



SEMAPHORE

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Association of Australia and New Zealand



US Expands Pacific Reach

An increasing United States Coast Guard presence is being observed in the Pacific, as local “ship rider” and potentially greater-empowering agreements are helping secure the country’s maritime law enforcement role in the region.

According to *Reuters* reportage at the end of June, the Coast Guard had patrolled nine of the 12 Pacific Island nations with which it has a ship rider agreement during the year to date. Such agreements are understood to enable local law officers to travel on Coast Guard vessels as they conduct patrols within that country’s exclusive economic zone.

Moreover, the Coast Guard is now reportedly seeking “ship boarding” agreements with Pacific nations, so as “to allow United States officials to board and search foreign vessels in their waters without a local official present”. The Federated States of Micronesia is said to be the first nation to sign on for such operations on its behalf.

In the middle of 2022, United States President Biden signed the National Security Memorandum on Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing and Associated Labor Abuses.

Under that initiative, United States engagement with Pacific nations is being seen in some quarters as a means to directly counter China’s security ambitions in the region. China has recently established closer ties with both the Solomon Islands and Vanuata, and is equally being seen as seeking to increase its security and fishing roles in the Pacific.



United States Coast Guard cutter Oliver Henry which in April completed a 30-day expeditionary patrol in support of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency’s Operation 365 and Operation Rematau to reportedly “stop illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing in the Pacific”

Visit from High-Level United States Delegation

Further reflecting the United States' ambitions for the region, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji recently hosted a high-level delegation consisting of:

- National Security Council Indo-Pacific Co-ordinator Kurt Campbell
- United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Assistant Administrator for Asia Michael Schiffer
- United States Coast Guard 14th District Commander RADM Michael Day
- Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Mark Lambert
- Special Envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Ambassador Frankie Reed.

According to a White House statement, the delegation met with the Prime Ministers of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji in addition to senior government officials, members of the political opposition, and partner countries in the region.

“Throughout the trip, the United States emphasised its commitment to the Pacific Islands and the important role Pacific nations play in ensuring a free, open and resilient Indo-Pacific,” it stated.

“Discussions centred around the importance of meeting the needs of the Pacific Islanders where they are, supporting capacity building efforts in the areas of education, healthcare, climate, and fishing, and furthering collaboration on the Partners in the Blue Pacific.”

In Papua New Guinea, the delegation reportedly discussed the next steps to finalising a ship rider agreement and Defense Co-operation Agreement.

“Both sides emphasised the importance of deepening bilateral ties to bolster collaboration on critical issues such as combating illegal fishing, protecting maritime resources, and strengthening health infrastructure.”

The visit to the Solomon Islands, which followed that country hosting the United States in April last year, reportedly saw the nations hold their first high-level strategic dialogue.

“[Representatives discussed] a range of issues important to both sides, including protection of maritime resources, economic development and education. The dialogue resulted in commitments to establish a technical assistance workshop and explore an education initiative with Solomon Islands National University, among other items. The second session of the dialogue will be held later this year.”

In Vanuatu, Prime Minister Kalsakau reportedly emphasised the importance of the United States presence in the region and the desire to work with the United States and other like-minded nations in combating climate change and building capacity to combat illegal fishing and protect maritime resources.

“USAID announced an additional US\$3.2 million in humanitarian assistance to support relief efforts following the Cyclones Judy and Kevin. The United States has also allocated funds to build an intensive care unit at Vila Central Hospital which will allow the hospital to provide additional healthcare services. Moreover, the two countries committed to explore the establishment of a United States embassy in Port Vila as part of United States efforts to demonstrate long-term commitment to the region.”

In Fiji, the delegation is understood to have met with the PIF Secretariat to discuss the Partners of the Blue Pacific (PBP) and how the PBP can work to support the PIF and the region's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

“In meetings with Prime Minister Rabuka and Fijian Government officials, the two sides discussed the importance of further enhancing the United States-Fiji relationship to support regional capacity building in the areas of protecting marine resources, resilience to climate change, and broadening economic and educational opportunities. The two sides also discussed ways to counter illegal activities such as illegal fishing and trafficking of narcotics.”

It is understood the delegation's New Zealand meetings were with the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

"Officials discussed the importance of co-ordinating efforts in the Pacific. The two sides expressed interest in establishing a working group to discuss emerging technologies and areas for future collaboration."

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