SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC:

BUILDING ON BIKETAWA

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A great deal of attention has been focused recently on the troubles of the South Pacific region. Most analyses of the security threats faced by the region have included examinations of state failure, and the impact this has on individual countries and their neighbours. Phrases such as the "arc of instability" are now being used to describe the region that was once considered not only a peaceful part of the world, but also a fine example of democratic governance.[1] However, despite the problems faced by some Pacific Island nations, little has been achieved in terms of security cooperation, notwithstanding the accomplishments of regional organisations in dealing with economic and development issues. One of the greatest criticisms of these organisations in this respect is the lack of institutionalised arrangements to facilitate security cooperation and action.[2] It is therefore of vital importance that the nations of the South Pacific region now come together to create mechanisms to address the threats they face.

This paper examines the notion of security cooperation as it exists in the South Pacific region. It commences with a discussion of the threats faced by Pacific Island nations, the existing regional responses to those threats, and the ability of the region's primary organisation to address security concerns. The paper then examines a number of factors that not only give cause to fostering greater security cooperation in the South Pacific, but that have also created unique opportunities for the achievement of this goal. Finally, it examines the form regional security mechanisms might take, offering a critique of some elements of a proposed regional peacekeeping force. It argues firstly that factors such as a change in direction by the region's pre-eminent intergovernmental grouping, changing notions of sovereignty and an altered security situation have created an environment in which regional security cooperation has a great chance of success. Secondly, the paper argues that political and legal processes, based on the Pacific Island Forum's Biketawa Declaration and on those that led to Operation Helpem Fren in the Solomon Islands could provide a more flexible and appropriate regional response than a regional peacekeeping force.

SECURITY IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

It has almost become a fact of life that, since the end of the Cold War, the majority of the world's armed conflicts have occurred within states. This is certainly true of the South Pacific region, where internal conflicts have tended to be the predominant security concern.[3] Since the late 1970s for example, various levels of internal conflict have occurred in Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.[4] In the year 2000, a report by the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Forum (Forsec) identified ethnic differences, land disputes, economic disparities, and a general lack of confidence in corrupt or ineffective governments as the main causes of conflict in the region.[5] These four elements have led in some cases to what analysts are calling state failure, and at the very least have contributed to

breakdowns in law and order, and to declining education and health services and living standards.[6] The Forsec report also highlighted economic stagnation, environmental degradation and food security issues as adding to the overall decline in security across the South Pacific.[7]

The nature of these threats has been such that they not only have an impact on neighbouring states, but they have also raised fears that the security environment is amenable to the evolution of other threats. The prevalence of weak states in the region for example, has, according to Elsina Wainwright of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, been ideal for the growth of transnational crime, money laundering, illegal immigration, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, and of course, terrorism.[8] These issues have been exacerbated by both the region's porous borders and the inability of governments to control them, as well as the susceptibility of these economically weakened states to well-funded criminal or terrorist organisations.[9]

REGIONAL RESPONSES

Despite the tensions that have occurred in the South Pacific, regional leaders have nonetheless been successful in creating institutions to deal with a variety of issues. A number of organisations deal with the environment, conservation and sustainability of fisheries, and the exploration of mineral resources. The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (formerly the South Pacific Commission) is responsible for delivering development assistance. There are also programs in place that encompass customs and immigration, law officers and Chiefs of Police conferences, and criminal intelligence. It is the Pacific Islands Forum, (PIF) however, that is the primary regional grouping. The Forum's mandate extends from regional trade and economic issues, to law enforcement and security. It also has observer status at the United Nations (UN) and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), thus representing the Pacific community internationally. As a regional grouping, the PIF has generally been a success, and has achieved a number of significant accomplishments in its time. However, one of the biggest criticisms of the organisation is that its ability to provide any meaningful assistance to states in need has been severely hampered by both the reluctance of regional leaders to address contentious issues, and the lack of institutionalised arrangements within the organisation itself.[10] Eric Shibuya, for example, has noted that 'many critics view the Forum as an example of unrealised potential, of an organization of endless (and useless) discussion, where talk has replaced action as the measure of effectiveness'.[11] While the Forum has been quite successful in giving the island states a voice internationally, and in dealing with a host of economic issues, it has traditionally been loathe to deal with the internal security problems of its member states. A fundamental aspect of this is the desire to maintain a norm of non-intervention in the affairs and sovereignty of those members. In this respect, the PIF has been compared to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and particularly ASEAN's preference for 'perpetuating cosmetic unanimity'[12] over confronting the region's primary security issues. As Stewart Firth has contended, '[l]ike ASEAN, the Pacific Islands Forum had consistently avoided responding to the internal political and security problems of member states.'[13] As the primary security problems of the Pacific Island nations are internal, the reluctance of the PIF to address them has meant that little has been achieved by way of creating appropriate responsive measures.

However, even if the PIF had been willing to discuss internal security problems, a lack of formal mechanisms for dealing with such issues has only added to the Forum's general inability to formulate proper responses. The PIF itself acknowledged this as a major concern. In their 1997 Aitutaki Declaration on Regional Security Cooperation, Forum leaders conceded that 'existing arrangements have not provided explicit mechanisms to ... respond promptly and effectively to requests for assistance.'[14] Similarly, at an August 2000 meeting brought together to address security problems in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, the Prime Minister of Samoa, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, stated that 'existing Forum arrangements do not prescribe a process for implementing a Forum response to help in the kind of crises that have occurred',