THE USSR AND ITS PROXIES IN A VOLATILE SOUTH PACIFIC

by Colin Rubenstein

For the United States and its allies the political and strategic environment of the South Pacific region is deteriorating. Instability in the region now stretches from the Philippines to the Solomon Islands. Central to this process of destabilization is the increasing political activity of the Soviet Union. Also of concern is Libya's intrusion into the region. Libya shares with the Soviet Union a profound antipathy to Western values. By attempting to estrange local elites from the U.S. and thus to undermine the Western alliance, and by seeking to further destabilize a region already undergoing a difficult process of decolonization, Libya serves as a vital Soviet proxy in the Pacific. Whether orchestrated or unplanned, Libya's activities in the Pacific ultimately benefit the Soviets.

The most critical recent event in the South Pacific was the crisis in the ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States) Alliance, brought about by New Zealand's action to disregard its treaty obligations. This encouraged the Soviet Union and its surrogates to upgrade their efforts to achieve certain longstanding objectives. These Soviet aims include the unraveling of ANZUS, the decoupling of Australia, New Zealand, and South Pacific countries from the Western alliance and the erosion of traditional pro-U.S. sentiments in Australia, to be replaced, it can only be assumed, by greater sympathy for the Soviet Union.

ANZUS Strains. Prominent among anti-American activists in the South Pacific are peace movement leaders, as well as certain political, academic, trade union, church, and media elites. These groups have persistently opposed ANZUS and its main components — the joint communication facilities in Australia and visits by U.S. nuclear ships. They have championed New Zealand's defection from ANZUS in order to undermine confidence in the U.S. as a reliable ally. Meanwhile they promote a benign view of the Soviet Union, despite growing evidence of expanding activity by the Soviet Union and its proxies in Australia and the South Pacific. Strains within ANZUS in recent years reflect the effectiveness of these strategies, although the anti-ANZUS, anti-U.S. coalition in Australia has been far from successful in achieving its overall objectives. But the role of Australia's extreme left and anti-democratic elites will be critical in determining the ultimate success or failure of these strategies.

Despite a generally enhanced commitment to ANZUS by the Australian government, this relentless campaign from unilateralists and anti-American quarters has resulted in several major Australian concessions. Among these: reneging in early 1985 on the commitment to allow U.S. aircraft use of Australian airfields to provide back-up support during MX missile testing in the Pacific; rejection of the U.S. invitation to participate in the Strategic Defense Initiative; disagreement over the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty

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(SPNFZT); and the isolationist, "benign environment" assumptions implicit in a major defense review released in March 1986 by the Australian government, the Dibb Report. Regional instability has been increased by the build-up of Soviet naval power in the Pacific, and by Soviet probing for naval access, which has achieved some success through fishing agreements with the island states of Kiribati (August 1985) and Vanuatu (January 1987). Also adding to regional tension have been Vanuatu's developing "nonaligned" and progressively anti-Western stance and Libya's menacing intrusions in the region.

The Libyan Factor

Isolated and ostracized in the Arab world and Africa and humiliatingly defeated in Chad, Libya's Colonel Muammar Qadhafi has devoted increasing attention to Australia and the South Pacific region. Over the past decade, Libyan attempts to destabilize the area have included: the arming and funding of the Bangsa Moro Islamic guerrillas in the southern Philippines, including the reported supplying of 2,400 weapons; the hijacking in 1981 of an Indonesian Garuda flight to Bangkok by Libyan-backed Islamic fundamentalists; and support for Islamic fundamentalists who have represented an ever increasing threat to Malaysia's stability, culminating in the violent November 1985 riots in which fourteen people were killed.

In the early months of 1987, Libya intensified its efforts in the South Pacific. It has established diplomatic relations with Vanuatu and improved relations with a militant faction of the independence movement in New Caledonia, FRETILIN in East Timor, and with the Free Papua Movement (OPM), a small separatist independence movement operating sporadically along the Papua New Guinea/Indonesia border. In April 1987 Libya hosted the second "terrorist conference" of its World Center Against Imperialism, Zionism and Racism (MATABA), in Tripoli. These have been attended by large numbers of Pacific and South East Asian revolutionaries, including Vanuatuans, New Caledonian Kanaks, OPM representatives from Irian Jaya, New Zealand Maoris, and aboriginal Australians.

