

US vice president intervenes at Pacific Islands Forum against China

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On July 13, United States Vice President Kamala Harris gave a virtual speech to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit, a meeting of 16 regional government leaders taking place in Fiji. She announced a major escalation of US involvement in the Pacific, aimed at ramping up the strategic, economic and military encirclement of China.

Harris was invited by Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama to speak at the last minute, despite a previous announcement by the PIF that the US, China and several other “observer” countries would be excluded from the talks. In a provocative move intended to underscore China’s exclusion, two officials from Beijing’s embassy in Fiji, who were sitting with the media during the session at which Harris spoke, were escorted out of the conference room by police.

Harris pledged to triple US funding for “economic development and ocean resilience” in the Pacific, with \$600 million to be provided over the next 10 years. “These funds will help strengthen climate resilience; invest in marine planning and conservation; and combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; and enhance maritime security,” she said. This provides a framework for the further expansion of the US Coast Guard and navy throughout the vast region.

In a throw-away line, Harris declared that the US will “continue to stand with [Pacific countries] to address the COVID-19 pandemic.” In fact, because of the homicidal “let it rip” policies adopted by the US, Australia and New Zealand, and almost everywhere else except China, COVID is now spreading rapidly across the Pacific. Fiji is one of the worst-hit countries, with 869 recorded deaths in a population of 900,000.

Nauru President Lionel Aingimea pulled out of the PIF summit at the last minute, saying he had to focus on addressing the pandemic. The country of fewer than 11,000 people recorded its first COVID death this month.

Harris also announced that two new US embassies will

be established, in Tonga and Kiribati, and a new USAID mission in Fiji, as well as the return of Peace Corps volunteers to the region.

The vice president left no doubt that China is the target of these moves. She declared that the US aimed to “strengthen the international rules-based order—to defend it, to promote it, and to build on it... At a time when we see bad actors seeking to undermine the rules-based order, we must stand united.”

The “rules-based order” refers to the US-dominated system of rules and institutions established following World War II. The US has repeatedly accused China of undermining the “rules-based order” through its economic and diplomatic expansion, including in the Pacific.

Kiribati suddenly announced it was pulling out of the PIF just days before the summit, saying it was dissatisfied with the leadership of the Forum. Immediately, international media outlets blamed China for the move, something denied by Kiribati’s government and Beijing.

The Marshall Islands, which is a key US ally and hosts a US Army base, has also pulled out of the PIF; like Kiribati, it had previously demanded a new leader for the Forum from one of the Micronesian countries.

This did not stop Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent pro-US academic in New Zealand, from telling CNN that “Kiribati appears to have been given instructions not to attend” and that its move was intended to disrupt “Pacific unity, just when it was about to come up with a collective response on China’s attempt to set up a security treaty in the region.”

The PIF summit has also been preceded by hysterical denunciations, particularly in the Australian and NZ media, of the Solomon Islands’ recent security agreement with China. In April, the US threatened to invade the country if steps were taken to establish a Chinese military presence there.

Harris' intervention at the Fiji summit signals that the Biden administration is no longer satisfied with allowing its junior imperialist allies, Australia and New Zealand, to police the region and keep the smaller Pacific states in line.

The fact that Fiji invited Harris to speak is significant. The country's leader, Bainimarama, is a former military strongman who came to power in a coup in 2006, and whose regime rests directly on the military. Fiji is becoming an important hub for US military engagement in the region. Last month, US Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro met with Fiji's military commander General Logavatou Kalouniwai and other officials. This followed a visit earlier in the year by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The entire Indo-Pacific has been transformed into a tinderbox by Washington's preparations for war against China, as the US and NATO escalate the war with Russia over Ukraine. The US ruling elite is seeking to overcome its historic economic decline by subordinating Russia and China to its domination, even if this means risking nuclear war.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, speaking to the media in Fiji today, said she told Solomon Islands leader Manasseh Sogavare that "it would be New Zealand's deep concern to see anything that contributed to the militarisation of our region." She said all PIF leaders agreed on this point, including Sogavare.

Such statements are profoundly hypocritical. The PIF summit coincides with the major US-led Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercise in Hawaii, held between June 29 and August 4. The exercise involves 26 countries including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, and several NATO powers including Germany, France and the UK.

Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Pacific Fleet, told reporters this week that "the combat power that China is developing over the last few decades" was "concerning" and that RIMPAC was intended to "demonstrate the solidarity of all its participants to the international rules-based order." According to *Defense News*, Paparo said RIMPAC was designed to bolster proficiency in areas that would be applicable in a war with China over Taiwan, including amphibious operations and long-range strikes.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday the US Navy destroyer USS Benfold carried out another provocative "freedom of navigation" exercise close to China-claimed islands in the South China Sea. According to Reuters, Tian Junli, a

Chinese military spokesperson, said troops were placed on high alert as the Benfold "illegally broke into China's Paracel territorial waters without the approval of the Chinese government."

Australia is playing an integral role in the militarisation of the Pacific, as Washington's main ally. At the PIF summit today, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is expected to recommit to the Labor Party's election pledge to establish a new "Australia Pacific Defence School." The academy is intended to coordinate and expand existing Australian-led training initiatives in the region, involving the armed forces of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu.

In a speech on Monday at the Washington CSIS think tank, Australian defence minister Richard Marles made clear that Australia is preparing for war against China. He denounced China's "military build-up," in order to justify Australia spending hundreds of billions of dollars to acquire nuclear-powered submarines and other high-tech weapons.

At the PIF summit, Harris, Ardern and Albanese all paid lip service to the need to address climate change, which poses an existential threat to the impoverished, low-lying island nations in the Pacific. Albanese declared that there was "no challenge more important than climate change." Ardern announced some funding for mitigation programs, including the preservation of Pacific seed crops impacted by climate change.

However, none of the imperialist powers have taken the necessary urgent steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which continue to soar. Australia is responsible for about 84 percent of the Pacific's emissions, according to the Climate Council.

Nor did any of the leaders explain how their intensifying preparations for world war, which would involve nuclear-armed adversaries, would benefit the environment.

The PIF summit underscores the imminent danger of such a war, and the urgent need for the international working class to intervene with its own anti-war program, based on the fight to abolish capitalism, which is the source of war.



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