

CHAPTER 5

Fiji Islands' Security Challenges and Defense Policy Issues

Sandra Tarte

Introduction

Fiji is an archipelagic nation in the central western Pacific Ocean comprising more than 300 islands, with a claimed sea area of about 1.29 million square kilometers. The last census taken in 2007 showed a population of 827,900 with indigenous Fijians comprising 57 percent and the Indo-Fijian population 37 percent. In 2007 it had a GDP of USD3.366 billion and a per capita income of USD 4,013.¹

Fiji has traditionally been regarded as the hub of the Pacific. The headquarters of most South Pacific regional organizations, South Pacific-based UN agencies and diplomatic missions (including that of Japan) are based in Fiji. Trans-Pacific sea and air routes pass through Fiji, and several small neighboring countries (such as Tuvalu and Kiribati) depend on Fiji as a transshipment point for their trade with the outside world.

Unique amongst the small island states of the Pacific, Fiji has a large standing army with a history of military intervention in the politics of the nation.² There have been four coups since 1987. The latest coup — in December 2006 — led to the installation of a military-backed interim regime and to the declaration of a new legal order (in April 2009). The intention of this government is to hold power until elections are held under a new constitution in 2014. It is likely the military will continue to exercise political influence after 2014 and the precise future role of the military is currently the subject of internal discussion.

This paper will survey the principal security challenges that currently face Fiji. It will argue that these security challenges stem primarily from the internal political crises that have periodically gripped the country. Political instability in Fiji, moreover, has

¹ Economic data is from United Nations Statistics Division, available at www.data.un.org/country.

² Only two other Pacific island countries have an army: Papua New Guinea and Tonga.

adversely affected the security of the wider South Pacific region and raises policy dilemmas and challenges for our regional neighbors (including traditional security partners, Australia and New Zealand). The paper will also explore the relationship between Fiji's security challenges and its defense posture (as it has evolved over time). It will show that the growth and structure of the Fiji military forces have been driven primarily by internal political concerns and imperatives. This has led to some tensions in Fiji's approach to security and defense. The current role of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) is focused on internal security and governance. Some analysts argue that this should be the principal rationale of the military forces. However, this role tends to detract from its external security function and indeed may heighten security threats and challenges facing the country.

Current Security Challenges

The following discussion draws from various Defense White Papers, RFMF Strategic planning documents, interviews with defense and government officials, academic analyses and media reports.

The last major review of Fiji's security and defense requirements was conducted in 2004 and a Draft White Paper based on this report was subsequently prepared by the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2005.³ The White Paper was never implemented however as the recommendations it contained (especially the reduction in the size of the military forces) were strongly opposed by the military leadership. The RFMF subsequently staged the coup of December 2006, in part to thwart the implementation of the White Paper.

Nevertheless this Review document provides a useful starting point to assessing the security threats and challenges currently facing Fiji. These are grouped under the following headings (although not in order of priority): Interstate conflict, International

³ Lowy, R., Firth, S., and Vitusagavulu, J. (2004), *National Security and Defence Review: Safeguarding Peace and Prosperity*, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of Fiji; *Draft White Paper 2005 – A safe and Prosperous Fiji*, National Security Defense Review Implementation Project, Ministry of Home Affairs, Immigration and National Disaster Management. The Ministry of Home Affairs is now named Ministry of Defence, National Security, Disaster Management and Immigration.

Non-State Conflict, Internal Conflict, Transnational Crime, and Natural and man-made Disasters.

Interstate Conflict

This refers to the threat to Fiji posed by another state — via invasion or conventional attack. The 2004 Review — and indeed most analyses — has rated the threat of such attack as minimal if not non-existent. Moreover, although Fiji does not have any formal security alliances with any other state, it has been assumed — due to traditional defense ties — that if Fiji were to be attacked it would almost certainly be defended by Australia, New Zealand and perhaps also the United States.⁴

Ironically, though, it was been these very ‘allies’ who have come closest in recent times to posing a ‘conventional’ threat to Fiji’s sovereignty. In the wake of Fiji’s first coup in May 1987, both Australia and New Zealand were on stand-by to intervene militarily to evacuate their nationals should the law and order situation have deteriorated. It was this perceived threat to territorial sovereignty, and the deterrent role played by the Fiji military forces, that influenced subsequent defense planning. The events of 1987 — particularly the hostile response of traditional allies to the military coup — had the effect of instilling a ‘hard learned lesson’ for defense planners: namely that ‘each sovereign nation (including Fiji) must look to its own defense’.⁵

