NEW ZEALAND AND THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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New Zealand is geographically in and of the South Pacific. As a result, despite strong and continuing ties with Australia, Europe (especially the United Kingdom) and the United States, New Zealand's relationships with the region's island states encompass a wide range of political, economic and socio-cultural issues. Four major themes have been apparent in New Zealand's relations with the region. They are: New Zealand as a would-be imperial power; New Zealand as a seeker after (military) security; New Zealand as a member of the community of Pacific island states; and, more recently, New Zealand's own development as a Pacific nation.

I INTRODUCTION

New Zealand is geographically in and of the South Pacific. As a result, despite strong and continuing ties with Europe — especially the United Kingdom — New Zealand's relationships with the region's island states encompass, and always have done, a wide range of political, economic and socio-cultural issues. Of course, the focus of the relationships has been different
at different times and New Zealand governments and traders have placed more or less emphasis on the region according to their current perceptions of its relevance and importance. Equally, the island states themselves have also altered their own (often heterogeneous) views of New Zealand and the relationship according to circumstance.

The South Pacific extends over a vast area from north of the equator to the Antarctic Circle.¹ The sphere of political influence of the states and territories in the region (some 16 independent and self-governing states and a number of colonies and territories administered by several metropolitan powers) is about 30 million square kilometres. The region is politically, economically, ethnically and culturally diverse, sparsely populated (except in some of the urban areas where population densities are amongst the highest in the world) and widely scattered. One unifying theme is the fact of "islandness" and, except for Papua New Guinea, "smallness". The two concepts are, as noted by Sutton and Payne (1993), closely linked. As well, they argue, islands are characterised by "remoteness, environmental precariousness, insularity, rights to maritime zones and military indefensibility" (Sutton and Payne, 1993: 584). These factors have been of continuing relevance to the way that New Zealand has approached the region over the years.

The region's size and diversity means that generalisations about it are difficult. Often, although the "region" has been the ostensible focus of New Zealand activity, in practice it has been specific states which have received special attention, rather than the region as a whole. Since the early 1970s, with the formation of the South Pacific (since 2000, Pacific Islands) Forum, it has been easier and more appropriate than in earlier times to discuss the islands as a region.² This article places New Zealand's varying approaches to the South Pacific region in context and examines them across the spectrum of political, economic and social relationships. Where appropriate, differentiations are made between relationships with particular Pacific Island states and with the region as a whole.

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¹ The term "South" may be misleading in this sense as the states commonly identified as "South Pacific" include several whose territories extend north of the equator. The South Pacific Policy Review (1990) prefers the term "Pacific Island region". This use of the term 'region' begs the question as to whether the South Pacific is indeed a coherent region or sub-region. See the discussion in Ross (1993: 3). It may be that the term "Oceania" is more useful as it removes any problem of geography and emphasises the predominant regional feature - the ocean, or the term "Pacific Island Region" may be preferred as encompassing all the area of those states eligible for membership in the main regional grouping, the Pacific Islands Forum. For the purposes of this article the region includes Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands south from about the Equator and east from Indonesia as far as Easter Island.
² For a general discussion of the South Pacific as a region, see Rolfe (1998) and Henderson (1999).
There are four important broad themes apparent in New Zealand's relations with the region. They are: New Zealand as would-be imperial power; New Zealand as seeker after (military) security; New Zealand as member of the community of Pacific Island states; and New Zealand's own development as a Pacific nation. None of these themes has been exclusive, but each has been dominant in a different period: imperial policies up to the second decade of the twentieth century; security from the late nineteenth century almost until the mid-twentieth; the development of a Pacific community from the mid-twentieth century; and New Zealand's development as a Pacific nation from the final quarter of the twentieth century. Subsidiary themes, such as the use of New Zealand as the springboard for missionary endeavours into the region or the trade relationships between New Zealand and the region, are not discussed.\(^3\)

**II IMPERIAL MANOEUVRING**

The nineteenth century was the imperial century. Britain, France, Germany, Holland and the United States were all establishing and consolidating their empires in Africa, Asia and North America. It was inevitable that their rivalries would extend to the Pacific.

