

Pacific Islands Forum in crisis following regional split

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The Pacific Islands Forum—the Pacific’s major regional leadership body—is facing a crisis after nearly one-third of its 18 member countries quit last month. The Micronesian sub-grouping—Palau, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati, and Nauru—gave notice they will leave in protest over the selection of the new secretary-general on February 3.

At the reportedly “heated” 16-hour remote meeting, former Cook Islands prime minister, Henry Puna, defeated the Marshall Islands’ US ambassador Gerald Zackios by 9 votes to 8 in the final round. Other contestants included Tongan economist Amelia Kinahoi Siamomua, Fiji’s former foreign minister Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, and Jimmie Rodgers of Solomon Islands.

Following the vote, the Micronesian leaders’ group released a statement expressing “great disappointment with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General appointment process.” It declared the northern sub-group will “act swiftly like the Republic of Palau.” Palau, a former US territory, had unilaterally announced it would close its embassy in Fiji and commence withdrawal proceedings.

Palau’s newly installed president Surangel Whipps Jr said the split was in response to the decision by other Pacific leaders to ignore Micronesia’s expectation that their candidate would take up the role. By convention, leadership of the forum is meant to cycle through the region’s three major subgroupings: Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia.

With former PIF head Meg Taylor stepping down after six years, positioning over her replacement was fractious from the start. Last October, the Micronesian group issued the “Mekreos Communique,” insisting the Forum honour the supposed agreement to rotate the position. In reality, Micronesia has only held the post once (Kiribati from 1992-98), while the two larger and more populous sub-regions have held it three times each.

Behind the manoeuvring lie profound geo-strategic rivalries fuelled by the US-led preparations for war with China, which are intensifying under President Joe Biden. Three of the defecting states—Palau, FSM, and the Marshall Islands—are closely allied to the United States in compacts of so-called “free association.”

Palau, Nauru, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu are the only Pacific states maintaining relationships with Taiwan, after the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic ties to Beijing in 2019, heightening concerns over China’s growing regional influence. Nauru, a former Australian colony and the site of its notorious refugee “offshore processing” centre, remains heavily dependent on Canberra financially. However, its president, Baron Waqa, has repeatedly denounced China for allegedly seeking to “entice and hook up” countries in the Pacific.

The split may well have involved the US State Department. The US ruling class views China as its main economic rival and chief obstacle to maintaining its post-World War II global dominance. The US and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, have sought to push back against China diplomatically and economically while carrying out provocative military exercises.

The PIF was formed in 1971 by New Zealand, Australia, Nauru, Western Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and the Cook Islands. Eleven more states progressively joined, mostly as they achieved formal independence. The Micronesian countries began joining in 1987, while the French territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia were admitted in 2016 with the support of Canberra and Wellington.

Palau would doubtless have viewed Micronesian leadership of the PIF as an opportunity to shift the organization closer to Washington. Whipps Jr, a US-born businessman and former member of the Palau senate, has taken an aggressive pro-US agenda. He has bluntly declared he will oppose Chinese “bullying” in the north

Pacific, and Palau will stand by its “true friends,” the US and Taiwan. Last September, Palau formally requested that the US military build new ports, airstrips and bases on its islands, which are strategically positioned in the Philippine Sea.

Speaking to Radio NZ on February 10, Whipps Jnr condemned Polynesia and Melanesia as siding with Australia and New Zealand to dominate the Forum’s decision-making. He challenged the membership of the Cook Islands and Niue, which are semi-colonies of New Zealand, while the US territories of American Samoa, Guam, Saipan and the state of Hawaii are not. “Maybe we need to come up with a new organisation and find new members because the current configuration is self-interest and that is the problem,” he concluded.

Puna’s appointment is clearly a disruption to US interests. The 71-year old Cook Islander campaigned for the position with a reputation for being friendly towards Beijing. The Cook Islands established consular relations with the US in 1995 and full diplomatic relations with China in 1997. In 2019, Puna remarked that China had been increasingly financially supportive of island nations. “China is very present in the Pacific. Unfortunately for a long time, America has not been,” Puna declared.

The impoverished Pacific island states have been forced into a delicate balancing act, reducing their dependence on the local powers by increasing economic and aid relations with China. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic the Cook Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu have all reached out to Chinese-led funding agencies to prop up their budgets after exhausting financing options from traditional sources.

According to the *Diplomat*, Australia and New Zealand are likely to have supported Puna’s candidacy under their policy of closer regional “integration” within their respective spheres of influence. New Caledonia and French Polynesia were also rumoured to have voted for the Cook Islands candidate. Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister James Marape revealed he had supported Zackios on the basis that the rotation agreement should have prevailed.

Writing in the *Guardian* on February 19, Whipps Jnr alleged that Australia, which had promised not to “influence the process,” should have abstained from the vote in the interests of “consensus,” as could have New Zealand and Fiji. “The lack of leadership by PIF’s strongest members could hardly be more jarring,” he wrote. Whipps Jnr further claimed that “Ambassador Zackios’s relationship with Washington” could well have

harmed his candidacy among South Pacific nations.

Since the launching of the Obama administration’s Pivot to Asia strategy, Australia and New Zealand have increasingly marched in lockstep with US policy across the region. However, the local powers still maintain their own imperialist interests, as does France with its substantial military presence.

Following the 2006 Fiji military coup, in which the current Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama seized power, Canberra and Wellington imposed sanctions and had Fiji suspended from the PIF. The move backfired, with Bainimarama encouraging Pacific neighbours to take a more “independent” stance. Concerned that Fiji was shifting closer to China, Washington unilaterally restored diplomatic relations, forcing Canberra and Wellington to fall into line and Fiji was readmitted to the PIF in 2014.

Tensions again emerged at the 2019 summit over a bitter dispute regarding the Australian government’s refusal to agree to limit coal production in order to address climate change. Bainimarama told the *Guardian* that Canberra’s intransigence was “alienating” Pacific leaders and warned that this would again push them closer to China.

The *Diplomat* claims that Washington remains unhappy with the way the two local powers are running their Pacific affairs. The subtext, the journal maintains, is that the US’s Five Eyes partners “haven’t been delivering,” allowing China to make inroads. Despite the particularly close relations between the US and Australia, the result will now force some “deep re-evaluations.” in Washington, with the prospect that the PIF result may well be “countered.”

The crisis comes as Pacific economies are being crushed by the shutdown of travel from the COVID-19 pandemic and the islands face the existential threat of global climate change. Australia, New Zealand and China have all called on the Forum nations to stay together. The Marshall Islands and the FSM have, however, followed Palau in initiating their withdrawal. With the formal process likely to take up to 12 months, anything can still happen. Meanwhile, Bainimarama has invited Biden to visit Fiji in August when it hosts the next summit.



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