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GLOBAL MARITIME GEOPOLITICS

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Edited by

Hasret Çomak, Burak Şakir Şeker,
Mehlika Özlem Ultan



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Edited by Hasret Çomak, Burak Şakir Şeker, Mehlika Özlem Ultan

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REGIONAL CHALLENGES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: THE COMPLEX REALITIES OF SOUTH PACIFIC GEOPOLITICS

Amba Pande¹

Introduction

South Pacific also known as *Oceania* is a relatively isolated and remote region and is a home of small island countries apart from two metropolitan powers scattered amidst a vast oceanic area. Yet, the region is not bereft of great power rivalry and both conventional and non-conventional security threats. South Pacific is also a witness to internal turmoils like political upheavals, nuclear tests, resource theft and depletion, environmental challenges, and many other issues. Interestingly, the regional security challenges have been entwined with the intervention of great powers which has given rise to a complex and cluttered geopolitical environment in the South Pacific. This paper seeks to discuss, the geopolitics of the South Pacific region in the context of regional vulnerabilities and international relations that has resulted in a quagmire of political, domestic, economic, ethno-geographic, diplomatic, and environmental issues.

Coined, originally by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén, *geopolitics* is an overly used term by scholars and practitioners alike. It generally, denotes international politics related to a geographical region. However, the regional politics arising out of geographic features, natural resources, *oecopolitik*, economic conditions, environmental and security dynamics, race, and religion, too are part of the geopolitical construct. In other words, it is about international relations that arise out of the internal politics of a geographical region. Without dwelling deep on the theoretical aspects of geopolitics (as it is already deliberated at the beginning of the volume), I will simply discuss the South Pacific International relations in the context of the internal power politics of the region. The regional politics and security challenges directly or indirectly guide the foreign policies and the security goals of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Since, South Pacific is majorly an oceanic body, the context of Maritime geopolitics will be taken into account to explore the challenges like over/illegal fishing, nuclear testing, seabed mining, global warming, rising sea levels etc.

Remoteness, and Vulnerability: An Introduction to South Pacific Region

The South Pacific region covers a vast area of almost 8,525,989 square

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kilometres and is home to 14 Island countries and the two metropolitan powers Australia and New Zealand. It is a sparsely populated region with less than 3 percent land area, and fragmented in numerous islands. South Pacific is divided into three geo-cultural or ethno-geographic sub-regions, the first being Melanesia that occupies the island countries of Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea; The second grouping is Micronesia that occupies the island countries of Nauru, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands. The largest group is Polynesia, which occupies the island countries of Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa, Kiribati, and French Polynesia. Other than these PICs, there is Australia, and New Zealand (together referred to as Australasia) and semi-independent territories of Cook Island and Niue which have a ‘free association’ status with New Zealand.

South Pacific is an extremely diverse region full of disparities and paradoxes in terms of size, population, ethnicity, topography, ecology, economic resources and level of development. On the one hand Australia and New Zealand are part of OECD countries and on the other Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, are classified as the least developed countries. On the one hand Australia, PNG and Fiji possess large land areas and have a relatively large population base and on the other Tuvalu and Nauru, have exceedingly small land areas with small populations. Niue has a only 1,398 people as its population. Colonialism still exists in the region with the colonisers and the colonised both being part of it. The remotely scattered islands have a troubling combination of small population base (in total 8 million approx.), low economic development, and weak governmental systems on the one hand but on the other, they are in possession of large oceanic areas under their EEZs which have abundant natural resources and Tuna supply, are strategically located at the key sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and have the crucial 14 votes at the UN and other international multilateral fora vast natural resources.²

Since the island countries were colonies to the western powers and after independence continued to rely on the former colonial masters for aid and development, Western culture and way of life have made deep inroads in the PICs. Although there is much emphasis on the indigenous cultural heritage and the Pacific way of life, the younger generations are captivated by the pop and fast-food culture. Christianity remains the dominant religion in Oceania with approximately 65.61 percent Australasia, 95 percent Melanesia, 93 percent Micronesia and 96 percent Polynesia being Christians.³ The church is often involved with domestic and regional politics.

Australia and New Zealand are the most important powers in the region.

² Amba Pande, “India and the South Pacific: Moving Towards a Closer Partnership”, **FPRC JOURNAL Focus: India and Pacific Islands**, No. 1, 201, pp. 18-24.

³ Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, “The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010”, **Pew Research Center**, 2012.

