

Pacific Islands Forum meets as region becomes a focal point of US confrontation with China

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12 July 2022

Fiji is hosting the 51st Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting (PIF) from 11–14 July in the capital, Suva, chaired by Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama.

The meeting is billed as one of the most significant in recent history, amid explosive geo-strategic tensions as the United States and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, seek to reassert their dominance and push back against China's growing influence. At the same time, the climate crisis and rising sea levels remain the urgent existential issues for forum leaders.

The PIF is the Pacific's peak diplomatic body. Leaders from 14 countries, including the two local imperialist powers Australia and NZ, are gathering face-to face for the first time since 2019, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his New Zealand counterpart, Jacinda Ardern, are attending. Both have just returned from Europe where they addressed the NATO summit, giving full-throated support for the US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine and fully endorsing the militarist organisation's expansion into the Asia-Pacific to confront China.

Indicating the deepening concern over intensifying geo-strategic rivalries and militarization, the PIF will for the first time not hold an in-person meeting for its 21 "dialogue partners," who usually attend as observers. China, the US, Japan and others will all be effectively excluded.

The PIF itself is increasingly divided and unstable, with at least four leaders announcing at the last minute that they will not attend this week's summit.

Kiribati President Taneti Maamau confirmed he was withdrawing from the PIF over dissatisfaction with the organisation's leadership. Immediately, unsubstantiated allegations that China had engineered the exit appeared in the international media.

Massey University lecturer Anna Powles told TVNZ that having an "ally" outside of the forum would benefit Beijing. The pro-NZ Labour Party *Daily Blog* declared Kiribati had

"walked into the open arms of China." The *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that "Kiribati is seen as a potential partner for China in the region."

In fact, Kiribati is one of five members of the Micronesian subgroup of countries which last year threatened to leave the PIF, ostensibly over the appointment of former Cook Islands prime minister Henry Puna as secretary general, instead of a Micronesian leader. The five—Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia—have traditionally been aligned with Washington, although Kiribati switched its diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China in 2019.

An agreement to stay inside the PIF, reached last month following talks with the Micronesian leaders in Fiji, appears to be breaking down. It cannot be ruled out that the crisis was provoked by the United States or one of its allies, in order to break apart the PIF and intensify the confrontation with Beijing.

In addition to Kiribati, the Marshall Islands government announced this week that it is not taking part in the PIF summit, and confirmed that it is no longer a member of the Forum. The Marshall Islands has close ties with US imperialism and hosts a US Army base.

Radio NZ (RNZ) reports today that "Nauru's Lionel Aingimea [is] also understood to not be attending [the summit], ostensibly because of the soaring levels of Covid-19 in his country." Nauru and the Marshall Islands are among a handful of countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan and have no relations with China.

The current Cook Islands prime minister Mark Brown "has also pulled out, and said he wants to focus on the election, which is to be held in three weeks," according to RNZ. The Cook Islands is a semi-colony of New Zealand, which controls the Cooks' foreign and defence policy.

The PIF meeting follows a recent ten-nation tour of the region by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The visit included the formalisation of a security deal with the

Solomon Islands, prompting hysterical threats by Washington and Canberra of a possible “regime change” operation against the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

Australia’s new foreign minister Penny Wong was dispatched to the Pacific to shore up relations. While her visits were couched in terms of “regional engagement” and “friendship,” in reality Canberra and Wellington have been delegated by the Biden administration to aggressively counter Beijing and line up island states throughout the Pacific behind the anti-China offensive.

Washington then announced the creation of a “Partners in the Blue Pacific” initiative involving the US, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Japan—all historic colonisers in the region—to address “growing challenges to the regional rules-based order,” i.e. the “order” established by the US by which it sets the rules globally.

The program declares it will “strengthen” the PIF while upgrading US diplomatic facilities, and very likely military bases, across the region. It has promised more contact with Pacific countries that at times “receive lesser attention,” and claims Washington will work in “partnership” with them.

However, as a commentary by the Development Policy Centre on July 5 noted, in the manner of its establishment the project “runs roughshod” over Pacific leaders while seeking to “impose a new hierarchy of preferred ‘partners’ from outside.” The project appropriates for its own purposes the PIF’s ‘Blue Pacific’ narrative while “pretending to share Pacific Islands agendas.”

Canberra and Wellington have been active in the lead-up to the PIF, meeting with the principal leaders and heavily promoting “regionalism” and the “Pacific family” against the “outsider” China. In fact the construct of a regional “family” is a pure invention. Behind the hypocritical phrasemongering lies over a century of imperialist domination over the impoverished island countries, including interfering in their domestic affairs.

Following a meeting with New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in Wellington last month, Samoan Prime Minister Fiame Naomi Mata’afa said the PIF meeting would provide the opportunity for leaders “to consider security issues” in a “wider context” and “test the usefulness” of current arrangements. Ardern added that while every PIF member has the “sovereign right” to make their own decisions, “as a forum we’ll come together, we’ll discuss these issues” and “build a consensus.”

One of the “arrangements” referred to by Mata’afa is the Biketawa Declaration, signed in 2000 under intense pressure from Australia and New Zealand. The declaration states that “in time of crisis,” including when countries face “threats to their security, broadly defined,” the PIF must “urgently”

take action together as a “family”—effectively overriding the principle of non-interference in the affairs of member nations. It provides a mechanism to rubber-stamp diplomatic, economic and military intervention anywhere in the region, at the behest of the major powers.

The Solomon Islands government is standing its ground over the agreements reached with China, setting the stage for a tense and divided summit of the PIF. Speaking to the *Guardian* last month, Collin Beck, the country’s permanent secretary of foreign affairs, said the China deal was needed to maintain internal security and help fight climate change.

Beck hit out at the international criticism that the deal had provoked. “We have various alliances that exist within the Pacific, which talk about the Pacific but the Pacific is not in the room,” he said, listing the Quad (a quasi-military alliance of the US, Australia, India and Japan) and the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US.

In a further sign of deteriorating relations, on July 11, the *Australian* newspaper said that five Australian “aid workers,” who had been employed to work as advisers on development projects in the Solomons, had been “blocked” from entering the country.

Meanwhile, many present and former Pacific leaders are insisting that the climate crisis—not China—is the biggest threat to the region. Pacific countries are already suffering from king tides, catastrophic cyclones, sustained droughts and the loss of low-lying islands to sea level rise.

In a statement in April, the Pacific Elders Voice group, which includes former leaders of the Marshall Islands, Palau, Kiribati and Tuvalu, as well Meg Taylor, the former PIF secretary general said that “the primary security threat to the Pacific is climate change”, adding that it was time that “the international community focus on these insecurities.”

Last week former Tuvalu prime minister and Pacific Elders Voice spokesman Enele Sopoaga sharply criticised the Australian Labor government’s target for greenhouse gas emissions to be cut by 43 percent, saying it was “far from being adequate.” “They need to do much more, they need to do not just these minimal targets, but move towards meeting more like 75 percent targets to catch up with the rest of the world,” Sopoaga warned, urging the PIF to discuss the issue.



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