

Rambo's Pacific Peace Zone

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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There has always been something impressive, if slightly idiosyncratic, about political ideas emanating from Pacific states. In recent years, on the world's largest body of water, the various island states seeing themselves as part of the Blue Pacific have tried to identify a set of principles by which to abide, forming an understanding of the environment that threatens to submerge them. Some sixteen states and territories in the Pacific became the second grouping to establish a nuclear free zone in 1985 via the Treaty of Rarotonga, first proposed by New Zealand at the South Pacific Forum meeting in Tonga in July 1975. Since then, climate change has taken centre stage.

Given that this vast aqueous area has again become an area of great power competition, it is time for the leaders, some cheeky, a number reckless, and all open to persuasion, to come to some arrangement to neutralise such competition even as they exploit it. Sitiveni Rabuka, Fiji's coup burnished Prime Minister, has put up his hand in this regard. As he put it in his [October 17 address](#) to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, "For us in the Blue Pacific, history may be calling, it might be our manifest destiny to carry banners for peace and speak out for harmony in our time and forever."

This is daringly opportunistic, as it should be. Doing so means that bulky, cloddish powers such as the United States and China may be discouraged from going to war, one that would be incalculably ruinous across the Indo- and Asia-Pacific. After all, once the missiles start flying between Beijing and Washington, notions of a tranquil Blue Pacific can be filed in the cabinet of oblivion.

In the words of Rabuka, "Rivalry between the two most powerful nations, the US and China, looks to be intensifying." The PM could only wonder, for instance, what would happen in instances where Chinese and Filipino ships confronted each other in the South China Sea. "Will this bring the US into an encounter with China?"

Concerns were also expressed about the deteriorating state of affairs regarding Taiwan. “Tensions over Taiwan are escalating with the potential for an armed face-off, or worse.” With this in mind, “Fiji’s position was clear. We are friendly with China and the US and do not want to be caught in the struggle between the superpowers.” The leaders in the Pacific, he warned, should not be made to choose sides.

With apostolic virtue, Rabuka suggested something of a different, middling formula: an “Ocean of Peace”. Such an idea was first aired in his [September address](#) to the United Nations General Assembly, where he urged “nations to come together” in tackling a whole set of crises, from great power competition to climate change.

This contemplated “Zone”, involving the major powers and Pacific Island states, would refrain “from actions that may jeopardise regional order and stability” and maintain “respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity”. Such an arrangement might also have immediate, tangible benefits, such as the deployment of Fijian peacekeepers to Papua New Guinea to quell tribal conflict, or brokering peace talks between West Papua and Indonesia. “There would be a continued emphasis on the Pacific way of dialogue, diplomacy and consensus,” he explained. “Protection and conservation of the environment would be central – a positive element for more harmony and peace.”

Rabuka’s ideas on peace and order are bound to cause a snigger over the canteen meals in foreign affairs departments. This was a man not averse to leading his own disruptive actions in undermining the very things he now redemptively extols. The ABC’s eternally looking adolescent, Stephen Dziedzic, was mature enough [to note](#) the obvious fact that Rabuka, “once nicknamed ‘Rambo’ – illegally seized power in a 1987 military coup”. A gentle exoneration follows, as Rambo “has since publicly apologised for his actions, and won a tight election 10 months ago to take Fiji’s top job once again.”

On that score, Fiji’s leader has much to apologise for. His coup (technically two coups staged over a few months) ensured the overthrow of the elected government of Timoci Bavadra in May 1987. He then daringly deposed Queen Elizabeth II as Queen of Fiji the following September, despite having been made an officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1981 [for showing](#) “imagination and innovation” in confronting and restraining the activities of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Lebanon. (He had done so commanding the first battalion of the Fiji Infantry Regiment, which was serving with the UN Interim Force in Lebanon.)

With such a resume, Rabuka tried to be penitent to his audience. He had “repented” and was “reborn. My past cannot be removed, but I can compensate to some extent for what I did.” Along the long road of political stuttering, he “became a convinced democrat ... and now this democratic politician will do what he can to be an apostle of peace.”

Rabuka, like some of his Pacific nation colleagues, continues to be an irrepressible tease in dealings with Australia, China and the United States. “We are more comfortable dealing with traditional friends that have similar systems of government, that our democracies are the same brand of democracy, coming out of the Westminster system of parliament, and also based on British law that we inherited.”

Having previously shown a glorious contempt for that system, he is perfectly placed to cash in on his continuing relationship with Canberra and, by extension, Washington, while dancing with the emissaries of Beijing. And what better way to do that than through a

solution that seeks preservation rather than suicidal annihilation?

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a regular contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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