Former colonial masters, are the largest aid donors (providing approximately half of all aid) and defence partners of the PICs and are responsible for the policing and surveillance of sea lanes. Australia, along with New Zealand, is the founding member of the major regional multilateral organisation. New Zealand has long been Australia’s ‘principal strategic partner’ and the two states have cooperated extensively on a range of security, diplomatic, economic, social, cultural, and political issues. However, geographically, culturally, and ethnically New Zealand is closer to PICs and hosts large Maori and Polynesian populations. It produces a sense of *Tagata Pasifika*, or the ‘identity as a Pacific nation’.⁴

For Australia, South Pacific has been the region of geopolitical and geo-strategic importance, and it has as Jim Rolfe describes done, ‘heavy lifting’ on part of the US. Nevertheless, South Pacific has never been high on Australia’s priority. What Australia has been doing is to keep the region under the American or the ANZUS influence. Australia has long viewed itself—and has been viewed by others, as an advocate for Western interests in the South Pacific.⁵ The strategic and geo-political goals have often been pursued through economic means by Australia.

The security challenges that the region faces relates to external as well as regional dynamics and concerns with both conventional and non-conventional threats. Vijay Naidu describes two sources of instability and challenge to regional peace,

External forces constitute one source of threat to regional stability. These include the continuation of colonial rule which has racial implications; super-power rivalry including the nuclear arms-race; and adventurism by various groups seeking material gains in the region. Another source of regional insecurity and threat to national sovereignty derives from internal pressures in the South Pacific Island States. Internal forces include social and economic divisions within island societies; the demands from extremist groups for various policies that support their interests in society; and the emergence of democratic forces which many island states find difficulties in accepting.⁶

The security challenges emanating from the extra-regional powers continue to be the state-centric traditional security concerns while for the PICs, the security threats revolve more around non- conventional threats focused on the needs of people and their societies. The majority of the PICs (except Fiji, PNG, and Tonga) have even rejected the possession of defence and military forces. As Herr, explains, “The Islands have focused on “human” or non-traditional

⁴ Jim Rolfe, “The South Pacific: Regional Security and The Role Of External Actors”. 2015. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/strategic-studies/documents/strategic-background-papers/24-the-south-pacific-regional-security-and-the-role-of-external-actors.pdf>

⁵ A Bergin & R Herr, “Our Near Abroad: Australia and Pacific Islands Regionalism, Strategy”, 30 November, **Australian Strategic Policy Institute**, Canberra, 2011.

⁶ Vijay Naidu, “The South Pacific: Issues of Regional Security”, Sovereignty and Ethnic Freedom. **Peace Research**, 22/23, Vol. 22, No. 4, 1990, pp. 51-56.

security over state or traditional security at the regional level. Consequently, linking the two approaches to security has proved challenging at many levels".⁷

Regional Co-operation in the South Pacific and the Challenges of Sub-regionalism

It is important to discuss regional cooperation as part of South Pacific geopolitics because, in view of the smallness and remoteness, the regional organisations often become a platform for an effective presence and collective voices of the PICs on various issues of regional and international significance. Through regional platforms, the PICs gain weightage while negotiating with external powers, and pursuing international diplomacy. It is also a source to maximise their economic potential and work closely with Australia and New Zealand. By far Pacific Island Forum remains the most important organisation in the region and Australia has been able to influence its agenda and decision-making to a large extent.

Nevertheless, regional co-operation in the South Pacific has remained problematic. Greg Fry writes that "Regional cooperation in the South Pacific has become a highly complex political process"⁸. The initial efforts towards regional co-operation were through South Pacific Commission (1947) which included western colonial powers and excluded the PICs from its membership. As the PICs started gaining independence the necessity for an indigenous organisation resulted in the formation of the South Pacific Forum in 1971 which was rechristened as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). SPF has a vast network of sub-groups for economic development SPEC, fisheries management (FFA), Environmental management (SPREP), South Pacific Forum Secretariat and the University of the South Pacific.

In recent, South Pacific regional cooperation has further broadened as PICs have been empowered by a greater choice of non-traditional external partners. the disenchantment with Australia and New Zealand has led the PICs form the Pacific Small Islands Developing States (PSIDS), which was formed under the leadership of Fiji after the 2006 coup leading to economic sanctions by Australia. This Melanesian spearhead group excludes Australia and New Zealand and has added a new challenge to regional geopolitics. The external powers like China, France, and Russia extend their support for PSIDS. To Australia's further displeasure PSIDS has managed to represent as the 'Asia Pacific group' at the UN instead of 'Asia Group' which operated under the auspices of PIF. PSIDS is also the main Pacific body representing South Pacific at various international platforms on environmental issues.⁹ Nevertheless, the biggest challenge for the

⁷ R.A. Herr, 1986. "Regionalism, Strategic Denial and South Pacific Security". *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1986, p 18.

