

**When the ‘tuna wars’ went hot:  
Kiribati, the Soviet Union, and the fishing pact that  
provoked a superpower**

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**Abstract**

In 1985 the Republic of Kiribati, a low-lying island nation in the central Pacific, entered into a fisheries access arrangement with the Soviet Union. Coming at the height of renewed Cold War tensions between the USSR and the West, this unprecedented manoeuvre provoked a significant international uproar and briefly placed Kiribati at the forefront of international geopolitics. Although the Cold War has long since passed, Kiribati’s Russian gambit remains a unique example of how confronting and impactful small state foreign policy can be, given the right circumstances. Drawing on media reports and academic writing of the day, as well as interviews conducted with relevant officials during 2017 fieldwork in the Pacific, this article offers an analysis of the Kiribati/Soviet fishing pact. It examines the issues – both at home and abroad – which motivated Kiribati to engage with the USSR; the international and domestic reactions to the Government of Kiribati’s actions; and what occurred in the aftermath of the agreement being signed. Finally, it considers the changing nature of foreign policy in the Pacific in the present day – and suggests that Kiribati’s 1985 actions provide an insight into what might be seen in Pacific international relations moving forward.

**Keywords:** Kiribati, Soviet Union, cold war, international relations, fisheries, Pacific, small state

**Introduction**

In a 2012 Keynote Address at the University of the South Pacific, the Republic of Kiribati’s President, Anote Tong, described what he called a ‘paradigm shift’ in the international relations of Pacific island states – stating that he believed the Pacific was entering a new era in which it would ‘chart its own course’ towards international leadership. His address was ostensibly delivered in response to a perceived lack of international action on climate change, and he made the case that Pacific island states must act in their own self-interest and behave more aggressively in foreign affairs to counter such inaction. Recalling the words of Epele Hau’ofa, he stated that Pacific islands should not allow smallness to define how they behave internationally, for ‘we are large ocean states, and with a great deal more relevance in international affairs than we realised’ (Tong, qtd. in Tarte and Fry, 2015: 23). Kiribati is a relatively young country, having gained its

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independence in 1979; however, this was not the first time a President of Kiribati had argued for aggressiveness in international affairs and called for the pursuit of self-reliance. Twenty-six years before President Tong took the floor at the University of the South Pacific, the first President of Kiribati, Ieremia Tabai, offered a similar Keynote Address at the University of Papua New Guinea. In his remarks, Tabai asserted that Pacific island states must be free to make their own development choices based on their own interests, not the interests of outsiders. He argued that 'above all, development is the ability to make a free decision, a free choice, in pursuit of one's self-interest,' and that island states like Kiribati must have 'the ability to say NO and resist the forces that are clearly detrimental to our long term national interests' (Tabai, 1987: 42-49). In other words, like Anote Tong, he argued that Pacific islands must be free to 'chart their own course'.

Whereas the issue which motivated Tong's 2012 remarks was climate change, the issue which motivated Tabai's comments was the controversy surrounding his government's decision to enter into a fisheries access agreement with the Soviet Union in 1985. While Kiribati's engagement with the USSR was 'purely commercial' in nature according to Tabai, in the context of the heightened Cold War tensions of the mid-1980s the move provoked an international uproar. During the negotiation of the agreement between Kiribati and the Soviets, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and even some island state neighbours all sought to dissuade Kiribati from dealing with the Russians, and for a brief time the previously internationally obscure young country found itself at the forefront of international geopolitics. Given the diplomatic pressure being applied from all sides, the fishing pact's completion – which made Kiribati the first Pacific island state to grant the Soviet Union the legal right to fish its waters – was an extraordinary act of political agency.

Although the Cold War has long since passed, Kiribati's Russian gambit remains a unique example of how confronting and impactful Pacific island foreign policy can be given the right circumstances. It also offers one vision of what it means to act as a 'large ocean state' in the manner suggested by President Tong. With this in mind, this article offers an analysis of the Kiribati/Soviet Union fishing pact. This analysis is based on media reports and academic writing of the day, as well as interviews conducted with relevant officials during 2017 fieldwork in the Pacific. It examines the issues – both at home and abroad – which motivated Kiribati to engage with the USSR; the international and domestic reactions to the Government of Kiribati's actions; and what occurred in the aftermath of the agreement's being signed. Finally, it returns to the present to ask: if the Pacific is in the midst of an international relations 'paradigm shift', as Anote Tong has suggested, what can the aggressive and unconventional action taken by Kiribati in 1985 tell us about what we might expect to see in 2017 and beyond?

### **Domestic context: Economic survival**

The Republic of Kiribati is made up of 32 low-lying atolls and reef islands and one raised limestone island. These are divided into three chains – the Western Gilbert Islands chain, the central Phoenix Islands chain, and the Eastern Line Islands chain (Government of Kiribati, 1999: 7). The raised limestone island, Banaba, is isolated, sitting 400 km to the West of the Gilberts

(Tabucanon, 2012: 4). The atolls that make up Kiribati are generally small, averaging less than 500 metres in width, and the total land area of the country is 811km<sup>2</sup> (Webber, 2013: 2718). This is stretched over a total surface area of 5 million km<sup>2</sup> (Storey and Hunter, 2010: 168), meaning the ratio of land area to water surface area in the country is 1:4,377 (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007: 117). South Tarawa, located in the Gilberts chain, is the economic and administrative hub of Kiribati and holds nearly half of the country's population despite being only 15km<sup>2</sup> in size. Conversely, Kiritimati, in the Line Islands, holds approximately 6% of the population, yet at 388 km<sup>2</sup> makes up nearly half of the country's total land area (Asian Development Bank, 2009: 137). Excepting Banaba, the highest points in Kiribati are between 2 and 4 metres above sea level. Freshwater on the atolls is primarily sourced from freshwater lenses, also known as Ghyben–Herzberg lenses. These lenses are limited and in the twenty-first century have increasingly been subject to salt-water intrusion as a result of climate change and other damaging anthropogenic factors like population growth (Kuruppu, 2009: 799). Soil on the atolls is generally shallow and infertile, being made up of sand and gravel (Webber, 2013: 2718). Ultimately, the environment is a challenging one and the potential for resource development or even basic agriculture is extremely limited.

