

# DEMOCRACY, SECURITY AND HEGEMONIC RIVALRY IN MELANESIA

*The article surveys the political scene in the Melanesian Pacific region and highlights the intense strategic rivalry that pits the United States and its allies, Australia and New Zealand, against the People's Republic of China. The latter has expanded its sphere of influence in the area, particularly in the Solomon Islands and Fiji, prompting Quad member-nations to increase their assistance to, and presence in Melanesia as part of their Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy*

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**T**he island states of the South Pacific—composed of three regions, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia—seldom engage democracy scholars. Aside from the four Melanesian countries they have tiny populations and territories, and most have been consolidated democracies since they became independent in the late 1970s and 80s. The four Melanesian countries are set apart not only by their larger territories and populations but also by their growing strategic significance in the great power competition unfolding in the South Pacific. Among them, the Solomon Islands, the only sizable Pacific Island state on the United Nations’ “Least Developed Countries” list, is uniquely vulnerable to foreign interference and security challenges.

This essay contends that the Solomons have seen the erosion of their sovereignty and democratic standards since 2019, when its government switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The country’s recent history plainly illustrates Beijing’s growing economic and political pressure concomitant with the shrinking influence of its traditional Western allies, Australia and the United States. Developments in the security realm highlight these trends. The experience of other Melanesian countries suggests how and why the states of the region may be able to protect their

sovereignty while also benefiting from both Western and Chinese aid and investment projects.

Countries of Melanesia	Year of Independence	Population (2023)	Land Area (sqm)	Transparency Int'l. Corruption Score	GDP/PPP (2022) World Bank/US\$
Fiji	1970	936,375	7,056	52/100	14,632
Papua New Guinea	1975	10,332,931	178,700	29/100	4,433
Solomon Islands	1978	740,424	11,740	43/100	2,655
Vanuatu	1980	334,506	4,706	48/100	3,291

Sources: Corruption perception score: <https://www.transparency.org/en> (2023)

GDP/PPP per capita: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=IW>

### THE SOLOMONS' FRAGILE DEMOCRACY

The Solomon Islands are made up of six larger islands and more than 900 smaller ones of which one-sixth are inhabited. The two most populous islands are Malaita and Guadalcanal, both with a little over 160,000 inhabitants; Honiara (population 95,000), the capital city, is also the largest municipality, and is situated on the northwest coast of Guadalcanal. Over 80 per cent of the population live in rural areas and engage in subsistence farming. Education and healthcare provisions are poor and spotty in part owing to the remote location of small settlements without modern conveniences. Logging, mining, and fisheries are the Solomons' main sources of income. The vast majority of lumber production and mining companies are foreign owned; over two-third of the Solomons' exports—and nearly all its timber—go to China.

The most distinctive feature of the Solomons' society is the wantok system that is critical to understanding the country. (Gordon Nanau, "The Wantok System as a Socio-Economic and Political Network in Melanesia," *Journal of Multicultural Society*, 2:1 (2011): pp31-55) Melanesian societies are treasure troves of linguistic diversity: more than 80 distinctive languages, not

**Melanesian societies are treasure troves of linguistic diversity: more than 80 distinctive languages, not counting various dialects, are spoken in the Solomon Islands alone. The wantok refers to people who speak the same language (wantok is pijin English for "one talk"), share kinship, and locality.**

counting various dialects, are spoken in the Solomon Islands alone. The wantok refers to people who speak the same language (wantok is pijin English for “one talk”), share kinship, and locality. Communities rather than individuals own the land; this arrangement, called “customary land ownership”, regulates over 90 per cent of the Solomons’ territory even in urban areas. (*Joseph Foukona and Matthew Allen, “Urban Land in the Solomon Islands,” in Siobhan McDonnell, Matthew Allen, and Colin Filer, eds., Kastom, Property, and Ideology: Land Transformation in Melanesia (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2017), pp 85-110*) Wantoks are usually led by “big men” selected for their perceived effectiveness in getting things done but their authority is temporary and easily challenged by wantok members. People’s primary identity is determined by their wantok. The wantok system is valuable for the social cohesion and social capacity building of small and often isolated communities. It is a major obstacle, however, to nation-building, economic development, and collective action on a larger scale; it privileges individuals instead of institutions and has been an impediment to democratic consolidation.

