

British Commonwealth summit sees line up against China and Russia

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A gathering in London last week of government leaders from the former British Empire became a forum for intrigues and diplomatic bullying directed against Russia and the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific and Africa.

In particular, Australia, one of the Commonwealth's imperialist powers, brought intense pressure to bear against small Pacific member states that have received aid or financial assistance from China.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) saw a concerted drive to turn the 53-member grouping of ex-British colonies, long regarded as an imperial relic, into a vehicle for confronting Moscow and Beijing. There were even suggestions in the media of extending the Commonwealth's membership, for this purpose, to include former French colonies.

The summit assembled amid the escalating global tensions generated by the US-French-British missiles strikes on Syria, the Trump administration's trade war moves and the Pentagon's recent National Defence Strategy, which openly accused Beijing and Moscow of seeking to challenge the hegemonic power of the US.

On the eve of the summit, the British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand leaders held a meeting, as four members of the US-led Five Eyes worldwide intelligence network, to stridently back the illegal attack on Syria and pledge to intensify their collaboration with the US and each other.

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull told reporters the Five Eyes partners showed "total solidarity" with Britain and "provided real support and endorsement" of the missile strikes. "It is vitally important that we work more closely together than ever. No countries work more closely together in intelligence and security matters than the Five Eyes,"

he said.

While the CHOGM event saw a line up behind the US-led militarism, the dominant members of the Commonwealth used various side meetings to assert their own predatory interests.

This was most notable in regard to the South Pacific, where Australia and New Zealand exert influence with the military backing of the US. There are nine small Pacific ex-colonies in the Commonwealth: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

With China's activities in aid and infrastructure projects growing in the region, its two middle-ranking imperialist powers are stepping up their relations with Britain, whose Pacific colonies they inherited, and France, which still holds significant territories in New Caledonia and French Polynesia and maintains a sizeable military presence.

In the lead-up to the summit, intelligence and military thinktanks declared that Australian governments had lost ground to China. Australian Strategic Policy Institute executive director Peter Jennings said: "We've kind of lost a lot of those connections, particularly on the military side where for the last 12, 13 years we've been heavily involved in Afghanistan and the Middle East and really taken our eye off the ball as far as the Pacific is concerned."

Citing unnamed "intelligence and security" sources, Australian media outlets fuelled an ongoing anti-China propaganda campaign, alleging that China and the tiny island nation of Vanuatu were in talks about establishing a Chinese naval base on one of the country's islands.

During a meeting held on the sidelines of CHOGM, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull reportedly secured an assurance from Vanuatu Prime Minister

Charlot Salwai that he would never allow such a base. Turnbull informed reporters: “Well the prime minister of Vanuatu has made it very clear, quite unequivocally, the media reports about Chinese interest in establishing a military base in Vanuatu have no basis in fact.”

In a separate meeting with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Rick Houenipwela, Turnbull insisted that Australia would substantially fund an underwater Internet cable between the two countries, as well as Papua New Guinea. This effectively blocks a rival bid by Chinese telecommunications firm Huawei, which has also been banned from major operations in the US and Australia on “national security” grounds.

Turnbull issued a media statement emphasising that Australia’s had “a long-standing commitment to peace and stability in the region, with Australia having led the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) over its 14 years of existence.”

This was a blunt reminder that in 2003 Australia sent more than 2,000 troops and police, backed by naval warships and air force support, to virtually take over Solomon Islands in order to reassert Australian domination over the country. “We will continue to work together to sustain the gains made under RAMSI and support long-term stability and growth in Solomon Islands, such as through our bilateral security treaty,” Turnbull declared.

In yet another meeting, Turnbull held talks with Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who has “looked north” to China for financial support. According to the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation, “various issues were discussed, including the strengthening of bilateral relations and cooperation between the two countries.”

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was as active as Turnbull, having stopped off in Paris for a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron. She and Macron agreed to “confirm our friendship” and work together on a range of issues, especially “defence” in the Pacific. Macron accepted an invitation to visit New Zealand, which would make him the first French president to do so.

Macron is already making a three-day visit to Australia, starting May 1. These developments mark a sharp shift from the 1960s to 1990s, when French nuclear testing in the Pacific was denounced by governments in Australia and New Zealand, which regarded France as a rival in their Pacific “spheres of

influence.”

Hosting the CHOGM summit, Prime Minister Theresa May’s government vowed to work in tandem with Australia and New Zealand. “Britain is about to dramatically expand its trade, aid and diplomatic presence in the South Pacific to counter China’s growing influence in the region as part of a global refocus ahead of its departure from the European Union,” the *Australian* reported.

Events have gathered pace since January, when the Australian government provoked a diplomatic row with China by condemning Beijing’s aid programs in the Pacific. Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Australia’s minister for international development and the Pacific, accused China of “duchessing” politicians in the Pacific, lending funds on unfavourable terms and financing worthless construction projects.

China’s involvement in the South Pacific is bound up with its response to Washington’s aggressive military and strategic “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific to confront China, which began under Obama and has intensified under Trump.

The Pacific was a major battlefield in World War II. Like other parts of the world, is again becoming a cauldron of geo-strategic conflict, primarily between the US and China, in which other powers are scrambling for alliances and jostling to assert their neo-colonial interests.



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