

Pacific leaders pull out of contentious Pacific Islands summit

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This year's summit of the 18-member Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) being held in Palau from August 30 to September 4 opened in considerable turmoil due to the absence of nearly a third of the region's key leaders.

Five prime ministers withdrew at the eleventh hour, citing various reasons including domestic politics, poor health and travel issues. Behind the withdrawals, however, were escalating tensions caused by the far-advanced war preparations by the US against China.

The forum was expected to be contentious after the failure of Australia and New Zealand to enforce a unanimous joint statement at a meeting of Pacific foreign ministers in Fiji on August 7 condemning China's test of a nuclear-capable ballistic missile in the region. Kiribati and Naoero (formerly Nauru), which have close ties with Beijing, were accused of "blocking" consensus, provoking outrage from the US and its two local imperialist allies.

Those not attending the forum include Fiji's prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who is dealing with a Constitutional Review and facing an election in coming months. Rabuka is a key regional leader and recently signed the Ocean of Peace Alliance with Australia—a mechanism for pulling the region further into US-led warmongering.

Reflecting anxiety in ruling circles in Wellington, New Zealand security studies academic Anna Powles posted on X, sharply criticising Rabuka's non-involvement as "a significant geopolitical win" for China that raised "serious questions about Forum solidarity in the face of geopolitical pressure."

The Solomon Islands' recently installed prime minister, Matthew Wale, also cancelled his appearance after a no-confidence motion was lodged against him by the home affairs minister, Manasseh Maelanga, prompting the resignation of two other ministers. The

threat to Wale's leadership came after he had earlier shifted Honiara's allegiance away from China and entered negotiations with Australia, with talks towards a new strategic agreement expected on the sidelines of the PIF summit.

Vanuatu's prime minister Jotham Napat and Samoa's La'auli Leuatea Schmidt are also not attending. Naoero only confirmed on the first morning of the summit that its President David Adeang would attend.

Kiribati President Taneti Maamau declared he could not attend due to flight unavailability but is expected to join some sessions virtually. Kiribati will be represented instead by its former ambassador to China.

NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters said Maamau's absence was "hugely disappointing." He said the "centrality" of the PIF should not be "compromised." Asked if "foreign [i.e. Chinese] interference" was involved, Peters told journalists: "You'd be defying gravity and logic if you said it wasn't a big problem."

The *Post* reported that senior NZ officials were privately calling Kiribati's stance "an effective boycott" of the PIF. Kiribati switched its diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 2019. During a diplomatic spat between Peters and Maamau in early 2025, a TVNZ report accused Kiribati of being on "a path of self-isolation from Western countries" since swapping allegiances.

After the Pacific foreign ministers' meeting failed to agree on the statement denouncing China's missile test, Peters railed against China, saying: "We made it very clear that we didn't think outsiders should be telling insiders—that's us, we've been here for thousands of years—what our position should be."

New Zealand and Australia, working closely with the US, are seeking to roll back China's economic and

diplomatic influence in the Pacific and are describing Beijing in increasingly hysterical terms as a military threat. While using aid to pressure Pacific states, they are militarising the region and forcing them to cut ties with Beijing.

Palau, which is hosting this year's PIF summit, is led by President Surangel Whipps Jr., one of the region's most bellicose anti-China hawks. In a neo-colonial "free association" relationship with the US, the small archipelago is one of just three Pacific states, along with the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu, that maintains diplomatic relations with Taipei rather than Beijing.

About 870km (540 miles) east of the Philippines, Palau was the site of brutal fighting between the US and Japan during World War II. Today, it hosts critical US military facilities and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth has described it, along with Guam, as the "the tip of America's spear in the Pacific."

The imperialist powers are heavily represented at the summit. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese flew to Palau on Monday leading a three-person ministerial team. New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon is attending along with Peters.

The US sent a high-ranking delegation including Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau and two senior military leaders: Admiral Kevin Lunday, Commandant of the US Coast Guard, and Lieutenant General George Rowell, deputy commander of the US Pacific Command. Landau will later conduct a four-country tour of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, Solomon Islands and Kiribati.

At the 2025 summit, the host Solomon Islands barred participation from Taiwan, China and the US, along with 18 other "dialogue partner" countries which are not members of the PIF. This year, Taiwan announced that its Foreign Minister Lin Chia-Lung would spend a week in Palau during the summit.

China's foreign ministry objected strongly, telling Reuters on August 26 that "sending Lin Chia-lung and other Taiwan independence separatists scurrying about all over to curry favour is a futile attempt to grab attention."

Peters hit back, telling summit participants on August 30 to reject "cash-book diplomacy," which the *Post* interpreted as a reference to China. He called on PIF members to "step up and provide some serious competition based on freedom, democracy and the right

to worship a god."

The US has already used the PIF to unveil a major new infrastructure deal with potential military implications. On September 1, Peters, Landau and Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown announced that the US would contribute \$US50 million and New Zealand \$US10 million for "a major port upgrade on the island of Penrhyn in the northern Cook Islands."

Peters told One News the decision was a "landmark" and "a seminal moment that we are back in the game looking after our part of the world."

In a statement, Landau referred to the fact that Penrhyn's port was first built by the US as a World War II military base. He said the new development would make the "United States and our partners safer, stronger, and more prosperous." While the US has military bases on Guam, the Marshall Islands and Palau, the Cook Islands opens up access to a wide swathe of the southwestern Pacific.

The port will also facilitate the US agreement with the Cook Islands to look for critical minerals under the sea.

Last year, New Zealand blocked \$NZ30 million worth of aid to the Cook Islands, a semi-colony of NZ, in retaliation for Brown entering into commercial agreements with China without first consulting NZ. In April, Peters signed a Security Declaration with Brown that reasserted NZ colonial domination, giving its military unimpeded access to the land, sea and airspace of the Cook Islands. Now, the territory is being developed for the benefit of US imperialism.



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