Fiji PM Rabuka visits China to re-set relations

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Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka concluded a 10-day visit to China last week, expressing high praise for China's "great progress" under President Xi Jingping.

Rabuka met with Xi and Premier Li Qiang, reaffirming support for the one-China policy, acknowledging that Taiwan is an "inalienable part of China's territory." The leaders emphasised the "great progress made in bilateral relations" since the establishment of diplomatic ties 49 years ago, when Fiji was the first Pacific country to do so.

The 17-point joint statement declared the two governments will "continue to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership." Xi gave his backing to Rabuka's proposal for a "zone of peace" in the Pacific, which Rabuka is promoting as a means to make the region "conflict free."

In fact, the entire region has become a geo-strategic cauldron, with tiny Pacific states caught in a precarious balancing act between the US and China amid the escalating drive to war by Washington and its allies, aimed directly against Beijing.

Beijing is seeking to strengthen its ties with Pacific countries to counter the escalating US-led confrontation. Last month Jeremiah Manele and Charlot Salwai, the prime ministers of Solomon Islands and Vanuatu visited China. The two met with Xi before signing agreements covering infrastructure development and, in the case of the Solomon Islands, $US20 million in "budgetary support."

Commenting on Rabuka's visit, the *Global Times*, part of China's state media, wrote that while cooperation with China had brought "tangible benefits to South Pacific island countries and their peoples," they were "facing mounting pressure from some former colonial powers such as the US and Australia."

Following his meeting with Xi, Rabuka declared that only Beijing stood by the country when its "traditional partners"—namely Australia and New Zealand, who had imposed sanctions—"turned away" after the 1987, 2000 and 2006 military coups. The role played by Canberra and Wellington in Fiji's isolation clearly still rankles.

Rabuka carried out two coups in 1987. Following the 2006 coup led by Frank Bainimarama, the diplomatic and economic sanctions backfired when Bainimarama turned to Beijing and Russia for financial assistance and military connections. The US finally intervened to force the restoration of ties in the wake of Fiji's bogus 2014 "democratic" elections.

The China-Fiji statement made no mention of direct financial aid or grants by Beijing. They agreed, however, to "strengthen interaction at all levels and in various areas, expand exchange between their respective legislatures, government agencies, municipalities and localities, carry out experience sharing on governance and development, and further deepen political mutual trust."

The statement noted Fiji's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative and listed intended cooperation infrastructure, trade and investment, e-commerce, civil aviation, agriculture and fisheries, educational facilities, and green and low-carbon development. It committed to increase Fiji exports to China and encourage Chinese investments in Fiji's tourism sector.

Rabuka spent the first week of his tour inspecting rural facilities and projects centering on agriculture, aquaculture, and community development. He told the media: "Agriculture is a vital part of our fight against poverty," adding: "Fiji has much to learn from [China's] success." Fiji has some 300,000 people—30 percent of the population—living in poverty.

Behind the diplomatic niceties, the trip was clearly an attempt by both sides to reset their affairs. After Rabuka took office in early 2023, there was a distinct cooling of the relationship. On policing and security issues, Rabuka insisted he preferred dealing with Fiji's "traditional partners," promising to tear up a 2011 police co-operation

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agreement with Beijing.

Rabuka has since upheld the policing agreement, which sees Fijian officers being trained in China while Beijing provides equipment such as surveillance gear and drones. But Chinese police will no longer be deployed inside Fiji.

Rabuka further angered China by allowing the Taiwanese embassy to revert to using that title instead of the designation "Chinese-Taiwan Trade Office" maintained under his predecessor, Bainimarama. Rabuka has since backtracked on this decision.

China accused Australia of sabotaging its ties with Fiji. Special Envoy to the Pacific, Qian Bo, told the *Samoa Observer* he was "surprised" by Fiji's actions, blaming "other parties" who had "interrupted" the relationship. "We have some patience, but there is a bottom line for us that sees that we meet the core concerns of China," he said.

Visiting New Zealand in June 2023, Rabuka said he was "readjusting" relations away from China and announced a Status of Forces Agreement for the two countries' militaries "to effectively cooperate within each other's territories." A month later, Fiji reopened its vacant diplomatic post in Washington with the appointment of a new ambassador.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) in April, Rabuka said while bilateral ties had improved after an "uncomfortable period" he remained concerned that Beijing's growing presence could "undermine democratic systems in the Pacific." The charge echoes US accusations that China engages in "debt-trap" diplomacy, using concessionary loans to tie Pacific governments into long-term dependency.

These governments, however, claim that Beijing's assistance comes with fewer "strings" attached. Rabuka admitted that Beijing's investments in facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games in the Solomon Islands had "turned heads" in the region. "We all want that sort of development" he said, "But at what cost? That's what leaders of these countries will be asking themselves."

As the second largest Pacific nation after Papua New Guinea, and strategically location, Fiji has become a vital hub for the US-led confrontation with China. In February 2022, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken became the most senior US official to visit Fiji in four decades. He used the occasion to denounce China's so-called "coercion and aggression" in the Indo-Pacific.

Later that year Bainimarama, as chair of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), invited US Vice President Kamala Harris to address its summit in Suva, from which China had been excluded. Harris announced a major escalation of US involvement in the Pacific aimed at excluding China.

Bainimarama had initially been an important ally of Beijing, seeking to persuade other Pacific leaders to adopt a more "independent" path outside the influence of Canberra and Wellington. However, under intense diplomatic and economic pressure amid the escalating US confrontation with Beijing, Bainimarama changed course. Visiting Wellington in 2016, he announced he wanted a "stronger engagement" with both New Zealand and Australia.

Since Harris's address to the 2022 PIF summit, Biden has convened and overseen two gatherings with Pacific Forum leaders to strengthen Washington's expanding "engagement" with the region. The most recent in September 2023 included Rabuka.

The Fiji regime has now cemented itself as a key collaborator with the US war drive. Last October Fiji led other Pacific Island states in opposing a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. An attorney representing Palestine at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) also revealed that Fiji and the US were the only two states to side with Israel at an ICJ hearing. Fiji has regularly lined up behind NATO to condemn Russia over Ukraine.

Australia, New Zealand and the US will have closely watched Rabuka's China visit, which came on the eve of this week's PIF summit in Tonga. With escalating conflicts enveloping the region, the imperialist powers including the US, Australia, New Zealand, France and the UK are all attending, seeking to influence proceedings.

The PIF's newly installed secretary general, former Nauru president Baron Waqa, recently said of the major powers: "We don't want them to fight in our backyard here. Take that elsewhere." But none of the Pacific's fragile micro-states can remain outside the looming confrontation. The region's populations are being dragged into a global maelstrom.

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