⁸ Greg Fry, "The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation". In: R. Thakur (Eds.), London, The South Pacific, Palgrave Macmillan, 1991, p. 169.

⁹ Joanne Wallis, "Crowded and complex: The changing geopolitics of the South Pacific". *The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Limited*. 2017, p. 15. www.aspistrategist.org.au

South Pacific regional co-operation is that it is not self-funded. The regional organisations fully depend on extra-regional powers, in addition to Australia and New Zealand for day to day running. Hence, they become a platform for the geopolitical powerplay.

The Regional Security Issues and the Geopolitical Environment in the South Pacific

South Pacific has been known for its atmosphere of relative peace for most of the time. However, the region and the PICs have never been devoid of various kinds of conventional and non-conventional threats. The interstate conflict has been almost absent but the non-conventional security threats and threat perceptions have been present in the region and have dominated the regional geopolitics. As Pande suggests "the regional threat perception means anything that force them (PICs) to compromise with their political and economic sovereignty, and their control over regional development".¹⁰ Even the nuclear threat that the region faced was not so much about being attacked by nuclear weapons but more about the environmental and health hazards because of nuclear testing and dumping.

By the end of the 1980s, the previously dominant picture of the peaceful South Pacific became a thing of the past as several conditions of instability came to the fore. The island of Bougainville faced violent, unrests against PNG due to environmental depletion as a result of excessive copper mining. As the Australian aid was being directed by the PNG to suppress the Bougainville unrest, it became a cause of big resentment in the region. For Australia on the other hand, the Indonesian presence in the West Papua was a matter of concern and led it to have its foothold in the PNG.¹¹ The 1980s also saw the resurgence of the self-determination movement in the New Caledonia from France. These incidents had a huge spillover in the region as the PICs sided with the indigenous populations.

One of the most eminent challenges that the South Pacific has been facing is the environmental threat which is the biggest challenge for regional security. Intriguingly, most of the environmental threats that the region faces are not caused by the PICs but by the countries outside the region. Be it the global warming, dumping of hazardous wastes, nuclear testing, resources depletion or overfishing, all were caused by the extra-regional powers. As the UN report says, "the people of the Pacific islands may be among the smallest contributors to climate change, but they are on the frontline of its impacts".¹² Hence, the

¹⁰ Amba Pande, *Regional Security in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific: Prospects of Nuclear Free Zone*, New Delhi: Authors Press, 2002, p. 105.

¹¹ Amba Pande, "Australia's Policy Towards South Pacific with Special Reference to PNG and Fiji", in D. Gopal (ed), *Australia in the Emerging World Order*, Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2002

¹² UN, "Informing Action: Pacific Nations Unite on The Environment", UN Environment Program, 2017, [Https://Www.UneP.Org/News-And-Stories/Story/Informing-Action-Pacific-Nations-Unite-Environment](https://Www.UneP.Org/News-And-Stories/Story/Informing-Action-Pacific-Nations-Unite-Environment)

environmental issues stirred up the regional geopolitics and galvanised the PICs to come on a common platform and address their challenges through regional cooperation. The nuclear test by France and the US in the 1980s is a good example of anti-nuclear activism of the PICs and a region-wide anti-nuclear movement. Although the PICs depended heavily on the western powers, for aid and economic assistance, they did not hesitate to pull France to the International court of justice against atmospheric testing and signed the Treaty of Rarotonga also known as the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone treaty in 1985.¹³ Another, regional issue that came to head during the 1980s was Tuna Poaching and drift net fishing. The distant water fishing nations (DWFN) were overfishing and juvenile fishing Tuna resources from the EEZs of the PICs. Under the auspices of the Forum Fisheries Agency, the PICs took the issue of drift net fishing and jurisdictional issues of EEZ to the UN. This incident caused great discontent in the US-PIC relations.¹⁴ Although known as the western lake the past PICs did not hesitate to raise anti-western voices and direct the whole anti-nuclear and anti-fisheries movement towards the Western powers. Another significant move was the signing of the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific (SPREP) for co-operation on sustainable development. In the past couple of decades, rising sea levels, increasingly extreme weather conditions, and the daily challenges have led to large scale emigration of Pacific islanders. It has resulted in large scale activism in the PICs and they have emerged as the front-runner advocates for urgent action on the environment. The UN has launched a program called INFORM involving the 14 PICs to build capacity in environmental data gathering and sharing around the region.¹⁵

