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# US-China rivalry on display at gathering of Pacific Islands leaders

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Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele, Tongan Prime Minister Hu'akavameiliku and Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Baron Waqa lead a meeting on Aug. 30, 2024, in Nuku'alofa, Tonga. The PFI rebuffed moves led by China ally Solomon Islands to sideline Taiwan.

WASHINGTON — Efforts by Beijing to limit Taiwan's participation in the recently concluded Pacific Islands Forum underscore the intense and ongoing tug-of-war between Western democracies and China for influence in the region, analysts say.

During the Pacific Islands Forum, or PIF, which wrapped up Friday, Beijing ally Solomon Islands tried unsuccessfully to block Taiwan from future participation. Then, on Saturday, the PIF removed a reference to Taiwan in its final communique after Beijing's top Pacific diplomat expressed outrage at its inclusion.

The communique originally reaffirmed a 30-year-old agreement allowing Taiwan to take part in the PIF. That wording was later removed. Beijing's communist leaders insist that democratically ruled Taiwan is a part of China and have worked for decades to limit the island's participation in international organizations.

After the references to Taiwan were removed, Taiwan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Saturday, "Taiwan issued the strongest condemnation on China's arbitrary intervention and unreasonable actions that undermine regional peace and stability."

However, the ministry said the revision did not undermine Taiwan's status at the forum or prevent it from participating in the future.

Asia Group senior adviser Kathryn Paik, who helped lead the creation of the first U.S.-Pacific Islands Forum Summit while at the U.S. National Security Council, said that while Taiwan's status as a development partner is still solid, what happened highlights the intensity of Beijing's efforts in the region.

"China has made gaining access and influence in the Pacific a top priority in recent years, sending savvy diplomats to the region. In fact, China currently has vastly more diplomats on the ground in more countries than the United States, outnumbering the U.S. in almost every location," Paik told VOA. "The pushback on the Solomon Islands' attempt — which was transparently an attempt by China — to remove Taiwan as a development partner to the PIF demonstrated the high regard that many nations have for Taiwan's contributions to Pacific development."

PIF officials did not explain why Taiwan was removed from the communique but stressed that the PIF would continue to welcome Taiwan at its regional meetings.



The flags of participating countries are displayed at the annual Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting in Nuku'alofa, Tonga, on Aug. 26, 2024.

Nikkei Asia reported that Chinese Special Envoy for the Pacific Qian Bo told reporters Friday the reference was “a mistake” that “should be corrected.”

"Taiwan is part of China. Taiwan is not a dialogue partner of PIF, so China has the representation on behalf of the whole China, including Taiwan and the mainland," Qian said.

VOA reached out to the Chinese Embassy in Washington and the Solomon Islands for comment but has yet to receive a response.

### **Partnership through 2027**

On Sunday, Taiwan announced an agreement with the Pacific Islands to extend the development partnership through 2027, according to a Foreign Ministry statement.

The statement also highlighted programs Taiwan has supported in the Pacific Islands, efforts that have focused on areas such as agriculture, education, medical care, communications technology, women's empowerment and basic infrastructure.

Commenting Tuesday on China's efforts at the PIF, the U.S. State Department backed Taiwan's continued right to attend regional meetings.

"The PRC's efforts to pressure Pacific Island countries to remove this reference fit a pattern of PRC coercion to constrain Taiwan's international position," a State Department spokesperson told VOA, using an abbreviation of the country's formal name, the People's Republic of China. "Taiwan is a highly capable, engaged, democratic and responsible member of the global community."

### **US Pacific territories**

While China and the United States maintain status as partner nations in the PIF, U.S. territories Guam and American Samoa were granted status as associate members during last week's meetings. Although they do not have voting rights, they will be able to provide speakers at plenary sessions and nominate members to PIF working groups.

"The United States supports the U.S. Pacific territories' increased participation in the PIF and greater connectivity with PIF members," a State Department spokesperson told VOA.

The Asia Group's Paik said that having two U.S. territories "more tightly knit into the Pacific community" further reinforces that the U.S. is a Pacific nation and opens opportunities for the U.S. to influence decision-making at the forum.

Ivan Kanapathy, a former deputy senior director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council, agrees.

"This will provide more allied voices and reduce PRC influence, which often relies on elite capture," said Kanapathy, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University.

He added: "Washington must convince the region that it is willing to impose real costs on Beijing — more than just diplomatic statements."

*Some information for this report came from Reuters.*