

Australian prime minister's Pacific visit reinforces militarist line up against China

By Mike Head
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Scott Morrison this week became the first Australian prime minister to visit neighbouring Vanuatu since 1990 or near-neighbour Fiji since 2006—and the previous trips were only to attend annual Pacific forums dominated by Australia and New Zealand.

This fact demonstrates the contempt that the Australian capitalist class has for the people of the small Pacific island states. It also points to the bullying nature of Canberra's turn to reassert its predatory interests, and that of Washington, against the rising influence of China.

The three-day trip was intended to reassure the military and corporate establishments of both the US and Australia that the government in Canberra is intent on militarily and strategically blocking China's activities across the Pacific.

At last November's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea (PNG), US Vice President Mike Pence launched a blunt attack on China and its policies throughout the region, including its "militarisation" of islets in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure plans for the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia.

In a lengthy private discussion with Morrison, Pence welcomed the Australian government's "assistance package" for the Pacific island states, announced ahead of the APEC meeting. The "step up" plan included \$1 billion to support Australian business operations in the region, \$2 billion in infrastructure loans, closer military ties, five new diplomatic missions and a push to get Australian broadcast media into the Pacific.

To boost the US and Australian military presence in the region, the US announced it would join Australia and PNG in establishing a naval base on Manus Island, off the PNG northern coast—blocking a Chinese proposal to build a port there. That followed the announcement last August by Morrison's predecessor Malcolm Turnbull, just before he was ousted, that Australia had outbid China in order to

fund a major regional military base, Blackrock Camp, in Fiji.

Successive US administrations have regarded the southwest Pacific as Australia's "patch" to police, as an integral part of the US dominance over the Pacific, established by its defeat of Japan in World War II. Washington has been increasingly concerned, however, that Australian governments have allowed China to gain financial and diplomatic influence in the region.

These concerns became more forceful under the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" to counter China, and intensified under Donald Trump, whose 2018 National Defense Strategy labelled China a "strategic competitor" that had to be combated, along with Russia.

There has been mounting agitation among Australia's strategic and corporate think tanks for the government to combat China's program of aid and loans in the southwest Pacific, which began to displace Australia's hegemony over the small states, which were mostly granted formal independence by Australia and New Zealand four decades ago.

Last November, a Lowy Institute report, entitled "Australia versus China in the South Pacific," declared: "Australia, which is already trying to balance its relations with China as an economic partner, and the US as a military ally, now finds itself contending with Beijing's ambitions on its doorstep."

Before embarking on this week's trip, Morrison told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that it was part of "our refocusing of our international efforts on our own region, in our own backyard." In Vanuatu and Fiji, Morrison arrogantly claimed that the region was a "family" that included Australia.

Morrison was accompanied by Australia's top intelligence chief, Office of National Intelligence director-general Nick Warner. Last year, Warner was central in insisting that Australia would build undersea

internet cables to PNG and Solomon Islands, effectively vetoing competing proposals from Chinese telecommunications company Huawei.

Warner has a long record of service to Australian imperialism, including as initial chief of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) military-police intervention, which effectively took over that state from 2003 to 2017. Later, he headed the Defence Department and the Australian Secret Intelligence Service (ASIS), the overseas spy agency.

Both the island state governments felt obliged to extend Morrison an officially warm welcome, but his efforts to tighten relations met resistance. Vanuatu Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu publicly dismissed an Australian request for a security treaty, saying there was no prospect of changing Vanuatu's "non-aligned" status.

Vanuatu's *Daily Post* reported that Australian officials had explicitly asked for a treaty during Vanuatu Prime Minister Charlot Salwai's visit to Canberra last year. On that visit, Salwai, who heads a shaky multi-party coalition, was forced by Turnbull to deny unsubstantiated reports that Vanuatu had been negotiating with China for the construction of a naval port.

Despite Reganvanu's statement, Morrison refused to back down. He told reporters such a treaty was a "live option" that "we're progressing."

Morrison offered nothing by way of economic assistance, except to lift restrictions on exports of kava, a mild narcotic commonly used in the Pacific, from Vanuatu. Apart from that, Morrison reiterated a 2018 announcement that Australia would train 300 Vanuatu police recruits.

In Fiji, Morrison and Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, a former military coup leader, put on a show of friendship. Bainimarama described the visit as an "historic step up" in the countries' relationship, which was ruptured in 2006 when Australia imposed sanctions on Fiji after the former naval commander seized power. Bainimarama countered with a "Look North" policy, seeking aid from China, Russia and elsewhere.

Morrison proclaimed a *vuvale* ("family") partnership, which the two prime ministers vaguely described as a "broad-ranging and comprehensive agreement that will pave the way for deeper security, economic and people-to-people links."

Morrison dismissed journalists' questions about the authoritarian nature of Bainimarama's government. But he offered Bainimarama little economically, except a "scoping study to identify ways to capitalise on the many

economic opportunities between our countries." Fiji will be granted entry into Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme, which permits agribusinesses to exploit Pacific islanders on temporary visas.

Bainimarama's hold on power is fragile. His Fiji First Party barely retained office with a 51.8 percent majority in elections last November, the results of which were subject to a legal challenge that was eventually dropped last month.

Anxious to display some independence, Bainimarama continued to refuse to join Pacer Plus, an Australian and New Zealand-dominated regional economic pact. He also urged Australia to shift away from coal and other fossil fuels in order to curb the impact of climate change and rising sea levels on the low-lying Pacific islands. Morrison flatly dismissed the call.

One striking feature of Morrison's trip was that the language he used closely matched that of Labor Party leader Bill Shorten in delivering a speech to the Lowy Institute last November. Shorten said Australia had to "turn up" in the Pacific, and strengthen military ties, to avoid "forfeiting" what he called "the Blue Continent" underscoring its global geo-strategic significance.

Shorten said this orientation was essential as part of Labor's "anchor" commitment to the US alliance, with the Trump administration wanting America's allies to "contribute more" to the "global order."

Whichever party heads the next Australian government after elections due by mid-May, there is a bipartisan agreement that the Australia must be on the frontline of the US confrontation with China, including across the Pacific, and that the Pacific states must be subordinated to that assignment.

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