WikiLeaks cables reveal Chinese vice president's secret visit to Fiji, in defiance of Australia

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Recently published WikiLeaks diplomatic cables originating from the US embassy in Beijing have revealed that in February 2009 the Chinese government attempted to secretly dispatch Vice President Xi Jinping to Fiji to deepen ties with the military regime. The incident points to growing rivalry between China and American allies, Australia and New Zealand, in the region.

Beijing initially concealed Xi's trip from Australia and New Zealand. Chinese authorities were finally forced to admit the flight to Fiji when they applied to pass through Australian and New Zealand airspace, but they then claimed that the landing in the South Pacific nation was a mere "transit" stopover, en route to Latin America. However, over two days, on February 8 and 9, Xi met with senior junta members and announced major new aid and investment projects. This prompted the Australia and New Zealand prime ministers to issue formal protests.

A cable sent by Deputy Chief of Mission in the Beijing embassy, Dan Piccuta, on February 13, 2009, described the Australian and New Zealand response to Xi's trip. The document, headed "Australia and New Zealand Demarche PRC [People's Republic of China] on Fiji Visit", was sent as a "priority" to the State Department in Washington and US embassies in Canberra, Wellington, and Suva.

The cable cited Australian embassy political officer Gedaliah Afterman—identified as a "protected" source—who "said that the Chinese sought to obscure plans for Xi's stop in Fiji by omitting the onward destination of Xi's aircraft in the Chinese Government's application to the New Zealand Government to transit New Zealand airspace". Afterman also explained that Canberra "were alerted to Xi's plans shortly before the visit when Chinese officials applied for visas to transit Australia on their way to Suva."

Once alerted, Australian and New Zealand ambassadors immediately issued formal protests to the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs, declaring that Xi's trip would "set back international efforts to persuade the leadership in Fiji, who came to power after a coup in 2006, to reform." The Australian ambassador complained that "it seemed that China was using the opportunity to deepen ties with the country just when other countries were pulling back."

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei then assured the Australian diplomat that Xi's visit to Fiji would only be a "transit stopover" en route to Latin America. The US cable explained: "As it turned out, however, China signed several development assistance deals in Fiji during the visit, and Xi met with President Iloilo and Prime Minister Bainimarama."

The Chinese government was fully aware that Xi's visit would cut directly across the Australian government's efforts to isolate Fiji. Australian embassy official Robert Fergusson—another "protected" US source—told American diplomatic officials that "the PRC would have known the Xi visit and its results would be contrary to the hard-won Pacific [Islands] Forum consensus."

Fergusson added that he was awaiting instructions from Canberra for issuing further protests "about the Fiji visit and its more-than-just-a-transit substance".

Another US Beijing embassy cable makes clear that the issue was actively pursued by the Australian and New Zealand governments. Dated June 19, 2009, and headed "PRC/South Pacific: International Isolation of Regime in Fiji an Opportunity for China", the cable referred to multiple "interventions by Australian and New Zealand officials, including at the Prime Minister-level."

Describing a discussion with New Zealand embassy political officer Tara Morton, the cable explained that "the value of the deals signed in the transit [Xi's visit] was 'massive' and potentially very destructive given the poor capacity of small South Pacific nations to repay large loans."

The significance of the vice presidential stopover was

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confirmed by Beijing-based Fijian embassy official Filipe Alifereti, another "protected" source, who told his US counterparts that "a new package of Chinese economic assistance to Fiji announced earlier this year arrived just as Western sanctions were proving problematic, and so had a political effect."

Under the subhead, "China Economic Activity Just in Time to Counter Sanctions", the June 19 cable continued: "Alifereti applauded the 'good timing' of the soft loans announced during Xi's stop-over... Alifereti explained that Chinese cash was flowing in just as traditional sources of income were drying up. A recent drop in remittances from Fijian troops serving in UN peace-keeping operations occurred at the same time that Chinese tourism to the island was growing quickly due in part to a new China-Fiji air service agreement and a relaxation of Fijian visa regulations for Chinese visitors. Alifereti also noted that Chinese goods, which used to come through Australia and New Zealand at a heavy premium, had been flowing directly to Fiji thanks to direct shipping routes opened in February 2008."

The US cable reported that, according to a New Zealand official, the Chinese appeared to have been "shamed" by the Xi Jinping trip and subsequent protests. Beijing "understood the political risks of being seen as undermining Western sanctions", and had "taken steps at damage control with Australia and New Zealand." This apparently included assurances that "such lack of coordination on regional issues would not happen again."

Since 2009, however, the Chinese government's relationship with the Fijian junta has become even closer. Further aid and investment deals have been signed, and there are now close ties between both countries' armed forces. The situation underscores the decline of Australia's hegemony in the South Pacific—where ever since 1945 it has been subcontracted by US imperialism to maintain control and shut out rival powers—and the rapid rise of Chinese regional influence.

Australian and New Zealand posturing against the Fijian junta has nothing to do with defending democratic rights in the South Pacific—instead they feared the 2006 military coup would spread instability and erode their regional dominance. China responded by stepping up relations under the guise of "non-interference" in other nations' internal affairs.

The June 2009 US cable discussed some of the economic and strategic calculations behind the great power rivalries with Fiji.

Zhou Jian, deputy director of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs American and Oceanian Affairs Division, told US officials that Beijing "did not seek to establish a 'sphere of influence' in the South Pacific or undermine third countries' interests there."

However, under the subhead, "China Sees Strategic and Economic Importance in Fiji", the cable described a discussion with Fijian embassy official Filipe Alifereti. He reported that "China viewed Fiji as an important partner, noting that China valued Fiji as a useful transit point and for its proximity to important shipping lanes." Alifereti also observed: "there was little need for the Chinese to push directly for political support from Fiji on issues of Chinese interest, because such support was 'guaranteed' ... such political support was a simple consequence of the enormous economic influence China had on the island".

The 2009 cables shed further light on the Obama administration's decision last September to break with the Australian government's "hardline" stance on Fiji and move to normalise relations with the regime. (See "US moves to normalise relations with Fiji's junta")

The audacious character of the Chinese Vice President's trip to Fiji, and the Chinese government's disregard for Canberra's regional prerogatives, would have fed into concerns in Washington that Australia's attempt to shun the junta was allowing Beijing to gain geo-strategic ground at US expense.

The Gillard government is now isolated in its determination to forcibly bring down the military government. Like the US, Fiji's South Pacific neighbours have demanded diplomatic re-engagement, while the New Zealand government has hinted it will soon soften its stance. Within Australia, the Liberal-National opposition has called on the government to drop the pretence of defending democracy in Fiji, as have key foreign policy think-tanks, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Lowy Institute.

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