

# SOVEREIGN BORDERS: THE MILITARISATION OF ASYLUM SEEKER DISCOURSES IN AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION NEWS MEDIA

LEICHA STEWART

*School of Design, Communication and Information Technology  
University of Newcastle  
leicha.stewart@newcastle.edu.au*

*Abstract:* While the democratic paradigm of governance and its constituent political processes are well established in Australia, consistently negative media representations of people seeking asylum may be viewed as justification for institutional decisions allowing continued punitive treatment of people seeking asylum on Australian shores. Historically, notions of Australian sovereignty exist as a changing discourse with reference to land claims and the Australian Indigenous population (O'Dowd 2011; Due 2008). However, in terms of contemporary political claims about Australia's need to enforce border protection policies, notions of sovereignty are consistently framed through the themes, images and language of military discourses. Media scholar, John Street suggests that although there is disagreement about whether specific political outcomes can be attributed to press influence, the role of television in politics has been more comprehensively established as shaping broader world views in regards to ideas, values and practices that are considered 'common-sense' (Street 2011; Craig 2013). This paper argues that the increasing role of the military in the treatment and processing of people seeking asylum may be justified, through repetitive negative media representations of asylum seekers which secures public support for such practices, thereby undermining the very principles of the democratic paradigm, and indeed the role of the media or 'fourth estate' (Schultz 1998) in a functioning democracy.

*Keywords:* media, democracy, sovereignty, militarisation, asylum seekers.

## INTRODUCTION

The militarisation of discourses pertaining to people seeking asylum has become an area of increasing concern for scholars in the fields of media, communication, politics and law. As policies regarding the treatment and processing of people seeking asylum in Australia have become increasingly punitive across successive Governments, similarly the visual presence of military artefacts and personnel at the borderline, and linguistic uses of militarist language in media reports of people seeking asylum have in-

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creased. Dallmayr argues that “some presently existing democracies are in large measure travesties, given the enormous abuses and glaring inequalities flourishing in them” (2009: 1). The free-to-air evening television news reports during the lead up to the 2013 Australian Federal Election do indeed highlight a set of highly problematic institutional practices in terms of human rights (and violation of such rights), visible in the framing of asylum seeker issues in terms of a threat to Australian borders and sovereignty, consequently requiring a military solution. This type of framing has a dual implication for shaping dominant socio-political narratives regarding people seeking asylum. Not only does a militarist frame naturalise military involvement in the treatment of civilians trying to seek asylum in Australia, but it obscures alternative framings such as humanitarian, legal, or simply a more inclusive and compassionate approach to processing people seeking asylum, arguably restricting possibilities for informed debate of alternatives within public forums.

This paper takes a Critical Discourse Analytic (Fairclough 2013a; Fairclough 2013b) approach to explore how the salience of military artefacts in visual imagery and the recurrent use of militarist language in the political discourses of the 2013 Australian Federal Election function to naturalise a problematized discourse of people seeking asylum in Australia. Two key communicative strategies will be analysed in close detail, the first is the ubiquitous presence of both military and asylum seeker boats located on the Australian borderline/shoreline through news media images. The second is the prolific use of military terminology in the language of political actors in discussions of immigration issues regarding people seeking asylum. Furthermore, the relationship between Australia and Indonesia, and the diplomatic tensions between ‘bilateral cooperation’ and ‘unilateral action’ will be discussed, with a specific focus on how each nation’s Government attempts to negotiate the protection of their own nation’s sovereignty, while avoiding violating the sovereignty of the other.

Of course, it must be noted that the construction of television news coverage of the 2013 Australian Federal Election, will necessarily result in myriad different interpretations between individuals. The inherent subjectivity of language and the even broader possibilities for the interpretation of images (particularly when re-contextualised with other images and an additional verbal ‘story’)

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will mean content is decoded by different social actors in various ways, depending on their own experiences and subjective ‘filters’ (Neuman: 2011). However, taking the possibility of polysemantic views into consideration (Happer & Phil: 2016; Pankov, Mihelj & Bajt: 2011), it is nonetheless possible to consider cultural conditions and prevailing social discourses to help to identify some of the *most likely* interpretations.

