

In the South Pacific, Chinese Opportunism Meets Western Indifference

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Abstract: *A secret pact between the Solomon Islands and China, mainly concerned with internal security in the islands, has sparked new US-China competition in the Pacific Island countries. The United States, Australia, and New Zealand worry about a future Chinese base in the Solomons and elsewhere, whereas most Pacific Island countries worry about environmental and economic problems and want to stay clear of the US-China rivalry. Omitted from most analyses is the overwhelming US naval and air superiority in the Asia Pacific, and the neglect of the United States and its allies of Pacific Islanders' concerns. Belatedly, the United States is trying to get back in the game, while China already is presenting the PI countries with a blueprint for economic recovery and environmental protection.*

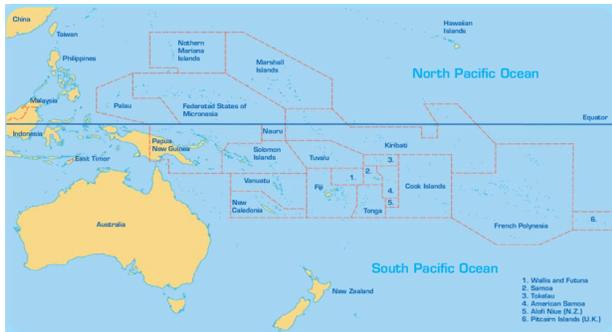
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This is what happens when you don't pay attention because you think you've got a situation locked up. In the South Pacific, the long-running assumption among the United States and its chief allies, Australia and New

Zealand, has been that all the small island-nations in the area are "one of us"—committed to democratic ideals and open economies (facts notwithstanding), all counting for their security on US power, and all with nowhere else to go for help with domestic problems. In reality, China is actively competing for the allegiance of all the Pacific Island (PI) states. Yet Washington and Canberra have failed to pay the region much attention ... until events in the Solomon Islands in November 2021 forced their hand.

Solomon Islands is about 2000 kilometers northeast of the Australian coast. It has a population of around 700,000, placing it third among the PI countries after Papua New Guinea (about 8.5 million) and Fiji (about 900,000). Inter-island tensions and fighting in the Solomons have occurred a number of times in recent years, leading to interventions by an Australian-New Zealand "Regional Assistance Mission" between 2003 and 2017. Australia and the Solomon Islands concluded a bilateral security treaty in 2017.¹ But the three days of antigovernment protests in Honiara, the capital, in November 2021 were different in magnitude and issues.² Apparently, they were caused by a combination of political and social complaints, including the Manasseh Sogavare government's switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019, official corruption, and poverty in the most densely populated and poorest island, Malaita. Australia, Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand sent in police and soldiers, reportedly

at the request of the government, but were too late to prevent serious damage to property. Prime Minister Sogavare blamed Taiwan for the unrest, probably to divert attention from his government’s failure to deliver on economic development in Malaita from which most of the demonstrators came and which had close ties with Taipei. He was able to defeat a no-confidence vote in parliament, greatly helped (according to some reports) by Chinese bribes to its members.³



Pacific Island Area Map from ResearchGate

The Solomons government eventually contained the outburst, but its dissatisfaction with the Australian-led intervention led it to conclude a secret deal with China in April 2022 that focused on internal security. The text of the arrangement leaked out, exposing an extraordinary policy shift: “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.” That portion of the treaty is worded much like the one the Solomons has with Australia. But the new deal allows China to intercede to protect *Chinese* lives and property, and grants China ship stopover privileges to carry out “logistical replenishment” in the islands.⁴

Concern in the US, Australia, and some PI countries about the prospect of a Chinese base in the Solomons—a prospect vigorously denied by Sogavare and Beijing⁵—overlooks the treaty’s domestic significance—specifically, the possibility that Chinese-trained police or Chinese police themselves might suppress dissent in the name of social order. Sogavare quite openly said that the Chinese could be better counted on than the Australians to keep the opposition in line. At a ceremony marking the end of five months of police training by the Chinese, he said: “I think it is prudent that Solomon Islands and the Peoples Republic of China start discussion on how we can elevate the current joint training arrangement to a more permanent arrangement . . . We must have the capability to address our internal threats” rather than “continue to depend on other countries to look after us.” The fact that Sogavare spoke of a “permanent arrangement” with China ensured that a future Chinese base would be at the center of outsiders’ concerns.⁶

