

British Commonwealth summit dominated by tensions over climate crisis and war preparations against China

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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The 27th biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) was held in Samoa last week against the backdrop of a worsening climate crisis, affecting low-lying island nations across the Pacific, and the escalating preparations by the imperialist powers for war against China.

The association of 56 members of the former British Empire, covering 2.7 billion people, once regarded as an imperial relic, has assumed more significance in recent years amid escalating global tensions, wars in Europe and the Middle East and the US-led confrontation with Beijing.

Samoa, the host nation for this year's meeting, is a former colony of New Zealand. Like the rest of the region, it is at the centre of growing geopolitical tensions and militarisation driven by the US and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Britain, France and other powers.

A majority of CHOGM attendees represented states which ostensibly maintain ties based on "friendship" with the British monarchy, having previously been under its colonial rule. Despite nominal "independence" in the decades following World War II, millions of people in India, the West Indies, Africa and the Pacific continue to live in countries that are plagued by poverty, backwardness and subservience to the imperialist powers and global financial institutions.

Last week's gathering was marked with the presence, for the first time since his 2023 coronation, of King Charles III. The monarch was the centre of effusive occasions including a so-called ava ceremony—a tradition reserved for monarchs—and was presented with the title of Samoan "high chief."

While key leaders, including prime ministers from Britain, Australia and New Zealand were present, there

were notable absences, in particular Canada's Justin Trudeau and India's Narendra Modi. The latter chose to attend the BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa) summit in Kazan, Russia instead.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer used CHOGM to make clear that Britain intends to continue to boost its military presence in the Indo-Pacific region, building on the anti-China AUKUS pact signed with the US and Australia in 2021. Starmer announced that the Royal Navy would increase the frequency of its patrols in the Pacific alongside Australia, New Zealand and various island states. While ostensibly aimed at "illegal fishing," the real purpose is to counter China's influence.

"My visit to the Pacific this week has only reinforced how important this part of the world is to the United Kingdom's prosperity and security," Starmer declared. He added that "we cannot turn a blind eye to the challenges faced by our friends and partners on the other side of the world, so my message today is clear: this is just the beginning of our commitment to the Indo-Pacific."

Starmer also met with Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong to confirm that the recently-commissioned British aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales will visit Singapore as part of a Pacific tour next year.

CHOGM itself was the occasion for a display of military might, with Samoa visited by the British warship HMS Tamar and navy ships from Australia and New Zealand. Police and soldiers from 21 countries were present for the event, including dozens of Australian officers and 100 New Zealand police. It was the first deployment of the Australian-initiated Pacific Policing Support Group, a multi-national force created to assert the imperialist powers' interests against China and to clamp

down on popular unrest such as the ongoing riots in New Caledonia.

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese hosted a special event to mark the deployment. In attendance were the prime ministers of Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and Tuvalu, senior ministers from Nauru, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon. In a thinly veiled warning against countries making security agreements with China, Albanese declared: “The Pacific family needs to provide security for the Pacific, by the Pacific, and that’s what this initiative is about.”

The main document approved by the Commonwealth leaders was the Apia Ocean Declaration. Outgoing Commonwealth Secretary-General Patricia Scotland said the declaration recognised the pressing need to protect the oceans given the devastating impact of climate change and rising sea levels on coastal and island nations.

Pacific nations are, however, increasingly alarmed at the stance of the imperialist powers which pay lip service to the climate crisis but fail to follow through on commitments to the so-called “Pacific family.” Several Pacific leaders called on Australia to phase out fossil fuel exports to help ensure their survival.

Tuvalu’s Prime Minister Feleti Teo launched a report by the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative which finds that Australia, Canada and the UK are responsible for over 60 percent of emissions generated from extraction across Commonwealth countries since 1990, despite making up just 6 percent of their combined population.

The report declares that the rhetoric on climate action from the named countries is fatally undermined by pushes to expand fossil fuel production, particularly in Australia and Canada. Teo told a press conference that the policies of major polluters were a “death sentence” for his country.

While Albanese points to his Labor government’s toothless commitment to cut emissions and reach net zero by 2050, Tuvalu’s Transport Minister Simon Kofe told RNZ Pacific that Canberra has undermined its own credibility with the recent extension of three more coal mines.

Australia’s Foreign Minister Penny Wong dismissed the concerns, saying the government could not be held responsible for emissions in other countries which purchase coal and gas. “Australia has to reduce its emissions, but the whole world—if we are going to combat sea level rise, temperature rising—the whole world will

have to peak and reduce emissions,” she said.

New Zealand is similarly moving to grant new oil and gas permits. While Luxon promised to contribute a paltry \$20 million to the Pacific Resilience Facility, the recently sunk HMNZS Manawanui was still leaking fuel on a Samoan reef. The livelihoods of people living along the coastline hang in the balance amid the risk of contamination from the wreck of the NZ navy vessel. Urgent clean-up operations were “scaled down” last week in deference to the summit.

The statement issued by CHOGM on the climate declared the leaders remained “concerned with the severe consequences of the climate crisis, including rising temperatures and sea levels.” It claimed to recommit “to urgent, ambitious and collective climate action and mitigation,” but with a rider recognising “differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.” In other words, a “get out of gaol” card for Australia, New Zealand and other major emitters whose capitalist economies are tied up with extractive industries.

The CHOGM communiqué also made no commitments to do anything in response to calls from African and Caribbean leaders for Britain and other European powers to pay financial compensation for slavery.

Under capitalism, any “reparations” scheme, even if it were implemented, would inevitably benefit only an elite minority in the countries affected by slavery, where the vast majority of the population would remain impoverished and oppressed.

King Charles used his opening speech at CHOGM to quash such calls, hypocritically declaring: “none of us can change the past, but we can commit ... to learning its lessons.” In fact, the ruling classes of Britain, the US and the other imperialist powers are seeking to reimpose colonial domination across the world, including through genocidal war in the Middle East and far-advanced preparations to carve up Russia and China.



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