Prior to independence, Kiribati was a constituent part of the United Kingdom's Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, commonly referred to as the GEIC. The GEIC was an amalgamation of three distinct entities: the Gilbert Islands (the colonial name for *all* of Kiribati, not just its Western chain), the Ellice Islands (Tuvalu), and Ocean Island (Banaba).<sup>2</sup> While the colony had initially been formed largely as a consequence of great power geopolitics in the late 1800s, the GEIC's main value to the British soon came to be rich phosphate deposits which were discovered on Banaba (MacDonald, 1982). Especially following the relocation of the native Banabans to Rabi Island in Fiji at the conclusion of World War II, phosphate mining was the economic engine which drove the GEIC. When the Gilbert and Ellice Islands were partitioned in 1974, the British did not permit the Ellice Islands (which would become the independent state of Tuvalu two years later in 1976) to retain any phosphate revenues (McIntyre, 2012: 142). Thus, by the late 1970s Banaban phosphate exports made up fully 88% of the Gilbert Island's export income (Baaro, 1993: 161).

The Gilbert Islands declared independence in 1979, becoming Kiribati. The same year, phosphate mining on Banaba ceased. While the exhaustion of readily accessible phosphate deposits on Banaba Island had been foreseen years in advance, no attempts were made to taper phosphate operations over an extended period of time. Thus, with the conclusion of mining operations, the I-Kiribati economy almost instantaneously lost close to 90% of its export income and GDP per capita was nearly halved from US\$737 in 1978 to US\$398 in 1980. Independence from the United Kingdom did not just bring political sovereignty to Kiribati, but also an abrupt 'cold turkey' transition into a new post-phosphate economic era (Bertram and Watters, 1984: 242 - 243). While in the short to medium term aid flows and remittances expanded enough to avert a looming threat of insolvency, it was apparent that in the long term the loss of phosphate revenues could lead to a balance of payments crisis (Bertram and Watters, 1984: 95). As such, entering into the independence era, the Government of Kiribati faced a pressing need to significantly restructure the national economy so as to maintain the long-term economic viability

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<sup>2</sup> Whether Banaba was a socio-political entity distinct from the rest of Kiribati prior to colonization remains a controversial topic in both I-Kiribati and Banaban communities even today. See Katerina Teaiwa's *Consuming Ocean Island: Stories of People and Phosphate from Banaba* for a detailed treatment of the island's complex history including I-Kiribati/Banaban relations.

of the state. Without phosphate revenues to rely on, the Government of Kiribati had ‘no doubt as to its most fundamental task - to ensure the economic survival and viability of the country’ (Government of Kiribati, 1982: 9).

Kiribati’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 3.5 million km<sup>2</sup> is widely recognized to encompass the richest tuna fishery in the region (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007). Given the unsuitability of the atoll environment for most forms of resource development, the closing of the Banaban mines therefore left Kiribati with one major export to which it could turn its attention – fish (Government of Kiribati, 1979: 18). Attempts to build a domestic fisheries industry had faced consistent struggles in the colonial period and continued to do so after independence. To generate revenue Kiribati turned to negotiating licensing agreements with distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) (Teiwaki, 1988). Japan was the first nation to sign a licensing agreement with Kiribati, gaining access to I-Kiribati waters from 1978 through 1980 in return for US\$600,000 and access to development aid. South Korea soon followed in 1979 with a US\$185,000 deal (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007: 123). According to President Ieremia Tabai, these were the first such licensing arrangements in the region and were distinctly motivated by knowledge that Kiribati had no other resources besides fish ripe for large-scale development (Tabai, 2017: personal communication).

While early deals were useful in terms of allowing the Government of Kiribati to engage in some of its first international negotiations as an independent political body, their monetary return was not to the level desired by government officials. Thus, as put by those involved in fisheries negotiations at the time, in order to generate what the government felt was an appropriate income from licensing agreements there was a feeling that that it would have to become ‘forceful and uncompromising’ in its dealings with DWFNs (Teiwaki, 1988: 90; Tabai, 2017: personal communication). This attitude was manifested in 1980 when Kiribati closed its EEZ to Japanese vessels after Japan refused to meet Kiribati’s desired access fee of US\$1.3 million. Kiribati’s hard-line stance initially resulted in the loss of between \$US2-3 million of bilateral aid from Japan (Trumbull, 1981). While the loss of aid and access fees was a significant blow to Kiribati’s fragile, and still transitional, economy, it paid off when Japan returned to the negotiating table in late 1981. The two settled on an arrangement which totalled \$US1.1 million and renewed bilateral aid - slightly under the \$1.3 million that Kiribati had initially requested, but nearly double what Japan had paid in 1978 (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007: 123; Teiwaki, 1988: 90). Given its economic challenges and the fact that its independent government was scarcely a year old when it first turned away the Japanese, Kiribati’s ability to remain steadfast in its convictions in this case was remarkable. However, unknown at the time, those convictions would be tested in a much more charged political environment just a few years later.

## **Regional context: The Tuna Wars**

Kiribati was not the only Pacific nation intent on generating income from its fisheries in the 1980s. The Pacific Ocean, particularly the Western and Central regions, houses the largest tuna fishery in the world, making tuna a valuable resource for many Pacific island nations other than Kiribati (Barclay and Cartwright, 2007: 1). Even so, generating income from fisheries is not a straightforward endeavour. Particularly challenging for many Pacific nations during this time were

attempts to negotiate what they considered to be satisfactory licensing agreements with the United States, and for a time the actions (or inactions) of the US and its fishing vessels dominated the regional conversation regarding economic development.

