



By: TA | AP Insight

Australia expands defense partnerships to counter China in the Pacific



Australia and Fiji on Monday signed a new bilateral defense alliance in a second major diplomatic win within a year for Australian Prime Minister **Anthony Albanese** against Chinese influence in the South Pacific.

Chinese official media later reported a Chinese submarine had test-launched a long-range ballistic missile in the South Pacific, a move criticized by Australia.

Albanese and his Fijian counterpart, **Sitiveni Rabuka**, signed the Ocean of Peace Alliance in Fiji's capital, Suva.

They also signed an economic treaty, the Vuvale Union, under which Australia will invest more than 1 billion Australian dollars (\$693 million) in its island neighbor over a decade.

The alliance is Fiji's first mutual defense treaty. It is Australia's fourth, following a treaty with the United States and New Zealand signed in 1951 and the bilateral treaty signed with Papua New Guinea last year.

"The Ocean of Peace Alliance introduces a mutual defense obligation and there's no higher obligation than to come to each other's aid at a time of need," Albanese told reporters.

Rabuka did not expect a negative reaction from Beijing to the new treaties.

"I do not expect China to have any severe pushback on either government. And I believe that they will welcome the understanding that is between Australia and Fiji," Rabuka told reporters.

"It does not threaten Fiji's relationship with China nor Australia's relationship with China," he added.

China's rapid military buildup

The Chinese missile launched Monday was tested as part of routine training and carried a dummy warhead, according to the Xinhua News Agency.

China last conducted a missile test in the Pacific two years ago, then firing an **intercontinental ballistic missile** with a dummy warhead.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong, who was in Fiji for the signing, did not comment on whether China had attempted to send a message by launching the missile on the same day as the security treaty was signed.

"I'll leave China to speak to its intent," Wong told reporters.

Australia has been clear with China that we regard this as destabilizing to the region - Penny Wong

Wong said Beijing had informed her government in advance of the launch. She spoke before the launch was confirmed.

"Australia has been clear with China that we regard this as destabilizing to the region," she said.

"Australia has been clear that this ... proposed test is in the context of a rapid military buildup by China which is lacking in the transparency and reassurance as to intent that the region expects," she added.

In Beijing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning told reporters that the test launch was a routine military arrangement and that it was not directed at any specific country.

"We hope that the relevant countries will avoid overinterpretation," Mao said.

Asked about the defense pact between Australia and Fiji, she said China's cooperation with Pacific island nations has always adhered to the principles of mutual respect and equality and that it does not seek political self-interest.

"We hope relevant countries will genuinely respect the independence and autonomy of

the island nations, focus on their sustainable economic and social development and refrain from targeting or harming the interests of third parties,” she said.

The security partner of choice in the region

Australia has been attempting to shore up its role as the security partner of choice in the region since 2022 when China struck a **secretive security treaty** with the Solomon Islands.

That deal raised fears of a Chinese naval base being built in the South Pacific.



The Australian defense treaty with Papua New Guinea, the country's nearest neighbor, takes effect Wednesday - James Marape

Albanese will fly to the Solomons on Tuesday to meet with his counterpart Matthew Wale after the two nations agreed to further discussions on a security pact.

Wale said while visiting Australia last month that his new government would **review the deal with Beijing**.

On Wednesday, Albanese will host Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape and Tongan Prime Minister Fatafehi Fakafānua in the Australian city of Brisbane.

The Australian defense treaty with Papua New Guinea, the country's nearest neighbor, takes effect Wednesday.

Australia and Vanuatu last week signed a long-awaited bilateral security and economic treaty that prevents China creating a military base on that island nation.

Albanese signed the so-called Nakamal Agreement with his Vanuatu counterpart, Jotham Napat, in the Australian capital nine months after the Vanuatuan government rejected an earlier draft. Vanuatu had feared the deal would limit its ability to attract infrastructure investment.

China expressed concern last week that the Nakamal Agreement may be targeted at Beijing.