

DOI:10.53555/ks.v3i2.2925

Shifting Foreign Policies Of Regional Powers In The South Pacific

Dr. Tripurari Sharan^{1*}

*Associate Professor, Political Science, Aryabhata College, Benito Juarez Road, New Delhi

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Tripurari Sharan

*Associate Professor, Political Science, Aryabhata College, Benito Juarez Road, New Delhi

A major development in the South Pacific's political situation in the past ten years has been a perceptible shift of emphasis in the foreign policies of its two regional powers- Australia and New Zealand, towards the region. In the post-World War II period, the fear of Japanese militarist resurgence led these two countries to join ANZUS, the only security alliance in the region, under the US leadership in 1951. Sharing the Western perception of communist China as a growing imperialist threat, Australia and New Zealand joined the anti-communist front in the Asia-Pacific - Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), in 1954 and followed a pro-Western line of foreign policy on major international issues. They not only maintained close diplomatic and economic relations with Britain and the USA but also remained committed partners in promoting US security interests in the region, ensuring the denial of any strategic access or influence to the Soviet Union in the Cold War rivalry between the Super Powers.

Since the beginning of the past decade, however, the realities of their geographical location has come to count more in the foreign policies of Australia and New Zealand than their traditional links with the West. In fact, with the British decision to withdraw from the east of Suez in 1967 and US president Nixon's Guam Doctrine in 1969, announcing US involvement in the region only in case of an external threat, these two countries started focussing attentions towards their immediate region. A number of steps were taken by Australia and New Zealand to develop close relations with Asian countries in the 1970s. Since the mid-1980s, the two countries have come up with well formulated policies to develop self-reliance in their defense preparedness on the one hand and to increase their role in the South Pacific affairs which may be explained as following.

Australia

The signs of new thinking in Australian foreign policy is traced to the "Review of Australia's Defense Capabilities" by Paul Dibb in March 1986, calling for Australian reliance in defense. The 1987 defense white paper supported the demand made in the "Dibb report" to develop an independent combat capability to defeat hostile forces in the areas of Australia's primary strategic concern which were identified as the South Pacific and the Southeast Asia. The department of defense submission to a 1989 Parliamentary enquiry stated that Australia had a direct interest in limiting the major external-military power involvement in the region, encouraging Pacific island countries look to Australia for guidance on strategic and defense issues, and facilitating Australian Defense Force operations in the region. Moreover, in December 1989, in a ministerial statement on "Australia's regional security," minister for foreign affairs and trade, senator Gareth Evans underlined that Australia believed in a "Comprehensive Engagement" in Southeast Asia and "Constructive Commitment" in the South Pacific. Comprehensive engagement was to support the major existing regional association ASEAN, to shape additional organisations like APEC which can contribute to the social and economic evolution of the region and to participate actively in the gradual development of a regional security community based on a sense of shared security interests. The term Constructive Commitment was described as promotion of close relations and effective regional co-operation through the regional organisations, offering assistance to the countries of South Pacific for both security and economic and social development, respect for the full sovereignty of the island states in relation both to their internal and external affairs and at the same time promotion of shared perceptions of the region's strategic and security interests, laying the basis for regional strategic and security interests, and for regional approach to situations, internal or external which put regional stability at risk.

Since the mid-1980s, Australia has taken a number of steps reflecting its increasing participation in South Pacific affairs. In May 1986, the Australian foreign minister Bill Hayden visited eight of the nine independent island countries of the region which in his own words was "the most comprehensive tour undertaken by an Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs." In November 1987, Australia's defence minister Kim Beazley toured

some of the South Pacific island countries- PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Kiribati -to get to know the individuals with whom he was dealing. Another gesture of Australia, assigning a high priority to the region, was the visit of the minister of foreign affairs and trade, Gareth Evans to Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, PNG and New Caledonia in April 1990.

Australia's active support to the regional economic and security concerns have led to its differences with the USA on a number of issues. First of all, the illegal fishing by the US in the Exclusive Economic Zones of the South Pacific countries was not supported by Australia and the USA, under pressure from the South Pacific Forum, agreed to sign a fishing treaty with the members of the Forum Fisheries Agency in 1982. Secondly, the USA, not sharing the Australian stand on New Caledonia's independence did not support Australia's move in 1986 for inscription of New Caledonia among the non-decolonized territories of the United Nations, which was resented by the island states of the South Pacific. Apart from these, testimony by the head of US space command in the US congress that the US was thinking of giving Israel, access to intelligence data through the joint Australia-US facility in Nurrungar, without consulting Australia, was resented by the latter. Moreover, Australia also expressed dissatisfaction over the US sale of wheat to Egypt, North Yemen, and the former Soviet Union well below the market price, causing damage to Australia's economic interests.

