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Regionalism In The South Pacific: A Collective Response To Promote Security And Economic Interests

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The growing challenges to their security and economic interests have received collective response from the countries of the South Pacific. Individually, most of the South Pacific island countries have little political and economic influence in the community of nations. However, acting collectively through regional organisations, the South Pacific countries have achieved considerable success in dealing with more powerful nations over issues of deep concern to them like trade, fisheries, and nuclear testing and in doing so they have acquired a recognizable collective identity in the international system. The small size and limited resources of the South Pacific countries makes intra- regional aggression both difficult and unprofitable and does not exist as a threat to region's security. However, with the growing economic potential of the region, there has been increasing threat of exploitation of their fisheries and marine resources by the powerful nations outside the region. The regional institutionalisation, grown fast in the South Pacific has not only been an effective avenue of diplomacy to promote the goal of economic development but has also acted as an insulating barrier to relieve the risk of exploitation of region's resources.

The South Pacific Commission was established in 1947 at Noumea, New Caledonia, by Britain, France, Netherlands, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand. Subsequently, Netherlands withdrew from the Commission in 1962 as it was no longer in possession of its territory of Irian Jaya and eight island states joined after they achieved independence- Western Samoa in 1965, Nauru in 1969, Fiji in 1971, Papua New Guinea in 1975, Soloman Islands and Tuvalu in 1978 and Cook Islands and Niue in 1980. In 1983, all the remaining governments and self-governing administrations of the region were accorded full membership in the Commission. At present, 27 countries send delegates to the meetings of the South Pacific Commission and also to the annual South Pacific Conference, which ratifies the Commission's work programme and budgets and to the Conference's Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations, which functions as a committee of the whole meeting twice- yearly.

The Commission's guiding philosophy is service to its island member countries and cooperation with the other regional and international organisations working to improve the economic, social and environmental qualities of the region. It is a conduit for aid funds and research initiatives from other sources and administers these in response to the wishes of the island members of the South Pacific Conference and its Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations.

At mainly French insistence, the political issues such as nuclear testing and decolonization were excluded from the Commission's agenda which led to the dissatisfaction of island leaders, particularly Fiji's prime minister Ratu Mara and stimulated the formation of the South Pacific Forum. Radical Melanesian independence leaders view the Commission as protective of the interests of the former colonial powers, administratively conservative and paternalistic, unresponsive to South Pacific political self-assertion and oriented to the needs of Polynesian members and self-governing territories that made up the majority. They proposed that the Commission be subordinated to or absorbed by the Forum.

However, by the late 1980s, these criticisms subsided as a result of reforms to make the Commission's budget more transparent and its operations more responsible to the South Pacific Conference and its Committee and to increase the island members' role in the Commission by initiating rotation of annual conference venues to a widening circle of island capitals and appointment of islanders on the top positions of the Commission's secretariat. Secondly, there has been an increase in the funding to the Commission by the European Community, France, Japan, and the USA. The 1989 South Pacific Conference allowed political issues like Guam's call for more autonomy, Fiji's criticism of Australia and New Zealand for reduced aid, and also passed a resolution condemning drift-net fishing by Japan and Taiwan.

Michel Rocard was the first French prime minister to visit the South Pacific Commission countries in 1989 and emphasized in a speech, France's new role in the region as a co-operative partner. The growing importance of the Commission has prompted other external powers like Japan to seek its membership.

The growing frustration with the political restraint in the South Pacific Commission and the South Pacific Conference led the South Pacific countries to feel the need for some official regional organisation to present a united front in dealings with stronger outside powers and with international organisations and agencies. As a result, South Pacific Forum (SPF) was inaugurated in August 1971 in Wellington, with the participation of Australia, New Zealand, nine island countries independent at present, and the self-governing Cook Islands and Niue. Over more than two decades of its existence, the South Pacific Forum has emerged as the most important regional organisation in the South Pacific and a central agency for taking positions and exerting pressure on political, economic, and security issues, on which there is a fairly widespread agreement.

The South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation (SPEC) was created in 1972 in Suva, Fiji, as the Forum's major executive branch and coordinator of various programmes in the fields of economic and social co-operation. Eventually, the SPEC became more of a secretariat than the executive of the Forum and it was decided in 1988 to call the SPEC, the Forum Secretariat. A large number of other agencies are set up under the aegis of SPEC which include the Pacific Forum Line (PFL), the South Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency (SPFFA), South Pacific Airlines etc.

The functioning of the SPF is characterised by two features. First, the annual Forum meetings are represented by the executive heads of the South Pacific countries, carrying full weight of the governments represented in SPF decisions. Second, the Forum's capability of making binding decisions through consensus is a definite plus point.