Apart from the period of violent unrest (known as “The Tensions”) in 1998-2003, since independence the Solomons have sustained a formal democracy underscored by relatively robust political rights and civil liberties. Heads of government and members of the legislature are selected by free and fair elections, the media is relatively open, and people are free to organise, practice their faith, and express their personal views. In the past several years, and particularly since the beginning of Manasseh Sogavare’s fourth non-consecutive stint as prime minister in April 2019, democratic standards have begun to wear away; at the same time, the country has become more vulnerable to outside interference.

As hinted above, at the root of the Solomon Islands’ fragile democracy is the wantok system that hinders the development of robust institutions. Politics of the Solomons is exceedingly personalistic, based to an unusually high extent on who one knows. The resultant polity is characterised by weak and unstable institutions: parties are feeble, parliamentary coalitions are ephemeral, crossing party lines is common as are non-confidence votes. (Prime Minister Sogavare himself lost one in 2007 and survived another in 2021.) Many of the National Parliament’s 50 members are ill-equipped for their position, some are reportedly illiterate. (*Author’s interviews in Honiara (December 2023)*) Decrees and laws are often poorly conceived and thus are easily circumvented.

The Solomons’ democracy is further undermined by the so-called Constituency Development Fund (CDF), established in 1989 to allow Members

of Parliament (MPs) to respond to the urgent needs of residents in their districts. The CDF are discretionary funds entrusted to the MPs; they have full control over how monies are spent without any real governmental oversight. The CDF has effectively become a slush fund used by many legislators to (directly or indirectly) buy votes, finance pet projects that benefit few, and to line their pockets. Consuming over a third of the Solomons' development budget, the CDF has advanced clientelism and personalism and reduced people's trust in their representatives and confidence in the political process. (*Georgina Kekea and Anouk Ride, "How Constituency Development Funds Undermine Solomon Islands' Democracy," US. Institute of Peace, 25 October 2023*) It also created the opportunity for foreign interference in the country's politics. Until the government established diplomatic ties with the PRC in 2019, CDF funds came primarily from Taipei. In December 2023 the legislature passed a much-needed bill designed to introduce some government regulation in how MPs disburse constituency funds. (*"Parliament Passes CDF Bill 2023," Solomon Islands Government, available at <https://solomons.gov.sb/parliament-passes-cdf-bill-2023/>*)

No one has harmed democracy in the Solomons more than Prime Minister Sogavare. Frequently portrayed as a deft political operator who thrives on conflict and a natural autocrat, he is charismatic, paranoid, vindictive, and unpredictable. (*Clive Moore, "The Mouse that Roared: Manasseh Sogavare, China, and Australia," University of Queensland-Solomon Islands Partnership Seminar, 11 May 2022; and Matthew Knott, "Manasseh Sogavare: the 'Paranoid' Pacific Leader Tormenting Canberra," Sydney Morning Herald, 22 September 2022*) Already in 1996 when a student in New Zealand, he declared that the Solomons, given its weak institutions and poorly educated populace, needed a dictator. (*Author's interview (#4036) 2023*) Many believe that his intention is "to hold onto power at all costs, pit regional players against each other and create a political wedge to get more for Solomon Islands". (*Alan C Tidwell et al., "Solomon Islands: Invest in People and Police before Military," Lowy Institute (Sydney), 28 July 2023*) Sogavare's weak leadership and volatile personality, the sycophancy of his cronies, and the

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pervasive corruption of the political elites are common complaints of politically engaged Solomon Islanders. According to the 2021 report of Transparency Solomon Islands—a local subsidiary of Transparency International, a global anti-corruption think-tank—Members of Parliament, companies extracting natural resources, and “The Prime Minister and Officials in his office” are the country’s most fraud-ridden institutions. (*Robert Iroga, “TSI Report Says MPs Most Corrupt in SI, Police Ranked 6<sup>th</sup>,” Solomon Business Online, 8 December 2022*)

In the past five years the increase of executive power has been accompanied by the chipping away of the democratic norms—such as unilaterally delaying elections on spurious grounds—and a precipitous decline in transparency in public life. Few media conferences are held, the executive branch seldom accepts let alone requests legislative input, and major strategic choices that profoundly affect the entire country are made without public debate. Prime Minister Sogavare was able to make deeply controversial foreign policy decisions on his own owing to a long-standing but ill-considered arrangement. The parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee’s (FAC) mandate extends largely to ceremonial functions such as receiving diplomats, but foreign policy is the bailiwick of the executive. In fact, FAC members do not have the right to view international treaties concluded by the government let alone to debate their merits. Unsurprisingly, no consultation with the public preceded the government’s highly controversial resolutions to switch diplomatic recognition to and sign a security treaty with Beijing.

