

US holds anti-China summit with Pacific Island leaders

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The summit convened by the Biden administration with Pacific Island leaders in Washington on September 28-29 pushed through a “partnership” agreement designed to undermine Beijing’s growing influence in the region.

The two-day summit, held at the US State Department, was the first of its kind. For much of the post-World War II period the US regarded the Pacific as America’s “lake,” with colonial oversight largely outsourced to its local allies, Australia and New Zealand. As the entire Pacific emerges as a geo-strategic tinderbox that has rapidly changed.

The summit, overseen by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, involved 14 Pacific leaders with observers from Australia and New Zealand. The only absentee was Kiribati, which had previously bypassed a Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting in Fiji in July.

The final document is cynically couched as a vision of the Pacific as a place of “peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity, where individuals can reach their potential, the environment can thrive, and democracy will be able to flourish.”

In fact, the summit was designed to advance Washington’s campaign to reassert its imperialist hegemony. A tour by China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi in May 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 if a Chinese military base was established in the country.

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

At the Washington summit the Pacific leaders unanimously endorsed an 11-point “vision” statement committing to joint endeavors on “priority areas” including security, the climate crisis, natural disasters and economic development.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare had objected to an initial draft which specified that security arrangements with “outside powers” would require region-wide “consultation,” a key demand raised by Australia and New Zealand following the Solomons’ deal with China. After this was removed, Sogavare signed the final document.

Addressing the final day of the meeting, Biden bluntly declared: “The security of America, quite frankly, and the world depends on your security and the security of the Pacific islands.”

A paper presented by the US State Department explicitly targeted China, declaring “pressure and economic coercion by the People’s Republic of China,” risked undermining “the peace, prosperity and security of the region, and by extension, of the United States.”

The Declaration begins by proclaiming a commitment by the US to bolster “Pacific regionalism”—a term used to exclude China—and to promote “greater connectivity” between key organisations such as the PIF and “other partners who share Pacific objectives and values.”

In reality, this means aligning the PIF and island nations directly with the rapidly developing militarist “architecture” uniting the imperialist powers against China. These include the Quad, a security arrangement between the US, Australia, India and Japan, and AUKUS which includes Australia, UK and US. Plans are afoot to add other powers to some of these arrangements, including Canada and even Germany.

The declaration notably condemns “all wars of aggression, including Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine.” Since most Pacific nations do not formally

recognise Taiwan, it remains unmentioned. However, the document affirms that “international law” and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea provides for “freedom of navigation and overflight,” thereby implicitly justifying US military provocations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

Several initiatives will vastly expand the reach and involvement of US military and state agencies. The US Coast Guard, already present throughout the Pacific, well beyond US territorial waters, will get an extra \$US3 million for “training and capacity building” in maritime security. The FBI will carry out “law enforcement training” in Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The US, already engaged in bilateral security negotiations with Fiji and PNG, intends to pursue such “opportunities” across the board.

Underpinning its presence, the US will appoint a permanent envoy to the PIF, increase the role of the federal aid agency USAID, return the Peace Corps to the region, and finish re-negotiating compacts of “free association”—i.e. neo-colonial relationships—with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia. The White House had previously announced new embassies in Tonga, Kiribati and Solomon Islands.

In a surprise move, the US will recognise New Zealand’s “realm” countries of the Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign states “following appropriate consultations.” Both are self-governing but New Zealand provides ongoing colonial oversight, including over foreign affairs, defence and security policy. Both territories have independent diplomatic relations with China, and US formal recognition of their “sovereignty” portends more direct involvement.

Much has been made in the establishment media of a US promise of an \$810 million aid package for a series of initiatives to meet “Pacific priorities.” While the Declaration acknowledges the climate crisis as “the highest priority of our partnership,” there is a paltry \$130 million to improve climate change “resilience” along with a commitment to finding another \$400 million from “private investors.” The amount is entirely inadequate to meet the urgent existential needs of Pacific islands already reeling from rising sea levels.

Acknowledgement is given that the COVID-19 pandemic has “wreaked havoc on Pacific economies.” While it is noted that economic recovery will be “a top priority requiring finance,” there is no dedicated funding and only vague, non-committal references to “strengthening” health systems which are, in fact, near

collapse. There is, however, an urgent warning about “vulnerability to debt,” a reference to repeated false charges of China’s purported “debt trap diplomacy” in the region.

There is nothing in the package that will make a material difference to the lives of impoverished Pacific Islanders. A significant \$US600 million will, however, support the South Pacific Tuna Treaty over the next decade to provide ongoing access for American trawlers into the waters of Pacific nations. The Declaration promises to combat “illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing,” a veiled threat against the fishing fleets of China and other Asian nations.

The document also promises to “strengthen democratic institutions across the Pacific, including through support for accountability, transparency, anti-corruption, civil society, human rights, and an independent and free media environment.”

This is especially hypocritical. The US, Australia and New Zealand have long histories of interference in the affairs of Pacific nations, including Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Washington’s agenda of putting “boots on the ground” across the region will be used to undermine and even remove any Pacific government that falls out of line.

As for “democracy,” the most prominent Pacific figure pushing the “partnership” is Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, who seized power in a military coup in 2006 and has kept office ever since on the basis of anti-democratic elections.

Bainimarama postured as the self-appointed “leader” of the Pacific delegation. Afterwards he tweeted: “I say goodbye to President Biden and our new friends on Capitol Hill and in the US private sector. I return to Suva with a new reassurance that America’s might and resources are with our people across the Pacific in the greatest battles we face.”

Just a week prior, Fiji had hosted an unprecedented five-nation military exercise, including troops from Fiji, the US, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, explicitly preparing for war on Pacific island soil against China.



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