

Advancing Regional Stability in an Era of Geopolitical Competition and Tension: The Role of Fiji

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Cover Photo: Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka with US President Joe Biden, 25 September, 2023
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Fiji Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka with Chinese President Xi Jinping, San Francisco, 16 November 2023
[Office of the Prime Minister of Fiji](#)



Executive Summary

Fiji is an archipelagic nation in the central western Pacific Ocean that stands at the crossroads of the Pacific, as a regional hub and as a transit point for regional commerce and communications. Fiji's leaders were instrumental in the establishment of the South Pacific Forum (now Pacific Islands Forum, or PIF) in 1971 and have had an influential role in regional affairs ever since. Unique amongst the small island states of the Pacific, Fiji has a relatively large standing army with a history of coups, beginning in 1987. These military interventions have had negative spillover effects on regional stability while also shaping Fiji's international role and relationships.

In December 2022, a general election saw the first peaceful transfer of power in Fiji's history, ending the 16-year long rule of a government that first came to power via a coup in December 2006 and was twice returned to power via elections. The current government, led by a former coup leader and prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, has sought to focus Fiji's foreign policy on the impact of geopolitical tensions in the Pacific and to position Fiji as a promoter of both regional and global peace and stability. Central to this foreign policy has been the concept of the Pacific as a zone or ocean of peace.

The Rabuka government's advocacy for the Pacific "zone of peace" concept (at regional and global levels) provides insights into how a small island state navigates geopolitical dynamics, with a view to enhancing regional stability and security. Unlike the previous Fijian government, which viewed geopolitics as an opportunity and/or a distraction, the current government has drawn attention to the risks arising from great power competition and conflict in the Pacific. It is these risks that the zone of peace concept ostensibly seeks to mitigate.

There are at least three inter-related elements that have emerged at the core of the zone of peace concept articulated by Rabuka. These are non-alignment (or 'friends to all'), advancing cooperation with and between the major powers (particularly the United States and China), and Pacific Way diplomacy. In combination, these elements may provide a basis for building regional stability while consolidating a Pacific-owned and led regional security agenda.

Recommendations

■ **Include the zone of peace in the Fiji defence and security review of 2024**

Fiji's defence and national security review of 2024 **should include the geopolitical implications of the zone of peace concept and ways to advance this concept at the national, regional and global levels.** The development of Fiji's first Foreign Policy White Paper in 2024 provides further opportunity to consolidate the zone of peace concept and Fiji's policies and actions to advance this concept. Policy coordination between Fiji's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (previously the Ministry of Defence) will need to be prioritized, particularly through representation at PIFS regional security meetings. Fiji must also coordinate its bilateral approaches to the major powers, especially China and the United States. This requires leadership from the respective Ministers and Permanent secretaries.

■ **Integrate the Zone of Peace in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent**

A priority action that Fiji should take at the regional level over the next 12 months (2024-25) is to advocate that the zone of peace be considered an integral part of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and seek high level endorsement from leaders and foreign ministers. Fiji should propose that the zone of peace become the overarching framework for the 'flexible, inclusive and responsive' regional security mechanism referred to in Phase One of the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan.

If the August 2024 Pacific Islands Forum Summit (PIFS) in Tonga considers and accepts this proposal by Fiji's Prime Minister, this could become part of the work underway within the PIFS to review the regional security architecture.

The PIFS has already been tasked to develop the zone of peace concept (see 2023 PIF leaders' communique). The Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs should work with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration to provide leadership and advocacy for this initiative.

■ **Build consensus on principles among Pacific Island countries**

Embedding the zone of peace within the regional architecture requires **building consensus** among Pacific Island countries around its core principles and components and how to operationalize this concept over the next twelve months (2024-25). In order to support this consensus building process, the Fiji Government should encourage and participate in regional dialogues on security and geopolitics in the Pacific. Regional security dialogues (Track 1.5 and Track 2) can build confidence between Pacific Island countries to discuss the impact of geopolitical tensions in the region, including militarization trends. These dialogues can also provide the foundation for collective engagement with the major powers,

particularly the United States and China, on operationalizing the zone of peace. The first Track 2 Dialogue on security and geopolitics in the Pacific was convened at the University of the South Pacific in December 2023. **The Fiji Government should propose that such Dialogues form part of the Boe Declaration Action Plan** on regional security cooperation, to be reviewed in 2024 by the PIFS.

■ Towards a code of conduct

One important outcome of Fiji's zone of peace initiative could be the development and adoption, by the Pacific Islands Forum, of a Code of Conduct for a Pacific Zone of Peace. This Code of Conduct would apply to Pacific Island countries as well major powers in the region. It would be an explicit statement of Pacific Way diplomacy, underpinned by international legal principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

Advancing Regional Stability in an Era of Geopolitical Competition and Tension: The Role of Fiji

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Fiji is an archipelagic nation in the central western Pacific Ocean comprising more than 300 islands, with a claimed sea area of about 1.29 million square kilometres. The last census taken in 2017 showed a population of 884,887 people.¹ According to most recent World Bank data it has a GDP of USD 4.98 billion and a per capita income of USD 5,356 and it is listed as a developing/emerging economy.²

Fiji has traditionally been regarded as the hub of the Pacific. The headquarters of most Pacific regional organizations, Pacific-based UN agencies and diplomatic missions are based in Fiji. Trans-Pacific sea and air routes pass through Fiji, and several small neighbouring countries (such as Tuvalu and Kiribati) depend on Fiji as a transshipment point for their trade with the outside world.

