Pacific defence ministers prepare to suppress civil unrest

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The 11th South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting (SPDMM) was held in Fiji from September 22 to 24. It included representatives of the regional imperialist powers Australia, New Zealand and France, alongside Chile, Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Tonga. They were joined by observers from Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. Desna Solofa, Acting Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) also attended.

The SPDMM describes itself as "the premier defence ministerial dialogue in the South Pacific, enhancing cooperation and driving Pacific-led responses to shared regional security challenges." Behind token statements about the need for "joint responses" to climate disasters, humanitarian emergencies and transnational crime, the organisation's real agenda is strengthening the web of imperialist alliances preparing for a US-led war against China.

Last year's SPDMM in Chile issued a communiqué calling for greater "operational collaboration" between the region's militaries to face "new trends in security challenges" and to promote "a secure and resilient region"—that is, against China.

The SPDMM 2026 communiqué expressed "grave concern" over the July ballistic missile test conducted by China in the Pacific, using stronger language than adopted at the divided PIF leaders' summit in Palau this month. It noted that it was the second test in the region by China within two years, while saying nothing about the many intercontinental ballistic missile tests by the United States around the Marshall Islands, most recently on May 20. The ministers hypocritically said the Chinese test "risked undermining" peace and "national sovereignty."

A key decision at the 2025 SPDMM was to transform the Pacific Response Group (PRG), a regional military disaster response group formed in 2004 ostensibly to develop a more coordinated response to natural crises, into a taskforce that could conduct "stabilisation operations" for Pacific nations to deal with civil unrest.

The imperialist powers anticipate that soaring social inequality and economic breakdown—intensified by the US-Israeli war against Iran—will produce social explosions across the Pacific. In 2024, riots erupted in PNG over poverty, and France deployed troops to suppress an uprising by Kanak youth in New Caledonia .

The aim is to create a mobile military force, alongside the Australian-led Pacific Policing Initiative, that can intervene rapidly anywhere in the region. Expanding the remit of the PRG to deal with civil unrest topped the agenda at this year's SPDMM.

In April, the Joint Heads of Pacific Security (JHOPS)—including military leaders from Australia, NZ and most Pacific island countries—endorsed a push for a "Regional Operations Deployment Framework Treaty" to provide a "flexible and responsive mechanism" for military deployments.

The ministers' group signalled they will not rush to expand the remit of the PRG. The caution was no doubt in response to the recent failure of Canberra and Wellington to impose a unified statement by the Pacific Foreign Ministers meeting, and then the PIF summit, to condemn China's missile test. A number of Pacific leaders with close ties to China were absent from the summit.

At the PIF summit in Palau, the leaders did not agree to kickstart negotiations on the treaty called for by the JHOPS group, signalling that they wanted to move more slowly on the issue.

Many Pacific countries, including Naoero (formally Nauru), the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, do not want

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to alienate Beijing as it provides significant development aid and loans. Increasingly, however, they face demands from Washington, backed by Australia and New Zealand, for complete and unwavering alignment with their war plans.

The SPDMM ministers declared last week they had decided on a "phased approach" to expanding the PRG's mandate, "recognising the importance of first consolidating and enhancing the PRG's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief [HADR] capabilities" before working to "include stabilisation operations."

The PRG could also be deployed in destabilisation and regime change operations against governments that are perceived to be too close to China.

Australian Defence Force chief, Admiral Mark Hammond, who was at the meeting alongside Assistant Defence Minister Peter Khalil, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that the group "must pay due respect to sovereign constitutional processes" and there had to be an "absolute consensus of an overlap with respect to national interest."

But Hammond emphasised there was "rock-solid" support for the PRG at a "macro level" because it embodied the idea of "Pacific-led security." The PRG, he declared, will "help us cut through bureaucracy and to interpret their national interest into individual language that enables us to get on, deliver and support."

"Pacific-led" security is fraudulently deployed by Canberra and Wellington to embed their own neocolonial domination over the region, which they regard as their own "backyard," and counter any Chinese influence. The 2000 Australian Defence White Paper enunciated an explicit interventionist doctrine laying the basis for military interventions to "foster the stability, integrity and cohesion of our immediate neighbourhood."

One thorny issue concerns the legal immunity necessary for military personnel deployed to other countries in the region. According to JHOPS, Pacific sovereignty would purportedly be safeguarded by the principle that deployments "would only be triggered by a formal request for assistance by a member."

Such "requests" are however easily manufactured in the heat of a crisis, particularly given the level of political and military interference across the Pacific from Washington, Canberra and Wellington.

There is no shortage of precedents for military interventions to enforce colonial domination, including the French military-police crackdown used to suppress the New Caledonia uprising. Australia and New Zealand have repeatedly dispatched troops to Pacific nations under the banners of "peacekeeping" and "restoring order"—including deployments to East Timor, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. The latter country was effectively occupied by Australia and NZ from 2003 to 2017.

The fresh military preparations take place against a backdrop of escalating social crises in every Pacific nation, involving deepening poverty, inequality and health disasters directly connected to the global capitalist crisis. The US-Israeli war of aggression against Iran, combined with the Trump administration's shutdown of the USAID program and withdrawal from the World Health Organisation (WHO), have severely impacted dependent Pacific nations.

According to the WHO, PNG now has the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the Asia-Pacific region, followed by Fiji. The Fiji government this month formally declared a national HIV emergency. Health Minister Dr. Atonio Lalabalavu confirmed that estimates indicated that one in every 60 adults in Fiji is living with HIV, connected with an epidemic of widespread drug use. Transmission between mothers and babies is on the rise, with 18 babies dying in the past year.

Major struggles will inevitably erupt as the imperialist powers and the local ruling elites turn to increasingly authoritarian measures to impose the full burden of the economic and social crisis. Working people in Australia, New Zealand and the wider Pacific must oppose the escalating neocolonial militarist operations and fight for the international unity of the working class across the Asia-Pacific.

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