

US and Australia ready another regime-change operation in Solomon Islands

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The US and Australian governments are preparing a destabilisation campaign against the Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, following his diplomatic recognition of China last September.

The Pacific state's diplomatic switch from Taiwan to China was a repudiation of Washington and Canberra. American and Australian officials had exerted considerable efforts to dissuade Sogavare from aligning with Beijing and reacted with fury to the decision. Vice President Mike Pence cancelled a scheduled meeting with Sogavare at a United Nations meeting, while Republican Senator Marco Rubio tweeted on September 17 that the US "must push back against Beijing's bullying and efforts to isolate Taiwan." He added that he would "begin exploring ways to cut off ties with #SolomonIslands including potentially ending financial assistance & restricting access to U.S. dollars & banking."

The day after Rubio's threat to crash the Solomon Islands' economy, the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs discussed the Pacific country's diplomatic switch during hearings on "US Interests in East Asia and the Pacific and the FY20 Budget." Republican congresswoman Ann Wagner described the Solomon Islands' recognition of Beijing as a "demoralising event" and declared that the Sogavare government had "just undermined US strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific." She asked the US Agency for International Development official Gloria Steele whether Solomon Islands would receive American aid money in 2020. Steele said that "we are reassessing our assistance to Solomon Islands." Wagner emphatically replied, "good."

The Sogavare government aims to capitalise on China's growing economic power and the international infrastructure projects being developed under its "Belt and Road" agenda. The Pacific country remains among the most impoverished in the world, with many of its 600,000 people remaining dependent on subsistence agriculture and lacking access to basic infrastructure, including electricity, transport and communications systems.

At the same time, the Solomon Islands hopes that Beijing will serve as a counter-weight to Australian imperialism—Washington's junior partner and South Pacific hegemon—allowing it greater room for diplomatic manoeuvres.

In July, as the diplomatic switch to China was being prepared, Sogavare spoke with the "Little Red Podcast." In remarks that he later protested had meant to be off the record, Sogavare said: "To be honest, when it comes to economics and politics, Taiwan is completely useless to us."

The prime minister explained that during a previous term in office, in 2006, Australia had sabotaged his government's decision to have Solomons police receive weapons training. "I sent 40 police officers to go and train in Taiwan," he said. "And you know what Australia did? The foreign affairs minister himself went to Taiwan and says: 'Stop the training, that area is ours.' What I'm saying is [that] if this was China, they wouldn't give a damn to Alexander Downer if he goes there and says: 'You stop, get out of here.' They'd say: 'Get the hell out of here.' This is a sovereign decision made by a sovereign government."

Sogavare expressed his admiration for the ability of Fiji's military-dominated government to defy Australian diktats issued in recent years. "Take Fiji," he said. "They can flex their muscles and [say], 'You behave yourself. I have another friend [China] here.'"

There is no reason to expect that the US and Australia will respect international law and accept the Solomon Islands' recognition of China as a sovereign decision of its elected government.

Around the world, US imperialism is on a violent rampage, attempting to offset its declining international economic standing by utilising its military superiority, with brazen disregard for legal and diplomatic norms. Washington's efforts to counter China's growing challenge to its domination of the Asia-Pacific include denying the Asian power naval access to the Pacific Ocean. After World War II, US imperialism claimed the vast ocean as an "American lake" and worked with its junior allies, Australia and New Zealand, to ensure that no rival power gained any significant economic, infrastructure, or military foothold in the region. This is now under threat from China.

In Solomon Islands—where in 1942–43 the US fought the Battle of Guadalcanal, one of the bloodiest campaigns waged against Japan—the Sogavare government has signed onto China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative. Chinese firms

are being invited to exploit the country's gold and nickel reserves. The American media reacted with alarm to an agreement by the authorities in the province of Tulagi to lease a large island to a Chinese company to develop into a special economic zone. The agreement was rescinded by the Solomon Islands government.

US officials in Solomon Islands have responded by stoking regional separatism, threatening to reignite the civil war that displaced tens of thousands of people between 1999 and 2003.

In August, a team of American officials travelled to Malaita and met with the province's separatist premier, Daniel Suidani. The contingent included members of the Department of State, Department of Defence, Department of Trade, as well as embassy and aid personnel. US intelligence agencies were no doubt also represented in the group.

Unusually, the visit to Malaita was not accompanied by a single press release or social media post. A few weeks after the US visit, when Sogavare officially announced the diplomatic switch to Beijing, Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani declared that he did not recognise the decision and would work to block Chinese investment in the province, the country's most populous. Suidani issued an anti-communist, evangelical Christian appeal and helped organise a pro-Taiwan demonstration in Malaita's capital, Auki. He has vowed to accelerate his push to establish the island province as a separate nation.

With extraordinary recklessness, the Trump administration is backing Suidani's campaign as a means of undermining the Sogavare government.

American and Australian aid money is being used to finance a new port and supporting infrastructure at Bina Harbour, in western Malaita. This has been presented as supporting passenger and commercial ferry services but may have longer term military implications. Another American government delegation is due to again visit the province next month.

Suidani boasted of US support in an interview with Reuters in November, explaining: "We've asked the US and Australia to be part of Malaita security so they can look after the province from Chinese developers."

There has been no official response from Washington or Canberra to this unspecified appeal to contribute to "Malaita security."

The Australian government spent nearly \$3 billion on its neo-colonial Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) takeover of the Pacific country between 2003 and 2017. The operation included a highly provocative campaign in 2006–07 to remove Sogavare as prime minister. This involved the illegal rendition of the then attorney general of Solomon Islands, Julian Moti, to Australia on trumped-up sexual assault allegations. Australia's High Court subsequently permanently barred any criminal proceedings against the international lawyer, and the government was forced to issue a formal apology and pay Moti compensation.

That Canberra is now readying a reprise of the "regime change" operation against Sogavare was indicated by an article in the *Australian* last month, headlined "Solomons PM Sogavare urged to sack nephew adviser and consider quitting over cash request."

Billed as an "exclusive" by Ben Packham, the newspaper's foreign affairs and defence writer, the piece contained a series of unsubstantiated allegations against Sogavare's chief-of-staff, Robson Djokovic, and Julian Moti. The *Australian* alleged that, in 2016, a consultancy company associated with Djokovic proposed to act on behalf of Axiom Mining, an Australian company that has since been kicked out of Solomon Islands, in exchange for a \$700,000 consultancy fee. Julian Moti allegedly presented the offer.

This was presented in the most sinister light, with the *Australian* falsely claiming that its story had "rocked Solomon Islands politics." The article prominently quoted the country's opposition leader Matthew Wale—who is very close to Canberra and has opposed the diplomatic recognition of Beijing—alleging "corruption perpetrated at the highest level of government."

No credence whatsoever should be lent to these allegations, given their source. Journalists at the *Australian* functioned as stenographers for the Australian government and foreign affairs department during the 2006–07 destabilisation campaign in Solomon Islands. They appear to be playing the same role now, as Canberra desperately seeks to maintain its role as the US-delegated gendarme of the South Pacific by again forcing Sogavare out of office.

The author recommends:

Australian High Court blocks frame-up charges against Moti [8 December 2011]

WikiLeaks cables reveal US role in Australia's "regime change" in Solomon Islands [14 September 2011]



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