Fiji's leaders have assumed a leadership role in regional affairs, beginning with the establishment of the South Pacific Forum (now Pacific Islands Forum, or PIF) in 1971.³ This role, based in part on Fiji's relative size and place in the region, has been a matter of national pride as it has positioned Fiji to 'punch above its weight' on the global stage. However, it has also been a source of tension with regional neighbours, especially when Fiji has sought to pursue its own interests, at the expense of regionalism.⁴

Unique amongst the small island states of the Pacific, Fiji has a relatively large standing army: the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), with force strength of approximately 4,000.⁵ Comparative regional data is provided in Table 1.

1 More recent population data from the World Bank (2021) shows a population of 924,610

2 See: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/FJ>

3 The Pacific Islands Forum is a regional intergovernmental organization comprising 16 Pacific island states and territories plus Australia and New Zealand. Its Secretariat is based in Suva, Fiji, see: <https://www.forumsec.org/>

4 Note the conflict over funding for the University of the South Pacific, which Fiji unilaterally withheld for several years until the change of government in December 2022. See: Sadhana Sen, The USP saga: Domestic politics versus regional aspirations, Dev Policy Blog, 21 October 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/the-usp-saga-domestic-politics-versus-regional-aspirations-20201021-1/>

5 This is based on budget estimates from the Fiji Ministry of Economy between 2016 - 2021. There have been no annual reports on the force strength of the RFMF in recent years.

As this data indicates, only one other Pacific island country (Tonga) has similarly sized military compared to the size of its population. Papua New Guinea army is smaller than Fiji's despite having ten times the population. Vanuatu has a small paramilitary mobile force and Solomon Islands has a comparatively large police force.⁶ Also unique in the region is Fiji's history of coups, beginning in 1987. These military interventions have had negative spillover effects on regional stability while also shaping Fiji's international role and relationships. Regional organizations based in Fiji as well as regional security mechanisms have been negatively impacted by defence and diplomatic sanctions on Fiji.⁷

Country	Type of Force	Personnel	Population
Fiji	Military	4,000	924,000
Papua New Guinea	Military	3,600	9,400,000
Tonga	Military	500	106,000
Vanuatu	Paramilitary	300	319,000
Solomon Islands	Police	1,500	700,000

TABLE 1:
MILITARY, PARAMILITARY, AND POLICE FORCES IN SELECTED PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

Source: World Bank data on population estimates. Military data is approximated from various sources.

In December 2022, a general election saw the first peaceful transfer of power in Fiji's history, ending the 16-year long rule of a government that first came to power via a coup in December 2006 and was twice returned to power via elections. The change of government provided an opportunity to rebuild regional relations, signaled by the early success of newly appointed Prime Minister Sitiveni

⁶ Recent reports have suggested that both Vanuatu and Solomon Islands are considering establishing military forces. See: Stephen Dziedzic, "Defence Minister Happy for Australia to Support Solomon Islands Defence Force," *ABC News*, July 19, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-19/australia-happy-to-support-solomon-islands-defence-force/102622652>

⁷ This includes the negative impact on Fiji's capacity to counter external threats. Sandra Tarte, "Fiji Islands' Security and Defense Policy Issues," in *Asia Pacific Countries' Security Outlook and Its Implications for the Defense Sector: The NIDS International Workshop on Asia Pacific Security January 21-22, 2009*, ed. Rizal Sukma, NIDS Joint Research Series 5 (International Workshop on Asia Pacific Security, Tokyo: The National Inst. for Defense Studies, 2010).

Rabuka to persuade Kiribati to return to the Pacific Islands Forum.⁸ The change of government also led to a new foreign policy focus on the impact of geopolitical tensions in the Pacific. Central to this foreign policy has been the concept of the Pacific as a zone or ocean of peace.

This paper begins with an overview of Fiji's recent perspectives of geopolitical dynamics in the Pacific. It analyses Fiji's efforts to promote regional and global stability in the context of heightened geopolitical competition, by focusing on its advocacy for the "zone of peace" concept. It assesses the factors that will impact Fiji's role in leading this process and the prospects for its implementation. Finally, it outlines recommendations for the way forward.

Perspectives on regional stability and geopolitics

Like a number of other Pacific Island countries, Fiji has a long held foreign policy position of 'friends to all, enemies to none'. In the Pacific Islands context, this posture has been interpreted to mean being free to choose who to partner with, and not being told by others who they can or cannot be friends with. It is a 'soft' non-alignment that does not preclude defence pacts but seeks to avoid or resist being confined to spheres of influence. As former prime minister Frank Bainimarama declared in 2015, 'We have no desire as a Pacific Small Island Developing State to be drawn into the conflicts of others.'⁹

This principle has been qualified to some extent by the foreign policy orientation of the government of the time. During the early years under the leadership of Frank Bainimarama, who was in power from 2007 to 2022, there was a tilt towards China. This tilt was primarily a response to the diplomatic isolation and sanctions imposed on the government by Western partners (including Australia, New Zealand and the United States) after the coup of 2006, which compelled Fiji to actively seek new friends and allies.¹⁰

