

US moves to normalise relations with Fiji's junta

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The Obama administration has moved to establish closer relations with the military regime in Fiji, cutting across the Australian government's imposition of sanctions and attempts to enforce diplomatic isolation. Washington's intervention, driven by concerns over China's growing influence, has compounded the dilemmas confronting Australian foreign policy makers in the South Pacific.

The Fijian military, headed by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, ousted an elected government in December 2006 and formally abrogated the country's constitution in April 2009. Fearing these developments would trigger wider regional instability, as well as undermining Australian economic and strategic interests within Fiji, the Australian government imposed a series of sanctions. It imposed travel bans on junta members and their families, ceased regular contact with the Fijian government and armed forces, and pushed for Fiji's suspension from regional and multilateral bodies. The US followed Australia's lead, consistent with the established post-World War II arrangement whereby American imperialism delegated responsibility in the South Pacific to its junior ally.

In recent weeks, however, the US government has made a significant tactical shift—independently of Canberra. On September 27, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton included Fiji's foreign affairs minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola in an hour-long meeting in New York with senior Pacific leaders. Clinton reportedly told Kubuabola that the US wanted “dialogue and partnership with Fiji”.

Two days later, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell declared in a congressional subcommittee: “Our objective is to put Fiji back on track for reintegration into international institutions and for holding free and fair elections no later than 2014.”

Given that the military junta has already declared that it would allow a national vote to be held in 2014, Campbell's statement amounted to an endorsement of the regime's timetable. Washington is now at odds with Canberra on this question, as the Australian government has never agreed to the

junta's proposal for elections in 2014.

At the same congressional hearing, Democratic Party Congressman Eni Faleomavaega from American Samoa condemned Canberra's role. “Clearly, the Australian and New Zealand policy of sanctions and isolating and punishing Fiji has not only failed but totally been counterproductive,” he stated. “For too long we effectively outsourced our policymaking toward the Pacific Islands to Australia and New Zealand. Unfortunately, the sometimes imperious attitudes and actions of our friends in Canberra and Wellington toward the Pacific Islands have fostered a degree of resentment and distrust that has limited their influence as well as their ability to represent US views and interests... By deferring to the foreign ministries of Canberra and Wellington, we left a vacuum in the Pacific that China has been only too eager to fill.”

Faleomavaega, who has made similar criticisms before, elaborated on growing Chinese aid and investment in Fiji. His call for Washington to assert its own position on Fiji and other regional matters now appears to have received a favourable hearing in the State Department, though Kurt Campbell stressed that the Obama administration would continue to “closely coordinate” with “regional players”.

On October 7, President Obama issued a personal statement marking the 40th anniversary of Fijian independence. “The people of our nations enjoy a friendship founded on the mutual commitments of our societies to peace, freedom, rule of law, and democratic ideals,” he declared. “I am confident that we will build ever closer ties between our countries in the years to come.”

This message was delivered six days after the Fijian regime arrested former Prime Minister and current Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, on spurious charges of breaking an emergency decree by convening a meeting of sugar farmers. The US government has issued no comment on the case.

Washington recently re-established its USAID agency in Fiji, after an absence of 15 years. This will operate out of the US

embassy and will administer aid through the Pacific. Washington is building a new embassy, accredited to also cover Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru.

The Obama administration's differentiation from Australia's "hardline" stance on Fiji is driven by one central factor—China. The Australian government's approach has failed to produce any results, with the junta openly defying Canberra's diktats. The Fijian military has consciously utilised the rising Asian power as a counterweight to the pressure of Australian imperialism.

In August, self-appointed prime minister Commodore Frank Bainimarama visited China. Attending the World Expo in Shanghai, he declared: "We need infrastructure, we need water, we need electricity. Australia and New Zealand and America—none of those nations are going to provide that. We know that now because of their policies towards us; so let's forget about these nations."

China has provided significant aid, including for high-profile infrastructure projects. Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping met with Fijian Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola earlier this month. Xi reportedly declared that "each country must be allowed to determine for themselves their own path to political, social and economic developments without bullying and unwarranted pressure from outsiders".

Kubuabola also met with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi and agreed to closer ties between the two countries. Yang offered to have senior Fijian civil servants trained at the China Executive Leadership Academy in Shanghai. The two men discussed including the Chinese currency as one of Fiji's basket of trading currencies. "This initiative will assist tremendously in facilitating Fiji's trade with China and is part of Fiji's 'look north' policy," the Fijian foreign minister said.

Most worryingly for Washington, military relations are becoming closer. Last month, *Fiji's* President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau led a *delegation to China* and visited the offices and factory of the China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), which produces high-tech defence products. The Fijian military has previously sourced its weaponry from America and Britain. For US strategists, the spectre of Fiji becoming a military outpost for China—providing ports for its expanding navy for instance—is a nightmare scenario. An essential component of US military strategy is to retain naval supremacy in the Pacific.

Despite the apparent shift in Washington, the Australian government is maintaining, at least for now, its stance toward Fiji.

Earlier this month, Australian Parliamentary Secretary for

Pacific Island Affairs Richard Marles toured six Pacific countries, but excluded Fiji. Speaking to Radio New Zealand International on October 11, Marles was asked about the Obama administration's support for the Fijian military's 2014 election schedule. "I think that we don't accept what's been put forward by the Fiji regime," he replied, without directly referring to Washington.

Sections of the Australian foreign policy establishment, however, are becoming increasingly alarmed about the situation and are urging the Gillard government to drop the pretence of concern for democracy in Fiji and patch up relations with the junta.

Professor Richard Herr and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Anthony Bergin published an opinion piece in the *Australian* on October 12, titled "Let's not drive Fiji further into China's open arms". It noted that during Fiji's 40th anniversary ceremonies in the capital Suva, Australia's high commissioner was missing, as he had previously been expelled from the country. China was the only state listed as an official sponsor of the ceremony and its embassy's logo was printed on the commemorative programs.

The entire planet is making some adjustment to China's emergence as a rising global power," Herr and Bergin wrote. "But Australia's four-year attempt to isolate and penalise the government of Bainimarama has pushed Fiji more quickly and fully into Beijing's arms. Arms has a double meaning here; Fiji's President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau has just returned from a state visit to China, where he visited a major arms manufacturing plant. The military sanctions imposed on Fiji by its traditional friends (Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the US) have left Fiji's military with few options for resupply or modernisation.

Pressure on Canberra to shift course is also coming from Washington's chief ally in the Asia-Pacific region—Japan. The *Australian* reported yesterday that Tokyo was considering inviting Bainimarama to its PALM 6 (Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting) meeting in 2012. A foreign affairs ministry official told the newspaper that Japan was considering changing tack because the current policy showed little progress and Fiji had drifted into the arms of China. Fijian Foreign Minister Kubuabola took part in an interim PALM meeting in Tokyo on Saturday.



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