Another major regional challenge has been the Economic vulnerability of the Island countries. Some of the major features of the PIC economy are small in size with limited natural resources, remoteness from major markets and centre of production, small markets, narrow-based exports, unfavourable balance of trade, heavy dependence on aid and vulnerability to external shocks.¹⁶ The PICs have been subsistence economies with fishing and agriculture as their main source of livelihood. All of these affect economic growth and can lead to a high degree of economic volatility. The declaration of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in 1982 under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, gave a new sense of power and authority to the PICs yet could not generate the desired revenues for them. For much of the region, aid and development assistance are required for state survival, and hence, clearly relates the economy to the regional geopolitics. For the future, tourism holds encouraging prospects, but the lack of

¹³ Pande, op.cit.

¹⁴ Ramesh Thakur, *The South Pacific: Problems, Issues and Prospects*, UK; Palgrave Macmillan, 1991; Wallis, op.cit.

¹⁵ UN, "Informing Action: Pacific Nations Unite on The Environment", UN Environment Program, 2017, [Https://Www.UneP.Org/News-And-Stories/Story/Informing-Action-Pacific-Nations-Unite-Environment](https://Www.UneP.Org/News-And-Stories/Story/Informing-Action-Pacific-Nations-Unite-Environment).

¹⁶ World Bank, "The World Bank in Pacific Islands", 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview> ; James Mak, "Pacific Island Economies. Center for Pacific Islands Studies", https://hawaii.edu/cpis/wp-content/uploads/Pacific_Island_Economies.pdf

infrastructures and internal security is a big impediment in the development of the tourism sector. Migration and remittances are yet another sector that may lead to economic development for the PICs but the COVID crisis poses major challenges for the industry.

As ADB points out, one of the major reasons for the inadequate and stagnated development of most of the island states arises from poor governance. The past few decades saw a decline in the democratic culture, and the state's authority to govern. The 'Melanesian arc of instability' witnessed several coups and political upheavals since the 1980s. Fiji has had five military coups since 1988, Solomon Island had coups and ethnic tensions emerging as a failed state.¹⁷ The collapse of law and order and mutinies of armed forces in PNG also had a major impact on the geopolitics of the region. As a spillover of these incidents, there were interventions and sanctions by Australia and New Zealand in an attempt to restore law and order and stability in the region which in turn gave space to extra-regional powers.

Following the 2006 coup, Australia and New Zealand imposed severe economic sanctions against Fiji. In turn, Fiji adopted a more independent approach under its Look North policy inching towards China, Malaysia, and other countries.¹⁸ As the Fijian Minister, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola pointed out 'Fiji no longer looks to Australia and New Zealand but to the world.' The Fijian coup leader Bainimarama visited Beijing and Russia in 2013, which resulted in the signing of several agreements. Fiji's drift away from Australia and New Zealand was also followed by the PNG, a member of the APEC and Non-aligned movement. Over the past five years, its dependence on Australian aid has been reduced by PNGs own growth. Thus, both PNG and Fiji have expanded their presence on the international stage, taking them further outside the sphere of influence of Australia, New Zealand, and other traditional partners. The weakening of ANZUS further undermined Australia's position.¹⁹ These developments have impacted the regional order and have generated a complex geopolitical situation in the South Pacific. "The Boe Declaration of 2018 is an important call by the PIF countries towards 'a more complex environment with an expanded concept of security and calls for closer coordination in the Pacific region."²⁰

In the recent, the threats of terrorism appear imminent in the south Pacific. There are reports of the use of PICs by the al-Qaeda operatives for access to international transit. The presence of Islamic fundamentalism in the nearby

¹⁷ Asian Development Bank, ADB, Annual Report 2004, p. 43. <Https://Www.Adb.Org/Documents/Adb-Annual-Report-2004>.

¹⁸ Amba Pande, "India and Its Diaspora in Fiji", *Diaspora Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2011, pp. 125-138.

¹⁹ R Ayson, "The "Arc of Instability" and Australia's Strategic Policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2, 2007, pp. 215-231.

