Public Symposium on "Asian Security Environment after the 9.11 Terrorism"
December 18, 2002, Tokyo

The South Pacific Security Environment after the 9.11 Terrorism

Greg Fry, Australian National University

- For the purposes of this paper the South Pacific comprises Australia, New Zealand, the fourteen Pacific Island states (including Papua New Guinea and Fiji), and several island territories of France and the United States (including French Polynesia and Guam). Although small in population these island states and territories are spread over an area of ocean larger than Africa. Since the mid 1970s both outside powers and Pacific governments have viewed the security of these countries as interlinked. Regional approaches to security threats are debated and pursued through the Pacific Islands Forum and its Regional Security Committee.

- In the post-Cold War period, but prior to September 11, the South Pacific security environment was largely dominated by the issue of instability within some of the post-colonial states particularly Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. By the end of 2000 some observers were speaking of a Pacific 'arc of crisis', the 'Africanisation of the Pacific' and of the impending 'Balkanisation' of the region. While there has been a tendency to exaggerate the geographical extent of this crisis there is general agreement within the regional forums that the security agenda is concerned mainly with the problems of post-colonial development within states – corruption, land issues, resource development, governance and ethnic differences-and the possible haven these 'failed states' may give to money- launderers, criminals and drug runners.

- The impact on the South Pacific of September 11 and of the subsequent War against Terror, though significant, is not of the same order as for other sub-regions of the Asia-Pacific. Outside Australia there is no evidence of the reach of al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiah (JI) or like- minded groups. The region has therefore not been seen as a front in the 'war against terror' in the way that Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia have. And the Bush Administration's doctrine of pre-emption against the so-called 'axis of evil' has not upset intra-regional relations as it has in Northeast Asia.

- While the impact on the South Pacific's *regional* security environment has been relatively slight, the impact on the region's largest state, Australia, has been very significant. From day one after September 11 the Australian Government presented itself with Britain as the staunchest ally of the US in the global war against terrorism. It sent SAS troops to Afghanistan. It has also given full support to the Bush Administration in its position on a possible war against Iraq indicating that it would give a similar level of military support.

- The Bali bombing on October 12, 2002 dramatically increased and changed the nature of Australia's involvement in the 'war against terror'. In the mind of the Australian Government and public the war had now to be fought within Australia as well as globally. For the first time the Australian mainland was seriously seen as a possible target of terrorism and some Australian citizens were seen as the potential perpetrators because of their alleged links with Jemaah Islamiah and the Indonesian radical cleric

thought to be behind the Bali bombing, Abu Bakar Bahir. Internal security was strengthened, houses of suspects were raided and it is alleged that JI training camps existed in Western Australia and in the Blue Mountains near Sydney.

- The Bali bombings also led to reconsideration of Australia's defence priorities within the 'war against terror'. While there was general agreement on the need for an increased priority for regional requirements in defence planning as a result of Bali there was debate over whether this could be achieved without impacting on commitments further afield in support of the United States. The Defence Minister, Senator Hill, also called for a revision of the self-defence doctrine governing intervention in the UN Charter in order that the threat of terrorism could be met more effectively.

- The main impact of September 11 and its aftermath on the South Pacific *regional* security environment derives from this changing Australian attitude and involvement in the 'war against terror'. Prior to Bali Australia had already promoted a regional approach to counter terrorism via a strengthening of existing cooperation to counter money laundering, drug running and criminal activity. This commitment, agreed to by Pacific island leaders, was captured in the Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security agreed to at the August 2002 Pacific Islands Forum.

- After the Bali bombing this precautionary approach within regional forums was joined by the view that Australia now needed to be more closely involved in the affairs of the so-called failed states if they were not to become havens for terrorists and assist them in laundering their money. An Australian Government- funded defence think tank, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, called in late November 2002 for a paradigm shift in Australia's approach to the failed states of Melanesia as a more direct way of countering their potential use as a 'haven' for terrorists.