



THE PROBLEMS AND POTENTIAL OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

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INTRODUCTION

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) can be justifiably proud of much of its accomplishments as a regional organization. Since its founding in 1971, the PIF (formerly the South Pacific Forum, and usually referred to simply as ‘the Forum’) has been the major avenue for the small island states of Oceania to assert a collective voice on major international issues, thereby amplifying their voice and impact. It has been through the Forum that positions on nuclear testing, climate change, fisheries, and other security and/or environmental issues have been articulated and pushed in the international arena. The pattern of cooperation developed among the countries in Oceania is well established and should provide many lessons for other regions. On the other hand, many critics view the Forum as an example of unrealized potential, of an organization of endless (and useless) discussion, where talk has replaced action as the measure of effectiveness. The Forum, it is argued, has refused to take the next step in its evolution, from regional organization to regional community.

This chapter will weigh the prospects for the development of a regional community. It will trace the historical development of cooperation in Oceania and the evolution of the Forum as an actor in regional and international politics. The structural and institutional obstacles to the Forum’s development beyond a regional organization towards a regional community will then be articulated, with some concluding remarks on the future of the Forum and its potential development.

THE COLONIAL CONTRIBUTION IN DEVELOPING REGIONAL COOPERATION IN OCEANIA

Greg Fry has accurately noted, ‘the full story of South Pacific regional cooperation cannot... be told solely as the history of the Forum in the way one might equate South-East Asian cooperation with ASEAN.... Much of the narrative should in fact be concerned with the politics of relations between

regional institutions and the political interests they represent'.¹ The accomplishments of the Forum have often been credited to its overarching philosophy of the 'Pacific Way'. Michael Haas has called the Pacific Way a system of 'unanimous compromise,' where everyone sacrifices something for the overall benefit of the whole and all decisions are made by consensus.² Although many government officials have ascribed to the Pacific Way a legacy extending to precolonial, precontact times, its actual development is more accurately traced to the aftermath of World War II. The colonial powers of the region (the United States, France, the Netherlands,³ United Kingdom,⁴ Australia and New Zealand) organized a 'South Seas' conference in 1947 and developed an organization for the welfare of their holdings. The organization was called the South Pacific Commission (SPC, or simply the Commission) and it was designed to provide technical advice on economic and social issues.⁵ Discussion of 'political' issues remains strictly prohibited under the SPC's charter, and meetings originally only included the administering powers of the region. Representatives from the islands met with the administering powers triennially at the 'South Pacific Conference' where the islands were able to make their views known about policies initiated by the SPC, but this was almost inevitably after the fact. (Meetings of the Commission and Conference did not even take place at the same time in the years the Conference met). When Western Samoa became independent in 1964, a question arose as to where it should be placed—should it remain in the Conference (and essentially have no voice) or become a full member of the Commission? The eventual decision was to give Western Samoa membership in both organizations, but this led to questions for the future. Concern rose that the remaining islands would seek independence 'too soon' in order to gain full membership into the SPC.⁶

¹ Greg Fry, 'International Cooperation in the South Pacific: From Regional Integration to Collective Diplomacy,' in W. Andrew Axline ed., *The Political Economy of Regional Cooperation* (London: Pinter, 1994), p.137.

² Michael Haas, *The Pacific Way: Regional Cooperation in the South Pacific* (New York: Praeger, 1989). Cook Islands Prime Minister Albert Henry coined the term in 1975.

³ The Netherlands would leave the SPC when it relinquished control of Netherlands New Guinea (West Papua/Irian Jaya, subsequently integrated into Indonesia) in 1962.

⁴ The United Kingdom withdrew from the SPC in 1996 but rejoined in 1998.

⁵ The organization is now known as the Secretariat for the Pacific Community, and the acronym obviously is unchanged.

⁶ Herbert Corkran, *Mini-Nations and Macro-Cooperation: The Caribbean and the South Pacific* (Washington D.C.: North American International, 1976), p.147.

