

Pacific Islands Forum approves Australia's anti-China policing plan

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Pacific island leaders have agreed to back a sweeping regional policing plan despite concerns that it will escalate the confrontation with China and fuel tensions in the region. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Summit, meeting in Tonga from August 26-30, approved the initiative following diplomatic pressure by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who participated in the PIF summit, made clear that Washington was also involved in devising the initiative. The US is seeking to secure its unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the Pacific as part of its already advanced preparations for war against China.

The Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) will see the formation of multi-country police units, with up to 200 officers, trained and led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Albanese said it would provide “a ready pool of trained Pacific police to deploy in response to Pacific country requirements, such as for major event management or additional capacity in times of crisis.”

Australia will set up a police development and coordination hub in Brisbane to bring in rotations of Pacific police officers for training and to prepare for deployment. Up to four training “centres of excellence” will also be established across the Pacific. Canberra has allocated \$A400 million over five years for the scheme.

In a farrago of lies, Albanese claimed the PPI was “a Pacific-led initiative” that reflected the desire of Pacific neighbours to “stand with each other and help each other in times of need.” Without directly mentioning China, Albanese said the Pacific nations would work together to look after its “own security ourselves.”

In reality, the AFP has been preparing the project for over two years with high-level involvement of Tonga's Police Commissioner, Shane McLennan, an Australian who previously served in the AFP for 14 years.

Albanese had to overcome resistance among leaders of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), who voiced concerns that Australia was using the initiative to try and lock out

strategic opponents, particularly China. Beijing has its own police support programs in place with Solomons Islands and Fiji.

Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai earlier said that the Forum needed “to make sure that this PPI is framed to fit our purposes and not developed to suit the geo-strategic interests and geo-strategic denial security postures of our big partners.”

In a particularly revealing episode, a Radio NZ (RNZ) Pacific reporting crew filmed Albanese boasting about his victory with Campbell.

The exchange, which took place during a break in official proceedings, began with Campbell telling Albanese that the US delegation was travelling to several locations in the Pacific, including Tonga. Albanese replied: “Well, we had a cracker today getting the Pacific policing initiative through. It is so important, it'll make such a difference.”

Campbell replied “fantastic,” then added: “I talked with Kevin [Rudd, Australia's ambassador to the US] about it and so you know we were going to do something and he asked us not to so we did not, we've given you the lane, so take the lane.”

Albanese joked: “Oh, you can go us halvies on the cost if you like. Only cost you a bit,” and the pair laughed. Asked by the media about the video the next day, Albanese brushed it off, saying “Kurt Campbell's a mate of mine, it's us having a chat,” then attacked the RNZ journalist for being “unethical.”

The exchange reveals the true relationship between the imperialist powers and impoverished South Pacific countries. Despite frequent invocations by Canberra and Wellington of one “Pacific family,” they are bluntly treated with neo-colonial contempt.

Washington clearly calls the shots—the US decides what and when it will delegate to its local allies in the escalating confrontation with China. Increasingly, the US is taking matters into its own hands. Campbell told a media briefing: “Our step up here in the Pacific has been very substantial,” with initiatives “across the board,” including on “climate

change resilience, illegal fishing, education, technology, and connectivity.”

The summit opened with a speech on the climate crisis, the region’s urgent existential issue, by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. “The Pacific is today the most vulnerable area of the world,” he said. “There is an enormous injustice in relation to the Pacific... The small islands don’t contribute to climate change but everything that happens because of climate change is multiplied here.”

Guterres told the Forum the G20—which includes the countries responsible for 80 percent of emissions—must lead by “phasing out the production and consumption of fossil fuels and stopping their expansion immediately.” He called on all countries to produce national climate plans aligning with the 1.5-degree upper limit of global heating.

Every recent PIF Summit has made the same call but meaningful action is inevitably stymied by the biggest regional emitter, Australia. Earlier this year Albanese said Australia would ramp up its extraction and use of gas until “2050 and beyond.” A new report by Climate Analytics, reviewed by the WSWS, reveals that Australia is the third largest exporter of fossil fuels in the world, behind only Russia and the United States.

At the 2019 PIF summit Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison successfully expunged any specific commitments to measures limiting temperature rises to no more than the 1.5 degrees level. In 2022 Fiji and Palau called on Australia to set more ambitious reduction targets; Albanese flatly dismissed the call as “hypothetical.”

After Albanese ratified a contentious climate and security pact with Tuvalu at the summit on Wednesday, the low-lying nation’s climate minister Maina Talia openly declared that “opening, subsidising and exporting fossil fuels is immoral and unacceptable.” Talia said that fossil fuels are “killing us.”

The Forum Communiqué, issued Friday, stated that climate change “continues to be a matter of priority to the Pacific region and relatedly, the issue of resilient development.” It noted that 62 percent of the region’s critical health facilities are situated within 500 metres of coastlines and threatened by rising sea levels.

The communiqué also formally endorsed Australia’s policing pact, while noting “the need for further national consultation on how members engage with the PPI.” Pacific police chiefs will develop an implementation plan, in which Canberra will no doubt dictate terms.

The Forum backed a Pacific mission to New Caledonia after officials from France, New Caledonia and the Pacific reached an agreement on terms of reference for the visit. The delegation will ostensibly seek to “support the ongoing efforts to call for peace and stability.” The French colony is

being occupied by thousands of French police and troops in an ongoing attempt to suppress popular unrest among the impoverished indigenous Kanak population.

Pacific governments are well aware that the unrest in New Caledonia could spark similar protests and riots across the impoverished region, where living standards are being ground down by inflation. The Pacific Policing Initiative is part of the preparations being made to confront and suppress popular unrest wherever it next erupts.

The summit further heightened the increasingly explosive tensions between the US and its allies and China. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported that China’s ambassador to the Pacific, Qian Bo, responded “furiously” after the communiqué noted the leaders had rejected a push from Solomon Islands to stop Taiwan participating in the event.

The Solomon Islands, which is due to host the 2025 summit, had been pressing to strip Taiwan of its status as a “development partner,” with its foreign minister Peter Shanel saying Taiwan is “not a sovereign country” and the PIF should “follow international law.” The communiqué stated that the Forum decided to stick with a 1992 agreement which maintains the status quo. No doubt this decision was heavily influenced by Washington and its regional allies.

Qian declared he had been “blindsided” by the communiqué, which he said “must be a mistake.” “The situation is obvious, among the 18 members of the PIF, 15 countries have diplomatic relations with China and 15 countries have categorically stated they stand by the One China principle,” he told reporters. Qian reportedly confronted the PIF secretary general, Baron Waqa, telling him the communiqué was “unacceptable.”

The text of the communiqué was promptly withdrawn from the PIF website, then later reposted with the section on Taiwan deleted—a minor concession to Beijing.



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