

The Political Situation in the South Pacific

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The huge oceanic region encompassed by the Northern Mariana Islands in the North, the tiny island of Pitcairn in the East, Australia and New Zealand in the South and Papua New Guinea in the West consists of more than three thousand islands. They form the three cultural regions of Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia. In the 19th century most of these archipelagos were under the rule of the colonial powers of Great Britain, France, Germany and the USA. Only during the early 1960s did the decolonization process begin in the South Pacific.

The most important island states of the region are Tahiti (French Polynesia), the Cook Islands, Western Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Kiribati, Tuvalu, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. The decolonization of this region, often described as an "aquatic continent", lagged behind that of Africa and Asia. Vanuatu, for example, became independent only in 1980 and New Caledonia and Tahiti still remain overseas territories of France. The majority of the Micronesian territories of the USA did not obtain independence until 1986.

In comparison to other Third World regions, the decolonization of the South Pacific region took place relatively recently, i.e. during the past thirty years, making it therefore the last region to go through the global wave of decolonization.

During the Reagan Administration, the U.S. shifted its political and economic orientation slowly towards the so-called Pacific Basin. The region has gradually been coming back into the limelight, just as it was the center of world attention during World War II. The European countries became concerned that the USA would get too preoccupied with this promising region. However, the concept of the Pacific Basin historically referred to nations such as the USA, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, the ASEAN member states, Australia, New Zealand and even the coastal countries of South America. Little attention was paid to the South Pacific and its tiny island states.

One of the reasons for this low profile was the absence of the East-West conflict in the region, because communism did not gain acceptance. The South Pacific, therefore, used to be a conflict-free enclave within the divided world of the later Cold War years. In addition, the political insignificance of most of these island states was enhanced by their "have-not" economic conditions (for example, the lesser developed countries of Vanuatu and Western Samoa). They have heavily depended on foreign aid, struggled with rapid population growth, lacked economic resources, and as a result of these factors, have been without political significance.

However, this perception has considerably changed recently. Nowadays, the rising political and economic status of the region and its increased role in world politics can readily be observed. Three points are especially worth discussing:

1. What are the reasons for the greater importance attributed to the South Pacific in the 1980s?
2. What are the characteristics of the present political situation in the region and what are the likely future trends?
3. What impact did the end of the Cold War have on the region?

1. The Growing Importance of the South Pacific

Since the beginning of the 1980s the East-West conflict has increasingly influenced politics in the region. Three developments in particular are to be noted:

Firstly, the reluctance of the USA to recognize the new maritime law resulted in a loss of its political influence in the region. American tuna trawlers continued to harvest the rich fishing grounds in the 200 nautical mile zone (Extended Economic Zone) of the states of the region without asking permission and without paying any compensation. This created the impression that the rich United States exploit the poor societies of the South Pacific. The interception and subsequent confiscation of an American trawler by the Solomon Islands led to diplomatic disturbances in 1984. Washington's image in the region was damaged. It took until 1988 to agree on a multilateral fisheries treaty that solved the problem to the satisfaction of the parties concerned.

This solution was only made possible after several island states decided to play the Soviet card. Kiribati and Vanuatu signed fisheries agreements with Moscow in 1985 and 1987 respectively. At the same time Libya, Vietnam, China and North Korea gained influence in the region, much to the dismay of the U.S. government. For the first time socialist countries acquired influence in what was formerly the preserve of Western countries.

Secondly, the nuclear tests of the French in Mururoa (Tahiti) have been a constant source of annoyance to all states in the region. These tests led the South Pacific nations which form a loose association, the "South Pacific Forum", to proclaim the "South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone" (SPNFZ) in 1985. Moscow and Beijing were quick to recognize the zone while Washington and Paris refuse to sign the treaty.¹ For the region this treaty is of fundamental ecological and political importance.

