

Russian arms consignment arrives in Fiji

By John Braddock
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Last week, two Russian ships, one from Vladivostok and one from Crimea, arrived in Suva, the capital of the Pacific island state of Fiji, with a consignment of arms and other military hardware. There was no prior announcement regarding the delivery and the manifest of the shipment has not been revealed.

Radio New Zealand Pacific affairs correspondent Michael Field reported on January 22 that the size of the consignment was disputed, but was estimated at between 20 and 27 container loads. Field said the materiel was rumoured to include a helicopter, heavy weaponry and new generation Kalashnikov assault rifles. According to the *Guardian*, the gifted weapons will be followed next month by Russian military personnel to act as “trainers” for the new arsenal.

The shipment underlines the deepening geo-strategic tensions in the Pacific. In preparation for war, US imperialism, assisted by its allies Australia and New Zealand, is seeking to ensure its dominance in the South West Pacific and to counter the growing influence of China in particular. This has heightened tensions throughout the region and turned every country, including small Pacific Island states, into an arena of geo-political intrigue.

Confirming the arrival of the Russian consignment, the acting commander of Fiji’s military forces, Rear-Admiral Viliame Naupoto, claimed the weapons were needed because Fijian “peacekeepers” serving on UN missions overseas are working in volatile areas with outdated arms. “I must thank the government of Russia for the timely donation,” Naupoto declared.

Currently, 1,000 Fijian troops are on duty in UN-led missions in the Sinai, Syria, the Golan Heights, Iraq and Lebanon. In August 2014, 43 Fijian soldiers were captured on the Golan Heights by Al-Qaeda linked fighters from the al-Nusra Front and held hostage for two weeks until a ransom of \$US25 million was paid. The UN assignments are an important source of

revenue for Fiji, with remittances from soldiers abroad a significant boost to the economy. The UN presently owes \$US140 million for the Fijian army’s services.

More fundamental strategic issues are, however, at stake. After the then military leader, now prime minister, Frank Bainimarama led a coup to seize control of the country in 2006, Australia, New Zealand and the US imposed travel, aid and commercial sanctions on Fiji. While professing concern for democracy, these imperialist powers were worried that Bainimarama’s junta could lessen their sway over the former British colony.

The sanctions only succeeded in alienating the regime, however. It adopted a “Look North” policy, initially establishing closer diplomatic, trade and aid ties with Beijing, and subsequently strengthening military ties. In 2010, Washington pressured Australia and New Zealand to drop the sanctions in an unsuccessful effort to stem the growth of Chinese influence in Fiji and across the wider region.

Despite the subsequent lifting of sanctions, and the endorsement by the three Western powers of a bogus election in September 2014 to legitimise Bainimarama’s rule, the Chinese role has continued. Chinese warships have started visiting the capital and, according to Michael Field, Fiji is considering the use of Chinese aircraft to patrol its exclusive economic zone.

Fiji has encouraged other Pacific nations to take a more “independent” stance from Canberra and Wellington. In 2012, it set up the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) as an alternative to the Australian and New Zealand-dominated Pacific Islands Forum, from which Fiji had been suspended. Led by Fiji, the PIDF meets without the two regional powers, and last month criticised them for opposing Pacific island calls at the Paris climate summit for more stringent emissions targets.

Since 2006, Fiji has established 57 new diplomatic partnerships, and developed ties with Russia. In 2012, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov became the first senior Russian government official to visit Fiji. Bainimarama reciprocated the following year, becoming the first Fijian leader to make a state visit to Russia.

Fiji notably refused to join in the international stampede to demonise Russia over the US-backed coup in the Ukraine. Fiji was one of 58 nations that abstained on the UN vote in March 2014 to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea.

The Russian arms shipment will ring alarm bells in Washington. Just as the Obama administration's strategic "pivot to Asia" involves the consolidation of US military alliances and partnerships throughout Asia directed against China, so the US seeks, at the opposite end of the Eurasian landmass, to isolate and subjugate Russia.

While expanding its own military might across the Pacific, the US is demanding that all local governments fall into line with its strategic agenda. Tonga has recently been the recipient of new US military equipment, partly as a quid pro quo for the role Tongan soldiers played in Afghanistan, guarding the massive US airbase outside Kabul for five years.

The militarisation of the wider Pacific under pressure from Washington has the potential to inflame even minor local disputes into dangerous confrontations. Tensions erupted in June 2013 after Tongan naval gunboats chased off a Fijian warship at the disputed Minerva Reefs, 1,500 kilometres north of New Zealand. The uninhabited reefs, annexed by Tonga in 1972, are also claimed by Fiji and could be a significant source of lucrative undersea minerals. South Korean, Chinese and Australian interests are seeking prospecting rights in the area.

Some Fijian opposition MPs have alleged that the Russian shipment could include equipment intended for use in crowd control and other acts of political suppression. The regime recently purchased tear gas and riot control gear from South Korea in order to deal with the looming consequences of deepening social tensions, widespread poverty and inequality.

The government still rests directly on the military, despite a bogus election in September 2014. The election, in which Bainimarama's Fiji First Party

purportedly won 60 percent of the ballot, was held under conditions of press censorship, severe restrictions on opposition political parties and military provocations. The government is anti-working class and authoritarian, ruling largely through fear and intimidation. It has previously enacted harsh "public order" laws with measures against riot, violent disorder, affray, public processions and public assemblies.

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