

Solomon Islands and Kiribati cut ties with Taiwan, shift to China

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28 September 2019

Foreign ministers from Solomon Islands and China sealed diplomatic relations at a meeting in Beijing on September 22, just days after the Pacific island nation severed 36 years of relations with Taiwan.

Beijing regards Taiwan as an integral part of China and has threatened to use military force if the “renegade province” should ever proclaim formal independence. Neither Beijing nor Taipei maintains diplomatic ties with countries that recognise the other.

The move by the Solomons brought the number of countries switching to China since 2016 to seven. Taiwan is left with only 15 formal allies, including the Vatican and small states in the Pacific, Caribbean, and Latin America.

A week earlier, Kiribati also announced it would suspend relations with Taipei. Taiwan now only has formal relations with Palau, Nauru, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific region. Questions remain over whether Tuvalu’s new government will switch, but a government spokesperson tweeted that Prime Minister Kausea Natano was likely to stick with Taipei.

A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman welcomed Solomon Islands into “the big family of China-Pacific Islands cooperation on the basis of the one-China principle,” saying the break with Taipei was “part of the irresistible trend of the times.” Beijing maintains both Kiribati and Solomon Islands will have “unprecedented development opportunities” after making the switch.

The decisions have dealt fresh blows to Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, who is seeking re-election in January. Her government attacked what it claimed was China’s use of “financial and political pressure to suppress Taiwan’s international space,” and declared it would not stoop to “dollar diplomacy” in order to meet

“unreasonable demands” from the Pacific. In reality, Taiwan has shamelessly resorted to money diplomacy to maintain its limited diplomatic relations.

Washington reacted with alarm. Republican senator and 2016 presidential aspirant Marco Rubio called on the Trump administration to consider cutting ties with the Solomons. Vice President Mike Pence cancelled a planned meeting with Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York. In May, US acting assistant secretary for Southeast Asia, Patrick Murphy, had warned Pacific 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 declared.

The impoverished states across the southwestern Pacific are seeking to reduce their dependence on the regional imperialist powers, Australia and New Zealand, by increasing economic relations with China. At the same time, rifts over climate change have intensified the geo-political tensions wracking the region.

Global warming and rising seas are an existential threat to the Pacific’s low-lying coastal communities. The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) held in Tuvalu in August was riven by a dispute over the Australian government’s refusal to limit coal production in order to address climate change. Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama warned that Canberra’s intransigence would push Pacific leaders closer to China. Beijing condemned Australia for acting like a “condescending master” toward Pacific countries at the PIF.

These developments underscore the conflicts intensified by the US trade war against China. While Washington formally acknowledges Beijing’s one-China Policy, Taiwan has become pivotal to its

economic and military offensive against China. In August, the White House announced the sale of 66 advanced F-16 Viper fighter jets, the largest military deal with Taipei in decades, among other measures to boost relations.

Washington's key ally in the South Pacific, Australia, officially remained non-committal on the switches. A Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokeswoman said Australia "does not take a position on other countries' choices about their diplomatic relationships." Nevertheless, the *Australian* newspaper bemoaned a "critical win" for Chinese President Xi Jinping, who had met personally with a group of Pacific leaders at the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Papua New Guinea last November.

The move is a significant setback for Australia and New Zealand. At the behest of the US, they have escalated their aid, commercial interests and military presence in the Pacific to push back against China. While Australia remains the largest donor to the region, China has increased its aid to the Pacific in recent years, pledging \$US4 billion to the region in 2017 alone.

To shore up his government's Pacific "Step Up" policy, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited the Solomons in June. It was his third trip to the southwest Pacific this year, following visits to Vanuatu and Fiji. Morrison reiterated Canberra's "security partnership" with Honiara, an agreement that includes a commitment to stage more joint military exercises.

Sogavare defended the diplomatic shift in an 11-page statement, saying any decision otherwise would have been irresponsible. "While we cannot deny the longstanding friendship we have maintained with Taiwan, the future stability and wellbeing of Solomon Islands depends on our own ability to engage at the international level with development partners capable of advancing our national interests," he said.

Sogavare claimed that recognising China would not mean taking on risky loans or falling into a debt trap. According to the *Australian*, Beijing offered an immediate \$500 million in grants but more is at stake economically. China is the Solomons' largest market, taking 65.2 percent, or \$US326 million, of its exports in 2017, mostly in timber.

In the case of Kiribati, for 23 years from 1980, the

country maintained relations with Beijing, and hosted a Chinese satellite tracking station on South Tarawa, near a similar US facility in the Marshall Islands. When its then-president, Anote Tong, recognised Taiwan in 2003, the Chinese satellite facility and embassy in Tarawa were abandoned.

Kiribati President Taneti Maamau's announcement of the switch back to China brought a swift rebuke from Taiwan's Foreign Minister Joseph Wu. He said Taiwan "deeply regrets and strongly condemns the Kiribati government's decision" and accused Maamau of holding "highly unrealistic expectations regarding China." Taiwan's statement claimed Maamau had recently sought financial assistance from Taiwan to help buy planes for the national airline, Air Kiribati.

Canberra and Wellington have long regarded the southwest Pacific as their own "backyard," exploiting its resources and cheap labour, with the backing of first British, then US, imperialism. The move by Pacific island countries to strengthen ties with Beijing will exacerbate rivalries across the region as the US-led confrontation with against China develops apace.



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