

Defying imperialist pressure, China and Solomon Islands sign security pact

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The Chinese government announced on Tuesday it has signed a framework agreement on security cooperation with the Solomon Islands. The Solomons government informed parliament that Beijing will send officials to the Pacific nation next month to formally sign the agreements.

Speaking from Beijing, Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said the pact would involve China cooperating with Honiara on maintaining social order, protecting people's safety, aid, combating natural disasters and helping safeguard national security.

Solomon Islands Foreign Affairs Minister Jeremiah Manele confirmed the signing to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) by text message.

Wang said the cooperation pact would be “public, transparent, open and inclusive,” and will not target any “third party.” It is “parallel to and complementary to the existing bilateral and multilateral security cooperation mechanisms in Solomon Islands,” he declared.

Australia, New Zealand and the US have strenuously opposed the pact, claiming it could open the door to a Chinese naval base in the South Pacific. Just days before the announcement Australia's minister for the Pacific, Zed Seselja, travelled to the Solomons to meet with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in a last-ditch effort to dissuade him from going ahead.

Since the draft agreement was leaked online on March 25, fierce diplomatic pressure has been applied by Canberra and Wellington, including appeals to other Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) governments, to halt the deal. In a defiant speech to parliament, Sogavare denounced the regional powers, who he accused of treating the Pacific as their “backyard,” and warned about Australian media calls for a “regime change” operation against his government.

The deal is a major set-back for US-led interests across the Southwest Pacific, centred on resisting any influence by Beijing in the strategically significant region. While Pacific governments have increasingly turned to China for aid and financial support, the pact is the first security agreement that gives China a foothold in the Southwest Pacific.

An hysterical reaction immediately erupted in the midst of the Australian election campaign. Deputy prime minister and National Party leader Barnaby Joyce declared it “a very bad day for Australia. We don't want our own little Cuba off our coast.” Opposition Labor Party foreign affairs spokesperson Penny Wong described it as the “worst Australian foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War Two.”

Highlighting the alarm in Australia's foreign policy establishment, the *Sydney Morning Herald* yesterday carried four comments excoriating successive governments. Political editor Peter Hartcher, who is highly connected in Washington, declared that the country's leaders should “hang their heads in shame” for allowing China to steal a march in the Pacific “without firing a shot.”

New Zealand Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern also denounced the pact, hypocritically declaring it will lead to an “increasing militarisation” of the Pacific. Ardern said while the Solomon Islands was free to make its own decisions, they were breaching an agreement within the 18-member PIF to “discuss defence matters” at the forum before making major decisions.

Ardern's comment is a veiled reference to the Biketawa Declaration, signed in 2000, under which Australia and New Zealand bullied the PIF to overturn a 30-year policy of non-interference in the internal

affairs of member countries. The declaration established a mechanism for diplomatic, economic and military intervention at the behest of the major powers in response to political crises.

The US State Department bluntly warned that the pact “leaves open the door for the deployment of PRC military forces to the Solomon Islands” and sets a “concerning precedent for the wider Pacific island region.” One diplomatic source told the ABC that the announcement was “clearly pushed through” by China and the Solomons ahead of an impending visit there by Kurt Campbell, the US National Security Council coordinator for the Indo-Pacific.

Campbell and top State Department official Daniel Kritenbrink are due to arrive in Honiara this week, before visiting Fiji and Papua New Guinea where the Solomons-China deal will be central to discussions. The high-level delegation will, according to Reuters, stop in Hawaii beforehand to “consult with senior military officials and regional partners at United States Indo-Pacific Command.”

Washington has already been directly interfering in the affairs of the Solomon Islands. Extensive riots and an attempted coup in Honiara last November were carried out by supporters of Daniel Suidani, the premier of Malaita province, who opposes the government’s links with China and maintains his own illegal “foreign policy” with ties to Taiwan. He is financed and politically supported by Washington.

After the riots, China donated police equipment and sent six police trainers to work with Solomon Islands officers. In February, the US announced it would open an embassy in Honiara, part of the Biden administration’s offensive to commit more diplomatic and security resources to the Indo-Pacific to counter China. The US embassy will doubtless provide a permanent base, not only for State Department operatives, but the CIA as well.

Recriminations are being voiced that Washington’s longstanding policy of outsourcing its Pacific policy-making to Canberra and Wellington has proved to be an abject failure. Writing in the *Diplomat*, prominent pro-US New Zealand academic Anne Marie Brady warned that it is now time “for the United States to shape its own policy on Solomon Islands, otherwise Campbell’s trip is a fool’s errand.”

Brady advised that Campbell should meet with

opposition MPs, i.e., the anti-China supporters of Suidani. The US, she said, “must make sure it is on good terms with all political forces in the Solomons.” In the *Sydney Morning Herald* last month, Brady called for a “cull of sacred cows,” including an “over-emphasis on sovereignty,” in other words any, even notional, commitment to international law and the Solomons’ rights as an independent sovereign nation.

Australia and New Zealand have a track record of aggressively intervening in what they regard as “their backyard” in the Southwest Pacific. Both imperialist powers exploited an acute political crisis in the Solomons in 2003 to launch the neo-colonial Regional Assistance Mission (RAMSI).

Australian military and police were stationed in the country together with officials who effectively took control of the state apparatus. When RAMSI ended in 2017, it left behind an impoverished country mired in economic and social crisis. Around 50 Australian Federal Police officers are still working in the Solomons along with a group of New Zealand police.

Following this week’s announcement, Washington and Canberra are likely to do everything they can to sabotage the Solomons-China military agreement before it is finalised. Whatever the outcome, as the US-led build-up to war and manoeuvres to block China in the Pacific escalate, there will be ongoing efforts to destabilise and remove the Sogavare government.

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