

Australia and New Zealand bully island states into accepting regional intervention

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The two regional powers in the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, bullied the small Pacific island states into accepting a new role for the Pacific Islands Forum when member countries met from October 27 to 30 in Kiribati. Under significant pressure, the 14 other Forum members agreed to endorse the Biketawa Declaration, which establishes a mechanism for diplomatic, economic and military intervention at the behest of the major powers in response to political crises.

This year's annual meeting of Forum heads of government was held amid escalating volatility throughout the Asia-Pacific region—from the armed conflict in East Timor to the coup in Fiji and the disintegration of the Solomon Islands government. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, it was attended by the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Niue, Palau, the Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Nauru, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard and New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark demanded that the Forum's 30-year policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries be overturned. Although the final declaration rules out Forum involvement in the current crises in Fiji and the Solomons, it specifies that in the future such upheavals will trigger action by the Forum, including “targeted measures”—a euphemism for punitive sanctions.

Howard attended the annual meeting for the first time in three years following accusations in the Australian press that he had failed to pay attention to the region, regarded in ruling circles as Australia's special sphere of influence. His insistence on the adoption of the Biketawa Declaration was in line with moves by the Australian government to adopt a more aggressive regional defence strategy. A Defence White Paper, due to be released next month, will recommend an expansion in military spending, combined with a shift from “continental defence” to a “regional defence orientation”.

The Declaration sets out “guiding principles” for Forum members that are so broad and vague that they can easily become triggers for intervention. They include “good

governance ... in a manner that is open, transparent, accountable, participatory, consultative and decisive but fair and equitable” and “belief in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief”.

Breaches of these principles that cause crises or requests for assistance can lead to escalating measures by the Forum, starting with the issuing of a statement, the creation of a Ministerial Action Group, a fact-finding mission, the convening of an eminent persons group, third party mediation or “support for appropriate institutions or mechanisms that would assist a resolution”. If the crisis persists, the Forum Secretary General and Chairman shall “convene a special meeting of Forum leaders to consider other options including if necessary targeted measures”.

The BBC commented that the Australian-initiated proposals marked “a fundamental change of direction for the organisation, by allowing itself greater involvement in the internal affairs of member countries”. Howard said the acceptance of the Declaration meant the Forum had taken “a quantum leap forward in relevance”. An editorial in the *Australian* welcomed the Declaration's reference to “targeted measures” as offering “licence to impose moral as well as trade or political leverage against errant nations. This is precisely what Australia was hoping for and gives the declaration some bite”.

In the leadup to the meeting, Australia and New Zealand had demanded an even stronger resolution, with clearer sanctions, including expulsion from the Forum. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that at the pre-forum meetings diplomats from Papua New Guinea accused Australia and New Zealand of trying to impose their views. Fiji's military-appointed Interim Government sent its Deputy Prime Minister Ratu Epeli Nailatikau touring the island states to lobby against the adoption of any resolution.

These conflicts continued at the Forum itself, with Howard and Clark returning from the weekend leaders' retreat on their own boat. The pair threatened to boycott next year's meeting if it were held in Fiji as scheduled. At their

insistence, the final Declaration was adopted, only slightly watered-down.

Speaking to the media after the retreat, Howard indicated how Australia would seek to make use of the Declaration. "Australia will always shoulder a burden proportionate to her size in the Forum, but it's valuable that others are involved," he declared. In other words, Australia, which dwarfs the tiny island states in economic size and power, will pressure Forum members into providing diplomatic cover as it throws its weight around.

Howard also used Australia's dominance to prevent any Forum support for West Papuan secession from Indonesia. West Papuan secessionist leader Franz Albert Joku attended the meeting as part of a delegation sponsored by Nauru and supported by Vanuatu. The final communiqué called for the end to violence and killing by both sides in West Papua, but Howard demanded that the statement be amended to explicitly recognise Indonesian sovereignty, an action for which Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid later thanked him.

Howard helped obtain his desired outcomes by offering to extend the Pacific Patrol Boat Program for another 25 years at a cost of \$350 million. Since 1987, Canberra has supplied 11 Pacific states with 22 patrol boats, without which many of the states would have no maritime defence capacity, even to police their extensive fisheries. Australian navy personnel maintain the boats, and advise and train the crews, providing high-level intelligence throughout the region.

Apart from this military bribe, Australia, together with New Zealand, dominates the region economically, so much so that several countries use the Australian dollar as their currency. Not only do Australian-owned banks, insurance and finance houses, trading firms and mining companies control much of the South Pacific's resources, but most of the states are almost entirely dependent on Australia and New Zealand for their imports and exports.

This grip is about to strengthen under a Pacific Regional Trade Agreement (PARTA) that will establish a Forum free trade area from January 2002. This will give Australian and New Zealand companies unrestricted access to all markets, in return for favoured treatment of island exports. Last year's Forum meeting adopted the PARTA plan in principle. This year's communiqué simply noted that "significant progress" had been made in negotiations.

The Australian concern for stability has nothing to do with the welfare of the impoverished inhabitants of the Pacific islands. Issues concerning their interests hardly rated a mention at the Forum, even though the venue, Kiribati, typifies the massive problems they confront. The country consists of 33 atolls spread over 3.6 million square kilometres of ocean with a total population of only 90,000. It

has a subsistence economy largely based on the ocean. Only a tiny minority of people is employed in the formal economy, with wages averaging around US\$1,500 per year.

The main island, the Tarawa atoll, is only a few metres above sea level and houses around 40,000 people. It has a chronic waste problem with garbage and sewerage littering the edges of the coral reef that forms the island. Yet it also features a new \$9.5 million Parliament House, built by the small elite cultivated by the British colonial authorities before formal independence in 1975.

After two centuries of colonial or semi-colonial domination, first by Britain, Germany and France and then by the United States, Australia and New Zealand, similar conditions prevail throughout the central and south Pacific.

Moreover, Kiribati and the other island nations are most directly affected by global warming and rising sea levels, which scientists predict will gain 20 centimetres over the next 40 years. The impact will be disastrous, socially and economically. Even in pure economic terms, by 2020 the Pacific islands' Gross Domestic Product could be cut by 20 percent as a result, with the tourist industry alone contracting by up to 75 percent.

Before the meeting, Tuvalu's Prime Minister Ionatana Ionatana said he would raise the fact that Australia had failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. At the last Forum summit that Howard attended, in 1997, the Australian leader bluntly overrode attempts by the smaller states to endorse an Association of Small Islands States proposal for legally binding 20 percent reductions in the 1990-level greenhouse gas emissions by 2005. This year's final communiqué was limited to a token statement: "The Forum highlighted the importance of the early entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol, preferably by 2002, and that its implementation will result in real and measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions."

Three years ago, Howard contemptuously rode roughshod over the vital concerns of the island states. This year, he was joined by his New Zealand Labour Party counterpart in bulldozing through a resolution that opens the way for renewed colonial-style intervention throughout the region.



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