Thirdly, the political developments in New Zealand and Australia should be pointed out. Except for the most recent past in New Zealand, both countries have had Labour governments since the middle of the 1980s. New Zealand's Labour Prime Ministers (Lange, Palmer and Moore) followed an explicit policy of keeping their country free from nuclear weapons. Even New Zealand's new conservative Prime Minister, Jim Bolger, has decided to stick for the time being to the policy of his predecessors.²

American ships, whether nuclear-powered and/or carrying nuclear arms, have been banned from New Zealand's harbors since 1984. The ANZUS Treaty, signed in 1951, showed its first cracks. In retaliation the U.S. cancelled its military cooperation treaty with New Zealand. Presently only the USA and Australia still work together and global security in the South Pacific has worsened.

At the same time, leftist trade unions in Australia and New Zealand supported the founding of Labour parties in the island states. The region was on its way to establish a new political profile.

In 1987 the coup d'état in Fiji - the first in any of the island states - brought to a climax the resistance of the indigenous people to the recently elected democratic government, which was mainly supported by the Labour Party with descendants of Indian immigrants.³

These three developments, enhanced further by geo-strategic factors, have been responsible for the growing importance of the region since the middle of the 1980s.⁴

2. The Present Political Situation in the South Pacific

The present situation inevitably has been influenced by the dynamic developments already described.

Firstly, the Soviet Union continues to make efforts to get a foothold in the South Pacific. A second fisheries agreement with Vanuatu is being negotiated. In March 1990 the USSR achieved one of its long-term goals and opened a regional embassy in Papua New Guinea (PNG). In June of the same year a bilateral fisheries agreement with PNG was also signed.⁵ Washington's recent announcement that it will reduce its armed forces in Asia by 10 per cent seems to indicate that the policy of "strategic denial" is losing its importance in the South Pacific as well.

Secondly, the exploitation of their natural resources has become a pivotal question to all countries and has increasingly been discussed as a common point of interest in the South Pacific Forum (SPF). At the moment Japan and Taiwan are under "political fire" for their driftnet fishing. The states associated with the SPF are requesting Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to conclude fisheries treaties similar to the one agreed to by the USA. Japan announced the end of driftnet fishing for the 1990/91 season, while South Korea has already stopped it.

Thirdly, despite increasing protests, France continues with its nuclear tests in Mururoa. To counter its poor image, Paris has started a diplomatic offensive which includes plans for the dubious granting of independence to New Caledonia (Matignon Accord).

Fourthly, Australia and New Zealand have both modified their foreign policies in the region since they lost considerable ground due to their tough reaction to the coup d'état in Fiji. Reacting to pressure from Washington, they, as well as Japan, have increased political, economic and security cooperation with the island states (except Fiji). At present the South Pacific seems less challenged by external threats than by internal destabilization, as a closer look at the following countries Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia and Tonga will confirm:

Fiji, the informal political spokesman for the archipelago states, recently experienced considerable political turmoil. The indigenous Fijians are no longer satisfied with the legacy of their 1970 constitution because 17 years after independence power went to an elected Labour government dominated by Indians. The indigenous people rebelled against their Indian countrymen, who at that time represented more than 48 per cent (indigenous Fijians 46 per cent) of the population. The coup d'état was only the climax of this rebellion. The newly elected coalition government (the Labour Party and the New Federation Party) was overthrown in May 1987. Since then Fiji has had an interim government that has appropriated unlimited and uncontrolled powers in the absence of a constitution and a parliament.

The new constitution proposed in July 1990 is very controversial as it ensures that the indigenous Fijians will have a numerical majority over the Indian population in Parliament.⁶ Elections announced for the end of 1991 have presently been postponed to 1992 or later.⁷

Fiji is at a difficult crossroad in trying on the one hand to revitalize its culture, tradition and chiefly order and on the other hand to accelerate modernization and economic development.⁸ In connection with their deep belief in Christianity

the indigenous people struggle for an identity and against domination and the associated feeling of inferiority. The method chosen to exclude the strong Indian community is considered undemocratic by some when compared with Western standards.⁹ According to the self-concept of the indigenous elite, however, this method is the only possible way to safeguard the existence of the Fijians.

Fiji's present instability can be seen as a typical result of its decolonization experience. The outcome of this internal political crisis cannot be gaged yet.

