Escalating tensions over Solomon Islands security pact with China

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In a defiant speech to the Solomon Islands parliament yesterday, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare denounced as "very insulting" the backlash from Australia and New Zealand to his government's negotiations with China. A draft "security cooperation" agreement between the Solomons and China would allow Beijing to send military forces and ships to the small Pacific Island state.

The online leaking of the draft agreement last week met with immediate uproar in Canberra, Wellington, and Washington. Sogavare declared that the regional imperialist powers viewed the Solomons as their "backyard" and pointed to "discussions in the Australian public media encouraging the invasion of Solomon Islands to force a regime change" to stop the deal. He said this was "a decision by a sovereign nation that has its national interest at heart," adding that there was "no intention whatsoever to ask China to build a military base" in the country.

The outraged response to the draft agreement by Washington and its local allies, Australia and New Zealand, points to the growing drive to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific amid a build-up to war. US imperialism is determined to maintain dominance in the strategic region that it has regarded as an "American lake" since the end of World War II.

Speaking on Radio New Zealand (RNZ) on Monday, NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern described the proposed deal as "gravely concerning." She hypocritically declared that it could lead to the "militarization of the region." Australia's Defence Minister Peter Dutton similarly stated: "We don't want unsettling influences. And we don't want pressure and exertion that we're seeing from China to continue to roll out in the region."

NZ Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta said the pact would "destabilise the current institutions and arrangements that have long underpinned the Pacific region's security. This would not benefit New Zealand or our Pacific neighbours."

Under the terms of the agreement, 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."

Further, 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."

Charles Edel, the chair of the Centre for Strategic & International Studies, a leading Washington think tank, said the agreement would be "deeply problematic for the United States and a real cause of concern for our allies and partners." The establishment of a base in the Solomon Islands by "a strategic adversary" would "significantly degrade" Australia and New Zealand's security, he said.

New Zealand High Commissioner Georgina Roberts directly raised the matter with Sogavare, while Ardern has sought contact with Beijing over the draft. The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that since Australia has not had any high-level ministerial contact with Beijing for more than two years due to diplomatic hostilities, New Zealand is a key negotiator with the Chinese government.

Along with several other Pacific states, the Sogavare government in 2019 switched the Solomons' diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China as Beijing has increased financial aid to the region. Following riots

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and an attempted coup in Honiara last November, China donated police equipment and sent six police trainers to work with Solomon Islands' officers.

The coup attempt, which saw moves to storm the parliament, was carried out by supporters of Daniel Suidani, the premier of Malaita province. Suidani maintains his own "foreign policy," with ties with Taiwan, and has barred Chinese personnel and investments from Malaita. He is financed and politically supported by Washington. Visiting Fiji in February, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told an online meeting of Pacific leaders that the US planned to establish an embassy in Honiara to counter China.

Australia and New Zealand had military personnel and vessels in Honiara during the recent crisis, ready to intervene in their own interests. Ardern told RNZ there were "leadership level talks" with the Solomon Islands at the end of last year. "We expressed some concern over the direction of travel that Solomons was taking in terms of their security arrangements with China," she said.

NZ Defence Minister Peeni Henare has revealed that both countries will maintain elements of their respective "assistance forces" in the Solomon Islands. According to Henare, Dutton wants to expand the deployment of Australian troops and police, while NZ will be "reassessing its contribution." Both want to "show strong signals" that Solomon Islands and the Pacific are "definitely in our collective backyard," he said.

Ardern told the media that Pacific countries are "sovereign nations which are entitled to form their own security arrangements." However, a NZ Defence Ministry Strategic Assessment released last December asserted New Zealand's "freedom to act in support of shared interests and values" against any competitor who sets up a military base or dual-use facility in the Pacific. This means intervening wherever Chinese influence is deemed a threat to New Zealand's interests as a minor imperialist power or those of its allies.

A clamour is erupting to prepare for such a reckless course of action. Defence analyst Paul Buchanan told the *New Zealand Herald* the Chinese could establish a secure base for further operations. "If you have forward-deployed boats then you can intimidate people, you can go to Vanuatu, you can go to Tonga," he said. If China established a foothold further east, perhaps in Fiji, then it will "have the ability to straddle the most important checkpoints in the southwest Pacific," he declared.

Prominent pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady has implicitly demanded a regime change operation in the Solomons. Following a comment in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on March 25, in which she called for a "cull of sacred cows," including an "over-emphasis on sovereignty," Brady told RNZ the Solomon Islands was a "failed state" ruled by a "corrupt elite." She hysterically declared that New Zealand "could be cut off and encircled" by China's navy.

On Monday, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin warned against any attempt "to disrupt and undermine" relations between China and Pacific countries. He also pointedly denounced the US-led military build-up and exercises in the region, backed by Australia and NZ, saying this was threatening regional peace and bringing "nuclear proliferation risks to the Pacific Ocean."

Australia and New Zealand are now putting pressure on countries throughout the Pacific to fall into line. Australian Prime Minister Morrison has already approached Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) to help persuade the Solomon Islands to end its deal with Beijing. According to Ardern, New Zealand will use "bilateral relationships" and the 18-member nation Pacific Islands Forum to raise issues related to the "militarisation of the Pacific," which she again stressed "is our backyard."

The Solomon Islands is expected to be on the agenda as Mahuta meets this week with Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama. Ardern said she was confident New Zealand and Fiji aligned on "many geopolitical affairs." In fact, both Fiji and PNG have long-standing diplomatic and financial links with Beijing. An article in the SMH on Tuesday pointedly warned that Canberra needed to "pay attention to PNG," following China's Solomon Islands deal.

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