

Pacific forum reveals regional geo-strategic tensions

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The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit at Pohnpei in Micronesia last weekend agreed to admit the French colonies of New Caledonia and French Polynesia as members of the organisation. Wallis and Futuna, another French territory, retains observer status. French Polynesian President Edouard Fritch called the decision “historic,” declaring it would see greater involvement of the territories in regional affairs.

In reality, the move is another sign of deepening geo-strategic tensions as the imperialist powers seek to counter Beijing’s growing influence in the southwest Pacific. France, a major imperialist power, is being brought forward to buttress the position of the US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand.

The French territories are strategically significant. New Caledonia has a key military base and is one of the world’s largest suppliers of nickel, an essential element in armaments manufacture. French Polynesia was the site of France’s nuclear testing program at Mururoa Atoll from 1966-1996.

Since the forum’s founding in 1971, Canberra and Wellington have used the 16-member body as a vehicle for their own neo-colonial interests. Their dominance began to break up after they imposed sanctions on Fiji following its 2006 military coup. Fiji’s regime turned elsewhere, primarily to China and Russia, for trade, aid and military equipment.

Frank Bainimarama, Fiji’s military leader, who was elected prime minister in 2014, has encouraged other Pacific nations to take a more “independent” stance. In 2012, Fiji set up the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) as an alternative to the PIF. While Fiji was readmitted to the PIF two years ago, Bainimarama boycotted the summit, sending his foreign minister in his place.

Last weekend, as the forum was sitting, Bainimarama

reshuffled his cabinet, relieving Foreign Minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola of his job and taking it on himself. Australia’s ABC political editor Chris Uhlmann described the sacking as “a calculated slap down of the forum, aimed at showing Australia and New Zealand that Fiji does not need them to make its way in the world.” Noting that the summit was being held in a sports centre financed by China, Uhlmann warned that while China had been “making friends in the Pacific,” Australia had been “making enemies.”

Fiji’s trade minister Faiyaz Koya last week announced Fiji was withdrawing from talks on a Pacific-wide trade deal, the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (Pacer Plus), citing backtracks on key commitments by Australia and New Zealand. Papua New Guinea has also withdrawn from the agreement.

At last year’s PIF meeting, Tony Abbott, then Australian prime minister, and New Zealand’s John Key tried to strong-arm the Pacific states, prior to the ecological summit in Paris, into accepting lower carbon emission targets even though rising sea levels threaten their survival. Bainimarama led a rebellion by the Pacific countries in Paris, declaring the Pacific was “bearing the brunt” of climate change.

This year, after lobbying by France, New Zealand and Australia, the vote to admit New Caledonia and French Polynesia to the PIF was unanimous. France has been pushing for membership for its territories since 2003. Their inclusion was resisted by the other island states because the forum is meant to be for “independent” countries, even though their own “independence” has always been extremely limited, largely because of the ongoing domination of the former colonial powers, Australia and New Zealand.

The legacy of France’s nuclear testing has long

fuelled opposition to the encroachment of France into regional policy. Canberra and Wellington have always viewed France as an imperialist competitor. New Zealand's "anti-nuclear" stance in the 1970s and 1980s sought to diminish French influence. Mutual antagonism reached fever pitch in 1985 when the French secret service bombed the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbour.

Opening the door to wider French influence in Pacific affairs is therefore a significant shift. According to Radio NZ, France had been able to "defy the forum for decades and now [it] gets to sit—indirectly—at the Forum table."

The decision coincided with an anti-China witch-hunting campaign by the Australian media and political establishment aimed at ramping up an atmosphere for war preparations with China. On August 29, analyst Hugh White told the ABC's "Pacific Beat" program that China was seeking to become "perhaps the leading power" in the western Pacific. It was cultivating closer relationships with "even the smallest and most remote" countries. Any improvement in China's position, he declared, would be a "negative for Washington."

In fact, China's expansion into the Pacific has been primarily in response to the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific. Within the next five years, 60 percent of the US Navy's warships will be operating in the Pacific. Military facilities in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines and Singapore are being upgraded, along with the expanded use of Australian ports and bases. In a break with New Zealand's longstanding "anti-nuclear" policy, a US warship is to visit the country in November.

According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, China has overtaken Australia as the biggest source of aid to Fiji, and will soon surpass Canberra's aid to Samoa and Tonga. Beijing's aid exceeds that from New Zealand and Japan and, at \$US1.8 billion, is on the verge of overtaking the US in terms of total aid delivered to the Pacific islands since 2006.

Trade between China and the Pacific doubled last year. The ABC reported that in 2015 total trade reached \$US7.5 billion, up from \$4.5 billion in 2014. Most of the growth has come from China's exports to the region, but the Pacific's exports to China are also expanding, led by the Papua New Guinea's liquefied natural gas projects. Fish products and timber are the

other major exports. More than half of Solomon Islands' total export income comes from logs sent to China.

The Chinese technology giant Huawei has a major regional presence, working with Pacific telecommunications providers, governments, and businesses to develop subsea cables, networks and datacentres. In 2013, the Australian government stopped Huawei being awarded contracts for a major fibre-optic Internet infrastructure project. The ban was imposed, on bogus "security" grounds, at the behest of Washington. Documents released by whistleblower Edward Snowden confirmed that the US engaged for years in a campaign of industrial espionage against Huawei.

The expansion of France, a European imperialist power, into the Pacific is a sharp warning of the deepening tensions and march to war. In his ABC interview last month, White warned that the growing pattern of rivalry in the Pacific is "what you would expect to see in the lead-up to conflict."



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