These differences, however, have not been able to effect a change in the close economic and security relations between the two countries. There has been no change in Australia's policy to promote the ANZUS security alliance which it regards as the most important instrument to ensure stability in the region. Australia does not agree with New Zealand's stand on banning port access to US nuclear ships. On the other hand, the USA does not disapprove Australia's independent initiatives for security and economic co-operation in the region. In fact, the US would favour Australia and New Zealand taking over the region's political leadership in the context of the questions raised in the country about the political and financial viability of maintaining American forces, forward deployed in Asia and Europe, in the post-Cold War period.

Australia has also been critical of France for its continued nuclear tests in the region. The Australian government told France in 1986 that if its nuclear tests were harmless as the French say, they should be conducted in metropolitan France itself. The French presence in the South Pacific, however, is not questioned by Australia as long as France continues with its aid programme, stops nuclear tests, goes ahead with decolonisation of New Caledonia, and does not antagonise the island states. The conservative elements in Australia instead feel the French presence in the South Pacific as favourable to Australian security perspectives. Australia has expressed satisfaction over the recent steps of France for the amicable settlement of the New Caledonian problem.

The military coups in Fiji were viewed seriously in Australia and after the second coup in September 1987, economic aid to Fiji was stopped and at the meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government, Australia along with India worked for the expulsion of Fiji from the Commonwealth. However, soon the Australian policymakers started realizing the loss of influence in Fiji where Australia had considerable economic investments. Soon after the Fijian president's warning that if Australia used "aid" as a means of dictating changes in Fiji's proposed new constitution, his country would turn to others for help, Australia began its phased release of a Australian \$10 million aid package. Australia did not want the instability in Fiji to continue nor did it want Fiji's opening to influence of France, China, Taiwan, and Malaysia for which these countries were keenly interested.

The crisis in Fiji also brought about a realization in Australia that threat to the region's security can also come from the domestic instability in the South Pacific. This also led to a debate over military intervention by Australia in the crisis. The security analysts felt that despite Australia's capacity to intervene militarily, such an action would be misunderstood by the South Pacific island countries. In fact, the support of the island countries of the South Pacific to the Fiji coup, made Australia and New Zealand appear isolated and alien at the twenty-first SPF meet at Vila in 1989. Even the help given to Walter Lini of Vanuatu at the time of Vila riots in 1988 by sending military supplies at his own request was seen by some Pacific island leaders as an interference in the external affairs of the South Pacific countries. In the light of these considerations, Australia's use of military power in the region remains a delicate issue.

Among the South Pacific island countries, PNG's geographical location and the presence of large economic investments and population from Australia gives a special importance to the relations between Australia and PNG. Australia has been concerned over the threats to stability in the PNG coming from continued secessionist movement in Bougainville and the tensions between PNG and Indonesia over the activities of OPM insurgents in Irian Jaya. Australia has extended substantial aid for the PNG's economic development and has also supported the development of the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) with training, equipment and funds. In 1977, in a declaration made by the prime ministers of Australia and PNG, the two countries expressed their intention to consult about matters affecting their common security interests and about other aspects in their defense relationship. Another decision by the prime ministers of the two countries in 1987 stressed the desire to continue

to engage in defence cooperation in the light of their unique historical links and shared strategic interests. Again in September 1991, the prime ministers of PNG and Australia issued a statement whereby they agreed that the two governments will engage in wide-ranging programmes of co-operation designed to strengthen national self-reliance. Australia's help to PNG in preventing illegal foreign fishing activities in PNG's 200 mile EEZ through the provision of fast patrol boats to PNG contributes to the overall security of the waters of South Pacific with clear implications for Australia's own defense. Similarly, the extension of Australian air force Orion surveillance flights over PNG waters also serves Australia's own security interests.

Under the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA) of 1980, Australia and New Zealand provide duty-free and concessional access to the products of the South Pacific island countries. This, however, benefits only the big island states like PNG and Fiji. The huge trade imbalance in Australia's favour continues to exist due to little export base of a number of island countries. Australia also provides help under the "Australian International Development Assistance Bureau" (AIDAB) and the "Pacific Disaster Preparedness Programme," the latter providing funds to cope with natural disasters in the region. Moreover, Australia also helps in the surveillance of the island countries' EEZs with the use of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) long range maritime patrol aircrafts and Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships and with its "Pacific Patrol Boat Scheme" in the region. The policy makers in Australia, regarding it as a part of the South Pacific, with considerable commercial and security interests in the region, want to ensure that the island states are not exposed to exploitation by outsiders. This focus of Australia's foreign policy will increase its role in the region's affairs in the coming future.

