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Fiji: Background and Issues Facing Congress

Successive U.S. presidential administrations and some Members of Congress have identified U.S. national security interests in the Pacific Islands, including maintaining free and open waterways, supporting U.S. diplomatic engagement with Pacific Island Countries (PICs) and regional organizations, and addressing security and other threats posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). Fiji is viewed as an important partner for the United States given its regional influence, relative economic power, and military forces, one of three in the region. Congressional considerations include Fiji's human rights record; U.S. assistance to Fiji across several areas including fisheries, security cooperation, and climate; and Fiji's law enforcement cooperation with China.

Background

Fiji is an archipelagic nation with a parliamentary republic-style government. The capital city of Suva is located on Viti Levu, one of the two major islands. Fiji is the second most populated PIC, after Papua New Guinea, with nearly one million people. Fiji is an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous society including the indigenous iTaukei (57%) and Indo-Fijians (37.5%) whose ancestors were brought by the British from India to serve as laborers during British rule of Fiji, which lasted 105 years until the nation gained its independence in 1970.

Fiji has one of the Pacific's largest economies, with the World Bank reporting a GDP of \$5.49 billion in 2023. The economy's primary industries—tourism and agriculture—have rebounded since the COVID-19 pandemic, but labor migration poses an economic risk for Fiji. Remittances provide an important source of national revenue. Australia is Fiji's most significant development partner, accounting for 25% of Fiji's official development financing.

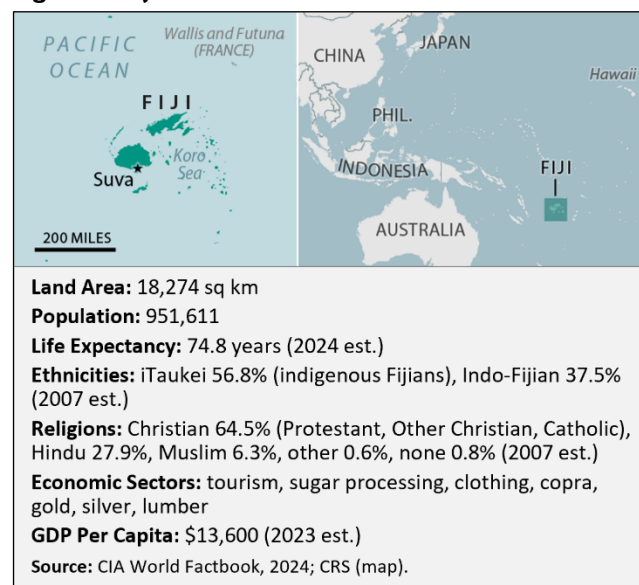
Some analysts consider Fiji a leader amongst the PICs. It plays an important role in Pacific regionalism as the hub of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the region's preeminent political and economic bloc. The PIF Secretariat in Suva is the PIF's administrative core, supporting Forum Leaders and member countries in making policy decisions. Fiji also hosts the main campus of the University of the South Pacific, the premier regional public research university. Outside the region, Fiji has a long history of providing troops to support UN peacekeeping operations.

Fiji and the United States

The United States established diplomatic relations with Fiji in 1970, and the two countries have historically maintained positive relations, cooperating on a broad set of mutual interests including trade, development, and security. However, following a 2006 military coup that installed former Prime Minister Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama, the

United States halted security assistance to Fiji under Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act of 2006 (P.L. 109-102). Since return to free and fair elections in 2014 and the 2022 election of Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, U.S.-Fiji relations have expanded.

Figure 1. Fiji at a Glance



The United States is Fiji's top export market. Trade between the United States and Fiji reached \$360 million in 2023. That year, the top U.S. export was aircraft parts worth a total of \$101 million. In 2020, Fiji signed a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with the United States to facilitate deeper economic engagement. In 2022, Fiji became the first and only PIC to join the Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) programming in Fiji addresses a range of issues including democracy, governance, economic growth, disaster preparedness and response, environmental and climate issues, and health. In 2024, the United States and Fiji signed a Bilateral Framework Agreement that established a USAID Pacific Regional Office in Suva.

Fiji is a party to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty (SPTT) between the United States and 16 PICs to provide access for U.S. tuna purse seine vessels to fish in PICs' waters in exchange for U.S. licensing fees. In 2024, Fiji endorsed and hosted the United States and eight PICs party to SPTT for the signing of a memorandum of understanding permitting U.S. fishing fleets to continue fishing in PIC exclusive economic zones. The United States has yet to enact changes to federal law reflecting 2016 amendments to the SPTT.

