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# *The strategic outlook: a Fijian perspective*

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*General Rabuka provides his own perspective on the strategic outlook for Fiji, its security assistance needs and its capacity to contribute to security in the neighbourhood and beyond.*

**Key words:** strategic outlook; Fiji.

This paper represents my own views as a former commander of the Fiji Military Forces, a graduate of the Indian Defence Services Staff College and the Australian Joint Services Staff College, and a former Prime Minister of Fiji. I do not claim that anything I say is the view of the government or the people of Fiji.

## **Fiji in Strategic Context**

### ***Historical background***

Abel Tasman sighted the Fiji Group in 1643 and in 1774, 100 years before the group was ceded to Great Britain, Captain Cook landed on an island and barely avoided being cooked for dinner! The Wesleyan Missionaries arrived in 1835 and the French Catholic priests in 1844. Ten years later, Cakobau renounced his heathen gods and embraced Christianity. Three years later, in 1857, the British Government appointed a Consul who took up office in Levuka, which was the main trading centre and main European population focus at the time. Cakobau and some other influential chiefs ceded their land and people to Queen Victoria of Great Britain on 10 October 1874, effectively making Fiji a British Colony. Indian workers were brought in to work in the sugar cane fields in 1879, and Fiji became independent in 1970 after 96 years as a colony. Seventeen years later, after two military coups, I declared Fiji a Republic on 7 October 1987.

### ***Settling down***

Recently, Fiji was alerted by a tsunami warning resulting from an eight-plus magnitude Richter-scale earthquake in the Solomon Islands. On 26 December 2004, the world stood in awe as breaking news of the Indonesian tsunami came into our living rooms via television and radio news. Our regional neighbour, New Zealand, especially the population of Christchurch, is still coming to terms with the threat of earthquakes.

These tragic events could not be averted. The earth's geological core is still evolving. The foundations of the earth are still active, generating forces that are beyond human control. The international community has

effectively evolved ways and means of mitigating the effects of this natural phenomenon; to alleviate hardships for those affected.

In May 1987, the world was stunned when a military *coup d'état* removed the elected government in Fiji. The democratic world reacted in the usual punitive manner, adopting the isolationism strategy to castigate the nation under the new political order leadership.

In May 2000, George Speight tried to overthrow the Labour Government of Fiji. There was a big hue and cry in the Oceania neighbourhood. Bainimarama outsmarted Speight and took control without an election. Our neighbours said nothing. Qarase used his time in the post-Speight interim government put in by Bainimarama to manoeuvre himself into a vote-winning position and won the elections of 2001 and 2006.

Bainimarama ousted Qarase in December 2006 and the latter cried foul, demanding that he be reinstated. He conveniently forgot that he did not advise Bainimarama to reinstate Chaudhry in 2000. Instead, he accepted the prime ministership in the post-Speight administration that took Fiji to the 2001 general election, which he won.

The 'democratic world' except for the biggest – *i.e.* China, India, and Indonesia – turned away from Fiji. France only said *c'est la vie* and sold us Airbus – well we have been informed that our government delegation that went to Toulouse was shown a mock-up of the aircraft we will get.

Bainimarama's government has promised the people of Fiji elections next year. The strategic outlook for Fiji is bound to change in the post 2014 era. Up to now, Fiji has been trying to find the natural settlement of its foundational socio-political fabrics, and when these attempts offend those societies that have found or forced their own settlement beyond domestic and international protests, Fiji and its people suffer castigation, isolation and alienation. Fortunately, in international affairs, there can be no vacuum. When traditional trading partners and development allies leave, the space created will always be immediately taken up by others.

### ***Socio-economic considerations***

The Fiji Group lies astride the 180<sup>th</sup> meridian, between 174 degrees east and 178 degrees west longitudes, and between 12 and 22 degrees latitudes south of the equator. It is quite centrally located and its central location is a

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strategic asset in sea and air travel – an advantage gradually diminished by the advent of long-haul bigger jets and the development of more attractive cruise-ship destinations in the region.

Fiji enjoys a tropical climate ideal for an agro-based<sup>2</sup> economy, but lacks the infrastructure and the investor confidence to encourage full utilisation of the agro-friendly climate for large-scale mechanised agriculture. The annual cyclone season is a damaging influence to both infrastructure and cultivations to the average value of FJ\$10 to 20 million each year. Sugar produced from sugar cane, which used to be the mainstay of Fiji's economy, now lies a poor sixth in importance in our export earnings, with less than FJ\$90 million. Ahead of sugar are: others FJ\$300 million, fish FJ\$205 million, mineral water FJ\$120 million, garments FJ\$95 million, and gold FJ\$90 million.