The evolving geopolitical dynamics in the region in recent years provided an enabling environment, not just for Fiji but also for other Pacific Island states, to drive their own priorities and agenda. New and emerging development partners such as China were willing to facilitate the establishment or reinvigoration of

8 Kiribati was one of five Micronesian states to split from the Forum in 2021 following a disputed appointment of a new Secretary General of the PIF Secretariat. Kiribati was the only one to initially not accept a political deal to reunite the PIF. See: Lydia Lewis and Kevin Anthony, "A 'significant' Moment for Pacific Unity? Leaders Keeping 'Fingers Crossed,'" RNZ, February 24, 2023, sec. Pacific, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/484776/a-significant-moment-for-pacific-unity-leaders-keeping-fingers-crossed>.

9 Frank Bainimarama, "Hon PM Bainimarama Speech at the China-Fiji 40th Anniversary Diplomatic Relations Symposium Opening," Fiji Government, November 5, 2015, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/English/hon-pm-bainimarama-speech-at-the-china-fiji-40th-a>

10 Sandra Tarte, "Fiji's Search for New Friends | East Asia Forum," *East Asia Forum* (blog), January 13, 2011, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2011/01/13/fijis-search-for-new-friends-2/>; see also Sandra Tarte, "Building a Strategic Partnership: Fiji-China Relations since 2009," in *The China Alternative*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (ANU Press, 2021), 375–95, <https://doi.org/10.22459/CA.2021>

Pacific Island-led regional bodies. They also provided alternative sources of security and development cooperation, as well as opportunities to access more markets.

Overall, China was viewed as a more amenable development partner, with less stringent processes for getting large infrastructure projects implemented.¹¹

As noted by the PIF's first Pacific Security Outlook report in 2023, geopolitical tensions benefitted the Pacific's efforts to address climate change and related security priorities such as maritime security and disaster preparedness 'by drawing much needed attention and resources to the Pacific'.¹² But as geopolitical competition intensified in the Pacific, it also became a distraction to the region's more pressing priorities, drawing resources away from where they were most needed. This was alluded to by former Fijian Prime Minister Bainimarama when he observed in 2022 that the 'staggering expense' of nuclear arsenals 'cripples our response' to the climate crisis and pandemic.¹³

An election at the end of 2022 brought former coup leader and prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka back to power. Rabuka, who is both Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, sought to focus Fiji's foreign policy on the impact of geopolitical tensions in the Pacific. Rabuka has repeatedly described the Pacific as being 'at the centre of geopolitical tensions'. Major powers were, in his view, seeking to 'polarize the Pacific into their own camps', compelling countries to choose sides and further militarizing the region.¹⁴

Despite early suggestions that the Rabuka-led government was planning to align more towards Western powers, the 'friends to all' principle has been reaffirmed as a foreign policy priority: promoting regional and global peace and security in the context of growing rivalry between the United States and China. This is encapsulated in the concept of the Pacific as a 'zone of peace'.

11 See: Dame Meg Taylor, "Opening Remarks," in *The China Alternative*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith (ANU Press, 2021), xi–xvi, <https://doi.org/10.22459/CA.2021>; Sandra Tarte, "Reconciling Regional Security Narratives in the Pacific," *East Asia* 39, no. 1 (March 1, 2022): 29–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09367-w>

12 "The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022-2023" (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022), <https://pacificsecurity.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pacific-Security-Outlook-Report-2022-2023-1-1.pdf>

13 Nic Maclellan, "Forum Leaders Meet to Consolidate Blue Pacific Agenda," *Islands Business*, July 11, 2022.

14 "Fiji Prime Minister Warns against US and China Attempts to 'Polarise' Pacific," *The Guardian*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/aug/25/fiji-prime-minister-warns-against-us-and-china-attempts-to-polarise-pacific>



View of the South Pacific Ocean, Fiji. August 2016, Rickard Törnblad, Wikimedia Commons.

The Pacific zone of peace

Prime Minister Rabuka first alluded to the zone of peace idea at the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) leaders' summit, held in Vanuatu in August 2023.¹⁵ In a video statement released by the Fijian Government, Rabuka spoke of the 'collective need of the Pacific to be a zone of peace, a zone of non-aligned territories'. Similarly, the Efate Declaration on Mutual Respect, Responsibility, Cooperation and Amity, adopted at the end of the 2023 Summit, highlighted 'the risks from major power tensions' and called for the MSG sub-region to be a zone of 'peace, prosperity and neutrality'.

Rabuka introduced the concept to the global stage when he addressed the UN General Assembly in September 2023. He asserted that the region's 'zone of peace' would be 'the Blue Pacific's contribution to world order'.¹⁶ The following month, in a speech in Australia, Rabuka explained that under the zone or 'Ocean of Peace',¹⁷ major powers and Pacific nations would commit to 'maintaining respect for

¹⁵ The MSG is a sub-regional intergovernmental group comprising four states (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji), plus the FLNKS, a coalition representing the pro-independence Kanak (Melanesian) population of New Caledonia. Its headquarters are located in Vanuatu. Indonesia is an Associate Member while the West Papuan independence movement has observer status.

