US maintains support for Solomon Islands' opposition forces after failed coup attempt

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The US government is maintaining its support for anti-government forces in Solomon Islands, as part of its aggressive drive to counter China's growing influence in the South Pacific.

US ambassador to Solomon Islands Erin McKee issued a provocative statement on December 10 insinuating that the government was corrupt and urging people to "choose" the US over China.

"I ask you to decide for yourself what type of development and future you want for you and your families," McKee wrote. "Do you want aid that benefits one person, one party, and one bank account? Or do you want assistance that empowers entire families, strengthens entire communities, and enriches entire nations? As democratic and independent states, you have a choice of who to partner with. And I believe that the choice is obvious."

The Solomons' government has been in Washington's cross hairs since it announced in late 2019 that it was ending diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognising Beijing as the sole legitimate government of China. This sovereign decision aligned the country's foreign relations with the vast majority of the world's nation-states.

In US ruling circles, however, it was regarded as a blow to their drive to isolate and encircle China and bolster Taiwan. Republican Senator Marco Rubio threatened to crash the Solomon Islands' economy by imposing sanctions and cutting off access to US and global financial institutions.

The State Department subsequently developed close ties with a provincial premier, Daniel Suidani in Malaita, who opposed the recognition of China on anti-communist and Christian fundamentalist grounds. Suidani was rewarded with $US25 million in so-called aid—50 times more than the province receives annually from all other countries put together—and the promise of additional American capital for infrastructure projects.

The provocative and reckless nature of these US moves cannot be overstated. Suidani is backed by the now proscribed Malaita for Democracy (M4D) outfit, which in September 2020 issued a pogromist threat to Chinese nationals in the province, giving them 24 hours to leave. Suidani and his supporters are separatists, and plan on staging an independence referendum early next year. Their manoeuvres now threaten to reignite the low intensity civil war that wracked the country between 1998 and 2003 as rival militias from Malaita and Guadalcanal fought for dominance.

Suidani's campaign culminated in last month's coup attempt. On November 24, around 1,000 of the Malaitan premier's supporters attempted to storm the parliament in the capital Honiara, and take Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare hostage. After riot police beat them back, the mob went on a three-day rampage, looting and burning dozens of buildings, including a police station, high school, and businesses owned by ethnic Chinese residents. Three people were killed in the destruction.

The US ambassador's December 10 statement only included a cursory, pro forma denunciation of the violence. McKee said this was "tragic and should not have happened," but immediately added tacit support to the claims of the Solomons' opposition that the rioting was not a coup but a peaceful protest that somehow got out of hand. "Those who wish to appeal to their government must do so in a peaceful manner," the ambassador stated.

McKee's reference to aid that "benefits one person, one party, and one bank account" was immediately understood in the Solomon Islands as lending support to opposition allegations of Sogavare government corruption.

After the failed coup attempt, the opposition attempted to remove the government through a parliamentary no confidence motion on December 5. When this failed, with only 15 of the 49 parliamentarians voting in favour, opposition leaders accused Sogavare of bribing members of his government with allegedly Chinese-sourced funds distributed via Constituency Development Funds.

While the US embassy has now thrown its weight behind these allegations, several points need to be made. Firstly, if channelling government funds to selected constituencies, known as pork barrelling, is corruption then there is not a

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single bourgeois government in the world that is not corrupt. Secondly, the Constituency Development Funds were first established by Taiwan and were for decades manipulated to favour Taipei's economic interests, especially in the logging sector. There is not a single faction of the Solomons' political establishment, including those now in the opposition, that did not capitalise on these funds when in power.

Inconveniently for the opposition and Ambassador McKee, there is also the fact that Sogavare has previously announced that Constituency Development Funds will be ended in 2022. Washington is in fact entirely uninterested in corruption, whether in Solomon Islands or anywhere else. The issue is nothing but a pretext to advance its anti-China agenda.

McKee emphasised her concern with Beijing after she was nominated in 2019 by the Trump administration to serve as the joint ambassador to Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu.

In her July 2019 statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which confirms ambassadorial appointments, McKee declared the Pacific states were "important to US national security" and warned that China's relationships in the region had "deepened dramatically over the past two years." McKee noted that Solomon Islands was then one of just six Pacific states that recognised Taiwan, and added that she would "stress the importance of maintaining cross-Strait relations."

Just three months later the Sogavare government switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, evidently blindsiding Washington.

At her confirmation hearing, McKee was asked two questions, both concerning China's presence in the Pacific. Democrat Senator Jeanne Shaheen asked what would be done to "counter" China. McKee demurred at this expression, saying she preferred to "characterise it as providing alternatives and options," while making clear her determination to "increase our presence" in the region to offset Beijing's influence.

US support for the Solomons' opposition remains subject to a blackout in the Australia and western media, with the issue never raised among the numerous articles and reports published in the aftermath of last month's violent rioting.

Within the foreign policy establishment, however, there is an ongoing discussion on how US imperialism can best advance its interests. There is frustration that the Australian-led military and police intervention force that was deployed to the country last month appears to be serving to stabilise Sogavare's rule. There have been open calls to organise the removal of the democratically elected government.

The *Diplomat* website, a US-based publication focussing on Asia-Pacific geopolitics, published a lengthy article yesterday titled "The Solomon Islands Crisis Shows America Needs a New Pacific Strategy."

The comment was authored by Alexander Gray, the former director for Oceania & Indo-Pacific Security at the White House National Security Council (2018–2019), and Cleo Paskal, of the right-wing think tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies. They stated that the Solomons' crisis "offers an opportunity for Washington to reimagine the scope of its engagement with the Pacific Islands."

Gray and Paskal explained that in the decades since World War II, Washington had "subcontracted US diplomacy and statecraft in the Pacific Islands" to Australia and New Zealand. "Yet the recent imbroglio in the Solomon Islands is revealing the folly of this approach," they continued. "[T]he United States' interests in the Pacific are unique to its global role and the increasing centrality of full-spectrum competition with Beijing. Outsourcing the effective representation of American interests on this front line of strategic competition to even its closest friends is fraught with peril."

The authors complained that the Australian-led intervention force was "likely to entrench the rule of Sogavare, whose corruption, pro-Beijing policies, and determination to suppress opposition to his switch of recognition from Taipei are directly contrary to US interests." Gray and Paskal concluded by calling on the Biden administration to organise a massive increase in Washington's military and diplomatic presence in the South Pacific.

The piece will no doubt set off alarm bells in Canberra. Australian imperialism has for decades benefitted from Washington's support for its predatory operations in the region. The threat of being sidelined in Solomon Islands will likely see the Australian government consider using its military and police assets in the country to help destabilise and remove Sogavare's government.

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