



**FIJI'S MANAGEMENT OF
GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION IN
2023: HOW NOT TO CHOOSE:**

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As previously highlighted, the new Fijian prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka set a new course for Fiji's domestic and foreign policies, including a seeming turn from China toward so-called traditional allies, such as Australia.

However, the new Fijian government has also taken an approach of balancing external power interests that at times appears indecisive and at other times signals to some [observers](#) the loss of Chinese influence. Nevertheless, I argue, hedging on China merely reflects the tightrope walking act Pacific leaders must perform.

The most notable example of a cautious approach to China came in January 2023 when Rabuka decided to not [renew](#) a memorandum of understanding between the Fiji Police Force and China's Ministry of Public Security. The agreement oversaw training of Fijian police officers in China and the secondment of Chinese officers for periods of three to six months in Fiji, as well as the transfer of equipment. What gets lost in the framework of geostrategic competition is that such decisions are made not to favor one power over another, but to, at least ostensibly, serve the interests of the Fijian people. In this light, Rabuka's [qualification](#) on the status of the MOU in this June as under review makes much more sense. The prime

minister has also said that if the conditions were right, the MOU could be renewed.

A further example of the difficulty in managing converging external interests in Fiji also came in the immediate post-election period. On Jan. 23, a Fijian government press release [reaffirmed](#) Fiji's support for the "[one China Principle](#)," stating that there is only one China, the People's Republic of China (PRC), of which Taiwan is a part. Yet, on March 24, an official communication from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [reinstated](#) the Beijing unfriendly name "Trade Mission of the Republic of China (Taiwan)" for Taipei's representative office in Suva. Nevertheless, in June, the Fijian government [reversed](#) its decision so that the contentious term Republic of China could not be included. Taiwan [claimed](#) the reversal came under pressure from the PRC.

Attempts at senior level meetings between Rabuka and Chinese officials haven't gone well. In April, Rabuka [skipped](#) a meeting with visiting Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ma Zhaoxu. Further, the Prime Minister [called off](#) a trip to China when he sustained an injury after stumbling on some steps while looking at his mobile phone. Perhaps picking up on the seesawing calibrations in Fiji's relations with China, the new Chinese ambassador, Zhou Jian, [commented](#) that his country would still be open to a security agreement with Fiji. That didn't seem to do the trick as three months later Fiji [signed](#) a defense agreement to strengthen military training and maritime security with Aotearoa New Zealand.

Nevertheless, Rabuka's new course in foreign relations deserves more context. Commentaries that [assert](#) zero sum outcomes in the geostrategic contest between China and the United States and allies overlook how the new Prime Minister has also used his platform to criticize so called traditional partners. Within a week of assuming office, Rabuka [told](#) the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that "Australia and New Zealand and the United Kingdom and America...have not reorientated their thinking to the international landscape where we are all equal." In an echo of his predecessor's comments, Rabuka added, "China has come in with a blank sheet of paper. They have seen us as just development partners." What's

apparent is, in Suva, China is seen more as a trade and investment partner, and to a lesser extent an aid partner, than a security one. Consistent with the emphasis on commercial relations, media in both [China](#) and [Fiji](#) have reported on the importance of trade to bilateral ties with [tourism](#) stressed as a critical industry in Fiji's post-COVID-19 economic recovery.

Rabuka has continued a pattern established by his predecessor of prime minister attendance at the annual Chinese New Year celebrations organized by the Fiji Chinese community. At this year's festivities, he [acknowledged](#) the contributions of Fiji Chinese stating, "The Chinese diaspora in Fiji may be small but they are influential and play an integral part of Fiji's development." In an interview with Voice of South Pacific, a Chinese language news app, Rabuka [discussed](#) his long association with Fiji Chinese growing up in rural Fiji. The messaging was one of familiarity with Chinese communities rather than populist exclusion. In conversations, my Fiji Chinese friends have expressed relief with the change of government. Many Fiji Chinese supported Bainimarama's call for inclusivity on who gets to identify as "Fijian." Others were cautious about Rabuka's past of ethnonationalism; however, fatigue with the former Prime Minister stemmed from post-Covid economic stagnation and the widespread corruption that impacted private enterprise.

The stakes are becoming higher in Oceania. Regional leaders' [appeal](#) to keep power politics and militarization out of the region appear to have fallen on half deaf ears. The security pact between Solomon Islands and China, AUKUS, the [opening](#) of a new US base in Guam, the first in 70 years, are signs of a militarizing space. The United States has [set out](#) a vision for Pacific-led engagement through its September 2022 Pacific Partnership Strategy that follows closely the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#) agreed by Pacific Islands Forum members in 2021. These promises are [contrasted](#) with the Biden administration's February 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, which outlines a much clearer rationale for presence in the Pacific. In other words, the threat of China. In March 2023, China [announced](#) a seven percent increase in military spending citing escalating threats as the explanation.

The high stakes of external political, economic, and social influence in Oceania are a reality. Since the middle of the last decade the momentum has only intensified towards greater economic and military competition that is very much intertwined. Prime Minister Rabuka's comments and his government's policies towards external powers, in my opinion, do not signal a turn from China to the United States and allies. What it does signal is the difficult middle path through these competing interests. Officials from the United States and China may indicate that at the core of their interventions are the interests of Pacific Islanders. However, the intensified political, diplomatic, and economic presence from Washington and Beijing alone means these statements should be treated with skepticism.

The pressure of choice is a reality and a preferred outcome for forces beyond the region. The United States and China need not only back up their economic promises, but also their pledge to leave choice of political and development partners to the people of Oceania. However, the task of converting "not choosing" into tangible benefits for the people of Fiji and more broadly the people of the Pacific Islands in an atmosphere of tacit conditions on friendships is onerous, so it is no surprise that regional political leaders feel pulled and pressed in multiple directions as they consider all the costs and benefits of this renewed interest in their blue continent.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.