The 'no politics' restriction on discussion in the SPC was the source of great dissatisfaction for the nascent leadership from the islands. The most pressing issues for the islands were clearly political ones involving larger questions of decolonization, but the greatest concern was nuclear testing by France.⁷ Matters came to a head at the 1965 meeting in Lae, Papua New Guinea, when Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of Fiji led a major push from the island representatives to give the Conference more relevance in the actions of the SPC beyond its existing 'advisory' capacity. The 'Lae Rebellion' was 'the first concerted effort by Pacific Islanders to protest against the structures in the SPC which ensured dominance by the colonial powers'.⁸ Mara was also the driving force behind the creation in 1965 of the first indigenously motivated 'islands-only' regional organization, the Pacific Islands Producers Association (PIPA). Formed by Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa outside of the domain of the SPC, PIPA provided a unified front for negotiating the prices of common agricultural products for export.

Faced with increasing irrelevance, the SPC did evolve in an attempt to meet these new challenges and demands from the island states. From 1967 onward, meetings of the Conference and Commission were held together, and the difference between the two bodies essentially disappeared by 1974.⁹ Despite these reforms, it was clear the SPC's charter made the organization too limited to deal with all of the issues confronting the region, and the South Pacific Forum was founded in 1971 as an attempt to address these rising challenges.

THE SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM

The first meeting of the South Pacific Forum was held in Wellington in August 1971. Attending the gathering were representatives of the Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Tonga, and Western Samoa, as well as Australia and New Zealand.¹⁰ Despite it being held in Wellington, New Zealand (and Australia) technically attended the first Forum meeting as observers, though both countries were recognized as full members a year later at the second meeting in

⁷ Although the US had tested nuclear weapons in the Pacific, those tests ended in 1962.

⁸ Greg Fry, 'The Politics of South Pacific Regional Cooperation,' in Ramesh Thakur, ed., *The South Pacific: Problems, Issues, and Prospects*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p.173.

⁹ Corkran, *Mini-Nations and Macro-Cooperation*, p.149. The administering powers still maintained the upper hand in the SPC due to its budgetary control.

¹⁰ The respective Head of Governments attended for all of the island nations, as well as the Prime Minister of New Zealand. Australia's representative for this first meeting was its Minister for External Territories.

Canberra.¹¹ The initial arrangement was due to questions as to whether Australia and/or New Zealand would or should be full members of this new organization. It was recognized, however, that inclusion of Australia and New Zealand as full members of the Forum would maximize the influence the island states would have on their larger neighbors.¹² Additionally, Australia and New Zealand would be the major sources of funding for the new organization (each provides one-third of the Forum's annual operating budget, with the island states collectively providing the remaining third) and both were expected to give voice to regional concerns in other international gatherings.

The Forum has no formal constitution and technically therefore has no legal personality in international relations.¹³ Far from a shortcoming, this fact is often listed as one of the strengths of the Forum because it gives the organization flexibility; all topics are up for discussion. Also, having no formal voting structure encourages decision making by consensus. The perceived benefits notwithstanding, the lack of legal personality may have been one of the major reasons for the establishment of the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC), which would eventually adopt the role of secretariat for the Forum.¹⁴

Although the original motivation behind the Forum's creation was an open discussion of political issues (nuclear testing and decolonization, in particular), the initial practical impact of the Forum came in the area of economics. SPEC's original function was to enhance the export capacity of the island states, absorbing the duties of PIPA until the latter organization was eventually terminated in 1974. The South Pacific Regional Trade and Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) was opened in 1980, an early attempt by the countries of the region to adapt to the shifting forces of economic globalization.

The early emphasis of the Forum itself had thus primarily been regional; developing connections as a region (especially economically) was the major focus of discussion. For example, the need to coordinate regional aviation and shipping, as well as to alleviate costs in these industries, led to cooperative

¹¹ Brij Lal and Kate Fortune, eds., *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), p.332.

¹² Fry, *op.cit.*, p.140.

¹³ Richard Herr, 'Regionalism and Nationalism,' in K.R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste, and Brij Lal, eds., *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p.286.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.286-287.. The Forum designated SPEC as its secretariat in 1975, and in 1988 the body was officially renamed the Forum Secretariat.

efforts in the establishment of Air Pacific and the Pacific Forum Line (PFL). Issues with the coordination of telecommunications within the region led to the organization of an annual Regional Ministers Meeting on Telecommunications. In the larger sense of building connections and a sense of the region as a unified whole, the University of the South Pacific (USP) has evolved into an institution of indigenous learning.

