of Nigerians queued for hours at polling booths to vote in Muhammadu Buhari from the All Progressive Congress (APC) and subsequently oust Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Disillusioned voters could have labelled the democratic decision a choice between a past Orwellian dictator and a failed president. However with the shadow of a notorious terror group, Boko Haram, growing darker in the north it became a choice for Nigerian citizens between action and inaction.

Under Jonathan's presidency, Boko Haram slaughtered more than 13 thousand Nigerians and displaced over 1.5 million in its attempt to carve out an Islamic caliphate since 2009. The extremists are currently waging the most brutal insurgency in Africa. Yet, the name is still clothed in mystery for many Westerners and often associated laconically with "the disappearance of those 200 school girls." Thus, a blind eye has been turned towards Africa's Islamic State.

Boko is the Hausa word for "book" and refers to Western education, while Haram is the Arabic word for "forbidden." Ultimately, the group is opposed to Muslims partaking in any political or social activity associated with "the West." This includes democracy, modern science, receiving a secular education and even wearing t-shirts.

Last year, the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau announced a caliphate in all Nigerian regions under the group's control and endorsed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-nominated caliph of Muslims worldwide. Shakau,

"Boko is the Hausa word for "book" and refers to Western education, while Haram is the Arabic word for "forbidden."

accompanied by armed and masked militants, declared to the world: "We are in an Islamic caliphate. We have nothing to do with Nigeria. We don't believe in this name." Boko Haram envisions Allah's kingdom on earth through violence against any non-believers. Thus, Nigeria has been shrouded in violence.

Boko Haram is regularly the name seen in newspapers associated with village massacres, suicide bombings, mass rapes and teenage abductions occurring in Nigeria. As such, Nigerians even believe the words Boko Haram to hold an incantatory power – refusing to the say the name aloud in fear. Instead the euphemisms of "the crisis" or "the insecurity" have replaced it in their vernacular. Indeed, its shadow is growing ever-present domestically.

However, as it often does, the West wraps itself in selfish self-preservation and asks: "what does Boko Haram mean for us?" Boko Haram has expanded its military activity into neighbouring countries and expressed solidarity with Al-Qaeda. They have kidnapped 11 Westerners since 2013; purposefully attacked Western interests, such as in the UN headquarters bombing in Abuja; and made open threats against the United States and its Western counterparts. Also, just like ISIS, they are exporting their Jihadist message virtually, past domestic borders.

This threat should not be regionally conditioned as Boko Haram has clearly exhibited that its menace umbrellas the world's interests. After a long pre-occupation with Islamist extremism in the Middle East, it may be time for Australians to turn their heads to the Islamic State growing in Africa.

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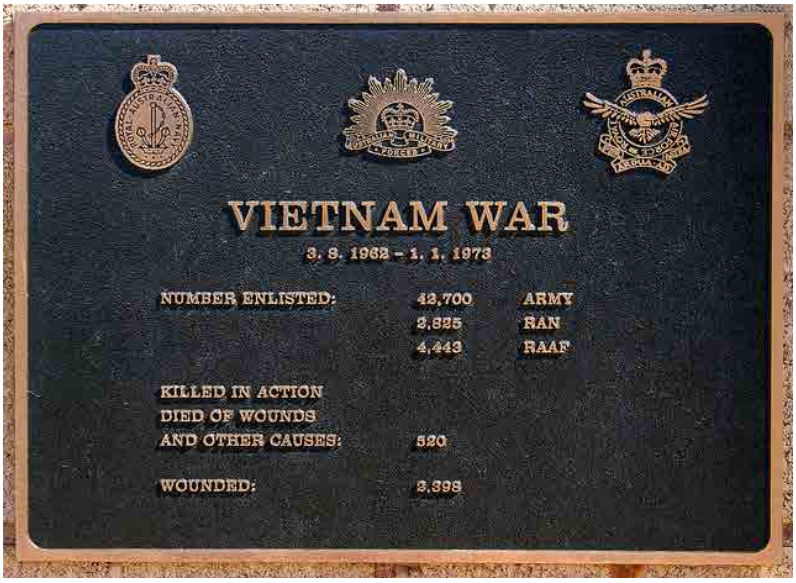

(Photo: Jenny Scott)

Australia and the Vietnam War

By Peter Edwards
New South, $49.99, pp. 304
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"The South East Asia of the 1950s and 1960s was uncertain: quickly changing due to decolonization, privy to territorial disputes, and prone to the emergence of new political powers. The domino theory, Edwards concludes, was a real and present threat."

