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# **D**iplomacy and the pursuit of regional security

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Most significant threats to security in the Pacific Islands region today are internal rather than external. One has only to look at the extraordinary situation today in Nauru, the governance issues in Papua New Guinea, the constitutional concerns in Vanuatu, and the dominance of the military in Fiji. And in considering them, we need to remember that the Biketawa Declaration, agreed 16 years ago now, provides a mechanism that can be used to combat threats to security in the region, including internal problems.

Some years ago, it was thought by many that China would come to pose a significant threat to security in the region. Academic observers, particularly but not exclusively from Australia and the United States talked at a conference in Canberra about China being a potential threat to the region and about the likely inability of Pacific island governments to cope with that threat. I still remember vividly being ridiculed by a leading professor there for even suggesting that the views being expressed about the China threat and the likely lack of Pacific countries' capacity to cope with it might be a bit over-stated and that indeed China would bring opportunities as well as challenges. Fast forward ten years to a conference in Apia earlier this year on China and the Pacific and it was evident that Pacific participants are clearly confident about their relations with China. Even most of the academics present seemed to have abandoned their fears of a demonic "threat".

Certainly, there are issues and some problems that China's increased involvement in the Pacific has brought with it. But they are not of the dimension predicted in the early 2000s.

More worrying is the tension in the North Pacific involving China and both the US and Japan. War is certainly not inevitable, but the risks are real, particularly now that the armed forces of opposing countries are challenging each other. And if hostilities should somehow break out, of course there would be enormous consequences for the whole Asia Pacific region, including the Pacific Islands. But that is not an issue today.

For New Zealand to have significant influence in support of regional security, depends on the quality of our diplomacy and the nature of the policies being pursued. So the question I would like to raise with you is whether and how New Zealand diplomacy could be improved in our home region.

At the conference in Apia this year which I mentioned earlier, a very senior regional official, a Pacific Islander who has been positive about New Zealand's role in the Pacific over many years, asked me whether New Zealanders were aware how unpopular their country was in the Pacific Islands these days. I was startled. But investigation suggested that there could be several areas deserving investigation:

- **Trade Policy:** Concern was expressed about New Zealand's position in recent regional trade negotiations. The issues, as always, are complex but the most frequent complaint I heard related to New Zealand's requiring reciprocity for tariff reductions. I was startled by that. More than 35 years ago I was with then Prime Minister Robert Muldoon at a Pacific Forum leaders' meeting held in Tarawa. He was promoting what was then a new non-reciprocal regional trade arrangement, called SPARTECA. I clearly remember Fiji's Prime Minister, Ratu Mara, who was unhappy with Muldoon over other issues, questioning Muldoon closely on the SPARTECA provision that tariff concessions by Australia and New Zealand would be non-reciprocal. But Muldoon was adamant, saying it would not be in New Zealand's long-term interests to impose the burden of reciprocity on the developing island economies of our neighbors.
- So, if my recent information is correct, New Zealand seems to be going backwards. Reciprocity was undesirable in the 1980s but is essential now? Amusing to think of the controversial Robert Muldoon (dawn raids and all that) as being comparatively more liberal and generous towards the region.

- **Development cooperation:** Here, too, there are complaints of a less conciliatory New Zealand approach in recent years. The respected Professor Terence Wesley-Smith of University of Hawai'i talked at the Apia conference I mentioned earlier of a "master strategy" heavily influenced by "neo-liberal ideology" and of an "unpopular aid-leveraged regional reform agenda". At the same conference, Professor John Overton of Victoria University of Wellington referred to a "retro-liberal turn among traditional aid donors" and to the most notable change being in New Zealand's aid.
- There was also mention at that conference of a more aggressive nationalism becoming associated with both Australian and New Zealand aid in the Pacific.
- Perhaps in the interests of more influential New Zealand diplomatic and policy support of regional security, we should also examine closely the policy drivers of our aid policies in the Pacific.
- **Climate change:** Clearly New Zealand's climate change policies, like those of most states, are determined by domestic priorities. Even so, it's surprising that New Zealand has not found a way of acknowledging, even if it hasn't felt able to fully support, the critical Pacific Island concerns over climate change and rising ocean levels.
- **Climate refugees:** Obviously the old Refugee Convention, at least in its present form, is of no help to climate refugees. But I suggest it's time that New Zealand made it clear, hopefully formally and unequivocally, that genuine refugees from ocean level changes could, as a matter of last resort, make a home in this country. I believe there's little point in waiting for any kind of global agreement on the subject. Of course, very many of those affected by climate change will want to pursue other options, and supporting them would be a sensible focus for NZ aid. But with, if all else fails, an open door for Pacific island climate refugees. (Proportionately the challenge for us would be much smaller and

