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Building a Strategic Partnership: Fiji–China Relations Since 2008

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Introduction

Fiji and China celebrated a ‘double anniversary’ in 2015. It was the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Fiji and 160 years since the arrival of the first Chinese settlers in Fiji. This milestone was commemorated by the exchange of congratulatory letters between the two governments and declarations highlighting their close and mutually beneficial relationship. The then Fijian foreign minister described engagement with China as forming ‘a fundamental part of our government’s Look North Policy’ and ‘crucial to Fiji’s economic development’ (Kubuabola 2015). Meanwhile, the Chinese ambassador to Fiji described the China–Fiji relationship as ‘a model of friendly cooperation between China and island countries in the South Pacific’. He also later referred to China’s policy towards Fiji as ‘an epitome of China’s foreign policy towards the South Pacific countries’ (Zhang 2015, 2016).

Relations between China and Fiji have strengthened considerably over the past decade. As the Chinese ambassador to Fiji commented in 2018, ‘China has had a very good relationship with Fiji, particularly after 2006’ (Kumar 2018b). By 2016 China had become Fiji’s largest aid donor and

its largest source of foreign investment. Politically China established itself as a close and valued partner on both regional and global issues, in the context of Fiji's more assertive and independent foreign policy after 2009 (Komai 2015). For China, Fiji has long held a special place in its Pacific regional diplomacy. In part this stems from the strategic location of Fiji at the centre of the Pacific Islands region, making it a hub for regional diplomacy as well as a communications crossroads. Fiji has also played an increasingly influential role in regional affairs. Moreover Fiji is home to an influential and growing Chinese population, now numbering about 10,000, and has thus been a focal point for both Taiwan's and China's regional engagement (Tarte 2010a; Yang 2011).

As these developments have taken place, concerns have been voiced both domestically and beyond about China's growing influence in Fiji, in particular the perceived loss of influence of traditional Western partners and the impact of Chinese aid and investment on Fiji's sovereignty, security and development. These concerns echo those voiced about China's influence in the region more broadly and which have become more heightened in recent times (see 60 Minutes 2018; Brady 2015; Chang 2018).

This chapter surveys developments in the Fiji–China relationship over the past decade (2008–18) in order to highlight the way the relationship has strengthened in that time politically, economically and culturally. It will locate these developments within two broad frameworks: Fiji's new foreign policy after 2009 and China's new strategic initiative—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—since 2013. This will not only show the convergence of Fiji's and China's interests that helps to underpin the relationship, but will also highlight the extent to which the Fiji Government has been instrumental in driving and shaping this relationship. Contrary to concerns about China's increasing influence in Fiji, the analysis suggests that Fiji has proactively exploited opportunities within this partnership, while maintaining and exercising its autonomy and agency. Moreover, the return of traditional partners in recent years (Australia and New Zealand) appears to have diluted China's influence, as Fiji has taken advantage of a growing range of foreign policy and defence options. These developments underscore the point made by Wesley-Smith (2013:369) about Pacific Island leaders 'making rational decisions about what they see as their best interests in the face of changing opportunities in the external environment'.

Evidence of a growing relationship

While 2015 was an auspicious anniversary year for China–Fiji relations, it was in fact 2014 that marked a highpoint in bilateral ties, when the relationship was elevated to a ‘Strategic Partnership of Mutual Respect and Cooperation’.¹ This was a year marked by intensifying diplomatic activity culminating in a two-day state visit to Fiji in November by Chinese President Xi Jinping. As the first such visit to the region by a Chinese head of state, the Fiji Government hosted other Pacific Island leaders (those with diplomatic ties with China) in a collective meeting with the Chinese leader, as well as a series of bilateral meetings. According to China’s ambassador to Fiji, the goal of the visit was ‘to exchange opinions on the development of China–Pacific relations and to promote practical cooperation and friendly communication of both sides’ (Tarte 2014).

The backdrop to the state visit was a series of high-level political meetings between Fiji and China in 2014. The foreign ministers of China and Fiji met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September, the first meeting following the Fijian election on 17 September, and reaffirmed the close relationship between the two states. As the Fijian Minister for Foreign Affairs stated: ‘Fiji will not forget that when other countries were quick to condemn us following the events of 1987, 2000 and 2006, China and other friends in Asia demonstrated a more understanding and sensitive approach’ (Tarte 2014).

