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Returning to Paradise
Combating the Soviet
Threat to the South Pacific

By Rep. Ben Blaz



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RETURNING TO PARADISE:
COMBATING THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

by Representative Ben Blaz

The Southwest Pacific is no longer a peaceful, palm fringed preserve of American goodwill. The region, long a staunch U.S. ally, has been thrust into the global struggle by a new Soviet strategy. The South Pacific has become the newest area of superpower rivalry.

The U.S. faces a three-pronged Soviet strategy in the region. Soviet naval expansion has made their Pacific fleet their largest and gained them their long-sought goal of a warm water port at Vietnam's Cam Rahn Bay--ironically a U.S.-built port.

Politically, they are attempting to inject themselves into the region through expanded diplomatic contacts and efforts at spreading nuclear free fallacies. Those efforts are complemented by economic ploys such as so-called fishing and economic development agreements aimed at securing port access and eventually naval and air facilities.

The Soviets are capitalizing on several trends in the region: 1) the rise in nationalistic/anti-colonial sentiment; 2) the spread of nuclear free Pacific fervor; 3) resentment over disputes with U.S. commercial fishermen; and 4) resentment with French nuclear and colonial policies. These developments threaten a major pillar of our Pacific Basin policy--strategic denial of the area to hostile outside forces.

The stakes are substantial: 1) the U.S. alliance structure in the Pacific and Southeast Asia; 2) vital sea lines of communication to U.S. allies and trading partners; 3) the right of passage and port entry for our nuclear Navy; 4) access to the natural resources of Oceania and the Indian Ocean; and 5) American prestige in the all-important Asia-Pacific era.

Congressman Blaz, a Republican, represents the Territory of Guam. He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on August 13, 1986.

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TWOFOLD NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

There are really two problems confronting the United States in the South Pacific: the long-term Soviet challenge in the region and the current trend of the area's nations to flirt back.

The Soviet half of the equation is easiest to understand. Soviet leaders have decided to become players in Asia and the Pacific because of the phenomenal increase in trade and development in the region and the Pacific Basin's enormous potential for future growth.

The expansion over the past decade of the Soviet Pacific Fleet--which is now the largest fleet in their navy--and the development of Soviet naval and air bases at Cam Rahn Bay are the most visible signs of this new Soviet thrust in the region.

The Soviets want to gain access and bases for their fleet and aircraft through fishing and other economic development and diplomatic agreements; and they seek to deny U.S. ships and aircraft access and bases by encouraging nuclear paranoia and underwriting extremist elements of the nuclear free Pacific movement.

The problem of South Pacific nations flirting back at the Soviets is less clearly understood. Previous Soviet attempts in the 1970s were ignored or rebuffed by South Pacific nations. But now some of these nations are responding, accepting Soviet aid and diplomatic relations, and providing port access and on-shore facilities for Soviet commercial vessels.

New Zealand has refused U.S. nuclear Navy port visits because the Labor Party there has swallowed the fatal fallacy, actively promoted by Soviet propaganda, that unilaterally banning our nuclear Navy will protect them. The United States has responded by ending New Zealand's role in the ANZUS Mutual Defense Pact.

The Republic of Kiribati is renewing its \$1.5 million fishing agreement with the Soviets and may add port access to the benefits granted Soviet vessels. This agreement allows Soviet trawlers and spy ships access to the largest exclusive economic zone in the Pacific--several million square miles--and positions their spy ships to observe testing at our Kwajalein Missile Test Range in the Marshalls.

Kiribati leaders have said they entered this Russian gambit out of disgust and resentment with the U.S. failure to enter a tuna fishing rights agreement that would allow the island to collect fishing fees from U.S. tuna boats.

Vanuatu has decided to establish diplomatic ties with Cuba, Libya, and the Soviet Union as well as provide the Soviets port and on-shore facilities at Espiritu Santo (a U.S. base in World War II) in a

soon-to-be-announced fishing treaty. Vanuatu's proximity to the racially troubled French colony of New Caledonia and potential for influencing developments there are very disturbing.

