

# US President Biden to make bullying visit to Papua New Guinea

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30 April 2023

In a significant ratcheting up of the pressure on all the Pacific island countries to line up behind United States imperialism's intensifying confrontation with China, US President Joe Biden will make the first-ever visit by a US president to Papua New Guinea (PNG) this month.

Biden will meet with a gathering of more than a dozen Pacific island leaders during a stop in Port Moresby, the capital of PNG. This strategically critical and resource-rich archipelago, just north of Australia, became a key battleground, along with the rest of the southwest Pacific, during both world wars.

Biden will make the unprecedented visit on May 20, in between a G-7 summit in Japan, which will focus on the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine, and a meeting in Sydney of the leaders of the anti-China Quad—the US, India, Japan and Australia—which will be preoccupied with escalating the military and economic offensive against China.

The US president will take advantage of an India-Pacific islands forum in PNG organised by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has turned India into a frontline base for conflict with China. Modi's event, to be held a day after Biden's visit, is a display of the Indian ruling class's assertion of greater power, as a US partner, throughout the Indo-Pacific region.

The US government's Voice of America underscored the menacing nature of Biden's meeting with the Pacific islands leaders. "The meeting would be a significant move in US efforts to push back against Chinese inroads in the region, and follows Biden hosting Pacific island leaders at the White House in September," it reported.

An editorial in today's *Australian* sent a similar message. "China would be unwise to ignore the significance" of the Biden and Modi trips, it declared. "The meetings and the Quad summit serve notice that the days when Beijing believed it would have things its own way across the region are over."

That warning turns reality on its head. Throughout the post-World War II period, having defeated Japanese imperialism in bloody battles across the region, US governments have treated the Pacific as America's "lake." For the most part, the US outsourced oversight of the southwest Pacific to its local imperialist allies, Australia and New Zealand, which mostly seized colonial control over the island territories, including German New Guinea, during World War I.

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 14 Pacific leaders at the State Department to push through a "partnership" agreement designed to undermine Beijing and advance Washington's assertion of its 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."

Biden's visit is backed, and reportedly will be joined by, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who made his own trip to PNG in January to prevail upon its government to enter a security treaty with Australia in order to block out China. The US is pushing for the finalisation of a similar "Defence Cooperation Agreement" with PNG Prime Minister James Marape.

There is unease and opposition across the Pacific islands toward the AUKUS military pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the US. Along with the Quad, AUKUS has been formed unmistakably to prepare for what would be a catastrophic nuclear war against China, with devastating consequences for the people of the entire region.

A group of former Pacific islands leaders last month declared that AUKUS, featuring the supply of nuclear-powered submarines, hypersonic missiles and other high-

tech weaponry to Australia, signalled a greater militarisation by joining Australia to the networks of US military bases in the northern Pacific. It was “triggering an arms race, by bringing war much closer to home,” the Pacific Elders’ Voice stated.

The AUKUS treaty 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. Others, notably the leaders of Vanuatu and New Caledonia, a French colony, have criticised AUKUS.

Last year, the Solomon Islands government caused alarm in Washington, Canberra and Wellington by signing a vague strategic agreement with Beijing. Washington threatened to conduct an armed intervention to block any de facto Chinese permanent military presence. A US delegation, led by White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell, met Solomon Islands’ Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. The US later issued an intimidating warning that it would “respond accordingly” to any such move.

To reinforce its threats, the US ramped up its diplomatic presence in the islands. It opened a new embassy in Solomon Islands and diplomatic missions in Vanuatu, Kiribati and Tonga, and appointed an envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum, a regional leaders’ assembly. The Biden administration also moved to expand the operations of the US Peace Corps and the US Agency for International Development, both vehicles for US intervention globally.

Together with the Labor government in Australia, the US further opposed and killed off a wider, equally vague, Chinese security and trade pact with 10 island nations. Governments across the Indo-Pacific are being bullied into reducing or cutting ties with Beijing, even though they depend substantially on China, the world’s second largest economy, for trade, aid and investment.

PNG Foreign Minister Justin Tkatchenko told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation last month that the US and PNG were finalising a Defence Cooperation Agreement after talks between officials in Hawaii and PNG earlier this year. He described the pact, covering training and the building up of bases, as “very important.”

Tkatchenko, however, said it was a “delicate balancing act” for PNG as it tried to open new economic opportunities with China, while assuaging the strategic concerns of traditional “partners” such as Australia. He said PNG would continue to work with China economically, but “stick to our partners in security.”

Under similar pressure, PNG signed a Status of Forces Agreement with the UK last month and one with France late last year.

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited PNG for several days in November 2018, when Port Moresby hosted an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit. China funded much of the infrastructure for the summit, including new roads and a conference centre.

Such Chinese influence in their self-proclaimed “backyard” is intolerable as far as the US and its closest allies, such as Australia and New Zealand, are concerned. Biden’s visit represents a sharp tightening of a full-court press to prevent any deviation from Washington’s offensive.

Visits to the region were conducted last month by Australian 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 visited the remaining two of 17 Pacific nations she had not already travelled to in her first year in office, underscoring the Albanese government’s role as an attack dog for US and Australian imperialism. Wong portrayed her visits to the Pacific “family” as liberating missions to free the region from alleged Chinese domineering. She spoke aggressively of “shaping” the region.

Last week, the Albanese government went further. It released a Defence Strategic Review that outlined the biggest military build-up in Australia since the end of World War II and the adoption of a new doctrine of “impactful projection” across the Indo-Pacific as part of the US military encirclement of China.

Like the rest of the world, even the seemingly remote islands of the southwest Pacific are again being thrust into the firing line of imperialist war, as they were during both world wars in the 20th century.



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