#### A VOLATILE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Since independence Melanesian countries have gone through periods of instability chiefly stemming from their fragmentary political systems based on patronage and generating high levels of corruption. Years of instability in Vanuatu culminated in its Mobile Force’s attempted coup in 1996. The Republic of Fiji Military Forces staged coups in 1987, 2000, and 2006, resulting in cycles of military rule. A decade-long secessionist uprising in Papua New Guinea’s Bougainville Island (geographically the northernmost and biggest island of the Solomon Islands Archipelago) cost 20,000 lives and was settled only in 1997. Twelve years later, native resentment against Chinese domination of the country’s commercial life led to riots mobilising tens of thousands.

The Solomon Islands have also experienced several violent upheavals. The Solomons maintain no military so when in 1992-1993, during the Bougainville

Crisis, Papua New Guinea's Defense Force conducted unsanctioned raids into Solomon Islands' territory in pursuit of Bougainville Revolutionary Army units, only the local police force could be counted on to protect the country's sovereignty. This, however, was the only one of the numerous conflicts with foreign actors involved. The years between 1998 and 2003 were a period of armed hostility between fighters representing the two main islands, stemming from the discrimination of Malaitans residing and working on Guadalcanal. The "Tensions" translated into an inter-island conflict that claimed 200 fatalities, displaced 10 per cent of the population and caused the collapse of both the economy and most government services. (Matthew G Allen, "Sovereignty, Civil Conflict, and Ethnicity," in Erich Hirsch and Will Rollason, eds.,

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*The Melanesian World* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp239-254) To protest the government's refusal to adequately address inter-island inequities, Malaitan militants staged a coup in June 2000, abducted Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu and forced him to resign. Ulufa'alu was replaced by the leader of the opposition, Manasseh Sogavare, in his first prime ministerial stint.

The violence continued until the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) brought police forces from around the region to the country. RAMSI ended up staying for 14 years (2003-17), quickly restored law and order, arrested 6,300 people (more than 1 per cent of the population), and created a stable environment necessary for the economy's slow but steady recovery. Just as importantly, RAMSI oversaw a liberal democratic state-building programme that included reinstating the "capabilities of the core liberal democratic institutions of the post-colonial state". RAMSI enjoyed sustained elite support and even broader public support throughout its tenure: "in 2013, 86 per cent of the population supported its presence, a remarkable proportion given the scale and nature of the intervention". (John Idriss Labai, et al., eds., *Governance and Political Adaptation in Fragile States* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2019), p273, 280) Sogavare was one

of the few aggressive opponents of RAMSI but after the programme ended, he was, according to former Australian High Commissioner James Batley, “literally in tears, saying RAMSI was a ‘blessing from god’, and said ‘thank you Australia for saving the country’.” (*Tidwell, et al., “Solomon Island: Invest in People and Police before Military.”*)

While the UN-backed 2000 Townsville Peace Agreement helped to alleviate the worst violence between militants, the treaty has never been fully implemented. Serious disturbances took place in Honiara in April 2006—prompted by a change in government that only prolonged the corrupt and dysfunctional politics of recent years—resulting in widespread arson, looting, and the destruction of much of Chinatown, the city’s commercial centre. (*Andrew Goldsmith and Sinclair Dinner, “Transnational Police Building: Critical Lessons from Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands,” Third World Quarterly, 28:6 (2007): 1102*) Thousands of Malaitans were repatriated to and reintegrated in their native island, but the fair employment opportunities they had demanded for generations have not materialised. Also, though RAMSI is widely recognised to have been enormously beneficial for the entire country, it did not deal with the sources of inter-island crisis, nor did it resolve the underlying issues that sparked the conflict in the first place.