Australian Leadership. Recognition of the implications of growing Libyan involvement in the South Pacific led Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke to advise South Pacific nations seeking links with Libya that they would be making a "very grave mistake." He further went on to say that the Libyans "...aim to promote terrorism and unrest. Libya has no concrete legitimate peaceful reason for coming into this region." Proving that Australian political leadership can make a difference, the Hawke Government forced the May 1987 closure of the Libyan People's Bureau in Canberra, which prompted the Vanuatu government, just one week later, to defer indefinitely a prior decision to open a Libyan People's Bureau in the capital, Port Vila.

Of particular concern is the situation in Vanuatu, which is the hub of Libyan penetration into the region. This link was symbolized in April 1986, when Vanuatuan Prime Minister Walter Lini sent a message of solidarity to Qadhafi after the U.S. attack on Libya. Vanuatu also has close ties to Cuba and Nicaragua, and it is a member of the Nonaligned Movement. Lini also has called for the South Pacific Forum to join the Nonaligned Movement and recognize the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), proposals that were rejected by all other South Pacific Forum members.

The main architect of the Vanuatu/Libya link has been the Secretary-General of the ruling Vanua'aku Parti, Barak Sope. Together with Prime Minister Lini (also an Anglican clergyman and thus often called Father Lini), Sope has organized "security training" for several dozen Vanuatuans in Libya. Their activities in Libya have been described by various sources in Libya as journalism, radio technician training, or general observation of the Libyan system.

Sope's influence in fostering the Libyan connection increased in Vanuatu when Lini was forced temporarily from public life following a stroke early in 1987. This led to reports in Australia and elsewhere that Sope's faction within the Vanua'aku Parti was positioning itself to gain control of the government. So strong was the connection with Libya that Sope admitted that Vanuatu would permit the establishment of a Libyan People's Bureau in its capital of Port Vila. According to Yann Celene Uregei, the New Caledonian delegate to a Libyan-sponsored conference of revolutionary forces and peace delegates from the Pacific Ocean region, the Port Vila Libyan People's Bureau was to have become regional headquarters of the *Mathabe*, a network of some 240 revolutionary groups including the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the PLO. Uregei also affirmed that among its objectives would be the adoption of armed struggle with a view to confronting "imperialism."

Potential Gains for Libya. The issue of Libyan involvement in Vanuatu has sharpened divisions within the governing party between radicals and moderates. Sope's strong advocacy of a Libyan connection has alienated such politicians as Foreign Affairs Minister Sela Molissa and former Finance Minister Kalpakor Kalsaka. They have warned of damage to the economy as a result of Libyan influence in Vanuatu. In an attempt to reassert his leadership and authority, Prime Minister Lini, in the first public appearance after his stroke, announced in May 1987 that the Vanuatuan government had decided to postpone indefinitely the establishment of a Libyan People's Bureau in Port Vila.

The Libyans would gain a great deal by establishing a foothold in Vanuatu. A Libyan base in Port Vila, for example, would facilitate the dissemination of Libyan money and arms throughout the region. Indeed it was the strong suspicion that Libyan weapons were being moved through Port Vila that seemed to be the final straw causing Hawke to close the Libyan People's Bureau in Canberra.

Radical Foreign Policy. With the return of the Vanua'aku Parti in the November 1987 general elections, a real tussle for power within the Vanuatu government has begun to unfold despite the improved performance of the opposition Union of Moderate Parties. A central issue in this struggle will be continued Libyan influence in Vanuatu. The country's radical foreign policy clearly cost the government votes in the elections, particularly in the capital, where the opposition won three out of five seats and leadership aspirant Sope just managed to retain his own seat.

While Prime Minister Lini won the first round and initially omitted Sope from his new cabinet, Vanuatu still seems to be set on a radical course that can only worsen regional tensions. The return of Sope to the cabinet in January 1988 only confirms this outlook.

