

The New Pacific Wall: The U.S., Australia, and New Zealand Isolate and Divide Small Insular Nations

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By Andre Vltchek

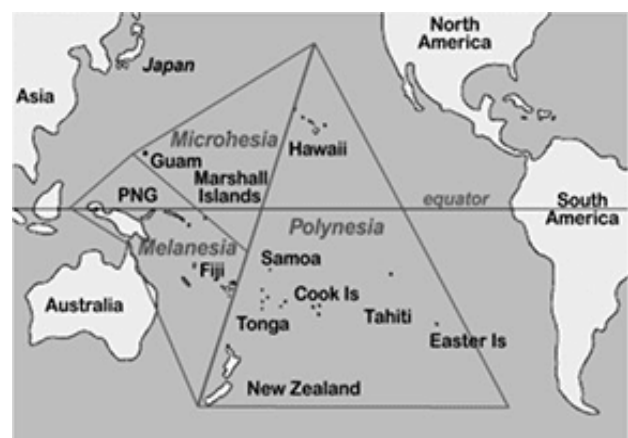
The big three, the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, have divided the Pacific island territories. New Zealand now controls Polynesia, Australia is "in charge of" Melanesia (including the plundering of natural resources by its multinationals in Papua New Guinea), and the U.S. has a firm grip on Micronesia. Andre Vltchek considers the consequences for the people of the island nations.

It is late at night and the coastal road between Apia (the capital of Samoa) and Faleolo International Airport is busy with traffic. Tonight is a big night: a Boeing 767 will arrive from Los Angeles and make a brief stop in Samoa before continuing to the Kingdom of Tonga and Auckland. This weekly flight is a lifeline for this tiny nation of 180,000 people, separated from the rest of the world by thousands of miles of ocean.

The closest supermarket is a four-hour flight away in New Zealand. So are the nearest bookstores and well-equipped medical facilities. Air New Zealand, which flies between Auckland and Samoa four times a week and between Samoa and Los Angeles once a week, is the lifeline of this nation, which is fully dependent on the rest of the world for foreign aid, job opportunities, education, medical care, and essential know-how. It takes Samoan immigrants to New Zealand, reunites families, brings gravely ill people to the hospital, shuttles government officials to foreign destinations, and brings food, medicine and perishable goods.

With foreign aid and remittances amounting to more than 50 percent of Samoan GDP, independence is a lofty and sweet word, but little more. In fact, most Pacific Island countries (Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia) opted for full or limited independence at some point after World War II. Colonialism here, mainly by France, the UK, the U.S., Germany, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, had not been as brutal as in most other parts of the world, but it left a legacy of dependency and confusion.

Some countries are hopelessly bankrupt (like Nauru); others are literally sinking as a result of global climate change. There is almost no regional unity and no attempt at integration. Financial dependency means that three major players—the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand—can exercise full control over the foreign policy and trade of their tiny and vulnerable client-states.



Foreign Policy of the Pacific Islands? Ask Washington or Canberra

"One day I had an entire television crew from Israel parked at my office," remembers Francis X. Hezel, head of Micronesian Seminar and a

leading expert on the islands. “I had no idea what were they doing here. Why would they travel so far, to such a small and insignificant country? Finally I understood: the Israeli public was fascinated with this place; they wanted to know ‘who are those people who keep voting in the U.N. against Security Council resolutions, supporting Israel and the United States against the entire world . . .’”

Pacific Island votes at the UN are openly for sale and it is often an extremely dirty business. Although several countries in the region are disappearing as a result of global warming, both Nauru and Kiribati voted against the Kyoto Protocol.

For several tiny nations, it became profitable to play the Taiwanese card. Quoting local government jargon, Pacific island nations “go either with Taiwan or the People’s Republic of China.” Palau, for instance, recognizes Taiwan, receiving substantial help and investment from Taipei.

The Taiwan (ROC) Embassy in Honiara (the capital of the Solomon Islands) has been heavily criticized for meddling in domestic politics, which included actually fielding and supporting candidates for the April 2006 elections. Taiwanese government officials have also been accused of bribing political leaders in both Kiribati and the Marshall Islands.

There is hardly a country anywhere that is more dependent on foreign power than the Republic of the Marshall Islands. With just 60,000 inhabitants, it receives \$30 million a year from land leases and other payments connected with the U.S. missile project on Kwajalein Atoll. A 15-year “Compact” guarantees this tiny nation more than \$1 billion.

