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Fijian Foreign Policy or Australian?

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A document articulating Fiji's foreign policy priorities and guiding its international engagements in the next decade was launched in September 2024 by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka. This first Foreign Policy White Paper (FPWP) is centred on the three pillars of sovereignty, security and prosperity and shows how Fiji views the region, the world and its ambitions in foreign policy.

The FPWP gravitates Fiji towards traditional partners (Western states) stemming from Rabuka's familiarity and comfort with these. However, the government's appointment of Peter Varghese, former head of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as the principal drafter of the FPWP does raise concern. As one political analyst has pointed out, 'the resonance with Australian foreign policy language is hard to miss' (Nailatikau 7/11/2024). The failure to appoint a Fijian principal drafter despite the available technical expertise brings into question the government's confidence in local capacity, despite more than 50 years of independence. Despite the input of the reference group, the authenticity of the FPWP and its alignment to Fiji's national interest should be scrutinised in light of Varghese's implicit bias towards Australia. History shows Fiji has the savvy to independently manage its international relations and policymaking.

Fiji had an 'orderly, peaceful and amicably negotiated' independence from the United Kingdom in 1970. The country's first prime minister and foreign minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, one of the architects of the South Pacific Forum (SPF), led Fiji's foreign relations in the immediate post-independence years. Ratu Mara, the first Pacific Island leader to address the United Nations, also introduced the idea of the 'Pacific Way'. The Mara government's 'concept of the Pacific Way in diplomacy was a rediscovery of a regional sense of identity, responsibility to neighbouring states, and an outlook for future cooperation' (Hawkins 2024:19). Fiji was keen to assert its newly acquired independence among the global community of states despite being a newcomer to the international arena and being perceived as a small and geographically isolated state. It took part in various United Nations (UN) initiatives, including growing commitments to UN peacekeeping in the 1980s and an expanding peacekeeping force.

The two coups in 1987 resulted in Fiji changing its status to a republic, and a decade-long suspension from the Commonwealth. At the time, the SPF recognised the 'complexity of the problems' (SPF 1987) with discussion of Fiji's internal political situation being 'studiously avoided' at its 1988 meeting (Alley 1990). Fiji experienced a (mainly) Indo-Fijian 'brain drain' and slow economic growth in the 1990s, which prompted it to join the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in 1996 (Kabutaulaka 17/6/2015). Later, in the 2010s, the Bainimarama government used the issue of West Papua to leverage their own diplomatic clout (at a time of isolation) at the MSG, while Rabuka in his current position as prime minister has also used the wearing of the Morning Star-branded *bilum*, symbolic of the Morning Star flag which is banned in Indonesia, for political optics.

Before Fiji was ousted from the Commonwealth and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in 2009, Fiji's foreign policies were closely aligned to its bilateral relations with Australia, New Zealand and the Commonwealth. The aftermath of the 2006 coup by Frank Bainimarama forced Fiji to adopt a new approach, a 'New Pacific Diplomacy', after being shunned by its traditional international partners (Fry and Tarte 2015). The 'Look North' orientation, though not a new one, reinvigorated Fiji's international engagements, resulting in a period of increased global recognition as a serious international actor despite the perceived restrictions of being a small state.

Fiji diversified its political alliances by formalising more than 60 new diplomatic relationships in the years following its suspension from the Commonwealth and the PIF. The 'Friends to All, Enemies to None' approach strengthened Fiji's international credibility and was rewarded with chairmanship of the Group of 77 plus China in 2013, and later through its assumption of the presidency of the 71st session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2016. Visits by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping followed after the Fiji First Party won the 2014 general elections, confirmation that Fiji's new diplomatic approach was working. Fiji strengthened military alliances beyond traditional partners, resulting in a large consignment of Russian weapons for the Fiji military in January 2016. The 'Look North' policy was described as a 'misnomer because it just meant "Look Anywhere Else"' other than the traditional partners that had turned away from Fiji (Doherty 22/1/2016).

However, Bainimarama's cold shoulder towards traditional partners changed after the devastating

Tropical Cyclone Winston that struck in late February 2016. Fijian public opinion promoted this shift on social media sites and was quick to point out how traditional partners Australia and New Zealand were there at a time of need, putting pressure on Bainimarama to change his tone to one of humility towards Canberra and Wellington.

The FPWP is a rewind to traditional partners, first among equals in 'Friends to All and Enemies to None'. The Australian '*Vuvale*' and New Zealand '*Duavata*' partnerships are strategically key for Fiji with 'development priorities' in alignment with 'UK's support' (MOFA 2024:17). The *Vuvale* partnership, first signed in 2019 and renewed in 2023, outlines priority areas of engagement. The *Duavata* partnership, signed in 2022, sets out priorities and principles for cooperation and coordination. In the region's polycrisis Fiji recognises and works with the Indo-Pacific narrative, but this is viewed as intersecting with their concept of an 'Ocean of Peace', which, according to Rabuka, 'is both an aspiration and a pathway to a regional arrangement crafted by the states of the Pacific region but also respected by the other powers of the broader Indo Pacific region …' (MOFA 5/8/2024).

The FPWP's trajectory aligns Fiji firmly with its traditional partners. The large Fijian diaspora in these countries, sports, shared military history and economics are reasons why some friends are more valued than others in the FPWP. In the Fiji government's policymaking process there are certain gaps where assistance from foreign expertise is needed, but foreign policy is not one of them.

At the Pacific Islands Political Studies Association 2025 conference, Solomon Islands National University Vice Chancellor and Principal Professor Transform Aqorau made the following remarks in his opening address:

> We are not an Ocean of Discontent; we are an Ocean of Possibility. The Pacific Islands must not be defined by the struggles of the past but by the vision, ambition, and leadership we bring to shaping our future. If we fail to take control of our own narrative, others will write it for us. If we fail to determine our own destiny, others will decide it for us. This is the moment for Pacific nations to seize the initiative, strengthen regional unity, and assert their place in the global order — not as spectators, but as architects of a more just, stable, and sustainable world.

In matters of Fijian sovereignty, foreign influence may be vectored through a foreign policy principal drafter, albeit unintentionally. Consequentially, Australia benefits from the FPWP skewed in their favour due to Rabuka's oversight. Aqorau's remarks are a cautionary message for other Pacific Islands leaders.

Author notes

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