More recently, in the lead-up to the coup of December 2006, Australia’s role was again the focus of controversy. A contingent of Australian defense personnel sent to assist the Australian diplomatic mission with evacuation plans if violence erupted allegedly included a number of SAS officers who — it was claimed — clandestinely entered the country (possibly with a consignment of arms). Support for a possible evacuation of Australian nationals was also the ostensible purpose of a naval deployment into Fiji’s waters immediately prior to the coup. The deployment included a guided missile frigate and a Blackhawk helicopter detachment (as well as two other naval vessels).

⁴ The ANZUS Alliance ‘has been understood to extend to Fiji and other South West Pacific states should they confront an armed threat to their territory.’ Lowry et al. (2004), Ch. 1, par. 50.

⁵ See “Defence White Paper 1997 — Defending Fiji”, *Parliamentary Paper*, No. 3, Parliament of Fiji, 1997. According to this document, in 1987 “The Possibility of Military Intervention on Fiji’s Territory Appeared Imminent”. See pp. 15, 20, 30.

An Australian Army Blackhawk helicopter subsequently crashed and sank while carrying out exercises off Fiji waters on 29 November 2006, causing two Australian deaths.⁶

Whether or not Australia actually intended to 'pit Australian soldiers against Fiji soldiers' is probably not the issue. What is salient is that the incident heightened threat perceptions within the Military leadership and gave credence to a view that foreign intervention remained a possibility and that the country should be prepared to defend itself. This remains a cornerstone of the Fiji Military Forces strategic plan and intent.⁷

This raises an apparent paradox: namely that recent threats of foreign intervention in Fiji have been prompted by the actions (coups) of the Fiji military forces —the institution that under law is 'charged with the defense of Fiji'.⁸ This paradox is heightened by the fact that a prevailing rationale for the maintenance of the Fiji military forces is to guard against 'the real potential for disruptive politics in the country in the future'.⁹ However, as long as it plays the internal security role the military may be exposing Fiji to external security threats.

International Non-state Conflict

This refers primarily to the threat from global terrorism. The 1997 Defense White Paper identified terrorism as a potential threat given that this was part of a global trend but also argued that small island nations had characteristics that terrorists 'could find attractive' —isolation from other nations, lack of counter terrorist capability, porous borders and so on. In the 2004 Defense Review, terrorism was also given prominence, but again in terms of potential vulnerability rather than actual evidence of threats from international terrorism. The assessment used the example of the Bali bombing of 2002 to show how attacks on western tourists (who comprise the bulk of

⁶ The Australian Government has denied that the vessels were operating in Fiji's territorial waters, but evidence indicates otherwise. See "Australian intervention in Fiji in October–November 2006 —an issue of international law", *Fiji Human Rights Commission Special Investigations Report*, March 31, 2008.

⁷ See RFMF Strategic Plan and Intent, 2009, p.3.

⁸ See Royal Fiji Military Forces Act [Cap. 81] Part II, Paragraph 3 (2). Available on http://www.paclii.org/fj/legis/consol_act/rfmfa.

⁹ Ratuva, S., "Redefining the role of the military in Fiji's national development", *Draft Paper for Technical and Support Secretariat*, NCBBF, Suva, 2008, pp. 17, 24.

Fiji's tourist market) could cause havoc to the country's economy. It also highlighted the vulnerability of Fiji as a transit point for terrorists organizing attacks elsewhere in the region.

Despite the absence — so far — of any evidence of terrorist infiltration in the country, security analyses tend to highlight this as a priority challenge. It is assumed that Fiji is not immune to global terrorist trends and should therefore strengthen its counter-terrorism capabilities. According to one senior source, the only link to terrorism so far in Fiji has been one case of terror financing. However, as the 2004 Defense Review noted, the potential for financing of terrorism through off-shore jurisdictions remains a real threat. In February 2008 the Interim Government announced it would be 'reviving and re-energizing' its national security agencies (namely the National Security Council and Fiji Intelligence Services) 'to better prepare the country for any eventualities in the future'. High on the list of possible eventualities was terrorism and other clandestine operations.¹⁰

It has also been argued that weak states (states characterized by political instability and economic fragility among other things) are more vulnerable to possible terrorist infiltration. As discussed in the next section, internal conflict in Fiji has the potential to weaken the state and thus its ability to deal with possible terrorist threats (as well as other threats such as transnational crime).

