US anti-China push dominates Pacific Islands summit

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The 55th Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) summit, held this year in Palau, concluded on September 4. The event was marked by intense diplomatic pressure from the United States and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, which pressured the small island nations to issue a joint statement condemning a Chinese missile test conducted in the Pacific in July.

When the 18-member PIF summit opened on August 30 the prime ministers of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Vanuatu and Kiribati had all withdrawn, citing domestic politics, poor health and travel issues. Behind the withdrawals, however, were escalating tensions caused by the advanced war preparations of US imperialism against China.

The US Embassy in Canberra shared a September 2 article in *The Australian* newspaper on X, which accused China of "undermining" the PIF. It cited statements by New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters that implied China was responsible for the leaders' non-attendance.

The article also claimed, without providing any evidence, that "Beijing most likely also had a hand in the timing of a leadership challenge against Solomon Islands Prime Minister Matthew Wale" that prevented him from attending the summit. Wale had shifted the Solomons' foreign policy away from Beijing and towards stronger ties with the US and Australia. A no confidence motion in his leadership was withdrawn on September 6, but there are clearly tensions in Wale's government.

The US sent a high-powered delegation to the summit, 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.

Following the PIF leaders' retreat on Thursday, Palau President and PIF chair Surangel Whipps Jr—one of the region's most open anti-China hawks—announced that a "consensus" had been reached on a statement condemning China over its missile test.

Reading from the official communique, Whipps said: "Leaders … registered concern on the recent intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test, which overflew a number of members without adequate notice."

The US itself has carried out many ICBM tests around the Marshall Islands, most recently on May 20. Between 1946 and 1958, the US carried out 67 nuclear explosions and a series of biological weapons tests in the islands. The Runit Dome, a radioactive waste dump on Enewetak Atoll, is deteriorating and threatening an environmental disaster.

Palau and the Marshall Islands—both US semi-colonies—and Tuvalu, are the only three Pacific states that maintain diplomatic relations with Taipei rather than Beijing. Palau invited Taiwan to participate in this year's summit as a "development partner," deliberately stoking tensions with China. Taiwan, China and the US were all barred from last year's summit in the Solomon Islands.

In fact, there was no consensus at the summit. Many Pacific countries do not want to alienate Beijing as it provides significant development aid and loans. Naoero (formally Nauru) and Kiribati had earlier opposed a Pacific Foreign Ministers' statement on the Chinese test. At the PIF Naoero formally dissented from the official statement, while Kiribati's representative David Teaabo was absent from the leaders' retreat.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that Kiribati Prime Minister Taneti Maamau declared in parliament last month: "America has been bombing, and testing its bombs … in the Marshall Islands, islands near us, and why don't we ask questions or criticise America?"

Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese defended the US missile tests, telling the media on September 3:

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"The US gives proper notice, has an agreement with the Marshall Islands."

New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon hypocritically said: "when you fire a nuclear missile into the nuclear free Pacific … that's not something we want to see." Like Albanese, he made no criticism of the regular US missile tests.

China's foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun blamed US-aligned Palau for creating divisions. He told a press briefing on September 3 that "Palau's repeated hype and attempts to manipulate the ?positions of other Pacific Islands forum member states are malicious and will not succeed."

Landau used the summit to announce a $US150 million package of projects, which the State Department said would "deliver economic prosperity and security for Americans and Pacific Islanders." The absurd claim follows the Trump administration's 2025 shutdown of the USAID program and withdrawal from the World Health Organisation which have severely impacted the economic and social crisis across the Pacific.

Much of the new funding is directly linked to the US military build-up against China. This includes money to modernise two ports and an airport in the Marshall Islands—a major US military hub—and $50 million to redevelop a port in Penrhyn in the Cook Islands, which was a US military base during World War II.

The Penrhyn development, to which New Zealand is contributing $10 million, will also facilitate a US deal with the Cook Islands to look for critical minerals under the sea.

The State Department also announced that it will organise an inaugural US-Pacific Islands Conference of Police Ministers (COPMIN), which will "focus on maritime security, drug trafficking, and cybercrime, and illicit finance." In addition, $17 million will be provided to counter "illegal fishing," including new monitoring technology. In the name of "law enforcement cooperation and maritime security" the US is embedding its security forces and bolstering its surveillance of the Pacific.

The US package includes $60 million "to help Pacific Islands countries address the ongoing global energy crisis, including expanding fuel storage capacity and supporting grid stability." This will not address the disaster created by Washington's criminal war against Iran, which led to soaring prices for fuel and other essential goods across the Pacific.

Australia meanwhile announced $US430 million for a new Pacific "maritime security initiative" called Waqa Moana. On the pretext of countering drug trafficking, this will lead to a major expansion of Australia's police and military presence across the Pacific, including greater aerial and maritime surveillance. The new program follows a Pacific Policing Initiative, formed in 2024 to increase the Australian Federal Police's presence in countries across the region and to counter China.

While the PIF summit concentrated on anti-China positioning and militarisation, the imperialist powers announced nothing to address the urgent social and environmental crises facing the Pacific. More than a century of colonial domination has led to deeply entrenched poverty, crumbling infrastructure and health crises, including severe HIV epidemics in Fiji, Tonga and Papua New Guinea.

In what has become an empty annual ritual, the PIF leaders' communique declared that climate change remains "the single greatest threat to the security, livelihoods and well-being of the Pacific people." As the summit was meeting in Palau, the UN Environmental Program released a report which said global temperatures were now 1.4 degrees above pre-industrial levels and will continue to rise above 1.5 degrees, resulting in "irreversible losses and permanently changed conditions."

The major capitalist powers, which are responsible for the bulk of carbon emissions, have done nothing to address the climate catastrophe. They have barely lifted a finger to protect small island nations from the consequences, including the existential threat of rising sea levels and frequent natural disasters.

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