

Biden speaks to Pacific Islands Forum to counter China

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Leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) celebrated the organisation's 50th anniversary in an online summit on August 6. The meeting of the Pacific's main leadership body took place under conditions of extraordinary global and regional crises, including worsening climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating geo-strategic tensions.

Leaders of 14 Pacific nations, including Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison and New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern, met under the chairmanship of Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. He began by declaring he had earlier hoped to host the gathering in person with "the worst of the COVID pandemic... behind us."

Fiji, however, is in the grip of a deadly COVID-19 outbreak with 24,138 active cases, 299 deaths and the highest official per capita infection rate in the world. Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Australia are also dealing with uncontrolled surges of the Delta variant which is devastating large parts of the globe.

Joe Biden delivered a pre-recorded video speech, the first time a sitting US president has ever attended or addressed the PIF. He emphasised that the US is a "proud Pacific power," and announced that Washington would donate half a billion COVID-19 vaccine doses to the global COVAX facility. He claimed the move would be "without any strings or conditions" and is "about saving lives."

In fact, the Biden administration has no interest in "saving lives," as the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic within the US shows. Washington is escalating diplomatic and economic efforts, begun under the Obama administration and expanded under Trump, to isolate and confront China. So-called "vaccine diplomacy" has not been organised as a global public health strategy, but to advance the economic and

strategic interests of competing ruling elites. US imperialism is prepared to use all means, including war, to prevent China from challenging its hegemony.

An August 7 article on the NZ website *Stuff* titled "The new militarisation of the Pacific" highlighted the "growing number of defence assets operating regularly in the region as Western partners counter China's growing power there." The US Coast Guard recently "commissioned three 47-metre fast response cutters in Guam." Meanwhile, "French President Emmanuel Macron announced France would launch a South Pacific coast guard network."

The article also noted "reports that Australia's Special Air Service Regiment will potentially be redirected to focus on operations in the Pacific," and that Australia is upgrading a naval base in PNG's Manus Island.

The entire Indo-Pacific is increasingly crowded with warships as US allies join in provocative military exercises targeting China. Last month, a UK-led NATO Carrier Strike Group headed for the South China Sea as part of a 28-week mission that includes joint exercises with the US, Australia, France, Japan, New Zealand. Germany is also sending a frigate to the South China Sea.

Washington is undoubtedly concerned about the fracturing of the PIF, highlighted by the absence of four leaders of the Micronesian sub-group over the organisation's refusal to assign the post of Secretary-General to their preferred nominee. Palau, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Kiribati and Nauru have all commenced the process for withdrawal from the PIF by February 2022.

Geo-strategic rivalries fuelled by the US-led preparations for war with China are behind the diplomatic stand-off. Three of the defecting

states—Palau, FSM, and the Marshall Islands—are closely allied to Washington in compacts of so-called “free association.” Palau’s president Surangel Whipps Jr boasted that he will oppose Chinese “bullying” in the north Pacific and is looking to the US military for new ports, airstrips and bases on islands strategically positioned in the Philippine Sea.

The appointment of former Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna, known to be friendly towards Beijing, to the PIF’s top post was a rebuff to plans to steer the organisation closer to Washington. The impoverished Pacific island states have been forced into a delicate balancing act, reducing their dependence on the local imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, while increasing economic and aid relations with Beijing.

Many countries have turned to Chinese-led funding agencies to prop up their budgets after exhausting traditional financing options. At a Pacific leaders’ conference convened in Hawaii in June, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken angrily declared that China was breaching “international standards” and using “economic coercion.”

Samoa’s new prime minister last month signalled a realignment towards Washington by abandoning a Chinese-backed port development. Fiame Naomi Mata’afa said the \$US100 million project would have significantly added to the country’s exposure to China, which accounts for 40 percent of external debt. The project played a part in April’s election which ended Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi’s 23-year term as prime minister.

The climate crisis remains the most contentious issue between the Pacific island nations and Australia. Posturing over the existential threat posed to Pacific nations by climate change, Biden declared that the US is committed to reducing emissions by 2030 and “building resilience into vulnerable communities globally.”

None of his empty rhetoric committed Washington to anything. Nonetheless on Twitter, Bainimarama lauded Biden “for bringing America forcefully back to the right side of climate history.” In a barely disguised swipe at Australia, which has resisted calls to commit to net zero emissions by 2050, Bainimarama added: “Fiji and the USA’s net zero commitments by 2050 must become the entire world’s—zero excuses. The

Pacific and the planet depend on it.”

The last in-person PIF meeting—in Tuvalu in 2019—almost broke up in bitter recrimination as Australia refused to budge on “red lines” over the defence of its coal industry. Bainimarama slammed Morrison at the time for “alienating” Pacific leaders and warned that it would push them closer to China, adding “the Chinese don’t insult us.”

The outgoing PIF Secretary General, Papua New Guinea’s Meg Taylor, last week told a media conference the Australian government’s stance on climate change and its support for fossil fuels is “affecting the country’s standing in the region.”

Kausea Natano, the prime minister of Tuvalu and outgoing chair, also criticised Japan’s plan to release more than one million tonnes of contaminated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean, which he said “places our region at risk of potential nuclear harm.”

The leaders’ declaration said the member countries should retain their existing maritime territories as rising sea levels drown their islands. Ardern said that the group would take the declaration to the United Nations, as “our interpretation” of the existing laws governing the seas, is “a first” in terms of protecting territories as sea levels inevitably rise.

Entirely missing, however, were any concrete demands placed on Australia or other major powers to act urgently. There was no repeat of calls that the PIF made at the 2015 Paris ecological summit to reduce emissions and keep the global temperature increase below 1.5 degrees.

Also off the agenda was any reference to the rapidly deepening economic and political crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Bainimarama’s regime in Fiji is presiding over a social catastrophe, caused by its refusal to control the pandemic. Growing popular discontent over austerity and authoritarian measures has also seen political turmoil in Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Vanuatu this past year.



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