less complicated than the challenge at present being faced by European countries).

- **Decolonisation:** New Zealand was a pioneer in the field of decolonisation. At the global level, Prime Minister Peter Fraser played a leading role in creating the UN Trusteeship system and enshrining it in the UN Charter. Then New Zealand led the way in the decolonisation of the Pacific, with independence for Samoa in 1962 and then devising special arrangements to meet the wishes of the people of the Cook Islands and Niue. Later, New Zealand was the only former metropolitan power to cooperate fully with the UN Committee on Decolonisation, something it still does today. It's not surprising that NZ's role in Pacific decolonisation has been called its greatest hour in the Pacific.
- Today, however, our situation is less clear. When the issue of re-inscription of French Polynesia arose at the UN in 2013, neither New Zealand nor Australia actively supported their Pacific Island partners. At least New Zealand did not go as far as an Australian minister with Pacific responsibilities, who said it was appropriate for Canberra to be guided by Paris (by Paris?) on such issues. Nevertheless, I suggest we need to give higher priority to decolonisation in the Pacific Islands region.
- **New Zealand's constitutional relationships with the Cook Islands and Niue:** These also need close attention. The concept of self-government in free association with New Zealand was a clever and brave experiment. It was recognised at the time it was devised that there would be problems to be worked through. So far, they have been. But a new development today is that the Cook Islands and to a lesser degree, Niue, are, with New Zealand's concurrence, recognised by a number of states, the United States, China and Japan among them. In that regard they have the attributes of sovereign states. But when, quite recently, the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands said that he wanted to discuss with New Zealand's Prime Minister the

possibility of the Cook Islands joining the United Nations, the idea was rejected publicly even before any discussion had taken place. I suggest that the "free association" relationship requires more than that.

And there's an additional and, I suggest, powerful reason for New Zealand to lift its diplomacy in the Pacific. From my own experience, having been off and on in Pacific Island countries for more than half a century, I believe that today there's a new confidence on the part of leaders, in government and elsewhere. It's evident in several areas, two of which were evident at the Apia conference which I've mentioned earlier. First, in relation to China, it was fascinating to hear Pacific Island politicians, officials and academics demonstrating their confidence in their own ability to deal with China and its government. Second, on aid generally it was fascinating to hear the Cook Islands Minister of Finance talk about his insistence in negotiations with potential aid donors that all aid projects need to not only make "economic sense" but also, and more important, need to make "island sense". He said donors had accepted this. This is an aspect of what some observers call an increased sense of island agency.

I suggest New Zealand has to take account of this increased island confidence. To have influence, to be taken notice of, is likely to require improved Pacific-focused diplomacy and policies. (As an aside illustrating the new confidence in the Pacific, after one Pacific participant at the Apia conference had referred to the need to tame the China dragon, another participant, also a Pacific Islander, suggested it would be useful to go further and "train the dragon to tame the bald eagle, the kangaroo and the kiwi".)

Overall, I suggest our relations in the Pacific, and therefore our ability to support regional security and stability, require more empathy and evident goodwill on our part. I'm reminded of some words written recently by Terence O'Brien, and I'd like to end with them:

"New Zealand has, through the Treaty of Waitangi process, placed reconciliation at the heart of our democracy in a way that the other English-speaking democracies have not. That process presents a national challenge and it is often controversial, but it must influence the conduct of New Zealand's foreign relations."

[Terence O'Brien, NZIR, Nov/Dec 1914]