Traditional friends such as Fiji also are entertaining Soviet offers of fishing treaties.

Anger with French nuclear and colonial policies has led to heightened anti-nuclear sentiment and the development of South Pacific nuclear free zones. French policies in Tahiti and New Caledonia also create resentment in the region and these anti-French feelings wash onto the United States because of the mistaken belief that we can force the French to change their policies.

The South Pacific, our World War II ally, is allowing Soviet inroads because of disillusionment with the United States and resentment with what the region's leaders see as our lack of interest in their welfare as well as disagreement over fishing policies.

In a sense, we are the victims of the passing of the Coral Sea generation. Those South Pacific leaders who remember the American servicemen, American democracy and equality, and the enormous productive power of the American economy are passing. This generation is being replaced by a younger generation which has no memory of the war-years partnership. They are more critical of our commitment to the region and want to see positive action from us to demonstrate our interest. Our reservoir of goodwill has not run out completely but we can see the end to it unless we act soon and act forcefully.

The most pressing issue is resentment with what the leaders see as years of "Jolly Roger" tactics by American tuna boat operators who refused to recognize the islands' fishery rights and would not pay fishing fees for tuna caught in the nation's exclusive economic zones--their major sources of wealth.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the deep resentment these "tuna wars" have created in the region. It is not an exaggeration to say that the current U.S. image in the South Pacific is dominated by the vision of rapacious and arrogant tuna boat operators.

Kiribati's Russian gambit is seen in the area as a direct result of the U.S. government's unwillingness to negotiate a new fishing pact recognizing these rights and fee payments.

The absence of adequate and clearly targeted U.S. financial aid to the region and the possible cut in AID funding for the next fiscal year are also a large part of the problem.

COMBATING THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE SOUTH PACIFIC

There is not much that can be done in the short term about Soviet adventurism in the region, but there is much we can do about the sudden receptivity of the region to Soviet allurements.

A complete denial of a Soviet presence in the region is not feasible or probably even desirable. We have political and economic relations with the Soviet Union, as do our closest allies. Why shouldn't the South Pacific?

Most important, we must recognize the roots of the problem in the South Pacific lie in changing leadership and the perceptions of the new regional leaders with short-term economic and political problems with the United States.

Who are these new generation leaders and what is it they seek for their nations? What do they want from the Soviets and us?

"The Pacific Way" is anti-colonial, yet conservative; traditionalist yet Christian; issues are openly debated but resolved through quiet compromise and consensus decision making.

The region is politically and culturally conservative with a strong commitment to democratic institutions and pluralistic societies. Interpersonal relationships are extremely important. Face-to-face dealings can solve problems thought unsolvable.

There is no grinding poverty, no clashing class conflicts. Families and kin groups provide basic necessities and bind all levels of society.

The ideal leader in the Pacific Way is the person who distributes the food, goods, resources as widely and fairly as possible.

So in international perceptions and relations, South Pacific leaders tend to view issues in terms of which countries can best approach the ideal of the Pacific Way--which country will be seen as giving--or thought likely to give--the fairest payments for services or the fairest amount of aid.

In short, the Pacific Way is diametrically opposed to everything communist doctrine and practice stand for. Despite our disagreements with regional leaders, the South Pacific retains a strong affinity for Americans and American ideals. Island leaders welcome U.S. interests, involvement, and concern, especially if it is followed up with aid and trade over the long term.

Few regional leaders savor the prospects of superpower competition, but they have discovered the best way to get our attention is to flirt back at the communists.

The leaders and people of the South Pacific want to be our friends. Can we be theirs?

LESSONS FROM FREE ASSOCIATION NEGOTIATIONS

The long, complex negotiations between the U.S. and Micronesia grappled with the same basic issues we face in the South Pacific today: How to meet the conflicting needs and wants of small Pacific island nations while protecting our preeminent strategic interests in the region.

