

Albanese, Blinken visit New Zealand to boost anti-China campaign in Pacific

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Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken this week made separate but coinciding visits to New Zealand for talks with Prime Minister Chris Hipkins and other government officials.

The ostensible reason for the joint diplomacy was the FIFA Women's World Cup, which New Zealand and Australia are jointly hosting. But the visits came amid a surge in diplomatic activity as the US and its allies intensify pressure on states across the Pacific to step up in the escalating confrontation with China.

New Zealand is under pressure because it is regarded in Washington and Canberra as not sufficiently reliable in the stand-off with Beijing due to the Labour-led government's efforts to maintain critically important trading relations with China. New Zealand, a partner in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which includes Britain, Australia and Canada, has sought to distance itself from the more belligerent anti-China rhetoric.

Albanese's visit to Wellington, for an annual bilateral leaders' meeting, followed Hipkins' trips across the Tasman in February and April. Then, Hipkins had to fend off accusations from Australian media that his predecessor Jacinda Ardern was reluctant to stand up against China's "bad behaviour" and "coercion" in the Pacific.

The official meeting statement highlighted an agreement by the leaders to investigate simplifying trans-Tasman travel processes. However, issues around defence and "security" were central to the agenda. The statement declared that an update of a joint Closer Defence Relations document would "ensure it is fit for purpose, drives interoperability and enables us to respond as allies in a deteriorating strategic environment."

Albanese said there were currently no plans for New Zealand to join the AUKUS military pact between the United Kingdom, Australia and the US. "We already have an important relationship in defence," he emphasised, and New Zealand's absence from AUKUS "doesn't mean that there won't be cooperation across a range of areas as well including access to technology, including complementarity,

including interoperability."

The statement also promised "deep cooperation in the Pacific," including a vague and meaningless commitment to address climate change. Such references to the Pacific invariably mean a strengthening of the neo-colonial position of the two countries across the region.

Since the New Zealand Labour government's "Pacific Reset" in 2018, its overtures to Pacific Island nations have recalibrated from a "humanitarian" posture towards direct military engagement. New Zealand has recently signed new security pacts with Japan and Fiji and, among other deployments, a group of NZ Defence Force personnel has been despatched to the Solomon Islands.

While Albanese and Blinken did not formally meet in Wellington, they are gathering in Australia this weekend for a bilateral Australia-US Ministerial Consultation (AUSMIN) event, which will further escalate the anti-China positioning.

Blinken's arrival in New Zealand followed a stopover in Tonga where he dedicated a new US embassy. The embassy is one of three, including in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, that Washington has opened in response to the Solomon Islands signing a security pact with China in April 2002. A fourth is now being fast-tracked in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu.

In Tonga, Blinken told the media that the US was "a Pacific nation" and had an "ambition to establish stronger partnerships" with other Pacific nations. He denounced China's "increasingly problematic behaviour," which he falsely claimed included "assertion of maritime claims," the "militarisation" of the South China Sea and "predatory financial activities," a reference to Tonga's indebted position.

Blinken's trip to New Zealand, his first, added to a stream of US official visits over the past year, including by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Kritenbrink. The aim is to further integrate New Zealand into US-led military arrangements.

Following a meeting with NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia

Mahuta, Blinken declared the “door is open” for New Zealand and “other partners” to engage with the AUKUS pact. “We’ve long worked together on the most important national security issues,” he emphasised. Apparently contradicting Albanese’s earlier position, the “second pillar” of the agreement—which involves the sharing of non-nuclear technology—was something NZ could join, Blinken said.

Mahuta afterwards confirmed that New Zealand was “not contemplating joining AUKUS.” The posturing, central to NZ’s claims to an “independent” foreign policy, is intended to appeal to widespread anti-war sentiment in the population. She did however clarify that “at an officials level,” the government is “exploring” what participating in AUKUS’ second pillar would “look like.”

Stressing New Zealand’s alignment with Washington, Mahuta said the US is “among our closest friends and... our commitment to the international rules-based system has been designed to protect norms that work in the interests of all states irrespective of size.” The “rules” are those set by Washington to ensure its hegemony. She said the pair underlined their commitments to “democracy and human rights”—a veiled and thoroughly hypocritical reference to the Chinese government’s human rights violations—and “acknowledged the US’ ongoing commitment to the resilience of its Pacific partners.”

Blinken did not publicly criticise New Zealand’s relations with Beijing. For now, the Biden administration is seeking to put off a military conflict with China while it escalates the NATO war with Russia over Ukraine.

The secretary of state declared there was an “extraordinary convergence” between the US and NZ on how to manage the “incredibly complex and consequential relationship” with China. Blinken referred to his own “very open, very candid” conversations while in Beijing in June, and praised Hipkins for his “similar constructive engagements.”

In June Hipkins led a business delegation to China and met with Premier Xi Jinping. Xi told a media conference that China viewed New Zealand as “a friend and a partner” and complimented Hipkins for making clear “that you value Chinese-New Zealand relations and will continue to strengthen cooperation with China.”

In a speech to the China Business Summit in Auckland on his return, however, Hipkins said the Pacific region is becoming more contested and less secure as China becomes “more assertive.” China’s rise and how it seeks to exert that influence is a “major driver of the increasing strategic competition,” particularly in the Indo-Pacific, he warned. It poses challenges for small countries like New Zealand “that are reliant on the stability and predictability of international rules for our prosperity and security,” he said.

In fact, in a hardening of New Zealand’s strategic positioning, the country is formally in partnership with NATO in the Indo-Pacific cohort known as AP4 that includes Australia, Japan and South Korea. NATO’s expansion into the Indo-Pacific region in the name of Euro-Atlantic “security” is an extension of preparations for war against China. China’s Ambassador to NZ, Wang Xiaolong, has warned Wellington not to “open the door to the devil” by aligning with a NATO bloc in the region.

Underscoring deepening strategic tensions, while Blinken and Albanese were in Wellington, French President Emmanuel Macron engaged in a week-long visit to New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea (PNG), pressing France’s own imperialist interests. It was the first time a sitting French President has visited any Pacific countries outside the French territories.

On Thursday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin also visited PNG, on his way to AUSMIN, to firm up the new US-PNG defence pact. Under the deal, signed in May but still to be ratified by the PNG parliament, the US military is granted unhindered access to six sites in PNG, including the strategically significant Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island.

Behind the diplomatic jockeying, Australia is currently hosting its annual Talisman Sabre military exercise, involving 13 countries and some 30,000 troops. Countries involved for the first time include Germany and Japan, while militaries from all three of the smaller Pacific Island nations that have standing armies are also on board: Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Tonga. The centerpiece of Talisman Sabre is a massive land, air and sea invasion of an island in the Pacific, clearly directed against the Chinese military.



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