The analysis of these specific discursive elements contributes original insights to the interdisciplinary field of media, political and immigration research, through close attention paid to both visual *and* linguistic features of news media texts. The neglect of research into contemporary visual elements of news discourses is noted by a number of scholars (Bednarek & Caple 2012a Bednarek & Caple 2012b; Grabe & Bucy 2009; Kaufer, Parry-Giles & Klebanov 2012; Wang 2014). Despite these calls for further research to explore, more extensively, implications of image use in broadcast news media bulletins, they have largely been ignored. Significantly, this lack of visual considerations is particularly notable within analysis of political communication. While Richardson and Wodak (2009) have contributed some visual analysis of the construction of asylum seekers in political communication, their research examines data drawn from Austrian and British Governmental communications. Subsequently, a continuing gap exists for such analyses with an Australian media focus. Grabe and Bucy explain how converging technological and political trends including “the continued domination of television as the primary channel of political communication” (2009: 4) have “shifted politics onto a visual platform” (ibid.). Despite the development towards more visually reliant electoral outcomes such as image-making campaign strategies, “surprisingly little research attention has been given to the systematic analysis of political visuals” (Grabe & Bucy 2009: 4). Importantly, this original study seeks to make headway into reducing this deficit.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years there has been a proliferation of scholarly writings on democratic Governments’ growing reliance on the militarisation of political issues (Dechent 2014; Dorr, Elcioglu &

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Gaydos 2014; Graham 2012; Graham 2010; Jefferis 2013; Andrejevic 2011; Chambers 2015; Chambers 2012; Hodge 2015; Hughes 2010; Smit 2011). While globally, this appears to be part of an emerging trend in the naturalisation of militarist paradigms in a broad sense, in Australia, the most recent literature on the militarisation of immigration tends to incorporate similar themes: borders as spaces fundamental to sovereignty, the asylum seeker body as a site of subjugation, and the introduction of the military led *Operation Sovereign Borders* by the Coalition Government in September 2013 (Chambers 2015; Dechent 2014; Hodge 2015; Vogl 2015; Hughes 2010).

The recent Australian literature foregrounds the construction of territorial borders as spaces of danger and risk, and the enactment of their security as a function of sovereignty and identity. Vogl examines the territorial excision of the Australian mainland from the Australian migration zone and the subsequent securitisation of the Australian border. She argues that the primary narrative driving the legitimisation of border security is the insistence that the ‘border’ (often used metonymically for the Australian nation-state or the ‘Australian people’) is under imminent threat from the outside, a threat that “can be effectively subdued by the sovereign’s complete control of the border” (2015: 131). Vogl’s findings concur with observations made repeatedly across emerging immigration literature (Hughes 2010; Dorr et al. 2014), that the border is represented as a space which is simultaneously “entirely controllable and permanently vulnerable” (Vogl 2015: 131). The construction of the border as permanently under threat, yet controllable brings about a cyclical form of false logic, whereby the ‘threat’ to the borders justifies increasingly militarised measures in order to gain complete control over border accessibility.

By drawing on themes of securitisation and the role of relational borders in creating identities and subjectivities, Hodge (2015) draws on the concept of a grievable life to discuss how the violent frames of *Operation Sovereign Borders* (OSB) function to criminalise and delegitimise the body of the asylum seeker subject. Hodge makes a number of claims in regard to visual tropes and symbols found in news media reporting of immigration issues, which empirical evidence supports. For example, Hodge’s observation that: “It is through images of asylum seekers in boats at sea; of them being escorted off planes, of them behind fences in off-

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shore detention; and their representation in the language of criminality, that asylum seeker subjectivities are formed and framed as part of OSB popular assent” (2015: 123).

