

US-led initiative to strengthen imperialist grip on the Pacific

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The week before the NATO summit in Madrid, a group of imperialist powers led by the US announced a new “coordination mechanism” for the Pacific while confronting and encircling China in preparation for war.

The so-called “Partners in the Blue Pacific” project involving the US, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Japan—all with long histories of ruthless colonisation in the region—announced a broad “concept” plan to address “growing challenges to the regional rules-based order.” The phrase, promoted by Washington, refers to the post-World War II “order” established by the US in which it sets the rules globally.

A tour by China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi saw multiple bilateral deals signed with almost a dozen Pacific nations. The Solomon Islands and China finalised a security agreement, prompting threats by Washington and Canberra of a possible “regime change” operation against the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

The announcement was in line with the NATO summit which, amid the US-led proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, signalled the extension of the Atlantic military alliance to the Asia-Pacific. The leaders of Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia were invited to attend, addressed the gathering and held an inaugural meeting of the so-called “Asia-Pacific Four.”

The “Blue Pacific” initiative includes the four countries plus the United Kingdom. France was also initially involved but chose not to formally join. According to the project’s official communiqué, the five-nation pact will provide “closer, more purposeful, and more ambitious cooperation.” “Too often, our efforts have been uncoordinated, creating duplication in some cases and gaps on the others,” it declared.

The statement claimed the program aims to “strengthen” the Pacific Islands Forum, facilitate regular engagement and dialogue, and coordinate future activities to avoid “lost opportunities.” It targets areas such as climate change, maritime security (i.e. China’s fishing fleet), health, education, and “better access to infrastructure.” Funding for infrastructure development has been a key element of China’s growing influence.

White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell introduced the initiative at a June 23 discussion hosted by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. The event was supported by the embassies of New Zealand and Australia and included a panel involving diplomats from Fiji, Samoa and the Marshall Islands.

Campbell said the US needed more diplomatic facilities across the region, and more contact with Pacific Island countries that at times “receive lesser attention.” He said: “I think you will see more cabinet-level, more senior officials, going to the Pacific as we go forward... recognising that nothing replaces, really, diplomatic boots on the ground.”

Claiming that Washington will work in “partnership” with the Pacific, Campbell declared: “Our mantra will be nothing in the Pacific without the Pacific... we do not take these bonds for granted.” He acknowledged there were “perceptions” that Washington had not always sufficiently taken the needs of islanders into account.

In fact, the upgraded “engagement” with the Pacific by the US and its allies has nothing to do with “listening” to Pacific governments—much less the peoples of the region—but is intent on aggressively re-asserting their geo-strategic dominance.

Visiting the Solomons in April, Campbell issued a menacing statement that Washington would “respond accordingly” to any announcement of a de facto

Chinese permanent military presence in the country. Asked directly if this meant a US military invasion of Solomon Islands, a State Department official refused to deny or clarify the query, leaving no doubt of the Biden administration's intentions.

Washington will now expedite the opening of an embassy in the Solomon Islands, announced earlier this year by Secretary of State Antony Blinken when he visited Fiji—the first trip to that country by the White House's top diplomat in four decades.

Campbell said he envisioned Fiji would also be one of the main “hubs” of US engagement. Fiji, the Pacific's second largest country after Papua New Guinea, occupies a pivotal strategic role. Following Prime Minister Bainimarama's 2006 military coup, he looked towards China and Russia to counter moves by Canberra and Wellington to isolate his regime. He also encouraged other Pacific countries to take a more “independent” line.

In a “discreet” visit to Suva last month, US Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro met with Fiji's military commander General Logavatou Kalouniwai, naval Commodore Humphery Tawake and Jone Usamate, infrastructure and lands minister. US Ambassador-designate to Australia, Caroline Kennedy also joined. Speculation is rife that the US is considering opening a navy base in Fiji.

The Biden administration has already vowed to commit more resources to the Indo-Pacific. Following a meeting with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in late May, the two leaders released a statement declaring that increased Chinese influence required “new resolve and closer co-operation” between the US, Wellington and other regional allies.

The countries joining the Blue Pacific partnership are all involved in the rapidly evolving “architecture” aimed against China. These include ASEAN, the Quad (the de facto military alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia), the IPEF trade bloc and AUKUS—the militarist pact between Australia, UK and the US. AUKUS includes Australia's acquisition of hypersonic missiles and nuclear-powered attack submarines.

As NATO vastly ramps up its military presence in Europe, US-led escalations are proceeding apace in the Pacific. Last month the Pentagon successfully conducted the first-ever Patriot missile live-firing near Palau, while major new bases are being established

across Micronesia.

This month the US Indo-Pacific command has begun holding its largest ever Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC 2022) war games, in Hawaiian waters. It sees 38 ships from 26 countries, 4 submarines, 170 aircraft and 25,000 military personnel involved in naval manoeuvres, while ground units from 9 countries will conduct amphibious landings. Forty percent of RIMPAC participants are either in NATO or have NATO ties.

Meanwhile, in a major step-up of its own military presence in the Pacific, Japan has dispatched its so-called “Maritime Self Defence Force” to 11 Indo-Pacific countries. The flotilla includes the helicopter-carrying vessel Izumo, currently being upgraded as a de facto aircraft carrier, two destroyers, a submarine and aerial units. The deployment runs until October 28.

Pacific Island governments, for their part, are increasingly concerned over the intensifying geostrategic competition and militarization buffeting the region. The Pacific's peak diplomatic body, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), will for the first time not hold an in-person meeting for dialogue partners at the Leaders' Week in Suva this month. China, the US, Japan and others will all be effectively excluded.



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