New Zealand

New Zealand identifies with the South Pacific more than any other country because of its relatively small size, insular geography, commitments to Cook Islands and Niue and continued administration of Tokelau. The presence of a large migrant population from a number of island countries who send remittances to their countries, constituting a major source of finance for them, makes New Zealand a major influence in maintaining dialogue and confidence in those countries. In addition, the role of a vocal and assertive Maori population in New Zealand is acknowledged by the establishment of the ministry of Maori Affairs. New Zealand had supported decolonization in the region from the very beginning and Western Samoa, a trust and mandated territory under New Zealand since 1914 was the first among the island states of the South Pacific to gain independence. New Zealand took the initiative in hosting the first South Pacific Forum (SPF) in 1971 and has fostered South Pacific cultural activities including radio and television time regularly since then.

The New Zealand government's white paper on defense, released in February 1987 concluded that a regionally focussed defence policy was the most appropriate for New Zealand's strategic circumstances. It also recognised the importance of the alliance relationship with Australia and co-operation with South Pacific countries in maintaining a favourable security situation in the region. A comprehensive South Pacific policy review was undertaken by the New Zealand government in 1990. The resulting report contained sixty-two recommendations covering diplomacy, economic relations and cultural relations, the environment and defense and security issues. The thrust of the recommendations was New Zealand's indissoluble relationship with the South Pacific in all policy sectors and the government's duty to promote harmony both with and within the region. The first visit of the minister of foreign affairs of the newly elected government in 1991 was to the South Pacific. The new government's 1991 defense white paper reiterated the traditional commitment to South Pacific stability.

New Zealand has perceived security in the regional context specially since the coming into power of the Labour Party in the 1980s. The New Zealand prime minister David Lange declared in December 1986, his government's firm belief that the main thrust of New Zealand's future defence policies should be directed towards the security of immediate area-New Zealand and South Pacific. Lange also stressed New Zealand's South Pacific identity. He acknowledged that in the past, the outlook was shaped by New Zealand's historical ties with Great Britain. But now, he emphasized, New Zealand accepted the fact that it was a South Pacific nation. In May 1986, the governor-general of New Zealand made goodwill visits to Tokelau, Western Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and PNG. The New Zealand foreign minister Russel Marshall visited Western Samoa and Tonga in May 1988 to discuss various issues concerning the South Pacific. Also, various South Pacific island leaders have visited New Zealand and acknowledged its constructive role in the region.

In pursuance of a strict nuclear-free policy, the Labour government in New Zealand decided to give port access only to those ships of friendly countries which were non-nuclear. The US proposal for a visit by the guided missile destroyer USS Buchanan, under the ANZUS obligations, was refused by the Labour cabinet in February 1985 since the US officials were following their "neither confirm, nor deny policy" regarding the nuclear status of the ship. The US secretary of state, Geogre Shultz declared that by rejecting Buchanan visit, New Zealand had decided in effect, that the basic operational elements of the ANZUS treaty would not apply to it. Reacting to this

step taken by the New Zealand government, the USA declared cancellation of joint military training and exercises with New Zealand, stopped intelligence sharing, and withdrew its security commitment to New Zealand under ANZUS.

It was with the instrumental role of the New Zealand's prime minister David Lange that the Rarotonga Treaty, declaring a nuclear-free zone for the South Pacific was adopted by the South Pacific Forum countries in August 1985. However, as a result of Australia's insistence, the SPNFZ treaty, in its final text, left to the individual countries to decide whether to grant access to visiting aircrafts and ships.

In June 1987, the New Zealand parliament passed "The Nuclear Free Zone Disarmament and Arms Control Act," incorporating ban on nuclear ships into legislation in accordance with its policy commitment. Under this, foreign ships and aircrafts might visit New Zealand only if the prime minister was satisfied about their non-nuclear status. This again was regarded by US officials as not a responsible action by a friend and an ally.

These policies and actions under the Labour government, led to a marked deterioration in New Zealand-United States relations. The USA banned any kind of discussion between the US defence secretary and New Zealand defence minister and later in June 1988, withdrew its security commitment to New Zealand. However, despite the demands for taking economic measures against New Zealand, trade relations were not restricted. The New Zealand government, on the other hand, insisted that its policies should not be seen as anti-American. Its policies were against nuclear weapons and for the security of the South Pacific.

