

Solomon Islands deal with Chinese developer highlights Pacific tensions

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A province of the Solomon Islands, a small island state in the southwestern Pacific, has agreed to lease a large island to a Chinese company to develop into a special economic zone, sparking concerns in the US and among its regional allies, New Zealand and Australia.

The Central Province agreement, signed on 22 September, gives the Beijing-based Sam Group an exclusive five-year development lease, renewable for 75 years, for Tulagi and its surrounding islands. The Xiamen International Trade Group, a second Chinese company, is also listed as a party to the agreement.

Radio NZ reported that the Central Province premier, Stanley Manetiva, confirmed he had signed the “strategic cooperation agreement” in Honiara with representatives of Sam Group. But he said it was not legally binding and the company would have to comply with local laws and respect landowner rights.

“We want the investors to come to our province,” Manetiva said, “but we must be mindful... that the people are our priority.” A statement by the Sam Group said the two parties hope to carry out “comprehensive cooperation in energy, chemical industry, investment, trade and other fields in addition to existing cooperation.”

Manetiva noted that the recent diplomatic switch by the national government to Beijing had opened up investment opportunities. Weeks earlier, defying pressure from the US Trump administration, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati governments sealed diplomatic ties with China after severing relations with Taiwan. Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare visited Beijing, signing agreements covering education, economic and technical cooperation and foreign affairs. China is the Solomons’ largest market, taking 65.2 percent, or \$US326 million, of its total exports in 2017.

New York Times, a mouthpiece for the US foreign policy and intelligence establishment, reacted with a provocative and dishonest article on October 16. Authored by Sydney-based correspondent Damien Cave, it bluntly alleged the Tulagi agreement was further proof of Beijing’s “military ambitions” in the important strategic area, “where Allied forces fought a bloody battle with Japan in World War II.”

Cave asserted that the “secretive” deal with Sam Group—which he accused, without any evidence, of having “close ties to the Chinese Communist Party”—alarmed US officials who regard the Pacific islands as “crucial to keeping China in check and protecting important sea routes.” Beijing, the writer declared, was “moving in with plans to effectively take control.”

The article, subsequently republished by the *New Zealand Herald*, quoted New Zealand-based Anne-Marie Brady, a prominent critic of Beijing, who claimed: “The geography tells you that this is a good location. China is expanding its military assets into the South Pacific and is looking for friendly ports and friendly airfields just like other rising powers before them.”

The contention that China seeks a military foothold in the Pacific reprises an alarmist campaign waged by the Australian media in April last year, stoking fears that Beijing was about to establish a naval base in nearby Vanuatu. The construction of a wharf on the island of Espirito Santo, funded with Chinese aid, the *Sydney Morning Herald* intoned, was “a globally significant move that could see the rising superpower sail warships on Australia’s doorstep.”

The Vanuatu government vehemently denied the claims. Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu criticised the Australian media’s “paranoia” about China, and

declared that, being non-aligned, Vanuatu was “not interested in any sort of military base in our country.”

The propaganda offensive vilifying China on the basis of threadbare claims turns reality on its head. Its purpose is to justify the aggressive diplomatic, economic and military build-up for war in the Pacific by the US and its allies launched by the Obama administration in 2011, and intensified under Trump. The imperialist powers are the ones stepping up their military operations across the region aimed at Beijing.

In August Mike Pompeo became the first US Secretary of State to visit Micronesia and negotiate an extension to a regional security agreement. It was necessary, he said, to face off “Chinese efforts to redraw the Pacific.” Under a so-called Compact of Free Association, the US military has exclusive access to the vast airspace and territorial waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and Palau. US imperialism carried out more than 100 nuclear bomb tests in this region in the years following World War II, with devastating consequences for the environment and indigenous peoples’ health.

Australia and New Zealand are following suit. Australia, the US and Papua New Guinea (PNG) have agreed to establish a naval base on Manus Island, blocking a Chinese proposal to build a port nearby. Australia previously outbid China to fund a major regional military base in Fiji. In a visit to the Solomons in June, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison reiterated Canberra’s “security partnership” with Honiara, an agreement that includes more joint military exercises.

Following the intervention of top-level US officials in 2018, the Australian government moved to stop

Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from providing a new internet cable to PNG and the Solomon Islands, on “security” grounds. The Solomons’ government had signed a contract with Huawei in 2017 to build the cable, but then agreed to renege on the contract.

There is opposition within the Solomons to the Tulagi deal. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation claimed on October 18 that many islanders did not “want to do business with Chinese operators” and are vowing to block it. Deputy opposition leader Peter Kenilorea Junior, who opposed severing ties with Taiwan, said there were no safeguards for “the interests of Central

islands province peoples and the resources.” The Sam Group would be able to survey for oil and gas developments, despite a sizeable anti-mining movement on the island, he said.

Successive US administrations have regarded the southwest Pacific as Australia and New Zealand’s “patch” to police, as part of US dominance over the Pacific, established by its defeat of Japan in World War II. In return, Canberra and Wellington have long exploited the Pacific’s resources and cheap labour.

Pacific states, however, are seeking to reduce their dependence by increasing diplomatic and economic relations with China. Rifts over climate change, which poses an existential threat to low-lying islands, have intensified geo-political tensions. The Pacific Islands Forum held in Tuvalu in August was marked by a dispute over the Australian government’s refusal to limit coal production to cut carbon emissions.

The response by Washington, Canberra and Wellington to developments in the Pacific is part of a broader xenophobic campaign against supposed Chinese “interference” in politics and business designed to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment in preparation for military conflict abroad, and to attack fundamental democratic rights at home.

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