United States fishing interests found themselves embroiled in controversies throughout the 1980s primarily as a result of the US Government's refusal to recognize coastal state sovereignty over highly migratory species (HMS). As their name implies, HMS, of which tuna is one, have a range of movement that covers a wide area. For most states this was uncontroversial, and at the time nearly every country in the world, and all in the Pacific, recognized that such species came under the exclusive jurisdiction of a coastal state while they were in that state's EEZ (Tsamenyi, 1986b: 31). However, in its 1976 Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the US explicitly delineated a stance that jurisdictional claims of sovereignty over resources did not apply to HMS (Dell'Apa, Schiavinato, and Rulifson, 2012: 673; Tsamenyi, 1986b: 31). This meant that the official position of the United States was that coastal states had no exclusive claims to tuna resources beyond 12 nautical miles of their coasts – and that under US law there was no requirement for US flagged vessels to obtain a license to fish for HMS in a foreign state's EEZ (Tsamenyi, 1986: 31; Waugh, 1988: 329). The Magnuson Act also dictated that the United States must automatically impose an embargo on the import of fisheries products from any state that seized a US vessel for fishing without a license, and the Fishermen's Protective Act of 1954 mandated that the US Government reimburse the owner of any seized vessel for imposed fines as a result of the seizure, as well as the value of the vessel, gear, catch and 50% of gross income lost. The cost of the reimbursement was deducted from US Government foreign aid to the state which seized the vessel (Tsamenyi, 1986a: 358, 1986b: 33; Waugh, 1988: 330).

The US stance on HMS and its regulatory environment domestically had the overall result of incentivizing US vessels to ignore jurisdictional resource claims. In effect, they 'encourag[ed] US fisherman to violate the fisheries laws of foreign nations' (Tsamenyi, 1986b: 33). Thus, from the 1970s onwards, US fishing vessels began to operate extensively throughout the Pacific, largely without licensing arrangements, and it was not lost on the Pacific island states that US Government policy drove this behaviour. As Dorrance (1992: 57), points out, 'From a regional perspective, they [US fisherman] were practicing, with US Government tolerance, resource piracy.' While the US offered legal arguments supporting its position on HMS based on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), this defence was largely considered to be premised on a misinterpretation of the Convention. Accordingly, the US was recognized to be 'out of step with state practice throughout the world' by most international lawyers (Tsamenyi, 1986a: 361).

The controversial provisions in the Magnuson Act, and the political stances taken by the US Government as a result, were largely driven by the efforts of American Tunaboat Association (ATA) lobbyists in Washington, D.C. (Crocombe, 1995: 294; Tarte, 1998: 101; Tsamenyi, 1986a: 357; Waugh, 1988: 330). During the 1980s, the ATA was a strong lobbying presence in Washington D.C., with close personal ties to President Ronald Reagan (Crocombe, 1995: 87). The ATA had a poor reputation amongst Pacific island states, as the American vessels that continually engaged in fishing ventures without licensing arrangements were nearly all associated with the it. However, despite its regional unpopularity, the US Government left the ATA to negotiate bilateral and multilateral agreements with Pacific island governments directly. As with other elements of its policies on fisheries, the 'hands-off' approach to negotiations for fishing licenses taken by the US Government was in contrast to the approach of other DWFN's of the

time, who mostly negotiated on a government to government bilateral basis (Tarte, 1998: 100–104; Tsamenyi, 1986a, 1986b; Waugh, 1988: 330–332).

Although the ATA was able to negotiate fisheries access agreements on its own behalf, with the US's legislative shielding in place, prior to 1985 formal licensing arrangements between it and Pacific island states were a rarity. The ATA did have a joint licensing agreement between Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) between 1981 and 1982, but at the time this was the only such agreement in the Pacific (Teiwaki, 1988: 93–94). Kiribati entered into a similar scheme with Palau and the FSM between 1983 and 1984, but the agreement was dysfunctional from the outset as the various parties it engaged found it difficult to agree upon appropriate fees and licensing structures (Teiwaki, 1988: 94). For Kiribati, the licensing fees that were ultimately decided upon were significantly lower than those paid by the Japanese and the Koreans, which caused the fishing fleets from those countries to agitate for lower fees more in line with those paid by the Americans (Doulman, 1986b: 8). Additionally, disputes over the catch data provided by the ATA led to a failure of licensing fees to be disbursed until late 1985 (Teiwaki, 1988: 95), and the US Government maintained that although the deal existed, it did not constitute US recognition of coastal state sovereignty over HMS (Neemia-Mackenzie, 1988: 197). Despite the deal's problematic history, Kiribati, Palau, and the FSM attempted to extend the agreement in late 1984. During the negotiations, the Pacific island governments wished to increase fees paid by the ATA vessels to bring them into line with those paid by the Koreans and Japanese, while the ATA argued that the tuna industry was experiencing a global downturn and fees should be reduced. Unable to find common ground, the talks failed, and the agreement expired (Doulman, 1986b: 8).

All of these dynamics, from the US Government's legislative shielding of the ATA through the inability of Pacific island governments and the ATA to come to terms with each other regarding licensing fees, conspired to cause significant diplomatic and economic conflict between the US and the Pacific island states throughout the early-to-mid 1980s – so much so that this is sometimes colloquially referred to as the 'Tuna Wars' period (Tarai, 2015: 238). In 1982 the Government of Papua New Guinea (PNG) seized the ATA-registered tuna vessel *Danica* for fishing within PNG's 200-nautical mile fishing zone without a license. The captain was convicted and fined in accordance with PNG law, and the *Danica* was forfeited to the Papua New Guinean state. In accordance with the Magnuson Act, the United States immediately imposed an embargo on the importation of fish products from PNG. This embargo lasted just several days, as upon its imposition the Government of PNG moved swiftly to release the *Danica* to its owners for a local fee of \$200,000 kina, well below the \$US13 million market value of the vessel and the catch (Waugh, 1988: 331). In the aftermath of the incident, PNG also agreed to enter into a fisheries access agreement with the ATA - an agreement which gave the ATA unlimited access to PNG's EEZ for significantly less money than paid by Japanese vessels (Tsamenyi, 1986b: 37).

