

Bush administration hosts meeting of Pacific Island governments

Patrick O'Connor**18 May 2007**

The Bush administration hosted a three-day meeting of Pacific Island countries in Washington held May 7-9. Openly declaring its intention to reassert its influence in the strategically important region, the US State Department has labelled 2007 the “Year of the Pacific”. Behind the intensified diplomatic efforts lies mounting great power rivalry, with Washington and its regional allies particularly concerned about Beijing’s increasingly close economic and diplomatic ties with the South Pacific.

The Washington meeting was convened as the eighth Pacific Island Conference of Leaders (PICL). The triennial PICL is normally held in Hawaii and is met with little international interest except from various donor countries’ aid officials. This year, however, the conference was held under the auspices of the State Department and hosted by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In her opening address, Rice explained that the phrase Year of the Pacific, “encapsulates our efforts to expand our engagement with your countries and to reaffirm America’s historic role in the Pacific. Maintaining security and stability in the Pacific region is crucial to the interest of every country and every territory represented in this room, including the United States.”

Aid officials from countries including China, France, Japan, Korea, India, and the European Union attended the conference, but the Bush administration set the agenda. “One Pacific ambassador who spoke to *Islands Business* said despite suggestions by Pacific Islands ambassadors to include some development issues like migration, HIV/AIDS, trade, etc, to the draft agenda, the Americans were reluctant,” one report noted prior to the meeting. “Their agenda is more focused on security and other matters of interest only to them,” the unnamed ambassador complained.

Washington’s renewed interest in the Pacific is in part an expression of the growing antagonism in the region toward the Bush administration and its “deputy sheriff,”

the Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard.

Canberra’s aggressive neo-colonial operations in the region have engendered the hostility both of ordinary Pacific Islanders and the local ruling elites. The Solomon Islands’ government has attempted to reduce the influence of the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) and has repeatedly denounced the Howard government for political interference. Similarly, in Papua New Guinea, Prime Minister Michael Somare recently accused Canberra of attempting to bring down his government. Political instability in countries, including Fiji and Tonga has further threatened Washington and Canberra’s strategic position.

At the Washington conference, the Bush administration lectured Pacific Island governments on the need for democracy, good governance, and the rule of law. This was nothing but rank hypocrisy, as was demonstrated by the welcome extended to senior representatives of the Fijian military junta. Secretary of State Rice formally condemned last year’s coup but made clear that it wished to normalise relations and even held out the possibility of additional US aid.

Representatives of the Fiji military regime expressed their satisfaction with the moves toward a rapprochement. “The fact we were invited to the meeting and in the US for that matter, where we were given visas to travel, reflects the pragmatic approach they have taken,” permanent secretary to the prime minister’s office Parmesh Chand declared. “It was kind of the US to do that, demonstrating they are very forward looking. We were given the highest-level audience. They were keen for open frank discussion.”

The Bush administration announced it was opening a new regional office of the State Department’s “public diplomacy” bureau in Fiji. Headed by Karen Hughes, a

former advisor to President George Bush, the bureau was established in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in an attempt to counter mounting international hostility toward the US. According to a State Department press release, the Fiji office “will introduce a broad array of press, culture, and education programs to the region”.

The development of a new US propaganda centre in the South Pacific was one of the few concrete measures unveiled during the three-day summit. No new aid programs were announced. The real content of the conference lay not in the formal communiqés and press releases, but in the behind-the-scenes pressure by the Bush administration on the impoverished Pacific Island countries to toe the US-Australian line.

Washington’s strong-arm tactics backfired, however, when the Pacific governments boycotted a meeting scheduled with officials from the various donor countries on the final day of the conference.

According to *Islands Business*, the governments of the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Fiji chose not to attend because they “felt the donors forum was not the right forum to discuss the political developments in these countries”. Every other Pacific country except Vanuatu backed this position and joined the boycott. Vanuatu was concerned to secure the \$US65 million in aid money previously pledged by the Bush administration via its Millennium Challenge Fund.

The donors’ meeting debacle marked an ignominious end to the gathering. Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Christopher Hill defended the Bush administration’s political manipulation of aid programs in the region by claiming it was all about “transparency” and “democracy”. “It is a little bit difficult for some countries that are not used to that kind of openness,” he complained.

The Pacific Island governments’ refusal to simply fall into line with the US agenda, however, is not driven by a lack of appreciation for “openness,” but rather reflects the new possibilities that have opened up for the political elites in the region.

Competition among the major powers for access to natural resources, increased diplomatic influence, and enhanced strategic position has seen relatively large amounts of money pour into the South Pacific in recent years. Last year Japan and France hosted separate summits and pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in additional aid.

Competition between Taiwan and China for diplomatic recognition has also fuelled an aid bidding war. Chinese

Premier Wen Jiabao visited the South Pacific in April last year and announced \$US375 million in preferential loans as well as a program of debt cancellation. Unlike aid from US and Australia, Chinese money does not come encumbered with various preconditions and obligations imposed in the name of “good governance”. Beijing also has significant economic investments in the South Pacific, most notably in Papua New Guinea, where the Ramu nickel mine is among China’s largest overseas direct investments.

Beijing’s growing interest in the region has shifted the strategic balance and allowed the various ruling circles in the Pacific to engage in manoeuvres with the US and Australia, the traditional hegemonic powers. The State Department may have declared 2007 to be the US’s “Year of the Pacific”, but it is unlikely that the Pacific Island countries will see it as the “Year of the US”.

There is increasing concern amongst Asia-Pacific foreign policy analysts in both Australia and the US about their growing inability to dictate terms to the region and the long-term threat posed by Beijing’s encroachments.

Former New Zealand diplomat Michael Powles recently wrote an article for the ASEAN Focus Group, using a headline, “Beijing—Guardian of the Pacific?”, taken from the *South China Morning Post* of February 22. “This North Asian headline will have startled the many who consider the Pacific strategically to be, if not still an ‘American lake’, at least an Australian one,” he noted. “China’s rising influence will require major adjustments in the Pacific, not least for countries like Australia which must naturally look askance at the reality of another player in the region, and a very major one at that.”



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