Another high-level meeting took place in August 2014, when the then president of Fiji, Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, met President Xi in Nanjing, while attending the second Summer Youth Olympic Games. President Xi used the opportunity to describe the ‘development of China–Fiji relations’ as being in the ‘fundamental interests of both peoples and conducive to peace, stability and development of the region’ (Tarte 2014). He foreshadowed the visit to Fiji and other Pacific Island countries of the *Peace Ark*, a Chinese naval hospital ship. The Fijian president responded with a call for more Chinese investment in Fiji as well as more exports (of agricultural and fishery products) to China. There has also been a longstanding view that Fiji could reap some benefits from the growth

1 According to official Chinese sources, the term Strategic Partnership for Mutual Respect and Cooperation connotes a relationship that is experiencing ‘long-term growth’. Designating the Fiji–China partnership in this way indicated a ‘step forward’ in the relationship (Embassy of PRC in Fiji, March 2019. Personal communication with author).

of Chinese tourism to the region. In order to give weight to this declared goal, the Fijian president officiated at the opening of Fiji's consulate general in Shanghai (the Fijian embassy in Beijing opened in 2001).

High-level political visits between China and Fiji reflected a pattern of so-called 'visit diplomacy' that had emerged over the previous decade and underscored the increasing priority both sides accorded the relationship (Tarte 2010a). These visits provided opportunities to promote and advance key diplomatic, economic and strategic objectives of both states.

President Xi's 2014 state visit was not his first visit to Fiji. He also visited in February 2009, as the then vice president of China. While the visit was described by Chinese media sources as a 'transit stopover' it served to reaffirm China's appreciation of Fiji's 'adherence to the one-China policy' (Smith 2015).² The visit also appeared to be a significant show of support for the Bainimarama Government at a time when Fiji was under pressure from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to hold elections by May 2009.

As president, Mr Xi first welcomed Prime Minister Bainimarama to Beijing in May 2013—once again stating that China appreciated Fiji's support on issues 'related to China's core interests', that being Fiji's support for the One China policy. The Fijian prime minister also held meetings with his counterpart, Premier Li Keqiang, who supported an agreement on visa exemption between the two countries. He also pledged China's support for increased coordination with the Pacific on climate change.

The bilateral visa exemption arrangement was implemented in 2014 and sought to further boost visitor arrivals from China. These have been steadily increasing—from 4,000 in 2009 to 48,796 in 2017 (Meick et al. 2018),³ aided by the launch by Fiji's national airline of direct flights between Fiji and Hong Kong in 2009. Chinese investment also increased and in 2016 a China Chamber of Commerce in Fiji (CCCCF) was established. By 2019 it had 40 member companies, and was chaired by China Railway First Group, with China Railway Fifth Group, Shanghai Deep Sea Fisheries and Ge Zhou Ba Group as vice chairs. According to its Secretary General, Zhou Yang, in the two years since its inception, CCCC member companies had invested US\$100 million in Fiji (Chambers 2019).

2 The One China policy declares the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government and sovereign state of China, with Taiwan Province an inalienable part of its territory.

3 Fiji's total tourist arrivals in 2017 reached 772,013. Arrivals are dominated by visitors from Australia and New Zealand (Meick et al. 2018:23).

Meanwhile, Fiji benefited from concessional loans, scholarships, professional training and agricultural and green energy assistance, offered as part of aid packages announced by China at the second China–Pacific Economic Development and Cooperation Forum held in Guangzhou in November 2013, and subsequently by President Xi during his state visit to Fiji in 2014. Infrastructure funded by Chinese loans and grants included roads, bridges, a hydropower project and public rental board housing. (P. Zhang 2015; then Chinese vice premier Wang Yang, cited in J. Zhang 2015:49). According to the Lowy Institute, aid to Fiji from China (between 2006 and 2016) amounted to AU\$485 million, compared to AU\$408 million from Australia for the same period (Chang 2018).

Fiji reciprocated by cooling its relations with Taiwan. There was some suggestion that this may have been at the initiative of the Taiwanese Government—a response to Fiji’s post-2006 coup isolation by ‘important’ Western countries and the ‘diplomatic truce’ between China and Taiwan after 2008 (Yang 2011). However, Taiwan had long enjoyed a good relationship with Fiji (predating Fiji’s diplomatic ties with China) as well as good relations with the local Chinese community in Fiji. Nor had it shied away from capitalising on previous post-coup crises that forced Fiji to search for new friends and partners. Indeed, following the 2000 coup, when Fiji reached out to China under its ‘Look North’ policy, it also strengthened ties with Taiwan. This invariably prompted protests and pressure from China to desist from these links, but to no avail (see Tarte 2010a:124–25).

