

Australian media menaces Solomon Islands over pause on naval visits

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The corporate media in Australia is attempting to whip up a frenzied atmosphere of hostility towards Manasseh Sogavare, prime minister of the small, impoverished Pacific nation of the Solomon Islands. Over recent days, major publications have openly asserted Australia's right to neo-colonial dominance over the Pacific, while denouncing Sogavare as a would-be autocrat and a puppet of the Chinese government.

The hysterical coverage is a response to confirmation that the Solomons blocked US Coast Guard vessel, the *Oliver Henry*, from docking in its capital Honiara late last month, and also denied entry to a British patrol vessel, the *HMS Spey*.

The exact details are murky. According to Western media reports, Solomons authorities did not respond to requests for clearance for the ships to dock. Honiara initially ascribed the issue to a paperwork bungle, but Sogavare's government has since confirmed a blanket pause on foreign military vessels docking in the country's ports pending a "review on processes and procedures."

While the issue of the ship ban itself is unclear, far more significant is the reaction. Leading Australian publications, with close ties to the military and intelligence establishment, have insisted that Australia and the US must have unfettered access to the Solomons' ports, in line with the imperialist dominance Washington established over the Indo-Pacific in World War Two.

The response can only be understood in the context of the US-led confrontation with China that threatens a catastrophic war. Any deviation from complete subservience to the US and its allies on the part of Pacific leaders is viewed as an unacceptable threat to these plans for conflict.

The revelation in April that the Solomons government had signed a security agreement with Beijing was met with furious condemnations.

The Biden administration threatened intervention in the

Solomon Islands if a Chinese base was established there, as did the Liberal-National Coalition government of Australia. The then Labor Party opposition condemned the Coalition for having failed to block the agreement, labeling it the greatest failure of Australian foreign policy in the Pacific since the Second World War.

Sogavare has since given repeated assurances that there is no prospect of a Chinese base. He met with Australia's new prime minister Anthony Albanese, demonstratively hugging the Labor leader. Despite this, the US and Australian campaign against his government continues.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper yesterday published a prominent editorial attacking the ban on naval visits. "[A]ctions speak louder than words and the blocking of naval visits confirms the worst fears that China is seeking to dictate the freedom of the US, British and Australian navies to act in an unrestricted fashion in our region," it declared.

The editorial concluded with a thinly-veiled threat. It noted that Sogavare is due to visit Australia and meet with Albanese, stating: "If the meeting proceeds, Mr Albanese must leave Mr Sogavare in no doubt about where the path the latter is taking, opening the door to Beijing against the strategic interests of Australia and its AUKUS partners, could lead."

AUKUS is the militarist pact unveiled last September between Australia, the US and Britain. Its explicit aim is to prepare for conflict in the Indo-Pacific through a rapid military-build up, including Australia's acquisition of aggressive weaponry such as nuclear-powered submarines and hypersonic missiles.

The *Australian* followed up today, featuring comments it solicited from US congresspeople.

Democrat Congressman Joe Courtney told the paper that the naval block "smacks of foreign influence by the People's Republic of China." Republican Congressman Mike Gallagher urged AUKUS partners to "prioritise

reversing the current disastrous trend in the Solomons before it's too late," warning that "A foreign aggressor seems bent on conquering the islands from within without even firing a shot."

A separate article, written by former Coalition government minister Dave Sharma, was headlined "Beijing-backed autocracy in our backyard with 'Cuba in the Pacific.'"

The article highlighted Sogavare's plans to delay national elections, due in mid-2023, for a year, because the Solomons is hosting the Pacific Games. It drew attention to Sogavare's condemnations of press reports accusing his government of turning to China.

This and other actions of the government, Sharma wrote, were "redolent of an autocratic leader during the time of the Cold War. But this is happening now. And not in Africa or the Middle East, but in Australia's own neighbourhood."

Sharma continued: "Australia and our allies have effectively operated a Monroe Doctrine in the southwest Pacific. We have ensured the region remains firmly within the Western security orbit, and deterred intervention and meddling by foreign powers.

"China's growing ambitions are now challenging this, and we must get to grips with the scale of the challenge. It's not simply a matter of turning up at meetings, giving hugs and making the right noises on climate change. Australia needs a strategy to check these moves and provide alternatives."

The claims of Chinese "foreign interference" in the Solomons are extraordinary for their hypocrisy. The Australian and US ruling elites are asserting their "right" to dictate the foreign policy relations of an independent state, dispensing with any pretense of respecting Solomons' sovereignty. The US Coast Guard and its vessels are to have unfettered access to the Pacific nation's ports, which are almost 10,000 kilometers from the American coast.

These imperialist powers, moreover, have a decades-long record of "interference" in the Pacific. In more recent times, this included the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands from 2003–2017, which amounted to a de facto Australian military-backed take-over of the country.

The US is continuing to intervene, actively stoking a separatist movement in Malaita Province that has been implicated in violent rioting and other actions aimed at destabilising Sogavare's government. Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani is conducting his own foreign policy, by

extending diplomatic recognition to Taiwan rather than China, in a blatant violation of the Solomons' constitution.

The warnings of autocracy are no less false. Sogavare, a bourgeois-nationalist who has sought to jockey between the major powers and maintain his political position, is a democratically-elected leader. That is more than can be said of many US and Australian allies, including such states as Saudi Arabia. As is always the case, the flag of "democracy" is raised by the US and its allies, to justify policies that are dictated by naked imperialist interests.

The response of the Australian and New Zealand governments to the naval ban has been muted. There is no doubt, however, that behind the scenes they are collaborating with Washington to undermine Sogavare and ensure US-led domination over the Solomons.

Since it scraped into office following the May 21 Australian election, the Labor government has centrally focused on foreign policy. It has played the role of an attack dog of the Biden administration, with Foreign Minister Penny Wong repeatedly touring the Pacific and the broader region, demanding that its leaders line up behind the US confrontation with China and threatening them with "consequences" if they do not.

Wong was in East Timor last week, warning the country of the dangers of going into "unstainable debt" to China in order to finance the Greater Sunrise gas development. She had earlier visited Papua New Guinea, with whose government the Labor administration wanted the "closest possible relationship."

The rapid transformation of the Pacific into a cauldron of imperialist intrigue and provocation is one of many warnings of the advanced US-led preparations for war in the region.



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