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The Mini – States Of South Pacific And Their Vulnerabilities

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The South Pacific is a vast sub-region of Asia and the Pacific consisting of two developed countries of Australia and New Zealand and twenty-two island countries delineated by the South Pacific Commission. Definitionally, that collectivity of island groups which participates in the work of the main regional bodies such as the South Pacific Forum and the South Pacific Commission is accepted as the South Pacific. The island nations of the South Pacific are scattered around the vast expanse of Oceania in the southwest, south, and west central Pacific. The geographical limits of this sub-region are represented by Papua New Guinea and the former United States Pacific Trust Territories to the west, Hawaii and Easter Island to the north and east respectively and Australia and New Zealand to the south.

Only nine island countries of South Pacific have attained the status of independent nations. In order of the time of their independence, they are Western Samoa (1962), Nauru (1968), Tonga (1970), Fiji (1970), Papua New Guinea (1975), the Solomon Islands (1978), Tuvalu, formerly the Ellice Islands (1978), Kiribati, formerly the Gilbert Islands (1979), and Vanuatu, formerly the New Hebrides (1980). Out of the four island groupings placed under the United States administration as Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands by the United Nations Organisation in 1947, the Northern Mariana Islands sought the Commonwealth status in association with the US, through a referendum in 1975, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia voted in favour of a Compact of Free Association with the US which was also joined by Palau (Belau) in 1994. American Samoa and Guam are the "Territories" of the US, while French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Wallis and Futuna are French Territories in the South Pacific. The Cook Islands and Niue came into Free Association with New Zealand in 1965 and 1974 respectively. While Tokelau is a dependency of New Zealand, Pitcairn is the last British dependency in the South Pacific, which is administered by Britain's high commissioner to New Zealand.

The principal physical characteristic of the South Pacific is dominated by a vast maritime space punctuated irregularly by small island groups. The total population of the South Pacific region was 5,660,500 in 1987. Populations were unevenly distributed, numbering less than 100 in Pitcairn, 1,600 in Tokelau, 2,500 in Niue and 8,500 in Tuvalu while exceeding 3.46 million in Papua New Guinea. The area encompassed by the maritime boundaries of island states is 29.5 million square kilometers of which .55 million square kilometres are land. The countries of the region also vary enormously in terms of their size. The Tokelau Islands has a land area of only 10 square kilometres while Papua New Guinea, with a total land area of approximately 460,500 square kilometres, is the state with the largest land mass in the region. The islands of the South Pacific comprise a wide range of geological types. These range from high volcanic islands as in the case of Tahiti and Rarotonga to low coral atolls, varying in size from the world's largest atoll, Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands (with a lagoon over 110 kilometres in length) to clusters of small isolated coral atolls that characterise much of the central Pacific nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu.

The geographical diversity of the region is matched by the diversity of its peoples and their cultures. Of the three main ethnic and cultural groupings in the South Pacific, Melanesian societies are found in the Islands of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and also in some parts of Fiji. These societies are generally small, fragmented, and separated geographically, which has contributed to the development of many distinct languages used by them, for example there are 800 different languages in Papua New Guinea alone. In Melanesian societies, the leadership is "achieved" and not "ascribed". "Chiefly leadership" operates at the local level in tribes and the base from which this leadership is drawn is generally small and fragmented. The second cultural grouping of Polynesians constitute a roughly triangular area from Hawaii in the north, Easter Island in the south east and New Zealand in the south west and thus including Tuvalu, Western Samoa, American Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau Wallis and Futuna, Niue, French Polynesia, Pitcairn and the Marquesas Islands. Polynesian societies are highly developed social structures with a tradition of hierarchical dynasties where chiefly rank and

status is ascriptive, not achieved as exemplified by the Tongan monarchy and the chiefly system in Fiji. Polynesians in each state or territory are unified by a common language, although many different dialects may exist- the 44 dialects in one Fijian language is an example of this. The third cultural grouping of Micronesians lies mostly in the northern part of Oceania including the Marshall Islands, the Federated states of Micronesia, Palau, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, and two independent islands. Micronesian societies are complex, combining countries-Kiribati and Nauru, elements of both Melanesian and Polynesian societies. Micronesians have also developed their own languages which belong to the Malaya-Polynesian family of languages, also spoken by peoples of Malaysia, Melanesia and Polynesia. About 1200 languages are spoken in the South Pacific which represent one quarter of the world's languages. The South Pacific region is also marked by obvious cultural overlaps, best represented by Fiji, which situated geographically in the Melanesian region, combines both Melanesian and Polynesian cultures to produce an indigenous culture that is distinctly Fijian.

