

US-backed Pacific Policing Initiative directed against China

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On December 10, Australian government officials and a large contingent of Pacific Islands police chiefs formally opened the Brisbane headquarters of a new multi-national police force created for deployment across the Pacific in response to civil unrest, natural disasters, transnational crime and major events.

The Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) was declared operational just 17 months after the chiefs agreed to it in 2023. At the Pacific Islands Forum in Tonga last August, political leaders from 18 member countries, under pressure from Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, backed the far-reaching project despite concerns that it could escalate confrontation with China and fuel tensions in the region.

US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell, who participated in the 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. Australia and its allies are locked in a geo-strategic contest for influence with Beijing, including over security and policing.

A key objective of Australia's 2017 foreign policy white paper was "to integrate Pacific countries into the Australian and New Zealand economies and our security institutions." Aiming to be the Pacific's so-called "security partner of choice," Canberra and Wellington have coordinated with Washington to extend policing and security agreements across the contested region.

The PPI involves the formation of multi-country police units, with up to 200 officers, trained and led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). The AFP prepared the project over two years with the involvement of Tonga's Police Commissioner Shane McLennan, an Australian who served in the AFP for 14 years.

The "state of the art" hub in Brisbane will bring in rotations of Pacific officers for training and to prepare for deployments. A series of satellite "centres of excellence" are being set up in Samoa, Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji to

form a regional network. Canberra has allocated \$A400 million over five years for the project.

The PPI's website boasts that the initiative "has the potential to be transformational for Pacific policing" and will ensure that the forces "have the capability they need to meet current and future internal and regional security requirements, and to respond together quickly in times of need." There is no sign however of any deployment for the outfit to assist with the crisis in Vanuatu following its devastating earthquake on December 17.

Twenty officers from the Pacific Policing Support Group had their first outing amid a display of military might, including several naval ships plus police and soldiers from 21 countries, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Samoa in October. Albanese hosted a formal event to mark the group's initial deployment, delivering a thinly veiled warning against any security agreements with China, declaring; "The Pacific family needs to provide security for the Pacific, by the Pacific, and that's what this initiative is about."

Pacific nations including Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Kiribati and Vanuatu have existing policing arrangements with Beijing to provide training and equipment. A security and policing deal signed with China by the Solomon Islands government of Manasseh Sogavare in 2022 prompted threats of a US-Australia regime change operation if China moved to establish a military presence there.

While seeking to lock out China, a key aspect is the PPI's anticipated role as a rapid deployment force for police-military interventions against civil unrest. The local ruling elites are well aware that the violent uprising that began in May in New Caledonia, following riots in Papua New Guinea last January, could spark similar rebellions across the impoverished region, where living standards are being ground down by inflation and deepening inequality.

Following a PIF leaders' fact finding mission to Nouméa in October, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, who has agreed to host a PPI facility, said a "peacekeeping mission" could be deployed to "quell tension" in New Caledonia,

modelled on Australia's neo-colonial Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which from 2003–2017 occupied and ran the country.

In 2021 a Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF) was then formed amid a violent coup attempt by US-backed forces from the province of Malaita. The intervention was dominated by Australian military and police, with some 100 soldiers and 140 AFP officers deployed alongside security personnel from New Zealand and several Pacific countries.

At the December flag-raising ceremony in Brisbane, PNG Police Commissioner David Manning, who chairs the PPI design steering committee, said that the initiative “provides a clear, effective, and agile mechanism to which we can support our Pacific family in times of need to uphold the law and maintain order in security.”

Samoan Police Minister Lefau Harry Schuster announced that the country would host the third “centre of excellence,” specializing in forensics alongside those in PNG and Fiji. It will be housed in the Samoan Police Academy built by China which opened in June. Schuster commended participating forces for operationalising the initiative so quickly, joking that usually “the ‘Pacific way’ takes a long time, we talk and talk and talk.”

Manning alluded to some of the “issues” in deploying foreign police throughout the region, noting that the 22 nations and territories were “close to completing the guiding legal framework around Pacific Island countries to be able to tap into this.”

Benar News observed that the constitutional difficulties of deploying foreign police are “well known to Manning” after PNG’s highest court ruled two decades ago that the presence of Australian Federal Police there was illegal. “That incident alone has taught us many lessons,” Manning said, claiming changes had been made to the group’s constitution and relevant national legislation to receive assistance and deploy to other countries “lawfully.”

References to the “Pacific family” are window-dressing for sweeping operations designed to further imperialist control over the strategically significant region. This comes as the US, Australia and their allies pin down a series of neo-colonial security deals that trample over the sovereign rights of Pacific nations to determine their own foreign policies.

In November the Australian Labor government signed pacts with both Nauru and PNG. The Nauru agreement is almost identical to one the Albanese government signed with Tuvalu in November, under which Australia secured veto rights over all military, police, telecommunications and infrastructure agreements between the tiny Pacific state and any other country.

The PNG agreement, worth \$600 million over a decade, will see Australia subsidise the development of a PNG

National Rugby League (NRL) team to enter the lucrative Australian competition. The arrangement reportedly includes a clause that could scuttle PNG’s involvement in the NRL and all sporting subsidies if the country was to enter any security arrangements opposed by Canberra.

PNG’s Foreign Affairs Minister Justin Tkatchenko told the *Post Courier* that his government continued to hold to Australia as its “traditional partner by choice,” and that China would “never have a security agreement” with PNG. Acknowledging China’s importance as a “great trading partner,” Prime Minister James Marape claimed that the deal was “strategic” only in the sense that Australia and PNG both “belong to one region... in a world that is currently conflicted all over.”

In early December Albanese announced Canberra’s latest security agreement, this time with the Solomon Islands. It provides funding of \$A190 million over four years to help double the size of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force to 3,000 officers. The deal includes the establishment of a new police training centre in the capital, Honiara, as well as an expansion of Australia’s own policing presence.

The *Australian* on December 23 and the Lowy Institute both furiously denounced the agreement because it failed to explicitly exclude China’s ongoing presence in the country’s policing set-up. Vague references to Australia remaining the “partner of choice” in the Solomon Islands, declared the *Australian*, “falls short of a solid strategic commitment, the likes of which Australia is clearly seeking and has had measures of success with Tuvalu, Nauru and PNG, respectively.”

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