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New Zealand prime ministers and regional diplomacy

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New Zealand performs best globally as a progressive small state, with a deep internationalism central to our national identity. That is, being a good international citizen. Our prime ministers are the most important players projecting New Zealand globally. Global diplomacy is what prime ministers do to advance their government's foreign policy.

Commentary on how capably each of New Zealand's fifteen prime ministers since 1945 engaged in global diplomacy has been sparse. Mostly, New Zealand prime ministers have been ill prepared to do global diplomacy – that has limited their effectiveness when engaging with their South Pacific counterparts.

The central thesis of the book I am writing is that Norman Kirk stands out as the most outstanding among the fifteen for doing global diplomacy. In the early 1970s his inspired branding of the country as a progressive small state - with a deep internationalism central to our national identity - was a pinnacle moment for New Zealand in world affairs.

At the forefront of the Kirk Brand was the ability of Wellington to be close to the South Pacific. For Kirk, this region was our foremost for being engaged with – Our Neighbourhood!

Kirk earns top spot for establishing a brand that endures, largely because of his initial outstanding effort. David Lange, Jim Bolger and Helen Clark have backed up his branding with strong support performances.

David Lange is the most recent New Zealand prime minister to have engaged

particularly well with South Pacific leaders. His kudos comes mostly from his extraordinary role in getting New Caledonia reinscribed on the United Nations List of Non Self Governing Territories in 1986. That was the first time regional leaders had sought to go to the global community to plead for the interests of people in their region.

Jim Bolger had much regard from many in the South Pacific for his leadership of the region's protests in 1995 against France's renewed nuclear testing, but he was not another Lange. Though some still smile quietly at how adeptly Bolger performed, particularly upstaging Paul Keating, who simply could not believe that Bolger could do what he did so well.

The South Pacific provides the foremost measure for how well New Zealand prime ministers do global diplomacy. You need your best mates – in our case our South Pacific neighbours - close to you when doing good global diplomacy. Australia, less so. We have to realise it is globally a middle power and we are a small state. Our interests do not always coincide!

Three episodes that highlight this balancing act are briefly explored here. The first was Australia's 1996 unsuccessful candidacy for a seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). John Howard had become prime minister in Canberra in March. He became 'His Masters Voice' - booming antagonism to the South Pacific. There was reaction. The Australians were in deep trouble with their 'home constituency' - Oceania. Six months later, it was doubtful that many of the eight Oceania votes willingly went to Canberra. Reportedly, Papua New Guinea actively campaigned against the Canberra

bid! The second was when New Zealand was trashed and thrashed in our 1982 bid for a UNSC seat. Those two instances are pertinent contrasts to the more recent successful bids that Wellington and Canberra made for terms on the Security Council. When, Oceania worked together well.

Let us not disappoint the region again. As happened in 1991. Then Michael Somare, Papua New Guinea's foreign minister sought and got regional support (in this case the Asian/African constituency) to contest the presidency of that year's UN General Assembly session only to find his early support dissipate when a Saudi rival entered the race to counter a Yemini. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War previous publicly announced supporters of Somare, including Washington and London, deserted him.

Identifying markers to measure the region's prospects with New Zealand prime ministers

The smartest future will come the same way that the best past was cultivated with the South Pacific. New Zealand prime ministers need to know, and engage with, the South Pacific leaders. Need to know when to come together with their Aussie counterpart and when to stand apart from their Canberra mate.

There is a big reciprocal onus on the South Pacific leaders - to know their New Zealand pal.

Also, supremely important is that they be collegial colleagues when playing away from home – such as, in New York at the United Nations or at Commonwealth

leaders' gatherings. Wellington has to keep close with our neighbours.

For the New Zealand prime minister a real responsibility - that their 'South Pacific' common sense travels well, when, for example, at APEC and the East Asia Summit, where their South Pacific friends are not present.

For the New Zealander to be "on brief" they do need to turn up at the annual Forums (and stay awake!). Also to have diplomatic cups of tea – or something a bit more spirited, but not too much more. That is to simply spend time together with South Pacific leaders, when together in capitals.

We do not want to repeat the 2011 fiasco when that year's Pacific Islands Forum was scheduled as an early curtain raiser to the Rugby World Cup finals.

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