The entry of the Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands in 1987 brought the SPF membership to fifteen. French Polynesia has been seeking observer status in the SPF. However, according to the guidelines laid down in 1986 SPF meet, observer status would be given to a Pacific island government only if it is on the verge of achieving self-government or independence and is subject to the approval of the Forum leaders.

The SPF has been the major channel for the expression of anti-nuclear sentiments of the South Pacific countries. At every annual meeting of the SPF, anti-nuclear resolutions have been passed. The South Pacific Forum countries succeeded in signing the South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone (SPNFZ) treaty in August 1985 at Rarotonga which prohibited testing, stationing, storage, acquisition, and deployment of nuclear weapons and the disposal of nuclear waste in the South Pacific. The rejection of the treaty by France, the USA and the UK invited bitter criticisms from the SPF. The French declarations of the suspension of nuclear testing in 1992 was welcomed by the SPF meet at Honiara in July 1992 and France was urged to make the moratorium permanent. The SPF led the worldwide voice of protests when the French government declared resumption of nuclear tests in the South Pacific in May 1995.

The SPF has also been vocal in demanding the independence of New Caledonia from the French colonial rule. Due to the efforts of the SPF, the UN General Assembly agreed to re-list New Caledonia as a non-self governing territory in 1986. The signing of Matignon Accord in 1988 to solve the New Caledonian crisis was welcomed by the SPF.

An example of the constructive activity of the Forum in the economic field has been its role in the prolonged disputes between the USA and several Pacific island countries over fishing rights. The fishing by American tuna boats within the exclusive economic zones of the Pacific island countries without licenses led to many unpleasant incidents including the impounding of American boats on charges of illegal poaching. In this situation, the "Forum Fisheries Agency" was responsible for negotiating an agreement with the USA in 1988 under which the USA could fish in the EEZs of the island countries on the basis of the payment of specified fees. This agreement gave a boost to SPF's reputation and helped to remove a major irritant in relations between the USA and the island countries of the South Pacific. Another important fisheries issue taken up by the SPF was the practice of drift-net fishing carried out by Taiwan and Japan which was responsible for large scale destruction of marine resources. The SPF's Tarawa declaration in July 1989 called the establishment of a drift-net-free zone in the South Pacific region. With the efforts of Australia, the United Nations passed a resolution in December 1989, calling for a moratorium on drift-net fishing on the high seas by 30th June 1992 and for a cut in the South Pacific fishing leading to a halt by 1st July 1990.

The SPF has also expressed serious concern over the greenhouse effect and rise in sea-levels, threatening the very existence of a number of South Pacific countries, made of low relief atolls. At the Tarawa meet in 1989, the SPF discussed the implications of the greenhouse effect in the region and agreed to an Australian offer to initiate a climate and ocean monitoring programme.

Another important development in regional co-operation has been the setting up of the Pacific Forum Line (PFL) in 1978 which has ensured regular shipping services to encourage the economic development of the South

Pacific region. There are a number of other successful regional organisations like the Committee for Coordination and Joint Prospecting Mineral Resources in South Pacific Offshore Area (CCOP/SOPAC), now known as SOPAC, and the University of South Pacific based in Suva. In 1988, the South Pacific organization's Co-ordination Committee (SPOCC) was established to co-ordinate the working of various regional institutions. In spite of the considerable success achieved by the South Pacific countries' regional efforts, there are a number of cleavages which have tended to disturb the consensus of the major South Pacific regional organisations. First of all, establishment in Suva of the SPF Secretariat and a number of other regional bodies such as the University of South Pacific and offices of international agencies has stimulated complaints by other members that Fiji is getting the lion's share of the educational and training opportunities, employment benefits, fees for services and taxes relative to its share of the costs. Also, Fiji's Ratu Mara has been suspected of arrogating to himself, the role of natural leader and spokesman for the South Pacific region in international affairs. The second cleavage has been between the small states and the larger ones regarding the importance of inter-governmental organisations in the region. These organisations have given the small states a nominal equality of status and influence in regional affairs and have also provided to them nominal aid and technical assistance. The small states have also turned to larger outside patrons, typically the former colonial power for assistance. In contrast, the larger states, possessing natural resources and some industrial base, have assumed a more self-sufficient nationalisation posture to which inter-governmental organisations are adjuncts rather than essential. Third, the region's division in three cultural areas provides a significant barrier in promoting regional Cooperation. Micronesians are restricted by the overwhelming dominance of the USA in their area. The Polynesian states like Western Samoa and Tonga have tended to be politically conservative while Melanesian states have taken a critical anti-colonial and pro-third world stance. Moreover, the rivalry between the west Melanesian Spearhead Group of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu on the one hand and Fiji in the east on the other, has made co-operation difficult. Finally, some of the island countries of the South Pacific, especially Fiji has suspected intra-regional metropolitans -Australia and New Zealand- of harbouring leadership ambitions and not being sensitive to island's interests.

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