



Alarm Bells Ringing: The Planned Security Pact Between Solomon Islands and China

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Abstract

Closer security ties between Solomon Islands and China with the prospect of a Chinese run maritime port in Australia's backyard will be of geopolitical importance to the Pacific region and a strategic challenge for Australia.

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Analysis

Australian and New Zealand government officials are alarmed at Solomon Islands' security deal with China which was inked on March 31 and had been leaked a few days ago. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of the Solomon Islands was adamant about his government being able to cut a deal and did not want to divulge any details. The Office of the Prime Minister stated: "Addressing Parliament on the Security treaty with China Prime Minister Sogavare said the deal was not a secret deal but a sovereign issue by a sovereign nation that has the (Solomon Islands) national interest at heart."

It follows a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China on policing cooperation which was signed on March 18. The leaked document states that "Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property." It gives China the possibility to provide "assistance on other tasks" and requires confidentiality: "Neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to a third party." The security cooperation provides for Chinese naval ships to carry out logistical replenishments in Solomon Islands. Even though there had been no indication from China's side about any additional move, this has fuelled frantic speculation in neighbouring countries that the MOU could be a step in the direction to build a Chinese military base in the Pacific. PM Sogavare, however, insisted: "We are not pressured in any way by our new friends and there is no intention whatsoever to ask China to build a military base in the Solomon Islands."

The implications for the Pacific region security situation could be far reaching. Solomon Islands being about 1700 miles away from Australia's east coast, politicians and commentators in Australia and New Zealand are concerned that such a security pact could give China the possibility to establish a military base and to send PLA forces into the heart of the Pacific region. They are also concerned that China could block vital shipping routes and be able to gather regional intelligence. Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton stated on TV: "...we don't want pressure and extortion rolled out from China." And the Australian opposition leader Anthony Albanese seconded with unusual unanimity: This is "an issue that has serious implications for Australia". New Zealand's Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said: "... developments within this purported agreement could destabilise the current institutions and arrangements that have long underpinned the Pacific region's security. This would not benefit New Zealand or our Pacific neighbours." On a side note: as a long-time member of the Five Eyes intelligence network, New Zealand must have been embarrassed about the surprise revelations of the China-Solomons agreement as its main surveillance activity is directed against its close partners, the Pacific Island countries.

China's Global Times, however, lamented a "hegemonic and colonial mentality" in Australia. "Military expert Song Zhongping believes Australia is 'experiencing persecutory delusions' in which whatever China does in the South Pacific region will be portrayed as 'threats' to Australia. This won't help Australia win the trust of the island countries in the region, but will only expose Australia's hysterical and ugly face..." (March 28, 2022).

As to reactions from other member countries of the Pacific Island Forum, only President of the Federated States of Micronesia, Panuelo, implored his Solomon Islands counterpart: "The Federated States of Micronesia cannot endorse or agree if your decision is to proceed with a security relationship with the People's Republic of China,



because of its far-reaching and grave security implications for our harmonious and peaceful Blue Pacific Continent.” Micronesia is presently re-negotiating its Compact of Free Association with the US.

To present a wider picture: Solomon Islands belongs to the Melanesian sub-region in the south west Pacific Ocean with some 1000 islands comprising of nine main island groups and an estimated population of 720 000. Timber and tuna fishing are its main exports and – in spite of undeveloped resources such as nickel, gold and zinc – it remains one of Asia’s poorest nations with a high unemployment rate. Australia is the main development partner with AUS \$ 174 million (2019-20) Official Development Assistance. Both countries have signed in 2018 a security agreement covering the deployment of Australian police and armed forces to Solomon Islands.

In September 2019, the re-elected government of PM Sogavare decided to upgrade its relations with the People’s Republic of China at the expense of its long-term political and economic connections with Taiwan and switched allegiance from Taiwan to China – similar to its fellow Pacific nation Kiribati. It was expected that economic and political cooperation with China would subsequently increase. In October 2019, a Chinese company leased for 75 years Tulagi Island, the pre-war seat of the Solomon Islands British colonial government. It was expected that economic and political cooperation with China would subsequently increase. Certainly, there was then also concern by some about a possible dual use (civilian as well as military) of Tulagi by the Chinese. One of the Solomon Island provinces, the island of Malaita, which has a history of disputes with the main island Guadalcanal, however, continued to support Taiwan with its Premier prohibiting Chinese companies in Malaita and receiving US aid. The subsequent riots which erupted in the capital Honiara on the Guadalcanal Island in November 2021, had a number of reasons: perceived unequal distribution of resources amongst the provinces, especially Malaita, unemployment and poverty, animosity against Chinese in the country and a list of grievances by the opposition against the Sogavare government such as the logging industry’s wealth extraction. Unable to control the situation, the Solomon Islands government requested help from abroad. Australia deployed police and army personnel under the bilateral security treaty and New Zealand, Fiji and PNG sent peacekeepers. The situation has since calmed down. One was somewhat reminded of the 14-year long multinational Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) 2003-2017 which also followed unrest in the country.

Now, following the revelations about the security pact with China, there are calls to increase Australia’s “Step-up” aid programme with the Pacific which was de facto reduced in recent years, to become more engaged with Solomon Islands and improve the economic situation to counter a growing Chinese influence. In terms of development assistance to the Pacific, China is lagging behind Australia, New Zealand and other countries. But closer security Solomon Islands-China ties and the prospect of a Chinese run maritime port in Australia’s backyard could present an additional strategic headache for a country which has become a member of the US-led defence alliance Aukus only six months ago.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by *ThinkChina*, Singapore, 1 April 2022.

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