

US pressures Papua New Guinea over security talks with China

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A senior US official visiting Australia this week has issued a blunt warning to Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Southwest Pacific's largest and most strategically placed island state, to reject an offer of a policing and security pact with China.

Last week, PNG's Foreign Minister Justin Tkachenko revealed that his government was in early negotiations over a deal with Beijing. "They are one of our biggest trading partners, but they have offered to assist our policing and security on the internal security side. They have offered it to us, but we have not accepted it at this point in time," he declared.

The offer was made last September but thrown into sharp relief following riots on January 10, driven by simmering social discontent and escalating living costs. The unrest decimated the capital Port Moresby leaving 22 people dead. The Chinese foreign ministry urged PNG to take "swift and effective measures" to protect its citizens after businesses owned by Chinese expatriates were looted and owners injured.

Tkachenko's announcement provoked alarm in Canberra with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reporting concerns that Beijing was "once again targeting Pacific Island nations' police and security sectors to spread its influence." Tkachenko quickly moved to assuage the Australian Labor government, saying: "We will not jeopardise or compromise relations with our traditional security partners."

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma, in Australia following stopovers in the Pacific, insisted PNG should turn down Beijing's offer. "That sort of security guarantee comes with consequences. It comes with costs. And we've seen that the Chinese commitment in defence or investment comes with a high cost. That's what we'd say to Papua New Guinea," he told the *Age* on February 5.

Verma's comments will ratchet up pressure on PNG's

Prime Minister James Marape who is due to address the Australian parliament on Thursday, the first for a sitting PNG leader. The *PNG Post Courier* has already noted; "The historic significance of this event cannot be overstated, marking a pivotal moment in the diplomatic history of both nations."

Verma stated bluntly that "it is a competition" for influence in the region between China on one hand and the US and its allies, including Australia, on the other, adding that "we have to compete aggressively."

He declared that countries in the Pacific should choose security arrangements, investment opportunities and advanced connectivity "with countries that play by the rules, that live up to the international standards. China has shown that it is not doing that. China has shown that it's not interested in the modern rules-based order." In fact, these "rules" are defined by Washington and invoked to maintain its own global hegemony.

Australia and the US both signed sweeping neo-colonial deals with PNG targeting China in the past year. The US-PNG Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in May gives Washington "uninhibited access" to numerous PNG military and civilian locations, including its strategic naval base on Manus Island.

While giving bland assurances that the country's "independence" would not be compromised, Marape stated: "[A]s we go forward over the next 15 years, we will see US soldiers in our country. We will see US contractors in our country." The US military presence is forecast to become the biggest since World War II.

With US President Obama's 2011 "Pivot to Asia," PNG was brought onto the "front line" of Washington's confrontation with China. More than a decade later, the danger of a US-led conflict is escalating. As it seeks to provoke war with China over Taiwan, the US and its allies are engaged in a full-court press to overcome any resistance among Pacific Island countries and integrate

them into its war planning.

Verma highlighted that the US is actively expanding its presence across the Pacific. He cited new US embassies in Tonga, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, an enlarged mission in Fiji, a step-up in the USAID office in Suva, an annual \$US350 million aid and development program and a private sector project to lay underwater fibre optic cable to connect all Pacific states.

Verma's warnings, however, carry an implied threat of imperialist intervention. Following riots and looting of Chinese businesses in the Solomon Islands in 2021, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare signed a security agreement with China allowing Chinese police to train local police officers and giving Chinese naval ships access to the country's extensive maritime zone.

US Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell visited the Solomons' capital Honiara and, supported by the then Australian government, publicly declared that Washington would have "significant concerns" and "respond accordingly," if China were permitted to have any military presence in the country. Sogavare told his parliament that the impoverished former British colony was in danger of invasion by the two allied powers.

Verma was not the only senior US figure active in the Pacific last week. The *Fiji Times* reported on January 30 that Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) deputy director David Cohen was in Suva heading a 15-member delegation to meet with government officials to discuss areas of "mutual interest and further co-operation to strengthen Fiji-US relations."

Fiji's acting PM and Minister for External Trade Manoa Kamikamica said the meeting re-affirmed "the close and unique relationship Fiji has with the United States of America." Apart from a prominent front-page photo of Cohen in the *Fiji Times*, no details were released to the media.

The appearance of a top CIA operative in the Southwest Pacific at a time when the region is being dragged into increasing geostrategic tensions, militarisation and instability, is not simply fortuitous.

Even as American imperialism escalates its "endless war" in the Middle East and directly threatens Iran, it is intensifying its confrontation with Beijing amid far-reaching preparations for war in the Pacific. The US ruling elite is determined that no Chinese presence, no matter how limited, can be tolerated that would in any way challenge Washington's grip over the region.

In the wake of a decision last month by PNG's neighbor Nauru to cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan and establish

relations with China, Washington's attention has turned to tiny Tuvalu, an isolated Pacific Island state with just 11,000 inhabitants. Tuvalu's position is causing intense concern after an election on January 27, closely watched by Taiwan, China, Australia and the US, saw pro-Taiwan leader, Kausea Natano, lose his seat.

In an opinion piece on November 1 titled "China sets sights on Taiwan's Pacific Allies," the *Washington Post* warned that Tuvalu, one of the three Pacific Island nations that still recognise Taiwan, is in danger of switching its allegiance to China. Such a move would leave Taiwan with only two allies in the Pacific—Palau and the Marshall Islands, both of which are US neo-colonies.

According to the *Washington Post*, as China vies with the US for power and influence in the Pacific, "it has tirelessly tried to pry allies away from Taiwan by many means—chief among them, money." It cited one of Tuvalu's leadership contenders, Seve Paeniu, declaring he was open to recognising Beijing: "As far as I am concerned, it boils down to whichever country ... offers the greatest support to achieving Tuvalu's development priorities and aspirations," he said.

Washington's claims that Beijing's activities in the Pacific are part of a broader plan to isolate and intimidate Taiwan by "picking off" its allies are entirely hypocritical. As the WSWS has noted, it is the Biden administration, following Donald Trump, that is aggravating tensions and deliberately goading China into seizing Taiwan.

The expanding conflicts are increasingly assuming the shape of a devastating world war. US imperialism, supported by its allies including Australia, will stop at nothing to end what it regards as the chief threat to its global domination—China's economic rise—and will intensify its reckless confrontation with Beijing throughout the Indo Pacific and internationally.



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