



## FIJIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE PACIFIC:

### CHARTING A NEW COURSE?

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*Amidst a changing geopolitical environment, issues of domestic politics, social concerns, as well as climate change related risks, the Pacific island nation of Fiji has set out on a path to reconcile its troubled past with ambitions of achieving regional leadership. The message seems clear: Suva will neither recede from seeking a leading role in the Pacific region nor will it be a pawn in a game of great power competition despite the growing economic pressure it faces.*

#### **Emboldened, Yet Fragile**

On October 10, 2020 the Pacific island nation of Fiji celebrated its 50th independence anniversary. In his address to the nation, Prime Minister Voreque Bainimarama called once again for “resilience and unity”, reaffirming that these have been the guiding principles for many since independence.<sup>1</sup> Standing out as the most developed nation among the Pacific Islands, Fiji’s ambitions to become a regional powerhouse are well known, yet are frequently undermined by its troubled past - characterized by four military coup d’états.<sup>2</sup>

Although continuously looked upon with suspicion by its Pacific neighbors for its persistent disregard for democratic principles as well as their human rights

violations, Fiji has since managed to recast itself as an aspiring leader wielding diplomatic influence. Despite creating the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF)<sup>3</sup> in 2013 as a regional counter architecture to the Australia and New Zealand spearheaded Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Suva still carries considerable political clout within the PIF. Its forthright discontent for the Pacific’s development agenda being dictated by the major donor countries primed the current Bainimarama government to step up and take the lead on the PIFs “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent”.<sup>4</sup> While the PIDF pushes for a distinctly regional development, its approach remains cautious as not to outright rebuff other cooperative mechanisms, such as the Belt and Road Initiative or the U.S.’ “Free and Open Indo Pacific” strategy. Instead, Fiji’s initiative appears to take aim

at ensuring that such cooperation unequivocally matches the Pacific Islands' development needs.

Additionally, the Bainimarama administration skillfully carved out Fiji's role as the region's main climate change advocate on the international stage. Besides taking uncompromising swipes at Canberra for failing to deliver on cutting its dependence on coal, Bainimarama was the leading Pacific voice at the COP23 climate change convention in Bonn in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Suva's recent nomination of Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, formerly a senior military official, for the post of Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum may raise eyebrows but underscores Fijian aspirations to shift focus to the Pacific region's climate change related challenges.<sup>6</sup>

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Nonetheless, these emboldened efforts to assume a leadership role are periodically hindered by Fiji's hybrid political system. Despite governmental efforts to stabilize the economy and stymie inter-ethnic tensions, a heavy-handed top-down approach largely guided by a strong military elite<sup>7</sup> leaves the country vulnerable to shocks and foreign interference.<sup>8</sup> Frequent attempts to silence critics and muzzle independent media expose the fragile domestic nature of Bainimarama's relative success in reclaiming Fiji's international reputation.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalizing on fractioned opposition parties has become another prominent tool to tighten the grip on Fijian politics. In early 2020, reshuffling within the concurrent leadership and the 60-day parliamentary suspension of Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) vividly mirrored such tactic. While allegedly due to breach of constitutional rules on party rules, SODELPA's adamant stance on

conspicuously scrutinizing foreign direct investment, especially from China, and introducing proper financial oversights mechanisms, are more likely to have caused the suspension.<sup>10</sup>

Against this backdrop, the devastation caused to Fiji's vital tourism industry by the Covid-19 pandemic may prove to be a litmus test for the island nation. Suva's firm push for a regional travel bubble with its Pacific neighbors, including Australia and New Zealand, may be regarded as an effort to salvage its regional political clout as its economy falters.<sup>11</sup> With little success in creating such a travel bubble, the government may be tempted to relieve the nation's economic distress by opening-up its borders to foreign tourists.

China's recent overtures to declare Fiji a safe travel destination may well cater to the island's economic needs;<sup>12</sup> however, it also serves as even greater leverage for Beijing in employing tourism as a diplomatic tool and thus expanding its influence-seeking campaigns in the region. Should Fiji opt to allow Chinese tourists into the country with reasonable economic success, it may entice other Pacific nations to follow suit. As uncertainty grows and domestic social problems mount, the need to boost the ailing economy will adversely affect Fiji's economic stride.

### **Upending Indifference**

In spite of Suva finding itself hard-pressed to resolve the catastrophic effects of Covid-19 on its vital tourism sector, the island nation appears to be back on the radar of key Pacific rim nations. Presumably due to the Bainimarama government's openly forthcoming relations with Beijing, other nations – including Australia and the United States – have resumed closer ties, whereas Taiwan, remained close to Fiji even throughout the turbulent post-2006 coup years. In addition to shifting foreign policy priorities among traditional Pacific rim states that now make Fiji a focal point, other countries have also intensified their outreach campaigns among Suva's political establishment, albeit with mixed results.