Since 2006, however, there has been a gradual distancing and downgrading of the relationship. Taiwanese representatives have been left out of key events (such as the Fijian-hosted summits of the Pacific Islands Development Forum from 2013–15). High-level visits have ceased. In 2017 Fiji closed its Trade and Tourism Representative Office in Taipei (that had been established with Taiwanese Government funding). A Taiwanese politician claimed the move was ‘orchestrated by China to embarrass Taiwan’, but from the Fijian Government’s perspective the decision was in line with its commitment to the One China policy (Meick et al. 2018). Significantly, the closure of the Taipei office coincided with Prime Minister Bainimarama’s visit to Beijing to attend the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation hosted by President Xi. In a further downgrading of the relationship in 2019, the Fijian Government directed that the Taiwan Trade Mission in Fiji be

renamed the Taipei Trade Office in Fiji. This move coincided with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and the diplomatic switch by Solomon Islands and Kiribati from Taiwan to the PRC.

Alongside the strengthening of bilateral ties (and commensurate cooling of Fiji's relations with Taiwan), the Fiji Government has also welcomed more 'people-to-people ties' and cultural diplomacy with China. China's stepped-up efforts in this area may be viewed as a way to counter the negative perceptions and stereotypes of China and Chinese immigrants that prevailed in Fijian public opinion (for examples see Tarte 2010a; also J. Zhang 2015). A Fiji–China Friendship Association was launched in 2012 as a branch of the Pacific China Friendship Association, aiming to strengthen 'bilateral exchanges in the area of poverty reduction, culture, sports and women's involvement in trade and investment' (PCFA n.d.). In 2015 its interim president was the Fijian Minister for Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation. There have been two visits by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) hospital ship, *Peace Ark*, providing free medical care to thousands of local patients. A Confucius Institute was established at the Suva campus of the University of the South Pacific in 2006 and a China Cultural Centre was opened in the Fijian capital (announced by President Xi during his 2014 state visit). Scholarships for study in China expanded and were increasingly utilised by Fijian students who in the past had appeared reluctant to take up these opportunities (Tarte 2010a). In 2018, 23 Fijians graduated from various universities in Beijing alone. Fijians receive between 30 and 40 scholarships a year for study in China. Senior public servants regularly receive leadership training at the China Executive Leadership Academy in Pudong.

Perhaps most significant, however, has been the effort by the Chinese Government, through its embassy in Suva, to cultivate the local (Cantonese-speaking) Chinese community, including by regular invitations to conferences and cultural events in China. In the past, this community, comprising the descendants of original Chinese settlers, was more closely associated with Taiwan, while Beijing focused its attention on the more recent arrivals from mainland China. Now the embassy 'gives equal attention to the Cantonese and Mandarin speakers',⁴ according to community representatives, making inroads in what was previously Taiwan's stronghold. The next section explores the drivers behind Fiji's shift towards closer ties with China.

4 Interview with Chinese community leader, December 2018. Personal communication.

Fiji's new foreign policy orientation

The 2009 abrogation of the Fijian constitution (which deferred for five years the holding of fresh elections following the coup of 2006) triggered the unprecedented suspension of Fiji from the PIF in May 2009 and its subsequent suspension from the Commonwealth in December. These events, coupled with existing sanctions and censure from traditional partners, were the catalyst for a major reorientation of Fiji's foreign policy, beginning in 2010. This in turn formed an integral part of the Bainimarama Government's Strategic Framework for Change, the set of reforms that Bainimarama was committed to implementing before Fiji returned to elected government in 2014. A number of strategies were put in place, aimed at not only countering Fiji's diplomatic isolation but also enhancing Fiji's overall standing in international affairs.

A key component of this reorientation was a revamped Look North policy. Like the earlier versions of this policy (initiated in 1987 and 2000) the Look North policy aimed to diversify Fiji's foreign relations, primarily economic partners (Tarte 2010a). But unlike its antecedents, this was not limited to new markets and donors in Asia. In fact, the foreign policy trend from 2010 onwards was an 'open door' policy of engaging with 'all members of the international community'. The Fijian Minister for Foreign Affairs Ratu Inoke Kubuabola explained the policy to an Australian audience in 2013:

Jolted from our complacency by the doors that were slammed in our faces, we looked north—to the great powers of Asia, especially China, India and Indonesia and more recently to Russia. We looked south to the vast array of nations, big and small, that make up the developing world ... And we looked to our Melanesian neighbours, to forge closer ties with them and use our collective strength to make our voices heard in global forums and secure better trading deals for us all (quoted in Komai 2015:13).