Internal Conflict

The history of internal conflict in Fiji is well documented and will not be elaborated in this paper. Suffice to say that this is regarded almost universally as the principal security threat and challenge facing Fiji.¹¹ This view that internal unrest was the most likely threat to the country originated during the colonial era and was predicated on the underlying ethnic composition of the country. It was the basis upon which the colonial state established and maintained a small military force.¹² A small force able to support the police was considered necessary in view of the potential for conflict between the two dominant racial groups (indigenous Fijians and the descendents

¹⁰ "Government revives National Security Council", 26 February 2008, *Fiji Government Online*, www.fiji.gov.fj. Accessed 14 September 2009.

¹¹ See Lowry et al. (2004), Ch. 1; and Draft Defense White Paper 2005, p. 95.

¹² *Defense White Paper 1997*, p. 17.

of Indian indentured laborers and settlers). There was also the potential for labor/industrial unrest — which was occasionally experienced.¹³

Internal conflict and instability in Fiji have been closely associated with military intervention in the country's political affairs (both as cause and effect). The army — acting on behalf of indigenous Fijian interests (but also to stem what was possibly a growing tide of nationalist unrest and agitation) — executed two military coups in 1987. These coups reasserted control over the state by indigenous Fijian elites (who had been dislodged from power by an election in April 1987).

The 'success' of these coups is likely to have paved the way in 2000 for an attempt by an armed civilian group (aided by a rogue element within the army and 'grassroots' Fijian support) to seize power. The government of the day (led by Fiji's first Indo-Fijian Prime Minister) was held hostage in the Parliament for 56 days and the army was compelled to move in and declare martial law to fill the ensuing power vacuum. It was in 2000 that the country faced its most serious test as a nation; the threat of anarchy and civil war was very real. This fate was avoided by the intervention of the military but for much of 2000 the nation endured major disruption as key infrastructure was sabotaged, rural Indian communities terrorized, roadblocks erected, land and property seized, and the army itself experienced several mutiny attempts.¹⁴

A dominant view of the cause of such political instability has been the need for indigenous Fijians to feel secure in their own land. The motivation for political unrest has been indigenous attempts to seize back control of the state as a way to safeguard their economic and cultural interests. Ethno-nationalist agitation has been fueled by the perceived economic disparities between Fijians and other ethnic groups (particularly Indo-Fijians). Interestingly, in the post 2000 period, the civilian government installed by the army (a government which subsequently won two general elections — in 2001 and 2006) pursued policies based on the assumption that stability could only be guaranteed if indigenous interests were protected. This was reflected in the 2005 Defense White Paper: 'The solution for the prevention of any further political upheavals in the country in the future are (sic) an affirmative action agenda

¹³ Ratuva, (2008), p. 6.

¹⁴ The most serious mutiny attempt took place in November 2000 when the military commander was targeted and narrowly escaped death. Eight soldiers died in the mutiny attempt and its aftermath.

designed to create the level playing field needed to neutralize ethnic differences (and a national constitution that supports affirmative action programs...'¹⁵

The 2006 coup however represented a repudiation of this philosophy and a rejection of the political strategy of pandering to ethnic and indigenous interests. For the current Prime Minister and head of the RFMF, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, 'security ... means a clean and corrupt-free country'.¹⁶ From the perspective of the Military leadership, the principal threats to Fiji's security come from indigenous nationalists who seek to exploit the 'race card' to stir nationalist and racial unrest. This includes elements of the traditional Fijian chiefly establishment and the conservative Methodist Church (the largest Christian denomination among Fijians). Corruption was also high on the list of political ills (fostered by Government backed affirmative action programs for indigenous Fijians).

Since taking power more than three years ago, the focus of the RFMF has been overwhelmingly on internal governance. The Military's 2010 Strategic Plan and Intent states that the 'overarching objective' of the RFMF is to 'rebuild Fiji into a non racial, culturally vibrant and united, well-governed, truly democratic nation; a nation that seeks progress and prosperity through merit based on equality of opportunity and peace'. Part of the means for achieving this goal has been to appoint senior military officers to key government positions. Moreover, while most of the Ministers in the Interim Government are civilians, much of the actual power lies with a Military Council (chaired by the army commander —who is also the Prime Minister). This 'guardian and leadership role' is to ensure that 'good governance is entrenched'.¹⁷

This latest coup has raised several security challenges:

(i) Potential for underground dissident movement to emerge in opposition to the Interim Government

So far the Military has acted swiftly to suppress any plots to destabilize the government.