Libya also has utilized anti-French sentiment to facilitate contacts in New Caledonia, a French colony. Libya has developed contacts in the broad independence movement known

as the Front de Liberation Nationale Kanake et Socialiste (FLNKS). These links have been encouraged by Yann Celene Uregei, leader of the militant United Front for the Liberation of Kanaky (FULK) faction within the Kanak independence movement. In mid-1984 Uregei and Elois Machora, a radical member of the largest and generally more moderate party in FLNKS, the Union Caledonienne, visited Tripoli to obtain assistance from Qadhafi. In September 1984, FLNKS sent seventeen militants to Libya for "self-defense" training in the use of firearms, explosives, and "protective security." But according to Jean-Marie Tjibaou, President of the Kanak movement, the connection with Libya went no further.

The FULK has continued to explore the Libyan connection, however, which has caused dissension within the broader independence movement. In 1986, Uregei announced that he would lead a group of eight Kanaks to attend a conference in Tripoli against imperialism, Zionism, racism, reaction, and fascism. This caused his temporary suspension from FLNKS. Uregei's group announced the formation of a revolutionary alliance to comprise FULK, the Free Papua Movement (OPM), and the Vanua'aku Parti, which was to be supported by Libya.

Libyan Activity in Papua New Guinea

Of great concern to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea has been Libya's assistance to the OPM. A 1987 report from Papua New Guinea's National Assessment Office identified the Libyan destabilization of the OPM guerrillas on their border as probably the most serious threat to their stability and security.

OPM leaders Yakob Prai and Seth Rumkorem, deported by the Papuan New Guinea government to Sweden (1978) and Greece (1982) respectively, signed the Port Vila Declaration in July 1985, which urged greater commitment to the liberation struggle in Irian Jaya, which borders Papua New Guinea. Despite denials by a key OPM commander, Bernad Mawen, reports from emigrants confirm that the organization has received weapons and training from Libya. The chairman of OPM's office in Port Vila, Moses Werror, has claimed that the organization gets as much as it wants from Libya through Port Vila or Melbourne.

Recruiting Mercenaries. Compounding Libya's threatening role in the South Pacific and South East Asia has been its inflated diplomatic and pseudo-diplomatic presence in Australia, particularly during the period before the removal of the Libyan People's Bureau in 1987. There it has engaged in a range of activities, including advertising to recruit mercenaries in Australia for Qadhafi's Islamic Brigade; attempts to illegally procure nine embargoed Australian C-130 Hercules transport aircraft; facilitating the September 1983 visit to Australia of Qadhafi's cousin, Ahmed Shahati, a senior Libyan intelligence official; and cultivating select leftist academic, political, and union activists.

By early 1986 Libyan initiatives in Australia had generated strong bipartisan support for retaliatory restrictions on Libyan diplomatic activities in Australia. In response, the Australian government issued many warnings to the Libyan Ambassador and, at the end of January 1987, the Federal Cabinet reduced Libya's diplomatic presence in Canberra and Melbourne, effectively closing the Libyan cultural center in South Melbourne.

Terrorist Network. However, the closing did not mean the end of Libyan efforts in Australia. The activities of the cultural center were simply transferred to a Brunswick office run by Robert Pash, who has since gained notoriety for having organized the visit in April 1987 of six Australians – including aboriginal independence activist Michael Mansell – to Tripoli to attend the second Libyan "terrorist conference." Pash has admitted that his Melbourne center and its two staff are funded exclusively by the Libyan Information Ministry through the Canberra People's Bureau. Prime Minister Hawke has promised to prevent the flow of funds to Pash from Libya through the offices of the Main People's Congress in Melbourne and Sydney. Pash's defiant claim that he will protest through contacts in the Malaysian government and seek funds from a Libyan People's Bureau in a third country indicates the links between Libyan activities in Australia and those throughout the region. Pash also has threatened to establish a local arm of *Mathabe*, the international terrorist network in the region, and has worked tirelessly to strengthen Libyan influence in the region. OPM leader Moses Werror admitted in April 1987 that his followers received support and warfare training from Libya, organized through Port Vila and Melbourne. In July 1986, Pash "officially" visited Vanuatu and issued jointly with Prime Minister Lini a pledge of support for Qadhafi "in his struggle against Zionist U.S. imperialism."

