

New Zealand challenges Solomon Islands' sovereignty over agreement with China

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In the wake of the recently revealed Solomon Islands' security deal with China, New Zealand Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta has declared that Pacific leaders will want "greater clarity" from Honiara. She is pushing to bring forward the June meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to intensify pressure on Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

The "security cooperation" agreement between the Solomon Islands and China, reportedly close to being signed, will potentially give the Chinese military scope to operate within the Pacific Island state.

The draft agreement leaked online on March 25 met with an uproar in Canberra, Wellington and Washington. Mahuta said the pact will "destabilise the current institutions and arrangements that have long underpinned the Pacific region's security." Australia's Defence Minister Peter Dutton accused China of using "incredibly aggressive" tactics to expand its presence in the region.

Sogavare denounced the backlash as "very insulting." He accused Canberra and Wellington of treating the region as their "backyard." He pointed to "discussions in the Australian public media encouraging the invasion of Solomon Islands to force a regime change" to stop the deal. He denied there were plans to allow China to establish a military base in the Solomons.

Dutton flatly rejected the assurance, also given by China, saying: "I don't think it's sincere, and I think it's propaganda that should be called out." A spokesperson for China's foreign ministry stated that countries in the region should "respect Solomon Islands' sovereignty and its independent decisions."

After meeting with Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama late last month, Mahuta declared the 18-member PIF would need to examine the impact of the agreement on the region. While formally noting that

the Solomons can "exercise their sovereignty," she suggested that could be over-ridden by concerns about the "reverberative impact across the Pacific and regional security interests."

These statements, implicitly questioning the Solomons' right to determine its own foreign and defence arrangements, highlight the neo-colonial character of New Zealand's relations with Pacific countries.

The Labour Party-led government usually tries to mask New Zealand's predatory interests with a veneer of cultural sensitivity and humanitarian concern. Last November Mahuta told an Institute of International Affairs audience that her new "Pacific Resilience" policy was not anti-Chinese, but "to do with people-to-people relationships and reengaging with the culture of Aotearoa [New Zealand] and the Pacific."

Australia and New Zealand, along with Washington, are determined to shut China out of the South Pacific. Any local government that fails to accede is soon targeted. In 2018, the Australian media launched a hysterical campaign based on false reports that Vanuatu was about to allow China a permanent naval facility. In 2021 further unfounded allegations about a Chinese military base in Kiribati generated dire predictions about changes to the balance of power in the Pacific. China had offered to help rebuild an airstrip on isolated Kanton Island for civilian use.

The New Zealand government is in lockstep with its Australian counterpart over the Solomon Islands—as it is aligned with the US and NATO in the war with Russia over Ukraine. Amid the eruption of geo-political tensions unleashed by the Biden administration's targeting both Russia and China, every country is being forced into line.

In a sign that Washington is preparing to intervene

directly and aggressively, the *Financial Times* reported last week that Kurt Campbell, the US National Security Council Co-ordinator for the Indo-Pacific, along with top State Department official Daniel Kritenbrink, will visit the archipelago this month.

The outcry over the Solomon Islands is being exploited to intensify the military and diplomatic offensive against China's presence in the Pacific. Recriminations have been mounting that the local imperialist powers have taken their eye off the ball over their influence in the region.

In New Zealand, former foreign minister Winston Peters accused Labour of neglect, telling Radio NZ on March 28, "we needed to intensify our interests" in the Pacific. Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, played a major role in the 2017-2020 Labour-led coalition government. He launched the country's "Pacific Reset" policy in 2018, aimed at pushing back against Beijing's influence, and repeatedly called for the US to boost its military presence in the region.

Former Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has appeared in the NZ media saying the threat China poses in the Pacific is "real," and NZ "must act." Rudd told TVNZ on April 3 that the Solomons deal was a "disturbing development." He claimed Beijing had a direct interest in establishing the ability to "interdict" the lines of communication between Australia and the US in the event of a crisis, while protecting its economic interests around fisheries.

Rudd emphasised that Canberra and Wellington should deal with Beijing together, rather than being "picked off individually." In an interview with the *Listener*, he urged New Zealand and Australia to pool military resources and establish "comprehensive, expansive joint maritime and aerial surveillance of the South-West Pacific."

The Australian government has just announced a major multi-billion dollar upgrade to defence spending, including advanced hypersonic missiles capable of attacking China. New Zealand's opposition National and ACT Parties reciprocated, calling for military spending to be raised to 2 percent of GDP, an increase of 0.5 percentage points or about \$NZ1.7 billion.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern pointed out in parliament that such an increase would lead to cuts in public services. In fact, last year's budget provided a

massive boost to the Defence Force. An extra \$NZ676.5 million was allocated for "readiness and frontline capability," alongside \$898 million towards replacing the ageing Hercules planes with new aircraft designed to provide "interoperability" with US forces.

The rapidly escalating diplomatic and military tensions across the Pacific, highlighted by the Solomon Islands estrangement, intersects with the war drive in Europe. On Friday, in a speech following high-level meetings among NATO Foreign Ministers, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said the alliance had "agreed to step up cooperation with our partners in the Asia-Pacific." The statement followed intense lobbying by Canberra.

While New Zealand is not a member of NATO, it is one of a few countries referred to as "partners across the globe" that contribute to NATO-led defence operations. Mahuta attended the NATO meeting online. Stoltenberg hypocritically declared: "We have seen that China is unwilling to condemn Russia's aggression. And Beijing has joined Moscow in questioning the right of nations to choose their own path. This is a serious challenge to us all." NATO will provide Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea with "practical and political cooperation" in the areas of cyber, new technology, and "countering disinformation."



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