The effects on the environment, health, and culture, however, have been devastating. After World War II, the U.S. occupied the Marshall Islands and began atomic bomb experiments on the small atolls of Bikini and Eniwetok, while Kwajalein Atoll was later targeted as a site for transcontinental missile testing. Many islanders died from radiation-related illnesses, while

others developed serious health problems, some of which have been passed on to a new generation. There are accusations that local people were used as test subjects for monitoring radiation’s long-term effect on humans.



On March 1, 1954, the United States tested a hydrogen bomb design on Bikini Atoll that turned out to be the largest U.S. nuclear test ever exploded.

Many residents were forced to leave the islands and most of the victims were relocated to the main atoll, Mjuro. The U.S. Congress allocated \$240 million to compensate victims of nuclear testing on condition that they agree to drop all future lawsuits against the U.S. government. Since then, more evidence has surfaced documenting the devastating impact of nuclear experiments on human health.

Economic Dependence

Despite substantial cash injection, the people of the Marshall Islands have never managed to build a sustainable economy. Experiments, missile testing, relocation of many islanders, and finally the introduction of a different culture based on corporate values have wrought havoc with the life of the once peaceful and self-sufficient archipelago. Many men and women are unemployed, their health damaged by nuclear testing and their culture in shambles.

More than 60 percent of the Marshall Islands’ GDP comes from U.S. handouts. Instead of

finding their own way forward, Marshall Islanders rely on leasing their land and territorial waters to others. In the 1990s the government flirted with the idea of accepting nuclear waste from several Asian countries, including Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, before a great outcry from people who already suffered the largest numbers of nuclear-related diseases anywhere in the world killed the project.

The U.S. Department of State describes Palau as a “constitutional republic in association with the United States,” since gaining its “independence” in 1994. [1] Its economy remains heavily dependent upon U.S. aid. The 50-year “Compact of Free Association with the U.S.” entitles Palau to \$450 million in funding until 2008, but much more money is flowing in through various U.S. grants and foreign aid from other countries, particularly Japan, which ruled the archipelago before and during World War II.

Before the Compact was signed, there was a lot of U.S. arm-twisting. There were eight heated referenda, each failing to obtain the 75 percent approval required to override the Constitution’s anti-nuclear provision. Finally, the pro-Compact government amended the Palau Constitution, allowing the Compact to be ratified by a simple majority vote. [2] The essence of the Compact is that in exchange for a large cash infusion, Palau gives the U.S. unlimited rights to build military bases. The Palau Constitution is anti-nuclear and it is known that large U.S. military ships are either nuclear-powered, carry nuclear weapons, or both. The U.S. refused to give any assurances that its ships would be nuclear-free and the government of Palau finally opted for a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. No military base has yet been built in Palau, but the possibility of future bases makes many citizens of this idyllic archipelago profoundly uncomfortable.



Sign from 1978 constitutional referendum in Palau

“For the U.S., the most important factor behind the Compact was so-called ‘strategic denial’ for Soviet ships,” explains Francis X. Hezel. “FSM covers an enormous ocean area and by signing the Compact, the entire territory became a no-go area for ships from those countries that the U.S. considered hostile to its interests. Ironically, the Compact was implemented just a few years before the end of the Cold War.”

The economy of Palau, as for the entire Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), is largely dependent on the U.S. handouts. Compact money amounted to more than 1.3 billion dollars, not including tens of millions of dollars in grants and aid programs. Even after the expiry of the Compact, the agreement and financial package were renegotiated, with less favorable terms for the entire FSM. [3]

Isaac Soaladaob, director of the Bureau of Foreign Affairs of Palau, barely hides his bitterness: “As you are aware of, we were colonized by Spain, Germany, Japan, and the United States. De-classified documents we can now access clearly show that the U.S. was out to Americanize the entire Micronesia. They wanted to change our culture. Before the Japanese occupation, there was no concept of private property or ownership; we had our own traditional societies that were based on collectivism. But that type of society was not

conducive to the capitalist system that the U.S. wanted to implement. We were fooled so many times . . . We wanted to be nuclear-free, because we knew that the Enola Gay left for Hiroshima from this part of the world—from Saipan.

“We also saw the devastation to the Marshall Islands—we saw what happened to our Micronesian brothers—where nuclear tests had been performed. But we negotiated with the U.S.—it was during the Cold War, after all, and we were told that ‘We have to be protected.’ People here were indoctrinated. Of course, there was not one Communist around here and people here had no idea what was happening in Russia, but they were petrified of Communists. In those days we had almost no visitors from abroad and we were not allowed to travel. In the early 1950s we could only travel to the United States.