The Soviet Challenge: Australian Reactions

While communist forces in the Philippines threaten the loss of United States access to Clark Field and Subic Bay, the Soviet Union aims to secure a Grenada-like strategic toehold in Vanuatu. The first component of Soviet strategy has been to obtain commercial fishing agreements. One cannot underestimate the surveillance, interdiction, resupply, even potentially the rearming capacity that commercial fishing ship access to Vanuatu will give Soviet forces in the Pacific. A recent report suggests that Moscow plans to position underwater acoustic monitoring devices in the waters off Vanuatu, which could be the forerunner to the establishment of safe, deep sanctuary for Soviet nuclear-armed submarines. The use of this acoustic monitoring device could conceivably provide an excellent haven from which Soviet submarines could loiter safely in a very well-protected position and be capable of attacking almost any target in the area of the Pacific Rim. If carried out, such a port facility could fundamentally alter the regional balance of power.

The Soviet challenge should not be misconstrued or exaggerated. U.S. and Western power and political influence are still dominant. At the same time, however, the dramatic and historic transformation of Soviet naval capabilities in the Pacific must not be underestimated. In particular, there is the improved mine-laying capacity of Soviet ships and submarines, the significance of which is clearly apparent in the Persian Gulf. Despite their military buildup, the main regional Soviet objectives of the Soviet Union in the South Pacific remain the neutralization of the ANZUS Alliance and the encouragement of anti-Western and nonaligned forces.

Soviet diplomatic initiatives in Australasia and the South Pacific are increasing. The Vladivostok speech by Mikhail Gorbachev on July 28, 1986, underlines the increased importance the Soviet Union attaches to becoming an East Asian and Pacific superpower. Other indicators have been the visits in September 1988 to Australia by Ludwig Chizhov,

the head of the newly created separate Department of Pacific Countries and by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in March 1987.

Demanding Proof of Good Intentions. Responding to this Soviet interest, Australian Prime Minister Hawke, in his visit to Moscow in December 1987, just prior to the U.S.-Soviet Summit in Washington, said he would "welcome a constructive involvement by the USSR in political and economic developments in the Asian Pacific Region." He cautiously stipulated, however, that Australia wanted visible signs of good Soviet intentions in Asian trouble spots like Vietnam and Afghanistan before welcoming extended Soviet involvement in the Pacific. Federal Opposition leader John Howard attacked Hawke's speech as legitimizing a Soviet presence in the region, and as "a folly that can only increase tensions." He argued that the Prime Minister "had implicitly endorsed Mr. Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech which threw down the gauntlet to Western influence in the region." Perhaps smarting at Howard's criticism, Hawke, in his next major speech delivered in Moscow, emphasized Australia's firm commitment to the U.S. alliance. "Australia has chosen the values, positions and interests of the West. Australia and the United States formed an alliance, an alliance which continues to exist today and is stronger than it has ever been....Australians do not see this as merely a military alliance, but as a partnership based on shared liberal-democratic values: our deeply cherished values."

Despite the apparent softening of Hawke's position, implicit in his offer of constructive involvement, both he and Foreign Minister William Hayden repeatedly expressed concern about the extent and nature of Soviet objectives in the Pacific. For example, in December 1986, Hayden unequivocally stated that the recently announced Soviet-Vanuatuan fishing agreement contained dangers for regional security as well as for the independence of Vanuatu itself. He argued that the Soviets, on the basis of past experience, were likely to engage in more than mere commercial activity and could "erode the political base" of Vanuatu through covert activities and subversion. In June 1987, prior to the Australian federal election, Hayden warned of the dangers of Soviet political front activity in Australia and throughout the region.

Kremlin Aim. During a visit to New Zealand in December 1986, Hayden firmly chastised his hosts for their breach of ANZUS obligations and the consequent harm to Australian security interests. In August 1987, Hayden stated bluntly that the Soviet Union "aspires to drive the United States out of the region, to limit the U.S. presence and influence in the region." According to Australian press reports Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov explained to Mr. Hawke at a formal Kremlin dinner in December 1987 that the aim of Soviet foreign policy is to "disband military alliances." Indeed, the regional strategy of the Soviet Union is to effectively unravel ANZUS, thereby achieving the Soviet aims of reducing U.S. influence, weakening the U.S. political and military position in Australia and the South Pacific, and ultimately breaking the Australia-U.S. connection.