The Vietnam War has become a touchstone for abject failure in war, a reference point by which to navigate the deficiencies of strategy in Australia's recent military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. But for many of those, like me, who didn't live through the Vietnam conflict the casual comparisons between it and current wars borders on the trite. For those readers, Peter Edwards has done a great service with his Australia and the Vietnam War.

Stretching beyond the familiar tales of tactical tenacity in the jungles of Vietnam, and personal stories of the determination of Australian diggers, Edwards knits a masterful arc that links the strategic environment of post war South East Asia to the strategic dilemmas of Australian governments today. He has produced a single book distilling the best of the nine-volume series Official History of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948-75. More importantly, Australia and the Vietnam War puts strategic decisions made by Australian leaders into context, and outlines which of their hard learnt lessons might be of relevance to decision makers today.

By necessity, much of Edwards' analysis focuses on how leaders like Prime Minister Menzies managed the alliance with the United States. Popular memory would posit that Australia was dragged into a war of America's choosing, with little in the way of sovereign interests at stake. Not so, outlines Peter Edwards. The South East Asia of the 1950s and 1960s was uncertain: quickly changing due to decolonization, privy to territorial disputes, and prone to the emergence of new political powers. The domino theory, Edwards concludes, was a real and present threat.

Australian leaders wanted the US military engaged in South East Asia but were alive to the intricacies of American involvement. Leaders like Menzies "respected the enormous military power of the US, but sometimes questioned the discretion and wisdom with which that power was exercised". Australia then faced the classic alliance dilemma – how to bridle its much more powerful partner in pursuit of mutual interests?

To illustrate the complexities of Australia's alliance management, Edwards contrasts the Anglo-Australian relationship during Confrontation with the ANZUS relationship during the Vietnam conflict. In the former crisis, Australian officials had greater involvement in the formulation of coalition strategy and deftly maintained relations with Indonesia despite Australian soldiers being in combat with their Indonesian counterparts. In the latter conflict, Australians played a largely peripheral role in decisions on the conduct of the war and struggled to maintain the capacity for independent strategic assessment and diplomatic relations.

Edwards concludes that the essence of Australia's deficiencies on Vietnam was in the formulaic approach taken to committing Australian forces to the US-led military campaign. Essentially unchanged since the Korean conflict, this relied on sending the Australian Army quickly to the fight, bridling American risk through a multinational coalition, putting officers in strategically important positions, and carving out a relatively autonomous military task. There are strong echoes of this model in Australia's recent commitments in Al Muthanna and Uruzgan. There are beats of the same thinking as Prime Minister Abbott weighs an imminent American request to contribute further military trainers to the fight against the Islamic State in Northern Iraq today.

Peter Edward's analysis of the popular memory of Vietnam is timely, as Australia considers the legacy of the past century of conflicts and the place veterans hold in our society. After the Vietnam conflict, he concludes, many veterans exaggerated stories of public indifference and hostility to their return home – importing them from the American experience. This accords with the findings of another recent study of Vietnam veterans, Mark Dapin's The Nasho's War. Far from being met by paint throwing protestors, 15 of the 16 battalions that deployed had homecoming thank you parades on their return. Peter Edwards has made his meticulously researched analysis of Australia's Vietnam conflict accessible and alive. Australia and the Vietnam War laces the ground with facts at the exact same time Australian military and political leaders are again grappling with how best to contribute to US-led military contributions.

Reviewed by James Brown, Military Fellow at the Lowy Institute and author of Anzac's Long Shadow. This review was originally published on Australian Outlook

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