

# Australian Labor foreign minister visits Solomon Islands, reinforcing threats over China ties

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The Australian Labor government's Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited Solomon Islands last Friday to bolster recent threats by the US and Australia against the Pacific country over its closer security ties with China.

Last April, Wong declared that Solomon Islands' decision to sign a military agreement with Beijing represented "the worst foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War II." She denounced the then Liberal-National government for not responding "in the most energetic, effective, and agile way."

These statements had been issued on the same day that a senior-level US delegation, led by White House Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell, met Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. Afterwards, the US issued a menacing statement warning that Washington would "respond accordingly" to any announcement of a de facto Chinese permanent military presence in the country. Asked directly if this meant a US military invasion of Solomon Islands, a State Department official refused to deny or clarify the query, leaving no doubt of the Biden administration's intentions.

Washington's aggressive stance against the Sogavare government includes highly provocative funding and political support for separatist forces in the Solomons province of Malaita. One section of this separatist movement led a violent coup attempt in Honiara last November. The US destabilisation drive is part of its wider strategy of confronting and encircling China while it prepares for war against the Asian power.

Then-Prime Minister Scott Morrison subsequently echoed the US threat of military action by declaring

that a Chinese military base would represent a "red line."

Penny Wong made no effort to distance herself from these thuggish threats, unsurprisingly given that during last month's federal election campaign the Labor Party sought to position itself as the most reliable and ruthless ally of US imperialism.

After meeting with Sogavare, Wong explained: "Obviously, we did talk about regional security. Australia's view does remain that the Pacific family should be responsible for our security. And the Pacific family is more than capable of providing that security."

She added that she "welcomed" the Solomon Islands' government assurances that "there will not be a military base, nor a persistent foreign military presence here in Solomon Islands," and that "Australia remains Solomon Islands' first security partner of choice."

Every aspect of Wong's visit to Solomon Islands reeked of neo-colonial arrogance and hypocrisy.

The compliant Australian media has not once challenged Wong, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, or their predecessors as to on what basis they claim the right to dictate the terms of a sovereign country's relationship with China. The elected government in Honiara has every right under international law to enter into whatever arrangements with other governments, including military arrangements, that it sees fit. For Washington and Canberra, however, this is a dead letter, with Solomon Islands regarded as nothing more than a subordinate dominion.

Wong's rhetoric about a "Pacific family" is based on the unstated premise that Australia is the paterfamilias, to be obeyed on all issues related to so-called national

security.

Again, there is no basis in international law for regional “families.” For the Labor government, this conception represents a thinly veiled Australian version transposed to the South West Pacific of the Monroe Doctrine, under which Washington insisted that no rival powers could intrude into Latin America.

After World War II, US strategic planners deemed the South Pacific an “American lake.” Responsibility for shutting out rival powers was delegated to Australia. Canberra lent support for American military operations around the world, and in return enjoyed US backing for its own predatory operations in the Pacific, including exploitation of the region’s considerable natural resources.

China’s growing global economic and military influence is now disrupting this longstanding arrangement.

In addition to military concerns, Canberra is alarmed by Beijing’s expanding economic influence in the Pacific. In Solomon Islands, significant gold reserves at the Gold Ridge mining site were previously extracted by an Australian company, but the mine is now operated by a Chinese company and is being prepared for a substantial expansion.

Chinese investments in other sectors of the economy are set to expand following last month’s agreement by the Honiara and Beijing governments of a memorandum of understanding on trade and investment. The memorandum reportedly referenced potential Chinese investment in “port wharves, submarine optical cable construction, shipbuilding and ship repair and ocean transportation,” as well as “exploration and development of offshore oil, gas and mineral resources.”

The reference to offshore resources will especially alarm the Australian government. Solomon Islands has a vast ocean territory under its exclusive economic zone. New technologies have developed in deep sea mining, potentially allowing the extraction of lucrative minerals including copper, nickel, manganese and rare earth minerals. These materials are critical for important products including batteries, computer and phone technologies, solar panels, and control over their extraction is an important strategic issue in the conflict between the US and China.

There are vast resources in the Pacific Ocean.

Scientists estimate that in one region alone, the Clipperton Fracture Zone (in the eastern Pacific, approximately the size of Europe), there is more manganese, cobalt, and nickel than all the known deposits on land.

The recently elected Labor government is a determined representative of Australian corporate interests and advocate of the US alliance. It can be expected to step up pressure on the Sogavare government.

No credence whatsoever ought to be given to Canberra’s “humanitarian” pretensions. In Honiara, Wong visited a local school and the impoverished Burns Creek settlement. She announced an additional donation of COVID-19 vaccines, promoted Australian health and education aid, and boasted of the Labor government’s climate change policies.

This all represented an effort to cloak Canberra’s iron fist within a velvet glove. Australian imperialism bears direct responsibility for Solomon Islands’ poverty and underdevelopment, not least through the 2003-2017 neo-colonial Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) intervention force, under which virtually nothing was done to improve the living conditions of working people and the rural poor.



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