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THE PACIFIC ISLANDS: SECURITY PROBLEMS OUT OF MIND AND OUT OF FOCUS

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The small island communities of Oceania (the Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian states of the Pacific Islands Forum, along with the residual territories and dependencies of metropolitan powers such as France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) have numerous problems and few resources to address them. The territories and dependencies are the responsibility of the governing states, and the independent island states generally do not have the resources or capacity to address the problems on their own.

An Overview of Pacific Island Challenges

The Oceania region has two dominant features: water and its vast expanses, and “islandness.”[1] The region measures about 5,000 miles from east to west, and about 2,500 miles from north to south, excluding New Zealand. (For comparison, San Francisco and New York are about 2,500 miles apart.) Within this space there are 20,000 to 30,000 islands, and only one land border between two countries exists: that which divides Papua New Guinea from Indonesia for a stretch of 450 miles. Air and maritime links between the island countries and the rest of the world are, at best, not well developed, and at worst they hardly exist. The countries themselves range in size from about 30 sq. km (12 sq. mi) to half a million sq. km (193,000 sq. mi). (For comparison, the United States is nearly 10 million square kilometers).[2]

The island states range in population from the 7.4 million people living in Papua New Guinea to the 10,000 people living in Nauru or Tuvalu. Per capita gross domestic product[3] across the region ranges between about USD \$2,000 to \$5,000, and a large proportion of that is remittances from national diasporas and various forms of development assistance. These low figures put most of the states firmly in the bottom half of any human development index ranking.[4] In addition to the broad range of populations across the region, cultural diversity throughout the island populations—sometimes a security issue in its own right—is extreme. For instance, there are more than 1,200 distinct languages throughout the area; more than 700 of which are in Papua New Guinea alone.

The Pacific islands are mostly out of sight and mind for the rest of the world. To the extent that the region does come to mind, it is often out of focus with much of the attention typically on the quirky, exotic, or current issues that the region faces, such as climate change and the rise of sea-levels. Rarely is a rounded view of the islands' challenges presented. On a positive note, however, the island states have not sufficiently disturbed the wider world to require its attention by being an international security concern. Instead, their problems are left to the Pacific Islands Forum and the regional metropolitan states, but to the extent that the island states cannot resolve their problems independently, this outside neglect is a disadvantage.

As a result of the challenging circumstances, the Pacific islands face a myriad of security issues. Fortunately, the issues are rarely complete state failure or extreme political turmoil (except in the cases of Fiji and the Solomon Islands in recent years). Instead, the issues primarily involve human security, including mortality rates, health deficiencies, and individual poverty; the inability to deal with transnational crime due to corruption and a lack of resources and capacity; and the inability to develop the economies of the islands and prevent foreign states from exploiting natural resources such as timber and fisheries. Furthermore, global warming creates the looming specter of rising sea-levels, which both reduces available land and destroys fresh water supplies. The problem is so great that Kiribati is considering moving its entire population to new land purchased from neighboring Fiji.[5] Tuvalu, and even Fiji itself, may eventually face the same problem.

Helen Hughes, an Australian economist and scholar of the Pacific islands, described the region's security issues in these terms:

Policing and legal systems are not sufficient to enforce law and security. The lack of income earning possibilities in rural areas and jobs and informal sector opportunities in towns will encourage criminal behaviour. Unchecked corruption at high levels gives justification for criminals in villages and on the street. Civil disorder ranging from urban gang fights to clan fighting is inevitable while there are no income earning opportunities and no jobs, and there is widespread evidence that the rest of the world lives at a much higher standard of living. Civil conflicts, secession movements and political coups will persist if the Pacific economies continue to stagnate and if morality continues to decline. Economic progress is impossible in such an environment.[6]

Despite the optimistic title under which her analysis was written ("The Pacific is Viable!") little has changed in the decade since that was written.

Although national security concerns do exist, the threat of external military intervention is not one of them. Only Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Fiji have any conventional armed

forces, and these have extremely limited military capabilities. It is arguable that armed forces are mostly irrelevant to the region's security needs and that the existence of armed forces actually diminishes, rather than enhances, security. Besides the non-existent threat of external military intervention, many of the national security problems in the Pacific islands are similar to those of weak states everywhere. In recent history, Fiji has been subject to periods of military rule since 1987. In the 1990s, a bloody separatist conflict was fought in the Bougainville province of Papua New Guinea, and a referendum on the province's future relationship with Papua New Guinea is due before 2020. Ethnic conflict was endemic for some years in the Solomon Islands and partially resolved by deployment of a regional police and military intervention force for a decade beginning in 2003. Tonga has experienced civil violence as pro-democracy activists have fought the absolute monarchy to bring about a measure of popular involvement in government processes. None of those conflicts is completely resolved, although all are heading toward resolution.

By nearly every measure mentioned thus far, the Pacific island countries are poor and weak. However, in spite of their security challenges they do not attract the attention of the rest of the world as do other equally fragile or fractious states and sub-regions. In Oceania, the activities of China get the most international attention. However, whether China is seen as attempting to gain profit or influence, few now see China as a threat to the region.[7] Of the other metropolitan powers, the United States is relatively passive and seems content to let Australia and New Zealand take the active lead on most issues.[8] With regard to development assistance, international aid comes from both regional and non-regional metropolitan states, notably Japan and China. The types of aid provided range from bottom-up projects designed to make communities more comfortable and viable, to more symbolic showcase projects such as the construction of sports stadiums and public buildings, which are often designed to show the donor's generosity but provide few sustainable benefits that accrue to the recipient state.[9]

Helping the Islands Help Themselves

Given the myriad security issues the region faces, there is general agreement that most issues need to be dealt with collectively rather than individually, and that the region should solve its own problems, when possible, rather than relying on external intervention in which the intervening actors often take responsibility for the processes and outcomes. As a result, the states have developed institutions and declarations that guide regional cooperation activities. The membership of the primary regional body, the Pacific Islands Forum, comprises all the sovereign countries of the region, including Australia and New Zealand.[10] The Forum operates under rules similar to those found in other regional bodies such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. The Forum Secretariat maintains a Regional Security Committee with a coordinating function.

