

## The United States and Fiji Reaffirm Security Assistance Cooperation

By Ambassador Steven McGann (ret)

The United States and Fiji continue to strengthen security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Ties between the regional partners endured throughout Fiji's 2006 military takeover and resultant domestic political challenges. During this period Washington's engagement with Suva included humanitarian assistance/disaster response, maritime security, law enforcement cooperation, counter-narcotics, and anti-trafficking of vulnerable populations.

The United States also supported Fiji's participation in existing United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. In turn Fiji continued to support U.S. initiatives regarding United Nations General Assembly resolutions and kept doors open for development aid and private sector investment opportunities.

The recent defense security cooperation assistance agreement with Fiji supports substantial funding for training and equipment for the Royal Fijian Military forces (RFMF) for future peacekeeping opportunities as well as an immediate boost for its navy including patrol boats to support fisheries protection as well as search and rescue efforts.

At the same time, these longstanding efforts should be seen in the context of Washington's prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region soon to be undergirded by significant U.S. Congressional legislation established in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) incentivizes the Department of Defense to prioritize investments that will widen the gap in military capabilities between the United States and China. The arc of deterrence that the United States will build in the Indo-Pacific region opens the door for billions of dollars in future funding.

The military requirements and economic development support to build reliable platforms will strengthen U.S. ties to Pacific Islands Countries and further coordination between regional allies. The Pacific Defense Initiative includes efforts to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change as a priority regional security imperative. This constructive focus on climate change centers the regional coordination with Pacific Islands Countries.

For the U.S.-Fiji relationship to prosper, the security assistance cooperation going forward must be causally linked to the Pacific Defense Initiative. Suva can help the United States link its policies in the North Pacific with its approach in the South Pacific. The United States has a clear understanding of how to better manage its relationship the Freely-Associated States – Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau – that will be undergirded in the outcomes of the current renegotiations of their Compact of Free Association. However, with Suva's help Washington can strengthen its relationships in the South Pacific to refocus engagement with the Melanesian countries of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu as well as future ties with an independent Bougainville.

Fiji's partnership with the United States is underscored by the ongoing relationship with the Nevada National Guard's Special Partnership Program (SPP) with Pacific Islands Countries. That relationship focuses on

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addressing the negative impacts of climate change to civil society, capacity-building, gender equity, and protecting vulnerable populations. These are necessary components of deterrence efforts and provide a mutual framework for working with Pacific Islands Countries. Moreover, the relationship will strengthen Fiji's capacity to fully operate in desired future peacekeeping efforts that will incorporate planning for civil-military efforts including protecting refugee populations, pandemic control, and logistical support.

The Nevada National Guard Special Partnership Program should be given added resources to expand cooperation in the Fiji-Tonga-Kiribati triangle. Kiribati's 2014 land purchase on the northern Fijian island of Vanua Levu was a preemptive intervention to address population movements and emergency needs.

The enhanced civil defense capabilities and capacity-building provided by the SPP should turn toward working with Fijian civilian and military components on land management, rural development, health, water, and waste management before any potential emergency aid to Kiribati overwhelms its infrastructure and displaces its people. These elements also would extend to the existing SPP cooperation with Tonga.

The increased security cooperation and assistance funding for PICs should lead to addressing a broader range of regional issues. The negative impacts of climate change are not restricted to intensifying weather patterns and rising sea levels. As a result of climate change the PICs are facing greater food insecurity that leads to increased importations of processed foods with the associated rise in diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. The coronavirus crisis has resulted in increased trafficking of labor and the exploitation of women and other vulnerable populations. The Women, Peace, and Security agenda adopted through UNSCR 1325 must be central to development assistance planning and programs.

Accommodating this broad range of issues requires sustainable efforts by regional allies Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, as well as other partner countries in conjunction with international organizations, regional coalitions and non-governmental organizations. Washington and Suva have a strong and consistent history on multilateral cooperation, particularly at the United Nations. Suva's support of UNGA resolutions promoted by Washington has been unabated.

The United States should look to Fiji to support strengthening the role of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). The SPC should be central to U.S. efforts to harmonize regional assistance with the Freely-Associated States, American territories, and Pacific Islands Countries. Conversely, the United States insisted that Fiji's SPC membership was undeniable during its domestic re-building toward democracy. Washington with its allies and donor countries also should open the door for a consultation with the Suva-supported Pacific Island Development Forum, the United Nations Office of South-South Cooperation, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, with a view to reduce redundancy and close gaps between development assistance programs. At the same time Suva should ease opportunities with the Melanesian Spearhead Group that broaden the ability of a wide-range of partner countries to help meet its priorities.

The United States also must have a strengthened diplomatic strategy with Pacific Islands Countries to complement implementation of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative. This strategy includes facilitating Taipei's legitimate regional humanitarian assistance and response to the coronavirus pandemic. The substantial resources that will flow to the region should be considered in deciding the United States full membership in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). U.S. membership in the PIF would further prove its commitment to a balanced regional approach and future assistance to the PIF Secretariat as well as better representation for U.S. territories in the Pacific.

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