For the past 20 years, China has been ramping up its engagement policy with Fiji especially in aid commitments, although Beijing still lags behind traditional donor countries, such as Australia.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, Beijing scored a crucial milestone when the Bainimarama government signed onto the large-scale, yet controversial, Belt and Road Initiative, which promised to bring economic prosperity to the trade-dependent nation.<sup>14</sup> Fully aware of Fiji's leadership aspirations and ambiguous stance towards Australia and New Zealand, China seems to consider Fiji to be a potential supporter that could tilt its political weight in Beijing's favor in regional fora. Moreover, Fiji's location, situated beyond the second island chain, makes it an ideal fit for China's potential maritime ambitions.<sup>15</sup>

However, such tacit agreements are vehemently denied by both sides in public settings. Despite the fact that Chinese development aid to Fiji has been plagued by design flaws and time lags, it has been successful in targeting critical areas, from health care to low-income housing projects.<sup>16</sup> Such financial diplomacy tactics, however, have in many cases gone hand-in-hand with strategies aimed to undermine local ownership, as all Chinese projects are funneled through the Prime Minister's office.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Australia's growing sense of urgency to counteract pervasive Chinese influence in its own backyard has reached new heights as it seeks to swiftly realign with Fiji. Alongside its commitment to send more resources to Pacific Island development through its 2018 Pacific Step-Up strategy,<sup>18</sup> Canberra and Suva signed the "Vuvale Partnership" in 2019.<sup>19</sup> The agreement covers areas ranging from security cooperation, increased connectivity, trade, and people-to-people exchanges. Thus far, Australia has been swift in delivering on security aspects, including patrol boats<sup>20</sup> and the redevelopment of the bilateral Blackrock military training facility.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Australia unequivocal determination to place emphasis on geopolitical security as the main driver to reengage with Fiji comes with considerable risk. Besides disregarding Fijian priorities for national development and being overtly dismissive of Suva's

demands to address climate change, this attitude could potentially drive a wedge between the two in the coming years. This is especially apparent as Fiji does not appear to fully share Canberra's concerns over China undermining the established regional order.

## ***U.S. bilateral relations with Fiji mainly revolve around strategic consideration and ad hoc maneuvering rather than mutual trust.***

A similar trend is observable for Washington's re-engagement policy towards Suva. Although relations had already been improving after Fiji's elections in 2014, Washington appeared to lack interest in offering more than simple platitudes.<sup>22</sup> However, since the worsening of Sino-American relations this trend has gradually been reversed, with Washington now showing a stronger commitment for Fiji's national security.

Rapprochement with Suva is in line with the U.S' Indo-Pacific Strategy,<sup>23</sup> which seeks to preserve a rule and value-based order by effectively functioning as a regional counter mechanism to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. A key concern for the U.S. is the potential loss of access to vital maritime space as well as maintenance of safe distance between Beijing and U.S. military bases in the Pacific. Scrambling to reclaim a reputation as a necessary security link for Fiji, Washington sped through a security agreement which explicitly refers to naval capacity building and technical equipment donations, including patrol boats.<sup>24</sup> Although Washington has also increased its commitment to improve people's livelihoods through economic relief grants post Covid-19,<sup>25</sup> its bilateral relations with Fiji mainly revolve around strategic consideration and ad hoc maneuvering rather than mutual trust.

Meanwhile, Taiwan remains a committed, albeit unofficial, partner to Fiji as tensions with China over

diplomatic recognition heat up across the Pacific. Rather than shoring up support among the local population and political circles through large-scale infrastructure investments, Taiwan's Technical Mission has been successfully organizing small-scale farming workshops and offering agricultural machinery training.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Taipei's persistently swift responses to cyclone relief aid, and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic,<sup>27</sup> have ensured that trust and consistency remain the foundation for informal relations. Not even pressure exerted by Beijing to change the name of the "Taipei Mission to Fiji" to the "Taipei Trade Office" was able to permanently disrupt the informal communication channels.<sup>28</sup>

***Albeit unofficially, Fiji continues to maintain close unofficial ties with Taiwan, despite growing pressure from Beijing to cut ties indefinitely.***

The Pacific Islands have also attracted attention from countries that only recently started to show interest in the South Pacific region. Indonesia has stepped up its diplomatic ambitions by deepening existing relations through a proposed trade deal with both Papua New Guinea and Fiji.<sup>29</sup> For Fiji, access to Indonesia's economy provides an opportunity to diversify its trading partners and to upend its over-reliance on larger nations, including China and Australia. Additionally, India is reasserting itself as a key security partner for Fiji. Although both nations have always maintained close ties due to Fiji's large Indian community, Modi's "Act East" strategy is unequivocally pivoting Indian foreign policy to include the Pacific Islands as a vital maritime space to balance China's growing influence.<sup>30</sup> A meeting in late 2019 between Modi and Bainimarama merely confirmed that Indian ambitions hinge upon critical infrastructure investments to strengthen political

partnerships.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, Suva remains a vocal critic of India's large-scale use of coal, which does not appear to hamper relations per se.

