

*The Region in Review:
International Issues and Events,
1988*

The year 1988 was a mixed one for Pacific Island regionalism, which faced a rapidly changing economic and political environment. The response to the year's internal and external challenges was something short of convincing. Within the region, progress was made on the critical issue of peace in New Caledonia and on the previously contentious issue of US tuna fishing. On the other hand, Fiji remained troubled, and the level of regional consensus, arguably, showed signs of erosion.

One of the major factors accounting for the ambivalence of the regional attempt to cope collectively with new demands was the growing impact of extraregional pressures, particularly from the greater Asia-Pacific area. Previously of relatively minor interest to the rest of the world, the Pacific Islands have recently begun to feel the effects of such important developments as the Japanese economic "miracle," China's integration into the global economy, the emergence of ASEAN as an important Pacific actor, the Soviet Union's claim to be a Pacific power, and the geostrategic uncertainties surrounding the Philippines.

The changing regional and extraregional environment during 1988 put as much pressure on the method of Pacific regionalism as on its substance. The reforms of the mechanisms of regional cooperation initiated during the year were probably more significant than the substantive issues treated. Three

principal themes—regional organization, subregionalism, and extraregional interests—will be discussed in turn.

REGIONAL ORGANIZATION

Over the last decade, an enormous amount of time, effort, and money have gone into attempting to satisfy a keen desire on the part of some island leaders for a single regional organization. However, the practical impediments to establishing such an organization have been substantial (Herr 1980) and, at the eighteenth meeting of the South Pacific Forum in Apia in May 1987, the chimera was put aside in favor of a coordinated, multiorganizational approach to regional cooperation. The newly formed Committee on Regional Institutional Arrangements (CRIA) was given responsibility for designing mechanisms to integrate the activities of the region's four intergovernmental agencies, as well as institutions such as the University of the South Pacific.

Significantly, solving the conundrum of a single regional organization was not the committee's primary task. Rather it was to create a means by which nonregional actors "willing to be constructively engaged" could interact with the Forum, "the paramount regional body" (SPC 1988). The committee's mandate marked a watershed in attitudes toward regional organization at two levels. It explicitly acknowledged the increasingly complex regional environment created by the growing involvement of extraregional actors. And it admitted implicitly that the Forum's informal status has created

some diplomatic problems for member governments. Despite its unquestionable political paramountcy, the Forum's lack of a legal personality prevents it from achieving some corporate objectives, even with the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC) acting as its secretariat.

The CRIA proposals, endorsed by the nineteenth meeting of the South Pacific Forum (at Nuku'alofa, 20–21 September 1988), will serve more to lift the Forum's political profile than to overcome its structural limitations. Borrowing an ASEAN concept, CRIA proposed that "governments and organisations which have demonstrated a serious and sustained interest in the region" be invited to become "dialogue partners," and to participate in discussions immediately following Forum meetings (SPC 1988). Dialogue partners would not have observer status at the Forum, but the privileged access and prospects of closer political ties with member states would nonetheless be valued by the states and agencies invited to participate. The dialogue partnership will be inaugurated at the 1989 Forum in Kiribati.

The CRIA arrangements have strengthened the structure of the Forum somewhat by renaming SPEC the "Forum Secretariat," a change intended to ensure its acceptance as the Forum's executive agency. The secretariat function was added some three years after the organization was established and has tended to be overshadowed by the original mandate to promote economic cooperation. The change may prove more than cosmetic, particularly if the political aspect of the new Forum Secretariat is adequately distinguished

from its economic duties. A major factor here may be a corporate plan submitted to SPEC by E. K. Fisk, Tony Hughes, and Savenaca Siwatibau in June 1988. The plan was sought by SPEC Director Henry Naisali, who was reappointed in 1988 for a further three-year term, to provide advice "on what sort of role we should play in future in view of the fact we want the Forum to be the paramount decision-making meeting of the region" (*Islands Business*, April 1988). The consultants identified a need for more staff, although the early evidence suggested that new recruits would be put to work on development rather than executive activities (SSD, 24 June 1988).