¹⁵ *Draft Defense White Paper 2005*, p. 98.

¹⁶ He made this assertion in January 2006, nearly a year before seizing power in a military coup – described by the army as a 'clean-up campaign'. Steven Ratuva, "The pre-election 'cold war': the role of the Fiji military during the 2006 election," in Firth, S. and Fraenkel, J. (Eds), *From Election to Coup in Fiji: The 2006 Campaign and its Aftermath*, IPS and ANU E Press, 2007, p. 40.

¹⁷ National Council for Building a Better Fiji, *The State of the Nation and the Economy Report*, August 2008, p. 97.

The imposition of strict media censorship and a Public Emergency Decree has curtailed public debate and information on the political situation, as well as any mobilization by opponents. The most likely source of unrest is groups of indigenous nationalists.¹⁸ The army has a monopoly on the use of force but some weapons that went missing in the year 2000 still have not been recovered. This remains a concern to the military. It should also be noted that in curbing political freedoms, the potential for human rights violations has also increased which highlights an important human security challenge facing the country.

(ii) Economic fall-out from the coup which has the potential to trigger or fuel social dislocation and political instability.

Since 2007 GDP growth has declined significantly — including a 2.5 decline in 2009. This is due to a drop in investment, decline in tourism, and poor performance in terms of domestic production and exports. Aid from traditional sources has been cut and — perhaps most crucially — the European Union has withheld funds that would ameliorate the effects of the removal of price support for Fiji's sugar exports to the EU market.¹⁹ In the past year the economic situation has been worsened by a combination of natural disasters and the global financial crisis. Although the Interim Government has prioritized poverty alleviation in its economic policies (in part perhaps to shore up domestic support and stability), this does not allay the fact that it has also contributed to a vicious cycle of adverse economic trends which may eventually overwhelm it.

(iii) Loss of defense cooperation with key partners has undermined Fiji's ability to deal with problems of transnational crime and provide for its border security.

As a direct consequence of the military coup, defense cooperation and assistance from Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States has all but ceased. This includes intelligence exchanges, training for military personnel, aerial surveillance of Fiji's EEZ, technical support for the operations of Fiji's three patrol boats (supplied by Australia), as well as regional patrol boat exercises. Fiji is also now excluded from

¹⁸ See for example "Taukei Nationalist Movement Worries Fiji Regime," *Pacific Islands Report*, 4 June 2009.

¹⁹ The EU is historically the main market for Fiji's sugar exports. In 2009 the price paid to Fiji by the EU dropped by 36 percent — in line with reforms in the EU sugar regime. The sugar industry supports directly and indirectly up to 30 percent of the Fiji population. Due to the political situation in the country the EU has put on hold up to US\$200 million aimed to assist the industry adjust to the new price regime, risking the potential for a total collapse of the industry.

regional security dialogues, under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum. Some of these gaps (in particular training) have been filled by other states — namely India and China. Fiji also continues to participate in Asia Pacific-wide forums (eg Asia Pacific group on money laundering). But the loss of defense cooperation has left Fiji dangerously exposed and vulnerable, especially to transnational crime threats, as discussed in the next section.

Transnational Crime

This is an umbrella term that includes people and drug smuggling, money laundering, identity fraud, cyber crime, corruption of public officials, and illegal exploitation of natural resources (forests and fish). All of these threats are prevalent in Fiji and are recognized as serious – although the extent of the problems is sometimes hard to verify. It is widely assumed these problems are increasing exponentially.

The 2004 Defense Review noted that ‘Fiji is used by international criminal organizations as a transit point for more dangerous drugs en route to Australia and New Zealand’.²⁰ Fiji has also been used as a manufacturing base for hard drugs destined for the Australasian market. Most of these activities have been linked to Asian (Chinese) drug syndicates. This role of Fiji as ‘transit point’ is well understood within the Fiji defense and law enforcement establishment (as well as in Australia and New Zealand). Successful drug busts in the past have depended on international cooperation and intelligence sharing.²¹ This cooperation is now hampered by the security bans in place against Fiji, which have also weakened border control capabilities of the country.

