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Reengaging Fiji: The Right Policy at the Right Time

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A group of foreign ministers from the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) member states visited Suva, Fiji, on February 14–15 to study that country’s progress toward democracy. The trip’s outcomes show that pragmatism has become the flavor of Pacific affairs. The group praised Fiji for its significant progress toward holding democratic elections in September. Even Australia and New Zealand, two of the military regime’s harshest critics, sent their foreign ministers to meet regime leader Commodore Voreqe “Frank” Bainimarama and broker a plan to normalize relations.

The rapprochement that Australia, New Zealand, and the other PIF members are seeking is a smart response for all parties, including Fiji, to what has become an intractable dispute.

The road to détente has been long and damaging for all involved. On December 5, 2006, Bainimarama led a military coup and seized control of the Fijian government as an “interim prime minister.” He began to consolidate power soon after. Following a Supreme Court decision in April 2009 that declared the coup unconstitutional, Bainimarama announced a road map to democracy, which included a commitment to create a new constitution in 2013 and hold elections in 2014. In response to this clear procrastination on a return to democracy, both the PIF and the Commonwealth, at the behest of Canberra and Wellington, suspended Fiji. Several regional players, including Australia, imposed travel sanctions on the coup instigators.

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Fiji's interim prime minister Voreqe "Frank" Bainimarama (left) during a 2011 visit to Brazil. Bainimarama has refused to change his self-imposed timetable for returning Fiji to democracy, despite international isolation. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mrebrasil/6195913852/>

This international response failed to achieve its goal of forcing an immediate return to democracy in Fiji. The major reason that this policy of isolation failed was that the instigators miscalculated Fiji's economic importance to its neighbors. As it became clear that Bainimarama would not give up power before his government's self-appointed deadlines, the policy's cohesion slowly dissipated, with other Pacific Islands deciding they could not afford to isolate Fiji, a vital transshipment route and economic hub.

Bainimarama has now reframed the narrative as one of Australia and New Zealand bullying their smaller neighbors. Fiji has portrayed itself as standing against this by strengthening multilateral organizations that exclude Australia and New Zealand, especially the Melanesian Spearhead Group and the newly created [Pacific Islands Development Forum](#). Fiji also sought out new international partners, such as China, to reduce its historical reliance on Australian aid. From the perspectives of Australia and New Zealand, the ongoing tensions with Fiji clearly have weakened their influence as regional leaders.

Nevertheless, Canberra and Wellington have succeeded in delegitimizing Fiji's military regime in the eyes of the international community. The military's efforts to consolidate power, including its heavy-handedness in writing the constitution and setting the stage for the upcoming elections, has reinforced these perceptions of illegitimacy and spurred concerns about Fiji's future stability and business climate. The pressure applied by the Australia- and New Zealand-led coalition has not sped up Bainimarama's timeline for a return to democracy, but it likely has forced the regime to stick to it, if imperfectly, to rebuild its international image.

So with both sides losing ground in this protracted disagreement, why did normalization take so long? First, the Bainimarama regime presented little opportunity for normalization until now. Indeed, the ongoing [voter registration process](#) may be the Bainimarama government's first undeniable step toward democracy since the 2006 coup. More than 600,000 voters—over two-thirds of the total population—will likely be registered to participate in the upcoming elections. Before, the authorities had at least partially broken every major promise along Bainimarama's road map.

A particularly stark example was the fate of the original draft constitution, created by an independent commission led by renowned [international expert Yash Ghai](#). Fijian police burned all hard copies of the draft in

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January 2013 and authorities replaced it two months later with one drafted by the Bainimarama government. This new constitution offers only limited personal freedoms and protects coup instigators from prosecution. Meanwhile, opposition groups have been disbanded and harassed in a continuation of the status quo.

A second reason that normalization is only now taking place is the change of government in Australia following that country's September 2013 general elections. The National-Liberal Coalition government can more easily break with the previous Labor government's hardline policies and rhetoric toward Fiji without Australia further losing face in the region.

Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop received a warm welcome from Bainimarama on February 15 and has set a rapid normalization agenda that includes the loosening of travel sanctions and the reestablishment of military ties via joint exercises and potential exchanges of military attachés. Canberra has also expressed encouragement for Fiji's "Look North Policy," which focuses on relations with Asia in general and China in particular, while expressing hope that Fiji will approach Australia as a "[partner of choice](#)."

Normalization does not come without conditions for Bainimarama, who is set to run for office in the upcoming elections. He must fulfill a promise to step down as military commander on February 28, and he must ensure that free elections take place before September 30. At this point, Bainimarama is unlikely to back away from this timetable, since normalization will bring at least some international legitimacy to him as a potential elected leader and to the military for following through with a return to democracy.

The United States should welcome these pragmatic regional efforts to bring Fiji back into the fold. If the cold shoulder treatment only hardened the regime's resolve to reject outside influence, then welcoming the country back into international institutions such as the PIF should increase Fiji's willingness to work with regional partners.



Fijian soldiers in 2007. As the country's military regime gives way to a new government, the armed forces hope to restore their international legitimacy.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/infiniteview/367647095/>

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However, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States must be careful not to forget the principles they have so strongly championed by isolating Fiji: human rights and democratic values for the Fijian people. It is unclear how fair the upcoming elections will actually be, considering the restrictions on political party formation and the press, as well as the fact that Bainimarama himself is running for prime minister. At a minimum, the regional powers must keep up pressure on the military regime so as to guarantee that international election observers and logistical assistance are allowed to ensure all Fijians have an opportunity to cast ballots on election day. ▲

The Month That Was

AUSTRALIA

Toyota announces closure of Australian factories. Toyota announced February 10 that it will close its Australian factories by 2017, citing high production costs and the strong Australian dollar. The move follows recent decisions by Ford and Holden to end their Australian operations. Toyota's exit will cost around 2,500 jobs and \$18 billion, and will leave no automotive manufacturing in Australia. Opposition parties are criticizing the government for failing to offer sufficient support to struggling Australian automakers.

Asylum seeker killed, dozens injured in riot at Manus Island detention center. An Iranian asylum seeker was killed and 67 others were injured on February 16 during a riot at an Australian detention center on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Immigration Minister Scott Morrison apologized for the incident, and Angus Campbell, commander of Operation Sovereign Borders, which is charged with stemming the flow of asylum seekers to Australia, visited the facility following the riot. The opposition Greens party is alleging that guards murdered the Iranian and wants a commission to investigate.

Navy, coast guard breached Indonesian waters six times. An Australian government review found that naval and coast guard vessels attempting to turn back asylum-seeker vessels inadvertently breached Indonesia's 12-nautical mile territorial waters six times between December 1 and January 20. The report said that Australian sailors miscalculated Indonesia's maritime boundaries. Canberra apologized for the incursions, but the incidents are the latest strain on the bilateral relationship. The Indonesian government on February 14 summoned Australian ambassador Greg Moriarty to protest Australia's controversial asylum-seeker policies.

High Court forces rerun of Senate election. The Australian High Court on February 20 voided the results of the September 2013 Senate elections in Western Australia state because 1,370 ballots could not be found for a recount. The decision means that Western Australians will need to vote again in what the media are framing as a referendum on the government's performance. Prime Minister Tony Abbott's National-Liberal Coalition won four of Western Australia's six Senate seats in September. But the opposition Labor and Green parties are hoping to dent that majority now that polls show 46 percent of voters hold a negative view of Abbott.



Australia's detention center for asylum seekers on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. A February 16 riot at the center left an Iranian detainee dead and 67 others injured. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/greensmps/8469445872/>

Vitol buys Shell's Australian downstream assets. Swiss company Vitol announced February 21 that it will purchase Royal Dutch Shell's downstream assets in Australia, including 870 gas stations, the Geelong refinery, and parts of the lubricant, bulk fuel, and bitumen businesses, for \$2.6 billion. Vitol chief executive Ian Taylor said the acquisition is part of a plan to increase the company's presence in the Australian fuel market, and said Vitol plans to bid for liquefied natural gas projects in the future. The deal is subject to approval by Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board.

