

# Chinese and Indian leaders hold competing visits to Fiji

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Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first official visit to the Pacific island nation of Fiji last weekend, arriving just two days after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the first trip by an Indian leader since 1981. Both leaders also held talks in Suva with leaders from other Pacific countries, including Tonga, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Micronesia, the Cook Islands and Niue.

Modi unveiled a \$75 million line of credit for Fiji's sugar industry (the country's largest export industry) and said India would "expand our defence and security cooperation [with Fiji], including assistance in defence training and capacity building." Modi announced that he would convene an inaugural forum of Pacific countries in India next year.

Xi signed five memoranda of understanding with the Fijian government, including one that pledged to strengthen military ties. He announced \$11.4 million in aid, on top of a \$13.06 million grant in August.

The visits took place amid escalating tensions between India and China, fuelled by the Obama administration's strategic "pivot" to Asia—aimed at isolating and militarily encircling China and securing US dominance over the Asia-Pacific region.

Modi and Xi headed to Fiji after attending the G20 summit in Australia, where President Barack Obama boasted about the military ties Washington has strengthened with Asia-Pacific countries, including India, Japan, the Philippines and Australia. Obama made thinly veiled threats of aggression against China should it fail "to adhere to the same rules as other nations"—rules set by Washington—in resolving territorial disputes with its neighbours.

As part of this imperialist strategy, the US ruling elite and its allies are taking steps to counter Beijing's growing influence in the Pacific, which Washington

has long regarded as an "American lake." Obama declared that the US was "a Pacific power" and that "no-one should ever question our resolve or our commitment to our allies" in the region.

After Fiji's military leader-turned prime minister Voreqe Bainimarama seized power in a coup in 2006, his regime adopted a "look north" policy aimed at strengthening economic ties with China. Over the past eight years, Beijing has provided \$330 million in aid to the country, according to *Bloomberg*. China was Fiji's fifth largest trading partner last year, compared with eighth largest before the 2006 coup.

Washington became increasingly alarmed by the "look north" policy, which was provoked by sanctions imposed by Australia and New Zealand, the regional imperialist powers and main US allies in the Pacific. In 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met with Fijian Foreign Affairs Minister Inoke Kubuabola, signalling an end to Australian-led efforts to force the military regime into submission by isolating it.

China's investment and influence throughout the region—Beijing has also provided substantial loans and aid to other Pacific countries, including Tonga and Samoa—continues to fuel concern in US ruling circles. Commenting on Xi's trip, which included visits to Australia and New Zealand, the *New York Times* said he left a "trail of money" and gave speeches reassuring Pacific countries that China was "worthy of consideration not only as an economic partner, but a strategic one, too."

In a speech welcoming Xi, Bainimarama thanked Beijing for its largesse and implicitly criticised Australia and New Zealand. "China has been a true friend to Fiji," he declared. "China never tried to interfere in our internal affairs or tell us what was best for us as a nation. Instead China was there in our time

of need, when others in the region had turned their backs on us.”

Washington, Canberra and Wellington are scrambling to restore ties with Suva, in a concerted effort to undercut China’s influence. Following the September 17 election, won by Bainimarama’s FijiFirst Party, all three governments hailed Fiji’s supposed return to “democracy.” In fact, the poll was carried out under conditions of press censorship, severe restrictions on opposition political parties, and military intimidation. The coup-makers remain firmly in control of the country, with seven ex-military cabinet members (see: “Australia, US back sham election staged by Fiji military regime”).

Even before the election, Australia and the US began courting Bainimarama’s dictatorship and easing sanctions. Since the poll, Fiji has been re-admitted to the British-led Commonwealth, while the World Bank and Asian Development Bank plan to increase their engagement in the country.

Modi’s visit was part of this coordinated strategy to re-engage Fiji and whitewash the Bainimarama regime. Speaking to the Fijian parliament, Modi heaped praise on the country’s election, declaring that “what unites us today is our democracy, the diversity of our societies, our creed that all human beings are equal, and our commitment to the liberty, dignity and rights of every individual.” These words are all the more ludicrous coming from Modi, a right-wing Hindu supremacist who played a central role in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom against Muslims, which killed as many as 2,000 people.

Balaji Chandramohan, an analyst for the Australian think tank Future Directions International and a member of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, explained the purpose of Modi’s visit in an interview with Radio New Zealand International on November 11. He declared that New Delhi “feels threatened by China’s expanding presence in this Indo-Pacific region” and intends to use Fiji, which has a large ethnic Indian population, as a “springboard” to extend its “naval presence” into the Pacific.

India is rapidly enlarging its navy to counter China in the Indian Ocean and, as part of its “Look East” policy, has sent warships to the South China Sea. Any Indian naval expansion into the South West Pacific, using the ethnic Indian population in Fiji as the pretext, would

further raise tensions with Beijing.

China has no military assets in the Pacific outside the Chinese mainland, while the US has bases in Guam, the Marshall Islands and Hawaii, as well as in Japan and South Korea. It also has basing arrangements with Australia and the Philippines. American, Australian and New Zealand naval and coast guard vessels patrol the ocean constantly.

However, Washington and its allies are determined to pre-empt any possibility of China establishing a base in Fiji or any other Pacific country. An editorial in the *Australian* on Monday warned Bainimarama not to “regard the new Chinese thrust into the South Pacific as an opportunity to hit out at Australia over sanctions.” The newspaper said ties with Australia were “crucial to the South Pacific’s economic and strategic interests.”

In an op-ed for the newspaper, Anthony Bergin and Lisa Sharland from the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute lamented: “The affection that had built up over the years between Australian officers and Fiji’s military has been lost.” They called for Canberra to help finance a “regional peacekeeping training centre” in Fiji as a “fresh initiative” to “advance security co-operation” and “address threats to regional and global security.” The article added that this was particularly important following Xi’s pledge to increase military ties.



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