²⁰ Boe Declaration on Regional Security, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

Indonesian and Philippines viewed as future vulnerabilities.²¹

Interests of External Powers in the South Pacific Region

The External actors have been present in the South Pacific region historically as explorers, traders, colonisers, missionaries, and settlers. The US, UK, Germany, and France colonised the region with Australia and New Zealand as their proxies. Even after the PICs gained independence, the former colonial masters continued to hold their authority as economic partners and aid donors. During WW 2, the South Pacific became the hotspot of the Pacific Wars and US bases operated from many island countries such as Fiji. In the aftermath of WW2, the perceived threat of Japan using these island countries as a steppingstone to attack Australia and New Zealand or challenge the western dominance in the region loomed large. Australia, New Zealand, and US collective security treaty ANZUS was signed in 1951. Traditionally, Australia, New Zealand, the US, and France, have worked as close partners, with several new countries increasing their presence in the region, most notably China, Russia, Indonesia, Japan, and India.²² Yet, the South Pacific region was never under a direct threat from the external powers.

The US has been the most important external power in the region and still has its strong foothold in the Micronesian subregion. Although the US is said to have a benign interest in the region, its nuclear and military bases in Australia and Guam has been dominated by the military focussed security. The US has pursued its interests in the region through Australia under *Burden Sharing* and throughout the cold war era, pursued *strategic denial* towards the spread of communism, as in other parts of Asia.²³ However, US activities related to illegal fishing, nuclear testing, refusal to sign the Treaty of Rarotonga, and support for France created a huge discontent against it throughout the region. The so-called *American Lake/ANZUS Lake* withered away for some years. Following the demise of the cold war, the US scaled down its presence further only to renew during Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State. In 2011, 'pivot' to the Asia-Pacific' was announced, by the US, followed by a series of high-level official visits, active multilateral diplomacy, increased strategic military deployments, and increased aid, trade and investment ties through USAID. Secretary of State Clinton attended the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Rarotonga in 2012 reviving the US presence.²⁴

²¹ Troy E. Mitchell, "Protecting the South Pacific", 2018.

<https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2018/2/27/protecting-the-south-pacific>

²² Jim Rolfe, "The South Pacific: Regional Security and The Role Of External Actors". 2015. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/strategic-studies/documents/strategic-background-papers/24-the-south-pacific-regional-security-and-the-role-of-external-actors.pdf>

²³ R.A. Herr, "Regionalism, Strategic Denial and South Pacific Security". *The Journal of Pacific History*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1986, pp. 170-182.

²⁴ Charles Edel, "Small dots, large strategic areas: US interests in the South Pacific" The Lowy Institute, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/small-dots-large-strategic-areas-us-interests-south-pacific>; Hong Say, "US Strategic Objectives in the South Pacific Challenged by Sino-American

France is another colonial power in the Pacific which still holds territories like New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis and Futuna. France had an uncomfortable relationship with the PICs and was considered as the main culprit, because of its nuclear tests till the mid-1990s and its attempt to hold on to New Caledonia. However, by ending its nuclear tests and signing the Matignon Agreements in 1988 and Noumea Accord in 1998, to settle the self-determination in New Caledonia, France sought to bolster its image and deepen its engagement with the PICs. It has invested for the benefit of the indigenous Kanak population and has adopted a more conciliatory approach towards Fiji after the 2006 coup, has provided an active support to the Melanesian Spearhead Group, and has taken a favourable stance for the PICs on climate change. France also plays a key role in facilitating the European Union's presence in the region.²⁵

The withdrawal of US interest in the South Pacific in the past few decades gave ample space for China to expand its presence in the region. Beijing has constantly expanded its diplomatic presence and development cooperation, initially driven by its competition with Taiwan and later to increase its strategic weight. It signed protocols 2 and 3 of the treaty of Rarotonga in 1987, has established diplomatic presence with most of the PICs, has pursued its chequebook diplomacy unhindered, has provided significant concessional loan packages and debt relief, has increased trade manifold, and has invested in infrastructure projects heavily in the past few decades. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Fiji in November 2014 to meet with leaders of those PICs that recognise mutual respect and common development through cooperative initiatives like China – Pacific Islands Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in April 2006, followed by a second forum in November 2013. China provides support to key regional organisations, particularly the Pacific Islands Forum and has a soft power presence through television and Mandarin centres.²⁶ Several of the PICs are part of China's *One Belt One road initiative* (OBOR) and MOUs have already been signed.