Another telling factor in the slow agro-industry growth is the land ownership system in Fiji and the indigenous people's perception that their only tangible identification with the country, their land, is being manipulated by law and legislature for ownership by immigrant Fijians. This is why the indigenous people feel insecure when the legislature is in the hands of the non-indigenous people who can pass laws to take land away from their ownership.

The volcanic nature of the major islands provides a lot of potential for renewable energy and the two major dams on Viti Levu and a few small ones in some outer islands provide much of the energy requirements for the country. The evolving weather pattern and the El Niño and La Niña cycles dictate that we still need diesel imports worth FJ\$500 million annually, for the diesel power to supplement or periodically replace hydroelectricity supplies. Indeed, the outer islands without mini-hydroelectricity sources rely totally on diesel, although small-scale and domestic units of solar power generation cater for families in rural communities served under the government's rural electrification programme.

Of the 800 million kWh of electricity produced, 64 per cent in 2012 was hydroelectricity. The government has very investor-friendly packages for those investors willing to come and invest in renewable energy developments, but investor and investment insecurity, real or perceived, has so far hampered real growth in this area.

Fiji has some commercial-scale deposits of minerals and underground water. Vatukoula Gold Mine producing FJ\$90 million in exports, and Fiji Water, with other underground water exporters, exporting FJ\$120 million, testify to this. The Chinese mining of bauxite on Vanua Levu, and the ongoing development of the Namosi Copper Mine in the interior of Viti Levu, promise greater national income in future, especially when predictions of gold output from this new mine exceed those of the long-running Vatukoula mine.

Fiji's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is good fishing ground for most of the Asian fleets, as well as the small Fiji fleet. Small as our fishing fleet is, fish exports earn the

country about FJ\$210 million annually. We regret the absence of effective EEZ policing by long-range maritime patrol aircraft that used to be a co-operative effort between Fiji and both Australia and New Zealand in the days when our defence and economic friendships were strong.

## **Defence and Security Outlook**

### ***Regional defence and security co-operation***

Fiji does not consider external direct military intervention or offensive operations against it as a threat. Fiji's military forces are not equipped nor trained for a prolonged defensive operation in Fiji against a better equipped force. Therefore, it will continue to want to develop regional defence co-operation.

Because the perceived perpetrators of the rape of democracy in Fiji in 1987 and 2006 were the military leaders, the first casualty was defence co-operation in the form of the Military Assistance Programme between Fiji and New Zealand, and the Defence Co-operation Programme between Fiji and Australia. This started 25 years ago, and many of the senior officers in the Fiji Military Forces now have never done any career courses in these neighbouring countries. The senior officers in the Fiji Military Forces now will not understand the close camaraderie felt by my generation of officers and those generations before me who served alongside officers and ranks of the Australian and New Zealand forces in the wars in the Pacific and the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s.

The distance between our service personnel has been the result of punitive political decisions made in Australia and New Zealand in the post-coup era. Any post-2014 election defence co-operation will not only have to be newly negotiated, but also will have to involve an acceptable disengagement from the vacuum-filling co-operations established with non-traditional defence co-operation partners like China, Indonesia and France.

Another factor to be considered in any post-2014 elections rapprochement is Fiji's active participation in the Non-Aligned Movement, and the recent active pursuit of stronger and physical-presence diplomatic relationships that the Bainimarama administration has established. They will not be easy to pull out from without diplomatic eye avoiding.

### ***Trafficking and border security co-operation***

The easy entry provisions offered by Fiji to some Asian citizens would make Fiji an easy target for those wishing to gain entry into other countries in the region, making Fiji an unlikely partner in counter trafficking co-operation. The poor diplomatic relations that have developed between the countries in the region, particularly Fiji and Australia, and New Zealand and Samoa, will need quick repairing and effective détente to ensure the development of normalisations in as short a time as possible, post the 2014 elections.

### ***Fiji's future assistance needs***

Fiji will continue to need foreign assistance with military training and development funding; assistance

<sup>2</sup>Agro-based industries are industries that source their raw materials from agricultural crops and typically involve the processing and preserving of agricultural products, e.g. producing sugar from sugar cane.

which we used to get from our traditional defence and development partners. Every effort must be made to expedite the full restoration of military co-operation in the post-2014 era, even to the extent of entering into pacts that will ensure mutual assistance in times of need.