In 2019 and again, in 2021, Honiara’s Chinatown was rocked by violence as Solomon Islanders’ resentment of the Sogavare government’s status quo policies and China’s political interference and increasing domination of its business sector boiled over. The announcement of switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC in April 2019 sparked first widespread protests, then rioting, and looting in Honiara and in Auki, the capital of Malaita Province. People were also disgruntled about Sogavare’s return as prime minister and the country’s continuing economic malaise: per capita GDP in 2019, though slowly increasing, was still lower than 25 years earlier. (*Terence Wood, “The 2019 Honiara Riots: What Went Wrong and What Does It Mean for Aid,” DevPolicy Blog, <https://devpolicy.org/the-2019-honiara-riots-what-went-wrong-and-what-does-it-mean-for-aid-20190621/>*) Then, in November 2021, the rioters’ rage was directed even more explicitly against Honiara’s growing Chinese community that had wrested control over the country’s economy. Given the feebleness of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF), police and military personnel from Australia and peacekeepers from Papua New Guinea were required once again to staunch the violence.

The RSIPF has been regularly outmatched in the country’s conflicts for several reasons. It is underfunded for its missions, inadequately trained, and, with a total personnel of 1,800 (which includes administrators, support personnel, etc.), it is undersized. The police leadership is weak, some of its leaders are unqualified for

their positions, and corruption within the institution is endemic. (*Author's interviews Honiara December 2023; Jennifer Kusapa, "Court to Hear Bail Application of Sikua's Case," Island Sun, 20 November 2018*) Another deep-seated problem, as police performance in crises has underscored, is that its personnel's primary loyalty is not to the institution but to their own wantok, kinship networks, or island. To make matters worse, some of the people involved in prolonging the Tensions are still involved in the police force's higher administration. The Police Act of 2013 has not solved the RSIPF's principal deficiencies.

In July 2023, Sogavare announced his plan to create the Solomons' own military to complement "an inadequately resourced police force". This ambition is irrational on several levels. The country faces no external threat. If one takes the prime minister's words seriously then his government (and its donors) should invest in upgrading the RSIPF's personnel, training, facilities, and equipment. Establishing a military from scratch is enormously expensive—particularly for one of the world's poorest countries—and it is unclear where the funds or, for that matter, manpower would come from. That no public debate preceded Sogavare's announcement might be explained with his customary impulsiveness or, more darkly, his intention to build an armed force loyal only to him to insure his political future.

The plan to form a military may partly explain the government's shift of diplomatic recognition as well. According to a senior opposition politician, Sogavare asked Taiwan to help him build an army, but Taiwanese officials were strongly dissuaded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (*author's interview 2023, ibid*) Sogavare may have calculated that China would not allow Australia to interfere in this matter. In any event, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles's reaction to Sogavare's announcement was unexpected. Perhaps reckoning that if the Solomons was determined to build a military, it ought to be with Canberra's assistance, he said that Australia would be a "natural partner of choice" and "very keen" to help. (*Stephen Dziedic, "Defence Minister Richard Marles Happy for Australia to Support Solomon Islands Defence Force," ABC News (Australia), 19 July 2023*) Politicians, experts, and NGOs condemned Marles's statement pointing out that the last thing the climate

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change-threatened South Pacific countries needed was militarisation. Only three Pacific Island nations—Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga—have standing armies: all have been used for domestic political interference and repression.

#### CHINA'S RAPIDLY GROWING INFLUENCE

A month before the 2021 riots Peter Kenilorea, Jr., one of the Solomons' most distinguished politicians, warned that the country's foreign policy was being "overrun" by China and lamented that:

We in the Pacific Islands say we are on the frontline of climate change—here in the Solomons; we are also on the frontline of the aggression from the Chinese Communist Party. The political warfare is on. The geopolitical frontline is in our tiny nation of the Solomon Islands, and even within the provinces within the Solomons. (*Max Walden, et al., "Here's What's Behind the Violent Protests in the Solomon Islands Capital, Honiara," ABC News (Australia), 24 November 2021*)

A 2023 Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Survey revealed that 76 per cent of respondents said that China did not consider the interests of countries like theirs and 71 per cent thought that Beijing did not contribute to peace and stability around the world. (*Laura Silver, et al., "China's Approach to Foreign Policy Gets Largely Negative Reviews in 24-Country Survey," Pew Research Center, 27 July 2023*) Chinese presence in the Solomon Islands lends strong support to these views.

