

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi tours the Pacific

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On Monday, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi convened a meeting of foreign ministers from 10 Pacific Island nations in Suva, Fiji. It was the second China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers' Meeting following its inaugural gathering, conducted remotely in October 2021.

All the Pacific countries which recognise China attended the on-line meeting: Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Niue and Federated States of Micronesia. Those maintaining ties with Taiwan—Tuvalu, Palau, the Marshall Islands and Nauru—were absent.

China presented a major document, leaked last week, which advanced a sweeping region-wide strategy boosting economic and security co-operation. Despite a direct appeal from Premier Xi Jinping, China announced after the meeting it would shelve the proposals and prepare a “position paper,” so that “going forward” it can “shape more consensus and cooperation.” China's Ambassador to Fiji, Qian Bo, said there had been “general support” for the plan, but some leaders had concerns about “specific issues.”

Pacific Islands Forum general secretary Henry Puna and Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama emphasised that the major issue for Pacific leaders is climate change. Bainimarama told the joint press conference that “geopolitical point scoring” means “less than nothing” to those threatened by climate change. He had urged China, he said, as he did with all major countries, to make stronger climate commitments.

The meeting came midway through an unprecedented tour of the Pacific by Wang and a 20-strong delegation of Chinese officials. It began in the Solomon Islands last Thursday with the signing of a security agreement

between the two countries.

The pact, which was agreed in April, was furiously denounced by Washington, Australia and New Zealand, which claimed it would open the way for a Chinese military base in the southwest Pacific. Beijing has repeatedly said it has no interest in establishing such a base.

Wang's tour takes place in the wake of a US-led diplomatic offensive in Asia, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) Tokyo meeting and President Biden's visits to South Korea and Japan, intended to strengthen its encirclement of China.

Beijing is facing the mounting threat of war as the US seeks to prevent any challenge to its global dominance amid a worsening global economic crisis. Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken delivered a speech to the Asia Society Policy Institute in Washington describing China as “the most serious long-term challenge to the international order.”

The Chinese proposals offered the Pacific states millions of dollars in financial assistance, the prospect of a China-Pacific Islands free trade agreement and access to China's market of 1.4 billion people. It also involved police training, cybersecurity and an expanded place in disaster and humanitarian relief and fisheries.

Beijing sought to shift from a series of bilateral arrangements towards multilateralism. It would appoint a special envoy for Pacific Affairs to advance political relations and a comprehensive partnership, including aligning its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the Pacific Island Forum's “Blue Pacific” plans.

The President of Micronesia David Panuelo, who is more closely aligned with Washington, warned China's proposal could spark a new Cold War in the region. He declared that Pacific Island states risked being pulled into Beijing's orbit, suggesting they would lose

sovereignty and independence.

Australia and New Zealand, backed by Washington, reacted with alarm at what they regard as an intrusion into their “backyard.” Australia’s Prime Minister Anthony Albanese accused China of seeking to increase its influence “in the region of the world where Australia has been the security partner of choice since the Second World War.”

Albanese revealed a “step-up” in Pacific engagement, with \$A500 million (\$US350 million) in additional aid for defence training, maritime security and infrastructure to combat the effects of climate change.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong was hurriedly dispatched to Fiji days before Wang’s visit. Wong bluntly warned the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat that Pacific leaders should weigh up the “consequences” of accepting security offers from Beijing.

The shelving of Beijing’s strategic plan has not stopped negotiations with individual Pacific governments. Wang arrived in Fiji from stopovers in Kiribati and Samoa. In Samoa an Economic & Technical Cooperation Agreement was signed, effectively reversing the FAST (Faith in the One True God) party government’s anti-China position at the 2021 election.

In Kiribati the two parties signed documents on climate change, tourism, infrastructure, marine transportation and COVID-19 medical supplies. Wang also spoke with Niue’s Foreign Minister Dalton Tagelagi via video link, both committing to extend cooperation including on the BRI.

The White House revealed last week that Fiji would join Biden’s newly-formed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), the first Pacific Island nation to sign on. The protectionist IPEF is designed to bolster US access to regional markets without offering reduced tariffs or greater access to US markets. The White House said it would enable the US and its allies “to decide on rules of the road.”

The *Financial Times* promptly trumpeted Fiji’s involvement in IPEF as “a victory in its [Washington’s] competition with Beijing over influence in the Pacific.” Bainimarama declared he had enjoyed a “wonderful meeting” with Australia’s foreign minister, tweeting; “Fiji is not anyone’s backyard—we are a part of a Pacific family. And our

greatest concern isn’t geopolitics—it’s climate change.”

When Wang and Bainimarama met separately on Monday, they signed several agreements to expand cooperation with Fiji over the economy, trade, agriculture, fisheries, tourism, civil aviation, education, law enforcement, and emergency management. Wang said that China would provide assistance to Pacific countries with “no political strings attached.”

Fiji, the second largest country in the Pacific after Papua New Guinea, occupies a pivotal strategic role. Following Bainimarama’s 2006 military coup he established a “Look North” policy towards China and Russia to counter moves by Canberra and Wellington to isolate the regime. He also encouraged other Pacific countries to take a more “independent” line.

With Fiji’s elections due this year, the opposition SODELPA leader Sitiveni Rabuka, who staged two military coups between 1987 and 1995, said China’s influence in the South Pacific will take a “king hit” if he returns to power. Rabuka has been sharply critical of debt repayments, claiming Beijing will take over “some of the public facilities we have, our ports and airports,” adding: “It’s happening around the world.”

The entire region is facing an economic and social catastrophe. According to the Lowy Institute, the Pacific is staring at a “potential lost decade” from the economic and social devastation wreaked by the COVID pandemic. Without an “ambitious and urgent increase in outside assistance,” it declared, the Pacific faces a permanently lower economic and developmental trajectory. The Institute estimates the Pacific will need at least US\$3.5 billion over three years in additional international assistance.

Wang’s tour still has nearly a week to run. After he leaves Fiji he visits Tonga, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste, all deeply impoverished countries that maintain existing links to Beijing.



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