In line with this more activist foreign policy, in 2010 Fiji sought membership of the Non-Aligned Movement. It announced new embassies in South Korea, Indonesia, Brazil and South Africa. It hosted a visiting delegation from Russia, led by the resident ambassador in Canberra (Tarte 2011). At the United Nations, Fiji was instrumental in boosting the role of Pacific Small Islands Developing States group as an alternative caucus to the PIF group and successfully lobbied for the renaming of

the Asia group to Asia-Pacific Small Islands Developing States group. This name change was more than cosmetic. It became the springboard to greater Pacific representation in the group and within the UN and was instrumental in Fiji being elected Chair of the Group of 77 plus China, in 2012 (Komai 2015).

Within this evolving foreign policy context, relations with China assumed an especially prominent place. It was the most frequent foreign destination for Fiji's leaders in 2010, including the prime minister, foreign minister and president—the latter at the invitation of the Governor of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, thus not a state visit. Prime Minister Bainimarama chose to mark the 40th anniversary of Fiji's independence in China, attending the World Expo in Shanghai. Although these visits were mainly exploratory and few concrete outcomes were announced, a number of future deals were mooted, including new arms procurement (to support Fiji's peacekeeping operations) and Chinese investment in the expansion of the government shipyard and slipway in Suva (Tarte 2011).

A key motivation for Fiji in building new partnerships, and strengthening those with China, was to 'fill the gaps' left by Australia, New Zealand and others in the aftermath of the coup of 2006. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the area of defence and law enforcement cooperation. This was evident as early as 2007 when Bainimarama declared, 'We have to talk to China about continuation of military courses which have been stopped by Australia and New Zealand'. He went on to explain:

We have always had close ties with Beijing. I have already made one official visit there at the invitation of the People's Liberation Army and we have had two senior officers at China's defence college since 2000 (quoted in Tarte 2010a:124).

Fiji actively pushed for closer military ties with China after the 2006 coup, although China did not always appear willing to reciprocate. Significantly, Chinese authorities did not approve the accreditation of a defence attaché to the Fijian embassy in Beijing. Despite this, defence links have grown stronger since President Xi took office in 2013, including bilateral meetings of senior military officers and a biannual forum hosted by the PLA for senior defence officials from the Caribbean and Pacific (Meick et al. 2018:17). The Fijian navy has also benefited from training opportunities for its officers (including scholarships for degree studies in China) and, most significantly, the donation of a hydrographic vessel in 2018. According to the Commander of the Fiji Navy, Captain Tawake,

the new vessel would assist the Fijian navy in the ‘measurement and description of the physical features of the coastal areas’ as well as assist with maritime surveillance (Qaranivalu 2018).

In 2011 Fiji and China signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the enhancement of bilateral law enforcement cooperation, especially targeting transnational crime. Since then the Fiji Police Force and China’s Ministry of Public Security have developed what has been described as ‘a close working relationship’, with Fijian police officers undertaking training in China on tackling cybercrime, drugs and corruption, as well as receiving equipment. According to the Fijian Police Commissioner, ‘When other countries had closed their doors on us, China had stood by us and continued with their assistance to the Fiji Police Force’ (Kumar 2018a).

This collaboration came to the fore in 2017 when a joint operation between the Fijian police and their Chinese counterparts led to the deportation (under somewhat dramatic circumstances) of 77 Chinese nationals from Fiji. According to a joint statement from the Chinese embassy in Fiji and the Fiji Police Force, the deportees were suspected of telecom and online fraud in China worth FJ\$1.1 million and had breached their visa conditions.

While there was media speculation about the actual nature of the criminal activity, the operation appeared very similar to those China had conducted in other countries, including Kenya, Indonesia and Cambodia, where Chinese nationals suspected of telecom and cyber fraud were deported to China. It has been claimed that China has become ‘increasingly assertive’ in extraditing suspected cyber criminals targeting victims in China (Agence France-Presse 2017).⁵

There has been a longstanding (popular) perception in Fiji of China ‘as a country that produces criminals’ and of links between recent Chinese arrivals and organised crime (Tarte 2010a:127). While the above operation may have served in part to demonstrate the Chinese state’s determination to deal with such activities, it also fuelled concerns in Fiji about the impact of the visa waiver agreement on the country’s border control. According to the Fijian Leader of the Opposition, ‘This may be

5 I am grateful to Dr Nicola Baker for these insights.

just the tip of the iceberg ... People are just moving in and out [of Fiji] and involved in all sorts of criminal activities, which we only get to hear about after the fact' (Hill 2017).