The South Pacific itself had received specific consideration as a suitable subject for British imperial attention as early as the late eighteenth century when a certain John Thomson wrote to Henry Dundas, minister in charge of Britain's colonial affairs, advocating the establishment of a British colony in New Zealand “from whence the King of England might conquer the greatest part of the South Seas, and conquest would bring peace, hence improvement and civilization” (Ross, 1964: 3). That was too soon and it was not for another five decades that New Zealand would be formally colonised by Britain.

By 1839 New Zealand was being promoted by the New Zealand Land Company on the basis that its nearness to “the thousands of inhabited islands in the great Polynesian and rich Indian archipelagoes [Southeast Asia] meant that a colony there would become the natural centre of a vast maritime trade” (Ross, 1964: 5). In practice, in 1840, commercial relations with the islands of the Pacific were almost non-existent and for the next decade trade with them was irregular, limited, and mostly with Europeans settled in them. For that reason, Tahiti (colonised by France) was the most important port, with trading visits being made also to Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] and New Caledonia (Ross, 1964: 200).

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3 Ross (1969) discusses missionary activities, while data relating to the trade relationship may be found in successive New Zealand Official Yearbooks.
Sir George Grey (New Zealand’s Governor and later Prime Minister) was the first important politician to advocate a “British Pacific Policy”. In 1848 he reported to the British Secretary of State that the principal chiefs and some of the people of Tonga and Fiji had applied to him seeking to become subjects of Queen Victoria (Ross, 1964: 42). The Colonial Office was not convinced; the cost appeared greater than any benefit to be gained from annexing the islands.

Grey perservered and ensured cordial relations with, in particular, Tonga. He promoted trade between that country and New Zealand and, in a move that has continued to the present, offered educational opportunities in New Zealand to the sons of Tongan leaders, most notably to the son of George Tupou, “king” of Tonga. New Zealand’s close and continuing social and cultural relationship with Tonga and with other Pacific states may be traced back to this initiative.

Political relationships began to appear ever more important as German and French colonial interests in the Pacific continued to be advanced. Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Kermadecs and the Cook Islands group all received New Zealand’s attention as potential dominions from the 1850s. The aim in each case was to exclude other powers, either through annexation or through maintaining the independence of the islands under their own native rulers.

From the 1870s imperial moves on the Pacific started in earnest. New Zealand’s imperialists took the British and Dutch East India companies (which, although established as trading companies, in effect exercised political power) as their models. A trading company, the New Zealand and Polynesian Company, was to be established to develop Pacific trade. This initiative was overtaken by events as Britain annexed Fiji and established a High Commissionership of the Western Pacific in the mid-1870s. Although that trading company did not take off, the imperialists were encouraged by the fact that trade, although still at a low level, grew significantly after Britain’s annexation of Fiji. But even by 1900 imports from the islands were worth only about 4% of the total of New Zealand’s trade (of which sugar from Fiji comprised about 75%) and exports were worth less still at about 2% (Ross, 1964: 132).

Samoa was (in New Zealand’s eyes) the most important of the island groups, but New Zealand was not consulted as to Samoa’s political destiny by the three major regional powers (the US, Germany and Britain). Although the local media continued to press for New Zealand control, the country had to accept the 1899 settlement between the powers to preserve Samoan

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4 New Zealand was a colony and ultimately any serious imperial activity had to be undertaken, or at least approved of, by Britain.
independence and the rights of those powers. Although Samoa was not (yet) to be New Zealand's, Seddon (as Treasurer) noted in 1900 in his Financial Statement that it was well known that the residents of the Fiji islands were no longer content to remain a Crown Colony. "They are favourable to and have moved in the direction of annexation to New Zealand" (Ross, 1964: 273). In the cases of Samoa, Tonga and Fiji in the late nineteenth century New Zealand was not successful in persuading the British government to annex any of them to New Zealand.

New Zealand had more success in persuading the British government over the disposition of the Kermadecs and Cook Islands.

