

Anti-China AUKUS pact fuels tensions in the Pacific

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A group of former leaders of Pacific island nations has condemned the AUKUS security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States which, along with other US-led “architecture” including the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and US), has been formed to prepare for war against China.

Washington views China as the major obstacle to its global imperialist hegemony and intends to roll back China’s growing influence using military force. Warmongering by the US and its allies is destabilising the Pacific region, where small and impoverished island nations rely heavily on trade and economic aid from China. Bloody battles were fought across the Pacific during World War II and now the region is being dragged into an approaching Third World War.

In a damning criticism of AUKUS issued on April 11, the Pacific Elders’ Voice, which includes ex-leaders of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau, said Canberra was deliberately exploiting a loophole in the anti-nuclear agreement, the Rarotonga Treaty. Signed in 1985, the treaty formalises a nuclear weapons-free zone in the South Pacific but permits the transit of nuclear-powered craft.

The group declared that AUKUS signals a greater militarisation by joining Australia to the networks of US military bases in the northern Pacific. It is “triggering an arms race, by bringing war much closer to home,” they stated.

Under the deal, Canberra will pay up to \$368 billion over the next three decades to establish a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines. The former Pacific leaders said that the “staggering” amount of money committed to AUKUS “flies in the face of Pacific islands countries which have been crying out for climate change support.”

Addressing the current crop of Pacific politicians, the group warned: “We are urging the Pacific Island Leaders to take a decisive and ethical stand on this important

matter and not to be subsumed by the AUKUS nations. This does not only put our region at greater risk of a nuclear war but the real environmental impacts arising out of any incidents will be huge.”

Former Kiribati president Anote Tong told Radio NZ it was disappointing that Australia will commit such vast sums to military expansionism. For the Pacific, the “threat that we see challenging our future existence... is climate change,” he said. “It is not China or what is happening on the other side of the world.”

Tong added that attempts by the Australian government to reassure regional leaders that AUKUS would not breach the Rarotonga agreement demonstrated a “lack of consultation” on Canberra’s part. Former Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) secretary general Meg Taylor added her voice, saying there was a “serious lack of consultation” within the region as it is caught between the superpowers.

The Pacific Elders’ Voice also raised concerns about New Zealand’s ambitions to join the trilateral security deal, saying the PIF should discourage it from doing so. The New Zealand Labour government is considering joining AUKUS as a non-nuclear partner, which will include sharing advanced military technologies such as artificial intelligence.

Australia and New Zealand are ramping up military co-operation amid US-led escalations. Last week, the two nations’ army chiefs signed a “Plan ANZAC” agreement, described as a “broader defence relationship” enhancing combat “interoperability,” joint operations and regenerating “land combat capability.” The pair are heading to Fiji and Vanuatu to discuss with their counterparts how to “confront security challenges in the region.”

The AUKUS deal has fuelled tensions and divisions among current Pacific leaders. A few have publicly supported Australia’s plans, including Fiji’s recently elected Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and Palau’s pro-

US President Surangel Whipps Jr.

PIF chairman and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown said he had been reassured by US officials that AUKUS will “honour” the Treaty of Rarotonga after he initially said it would contravene it. Brown earlier told the *Cook Islands News* the treaty, which includes Australia and New Zealand, was framed to de-escalate “Cold War tensions between the major superpowers. This AUKUS arrangement seems to be going against it.”

The Cook Islands and China are preparing to sign a bilateral strategic partnership this year, with key areas of cooperation to include support for economic recovery following the crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, inter-island transport and air connectivity and future “economic and political cooperation.”

The Solomon Islands government is also pushing for the Melanesian Spearhead Group of Vanuatu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia’s pro-independence FLNKS movement, to create a sub-regional “security” framework which would also involve Beijing.

Any such moves run directly counter to the plans of the US administration for the region. Last September, US President Joe Biden convened a summit with 14 Pacific leaders at the State Department to push through a “partnership” agreement designed to undermine Beijing and advance Washington’s campaign to reassert its imperialist hegemony. Biden bluntly told the gathering: “The security of America, quite frankly, and the world depends on your security and the security of the Pacific islands.”

With the PIF summit due to be held in the Cook Islands in July and reports that Biden might attend, a diplomatic full-court press is under way to cajole and bully any dissent over AUKUS. Visits to the region were conducted last week by Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong, New Zealand’s Deputy Prime Minister Carmel Sepuloni and Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, as well as UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly.

Wong was visiting the remaining two of 17 Pacific nations she had not already been to in her first year in office: New Caledonia and Vanuatu. Respective leaders of both have been vocal opponents of AUKUS.

New Caledonia’s Kanak President Louis Mapou said AUKUS raised “many questions” among Melanesian nations who advance a “friends to all, enemies to none” foreign policy. Tuvalu’s Foreign Minister Simon Kofe bluntly declared: “The 2011 Fukushima disaster highlighted the danger of nuclear power to human health and the environment. As we discuss nuclear powered

submarines in the Pacific we must also address concerns about increased militarisation of the region.”

Speaking to New Caledonia’s Congress on Thursday, Wong urged the Pacific countries to “stay united” in the face of great power competition, emphasising “we believe a united Pacific Islands Forum is central to protecting our shared interests.”

At the Australian National Press Club days before her departure Wong had been more direct. She portrayed her visits to the Pacific “family” as liberating missions to free the region from alleged Chinese domineering and spoke aggressively of “shaping” the region in the interests of Australian imperialism.

The focus of Sepuloni’s visit was the Solomon Islands, which last year caused alarm in Washington, Canberra and Wellington by signing a strategic agreement with Beijing. The pact saw threats by Washington to stage an armed intervention in the event that a Chinese military base was opened in the strategically significant country.

Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare continues to come under strong pressure. Cleverly’s own two-day visit there was the first ever by a UK foreign secretary and came as NATO powers are asserting their interests in the region on the back of the escalating war in Ukraine. Cleverly had earlier signed a new defence agreement with Papua New Guinea, whose military forces the UK is already training.

The Solomon Islands and Kiribati have meanwhile been identified in a new “Defund China’s Allies Act” put before the US Congress by a group of far-right Republican lawmakers this month. The measure aims to prohibit foreign assistance, including humanitarian aid, to countries not recognising “sovereignty” of Taiwan or who offer political support to the People’s Republic of China.



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