Almost every form of functional activity (such as police, customs, or immigration) has a regional body consisting of the heads of the relevant national agencies.

Regional cooperative action is legitimized under a series of declarations—namely Honiara (1992), Aitutaki (1997), and Biketawa (2000)—that allow the region to take group action to resolve security issues. The Biketawa Declaration offers principles for governance and for guiding regional responses to regional crises, [11] and it has been invoked at least three times: in 2003 to legitimize the Regional Assistance Mission (primarily police and armed forces) to the Solomon Islands in response to ethnic conflict there; in 2004 to offer economic support to Nauru; and in 2009 to take regional measures against the military government of Fiji.

This kind of cooperative response is not that of a collective security mechanism in which a military threat to one invokes a response in kind from all. Instead, the region requires external support to bring it within the core of states able to respond to the norms, rules, and processes of the globalized world, rather than let the region continue as gap states at the mercy of wealthier states and the rules they play by. This is an issue of international equity rather than international security. If the equity issues are not addressed, the concerns will almost certainly again become regional and possibly international as the contradictions inherent in corrupt societies become insupportable, the disparity between haves and have-nots becomes unacceptable, and the consequent instability spills over national borders. The region needs action in two areas, one primarily internal, and the other external.

- First, it needs to develop a culture that ensures open access to politics, the rule of law across society, and political accountability, and in which poor or malign governance cannot flourish.[12]

- Second, it needs support across the public sector to allow the countries to both individually and collectively develop their national capacity to manage their security environment. Such capacity building would include assistance in developing a culture of open, transparent, and honest government.

Once these needs are properly addressed, a range of concurrent activities within regional economies and regional processes is necessary if the region is to overcome the disadvantages of distance and resource shortages. The following are some suggestions by other analysts:

- Merge or pool regional functions to give economies of scale when dealing with many of the issues that face the region;[13]

- Harmonize legislation to ensure that gaps between countries do not exist;[14]

- Deepen economic integration by easing restrictions on the movement of goods, services, and labour.[15]

These are just a selection of the possibilities to expand security for the Pacific Islands. Much work is being carried out, but the issues do not incite the attention of many beyond those directly concerned, and they do not receive international support except from traditional donor states. Although the Pacific islands want to be able to resolve their own problems, they need more practical assistance and fewer symbolic and showcase projects. They need help catching the fish rather than having the fish given to them.

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[1] Paul Sutton and Anthony Payne, "Lilliput under Threat: The Security Problems of Small Island and Enclave Developing States," *Political Studies*, XLI: 1993, pp. 579-593.

[2] Ron Crocombe, *The South Pacific*, Suva, Fiji: Institute of the Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2001, gives a broad and comprehensive overview of the region and its characteristics.

[3] Accurate data are not always available or relevant; many people are in the subsistence economy.

[4] For basic economic and other data, see the range of statistics at *Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific, 2014*, Mandalong City, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, August 2014, <http://www.adb.org/publications/key-indicators-asia-and-pacific-2014>.

[5] Paul Chapman, "Entire Nation of Kiribati to Be Relocated over Rising Sea Level Threat," *London Telegraph*, March 7, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/australiaandthepacific/kiribati/9127576/Entire-nation-of-Kiribati-to-be-relocated-over-rising-sea-level-threat.html>.

[6] Helen Hughes, *The Pacific Is Viable!* Issue Analysis No. 53, Sydney: Centre for Independent Studies, December 2004, p. 8, <http://www.cis.org.au/images/stories/issue-analysis/ia53.pdf>.

[7] The thesis of China as a threat is seen, for example, in John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly, "Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania," *The National Interest* 72, summer 2003. A counter view is in Jiang Yang, *The Pacific Islands in China's Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

[8] This is true of the region as a whole. The United States is closely connected with the Micronesian states through the various compacts of free association; Australia is closely

linked to Melanesian states, especially Papua New Guinea, because of its previous colonial history; New Zealand has close political, cultural, and ethnic relationships with Polynesia.

[9] A recent United Nations Development Programme evaluation of its own programs in the region reported mixed results in terms of effectiveness and efficiency and with distinct problems in regional capacity building. See *Assessment of Development Results: Evaluation of UNDP Contribution—Pacific Island Countries*, New York: UNDP, 2012. Other assessments talk of “black holes” or “bottomless pits” when discussing the region’s ability to absorb development assistance.

[10] There are many other regional organizations, some pan-regional and with a wide focus, others pan-regional with a narrowly functional focus, and yet others sub-sub-regional. The Pacific Islands Forum is the main political body.

[11] See Pacific Islands Forum, *Biketawa Declaration*, Forum Secretariat, 2000, <http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Biketawa%20Declaration,%2028%20October%2020002.pdf>.

[12] Ray Anere et al., *Security in Melanesia: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu*, a report for the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat for the Forum Regional Security Committee, June 25-26, 2001, Suva, Fiji, May 2001.

[13] For example, in the Australian Senate, Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade Committee, *Australia’s Relationship with Papua New Guinea and Other Pacific Island Countries*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2003.

[14] Forum Secretariat, “Regional Approach to Combat Crime,” media release, Nadi, Fiji, June 18, 2004.

[15] Satish Chand, “An Assessment of the Proposal for a Pacific Economic and Political Community,” *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, 18:2, November 2003.