Nowhere is this more evident than in respect to Fiji’s maritime border control. As an archipelagic state with a large sea area under its jurisdiction, Fiji has always had difficulties policing its maritime borders and guarding against illegal fishing, illegal transshipments of contraband and people smuggling. As discussed below, Fiji’s naval capacity has traditionally been poorly or under resourced, resulting in capability gaps. For example, the 2004 Defense Review observed that ‘there is little knowledge about

²⁰ Lowry et al (2004), Ch. 1 par. 72.

²¹ Major examples of Chinese-linked criminal activity in Fiji were the seizure of 357 kilograms of heroin in 2000 (valued at over US\$145 million) and the discovery of a methamphetamine factory in 2004, reportedly the largest such laboratory yet found in the Southern hemisphere.

the scale of Fiji's maritime security infringements'.²²

This situation has been compounded since 2006 by the cutting off of Australian, New Zealand and French military cooperation. Aerial surveillance flights have ceased; there is no intelligence sharing with Fiji by these regional neighbors; and Fiji's patrol boats now rarely undertake surveillance operations (due to a lack of technical support, maintenance and training). The costs of operating the vessels are also regarded as prohibitive. In the absence of traditional support, the Fiji Government is exploring the possibility of China assuming a greater role in Fiji's maritime surveillance. This is discussed again later in the paper.

Natural and Man-made Disasters

Fiji is vulnerable to natural disasters which can have a devastating economic and social impact — as demonstrated by the floods in early 2009 and cyclone in late 2009. It is also vulnerable to drought and the more general effects of climate change. The last major tsunami was in 1952 but there have recently been several tsunami warnings (part of a more heightened awareness of the risk these can pose.)

Natural disaster management was highlighted in the 2005 draft Defense White Paper. This was in recognition of 'the fact that the most frequent attacks on national socio-economic resources result from natural disasters'.²³ The White Paper recommended the streamlining of policy making structures including national security functions. In this context, the Fiji military forces have been regarded as 'uniquely suited to disaster relief operations'.²⁴

Man-made environmental pollution and degradation also pose a long-term security risk to the country. In addition to environmental disasters, Fiji — like most countries — recognizes a threat from global pandemics and diseases (HIV/AIDS, SARS and Swine Flu) although so far none have been as devastating as in some other parts of the world. It was noted in the 2004 Defense Review that Fiji's involvement in international peacekeeping operations — especially in Africa (military and police) — is a potential contributor ('vector') to the spread of HIV/AIDS in Fiji.

²² Lowry et al (2004), Ch. 3.

²³ *Draft Defense White Paper 2005*, p. 4.

²⁴ *Defense White Paper 1997*, p. 32. See also *State of the Nation and Economy Report*, p. 102.

Relationship Between Security Challenges and Defense Posture

Defense Policy

Fiji does not have an explicit defense policy. The 1997 White Paper had emphasized external threats in its analysis and advocated a defense posture that would provide for 'real deterrence (and) real combat capability' in order to preserve national sovereignty 'on land and sea'. Thus it had proposed the concept 'Defending Fiji' as a basis to defense policy and a force strength 'of sufficient manifest capability' to deter 'aggressor nations'.²⁵

This White Paper was not implemented despite Parliamentary approval because, according to the Draft White Paper of 2005, it was considered 'impractical and too costly to implement'.²⁶ The 2005 Draft White Paper, which was based on the 2004 Defense Review, had called for a reduction in the size of the RFMF, mainly due to what it considered the absence of any external threat to the nation from the armed forces of another country. However this was also never implemented, in large part due to opposition from the RFMF and the subsequent coup.

The basis for defense policy therefore lies in legislation establishing the military forces — RFMF Act [Cap 81], which dates back to 1949 and was last revised in 1985. This is supplemented by the RFMF's own Strategic Plan and Intent. According to the military's 2008–2012 Strategic Plan, there are 10 defense goals which are as follows: Maintaining a war fighting capability; Crisis management and response; Protection of our EEZ; Contribute to regional and world peace; Contribute to nation-building; Improvement of the RFMF through modernization; Develop Military Doctrine; Human resource development; Affordability; and Domestic environment.²⁷

Some of these goals reflect conventional defense objectives, relating to external security. But the Strategic Plan also reflects the more broad-based role that the RFMF has played in the affairs of the state and which have largely determined the growth and structure of the RFMF over time.