A third element of the CRIA proposal endorsed by the 1988 Forum concerned the hoary issue of a single regional organization. A new, more formal, mechanism would replace the annual consultation between agency heads that has been used to promote institutional cooperation for a decade. Perhaps in response to South Pacific Commission sensitivities, the name of the proposed body was changed from the Forum Agency Coordinating Committee to the South Pacific Organisations Coordinating Committee (SPOCC). However, the exact nature of SPOCC's powers were unclear, and the question of the commission's participation in it was referred by the twenty-eighth South Pacific Conference to the 1989 meeting of the Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations (CRGA) for further consideration (SPC 1988). Given its involvement in established annual consultations, the commission is likely to participate in SPOCC, in which case it will be involved

with the new institutional arrangements both through SPOCC and as a designated dialogue partner.

The restructuring of the procedures for regional cooperation was the key long-term organizational issue for 1988. But the Forum also took steps to enhance its influence as a regional actor in other areas. Having negotiated a regional fisheries agreement with the United States in 1987, the Forum Fisheries Agency sought a similar concession from Japan and, when Tokyo resisted, turned to the South Pacific Forum for support. The Forum's 1988 meeting backed the Forum Fisheries Agency with a strongly worded paragraph in its formal communiqué that named Japan, and expressed the "high priority" it attached to "improved multilateral fisheries arrangements." The meeting also resolved to explore means of becoming more involved in the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC) to be hosted by New Zealand in 1989. Recognizing its "increasingly complex" regional security environment, the 1988 Forum endorsed a proposal by its recently formed Committee on Regional Security Information Exchange "to establish a system for an enhanced and timely exchange of information among Forum members on a wide range of issues affecting their political and economic security" (ADFAT 1988).

All of the South Pacific's intergovernmental organizations are affected by the CRIA proposals, but none more so than the South Pacific Commission. The dialogue partners' arrangement is expected to undercut to some extent the special affection for the commission held by Britain, France, and the

United States, who helped establish the organization more than forty years ago. This change will be accentuated in the longer run should the dialogue relationship provide genuine political access to the Forum. An effective SPOCC will secure some of the long-cherished aims of single regional organization supporters to achieve aid coordination, and this will cut across the commission's other major strength—the geographically comprehensive South Pacific Conference. Understandably, the October 1988 meeting of the South Pacific Conference at Rarotonga reacted cautiously to the CRIA proposals. However, the 1988 Conference may not have represented a true test of regional opinion since much of its time had to be devoted to an internal house-keeping matter. Lamentably, a controversy over the commission's finances combined with personal matters to force the early retirement of Palauni Tuiasosopo, the energetic secretary-general from American Samoa.

Indicative of the more active interest that it has taken in regional affairs over the past few years, France sought membership of the Coordinating Committee on Offshore Prospecting/South Pacific (CCOP/SOPAC) during 1988 (SSD, 14 Oct 1988). Although the French request was denied on the grounds that membership is restricted to Forum members, not all expressions of extraregional interest were rejected. The Soviet Union, which had been excluded from the 1987 meeting, was again invited to participate in the Technical Advisory Group that assisted the work of the seventeenth session of CCOP/SOPAC held in Suva from 13–22 October 1988. The Soviet offer of mul-

tilateral assistance to CCOP/SOPAC members was declined, but there was some indication that a series of bilateral offers outside the CCOP/SOPAC framework might be accepted (*SSD*, 28 Oct 1988).

In other areas of maritime regional cooperation the news was very good for the Pacific Islands during 1988. Reports early in the year suggested that the Pacific Forum Line would suffer losses, in part because of traffic downturns following the 1987 military coups in Fiji. But, in the event, the shipping line returned a profit in 1988 (*SSD*, 14 Oct 1988). Resolution of the dispute with the United States in 1987 was a spectacular success for the Forum Fisheries Agency, and much of 1988 was spent preparing for, or reaping, the rewards of this success. The United States deposited its instrument of ratification for the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Treaty in Port Moresby on 15 June 1988 and made the first payments in a package worth \$50 million over the next five years (Keith-Reid 1988a, 26).