It was really only as the Forum entered its second decade that it began to stretch its efforts as an organization into the international realm. The Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) was founded in 1979 to provide a central point for information sharing and to serve as the chief negotiating body between Forum members and Distant Water Fishing Nations on licensing agreements to fish in the large and tuna-rich Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the Forum nations.¹⁵ The region was finally able to coalesce its opposition to French nuclear testing into legal expression with the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ) Treaty in 1985. The Forum also provided strong statements calling for action to deal with climate change, especially during the run-up to the 1992 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro. The issue was first raised as a concern for study in the Forum's 1988 communiqué.¹⁶ Three years later, the Forum would call global warming and sea level rise 'the most serious environmental threats to the Pacific region'.¹⁷

Certainly, the Forum has done much in its thirty years of existence. However, despite these accomplishments, the Forum has been hampered by lack of capacity, national interests overriding regional benefits, and the ability of single nations to exercise a de facto veto, thereby watering down Forum statements for the sake of 'Pacific Way' consensus. While the Forum has proven an effective avenue for small island states to amplify their voices (with

¹⁵ A brief outline of the development of the FFA can be found in Christopher Jasparro and Eric Shibuya, 'Environmental Security and Ingenuity in the Pacific: Case Studies of Local Biodiversity Protection and Regional Fisheries Management,' *Regional Development Dialogue* 23, no.1 (2002): 1-17.

¹⁶ Climate change was becoming a prominent issue in 1988, with a conference on 'The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security' convening in Toronto in June. Also that month, James Hansen, head of NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies sparked a major debate when he testified before the US Senate Energy Committee and stated he was '99 percent certain' the warm temperatures of the 1980's were the byproduct of global warming (Ian H. Rowlands, *The Politics of Global Atmospheric Change* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.73).

¹⁷ Forum Communiqué, 1991. Twenty-Second South Pacific Forum, Palikir, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, 29-30 July. Texts of Forum Communiqués can be found on the Forum Secretariat website: <http://www.sidsnet.org/pacific/forumsec/docs/docs.htm>.

the aid of middle powers Australia and New Zealand) in the international arena, the record of the Forum as a regional *organization* should give one pause in considering the viability of Oceania as a growing regional *community*.

FAILING TO MAKE CONNECTIONS: THE REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE QUESTION

Although the leaders of the island states continually assert that the Forum allows them to unify and harmonize their voices and work together, many of the shortcomings of the Forum have been due to the propensity of one or more of its membership to take unfair advantage (or be perceived as taking unfair advantage) of the benefits derived from Forum projects. Air Pacific, for example, was originally conceived as the regional airline to service the island states. However, as Ron Crocombe has noted, Air Pacific's 'collapse as a regional airline and takeover by Fiji as a national airline, can be attributed to several factors, the biggest being the inequitable distribution of benefits'.¹⁸ In Air Pacific's case, Fiji controlled the employment of airline staff and required all routes to be flown through Fiji, thus curbing its usefulness to other island nations, as well as shattering any façade that Air Pacific was in fact a *regional* body.

The bitter experience of Air Pacific left the island states wary of other regional transportation projects. As a result, shipping proposals were continually put off or rejected outright. Finally the Forum agreed in 1977 to establish the Pacific Forum Line, with each nation owning individual ships but those ships being leased to the PFL. While the leasing plan kept the PFL from falling victim to the inequities that befell Air Pacific, the PFL as a fully regional shipping line was not economically viable and would have collapsed without heavy subsidies and loans. In 1982, the PFL undertook substantial capitalization with a US\$6 million loan from the European Investment Bank and an additional US\$12.6 million from Australia, New Zealand, and seven island investors. The PFL currently operates on a commercial basis and has had marginal success, running its first surplus in 1985. The PFL returned dividends to its shareholders in 1988 and 1996.¹⁹

The University of the South Pacific, meanwhile, has not lived up to its potential as a regional institution of higher learning. Again, inequitable distribution of benefits stirred increasing dissatisfaction with the USP,

¹⁸ Ron Crocombe, *The South Pacific* (Suva: University of the South Pacific, 2001), p.607.