²⁵ *Defense White Paper 1997*, pp. 20, 24–26.

²⁶ *Draft Defense White Paper 2005*, pp. 2, 95. It described the 1997 White Paper as 'flawed' and based on 'limited consultations' with the RFMF.

²⁷ Republic of Fiji Military Forces, *Strategic Plan and Intent 2010*, p. 3.

Current Force Strength and Structure of the Fiji Military Forces

The RFMF is an infantry-based organization comprising a Regular Force and a Territorial/Reserve Force. The approved force strength of the Regular Force is 3257. Actual numbers in recent years have tended to be slightly lower — for example 3,095 in 2008. Close to half this number (1,300 or two battalions) is on active duty overseas, serving in peacekeeping operations.²⁸ The budget allocation to the RFMF has increased significantly since 2006: rising from \$76.4 million in 2006 to \$96.8 million in 2009.²⁹ Much of this increase appears to be allocated towards increasing the salaries/emoluments of RFMF personnel rather than investment in new equipment or capital expenditure.

The following table gives a breakdown of the RFMF's force structure and personnel strength in 2005 and 2008, and a budget breakdown for 2009:

Table 1

Unit/Activity	Fiji \$ millions		
	2005 Strength ³⁰	2008 Strength ³¹	2009 Budget ³²
Headquarters: Policy and Administration	126	274	10,184
Headquarters: Land Force Command	347	416	8,989
Navy	300	290	9,616
Engineers Regiment	500	394	9,311
Third Fiji Infantry Regiment (3FIR)	942	575	19,323
Force Training Group	191	149	5,194
Logistics Support Unit	396	300	11,082
Second Fiji Infantry Regiment (2FIR)	336	338	11,787
Territorials	767	NA	1,301

Notes: The Second Fiji Infantry Battalion is dedicated to peacekeeping duties in Sinai (MFO) and came into being in 1982. Fiji currently also has troops deployed to Iraq under the UN Assistance Mission to Iraq. These missions are funded externally (although initial costs are borne by the FMF and show up as budget items). The 2009 budget does not include the expenditure of the Iraq mission.

²⁸ *State of the Nation and Economy Report*, p. 95.

²⁹ Ratuva, (2007) p. 38; RFMF Strategic Plan and Intent 2009. This does not take into account reimbursements from Peace Keeping Operations. According to the 2004 Defense Review, net government expenditure on the RFMF over ten year period 1993–2002 was about \$34 per annum (3.1 percent of government expenditure).

³⁰ See *Draft Defense White Paper 2005*, p. 110.

³¹ See *State of the Nation and Economy Report*, p. 95.

³² See *RFMF Strategic Plan and Intent 2009*.

Determinants of Force Strength and Structure

At the time of Fiji's independence in 1970 the regular strength of the RFMF was just 200, although it had previously been much higher. During World War Two the Fiji Military Forces had a strength of 8,500, including 6,371 indigenous Fijians.³³ Two battalions were deployed to the Solomon Islands to fight in the campaign against the Imperial Forces of Japan, and served under United States and New Zealand commanders.³⁴ During the colonial era, the potential for 'internal unrest' was recognized by both the British administration and New Zealand defense advisors they relied on. The need for a military force to support the police in internal security was one of the main justifications for the RFMF and the force was structured accordingly.³⁵

Following independence the main determinants shaping the growth and structure of the RFMF were as follows:

(i) Nation-building and National Development

In the early 1970s political decisions led to the modest expansion of the RFMF, mainly via the Military Engineers Unit which undertook non-defense functions such as rural road building and infrastructure development. As mentioned above, the RFMF has also been deployed to carry out disaster relief and rehabilitation work. Other non-defense functions that have been prominent include training of rural youth in trades such as carpentry and construction, and support for cadet training in schools. A nation-building role for the RFMF seems to be returning to the fore in the various discussions now taking place and this may impact on future force strength and structure. An expansion of the role of the RFMF Engineers has recently been proposed by the military —as part of its nation building work (particularly in the outer islands).³⁶ It is envisaged that the navy contribute to this exercise in 'nation building', as discussed in the following section.

³³ Firth, S. and Fraenkel, J. "The Fiji military and ethno-nationalism: Analysing the Paradox", in Firth, S. Fraenkel, J. and Lal, B.V. (Eds) *The 2006 Military Takeover in Fiji: A Coup to end all Coups?*, ANU E Press, 2009, p. 118.