Australia to buy eight Boeing maritime patrol aircraft. Australia announced February 21 that it will purchase eight Boeing Poseidon P-8A surveillance planes for \$3.6 billion. The planes will vastly improve Australia's capability to patrol its nearly 730,000-nautical mile exclusive economic zone. Australia also plans to utilize the aircraft to identify asylum seekers attempting to reach its shores. The first planes will be delivered in 2017, with all eight operational by 2021.

NEW ZEALAND

U.S. ambassador-designate to New Zealand accepts nomination. Mark Gilbert, President Barack Obama's choice for U.S. ambassador to New Zealand and Samoa, formally accepted his nomination before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on February 13. Republican lawmakers had blocked Gilbert's committee hearing, leaving the United States without an ambassador in Wellington since David Huebner stepped down on January 17 after four years in the office. Gilbert was previously a director at Barclays Wealth and a senior vice president at Goldman Sachs. He still faces confirmation by the SFRC and then the full Senate.

New Zealand summons Japanese ambassador after whaling ship breaches EEZ. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on February 10 summoned Japanese ambassador Yasuaki Nogawato to protest a Japanese whaling vessel's breaching of New Zealand's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) on February 7. The ship crossed into New Zealand's EEZ while pursuing one of the anti-whaling group Sea Shepherd's vessels. Foreign Affairs Minister Murray McCully called the ship's actions legal but disrespectful since Wellington had asked it to stay out of New Zealand's waters. Prime Minister John Key said he hopes for an official apology from Tokyo.



A U.S. Navy Poseidon P-8A. Australia has agreed to purchase eight of the surveillance planes from Boeing for \$3.6 billion. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/smartjunco/5378860067/>



A Japanese whaling ship uses water cannons to fend off crew members of the Sea Shepherd anti-whaling group in 2009. Another Japanese whaling ship recently pursued a Sea Shepherd vessel into New Zealand's exclusive economic zone. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/guano/3264971586/>

Prime minister floats referendum on national flag. Prime Minister John Key said January 29 that a referendum on changing the New Zealand flag could be held concurrently with the 2014 national elections, which are expected to be held by early December. A referendum has broad public support, with polls showing only 38 percent of citizens favor keeping the current flag. Many people want a new design that incorporates New Zealand's Maori heritage and removes the British Union Jack to help differentiate the flag from the flag of Australia.

"Buy Australia" campaign sees New Zealand goods taken off Australian shelves. Australian supermarkets began pulling New Zealand products from their shelves in early February after major chains launched an aggressive nationwide "Buy Australia" campaign. New Zealand prime minister John Key raised the issue with his counterpart Tony Abbott and other Australian officials during a February 7 joint cabinet meeting in Sydney. Key said the campaign violates the spirit, if not the law, of a 1983 Australia-New Zealand trade agreement, but Canberra has so far declined to take action.

PACIFIC ISLANDS

Pacific Islands ministers travel to Fiji to measure progress on democracy. Australia's Julie Bishop and New Zealand's Murray McCully led a delegation of foreign ministers from the member states of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to Fiji on February 15-16 to assess the country's progress toward democratic elections scheduled for September. The delegation praised Fiji's new constitution, its recently established election office, and the registration of four political parties and more than half a million voters. But the ministers cautioned against restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. Fiji was suspended from the PIF in 2009 because of its military coup three years earlier.

Australia, New Zealand slowly normalizing relations with Fiji. Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop announced February 15 that Canberra is reviewing travel sanctions on members of Fiji's military regime in the latest step toward ending the country's international isolation. Wellington began easing sanctions on members of the Fijian regime in January, allowing some family members to enter New Zealand to study and play rugby. The governments of Australia and New Zealand have also suggested that Fiji be brought back into regional initiatives, such as the Pacific Islands Forum, as a reward for its progress toward democracy.



