

Washington intervenes in Pacific Islands Forum

By Patrick O'Connor
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Washington dispatched an unprecedented number of senior officials to this year's Pacific Islands Forum leader's summit, held on Wednesday and Thursday in New Zealand. Deputy Secretary of State Tom Nides and Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell headed the delegation, which included about 50 personnel from the White House, Departments of State, Defence and Commerce, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Coast Guard and the Peace Corps.

The Obama administration's intervention into the Forum underscores its aggressive drive to bolster US hegemony in East Asia and the Pacific, and counter China's rising regional economic, military and strategic influence.

The Pacific Islands Forum comprises Australia, New Zealand and 14 Pacific Island nations, some of them micro-states with populations numbering in the thousands. Only a few years ago, Forum summits were of virtually no interest to any government outside the region—and held only marginal interest for many member states. Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard frequently chose not to attend, dispatching one of his ministers as a stand-in. US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell this week noted that six years ago, the US government sent just two officials to the event.

The situation is now very different. In addition to the large US delegation, senior international diplomats attended the Forum for the first time, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso. The Pacific Islands Forum now has 14 “dialogue partners”—the US, China, the European Union, France, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Britain—and many sent senior officials.

France dispatched its foreign minister, Alain Juppé, to

the event for the first time, while China sent Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai. *Kyodo News* last month cited Japanese government sources saying that their participation in this year's Forum would be “aimed at putting a brake on China's efforts to secure greater influence through the provision of economic aid to the island nations of the region.” East Timor's President Xanana Gusmao attended, as did representatives from other countries, including Hungary, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Spain and Finland. These governments are reportedly campaigning for votes for temporary membership of the UN Security Council.

The South Pacific, previously regarded as something of a strategic backwater, is now riven by great power rivalries, driven above all by China's growing presence. Beijing has massively expanded its aid to the region in the past decade, launched important investment projects, such as the \$1 billion Ramu nickel mine in Papua New Guinea, and developed military ties with Fiji, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. This has met with a sharp response from the Obama administration. US imperialism waged a series of bloody battles against Japan during World War II for control of the Pacific, and ever since has regarded the ocean as an “American lake.” Washington's current diplomatic offensive is aimed at maintaining its regional dominance, and forms part of a wider strategic orientation toward East Asia.

Deputy Secretary of State Nides declared that this year's Forum summit was “one of the most consequential meetings in the Pacific in decades.” He told reporters in New Zealand: “The President himself has asked us to come and be here to represent the United States... Without question, the President is very much focused on what we're doing in this region.”

Before attending the Forum, Assistant Secretary of State Campbell delivered a speech in Washington DC to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS),

a think tank with close ties to the US government. The CSIS recently established the “Pacific Partners Initiative”: the “first Washington-based policy and think tank forum dedicated to providing a sustained high-level policy focus on Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Island Countries.”

In his speech, Campbell referred to a recent one-week long tour of several Pacific countries that he and other senior diplomatic and military officials conducted. He explained: “One of the things that we have tried to do over the course of the last few years is do a comprehensive assessment, almost an accounting of where we stand in the Asian Pacific region... We’ve also been struck, frankly, as you travel through the Pacific, there are new indicators of changes in the geopolitical context. In almost every capital there are large new buildings and stadiums, many of them built either by China or Taiwan over the course of the last several years, more recently almost all by China.”

Campbell insisted that the US “welcomed” Chinese interest in the region. In New Zealand this week, Deputy Secretary of State Nides similarly attempted to deny the obvious fact that Washington is deeply concerned about China’s activities in the Pacific. “We look at our relationship with China [here] in the same way as we look at it around the world—that we are partners, we work together, and are very comfortable with our relationship,” he declared.

In reality, Washington welcomes Chinese “engagement” in the Pacific, as throughout Asia, only to the extent that Beijing entirely subordinates itself to the existing strategic and military framework maintained by the US.

During the Pacific Islands Forum’s public events, the US kept a low profile. Various “humanitarian” issues were promoted, including climate change, health, youth employment, women’s rights and “sustainable development.” Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard pledged an additional \$200 million in aid—a pittance compared to the real social needs of the impoverished countries—and promoted her decision to expand the agricultural “guest worker” scheme under which Pacific Islanders are exploited as cheap labour, picking fruit and doing other low-paid seasonal work in Australia.

On all issues of contention, as usual, the Australian and New Zealand governments dominated formal proceedings. Their officials drafted the communiqué that the Pacific Island governments were made sign. This included a statement that negotiations on the proposed

PACER Plus “free trade” deal, under which the Pacific states will have to dismantle all barriers to Australian and New Zealand corporations, “would also be progressed as matters of priority.”

Australia and New Zealand insisted that Fiji would remain suspended from the Forum. Several Pacific governments previously indicated they disagreed with this policy, but all again toed the line at the leader’s summit. The only change on the policy of isolating Fiji was to allow Fijian officials to participate in PACER Plus negotiations. This does not represent any let up in the sanctions regime but appears to reflect concerns in Canberra and Wellington that the trade deal will not be finalised without Fiji’s involvement.

The US previously indicated that it wanted to reach a rapprochement with the Fijian military government in order to counter China’s influence, but now appears to be backing Australia. American officials in New Zealand for the Forum expressed support for ongoing sanctions, and confirmed that a USAID regional base will be constructed in Papua New Guinea, rather than Fiji, as had been announced late last year.

Washington is nevertheless deeply concerned about Canberra’s inability to resolve the political crisis in Fiji. Ever since 1945, US imperialism has delegated responsibility to Australia for maintaining control of the South West Pacific and shutting out rival powers. Under this arrangement, Canberra has pursued its own predatory economic and strategic interests, including via several US-backed neo-colonial interventions such as the 2003 Solomon Islands takeover. Washington’s recent decision to directly intervene into Pacific politics represents an implicit rebuke of its junior ally for failing to prevent Beijing from gaining a strategic foothold.

The author recommends:

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[1 September 2011]

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[18 July 2011]

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