¹⁹ Lal and Fortune, *op.cit.*, p.389.

especially evident on its main campus in Fiji.²⁰ Fiji's immigration policies meant that employment again went mostly to Fiji nationals, as well as the bulk of the scholarships. USP has also not been immune to domestic tensions within Fiji, as shown in incidents of violence in the aftermath of the coups in 1987 and the attempted coup in 2000. Then-President of the USP Students Association Veresi Bainivualiku was the center of the 2000 controversy with alleged connections to the Speight rebellion as well as accusations of assault on an Ethnic-Indian Fijian student, among other questions.²¹ In light of these events, the USP Council put forward in 2000 recommendations on ways to create a 'Pan-Pacific' identity at the university. These are currently under review.²² Whether or not such an identity can be instituted deliberately in a top-down fashion is questionable. However, the point is that it is recognized that the USP has fallen far short in an area that is a cornerstone of its educational philosophy and purpose.

NATIONAL INTERESTS OVER REGIONAL CONCERNS

The unequal distribution of benefits found in the Air Pacific and USP experiences are an example of a nation placing national advantage over regional benefits, but Fiji is not the only country guilty of using this tactic within Oceania (or anywhere else, for that matter). While the Pacific Way is supposed to bring about flexibility and compromise, the strong desire for consensus (at times for its own sake, it seems) gives each Forum member a *de facto* veto during the Forum meetings, thus weakening the collective unity and power of the Forum. For example, in the mid-1980s, although the countries of the region were united in their opposition to French nuclear testing, the stance of each country regarding the larger question of nuclear deterrence varied rather significantly. Governments in Australia, Fiji, and Tonga were strong supporters of the United States and the nuclear umbrella that it provided. Vanuatu was very much against any aspect of 'nuclearism' in the region, a term coined by then-PM Father Walter Lini to describe the extension of colonial power through the US military presence. Although New Zealand received most of the international headlines due to its anti-nuclear stance resulting in the end of the trilateral Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS)

²⁰ Crocombe, *op.cit.*, p.247-251.

²¹ USP News, 'Daily Post Calls for 'Truth' at USP,' 23 August 2000, <http://www.sidsnet.org/pacific/usp/journ/docs/news/usp3.html>. Accessed 3 January 2003.

²² Tamani Nair, USP News, 'USP Has 'Full-On' Programme in Spite of Political Crisis,' 1 September 2000, <http://www.sidsnet.org/pacific/usp/journ/docs/news/usp11depvc.html>. Accessed 3 January 2003.

alliance, the Lange Government actually attempted to craft its stance as non-nuclear, but not anti-ANZUS.²³ The SPNFZ Treaty is an attempt to produce a document that exhibited unified resistance to French testing but left the US issue slightly more ambiguous. Some analysts criticized the treaty as being too much a by-product of the Australian position, arguing that the Hawke government had forced the creation of the SPNFZ Treaty in such a manner as to protect its military alliance with the US and its uranium exports.²⁴ The resulting treaty came under fire from both the conservative and radical camps, with Tonga (arguing that it went too far) and Vanuatu (arguing that it did not go far enough) both refusing to sign the treaty when it was first opened.²⁵

Both Australia and New Zealand, being former colonial powers in the region, have occasionally had image problems in the South Pacific, and both have at times been perceived as overbearing, condescending, or even hegemonic.²⁶ New Zealand has generally been more sensitive to this issue, and as a consequence has been seen as more a part of Oceania than Australia. That said, New Zealand has had recent splits with the island states, notably on questions of democracy and (from the view of the islanders) issues of indigenous rights. Most notably, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark declared prior to the 2000 Forum Meeting that she would not ride to the leaders' retreat on the same boat with Fiji PM Laisenia Qarase, who had been installed in the aftermath of the coup. As a result, two boats were used, but Clark and John Howard rode on one boat, while the other island states' heads of government rode with Qarase. As Firth says, 'the incident underlined the extent to which Clark, and in smaller measure John Howard, were under domestic pressure to parade their democratic credentials when in the Pacific,

²³ For an expanded articulation of this position, see David Lange, *Nuclear Free--the New Zealand Way* (Auckland: Penguin, 1990).

²⁴ The most articulate version of this argument is found in Michael Hamel-Green, *The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty: A Critical Assessment* (Canberra: Peace Research Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1990). For an analysis that views the treaty's construction more pragmatically, see Greg Fry, 'Regional Arms Control in the South Pacific,' in Desmond Ball and Andrew Mack, eds., *The Future of Arms Control* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1987).

²⁵ This could be taken as a sign that 'unanimous compromise' was achieved in the negotiations.