The Kermadecs are a small and intrinsically unimportant group of islands about 1,000 kilometres (600 miles) northeast of Auckland. In 1885, the New Zealand government claimed that the Kermadecs "bore the same relationship to the North Island of New Zealand as the Chathams did to the South Island". They may almost be regarded, the government said, "as an integral part of this colony and are of additional importance as being nearly on the route to Fiji" (Ross, 1964: 231). This was a considerable exaggeration on all counts, but Germany and France were both claiming and using Pacific islands for their own colonial ends and New Zealand felt threatened. Letters patent giving New Zealand control over the Kermadecs were granted in 1887.

As early as 1865 some of the native rulers and British residents of Rarotonga had unsuccessfully petitioned Britain, through New Zealand, for a protectorate to be established over the group. In 1888 these pleas were renewed by Queen Makea Ariki, who argued that British protection would prevent the French from taking possession of Rarotonga. She reminded the governor that her people were members of the same race as the New Zealand Maori and that they had been 'educated and civilised by English missionaries'. These two facts, she said, made the Rarotongans "consider themselves to be already British subjects" (Ross, 1964: 239). This, together with data that showed that most of the Cooks' trade was with New Zealand, removed British Colonial Office objections to taking control of the islands. In September 1888 an order was made for the immediate proclamation of a British protectorate over the Cook Islands.

New Zealand accepted this protectorate as it served to keep out the French, but the country's preference remained for annexation to New Zealand — a concept continually promoted by Seddon as both colonial Treasurer and as Prime Minister and which occurred in 1901. New Zealand's ultimate imperial aspirations were revealed in 1902 when the British colonial office was invited to "favourably consider the advisability of all islands, either British
or under British protection, lying near New Zealand being annexed to this Colony" (Ross, 1964: 284). The British government took no action on that request because of sensitivity to Australian reaction and because no advantage to the islands concerned (Fiji, Tonga or the Phoenix Islands) could be seen.

Imperial ambitions were only reluctantly discarded by New Zealand politicians and indeed New Zealand accepted a mandate over parts of Samoa following Germany's defeat in the First World War. The purposes of or reasons for "empire" were rarely defined. Trade was barely a reason, although some hoped that a steady growth of trade would make political association inevitable (Ross, 1969: 5). For others, a moral duty for the advancement of the islanders was given as a reason for annexation (Ross, 1969: 7). For most, though, New Zealand was simply the "Britain of the South" and needed security from non-British powers in the Pacific.

New Zealand's imperial pretensions ended as the territories and states gained independence. Western Samoa (now Samoa) became independent in 1962, the Cook Islands have been self-governing in free association with New Zealand since 1965, and Niue achieved the same status in 1974. Now only Tokelau remains as a non-self-governing territory from the states previously administered by New Zealand, and even that territory is moving towards self-government with the passage through the New Zealand parliament of the Tokelau Amendment Act 1996 which gave "rule-making" powers to Tokelau itself.

III A REGION OF SECURITY AND INSECURITY

New Zealand's security was early identified with its place in the Pacific, far from British or other friendly protection. In the 1850s Governor Grey assessed as a possibility that French warships operating from Tahiti could mount expeditions "for the purposes of pillaging towns ... as also for capturing vessels or taking home gold" (Cooke, 2000: 18). In the 1860s it was the Russians and (U.S.) Confederate commerce raiders who aroused New Zealand's awareness of vulnerability, not just of her own shores but also of her sea lines of communication. The Russians were seen as a potential threat again in the 1870s and 1880s as tensions between that country and Britain continued. These war scares prompted New Zealand to develop the harbour defences of the major and some of the country's minor ports.

New Zealand did not have a significant Pacific enemy during World War I — light surface raiders and sporadic mine-laying around the coast were the main threat. Samoa — a German territory — was seized as the first task of the war and that action secured "the front line of
NZ's immediate region” (Cooke, 2000: 203) and, not incidentally, denied Germany the use of the wireless-telegraphy station at Apia.

