



ANALYSIS

Principled engagement: Rebuilding defence ties with Fiji

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The geopolitics of the Pacific Islands region is changing, including the emergence of the new Pacific regionalism. The traditional regional security orthodoxy is also changing. The Russian arms deal to Fiji has underlined the extent to which Australia and New Zealand face competition for access and influence from external players in their relations with Fiji. Since the normalisation of relations in 2014, Australia and New Zealand have pursued a soft approach to engagement. Australia's and New Zealand's response to Cyclone Winston offered an opportunity to re-engage with Fiji's military and test the potential for increased defence diplomacy. It is time for Australia and New Zealand to undertake a principled rebuilding of defence ties with Fiji.

In January 2016 Russia announced that it would be making a significant grant of equipment and ordnance to Fiji to support Fiji's peacekeeping operations on the Golan Heights. The Russian deal was, for some observers, indicative of Fiji's pivot away from the West and signalled Moscow's opening move in a battle for influence in the Pacific.¹ Importantly, the deal fuelled perceptions that Australia's and New Zealand's strategic influence over Fiji had diminished.²

The arms deal was a direct result of Fiji's pursuit of non-traditional partners in the face of the Australian and New Zealand-led sanctions regime imposed after the 2006 military coup in Fiji. It was also, arguably, an attempt by Fiji to diversify the patrons it was cultivating under its 'Look North' policy and, in particular, to avoid dependence on China.³ What is less clear is Russia's motive. Russia asserts that it has wider Pacific interests and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that "deepening interaction with the island nations of the South Pacific is an integral part of the Russian agenda in the region".⁴ However, the Russian agenda in the Pacific has so far appeared opportunistic.

This Analysis will argue that the Russian arms deal with Fiji demonstrates that the traditional security orthodoxy in the region is changing. In particular, the influence of peripheral powers is rising against the landscape of the 'new Pacific diplomacy'⁵ and a revived regionalism. To respond to these changes, Australia and New Zealand will need to move beyond traditional approaches to Pacific policy and develop a deeper understanding of the transformation the region is experiencing. Canberra and Wellington will need to be smarter in their engagement with Fiji and the wider Pacific. This Analysis will suggest a number of options for doing so in the military sphere.

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FIJIAN FOREIGN POLICY

To understand the implications of Russia's arms deal with Fiji first requires an appreciation of the changes that have taken place in Fijian foreign policy since the imposition of sanctions after the military coup led by the then Navy Commodore and current Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama in 2006.

In October 2014 Australia and New Zealand removed the final sanctions put in place against Fiji following the coup.⁶ Sanctions were also lifted by the United States, and the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat fully lifted Fiji's suspension from the Commonwealth and the Forum, respectively.⁷ The catalyst for ending the sanctions was Fiji's parliamentary elections held in September 2014, which after eight years of military rule were viewed as the first step on the road back to democracy and "as free and as fair" as could be expected.⁸

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In Fiji the sanctions regime fed three interconnected narratives which became central to Bainimarama's political discourse. First, that Fiji was bullied and abandoned by its more powerful neighbours in its time of need. Second, that in response, Fiji would realign its foreign policy, introduce the 'Look and Engage North' policy, and build new strategic partnerships independent of its traditional partners, Australia and New Zealand. Third, that Fiji would restore its position as the strategic hub of the region and become the driving force behind a 'new Pacific agenda'.

It was, however, Fiji's suspension from the Pacific Islands Forum and the Commonwealth in 2009 that proved to be the direct catalyst for a major shift in Fiji's foreign policy.⁹ Since 2009, Fiji has sought to create a network of new partners and patrons, and expand its membership and leadership of intergovernmental organisations. The strategy has for the most part been effective.

At the international level, Fiji joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)¹⁰ in 2012 with Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola stating that joining NAM would help refocus Fiji's relationships away from its traditional trading partners, Australia and New Zealand.¹¹ Membership of the NAM was seen as crucial to Fiji's aspirations of establishing itself within the south-south axis group of countries, pursuing relations with the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, China, and South Africa), and reinforcing Fiji's position as the strategic hub within the Pacific. Fiji has also sought observer status at ASEAN with its close ties with Indonesia underpinning the bid.

