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Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

27 March 1985

Recent Soviet Activity in the South Pacific

Summary

After a decade of stalled economic and political initiatives aimed at the nine independent South Pacific island states, changing regional circumstances are providing a somewhat more fertile ground for Soviet offerings. The altered regional economic conditions and more skillful Soviet targeting may help Moscow to conclude fishing agreements with Kiribati and Tuvalu sometime over the next twelve months. If the Soviets succeed, they may be able to make economic inroads among the other states. This would further Moscow's objectives to prevent the West, Japan, and China from having exclusive influence in the region and to ensure Soviet access to local fish resources. Meanwhile, Moscow's cautious handling of the New Caledonia secession movement, probably indicating a Soviet decision not to put Franco-Soviet relations at risk, suggests that Soviet political initiatives in the region are likely to remain limited over the near term. Nevertheless, continued disagreements over military matters within the ANZUS treaty framework may encourage the Soviets to step up efforts to foster the growth of local antinuclear sentiments and to employ surrogates to build influence with the South Pacific states. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Third World Activities, Office of Soviet Analysis with a contribution from [redacted] NESA. It has been coordinated with the Office of East Asia Analysis, NESA, and ALA. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities, SOVA [redacted]

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Moscow's Goals

Moscow's regional objectives in the area defined by the nine independent island states of the South Pacific include:

- Establishing an economic and political presence in the area over the near term to deny the West, Japan and China a zone of exclusive influence.
- Gaining access to offshore fish resources in the near term, owing to a projected rise in Soviet fish consumption, Moscow's increased long-distance fishing capabilities, and the limits imposed on Soviet offshore fishing by developed states.
- Nourishing indigenous antinuclear sentiments to build support among the island states for a highly restrictive variant of a South Pacific nuclear-free zone. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, the area has not been targeted as part of the Soviet military buildup and modernization in Asia of the past two decades. It apparently occupies a relatively low position in Soviet strategic calculations. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We judge therefore that the Soviets are not prepared to pay a high price for increased influence, given the region's minimal importance for their global concerns. Soviet tactics most likely will continue to focus on low-cost targets of opportunity. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Economic Activities

Soviet economic offerings to South Pacific island states between 1976 and 1980 were refused, owing to modest increases in aid from traditional donors and the reluctance of newly independent island governments to deal with Moscow. The invasion of Afghanistan and the KAL shootdown fueled the islanders' political antipathy towards the USSR, and until last year Moscow apparently had decided that any new economic initiatives were bound to be rejected out of hand. Currently, however, memories of previous Soviet transgressions seem to be fading. Moscow now appears poised to exploit growing tensions between the US and the economically vulnerable South Pacific island states over maritime issues--especially tuna fishing--with proposals for fisheries cooperation. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets last fall also discussed a fishing agreement with Kiribati, and the two sides held their first negotiating session early this year.

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[redacted] Embassy Wellington recently reported that Kiribati President Tabai supports a fishing agreement with the USSR on economic grounds. [redacted]

[redacted]

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Political Initiatives

Moscow continues to make low level political overtures to the island ministates but has yet to display a sustained interest in such endeavors or a willingness to commit substantial resources. Efforts to sound out Vanuatu on the prospects for establishing diplomatic relations in late 1983 and early 1984, using the Soviet journalist Victor Louis as a channel, were sidetracked owing to General Secretary Andropov's illness and death. When the Soviet ambassador to Australia finally managed to get a visa for a private visit to Vanuatu last spring, the prime minister and other high foreign affairs officials studiously avoided any meetings. To date Vanuatu--the only nonaligned state in the region--has adhered rigorously to its interpretation of nonalignment as keeping one's distance from both superpowers. [redacted]

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Moscow continues to give extensive media play to anti-nuclear sentiments in the South Pacific island states, [redacted]

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[redacted] The Soviet press remains critical of US policy in Micronesia, alleging de facto annexation and militarization of the Pacific Island Trust Territories. Soviet offers of scholarships for South Pacific nationals since the mid-1970s, however, have found few takers. Nor is there evidence in hand to suggest that Moscow has made headway in establishing local front groups or influencing the South Pacific media. [redacted]

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Constraints

We judge that a number of obstacles to expanded Soviet influence in the region continue in force, including:

- The pro-Western orientation of most of the ministates since independence.
- The continued influence of pro-Western opinion leaders such as Fiji.
- The strength of local Christian churches.
- A continued flow of aid from the West and Japan.