See: <https://msgsec.info/>

¹⁶ Sitiveni Rabuka, "Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka Delivers a Powerful Address at the UN General Assembly," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Fiji, September 22, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/prime-minister-sitiveni-rabuka-delivers-powerful-address-at-the-un-general-assembly/>

¹⁷ The terms 'zone of peace' and 'ocean of peace' are now used interchangeably.

each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity' and refrain from 'actions that may jeopardise regional order and stability'.¹⁸ While no examples were provided by Rabuka, he has since referred to his vision of a region 'free of militarization, with a careful definition of what that means'.¹⁹ In remarks commemorating Fiji's independence day on October 10, Rabuka described the 'Pacific zone of peace' as a 'call for global solidarity in the face of environmental challenges that threaten our very existence'.²⁰ This advocacy culminated with a presentation to leaders at the PIF meeting in Cook Islands in November. Welcoming this presentation, leaders tasked the PIF Secretariat to 'further develop the concept to ensure the initiatives and activities... are aligned with regional security arrangements...'.²¹

Regional diplomacy remains central to how Fiji and its neighbours respond to and navigate the challenges they face, including intensifying strategic competition. This includes sub-regionalism (see Efate Declaration above). For Fiji, regional action is a way to influence and inform both the broader region (the Asia-Pacific) and global arenas. The PIF has adopted a collective vision for the region and an agreed-upon set of priorities to advance Pacific regionalism for the next three decades: the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. One of the thematic areas is peace and security. Fiji's leaders (present and past) have endorsed this strategy as the basis of regional solidarity and stability.²²

Kaiku and Boie note that the zone of peace concept 'overlaps with existing regional commitments, which have been set out to navigate the region through uncertain times'.²³ Apart from the 2050 Strategy, these include the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty and the Boe Declaration on regional security cooperation. In this context it has been described as yet another way to assert a 'Pacific notion of peace'.

Statements by Fiji's leaders reveal several key elements of the zone of peace. Non-alignment – or not taking sides in the current geopolitical environment – is a major component of the zone of peace concept. This reflects the 'friends to all'

18 "Pacific Security Snapshot | 27 October 2023," *Pacific Security College* (blog), October 26, 2023, <https://pacificsecurity.net/pacific-security-snapshot-27-october-2023/>

19 Sitiveni Rabuka, "The Prime Minister Hon. Sitiveni Rabuka's Remarks at the Opening of the Great Council of Chiefs Meeting," Office of the Prime Minister Fiji, February 27, 2024, <https://www.pmooffice.gov.fj/the-prime-minister-hon-sitiveni-rabukas-remarks-at-the-opening-of-the-great-council-of-chiefs-meeting-27-02-2024/>

20 Shania Prasad, "PM Emphasizes about Rebuilding Fiji," *Fiji Broadcasting Corporation*, October 10, 2023, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/pm-emphasizes-about-rebuilding-fiji/>

21 "52nd Pacific Islands Forum Communique," November 9, 2023, <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/52nd%20Pacific%20Islands%20Forum%20Communique%2020231109.pdf>

22 "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent" (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022), <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>

23 Patrick Kaiku and Faith Hope Boie, "A Pacific 'Zone of Peace' – What Will It Entail?," *The Interpreter* (blog), November 21, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/pacific-zone-peace-what-will-it-entail>

posture adopted by Fiji and other Pacific Island countries. Rabuka has repeatedly stressed the importance of maintaining good relations with both the US and China. In this way the United States and China, together with Australia and New Zealand (among others) can be encouraged ‘to work more closely together’ in the Pacific.²⁴

This is linked to a second key element, which is to promote greater cooperation, particularly among major powers, in addressing global as well as regional challenges such as climate change and maritime security. Kaiku and Boie observe that Rabuka ‘envisages a mediator role for Pacific Island states’. This does not necessarily refer to a ‘peace brokering’ role,²⁵ but rather to facilitating dialogue and perhaps constructive engagement between the major powers. In 2023 Rabuka made use of bilateral and regional summits with world leaders, including with the Presidents of China and the United States, to call for a peaceful resolution of major power differences and for the US and China to find ‘common ground’. Advancing the zone of peace has also been a means for Fiji to promote common ground with these major powers. For instance, at a meeting with Xi Jinping on the margins of the 2023 APEC Summit, Rabuka ‘expressed Fiji’s solidarity with China’s Global Security Initiative’ which he said aligned with the Pacific zone of peace.²⁶

Underpinning the cooperation envisaged above is the return to prominence of the Pacific Way discourse. This can be viewed as a third key element of the zone of peace concept. The Pacific Way was a phrase coined by Fiji’s first prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, in his first speech to the United Nations in 1970, to describe the ‘calm and orderly moves to independence’ by Pacific Island states.²⁷ It subsequently served as a unifying concept, facilitating regional cooperation by transcending the diversity of cultures and geography within the region.²⁸ In more recent years, the Pacific Way was invoked by former Prime Minister Bainimarama to support a Pacific Island-led regionalism and Pacific Island control over regional policy agendas.²⁹

24 Lydia Lewis, “Self-Proclaimed ‘apostle of Peace’ Fiji PM Rabuka Wants Conflict Free Pacific Ocean,” *RNZ*, October 18, 2023, sec. Pacific, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/500482/self-proclaimed-apostle-of-peace-fiji-pm-rabuka-wants-conflict-free-pacific-ocean>