The island mini-states want independence, sovereignty, dignity as members of the world community, political stability and, most important, assured long-term economic growth so they can gain a better life for their people. The United States wants assurance of political stability and strategic denial of the area to hostile outside forces.

The outcome of 17 years of difficult negotiations with Micronesia was the U.S. recognition that there is not necessarily an inherent conflict between self-determination/economic development and strategic denial.

By our recognizing that we had a responsibility and self-interest in accepting and respecting Micronesia's sovereignty and underwriting its development, the Micronesians, persuaded by our willingness to negotiate a long-term commitment, were willing to endorse and support our strategic interests.

The South Pacific is not in the same situation as Micronesia but what I believe they are saying to us is, if we are not interested in their long-term economic well-being (beyond lip service and about \$8 to \$10 million a year in development aid), then they will go elsewhere for underwriters.

The essence of the free association agreement with Micronesia--a long-term, comprehensive commitment to the region's political and economic development in return for strategic denial of the area--is the solution we are seeking with the South Pacific.

I am not suggesting we enter an auction with the Soviets for the favor of the South Pacific. That leads us into a game of manipulation we should not play and does not address the real long-term needs of the region.

Nor am I suggesting we shoulder the burden alone. Whatever we do in the region, we must do it as a community effort with regional organizations like the South Pacific Forum and our major allies, especially Japan, Australia and New Zealand. This does not mean the aid cannot be bilateral and clearly marked USA.

I am not talking about huge expenditures even over the long run. There is a fundamental reality of scale here that places clear limits on the amount of aid the islands can absorb. There are about 5 million people on islands scattered over several million miles of ocean.

THOUGHTS ON AN ECONOMIC/POLITICAL STRATEGY FOR THE PACIFIC BASIN

In conclusion, I offer the following thoughts for a plan to combat the Soviet threat to the South Pacific:

- 1) In conjunction with our allies, negotiate with the region a comprehensive, long-term development plan, properly scaled to the size and needs of the island nations--a South Pacific initiative that addresses immediate solutions to major stress points in our relationship with the region; conclude at the earliest possible time a fisheries treaty recognizing the EEZs and fishing fee rights of the region.

This plan should also address long range plans to better integrate, economically and strategically, the South Pacific, Micronesia, and our Southeast Asian allies.

- 2) Upgrade our presence. Our physical presence in the region is minimal and that lack of constant personal contact on leadership as well as academic and people-to-people levels feeds an impression of the U.S. as unconcerned, uncaring, and uninterested in the welfare of South Pacific people.

We need to return to paradise, to rediscover the South Pacific on all levels--diplomatically and politically, with expanded cultural ties, tourism, business investment--a broad spectrum presence.

- 3) Strengthen the moderate center. Expand the moderate center of the political spectrum in the region through regional approach and support. Allow moderates to bring extremist nations around through Pacific Way consensus.

- 4) Clarify our nuclear position and disengage from the French connection through an expanded public diplomacy effort in the region. The U.S. does not now and does not intend to dump nuclear waste, conduct nuclear tests, or store nuclear weapons in the South Pacific.

This policy conforms with the basic needs of the island states for nuclear weapons free societies.

We have little control over French actions, and if we cannot make them see their nuclear testing policy is creating strategic problems in the region, we should reevaluate our position on French nuclear testing and, if needed, clearly disassociate from their policy.

We must also seriously examine and, if necessary, clearly disassociate ourselves from French colonial policy in Tahiti and New Caledonia. The volatile situation in New Caledonia and the specter of racial war there between the indigenous Melanesians and white settlers requires us to speak out on behalf of democratic self-determination. We have an excellent, progressive record of fostering self-determination in the Philippines and Micronesia. We should not allow ourselves to be associated with French policies that regional leaders view as colonial and regressive. We must continue to stress that any unilateral barring of U.S. nuclear forces is dangerous and destabilizing because it can generate in nations a perception of superior Soviet strength and the attendant political influence that might be gained by that perception.

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