

## CHAPTER 4

### OVERVIEW OF SECURITY IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Australia's principal strategic interest in the South Pacific is to ensure that our sea communications with Japan and the Americas remain open. It is argued that instability in the South Pacific could endanger these sea approaches. Australia is also concerned that the Soviet presence in the region is kept to a minimum, diplomatically and militarily.

For the Pacific nations security has broader parameters involving the absence of all super-power rivalry from the region, no external domination of regional forums such as the South Pacific Forum, and the absence of 'Metropolitan Capitals' administering Pacific territories. More importantly, they also see regional security in an economic sense - free from external exploitation of their resources. In the main, the culprits in such regional militarism, as the Pacific nations see it, are the United States, France, Japan, Australia and the Soviet Union.

Of these countries, the Soviet Union has been the least successful in establishing a presence in the region, having accreditation only in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Western Samoa. However, there are no Soviet diplomats resident in the area. These countries are serviced from Wellington, Canberra and Jakarta. As Paul Dibb has observed,

There are probably few areas of the world, with the possible exception of Antarctica, that are of lower priority strategically for Moscow than the Southwest Pacific. Other than Australia, this region contains no strategically or politically significant

countries or militarily important targets and it offers only modest economic, and probably few political, opportunities for the USSR.

This is not to say that the Southwest Pacific is irrelevant to the Soviet Union's global interests or that the USSR will not probe for gains there. It merely suggests that Moscow is unlikely to put a great deal of effort into this part of the region.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps reflecting the change in approach by the Western powers towards China, that country has been able to establish embassies in Port Moresby (as of July 1983), Suva and Apia and to provide a small amount of assistance to them. Australia has diplomatic representation in Fiji, Nauru, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Western Samoa.

As part of Australia's and the Pacific Islands' effort to exclude super-power rivalry in the region, there has been considerable effort given to establishing a nuclear-free zone in the region.

#### A Nuclear-Free Zone in the South Pacific

While there is general regional agreement opposing the dumping of nuclear wastes and nuclear testing in the Pacific, on the issue of the passage of nuclear-armed ships through the Pacific only Vanuatu and, recently, New Zealand do not allow visits by such ships to their countries. There is concern amongst the Pacific nations that by banning such visits they will close off the option of protection that may be required in some future circumstances. The belief in 'no access, no protection' has meant that no consensus has been reached within the region. For example, Papua New Guinea is a strong advocate for a nuclear-free Pacific, nonetheless it aligns with the Solomon Islands in allowing nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels to visit its ports. It has been clear for some time that

the only way to reach agreement on a nuclear-free zone declaration would be to accept the passage of nuclear-armed and nuclear-propelled ships through the region.

At the 14th meeting of the South Pacific Forum held in Canberra in August 1983, the possibility of a nuclear-free zone was again canvassed. The motion was moved by the Australian Government. Once again the divisions amongst Pacific nations outlined above emerged and the motion failed to receive endorsement. Further discussion took place at the meeting of the Forum at Tuvalu in August 1984. At this meeting the Forum agreed on the desirability of establishing a nuclear-free zone, and to this end established a working party. While there appears to be no chance of having testing banned in the region, on the issue of nuclear dumping and the storage of nuclear waste, both the Japanese and American governments have been forced to reconsider their plans in response to strong opposition.

#### Access to Regional Resources

Of particular concern to all of the Pacific island states is economic security which involves both access to the resources within their own region and a collective self-reliance.

The establishment of 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zones highlights the difficulty that Pacific island nations face in attempting to protect their own interests. Effective policing of these EEZ's is beyond the resources of the nations themselves and it is highly unlikely that any proposal to involve Australia and New Zealand in providing patrols in the region would be either acceptable or practicable.

With regard to the issue of resource exploitation in the region, it appears that those islands further to the east in the Pacific are more prepared to compromise in their approach to the utilisation of the region's resources and are more willing to accommodate the United States interests in the area.

As a result of this difference of emphasis within the Pacific group, the region has developed a sub-regional agreement. The Nauru Agreement was signed in February 1982 by Papua New Guinea, the Solomons, Palau, Nauru, Kiribati, the Marshalls and Micronesia after intransigence was shown by a number of other Pacific nations on the issue of fishing rights.

Nonetheless, there is agreement among the Pacific states that the exploitation of their fisheries by external powers, in particular the United States, is seen to be the only visible threat to the security of their natural resources. The United States has not signed the Law of the Sea Convention covering the right of jurisdiction over natural resources. There has been a history of boats from the United States fishing the waters of the Island states without always paying their licensing fees. Recent examples include the impounding of the United States registered fishing trawler 'Danika' by the Papua New Guinea Government in 1982 and the seizing by the Solomon Islands of the United States registered trawler, the 'Jeanette Diana' on 28 June 1984.

Accordingly, it is the security of natural resources in particular to which the Australian Government should address itself if it wishes to ensure the security of small island States in the South Pacific. This will involve providing assistance with the equipment and training necessary for the policing of fishing zones of small island States. Equally important, the Australian Government should be active diplomatically, supporting these small States to ensure that

their sovereignty is respected. Without diplomatic support the effectiveness of assistance through such projects as the provision of patrol boats will be reduced.

### Collective Self-Reliance

The desire of the Pacific nations is for the development of mutual support and dependence thus lessening reliance on the outside world. According to Fry, 'this has been pursued in a variety of ways: the sharing of services; experts and training facilities, ...; a regional shipping line and a regional university; the promotion of an intra-regional trade; joint approaches to production and marketing problems; and the sharing of information and research'.<sup>2</sup>

However, as Fry then notes, this co-operation has only been marginally successful. He sees two reasons for this: firstly, the economic basis is not there - the islands are receiving a great deal of assistance from major powers in the region, especially Australia and the United States, (as well as some assistance from powers outside the region such as the EEC); and secondly the political will is absent.

The major theme underpinning all of the objectives of the Pacific countries is the exclusion of super-power rivalry from the region which they believe will reduce the threat of intervention in their affairs. It is important that Australia accept that the South Pacific nations wish to pursue independent foreign policies which allow them to determine their own interests. It is clear that the Pacific nations still believe that their interests are best served by looking to the ANZUS countries for security, support and ultimate protection. Indeed, Fry says that a few island countries have even sounded out the possibility of formal inclusion in the ANZUS treaty.

ENDNOTES

1. Dobb, Paul, 'The Interests of the Soviet Union in the Region: Implications for Regional Security' in International Security in the Southeast Asian and Southwest Pacific Region, (ed), T.B. Miller, University of Queensland Press, 1983.
2. Submission, (Greg Fry), p. S168.