Within the region, Fiji deepened engagement with the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) as a counter to the Pacific Islands Forum in an effort to reassert Fiji's centrality in the Pacific.¹² Fiji currently holds the chairmanship of the MSG as it did in 2012–13. Supporting this was the flagship of Fiji's new foreign policy agenda, the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF), which would serve as the Pacific regional counterpart for the south-south groupings.¹³ In 2013 Fiji became the first Pacific nation to hold the 12-month chairmanship of the Group of 77 plus China, the largest voting bloc in the United Nations and, in June 2016, Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Peter Thomson, was elected as President of the 71st session of the UN General Assembly. Most notably, the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), a grouping which has been in existence since the early 1990s, has risen in diplomatic significance since 2009,¹⁴ in part due to Fiji's continued foreign policy activism.

This reinvigoration of Fijian diplomacy, a result of the sanctions and a resurgence in regionalism, has in turn stimulated a more assertive approach by other Pacific countries at the regional and international

levels. Despite some tensions between regional leaders, the agenda holds appeal across the region. Connections beyond the region are becoming increasingly important to the way that Pacific Island countries define themselves.¹⁵ This, coupled with region-wide dissatisfaction with Australia and New Zealand, has reinforced Bainimarama's agenda.

Nevertheless, some aspects of Fiji's new diplomacy have created problems with its neighbours and caused divisions within sub-regional alliances. Its cultivation of relations with Indonesia, for example, has placed Fiji at odds with Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, over the issue of West Papuan membership of the MSG.¹⁶

The single obstacle to Fiji's efforts to reshape the regional architecture has been the Pacific Islands Forum. In May 2015 the prime minister stated:

"We will continue to participate in all forum activities at the public service, technical and ministerial levels ... As head of government, I will not participate in any Forum Leader's Meeting until the issue of the undue influence of Australia and New Zealand and our divergence of views is addressed."¹⁷

This stance has created a narrative straitjacket which will require Fiji to balance its national interest with its regional leadership aspirations and will test Fiji's foreign policy maturity. Whether or not Fiji's foreign minister attends the 2016 Pacific Islands Forum Foreign Ministers Meeting will be an indication of Fiji's re-engagement with the regional architecture.

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FIJI–RUSSIAN RELATIONS

It is against the background of this shift in Fijian foreign policy that Russia's donation of ordnance and equipment to the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) needs to be viewed. The equipment provided by Russia included AK-47 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and trucks worth an estimated US\$12.5 million. Fiji's enhanced ties with Russia reflect a military culture and leadership born out of Fiji's period of isolation under sanctions. The same can also be said of Fiji's military cooperation with China and, to a lesser degree, India and Malaysia. What is less clear is what has driven the deal from the Russian side.

During Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's first visit to Fiji in February 2012, he was at pains to state that cooperation and partnership drove Russian interests in the region and that Russia was "not making friends against anybody".¹⁸ In addition to Russian support of Fiji's peacekeeping operations, economic cooperation, educational assistance and cooperation, and visa-free travel between Russia and Fiji were discussed. Foreign Minister Kubuabola stated that "by diversifying our relations with such countries as Russia, we are creating greater stability for ourselves".¹⁹ The following year, during the first-ever visit to Moscow by a Fijian leader, Bainimarama and his Russian counterpart, Dimitry Medvedev, signed five bilateral agreements on military and technical cooperation; a mutual visa

exemption scheme; cooperation in tackling money laundering, the proceeds of crime and the financing of terrorism; public health assistance; and university exchanges between Russia's Far East University and the Fiji National University.²⁰ Medvedev expressed Russia's continuing support for Fiji and stated that Russia wanted to pay particular attention to assisting Fiji with its UN peacekeeping deployments.²¹

One driver of Russian efforts in the Pacific may be the easy access to UN votes that modest levels of largesse in the region can provide — a strategy that has been pursued by other new external players in the region such as the United Arab Emirates. Indeed, Russia's strategy appears to be effective in this regard. Fiji was one of 58 states that abstained from voting on UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 in March 2014 on the Russian annexation of Crimea and the territorial integrity of the Ukraine.²²