The images of asylum seekers found in the TV news report data this original research draws on depicts them almost exclusively in one of the situations mentioned by Hodge; in boats, being escorted on and off various forms of transport, and behind detention centre fences (which visually, generally appear as indistinguishable from prisons). Certainly, there is a profusion of more specific bodily orientations and actions in footage featured in television news packages, which carry nuanced implications for the criminalisation of asylum seeker subjects. However, as broad situational categories, the limited range of ways asylum seeker bodies are represented relates to Hodge’s assertion that “these visual and discursive dimensions of OSB, delimit public discourse and produce uncompromising life norms of ‘personhood’” (2015: 123). The depiction of asylum seekers being patted down by authorities for example, and the authorities’ use of latex gloves while conducting such searches on asylum seekers, invokes ideas of dirtiness and disease. Combined with other common representations of asylum seekers, as criminalised, as deviant, these representations rob the asylum seeker subject of any ‘ordinariness’ which could constitute Hodge’s “life norms”, and preclude the asylum seeker from the subject status of personhood, resulting in what Hodge describes as a life “unrecognisable as a life” (ibid.).

## METHODOLOGY

The data drawn on here is comprised of 339 television news reports aired from three months prior to the election on 7 September 2013 to three months after. The reports were aired across both commercial and public broadcasting stations including SBS, ABC, Seven Network, Nine Network, and Ten Network.

This study considers the 2013 Australian Federal Election campaign as a “critical instance case study” (Donley 2012: 48). A critical instance type of case is selected for its remarkable or ‘extreme’ properties. While the 2013 Federal Election is a typical example of a federal election, with no particularly notable or significant features in terms of political process, it is remarkable in terms

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of its political communication, particularly through prominent discussions of asylum seeker issues as one of, if not *the* key election issue. Mitchell notes that critical instance case studies can play an important role in illumination and understanding in cases “where the concatenation of events is so idiosyncratic as to throw into sharp relief the principles underlying them” (1983: 37). During the 2013 Federal Election, the particular language and visual material used in the prominent and constant discussion of people seeking asylum, further mediated through news discourses, sharply highlights a set of socio-political narratives underpinning the representation of people seeking asylum in television news discourses.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the methodology for this research follows logically from a theoretical approach advocating language as the primary way subjects construct social meaning. For Machin and Mayr, language and society are not separate entities but are deeply entwined, and thus “linguistic practice is social practice” (2012: 35). The aims of this original research are primarily concerned with how the microstructures of language shape perceptions and meanings, ultimately contributing to the maintenance of macro social structures and processes. A CDA approach shares these concerns of language and power, and offers opportunities for the close examination of news coverage of immigration issues related to asylum seekers during the 2013 Federal Election to uncover power relations and ideological messages found within texts.

## BOATS AT THE BORDERLINE

Throughout the data, the use of visuals, particularly file footage (opposed to ‘actuality’ footage (Putnis 1994), which is taken specifically at the event/situation being reported on), features extensively within news packages to accompany spoken narration. In the case of news reports on immigration issues, visuals featuring boats carrying people seeking asylum and Navy ‘ships’ in the processes of ‘border protection’ feature heavily. Across 339 news reports analysed, 337 separate images of an asylum boat and 542 images of an Australia Navy or Customs boat were identified. The frequent presence of Navy boats and military personnel in the tel-

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evision news reports are strong evidence of the militarisation discourses linked to asylum seeker and immigration issues, in light of Wilson's argument that 'militarisation' often involves the "highly visible presence of military personnel and artefacts at the borderline or the adoption of overtly military tactics" (2014: 142). While Banks (2001) refers to these images as "wallpaper" shots, images which are either largely or completely redundant, a CDA perspective considers these images, not as arbitrary illustrations of what the journalist is saying, but rather, as strategic framings of particular news issues. Putnis agrees with this reasoning, having examined the use of file footage in a number of television news case studies in order to better understand the "role of a key process in the construction of television news – the use of library file footage as a source of visual illustration" (1994: 74). He observes that the use of file footage in television news reports can be indicative of ideological 'ways of seeing', and tend to, through the repetition of particular stock footage, reinforce stereotypes of minority groups both as 'them' and as problematic.