Two years later in 1984, the Solomon Islands seized the ATA vessel *Jeanette Diana*, setting off a similar, though more protracted, series of events. Following the initial seizure of the vessel, the crew were convicted in the High Court of the Solomon Islands for illegal fishing and fined \$72,000 Solomon Islands dollars. In accordance with Solomon Islands law the *Jeanette Diana* itself was forfeited to the state, along with the fishing gear onboard (including a helicopter) and the catch. As it had with PNG, the United States imposed an embargo on the importation of Solomon Islands fish products under the Magnuson Act. However, the Solomon Islands responded by more forcefully delineating its position on the necessity of access agreements and, amongst other measures, banning all American fishing vessels from its waters. At the height of

the crisis, the Solomon Islands gave a briefing on events at the annual Pacific Island Forum meeting, and described the embargo as a kind of economic warfare. The Solomons proposed that the Forum include in its annual communiqué a suggestion that American fishing vessels be banned from the Pacific in retaliation. While the Forum offered moral support to the Solomons, fear of antagonizing the US meant this proposal was not met with enthusiasm and no such wording was included in the final communiqué (South Pacific Forum Secretariat, 1984: 40–45). With little apparent recourse to resolving the situation, the Solomon Islands also announced it would consider entering into discussions with the USSR regarding fisheries access (Tarai, 2015: 239). To that point no Pacific island state had seriously engaged with the USSR regarding fisheries and earlier in 1984 the Solomons had rejected a Soviet licensing proposal. The threat to negotiate with the USSR was essentially a bluff, and following the election of a new national government in the Solomons an agreement to lift the embargo was reached – seven months after it had initially been imposed (Tsamenyi, 1986a: 356). Economic relations between the Solomon Islands and the United States did not recover, and much of the Solomons' US\$10 million trade with the US was lost (Waugh, 1988: 331).

These two events contributed to regional frustration with the behaviour of US fishing vessels, and by extension the US Government, that already existed – and they were not isolated. The FSM threatened to have the ATA vessel *Ocean Pearl* blacklisted when the crew threatened to drop a speedboat rigged to her boom on a boarding party after being caught fishing illegally, and in Kiribati specifically sightings of ATA boats illegally fishing within territorial waters were common (Waugh, 1988: 331). Several helicopters used to scout for tuna landed on a number of outer islands without clearance, and most famously the ATA tuna vessel *Carol Linda* ran aground while engaged in fishing activities well inside Kiribati's territorial waters (Teiwaki, 1988: 93). Commenting on Kiribati's case, Crocombe notes that 'American trawlers took the fish continually, landed helicopters on islands without notice or permission, and treated the independent nation with the crude arrogance of power' (Crocombe, 1995: 294).

By the mid-1980s, regional concerns with US behaviour were at their peak. The director of the South Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency stated in 1985, 'It's Wild West stuff. They take what they want and to hell with the rights and aspirations of anyone else' (Muller, qtd. in "Soviet Fishing Pact Stirs South Pacific Fears," 1985), and that the island states would have to resort to gunboats to keep American vessels from engaging in illegal fishing operations ("U.S. tuna boats irk islanders," 1985: 4). The same year PNG's minister for foreign affairs and trade stated that his government was 'deeply concerned at the reckless bullying and heavy-handed way the US had been treating relations with countries in the Pacific' (Giheno, qtd. in "U.S. 'Bullying' South Pacific?", 1985). Later in the decade, a US Information Agency report commissioned to analyse relations with PNG found that during this time tuna was 'the most disruptive issue in the relations between PNG and the United States', with the US perceived as 'intransigent and bullying' (Pintz and Pintz, 1988). This was the regional context as Kiribati entered into negotiations with the Soviet Union in February 1985. The Pacific island states, and Kiribati in particular, had grown increasingly frustrated and angry that what they perceived to be their legitimately claimed natural resources were essentially being stolen by one of the world's two superpowers.

## International context: Cold War II

After an extended period of détente, by the late 1970s the United States and the Soviet Union had entered a more contentious phase of the global 'Cold War'. In contrast to the rapprochement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this new period of the Cold War, sometimes referred to as 'the second Cold War' or 'Cold War II', was characterized by highly acrimonious relations between the Eastern and Western political blocs and intense militarization on both sides (Dalby, 1990: ix). The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, along with the election of hawkish leaders Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the United Kingdom and the United States, accelerated the deterioration of relations. Spurred by the public discourse of the early Reagan Administration which emphasized the 'winnability' of a nuclear exchange, by 1985 tensions amongst the international community were extremely high (Dalby, 1990; Mehan, Nathanson, and Skelly, 1990: 133). It has often been observed that at no point since the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis nearly a quarter-century earlier had the world been closer to nuclear war than during this period (Hensley, 2013: 11). This tension was felt globally, not just amongst the superpowers. At a meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1983 Kiribati's President Tabai commented on the state of international politics, observing that 'there appears to be no reason for anyone to feel at ease' ("Sombre Thoughts From Kiribati," 1984: 7).

