



***FIJI'S MANAGEMENT OF
GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION IN
2023: SCALING BACK ON CHINA?***

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On Aug. 25, after a gathering of the [Melanesian Spearhead Group](#) in Vanuatu, Sitiveni Rabuka, the Fijian prime minister, [observed](#) that China and the United States “are trying to polarize the Pacific into their own camps, so we have to be very certain that whatever we do, we are mindful of the collective need of the Pacific to be a zone of peace, a zone of non-aligned territories.” Only 10 days earlier, in Suva, Samantha Power, administrator of the United States Agency for International Development, [told](#) an audience at the University of the South Pacific, “The United States is not forcing nations to choose between partnering with the United States and partnering with other nations to meet their development goals.” China’s foreign ministry [echoed](#) the choice of development partners sentiment only two months prior.

Set against each other, the above statements indicate a gap in the perceptions of external states and Pacific Island countries amid intensifying geostrategic competition in Oceania. As such, the task for Oceania’s political leaders to manage powerful and competing interests toward domestic and regional benefit is unenviable. This series, in two parts, examines how before and after the Fijian elections in December 2022, Suva has practiced the “friends to all, enemy to none” ethos held in many Pacific Island state capitals, and what the chances are of success for not

choosing. This first part explores the Rabuka administration’s outward decisiveness in domestic and international affairs, but part two shows how Suva has in reality implemented external power balancing that has resonances beyond the Fijian Islands.

When Fiji went to the polls on Dec. 14, 2022, familiar political parties and leaders sought political power, including FijiFirst, led by incumbent Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, the National Federation Party (NFP), led by Biman Prasad, and the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), led by Bill Govoka. The previous month, in a leadership contest, SODELPA removed Sitiveni Rabuka as party leader, who subsequently formed the People’s Alliance Party (PAP) and stood for national office. Rabuka is a long-standing political figure in Fiji leading two military coups in 1987 and serving as prime minister between 1992 and 1999. Rabuka’s move proved successful, after forming a coalition with the NFP and SODELPA, he became the new prime minister of Fiji on Christmas Eve in 2022. The change of administration ended 16 years of controversial rule under Bainimarama. The politics of Fiji were about to take new directions.

Debates prior to the December 2022 election centered on critical domestic issues, such as health, education, and the economy, as well as more divisive topics, such as funding for indigenous affairs, corruption, and accountability for past military coups. The election also raised differences over the foreign policy with Bainimarama’s administration represented as too close to China, a shift borne from the isolation of diplomatic and economic sanctions in Fiji’s post-2006 coup period. Under Bainimarama, in 2018, Fiji [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding on Belt and Road Initiative cooperation codifying over a decade’s worth of Chinese migration, aid, trade, and investment. At a testy Pacific Islands Forum Leaders meeting in 2019, Bainimarama [said](#), “The Chinese don’t insult us... They don’t go down and tell the world that we’ve given this much money to the Pacific islands. They don’t do that. They’re good people.”

Consequently, as the elections drew closer, opposition parties adopted positions that would slow the pace of relations with the People’s Republic of China and

move toward more favorable engagement with so-called traditional partners. Further, a security deal [signed](#) between the Solomon Islands and China set off a regional debate about the role of external powers in traditional security arrangements in Oceania. [SODELPA](#) and [PAP](#), and even [FijiFirst](#), sensing the electorate's waning feelings toward China and the reemergence of the United States in regional affairs, came out against the idea of such an agreement for Fiji. In the period between election day and the appointment of Rabuka as prime minister, Bill Govoka—as he pondered whether to join PAP and NFP in a coalition government—[told](#) the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “For SODELPA, our relationship in foreign affairs will be aligned closely to Australia, New Zealand and the members of the Pacific Island forum.”

In the immediate period following the formation of the new government, now Prime Minister Rabuka set about an ambitious agenda to set right the perceived domestic wrongs of the Bainimarama administration and to realign Fiji's sometimes uncooperative standpoints on regional issues. For example, in April, the coalition [overturned](#) the restrictive 2010 Media Industry Development Act and sought to [atone](#) on the state's behalf for the treatment of dissenters to the Bainimarama administration. To signal Fiji's more cooperative role in regional affairs, Rabuka was prominent in [facilitating](#) the return of Kiribati to the Pacific Islands Forum after it had resigned in protest at the appointment of Henry Puna to the position of secretary-general.

Prime Minister Rabuka also [approved](#) the return of University of South Pacific Vice Chancellor, Pal Ahluwalia to Fiji and resumed state funding, suspended under FijiFirst, of the region's leading higher education institution. Issues over USP also precipitated a sequence of events leading to legal charges for Bainimarama. In March, Fijian authorities accused the former prime minister and police commissioner, Sitiveni Qiliho, of tampering with an inquiry into financial misconduct at USP. Their trial [began](#) in July.

Foreign policy mirrors these rapid developments in domestic and regional affairs in the months since

Rabuka assumed office. In contrast to the early years of isolation under the Bainimarama administration, the strategic environment in the region has become [increasingly complex](#) with significant policy commitments and suitors reemerging, including the [United States](#), [Australia](#), [Aotearoa New Zealand](#), [India](#), [Korea](#), and [Japan](#), as well as the establishment of the [Partners of the Blue Pacific](#) in September 2022.

Rabuka made haste of his pre-election pledge to scale back relations with China, [noting](#), “Our system of democracy and justice systems are different so we will go back to those that have similar systems with us.” The shift was not only premised on political values, but also [support](#) for traditional partners on issues unpopular with Pacific Islanders, particularly Australia's acquisition of nuclear submarines under the AUKUS security pact. [AUKUS](#), a defense agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, is a response to China's growing military capabilities. Militarization and deployment of nuclear technology in a region experiencing the health and environmental traumas of nuclear testing proved [unwelcome](#) in Oceania. In this context, Rabuka's backing for Australia was a considerable marker of new times. However, this resolve in establishing in domestic and foreign affairs has not resulted in complete breaks with the past. As we will see in part two, Fiji has been put to the test in “how not choose” amid geostrategic competition.

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