By contrast, Fiji's pursuit of ties with Russia has much clearer motivations. By turning away from its traditional defence partners, Fiji has challenged the underlying premise of the Western-driven regional security orthodoxy: the assumption that the strategic orientation of the Pacific Islands would always be towards Western partners. In 2010 then RFMF Land Force Commander Brigadier General Pita Driti welcomed the shift in the balance of power in the region stating that Fiji was realigning its foreign policy towards Russia and China and that "Russia is now knocking on Fiji's door".²³ Fiji's recent actions have, according to some observers, potentially opened a new front in the larger geopolitical contest between Russia and the United States.²⁴ The US pivot to the Pacific has been underwhelming at best and undermined by inconsistent engagement and poor public diplomacy although there are increasing indications of efforts to secure greater access and influence.²⁵ Moreover, while it would be unwise to overplay Russian interests and influence in the region, equally it would be imprudent to ignore the impact geopolitical contests could have on regional security management.

Still, the Russian arms deal was not met with unqualified support within Fiji. The arms deal was not secret but nor was it transparent. Fiji's Opposition Whip, Ratu Isoa Tikoca, demanded, to no avail, that Defence Minister Timoci Natuva explain the consignment and discuss it in parliament. The Fijian Government did not manage the messaging of the arms deal well, which contributed to concerns about what the weapons would be used for.

The level of support across Fijian society for growing Fiji–Russian relations is muted and underpinned by a degree of suspicion over Russian motivations in the Pacific. Concerns over Fiji being drawn into a new Cold War in the Pacific trended on local social media following the arms shipment. Fiji's active netizens also noted the absence of Russian assistance following Tropical Cyclone Winston in 2016 in the face of the overwhelming Australian and New Zealand humanitarian response to the disaster.²⁶

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The Pacific Islands region is not new to strategic competition between external powers, nor to that competition being used by local states. The ‘Soviet card’ was played on several occasions by Pacific nations during the Cold War in an effort to force Australia and New Zealand to take the region more seriously in security terms. Chinese and Taiwanese chequebook diplomacy of the 1990s raised concerns about the destabilising impact that their competition was having in the region.

Indeed, Russia is by no means the only external strategic actor of note in the Pacific. Chinese activities in the region have garnered far more attention in recent years, and for good reason. Fiji is the only country in the Pacific where Chinese aid (US\$339 million between 2006 and 2013 in nominal terms) exceeds that of Australia (US\$303 million between 2006 and 2013), New Zealand (US\$44 million between 2006 and 2013), and the United States (\$15 million between 2006 and 2014).²⁷ China is also successfully cultivating personal relationships with key political leaders and officials in the region. China may not present a direct geostrategic threat to Western interests in the Pacific,²⁸ nevertheless broader geopolitical tensions between China and the West elsewhere, such as in the South China Sea, have the potential to spill over into the region.

Fiji’s recent position on the South China Sea issue is an excellent illustration of how politically astute local partners in the Pacific can be. China’s diplomatic charm offensive to gain support for its position in the South China Sea backfired when Beijing wrongly claimed support from Fiji. Fiji’s statement calling on all parties to adhere to international law and resolve the territorial dispute peacefully was both much less than Beijing wanted and somewhat surprising given Suva’s close ties with Beijing.

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AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND LEFT IN THE COLD?

Australia and New Zealand restored full relations with Fiji in 2014 and embarked on a gradual strategy of ‘soft re-engagement’ with a predictable mix of caution and quiet optimism. But this rapprochement has not deterred the Fijian leadership from reminding Australia and New Zealand that Fiji would not be ‘coming in from the cold’ and returning to ‘business as usual’ without a renegotiation of the bilateral relationships.

A significant legacy of the sanction years was that the Fijian political and military elite who emerged during this period do not have the personal relationships with their Australian and New Zealand counterparts. This has been lamented by both former and current senior members of the RFMF who are nostalgic for the close ties between Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand, and the high level of military professionalism and training enjoyed as a consequence of those relationships. By contrast, Fiji’s non-traditional partners are establishing strong personal networks within the government and the military and generating the kind of access and influence that Australia and New Zealand once wielded.