New Zealand has been a vocal critic of French nuclear tests in the South Pacific at various international forums, including the UN. On 10th July 1985, the Rainbow Warrior, a greenpeace environmental movement's ship from New Zealand, which was protesting against the French Nuclear Testing in Muroroa atoll was bombed by French agents, killing one person on board the ship and causing extensive damage to the ship. The two French agents were arrested and were sentenced to ten years imprisonment by the Chief Justice of New Zealand. The issue was also taken to the UN, considering the attack on Rainbow Warrior a serious violation of norms of international law and also of sovereignty of New Zealand and the UN charter. New Zealand also demanded US \$9 million as compensation which France considered as excessive and wanted immediate deportation of its agents. Finally, on the assent of the two parties, the UN Secretary-General gave the ruling that France would pay US \$9 million to New Zealand for the damage suffered and the two French agents had to be transferred to a French military facility, on an isolated island outside of Europe for a period of three years. New Zealand government handed over the two agents to France. This, however, led to criticism at some quarters in New Zealand, blaming the Labour government for the deal in which France handed over \$10 million and promised not to vote against the sale of New Zealand butter within the European Economic Community.

New Zealand's strong anti-nuclear policies have led to its close identification with the South Pacific island countries. New Zealand is perceived as a sensitive and sympathetic partner by the countries of the region. Over two-thirds of its bilateral aid is directed to the island countries and organisations in the region. New Zealand has provided unrestricted trade access to the island countries under the provisions of SPARTECA and also helps the island states in maritime surveillance of the region. New Zealand's developing emphasis on the South Pacific region is attributed to its growing appreciation of the ancient Maori tradition of belonging to the region. The PNG's invitation to the New Zealand navy to assist in negotiating a cease-fire with the Bougainville rebels in September 1990, called the Endeavour Accord, and the choice of Wellington for the signing of the South Pacific Forum convention condemning drift-net fishing are all indicators of the value of New Zealand's constructive role.

REFERENCES

1. Paul Dibb, *Review of Australia's Defence Capabilities*, Report to the Ministry for Defence (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, March 1986), p.5.
2. Department of Defence, Government of Australia, *The Defence of Australia-1987*, The White Paper on Australia's Defence Policy (Canberra: March 1987), pp. 17- 18.
3. Parliament Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia's Relations with the South Pacific* (Canberra, March 1989).
4. *Australia's Regional Security*, Ministerial Statement by Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, December 1989.
5. *Australian Foreign Affairs Record*, May 1986, p.384.
6. Man Mohini Kaul, *Pearls in the Ocean: Security Perspectives in the South-West Pacific*, p.101.
7. Thomas Durell Young, "Prospects for Future Australia - United States Defence Co-Operation," *The Pacific Review*, Vol.7, No.2, 1994, p. 197.
8. Man Mohini Kaul, *Pearls in the Ocean: Security Perspectives in the South-West Pacific*, p.42.
9. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, *Backgrounder*, September 1991, p.3.

10. Peter King "Breaking Deadlock - Peacemaking Opportunities for Australia in East Timor, West Papua and Papua New Guinea," in Kevin Clements (ed.), *Peace and Security in the Asia Pacific Region: Post-Cold War Problems and Prospects* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1992), pp.78-101.
11. Steve Hoadley, *The South Pacific Foreign Affairs Handbook*, pp.35-36.
12. *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review* (Wellington), January-March 1989, p.15.
13. New Zealand Government, South Pacific Policy Review Group, *Towards Pacific Islands Community*, May 1990.
14. *New Zealand Official Yearbook-1993* (Wellington: Statistics New Zealand, 1993), p.55.
15. *New Zealand External Relations Review* (Wellington), October-December 1988, p.20.
16. *The Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong), 3 October 1985, p.36.
17. Dora Alves, "US-New Zealand Relations: The National Government of New Zealand," *Asian Survey* (Berkeley), Vol.31, No.11, November 1991, pp.1061-78.
18. David Robie, "A Tale of Two Oceans I.South Pacific Takes Firm Steps Towards N-Free Zone," *Vanuatu Weekly*, 29 September 1984.
19. Keith Jackson and Jim Liamare, "Politics, Public Opinion and International Crises: The ANZUS Issue in New Zealand Politics," in Jacob Bercovitch (ed.), *ANZUS in Crisis: Alliance Management in International Affairs* (London: MacMillan, 1986), p.175.
20. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 October 1985, p.36.
21. Andrew Mark, *Nuclear Allergy: New Zealand's Anti-Nuclear Stance and the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone*, Working Paper No.26 (Peace Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1988), p.5.
22. *Pacific Islands Monthly*, Vol.58, No. 12, December 1987, p. 17.
23. *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, July-September 1986, pp.37-46.
24. *The Herald* (Melbourne), 9 July 1986.
25. Dora Alves, "The Changing New Zealand Defence Posture," *Asian Survey*, Vol.29, No.4, April 1989, p.364.