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'ITIKIANGA TINAMOU ORA: THE COOK ISLANDS, NEW ZEALAND AND FREE ASSOCIATION

Kia Orana e Kia Ora tatou

The Rt Honourable Winston Peters, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister

Hon Carmel Sepuloni, Minister for Social Development

Sir Doug Kidd, President and Ms Maty Nikkhou-O'Brien of the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs

His Excellency Leasi Papali'i Tommy Scanlan, Samoa High Commissioner to New Zealand and Dean of the Diplomatic Corp

Ladies and Gentlemen, kia orana

Since its establishment in 1934, the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs has played a valuable role in promoting discussion and understanding of international issues and emerging trends, especially from a New Zealand perspective. Given the Institute's esteemed position, therefore, it is both an honour and a pleasure for me to be here today to share a few thoughts on the Cook Islands and New Zealand relationship of free association.

My basic proposition is that the relationship, which is founded on close historical and cultural ties, unique constitutional arrangements, strong people to people ties and shared values have endured and strengthened over time. And that the flexibilities inherent in this relationship as have been evolved by both our countries have enabled both of us to pursue our joint and separate policies and interests at both the bilateral and international levels in a mutually beneficial manner.

My remarks today is titled "Itikianga tinamou ora".

Itiki in Cook Islands Maori means the ties that bind. But itiki also refers to the freshwater eel, or tuna, as it's also called by Maori people of both the Cook Islands and New Zealand.

Tinamou means steadfast, enduring and permanent.

Ora means alive, living and dynamic.

It is my view, the Cook Islands New Zealand relationship of free association has been an enduring, evolving and living partnership and must continue to be so as we look to the future.

Through the centuries, the historic, cultural and other linkages between the Cook Islands and Ao-Tea-Roa have been maintained in the shared ethos of our peoples and manifested in diverse ways including through person-to-person contact, language and traditions.

Among such traditions are those concerning the freshwater eel – the itiki. Traditions and legends often contain valuable lessons for those willing to listen. A valued resource of our indigenous food supplies and cultural traditions, stories have been passed down from our tupuna, our ancestors, about how the itiki have learned since the dawn of time to change and adapt to evolving circumstances in order to survive. So too has our relationship of free association. We have continuously evolved our relationship for more than 100 years in response to the changing world in which we live to ensure our survival.

The Cook Islands became a dependent territory of New Zealand in 1901, when it was annexed from the United Kingdom.

Over the next 60 years, New Zealand tried with varying degrees of effort and success to promote the social, economic and political development of the Cook Islands.

On the 4 August 1965, against a backdrop of the United Nations General Assembly adoption of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples¹ and a related Resolution on self-determination, the Cook Islands, with New Zealand's support, chose self-government in free association with New Zealand.

Free association allows for the Cook Islands to maintain New Zealand citizenship, whilst at the same time making its own laws and conducting its own domestic and foreign affairs.

The desire of the Cook Islands to pursue its own policies and interests has been reflected over the years in developments both in the Cook Islands-New Zealand bilateral relationship as well as in the Cook Islands' growing participation on the broader international stage.

For many years now, the two Governments have concluded a growing number of bilateral treaties to facilitate cooperation on a wide range of issues including civil aviation, maritime boundaries and the status of New Zealand military forces in the Cook Islands. Just last week, we signed yet another partnership agreement to co-operate on immigration matters.

Over the years, New Zealand has extended valuable and much appreciated development assistance that has reaped significant benefits. Cook Islanders have long migrated to New Zealand in search of employment opportunities and for other reasons. In doing so, they have made significant contributions to New Zealand's development in many areas. The recent New Zealand Government decision on pension portability will serve to promote our economy and strengthen familial linkages.

Beyond our bilateral relations, over the years the Cook Islands has joined a wide number of regional and international organisations in order to promote and protect our interests. The Cook Islands is a member of most Pacific regional organisations

¹ UNGA Resolution 1514 (XV)

and has joined as a full member the FAO, ICAO, UNESCO, WHO and other UN specialised agencies.

In light of its growing participation in international affairs, the United Nations recognised the full treaty-making capacity of the Cook Islands in 1992² and the Cook Islands today is party in its own right to well over a hundred multilateral disarmament, environmental, fisheries, human rights and other internationally binding treaties.

The Cook Islands has also concluded a large number of bilateral treaties with countries other than New Zealand, including with the People's Republic of China, France, Samoa and the United States on civil aviation, trade, maritime boundary delimitation, exchange of prisoners and other matters.