Vanuatu, a tiny island state, was governed jointly by Great Britain and France until 1980. It is at present struggling to determine its future political structure.¹⁰ The years 1988 and 1989 were characterized by a severe political and constitutional crisis when the President substituted a legally elected government by an illegitimate one and then was sent to prison for this.¹¹ Vanuatu's contacts to the Soviet Union, Libya, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua and North Korea have caused international concern. The internal crisis seems to be solved for the moment but future developments are very uncertain.¹² The elections in November 1991 will certainly cause new political unrest.¹³

Papua New Guinea, with 3.6 million inhabitants, is faced with a serious crisis.¹⁴ In mid-1989 the biggest copper mine of the country, on the island of Bougainville, had to be closed as a result of demands for considerable compensation by local landowners. They were led by militants like Francis Ona and Sam Kauna. As their demands could not be fulfilled, the militants, with some local support, started a civil war against the authorities of the central government.¹⁵ Since 1990, when the government forces retreated, the province of North Solomons has been controlled by the "Bougainville Revolutionary Army" (BRA).¹⁶ The closure of the copper mine alone meant a loss of 17 per cent in national revenue and 40 per cent in export earnings.

The operation of Ok Tedi and Porgera mines (copper and gold) were temporarily endangered, too, as the spirit of Bougainville spread over to the mainland. The central government has been unable to stop the factionalization of the country. A peaceful solution is unlikely. The so-called "Endeavour Accord" of 5 August, 1990 envisaged an end to the economic blockade imposed on Bougainville as well as renewed peace talks but it could not be implemented because the rebels did not agree to the presence of the security forces that were to accompany the aid shipments.¹⁷

PNG, rich in resources, seems well on the way to poverty and to become totally dependent on World Bank and Asian Development Bank support. Internal destabilization and the associated escalation of force, however, cannot be stopped by financial support and an austerity policy. The groundwork for possible revolutionary change has already been laid.¹⁸

New Caledonia is still a French Overseas Territory but according to the Matignon Accord (Paris 1988) it should be prepared for independence by 1998. The problem lies in the fact that the French settlers are in the majority and they are not willing to leave political power and dominance to the indigenous Kanaks. After the murder of the moderate Kanak leader Tjibaou in 1989, there have been few hopes for a peaceful solution.¹⁹ Neither in Algeria nor Vietnam did France undertake the decolonization process without considerable loss of lives. Therefore the future looks dim for New Caledonia.²⁰ French diplomatic efforts in the region, which include military aid, are not only aimed at creating a better image, but also at preparing a groundwork for "eventualities" in New Caledonia.²¹

The Kingdom of Tonga has been ruled for nearly 1,000 years by a monarchy. The elderly king (71 years old) will resign in the near future and the elections in February 1990 saw a landslide victory by left-oriented candidates (six out of nine).²² Only nine out of thirty parliamentarians are elected by the people. Tonga is in the midst of a revolutionary transformation to a republic. The present appointed government created a scandal by selling passports to Hongkong Chinese (Hokkien). Akilisi Pohiva, one of the six left-oriented parliamentarians, contributed to growing political unrest by revealing such scandals. The resulting instabilities, which nearly led to a coup d'état in April 1990, will not be discussed here in detail.²³ Suffice it to say that in Tonga a political transformation is also inevitable, although the outcome is difficult to predict.

These examples of internal political destabilization could be easily supplemented by others such as in the Solomon Islands or in Western Samoa.²⁴ It becomes clear that these destabilization trends could transform the South Pacific to a crisis region in the not too distant future.

3. Impact of the Revolutionary Transformations in Europe

Finally, the consequences of the revolutionary transformations in Europe as well as of the declared end of the Cold War for the South Pacific are to be discussed.