³⁴ Ratuva (2006), p. 28.

³⁵ See *Defense White Paper 1997*, p. 17.

³⁶ Anon. "Role of Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF)", paper prepared for working group 3, NCBFF, 2008. Note that the 2004 Defense Review had argued against expanding the RFMF's role in 'nation-building', but the 2005 Draft White Paper recommended otherwise.

(ii) Maritime Security:

Fiji established a small naval squadron in 1978 based initially on four minesweepers purchased from the US. The main purpose was to provide some policing capability for Fiji's newly declared 200-mile exclusive economic zone. Subsequent additions to the navy included Dabur class patrol boats from Israel (one remains operational) and two L-class patrol boats from the US, used for in-share and coastal surveillance. The most significant addition came in the early 1990s, when Fiji received three custom built Pacific class patrol boats from Australia (as part of Australia's regional patrol boat program).³⁷

As mentioned earlier, current defense bans on Fiji have left the Pacific patrol boats without adequate maintenance and technical support. This, together with the high operating costs, means the boats are no longer carrying out surveillance patrols of Fiji's EEZ (and only occasionally undertaking search and rescue operations).

Despite the fact that Fiji is a maritime nation, with maritime security representing a vital component of its national security, the navy seems to have a relatively low profile and receive a relatively small share of the defense budget. The RFMF has overwhelmingly focused on land-based operations, for reasons discussed in the following sections. Recommendations (in the 2004 Defense Review and 2005 Draft White Paper) that the navy be transformed into a coast guard (which would centralize and coordinate maritime security responsibilities) were opposed by the military which continued to view the navy as a core part of the RFMF. However one line of thinking in the RFMF seems to view the navy as playing a future supporting role in nation building — supporting the Engineers unit in assisting outer island development. This role would require that the navy expand to include troop carriers and landing ships.³⁸

³⁷ Fiji was initially to have received these patrol boats in 1987, but delivery was put on hold following the military coup in May that year. Until 2006 Australia provided on-going technical support and maintenance of the patrol boats. Fiji also participated in regular regional patrol boat exercises and its naval personnel regularly received training in Australia (about 100 personnel a year on average). The boats were extensively overhauled in 2006, prior to the coup.

³⁸ Anon. "Role of Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF)," paper prepared for working group 3, NCBBF, 2008.

(iii) International Peacekeeping:

By far the main determinant of Fiji's force strength, structure and expenditure has been the role played in international peacekeeping operations. Fiji has raised forces specifically for these missions, beginning in 1978 with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) where a battalion was deployed until 2002. A second battalion was established to support the Multinational Forces and Observers to the Sinai (MFO), which remains today. Between 1978 and 1986, the force strength grew from 800 to 2,200 to service these missions. In the 30 years since 1978, 25,000 Fiji soldiers have served in overseas peacekeeping missions.³⁹

The decision to participate in peacekeeping was a political one. As noted in the 1997 Defense White Paper, the government of the day recognized the 'nation building' aspects of peacekeeping: 'to give as many young men as possible the opportunity to learn discipline, serve Fiji and to experience active service in the Holy Lands'.⁴⁰ Peacekeeping was also considered to be a way for Fiji to contribute to global security. Moreover it has long been a source of national pride that 'on a population basis, no other nation can approach Fiji's peacekeeping performance'.⁴¹

Another rationale often given for Fiji's on-going peacekeeping contributions is the revenue they generate for the country. However while the peacekeeping missions have facilitated the recruitment of more soldiers — thereby generating employment — the actual income earned by the country approximates expenditure. In the 2004 Defense Review, peacekeeping was described as a 'net liability' for the country — because it was undertaken by forces raised for that purpose; and thus carried inherent opportunity costs. Despite the recognition that peacekeeping does not in fact earn revenue for the country, the current Interim Government remains committed to its peacekeeping role and has strongly condemned the decision of the UN to not include Fiji in new peacekeeping missions.⁴²

³⁹ Firth and Fraenkel (2009), p. 119. Initially it was intended that these missions would comprise mostly reservists, but this became hard to sustain and so regulars were recruited and retained for the missions.

⁴⁰ See *Defense White Paper 1997*, p. 58.

⁴¹ See *Defense White Paper 1997*; also Firth and Fraenkel (2009), p. 119.