SUBREGIONALISM

Despite the recognition that increasing external pressures have put on collective regional action, a major step toward the creation of bloc politics within Pacific Island regionalism was taken during 1988. Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu signed an accord on 14 March 1988 in Port Vila to formalize an association formed more than two years earlier as the Melanesian Spearhead group. This was not the first expression of Melanesian subregionalism, nor the first attempt to formalize a subregional

grouping. Proposals for a Melanesian federation have circulated since the 1950s, and the creation of the Nauru Group within the Forum Fisheries Agency in 1982 provided a precedent for formal subregionalism. Nevertheless, the formation of the Melanesian Spearhead group does appear to be a concerted effort to pursue Melanesian solidarity and foreign policy aims in a more disciplined fashion than ever before.

The catalyst for the Vila declaration appears to have been the tense situation in New Caledonia, although some observers speculated that the explicit Melanesian nationalism of the coups in Fiji was also a factor (Loudon 1988, 4). Cultural commonality figured prominently in the principles espoused by the three prime ministers who signed the agreement (which they refused to call a treaty): Paias Wingti of Papua New Guinea, Ezekiel Alebu of the Solomons, and Walter Lini of Vanuatu. The nine declared principles were long on sentiment but short on substance. Almost as if drafted by a greeting-card writer, the first letters of each statement combined to spell out the word MELANESIA, and commitments to traditional values, national independence, and the reduction of international tensions were proclaimed.

The three prime ministers were sensitive to the charge that the spearhead might undermine Pacific regionalism, in part because the Melanesian states had long been in the vanguard of the push for a single regional organization. They emphasized their support for the South Pacific Forum "as the paramount regional organisation" (*Mercury*, 15 March 1988). Yet even before the Vila

declaration was drafted, skepticism was expressed about the implications of the spearhead. The more conservative states of Polynesia have viewed Melanesian solidarity with some suspicion from the early 1970s. Since the size, population, and resources of the Melanesian states give them a potential weight that the Polynesian states, although more numerous, cannot match, a Polynesian backlash was to be expected when the spearhead group began to take shape.

Statements by King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV of Tonga early in 1988 drew attention to an initiative by French Polynesia and the Cook Islands to promote Polynesian cooperation under the banner of the "Polynesian Community" (Keith-Reid 1988b, 8). Like the Melanesian Spearhead, the Polynesian Community was to be grounded in cultural affinity. Unlike the spearhead, however, the Polynesian grouping was not intended to have a political function, a decision that was probably necessitated by a membership that would include dependencies such as the Tokelaus, French Polynesia, and American Samoa, as well as communities such as the Maoris and the Hawaiians (Lomas 1988, 10). The most important difference between the two subregional associations may turn out to be their capacity for collective action. The spearhead countries were sufficiently cohesive to ensure that the spearhead did materialize during 1988, but the Polynesian group has yet to be finalized. It appears that the political reverses of French Polynesia's Gaullist strongman, Gaston Flosse, during 1988 had much to do with the loss of impetus for pursuing the Polynesian Community concept.

The moves toward more structured and coherent subregional bloc politics are potentially important but did not prove critical during 1988. Circumstances that might have provoked a major confrontation, such as the ongoing crisis in New Caledonia, eased. The political eclipse of the powerful but erratic Barak Sope in Vanuatu during the second half of 1988, and the mid-year change of government in Papua New Guinea, also tended to elevate domestic concerns over foreign policy issues within the spearhead nations. Nonetheless, the sentiments that motivated the formation of the two blocs are likely to lead to longer-term foreign policy cleavages. Attachment to Western geostrategic assessments is clearly an important element in the Polynesian perception of the need for unity. Yet these attachments are increasingly coming under challenge as a wider range of nontraditional actors seeks influence in the region, and the spearhead countries are still likely to be more supportive of a broader range of diplomatic contacts.

EXTRAREGIONAL INTERESTS

Observers agree that regional politics have become vastly more intricate in recent years, but there is less agreement on the rationale for this broadening involvement. The interest of the Soviet Union has been a highly visible case in point. Where critics have seen a covert and sinister military ambition behind Moscow's fishing deals in the region, others have found only an overt and benign commercial interest. Multiple objectives motivate the increased concern of most extraregional states with

the Pacific Islands. Nevertheless, changes outside the region have contributed more than changes inside to the increased international prominence of the islands. Heightened diplomatic activity in the region may be more easily explained by instrumental interests than interest in the islands themselves.

