

Pacific Islands Forum embroiled in dispute over Taiwan

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A meeting of foreign ministers of the 18-member inter-governmental Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) in Suva on August 14 affirmed a proposal to block the participation of 21 so-called “development partners,” including China, the US and the UK, from attending the annual PIF Summit that begins in Honiara on September 8.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele made the proposal amid an escalating dispute over whether Taiwan should be invited to the summit. Since being admitted as a development partner in 1992, Taiwan has “informally” attended regular PIF side-events. Unsubstantiated media reports began circulating earlier this month that China was using its influence with the Solomon Islands government, which is hosting the upcoming summit, to not invite Taiwan.

The dispute is evidence of the enormous tensions wracking the fragile and impoverished Pacific Island nations, as US imperialism and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, seek to secure unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the region. Amid advanced US preparations for war against China, the Pacific states find themselves drawn into the intensifying geopolitical confrontation between Washington and Beijing.

Manele decided to block Taiwan, claiming it was due to an impending overhaul of how PIF nations deal with “outside countries.” He said more time was needed to put processes in place, “so we can engage more effectively with our partners.” Solomons Foreign Minister Peter Agovaka bluntly stated that Taiwan was “not a country” and should not be involved in the PIF, declaring the organisation should abide by “international law.”

Samoa’s caretaker Prime Minister Fiam? Naomi Mata?afa then threatened to boycott the summit if Taiwan was prevented from attending. She told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) on August 7 that “this is real interference, or intervention, into the sovereignty of the Forum.”

On August 8, Manele told the Solomon Islands parliament his cabinet had decided no dialogue partners would be invited until the review of each country’s relationship with the Pacific had been completed. He proposed that the dialogue partners’ meeting, which usually accompanies the PIF leaders’ summit, be deferred until next year when it will be hosted by Palau.

The Australian government promptly opposed Manele’s plan. Foreign Minister Penny Wong declared, “Australia supports the participation of all development and dialogue partners in the PIF Leaders’ Meeting.” New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon concurred, as did Papua New Guinea’s James Marape. Fiji’s Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka warned the move could “fracture” the PIF.

China was quickly targeted for blame. An ABC report claimed that China, which it declared “remains determined” to isolate Taiwan diplomatically, was “pushing” Manele to block Taiwan. NZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver claimed that Taiwan’s presence at the PIF “drives Beijing into a rage.” She referenced last year’s summit in Tonga, when Taiwan was recognised in the communiqué but China’s envoy for the Pacific, Qian Bo, successfully called for it to be taken out.

Manele flatly rejected what he called the “divisive issues” being pushed by the foreign media’s “narratives,” saying, “We are not under pressure from any external forces,” and adding that the Solomons’ “sovereign decision” was made in the region’s best interests.

Taiwan is at the forefront of US war plans. Washington still formally abides by the “One China” principle, recognising Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan. At the same time the US has deliberately inflamed tensions, including by arming Taiwan with offensive weapons and stationing US troops on the island.

There are just three Pacific nations that formally

recognise Taiwan: Palau, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu. Since the Solomons swapped diplomatic ties to Beijing in 2019, it has been a focus of imperialist bullying. A security and policing deal signed with China by the then Solomons government of Manasseh Sogavare in 2022 prompted threats of a US-Australia regime change operation if China moved to establish a military presence there.

Manele's decision to postpone the dialogue partners' meeting was supported by both Fiam? and Palau's President Surangel Whipps Junior. Fiam? told Radio NZ (RNZ) that the deferral would allow time for the review of external partners within the "regional architecture." Whipps Jr. told RNZ: "It is about the PIF, and the PIF recognises both [China and Taiwan]. Within the PIF, we of course have our differences. But we come together as one Pacific."

Reports from the foreign ministers' meeting indicated that strong opposition to Manele's move was voiced by Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. Fiji's Rabuka said it would threaten to fracture "decades of Pacific cooperation." New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters bluntly blamed "outsiders," i.e. China, for causing "disagreements" within the PIF.

With the meeting reaching no consensus to force Manele to rescind his decision, the foreign ministers eventually approved the deferral. The meeting's chair, Tonga's Crown Prince Tupouto'a 'Ulukalala, described it as "a rich and robust discussion and was reflective of our collective maturity and solidarity as a region."

The tensions within the PIF, however, cannot be papered over. Tuvalu's Taiwan-aligned Prime Minister Feleti Teo told the *Guardian* his country may pull out of the PIF leaders' summit, but he would wait to see how other Pacific leaders respond. "There is no denying that China is trying to extend its footprint in the Pacific, and so is the US," Teo said.

While Tuvalu is nominally independent, Australia, under a treaty signed in 2023, exerts significant neo-colonial control.

The regional imperialist powers, Australia and NZ, which regard the Pacific as their own colonial backyard, are acting in an alliance with the US to maintain their influence over the PIF and to push back against China.

A US state department spokesperson said Washington was "disappointed" by the PIF's decision and reaffirmed the Trump administration's support for the attendance of all partners. "All [forum] partners, and that includes Taiwan, should be invited to participate ... regardless of

where it is hosted," he said. A Taiwanese spokesman also urged that "existing arrangements be maintained."

China's embassy in New Zealand issued a strong rebuke, rejecting the "groundless accusations" that China was agitating behind the scenes to have Taiwan excluded. The embassy declared that China "respects the Forum's role in regional cooperation," while calling on it to "honour the one-China commitment." It bluntly reiterated that Taiwan was "a province of China—never a country" and has "no qualification or right to participate in Forum activities whatsoever."

The embassy, along with China's *Global Times*, responded particularly sharply to Peters' widely reported comments that "outsiders" were "telling us who we can have as guests." Professor Chen Hong from the East China Normal University told the *Global Times* that Peters was seeking to frame the Pacific "as a closed region, [to] marginalise China, and bolster the influence [of] minor regional hegemons. Such a perspective is shortsighted and exclusionary."

Peters, who leads the nationalist anti-immigrant NZ First Party in the ruling coalition, is a long-time Washington asset. He was installed as foreign minister under Labour following an intervention by then US Ambassador Scott Brown, after the inconclusive 2017 election. Brown publicly criticised the previous National Party government as too soft on China.

Peters fervently advocates for increasing US diplomatic and military presence in the region while escalating NZ's own preparations for war. The NZ government recently welcomed FBI Director Kash Patel to Wellington to open a permanent FBI office in the capital with an active regional role alongside the US Armed Forces Indo-Pacific Command.

Speaking to the *Cook Islands News* last week, the NZ-based US Chargé d'Affaires David Gehrenbeck confirmed the FBI's Wellington office will give the agency "greater autonomy to work directly with partners across the Pacific," including the Cook Islands. Earlier this year, China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with the Cook Islands, prompting an ongoing breakdown in diplomatic relations with Peters and the New Zealand government.



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