The Kermadecs were used in World War I by the German minelayer Wolf, because they were remote and uninhabited. In the 1930s New Zealand established a coast watching station there to give early warning of the presence of naval raiders entering the South Pacific (Cooke, 2000: 216).

As early as 1919, a survey by Admiral of the Fleet Viscount Jellicoe of New Zealand's defences against a threat from the Pacific noted the strength of the Japanese fleet and the Pacific islands under Japanese mandate (Cooke, 2000: 229). Japan's attack on Manchuria in 1931 led the British Committee of Imperial Defence to determine that "Japan was the power most likely to challenge Commonwealth security in the Pacific area", and by 1933 the belief was that "coastlines ... and trade and shipping lay open to attack" (Cooke, 2000: 239).

As a precaution for Pacific war, New Zealand sent troops to Fiji in 1940, but it was the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 and the speed of the subsequent advance (to New Guinea and attacking Australia within three months) that concentrated New Zealand planners' minds towards the security threat from the Pacific and the need for appropriate responses. These involved, primarily, ensuring that the United States was fully committed to New Zealand's defence from any assault by Japan.

Although there remains debate about the actual threat posed by Japan, there can be no doubt about the response. The United States, in effect, underpinned the defence of the Pacific. As well as taking over responsibility for the physical defence of Western Samoa (because New Zealand was overstretched) and (for a time) New Caledonia, the US stationed troops in New Zealand and became responsible for naval security in the region (Cooke, 2000: 258-265).

New Zealand's troops in the Pacific during this war included some 9,000 men in four significant island garrisons (Fiji, Fanning Island, New Caledonia and Tonga), more than 11,000 men in New Caledonia preparing for offensive action in the Solomon Islands, and a chain of more than 100 coastwatching stations on 69 isolated but strategic islands throughout the Pacific (Cooke, 2000: 785-815). They "tempered the audacity of the enemy, deterred him from launching a precipitate attack, and served as an insurance against an attack on New Zealand itself" (Cooke, 2000: 785).

After the end of World War II the region's importance in security terms to New Zealand changed quite quickly. In 1949 military assessments saw Fiji as important because of its "geographic location in the South Pacific area and relation to the northern approaches to New
Zealand" (Chiefs of Staff, 1949). Fiji was an important station in the trans-Pacific air route and an essential base for the operation of forces for the protection of trade and shipping in the south Pacific. If Fiji were to be taken by an enemy, "the territorial integrity of New Zealand would be threatened" (Chiefs of Staff, 1948). Ten years later Fiji held a quite different strategic focus. Rather than an "umbrella essential to the defence of New Zealand", it was now merely "a stepping stone to Pearl Harbour" (Chiefs of Staff, 1959).

Today, New Zealand does not identify any form of military threat to the country’s territorial integrity as emanating from or through the South Pacific.

IV PACIFIC COMMUNITY AND SOCIETY

The South Pacific has a relatively well developed sense of community and for the last 50 years New Zealand has worked to promote that. Although the region is one of disparity, the small size of the individual members has meant that they have had to work together if they wish to resolve issues relating to their own economies or to the regional environment. New Zealand’s heritage, of course, was as a British colony, but always there has been at least a residual sense that its place has been in the South Pacific. In the nineteenth century that sense was manifest, as we have seen, in attempts to create a South Seas Empire. Later, the region had to be guarded against, not because it would itself threaten New Zealand but because other states could use it to approach New Zealand.

More recently, New Zealand has worked actively to develop the sense of regional community and to demonstrate that the country has a place in the Pacific. Sometimes that has been expressed diffidently: "a rediscovery of our role in the South Pacific will contribute to the process by which we are ... rediscovering our unique identity as New Zealanders" (Corner, 1962 in Kennaway, 1972: 111). Sometimes in paternalistic language: "We owe a special responsibility to the Pacific because these countries have chosen to place a special value on their relationship with New Zealand" (New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review, 1971: 5). More latterly, the tone is of partnership: "in the post-colonial era regional cooperation has become one of the key elements in the development of the South Pacific" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 3).

