

US Defense Secretary visits Fiji to boost military ties

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The US and Fiji have started talks aimed at strengthening military ties between Washington and the strategically-important Pacific Island nation, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told media after a two-day visit last week.

Austin was on his 12th trip to the Indo-Pacific region as defense secretary, but the first visit by any US defense secretary to Fiji. Austin said negotiations were underway on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) which would enable the US to “deploy and redeploy forces in support of Fiji.” It could allow the Pentagon to station troops either permanently or temporarily in Fiji, though US officials speaking before the visit said they did not know how many there would be.

The SOFA follows an agreement signed by Austin during a visit to Papua New Guinea (PNG) in July last year, which gives Washington “uninhibited access” to numerous PNG military and civilian locations, including its important naval base on Manus Island. The US-PNG Agreement was met with protests by hundreds of university students accusing Prime Minister James Marape of drawing PNG into broader geopolitical turmoil.

In a live-streamed press conference with Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka on November 23, Austin declared the SOFA would “help us train with the Fijians on a very routine basis.” He pledged \$US4.9 million to support Fiji’s military modernisation and signed a bilateral logistics cooperation deal allowing the US to leave stores of military equipment on the island.

In turn Rabuka, sporting a US “stars-and-stripes” themed tie, called Austin’s visit a “historic moment in the US and Fiji relationship.” He said Fiji looked forward “to continuing to work closely with the United States going forward, including with the new incoming Trump administration.” Austin said the close US-Fiji relationship would “endure far beyond transition of administrations.”

Fiji and US forces already train together in Exercise Cartwheel, held annually in Fiji’s Nausori Highlands, allowing troops to work together in “a jungle warfare environment”—clearly in preparation for deployment in the Pacific. Troops from Australia, New Zealand and Britain are also involved. The SOFA agreement provides the basis for an upgraded, permanent military partnership.

Rabuka, a former military commander and coup leader, insisted that the strengthened military ties were “about peace, and how we guard and protect and promote that peace.” His administration, however, is aligning with Washington as it militarises the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for war against China.

Fiji continues to maintain ties with Beijing, but this is an increasingly fraught balancing act. After Rabuka took office in early 2023, he insisted on dealing with Fiji’s “traditional partners”—Australia, New Zealand and the US—over policing and security issues, promising to tear up a 2011 police co-operation agreement with China. In an attempt to restore relations, he visited Beijing last year, reaffirming Fiji’s support for the one-China policy and signing bilateral deals on trade, infrastructure and Chinese-language education.

On his return, Rabuka convinced leaders at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), held in Tonga in August, to adopt his proposal to make the Pacific Ocean a “Zone of Peace.” Promoting the concept earlier at Sydney’s Lowy Institute, Rabuka had maintained that Fiji would not “take sides” between the US and China. “We are friendly with China and the US and do not want to be caught in the struggle between the superpowers,” he declared.

But the US is seeking to secure its unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the Pacific. Austin’s visit to Fiji was the last stop on a trip that took him to Australia, the Philippines and to Laos for an ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting.

According to a statement by the US Department of

Defense, the purpose of the secretary's tour was to "drive ongoing efforts to modernize our alliances and partnerships toward our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific"—that is, to boost key alliances and strategic partnerships across the region to maintain US hegemony.

Meeting with Australian and Japanese defence ministers in Darwin, Austin approved plans to integrate Japanese military forces with their Australian and US counterparts and hold annual trilateral training with joint amphibious forces from 2025. In the Philippines, which is on the front line of the build-up against China, Austin reaffirmed Washington's "ironclad commitment" to the US-Philippine mutual defense treaty and signed a new agreement on enhanced sharing of information and military technology.

The entire Pacific region has become a geo-strategic cauldron, with even tiny island states such as Fiji caught up in the escalating drive to war. Under pressure from Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, the PIF summit approved Canberra's Pacific Policing Initiative, which will see the formation of multi-country police units, with up to 200 officers, trained and led by the Australian Federal Police, designed to push back against China.

Rabuka's predecessor Frank Bainimarama, Fiji's leader from his 2006 coup until 2022, had initially fostered ties with Beijing and sought to persuade other Pacific leaders to adopt an "independent" path outside the influence of Canberra and Wellington. From 2016, under intense diplomatic and economic pressure from the US and its regional allies, Bainimarama changed course. As chair of the PIF, he invited US Vice President Kamala Harris to address its 2022 Suva summit, from which China was excluded. Harris announced a major escalation of US involvement in the Pacific aimed against China.

According to *Defense News*, during his four years in office, Austin has helped recast America's military role in the Indo-Pacific. "Its allies are working more often with each other, and America is working more closely with its allies," the publication declared. The US is now spreading its forces widely across the region to confront China by signing new basing agreements "with old and new allies" and island states including Fiji.

Due to its relative size and strategic location in the Southwest Pacific, Fiji has become a focus of US diplomatic and military activity, especially after the Solomon Islands signed a policing agreement with Beijing following riots in Honiara in 2021. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Suva in 2022, the most senior US official to do so in almost four decades. He denounced

both Russia and China, accusing the latter of "coercion and aggression" which "spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific."

The rhetoric turns reality on its head. Ever since World War II, the US has regarded the Pacific as an "American lake" and, along with Australia and New Zealand, has repeatedly intervened in the region.

Recently, Washington threatened the Solomon Islands with regime change if China was allowed a military base there. In February this year US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma warned PNG to reject an offer of a policing pact with China. Verma stated bluntly that "it is a competition" for influence in the region between China and the US and its allies, adding "we have to compete aggressively."

As part of the escalating confrontation, wherever Washington has a presence a vast expansion of military facilities is under way. The Pentagon has begun to refurbish WWII-era airbases in the American neo-colonies in the North Pacific of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Northern Marianas. In 2020, US engineers rebuilt an airstrip on Angaur Island in Palau and planning is going ahead to install an elaborate radar system and missile facility in the islands.

Rabuka is meanwhile supporting the criminal actions of US imperialism throughout the world. 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 also regularly lined up behind NATO to condemn Russia over Ukraine.



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