Alarm Bells

No sooner was the Solomons-China treaty revealed than top diplomats from Australia and New Zealand descended on the Pacific islands like panicked salesmen worried about losing their old customers. Their concern is that a Chinese base in the Solomons might one day enable China to obstruct traffic into the Indian Ocean.⁷ They also see a Chinese pattern of military deal making with PI nations, as Anne-Marie Brady writes, in which China provides “weapons, military vehicles and vessels, uniforms, training and military buildings to the military forces of Fiji, PNG [Papua New Guinea] and Tonga, and to the police forces of Vanuatu . . .”⁸ American strategic analysts concur. Even before the events in the Solomons, they had warned that China would be seeking basing rights from Tanzania to Kiribati. US defense of Northeast Asia and even Hawaii was now in

doubt, they argued.⁹ After the Solomons events, the alarm bells rang much louder. Alexander Gray, who served in the Trump National Security Council on Indo-Pacific security, wrote: “The ability to dictate access through the Pacific Islands is integral to the entire concept of Western defense in the Indo-Pacific. Simply put, there is no U.S. forward presence in maritime East Asia without access through the Pacific Islands from Hawaii and the U.S. West Coast.”¹⁰ Warnings like those, however, neglect to mention the longstanding US naval dominance of Asia Pacific sea lanes.

Such one-sided geopolitical comments also take us back to the worst days of the Cold War, when threat analysis emphasized strategic vacuums that Russians and Chinese were capable of stepping into whenever and wherever “we” weren’t. Virtually every corner of the globe was “strategic.” Then as now, the threat-based analysis presumes that confrontation with China is inevitable. Diplomacy as part of an engagement strategy has no place. Now we’re being warned that it’s just a matter of time before the Pacific becomes a Chinese lake instead of an American one unless the US reenergizes its air and naval forces to confront Chinese expansionism—which in fact it is doing. Unanswered are two questions. First, why should it be taken for granted that only the US has a right to bases and security partnerships in the Asia Pacific? Second, shouldn’t we expect that China’s rising power would lead it to emulate the United States in seeking East Asian air and naval access points, such as in the South China Sea, to protect its proclaimed economic and political interests?¹¹

The other side of the coin is the actual strategic situation in the Pacific. The United States has friends and military bases too, far more than China has, and US air and naval capabilities, alone and with allies, far exceed China’s. Most recent commentaries on the China-Solomon Islands deal fail to mention US military

preponderance in Asia Pacific. Aside from close military and political ties with Australia and New Zealand, the United States has crucial shipping and military access to several Pacific Island states, including the Federated States of Micronesia and US territories such as Guam in the Mariana Islands. US missile and space programs are also based in the region. Whereas China has no formal security alliances and no formal overseas bases in Asia,¹² the United States has five, tied by treaty (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, Philippines). This region-wide capability is demonstrated whenever the United States and its partners conduct joint exercises, such as the RIMPAC (Rim of the Pacific) this summer near Hawai’i that, as Gavan McCormack reports, was “the largest air, land, and sea war maneuvers in the world.”¹³ Then we should add deployed military personnel. As of fall 2021, US Army and Marine Corps troops based in Asia-Pacific totaled about 110,000.¹⁴ The US Navy, while noting that the total number of China’s military vessels now exceeds the United States’, still far outclasses China with respect to aircraft carriers (eleven to three) and nuclear-powered, nuclear-missile armed submarines.¹⁵

Just ahead may be further strengthening of the US military presence in the Asia Pacific. The Pentagon’s China Task Force recommended in July that a new naval task force to confront China be established, drawing military and budget resources from the Middle East.¹⁶ NATO has also begun to move into Asia-Pacific security at the behest of the United States. The alliance pledged this year to consider China a common security threat, and Japan, Australia, and South Korea are in discussions with NATO about the interoperability of their military forces, cyber security, and maritime security.¹⁷ The US Joint Chiefs chairman has visited Indonesia with the announced aim to “develop interoperability” with Indonesian forces and “modernize our militaries collectively” so that they could “meet whatever challenge that China poses.”¹⁸ You can bet that all these

activities have the full attention of China's leaders, just as Obama's "pivot" to Asia did about fifteen years ago.

