

Fiji and Australia to negotiate new military pact

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The announcement that Fiji and Australia are negotiating a new military pact is another significant step in the intensifying US-led build-up to counter China's influence in the southwest Pacific.

The Status of Forces Agreement will facilitate Fijian and Australian defence personnel to undertake exchanges and joint deployments and allow the two forces to exercise in each other's jurisdiction. According to an official statement, the "landmark" agreement recognises the "growing sophistication of defence engagement between Fiji and Australia."

The negotiations were initiated at the second annual Defence Ministers' Meeting involving Fiji's Inia Seruiratu and Australia's Linda Reynolds on 24 November. Reynolds declared the relationship was going from "strength to strength." She praised Fiji's deployment of a military unit to support Australia during last summer's bushfire crisis. Australia and Fiji worked "shoulder-to-shoulder" in response to challenges from COVID-19 to Tropical Cyclone Harold, Reynolds said.

Both ministers stressed the importance of a "collective response to the security challenges" in the Pacific. The two countries' armed forces should "work closely together to develop the capability and interoperability we need to help maintain a resilient and secure region," Reynolds said. Seruiratu added that they must "move quickly to support one another, when required."

Under Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program, Fiji received its first Guardian Class naval patrol vessel in March with a second scheduled for handover in 2023. Canberra will also fund and oversee construction of a new Maritime Essential Services Centre that will incorporate Fiji's Navy Headquarters, Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Coordination

Centre, Coastal Radio and Fiji's Navy Hydrographic Service.

An Australian-funded regional security centre is also being established in Vanuatu. The Pacific Fusion Centre will host analysts and share information on "maritime risks," "disinformation," illegal fishing, drug smuggling, human trafficking and climate change security. A team of 21 analysts from 14 Pacific Island nations began training in Canberra a year ago to staff the centre.

The initiatives are part of the Australian government's "Pacific Step Up" strategy, launched in 2018 to counter China's growing influence, along with the New Zealand government's "Pacific Reset" policy. Both regional imperialist powers are determined to ensure their continued dominance in what they regard as their "own" neo-colonial backyard.

Following the 2006 coup that installed Fiji's current prime minister, Frank Bainimarama, Canberra and Wellington imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions, concerned it could destabilise the region and open the way for China. The sanctions backfired, with Bainimarama adopting a "Look North" policy, seeking and receiving economic, diplomatic and military aid from China, Russia and elsewhere.

Australia and New Zealand have made it a priority to restore relations. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern visited Fiji in February, only the second visit by a NZ leader since 2006. Her Labour Party government is bolstering military connections. In the largest project of its type, a NZ Defence Force team has been in Fiji since October, to "train, coach, mentor and embed alongside" Fijian military personnel.

Vanuatu is also involved in the escalating geopolitical tensions across the Pacific. An official visit by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Vanuatu,

Fiji and the Solomon Islands in 2019 was the first by an Australian leader to the supposed Pacific “family” in more than a decade.

The Australian Defence Force has increased its engagements with Vanuatu’s police, alongside training and exercises. In February, a visiting Australian naval ship docked at a Chinese-built wharf in northern Vanuatu. The wharf was the subject of an alarmist media beat-up in 2018 in which the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that China had pressured Vanuatu to build a permanent military facility, a claim the Vanuatu government vehemently denied.

The moves by Australia and New Zealand are in lock-step with Washington’s advanced preparations for war against China, begun under President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” and continued by the Trump administration. The Pentagon is planning to re-establish the US Navy’s First Fleet, which was deactivated nearly 50 years ago, to bolster its offensive positioning in the Indo-Pacific alongside its Japan-based Seventh Fleet.

US National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien told Radio NZ on October 27 that US Coast Guard cutters will also be deployed to American Samoa and Guam. The armed high-speed vessels will patrol and “enforce US laws,” while “partnering” with other Pacific nations. He falsely claimed that China is “threatening the rules-based order that’s kept the peace since World War II.”

O’Brien revealed that he had spoken with Ardern, who told him she was “pleased with the idea of more US law enforcement on the high seas.” Ardern’s previously undisclosed commitment, made in the midst of the campaign for New Zealand’s October 17 election, underscored the suppression of any public discussion of the country’s role in the US build-up to war.

Competing geo-strategic pressures have been escalating over the past 12 months. The impoverished states across the southwest Pacific are seeking to reduce their dependence on Australia and New Zealand by increasing economic relations with China. Meanwhile, rifts over climate change have intensified regional disputes, particularly over Canberra’s refusal to limit coal production.

The Solomon Islands last year sealed diplomatic relations with Beijing, ending 36 years of relations with Taiwan. Kiribati also announced it would similarly

switch diplomatic relations. Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a renegade province, now only has formal relations with Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific.

Washington reacted with alarm to these developments. The US State Department has just announced it will spend \$US200 million on programs for Pacific nations. Sandra Oudkirk, the US deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, accused China of increasingly “problematic behaviour,” including “predatory economic activities” that undermined “good governance.”

Nations such as Palau in the northern Pacific and PNG will receive the funding, Oudkirk said, to “promote development” and protect their fishing industries against competition from China. She declared that Pacific islands were “essential partners in fostering a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

The US Defense Department has also held talks with leaders of Palau and PNG regarding the establishment of an American military presence in both countries. Australia is already developing a joint naval base on PNG’s Manus Island to host Australian and US warships.

US President-elect Joe Biden has also signalled a more aggressive posture towards the Middle East, Russia and China. “America is back. We’re back at the head of the table once again,” Biden recently declared. “America’s going to reassert its role in the world.”

Washington’s Pacific allies are falling into line. In a conversation with Ardern on November 23, Biden stressed that he wants to “reinvigorate” the bilateral relationship. Morrison and Ardern have invited Biden to visit Australia and NZ next year for the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS military alliance between the three countries.



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