The first Chinese tradesmen and shopkeepers arrived in what was then a British Protectorate in 1910. Their number had gradually increased, and the 1976 (last pre-independence) census recorded 452, most living in larger settlements. Many adopted Christianity, which eased their paths to British citizenship, and integrated into colonial society. (*Clive Moore, "No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: Asian Involvement in the Solomon Islands Economic and Political Processes," <https://www.solomonencyclopaedia.net/biogs/E000061b.htm>*) The community's size remained more or less stable for the rest of the twentieth century. The large influx of "new" Chinese began in the early 2000s after RAMSI restored public order, finding commercial and business opportunities in the country's devastated economy. While the arrivals filled an economic vacuum and provided much-needed services, their growing prosperity sharply contrasted with much of the native population's crushing poverty. The recurring anti-Chinese riots and the RSIPF's indisputable ineffectiveness to protect Chinese residents and their property, in turn, furnished Beijing with the perfect pretext to push for a security treaty with the Honiara government.

The most important reason behind the government's 2019 move to grant China diplomatic recognitions was financial. This was a textbook case of "checkbook diplomacy" that poor countries in the South Pacific and beyond have long found irresistible. The Solomons reportedly gained about US\$ 500 million in investment, grants, and low-interest loans. Beijing has made several infrastructural developments, built a new stadium that allowed the hosting of the 2023 Pacific Island Games in Honiara, and is set to break ground on a much-needed Health Center at the National Referral Hospital in 2024. Ashley Wickham, the first CEO of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation, remarked that "China

has the means to provide everything we need. But I'm uneasy about how it came about and where we're going as a country". (*Nick Sas, "China's Influence Hard to Ignore in Solomon Islands' Capital Honiara, as Australia Warned It Could Be Left Behind," ABC News (Australia), 3 July 2022*) So why is Beijing and the Chinese expat community so unpopular?

Deeply spiritual Solomon Islanders learn in school about communism's hostility to democracy and religion which creates an inauspicious basis for relations between islanders' and the growing Chinese community. The conduct of some Chinese officials, entrepreneurs, and their corporations serve to aggravate this discord. Chinese mining and logging companies are frequently accused by locals of disregarding environmental regulations, and "they come and rip out everything from the earth and then leave". Stories of environmental crimes—such as poorly maintained pipelines bursting and discharging cyanide into local lakes and streams—are legion. (*Charley Piringi, "The Unsustainable Exploitation of Solomon Islands' Natural Resources," U.S. Institute of Peace, 30 November 2023*)

Many complain that Chinese business practices shut out locals from the market—for instance the practice of Chinese landlords who own a large proportion of commercial real estate to lease to Chinese tenants at preferential terms—and from many business opportunities.

Just as troubling are the numerous ways in which Chinese interference directly undermines the Solomons' democracy. It has been widely alleged that Beijing interfered in the 2019 elections and subsequently bribed individual MPs

to vote for the diplomatic recognition of China. (*Edward Cavanaugh, "China and Taiwan offered us huge bribes, say Solomon Islands MPs," Guardian, 8 December 2019*) The Chinese also took the place of Taiwan in disbursing Constituency Development Funds to legislators. The key difference is that while the Taiwanese funnelled funds to all MPs, and Beijing is privileging only those approved by Sogavare—through a slush fund controlled by the prime minister—which includes members of his coalition plus six other members who generally lend support to the government. (*RA Herr, "State Capture: Behind Sogavare's Marriage of Convenience with China," Center for Independent Studies, Analysis Paper 42 (February 2023), p 3*) All of the representatives, regardless of their relationship to the executive branch, receive CDF from the state.