The economic and political interest that the Soviet Union has taken in the region since the early 1980s has forced Washington to exert pressure on numerous of its allies including Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Germany to increase their presence in the region. In response, Japan announced the "Kuranari Doctrine" for the development of the South Pacific.²⁵ Japan is presently the third largest donor to the region.²⁶ In cooperation with Australia, the Federal Republic of Germany has increased its aid to the region. Apart from a few exceptions (Western Samoa, Tonga and PNG), Bonn refrains from bilateral economic cooperation and instead channels its aid via EC funds and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).²⁷ Germany's interest in the region lies, on the one hand, in participating in multilateral common efforts to develop and stabilize the region and, on the other hand, in safeguarding its access to maritime (mineral) resources.²⁸

Cold War Ending?

So far the South Pacific nations, as well as Australia and New Zealand, merely took note of the transformations in Europe rather than reacting to them. The geographical distance strengthens the perception that the impact of the end of the Cold War is restricted to Europe alone. One gets the impression that Australia and New Zealand still cannot detach themselves from the old perceptive of Cold War times. New Zealand, for its part, turned away the Soviet research vessel *Akademik Oparin* in June 1989 for "security reasons". Anchoring has been allowed at the harbour of Wellington only. Australia has tried to preserve the dominant role it has played since World War II as a proxy for the United States.²⁹ It goes without question that Canberra's claim to political dominance is much to the dislike of its smaller neighbors, especially Fiji, which has expressed its disapproval.³⁰

For the island states the end of the Cold War also means the end to their ability to play the "red card".³¹ In future the distribution of development aid will be oriented more to the needs of the respective countries than to their flexible ideological commitments.

In contrast to Europe, there is so far no bilateral disarmament treaty between the USA and the USSR for the Pacific. The withdrawal of the Soviets from the Cam Ranh naval base in Vietnam and the 10 per cent reduction in U.S. troop strength in Asia are unilateral steps.³² In other words, negotiations comparable to those in Vienna are still missing.³³ In addition, Vietnam, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and North Korea continue to be ruled by dogmatic communists.

These facts though mentioned only briefly influence the foreign policies and strategic positions of the island states and as a result the continuing presence of the Cold War attitude within the region.

Regional Dynamics

The internal instabilities described above are the basis for the inherent dynamics of the region. For the time being these dynamics block any impact the changes in Europe could have on the region. This became clear by the reactions to the tough stand Australia and New Zealand took towards the first coup d'état in the region (Fiji 1987). Both nations lost considerable influence as a consequence. Fiji was and still is the spokesman for the archipelago states.³⁴ The temporary condemnation by Australia and New Zealand caused Fiji to look for new "friends", a policy which has been followed by other neighboring states, too. France, Japan, several ASEAN states and increasingly the PRC have been discovered as alternative friends.³⁵

The growing influence of France (in Fiji, Cook Islands and Tonga) and the PRC (Fiji, PNG and Western Samoa) has been achieved at the expense of Australia and New Zealand.³⁶ New Zealand's new conservative government, with its economic problems and isolation after its exclusion from ANZUS, will focus its attention primarily on domestic problems.³⁷ Australia has tried to recover its lost diplomatic ground but it has not been successful in either PNG or Fiji. In PNG it failed to mediate between the fighting factions in the Bougainville crisis.³⁸ In retaliation, Fiji repeatedly cancelled visits by Evans, the Australian Foreign Minister.³⁹ The regional dynamics involving internal destabilization processes make the South Pacific vulnerable to disturbances in the future. In other words, the end of the Cold War and the relaxation of East-West tensions in Europe have not affected developments in the South Pacific so far. However, indirect impacts can be observed, especially the increasing influence of the PRC. The Chinese interests in the region are not easy to identify. Does China simply want to improve its relations with the tiny island states to uphold its claim to Third World status? Does it want to collect United Nations votes, or break out of its international isolation after the Tiananmen massacre, or restrict Taiwan's influence? Or is it possible that it even wants to continue the ideological battle despite the accord between the USA and the USSR?