The government of Prime Minister Bainimarama weathered the adverse international environment following the 2006 coup (and subsequent political events of 2009) through implementing a proactive and innovative foreign policy. It has been argued that China, in turn, strengthened 'Bainimarama's hand' and 'he was able to afford to ignore economic and political sanctions imposed by New Zealand and Australia' (Brady 2015). China has become an increasingly important trade, investment and aid partner of Fiji (Meick et al. 2018). It also stood by Fiji in international forums. Significantly, China refused to support a move led by Australia and New Zealand to 'shut Fiji out of peacekeeping duties'. This move had been strongly condemned by Prime Minister Bainimarama, as it targeted a cornerstone of Fiji's international role as well as a longstanding approach to nation-building.⁶ A resolution to the UN Security Council against Fiji's peacekeeping participation in 2010 was subsequently withdrawn (Komai 2015:115).

The following section examines China's reasons for supporting Fiji at this time and the motivations behind its steadily increasing engagement with Fiji, especially since 2013.

China's evolving regional strategy

Following the December 2006 coup in Fiji, some commentators predicted that the 'hostile reaction' of traditional partners (particularly Australia and New Zealand) provided China with 'its best chance yet of gaining a more substantial presence in Fiji and the surrounding region' (journalist Graham Davis quoted in Tarte 2010a:128). A dominant argument (propagated by the Fijian Government as well as by observers) has been that Australia (and others) left an opening that China stepped into.⁷ China's policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of states has been highlighted as facilitating this growing relationship. As Prime Minister Bainimarama

6 Between 1978 and 2008, over 25,000 Fijians served in overseas peacekeeping missions. It has long been a source of national pride that, on a population basis, 'no nation can approach Fiji's peacekeeping performance' (Tarte 2010b:81).

7 See, for example, comments by the Fijian Attorney General, Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum (60 Minutes 2018).

stated in 2009, ‘The Chinese authorities are very sympathetic and understand what’s happening here—the fact that we need to do things our own way’ (quoted in Komai 2015:113). It is significant perhaps that this comment was made after the abrogation of the constitution and just prior to Fiji’s suspension from the PIF.

Evidence of China’s ‘sympathy and understanding’ can be found in the lack of criticism of the coup in 2006—it instead expressed the hope that ‘all parties involved resolve their problems for the sake of economic development, political stability and people’s harmonious life’ (Embassy of the PRC in Fiji statement, December 2006, quoted in Tarte 2010a:130). In 2007 the Chinese Government accepted a Bainimarama appointee as Fiji’s new ambassador to China. As noted above, in early 2009 then vice president Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to Fiji, pledging to enhance Sino–Fijian cooperation. On subsequent occasions Chinese officials defended Fiji’s human rights record, in the face of international criticism, and spoke against the ‘imposition of isolation by some countries over Fiji’ (Brady 2015).

But in the initial post-coup years (up to 2013) it was not clear that China ‘pursued a well calculated strategy of displacing the traditional western players in Fiji’ (Yang 2011:318). This reflects a broader point made by Wesley-Smith, ‘Most commentators struggle to identify any coherent policy in Beijing regarding Oceania, let alone a grand strategy driven by hegemonic aspirations’ (2013:360). China’s priorities with Fiji remained centred on the One China policy. This was emphasised by then vice president Xi during his 2009 stopover in Fiji (Smith 2015).

As noted above, China did not respond to Fiji’s request to accredit a military attaché to the Fijian embassy in Beijing. According to informed sources, Chinese officials gave no reason for the non-approval; they simply failed to act on the request.⁸ This could be interpreted as a sign of caution on China’s part, as it sought to navigate competing foreign policy interests in the region. An important consideration in this regard was managing its relations with Australia and New Zealand. It was clear that Australia was ‘pressing China to curb its support for Fiji’ (Yang 2011:314). According

⁸ Fiji has not pursued this request. At the time of writing, it had deployed only one defence attaché, accredited to Fiji’s mission to the United Nations, overseeing peacekeeping operations. Nor is there a Chinese defence attaché accredited to the Chinese embassy in Suva. The only foreign missions with defence or military attachés in Fiji are Australia, New Zealand, the United States and, most recently, Indonesia.

to Yang, 'China has a big stake in a good relationship with Australia and New Zealand', including trade, support for the One China policy and as a conduit to the US on security matters (Yang 2011). It has also been argued that in order to maintain influence in the region, China 'may not want to be too much out of step with the position on Fiji taken by the Pacific Islands Forum' (Tarte 2010a:129).