Over the years, the Cook Islands has established formal diplomatic relations with almost 50 other States not only in the Pacific but also in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

In sum, using the flexibilities inherent in the Constitution, the Cook Islands—often in consort with New Zealand—has over the decades taken steps at the domestic, bilateral and international levels to better enable it to achieve its national goals and objectives, often with considerable success. In effect, this has been Itikianga Tinamou Ora in practice – the Cook Islands taking measures to respond to evolving circumstances, with the support of New Zealand, to grow and flourish.

And that brings me to the Pacific today. It is appropriate at this time to express my Government's strong support for "shifting the dial" on the New Zealand Government's foreign policy with the Pacific Reset as recently enunciated by the Rt Hon Winston Peters.

New Zealand is not only located in the region but also has long and deep-rooted links and genuine affinities with its Pacific neighbours. Its renewed emphasis on strengthening its cooperation with the Cook Islands and other members of the Pacific family on the basis of a mature partnership of equals is welcomed.

The New Zealand re-set comes at a time of dynamic activity in the Pacific as major and minor powers engage in the region. The Pacific is turning into a contestable space and it can be argued that many Pacific nations "re-set" their Foreign Policy positions a number of years ago and perhaps New Zealand and Australia are only just now catching up.

Pacific nations have come a long way from the early days of independence of the 1960s through to the 1980s and are becoming more assertive in managing a maze of relationships with new partners. For instance, much has been made of the rise of China in the region.

China has been a partner of the Cook Islands since 1997. This is not a new relationship. We have been a long-time supporter of the One China Policy. We have partnered with China as their interests into the Pacific have grown and it's been a most mutually beneficial relationship.

² United Nations. Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs. Supplement No. 8. Vol 6. Article 102. Paragraph 11

From a Cook Islands perspective, the Pacific need not be a zero sum game. There is a time and place for many partners to address the challenging development needs of the region. The Cook Islands was one of the first countries in the world to enter into a tripartite development agreement with New Zealand and China. The project is Te Mato Vai and its purpose is to rehabilitate the water network in Rarotonga.

There have been challenges in bringing three partners together with different approaches to development but the core principle behind this relationship is....partnership. Working through these differences is critical to making this partnership work. Each partner is committed to success to show that the Pacific is a region of consensus rather than competition and that we can bring transformational initiatives to fruition collaboratively.

This is but a small example of Cook Islands innovation in supporting its development aspirations, within the provisions of its relationship of free association with New Zealand and a global power such as China. It is an approach we see great value in and will continue to explore with other partners.

For several years the Cook Islands' economy has enjoyed positive growth, led by a strong tourism sector.

As a consequence of the Cook Islands recent economic performance, the Government has been informed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that it might soon reach high income status. In other words, it would 'graduate' and thus become ineligible for ODA from OECD member countries.

While the Cook Islands, aspires to developed country status, premature graduation could have serious implications for the amount of overall resources available to meet our developmental challenges and fund our multifarious development initiatives.

Whether or not we graduate in 2019 or 2023, the Cook Islands realises the importance of continuing to make strong efforts to develop and diversify its economy. The reality of our existence is such that one cyclone could potentially destroy our tourism based economy and require years to rebuild – sadly, our friends in the Caribbean have experienced this first hand in recent years.

Through the lens of impending graduation, the Cook Islands will need to re-asses the nature of our international relationships. Very much like New Zealand's Pacific re-set, the Cook Islands will re-set our partnerships to move beyond a development focus to one of equality and mutual benefit.

What does this look like you may ask?

New Zealand remains our premier partner of choice and we will continue to work closely with them post-graduation. We will look for opportunities to build closer relations with key New Zealand Ministries to assist with technical expertise and training.

Internationally, we would like to share our experience and views on moving towards developed country status. To this end, we would look to continue expanding our diplomatic partners and membership of international organisations such as the IMF, the World Bank, UNESCAP and IRENA. I believe we have a great story to tell and we can contribute positively to the international debate on issues relating to the Pacific.

The Cook Islands shares similar international values with many of you in the room today. We are committed to upholding universal human rights and adhering to principles of the international rules based system that has carefully evolved over time and underpins global security.

Regionally, the Cook Islands remains fully engaged in the regional architecture and processes. The Pacific Leaders recently endorsed the "Blue Pacific" as a new narrative to frame our views as stewards of the Pacific Ocean Continent.