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Australia and New Zealand have also been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the shifting regional dynamics, specifically the regional sentiment underpinning the calls by island states for a Pacific-driven agenda. Fiji's call for Australia and New Zealand to step back from the Pacific Islands Forum may not have received broad public support,²⁹ but privately there was consensus that the regional agenda should better reflect the needs of Pacific Island states.

Despite extensive engagement in the Pacific Islands region, there is a growing regional perception that Australia's and New Zealand's relevance has diminished as a result of inadequate engagement at the highest political levels, the lack of commitment to relationship building between governments, the rise of new players in the region, and the emergence of the assertive new Pacific regionalism. Although Australia and New Zealand refute the claim that their influence is in decline, both acknowledge that they face increased competition for influence in the region. For example, Australia's recent Defence White Paper notes the threat posed to Australian interests in the Pacific by a growing number of external actors. Likewise, the New Zealand 2016 Defence White Paper observes that Pacific states are "seeking to broaden their potential support bases by forming links with countries beyond their existing traditional partners".³⁰ To counter a potential decline, a sustained and genuine diplomatic push into the region that reflects partnership over patronage is the only means by which to respond to geopolitical influences.

DISASTER DIPLOMACY

Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston made landfall in Fiji on 20 February 2016. It was the second strongest storm ever recorded in the southern hemisphere and cut a swathe through the islands of Fiji. Like Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Solomon Islands in 2015,³¹ Cyclone Winston was an opportunity to reset regional cooperation and engage in some discrete disaster diplomacy.³² Cyclone Winston provided Australia and New Zealand with the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to Fiji irrespective of their political differences. It was also a timely reminder that geography and proximity do matter. Russia's modest assistance in this instance was overshadowed by the massive support provided by Australia and New Zealand. As New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully stated:

"When there is an urgent need for humanitarian support everybody in this neighbourhood understands that you just knuckle down and deal with those needs and that's what we've tried to do and I know that's very much appreciated and everyone I met in Fiji told me that."³³

Australia committed major defence assets, such as its newly commissioned landing helicopter dock HMAS *Canberra*, and over 1000 defence personnel to the mission. It provided 140 tonnes of aid and

donated \$15 million in immediate humanitarian assistance.³⁴ New Zealand deployed HMNZs *Canterbury* and *Wellington*, along with C130 and P3 Orion aircraft, approximately 500 personnel, and provided an initial \$4.7 million aid package.³⁵ Australia and New Zealand have also made substantial longer-term commitments to Fiji's rehabilitation and recovery through 'build back better' assistance packages and economic stimulation and resilience initiatives. This includes Australia's \$20 million package to rebuild infrastructure, replace medical equipment, and restore water and sanitation services, and New Zealand's \$10 million package to rebuild public infrastructure and increase support to the dairy and agricultural sectors to boost the local economy.³⁶

The Australian and New Zealand response to Cyclone Winston was primarily humanitarian. The question now is how to develop a post-Cyclone Winston strategy that capitalises on the highly successful public diplomacy campaign conducted during the humanitarian operation. This was epitomised by photographs on social media of a young RFMF soldier hoisting the New Zealand flag and of Fijian–Australian members of the Australian Defence Force proudly preparing to join in the post-Winston clean-up. The symbolism was profound; but symbolism is not a substitute for a strategy.

Whether this humanitarian response to Cyclone Winston will reinvigorate relations with Fiji is yet to be seen. Both Canberra and Wellington have been careful to depoliticise the response and present it as a genuine partnership between Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. The size of the humanitarian response was a clear signal, however, of the importance of the relationship.

The public response in Fiji to Australian and New Zealand assistance has been overwhelmingly positive. The Fiji Government's response has, however, been more cautious and qualified. The *Fiji Sun*, considered to be pro-government, lauded Australian and New Zealand assistance efforts while at the same time suggesting that the onus is on Australia and New Zealand to rebuild relations having "torn apart" the "long-standing links" following the 2006 coup.³⁷ This was further underlined during New Zealand Prime Minister John Key's visit to Fiji in June — the first visit by a New Zealand prime minister in ten years. In his public messages, Key emphasised that the 2006 coup was "ancient history".³⁸ He made it clear that the intention of the visit was not to "relitigate the issues of the last ten years".³⁹ Bainimarama's welcome speech, by contrast, was combative. After thanking New Zealand for its assistance in response to Cyclone Winston, Bainimarama outlined the justifications for the 2006 coup and the progress that had been achieved in Fiji since that time, and emphasised his own political legitimacy.⁴⁰

In describing the type of political relationship that Fiji sought to establish with New Zealand, Bainimarama underlined equality, mutual respect, partnership, and the need for New Zealand to understand Fijian priorities.