At the moment it is not possible to answer these questions. However, the process in which internal destabilization and regional dynamics influence the political transformation of the South Pacific will become clearer in future.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1) The destruction of chemical weapons by the U.S. on Johnston Atoll since mid-1989 again met with strong disapproval by the South Pacific nations. Cf. the report on the annual meeting of the South Pacific Forum, published in: **Pacific Islands Monthly**, September 1990, pp.10-15; and **Islands Business**, September 1990, pp.22-24.
- 2) In May 1990 the then opposition leader Jim Bolger (New Zealand National Party) unexpectedly abandoned his veto against the "New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone Disarmament and Arms Control Act". That meant that even the conservatives turned against the visits by nuclear-powered and/or nuclear-armed ships. Cf. **Pacific Defense Reporter**, June 1990, p.38.
- 3) Cf. the contributions to **KAS-Auslandsinformationen**, November 1987 and May 1988.
- 4) For more details see K.M. Schellhorn, **Politische Entwicklungen im Südpazifik. Ein regionaler Überblick**, published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Internationales Institut, St. Augustin, December 1988.
- 5) This treaty, signed 6 June 1990, is expected to yield A\$ 9.5 to 11 m during the next three years, cf. **Fiji Times**, 7 June 1990.
- 6) Fiji's new constitution stipulates a fixed ethnic distribution of the 70 Parliament seats: 37 for indigenous Fijians, 27 for Indians, 1 for Rotumans and 5 for members of other races. Cf. **Fiji Times**, 25 July 1990. Full text published in **Fijis Republic Gazette**, 25 July 1990.
- 7) Cf. **Islands Business**, August 1990, pp.16-25; **Pacific Islands Monthly**, August 1990, pp.10-14.
- 8) The constitutional inclusion of the "Great Council of Chiefs" is exemplary for several neighboring states such as Vanuatu.
- 9) See the eloquent critiques by Miles Johnson, ex-president of the Fiji Law Society, cf. **Islands Business**, August 1990, p.23.
- 10) Cf. the report on the 10th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence in **Islands Business**, July 1990, pp.18-30.
- 11) Cf. K.M. Schellhorn, "Die Staatskrise in Vanuatu", in: **ASIEN**, No.33, October 1989, pp.24-37.
- 12) Cf. Karen Mangnall, "A New Direction. Vanuatu Changes Course a Decade Later", in: **Pacific Islands Monthly**, September 1990, pp.18-21; and Robert Keith-Reid, "Vanuatu's Good Time Is Dawning", in: **Islands Business**, May 1990, pp.12-18.
- 13) Cf. Helen Fraser, "Whither Vanuatu?", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, June 1990, pp.17-23. Concerning the (planned) controversial change of the constitution, see Prime Minister Walter Lini's interview in: **Islands Business**, May 1990, pp.51-52.
- 14) Cf. Rowan Callick, "The Agony of Bougainville", in: **Islands Business**, February 1990, pp.12-18.
- 15) Cf. Helen Fraser, "PNG's Bougainville Agony", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, March 1990, p.12.
- 16) Cf. Rowan Callick, "Bougainville Revolutionary Army Takes Charge", in: **Islands Business**, April 1990, pp.20-27; and Rowan Callick, "The War Port Moresby Lost", in: **Islands Business**, March 1990, pp.18-22.
- 17) Clashes between the BRA and government forces in September 1990 resulted in several casualties, cf. **Fiji Times**, 22 and 24 September 1990.
- 18) Cf. **Islands Business**, September 1990, pp.54-58; and October 1990, pp.22-31.
- 19) Cf. Helen Fraser, "After Tjibaou and Yeiweine", in: **Islands Business**, February 1990, pp.28-29.
- 20) Cf. Prof. Jean Guiart, "Why You Can't Bank on Matignon Accords to Bring Peace in New Caledonia", in: **Islands Business**, February 1990, pp.12-14.
- 21) In preparation for "eventualities" the French army command in Noumea recently changed its strategy and conducted manoeuvres in the Northern (Kanak) part of the island. Cf. Ian Mott, "Military Exercise Reflects Change in Strategic Thinking", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, May 1990, pp.16-17.
- 22) Cf. Davendra Sharma, "The People Call", in: **Islands Business**, March 1990, pp.12-14.
- 23) Cf. **Islands Business**, May 1990, pp.63-65; and **Pacific Islands Monthly**, May 1990, p.15.
- 24) For the recent domestic crisis in the Solomon Islands cf. **Islands Business**, November 1990, pp.18-23. After the successful referendum for universal suffrage in Western Samoa, which means a great step towards democratization, unrest can be expected before and after the upcoming elections in 1991.
- 25) Cf. the address by H.E. Tadashi Kuranari, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan "Working Towards 'the Pacific Future Community'", Suva, Fiji on 14 January 1987.
- 26) Cf. **Pacific Islands Monthly**, July 1990, pp.44-45.
- 27) At the moment the total German aid to the South Pacific amounts to approximately DM 15 m annually.
- 28) The 21st century will be characterized by dwindling resources of fossil energy. The South Pacific, however, is one of the areas richest in resources and German maritime technology to exploit these resources is leading worldwide.