This approach to the Pacific coincides with my own long held view of the Cook Islands as a large ocean state and not a small island state. The Blue Pacific may be a new phrase for the region, but we have been practicing this approach in the Cook Islands for some years now.

The Marae Moana Marine protected area is how we in the Cook Islands put rhetoric into action. It covers our EEZ of close to 2 million square kilometres and was developed through close consultation with communities throughout our islands.

We take our ocean stewardship role seriously by balancing commercial interests against our conservation ambitions. The Marae Moana legislation provides the framework that produces evidence to make resourcing decisions on integrated management through sustaining fishery stocks, environmental impact assessments for seabed mining and adopting a precautionary approach to the marine environment.

Looking further ahead, the forces and potential of globalisation have intensified and, together with advances in telecommunications, power generation and other areas, there are greater opportunities for development than ever before. It is for our generation to take advantage of those opportunities to build the future.

And that is precisely what we in the Cook Islands are doing.

To take but one example, the next few years will see the Cook Islands strengthen its connection to the outside world through the Manatua submarine cable. Like the Rarotonga airport in 1974, the Manatua cable will have a catalytic effect on our economic growth.

The Manatua cable is being developed in partnership between the Cook Islands, Samoa, French Polynesia and Niue with some support from New Zealand. The cable will open new opportunities for the expansion and diversification of the Cook Islands and Polynesia private and public sectors.

Like New Zealand, the Cook Islands has an open economy and this has proved beneficial in many ways over the years. My Government was one of the first countries to sign the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER Plus) with New Zealand, Australia and other Pacific countries.

We in the Cook Islands see PACER Plus as providing a useful foundation for the expansion of our economy and opening new market opportunities for Cook Islands goods and services in future. Assistance available under the Agreement to strengthen our trade capacity and exploit those opportunities will also be fully explored. In the fullness of time, we see PACER Plus as having the potential that ANZCERTA has realised for New Zealand and Australia.

Today, the Cook Islands imports in the region of \$100 million of goods and services from New Zealand each year. That figure will no doubt continue to rise as our economy expands. We will continue to promote trade and investment linkages between our private sectors for our mutual benefit. Our investment policies and procedures are being reviewed to ensure that they are conducive to promoting mutually-advantageous initiatives whilst at the same time catering for our cultural and environmental vulnerabilities.

Wherever possible, an important focus of our efforts going forward will be on strengthening business, social and cultural relations with Maori iwi of Aotearoa based on the Kororomotu/ Kawenata between the Government of the Cook Islands and the Kiingitanga signed in 2015. That agreement formalised our mutual commitment to enter into a positive, co-operative and enduring relationship recognising our mutual interest in the cultural, social, environmental and economic health and well-being of the Maori of the Cook Islands and the Maori of New Zealand.

In drawing my remarks to a close, two areas of cooperation merit further attention. Climate Change poses an existential threat to the Cook Islands and many other low-lying Pacific Islands. This has prompted the Cook Islands to ambitiously pioneer a swift shift to renewable energy with the northern group islands fully converted in 2015 and much of the southern group to be completed over the coming months. But these transformative actions on their own are not enough. We therefore welcome New Zealand's strong commitment to address climate change issues and the Cook Islands will work closely with New Zealand in this area wherever possible.

And secondly, I have highlighted the positive potential of globalisation and changes in the international environment for our future development. At the same time, however, we must be constantly vigilant of the growing threats to international security resulting from terrorism, transnational crime, drug and human trafficking and other problems.

While we are fortunate in our insular region being relatively distant from many such threats to our security, we must never be complacent. It will be important to intensify cooperation in security and we will need to put in place protective measures to enable us to anticipate and—if necessary—respond to such threats. It is timely that the region is revitalising its regional security through a rejuvenated Biketawa Plus.

The Cook Islands looks forward to cooperating with New Zealand and other partners in this area at the bilateral, regional and international levels. This is a valuable instance of our itikianga tinamou ora, responding to changing events to protect our vital interests.

For over 100 years the Cook Islands and New Zealand have had a relationship that has today blossomed into a unique partnership. The flexibilities inherent in the free association as it has evolved have enabled the Cook Islands and New Zealand to pursue their own policies and interests at both the bilateral and international levels.

At the same time, the bonds between our two countries based on citizenship and shared values have endured and strengthened over time. That relationship puts us in an ideal position, like the itiki, to respond to an ever-changing environment and respond positively to the opportunities and challenges ahead.

Thank you for your attention. Kia Ora e Kia Manuia tatou katoatoa. End.