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Bainimarama referred to Fiji's "desire to reform [the] regional architecture to give Pacific Islanders a bigger voice". He also called on the New Zealand Government to work with Fiji "to create a better framework in which to conduct our affairs" — one that is "less prescriptive", "more consultative" and "more understanding of the challenges we face".⁴¹ This, however, was overshadowed by Bainimarama's scathing attack on elements of New Zealand's media.

Key's visit illustrated the challenges that Australia and New Zealand face in rebuilding ties with Fiji. During the visit, Bainimarama laid the responsibility for moving the relationship forward at New Zealand's door. But it is likely that New Zealand will continue to tread warily, continuing its strategy of 'engage soft, engage smart', building on the openings created by Key's visit. During Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's first official visit to Fiji since the normalisation of relations, Bishop emphasised Canberra's strong ties with Suva, its commitment to rebuilding Fiji following Cyclone Winston, and the strength of the mutual defence ties.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE INTERESTS

Despite the challenges of dealing with Bainimarama, the strategic costs to Australia and New Zealand of a downgraded partnership with Fiji are considerable. Fiji is actively challenging Australia's and New Zealand's privileged positions in the regional system and, as a consequence, is aspiring to a leading role in reshaping the geopolitics of the region.⁴² Fiji is the strategic hub of the Pacific, an influential voice within intra-regional politics, and increasingly the bridge between the Pacific Islands region and non-traditional actors seeking to engage the region. Re-engagement with Fiji at the highest political and defence levels is of significant importance to Canberra and Wellington — and to regional dynamics.

The geopolitics of the Pacific region are changing, a shift recognised in recent Australian and New Zealand White Papers. Australia's *2016 Defence White Paper* makes plain that Canberra is not taking for granted long-standing assumptions about Australian pre-eminence in the Pacific region. The White Paper suggests that external actors are taking advantage of state fragility and instability in the region and could challenge Australian interests and threaten Australian security. The White Paper warns, for example, of the danger of a foreign military power seeking influence in the Pacific in ways that could "challenge the security of [Australia's] maritime approaches".⁴³ For these reasons, the White Paper calls for Australia to continue playing a "leadership role in our immediate neighbourhood".⁴⁴ What is missing from the White Paper, however, is a strong sense of what Australia's regional leadership role should look like in the future, beyond the continuation of long-standing defence, policing, and development cooperation. Nor is there much discussion of whether Australia's leadership role will continue to be welcomed by regional states.

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The Defence White Paper refers broadly to Australian assistance in the areas of national resilience, defence cooperation, aid, policing and building regional organisations as crucial elements in its efforts to prevent regional instability. In the context of deepening its security partnerships, the White Paper mentions the Defence Cooperation Program, the cornerstone of which is the Pacific Maritime Security Program, as well as increased plans to strengthen military forces in Papua New Guinea, Tonga, and Fiji. The White Paper also acknowledges the need to cooperate with Pacific Island countries to conduct humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and security or stabilisation operations, such as those in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands.⁴⁵

By contrast, New Zealand's Defence White Paper, released in June 2016, provides less insight into how New Zealand views its role within the region. The White Paper states that New Zealand's immediate region, including the Pacific, is a "fundamental priority for the Government" but then states that "areas beyond this are increasing in significance".⁴⁶ Enduring links with Pacific neighbours, specifically cultural and historical ties, are cited and it is noted that "these links, and the potential for any adverse security situation to impact on New Zealand or New Zealanders, underpin its enduring interest in the region".⁴⁷ Unlike the Australian White Paper, which recognises the potential impact of strategic competition in the region, New Zealand's White Paper is underwhelming in its analysis of its strategic interests in the region, its position as a security partner in the region, and the impact non-traditional players are having on New Zealand's position.