- 29) New Zealand's role in the South Pacific is currently being debated, cf. Air Marshall Sir Eriwan Jamieson, **Friend or Ally? New Zealand at Odds with Its Past**, Pergamon Press 1990.
Australia attempted to intensify its strategic influence with the "Australian Pacific Patrol Boat Program", cf. Dora Alves, "Patrol-boats Foster Regional Stability", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, June 1990, pp.18-19. For Australia's leading role in the last annual meeting of the South Pacific Forum, cf. **Islands Business**, September 1990, pp.22-24; and **Pacific Islands Monthly**, September 1990, pp.10-15. Furthermore, Canberra supports the extension of U.S. electronics reconnaissance installations in Nurrungar and Pinegap (Australia) on the ground that otherwise the Soviet disarmament could not be supervised properly, cf. Michael Richard, "U.S. Bases More Important as Global Threat Recedes", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, February 1990, pp.12-14.
- 30) The island states have long requested a stronger involvement by the Americans to diminish Australia's role as the dominant regional power South of the equator, cf. Danial North, "U.S. Told: Pay Islands More Attention", in: **Pacific Islands Monthly**, July 1990, pp.44-45.
- 31) According to Victor Vresky, head of the South Pacific Studies Department at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow, the Soviet interest in the region is still exclusively aimed at economic cooperation, cf. Griff Johnson, "Soviet Talks on 'Trade' for Micronesia Yes", in: **Islands Business**, November 1990, p.52.
- 32) Cf. Denis Warner, "Phased Reduction in Asia", in: **Asia Pacific Defense Reporter** (former PDR), August 1990, p.14. The USA has the intention to reduce its presence in Asia by 14,000 to 15,000 soldiers within three years. For the Soviet withdrawal from Vietnam cf. M. Richardson, "Major Changes in Power Balance as Soviets Withdraw from Cam Ranh", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, March 1990, pp.13-14.
- 33) Ronald F. Lehman, Director, U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, still considers the Soviet Pacific fleet a threat, cf. the interview with M. Richardson in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, June 1990, p.43.
- 34) On the summit between the U.S. President Bush and the South Pacific Islands leaders at the end of October 1990 in Hawaii, Fiji's Interim Prime Minister Mara was unanimously elected spokesman for the island states, cf. **Fiji Times**, 29 October 1990.
- 35) For the position of France cf. Helen Fraser, "France Winning Friends and Influencing People", in: **Asia Pacific Defense Reporter**, July 1990, p.14.
- 36) The Western Samoan Prime Minister Tofilau Eti Alesana was the first Western head of state to visit China after the Tiananmen massacre, cf. **The Savali** (Western Samoa), 6 November 1989.
- 37) The new conservative government announced plans to reformulate New Zealand's South Pacific policy in 1991, cf. **Fiji Times**, 24 December 1990.
- 38) Cf. Herschel Hurst, "PNG Must Go It alone in Bougainville", in: **Pacific Defense Reporter**, March 1990, pp.34-35.
- 39) In October 1990 Fiji's Prime Minister Mara barred a visit by Evans on the grounds that the latter criticized Fiji's new constitution when attending the General Assembly of the United Nations, cf. **Fiji Times**, 30 October 1990.
- 40) This report was prepared in December 1990.

