

Biden invited to visit Pacific in escalating diplomatic offensive against China

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Five Micronesian leaders have announced that US President Joe Biden will likely attend the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Summit in the Cook Islands later this year. The forum's membership comprises 18 countries and territories and is the Pacific's major leadership body.

Washington is ramping up its high-level diplomatic offensive against China throughout the Indo-Pacific. Biden is expected to travel to Australia to attend a summit of the Quad group, consisting of the United States, India, Australia and Japan in May, after the G7 meeting in Japan.

While the White House has yet to confirm a visit into the Pacific, the leaders of the Micronesian nations allied with the US—Kiribati, Palau, Nauru, Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)—issued a communiqué on February 13 saying they had discussed the “value of a visit by US President Joseph R. Biden Jr to the Pacific sometime in the near future.”

FSM President David Panuelo said the Micronesian nations had invited Biden to come “and engage the Pacific leaders,” adding, “there is a high likelihood that such a meeting will take place in the upcoming months.” The announcement came ahead of a PIF special leaders’ retreat scheduled to take place in Fiji next week.

The Micronesian group briefly split from the PIF in 2021, ostensibly in protest over the selection of the Cook Islands’ Henry Puna as the new secretary-general. However, geo-strategic rivalries fuelled by the US were involved.

Palau, FSM, and the Marshall Islands are closely allied to Washington in neo-colonial compacts of “free association.” Palau, Nauru, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu are the only Pacific states maintaining relationships with Taiwan after the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic ties to Beijing in 2019.

As the Kiribati government drew closer to China, opposition figures in the country accused Chinese

diplomats of encouraging President Taneti Maamau to split from the PIF, a claim denied by the Chinese foreign ministry. Kiribati finally agreed to re-join the Forum last month after a visit by recently elected Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

Micronesia is essential to the US militarisation of the North Pacific. The Marshall Islands hosts a missile test range critical to US space and missile-defence capabilities. Palau has been designated by the Pentagon as the site of a new military base and a \$197 million tactical radar system while a major US Air Force expansion at Tinian in the Northern Mariana Islands is under way.

The increasingly assertive Micronesian bloc has declared it will attend the upcoming PIF leaders’ Fiji retreat, “armed with demands” to “put an end to issues impacting regional unity.” Panuelo said the Forum is “now fully together as a family and will never be fractured ever again.”

Micronesia’s invitation to Biden is a significant escalation of Washington’s involvement in the region. An in-person visit would be the first by a sitting US president and a major step-up in direct US presence in the South West Pacific. Following interventions at online meetings last year by Biden and Vice President Harris, the PIF has assumed a key role in the US confrontation with China across the region.

Throughout the post-World War II period the US has regarded the Pacific as America’s “lake,” with colonial oversight largely outsourced to its local imperialist allies, Australia and New Zealand. As US imperialism has ramped up its preparations for war with China over the past decade, it has increasingly intervened directly into the affairs of the Pacific island states.

Last September Biden convened a summit with Pacific leaders in Washington and pushed through a “partnership” agreement designed to undermine Beijing’s influence. Held at the US State Department, it was the

first meeting of its kind. Overseen by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, it involved 14 Pacific leaders with observers from Australia and New Zealand. The only absentee was Kiribati, which had bypassed a PIF meeting in Fiji in July.

Among the measures announced, the US declared it would recognise New Zealand's "realm" countries of the Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign states. Both are self-governing but New Zealand provides 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, including Biden's foreshadowed visit.

Considerable effort has gone into solidifying the Forum. A regional deal, the Suva Agreement, has been hammered out to pave the way for Kiribati to formally re-join. The agreement hands Micronesia the right to pick the next PIF secretary-general, with the Micronesian leaders indicating their candidate will come from Nauru. Kiribati will be given the right to host a new sub-regional PIF office while the Marshall Islands will put up the candidate for a Pacific Ocean Commissioner's position.

Canberra was behind Rabuka's visit to Kiribati's Maamau, providing an Australian Air Force aircraft for the trip. His involvement was a signal that Fiji will retain the pivotal role played by ex-Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama as chair of the PIF. Rabuka recently cancelled a police training and exchange agreement with China before tweeting: "Australia and NZ remain key strategic partners. We will continue to strengthen our relationship with the @USEmbassySuva, while continuing cooperation with China."

Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong is travelling back to the Pacific next week and is expected to visit Kiribati to strengthen Australia's bilateral ties. Wong has made multiple trips to the Pacific in the last year, enforcing Canberra's imperialist interests following the Solomon Islands' security agreement with China which prompted threats of a US-led regime change operation in the event of China establishing a military base.

The Pacific, a bloody theatre of conflict in World War II, is increasingly an arena of imperialist intrigue and positioning. Last week, French Polynesia President Edouard Fritch endorsed France's strategy of expanding its presence. With the rise in power of the PIF, he said, it was opportune for France to work with French Polynesia, which he declared is a Forum member that is "familiar with the Pacific Way."

In 2018 French President Macron introduced a policy of building an "axis" from Paris to Tahiti to counter China's influence. Macron's strategy rested on France's status as a Pacific power because of its control of New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia, as well as French colonial dependencies in the Indian Ocean.

A recent French Senate committee report, however, expressed alarm that France's "ambitions to be a balancing power are not in line with our real weight, which ultimately raises questions about the very credibility of our strategy." The report declared that the capacity of the French military was particularly weak "due to the chronic lack of equipment" for the Armed Forces of both New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

The Australian Labor Party government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is meanwhile seeking to rebuild relations with France following a breakdown in relations after the previous Morrison government scrapped a \$A90 billion French submarine deal. Australia is to be provided with nuclear attack submarines instead under the AUKUS pact with the US and Britain.

In January, an Australia-France meeting of defence and foreign ministers in Paris lauded France as a "Pacific nation." Australia has pledged to extend military ties with France in the Pacific, with both countries agreeing "to deepen operational and logistical cooperation to support their commitment to shared interests in the Indo-Pacific."

The agreement marked a further stepping up of both governments' involvement in the US-NATO war against in Ukraine, highlighting that the war against Russia is regarded by the US and its imperialist allies as a prelude to one against China. By repairing relations with France, Albanese is assisting the Biden administration to strengthen its network of military alliances encircling China, while bolstering the interests of Australian and French capitalism in the region.



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