25 Rabuka himself played such a role in the Solomon Islands conflict in the late 1990s.

26 Kretika Kumar, “Fiji and China Bolster Diplomatic Bonds for Global Security,” *Fiji Broadcasting Corporation*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/fiji-and-china-bolster-diplomatic-bonds-for-global-security/>

27 Stephanie Lawson, “Postcolonialism, Neo-Colonialism and the ‘Pacific Way’: A Critique of (Un)Critical Approaches,” <http://Dpa.Bellschool.Anu.Edu.Au/Ssgm-Research-Communication/Discussion-Paper-Series>, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.25911/5f20044706527>

28 The Pacific Way lost salience in later decades and was described by Epeli Hau’ofa as a ‘shallow ideology that was swept away by the rising tide of regional disunity of the 1980s’. See: “The Ocean in Us,” in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*, by Epeli Hau’ofa, [Nachdr.] (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), 41–59.

29 Sandra Tarte, “A New Pacific Regional Voice?: The Pacific Islands Development Forum,” in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, ed. Sandra Tarte and Greg Fry (ANU Press, 2015), 79–88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19w71mc.13>

In the contemporary context, the Pacific Way has several applications. Perhaps most pertinent to this paper is the Pacific Way approach to conflict resolution and problem solving. Ratu Mara, in a speech marking the 30th anniversary of the PIF in 2001, remarked on the difference between ‘imposed solutions’ and ‘working things out in ... the Pacific Way’.³⁰ The latter refers to building trust and understanding through dialogue and consensus, with an emphasis on personal relationships.

Rabuka’s successful mission to bring Kiribati back into the PIF in early 2023 was seen as an exemplar of Pacific Way diplomacy and has elevated the concept once again in regional diplomacy.³¹ Rabuka has since highlighted the Pacific Way as a means to ‘foster understanding within and beyond the region’.³²

A response by Fiji to geopolitical dynamics in the region, the zone of peace aims to mitigate the effects of US-China competition. These include the risks of growing militarisation, polarisation, and possible great power conflict in the Pacific. But how well placed is Fiji to drive this agenda? The following section examines the factors that are shaping Fiji’s role and its ability to advance the Pacific zone of peace.

Coherence and compromise in Fiji’s zone of peace diplomacy

As an influential Pacific Island nation and regional hub, Fiji has attracted the attention of major powers, seeking to ensure they remain (or become) Fiji’s ‘security partner of choice’. In recent years this international attention has led to significant levels of defence cooperation, notably with Australia, New Zealand and the United States.³³ This cooperation has served to also enhance Fiji’s ability to contribute to broader regional security agendas such as through maritime surveillance and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HA/DR). But while the security cooperation of major partners has been beneficial, especially to the Fiji Military, it can also constrain the policy space for Fiji, making it difficult for the government to challenge the security priorities and preferences of its partners.

This can be seen in the Rabuka Government’s response to the Trilateral Security Pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States (known as AUKUS). As a result of the agreement, Australia will become the seventh country in the world to operate nuclear-powered submarines.

30 The speech given in Nauru, was reprinted in: Kamimese Mara, “Keynote Address on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the South Pacific Forum of Leaders,” *Fiji Times*, August 19, 2001.

31 Kaiku and Boie argue that Rabuka is ‘putting a personal stamp on the regional response’: Kaiku and Boie, “A Pacific ‘Zone of Peace’ – What Will It Entail?”

32 Mosese Raqio, “In Fiji, We Place Our Trust in Multilateralism – PM Rabuka,” *Fiji Village*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/In-Fiji-we-place-our-trust-in-multilateralism--PM-Rabuka-rxf485/>

33 Tarte, “Reconciling Regional Security Narratives in the Pacific.”

AUKUS remains a contentious and divisive issue within the region. The announcement of the agreement in 2021 caught many Pacific Island countries by surprise and caused widespread disquiet in the region. Questions remain about its compatibility with the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (also known as the Treaty of Rarotonga).³⁴ China has sought to heighten regional concern about AUKUS, with the Chinese Foreign Minister in 2021, warning that the Agreement would “create risks of nuclear proliferation ...cause an arms race and jeopardize regional peace and stability”.³⁵

Despite Prime Minister Rabuka’s advocacy for the Pacific zone of peace concept, he has not spoken out against the nuclear-powered submarine deal.

Instead, he expressed appreciation that AUKUS members ‘were prepared to share with Fiji what they were strategically doing ... to maintain stability in the region’.³⁶

When asked about AUKUS during an event at the Lowy Institute in Sydney, he stressed that Fiji had limited influence on the deal, saying: ‘All I can do is hope that this project will assist the concept of the zone of peace in the Pacific’.³⁷

The above (somewhat muted) position on AUKUS underscores what critics have described as a ‘major flaw’ in the zone of peace concept, which is that, as currently conceived, it fails to ‘negate the growing militarism’ in the region. This is because, according to one assessment, ‘Rabuka’s zone of peace relies on military might to work. It doesn’t seek to disarm the Pacific or remove foreign bases. Instead, it paints a picture of a zone of peacekeeping, where we simply manage conflicts and instability among our own by having military forces ready to go...’³⁸

