Diplomatic Strategies: The Pacific Islands and Japan

Japan is a leading distant water fishing nation, aid donor and trading partner in the Pacific island region. The question that this paper addresses is how do, or how might, Pacific island countries maximise their interests in dealing with Japan. The paper explores various regional strategies that Pacific island countries have utilised, especially in the area of fisheries diplomacy. The purpose of the analysis is to identify where regional cooperation has worked or could work, and to thus establish a clearer basis for regional or collective diplomacy. It argues that extreme disparities between Japan and the Pacific island states may be balanced to some extent by regional strategies. States may enhance their leverage through a combination of collective diplomacy, building ‘alliances’ with other external powers and exploiting opportunities provided by new international regimes. They may even gain advantage from bureaucratic divisions and rivalry within Japan’s foreign policy and fisheries administrations.

Introduction

The theme of the 1996 South Pacific Forum meeting was ‘Regional Solidarity for the Common Good?’. The question mark, which was accidentally left off the final communiqué of the meeting, was crucial to the Forum’s theme. Essentially, the Pacific island leaders were responding to a call to rethink regional cooperation: to identify where it has worked and where it has not worked. As the host of the meeting, the Marshall Islands government suggested that there should be ‘all the freedom and latitude necessary to ponder…which issues require solidarity at the regional level and which should be left to the sub-regions or to individual nations’ (South Pacific Forum 1996). This reflects a more pragmatic approach to regional cooperation than was perhaps evident in the past; an emphasis on results, or on what Papua New Guinea’s then Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan (1996), termed in his Forum statement on the theme: ‘dispassionate calculation’.

This paper engages in some ‘dispassionate calculation’ of the benefits and value of regional cooperation in Pacific island diplomacy. The emphasis here is the broad issue of how Pacific island countries may maximise their interests in dealing with extra-regional powers. The focus is Japan, a leading distant water fishing nation, aid donor and trading partner in the region. Based on this empirical study of the various strategies that Pacific island countries have utilised