

# Australian PM's trip to Solomon Islands highlights intensifying US confrontation with China

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Prime Minister Scott Morrison demonstrated his government's commitment to the escalating US offensive against China by paying a brief, but pointed, trip to the strategically-located Pacific island state of Solomon Islands this week.

Morrison's visit was not only his first overseas trip since his government scraped back into office on May 18. It was his third to the southwest Pacific this year, following equally revealing visits to nearby Vanuatu and Fiji in January.

Conducted amid provocative US accusations of Chinese "coercion" of Pacific countries, the latest trip was clearly intended to send a blunt message to the Solomons' government: do not cut across the interests of the US and Australia by accepting Chinese aid and investment.

Morrison was wary of too openly bullying the small Pacific state, which remained an impoverished British colony from 1893 to 1978. Conscious of popular resentment of Australia's long record of colonial-style domination, Morrison denied that his trip had anything to do with the intensifying US economic war and military build-up against Beijing. "We're here because we are family with the Pacific," he said.

Every aspect of the visit belied that claim. It was the first by an Australian prime minister to the Solomon Islands since 2008, just like Morrison's trips to Vanuatu and Fiji were the first to the supposed "family" for more than a decade.

The visits came only after the Trump administration sounded alarms about alleged growing Chinese influence in the region. The strategic importance of the Solomons is underlined by the fact that the main island, Guadalcanal, was the site of a six-month ground and

naval battle between the US and Japan during World War II.

Just before Morrison landed in Honiara, US President Donald Trump's Acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan told last weekend's Shangri-La Dialogue gathering in Singapore that Beijing was wielding a "toolkit of coercion" in the region, supposedly by funding infrastructure projects. This came during a 40-minute tirade against Beijing in which he emphasised US readiness to use military power to secure its interests.

Last month, while in Australia, US acting assistant secretary for Southeast Asia, Patrick Murphy, delivered a similar missive. He urged Pacific Island countries not to establish diplomatic relations with China. "It gives rise to tensions by changing the status quo and then the possibility of conflict," Murphy said.

Solomon Islands is one of six Pacific states that still recognise Taiwan as the legitimate government of China, in return for Taiwanese aid, while accepting funds from Beijing. The US and Australian authorities have voiced concern that if the Solomons switches its recognition to Beijing that will start a "domino effect."

The Solomon's Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare recently announced a review of the recognition of Taiwan and foreshadowed signing up to China's "Belt and Road" infrastructure program. During Morrison's stopover, Sogavare said any such move was a "sovereign decision" for the Solomon Islands alone to make. Publicly, Morrison professed to agree.

However, according to the *Solomon Star*, Morrison also met with former Prime Minister Rick Hou, who said he believed it was "in the long-term interest of the Solomon Islands to maintain the status quo" in relation

to Taiwan.

Sogavare heads an unstable multi-party coalition. It was formed after intensive horse-trading following elections in April that left no single party with more than eight of the 50 parliamentary seats. Currently prime minister for the fourth time, Sogavare has experienced an Australian regime-change operation before.

In 2006-07, Sogavare was ousted and his then attorney general, Julian Moti, was persecuted after being perceived as threats to Australia's hold over the country via its police-military intervention in 2003. On the pretext of a humanitarian operation to end civil conflict, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) disarmed the Solomons' police force and took control of its prison and judicial systems, central bank and finance department, and the public service.

Although RAMSI formally ended in 2017, Australian officials and federal police personnel remain to bolster Canberra's influence in Honiara. Significantly, Morrison feted Australian Federal Police officers during a barbecue at the Australian High Commissioner's residence.

For the Solomon Islands, much is at stake economically. According to the World Bank, China is its largest market, taking 65.2 percent, or \$US326 million, of its total exports in 2017. Timber constituted 94.5 percent of Solomon Islands' exports to China in that year.

Far from "family" members, successive Australian governments have regarded the people of the South Pacific with contempt—only as subjects of exploitation by Australian companies and pawns in the US-led confrontation with China now wracking the region.

Even Morrison's announcement of infrastructure funding underlined Canberra's condescension. He offered up to \$250 million in financing over 10 years, specifically for high-profile projects, such as government offices. But the funds would be diverted from the existing pitiful aid provided for health and education. He also promised to grant more temporary visas to Solomon Island workers, effectively permitting them to be employed as cheap labour in Australia.

Morrison's stopover marks an escalation in the "Pacific step up" that the Liberal-National Coalition government unveiled last year. He reiterated last year's

renewal of the Solomons' "security partnership" with Australia. The agreement included a commitment to stage more joint military exercises.

That pact was foisted on Solomon Islands just after Australia blocked a bid by Chinese telco giant Huawei to build regional internet cable links, and strong-armed Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands into accepting an undersea cable linking them to Australia.

Last November, Morrison arrogantly declared the region "our patch" while proposing a fund of up to \$2 billion to provide grants and cheap loans to Pacific states. The "step up" plan included \$1 billion to support Australian business operations in the region, as well as closer military ties.

At last November's Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea, US Vice President Mike Pence welcomed the Australian package. He launched a blunt attack on China, accusing it of "militarising" islets in the South China Sea and denouncing its Indo-Pacific infrastructure plans.

To boost the US and Australian military presence in the region, the US announced it would join Australia and PNG in establishing a naval base on Manus Island, off the PNG northern coast—blocking a Chinese proposal to build a port there. That followed the announcement last August that Australia had outbid China in funding a regional military base, Blackrock Camp, in Fiji.

This is part of a bipartisan pledge to support US war preparations. In a speech last November, the Labor Party's then leader, Bill Shorten, said Australia had to "turn up" in the Pacific to avoid "forfeiting" what he called "the Blue Continent." He said this was part of Labor's "anchor" commitment to the US alliance.



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