While the Pacific had dealt with many Cold War era controversies prior to the mid-1980s, most of these were related to nuclear testing in the region by Western bloc states like the US, the UK, and France. They were not primarily related to the broader geopolitical conflict between the USSR and the United States. While the extent of Russian influence in the Pacific prior to 1985 would become a source of contention between the United States and Kiribati following the signing of the Soviet fishing pact, for the most part the US and its allies agreed that before the pact's signing Soviet military and political influence in the region was minimal (*National Security Study Directive 05-85: U.S. Policy Towards Oceania*, 1985; Wilson, 2004: 141). Indeed, supported in the region by staunch allies Australia and New Zealand, for many years following World War II the United States viewed its influence in the Pacific as 'comfortable and unchallenged.' (*National Security Study Directive 05-85: U.S. Policy Towards Oceania*, 1985: 1)

## Details of the agreement

Negotiations between The Republic of Kiribati and the USSR for Soviet access to Kiribati's fisheries began in Sydney, Australia in February 1985 (Doulman, 1986b: 9). This was just two months after talks to renew the multilateral arrangement between Kiribati, Palau, the FSM, and the ATA had collapsed (Doulman, 1986a: 26), and one month after the US fishing vessel *Carol Linda* ran aground in Kiribati's territorial waters. The bulk of the Agreement was negotiated in Singapore in May 1985, details were finalized in Manila in August 1985, and the final agreement was signed by both parties in Singapore in October (Doulman, 1986b: 9; Teiwaki, 1988: 85). The delegation from Kiribati was led by Babera Kirata, a veteran politician. At a technical level, the agreement was similar to previous agreements reached between Kiribati and other DWFNs, such as Japan. It allowed the Soviet Union to deploy 16 fishing vessels and one processing/factory ship into Kiribati's EEZ for one year beginning October 15, 1985. All ships were individually licensed to engage in fishing operations in Kiribati's EEZ, were required to be in good standing on the Forum Fisheries Agency's Register of Foreign Fishing Vessels and report via telex upon



entering or exiting Kiribati's waters. The Soviet fleet was not permitted to operate within 12 miles of Kiribati's coast, nor was it granted any port access except in Tarawa in case of emergency. The agreement explicitly acknowledged Kiribati's sovereignty over and right to develop and manage the resources contained within its EEZ (including HMS), the legitimacy of Kiribati's domestic fisheries legislation and UNCLOS, and the responsibility of the Soviet Union for the actions of its vessels operating within I-Kiribati waters. While these provisions were fairly standard for Pacific licensing agreements at the time, they were notably all provisions that the ATA and the United States had, to that point, refused to accept (Doulman, 1986b: 9; Waugh, 1988: 32). The final agreement was worth a total of \$US1.5 million, which was paid in three advance instalments, with the first being due upon the agreement taking effect in October 1985 (Doulman, 1986b: 10). These payments effectively doubled Kiribati's annual income from licensing agreements - taking income from access agreements from 13–15% of the national budget in the previous years to 25% of the national budget in 1986 (Doulman, 1986b: 6).

### International reactions

Given the context of heightened Cold War tensions, the United States and its allies Australia and New Zealand had no desire to see the Soviet Union gain any purchase in the Pacific region. All three perceived the Pacific as a region relatively free of Soviet influence, militarily and politically.<sup>3</sup> The Kiribati/Soviet pact was thus viewed as a fundamentally new development – something that had not been seen in the Pacific previously. With this in mind, US, Australian, and New Zealand concerns about the Kiribati agreement were premised on three main points: that Soviet vessels might be used for intelligence gathering (Tanham, 1988: 2), that the Soviets might eventually gain access to land-based facilities in Kiribati (Keith-Reid, 1985: 19), and that the agreement could lead to expanded Soviet political influence in the Pacific islands more generally (Dorrance, 1990: 915). While some experts rejected the premise that the Kiribati Agreement would represent a 'new' Soviet incursion in the Pacific<sup>4</sup>, Washington and Canberra viewed the possibility of a deal as consequential enough that it was the subject of lengthy discussions between the Australian Minister for Defence, Kim Beasley, and the US Secretary of Defense, Caspar Weinberger, during the period of negotiations between Kiribati and the Soviets (Doulman, 1986b: 12; Keith-Reid, 1985: 19). It was also viewed as significant enough that Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke specifically raised the issue with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, just after negotiations became public (Lamb, 1987).

Given their political and geostrategic outlooks, throughout 1985 the United States, Australia, and New Zealand applied significant diplomatic pressure on Kiribati in an attempt to prevent it from finalizing a deal with the USSR. This played out both publicly and behind closed doors –

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<sup>3</sup> For example, a 1984 US State Department report found that 'unlike other parts of the world, the bull is not yet amongst the China.' (Kiste and Herr, 1984: 17), and in a 1985 Defence Review the New Zealand Ministry of Defence noted 'that there was no evidence of Soviet subversion in the region' (Wilson, 2004: 104).

<sup>4</sup> Soviet fishing vessels had been operating in the Pacific since the 1970s, fishing illegally within the EEZs of Pacific island states without access agreements. Also, as Kiribati itself would point out, by this time the Soviet Union had had a joint-venture fishing arrangement with New Zealand since 1978, and the United States since the late 1960s (Doulman, 1986b: 13; Tsamenyi & Blay, 1989: 160-161).

including in communications directly between President Tabai and his counterparts in Australia and New Zealand (Holberton, 1986; Keith-Reid, 1985; Teiwaki, 1987).

The public reaction of the United States during the Kiribati/Soviet negotiations was perhaps the most measured. On a tour of the region which was in part provoked by the potential fishing pact, US Secretary of State George P. Schultz pointedly noted that the Kiribati/Soviet pact 'might represent a further development of Soviet presence and intrusion into areas where they haven't been before' (Shultz, qtd. in Atlas, 1985). Separately, several prominent military officials, including the commander of the US Pacific fleet, indicated that the deal was 'disturbing' and that increased Soviet activity in the Pacific could provoke regional instability; and the Pentagon made it clear that US military interest in the Pacific had greatly increased as a result of Soviet activity there (Atlas, 1985; O'Loughlin, 1985). As the negotiations moved forward the US began, rather ominously, to warn that any agreement would not be in Kiribati's long-term interest (Doulman, 1986b: 13). When the deal was completed in October, the terse wording of the US Government's statement on the signing reflected this point by declaring that it was well known that Russia would do anything to expand its influence and there could be 'unforeseen consequences' for Kiribati in the long-term (Keith-Reid, 1985: 19).

