

Australian media stokes fears of Chinese military base in Vanuatu

John Braddock
13 April 2018

The sharpening propaganda war between Washington and its allies Australia and New Zealand on the one hand, and China on the other, has been further fuelled by media reports that Beijing is in talks with Vanuatu to establish a military base in the country. The tiny South Pacific island nation with a population of just 270,000, lies 2,000 kilometres directly east of Australia.

Citing unnamed “intelligence and security” sources, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) reported on Tuesday that China had approached Vanuatu to build a permanent military facility, describing it as “a globally significant move that could see the rising superpower sail warships on Australia's doorstep.” At the same time, it admitted that no formal proposals had been put to Vanuatu's government, but claimed “preliminary discussions” were under way.

The article grossly inflated the extent of Chinese aid and influence and raised concerns about the building of a major new wharf on the island of Espirito Santo. It cited Lowy Institute analyst Jonathan Pryke as saying the wharf had “raised eyebrows in defence, intelligence and diplomatic circles” in Canberra, because, while its stated purpose was to host cruise ships, it could also service naval vessels.

In a separate comment, SMH political editor Peter Hartcher bluntly declared: “Canberra needs to get very serious, very quickly, to counter this move by a master strategist.”

The purpose of these unsubstantiated allegations is to again vilify Beijing and justify the military build-up and preparations for war against China by the US and its allies. The same unnamed intelligence sources were the basis for the government and the media, particularly the SMH and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, to whip up lurid allegations of Chinese interference in Australian politics to pave the way for draconian new laws against “foreign agents of influence.”

The Vanuatu government vehemently denied the claims. Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu criticised the “paranoia” in the Australian media about China, and declared that as a non-aligned country Vanuatu was “not interested in any sort of military base in our country.”

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who visited Vanuatu last weekend, denied any knowledge of the plans. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull warned: “We would view with great concern the establishment of any foreign military bases” in Vanuatu or the neighbouring Pacific.

The opposition Labor Party fell into line. Spokesperson Penny Wong said that any move towards “militarisation and competition” was “not conducive to the sort of stable and prosperous region we want.” New Zealand Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern also said while she couldn't comment on the validity of the reports, her government “is opposed to the militarisation of the Pacific.”

Such comments are entirely hypocritical. Canberra and Wellington, which regard the Pacific as their own “back yard,” have over the past decade found various pretexts to dispatch military forces to East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Fiji and Tonga. France, a major imperialist power, also maintains substantial military facilities and thousands of troops in New Caledonia and Tahiti.

According to the SMH, the prospect of a Chinese military outpost in Vanuatu, or even Tonga, has been discussed “at the highest levels” in Canberra and Washington. Such a project, it alleged, would allow China to “project military power into the Pacific Ocean and upend the long-standing strategic balance in the region, potentially increasing the risk of confrontation between China and the United States.”

The claim is absurd. China currently operates only one overseas military base, in the west African country of Djibouti. Whereas the US has a world-wide network of

alliances and hundreds of military bases that include major installations on China's doorstep in Japan and South Korea and basing arrangements with a string of Asian countries, including the Philippines, Singapore, Australia and India.

The Vanuatu scare is being exploited to justify a further military build-up. Peter Jennings from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute wrote in the *Australian* on April 1 that in order to push back against "China's rise," Australia had to upgrade its strategic readiness and "investment in alliance cooperation" with partners in the region, such as Japan and South Korea. New Zealand, he flatly warned, must stop "kowtowing to Beijing"—the country's second largest trading partner—and join the fight for "Western values."

Last month Ardern conducted a high-powered tour of the Pacific. NZ Foreign Minister Winston Peters earlier delivered a speech at the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, declaring the need for a "Pacific reset" to counter "external actors and interests" entering the region. He twice stated that "there has never been a time since 1945 when Australia and New Zealand need to work together more closely in the Pacific."

China's involvement in the South West Pacific has been primarily in response to Washington's confrontational policy, which began under the Obama administration's "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific, and intensified under Trump. Some 60 percent of the US navy's warships and military aircraft will be deployed in the Pacific by 2020.

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Beijing has sought to counter the US by expanding its diplomatic and economic influence. It has been assisted by the disenchantment among Pacific island governments, led by Fiji, over the dominance wielded by the imperialist powers, Australian and New Zealand, over their affairs. In recent years, Pacific countries have received an estimated \$US1.8 billion in aid, infrastructure investment and loans from Beijing. Chinese aid to Fiji already exceeds Australia's, and is close to doing the same in Samoa and Tonga.

Amid sharpening tensions, Australia's minister for international development and the Pacific, Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, lashed out in January at Chinese aid in the Pacific Islands, declaring it was creating "roads to nowhere" and "white elephants," threatening "economic stability without delivering benefits." China's foreign ministry lodged a formal protest, describing the minister's comments as

"irresponsible."

The Vanuatu government released its own statement saying that China's aid assistance was based on requests by Vanuatu "because of its development needs which may not fall within the aid policies of other donor partners." It noted that China was providing "more development options to the Pacific Island Countries who would otherwise be overly dependent on Australia and New Zealand."

The SMH continued its campaign on April 11 declaring that the "sheer ubiquity" of Chinese presence in Vanuatu is "striking," with hundreds of millions of dollars in Chinese grants and loans spent on buildings and infrastructure. China reportedly accounts for nearly half of Vanuatu's \$440 million foreign debt, similar to the level of Tonga's debt to Beijing. Vanuatu has, in return supported Beijing's island-reclamation in the South China Sea that has been attacked by Washington and its allies.

The SMH once again honed in on the large wharf on Espirito Santo, claiming it was "big enough to allow powerful warships to dock alongside it, heightening fears the port could be converted into a Chinese naval installation." Again citing unnamed "defence experts," the article described the wharf as the largest in the South Pacific and "strategically located in the same harbour in which the US based tens of thousands of troops during World War II."

This propaganda offensive in the Australian media, backed by the intelligence and military establishment, is one more sign of Washington's determination, if necessary by military means, to maintain the Pacific as an "American lake"—as the US termed it after World War II.



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