The first regional grouping was the South Pacific Commission, established in 1947 with headquarters in Noumea. Originally established as a forum for the independent metropolitan (and almost by definition colonial) states in the region (including New Zealand), the Commission now includes all independent states, territories and administering powers. It has an advisory and consultative role aimed at "encouraging and promoting the economic and
social development of the region” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 18). New Zealand contributes over 17% of the Commission’s core budget and makes additional extra-budgetary contributions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 18).

The Commission did not fully meet the needs of the island states themselves, however. In 1971, at a meeting of an early institution, the Pacific Island Producers’ Association, the leaders of the five then independent island states agreed to form a forum of independent states to deal with political issues. They agreed to hold a summit conference soon and reached a tacit understanding that the meeting would include only independent island countries. New Zealand was asked to provide a venue as a means of “avoiding discord arising from mutual suspicion” (Ôgashiwa, 1991: 6).

This first meeting decided to establish the South Pacific Forum (since 2000 the Pacific Islands Forum) as a permanent heads of government organisation. Australia and New Zealand were ultimately included in the Forum because, according to the then Prime Minister of Fiji, “we thought that without the inclusion of Australia and New Zealand the Forum might tend to develop along the ethnically confrontational lines of the Organisation of African States” (Mara, 1974: 26).

Strictly speaking, the Forum is the annual meeting of heads of government at which decisions are taken informally and in private. To put substance on its decisions, the Forum has developed a range of functional organisations dealing with issues as diverse as fisheries, the environment, geoscience, tourism and higher education. Today the Forum is the principal channel by which South Pacific states develop and express their collective views on international issues and maintain contact with countries outside the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 4). New Zealand provides about a third of the budget for the Forum Secretariat and actively participates in all Forum activities and institutions.

Outside the Forum, New Zealand contributes through the Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme to economic and social development within the region. The Pacific region is the clear focus of New Zealand’s development assistance. In 1995-96 some $97 million of an ODA budget of $165 million went to bilateral and multilateral development projects in the South Pacific (including to multilateral agencies) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 32). The emphasis of the ODA programme is on the development of human skills. A large part of the programme funds education in New Zealand and at regional institutions such as the University of the South Pacific, and other projects provide technical skills assistance that in

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5 For details of the agencies and issues see Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (1996).
almost every case involves in-country training and staff development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1996: 33).

V NEW ZEALAND AS A PACIFIC NATION

In recent decades New Zealand has attempted to (re)define itself as a Pacific nation, although these moves are often in conflict with, for example, trade imperatives which have seemed to require New Zealand to be a part of a wider Asia region - something it is demonstrably not, in cultural terms at least.

The growth in New Zealand's Pacific population has been reflected in the interest taken in the region by the country's politicians. In 1951 there were only 3,600 people of Pacific island descent in New Zealand (excepting of course Maori). By 1961 there were 14,500, some 50,000 in 1971 and 95,000 in 1981. In 1996 there were 202,233 Pacific islanders in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2000: 153). Most of these (some 93%) live in the North Island, mostly in Auckland. This growth in population has occurred because of New Zealand's past and continuing constitutional ties with a number of the states. As a result, immigration laws have allowed for easy immigration, with many in the South Pacific seeing New Zealand as the land of economic opportunity. This is an impression only slightly dented by periodic crackdowns on so-called "overstayers", visitors who have neglected to return to their own country at the end of their permitted stay.6

New Zealand's position as a South Pacific nation was put strongly by labour politician Fran Wilde: "The Pacific is not our "backyard". It is our political and social context - and it is our future" (Wilde, 1991: 35) and in a similar vein, also in 1991, in the words of National's Don McKinnon, the then Minister for External Relations and Trade: "this is home" (Henderson, 1999: 268). But that has been true (in the sense of New Zealand identifying with, rather than fearing or seeking to exploit the region) only from late in the second half of the twentieth century. From the early 1970s successive administrations made an explicit point of reinforcing the concept of New Zealand as a South Pacific nation. In recognition of this growing identification with the region, the government in 1990 conducted a review of its policies towards the South Pacific (South Pacific Policy Review Group, 1990). That review noted that New Zealand is an integral part of the region through its location, island geography, constitutional obligations to a number of territories and states and "because approximately a fifth of our population are Polynesian." The report concluded that New Zealand should "take

6 Of course, overstayers come from many countries, not just those of the Pacific, but it is the Pacific community that generally bears the brunt of adverse publicity.
its place as a constructive member of the Pacific Island community" (South Pacific Policy Review Group, 1990: 231; Henderson, 1999: 268).