The beginning of President Xi's first term in office in 2013 and the launch of the strategy of global engagement dubbed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) marked the shift towards a more assertive engagement with Fiji. It was on his two-day state visit to Fiji in 2014 that President Xi set out a plan for heightened engagement with the Pacific Islands region, based on five diplomatic priorities. These were to build a strategic partnership; enhance high-level exchanges; deepen economic cooperation, including through the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative; expand people-to-people exchanges; and increase multilateral cooperation through the PIF and Pacific Islands Development Forum (Meick et al. 2018:16).

President Xi backed up this announcement by restating economic commitments made at the second meeting of the China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in Guangzhou in November 2013. At this gathering, then vice premier Wang Yang had 'announced an aid package of \$1 billion in concessional loans and promised to set up a \$1 billion special loan fund to support infrastructure development in the region' (J. Zhang 2015:49).

The BRI provides the overarching framework for China's enhanced relations with the Pacific Islands region. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative is one component of BRI (Meick et al. 2018:3). While the BRI has been described as 'a gigantic economic belt across Asia, Africa and Europe ... [that] carries the spirit of the ancient Silk Road', the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is seen as an 'important maritime passage connecting China's coast with Europe through the South China Sea and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific' (Tuimaisala 2018).⁹

9 According to President Xi, 'BRI aims to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial and people-to-people connectivity, building a new platform for international cooperation and creating new drivers of shared development' (Tuimaisala 2018).

The rolling out of the BRI and Maritime Silk Road Initiative has shaped the narrative underpinning China's relations with the Pacific and with Fiji.¹⁰ BRI is now referred to by China as the 'framework' for building the China–Fiji 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (Xinhua 2018b).¹¹ In his address on the 40th anniversary of China–Fiji diplomatic ties, the then Chinese ambassador to Fiji, Zhang Ping, linked the BRI with Fiji's national development plan. He declared that 'the two sides should proceed from long-term interests and overall national development goals to find ways to integrate our development strategies' (P. Zhang 2015).

This was reaffirmed during a visit by the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, in 2018, when he declared that 'China stands ready to step up all-round practical cooperation with Fiji and align the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative and Fiji's 20-year National Development Plan' (Xinhua 2018a). Prime Minister Bainimarama in turn said, 'Fiji would firmly support and actively take part in the Belt and Road Cooperation between the two countries' (Xinhua 2018a). A Fijian BRI working committee, headed by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, was tasked to negotiate a BRI MOU with China. The signing of this MOU on 12 November 2018 was described by the Chinese ambassador as marking a 'new chapter' in relations between China and Fiji (Xinhua 2019).

While the narrative has focused on BRI as an economic partnership, from China's perspective the value of the relationship with Fiji goes much beyond that. As the Chinese foreign minister declared in a 2018 meeting with Prime Minister Bainimarama, 'China attaches importance to Fiji's role in the South Pacific island countries' (Xinhua 2018a). The key factor for China is the influential role Fiji plays in regional affairs and as a leading Pacific Island state in the international arena, including at the UN. While Fiji has grown more steadfast on the One China policy in the past decade, it has close and influential relationships with two of Taiwan's remaining allies in the Pacific (Tuvalu and Nauru). It remains an important diplomatic hub in the region (it hosts the secretariats of the PIF and the Pacific Islands Development Forum) and a communications crossroads in terms

10 Some accounts of the BRI and Maritime Silk Road fail to include the South Pacific. However, the second edition of China's *Blue Book on Oceania*, released in 2015 and subtitled 'China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the South Pacific Countries', describes the Pacific Islands as 'the natural extension of China's new Maritime Silk Road Initiative and can be a testing ground for South-South cooperation' (Smith and Zhang 2015).

11 According to Meick et al., the use of the term 'comprehensive strategic partnership' is reserved for China's 'more important partners' (2018:16).

of air and sea connectivity. Fiji is also home (and destination) to a growing number of Chinese migrants and visitors, who in turn provide a vanguard for China's cultural diplomacy and people-to-people links.