Peacekeeping has featured in the conceptualization of the zone of peace. The Fijian Prime Minister had indicated on one occasion that within the zone of peace, countries with armed forces, such as Fiji, could assist other regional countries experiencing domestic unrest.³⁹

34 See references in para 56 of “52nd Pacific Islands Forum Communique.” The leaders urged commitment to compliance with ‘international law, in particular the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Rarotonga Treaty, and IAEA safeguard agreements’:

35 Xiaoci Deng, “China Warns against AUKUS, to Make Meetings Routine with Pacific Island Countries, Enhancing Ties to Higher Level - Global Times,” Global Times, October 21, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236961.shtml>

36 Apenisa Waqairadovu, “Rabuka Acknowledges Key International Partners,” *Fiji Broadcasting Corporation*, October 15, 2023, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/rabuka-acknowledges-key-international-partners/>

37 Rod McGuirk, “Fijian Leader Hopes Australian Submarines Powered by US Nuclear Technology Will Enhance Peace,” *AP News*, October 17, 2023, sec. World News, <https://apnews.com/article/rabuka-australia-fiji-aucus-submarine-5a4caa08a0b6cba5e51c71d1f8590657>

38 Marco de Jong and Talei Mangioni, “Where to Now for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific?,” *E-Tangata*, November 18, 2023, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/where-to-now-for-a-nuclear-free-and-independent-pacific/>

39 “Pacific Security Snapshot | 27 October 2023.”

This reliance on military-based approaches to peace, what has been described as ‘peace through deterrence’ rather than ‘peace through disarmament and non-proliferation’,⁴⁰ can be explained further by the prominent role of the military in Fiji’s political decision making.



Lance Corporal Nabala Rua, assigned to 3rd Battalion, Fiji Infantry Regiment, rushes during a flanking maneuver demonstration at a cadet graduation in Napuka Village, Aug. 7, 2019. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Whitney C. Houston, Flickr.

The Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) has a key role, beyond traditional security and defence, international peacekeeping, and HA/DR. The Constitution of 2013 (section 131) grants ‘overall responsibility’ to the RFMF ‘to ensure at all times the security, defence and well-being of Fiji and all Fijians’. This has been interpreted, at times, by the RFMF leadership to bestow a form of supra-constitutional authority over democratically-elected governments. Indeed, Fiji has been described as a ‘democracy by military permission’.⁴¹

40 “Outcomes Document” (Track Two Pacific Dialogue on Security and Geopolitics in the Pacific, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 2024), 10.

41 Stewart Firth, “Instability in the Pacific Islands: A Status Report,” *The Interpreter* (blog), June 4, 2018, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/instability-pacific-islands-status-report>

Unlike the Government, the RFMF arguably views the current geopolitical context in a more positive light and has benefitted substantially from geopolitical competition. Australia has been a major contributor, for example funding the development of a Fijian military facility known as Blackrock (a regional hub for peacekeeping and HA/DR training) and a new naval headquarters.

The RFMF also courts partnerships with both the United States and China which have proved fruitful. Examples include a Shiprider agreement signed by Fiji and the United States in 2018, whereby Fijian defence and law enforcement personnel embark on United States Navy and Coast Guard vessels to patrol Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone and adjacent high seas. With China, a bilateral meeting between the Commander of the RFMF and the Chief of Joint Staff Department of China's Central Military Committee in Beijing in late 2023 provided opportunities to explore areas of cooperation ranging from military aid and training, to joint exercises and information sharing 'to promote stability and peace in the region'.⁴²

Despite the return to an elected government in 2014 and the historic transfer of power in 2022, the RFMF continues to maintain a dominant position within the state, including forging defence partnerships that may in turn shape government policy. In the past year, the Fiji Military Forces publicly asserted its position against a number of government decisions and policies. These included a proposed Cabinet reshuffle (which was subsequently dropped), as well as Fiji's vote against a United National General Assembly Resolution (ES-10/21) in October 2023 calling for a 'humanitarian truce' in Gaza. This vote was strongly criticized by the Military commander, among others, who described it as jeopardizing the 'safety and security' of Fiji's peacekeepers deployed in the Middle East.⁴³ Fiji voted in favour of a subsequent ceasefire resolution in December 2023 (ES-10/22).⁴⁴

While the role of the RFMF in Fiji leads to a stronger emphasis on military-based notions of peace and security, it also reaffirms Fiji's position of 'friends to all' and arguably provides Fiji with some leverage in driving this element of the zone of peace. However, this 'friends to all' position is not shared within the current government, which is a coalition of three parties.

42 Also discussed at this meeting was collaboration to address the global challenge of climate change, see: Ritika Pratap, "RFMF Strengthens Ties with PLA," *Fiji Broadcasting Corporation*, November 5, 2023, <https://www.fbcnews.com.fj/news/rfmf-strengthens-ties-with-pla/>

43 Vijay Narayan, "RFMF Concerned with Non-Consultative Approach Taken by the Govt in Its Decision to Disapprove the UN Resolution on Gaza - Major General Kalouniwai," *Fiji Village*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/RFMF-concerned-with-non-consultative-approach-taken-by-the-Govt-in-its-decision-to-disapprove-the-UN-resolution-on-Gaza---Major-General-Kalouniwai-5xf84r/>

44 Fiji, like a number of other Pacific Island states, voted against the first resolution. On the second resolution, Fiji was the only Pacific island country to move from a no to a yes vote.



Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, Wikimedia Commons.

One of these, the National Federation Party, is wary of geopolitical competition declaring that this will have 'long term adverse consequences for the region'.⁴⁵ This party has made clear its concern about China's growing influence in Fiji, particularly under the previous government. It has reservations about the 'friends to all' foreign policy, believing Fiji should align more closely with its traditional partners with whom it shares similar political values. It also favours a closer relationship with Taiwan. Following the change of government in Fiji in December 2022 the Taipei Trade Office in Fiji was allowed to revert to its former title: Trade Mission of the Republic of China (Taiwan) to the Republic of Fiji. There were expectations of closer ties between Taiwan and Fiji. However, this expectation was short-lived and the change was reversed several months later following pressure from China.⁴⁶

The role and status of Taiwan is one of the Pacific's most contentious geopolitical issues, which the zone of peace will need to address. This has implications for the broader Asia-Pacific region, where tensions between Taiwan and China are considered a major flashpoint. Until recently, a significant number of Taiwan's allies were from the region. This has steadily dwindled to just three states now who have diplomatic ties with Taiwan – Tuvalu, Republic of Marshall Islands and Palau. The most recent switch occurred in early 2024 with Nauru restoring diplomatic relations with the PRC. This provoked a sharp exchange between

45 Vijay Narayan, "I Hope the World Will Find the Courage and Will to Reform the Global Financial Architecture – Prof. Prasad," *Fiji Village*, September 26, 2023, <https://www.fijivillage.com/news/I-hope-the-world-will-find-the-courage-and-will-to-reform-the-global-financial-architecture--Prof-Prasad-58rxf4/>

46 "Fiji Reverses Taiwan Office Name Change Decision Due to Chinese Pressure," *Focus Taiwan - CNA English News*, June 21, 2023, <https://focustaiwan.tw/cross-strait/202306210023>

the United States and China when individuals in the US government expressed disappointment with Nauru's decision.⁴⁷

The regional trend has thus been in line with the global norm of recognition of the People's Republic of China over Taiwan and the One China policy. But several Pacific Island states, including Fiji, also maintain political and economic attachments to Taiwan. These have the potential to provoke future instability and external pressure, if not interference, particularly during periods of political transition.

Fiji's advocacy for the zone of peace – while complicated by the internal differences described above – can be a way to 'future proof' against such interference. This future proofing can be seen with the emphasis on forging foreign relations based on principles of 'Pacific Way diplomacy', including mutual trust and respect, non-interference and consensus. For Prime Minister Rabuka, the zone of peace can also be a way to mediate differences and tensions between foreign partners and thus to also build his personal legacy.⁴⁸

47 See: "China Accuses US of 'Slander' as Diplomatic Spats Surround Taiwan Election," *Al-Jazeera*, January 15, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/15/pacific-nation-nauru-cuts-ties-with-taiwan-switches-to-china>; "China Formally Restores Diplomatic Relations with Nauru after Pacific Island Nation Cut Taiwan Ties," *AP News*, January 24, 2024, sec. World News, <https://apnews.com/article/china-nauru-taiwan-diplomatic-recognition-23fd9cdd0210a2340b5ae2092d2a85d1>

48 Kaiku and Boie, "A Pacific 'Zone of Peace' – What Will It Entail?"

Outlook and recommendations

The zone of peace as articulated by Rabuka may provide a basis for building regional stability while consolidating a Pacific-owned and led regional security agenda. In terms of Fiji's role, much depends on how political actors within Fiji (including the military) embrace this concept and contribute to advancing its core elements at the regional level. An opportunity to progress this conversation domestically will come with Fiji's defence and national security review, scheduled for 2024. As Singh observes, the review will be an opportunity to understand and address 'internal security risks' and thus 'create an acceptable framework for Fiji's future stability'.⁴⁹ Such risks have the potential to destabilize not only Fiji but the wider region.

The RFMF has welcomed this review, which it sees as an opportunity to review its own strategic plan. The zone of peace concept could draw much needed attention to the role and responsibilities of the RFMF in advancing national security, as well as its contributions to and impact on regional stability. This includes analysis of the defence partnerships the RFMF has forged, particularly with China, the United States and Australia. The 2024 defence and national security review, along with the development of Fiji's first-ever Foreign Policy White Paper,⁵⁰ provides opportunities for Fiji to further clarify the zone of peace concept and determine how to advance this concept both regionally and globally. There is also an unprecedented opportunity to articulate synergies and advance coordination between Fiji's foreign and defence policies.⁵¹

At the regional level, the PIF Secretariat has been tasked to further develop the zone of peace concept, for consideration at the 2024 PIF leaders' summit. There is a directive that the 'initiatives and activities' arising from this process be aligned with existing regional security arrangements. Key among these is the 2050 Strategy, adopted in 2022 as the PIF's overarching blueprint to advance Pacific regionalism for the next three decades. It is described as the region's 'opportunity to engage with and shape the most significant dynamics on our region, in order to secure our long-term wellbeing and prosperity'.⁵²