Although Putnis (1994) found that journalists and editors preferred to use file footage as little as possible, the empirical data shows a high percentage of file footage making up the visual element of the news packages. This may be due to increasingly limited time and staffing resources available in modern newsrooms (Rivenburgh 2009). Nonetheless, the high level of file footage used remains fairly consistent across the entire data sample, with the exception of a very small number of more specific, specialised news reports which require 'actuality' footage'. However, the *amount* of file footage used is not the focus of this study, but rather the content and nature of the footage used.

While the file footage used is extensive in volume, it is limited in range. Limited combinations of file footage images including Navy boats, asylum seeker boats, asylum-seekers in custody, and detention centre scenes, are prime examples of how repetitious mediation may construct and reinforce stereotypes. 62% of the 337 news reports analysed featured at least one image of a Navy or asylum boat, with both *types* of images averaging out a representation of three per report. Importantly, the particular narrative timeline order that file footage shots tend to follow also has implications for shaping audience's understandings of people seeking asylum. For the data reveals the particular order that file footage is

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placed in in the news packages, consistently communicates narratives of exclusion.

The typical narrative order of images found throughout the data is as follows. First, there is an image of a boat in distress, then a Navy boat approaching, preparing for a ‘rescue’, military personnel board the asylum boat, asylum seekers are taken into custody, then transferred elsewhere, the final step of exclusion may be represented by a plane departing, but more frequently, the conclusion of the narrative is represented by people seeking asylum being moved into and shown behind the fences of detention centre. In Ott and Aoki examination of news media’s framing and negotiation of ‘public tragedy’, they concluded that:

In fostering symbolic resolution through narrative closure, the news media’s coverage of the story re-imposed order and eliminated the self-reflective space that might serve as the basis for social and political change (2002: 494)

The symbolic resolution of this narrative timeline is the removal of bodies representing a ‘threat’ to the nation state. By closing the narrative there, the media is similarly, removing the space for audiences to reflect on what happens to people seeking asylum after they are put in detention centres, to reflect on their experiences as people with lives and families, rather than the “criminalised human targets” (2015: 128) that Hodge describes.

A key point of difference in the representation of the two types of boat is that the Navy boat is almost exclusively pictured as moving through the water, at speed, while the asylum boat is generally shown as either stationary, in distress, or in the process of being boarded by authorities. Navy boats moving through the ocean rather than stationary may be significant because movement implies *action*. Semiotically, these visuals fall under Barthes (1982) proairetic code which deals with actions and sequences within the narrative. Crucially, as news packages certainly constitute a highly stylised type of narrative, the action of a Navy boat on its way to *do something* (which, depending on the verbal accompaniment may be a ‘search and rescue’ or a ‘protecting our borders’ narrative) frames the ship as the active protagonist. While by comparison, the stationary nature of the vessel carrying asylum seekers functions to visually position the people in the asylum seeker boat





Fig. 1. *Some images of military personnel's watching.*

as passive participants in the situation, being acted upon. Such a visual contrast constructs an asymmetrical power relationship, in which the Navy boat is clearly represented as having the power to act upon the asylum seeker boat.

Images of asylum seeker boats are often shown as being under the gaze, or as watched by military personnel. Out of the 339 news reports, 94 visual clips fall into this category. Seven distinct types of 'gaze' visuals were identified; footage of an asylum seeker boat on a Navy/Border Patrol surveillance screen (29), footage of military personnel looking through binoculars (27), footage with the bow of a ship in the foreground and an asylum seeker boat in the background (18), an info graphic featuring an asylum seeker

boat on a ‘military mission screen’ (11), a view over the shoulder of military personnel operating a weapon (4), a view over the shoulder of military personnel on a helicopter (3), and on a ship (2) (see fig. 1).

This type of visual positioning may constitute what van Dijk refers to as ‘ideological squaring’. Van Dijk (2012) has shown how news reporting uses ideological squaring to align audiences either with or against news subjects. Ideological squaring occurs when “opposing classes of concepts are built up around participants” (van Dijk in Machin & Mayr 2012: 40), indicating to the audience how particular social identities should be evaluated. While van Dijk uses verbal referential choices to demonstrate this alignment, we can observe the same phenomenon in the visual construction of news as well. By giving the audience a direct perspective of the boat carrying people seeking asylum, with part of the bow of the Navy vessel in the foreground, the file footage visuals effectively position audiences *on* the Navy boat, aligning them, at least metaphorically, with the Australian Navy, and thus the Government.