In Donald Trump's time, the American mantra was "a free and open Indo-Pacific." Little was done to implement this vision beyond a \$25-million development grant to the Solomons and revival in 2017 of the Quad Security Dialogue, a loose grouping of the US, Japan, Australia, and India. Biden has borrowed the Indo-Pacific idea and added to it, mainly on the military side—by reinforcing the importance of the security treaty ties, forming new security arrangements (AUKUS=Australia, United Kingdom, US), and revitalizing the Quad, all in order to compete with and constrain China. Nevertheless, US regional military superiority has made it complacent, yet it is now alarmed by the sudden Chinese "intrusion" into its assumed domain and out of touch with China's actual challenge, which is primarily economic as discussed below. When it comes to meeting Pacific Islands economic development needs, the Biden administration is only beginning to talk about building "resilience" and "expanding [its] diplomatic presence" there.¹⁹ The United States hasn't had an embassy in the Solomon Islands for many years, and only after the China-Solomon Islands security pact was revealed did it announce its intention to appoint ambassadors to the Solomons and the other Pacific Island states.

Chinese Island Hopping: Not Everyone's Welcoming

Where China has an advantage in the South Pacific is its attentiveness to regional development needs. While the US and Australia strategize, the Chinese are winning points with aid proposals that include scholarships, resource development under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), humanitarian relief, a free-trade area, digital network improvements, and police training. China's Foreign Minister Wang

Yi included that aid package in a draft document—the China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision and a five-year action plan—sent to ten Pacific Island governments in May with the hope of their collective approval.

Wang Yi followed up by visiting eight PI countries. But his mission failed to gain approval from most of them. Several PI officials—as well as the political opposition in the Solomons—were openly skeptical of China's ultimate ambition.²⁰ China did conclude a few bilateral deals focused on trade and investment, such as with East Timor (which is outside the PIs) and Papua New Guinea, but other PI countries—notably, Fiji, Samoa, Micronesia, and Tonga—expressed concern about becoming too indebted to China and pushed into a new Cold War between China and the United States. Wang Yi countered by promising a position paper and further discussions, saying "Don't be too anxious and don't be too nervous"—a clear indication of these nations' unease over too close ties with China, especially on security matters such as police training and maritime mapping.²¹ The Chinese were seeking to capitalize on their success in the Solomons, but they may have overreached. Still, Wang Yi's trip shows that while (in the words of Secretary of State Antony Blinken) the United States wants to "shape the strategic environment" in Asia—Pentagon-ese for maintaining dominance—the Chinese are doing the actual spadework.

Whether or not there is reason for the PI countries or the United States to be concerned about China's presence in the South Pacific remains to be seen. On one hand, the Solomon Islands venture could represent a new step in Chinese interventionism: a treaty-based commitment by Beijing to ensure a particular government's survival. That commitment would be akin to historic US policy in Latin America in the heyday of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, which

warned Europe against further interfering in the affairs of the Americas. The policy paved the way for a long period in which the United States made protectorates of weak Latin governments that could not pay their bills. On the other hand, Wang Yi's diplomacy suggests a regional approach that aims to challenge US predominance by at least neutralizing PI political and strategic leanings. The China challenge is likely to be less military than developmental, since China clearly has the economic resources to win the affection of Pacific Islanders.

Climate change, poverty, health care, and education are central issues in the Pacific Islands. PI leaders seeking to address these needs face a dilemma common to developing countries caught between the attention of competing sides in the Cold War and facing domestic political and social instability.²² On one hand, they need help to assure that China is willing and able to provide immediate aid on trade and environmental problems such as rising sea levels and illegal fishing.²³ They are well aware that foreign loans always come with strings attached, and could create debt traps. Yet Chinese aid might also be a leveraging opportunity for inducing more aid from Australia, the United States, and their partners.²⁴ On the other hand, PI leaders don't want to get caught up in the US-China competition. The Solomon Islands situation warns them that close ties with China could lead to a compromising foreign presence, feeding local political animosities and arousing the wrong kind of attention from Down Under and Washington.