Earlier, in recognition of increased regional instability from the Philippines to Fiji, the March 1987 Australian government White Paper ("The Defence of Australia") rejected most of the isolationist proposals of the 1986 Dibb Report, which were based on the assumption of a benign strategic environment in the region. In contrast, the White Paper emphatically reaffirmed Australia's position in the Western Alliance, supported U.S. nuclear deterrence policies, and endorsed a strong regional role for Australian defense

forces in the South Pacific, as well as South East Asia, Indo-China, and the Eastern Indian Ocean. An extension of Soviet influence in the region at the expense of the U.S., the report argued, "would be a fundamental concern to Australia and would be contrary to our national interests." In his parliamentary statement of February 23, 1988, Defense Minister Kim Beazley further reaffirmed Australia's regional defense role and its pursuit of greater self-reliance in defense.

Premature Expectations. The Soviet Union's overtures to Prime Minister Hawke, which have sought to establish broader cooperation with Australia in the Asian Pacific region, represent an important part of its strategy to gain acceptance as a major Pacific power. At a time when Australia should be endeavoring to deter hostile intrusions into the region, Hawke's apparent expectations of constructive Soviet involvement in the area seem somewhat premature and problematic. However, leading Australian journalists praised Hawke for his "copybook" visit to Moscow, describing it as "a personal triumph," while ridiculing the opposition party's criticisms: "one suspects the Liberals (the opposition party) work at foreign policy in a time warp, repeating conditioned responses without rethinking their validity."

Over the last decade, the peddling of fraudulent notions about the relative moral equivalence between the Soviet Union and the United States has gained credence, particularly in left-wing union movements, academia, churches and of course, the left wing of the political spectrum. According to recent, nationally held Australian polls, these extreme neutralist, unilateralist, anti-Western, anti-ANZUS assumptions are rejected by 75 percent of the Australian population. A main proponent of the views has been the Pacific Trade Union Forum (PTUF), a body set up as a result of an explicit decision of the 1978 meeting of the Soviet World Federation of Trade Unionists held in Prague. The PTUF has been a key source of radical activity in the South Pacific. The objectives of its leader, John Halfpenny, and his colleagues over the last decade deserve careful scrutiny. They have been promoting the fraudulent concepts of nuclear free zones and a whole range of pro-Soviet themes, designed to lead to the dismantling of ANZUS, as well as its essential bases and facilities. Through these efforts, Soviet disinformation has made significant inroads in Australia.

The contradictions in the Australian government's approach are highlighted by its promotion of the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and its opposition to the Strategic Defense Initiative. The South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty would promote unilateral restrictions on the U.S. in Australia that would make the area more rather than less dangerous. Canberra also has been relatively hypocritical, because while opposing SDI, the government recognizes that American SDI research is necessary if only because of the extensive Soviet program in this area. Recently this view was articulated by Australian Foreign Minister Hayden.

What Should Be Done?

Australia, in unison with its allies, should be raising its political profile in the area instead of cringing before left-wing criticism of its so-called neo-colonialist activities, realizing that vacuums only favor our adversaries. I would argue that we can make a great difference to developments in Vanuatu, or New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji. A judicious

mixture of carrot and stick, based on better intelligence and more involvement in the area, would give us the leverage to reverse or at least preempt some of the more disturbing developments.

To achieve this, Australia must look at its priorities. Instead of squandering good money on the United Nations' Year of Peace and building up the Disarmament Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Australia should be upgrading its diplomatic representation in the area and the quality of its intelligence. Canberra's link with New Zealand is almost counterproductive, and Wellington's behavior on broader political issues is little short of appalling.

Australia should encourage enhanced diplomatic representation of Pacific nations in Canberra. It should do everything it can in terms of positive aid and offer to serve as a conduit for increased Japanese economic aid to the region. Australia also should do much more to train the elites of the South Pacific about the values of social democratic societies rather than allowing them to drift to the totalitarian values that they will pick up in the training they currently receive from the Eastern bloc and Libya.

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