²⁶ See Rosaleen Smyth, Nii-K Plange, and Neil Burdess, 'Big Brother? Australia's Image in the South Pacific,' *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 51, no. 1 (1997): 37-52 and Jim Rolfe, 'New Zealand and the South Pacific,' *Revue Juridique Polynesienne* 1 (2001): 157-169.

and the tendency of Island leaders to stick by their own in the face of *foreign criticism*’.²⁷

Australia has hurt its image by holding fast on the issue of climate change. During early discussions, both Australia and New Zealand were supporters of reduced greenhouse-gas emissions and both countries had even endorsed what was then known as the ‘Toronto Target,’ a pledge to cut emissions by twenty percent from 1990 levels by the year 2000.²⁸ The Forum had issued unequivocal statements of concern on the threat of climate change and sea-level rise, but things would change as the issue moved from agenda setting to policy formulation. The 1991 Communiqué called for ‘significant and immediate reductions’ of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, as well as pointing to the responsibility of the industrialized countries to take the initial steps to mitigating climate change.²⁹ A year later, after the negotiations in Rio, the Forum urged the early negotiations of protocols that address, ‘in particular, the issue of *targets* and *timetables* for the reduction of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions’.³⁰ The call for binding protocols establishing set targets and timetables for achieving reductions in greenhouse gases would be repeated the next year, though the language would be toned down in following communiqués. On the eve of the climate meeting in Kyoto, the Forum had a chance at their meeting in Rarotonga to issue a strong statement on climate change and perhaps build some international sentiment for a strong protocol. However, Prime Minister John Howard of Australia had already publicly stated that he would not agree to any statement on binding targets for greenhouse-gas reductions for fear that the Australian economy would be damaged.³¹ The Forum leaders’ statement on climate change is a completely uncontroversial document, recognizing ‘deep concerns’ about the impacts of climate change and ‘urged all participants at the forthcoming Kyoto Conference to pursue vigorously an outcome which would produce the highest level of net reduction in global greenhouse emissions’.³² Tuvalu’s Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu said after the statement was issued, ‘Australia

²⁷ Stewart Firth, ‘A Reflection on South Pacific Regional Security, Mid-2000 to Mid-2001,’ *Journal of Pacific History* 36, no. 3 (2001), p.278, emphasis added.

²⁸ The target would later be called the ‘AOSIS Protocol,’ named after its proposal by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

²⁹ *Forum Communiqué*, 1991.

³⁰ *Forum Communiqué*, 1992. Twenty-Third South Pacific Forum, Honiara, Solomon Islands, 8-9 July, emphasis added.

³¹ Bernadette Hussein. ‘The Big Retreat,’ *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1997, p.11.

³² Forum Leaders’ Retreat Statement on Climate Change, 1997. Annex I of 28th South Pacific Forum Communiqué, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 19 September.

dominates us so much in this region. For once, we would have liked to have got some respect'. Howard, on the other hand, remarked that 'there were a range of views, but in the end there was consensus'.³³ Howard's actions at the 1997 Forum are perhaps more infamous within the region for *how* he acted rather than what he said. At the leaders' welcome dinner, dancers came to each leader and brought them up to the floor. Howard refused to move from his seat.³⁴ The awkward situation only further highlighted the gap between Australia and its island neighbors.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OBSTACLE

Quite similar in many respects to ASEAN, there is a strong reluctance in the Forum to deal with matters internal to another country. While there are no official limitations or pledges of 'noninterference,' the Forum has generally respected the internal sovereignty of its members. Indeed, the one successful example of Forum intervention was the 1980 secession in Vanuatu, which was quelled by members of the Papua New Guinea defense force, with Australia providing logistical and transportation support.

This situation has not gone without criticism from within the Forum itself, however. Former New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange is reported as commenting that, 'in no circumstances will anything be discussed, no matter how important, which involves the internal affairs of a member. We met in Apia in 1987, shortly after the Fiji coup and pretended it hadn't happened'.³⁵ Indeed, the Forum Communiqué of that year stated the 'deep concern and anguish... felt over recent events involving the overthrow of the elected Government in Fiji'. In a comment regarding any role the Forum might play in resolving the crisis, the only thing mentioned explicitly was a Forum-sponsored mission sent to Fiji to hold 'discussions with all parties in Fiji with a view to attempting to facilitate processes leading to a resolution of current problems'.³⁶ Furthermore, the mission would only be sent at the request of Fiji's Governor-General.