In December of 2021, when parliamentarians organised a no-confidence motion to recall Prime Minister Sogavare, China's agents paid US\$ 30,000 to each legislator who voted to ensure that he would stay in his position. (*Ben Packham, "Chinese Money Used to Sway MP Votes for Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare," Weekend Australian, 6 December 2021; and Celsus Irokawato Talifilu, "Solomon Islands in Danger of Becoming a Puppet State of China," Sydney Morning Herald, 30 March 2022*) Chinese officials rely on Sogavare not only because he is willing to deride the Solomons' traditional supporters, Australia and the United States, but because he seems to naively trust them, not understanding how the Chinese system works. As one senior opposition leader said, "We are a client state owned by China because our prime minister who thinks himself clever, does not understand that we have been turned into Beijing's vassal state". (*Author's interview 2023*) Many believe that Chinese officials give talking points to or write the speeches of high-ranking government officials. The Chinese are masters at not just state capture but also at elite capture. Several government ministers are housed in Chinese built, owned, and guarded gated compounds. As a result of Beijing's influence, the country's "public service and institutions have become weaker and tainted by a level of corruption never before seen". (*Transform Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China," in Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, eds., The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2021), p325*)

For Solomon Islanders no feature of the Chinese domination over their country is more frustrating than the lack of transparency that Sogavare's government has readily adopted. No issue is more emblematic in this regard than the 2022 security treaty between Beijing and Honiara. The government's announcement came as a shock to even most politicians and little beyond its existence was revealed: the details have been steeped in secrecy. One former

government official who participated in the negotiations leading to the treaty claimed that the most controversial aspects of the agreement were that it gave the PRC the right to send Chinese policemen to the Solomons when it saw fit to protect Chinese residents and their property and allowed for a potential future military presence in the country. For James Batley, the surprise was not the security agreement but that it was “so obviously an agreement drafted in Beijing and sent to Honiara”; for Ashley Wickham “it was secretive, it was undemocratic, and the arrogance of the decision was astounding”. (*Sas*, “*Solomon Islands Security Pact with China*,” and “*China’s Influence Hard to Ignore*,” respectively)

Many islanders were concerned about the spectre of “Chinese-style” policing replacing the more easy-going approach to law enforcement characteristic of the South Pacific. Thus far the practical manifestations of the security agreement have been the training of the Solomons’ police personnel in, and the importing of weapons and equipment for the police from the PRC. In the spring of 2022 controversy arose about the secret shipping of Chinese “replica” guns—ostensibly for training purposes—to the Solomons. The government could not explain why the weapons—which many believe are real—were transported clandestinely and “offloaded at a log pond somewhere in Guadalcanal” and not at an internationally recognised port.

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(*Georgina Kekea*, “*Secret Shipment of Replica Guns to Solomon Islands Police by China Triggers Concern*,” *Guardian*, 25 March 2022)

The growing Chinese presence is an irritant for people in urban areas. Most shops, restaurants, and commercial establishments are Chinese owned and run. In recent years the sight of Chinese security personnel and vehicles at RSIPF’s Honiara Headquarters has become pervasive—a constant reminder of the country’s frayed sovereignty. The PRC’s Embassy is one of the largest buildings on Honiara’s main street. Ambassador Cai Weiming, appointed in December 2023—previously he was Beijing’s envoy in Israel—gets around town with a motorcade, sirens blaring. (*New China Envoy Welcomed*,” *Solomon Star*, 12 December 2023)

## THE WESTERN COUNTER TO CHINA'S ASCENDANCY

China's attention to the Solomons and Melanesia contrasts with the United States' relative negligence of the region in recent years. There is more than an element of truth in a September 2023 editorial in the Chinese Communist Party's central newspaper, *China Daily*, claiming that the Pacific Islands "were largely forgotten by the West" until recently, "when the US and its allies started viewing PRC as a rival". (Michael Crowley, "Biden Hosts Pacific Islands, with a Rising China in Mind," *New York Times*, 25 September 2023) Since 2022, the US government and its aid organisations such as USAID have stepped up their diplomatic presence in the Solomons and in the South Pacific. America closed its embassy in Honiara in 1993, five years after it was established, but re-opened it 30 years later, in January 2023. In the same year Washington also opened an embassy in Tonga and will inaugurate one in Vanuatu in 2024. In 2022, Anthony Blinken was the first American Secretary of State in 36 years to visit Fiji signalling the US's commitment to deepen its engagement with the island nations of the South Pacific.

The US has redoubled its efforts to counter China's expanding influence in the region not only through bilateral relations but also through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a diplomatic partnership with Australia, Japan, and India to support democracy, stability, and economic development in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Australia through its Agency for International Development has been the largest donor and the leading development partner for the area. Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategic vision has been formulated in response to China's challenge to the rules-based international order in the region. New Delhi's rocky relationship with Beijing has impelled India to participate in the Quad, as is widely known, even though it has been traditionally reticent in embracing security partnerships.