Japan may appear to be an exception since it has steadily expanded its role in the Pacific for more than two decades, largely on the basis of a trading relationship. But Tokyo's diplomatic reticence changed dramatically in January 1987, when then Foreign Minister Tadashi Kuranari announced that Japan would significantly expand its political presence in the islands. The "Kuranari Doctrine" was not prompted by intrinsic commercial interests. Instability in the post-Marcos Philippines, Soviet access to base facilities in Vietnam, and Moscow's fisheries agreements with Kiribati and Vanuatu all helped to convince Tokyo of the vulnerability of its southern approaches, and the need to pay more direct attention to the islands.

However, Japan's newly claimed political responsibilities have not won universal acceptance, and a perception that the Kuranari Doctrine would be more difficult to implement than was first expected emerged during 1988. A report by a Tokyo University international relations specialist, Akio Watanabe, offered trenchant criticism of the new policy's main instruments—technical assistance and financial aid (Goodall 1988, 28). Japanese aid was criticized as misdirected, inappropriate, and, in many cases, self-serving. Watanabe's report has been adopted by Dr Saburo Okita, himself a former for-

ign minister and now a chief adviser to the Foreign Affairs Ministry, as the basis for refurbishing the Japanese image in the islands (Goodall 1988). Significantly, in light of the Japanese stance toward the Forum Fisheries Agency's demand for a regional access treaty, the Watanabe Report seems likely to buttress movement toward a more regional emphasis in aid-giving.

Japan's review of its foreign relations with Pacific entities during 1988 was prompted not only by a perception that its southern sea lanes had become more vulnerable, but also by a belief that the traditional guarantors of security in this part of the world had become less reliable. Despite renewal of the Philippines bases agreement in October 1988, Washington clearly needed help on the Asian littoral, help the Reagan administration sought from Japan under the guise of "burden-sharing." Japan's view of the Australian and New Zealand effort in the islands also appeared to become more sanguine following the military coups in Fiji (Goodall 1988, 28). Concern for the indigenous commitment to introduced democratic structures may have been an immediate catalyst for the more overt Japanese influence that Okita proposed, but this was probably not the primary motivation for the new policy directions of 1988. Anxiety over the ANZUS treaty, and in particular the Soviet Union's moves to detach Australia from its close security relationship with the United States, was almost certainly the ultimate consideration.

On the face of it, and despite some recorded gains, 1988 was not a banner year for the Soviet Union in its relations with the Pacific Islands. Early in

the year, the much-criticized fishing agreement with Vanuatu lapsed after only one year of operation (as had the even more controversial first agreement with Kiribati the year before). The Soviet fishing fleet was said to have been equally, if not more, unsuccessful in the waters around Vanuatu than it had been in those of Kiribati. Despite its embarrassment, however, the Soviet Ministry for Fisheries persisted in attempts to reach a new agreement with Vanuatu. By the end of 1988 these attempts appeared to have been successful, although the terms of the new agreement were not public at the time of writing. The one evident breakthrough for Moscow was the decision of the new government of Rabbie Namaliu to permit the building of a resident mission in Papua New Guinea (SSD, 2 Sept 1988). Ironically, Foreign Minister Michael Somare, within whose portfolio the issue rested, had opposed similar Soviet requests during his earlier terms as prime minister. The PNG move, which seemed to be part of a strategy to develop a more independent foreign policy, surprised external observers, and upset some within the country. A temporary delay was forced by the national Parliament, which reportedly wanted to be satisfied that Moscow had "a genuine desire for relations which would benefit PNG" (SSD, 16 Sept 1988).

Suspicions that a security objective lay behind Soviet interest in the islands were reinforced in some quarters during the year. The Soviet Union linked the US-Australian joint facilities to possible future global security negotiations, and in September 1988, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev proposed

that the Soviet Union would relinquish access to Cam Ranh and Da Nang in Vietnam if the United States reciprocated with its Philippine bases. Both were seen by some defense planners as, among other things, attempting to reduce the Australian commitment to ANZUS. Undermining the Western alignment of the islands would contribute to the pressure on Australia, the one country in the region that is recognized as vital to the global defense posture of the United States. Even more benign interpretations of Soviet activities underscored the extent of geopolitical change in the Asia-Pacific area, which has set in train a chain reaction of adjustments among all international actors with interests in, or abutting, the islands.

