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### **US-China relations**

## US employs 'tuna politics' to resist China's Pacific push

Kamala Harris warns island nations of 'bad actors' after promising more aid to the region



US vice-president Kamala Harris addresses the Pacific Island Forum in Suva by video link on Wednesday © Ben McKay/AAP Image

**Nic Fildes** in Suva and **Demetri Sevastopulo** in Washington 5 HOURS AGO

The US has signed a vital fishing agreement with a group of Pacific Islands that will help strengthen security ties in Oceania to counter China's campaign for influence in the region.

Vice-president Kamala Harris appeared by video link at the Pacific Islands Forum in Suva on Wednesday as she detailed a [renewed diplomatic push](#) into the region as well as \$60mn a year of new aid, fishing and development measures.

She also called for unity in the Pacific Islands with tensions running high following the decision by the Solomon Islands to sign a security pact with China in April.

“At a time when we see bad actors seeking to undermine the rules-based order, we must stand united,” Harris said, in what delegates understood as a pointed reference to China.

The renewed treaty on tuna fishing in the region was originally signed 32 years ago and was due to expire at the end of the year. The agreement was described as unique because it provided the US with a forum to deal with 14 countries in the region on a multilateral basis.

Semi Koroilavesau, Fiji's fisheries minister and chair of the PIF's fishing body, told the Financial Times that striking the agreement would allow subsidiary measures

around climate change and maritime security to be negotiated. “It’s tuna politics,” he said.

The appearance of [Harris](#) proved to be provocative, though. The PIF had requested that only member countries attend the conference so that the leaders could discuss regional issues including climate change and illegal fishing.

An attempt by China to organise a conference in Suva alongside the PIF — a month after it [failed to sign](#) a regionwide security pact in the Pacific — was also rejected.

Tess Newton Cain, an analyst with the Griffith Asia Institute think-tank, said Harris’s speech would provide China’s foreign ministry with an “open goal” to criticise and undermine the PIF at a time when the bloc’s unity had been shaken by the withdrawal of Kiribati from the Suva conference.

“It looks strategically inept,” she said. “Maybe [the PIF] want to send a signal but it is not a fully articulated position.”

Despite not being delegates either, Chinese embassy staff wearing *bula* shirts, a traditional top worn by Pacific Island men, were spotted in the main meeting room listening to the Harris address.

The renewed push by the US into the Pacific has been a hallmark of the Biden administration. Harris said the islands “may have not received the diplomatic attention and support they deserve” in recent years.

Frank Bainimarama, Fiji’s prime minister, described the US proposal — which still requires approval from Congress — as a “powerful commitment” for the region. “The US is clearly looking more like the Pacific partner we have always held it to be,” he said.

Anthony Albanese, Australia’s prime minister, said in Suva that the US commitment was in line with broader regional attempts to counter China’s growing influence in the region. “The message is very clear. The US has a presence in the Pacific and has for a very long time,” he said.

Albanese argued that Australia’s relations with its neighbours frayed during the tenure of his predecessor, Scott Morrison, culminating in the security pact signed between China and the Solomon Islands.

“We quite clearly said that we had a Pacific ‘step up’. I described what happened earlier this year as a Pacific stuff up. We hadn’t paid enough attention,” he told reporters in Suva.

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Albanese will formally meet Manasseh Sogavare, the prime minister of the Solomon Islands, for the first time in Suva on Wednesday and will raise the security pact and the prospect of a permanent Chinese police presence in Honiara with his counterpart. “We don’t think that is in the interest of the region,” he said.

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