

The United States has a problem with systems, not summits

by Nic Maclellan

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US Secretary of State Blinken, not President Biden, arrives in Papua New Guinea, 22 May 2023

Photo Credit: Department of Prime Minister & NEC/Facebook

United States President Joe Biden has hit the headlines after pulling out of a three-hour summit with Pacific leaders in Port Moresby. But the furore over Biden's no-show overshadows a more serious problem.

The Biden administration's biggest challenge in the Pacific islands isn't coming from Beijing – it's coming from Washington DC. The US Congress routinely fails to appropriate funds to implement pledges made to island nations at regional summits, and the US bureaucracy seems too cumbersome to adapt to the capacities and priorities of small island developing states.

Of course, it takes time to move through the development assistance cycle, from policy development to Cabinet decision, then parliamentary approval, budget allocation, consultation with partners, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. But there are far too many examples of US rhetoric failing to translate into action on the ground. Such failures are systematic and the problem dates back decades (some of us are old enough to remember George H.W. Bush's Joint Commercial Commission, which tried but failed to promote US trade and corporate investment in the Pacific islands).

The last time a US President failed to turn up to a summit in Papua New Guinea was November 2018, when Donald J. Trump declined to attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' summit (in contrast to Xi Jinping, who met with island leaders in Port Moresby).

In the absence of his boss, then Vice President Mike Pence announced a US-led PNG Electrification Partnership (PEP), designed as an alternative to infrastructure funding from China's Belt and Road initiative. The **US\$1.7 billion PEP agreement** between the United States, Australia, Japan and New Zealand pledged to support PNG's target of connecting 70% of the population to the electricity grid by 2030. It

was a bold commitment, given the many challenges of logistics, land tenure and community engagement involved in PNG development programs.

Since then, Australia and Papua New Guinea have allocated funds to pilot off-grid electrification projects in remote areas, but a [2021 study of the PEP](#) noted that “more than two years since the Partnership’s announcement, there is little clarity around the basic structure and operational integrity of the Partnership. It is fair to suggest that the Partnership – or what exists of it so far in terms of ad hoc partner initiatives – provides little confidence in its potential to build a cohesive long-term strategy to achieve the PNG government’s electrification target by 2030”.

Five years after the summit announcement, little has been achieved by PNG’s PEP partners to build concrete achievements on the ground. Researchers from the [PNG National Research Institute](#) argue that “ineffective coordination among key stakeholders and delayed implementation of the PNG Electrification Partnership are posing a formidable threat to progressing energy reform in PNG”.

This has not deterred further headline grabbing announcements from the US government. When President Biden invited Pacific Islands Forum leaders to last September’s unprecedented US-Pacific summit in the White House, he announced a new plan to expand PEP across the whole Pacific islands region! This renewed pledge, however, was allocated a meagre US\$18 million in funding “subject to Congressional notification and domestic procedures”.

This is a problem, because the US Congress routinely fails to step up. At his 2021 Climate Action Summit, President Biden also pledged to double America’s annual public climate finance to developing countries by 2024. As part of this goal, Biden said he wanted to triple the amount committed to climate adaptation, by next year! While the Biden administration’s August 2022 Inflation Reduction Act allocates massive domestic investment on climate programs and renewable technology within the United States, it did not include finance for the Green Climate Fund (GCF), climate adaptation or loss and damage in developing nations.

Last December, the [US Congress passed a US\\$1.7 trillion omnibus bill](#) that included just \$270 million for climate adaptation programs across the globe, with “language recommending no less than \$20 million for climate resilient development and climate mitigation and adaptation efforts in the Pacific Islands”. The White House also sought a US\$1.6 billion package for the GCF, but Congress refused to allocate anything to the global climate finance mechanism, used by many island states. This year, Biden has again asked for GCF funds in 2024 financial year, but this money is unlikely to emerge from the current chaotic debt ceiling negotiations.

At last July's Pacific Islands Forum in Fiji, US Vice President Kamala Harris was the only development partner invited to make an online address to Forum leaders. Harris pledged to triple funding for the US-Pacific South Pacific Tuna Treaty, allocating US\$60 million a year over the next decade, "subject to Congressional approval". At the press conference announcing the deal, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman assured journalists that Congress would deliver. However the US\$600 million commitment was not included in last December's omnibus funding package, [despite its importance for the Forum Fisheries Agency](#). Nearly a year after the summit pledge, [Sherman is retiring](#) from the US diplomatic corps, and this crucial funding package still hasn't been approved by the US Congress.

When it wants to, the US government can mobilise massive human, financial and institutional resources, as shown by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the bailout of banks during the 2008-09 financial crisis, today's technology competition with China and the NATO mobilisation against Russian aggression in Ukraine. Despite this, many US institutions are clearly ill-equipped to engage with small island developing states, despite their strategic importance.

Some US diplomats and politicians understand that the lack of follow through is causing concern amongst island leaders (especially as the US electoral cycle is heading towards a Biden-Trump presidential contest that will dominate the next 18 months). Hawai'i Congressman Ed Case is a co-founder of the Pacific Islands Caucus within the US legislature. In a [recent interview](#), Case acknowledged that lack of consistency and predictability in US programs might damage regional relations: "I acknowledge the anxiety in the Pacific islands about whether our engagement will last, and whether they can depend on us as full and consistent partners. I'm not going to deny that anxiety. Clearly the challenge is on us to prove that anxiety incorrect."

This week's summit chaos is not a good sign, even as the US works to improve co-ordination with Quad partners and routinely pledges support for the Pacific Islands Forum. In 2022, the Biden administration created the "[Partners in the Blue Pacific](#)", to co-ordinate development assistance policy with Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the United Kingdom. However this unilateral initiative, undertaken without proper consultation with the Forum Secretariat and island leaders, was [widely criticised as undercutting regional institutions and priorities](#).

The September 2021 announcement of the AUKUS partnership once again came without warning – let alone consultation – with island politicians. Despite the muffled assent for AUKUS from some Pacific leaders, many island communities are angered by AUKUS and its nuclear programs, scarred by the radioactive legacies of Cold War nuclear testing. Despite AUKUS pledges of respect for the 1985

Rarotonga Treaty for a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ), the United States is the only major nuclear weapons power that has **failed to ratify the three SPNFZ protocols**, unlike Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom. In May 2011, President Barack Obama formally requested the US Senate to ratify these protocols. Twelve years later, nothing has progressed.

As the AUKUS partners prepare to deploy US nuclear submarines to Western Australia and construct a new generation of nuclear-powered vessels, Forum leaders will likely discuss the Rarotonga Treaty when they gather next November for their annual summit in – you guessed it – Rarotonga.

The Congressional gridlock that blocks ratification of the SPNFZ treaty highlights a broader problem. The US government is notorious for refusing to ratify international treaties – it's literally the only country in the world that has refused to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Despite rhetoric about the “rules-based order”, Washington won't ratify many global agreements of central importance for the Pacific, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Given repeated US pledges of support for Pacific Island states, this is a systematic problem in Washington that more summits won't resolve.

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