The New Zealand White Paper makes no reference to a leadership role, nor of specific bilateral relationships, such as the significance of restored relations with Fiji, and it does not provide specific details of defence engagement programs or military cooperation with other key Pacific Island partners. In fact, it is hard to imagine how the White Paper could say less about New Zealand's relationships with individual Pacific Island countries or its role in the region.

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REBUILDING DEFENCE RELATIONS WITH FIJI: PRINCIPLED ENGAGEMENT

Against the background of shifting geopolitics in the Pacific, rebuilding the defence relationship with Fiji is central to Australian and New Zealand strategic interests in the region. In doing this, Australia and New Zealand will need to understand that there is a new confidence in the Pacific region and a stronger determination by the people of the region to determine their own futures.⁴⁸ This new confidence will inevitably limit the influence of the traditional partners and possibly even the non-traditional players. Nevertheless, even with these new parameters it will be possible to build a new practical defence relationship with Fiji that will also benefit Australia's and New Zealand's broader strategic engagement in the region.

There are a number of initiatives that should be pursued to rebuild defence ties with Fiji. But before examining these in detail it should be noted that while rebuilding defence relations with Fiji is the principal focus of our recommendations, it is also relevant to efforts to strengthen security ties across the region. The Australia–New Zealand–Fiji relationship cannot be viewed in isolation from regional dynamics. For that reason, one theme running through all of these recommendations is the need to build stronger intra-regional partnerships.

Another key theme is the need to build strong personal links between the respective defence forces. This should be done through increased exchanges of personnel and the development of a security ‘community of interest’ across the region. It would be valuable, for example, to conduct professional education and development courses for mid-level defence policy officials from Fiji and other Pacific Island states to build networks between regional civilian and uniformed defence personnel. This would also involve increasing the numbers of RFMF officers on Australian and New Zealand staff courses, including those for junior and senior non-commissioned officers as well as those for intermediate and advanced commissioned officers. Offering Australian Defence Force and New Zealand Defence Force officers to the RFMF Officers Training School would help build relationships with new generations of Fiji military personnel.

Beyond enhancing personal connections, Australia and New Zealand should pursue three specific initiatives to help rebuild the defence relationship with Fiji.

A CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Fiji’s peacekeeping objectives, capabilities, and strengths provide a strategic entry point for Australia and New Zealand to re-engage Fiji as a key partner in regional peacekeeping. Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji have deployed together in Bougainville and the Solomon Islands and are likely to do so again within the Pacific Islands region. Concerns within the United Nations about the calibre of training the RFMF is receiving from China and Russia is having an impact on Fiji’s peacekeeping reputation and Australia and New Zealand could help to mitigate this. The three countries should jointly develop a regional peacekeeping centre of excellence,⁴⁹ which could utilise the proposed Blackrock Integrated Peacekeeping Centre in Fiji. This would benefit all regional countries through the greater sharing of knowledge and lessons learned. The centre could also focus on the development of niche peacekeeping capabilities appropriate to small troop contributing countries. There has already been some informal discussion of a proposed Australian-led and located peacekeeping centre and, if this is to proceed, it will be imperative that Australia be seen to partner with the region’s troop contributing countries in a manner that takes into account Fiji’s rich history of peacekeeping experience.

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A PACIFIC DISASTER RESPONSE AND COORDINATION UNIT

Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) is a core focus of the region's defence forces, with Australia and New Zealand frequently taking the lead in disaster responses. Cyclone Winston emphasised the benefits of an integrated military and humanitarian response, the importance of interoperability, and the need to formalise collaboration on regional disaster response. The RFMF demonstrated it is a core partner in HA/DR efforts. Australia and New Zealand should support the creation of a Pacific Disaster Response and Coordination Unit (PDRCU),⁵⁰ which would address the common regional challenge of building and coordinating regional and national capacities to respond effectively to natural disasters. The PDRCU would have three core responsibilities: (1) coordination of preparedness and response; (2) disaster monitoring and analysis and capturing of lessons learned; (3) a clearing house for all relevant information including national statistics, logistical data and other knowledge resources such as collations of lessons learned.⁵¹ As with a regional peacekeeping centre of excellence, a PDRCU would provide a means to engage with the Fiji military on a professional and regional level.