For its part, the Australian Government expressed that it was not concerned with the concept of a fishing agreement in principle, but that it was concerned that such an agreement could lead to a Soviet land base. President Tabai stated that 'the only concerns' expressed to him by Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke regarding the deal were about the possibility of a land-base (Keith-Reid, 1985: 19), and the former Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, frequently made statements to the effect that a Soviet base in Kiribati would be all but a certainty should the fishing pact be signed.<sup>5</sup> Australia's Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden, claimed that a completed fishing pact would lead to greater Soviet intelligence gathering in the region and could potentially make Kiribati a military target (Jones, 1988: 66; Neemia-Mackenzie, 1988: 199). Beyond public statements, the main Australian attempts to curtail the signing of the agreement came in the form of offers of greater aid. At the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in 1985, Prime Minister Hawke approached President Tabai to request that Kiribati desist from signing the Soviet deal ("We've Done Well Despite The Odds," 2004). He reportedly offered Australian aid equivalent to the dollar value of the Soviet fishing pact if Kiribati refused to sign it (Holberton, 1986).

Somewhat unusually, the Prime Minister of New Zealand presented some of the most aggressive arguments against the pact. Aligning himself with the idea that in the Pacific 'the bull was not yet amongst the China', Prime Minister David Lange argued that 'at the moment we have a large spread of the Pacific absolutely immune from a Russian presence,' and that this should remain so. He further claimed that there was 'evidence of considerable diplomacy on the part of the

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<sup>5</sup> 'It will start as a fish processing facility, but that will have some refuelling facilities, which will then require repair facilities, and in turn an airfield ... Then it's a base.' (Fraser, qtd in Atlas, 1985; See also the Melbourne Herald, 29 October 1985 and The New York Times, 10 November 1985).

Russians to establish a preserve quite unrelated to their economic interests' (Lange, qtd. in Malone, 1985: 7). Perhaps most interestingly, when questioned about New Zealand's own fishing arrangement with the Soviets, Lange argued that small island states like Kiribati lacked the capacity to defend themselves from larger actors like the Soviet Union, stating: 'It is not my view that smaller island states have the means that we have to preserve their interests' – an aggressively patronizing statement about New Zealand's regional neighbours<sup>6</sup> (Lange, qtd. in Richardson, 1985: 12). Behind the scenes Lange reportedly counselled President Tabai against entering into any arrangement which could conceivably be interpreted as an exclusive deal with the Russians, and that it was in the best interests of Kiribati to prevent potential enemies from gaining any influence in the Pacific region (Malone, 1985: 7; "Possible Soviet Deal 'Purely Commercial' - Tabai," 1985: 15).

### **I-Kiribati reactions**

From the outset President Tabai, the primary spokesperson for the Government of Kiribati, portrayed the deal as a commonplace economic agreement between two sovereign states and as a preferable alternative to external aid. In his words, the fishing agreement was 'simply a commercial deal' that would allow Kiribati to achieve its stated goal of economic self-reliance (Tabai, qtd. in "Possible Soviet Deal 'Purely Commercial' - Tabai," 1985). He suggested that Kiribati did not see any significant issues in negotiating with the Soviets and made statements such as: 'They (the Soviets) want to fish our waters and we don't see anything wrong with it.' (Tabai, qtd. in Malone, 1985: 7). It was in the national interest of Kiribati, he argued, to move away from foreign aid in favour of earned income: 'We want to earn as much income from it as we can. It is better than aid. We have the resource they (the USSR) want and they may be prepared to pay the price we want.' (Tabai, qtd. in Malone, 1985: 7). In furtherance of this point, Tabai claimed that the negotiations should not be interpreted as an attempt to provoke more aid from the Western bloc nations, and indeed that Kiribati did not wish to rely on *any* external actor for budgetary support: 'We don't see anything wrong with talking to the Russians in a commercial way ... We want to earn our living. Earning a fishing living from the Russians is better than having to ask our traditional friends to support us. Do those traditional friends understand the way Kiribati feels? I hope they understand, and if they don't that's their problem' (Tabai, qtd. in Richardson, 1985).

As negotiations progressed and it became apparent that the controversy would be an enduring one, Tabai expanded his narrative to include criticisms of US fishing policies while maintaining that the deal was in Kiribati's best interest. He noted: 'We feel insulted if they (the US) fish our waters without an agreement' (Tabai, qtd. in Malone, 1985: 7), and argued that Kiribati did not have the ability to monitor US fishing vessels to the degree required to prevent large-scale illegal

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of the Kiribati/Soviet negotiations, New Zealand had for some time been embroiled in an international controversy regarding its recently adopted anti-nuclear stance. In January 1985 it denied a US battleship port privileges based on the United States refusal to confirm or deny its nuclear capabilities. As such, it has been argued that Lange's forcefulness was a result of a desire to 'mend-fences' with the United States and Australia, and prove that New Zealand remained committed to the Western cause (Doulman, 1986b: 12). See Hensley, 2013, for a detailed recounting of these events.

