

Pacific Defence Ministers escalate militarisation across the region

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The 10th annual South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) convened in Viña del Mar, Chile from October 22-24, amid the escalating imperialist war drive across the region, led by the United States, aimed against China.

Defence Ministers or their representatives attended from Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji and Tonga, along with observers from Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Baron Waqa, Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), also attended.

The SPDMM declares it is “the premier defence ministerial dialogue in the South Pacific, enhancing cooperation and driving Pacific-led responses to shared regional security challenges.” Beyond token concerns about the need for “joint responses” to climate disasters, humanitarian emergencies and transnational crime, the summit's real agenda was devoted to developing “operational collaboration” between the region's militaries to face “new trends in security challenges.”

While not directly naming China, Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles, a leading Labor Party hawk, emphasised that the Pacific “is a place of growing geostrategic contest.” New Zealand Defence Minister Judith Collins, fresh from visiting the CIA's Langley headquarters in the US, told Radio NZ the SPDMM helps “set our defence and security goals to ensure we are ready to meet the challenges our region will face from increasing strategic competition.”

Marles falsely declared that SPDMM members “share values as democracies, as countries which respect freedom of speech, and which seek to uphold a rules-based order.” He claimed that such rules give “countries of our size” agency. “In a world which is only about power and might, it is hard for smaller

countries to be able to deal with the issues around them.”

This is a deliberate inversion of reality. The “rules-based order” is the post-World War II financial, diplomatic and military arrangements established by Washington to ensure its global hegemony.

In the Indo-Pacific region, the Trump administration has accelerated a protracted military build-up against China, which US imperialism views as the chief threat to a world in which it sets the rules. US Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth has predicted imminent war with China over Taiwan and demanded allies in the region dramatically hike their military budgets.

The SPDMM summit moved to ramp up the confrontation with Beijing, as the US and its allies Australia and New Zealand militarise the entire region and pressure Pacific countries to cut economic and diplomatic ties with Beijing. The official communiqué declared that the ministers reaffirmed the importance of “operational collaboration between their militaries in promoting a secure and resilient region”—that is, intensifying collaboration to block China.

Under the guise of combatting “transnational organised crime” and ensuring “comprehensive maritime security,” the group called on the Heads of Maritime Forces to implement an “intelligence-led operation.” They welcomed Fiji's offer of its Vuvale Maritime Essential Services Centre as a regional hub for coordination against “maritime threats.” Marles commented that the facility “will play a crucial role in intelligence-sharing, surveillance, and rapid response to illicit maritime activities.”

The *Fiji Times* reported that French Ambassador to Chile Cyrille Rogeau and Fiji's Minister for Defence Pio Tikoduadua signed a “ship-riding” agreement allowing foreign agents to embark on French Navy

vessels for “fisheries control” operations. The agreement will boost “maritime security and interoperability” and was recognition of Fiji’s “growing leadership in Pacific maritime security.” Notably, neither France nor Chile are members of the PIF.

Chile’s Minister of National Defence, Adriana Delpiano, also submitted a proposal, “welcomed” by fellow ministers, to establish joint biennial military exercises in the East Pacific, commencing in 2027-28 and centred on Rapa Nui (Easter Island). “Few maritime territories are as vast as the one that goes from Australia to Chile on the south side of the Pacific, to the north from Ecuador to Antarctica,” Delpiano announced, which will require “new trends in terms of security.”

A key decision confirmed a proposal to transform a regional military disaster response group, the Pacific Response Group (PRG) created a year ago, into a taskforce that will conduct Pacific “stabilisation” missions. It was agreed to establish annual co-locations of the PRG, with New Zealand taking over command and hosting the headquarters from July 2026.

The PRG has already been involved in an earthquake response in December 2024 and regional military exercises, including the biennial Croix Du Sud in New Caledonia and the Australia-Tuvalu Longreach exercise. Ministers directed their defence chiefs to “explore options to broaden the mandate” of the PRG from disaster response to “include stabilisation operations, including any necessary legal frameworks.” “Stabilisation” missions include a range of activities, including military deployments, to enforce “stability” in small, increasingly volatile Pacific Island states hit by economic and social crises.

The SPDMM Secretariat has been tasked to work with the regional defence chiefs “to explore options to establish a PRG-led exercise,” alongside the current cycle of exercises and activities. In July, PNG hosted, for the first time ever, a part of Australia’s massive Talisman Sabre military exercise targeting China. It has recently signed a treaty with Australia which binds PNG to any military conflict that Canberra embarks upon.

The communiqué also highlighted the launch of SPDMM’s Academic Cooperation Network (ACN). The ACN will “enhance cooperation and networks

between academic defence institutions and national security researchers” focused on the South Pacific. Chile was thanked for its “leadership” on the initiative. The Intersessional Working Group and Secretariat have been tasked with identifying specific “research topics,” which will see academic establishments and think-tanks further mobilised to plan and prepare for war.

Australia and New Zealand—minor imperialist powers, allied with the US—view the Pacific as their own colonial back yard and are playing a leading role in militarising the region. Australia has invested \$200 million to train police in PNG, and has effectively taken over security and defence policy for the tiny island nations of Tuvalu and Nauru. These moves are exacerbating tensions throughout the region, which the decisions made at the defence summit will further inflame.

Those nations outside the SPDMM, including the Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, Samoa, Kiribati and Vanuatu, all have significant funding, economic, security and policing links with China that Canberra and Wellington constantly seek to undermine. Diplomatic tensions erupted at the Pacific Islands Forum summit held in the Solomon Islands in September, after the Solomons government sought to exclude 21 dialogue partners, including Taiwan’s government, from taking part. The Australian media published numerous articles hysterically denouncing Chinese “influence” in the Solomons.

The role of imperialism remains deeply contentious among many Pacific nations. The region, which witnessed some of the bloodiest battles during World War II, is being drawn into the maelstrom of US-led preparations for a third world war.



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