Western efforts to re-energise their relationship with the South Pacific have met with some resistance, particularly in the Solomons. In October 2023, Prime Minister Sogavare was a no-show at the Second Pacific Island Forum-United State Summit in Washington—saying he did not want to "listen to them (the US) lecturing us of how good they are". Sogavare blustered, implausibly, that "They promised us US\$ 800 billion or something like that and at the time [the first forum a year earlier] I was impressed, but we come to today and nothing's happened". (Nick Sas, et al., "Solomon PM Blasts the United States after Missing Pacific Leaders' Summit in White House," *ABC News (Australia)*, 27 September 2023; and Robert Iroga, "Sogavare's Absence Will Not Affect SI's Ability

to Receive Support from US, says PIF SG,” *Solomon Business Online*, 4 October 2023) (In fact, Washington pledged \$200 million for new projects in the region at the 2022 conference.)

Since his switch of diplomatic recognition to Beijing, Sogavare has regularly launched verbal assaults against Australia—the country that has been the Solomons’ most generous benefactor for decades—especially on his return from trips to China. (“*Sogavare Rant Is Fooling No One*,” *The Australian*, 19 July 2023) He has repeatedly accused Canberra for its “unneighbourly” interference in the Solomons’ domestic affairs and maintained that Honiara’s bilateral security treaty with Australia has proven to be “inadequate”. Sogavare used to publicly recognise the usefulness of the Pacific Island Forum, the region’s paramount political grouping that meets annually and is headquartered in Fiji’s capital, Suva. Lately, however, he has argued that it was “irrelevant” and urged its disbanding, many believe to reduce the influence of Australia and New Zealand that are also the chief contributors to its budget. (*author’s interview*, 2023)

The United States continues to have the largest military presence in the South Pacific—in Guam and the Marshall Islands—and it may be expanding. Washington is planning to build a base in the Federated States of Micronesia and, in 2020, another Micronesian island state, Palau, invited the US to build a military base and radar station on its territory. Moreover, in a joint project the US and Australia are upgrading Papua New Guinea’s Lombrum Naval Base to modernise the country’s border defence capability. (*Tarcisius Kabuauulaka*, “*China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement and Competition for Influence in Oceania*,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 2 December 2022) Both Australia and the US have valid security treaties with the Solomon Islands. In 1991, Honiara and Washington signed a Status of Forces Agreement—an accord establishing the framework under which the American military personnel may operate in a country—though Sogavare was reportedly unaware of its existence. The Australia-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Treaty of 2017—invoked during the 2021 unrest—allows Canberra to deploy police, military, and civilian personnel in the island state to assist with security threats. (*Anna Powles*, “*Geopolitical Duel in the Pacific*,” *Lowy Institute* (Sydney), 7 July 2023)

**The US has redoubled its efforts to counter China’s expanding influence in the region not only through bilateral relations but also through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), a diplomatic partnership with Australia, Japan, and India to support democracy, stability, and economic development in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.**

In the past several years the United States has stepped up its regional aid programmes in the Solomons. Washington provided over 188,000 Covid-19 vaccine doses; the USAID has been running numerous programmes offering assistance to more than 2,500 Solomon Islanders in 20 at-risk communities to fortify their defences against potential climate change-related disasters. In 2022 and 2023, the USNS Mercy, a hospital ship with 1,200 medical personnel, visited the Solomons within the framework of the Pacific Partnership programme and held 150 medical training sessions and provided free treatment to thousands of patients. (*Russell Comeau, "US Engagement in Solomon Islands," US Embassy to Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, 20 March 2023*) In the autumn of 2019 Washington announced that after a two-decade absence the Peace Corps would return to the South Pacific. Although volunteers have now resumed work in Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa—following the suspension of activities during the pandemic—they have yet to arrive in the Solomons. Observers argue that the reason for the delay is Chinese opposition to the programme. Beijing, the only party that benefits from the Peace Corps not returning to the Solomons, cannot counter this form of assistance because it does not have a similar volunteer organisation that assists developing nations. (*Erin Hale, "In the Solomon Islands, a US Agency's Struggles Hint at China's Influence," Al Jazeera, 5 December 2023; and author's interview 2023*)

## STANDING UP TO CHINA

How can relatively underdeveloped countries resist Beijing's economic and political influence? What lessons are suggested by the experience of the Solomons? Underdeveloped countries cannot afford to refuse foreign assistance but how can they balance that seldom altruistic help without sacrificing their sovereignty? Fiji's recent history might offer some lessons.