fishing ventures – a challenge which led to situations that were ‘often frustrating and downright humiliating’ (Tabai, qtd. in Johnson, 1985a: 6). He blamed the collapse of the multilateral fishing arrangement between Kiribati, Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the American Tunaboat Association on the American fisherman, describing what they were willing to pay as ‘nonsensical’ (Tabai, qtd. in Malone, 1985: 6). Finally, as an example of the United States high-handed behaviour, he pointed to the case the *Carol Linda* (Malone, 1985: 7), and instructed his government to lodge a formal protest with the US Government regarding the incident – an action which yielded no results but served to reinforce his points (Doulman, 1986b: 9). His tone became increasingly more combative as the year progressed, culminating in a lengthy interview in which he strongly denied the possibility of a Soviet land base and linked the attitudes of some Western states to neo-colonial behaviour: ‘The main concern I see [coming from other nations regarding the Russian fishing pact] is that we are so poor that we will allow the Soviets to establish a base in Kiribati. Well, we are not so poor as to lack principles ... We are not pro-Russian, we are pro-Kiribati and we believe in our capacity to pursue our national interests to achieve self-reliance. The colonial mentality is still around – that we are an appendage of the colonial countries ... Since 1979 we have ceased to belong to any other nation. We are only 64,000 people but we don’t belong to anyone... I have told these countries that we will continue to pursue our national interests’ (Tabai, qtd. in Johnson, 1985a: 6).

Domestically, the deal proved to be extremely controversial in Kiribati. In May an opposition MP moved that the fishing pact be put to a national referendum. The idea of a referendum was dismissed by Tabai, and a minister of his government successfully proposed that the motion be amended to require the government to ‘discuss’ the issue before signing, but not require a referendum (Doulman, 1986b: 10–11). This led to an extended period of political posturing, which culminated in a vote of no-confidence in the Tabai Government in August. The Tabai Government survived the vote 19-15 with two abstentions and one absentee – effectively ratifying its intention to sign the agreement (“Kiribati - Soviet Deal Goes Through,” 1985). Even so, the deal remained publicly controversial. In a not unusual situation for Kiribati, support for the government split along religious lines, with the primarily Protestant islands to the South supporting and the more Catholic islands to the North opposing (Doulman, 1986b: 11; Keith-Reid, 1985: 20). The Roman Catholic Bishop of Kiribati distributed a pamphlet entitled *The Great Russian Bear* which claimed that the Russian goal was ultimately to overthrow the Government of Kiribati (and all other non-communist governments) and replace them with communist dictatorships (Keith-Reid, 1985: 20; Tabai, 2017, personal communication). Some prominent I-Kiribati claimed that this pamphlet was written in collaboration with right-wing Australian advocacy groups (Neemia-Mackenzie, 1988: 201). In an attempt to explain and shore up support for the deal, Tabai and his ministers toured Kiribati’s outer islands, which occasionally led to more controversy – such as when Tabai met banners proclaiming him the ‘anti-Christ’ on the Marakei atoll. Also, for one of the few times in I-Kiribati history, there were public protests at the country’s main port of Betio (Keith-Reid, 1985: 20). Despite all this, the Tabai Government never wavered from its intention to sign the agreement, and did so in October 1985. Two months after the signing Tabai claimed as it became apparent that the Russian deal was not a threat, it was ‘becoming a non-issue at home.’ (Tabai, qtd. in Johnson, 1985b: 22).

## Aftermath

Negotiations between the Soviets and Kiribati to renew the agreement broke down in mid-1986, and the deal subsequently expired in October of that year. According to Babera Kirata, Kiribati's Minister for Natural Resources and Development, the breakdown in negotiations came as a result of the inability of the two sides to come to terms on the price, and as a result of a request by the Soviets to transfer fish from their fishing boats to the fleet's mother ship inside Kiribati's territorial waters. Echoing the statements of President Tabai, upon the collapse of the deal Kirata stated: 'It was purely commercial. The influence of the United States, Australia and New Zealand had nothing to do with it. We were just asking for a fair price' (Kirata, qtd. in "Kiribati nixes Russian treaty," 1986: 19). Perhaps recalling Kiribati's experience of shutting its EEZ to the Japanese earlier in the 1980s, Kirata went on to say: 'I think they will come back to us. It may take a couple months but they will come back' (Kirata, qtd. in "Kiribati nixes Russian treaty," 1986: 19). Before its collapse in the early 1990s the Soviet Union did sign an access agreement with Vanuatu in 1987, but it never returned to Kiribati (Lamb, 1987).

Although the Kiribati/Soviet Union fishing pact only lasted one year it had a significant impact at the regional level. Most obviously it provoked the United States into re-evaluating its 'hands-off' approach to Pacific diplomacy, and catalysed the US Government into finally acting to address the 'Tuna Wars'. In 1986 the extent to which the Kiribati/Soviet pact had prompted a new awareness of Pacific issues in the US became apparent at a major hearing on 'Developments in the South Pacific Region' before a subcommittee of US House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. In one telling exchange, a House committee member chastised a representative of the American Tunaboat Association for the ATA's behaviour in the Pacific. The member stated: '[Your testimony seems] to imply by tone that you're a sovereign country negotiating with other sovereign countries. I mean, you're just an industry within the United States ... when we (the US Government) negotiate with foreign countries, there is a broad spectrum of interests we take into consideration – one is commercial, one is strategic, one is humanitarian. In the broad scope of things, your perspective is entirely commercial ... the Government of the United States has a perspective that's broader than that' (United States House of Representatives, 1986: 58). The following year, President Reagan, in communication with Congress, noted that US fishing policy was responsible for 'a serious erosion of our good relations with the countries in the [Pacific] region', and had provided a strategic opening for the Soviet Union to exploit' (Reagan, qtd. in Tsamenyi and Blay, 1989: 168).

In 1987 US and Pacific negotiators agreed to a long sought-after multilateral agreement between the US Government and 16 Pacific states.<sup>7</sup> The 'US Treaty' initially ran for five years, from 1988 to 1993, and guaranteed a total of \$US12 million over that period. Eighty-five percent of this was distributed by catch volume within EEZs, and 15% was distributed equally in the form of technical assistance and development aid (Tarai, 2015: 38). The deal allowed for an average ten percent rate of return for the state where the catch was taken. While this may seem low, at the time it was far better than the three percent catch return of most bilateral arrangements (Tarai, 2015: 239). Since 1993 the deal has been renewed multiple times, and as of 2009 was responsible for nearly 1/3 of all access fees paid in the Western and Central Pacific Region (Havice, 2010:

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<sup>7</sup> Namely, Australia, the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.