We never realized that in reality our traditional culture was much closer to communism than to capitalism . . . We were colonized and thoroughly brainwashed. Then you know what happened during the vote; all that arm-twisting . . . I know because I was the chair of the constitutional amendment. And now, after all that, this government considers the U.S., Japan, Australia, and Taiwan to be our best friends: in that order. We even have our men in Afghanistan now, and in Iraq. Our people are easily fooled. They learned that it is easiest to be associated with the strongest. They are even proud of their position . . . Oh, Bush said he is grateful to Palau.”

Palau is not the only country in the region that sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. American Samoa, the U.S. territory, has a disproportionately high number of men who were killed in the Middle East wars. The *Samoan Observer*, a daily newspaper in independent Samoa, is running U.S. Army recruitment ads, trying to recruit Samoans who hold dual citizenship. Fiji is exporting its soldiers to conflicts all over the world, from UN-sponsored operations to mercenary adventures.



Staff Sgt. Frank F. Tiai, 46, an Army reservist from American Samoa, was killed in Iraq when a homemade bomb exploded under his vehicle. (honoluluadvertiser.com)

Control of Movement

Control over foreign policy of the Pacific nations is taken for granted. But the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand also have almost unlimited control over who is on the move and who encounters whom. Foreign immigration and customs officers can interrogate passengers about the purpose of their journey, check their luggage, and deny their transit.

If Samoan or Tongan citizens want to visit Papua New Guinea (PNG), they have to fly to Australia and then to Port Moresby from Brisbane. Due to the scarcity of flights, passengers often have to travel through both Auckland and Brisbane. In order to do that, it is necessary to obtain an Australian transit visa if the transit time is more than eight hours. But even this eight hour transit visa waiver is rarely respected: airlines often deny boarding to Australian transit points to people from the Pacific Island countries and from other developing countries that are not in possession of Australian transit visas, according to numerous personal testimonies. To visit any of the countries in Micronesia requires a U.S. transit visa to change planes in Hawaii or Guam.

The United States has a small embassy in Apia, Samoa, but it is not authorized to issue visas. A Samoan citizen has to first apply for a New Zealand visa (not easy to obtain), then pay

around \$500 for tickets to New Zealand, then apply for a U.S. transit visa, wait for the interview, pay a non-refundable deposit, then wait for the highly unlikely positive outcome in order to travel within the region.

Both Australia and New Zealand are now adopting the U.S. approach to transit passengers. Even those who remain in the transit area at New Zealand airports now require transit visas. Immigration officers at the U.S., Australian, and New Zealand gateways are tough and uncompromising. Recently, the prime minister of Papua New Guinea decided to fly on a regular airline during an official visit to Australia and was forced to take off his shoes at the Brisbane airport, an incident that triggered a diplomatic stand-off between two neighboring countries.

While average citizens find it extremely difficult to get U.S., Australian, and New Zealand transit visas to visit neighboring countries, even government officials, diplomats, and UN officials encounter discrimination and harassment. In July 2005 the newly appointed head of UNESCO in the Pacific, Visessio Pongi, was asked to accompany the director general of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, on his official visit to Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Marshall Islands. To reach Palau, Pongi had to travel from Samoa to Brisbane, then to Cairns and Guam before arriving in Palau. At Cairns, he was denied boarding because he did not have a U.S. transit visa. Eventually he was re-routed via Tokyo, as Japan does not require a transit visa to change planes. But in Tokyo he was again prevented from boarding his flight to Palau, as he would have to change planes in Guam. He tried to argue that he was a high-ranking UN diplomat, required to accompany the head of UNESCO, but U.S. regulations were unbending. He was loaded on the last flight from Tokyo to Sydney and from there had to travel back to Samoa via Fiji.

Other officials in the Pacific have similar stories. Shaukat Hakim, a Pakistani administrator of the UNESCO office in Apia,

recalls, "Once I had to fly from Dubai to Apia via Singapore and Auckland, but was denied boarding as my plane was supposed to make a short stop in Sydney and I didn't have an Australian transit visa. Before, holders of U.N. diplomatic passports (*Laissez Passer*) were not required to apply for transit visas in Australia and New Zealand, but lately, everything has become more difficult."

Mali Voi, a UNESCO cultural expert in Apia, holds a national passport of PNG, as well as a UN diplomatic passport. "I never travel through the U.S. since 1999 when I had to fly to Paris Headquarters via Los Angeles. In LA they checked my luggage, despite the fact that I was just transiting. I had to take my shoes off. At one point I felt very scared. They thought that I was Ethiopian. They didn't care that I had the UN passport, they treated me badly. Since then I fly to Paris through Asia."