The 1987 coups in Fiji were not the only instance of the Forum avoiding an internal matter of one of its members. Papua New Guinea (PNG) had been dealing with a secessionist movement in the province of Bougainville that had escalated into a full-scale civil war in 1989. Despite the loss of life and

³³ Hussein, *op.cit.*, p.11.

³⁴ 'Editorial: 28th South Pacific Forum: Australia Calls the Tune,' *Pacific Islands Monthly*, November 1997, p.5.

³⁵ 'Pacific Forum goes on Trial,' *Dominion* (NZ). 27 October 2000, p.10.

³⁶ Forum Communiqué, 1987, Eighteenth South Pacific Forum, Apia, Samoa, 29-30 May.

evidence of human rights abuses on the part of both the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and the PNG Defense Force, the Forum made no comment on Bougainville until 1997, and the reference then was to peace talks being put in place.³⁷

SOME SOUND AND FURY: REGIONAL STATEMENTS

Most major internal security issues have been ignored or avoided by the Forum. The focus has been on issues like French nuclear testing and decolonization issues such as New Caledonia. The Forum has issued three major statements on security and security cooperation. The 1992 Honiara Declaration on Law Enforcement Cooperation was the first. As its title suggests, however, its focus was on developing methods of cooperation to deal with transnational crime issues. Major concerns included drug trafficking and money laundering, and discussions about mutual assistance were welcomed, but the Declaration was never implemented.³⁸ Five years later, the 1997 Forum issued the Aitutaki Declaration on Regional Security Cooperation. Again, it only specifically mentioned environmental disasters and transnational crime issues. Finally, the Biketawa Declaration was issued at the 2000 Forum. Coming in the aftermath of the overthrow of Fiji's elected Chaudhry government in May, both Australia and New Zealand pushed for a strong statement and an attempt at developing guidelines to assist on internal security matters. Although the main communiqué itself provided little comment on Fiji or other security issues (the communiqué mentioned the Townsville Peace Agreement on the Solomon Islands and 'welcomed the effort and commitment to date by the Fiji Interim Government to return the country to constitutional democracy and looked forward to further progress in these efforts³⁹'), Biketawa may be read as giving the Forum a larger role to play in the kinds of regional security issues it has previously avoided.

Biketawa commits Forum member countries to guiding principles including good governance, equality of all individuals under the law, and

³⁷ 'The Forum warmly endorsed the recent efforts made by the Government of Papua New Guinea in restoring peace to the island and expressed its readiness to assist Papua New Guinea wherever possible in its efforts to bring about a lasting a durable peace to Bougainville Province'. Forum Communiqué, 1997, Twenty-Eighth South Pacific Forum, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 17-19 September.

³⁸ As an interesting side note, the Declaration does mention as part of its 'Other Issues' section the threat of terrorism to the political and economic stability of the region noting special concern for civil aviation agencies.

³⁹ Forum Communiqué, 2000. Thirty-First Pacific Islands Forum, Tarawa, Kiribati, 27-30 October.

peaceful transitions of power, but it also respects indigenous rights and traditional values.⁴⁰ So the underlying tensions continue even under this latest statement. Biketawa does go further than its predecessors in that it does lay out processes of investigation that the Forum could initiate during a crisis in one of its members. While all of the explicit actions are innocuous (assess the situation, appoint a fact-finding mission, provide mediation, among others), the ability to convene a special meeting to ‘consider other options’ does leave open the possibility of some type of intervention. It remains to be seen whether Biketawa will stand up to the test posed by the next crisis.

THE FUTURE OF THE PACIFIC WAY

‘The Pacific Way must emphasize effective regional co-operation, if we are to achieve our goals. To me the primary goals are social adequacy through quality education in its broadest sense, and economic self-reliance’.⁴¹ Although much has been accomplished during its existence, those primary goals remain as prominent as when the preceding quote was written a quarter-century ago. Despite a growing willingness to deal with security issues, the island states especially have returned to chronic issues of economic viability. These issues have become even more important now due to economic globalization, and the Forum and its membership are re-examining issues of economic cooperation. Efforts are under way to stimulate trade both within the region and with other parts of the world. Agreements such as the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) and the Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA), both signed in 2001, are efforts by the region (and especially the small islands) to ride the waves of economic globalization without being swept away. The current Cotonou Convention gives some former island colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific preferential access into European markets. The Convention states that this arrangement will gradually be replaced by free trade agreements to take effect by January 2008. The PACER agreement is an umbrella agreement that allows the small island states to slowly phase in free trade, first amongst the island countries (via PICTA), then within the region (Australia and New Zealand), and then beyond.

