

SOUTH PACIFIC - STRATEGIC CHALLENGES

The South Pacific is beset by serious challenges. Its tranquil image is at odds with growing unrest and external threats. Governments in the region are limited in their possible responses due to lack of resources and dependency on external aid.

Economic Challenges

Tourism offers mixed prospects. It is a solid economic earner, but vulnerable to global economic trends. Increasing levels of poverty, urban drift and crime may begin to impact on visitor numbers in the future.

The region is dependant on primary resource extraction for economic development – mining, forestry and fishing. Unsustainable methods are often used. Corruption at all levels often assists external resource extractors in gaining political influence.

Island states are heavily aid dependent. This creates issues with donor nations, such as Australia and New Zealand. Lately, any resentment has been aimed more at large multinational organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

With population growth rates averaging close to 2.5%, island states are becoming overpopulated, especially in Polynesia, with its smaller islands and atolls. Micronesia faces the worst situation, with massive population densities, and accompanying pollution of the lagoons.

Environmental Challenges

Thermal expansion of the oceans connected to global warming is a

genuine phenomenon among small island states. For low-lying atolls in particular, a rise in sea level of even a few centimetres could have significant negative impact on traditional pit agriculture. There is considerable depth of feeling in the islands on this issue, and considerable ill will has been generated towards larger, developed countries that are perceived as indifferent to the islands that will bear the brunt of sea level rise. Australia and New Zealand are criticised for not reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and for not representing Pacific concerns on the issue internationally.

Nuclear fuel shipments from France and the UK to Japan are scheduled to continue passing through the South Pacific on a regular basis for another decade. This has exacerbated regional anti-nuclear sentiment, even among usually reticent governments such as Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Affected Marshall Islands' inhabitants continue to argue for compensation for illnesses caused in the 1940s and 50s by US nuclear bomb tests in the area.

Internal

Where they are present, national defence forces in the Pacific have tended to be more of a threat to their own governments than to any external enemies. In Fiji, the (almost exclusively Fijian) Army overthrew the democratically elected government of Dr Timoci Bavadra in 1987. In PNG, the Army surrounded Parliament and forced Prime Minister Sir Julius Chan to step down in what amounted to a coup in all but name in 1997 during the Sandline crisis. In Vanuatu, in

1996, the paramilitary Mobile Force mutinied over the issue of non-payment of outstanding allowances they believed were due to them. The Solomon Islands Police Field Force has been accused by anti-government militants on Guadalcanal of shooting unarmed villagers during security sweeps of suspected militant-controlled villages.

High population growth and lack of economic development in rural areas has led to increasing rates of urban drift, especially among young people. As their education levels are either basic or non-existent, they become unemployed shanty-dwellers and drift almost inevitably into crime. While this phenomenon is only starting to become apparent in Polynesia, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, PNG provides a full-scale example of what may lie in store for the rest of the region. Crime rates in PNG's main urban areas of Port Moresby, Lae, Goroka and Mount Hagen are all high, and the types of crimes committed are often horrific.

Lately, ethnic conflicts have also been developing. In Solomon Islands, villagers on Guadalcanal who felt they were not benefiting from the economic development of the capital, Honiara, attacked and drove out several thousand people from the neighbouring island of Malaita over a period of months. It quickly became an uncontrollable social phenomenon. The country's economy is now facing enormous problems as a result of the closure of several businesses that formerly employed large numbers of people and provided a sizeable amount of the government's tax base.

Corruption is a continuing problem, with political leaders often claiming traditional leadership status should exempt them from normal rules on accepting gifts, distributing government funds to their political supporters, or even facing scrutiny on these matters. This has helped create a great deal of resistance in many island states to the imposition of international standards of transparency and accountability.

External

Continuing political and economic instability in Papua New Guinea has led some observers to speculate over a possible Indonesian threat to the resource-rich country. However, Indonesia has its own internal problems to concentrate on. Border tension between the two countries has eased noticeably since the signing of a border cooperation agreement. The PNG government is clearly anxious to placate its neighbour, acting to suppress pro-West Papuan activist groups, and withdrawing an initial offer to send troops to the UN peacekeeping operation in East Timor.

Irian Jaya became part of Indonesia in the 1960s under murky and disputed circumstances. The indigenous population is Melanesian and Christian, and is generally opposed to Indonesian control. The Free Papua Movement (OPM) has mounted a low-level insurgency against Indonesian rule ever since. It has been largely ineffective, but has proved impossible to quell. There is widespread support for the West Papuan cause across the border in Papua New Guinea, because of ethnic links, but the PNG government does not dare offend Indonesia, and has acted to suppress groups agitating in support of the OPM. A cooperation agreement between both countries has seen increasing military links, and a marked decrease in border tension.

The rivalry between China and Taiwan has sparked a diplomatic struggle for influence in the Pacific. Some island states have discovered that both governments are willing to offer attractive economic aid packages in exchange for diplomatic recognition and support at the United Nations.

Decolonisation

Decolonisation has occurred in Niue and Cook Islands in name, but, in fact, New Zealand remains the single most important influence, as well as retaining certain constitutional responsibilities. Continuing depopulation and economic downturns in both countries could eventually lead to a re-evaluation of their viability as independent nations.

French rule in French Polynesia continues with the consent of the indigenous population. French Polynesians are the overwhelming majority in the territory, and there is little fear that their culture or ultimate sovereignty are under any real threat. Dependence on French financial support to maintain high standards of living is likely to offset demands for independence. Support for pro-independence leaders, such as Oscar Temaru, has been slowly increasing, but is still not a majority.

The situation in New Caledonia is far more ominous than that in French Polynesia. The population is split nearly 50/50 between the indigenous Kanaks and French settlers. The two communities have mutually exclusive objectives. The Kanaks largely support independence, while the settlers (Caldoche) want to remain part of France. Relations between the two peoples are largely antagonistic, and there is virtually zero intermarriage. Tension between the two communities spilled over into what was virtually a small civil war in the 1980s, which led to dialogue and the signing of the Matignon

Accords, and more recently the Noumea Accord. This has given the territory 15 to 20 years in which to develop economically and work out a political solution before an eventual vote on independence.

Regional Responses

The South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum) for Pacific leaders is supposedly the most important annual regional gathering, but there are signs its importance may be dwindling. Larger countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji, are increasingly staying away from the leaders meeting. Reasons for this may include the Forum's internal methodology, which emphasises consensus and avoidance of internal disputes. Known as "the Pacific Way", critics say it avoids discussion of issues which may prove divisive, leading to bland and meaningless communiqués.

Future Outlook

The Pacific Islands face increasing environmental, economic and political challenges. Their ability to cope with them is hampered by their small size, lack of infrastructure, distance from world markets, and in some cases, increasing instability. Australia and New Zealand, as the region's two metropolitan nations, are likely to face more demands for aid. This will be economic aid at first, but if conditions deteriorate, political and military assistance may become more significant. This will prove a challenge to both nations, who have not traditionally seen themselves as taking such a dominant role in regional affairs.