The use of gaze also invites the audience to participate in the military surveillance of ‘the border’, and functions as a ‘recruitment’ device, according to Butler who asserts that “those of us who watch the wars our governments wage at a distance, are solicited and recruited into war through images and narratives” (2009: 127). The gaze device operates, in the context of television news, similarly to the emerging television genre of ‘securitainment’. A genre which Andrejevic argues “invites viewers to adopt the framing and imperatives of state authorities while simultaneously enlisting them to participate in the project of securing themselves and their homeland” (2011: 165). By showing audiences images through the eyes of military personnel, the audience are unwittingly participating in patrol of the Australian border, in other words, they are now participating in the Government’s project of security.

## AN OPERATIONAL STRATEGY

The prolific use of the word ‘operation’ (57 times) and its variants ‘operations’ (20) and ‘operational’ (19) as a rhetorical strategy was a key observation during the transcription process. Phrases

found in the data such as ‘operational decision’, ‘operational safety’ and ‘operational information’ have the potential to compress complex processes into simplistic terms, disguising the agency of decision makers. Furthermore, the description of a decision, as ‘operational’, not only reveals very little about the nature of the political processes which led to that particular outcome. The ubiquitous use of the term ‘operational’ across a range of institutions; police, military and law has enabled it to be co-opted into the political sphere, where it is now commonly used as a nomenclature to encompass institutionalized activities. The use of the term can relate to Foucault’s (1972) theories on institutionalised bodies of knowledge, drawn on by powerful social actors in order to encourage and maintain the naturalisation of viewpoints and ideas. Drawing on terms belonging to the established Government institution of the Military Defence Force has two main implications for the shaping of social narratives regarding asylum seekers.

Firstly, in relation to Foucault’s theory of knowledge, political actors gain authority and validation of their position through the deployment of language drawn from institutionalised bodies of knowledge, in this case the institution of the Australian Military. For Foucault, power and authority is established through access to specialised knowledge. Truth claims, or ‘games of truth’ were of primary interest to Foucault (Schirato, Danaher & Webb 2012). Institutionalised bodies of knowledge are called on to categorise and evaluate practices; based on this knowledge, power is legitimised and certain positions, values, ideas or narratives are naturalised (ibid.). As a result of the LNP naming their immigration policy initiative *Operation Sovereign Borders*, they are drawing on the institutionalised body of Military knowledge, expertise and historical legitimacy as an institution which ‘protects’ its national subjects. The word ‘operation’ is directly appropriated from military and war discourses, while ‘sovereign borders’ indexes the nation state of Australia and the institutionally justified right the Government of a nation state has to ‘protect the borders’. By framing such a policy as a legitimate military *led* operation, any further claims or statements made by those political actors involved in its organisation or implementation, or indeed any refusal to release certain information (which Morrison does), may justify their actions or utterances through reference to the Military sanctioned nature of the operation.

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Wherever the term ‘operational’ has been used the language surrounding the term exclusively features words associated with Governmental or other institutional procedures and policies; ‘arrangements’, ‘aspects’, ‘considerations’, ‘costs’, ‘decisions’, ‘details’, ‘difficulties’, ‘information’, ‘integrity’, ‘reasons’, ‘security’ and ‘updates’. These linguistic pairings fortify the speakers’ claims of truth by implying that the speaker has access to specialised or restricted information. Drawing on institutional language in such a way not only aides in the justification of their own position and claims, in line with Foucault’s (1972) understanding of institutionalised bodies of knowledge in securing a powerful position, but in cases where information is mundane or easily accessible, re-branding the information as ‘operational arrangements’ has the potential to increase the perceived brevity of information and expert status or knowledge in the speaker

Another example of truth claims can be identified in news reports called ‘fact checks’. On SBS one reports claims to evaluate the legitimacy of opposing claims made by Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott, to see who is ‘telling the truth’. Both politicians are drawing on statistical information in order to illustrate or support the argument they are making about the number of people seeking asylum who were eventually settled in Australia.