"Everything changed after 9-11," Voi continues, "but I don't think it is about security; it is about control. Australia and New Zealand changed their regulations dramatically so that now one needs visas to enter the Pacific territories. It makes networking in this part of the world very difficult."

"Many people in the Pacific still feel allegiance to the U.S.," says Voi. "In some parts we saw Americans as liberators. But that's changing. They definitely lost my vote. And Australia and New Zealand are playing into U.S. hands. I see it all as a new form of colonialism . . . Australia, for instance, is trying to reaffirm its position in the Pacific. I really see this triangle—the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand—as a main stumbling block for the rest of the countries in this part of the world."

Travel regulations are just one problem which the citizens of Pacific nations have to face, but it is a serious one, amounting to something that can easily be described as a New Pacific Wall. The U.S., Australia, and New Zealand are effectively isolating small and poor countries of the Pacific from each other, as well as from the rest of the world. It is almost impossible for the citizens of most of the Southeast Asian nations

(including the Philippines and Indonesia) to visit their neighbors in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, as the same transit visa requirements would apply to their citizens as well (the US and New Zealand transit visas, or Australian transit visa if the time needed to change planes is over 8 hours).

New visa regulations effectively deprive many of the most logical routes between Southeast Asia and South America. Indonesian citizens don't need a visa to go to Peru or Chile, but in order to catch the Lan Chile flight from Sydney via Auckland to Santiago, Chile, they need a New Zealand transit visa even if they do not plan to leave the airport.

Samoa, divided between so-called American Samoa (the U.S. territory) and the Independent State of Samoa (previously known as Western Samoa) can't count on a free flow of people between its isles anymore. Recent regulations require citizens of Samoa to apply for special permits to enter the U.S. territory of American Samoa. On 18 October 2006, the entire 27-member National University of Samoa (NUS) rugby team was detained at Fagatogo Harbour in American Samoa and subsequently deported for not having necessary permits to enter the territory, according to the Samoan Observer.

But the situation gets even more Kafkaesque. Citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) who wish to travel from the island of Yap to their capital city, on the island of Phonpei, have no other choice than to fly with Continental Micronesia, a U.S. carrier, which makes a stop in Guam. Consequently, people of FSM have to go through U.S. immigration and customs. They are questioned and risk refusal to travel within their own territory. Continental Micronesia is the sole carrier between FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands.

Regional airlines are collapsing one after another, as was recently the case with the national carrier of Palau and Polynesian of Samoa, which was forced to enter into a joint-venture with the Australian low-cost carrier Virgin Blue, changing its name to Poly Blue. Polynesian Airlines itself was reduced to just a

few inter-island routes. Air Nauru (the only direct carrier between Micronesia and Melanesia), which collapsed earlier this year, is now operating on an extremely limited budget, drastically reducing its routes. Several regional carriers, including Air Niughini and Air Vanuatu, are partially owned by Australian Qantas, operating almost exclusively profitable routes which bring tourists and foreign experts to these countries but do not necessarily contribute to integration of the region.

The smallest self-governed nation in the world, Niue, can count on only one weekly flight from Auckland. The only large, full-service airline in the region is Fiji-based Air Pacific, with direct flights to the U.S. and Japan. It serves several Pacific destinations including Kiribati, Samoa, the Kingdom of Tonga, and Vanuatu, but prices are exorbitant and connecting times inconvenient.

The big three (the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand) have managed to divide the Pacific. New Zealand now controls Polynesia, Australia is "in charge of" Melanesia (including the plundering of natural resources by its multinationals in PNG), and the U.S. has a firm grip on Micronesia.

With Pacific countries weak and dependent on their minders, integration is at best a distant dream. High costs of travel between Pacific nations, as well as new transit visa regulations in New Zealand and Australia, add to the fragmentation. There is almost no direct contact among the citizens of Pacific nations. The few sporting and cultural events can hardly fill the gap. If citizens of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia travel at all, they go to the cities of the powerful, almost never to visit their neighbors.

Inter-Pacific cultural and economic ties are being replaced by ties with the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand. An average citizen of Samoa knows much more about life in Auckland than about life in Micronesia and Melanesia. Those living in Palau are fluent in cultural nuances and opportunities in the United States, while Melanesia and Polynesia is for them just an

enormous, remote, and sparsely inhabited area of the South Pacific.

