

Security In Oceania: In the 21st Century

Eric Shibuya and Jim Rolfe

This book is based on papers prepared for a conference held in Hawaii in January 2001, on the theme of island state security. Some of the analysis has been overtaken by events (for example, the comments on French Polynesia) but the basic issues addressed remain pertinent, even pressing. The concept 'security' is treated very broadly (as is the modern academic fashion), encompassing both traditional concerns about external military threats as well as internal problems arising from economic, environmental and social factors. Thus broadly defined, security in Oceania is mainly an internal problem but it is one that also has implications for the major states of the region, whose own security could be adversely affected by events there. Certainly, it is clear what happens in the islands of Oceania will require the continued involvement of the major regional states for the indefinite future.

For many contributors the most pressing problem facing the island states of the Pacific is that of underdevelopment, the consequences of which are hunger, disease and social breakdown, the responsibility for which is laid at the door of the former colonial powers and the industrialised countries of the region. Since the end of the Cold War, when a policy of 'strategic denial' focussed attention on the island states, there has been (it is said) a period of relative neglect. A growing realisation of the possible effects of climate change, only adds to a sense of helplessness as well as fuelling resentment against those who are seen to have significantly contributed to the problem.

In this context, some traditional security provisions are seen as particularly inappropriate. Vijay Naidu of the University of the South Pacific in Fiji talks of 'The Oxymoron of Security Forces in Island States' (Chapter 3) and comments that military forces tend to exacerbate problems of leadership and governance, corruption and crime. There is substantial agreement amongst the various writers that military forces are part of the security problem, not any part of its solution, although those that comment on this issue stop short of saying what ought to be done.

The bulk of the contributors to *Security in Oceania* are from the bordering larger states and these comments tend to focus on how poorly or well the responsibilities of these states to the island states of Oceania have been discharged, and on the implications for their own security from what is happening in Oceania. Thus, Richard Payne from Illinois notes (Chapter 5) that, after a period of neglect, there is a renewed US interest in the Pacific because of its significance in regard to the global problems of terrorism, crime and drugs and because of the growing importance of US relations with China. He also criticises US failure to accept the Kyoto Protocol and to ratify the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty. Another American contributor (Anthropologist, Glen Petersea, Chapter 13) agrees and, in what is the longest chapter in the book, rails against US policy in the region from Vietnam onwards. One of the recurrent features of collections of articles of this kind is the apparent ease with which US commentators can be found ready and willing to criticise US policy and actions in the most trenchant terms, and the apparent difficulty of finding anybody to take a contrary view.

The contributions from academics in the other bordering states tend to be more positive and more insightful in regard to the problems that confront the states of Oceania. For example, Tanaka Yoshiaki of Japan provides an assessment of the future potential for development, finding that half of them have a fragile resource base and little prospect beyond continuing subsistence. What is to be done in these cases?

Yoshiaki notes that Japan is the biggest aid donor in the Pacific but (by implication, only) asks what can be achieved. He also raises the crucial question of conditionality. To what extent (he asks) should acceptance of western democratic standards of political and economic freedom be seen as a precondition for the receipt of aid?

As far as Australia is concerned, the key policy assumption is that Australia's security would be served by the development of independent viable states in the region (Rolfe, Chapter 8). A major contribution to this is Australia's Pacific Patrol Boat Project, which is intended to enable Pacific states to control their Exclusive Economic Zones. Whether it will do so remains to be seen and whether this control results in a sustained economic benefit to the states of Oceania could be critical to their future.

Stephen Hoadley, writing the New Zealand perspective (Chapter 9), asserts that strategic denial is still a significant policy determinant. We still want to control who has influence in the region (he says). The other side of this coin is that the states of the region still expect us to support them in addressing the various problems (and Hoadley is in broad agreement with the other writers in regard to what these problems are). His main reservation concerns our capacity to make a significant contribution to regional security in the light of our much reduced defence capability. He fears that the 'eroding usefulness of NZDF as a partner to more robust and technologically advanced defence forces of the Pacific Rim States will progressively limit New Zealand's ability to respond to distant and varied contingencies, both unilaterally and in concert with like-minded governments.' He goes on, 'New Zealand's credibilitymay now be at risk.'

One of the most interesting chapters in the book is that on environmental security by Eric Shibuya (one of the two editors of *Security in Oceania*). This addresses a clutch of complex and difficult scientific, political and social issues surrounding the possibility (perhaps, inevitability) of serious environmental change and comes to some uncomfortable conclusions. The other editor (Jim Rolfe) has the final word in a chapter titled, 'Surviving in a Sea of Troubles'. His conclusion in relation to the many concerns raised by his fellow authors is that the 'regional states will not be able to meet the challenges that confront them'. He suggests that the states of Oceania need to go beyond efforts at cooperation to some measure of 'confederation' and that New Zealand and Australia should 'remove themselves' from this process.

Having regard to the problems that confront them, it is hard to be optimistic about the prospects for the island states of our region. *Security in Oceania* gives a good picture of those problems and raises some pertinent policy questions but is rather lighter on what, realistically, may be done about them. Perhaps, that is what the next conference should be about.

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