Kiribati illustrates the dilemma. Like the Solomon Islands, Kiribati switched diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China in 2019. With a high poverty rate among its roughly 100,000 people, Kiribati is a recipient of Chinese aid as a participant in the BRI. The islands also have an airport that was used by the United States during World War II and now may be upgraded

with Chinese help, after Kiribati's government claims Washington turned down a request to do so. From Kiribati's standpoint, China is an invaluable partner in promoting tourism and inter-island travel, while for Beijing, Kiribati is another opportunity to get a foot in the door with the calling card of providing economic development aid without strings.²⁵

Ideally, the United States and China would cooperate on aid and establish a confidence-building system for military deployments in the Pacific Islands. But that presupposes a degree of engagement far removed from the mistrust and strategic competition that currently characterize their relations. Following Wang Yi's aid tour, Australia and New Zealand rushed to offset it. Australia's newly elected government sent Foreign Minister Penny Wong to the islands, and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese followed in July. New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern pledged economic assistance to the Pacific Islands countries; she met with the Solomon Islands government in mid-July. This shuttle diplomacy may produce benefits for the PI, but they have another option: identifying with the regional fora these states have created to maintain policy making independence and deal with common priorities such as climate change protection.²⁶ That would be the Pacific Islands Forum, which in July convened a leaders' meeting in Fiji. For the first time, a non-member state addressed the gathering: the United States, represented (virtually) by Vice President Kamala Harris. She offered economic assistance on fisheries, announced the opening of a US Agency for International Development regional office, and said the Peace Corps would be returning to four island countries. Albanese and Ardern attended the forum, but China's request to speak was reportedly denied, perhaps prompting Kiribati's decision not to participate.²⁷ Thus, the US-China competition intensifies throughout the PI region.

Clearly, the uproar over the Solomon Islands

has galvanized a response among the US and its Pacific allies. But will it be a lasting one, and will it lead to a meaningful contribution to human development in the island states or instead be a kneejerk military response focused on the “China threat”? A Solomon Islands journalist offered some thoughtful advice to

Americans. What the United States should learn from China’s initiatives in the South Pacific, she wrote, is this: “You have got to show up. And the United States has not.” Unless it does, “China will pick us off one by one with its promises of business projects and development aid.”²⁸

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Notes

¹ That treaty, as summarized by Australia, “will allow Australian police, defence and associated civilian personnel to deploy rapidly to Solomon Islands if the need arises and where both countries consent. It will cover a range of foreseeable security threats, including natural disasters, and will allow for third country contributions.” Government of Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “[Bilateral Treaty](#).”

² For background, see Yan Zhuang, “Protests Rock Solomon Islands: Here’s What’s Behind the Unrest,” *New York Times*, November 25, 2021 (hereafter, *NYT*).

³ Though most of the bribery accusations concern Beijing, at least one concerns Taiwan. See Edward Cavanaugh, “[China and Taiwan Offered Us Huge Bribes, Say Solomon Islands MPs](#),” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2019. Peter Dutton, Australia’s defense minister under the previous Scott Morrison government, also accused China of bribing the Solomon Islands government to obtain the security deal. Peter Coorey and Andrew Tillett, “[Dutton Suggests Bribes Swayed Solomons in China Pact](#),” *Financial Review*, April 21, 2022.

⁴ Patricia M. Kim, “[Does the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact Portend a More Interventionist Beijing?](#)” Brookings Institution, May 6, 2022; Yan Zhuang, “Solomon Islands’ Leader Calls Concern Over Security Deal with China ‘Insulting,’” *NYT*, March 29, 2022.

⁵ The prime minister denied the deal would mean a Chinese base and said the criticism was demeaning. Zhuang, “Solomon Islands’ Leader Calls Concern over Chinese Security Deal ‘Insulting.’”

⁶ “[PM Wants Permanent Policing Arrangement to Deal with Uprisings](#),” *The Island Sun*, July 7, 2022; “[Chinese Communist Party Donates Police Equipment to Solomon Islands](#),” July 6, 2022.

⁷ “[Shock China Security Deal Shows Pacific Powers Need to Face Facts](#),” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 25, 2022.

⁸ Anne-Marie Brady, “[How China Is Using Humanitarian Aid to Gain a Foothold in the South Pacific](#),” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 9, 2022.

⁹ Craig Singleton, “[Beijing Eyes New Military Bases Across the Indo-Pacific](#),” *Foreign Policy*,

July 7, 2021; Alexander B. Gray, [“The Pacific Shouldn’t be a ‘Strategic Surprise,’”](#) *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2022.

