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US expands military presence in Micronesia targeting China

High-level talks were held in Honolulu during July involving Micronesian President David Panuelo and US Navy Admiral John C. Aquilino, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), about “the United States’ broader defense and force posture in the Pacific,” as well as associated “security” issues around climate change, law enforcement training and search and rescue operations.

A statement by the Micronesian government read: “The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the United States collaborated on plans for more frequent and permanent US Armed Forces presence, and have agreed to cooperate on how that presence will be built up both temporarily and permanently within the FSM, with the purpose of serving the mutual security interests of both nations.” Few details were provided, but a military base and other military facilities are involved.



US aircraft Carrier USS NIMITZ in Guam [Credit: US Navy]

The FSM is a strategically situated archipelago of 600 islands, with a population of 58,000, in the north-west Pacific near the Philippine Sea. The expansion of the US military presence comes in the wake of Washington's Afghanistan debacle and as the Biden administration heightens its military build-up against China, which it views as the main obstacle to its global hegemony.

While China is not explicitly named in the communique it is clearly the main target. The bolstering of the US presence in Micronesia is part of the wider militarisation of the Pacific, which is drawing the entire region into the intensifying confrontation between nuclear-armed powers that potentially has devastating consequences.

The FSM, along with neighbouring Palau and the Marshall Islands, are in so-called Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with Washington, a semi-colonial arrangement that enables the islands to receive federal funding in exchange for the US military having exclusive access to airspace and territorial waters across Micronesia's vast maritime region.

The 20-year treaties are set to expire in 2023 for FSM and the Marshall Islands, with Palau's expiring in 2024. Under COFA the US supplies more than 60 percent of FSM's national budget. The funding was meant to progressively reduce across the term of the agreement, but the region's economic stagnation and China's growing influence put this on hold.

Legislation currently before the US Congress proposes spending \$US1bn annually in 14 sovereign Pacific nations. In a *Guardian* article on September 7, American academics Gerard Finin and Terence Wesley-Smith described Washington's planned funding initiatives as "motivated by security concerns not necessarily shared by island leaders, who see climate change, not China, as the major threat to Pacific futures."

Amid deepening geo-strategic tensions and concerns over its "sovereignty," in 2018 the FSM congress called for the termination of COFA and for China to be the only country allowed to fish FSM's exclusive economic zone. A 2019 RAND Corporation report alleged that Beijing paid for homes for government officials, inter-island ships and student

scholarships. China also proposed building two casinos in Micronesia and had hosted the then-president's 2017 state visit to Beijing.

In August 2019 Mike Pompeo became the first US secretary of state to visit Micronesia to begin negotiations to renew the COFA pacts, including an extension to funding guarantees. "I am here to confirm the United States will help you protect your sovereignty, your security, your right to live in freedom and peace," he announced. Extending the compacts, he declared, will "sustain democracy in the face of Chinese efforts to redraw the Pacific."

Another unprecedented visit to the Marshall Islands by Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Kono quickly followed. Promising millions of dollars for a string of aid and infrastructure projects, Kono declared that Japan had decided "to increase support to countries in the region for a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Palau, Nauru, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu are the only Pacific states retaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan. While the FSM maintains diplomatic ties with Beijing, Panuelo told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation he did not believe that a new US base would harm the relationship. "We have that right to delegate some of the defence responsibility to a close ally and in this case with the United States," he said.

Palau has meanwhile formally requested that the US military build new ports, airstrips and bases on its islands. President Surangel Whipps Jr. took office in January with an aggressive anti-Beijing agenda, declaring Palau would oppose Chinese "bullying" in the region and stand by its "true friends," the US and Taiwan.

The critical strategic importance to the US of the island nations in the north-west Pacific was highlighted in a 2019 Rand report, prepared at the request of Congress for the Department of Defense.

The report bluntly described the Freely Associated States (FAS) as "tantamount to a power-projection superhighway running through the heart of the North Pacific into Asia. It effectively connects US military forces in Hawaii to those in theatre, particularly to forward operating positions on the US territory of Guam."

The report recommended that Washington “open a productive new chapter” with the FAS to better confront China. “History underscores that the FAS play a vital role in US defense strategy,” the report said. “If ignored or subverted, they could become, as in the past, a critical vulnerability.”

An op-ed in *Defense One* in April this year by Abraham Denmark, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia under former President Obama and Eric Sayers, a former special assistant to INDOPACOM, further argued that to deter China the US must build military facilities on “key Pacific islands.” These included Tinian, in the Northern Marianas, Palau and Yap, the westernmost large island in Micronesia.

Guam and the Northern Marianas, both US colonial possessions since 1898, have strategic and historic significance in US imperialism’s drive into the western Pacific. During World War II American forces retook Guam from the Japanese and converted it into a massive supply depot to support the invasions of the Philippines, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Thousands of B-29 bombing raids flew from Guam’s Andersen Air Force Base in operations over Japan.

In August 1945, the airfield on Tinian became the staging post for the devastating nuclear attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. During the Vietnam War, 150 B-52s were amassed at Andersen Base for the intensive bombing of North Vietnam. Andersen remained a strategic B-52 base until the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 when it was downgraded.

Guam has since 2015 received expensive upgrades to its Navy and Air Force facilities to accommodate advanced warships and aircraft, as well as the relocation of thousands of US Marines from the Japanese island of Okinawa.

Driven by the deepening US diplomatic, economic and strategic offensive against China, Pacific states are being drawn into fierce geo-strategic rivalries. The Pacific Islands Forum, the region’s major leadership body, remains in crisis after the more overtly pro-Washington Micronesia sub-grouping—Palau, the Marshall Islands, FSM, Kiribati, and Nauru—quit earlier this year, purportedly over the organisation’s refusal to assign the post of Secretary-General to their nominee. Behind the fracturing, however, are deepening tensions over the escalating confrontation with China and its consequences.

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