

Following passage of “foreign interference” laws

Australia pushes Pacific Pact to combat China

Mike Head
7 July 2018

Acting in concert with Washington, the Australian and New Zealand governments are strong-arming small Pacific island countries into signing a “security agreement” directed against alleged Chinese influence in the region.

The two regional imperialist powers are seeking to shore up their military and economic dominance in the southwest Pacific, in partnership with the overall regional hegemon, the US. The Pacific Ocean is once again becoming a key geo-strategic battleground, as it was in World War II.

According to yesterday’s *Australian*, the Pacific pact, “covering defence, law and order, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,” is expected to be signed at September’s Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru.

An editorial in the Murdoch newspaper welcomed the move and placed it directly in the context of preparations for a military confrontation between the US and China:

“It’s reassuring news that Australia and New Zealand are working on a Pacific Islands security agreement calculated to discourage the military presence of outsiders, notably China. The Pacific was a crucial theatre in World War II, and the sprawling island region is likely to be the source of future tension, given US interest in the Indo-Pacific and the rising maritime power of China.”

The push for the pact is related to a xenophobic campaign over the past two years by the media and political establishment in both countries against supposed Chinese “interference” in politics and business, designed to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment in preparation for military conflict.

Just over a week ago, Australia’s Liberal-National government and Labor Party opposition joined hands to ram through parliament unprecedented “foreign interference” laws. The legislation lays the basis for criminal charges against people linked to China and anyone else engaged in political activity—such as anti-war campaigns—that allegedly aids a “foreign organisation.”

Even people conducting a campaign in Australia, in alliance with oppositional voices in the Pacific and globally, that denounced the proposed neo-colonial pact for what it is, could be charged under the new laws.

The 22 mostly tiny nations and territories covering a vast swathe of the Pacific, from Palau, near the Philippines, to French Polynesia, are being bullied into an expanded compact intended to bar military relations with China.

Australia’s International Development and Pacific Minister Concetta Fierravanti-Wells told the *Australian*: “A new Biketawa Plus regional security declaration will guide Pacific Islands Forum member countries, including Australia, and regional organisations on Pacific priorities for security co-operation, and provide a framework for responding to emerging threats.”

In January, the Australian government provoked a diplomatic row with China when Fierravanti-Wells accused China of “duchessing” politicians in the Pacific, lending funds on unfavourable terms to deliberately entrap them in debt and financing worthless “white elephant” construction projects.

That marked a new offensive by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s government to answer concerns in Washington, first voiced by the Obama administration, that the Australian establishment has permitted China to gain ground in the Pacific. In 2016, Turnbull pledged Australia would “step up” its engagement in the Pacific.

The initial Biketawa Declaration foisted on Pacific governments in 2000, followed the 1999 Australian-led military intervention in East Timor to secure control over Timor Sea oil and gas fields. The declaration laid the groundwork for further Australian and New Zealand operations to assert their predatory interests.

That included a de facto occupation of Solomon Islands for a decade from 2003, another dispatch of troops to East Timor in 2006 and Canberra’s bullying of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Nauru into establishing offshore

detention centres to incarcerate refugees indefinitely.

However, the Liberal-National government has come under fire for allowing China to step up its aid and investment in the Pacific. China put \$2.3 billion into 218 Pacific projects in the 10 years to 2016, according to an estimate by the Sydney-based Lowy Institute.

Lieutenant Colonel Greg Colton, an Australian army officer, took 12 months leave to work at the Lowy Institute heading a “South Pacific Fragile States Project.” He authored a paper in April entitled “Safeguarding Australia’s security interests through closer Pacific ties.”

Colton said the proposed Biketawa Plus Declaration should be “Australia’s primary strategic objective in the region” and should extend to US-associated territories in the western Pacific.

The pact should “include those states and territories with Pacific Islands Forum Observer Status, namely Wallis and Fortuna, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Timor Leste [East Timor].”

Colton’s report said: “[T]he new declaration should seek to limit the military involvement in the region of those external actors not signatories to the agreement, and therefore not part of the larger ‘Pacific Family’. This would at least make it more difficult for nations from outside the region, such as China or Russia, to use military means in the region.”

The report advocated a neo-colonial role for Canberra, similar to that retained by the US across the western Pacific. “Australia should also seek to enhance the bilateral security memoranda of understanding it has signed with Tuvalu and Nauru, and is negotiating with Kiribati, into compacts of free association similar to those the United States has with Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia,” Colton stated.

“Under these compacts, Australia would provide these countries with a host of government services, greater access to labour markets, and take on the responsibility for their defence, in return for an undertaking that foreign military forces or installations would not be allowed in these countries.”

A new battle for control over the Pacific is underway. Colton’s Lowy Institute report cited the 2018 US National Defense Strategy, which accuses China of seeking “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global pre-eminence in the future.”

Colton insisted: “The United States will expect

Australia, which it sees as the region’s dominant power, to do more to counter rising Chinese influence and in many cases, it will be in Australia’s interest to do so.”

Significant steps have already been taken over the past month:

- A bipartisan delegation, led by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Labor’s foreign affairs spokeswoman Penny Wong, visited Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands on what has become an annual tour. “[W]e regard the Pacific as our part of the world,” Bishop declared during the trip.

- Turnbull launched negotiations for a new “security” deal with Vanuatu after unsubstantiated media reports that China had discussed establishing a naval base in the country. In addition, Defence Minister Marise Payne went to Tonga and Solomon Islands for military-to-military talks.

- The Turnbull government pledged to build an undersea Internet cable connecting PNG, Solomon Islands and Australia, in order to prevent Chinese company Huawei building the infrastructure.

- Four Australian warships, led by a new Landing Helicopter Dock Ship, are conducting a show of force throughout the southwest Pacific. The three-month “Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2018” military tour, which began in June, includes training during port visits in Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, PNG and Solomon Islands.

- Australia’s “Pacific Maritime Security Program” commenced, aiming to supply 19 new patrol vessels to 12 Pacific nations at a cost of around \$2 billion over 30 years.



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