⁴² See statement of the Prime Minister to the United Nations General Assembly, September 2009. Available at www.pidp.eastwestcenter.org/pireport. This move by the UN was in part a response to lobbying by Australia and New Zealand as a reaction to Fiji's political situation.

(iv) Internal Security:

Apart from peacekeeping, the intervention by the military in the politics of the country — starting with the two military coups in 1987 — has been the main impetus behind the growth in the RFMF. Force strength grew significantly after 1987 — to nearly 6000 (including reservists).⁴³ This increase led to subsequent adjustments in rank structures. At the time of the May coup the highest rank in the RFMF was full colonel. However subsequent to the coup, the head of the military rose to become a Major General and other adjustments followed. The size and command structure of the military had an obvious impact on the RFMF budget.

In the 1990s, the force strength settled at around 3,500, as the RFMF temporarily retreated from politics. The events of 2000 (described above) profoundly influenced the role and outlook of the RFMF. The military was catapulted back onto the political stage and, since the coup of 2006 it has largely controlled the political agenda. In this context, it is unlikely the military size will decline, although given budget pressures (as well as public concerns) the RFMF may seek to realign its operations and structures. The focus — as mentioned above — may well be in national development and governance, rather than defense, based on a broad or comprehensive view of national security.⁴⁴

Future Prospects and Regional Dimensions

As discussed in this paper, Fiji's military forces have long played an internal security and development function, in addition to an external defense role. In fact the internal function has tended to overshadow the external role. This internal role (together with peacekeeping operations overseas) has shaped the force strength and structure of the RFMF over time. It has also complicated the defense or security discourse in Fiji — dividing opinion over whether or not the military is a source of insecurity in the nation or the final guarantor of its security.

Despite the criticisms and sanctions, the 'guardian and leadership role' of the

⁴³ Firth and Fraenkel (2009), p. 120.

⁴⁴ *State of the Nation and Economy Report 2008*, p. 97. This report discussed at length the benefits of engagement by the military with civil society and Government — and in 'human security' broadly defined.

military is likely to dominate politics in the future and shape security and defense planning. Through its reform agenda the Interim Government and the RFMF aim to build a long-term basis for Fiji's national stability. Work is also underway within Government to develop for the first time a comprehensive national security strategy and a National Security Act. This would codify, among other things, the relationship between the RFMF and various law-enforcement agencies in dealing with national security matters (including terrorism and transnational crime).

While these may be seen as potentially positive developments in terms of Fiji's national security, there is also the inherent risk that the current political situation breeds new security challenges or exacerbates long standing ones. This is the overriding dilemma facing Fiji and the region.

As stated in the introduction, Fiji stands at the cross-roads of the Pacific — as a regional hub and as a transit point for regional commerce and communications. Internal instability in Fiji has adversely affected the operations of regional organizations in the country, and disrupted trade and commerce with island neighbors. More significant, perhaps, it has undermined Fiji's capacity to counter external threats (particularly transnational crime) which directly and indirectly threaten Fiji's larger neighbors (Australia and New Zealand). It is also apparent that the coups in Fiji have heightened the risk of military intervention in Fiji by these same neighboring states.

It can therefore be argued that Fiji is part of a wider regional security system or 'security complex'. Political conflict within Fiji creates security challenges for the region, as well as for Fiji. Isolating Fiji from security cooperation — as a way of pressuring the government to fast-track elections — has not proved successful and in fact poses a number of risks. Apart from the concerns noted above, for traditional security partners there is the risk that Fiji will move increasingly towards closer defense ties with emerging powers (namely China), thereby weakening their own influence in the region. This is already occurring as RFMF personnel increasingly travel to China (or other Asian nations) for military training. What little military procurement is being carried out is also sourced from Asia (particularly China and South Korea). The Fiji government is also exploring the possibility of formalizing a relationship with China whereby the Chinese navy would assist Fiji with maritime surveillance.

Mechanisms for bilateral and multilateral security and law enforcement cooperation in the region are well established (especially those fostered through the Pacific Islands Forum network). While these have been weakened as a consequence of the political events in Fiji, it is likely that they will survive in the future as they are deemed too important to lose. The coming year could witness some interesting diplomatic shifts, as key players seek to find new ways of engaging with Fiji and its political leadership.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Efforts to improve diplomatic relations between Fiji and New Zealand have recently begun with a meeting in Nadi in early January 2010 between the Foreign Ministers of both countries.