

Coalition's Operation Sovereign Borders Policy

What is Operation Sovereign Borders?

The Coalition Government will implement a military-led response to deter and prevent people seeking asylum arriving by boat in Australian waters, named *Operation Sovereign Borders*. The policy is situated within a wider array of asylum seeker and refugee policies, including;

- **Military-led border protection operation which focuses on people smugglers**
- **Reintroduction of [TPVs](#)**
- **Increasing Australia's [offshore processing](#) capacities**
- **Turning back boats, including facilitating the interception of boats in source and transit countries**
- **Deny refugee status to those who are believed to have destroyed their documentation**

Operation Sovereign Borders appears to have been designed purely to compete with the ALP's hard-line PNG Resettlement Arrangement. That policy sought to remove every boat arrival to PNG or Nauru for processing and resettlement, and the Coalition government flagged its support for it.

However they have taken the policy further. Along with subsuming 'Border Protection' into the Department of Immigration's portfolio, the Coalition is attempting to present boat arrivals of people seeking asylum as a security emergency rather than a humanitarian issue. Representing the issue in such a way gives rise to the policies mentioned above, which draw attention away from the plight of people seeking Australia's protection from persecution¹.

The Government will attempt to prevent boat arrivals by promoting Major General Angus Campbell to a three-star rank of lieutenant-general to lead operations against people smugglers. It would increase offshore processing centre capacities on both Nauru and Manus Island whilst strengthening the authority of the armed forces. The Government has allocated \$10m for a new headquarters to oversee this joint agency taskforce.

¹ <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/09/18/coalition-launches-operation-sovereign-borders>

The taskforce will have the responsibility of coordinating the agencies that already deal with the arrival of asylum seekers and report directly to the Minister for Immigration.

The ultimate objective of these policies of deterrence would appear to be ensuring that no person seeking asylum who arrives by boat can apply within Australia. The argument that these people should be going through the 'regular channels' ignores the fact that there is no semblance of an orderly queue².

Will it work?

Read more on the failures of [offshore processing](#) and [TPVs](#).

Operation Sovereign Borders is a failed policy for a number of reasons. The appointment of a three-star commander to oversee a new taskforce is merely a restructuring of what occurs in Canberra already, though adding a legally complex element regarding the separation of military command from civil control³. It is not targeted at solving systemic issues of why asylum seekers board boats in the first place.⁴

The threat to turn back boats will “result in people smugglers sabotaging their own boats, and asylum seekers throwing themselves into the sea, rather than be turned back to Indonesia”⁵. The idea that people would risk their lives at sea in search of Australia’s protection, but then agree to be turned back to Indonesia where they face the threat of deportation simply does not make sense. This policy would create a highly volatile situation at sea for both our navy personnel and people seeking asylum.

Indonesia has stated on numerous occasions that it does not accept this affront on their national sovereignty, and will not agree to any such plan⁶. It is the height of diplomatic arrogance to formulate such policy without any consultation with our regional partner. Australia is presenting itself as a country which is willing to push our moral and legal obligations onto countries which are far less capable of coping with them.

² See page 11 <http://www.asrc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MythBusterJuly2013FINAL.pdf>

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/18/army-deputy-angus-campbell-sovereign-borders>

⁴ <http://news.theage.com.au/breaking-news-national/oppn-boat-plan-wont-change-much-barrie-20130726-2qo40.html>

⁵ <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2013/09/18/coalition-launches-operation-sovereign-borders>

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-16/marty-natelegawa-says-indonesia-will-not-accept-boats-which-hav/4822114>

This strategy has also been heavily criticised by the Australian Defence Force. It is impractical and puts both Australian personnel and asylum seekers at risk.⁷ Admiral Chris Barrie (ret) has stated categorically that mounting “an impermeable barrier at sea” is not possible. Linking the line of command more directly with the Minister is also highly problematic, as he/she “cannot tell a commanding officer what decisions they must make at sea at the time”.⁸

Vice Admiral Ritchie (ret) has said that a turn back policy worked and would work again. However, he stated in July 2013 that it would work “if the conditions [during the Howard years] were replicated”.⁹ Of course, that is not possible. Australia cannot simply replicate conditions because since the Howard years violence in Afghanistan had worsened, Sri Lanka has suffered from a violent civil war and continues to breach basic human rights, and the Rohingya in Myanmar face more atrocities at the hands of the military junta. These factors will always play a far greater role in determining asylum seeker numbers than domestic policies, no matter how harsh they may be.

Furthermore, Vice Admiral Ritchie (ret) said that all that was needed was for the Navy to give the vessels just enough fuel to reach the border of Indonesia. That would be disastrous both in terms of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Australia, but also because the asylum seekers would still be at sea and could simply exit Indonesian waters later on. It is a dangerously temporary fix at best, or disastrously fatal at worst.

⁷<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013/say-we-vote-to-turn-back-those-boats-what-next-20130712-2pvkg.html>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/turning-back-the-boats-can-work-exnavy-chief-20130705-2pfsi.html>