

Japan's South Pacific summit directed against China

John Watanabe
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The US last month participated for the first time in Japan's triennial Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting. The summit was established in 1997 to advance Japanese strategic interests in the region and boost economic ties, particularly in the tuna and fishing industry. Now, however, for both Tokyo and Washington the primary purpose of the diplomatic forum is to bolster their efforts to undermine Chinese influence in the South Pacific.

The Sixth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM6) was held on May 25 and 26 in Okinawa. Leaders and officials from Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) member states attended: Australia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Fiji (currently suspended), Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The agenda included various humanitarian and diplomatic initiatives relating to natural disaster response, climate change, sustainable management of fishing resources, and aid programs. Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda pledged another \$500 million to the region over the next three years. This is virtually the same amount provided in the three years since the last PALM Summit in 2009.

Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna, who co-chaired the meeting with Noda, praised Japan for not reducing its assistance despite the worsening economic crisis. "At a time of significant global financial uncertainty, together with your own significant challenges experienced over the last few years, we are extremely grateful for your continued significant contributions to our region," he declared.

Behind the diplomatic niceties and aid pledges, however, lay definite strategic and military calculations.

The Obama administration sent State Department official Dan Clune to participate. Noda welcomed this, declaring it "of great significance to this region as a whole", and proposed the US be added as a formal PALM member. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that during the summit, Clune explained that "US participation in PALM was a manifestation of Washington's new engagement in the Pacific region."

The Obama administration's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific has involved a strategic and diplomatic offensive that is aimed at containing Chinese influence in the region. Washington has bolstered relations and moved to expand its military ties with countries including Japan, Australia, Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, and Indonesia. What Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has described as "a full court press" also extends to the South Pacific, where in the last decade China has significantly extended its diplomatic influence through loans and investment in infrastructure projects as well as new mining projects. Beijing has also developed military ties with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and other countries in the region.

The Japanese media understood the purpose of the latest Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting. *Kyodo News*, in an article titled "Japan bonds with US against China's push in Pacific", stated: "The presence of the United States for the first time in the often overlooked summit between Japan and Pacific island states reflects the advent of a new Asian power rivalry in the Pacific region, where China is expanding its influence."

The news agency noted: “Japan, for its part, is pressed more than ever to strengthen its presence in the region out of concern that the Pacific island states’ traditionally pro-Japanese stance can no longer be taken as a matter of course amid China’s inroads into the area.” The article cited Osaka Gakuin University professor Izumi Kobayashi: “Even if most are supportive of Japan, it cannot be helped that a recipient country might lean toward a new donor such as China if it is faster than Japan at giving out aid.”

A *Yomiuri Shimbun* article, “US boosting Pacific support to stave off China,” stated: “US participation in the triennial event was seen as a clear indication of that country’s intention to keep China’s growing assertiveness in the Pacific region in check in collaboration with Japan and other Pacific powers such as Australia.” The report continued: “Japan temporarily captured the region during World War II, but the area is now in the middle of a power struggle involving Japan, the United States and Australia on the one hand and China on the other.”

At the PALM6 summit, Japan proposed defence exchanges with Pacific islands nations for the first time. The event’s official declaration also notably included references to “maritime security” and a statement “recognising the role of international law for the maintenance of peace and security in the Pacific Ocean”, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as the “principal legal framework with regard to maritime order.” The PALM5 declaration in 2009 contained no such statements. Tokyo appears to be following the Obama administration’s lead in utilising the pretext of maritime “security” and “order” against Beijing’s disputed territorial claims, including in the South China Sea.

Japan has indicated its support for the Philippines in the current dispute with China in the South China Sea. In the last four days of May, three training warships from the Japanese Maritime Self Defence Force visited Manila, only days after the visits of a US nuclear-powered submarine and two Indian warships. The Japanese government has also declared that it will supply the Philippines with 10 brand-new patrol boats

this year to bolster its maritime and territorial capabilities.

Japanese media outlets and politicians often link the conflict between Beijing and Manila over the Scarborough Shoal with similar friction over the Senkaku or Diaoyu islets that are claimed by both Tokyo and Beijing. Encouraged by the Obama administration, a Japanese defence guideline issued in late 2010 designated the “southwest” islands, including Senkaku, as the new focus of Japan’s defence posture. This is clearly aimed against China.

In an attempt to further inflame tensions, right-wing Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara recently announced plans to have the metropolitan government buy Senkaku isles from their private owner. This move exposed deep divisions within the Japanese ruling elite, sections of which are concerned over the implications of provoking a conflict with China, Japan’s largest trading partner. Last Thursday, Japan’s ambassador to China, Uichiro Niwa, warned that the Tokyo governor’s plan would trigger an “extremely grave crisis” between the two countries. Japanese foreign minister Koichiro Gamba, however, responded by declaring that the ambassador’s statement did not represent the official position of the Japanese government.

Tokyo’s latest manoeuvres in both the South China Sea and South Pacific underscore its alignment with Washington’s reckless and provocative moves against China that threaten to trigger military conflict.



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