Reporter: “So what are those facts? Did 70% or 40% settle in Australia? 1637 people were detained on Nauru and Manus island between 2001 and 2007. 705 of them were permanently resettled in Australia. Thats 43%, very close Mr Abbott’s 40%. So what about Mr Rudd’s figure of 70%? Where does that come from?” (ABC, 15 August).

Interestingly, this example contains two levels of truth claims, primarily by both politicians, and then additionally, by the media, which has appropriated the comments to conduct its own ‘analysis’, similarly claiming to ‘know the truth’ of Tony Abbott’s statement, and the inaccuracy of Kevin Rudd’s. Furthermore, just as the reporter asked, “where does that come from?” in regard to Kevin Rudd’s information, any reference to the source of the facts and figures which constitute the media’s specialised knowledge, is also absent. Statistical information is a powerful tool in games of truth, Foucault asserts that “statistical knowledge has been a fundamental aspect of effective governance of nation-states throughout modern history... closely bound up with the operations and

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maintenance of political power” (Schirato, Danaher & Webb 2012: 58). The implicit assumption which both claims of truth appear to be resting on is that the information comes from records accumulated by the Government Department of Immigration. The gathering and representation of this knowledge in an infographic form is legitimised by its (implied) institutional origin, which in turn, as Foucault would argue, acts to authenticate, in the first instance, both politicians claims of truth, and in the second, only the news reporter and Tony Abbott’s claims, exposing Kevin Rudd’s claims as inaccurate.

Another result of invoking a military frame in discussions of immigration policy, is entrenched tropes of military discourses such as secrecy and confidentiality allowing unsubstantiated, vague or euphemistic statements to be made without any onus on the speaker for further explanation or clarification. For example, when Julia Gillard describes the decision for the Navy to call off the search for bodies of asylum seekers who drowned when their boat sank, as an “operational decision” it reveals very little information about the nature of the decision. Who made the decision? What factors were taken into account? What other alternatives were considered? The use of the term ‘operational’ demarcates the decision as outside of routine political decisions, instead falling within military jurisdiction. At which point hierarchies of responsibility, established protocols and the agency of the eventual decision maker are obscured, formulated simply as ‘operational’, which both legitimises and obscures the processes involved in reaching such a decision.

Other terms drawn from military procedural discourse can be effectively combined with more banal institutional jargon to achieve a high level of obfuscation in official statements. For example, in one of his first official weekly briefings under *Operation Sovereign Borders*, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison makes the following statement:

We’re in the process of implementing and planning for the implementation of the regional deterrence framework measures and other related measures including maritime operations, that’s my statement on that today, and that’s what I’ll be saying today (ABC, 23 September).

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Both typical causes of obfuscation are present in this statement. Circumlocution, or ‘yielding wordiness’, and the use of jargon result in a sentence in which it could be reasonably argued that the intended meaning is obscured, confusing and potentially wilfully ambiguous. The institutional phrases “regional deterrence framework”, and “maritime operations” (which are also potentially both used in a euphemistic capacity) combined with hedging terms such as “in the process”, “implementing” and “planning”, result in an ‘official’ statement which contains no solid information regarding any of the decisions or actions taking place under the new ‘Operation’. In this example, and many others found throughout the data, the militarist language performs multiple functions; obfuscating meaning, negating the need for the speaker to make any specific, binding or politically divisive comments and simultaneously justifying a powerful social position by displaying the speakers links to legitimate social institutions and resultant ‘expert’ knowledge (Foucault, 1972).

