

Pacific Islands Forum intensifies anti-China push

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The 18-member Pacific Islands Forum concluded its 49th annual meeting last Wednesday with the release of the Boe Declaration, named after the district in the island of Nauru where it was signed.

The forum was attended by Pacific island leaders as well as New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and delegations from the US and China. Australia's recently-installed Prime Minister Scott Morrison did not attend. Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, a former coup leader, boycotted the event as he regularly does, asserting its proceedings are dominated by the two regional powers, Australia and New Zealand.

According to the official communiqué, the Boe Declaration “expands the concept of security to include human security, environmental and resource security, as well as transnational crime and cybersecurity.” While China is not explicitly mentioned, the enhanced “regional security” agreement signals deepening tensions between Washington and its local imperialist allies on the one hand, and Beijing on the other.

After one closed-door meeting, Nauru President Baron Waqa complained that a Chinese official had demanded to be heard when other leaders were due to speak. “Maybe because he was from a big country he wanted to bully us,” he said. Waqa later lashed out at Beijing's “arrogant” presence in the region. “We're seeing a lot of big countries coming in and sometimes buying their way through the Pacific, some are extremely aggressive, even to the point that they tread all over us,” Waqa told the international media.

Significantly, Nauru is one of the few countries in the world that recognises Taiwan and therefore has no diplomatic relations with China. Most of the facilities to host the forum were built or upgraded with Taiwanese money. With a population of just 11,000,

Nauru functions as an Australian semi-colony strategically situated adjacent to the US-controlled Marshall Islands, an American missile testing ground.

Australia and New Zealand have been seeking to reassert their dominant position and push back against Chinese diplomatic and financial presence. According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, China is set to overtake Australia as the largest aid donor to the Pacific. After funding a \$US3.5 billion road project in Papua New Guinea, a former Australian colony, Beijing committed four times more in aid funding than Canberra in 2017.

Ardern described the Boe Declaration as recognising the Pacific's “dynamic geopolitical environment,” which is leading to “an increasingly crowded and complex region.” She emphasised: “The prosperity of New Zealand is intrinsically linked to the security of our region, which is why this declaration is so important.”

New Zealand's Labour-led government has embarked on a Pacific “reset,” including a major boost to aid funding, now totalling \$NZ1 billion. This is combined with military upgrades to integrate the country into US war preparations. NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters has repeatedly warned that the Pacific is a “contested space” where “Great Power” rivalries are being played out. The US ambassador to Wellington, Scott Brown, recently lauded NZ's support for Washington's intensifying offensive against China.

Australia is to establish a new Pacific Fusion Centre in 2019 focused on “strengthening the ability of Pacific governments to enforce their laws and protect their sovereignty,” according to Payne. The centre will enable Pacific leaders to better respond to “security threats,” including illegal fishing, people smuggling and narcotics trafficking, she said. Canberra will also

enhance “strategic policy development” in the region with a new Australia Pacific Security College.

The Boe Declaration highlighted climate change as “the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.” Rising sea levels pose an existential threat for many low-lying islands, including Tuvalu, Kiribati and coastal areas of Fiji. The statement called on the US to return to the Paris climate agreement. President Trump formally announced Washington would withdraw from the agreement in August last year.

According to the *Guardian*, Australia was responsible for watering down the resolution. The final communiqué was endorsed by leaders “with qualification.” Asked at a press conference if those qualifications came from a country “beginning with A,” Enele Sopoaga, the prime minister of Tuvalu, confirmed that it was. Australia reportedly did not support calling on the US to return to the Paris agreement.

In fact, Pacific leaders felt betrayed by the 2015 Paris summit. They failed to persuade Canberra and Wellington to support their calls for measures to keep global temperature rises below 1.5 degrees centigrade, instead of the current agreed goal of 2 degrees. Pacific nations also want compensation for loss and damage, and recognition for climate change refugees.

Australia and New Zealand have adopted hypocritical positions on climate change. Their own measures have been criticised as “weak” and “unambitious” by academics and environmental groups, while Canberra recently abandoned proposed climate targets. Xavier Matsutaro, the climate change coordinator for Palau, told the *Guardian* that Australia was like an “abusive spouse,” providing aid to the region to deal with the effects of global warming but repeatedly undermining attempts to halt its progress.

Throughout the forum, Waqa sought to suppress discussion of the more than 600 refugees detained on the island by Canberra’s criminal offshore processing policy. Some of the 120 refugee children on Nauru have been evacuated because they are suffering from resignation syndrome, a medical condition in which they withdraw socially and stop eating and drinking.

Led by Amnesty International, 84 non-government organisations had signed an open letter calling on the forum to put the fate of the refugees at the top of its

agenda. NZ Foreign Minister Peters retorted: “We’ve got 50,000 people who are homeless back home... we have to help fix their lives up as well before we start taking on new obligations of the level that some people would like.”

Ardern, who had initially expressed her intention to meet with refugees, failed to do so arguing she did not want to raise their “expectations.” New Zealand’s previous offer to accept 150 of the refugees has been flatly rejected by Canberra.

Waqar claimed that refugees are “not an issue” for other Pacific nations. He hit out at reports of mistreatment of refugees, posting on the government’s Twitter account that the children were being “manipulated into self-harm by some of their families (supported by activists) in a disgusting & tragic political game.” Their end goal, he declared, was “to make international headlines & get to Australia.”

Over the last five years, Waqa has established a virtual dictatorship. Backed by Canberra, his government has deported and imprisoned opposition politicians, disciplined the police and judiciary, shut down social media web sites, and criminalised political dissent.

Australian Broadcasting Corporation journalists were banned from entering the country to cover the forum. Restrictions were placed on the number of visiting journalists and their ability to report on topics outside the official proceedings. Police detained NZ journalist Barbara Dreaver for three hours and revoked her media accreditation after she was seen interviewing a refugee outside a local restaurant.



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