Russia is another, major power that has a growing presence in the South Pacific region. During the cold war, the Soviet overtures in the 1980s with the signing of fishing deals and other incentives had generated moderate responses from the PICs. In recent Russia expressed a renewed interest with aid payments, partly for diplomatic recognition for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, after their independence from Georgia. It succeeded in getting recognition from Nauru and Tuvalu in 2009 and 2011 (but later withdrawn). Russian assertiveness is also due to its desire to emerge as a Pacific Ocean power. It has increased its co-operation

Competition" Xian Strategic Analysis Paper. 2019. <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/us-strategic-objectives-in-the-south-pacific-challenged-by-sino-american-competition>

²⁵ Wallis, op.cit.; Frederic Grare, "France, the Other Indo-Pacific Power". 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/21/france-other-indo-pacific-power-pub-83000>

²⁶ Sriparna Pathak, "The Pacific Island Nations: Engagements with India and China". *FPRC Journal*, No. 1, 2018, pp. 33-47; Hong Say, "US Strategic Objectives in the South Pacific Challenged by Sino-American Competition" Xian Strategic Analysis Paper. 2019. <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/us-strategic-objectives-in-the-south-pacific-challenged-by-sino-american-competition>

with Fiji, with a defence agreement, a mutual visa exemption scheme, and agreements on tackling money laundering, public health assistance and university exchanges.²⁷

Japan, the initial colonial power, and a World War 2 enemy, increased its favourable presence since the 1970s through aid, trade, fishing, and diplomatic presence. Japan's interest is driven by economic as well as strategic considerations, and free access to sea lines of communication to Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Southeast Asia. It is also driven by the desire of having the support of the PICs in the UN for security council membership. Japan is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum, provided medical and technical support and has held triennial Japan–Forum summits, referred to as the PALM (Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting) since 1997.²⁸

India has been a relatively new player in the South Pacific, but has a deep strategic interest as part of its emergence as an Asia-Pacific power, manifested in its 'Look East' policy. India traditionally had close ties with PNG and Fiji. Fiji has a large Indian diaspora that was created under the Indenture Labour system during British colonialism. With its increased presence, India announced an annual grant of US\$ 100,000, which increased to US\$ 125,000 in 2009. Between 2005 and 2012, Indian development assistance was nearly US\$ 50 million in the form of Lines of Credit and over US\$ 11 million in grants (Balakrishnan 2015). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Fiji in November 2014 where he held a summit with the PICs and inaugurated the Forum for India-Pacific Island Cooperation (FIPIC) for cooperation and dialogue on issues of common concern, such as climate change, technical co-operation, human resource development and many other incentives. As Pande says, "FIPIC can provide an important bridge for deepening the economic, political and social engagement in future. India is aiming at a wide range of co-operation based on shared aspirations and interests to build a dynamic relationship with the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) which correspondingly solidifies its position as a geopolitical power in the regional power balance".²⁹ Maitrayee Shilpa Kishore, in a detailed report for VIF, writes, "the current political climate is best suited for India to increase its engagement with the region, bilaterally and in collaboration with other partners".³⁰

The Current Geopolitical Scenario in the South Pacific and the Future Prospects

The above discussion illustrates that the remoteness and smallness have not prevented the PICs and the South Pacific from the involvement of external

²⁷ Wallis, op.cit.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Amba Pande, "India and Pacific Islands Region: Building New Partnerships". *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1015, pp. 284-289.

³⁰ Maitrayee Shilpa Kishore, "Geopolitics of the South Pacific and Opportunities for India", *National Security*, Vivekananda International Foundation Vol. 2, No. 3, 2019, p. 367.

powers in the regional politics giving rise to a complex geopolitical environment. The external powers have competed for the regional influence which opened new opportunities of engagement for the PICs. At the same time, the domestic and regional developments opened space for the external powers for further engagement with the PICs. Of course, Australia's stakes have been the highest given its strategic proximity, but it has represented the interests of the western powers especially the US. Its prime concern has been 'to ensure that no power hostile to Western interests establishes a strategic foothold in the region and on the maritime approaches'.³¹ As a result, Australia could never be complacent towards the geopolitical challenges of the region and interestingly, has often pursued its strategic goals through the means of economic assistance.