VULNERABILITIES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

Almost all the South Pacific island countries come under the category of "small" or "mini" states. The United Nations defines mini states as those falling under the one- million population limit which is exceeded only by Papua New Guinea. Their smallness is characterised also by "a very low conventional war capability," as defined by Maniruzzaman, which reflects different aspects of a country's power such as the quality of manpower, the level of economic and technological development and the skilful use of political manoeuvrability.

The threat of external aggression, however, does not hold much relevance to the security perceptions of the South Pacific island states. The report of a Commonwealth Consultative Group, published in 1985, does not find an immediate military threat in the region. The mini states, unlike large states, face non-military threats also. South Pacific island countries, being "Third World" or "Developing" mini states, suffer from a number of vulnerabilities that produce threats to their security.

In view of the islanders themselves, the greatest threat to their survival as nation- states lies not in military take-over but in excessive dependence on foreign aid, single product exports, and foreign investments. A drop in the price of phosphate could have devastating consequences for the economy of Nauru and the closure of copper mining facilities in Bougainville would have the same effect on the economy of Papua New Guinea. The smallness of their size imposes serious constraints on the development process. With no domestic market to support import substitution industries, distance from markets, and irregular shipping links as well as a limited technical manpower base, industrial manufacturing is not possible in these countries. The earnings of the most of the island countries are based on either agricultural or mineral exports, whose fluctuating world prices affect their economies. On the other hand, most of these countries are compelled to import food because farming is carried out only at a subsistence level due to traditional ownership of land. Their huge spending on food and other consumer items makes the annual import bill in some island countries three-four times higher than their export earnings.

The growing imbalance in their earnings and spending lead to their large-scale dependence on foreign aid which constitutes well over 75 percent and in some countries over 90 percent of the total government expenditures. Aid dependency among the South Pacific island countries is currently increasing as a consequence of rapidly expanding populations, unplanned urbanization, high levels of unemployment and rising expectations flowing from modernization processes.

Additional income could be generated through the development of tourism and exploitation of fisheries and marine resources but these cannot be done without foreign capital. Though foreign investments are already playing an increasingly important role in key sectors of Pacific island economy, there have been difficulties regarding the implementation of investment codes as experienced by other economically weak third world countries.

Natural calamities like typhoons, hurricanes, floods and droughts also sharpen economic vulnerabilities of these states. In May 1986, mass destruction took place in Solomon Islands when it was struck by cyclone. From December 1986 to March 1987, Vanuatu suffered US \$280 million of damage caused by the cyclones.

Due to the lack of resources and shortage of knowledgeable diplomats, the South Pacific island countries also suffer from restrictions on their diplomatic machinery. It is not possible for some of these countries to become either members of the United Nations or to have diplomatic representation as it would be too expensive for them. Peter J. Boyce and Richard A. Herr hold that "smallness also means, particularly in the South Pacific context that foreign affairs commands only a low salience among the political leadership. The result of this, as pointed out by Diggines in the context of the small states, is that they are likely to be ill-informed about the rest of the world and that their legitimate claim to independence of action are rarely communicated to or understood by other governments.

In spite of the absence of an imminent danger of military aggression, security risks to the region cannot be ruled out in the light of some domestic tensions in the region as a result of conditions of migrant workers (in Nauru,

Vanuatu and Solomon Islands) and differences over boundaries (between Kiribati, Vanuatu and New Caledonia and between Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands). These tensions may result into conflicts and occupations of territory which could be prevented only with a military force. But defence capacity in most of the South Pacific island countries is low to non-existent. Only Papua New Guinea and Fiji maintain defence forces with considerable numbers to meet their needs. None of the states has the capacity to monitor and police their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Few of the states are well placed to counter such domestic security problems which might arise from mischief makers, subversives, or foreign intelligence operatives. Most rely on police and paramilitary forces to do the work of a professional army. Moreover, in case of an external attack on these island countries, there is no hinterland to retreat to, in order to mount a counter offensive or guerilla campaign. Few natural land barriers exist to compensate for the fact that the islands are highly approachable by sea and air. The viability of such nations is clearly brought into question when all that is required to overrun them is a boat-load or a plane- load of mercenaries.

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