983). While it is true that the Kiribati/Soviet Pact was not the only factor which led to the conclusion of the treaty – its negotiation had started before the deal was signed, in 1984 – the actions of Kiribati undoubtedly prompted the US to complete the deal in an expedited fashion. The 1986 ‘Pacific Developments’ hearing in the House of Representatives, which discussed the Kiribati/Soviet pact at length and made clear that the US was moving towards adopting a new approach towards regional diplomacy in the region, demonstrates this point. As Havea put it, following the Kiribati/Soviet pact, ‘the US launched a counter attack to reclaim its political superiority in the region through the adoption of the 1987 Treaty’ (Havea, 2012: 38).

On a more country specific scale, the \$1.5 million it received from the Soviet Union allowed Kiribati to cancel recurring budgetary aid from the United Kingdom. Aid had been granted by the UK as part of Kiribati’s decolonization, but the government had been forced to negotiate a new package every year – a situation which was culturally problematic, and that officials viewed as something akin to a national embarrassment (Teiwaki, 1987: 281). Accordingly, cancellation of the British aid was something that Tabai was particularly proud of, and described as one of the chief benefits of the Soviet pact (Tabai, 1987). Despite the more heated anti-aid rhetoric displayed by Tabai during the deal’s negotiation, its signing did provoke greater attention from aid agencies in the US, Australia, New Zealand, and other nations. Through its aid agency, USAID, the US offered to provide technical assistance in the development of Kiribati’s domestic tuna industry and a grant of US\$453,000. The money was funnelled through the Save the Children Foundation so that the US could avoid a direct cash grant, which it feared would encourage other small states to ‘play the Russia card’ (“Ratu Mara Plays the Russia Card,” 1986). The Australian Government also proposed to increase development assistance (and ultimately did increase its aid to the region as a whole by 400% in 1985), and New Zealand offered to double its aid and enter into a long-term technical assistance agreement (Havea, 2012: 29; “Ratu Mara Plays the Russia Card,” 1986; Van Trease, 1993: 63). New Zealand also agreed to provide Kiribati use of its air force for EEZ surveillance (Doulman, 1986b: 13). Other international actors made similar offers to the Government of Kiribati - notably China, which offered a grant of US\$350,000 and interest-free loans for development purposes (Doulman, 1986b: 14).

## Conclusion

The signing of the Kiribati/Soviet Union fishing agreement should not be remembered as a historical footnote, or as an isolated instance of Cold War geopolitics with no broader relevance. It is an event which speaks to many challenges faced in the contemporary Pacific, by both Kiribati and its regional neighbours. While it is certainly true that the Cold War is long past, that does not mean that in the future opportunities to exert leverage in foreign affairs will not present themselves to Pacific island states in new and unforeseen ways. Indeed, given the election of Donald J. Trump in the United States, the ongoing uncertainty regarding a United Kingdom ‘Brexit’ from the European Union, and the continuing expansion of Chinese, Indian, and Russian influence in the region, the geopolitical situation in the Pacific is more fluid than it has been at any point since the conclusion of World War II. The ability of Pacific island states to engage with non-traditional partners and undertake unconventional foreign policy endeavours which may

provoke larger actors in the region will only increase while this fluidity persists. In a discussion of this topic with a regional foreign affairs official during fieldwork conducted in 2017, the official noted that it was not in the United States' interest to see an expansion of Russian and Chinese influence in the Pacific – and that Pacific leaders were likely to take that into account at this year's Forum meeting when drafting a regional response to Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris climate change agreement (foreign affairs official, 2017, personal communication). Thus, as a 2017 report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute argued, 'the perception that external powers are competing for regional influence has opened up global opportunities for South Pacific states, as it has encouraged the belief that they can play competing great powers against each other. Consequently, South Pacific states appreciate that they have more choice as to which external power (or powers) they engage with' (Wallis, 2017: 20).

This brings us full-circle to now-former-President Anote Tong's conceptualization of a 'paradigm shift' in Pacific international relations. In a 2017 conversation with Tong, I asked him how he felt about the idea of the 'paradigm shift', and the current state of international affairs in light of the fluidity noted above. He responded that international affairs are in a period of realignment, and while the initial reaction to such realignments is usually worry, the changing order may produce new opportunities for smaller states and for the Pacific region. The key for small states, he indicated, was to find a way to make themselves relevant in such a changing environment. He also argued strongly in favor of a 360-degree foreign policy which explicitly sought engagement with non-traditional partners (Tong, 2017, personal communication). While he told me that the Kiribati/Soviet fishing pact was not something which he explicitly considered during his time as president, it nonetheless speaks to these points, and it does seem to be the type of action that he would like to see more of in Kiribati and in the Pacific. When I first asked him his thoughts about it he stated: 'The Russian issue was a masterstroke of strategy. That's how we should always have conducted foreign policy' (Tong, 2017, personal communication).

By exploiting the geostrategic interests of the US and its allies, and maintaining a steadfast commitment to its own perceived self-interest in the face of significant internal and external pressure, the Government of Kiribati found a way to make itself relevant and 'chart its own course' in 1985. In so doing, it proved that a small state could prompt behavioral change in one of the world's 'great powers'. All of the elements inherent to Tong's vision of a 'paradigm shift' in Pacific international relations, from acting as a 'large ocean state', through engaging with a non-traditional diplomatic partner, were represented in Kiribati's decision to engage with the Soviet Union. The significance of the agreement's being signed should not be underestimated – and if leaders like Tabai and Tong continue to emerge from the island states of the Pacific, neither should the possibility that a similar event could happen again.

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