It is arguable whether the purpose of the Forum, despite the occasional lofty statement, really is to develop a regional community. Perhaps a more clear distinction should be made between the Forum as regional organization

⁴⁰ Biketawa Declaration, Thirty-First Pacific Islands Forum, Tarawa, Kiribati, 27-30 October.

⁴¹ Dr. T.R.A. Davis, ‘Pacific Survival: Effective Regional Co-Operation,’ *Pacific Perspective* 7, no. 1-2 (1978), p.4.

and the Pacific Way as a philosophy and practice that may evolve into a regional, communal identity. As Firth points out, ‘The Commonwealth, not the Forum, negotiated the first precarious peace agreements in the Solomons enshrined in the Honiara Accord and the Panatina Agreement of 1999. When those agreements collapsed in the armed conflict of mid-2000, it was Australia and New Zealand, not the Forum, that intervened’. He then posits, ‘Under these circumstances, the future role of the Biketawa mechanism might well be to confer the imprimatur of regional legitimacy on what are essentially bilateral interventions undertaken by Australia and New Zealand, which will claim to be acting on the basis of a mandate given by the Pacific Islands Forum’.⁴² However, if actions are indeed taken, and (perhaps more importantly) seen as legitimate, could this be detrimental to the security of the region? Recent events may suggest a shift in thinking, as Australia has now led what has been judged a successful intervention operation in the Solomon Islands dispute. There continue to be fears that this intervention will require a commitment greater than Australia will be willing or able to provide. The concern has been expressed that, ‘if [Australia] intervene[s] on their request, we will be running the show for the next 50 to 100 years’.⁴³ Nevertheless, the fact that Australia was willing to lead the operation, and other states were willing to participate may signal a new trend in the activism of Australia and New Zealand in the region under the approval of the Forum. Australia has continually pointed to the Biketawa mechanism and the unanimous approval/invitation by the Solomons Parliament as its justification for the legitimacy of the operation.

One of the major criticisms of the Pacific Way has been its slow pace. Noel Levi, then Secretary General of the Forum Secretariat, noted that while those from the outside want to come to a decision, ‘here in the Pacific, we take our time’.⁴⁴ Frustrating though that gradual process may be, no result will ever have credibility without a sense of procedural legitimacy. As Jim Rolfe writes, ‘The Pacific Way involves sitting and thinking about the process and getting that right as much as it does in trying to develop solutions. Once the participants are happy with the process, solutions are likely to follow.... No way forward is possible until both sides can see that there is more to gain from peace than from fighting’.⁴⁵ Sitiveni Halapua, director of the East-West Center’s Pacific Islands Development Program, developed the *Talanoa* process

⁴² Firth, *op.cit.*, p.280.

⁴³ Megan Saunders, ‘In the Midst of Pacific Grim,’ *Australian*, 3 October 2002, p.5.

⁴⁴ Pacific Islands Forum, 2001. ‘Focus on the Future,’ video.

⁴⁵ Jim Rolfe, ‘Peacekeeping the Pacific Way in Bougainville,’ *International Peacekeeping* 8, no.4 (2001), p.52.

to mediate between the main actors in the aftermath of the May 2000 overthrow in Fiji. The process brought deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and caretaker PM Laisenia Qarase together for talks.⁴⁶ Certainly, one can debate whether more needs to be done, but no major incidents of violence have occurred since *Talanoa* was instituted, and that may be a sign of progress in and of itself. As Halapua himself said, 'Better people take a long time and talk than a long time and fight'.⁴⁷

⁴⁶The term 'talanoa' itself is Fijian for talking. Halapua in his presentations on the process stresses that it does not mean 'talking about nothing,' but rather 'talking without control or with a specific agenda.'

⁴⁷ Personal Communication with the Author, 6 November 2002