But the growing presence and visibility of China in Fiji has also fuelled fear-mongering (in some cases politically motivated) about its impact and intentions. In an Australian television documentary in 2018, the leader of Fiji's main opposition party (former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka) declared that he was 'not comfortable' with China's involvement in Fiji's affairs. He expressed the view that China planned 'domination' of the region and to take over Fiji's ports and airports (60 Minutes 2018). Other opposition leaders have also indicated their reservations. One of the foreign policy priorities of the National Federation Party in the 2018 general election was to 'reduce our dependence on countries that do not share democratic values and respect for human rights', an oblique reference to China (Nacei 2018).¹²

These concerns have resonated with an environment of heightened anxiety, if not paranoia, surrounding China's regional presence. In 2018, Australian media reported that a Chinese space surveillance ship, on a regular stopover in Suva harbour, was spying on a visiting Australian naval vessel. This prompted the Chinese ambassador to Fiji to denounce the claims as 'sheer fabrication', adding that 'spying is not at all the Chinese technique' (Kumar 2018b).

It is clear that China's growing engagement with Fiji and the region, underpinned by the BRI strategy, has ignited renewed geopolitical rivalry in the Pacific (Morgan 2018). But ironically this has transpired at a time when Fiji's foreign policy was again on the move. As China's interests in building closer relations with Fiji have grown in recent years, so too have the interests of other more traditional partners, willing to reembrace Fiji once it returned to elected government in 2014. This has important implications for the China–Fiji relationship, as discussed in the next section.

12 While the government of Prime Minister Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama, from the FijiFirst party, has appeared uniformly committed to the Fiji–China partnership, it is perhaps significant that the powerful Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for the Economy, Civil Service and Communications, and Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum has not made an official visit to China.

New dynamics in Fiji–China relations

The adverse international environment facing Fiji after 2006 compelled Fiji to reach out beyond its ‘traditional’ comfort zone to forge new partnerships and diplomatic strategies. The success of this new foreign policy was perhaps beyond the expectations of the government—as Fiji reached new heights on the world stage. These included being the first Pacific Island state to chair or preside over the Group of 77 plus China, the UN General Assembly and the UN Climate Change conference (COP23). Such achievements have in turn bolstered the confidence of the Bainimarama Government to pursue a foreign policy that is both independent and assertive (Fry and Tarte 2015).

Evidence of this independence in its relations with China came in 2016 in the context of jurisdiction over the South China Sea. Following a meeting in Beijing between the Chinese foreign minister and his Fijian counterpart, a so-called joint press release was issued that claimed—among other things—that ‘Fiji supported China’s proposition on the issue of the South China Sea’. According to the press release, both sides stressed the right of states to ‘independently choose the means of dispute settlement’, adding that ‘prior consent of parties to the dispute must be sought before proceeding with any third party settlement’ (Xinhua 2016). This referred to the arbitration case brought by the Philippines against China under provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); an arbitration that China has rejected.

Almost immediately the Fijian Government issued a separate ‘clarification’, stating that the press release by China ‘incorrectly depicts Fijian policy towards China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea’. The statement explained that:

In line with our policy of strict non-alignment, Fiji enjoys friendly relations with all countries bordering the South China Sea, including China. We also believe in the strict adherence to and enforcement of international law. In relation to the South China Sea, Fiji calls on all relevant parties to resolve any territorial disputes by peaceful means under international law (Delaibatiki 2016).

In its jingoistic editorial on this issue, the pro-government daily newspaper *Fiji Sun* declared that ‘this emphatic statement sends a clear message to the international community that we will not be forced into a foreign policy position by anyone’ (Delaibatiki 2016). It went on to

describe the Bainimarama Government as working hard since 2006 ‘to show that Fiji no longer dances to the Australia/New Zealand/USA foreign policy tunes ... The same applies equally to all countries, including our good friends in China’ (ibid.). It would also have been pertinent to point out that, as one of the architects of UNCLOS, Fiji was not likely to take a stand that would undermine the authority of the convention in resolving such maritime disputes.

Since Fiji returned to parliamentary rule in 2014, Australia, New Zealand and the United States have resumed their high-level political, diplomatic and military engagement. There has also been a reassertion of traditional economic partnerships. For example, Fiji commissioned a new consulate general and trade commission in Sydney in 2018. Speaking at the opening, Prime Minister Bainimarama declared:

We’re leaving old disagreements in the past, where they belong, and we’re writing a new chapter in our partnership— putting Fiji and Australia in a position to take our cooperation to historic heights, particularly when it comes to opening up new and greater flows of trade and investment (Islands Business 2018:32).

