

Clinton intervenes at Pacific Islands Forum

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The annual Pacific Islands Forum, held last week in the remote Cook Islands, attracted the largest and highest-level US delegation in the event's 41-year history. The 50-strong contingent was headed by Hillary Clinton—the first US secretary of state to attend the forum—and included Navy Admiral Samuel Locklear, head of the US Pacific Command, and Coast Guard Rear Admiral Charles W. Ray.

Clinton's visit to the tiny island state, located to the north of New Zealand, with fewer than 11,000 inhabitants, was her first stop in an 11-day trip that will include visits to Indonesia, East Timor, Brunei, China and the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in the Russian city Vladivostok.

Clinton's tour is part of the Obama administration's efforts to reassert US hegemony throughout Asia and undermine China's growing economic and diplomatic influence. Washington has been strengthening alliances and strategic partnerships as well as restructuring and building up its military forces in the region.

Fergus Hanson of the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, told the *Christian Science Monitor* that it was “serious overkill to send the world's most senior diplomat to the after-party of an obscure regional meeting.” But the presence of the high-level delegation reflects Washington's determination to stamp its domination in every region of the Pacific, which it has regarded as an American lake since the end of World War II.

The Pacific Islands Forum comprises Australia, New Zealand and 14 island nations, many of them micro-states with populations numbering in the thousands. Just a few years ago, Forum summits were of little interest to countries outside the region. Now, however, the situation is very different. This year's forum included observers from nearly 60 nations including Britain, Canada, China, Japan and France.

Speaking last Friday, Clinton declared that the

Obama administration had made a “major push to increase our engagement” in the Pacific region, which it saw as “strategically and economically vital and becoming more so.” She declared that this was “America's Pacific Century”. Clinton denied that the US was acting “as a hedge against particular countries” and declared the Pacific was “big enough for all of us”, but her presence at the forum was clearly aimed at countering Chinese influence.

At a press conference, Clinton was flanked by the US Pacific Command head Locklear who emphasised the strategic importance of the Pacific Island states. “Five trillion dollars of commerce rides on the (Asia-Pacific) sea lanes each year, and you people are sitting right in the middle of it,” he said. “We will enhance the US Navy and Coast Guard Shiprider program so that we can more effectively combat the illegal activity and enforce conservation measures and build nation capacity to do the same.”

At the Forum, Clinton declared that the US would work “with Australia, New Zealand, and France to strengthen our Pacific maritime surveillance partnership”, to stop illegal fishing and other activities. The US Coast Guard already patrols the waters of nine Pacific Island states and Clinton said the US wanted to also “allow countries to take advantage of US Navy ships.”

The expanding US naval and coastguard presence is not aimed at helping the Pacific Island states curb illegal activities, but rather at blocking Chinese access to the region. Clinton declared that the US wanted China to “act in a fair and transparent way”, and to “play a positive role in navigation and maritime security issues”—that is, within the framework dictated by Washington.

Over the past three years Washington has recklessly ratcheted up tensions throughout the Asia-Pacific. Under the banner of “freedom of navigation”, the US is

asserting its naval dominance over strategic waters near the Chinese mainland, and has encouraged countries including the Philippines and Vietnam to press their territorial claims against China in the South China Sea. The US Navy plans to station 60 percent of its assets in the Asia Pacific by 2020, up from the current 50 percent.

Beijing's representative at the Pacific Islands Forum, Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai, said China was willing to work with other powers but this did "not mean that China will change its foreign aid policy." The state-controlled *People's Daily* criticised Clinton's visit and her emphasis on "security". The newspaper declared that "countries and regions in the South Pacific have been at peace since World War II and have been rarely troubled with security problems. What they really need is investment and technology, something that the US cannot offer them."

According to the Lowy Institute, China has increased its aid and soft loans to Pacific island governments, from \$23 million in 2005 to an annual total of \$200 million. Clinton announced an increase in US aid to the region, but the new programs are worth just \$32 million. The US and Australia have both pressed for China to contribute aid via multilateral programs—that is, within structures dominated by Washington—but Beijing has refused. In particular, China has declined to sign up to Australia's "Cairns compact", devised at the 2009 Pacific Islands Forum to coordinate aid to the region under the auspices of AusAID.

In June, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi praised Beijing for being "extremely flexible" and financing government buildings and sports facilities which New Zealand and Australia would not touch. He told the *New Zealand Herald* that the "Chinese have been very good in being prepared to forgive when warranted. For instance, five years ago, I asked them to help us with our debt problem and they forgave \$80 million of earlier loans."

Tuilaepa was critical of Washington, declaring: "The US is only interested in areas where wars are fought, so that it can help its industries, its war machine. The US is not interested in the Pacific because it is peaceful. But recently, I have now been informed of American approval to build a hospital for us at the airport. This is the first American aid since the 1960s when we had Peace Corps people here."

The military regime in Fiji maintains close ties with Beijing, which increased its aid to the country and stepped up military collaboration after military leader Frank Bainimarama seized power in a coup in 2006. Following the lead of the Obama administration, Australia and New Zealand recently relaxed sanctions on Fiji and engaged in diplomatic efforts aimed at countering Chinese influence. Fiji was expelled from the Forum in 2009, but Australia and New Zealand have signalled they will allow the country to be readmitted after the junta holds elections in 2014.

Clinton's presence at the Forum indicates that the US is not prepared to leave the defence of its interests to its regional allies and is now directly intervening. The New Zealand and Australian governments, for their part, face an increasingly fraught dilemma. Both are attempting to balance their long-standing military and strategic ties to the US with their heavy economic reliance on China. Clinton undoubtedly used the Forum to pressure both governments to support the Obama administration's increasingly aggressive moves in Asia.



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