Military training assistance is important in updating the interoperability of Fiji's military personnel with those of likely friendly troops in international peace-keeping or even peace-enforcement operations. Some military training is now available from 'new partners', but the language barrier and unlikelihood of operating in concert with these new partners in international operations greatly militate against the value of these co-operations.

Our Naval Division will continue to need training and also ship replacement programmes, but more importantly, co-operation in EEZ patrolling and policing using military assets which Fiji does not have, such as maritime patrol aircraft, and in the development of a co-ordinated surveillance capability using civilian commercial aircraft and ships.

Post natural disaster surveillance and rehabilitation work in Fiji will always need international co-operation, especially from our neighbours, Australia and New Zealand.

### ***Fiji's capacity to contribute neighbourhood security***

Because of Fiji's continued exposure to international peace-keeping operations in the 35 years since Fiji first deployed a battalion into South Lebanon as part of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), Fiji's service personnel can contribute effectively to international peace-keeping, peace monitoring and peace enforcement.

Fiji's 25 years' participation in UNIFIL and 31 years in the Sinai; recent participation by units in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan; and deployment of individuals as members of observer groups in other parts of the world, and closer to home as part of the United Nations regional efforts in East Timor, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands; give the Fiji Military Forces the basic skills and expertise to be able to work in similar situations in the future.

Given normalisation of defence and development co-operation, Fiji could once again become an ideal training area for military units preparing for operations in similar terrain and climate around the world, including offensive operations against the production of narcotic drugs, and policing, detection and apprehension of international criminals involved in narcotics and contraband trade.

The Fiji Navy could become a very useful contributor in the co-operative war against illegal fishing, human trafficking, and the policing of the abuse of internationally-recognised endangered species, like whales and sharks, within Fiji's EEZ, in our neighbours' EEZs and in international waters in our Pacific region, and the enforcement of bio-security laws.

Fiji's military engineers would also be a great asset in combined post-disaster rehabilitation work in co-operation with our neighbours in most island nations of the Pacific.

### ***Fiji's expectations of Australia***

After Fiji normalises its own national political situation, Fiji will expect the quick restoration of the bilateral

relationship with Australia and the pursuit of all efforts for a better understanding of each other's values and expectations of each other.

The quick restoration of pre-2006 diplomatic and defence co-operation and the development of better socio-cultural understanding should quickly bring back the good neighbourliness that was manifested in the past in resisting the Japanese military invasion of the Pacific in the 1940s, and the Chinese Communists' attempts to control Malaya in the 1950s – and perhaps slow down what the late Professor Ron Crocombe wrote in his book *Asia in the Pacific Islands – replacing the West* (Crocombe 2007). Perhaps what Professor Crocombe should have highlighted was 'Asia in the Pacific Islands – restoring the Asia-Pacific hegemony', where the majority of Australians and New Zealanders are reminded of their dislocation as European societies in the Asia-Pacific geographic region.

### **Conclusion**

While the past 25 years of Australia-Fiji relationships have been strained and dominated by isolationism and a diplomatic feud, the longer the isolation continues, the more difficult will be the restoration. While you have been shielding yourselves behind a wall of 'correctness', new players in the Pacific have been using the time to settle in; and the Pacific, particularly Fiji, is beginning to settle down comfortably with these new friends.

What the Chinese did behind the Bamboo Curtain, and tried to implement by knocking over the Indo-Chinese dominoes; and which you, with the help of the United States and New Zealand and other friends at the time, tried to stop in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chinese are doing in the Pacific now – positioning following Sun Tzu's dictum.

And to Australia – if you can ever regain your position in Fiji, do not lose it again.

### **Reference**

Crocombe, R. G. (2007). *Asia in the Pacific Islands: replacing the West* (University of the South Pacific: Suva).

**The Author:** Sitiveni (Steve) Rabuka, an elder statesman of the South Pacific, was the democratically-elected Prime Minister of Fiji from 1992 to 1999. Subsequently, he was Chairman of Fiji's Great Council of Chiefs; and the Commonwealth Special Envoy for Peace in the Solomon Islands. He was made a Companion of the Order of Fiji for his leadership as Prime Minister. General Rabuka retired as Commander of the Fiji Military Forces in 1991. During his military career between 1968 and 1991, he commanded two infantry battalions on peace-keeping duties – in the Sinai (1983-1985) and Lebanon (1980-1981); and led two coups in Fiji in 1987. For his service in Lebanon, he was awarded the French *Legion d'Honneur* for bravery and was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. [Photo of General Rabuka: the author]

