Solomon Islands drafts military agreement with China, defying US-Australian threats

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The Australian political and foreign policy establishment met with uproar a leaked draft memorandum of understanding on military cooperation between Solomon Islands and China. The draft agreement threatens to undermine one of the longstanding pillars of US and Australian imperialist strategy in the region—shutting rival powers out of the South Pacific.

The Solomons' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare switched the country's diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China in 2019. Honiara and Beijing have since deepened their relationship, including on security issues.

China last month donated police equipment and has sent six police trainers to work with Solomon Islands' officers. When this development was first mooted last December, an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reporter stated that in Canberra "privately officials are fuming." The Solomon Islands and China have nevertheless proceeded, and on March 18 signed a memorandum of understanding on police cooperation.

The draft "framework agreement" on "security cooperation" includes clauses potentially giving the Chinese military wide scope to operate within Solomon Islands.

The document outlines that Honiara can request a military intervention "to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks."

In addition: "China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands."

In a statement issued yesterday, the Sogavare government confirmed the authenticity of the leaked document, stating: "Solomon Islands is working to broaden its security and development cooperation with more countries. […] Broadening partnerships is needed to improve the quality of lives of our people and address soft and hard security threats facing the country."

The draft memorandum was leaked on social media by officials working with Daniel Suidani, the premier of Malaita province, in an apparent effort to blow up the agreement.

Since 2019, Suidani has provocatively refused to recognise the diplomatic switch to Beijing. He has maintained separate ties with Taiwan and illegally barred Chinese personnel and investments from Malaita. Suidani's supporters in the now proscribed Malaita For Democracy (M4D) separatist group have issued pogromist threats against ethnic Chinese people in the province.

In November last year, M4D led a violent coup attempt in Honiara. Hundreds of people travelled from Malaita to the capital and attempted to storm the parliament and overthrow the government. After that failed, they spent three days looting and burning shops, schools, and police buildings in the city.

Suidani and his supporters have been financed and politically supported by Washington since 2019. USAID has funnelled tens of millions of dollars in so-called aid directly to Malaita, bypassing the central government. Suidani and his colleagues have received political "training" from personnel with the International Republican Institute, an organisation with close ties to the US intelligence agencies.

The prospect of a Solomons-China military agreement has exposed the "democratic" and "humanitarian" façade of US and Australian imperialist policy in the South Pacific.

As a sovereign nation, the elected government of Solomon Islands has every right under international law

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to enter into military agreements with any country of its choosing. As far as Washington and its ally Canberra are concerned, however, the South Pacific has been its "patch" since 1945 and must remain so. Any Pacific government that fails to abide by this is immediately targeted.

In Australia, the Labor Party has led the chorus of opposition to the Solomons-China deal. Opposition leader Anthony Albanese and numerous Labor parliamentarians have denounced the government for being "asleep at the wheel" and negligent in its foreign policy operations in the South Pacific. Ahead of a federal election, this forms part of the Labor Party's efforts to present itself as the more ruthless representative of Australian economic and geostrategic interests in the region, and the more reliable ally of the US.

Former Labor prime minister Kevin Rudd weighed in on developments in the Solomons in an interview with ABC Radio yesterday, describing the draft military agreement as "one of the most significant security developments that we've seen in decades."

Rudd explained: "The doctrine that Australia has adhered to for decades, under governments both Labor and conservative, going back to the end of the Second World War, is that our job under the ANZUS [Australia-New Zealand-US] treaty, was to keep the Pacific island countries as a part of the region which was basically consistent and compatible with overall American and Australian national security interests. That's what our job was, that's what our core responsibility has been under the framework of the ANZUS alliance."

These remarks point to the high stakes involved for the Australian government, which is no doubt now under close scrutiny from Washington.

The *Wall Street Journal* issued an editorial on Thursday, "Meanwhile, Watch China in the Pacific: With the world focused on Ukraine, bad actors in Asia are on the march." After referring to developments in the Korean Peninsula and South China Sea, the leading organ of American finance capital raised the alarm over the Honiara-Beijing military agreement. It concluded, in the style of a mafia don, "Our advice to the Solomons and other smaller nations is to think twice before getting in bed with Beijing or Moscow."

Within Australian foreign policy circles there is now debate on how to respond, including open discussion on an illegal military intervention into Solomon Islands.

Jonathan Pryke of the Lowy Institute think tank declared that any Chinese military base in the South Pacific would represent a "red line" for Canberra. In the vocabulary of imperialist geopolitics, "red lines" represent triggers for military action.

In a piece published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* today, New Zealand academic and long standing anti-Chinese agitator Anne-Marie Brady called for a "cull of sacred cows," including an "over-emphasis on sovereignty," in other words, any even notional commitment to international law in the South Pacific.

Brady denounced the Sogavare government, labelled the Solomons a "failed state," and declared: "When war broke out in 1914 and 1939, governments in Canberra and Wellington knew immediately what to do." She did not explicitly elaborate what she meant by this reference—but in 1914 and 1939, Australia and New Zealand occupied strategically significant outposts across the South Pacific.

Brady's call for military intervention was detailed by another commentator, David Llewellyn-Smith, the former owner of the foreign affairs journal, the *Diplomat*. In a piece published on the *MacroBusiness* website, "Australia must ready Solomon Islands invasion," and extensively cited in articles in the Murdoch-owned *news.com.au* as well as the *Daily Mail*, Llewellyn-Smith hysterically compared the situation in the Solomons to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. He declared: "There is no way that Australia can allow this deal to proceed. If it must, the nation should invade and capture Guadalcanal such that we engineer regime change in Honiara."

Australia has a long record of imperialist interventions and "regime change" operations in the region. This includes East Timor in 1999 and 2006, and Solomon Islands from 2003–2017, when military and police were stationed in the country together with Australian officials who effectively took control of the state apparatus as part of the neo-colonial Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) operation.

The Australian government still wields considerable influence in Honiara, and around 50 Australian Federal Police office are working in the country. Canberra will no doubt do everything it can to sabotage the Solomons-China military agreement before it is finalised, including by working to destabilise and remove the Sogavare government.

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