ENHANCED REGIONAL SECURITY ARCHITECTURE: NETWORKED SECURITY IN THE PACIFIC

In terms of rebuilding Australia–New Zealand–Fiji defence ties, the obvious difficulty remains the dispute between the three countries over the conditions under which Fiji would rejoin the Pacific Islands Forum. The Forum remains the pre-eminent body responsible for regional security cooperation. It is unclear how this will be resolved as Fiji is unwilling to compromise. The longer the stalemate lasts, the more entrenched the issue will become, and the greater the impact on collective regional security. It is only through increased engagement and relationship building that a solution will be found.

For these reasons, Australia and New Zealand should engage Fiji through other regional forums. Fiji is not currently a member of the South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting, first held in 2013, and should be encouraged to join as a key defence partner within the region. Regional defence forums such as the FRANZ Arrangement between France, Australia and New Zealand, and the Quadrilateral Defence Coordinating Group that brings together Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States (QUAD) should be expanded to include key Pacific Island militaries. In the case of the FRANZ Arrangement, this would include extending membership to Fiji and other Pacific Island states with the capacity, personnel, and assets to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Currently, Pacific Island countries are FRANZ Partners but a full membership role would provide increased opportunities to develop the skills of the RFMF, strengthen relations, and enhance networked security within the region. Similarly, the QUAD grouping, which coordinates maritime security assistance, particularly resource security and fisheries

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surveillance and monitoring, also presents an opportunity to enhance Pacific Island country involvement in regional security.

Australia and New Zealand should facilitate stronger participation and engagement between the Fijian Government and the key Asia-Pacific regional security forums such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus. Australia and New Zealand should also encourage Fiji to support the participation of academics and non-government organisations in Track II diplomacy efforts such as the Shangri-La Dialogue in order to develop strategic expertise outside government. The likelihood that strategic rivalries in Asia will spill over into the Pacific cannot be discounted. It is imperative that Pacific Island countries such as Fiji be included in the regional discussion of how the Pacific Islands region responds to and manages such challenges and pressures.

Australia and New Zealand should also support Fiji's participation in multinational military training exercises. In 2015, the RFMF participated in Exercise Southern Katipo, the New Zealand-led multinational training exercise. Australia and New Zealand should also support Fiji's participation in multinational planning and training, and exercises such as Talisman Sabre and the Croix du Sud (Southern Cross) military exercise at which Fiji was an observer in 2015.

Australia and New Zealand should take a leading role in the facilitation of sourcing and upgrading RFMF and Fiji Police Force capabilities to ensure interoperability between the militaries. Australia's Defence Cooperation Program with Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste is a potential model for such cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The geopolitics of the Pacific Islands region is changing and with it the traditional regional security orthodoxy. The Russian arms deal to Fiji has underlined the extent to which Australia and New Zealand face competition from other external players in their relations with Fiji. The consequences of this are far-reaching as long-standing assumptions about Canberra's and Wellington's influence in the Pacific Islands region are challenged.

The rebuilding of defence and security relations with Fiji will ultimately need Suva's commitment and willingness to engage. Moreover, Australian and New Zealand efforts to rebuild defence ties with Fiji should not be made at the expense of continuing to place pressure on Fiji on issues of democratic governance and human rights. Principled re-engagement must therefore be the basis for the rebuilding of defence ties with Fiji. But the single lesson of the sanctions period is that it is only through interpersonal relationships and a strengthened partnership that

Australia and New Zealand will have the influence and access necessary to push for change in Fiji.

The successful rebuilding of defence relations with Fiji cannot be measured by increased defence cooperation alone. Rather, it will require Australia and New Zealand to develop a deeper understanding of, and respect for, the origins and implications of the new confidence in the Pacific, driven in large part by an increasingly assertive Fiji. Australia and New Zealand will need to come to terms with where they fit into the new Pacific regionalism. This will be a challenging and uncomfortable process but one that is necessary if Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji are truly able to build mutual and strategically beneficial partnerships in the region.

NOTES

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