Through a separate but related Economic Assistance Agreement, the United States is to provide \$60 million annually for 10 years to treaty members.

Fiji is one of three PICs with a standing military: the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF). The United States provides the RFMF with training and equipment and in November 2024 the two governments announced they are negotiating a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and signed an Acquisition and Cross Service Agreement (ACSA) to facilitate U.S. logistical support to Fiji in case of emergencies. Fiji and the United States participate in joint military exercises including Pacific Partnership and Exercise Cartwheel. Pacific Partnership is the U.S. Navy's largest maritime humanitarian and civic assistance mission in the Indo-Pacific. Exercise Cartwheel is a multilateral training exercise to build expeditionary readiness and interoperability with the RFMF and regional forces. The RFMF has a partnership with the Nevada National Guard under the Department of Defense (DOD) State Partnership Program to support U.S. security cooperation activities. In 2019, Fiji signed an expanded maritime law enforcement agreement with the United States that includes a shiprider provision to allow Fijian shipriders to embark U.S. surface and air assets to conduct law enforcement operations.

Human Rights Abuses

Since the 1980s, Fiji has had four coups, each of which included elements of ethnic tension and human rights abuses between the iTaukei and Indo-Fijians. The British colonial administration bisected Fiji along racial lines: Indo-Fijian laborers were viewed as economically dominant while the iTaukei held a monopoly on land ownership, the military, and senior public offices. Since Fiji gained independence, Indo-Fijian underrepresentation in government has exacerbated institutional discrimination and at times led to racial violence.

Under the Rabuka government, Fiji has attempted to address its human rights abuse record. These attempts include repealing legislation that threatened freedom of the press and signing a declaration that addresses Fiji's history of ethnic discrimination and creates a process for reconciliation. Still, some observers note recent examples of the police denying protest group permits to organize against Fiji's pro-Israel position on the war in Gaza.

Fiji-China Relations

Fiji was the first PIC to establish formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (China or PRC) in 1975. During Bainimarama's rule, China increased its assistance to Fiji, filling a perceived gap left when Australia, New Zealand, and the United States restricted bilateral assistance following the 2006 coup.

In 2011, Bainimarama signed a policing agreement with China that included annual six-month police exchanges to embed PRC police in the Fiji police force while Fijians were trained in China. The agreement faced criticism in 2017 as reports of PRC police conducting a mass extradition of PRC nationals from Fiji received international press coverage. When Rabuka assumed office in 2022, he suspended the policing agreement for a one-

year governmental review. The agreement was reinstated in 2024, but dropped provisions providing for embedded PRC officers in the Fiji police force.

Though Rabuka is viewed by some analysts as being more pro-West than Bainimarama, Fiji continues to engage China, especially on economics and development projects. China is Fiji's second largest import partner after Singapore. After meeting PRC President Xi Jinping at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference in 2023, Rabuka expressed his hope for PRC assistance to upgrade Fijian shipyards and ports. In 2024, Fiji and China signed a \$300 million infrastructure and development project as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Challenges Facing Fiji

Fiji's 2024 National Security and Defense Report identified climate change as a key issue for the country. Fiji's Ministry of Environment and Climate Change developed a National Climate Change Policy to foster collaboration on climate issues between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, regional and international agencies, and development partners. Climate-related catastrophes have raised cases of climate-sensitive diseases and injuries and stressed Fiji's health infrastructure. Fiji has worked to address this issue in collaboration with the World Health Organization and the Korea International Cooperation Agency.

According to an October 2024 UN Office on Drugs and Crimes report, Fiji appears to be a growing hub for drug trafficking. Observers also note an increase in the production and consumption of illicit drugs in the country.

Considerations for Congress

Fiji has become an important partner as the United States expands its strategic engagement and diplomatic presence in the Pacific. Congress may consider whether:

- In the event of future democratic backsliding that triggers Section 7008 (P.L. 117-328, Division K, carried into FY2024 via continuing resolutions) foreign assistance restrictions, what impact would this have to U.S. interests, particularly if China fills aid vacuums left by the United States or its allies and partners?
- What may be the implications for U.S.-PIC relations and U.S. fishers should Congress pass changes to federal law to reflect the 2016 amendments to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty? House-passed H.R. 1792 is now pending in the Senate. What may be the implications if Congress does not pass these changes?
- Is it in the United States' interest to support the Fiji in strengthening rule of law, particularly to address transnational crimes like drug trafficking?
- How might Congress best conduct oversight of any defense engagements DOD pursue with the RFMF, particularly in light of ongoing SOFA negotiations and the ACSA signing?

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