US pressure mounts over Solomon Islands' relations with China

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American foreign policy strategists are sounding the alarm over the Solomon Islands' developing relationship with China.

Officials in the small Pacific country received riot police equipment from the Chinese government late last month. A ceremony held at Honiara airport involved local police and government officials, as well as the Chinese ambassador. Police Minister Dickson Mua stated, "This batch of consignment is part of a larger batch, which will be delivered in the coming months. And it is only fitting to say that this progress support is a sign of how our friendship will grow over time."

Six Chinese police liaison officials are also to be sent to Solomon Islands, at the government's invitation. This deployment marks the first time that Chinese security personnel have ever been stationed in Solomon Islands.

For both American and Australian imperialist strategists, the move is feared as foreshadowing a more substantial military deployment in what they regard, without this having any basis in international law, as their exclusive "sphere of influence."

The *Wall Street Journal* devoted an editorial to these developments on December 31, entitled "Beijing courts the Solomon Islands." It is significant, in itself, that the editorial board of America's leading organ of finance capital is discussing the situation in the small Pacific state (population 700,000). No area on the planet is now exempt from US imperialism's drive to counter China's perceived challenge to its geo-strategic domination.

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial began by reminding its readers of the major 1942 battle of Guadalcanal during World War II, which, it stated, "proved the critical importance of the Solomon Islands for Pacific security."

The *Journal* continued: "As Beijing seeks to displac the US as the dominant power in the Pacific, it's establishing a small police presence on the Solomon Islands that could easily grow. This development underscores the importance of US engagement with the small but strategic sovereign states dotting the world's largest ocean."

The editorial took the form of an alert for foreign policy and military strategists in Washington. "The South Pacific hasn't received much US attention since World War II," it noted, "but China's foray into the Solomons shows it deserves more."

The *Journal* also issued an implicit criticism of the Australian government's role. "Australia, which led a peacekeeping force in the Solomon Islands from 2003 until 2017, sent security forces back last month to help control the riots," the newspaper explained. "Canberra would prefer a Solomon Islands government less susceptible to Beijing's influence, but it helped suppress the political violence on [Prime Minister] Sogavare's behalf."

This referred to the aftermath of a failed coup against the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare last November. On November 24, a large crowd attempted to storm the parliament and overthrow the government. After being repelled by police, the mob looted and burned substantial sections of the capital Honiara over three days, destroying businesses and killing three people.

These forces were dominated by supporters of Daniel Suidani, premier of Malaita province. Suidani has opposed diplomatic recognition of Beijing and has unlawfully maintained his own "foreign policy," oriented to Taiwan. For this he has received crucial US funding and political support.

Washington's provocative backing for Suidani and

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his violent separatist followers went unmentioned in the *Journal* editorial, in keeping with the US and Australian media blackout on this matter.

The complaint that the Australian forces deployed in late November have hindered efforts to remove Sogavare represents a call for the organisation of a full blown "regime change" operation.

Dissatisfaction with the Australian troops and police was also voiced by right-wing foreign policy commentator Cleo Paskal, of the anti-communist Foundation for Defense of Democracies. She has previously criticised the "folly" of continuing to "subcontract US diplomacy and statecraft in the Pacific Islands" to Australia and New Zealand.

In a January 1 comment in the *Sunday Guardian*, "China enters new role as Pacific Islands policeman," she accused Canberra of failing to have anticipated and opposed the Sogavare government's diplomatic switch in 2019 from Taiwan to China: "Washington was reliant on advice from Australia, which had led a peacekeeping mission in the country from 2003–2017. However, either Canberra was not aware of how close the country was to switching, or didn't think it was an issue of concern. Either way, not good."

Referring to the late November Australian-led intervention, Paskal added: "At the time, one argument in Canberra for the intervention was that if the Australians didn't go in, Sogavare would call in the Chinese. So, what happened? The Australians went in, justifying interventions (though by the time they arrived all the protests had ended anyway). And now that they are heading home—perhaps having realised they were snookered—the Chinese are sending in police trainers and equipment and no one can complain because the Australians were just there. Nicely done."

It remains unclear whether Australian forces will be "heading home." Most of the dozens of soldiers deployed have been withdrawn in the last fortnight, but approximately 15 soldiers and 40 federal police remain.

Discussion is underway within the Australian foreign policy establishment on the possibility of maintaining a larger, semi-permanent presence in the country.

Deakin and RMIT university academics Matthew Clarke and Simon Feeny published an article in the *Canberra Times* on December 31, "Australia won't leave Honiara unless China does first."

They stated: "Given Australia's long history in the region, any increase in Chinese influence in the Pacific can arguably only come at the expense of Australia… China's offer of support, and its acceptance by the Solomon Islands government, will be causing enormous concern to Australia and its international security partners. Australia's influence in the region is not something it will willingly cede, but nor is it something it can expect not to be challenged by others with similar goals.

"As such, it would be reasonable to expect the Australian forces who arrived in Solomon Islands one month ago to not only be there longer than we might have initially expected, but potentially also continue growing in number. Australia certainly won't leave Honiara unless China does first. As such, it may be another long deployment."

The situation in Solomon Islands represents another indictment of US and Australian imperialism. Talk of respecting the national sovereignty of small nations and of upholding basic precepts of international law is quickly abandoned when geo-strategic interests are at stake. Preparations to destabilise and potentially overthrow the Sogavare government threaten an enormous crisis in the impoverished Pacific country.

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