

New Zealand foreign minister visits Fiji to strengthen military ties

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6 March 2019

Winston Peters, foreign affairs minister in New Zealand's Labour Party-led government, used a two-day visit to Fiji late last month to announce measures to bolster Fiji's military and "take the Fiji-New Zealand relationship to a new level."

Following a meeting in Suva, Peters and his Fijian counterpart, Inia Seruiratu, released a statement outlining their joint commitment to "reinvigorated relations." New Zealand will provide Fiji's military with a "package of support" for "peacekeeping," leadership development and border security to "combat transnational organised crime."

According to NZ's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the support will include updating Fiji's military law, pre-deployment training for Fijian soldiers heading to the Middle East, leadership development and Fijian involvement in military exercises with the NZ Defence Force. There will also be a focus on building an "enhanced partnership" between the NZ Police and the Fiji Police Force. NZ Police Commissioner Mike Bush will visit Fiji in the coming months.

The Fiji government, led by former army commander and coup leader Frank Bainimarama, rests directly on the military. Successive regimes have all been authoritarian and anti-working class. The imposition of inequality and social misery—28 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line—has been accompanied by the intimidation of opposition parties, repressive laws and the use of violence by the police and military.

The Fijian military and police are notorious for brutality. A 2016 Amnesty International report indicted the country's security forces, including the police, corrections and military officers, for repeated violations of international law, including beatings, rape, sexual violence, attacks by police dogs and murder.

Peters' Fiji stopover was part of a tour of the region that included Tuvalu and Kiribati. Peters is also deputy prime minister and leader of the populist anti-Asian New Zealand First Party. He has led the coalition government's "Pacific Reset" strategy, aimed at boosting Wellington's presence in the Pacific through stepped-up diplomatic, aid and military measures aimed against Beijing.

Soon after taking office, the NZ government undertook a high-level tour of the Pacific in March 2018, led by Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, accompanied by Peters and Green Party leader James Shaw. The visit to Samoa, Tonga, Niue and the Cook Islands was intended to strengthen New Zealand imperialism's presence in the South West Pacific as part of the escalating US-led confrontation with China.

To implement the Pacific Reset, the foreign ministry received a substantial funding boost in the 2018 budget, to nearly \$NZ1 billion. Another \$NZ2.3 billion was earmarked for new anti-submarine aircraft to upgrade the NZ military's "inter-operability" with US and allied forces.

New Zealand and Australia regard Fiji as critical to their hegemony over the Pacific, which they regard as their own "backyard," and are increasingly concerned about China's growing diplomatic and economic presence.

NZ has aligned itself with the Trump administration's aggressive moves against China and preparations for war. Last December, Peters delivered a speech at Georgetown University calling for a stronger US-NZ alliance in the Pacific. He declared that the South West Pacific was "becoming more contested and its security... ever more fragile." He called on the US "to engage more" in the region, adding, "we think it is in your vital interests to do so, and time is of the

essence.”

Fiji, the largest South Pacific island state, is regarded by Canberra and Wellington as spearheading a thrust by Beijing and Russia into the South West Pacific. China has overtaken Australia as the biggest source of aid to Fiji, and will soon surpass Canberra’s aid to Samoa and Tonga. In February 2016, a consignment of Russian weapons was presented to the Fiji government, accompanied by a team of instructors from the Russian Armed Forces. Russian ambassador Vladimir Morozov declared Fiji was Moscow’s “leading partner in the South Pacific.”

Seruiratu welcomed New Zealand’s increased presence in the Pacific. New Zealand will establish two new positions in the High Commission in Suva to “boost the heightened engagements anticipated as a result of these renewed relations.” The ministers also agreed to hold more regular talks, committing to “joint ministerial consultations” and regular “multi-agency officials’ level talks.”

New Zealand also sought more Fijian workers for the Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme which allows horticulture and viticulture employers to recruit overseas workers for seasonal work. It is highly restricted, poorly paid and exploitative. Pacific Island workers stay in New Zealand for up to seven months before being returned home. Of the 99,903 workers who have been admitted since 2008, 1,061 have been from Fiji. Meanwhile, the number of Fijians given regular work visas has fallen from nearly 10,000 in 2008–9 to 3,000 last year.

Australia and New Zealand initially imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions on Fiji following the 2006 coup. The two regional powers were driven by concerns that the regime could destabilise the Pacific and open the way for Beijing. The sanctions backfired, however. Bainimarama countered with a “Look North” policy, receiving economic, diplomatic and military aid from China, Russia and elsewhere. He also encouraged other Pacific island states to take a more “independent” path.

Peters has previously criticised Fiji and in 2014 accused New Zealand’s then National Party government of lifting sanctions too soon in a bid to restore relations. However, Peters said last week the Fiji elections in that year and in 2018 had allayed his concerns. “The past is the past. We have made no

bones about congratulating Fiji on the two successful elections in 2014 and 2018. We have to put the past behind us because the challenges and demands that face us, scream out for attention now,” he declared.

In fact, both elections were completely fraudulent, only serving to legitimise and entrench Bainimarama’s regime. The 2018 election was a contest between two parties run by former coup leaders and military strongmen, Bainimarama and Sitiveni Rabuka. The US, Australia and New Zealand supported a series of coups in Fiji as long as the resulting regime lined up with their imperialist interests. Since 2014, they have sought to re-forge ties with Fiji in order to undercut China’s influence.

Meanwhile, the imperialist powers are increasingly concerned about the rising class struggles in the Pacific, including strikes and protests in Papua New Guinea, Fiji and French Polynesia. Since 2013, large-scale biennial military exercises in New Zealand, called Operation Southern Katipo, have been explicitly designed to prepare for interventions to restore “order” in Pacific nations. The exercises will now undoubtedly involve the Fijian military.

Peters’ visit to Fiji underscores the fact that the Ardern-led government, despite its “progressive” rhetoric, is a right-wing coalition, brought to power to suppress workers’ struggles and to consolidate its neo-colonial interests in the Asia-Pacific, in alliance with US imperialism and the Trump administration’s drive to war.



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