The geopolitical environment of the South Pacific has been mainly driven by two major factors in the past as well as in the present. First, is the involvement of a multitude of external powers because of their own political and strategic interests. Moreover, there existed a sharp-edged competition between the western and non-western powers for increased influence. It converted the South Pacific into an arena of great power rivalry. During WW2, Japan's advance in the Pacific demonstrated the region's vulnerabilities. In the post-war era security treaties like ANZUS were signed and several economic incentives, aid and efforts of regional co-operation were put into place by Australia led Western powers to keep the PICs under the Western security umbrella. The external vulnerabilities resurfaced again during the Cold War when the former USSR and Libya started their overtures in the South Pacific. USSR established diplomatic relations with Tonga, signed fishing deals with Kiribati (1985) and Vanuatu (1987) and offered other incentives to the PICs. 'Soviets are coming' triggered a sharp reaction among the western bloc leading to critical policy changes. The ANZUS increased its presence in the regional security architecture and much greater financial and technical incentives were offered to the PICs. It also led the US to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the fishing dispute with the PICs by signing a multilateral fishing agreement. A similar kind of anxiety appeared to have resurfaced again as a reaction to China's expanding involvement in the South Pacific. The threat perception that China's growing regional activism could destabilise the pro-US /Australia power balance was a factor for the Asia-Pacific Pivot', and Clinton's subsequent visit and participation in the PIF meeting. It very well reflects the counterbalancing China approach.

The second factor that drives the South Pacific geopolitics relates to the developments within the region that have created space for external intervention beyond the traditional security partners. The most important development in this regard was five Coups that has took place in Fiji. The economic sanctions imposed by Australia and New Zealand made Fiji look towards China and some other powers for support and co-operation. Fiji's Look North move gave the much-desired space to China and other external powers, to increase their

³¹ Defence White Paper. Department of defence, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. 2016.

foothold in the region. Moreover, the economic vulnerabilities of the PICs have also led them to increasingly engage with alternative partners whose interests might be inimical to the Western bloc. Some of the PICs appear to be taking advantage of this in order to access aid, concessional loans, military support and international influence. As a counter reaction, significant renovations and regional involvement by the Western bloc with increased incentives, and agreements were witnessed, like Biketawa Declaration and the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) for direct intervention, and Enhanced Cooperation Programme by Australia with Papua New Guinea. The continued tussle between the Melanesian Spearhead Group and Australia has facilitated the increased Chinese and Russian presence who have their own strategic and economic goals.

There is hardly any doubt that the South Pacific geopolitical scenario has undergone a paradigm shift in the past few decades. It is no more a Western Lake. China quite deftly turned the power vacuum created by waning Western interests to its advantage and has developed deep bilateral relations with PICs. The geopolitical shift also got reflected when in 2018, the Federated States of Micronesia introduced a resolution to end the compact with the US instead of 2023. Speculations were rife about China stepping in as a guarantor of security. Any such move would make American bases at Guam vulnerable and would have great strategic implications for Australia.³² Under such circumstances, a situation similar to South China Sea could have been possible. The region is also a hot-spot of other power rivalries with the presence of Taiwan, Indonesia, France, Japan, and India. In this state-centric conventional security concerns of the extra-regional powers, the non-conventional regional challenges too have taken new forms along with environmental, and economic challenges. The threats of sea-lane piracy, drug and human trafficking, smuggling, money laundering, illegal logging and terrorism loom large over the region. Illegal fishing and the management of Tuna resources remains a challenge that might require new platforms of cooperative collaboration.

Nevertheless, Beijing's economic cooperation with PICs suffered a significant loss of goodwill and the initial euphoria of China's cheque-book diplomacy, frittered away over time. The extraction of raw material by large Chinese corporations, closer of local companies, use of Chinese workers by their firms, illegal Chinese immigrants in wholesale and retail trade as well as the service sector, loss of jobs for the locals and above all the Chinese debt trap has presented a major challenge for the PICs and has led to deep resentment. There were anti-Chinese riots and destruction of Chinese business districts in PNG, Tonga and the Solomon Islands in 2006. As Ronald Seib points out, "It is obvious that economic cooperation with the island states has hardly led to the "win-win" situation promised by Beijing. This means that China's acclaimed South-South model of cooperation (the "Beijing Consensus") as an alternative

³² Wallis, op.cit.

to Western development concepts has no empirical basis. As with other economic players, self-interest stands in the foreground".³³

Against this backdrop, the rise of Quad (India, U.S., Australia, and Japan) can be viewed as a significant development for the South Pacific or in fact for the whole of Indo-Pacific. The coming together of liberal democratic stakeholders of the Indo-Pacific under the Quad umbrella has the ability to provide stability to the South Pacific region. In its initial declaration, the Quad group highlighted its aim as 'promote freedom, liberty and democracy and to make sure liberalism prevails over totalitarianism in the region'. Nevertheless, it clearly has a security agenda to countervail China. Moreover, democracy has been a sensitive issue for several of the PICs and has dragged them into the Chinese lap. The rhetoric of 'Democracy as a foreign concept versus the indigenous culture' has often been used to generate a regional response against the economic sanctions after toppling of democratically elected governments in the past³⁴. Hence, taking a pro-democratic stand (at least overtly) while dealing with PICs might not be the correct path. The pro-democratic agenda can be pursued covertly through other diplomatic means.