A less overt player in the region, but nevertheless a prominent one, Russia's interest in deepening ties with Suva have sparked some concern. A 2016 arms deal between the two nations resulted in a domestic backlash as Fijian opposition politicians demanded transparency over the deal as well as Russia's intentions to equip the Fijian army.<sup>32</sup> Moscow's engagement policy could signal a return of Russia as a naval power, but much of its policy remains opaque as domestic issues appear to have redirected attention away from the Pacific Islands for now.

### **Influence, Priorities & A Way Forward**

Albeit being in a favorable position now that geopolitical tides have re-centered Fiji as a strategic hub in the Pacific region, it would be wrong to assume that Suva does not actively take part in the unfolding foreign policy game. Notwithstanding the inherent fragility of the political system and strong economic headwinds, policymaking in the Fijian capital is marked by confidence-inducing creativity and a drive to bridge the gap between domestic and international interests.

Upon the Australian government's decision to return Fiji to the fold after the country held its first free elections in 2014, Canberra has reclaimed its position as a trusted partner for the Bainimarama government. Not only is Australia a key trading partner for Fijian agricultural produce, it also provides a large share of remittances through its Pacific labor mobility program.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Fiji is slated to further benefit from Australia's Pacific Step-Up campaign initiated in 2016, particularly now that the Fijian economy is in distress. This, however, does not indicate that Fiji will concede on major issues, especially when it comes to raising Canberra's shortcomings in addressing climate change. While Prime Minister Bainimarama is fully aware that Fiji is back on Australia's foreign policy radar, his public rebuff of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison

in 2019 on failing to live up to the promise of cutting Australia's coal usage signaled that giving short shrift to Fiji's demands could become a liability for Canberra.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, Fiji's relationship with the U.S. remains ambiguous on all fronts. Although U.S. attempts to regain ground in Suva through medical donations and small business grants as the pandemic rages on, Fiji's Foreign Ministry announced that it was considering closing its embassy in Washington.<sup>35</sup> Supposedly due to financial constraints and shifting priorities, it does invite speculations that Suva perceives Washington's renewed interest in realigning both nations' foreign policies to merely mirror U.S. concerns over growing Chinese influence. The signing of a defense and security agreement in mid-August 2020 appeared to confirm just that, yet it also vividly marks Fiji's capability of putting sufficient pressure on the U.S. to remain committed as a security partner by threatening to close its diplomatic outpost in the American capital.

Albeit unofficially, Fiji continues to maintain close unofficial ties with Taiwan, despite growing pressure from Beijing to cut ties indefinitely. In 2017, Fiji closed its representative office in Taipei, yet the Fijian Foreign Ministry refused to issue a statement expounding the reasons for such move.<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact that Taiwan's representative office in Fiji was forced to change its name, the Bainimarama government has thus far remained committed to balancing informal ties against Beijing's demands for adherence to the "One China" principle. Although Taipei's contributions to agricultural development and the fisheries industry do not compare to other major donors, it nevertheless speaks volumes that Suva appreciates these niche inputs vis-à-vis grand development projects put forward by China.

Perhaps tellingly, Chinese infrastructure development projects have come under intense scrutiny from within Suva's political circles. In 2019, the Department of the Environment revoked an environmental impact assessment license given to a Chinese real estate company for failing to adhere to Fijian environmental protection laws.<sup>37</sup> Similarly,

Fijian authorities have up until now refused to issue landing licenses to Chinese airlines as it could expose Fiji's national carrier to financial risks.<sup>38</sup> Regardless of Beijing's expanding influence, those within Fiji's government have been wary not to overcommit and instead leverage the country's development needs, ranging from infrastructure projects to capacity building measures, with the costs of granting unhindered access to foreign powers. However, it remains to be seen whether Fiji can sustain this approach now that a flailing economy may threaten domestic stability.

Overall, even if Fiji is slated for immense economic uncertainty, it is unlikely that this will undo Fiji's aspirations to push ahead as a regional spearhead. If anything, recent months have shown that politics in Suva does not shy away from lamenting paternalistic behavior coming from its larger Pacific rim neighbors.

Building up a foreign policy regime that unequivocally places emphasis on Fijian national interests, allows the Bainimarama government to reap the benefits that a Pacific island pivoting among the major regional powers, including Australia, the U.S. as well as China, brings with it. Regardless of the difficulties that Suva will face, an intensifying geopolitical power game could prove to be a vital impetus for Suva to continue making demands on climate change and purposeful aid schemes whilst underscoring that such position would make it an ideal candidate to represent the Pacific region as whole. ■

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