But in the context of heightened geopolitical competition, it is the security relationships that have taken on greater significance. The Australian Government has refitted a Fijian naval vessel (which also took part in a naval exercise in Darwin in 2018). Coincidentally, the return of the refitted vessel occurred just before the arrival of a new hydrographic vessel from China. Between 2020 and 2022 Australia will deliver two new patrol boats to Fiji’s navy. Meanwhile the New Zealand Defence Force has for two consecutive years (2017 and 2018) deployed one of its inshore patrol vessels to Fiji to assist with surveillance of Fiji’s exclusive economic zone. The Fiji Navy also received a new hydrographic vessel in early 2019, donated by South Korea.

The US has also stepped up its defence cooperation. In 2018 a US guided-missile destroyer (USS *Shoup*) visited Fiji as part of its Oceania Maritime Security Initiative deployment. In a symbolic gesture, the Fiji naval maritime commander was transferred to the vessel by a US Black Hawk helicopter to welcome the crew. In 2018 Fiji became the 11th Pacific Island state to conclude a ‘Shiprider agreement’ with the US Government to allow Fijian law enforcement officers to be deployed on US coast guard and naval vessels. In the words of the US chargé d’affaires, the agreement demonstrated that ‘the United States is a committed security partner with Fiji and other Pacific island nations’ (United States Embassy in Fiji 2018).

These renewed relationships have reduced or diluted China's influence in Fiji, essentially by offering Fiji more options and choices. Nowhere was this more evident than the announcement in June 2018 that the Black Rock military camp in Fiji would be redeveloped by Australia as a regional hub for police and peacekeeping training. According to a Fiji military source, while China had an interest in Black Rock, Australia had offered a more 'holistic' package, providing troop training as well as infrastructure, 'something that China was reluctant to do' (Radio New Zealand 2018). For some commentators, this incident reflected how Australia was willing to 'outbid' China. But there has also been speculation that China is not getting the same attention from Fiji it once enjoyed and that the ball game has now changed.

Conclusion

In the decade since 2008 the Fiji–China relationship strengthened significantly—politically, economically and culturally. This was propelled, on the one hand, by Fiji's own efforts to redefine its foreign policy and place in the world, as it navigated a difficult (if not hostile) diplomatic environment following the political upheavals of 2006 and 2009. On the other hand, the Chinese Government has elevated the relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership', signalling the importance China attaches to relations with Fiji, especially in the context of its evolving strategy of global and regional engagement: the BRI and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

The evidence suggests that Fiji has benefited from these closer ties with China. On the political and diplomatic front, China has proven to be a close and valued supporter and partner, especially as Fiji sought to define a more independent foreign policy after 2009. On the economic front, Fiji and China have exploited new opportunities, especially in trade and investment. The economic relationship has been increasingly underpinned by the BRI, which is seen as providing the catalyst for rapidly growing Chinese investment in Fiji and for increasing Fiji's 'exposure in the Chinese market' (Fiji Broadcasting Corporation 2017). The BRI has also become the framework for future development cooperation between Fiji and China and for promoting people-to-people ties.

For China, Fiji is crucial to the implementation of the five diplomatic priorities announced in 2014 by President Xi in his policy of heightened engagement with the Pacific Islands region. Relations with Fiji serve to bolster China's credentials as an economic power in the region. They also help to curtail Taiwan's regional influence, which has waned in Fiji over the past decade. But this relationship has not been without its controversies and setbacks. It has been observed that some of the purported investment from China (especially in the tourism sector) has either failed to materialise or encountered major obstacles. These obstacles include alleged violation of environmental laws, sometimes leading to prosecution (such as the Freesoul real estate development on Malolo Island) and conflicts with landowning units (such as the Guangdong Silkroad Ark Investment (Fiji) Company's hotel project on the Coral Coast). Such controversies in turn complicate the political relationship, fuelling criticisms in Fiji of the Chinese connection.¹³

In recent years, Fiji has welcomed the return of traditional partners—especially Australia, New Zealand and the United States; all three motivated by a common interest to counter the perceived influence of China in Fiji (and the region more broadly). This 'changing external environment' has opened up new opportunities for Fiji—economically, politically and strategically. It is clear that the Bainimarama Government (elected for a further four years in November 2018) takes a pragmatic approach to its foreign and defence relations, making decisions based on its calculations of Fiji's national interest. These decisions seem unlikely to privilege relations with China over other foreign relationships. How China responds to these changing dynamics in relations with Fiji remains to be seen.

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13 There also remains some confusion among business leaders in Fiji, who struggle to understand the relevance of BRI for the region and are wary of formal MOUs governing the relationship.

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