#### AUSTRALIA AND INDONESIA, SOVEREIGN STATES

While the news coverage in the months prior to the 2013 Federal Election focused primarily on domestic policy and events, in the months after the election, the focus broadened to the relationship between Australia and Indonesia, particularly in regard to immigration and foreign policy. The “important relationship” between the two nations was repeatedly referred to by the newly elected Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his ministers in television news reports and political statements immediately following the election, and continued to be a prominent theme for the 3 months post-election. In this period, the focus shifted from reporting and emphasising arrivals of people seeking asylum (as was the case prior to the election), to the newly introduced Australian immigration policy *Operation Sovereign Borders* and its implications for the delicate political relationship between Australia and Indonesia. ‘Bilateral (or regional) cooperation’, was consistently praised, and ‘unilateral action’ condemned. Disagreements over whose sovereignty was being violated were voiced, and use of military language and visuals were consistently present in news packages.

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The Indonesian Government were strongly opposed to the LNP's tow back policy on the grounds that it would violate their sovereignty. This sentiment was a prominent feature of the television news reports immediately following the LNP's success in the election, frequently quoting Indonesian Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natelegawa, and Indonesian MP Tantowi Yahya who states: "The [tow-back] policy will be very offensive and we in the Parliament fully support what was said by our Foreign Minister, that we will fully reject the policy" (ABC, 19 September). Finding 'regional solutions' was promoted as crucial to the healthy functioning of the relationship, further extending the construction of 'people smugglers' or 'people smuggling' as the common enemy to be united against. Grewcock agrees, noting that: "The policing of people smuggling has become emblematic of cooperation and 'capacity building' with the Indonesian National Police and an important component of the developing political relationship between the two states" (2014: 74). The language used in these later reports draws mainly from a problematized narrative, readily framing people seeking asylum as a problem to be overcome through 'regional cooperation'.

While the 'problem' narrative is consistent, the subject of *whose* 'problem' people seeking asylum are, changes. Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison make a number of varying claims throughout the time period examined. Pre-election, when it may have been in their political interests to suggest that the 'problem' is solely Australia's, in order to accuse Kevin Rudd of being incompetent based on his inability to solve the 'problem' of asylum seekers, Tony Abbott made these comments: "Mr Rudd is always trying to internationalise problems, and that's an excuse for inaction here in Australia" (National Nine News, 18 July). SBS used an extended form of this comment in their World News Australia (WNA) news report on the same day: "Mr Rudd is always trying to internationalise problems, and that's an excuse for inaction here in Australia. Stop trying to say this is the world's problem, it's not it's our problem". And again on 24 July, SBS's WNA used this statement by Tony Abbott: "You're the Prime Minister Mr Rudd, it's your problem, you've got to fix it". Post-election though, the scope of the 'problem' was re-framed as a regional issue, with Tony Abbott stating: "I do expect continued cooperation from Indonesia in our anti-people smuggling campaign"

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(SBS, 6 December). “Well it’s not a question of forcing anyone; it’s a question of working very cooperatively and constructively with our neighbours” (SBS, 26 September). This framing may be explained as the result of strategic campaigning techniques, and while the shift in perspective is not particularly relevant in terms of militarisation discourses, it highlights the underpinning values and beliefs fundamental to both positions; firstly the people seeking asylum in Australian (and Indonesian waters) are a problem, and secondly, the Government consider it important to resolve, or deal with that ‘problem’ in a way that protects the diplomatic relationship between Australia and Indonesia.

The outcome of *not* maintaining a favourable working relationship between the two Governments is explicitly referenced by Kevin Rudd, and draws on suggestions of actual rather than metaphorical war, between the two nations: “I really wonder whether he’s trying to risk some sort of conflict with Indonesia. What I’m talking about is diplomatic conflict, but I’m always wary about where diplomatic conflicts go” (ABC, 28 July), and later in that same report: “What happens on day one when field marshal Tony puts out the order to the Captain of the Australian Frigate X to turn back a bunch of boats, and you’ve got Naval Frigate from the Indonesian Navy on the other side of the equation”. While Kevin Rudd does not explicitly refer to armed conflict between the two nations, the newsreader verbally links Prime Minister Rudd’s vague reference to conflict to an undeclared war between Indonesia and Malaysia: “Mr Rudd raised the spectre of the *confrontasi*, an undeclared war between Indonesia and Malaysia that led to the deaths of Australian troops”. The verbal statement is accompanied by archive file footage of the “*confrontasi*” conflict.

