

US secretary of state visits Fiji, escalating confrontation with China

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Fiji on Saturday to meet with acting Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, in the absence of Prime Minister Bainimarama who is recovering from heart surgery, with 18 Pacific Island leaders participating online. The eight-hour visit was a significant event, designed to advance the strategic interests of US imperialism across the Pacific amid escalating war tensions.

Blinken is the most senior US official to visit Fiji in almost four decades. The last visit was in 1985 by then Secretary of State George Shultz, ostensibly to show Washington's "appreciation" after Fiji reopened its ports to US naval ships. At the time, many Pacific nations, including New Zealand, banned the entry of American nuclear vessels.

While the Pacific island countries have tiny populations and economies, their position in the South West Pacific has a strategic significance that far outweighs their size. US imperialism is returning to an area of the globe where it fought fierce naval battles during World War II with its rival Japan in the struggle for dominance in Asia.

Blinken was returning from Melbourne, where he met with members of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue or Quad, a quasi-military bloc of Australia, the US, Japan and India. While there, he told the *Australian* that the US aimed to bring together a coalition of states to take on China, which he accused of seeking to "dominate the world" and establish an "illiberal order." In reality, it is the US that is determined to maintain its global domination through all means including military.

New Zealand was only left off the itinerary because of COVID-19 border restrictions. NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta received a phone call from Blinken. According to the US State Department the pair discussed the "collective challenges of the Indo-

Pacific" and "their shared commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." The US is promoting the lie that Russia is preparing to invade the Ukraine to justify its own military build-up and provocations against Moscow.

As soon as Blinken touched down in Fiji, he launched a broadside at Moscow, telling reporters the US was prepared for either diplomacy or "aggression" over Ukraine. He warned of economic sanctions "in coordination with allies and partners around the globe" if Russian President Putin decided on military action. Blinken also declared the US would "reinforce our allies on the eastern flank of NATO."

Blinken's meeting with Pacific leaders was centred on countering China's influence in the region. He declared that China's "coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific," then reiterated what has now become Washington's list of falsifications and half-truths aimed against Beijing: "economic coercion of Australia"; conflict with India, "growing pressure on Taiwan"; and "bullying of neighbours in the East and South China Seas." In each and every case, the US has had a hand in pushing allies and partners to take a more aggressive stance against China, thus heightening tensions.

At Saturday's meeting, Blinken announced that the US will establish a new embassy in the Solomon Islands. Last November, the US provided crucial funding and support to a failed regime change operation by supporters of Daniel Suidani, premier of Malaita province. Suidani opposes Beijing's recognition by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and maintains his own "foreign policy," oriented to Taiwan.

The choice of Fiji for Blinken's meeting underscored its strategically important position in the region. Under pressure from Washington, Australia and New Zealand

have worked assiduously to restore diplomatic and military ties with Bainimarama. Following the 2006 military coup, which he led, the two regional powers imposed sanctions. These backfired when the Fiji regime turned to Beijing and Russia for financial assistance and military connections. Russia sent gifts of military weapons to Fiji in 2016.

Bainimarama has since become an important ally of Beijing, and sought to persuade other Pacific leaders to adopt a more “independent” path outside the influence of Canberra and Wellington. Governments across the region see China not as a threat, but as a crucial partner in development and aid. Ten Pacific countries, including Fiji, have signed on to China’s \$US1 trillion Belt and Road development initiative.

Blinken’s visit took place as the Biden administration unveiled its Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at consolidating military alliances and partnerships against Russia and China in Asia and internationally. Significantly, Biden last year became the first sitting US president to address the Pacific Islands Forum, declaring that the US was a “proud Pacific power.”

In a blunt warning about war preparations encompassing both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, Blinken said the Pacific could expect “power derived from US alliances in other parts of the world” to come to the islands. “The United States is increasingly speaking with one voice with our NATO allies and our G7 partners, when it comes to Indo-Pacific matters,” he declared.

Blinken announced deeper economic integration between the US and Pacific island countries including measures to open market access for their agricultural commodities. An emphasis was given to “new approaches” to trade, to create more secure supply chains which are “diverse, open, and predictable.”

Addressing the existential issue confronting Pacific countries—climate change driving rising sea levels—Blinken unveiled a plan to divert portions of the \$US150 billion announced at COP26 last year to the Pacific. Without giving any specific undertakings, he made a vague promise to pursue policies “consistent with limiting global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius.”

The Glasgow summit, however, was only the latest in a long trail of UN climate meetings that failed to come close to delivering the necessary action to slash carbon

emissions at the scale and speed required to prevent an escalation of global warming, let alone to resolve the environmental crisis.

Blinken made no commitments to assist vulnerable Pacific nations with the threat of COVID-19, which has now gained a foothold across the region. In Fiji, one of the worst affected, the virus has killed more than 800 people. Any funding promises from Washington, like those from Australia and New Zealand, are not based on addressing the pressing needs of the local population, but to buttress their position versus China.

Blinken has previously campaigned against Beijing’s concessionary loans to the region, accusing China of “debt trap diplomacy.” At a Pacific leaders’ conference in Hawaii last June, Blinken angrily declared that China was breaching “international standards” and using “economic coercion” in its provision of aid and concessionary loans.

Coinciding with Blinken’s visit, the leaders of five pro-US nations have agreed to “pause” their plans to break away from the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). The Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru and Palau announced last year that they would withdraw from the forum, after losing the vote to elect a new secretary-general.

The sub-regional split was bound up with deepening tensions within the PIF and the increasing orientation of the so-called Micronesian group towards Taiwan. The move, together with Blinken’s visit, indicates that the US is preparing a far more aggressive intervention into the PIF in order to marginalise China.



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