¹⁰ Alexander B. Gray, [“Beijing Eyes Pacific Islands, Exploiting US Strategic Vacuum,”](#) *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2022.

¹¹ China’s military buildup on three islets that it claims in the South China Sea so far, according to US military sources, includes completed infrastructure for anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, radar, and laser jamming equipment as well as jet fighter runways and ports. Associated Press, [“China Has Fully Militarized Three Islands in the South China Sea, US Admiral Says,”](#) *The Guardian*, March 20, 2022.

¹² Reports now suggest that China may have acquired basing rights in Cambodia that would allow Chinese soldiers to occupy a portion of a Cambodian base they are upgrading. The Cambodians deny this report.

¹³ “They would assemble a staggering 238 ships, 170 aircraft, 4 submarines and 25,000 military personnel from 26 countries,” McCormack writes, among them India, Indonesia, and Tonga. Gavan McCormack, [“Global Agendas 2022: NATO and RIMPAC,”](#) *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, July 1, 2022.

¹⁴ Congressional Research Service, [“U.S. Ground Forces in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress,”](#) May 6, 2022.

¹⁵ Jon Harper, [“Eagles vs. Dragon: How the U.S. and Chinese Navies Stack Up,”](#) March 9, 2020.

¹⁶ Lara Seligman, [“Pentagon Considering Permanent Naval Task Force to Counter China in Pacific,”](#) *Politico*, June 15, 2022.

¹⁷ Centre for Air Power Studies (New Delhi), [“Positioning Japan-NATO Cooperation,”](#) July 13, 2022.

¹⁸ General Mark Milley’s visit in July 2022 was the first by a high-ranking U.S. military officer since 2008. Colm Quinn, [“Xi Jinping Welcomes a Rare Visitor in Indonesia’s President,”](#) *Foreign Policy*, July 26, 2022.

¹⁹ The White House, [“Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,”](#) February 11, 2022.

²⁰ Damien Cave, [“China Seeks Sweeping Regional Deal with Pacific Island Countries,”](#) *NYT*, May 25, 2022; Reuters, [“China is Pursuing a Pacific-wide Pact with 10 Island Nations on Security, Policing and Data—Report,”](#) *The Guardian*, May 25, 2022.

²¹ Kate Lyons, [“China’s Foreign Minister Tells Pacific Leaders, ‘Don’t be Too Anxious’ After They Reject Regional Security Pact,”](#) *The Guardian*, May 30, 2022.

²² At this writing, Papua New Guinea was undergoing election-time political violence. The cause is under investigation, but thousands of people have been displaced and “dozens” have been killed. Lyanne Togiba, [“Dozens Killed and Thousands Displaced in Election Fighting in Papua New Guinea, UN Says,”](#) *The Guardian*, July 22, 2022.

²³ At least a few strategic analysts, such as Alexander Gray cited earlier (“Beijing Eyes Pacific Islands”), recognize that geopolitics cannot entirely account for the Pacific Island situation, and that environmental and social concerns—“issues like illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; rising sea levels; soil erosion; wildlife trafficking; and the impact of severe weather events”—and development needs in areas such as health care and education are also very important.

²⁴ A Chinese deal with East Timor following on Wang Yi’s visit points in that direction. China’s

aid package included healthcare, digitizing East Timor's national radio and television services, and adding to already substantial investments in port and construction facilities. [“Beijing Targets East Timor, Four Deals Set to be Signed,”](#) *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 3, 2022.

²⁵ Hilary Whiteman, [“The US Steps Up Its Game as China Circles the Pacific,”](#) CNN, July 12, 2022.

²⁶ Rebecca Starting and Joanne Wallis, [“Strategic Competition in Oceania,”](#) in Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, eds., *Navigating Tumultuous Times in the Indo-Pacific* (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2022).

²⁷ Kiribati's decision probably was taken to show solidarity with China. [“Pacific Islands Forum 2022: US Makes Push Into Forum as China Barred,”](#) *New Zealand Herald*, July 17, 2022; [“Smiles and Unity at the Pacific Island Forum Mask Tough Questions Shelves for Another Day,”](#) *The Guardian*, July 15, 2022.

²⁸ Dorothy Wickham, [“Can You Blame Poor Countries Like Mine for Turning to China?”](#) *NYT*, June 27, 2022.