While the likelihood of an actual armed conflict between Australia and Indonesia may be minimal, this statement by Kevin Rudd outlines the options presented as available to the two countries in terms of international relations. ‘Bilateral cooperation’ is emphasised by both countries as the appropriate or desired option, while ‘unilateral action’ is cast as the negative, undesirable option. While these options are presented as binary oppositions, placed at two ends of a spectrum, the whole discussion is underpinned by both an implicit and explicit tension in regards to the government of each country’s belief in their right to defend the sovereignty of their own nation. The following examples are evi-

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dence of the political importance placed on the maintenance of 'sovereignty' and the resulting tension between the two countries.

Newsreader: "It came as Julie Bishop's charm offensive continued at the UN, though conceding more work's needed with Jakarta, as an Indonesian news agency quoted Minister Natelagawa saying he warned Ms Bishop against any boat policy that threatens his country's sovereignty".

Alexander Downer: "Instead of a lot of pious rhetoric about the Australian Government threatening their sovereignty, their people, their boats, their crews are breaching our sovereignty".

Newsreader: "The Indonesian Government has told Australia's Foreign Minister it won't accept any policy that violates its sovereignty".

Dr Marty Natelagawa, Indonesian Foreign Minister: "We have reiterated that Indonesia cannot accept any Australian policy that would, in nature, violate Indonesia's sovereignty".

Julie Bishop, Australian Foreign Minister: "There can be some misunderstanding as to what our policy is, and it is certainly not, to, in any way, show disrespect to Indonesian sovereignty. For anyone to think that that was our policy that would be a mistake. Our policy respects Indonesia's sovereignty, respects Indonesia's territorial borders, just as Indonesia respects ours".

Newsreader: "The Opposition insists its policy poses no threat to Indonesian sovereignty".

Tony Abbott: "Australia was entitled to do what was in Australia's national interest and that's my position, always has been, always will be".

Newsreader: "The Coalitions says Australia's interests must come first".

Scott Morrison: "Regional cooperation is one thing, but Australia will always take the decisions that it needs to take on our side of the border in our own interests".

The majority of the comments above appear in post-election news reports are made in reference to Tony Abbott's 'turn back the boats' policy. The boats present in the ocean between Australia and Indonesia (both in international water and each country's search and rescue zone) become the potential threat to each country's sovereignty, and thus the militarisation of the Australian borders is justified through, not only the constructed need to 'stop the boats', but also through the political imperative to monitor, protect, and maintain control of access to the Australian borders, in the process of ensuring national 'sovereignty'.

## FINDINGS

Militarisation themes in the discourses of the 2013 Australian Federal Election are repetitive and consistent. While they are constituted by a set of inextricably linked words, phrases, images, ideas and concepts, this paper has attempted to isolate some of the most prominent and significant themes in order to examine them in fine detail. Images of boats (Navy, Customs and asylum boats) contribute to the naturalisation of a militarised border/shoreline as well as visually inviting audiences to participate in the Government's project of 'securing' Australian borders. Key military terms function strategically in a range of rhetorical techniques employed by politicians, facilitating the frequent obfuscation of political statements. Examination of the language used to frame the relationship between Australia and Indonesia further illustrates the importance placed on national sovereignty in the negotiation of a resolution to the 'problem' of people seeking asylum. These key features of the data arguably function in television news reports to naturalise and legitimise a military response to people seeking asylum in Australia. While the representation of asylum seekers as a 'problem' and a 'threat' is consistent with a large body of prior research into this field, the findings of this research suggest that current media discourses of people seeking asylum constitute an elevation or extension of previous constructions of people seeking asylum as a 'problem' to them as a problem requiring a *military solution*.

These findings apply across the range of networks examined, with very little variance in content between commercial and public broadcast networks. While such a homogenised construction of news packages across the board was not anticipated, it may be a result of what appeared to be a high reliance on file footage to accompany the voice-over script.

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