Gorbachev's program of *perestroika* (economic and social restructuring) has provided an alternative explanation for the Soviets' special interest in the Pacific over the past three years. Gorbachev has set the Soviet Union on a course of joining the movement toward regional economic cooperation under the auspices of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (PECC), regarded by his predecessors as an anti-Soviet economic bloc. Although still denied formal membership in the five-country association, the Soviets quickly sought to develop the observer status granted in 1988 (Barber 1988). PECC will meet in New Zealand late in 1989 and necessarily the Soviets' desire for genuine participation in Asia-Pacific economic integration will be joined with New Zealand's efforts to involve the islands more fully in PECC activities.

As noted earlier, the United States

took a vital step toward repairing its relations with the region by concluding the multilateral fisheries access agreement in 1987. However, except for the implementation of this treaty (including the passing of supportive legislation), the emphasis was on bilateral diplomacy in 1988. Most notably, the satellite mission in Honiara was upgraded to full embassy status, and a resident mission in Western Samoa was opened. The on-again, off-again compact of free association with Belau, including the apparent suicide of President Lazarus Salii in August 1988, was the most obvious bilateral debit.

Although the major extraregional changes affecting the Pacific Islands were generated by processes independent of them, some changes were sparked by developments within the area. Regional hegemony Australia and New Zealand were concerned primarily with events in New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and especially, Fiji during 1988. The military coups and the subsequent cuts in aid had alienated Australia and New Zealand from Fiji in 1987, and Rabuka's new quasi-civilian regime devoted some effort during 1988 to developing alternative diplomatic contacts. Asia was the focus of this search. Closer links were forged with Taiwan, to the annoyance of Beijing, and with Malaysia, a country which, because of its ethnic tensions, has much in common with contemporary Fiji. France wasted little time in exploiting the political embarrassment of Australia and New Zealand in Fiji and continued to expand its aid program there. Meanwhile, Australia's Pacific Patrol Boat scheme continued in 1988, with the Solomons and Western

Samoa receiving their first boats and Papua New Guinea its third.

One extraregional development that was exposed during 1988 could threaten the very existence of the smaller islands of the region and owes nothing to political maneuvering. The "greenhouse effect" of the earth's polluted atmosphere puts the region's low-lying atolls in danger of inundation as rising temperatures melt the polar ice-caps and raise sea levels around the globe. The Nuku'alofa meeting of the Forum discussed the issue, but could do little except endorse an Australian proposal to assess the value of setting up a network of climatic monitors across the region (Fraser 1988, 24). Should the "greenhouse effect" prove genuine, this extraregional intrusion may well menace the region more fundamentally than the political machinations that dominated the headlines throughout 1988.

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Fiji

The dominating feature of 1988 for Fiji was its attempt to come to terms with the consequences of the preceding year's two military coups. While many claimed the country had now changed irrevocably through the installation of de facto military rule, the Rabuka-dominated order, with Ratu Sir Penaia

Ganilau as President and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara continuing as Prime Minister in an interim government, accorded urgency to persuading publics at home and abroad that Fiji was returning to normal. For the Australian, New Zealand, United States, British, and neighboring South Pacific governments, there was a predisposition to take the regime at its word about its intentions. For the Mara government, the major objectives on the road to acceptability included acquisition of legitimacy via constitutional change, economic recovery through incentives and enlistment of foreign interests, and, not least, keeping a firm local lid on a potentially volatile mix of social, political, and ethnic conflict.

The proposed constitutional reformulation, in particular intentions about parliamentary representation, saw details drip fed through a series of far from consistent statements.

Through a major address to the nation in March, Ratu Sir Kamisese said that it was the intention of his interim administration to "hold free and open elections once a broadly acceptable constitution was completed." Nevertheless this would "have to ensure the full protection of the fundamental interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian people, but at the same time accommodate on a fair and equitable basis the position of other communities" (*PIM*, May 1988, 37).

Yet in July, when details for such a single chamber parliament comprising 71 seats were announced, such principles of equity were hardly in evidence. Indians would elect 22 representatives from a communal roll; Fijians would have 28 representatives although, inter-