On the governmental level, there is a certain will to pursue integration of the region, the most significant attempt being the Pacific Plan approved by the leaders of the Pacific Island countries in Papua New Guinea in October 2005. But most of the governments are weak and financially dependent on the big three regional powers, relying on expertise and know-how from the very countries they should be seeking independence from.

While Micronesian nations are securing cash through direct agreements with the United States by offering the military unlimited access to their territories, other nations of the South Pacific are opting for different types of dependency. Family-designated “breadwinners” are going abroad in search of jobs to support large families back home. In 2002 the Kingdom of Tonga received an astonishing \$65.2 million in remittances, Samoa \$57.9 million, and the Cook Islands \$53 million (according to Asian Development Bank statistics). This creates an unprecedented brain drain. Niue lost 90 percent of its population to accelerating emigration—while Niue presently has 1,700 inhabitants, 18,500 Niueans live in New Zealand and 3,000 in Australia.



Photo from Niue posted on xtramsn.co.nz, with plug for weekly Air New Zealand flight between Auckland and Niue that began on Nov. 4, 2005

Despite nationalistic rhetoric trumpeted by many governments in the region, there is not much hope left in the Pacific. People with skills and education are leaving, unemployment is extremely high, the standard of living (most notably in Fiji) is declining, and so is health (mostly due to changes in lifestyle and cheap, low-quality food imports).

Creation of this New Pacific Wall has fragmented this enormous area of the Pacific, once inhabited by diverse but historically intertwined cultures. There is an acute need for Pacific island nations to create a strong and united bloc able to negotiate with the rest of the world with one voice. Only such a bloc could effectively address economic, social, transportation, educational, and political problems confronting the entire region.

Such a regional approach appears to be exactly what the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand find contrary to their geopolitical interests. But Pacific Islanders have no choice but to look to regional solutions or continue in a dependent and humiliating position. Rather than seeking more aid, their best prospect lies in constructing their own common regional home.

Notes

[1] www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1840.htm

[2]

www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1309/is_n3_v31/ai_16435118

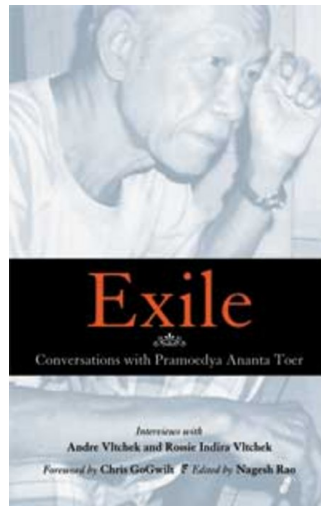
[3] www.fsmlaw.org/compact/index.htm

Andre Vltchek is a novelist, political analyst, filmmaker, and co-founder of Mainstay Press, a new publishing house for political fiction. His latest books include a political novel, Point of No Return, and a collection of political essays, Western Terror: From Potosi to Baghdad. He presently works in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific and can be reached at andre-wcn@usa.net.

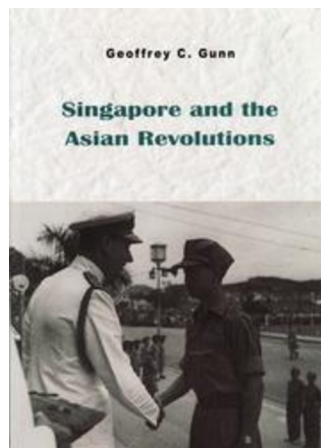
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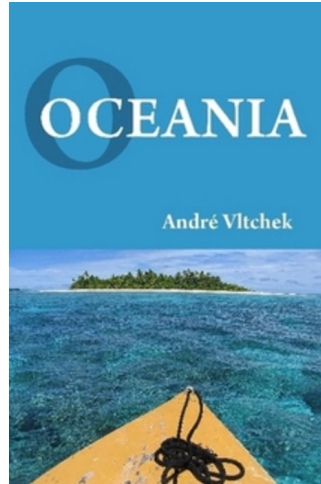
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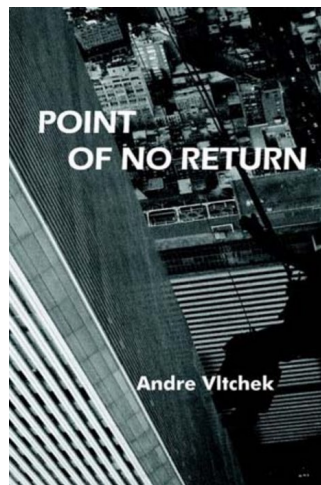
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