The goodwill the US built up in the region during World War II apparently remains an important factor, giving US economic assistance a large multiplier effect. [redacted]

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Moscow meanwhile has established diplomatic ties with only four of the nine states--Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Western Samoa--and still has no resident missions. The Chinese, by comparison, have embassies in three states (Fiji, Western Samoa, Papua New Guinea) and modest aid programs. Local trade union bodies on the whole remain resistant to Soviet penetration, despite ongoing visits to Moscow and East Europe by South Pacific officials. [redacted]

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Outside Actors and Soviet Interests: Vietnam and Cuba

Two of Moscow's close allies, Vietnam and Cuba, maintain diplomatic relations with Vanuatu and have hinted at closer ties, although thus far both maintain rather low-profile relationships. [redacted]

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To date, however, there are no signs of a major investment by Hanoi in forging links to the South Pacific island states. Vietnam's internal economic difficulties probably preclude any significant allocation of resources to military or economic aid programs for the region. Moscow's own relatively low priority for the South Pacific apparently minimizes Soviet interest in using the Vietnamese as a conduit. Problems of distance, transportation, and poor communications--as well as the absence of a fit between the Vietnamese and the South Pacific economies--also make close bilateral economic ties unlikely for the near future. [REDACTED]

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Cuba has had diplomatic relations with Vanuatu since early 1983 but still has no resident mission. Official contacts over the past two years, nevertheless, have been extremely rare. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Prospects

We judge that changing circumstances already provide more fertile ground for Soviet economic offerings than at any time since the island states gained their independence in the 1970s. Other trends that probably would provide opportunities for Moscow include:

- Increased perceptions of local economic vulnerabilities by ministates such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, arising out of ongoing trade imbalances, growing budget deficits, a sense of limited economic alternatives, and pessimism about the prospects for increased Western aid.
- A rising sense of economic nationalism, as reflected in the recent threat by the Solomon Islands to withdraw from regional fishing negotiations with the US until Washington agreed to remove the tuna embargo on Solomon Island products imposed in the wake of the August 1984 seizure of a US tuna boat.
- Differences between the US and its Antipodean allies over security matters that, as perceived by the island states, may weaken the region's military links to the US and will almost certainly produce new pressures from local antinuclear activists to close ports and waterways to US warships possibly carrying nuclear weapons. [REDACTED]

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Moscow almost certainly will try to gain a propaganda advantage from recent criticism of US actions by South Pacific forum members such as Papua New Guinea. If targets of opportunity increase and signs of strains in US security relationships with New Zealand and Australia multiply, Soviet assertiveness in the South Pacific region probably will rise. [REDACTED]

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Meanwhile, the Soviets will likely maintain a low diplomatic and military profile in the region, relying on expanded economic ties to improve their access and further their objectives. They probably will, for example, continue to urge South Pacific governments not to allow political differences to stand in the way of mutually profitable economic ties.

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Covert activities and the use of Cuban or Vietnamese surrogates always constitute a potential avenue of influence for the Soviets. To date, however, Moscow's surrogate activities apparently remain highly circumscribed--probably out of concern over reinforcing the antipathy toward the USSR already present in the region. The Soviets, for example, probably will refrain from such actions as open contacts and material assistance to the Kanak secessionists. They probably calculate that the uncertain benefits such aid might confer on the Soviet position in the region would not be worth the damage such initiatives almost certainly would inflict on Moscow's ability to take advantage of emerging economic opportunities in the South Pacific area.

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