

US delegation tours Pacific island states

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US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Patrick Walsh recently led American diplomatic, military and aid officials on an unprecedented week-long tour of nine island states in the western Pacific Ocean. The initiative was aimed at reinforcing US dominance in the region and came as the Obama administration stepped up its provocative efforts to contain Chinese influence in East Asia.

The delegation, including USAID Assistant Administrator Nisha Biswal and Brigadier General Richard Simcock of the Office of the Secretary of Defense South/Southeast Asia, toured the Pacific between June 26 and July 1. They met with heads of government in Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands.

Despite the high-powered character of the delegation, the trip received little media coverage outside the Pacific Island states. No one raised the obvious question: what were Washington's top diplomat and military commander for the region doing touring countries for the most part the size of modest American towns? Publicly Campbell and Walsh attended ceremonies and gave small aid handouts. Behind closed doors, the discussion undoubtedly turned to vital US strategic interests in the Pacific.

Campbell told Pacific journalists: "Our overall determination here is that the United States does want to step up its game generally in the Asia-Pacific region given that we all, I think, recognise that much of the history of the 21st century will be written out—written in this key arena. And we believe that it is important that the United States, as a resident power and a deeply engaged economic player, demonstrate on a regular basis our commitment to play a strong and enduring role—not just in Asia, but in the Pacific as well."

Underscoring the central purpose of the tour, just before his departure from the US, Campbell met with China's Vice Foreign Minister, Cui Tiankai, for the first "US-China Consultations on the Asia-Pacific." Tensions were clearly evident behind the diplomatic platitudes. Much of the discussion centred on the South China Sea, where the US has

aggressively intervened in territorial disputes between China, Vietnam and the Philippines. Campbell told journalists that there had been "a candid and clear discussion" on the issue. He added that China's "military expansion, their military capabilities, have raised concerns in the region."

The US delegation spent several days visiting several tiny island states just north of the equator—Kiribati (estimated population 100,000), Marshall Islands (70,000), Palau (21,000), and the Federated States of Micronesia (115,000). The latter three states function as semi-colonies of the US, having been seized from Japan in the final stages of World War II. Under so-called Compacts of Free Association with Washington, the nominally sovereign states allow the US military free rein on their territories in return for annual subsidies and the provision of social infrastructure.

The strategic and military importance of these island states has markedly increased amid fears in Washington of the Chinese development of a "blue water" navy potentially capable of undermining American dominance in the Pacific.

Chinese military strategists have referred to first and second "island chains" off the Chinese mainland. The first chain stretches from the southern islands of Japan to Taiwan, the Philippines and the South China Sea. The second island chain runs further into the Pacific Ocean, beginning east of Japan and extending to Guam, a territory that serves as a major American military base after being seized by the US in the 1898 Spanish-American war. On the southernmost flank of the second island chain is Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia. By preventing Chinese access to these island chains, the US could inhibit any potential Chinese naval expansion into the Pacific.

Campbell and his colleagues went to several memorial sites for the more than 15,000 American troops killed in the regional "island hopping" campaigns against the Japanese in late 1943 and 1944. They also met with local residents who had enlisted in the US military and served in Iraq and Afghanistan. The delegation, however, downplayed the contemporary military calculations underlying their visit. Instead the emphasis was on boosting Washington's diplomatic standing by promoting aid and investment projects. In the Federated States of Micronesia,

Admiral Walsh staged a photo opportunity in a US-funded primary school.

Strategic calculations were similarly evident behind the “development” rhetoric issued by the US delegation in four states south of the equator. In Samoa, Campbell met with Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi for two hours, with one of the subjects of discussion the monitoring of the country’s vast ocean territory. Admiral Walsh held a meeting with senior Samoan police to discuss transnational crime and how the US navy could help stop illegal fishing. Under the guise of helping protect the sovereignty and fishing and other property rights of Samoa and neighbouring states, the Obama administration is paving the ground for a heightened US naval presence in the region.

Washington also wants to ensure that naval patrol vessels are sourced from the US and its allies. It clearly aims to pre-empt Pacific states from following East Timor’s example of accepting Chinese armed patrol boats and effectively integrating their limited naval assets into Beijing’s military infrastructure.

Also in Samoa, the American contingent donated \$50,000 to a local research organisation and \$2 million to renovate two hospitals—a pittance when contrasted with the real needs of the impoverished state. Samoa is yet to complete the reconstruction of basic infrastructure, including roads, schools, and power networks, that was devastated in a tsunami two years ago.

In Tonga, the US delegation met King George Tupou V and Prime Minister Tui’vakano and thanked them for deploying 55 Royal Tongan Marines to Afghanistan.

Campbell and his colleagues then went to Solomon Islands where they met with Australian officials operating the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), the neo-colonial intervention force that has dominated the country since 2003. The intervention remains the lynchpin of Canberra’s efforts to assert its dominance in the South Pacific and block China from gaining ground at its expense. No information was released about what was discussed between the US delegation and RAMSI, but Campbell no doubt stressed continued American support for the operation.

Also in the Solomons, Campbell met with Prime Minister Danny Philip. In a joint press conference, Philip urged Washington to normalise relations with the Fijian military junta. The State Department official, however, backed the Australian-led sanctions regime. “I don’t think we have expressed a different approach to Fiji [than Canberra has], and in fact, I think the hallmark of our approach has been a very deep dialogue with both Australia and New Zealand,”

Campbell declared.

These remarks indicate that the Obama administration may have backed away from previous indications that it wanted to engage with the Fijian government. The US delegation notably excluded Fiji from its list of destinations. Also, according to Radio International New Zealand, Washington has reversed its decision to open a USAID office in Fiji and will instead direct regional aid operations from Papua New Guinea.

Last September the State Department publicly backed the junta’s stated goal of holding elections in 2014, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged “dialogue and partnership.” These statements were clearly aimed at countering China’s growing diplomatic and military ties with Fiji, but they immediately opened up an unprecedented breach with Canberra, which maintained calls for sanctions and isolation.

The latest diplomatic shift likely reflects behind-the-scenes tactical discussions between the Australian and American governments over how best to fashion a pliant administration in Fiji and sideline Beijing.

The other Melanesian country visited by the US delegation was Papua New Guinea, where Campbell held discussions with Acting Prime Minister Samuel Abal and Foreign Minister Ano Pala. The diplomat also met with US executives involved in a \$15 billion liquid natural gas project led by ExxonMobil in the country’s highlands.

In March, Hillary Clinton highlighted the project in testimony to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. “Let’s put aside the moral, humanitarian, do-good side of what we believe in, and let’s just talk, you know, straight *Realpolitik*,” she declared. “We are in a competition with China. Take Papua New Guinea, huge energy find ... ExxonMobil is producing it. China is in there every day in every way trying to figure out how it’s going to come in behind us, come in under us.”

Campbell’s visit to PNG, and indeed the entire Pacific tour, was in line with this “*Realpolitik*”. Behind the pitiful aid handouts, wartime reminiscences and photo opportunities, the US is determined to use whatever means necessary to expand its influence in what Washington has regarded since World War II as an American lake.



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