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## ***Biden intensifies pressure on Pacific leaders over confrontation with China***

US President Joe Biden hosted a second summit with leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) at the White House on September 25–26 as part of his administration’s stepped up “engagement” with the region as the US intensifies its preparations for war with China.



US President Joe Biden talks with Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown as they stand for group photo with Pacific Islands Forum leaders at the White House in Washington, Monday, Sept. 25, 2023. Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape is on their left. [AP Photo/Susan Walsh]

Biden hosted an inaugural summit with 14 Pacific island nations a year ago, claiming it would help islanders stave off China’s “economic coercion” and pushed through a so-called Blue Pacific “partnership” agreement to undermine Beijing’s growing influence in the region.

Last year's summit was designed to advance Washington's campaign to reassert its imperialist hegemony. A tour by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in May 2022 saw multiple bilateral deals signed with almost a dozen Pacific nations. The Solomon Islands and China finalised a security agreement, prompting threats by Washington and Canberra of a possible "regime change" operation if a Chinese military base was established in the country.

The ongoing tensions were highlighted this time by the blunt refusal of Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, to attend, sending Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele instead.

Vanuatu's new Prime Minister Sato Kilman also did not participate, remaining in Port Vila embroiled in a domestic political crisis. Kilman was installed earlier this month after a no-confidence vote ousted incumbent Ishmael Kalsakau over a security agreement he signed with Australia in December, which has met significant opposition.

At last week's UN General Assembly Sogavare condemned the "toxic mix of geopolitical power posturing" in the region. During his visit to China in July, he and President Xi Jinping agreed on an extended development partnership and "comprehensive strategic framework." Sogavare praised China as "less restrictive, more responsive and aligned to our national needs."

PIF secretary-general Henry Puna raised similar concerns at an event in New York ahead of the UN gathering, saying the Pacific region had become a focal point for strategic competition and "manipulation." He said Pacific countries would "engage with any partner who is willing to work with us, rather than around us."

The last year has seen a vast intensification of diplomatic, economic and military activities by Washington and its allies, Australia and New Zealand aimed at China. The US is establishing embassies in the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu and has upgraded its neo-colonial Compacts of Free Association with Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, which host significant military installations.

Amid a flurry of visits to the Pacific by senior US officials, a defence pact was signed with Papua New Guinea (PNG) giving the US military unimpeded access to important facilities including the strategically significant Manus Island naval base.

Imperialist alliances have also been strengthened. These include the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US, and the Quad consisting of Australia, India, Japan and the US. Military contingents from PNG, Tonga and Fiji were included in

the recent Talisman Sabre military exercise in Australia, in which 30,000 troops from 14 countries engaged in war games aimed against China.

The visiting Pacific leaders were effusively feted by the White House. The group was transported from New York, where most had attended the UN General Assembly, on a special train to Baltimore and hosted at an American NFL football game. In a display of neo-colonial arrogance, they were ushered onto the field and publicly applauded “for their roles as American friends in the Indo-Pacific.”

At the summit’s welcoming ceremony, Biden referenced the decisive battles fought in the Pacific 80 years ago. Ominously, he compared this period with the present: “Like our forebears during World War Two, we know that a great deal of the history of our world will be written across the Pacific over the coming year.”

A statement released by the White House indicates that the US will commit an extra \$200 million to various projects, in addition to \$7.2 billion announced in May by Secretary of State Blinken. The money will be used, among other things, to enhance Washington’s diplomatic engagement in the Pacific, boost the presence of the US Coast Guard to patrol the ocean, and to “build enduring ties between our security forces and train future Pacific Island security force leaders.”

Over the past five years, funding has been allocated to train “future military leaders” from Fiji, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea in US military training facilities.

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Washington will formally recognise the Cook Islands and Niue as “independent, sovereign nations” and establish diplomatic relations with them. Both are semi-colonies of New Zealand, which exercises control over their defence and foreign policies. NZ Prime Minister Chris Hipkins welcomed the Biden administration’s move, however. As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand is seeking to advance its interests in the Pacific in an alliance with the United States.

Other diplomatic initiatives will see the opening of a USAID regional Pacific Mission in Fiji and a Country Representative Office in PNG. USAID plans to double its current staffing footprint in the region.

While climate change is a pressing issue across the region, with some island countries already dealing with existential sea level rises, the measures offered by Washington were meagre. The existing USAID Climate Ready program will get some more funding to help “climate adaptation efforts” and regional disaster preparedness. But there are no serious initiatives to reduce carbon emissions and limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius, regarded by scientists as an urgent necessity.

Also absent from the communiqué is any reference to the plan by Japan—a US ally in the confrontation with China—to begin releasing treated nuclear wastewater from the Fukushima nuclear plant into the ocean—a major concern across the Pacific.

Finally, Washington is offering funding for “trade ties and economic development,” including initiatives to promote “financial sector resilience,” support fisheries development and engage “public and private partners to make the business environment and economic system more efficient.”

What this really means is enhancing opportunities for corporate profit from the region’s resources and cheap labour. All the Pacific islands are victims of more than a century of colonial oppression and two world wars. They are deeply impoverished, underdeveloped and remain subject to imperialist domination, particularly by Australia, New Zealand, France and the US. Their populations are among the most vulnerable in global indexes of social sustainability, health, education and welfare. Economic inequality, political corruption and social tensions are endemic.

Now the population of the entire region is being dragged into Washington’s intensifying confrontation against China that threatens to erupt into a catastrophic world war between nuclear-armed powers.

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