

Solomon Islands' renegade province threatens separatist split over China diplomatic recognition

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The leader of one of Solomon Islands' nine provinces, Malaita, has said he is organising an independence referendum, possibly to be held within weeks.

The separatist threat is the latest in a series of provocations by Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani, who is being backed by US and Australian imperialism in his campaign against the national government's diplomatic switch from Taiwan to Beijing that was announced in September last year.

After diplomatic ties were established between the Solomon Islands and China, Suidani immediately insisted that Malaita province did not recognise the move. He organised pro-Taiwan demonstrations on the island and sought to whip up anti-Chinese sentiment through anti-communist and evangelical Christian, anti-atheist rhetoric. The Malaitan provincial administration has effectively sought to maintain its own foreign policy, coordinating aid and economic assistance from Taipei. Suidani also declared that no Chinese aid projects or economic investment would be permitted on Malaita, and no Chinese nationals would be allowed to visit.

The provincial government has created a pogromist atmosphere. A pro-independence outfit "Malaita 4 Democracy," issued a threat at the beginning of this month to all ethnic Chinese businesspeople to leave the island within 24 hours. Many shops in the Malaita provincial centre of Auki were boarded up on September 2, before police intervened to prevent attacks.

Suidani used as the pretext for the threatened independence referendum the national government's authorisation of a flight on August 31 from Guangzhou,

China to Solomon Islands. The Chinese-funded flight carried returning Solomon Islands' citizens as well as Chinese aid workers sent to help construct facilities for the 2023 Pacific Games, and the first Chinese ambassador to the country, Li Ming. All passengers tested negative for COVID-19 three times before boarding the flight. Suidani nevertheless attempted to whip up a fear campaign over coronavirus infections. (Solomon Islands is one of the few countries to have avoided any positive cases.)

It remains to be seen whether Suidani will be able to proceed with the separatist ballot. Opposition members of the Malaitan provincial legislature have also said they hope to move a no confidence resolution against the premier. The national government has declared the proposed referendum illegal and threatened court action to stop it.

Suidani's administration responded with a statement that absurdly accused the elected, multi-party coalition national government of "moving into the area of dictatorship; Solomon Islands is slipping into the direction of the one-party system of China."

The Malaitan administration's reckless actions threaten a civil war within the impoverished South Pacific country. Between 1999 and 2003, a low-intensity civil war that involved the separatist Malaita Eagle Force militia cost around 200 lives and forced tens of thousands of people to flee their homes.

The threat of renewed conflict has been deliberately stoked by the United States, as part of its aggressive drive to undermine China's influence in the Pacific.

When Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare announced the diplomatic switch from Taipei to Beijing last year, US officials reacted with fury. Vice

President Mike Pence cancelled a scheduled meeting with Sogavare at a United Nations meeting, Republican Senator Marco Rubio threatened economic sanctions, and other Republican congressmen demanded that aid be cut-off.

These public declarations followed an earlier, highly secretive deployment of US officials to Malaita. Dispatched to the province in August last year, just prior to Sogavare's confirmation of the diplomatic switch, members of the Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of Trade, as well as embassy and aid personnel met with Daniel Suidani. No doubt CIA operatives were also represented in the delegation. After the meeting, unusually, no press statements, photographs, or social media posts were issued to explain what had been discussed.

Subsequently, Suidani boasted of American support and said he would invite the US and Australian governments to assist with "Malaitan security."

Solomon Islands is an isolated country of just 600,000 people, with an undeveloped economy largely based on subsistence agriculture. Its location, however, makes it geo-strategically significant. The 1942–43 Battle of Guadalcanal was among the bloodiest of the US military's confrontations with Japanese forces during World War II. US imperialism's post-war declaration that the entire Pacific Ocean constituted an "American lake," is now threatened by the economic and military rise of China.

The US ruling elite is seeking to maintain its Pacific and global hegemony through diplomatic provocations, economic pressure, and threats of military violence. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo signalled a shift towards a de facto "regime-change" policy against China in a major speech last July. The Solomon Islands' government has been targeted for destabilisation and potential removal as part of this campaign.

The US Defense Department's annual report to Congress on China's military capacity, "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (PRC) 2020," was issued on September 1. Without presenting any evidence, it accused Beijing of having "likely considered" twelve countries (among them Sri Lanka, Burma, Indonesia, and Kenya) as potential sites for overseas military bases. The Chinese government, the report alleged,

"has probably already made overtures" to three other countries—Namibia, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands.

The report added: "Known focus areas of PLA planning are along the SLOCs [Sea lines of communication] from China to the Strait of Hormuz, Africa, and the Pacific Islands."

Washington is accelerating its military buildup in the Pacific. Defense Secretary Mark Esper visited Palau on August 28, a small archipelago chain east of the Philippines with a population of about 20,000 people. The islands, which were a "trust territory" administered by the US after World War II, received formal independence in 1994 but the state continues to function as an American semi-colony. Palau is one of just four Pacific states that maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan and not China. Esper used his visit to hypocritically denounce Beijing for "its ongoing destabilising activities in the region."

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on Tuesday that the visit may be followed by the establishment of a permanent US military base: "The Republic of Palau has asked the Pentagon to build ports, bases and airfields on the island nation, officials said, offering a boost to US military expansion plans in Asia, as Washington aims to counter China."



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