Since then, New Zealand has become particularly active in promoting "Pacific" issues and in working within the region to promote political stability and social and economic development. New Zealand has done this not because of any necessary or "compelling economic or strategic interest in the region" (Henningham, 1995 in Henderson, 1999: 291), but because it sees itself as a legitimate participant in regional processes and tends to think that what is good for the region is good for New Zealand as a member of the region. Issues as diverse as driftnet fishing, nuclear testing, the development of the region as a nuclear weapons free zone, the shipping of nuclear waste through the region, decolonisation in New Caledonia, peacekeeping in Bougainville and East Timor, and assistance during times of internal political difficulty have been adopted by New Zealand with other regional members and worked through with some success.

Through all of these issues New Zealand has attempted to tread the fine line between promotion of specifically "national" interests and reinforcement of its credentials as a Pacific state. That effort has not always been successful. At times, Pacific leaders have criticised New Zealand for apparently self-interested or self-righteous contradictions in its approach. New Zealand, for example, in the 1970s and 1980s attempted to "scare" Pacific island states from responding to overtures from Soviet fishing interests. These were resented as attempts by New Zealand to define security in Western cold war terms when for the island states concerned, security lay more in ensuring a sustainable economic future. Whatever the motives, the events forced New Zealand to consider wider aspects of security than just the military dimension for the island states. More recently, the coups in Fiji in 1987 (two) and 2000 (abortive) led to charges from Fijian leaders that New Zealand was meddling in Fiji's internal affairs, at best through gratuitous comments and at worst by contemplating military intervention.

On balance, New Zealand has become a South Pacific nation to the extent that it has through both the inevitable effects of relatively easy immigration and the deliberate effects of participation in Pacific processes. But that "pacificness" is tempered by cultural, economic and strategic reality. The Pacific is not the region from which most New Zealanders derive their ethnic identity, it is not an area in which events will threaten New Zealand's wider national interests, and although it has been at times a source of low wage labour (not always useful, especially in times of economic downturn), it has less often been a source of economic gain. To that extent, New Zealand will remain at most a Pacific nation through geography and social contact, rather than because of any reasons of high or medium politics.
VI INTO THE FUTURE

For the last 150 years New Zealand’s attitudes towards the South Pacific have changed regularly to take account of the preoccupations of the day. There has been consistency, too, however, in the recognition that the region is important to New Zealand. This article’s survey of the way that attitudes have changed has clearly highlighted that.

Henderson (1999: 268, in response to McKinnon above) notes that the journey "home" to the Pacific has some way to go. This is demonstrated by an ambivalence in the country’s relationship towards the island states which, on the one hand, supports them politically, economically and culturally, but on the other wants them to conform to New Zealand’s view of what is necessary and appropriate in the way they conduct themselves internally, towards New Zealand itself, and towards the rest of the international community.

In the first 100 or more years of the relationship the emphasis was on the politics of imperialism, diplomacy and military security. More recently the cultural and communal aspects of the relationship have been emphasised. The relationship is relatively easy at that level, but if issues of high politics (instability in Fiji, secession in Bougainville) continue to rise and have salience then the relationship may lose some of the ease and New Zealand may be forced to make hard choices about the nature of its Pacific ties and outlook. In the meantime, New Zealand will continue to work to strengthen the links between herself and the region and hope that engagement at the technical level through regional multilateral initiatives, and at the social level through the close links between New Zealand’s Polynesian community and their island relatives, will outweigh any problems arising out of the dramas of political conflict and ambitions.

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