49 Shailendra Singh, "Fiji's Defence and Security Review | A Pivotal Step towards Stability," *The Fiji Times*, December 30, 2023, <https://www.fijitimes.com.fj/fjis-defence-and-security-review-a-pivotal-step-towards-stability/>

50 "Fiji's First Foreign Policy White Paper," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Fiji, February 16, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.gov.fj/fjis-first-foreign-policy-white-paper/>

51 Note that Fiji's representatives at PIFS regional security committee meetings are usually from Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (previously the Ministry of Defence), rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

52 "2050 Strategy Implementation Plan 2023-2030 Phase One: Setting the Foundations Towards Transformational Change" (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2023), https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/2050-Strategy-Implementation-Plan_2023-2030.pdf

Among other things, the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan calls for a ‘flexible, inclusive and responsive regional security mechanism’ to address both traditional and non-traditional security issues. This includes developing peace building approaches. There is an opportunity to frame this mechanism around the core elements of the zone of peace concept. Below follow a few recommendations towards this end.

► **Include the zone of peace in the Fiji defence and security review of 2024**

Fiji’s defence and national security review of 2024 **should include the geopolitical implications of the zone of peace concept and ways to advance this concept at the national, regional, and global levels.** The government has appointed a review committee led by a former RFMF Chief of Staff to undertake consultations and prepare the national security and defence strategy. The development of Fiji’s first Foreign Policy White Paper in 2024 provides further opportunity to consolidate the zone of peace concept and Fiji’s policies and actions to advance this concept. It is important to **achieve consensus** around the core elements of the zone of peace and ensure its guiding principles and priorities are reflected in the National Security and Defence Strategy and Foreign Policy White Paper. This includes consensus on the role of the RFMF in advancing national security, including its constitutionally prescribed powers, as well as its contributions to and impact on regional stability. Policy coordination between Fiji’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (previously the Ministry of Defence) will need to be prioritized, in particular on representation at PIFS regional security meetings. There is also a need for coordination in Fiji’s bilateral approaches to the major powers, especially China and the United States. This requires leadership from ministers and Permanent Secretaries.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Suva, Fiji. Matthias Suessen, Wikimedia Commons

■ Integrate the Zone of Peace in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent

A priority action that Fiji should take at the regional level over the next 12 months (2024-25) is to **advocate that the zone of peace be considered an integral part of the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and seek high level endorsement from leaders and foreign ministers.** Fiji should propose that the zone of peace become the overarching framework for the ‘flexible, inclusive and responsive’ regional security mechanism referred to in Phase One of the 2050 Strategy Implementation Plan.

If the PIF at its August 2024 summit in Tonga considers and accepts this proposal by Fiji’s Prime Minister, it could become part of the work underway within the PIFS to review the regional security architecture.

The PIFS has already been tasked with developing the zone of peace concept, in the 2023 PIF leaders’ communique.⁵³ The Fiji Ministry of Foreign Affairs should work with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration to provide leadership and advocacy for this initiative.

■ Build consensus on principles among Pacific Island countries

Embedding the zone of peace within the regional architecture requires building consensus among Pacific Island countries around its core principles and components, as well as how to operationalize this concept over the next twelve months (2024-25). In order to support this consensus building process, the Fiji Government should encourage and participate in regional dialogues on security and geopolitics in the Pacific. Regional security dialogues (Track 1.5 and Track 2) can build confidence between Pacific Island countries to discuss the impact of geopolitical tensions in the region, including militarization trends. These dialogues can also provide the foundation for collective engagement with the major powers, particularly the United States and China, on operationalizing the zone of peace. The first Track 2 Dialogue on security and geopolitics in the Pacific was convened at the University of the South Pacific in December 2023. The dialogue supported the need for further dialogues, including the prospect of including security partners in future rounds. **The Fiji Government should propose that such Dialogues form part of the Boe Declaration Action Plan** on regional security cooperation, to be reviewed in 2024 by the PIFS.

■ Towards a code of conduct

One important outcome of Fiji’s zone of peace initiative could be the development and adoption, by the PIF, of a Code of Conduct for a Pacific Zone of Peace. This Code of Conduct would apply to Pacific Island countries as well major powers

⁵³ “52nd Pacific Islands Forum Communique.”

in the region. It would be an explicit statement of Pacific Way diplomacy, underpinned by international legal principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. While voluntary, it would promote transparency on defence and foreign policy matters and serve as a regional confidence building and tension reduction instrument. The region has some prior experience with international codes of conduct – the main example being the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.⁵⁴ Further research and analysis of this proposal is recommended.

54 Samantha Andrews, “Twenty Years of the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries,” *The Fish Site* (blog), December 4, 2015, <https://thefishsite.com/articles/twenty-years-of-the-fao-code-of-conduct-for-responsible-fisheries>.

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The Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is a Seoul-based organization and network of political, military, diplomatic leaders, and experts from across the Asia-Pacific region, working to address global security challenges, with a particular focus on reducing and eliminating nuclear weapons risks. The mission of APLN is to inform and stimulate debate, influence action, and propose policy recommendations designed to address regional security threats, with an emphasis on nuclear and other WMD (weapon of mass destruction) threats, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which nuclear weapons and other WMDs are contained, diminished, and eventually eliminated.

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