

Australia strikes neo-colonial “security” pact with Tuvalu to counter China in Pacific

John Braddock
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Australia will vet the military, police, telecommunications and infrastructure agreements that the tiny Pacific island state of Tuvalu makes with other countries, notably China, under a treaty announced last Friday by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his Tuvalu counterpart Kausea Natano.

Under the guise of protecting Tuvalu’s 11,200 people from military aggression and climate change, Albanese proclaimed the pact Australia’s most significant agreement with a Pacific Island nation, giving “a guarantee that upon a request from Tuvalu for any military assistance based upon security issues, Australia will be there.”

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, a member of the Labor Party’s “left” faction like Albanese, declared on national television on Sunday: “This agreement with Tuvalu is the most important step any Australian Government has taken in the Pacific since the independence of Papua New Guinea.”

These boasts point to the neo-colonial thrust of the pact, which Albanese and Wong said provides a blueprint for similar treaties with other Pacific island states. In 1975, Australia granted formal independence to Papua New Guinea after colonising it since World War I, but still exerts economic, military and strategic sway over PNG, which has the largest population of the region’s ex-colonial island states.

In return for taking effective control over Tuvalu’s key policies, Australia will offer eventual residency to Tuvalu’s population, at a rate of just 280 a year, as “climate refugees” displaced by the global warming generated by Australia and other capitalist powers, which is raising sea levels disastrously.

A token refugee intake from Tuvalu is the cost Canberra is happy to pay for tightening its grip in the Pacific. Under the Australia-Tuvalu Falepili Treaty, Tuvalu will provide Australia rights to “access, presence within, and

overflight of Tuvalu’s territory.”

Further, Tuvalu “shall mutually agree with Australia any partnership, arrangement or engagement with any other State or entity on security and defence-related matters.” This sweeping provision includes, but is not limited to, “defence, policing, border protection, cyber security and critical infrastructure, including ports, telecommunications and energy infrastructure.”

Albanese announced the agreement at the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) annual meeting, held this year in the Cook Islands. Albanese’s presence at the PIF was significant. He flew straight from an official three-day trip to China, which followed a state visit to Washington, as part of the intensifying US economic and military pressure on China, accompanied by escalating preparations for war.

The Tuvalu pact will see its citizens offered a “special mobility pathway” to “live, work and study” in Australia. This is the first time that a Pacific nation has agreed to such a relationship with Australia.

Tuvalu is a chain of nine small coral islands in the west-central Pacific, halfway between Australia and Hawaii. “As a low-lying nation it is particularly impacted by climate change,” Albanese said. “Its very existence is threatened. I believe developed nations have a responsibility to provide assistance and that is precisely what we are doing.”

In fact, the agreement is a cynical move by the Australian government, which has a long record of indifference to the Pacific peoples’ desperate concerns over Australian capitalism’s particular role in advancing the climate crisis, as one of the globe’s largest suppliers of coal, gas and other fossil fuels.

In the lead-up to the PIF, the Pacific Elders Voice, which includes former leaders of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau, warned that Australia “continues to be one of the world’s biggest fossil fuel

exporters and continues to have one of the world's largest per capita carbon pollution footprints." The group criticised Canberra's "failure to match its words with its actions" on climate, "especially in comparison to the costs of developing their war machines."

That condemnation also reflected concerns throughout the region over the AUKUS treaty between the US, UK and Australia to arm Australia with nuclear-powered long-range attack submarines, hypersonic missiles and other hi-tech weaponry for use against China.

Australia and neighbouring New Zealand are imperialist powers. They have dominated the Pacific for over a century and carry primary responsibility for the legacy of impoverishment, backwardness and isolation. Today, they are helping ramp up the US confrontation with China, which Washington has designated a threat to US hegemony.

Canberra has previously encountered resistance from some Pacific nations, including Vanuatu, to attempts to sign them up to anti-China security arrangements. In August, Vanuatu's Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau was ousted after signing an "enhanced strategic engagement" between the two countries which potentially provided vast scope for a range of military activities directed against China.

Under the pact with Tuvalu, Australia will effectively recolonise the Pacific state, which was a British colony, known as the Ellice Islands, from 1892 to 1978. The agreement echoes the "Compacts of Free Association" (COFA) that Washington operates with Palau, Marshall Islands and Micronesia in northern Oceania.

The COFA states are colonies of the United States in all but name. Washington funnels cash to their ruling elites each year, in return for the US being legally responsible for defence and national security while the American military enjoys unfettered access to the islands and sea territories. They provide essential military facilities in the confrontation with China.

The COFA states plus Nauru and Kiribati comprise the Micronesia sub-group of the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific's peak diplomatic body. The sub-group is increasingly assertive in advancing US interests against those island states that remain opposed to the escalating geo-strategic competition and militarisation of the region.

Of the 12 nation states that lined up with the US and Israel to vote "no" to the recent United Nations motion calling for an "immediate, durable and sustainable humanitarian truce" in Gaza, six were from the Pacific.

Demonstrating their subservience to imperialism, Nauru, Palau, Marshall Islands and Micronesia were four, with Papua New Guinea and Fiji the other two.

As well as asserting the predatory interests of Australian imperialism, the Albanese government is anxious to display its commitment to the US offensive against China. A *Weekend Australian* editorial stated:

"This is the message the Prime Minister will take to California next week for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting, his second major US visit in as many months. Pacific engagement and China's military intentions in the region were the obvious concerns for Joe Biden in Mr Albanese's recent White House discussions."

A major agenda item at the PIF summit was the vote on a new secretary-general. In 2021, the Micronesia group threatened to leave the PIF, ostensibly over the appointment of former Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna as secretary general, instead of a Micronesia leader.

The Micronesia group was last year persuaded to remain part of the organisation on the basis that it could put forward its nominee to replace Puna, who was pressured to relinquish the position. The candidate from Nauru, Baron Waqa, has now been appointed, effectively solidifying US diplomatic influence at the top of the PIF.

During last week's summit, Waqa and the Nauru delegation walked out after questions were raised about the process by which he had been nominated.

Justifying Waqa's appointment however, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who has since entering office in January taken steps to re-orient his country's foreign policy away from Beijing, posted on X (Twitter): "Forum leaders are not judges. We rely on nations' submissions, not personal judgments."

The PIF summit declared its support for the concept of a "Zone of Peace" in the Pacific, but avoided any criticism of the escalating drive to war by the US and its local imperialist allies.



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