That Fiji is not a consolidated democracy is primarily due to its armed forces that have a long tradition of intervening in domestic politics. Most of its political leaders since independence have been military men. Following the 2006 coup, the leader and active-duty naval officer, Commodore Frank Bainimarama, became prime minister and stayed in that position until the December 2022 elections when he was narrowly defeated by a three-party coalition. In the short time since then, the military has repeatedly inserted itself in political debates. After the 2006 coup, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States imposed sanctions on Fiji that were lifted only after the 2014 parliamentary elections.

Fiji's strengthening diplomatic, economic, and military relationship with China was a direct response to the Western sanctions. (*Sandra Tarte, "Building a Strategic Partnership: Fiji-China Relations Since 2008," in Smith and Wesley-Smith, eds., The China Alternative, pp375-395*) Suva pursued security cooperation with Beijing with special vigour, resulting in a wide range of assistance programmes. Beijing supplied the Republic of Fiji Military Forces—an organisation with 6,500 active-duty soldiers and a US\$ 50 million annual budget—with equipment and offered specialised training and university education to Fijian police and military personnel in China. Nonetheless, since the return to parliamentary rule Suva's foreign policy pendulum has swung back. Western countries renewed and intensified their political and economic relations and stepped up military aid to and cooperation with the RFMF.


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The revitalised relationship with Australia, the US, and other Western partners has offset China's influence over the country. Since the coalition government of Sitiveni Rabuka took office, Fiji's discrete but unmistakable move towards enhancing bonds with its traditional allies has continued.

China has been relentless in seeking to establish a military presence in Melanesia. In 2018 it attempted to pressure Vanuatu's government to build a military base in the country. The then Prime Minister Charlot Salwai publicly promised anxious Australian officials that there would be no Chinese military presence in his country. (*Brian Harding and Camilla Poble, "China's Search for a Permanent Military Presence in the Pacific Islands," USIP Analysis, 21 July 2022*) Even though Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape named Australia and the US as its security partners and in 2023 Washington signed a 15-year pact with the government in Port Moresby to station troops and build military bases in the country, China has continued to tempt the country with offers of security programmes. In February 2024, US diplomats urged the Pacific nation to turn down a security pact with Beijing—providing police training, equipment, and surveillance technology—noting the high cost of Chinese investment to the recipient. (*US Official Urges Papua New Guinea to Reject Chinese Security Deal," Reuters (Sydney), 5 February 2024*)



Although the experience of the Solomons suggests that China possesses the capacity to turn Pacific Island nations into pawns on its geopolitical chessboard, some lessons from Melanesia suggest that it is possible to resist Beijing. The balanced political leadership that privileges national interest and is capable of dispassionately examining foreign actors' intentions that is lacking in the Solomons is far more in evidence in the other Melanesian countries. Political institutions, including the party system, are stronger in Papua New Guinea and especially in Fiji than in the Solomons. More prosperous countries with competitive market economies do not offer an easy target for opportunistic economic intervention and can afford to be more circumspect in assessing assistance programmes and investment plans.

China, accounting for nine per cent of the total aid received by Melanesian states, is only the third biggest aid donor to the South Pacific following Australia (40 per cent) and the Asian Development Bank; in fact, Beijing's overall aid has declined over the years to the region (from US\$ 384 million in 2016 to US\$ 241 million in 2021). (*China's Declining Aid to Pacific Islands Increasingly Goes to Allies, Think Tank Reports,* Associated Press (Canberra), 30 October 2023) Washington and Canberra must not take the partnership of Pacific Island nations for granted as they did in the Solomons. They need to steadily train their sights on the countries of the region and focus on presenting them with pragmatic aid programmes that better people's lives. The United States, Australia, and their allies should be explicit in representing a clear alternative to authoritarian politics and provide robust support to democratic actors in the region.  (DI2822024DSAHRMZB@3854)