Islands and waters in Palau's Koror state. President Tommy Remengesau has stated that Palau will ban commercial fishing within its 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone, declaring its waters a marine reserve. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/86265563@N00/2347767520/>

Palau bans commercial fishing in exclusive economic zone. Palau's president, Tommy Remengesau, announced at a February 7 UN conference on the oceans that his country will declare its waters a marine reserve and ban commercial fishing within its 200-nautical mile exclusive economic zone. Remengesau said commercial fishing will be prohibited once existing fishing contracts with Japan, Taiwan, and private companies are allowed to expire. Palau plans to offset the lost revenue with tourism to the new marine sanctuary. Tourists and locals will be permitted to fish, but not on a commercial scale.

Vanuatu parliament postpones no confidence motion against prime minister. Vanuatu's parliament on February 24 failed to reach a quorum and was forced to put on hold a motion of no confidence filed a week earlier in an attempt to oust Prime Minister Moanna Carcasses. It was originally reported that the no confidence motion had the support of the requisite 27 lawmakers, including three cabinet ministers. But the motion's future is now unclear after Carcasses spent a week trying to convince opposition members of parliament to change their votes, including by offering them ministerial positions. Parliament has until February 24 to debate the motion.

Papua New Guinea government loses share in seabed mining project. Canada's Nautilus Minerals on February 17 terminated the 30 percent share that Papua New Guinea's (PNG) government held in the company's Solwara 1 deep seabed mining project after the government repeatedly failed to pay for its stake. Nautilus is exploring for silver, copper, and gold in the Bismarck Sea off PNG's northern coast. Arbitrators in 2012 ordered PNG authorities to pay Nautilus \$130 million by October 2013. The company is also claiming PNG owes it for damages. ▲

Looking Ahead

A look at the future of U.S. defense policy. The Brookings Institution will host House of Representatives Armed Services members Mac Thornberry (R-TX) and Rick Larsen (D-WA) on March 3 for a discussion of the strategic defense policy issues that the United States will face in the coming years. Brookings senior fellow Michael O’Hanlon will moderate the discussion. The event will be held from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. in the Falk Auditorium, Brookings Institution, 1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW. To register for the event, please [click here](#).

Seminar on Asian integration and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The East-West Center in Washington will hold a discussion March 3 on influential factors for Asia’s integration. The discussion will focus on maritime territorial disputes, the role of the United States in the region, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Panelists will include Ganeshan Wignaraja of the Asian Development Bank and Ellen Frost of the East-West Center and National Defense University. The event will take place from 12:00 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. at 1819 L St., NW, Sixth Floor Conference Room. Please [RSVP here](#).

Discussion with the Australian and U.S. G20 sherpas. CSIS’s William E. Simon Chair in Political Economy will host a discussion March 5 with the Australian and U.S. sherpas for the Group of 20 (G20). Australian deputy secretary in the Department of the Prime Minister Heather Smith and U.S. deputy national security adviser for international economics Caroline Atkinson will discuss the November G20 summit in Brisbane, Australia. The event will be held from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at CSIS, 1616 Rhode Island Ave., NW, First Floor Conference Room. To RSVP, please e-mail simon.chair@csis.org.

Event on intellectual property in the TPP. The Cato Institute will host a discussion March 5 on intellectual property rights in the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Yale University’s Margot Kaminski, the Institute for Policy Innovation’s Tom Giovanetti, and Cato’s K. William Watson will talk about the contentiousness of intellectual property protections in the agreement. The event will begin at 11:00 a.m. in the Hayek Auditorium, Cato Institute, 1000 Massachusetts Ave., NW. To register, please e-mail events@cato.org.

Conversation on the role of policy in natural resource scarcity. CSIS will host Andrew Mackenzie, CEO of Australian mining giant BHP Billiton, on March 6 to discuss his experience with resource scarcity. The event will be the first in CSIS’s new U.S.-Australia Speaker Series. The conversation will take place from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at CSIS, 1616 Rhode Island Avenue, Conference Room 212. Please [click here](#) for more information and to RSVP. ▲

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