The Quad can have a more meaningful presence in the South Pacific if it can accommodate the non-conventional security concerns of the PICs and promote cooperation in response to natural disasters, Pandemic situations, human security issues, money laundering, trafficking and terrorism. One of the most gigantic concerns of economic vulnerability and the debt trap is something that can really go a long way in building partnerships with the PICs and countervailing China. In this regard developing a common pool or a regional bank like institution to help the PICs pay back their loans to China and avail development assistance in the future can prove to be a gamechanger. All the Quad members are already providing development assistance to the PICs. A coordinated effort to have a common pool can be a great move ahead. Some other democratic nations like France, and New Zealand can also be regional partners of Quad. It is surely, not going to be a simple task considering Australia's heavy economic dependence on China and lure of OBOR for several of the South Pacific countries.

The Quad outreach towards the PICs should be both as a donor as well as a partner. The PICs can have something like an observer status in Quad for the South Pacific region. Quad@ South Pacific can be the new lynchpin of the regional geopolitical environment. Its clear, consistent and sustained presence can crowd out, the economic and political influence of China and curtail the future penetration by potentially hostile powers. The PICs possess a stronghold over the marine resources holding a vast potential for the blue economy and each one has one vote in the UN and many other international bodies. It makes them

³³ Roland Seib, "China in the South Pacific: No New Hegemon on the Horizon", PRIF-Reports No. 90, 2009, https://www.hskf.de/fileadmin/HSKF/hskf_downloads/prif90.pdf

³⁴ Amba Pande, "Coups, Constitutions and the Struggle for Power: Contours of Racial Politics in Fiji, in Manmohini Kaul & Anushree Chakraborty (eds.) **India's Look East to Act East Policy: Tracking the Opportunities and Challenges in the Indo-Pacific**, New Delhi, Pentagon Press, 2016.

diplomatically and economically extremely relevant. The Quad presence with a peaceful geopolitical environment in the South Pacific can open new vistas of cooperation between the external powers and the PICs.

THE WIDER NORTH AND THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE NORTH PACIFIC: CRYOPOLITICS

Ebru Caymaz¹ and Fahri Erenel²

Introduction

Asia-Pacific is one of the most important regions in world politics and the 21st century is widely regarded as the Asian century since America's global leadership is being directly challenged for the first time upon the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the states such as the USA, China, Japan and Russia take an active role in the power struggle in this region, India also closely monitors the recent developments, as well as several European countries, which attach importance to Asia-Pacific relations.

This chapter focuses on the northern part of the Pacific since several tensions have been experienced among the different actors due to sea ice loss and the emergence of new economic opportunities accordingly. Therefore, combined with the effects of globalization, the circumpolar North has also turned into an international region underscored by the major interest on a global scale. The main aim of this chapter is to further discuss the concept of the wider north and cryopolitics within the context of the new geopolitics of the North Pacific.

The New Geopolitics of the North Pacific

'The Geographical Pivot of History' was introduced by Mackinder a hundred years ago through which he defended the idea that the control and containment of Euro-Asia were essential for power and therefore it meant control over the world since the heartland of the region was pivotal for the balance on a global scale. Although that view is challenged by stating '*Mackinder's contribution is a good illustration of... a limited and dubious Western-centric theory of history to claim a neutral and informed intellectual basis for what is, in fact, a very biased or situated view*',³ it is noteworthy to mention the influence of this assessment on subsequent studies defining the term 'world order' since Mackinder has taken attention to the discussions of the late Victorian period.⁴

Mackinder's model places Eurasia at the strategic centre that outer crescents are instrumental to containment while Eurasia lays on strategic inner within the

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³ C. Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics*, London, Routledge, 2006.

⁴ P. Venier, "The Geographical Pivot of History and Early Twentieth Century Geopolitical Culture", *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No.4, December, 2004, pp. 330-336.