

Tensions over climate change dominate Pacific Islands summit

John Braddock
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At a three-day summit of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) last week, small Pacific nations confronted regional imperialist powers Australia and New Zealand over their inaction on the urgent issues of climate change. The 50th annual meeting of the PIF, which brings together leaders from 18 Pacific countries, took place in Tuvalu.

The summit's communiqué passed with a qualification that not all countries supported a call by all member states for an immediate global ban on new coal-fired power plants and coalmines, and for all countries to rapidly phase out the use of coal in the power sector.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison succeeded in expunging any specific commitments to limit temperature rises to no more than 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels. References to coal were removed from the communiqué, although in a separate statement, the phrase "climate change crisis" remained.

Expressing disappointment with the outcome, forum chair Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga described the 12-hour leaders' meeting as "a very, very tough, difficult struggle." The talks reportedly almost collapsed twice amid "fierce" clashes over Australia's "red lines" on climate change. Australia is the region's largest carbon emitter and one of the world's largest coal exporters.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern did not criticise the Australian government's position. She falsely presented the final communiqué as a "compromise" between "some who wish to go further and some who would've wished it to have been pushed back further in the other direction."

In fact, the dominant position of Australia and New Zealand prevailed. Fijian Prime Minister Frank

Bainimarama told the *Guardian* that Morrison had only attended "to make sure that the Australian policies were upheld by the Pacific island nations." He slammed Morrison for "alienating" Pacific leaders and warned that this would push them closer to China, adding "the Chinese don't insult us."

The presence of observer delegations from China and the US underscored the intensifying geo-strategic tensions enveloping the Pacific as Washington ramps up its diplomatic, trade and strategic confrontation with Beijing. Australia and New Zealand have strengthened their alliance with the Trump administration while seeking to reassert their own regional dominance and push back against China's presence.

This was not the first time Canberra has quashed efforts to address climate change. At the 2015 UN Paris summit, Pacific leaders failed to persuade Canberra and Wellington to support measures to keep global temperature rises below 1.5 degrees centigrade, instead of the current goal of 2 degrees. Pacific nations also demanded compensation for loss and damage, and recognition for climate change refugees.

At last year's forum in Nauru, the Boe Declaration, which formally highlighted climate change as "the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific," was watered down at Australia's insistence.

Tuvalu exemplifies the crisis facing the Pacific states. Made up of nine atolls and with a population of just 11,000, it is one of the world's smallest and most vulnerable countries. Its highest point is little more than four metres above sea level and the main island in places is barely 20 metres wide. Rising seas pose an existential threat. When Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu in 2015, storm surges inundated about 40 percent of Tuvalu.

A 2018 World Bank report predicted that 180,000 people in Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and atolls in some larger nations will be significantly affected by climate change. Low-lying coastal communities are especially exposed to sea-level rise, tidal flooding, increasingly intense storm surges and erosion. In Fiji, four coastal villages have already been forced to relocate, with another 80 identified for potential future relocation.

In the lead-up to the PIF summit, Australia and New Zealand came under fire for their climate stance. In July, Pacific leaders meeting in Fiji, with Australia and NZ absent, declared a climate crisis and demanded an end to coal mining and an enforced reduction of carbon emissions.

Sopoaga made clear that financial aid packages alone were insufficient. He criticised Australia's use of carryover credits as a means of reducing emissions. He said: "We cannot go on talking about partnerships... while you keep pouring your coal emissions into the atmosphere that is killing my people and drowning my people into the water."

Bainimarama said Pacific leaders should accept nothing less than concrete commitments to cut emissions. "We cannot allow climate commitments to be watered down at a meeting hosted in a nation whose very existence is threatened by the rising waters lapping at its shores," he declared.

The Fijian leader was attending his first PIF since 2008. Australia and New Zealand have sought to strengthen relations with Bainimarama, a military strongman who led a coup in 2006, in order to prevent Fiji from moving closer to China. He has previously denounced the PIF as being dominated by the two powers, and encouraged other Pacific states to strike a more "independent" stance.

The day before his arrival in Tuvalu, Morrison touted Canberra's supposed "family" relationship with the Pacific. He announced a \$US3.4 million package—funded from existing aid programs—over five years on renewable energy, infrastructure development and health services. Morrison hypocritically said Australia recognised the climate challenges the region faces and is "doing its bit to help."

Ardern initially distanced herself from Morrison, stating that Australia "has to answer to the Pacific [and] that's a matter for them" which prompted indignant

responses in the Australian media. This empty show of concern is aimed at promoting New Zealand's interests among PIF members without alienating Canberra.

Ardern announced a \$150 million package to support climate change "resilience" in the Pacific. However, her Labour-NZ First-Greens coalition government's Zero Carbon Bill, which promises carbon neutrality by 2050, falls short of the immediate action necessary to limit global warming. Agriculture, the country's biggest source of greenhouse emissions, has a 95 percent exemption under the current Emissions Trading Scheme.

NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters, however, who leads the right-wing NZ First Party and is notorious for his anti-China chauvinism, openly supported Canberra. Pacific nations seeking Chinese investment should remember it comes on the back of "coal-fired everything, he said, adding that criticisms of Australia were a "bit of a paradox" because Pacific leaders were not openly challenging China's emission levels.

Peters further declared that Australia was a "great neighbour" and Pacific countries "should remember who has been their long-term and short-term friends." The shot, aimed against Beijing, was in line with his promotion of New Zealand's "Pacific Reset" policy designed to strengthen Wellington's neo-colonial position among Pacific Island states, as part of broader US efforts to undermine China throughout the region.

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