

Fiji orders second arms consignment from Russia

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A consignment of Russian weapons was presented to the Fiji government at an official ceremony in Suva on February 16 by the Russian Ambassador Vladimir Morozov and armed forces' Missile Artillery group head, Lieutenant General Nikolay Parshin.

Morozov, who is based in Australia, said Russia sees Fiji as a "leading partner in the South Pacific," while Parshin declared that Moscow was looking to "strengthen its relationship" with its Fijian counterparts.

A 10-member team from the Russian Armed Forces arrived in Suva last week to begin training Fijian instructors in the use of the weapons. Fiji has already initiated negotiations for a second consignment of arms and ammunition.

The gifted weapons arrived on January 14 aboard two Russian container ships. According to the *Fiji Times*, the equipment included grenade launchers, grenade simulators and maintenance equipment. The manifest for the 27 sealed containers has not been revealed. It is rumoured to also include heavy weaponry, as well as new generation Kalashnikov assault rifles. Fiji's parliament was told the shipment is valued at \$US8.8 million.

A memorandum, including protocols on military technical cooperation, was first signed in 2013 during an official visit to Moscow by Fiji's prime minister and former military coup leader Frank Bainimarama. It was the first state visit by a Fijian leader, and followed a trip by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Fiji in February 2012.

Fiji Defence Minister Timoci Natuva said the weapons would be deployed to Fiji's 1,000-strong "peacekeeping" forces in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Fijian participation in peacekeeping missions was being recognised by "bigger countries" and when Fiji asked

for arms and ammunition, Russia provided a grant, he said.

Opposition spokesmen have charged that the arms could be used to suppress domestic opposition to the increasingly autocratic regime.

The response by the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand has, at least publicly, been muted. New Zealand Prime Minister John Key said what Fiji and Russia "do with each other is up to them, as long as it's lawful."

Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper was more revealing. A February 18 editorial bluntly declared that Bainimarama was "making a bad mistake" if he believed that the consignment was "a good idea for his nation." The editorial listed the purported crimes of Russian President Putin—from the annexation of Crimea to the "bombing of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Aleppo."

The editorial concluded with a direct warning that Bainimarama could not afford to consider himself "far removed" from these events, particularly as the Obama administration had proved incapable of dealing with "the Kremlin's Soviet-style aggression."

Such belligerent posturing, which raises the prospect of an Australian-led operation against Fiji, turns reality on its head. The widening involvement of Russia and China in the Pacific is in response to the Obama administration's military and economic "pivot" to Asia.

In preparation for war, US imperialism, assisted by its allies Australia and New Zealand, is seeking to ensure its dominance in the South West Pacific and to counter the growing influence of China. This has heightened tensions throughout the region. Russia simultaneously faces the intensifying threat by the US to isolate and subjugate it from Europe in the west.

Over the past decade, Fiji has developed closer relations with China, Russia and India as part of its “Look North” policy, in reaction to sanctions applied by Australia, New Zealand and the US following Bainimarama’s December 2006 military coup. While professing concern for democracy, the imperialist powers were worried that Bainimarama’s junta could lessen their sway over the former British colony.

Australia and New Zealand, beginning in 2007, attempted to cut Fiji out of the UN’s peacekeeping operations, which generate significant income for its economy. This alienated the Fijian regime and strengthened its diplomatic and military connections with both China and Russia. In 2010, in an unsuccessful effort to stem the growth of Chinese influence, Washington pressured Australia and New Zealand to drop the sanctions.

Fiji’s relations with Russia have been bolstered through closer diplomatic ties and Russian military delegations visiting Fiji. Fijian military officers have received training in Russia and China. China is already heavily involved in Fiji, building infrastructure, sending visiting naval ships and stationing a satellite tracking ship in Suva.

In March 2014, Fiji was one of 58 nations that abstained on the UN vote condemn Russia’s annexation of Crimea.

In an exchange of greetings marking 40 years of diplomatic relations between the countries in July 2014, Fijian Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola declared that Russia was emerging as “one of Fiji’s significant partners in its pursuance of its Look North policy.” Lavrov declared that “deepening interaction with the island nations of the South Pacific is an integral part of the Russian agenda in the region.”

Russia first announced its intentions to restore its Pacific maritime power in 2013. Russia and China held their largest ever combined naval drill, the Joint Sea/Naval Interaction 2013, followed by another major military exercise in Russia’s east. Following the drills, Rear Admiral Sergei Avakyants, Commander of Russia’s Pacific Fleet, disclosed that, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia would send new warships to the Far East, including nuclear submarines.

In 2015, the first of four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines joined the Russian Pacific Fleet.

Navy Commander-in-Chief Viktor Chirkov stated that the deployment of Russian ballistic and multipurpose nuclear submarines on operational duty in the Pacific Ocean had increased almost 50 percent over the previous year.

Expressing concerns in Australian strategic circles, an article last month by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute declared: “Not surprisingly, analysts are speculating that the next logical step to Russia’s increased submarine activity in the Pacific is a submarine fleet support base in the South Pacific.” The article was headlined “Russia ships arms to Fiji: What will be the quid pro quo?”

Moscow has no progressive answer to Washington’s provocations and threats of war. The Putin regime represents the interests of the super-wealthy, criminal oligopoly that emerged through the processes of capitalist restoration following the collapse of the USSR. Its military build-up in the Pacific only compounds the danger of conflict.

Russia’s increasing military involvement will not be welcome in Washington, Canberra or Wellington. While expanding its own military might across the Pacific, the US is pressuring governments throughout the region, no matter how small, to fall into line with its strategic agenda. The United States, in league with Australian and New Zealand, will not hesitate to use all means at its disposal to ensure Fiji does not become a Chinese or Russia base of operations.



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