

Australian defence minister seeks extension of military-police deployment in Solomon Islands

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Australia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles visited Solomon Islands June 28-29, seeking an extension of Canberra's military-police intervention force.

Australian imperialism is striving to maintain its hegemony in the impoverished Pacific country and counter China's growing influence. The Solomon Islands government signed a security pact with Beijing in March last year, facilitating a Chinese police presence and docking rights for Chinese naval vessels in Solomons' ports.

This agreement was met with furious denunciations in both Canberra and Washington. The White House issued a statement warning it could invade Solomon Islands if China established a military base there, while the Australian Labor Party, then in opposition, denounced the Scott Morrison government for "the worst foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War II."

In Solomon Islands, Richard Marles promoted different aid initiatives, including small investments in hospitals and immunisation programs, as well as support for the upcoming Pacific Games sport event and next year's national election.

The central purpose of his visit, however, was to ensure an extension into 2024 of the Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF). The SIAF was formed in 2021, amid a violent coup attempt by US-backed forces from the province of Malaita. The intervention operation includes security personnel from New Zealand and several Pacific countries but is dominated by Australian military and police. Around 100 Australian soldiers and 140 Australian Federal Police are deployed in the Solomons.

Speaking in the capital, Honiara, Marles declared: "We made clear that if it was the Solomons' wish for SIAF, then Australia stood ready for that to occur. And that we were happy to support a continuation of the SIAF's presence in supporting the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force as necessary. We wanted to make completely clear that from the perspective of Australia, we stood ready for that support to be provided for as long as possible."

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare issued non-committal public statements. A government press release explained that in talks with Marles, Sogavare had "conveyed the country's appreciation to Australia's ongoing support in the area of security," but added: "Assessments are still ongoing to determine the security needs during the [Pacific] Games and should there be areas to address, Australia will be notified through appropriate channels."

Sogavare also raised the need for a review of the Australia-Solomons security treaty, "to take into account the changing security challenges faced by both countries."

This statement appeared to raise concerns within the Australian foreign policy and military establishment. In 2006-2007, when Sogavare was previously in office, he was the target of a provocative Australian destabilisation campaign. This was motivated in part by the Solomons' prime minister's call for a review into the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), the Australian-dominated neo-colonial intervention force in the country from 2003 to 2017.

The current security pact between Solomons and Australia was signed in 2017. It provides any intervention force invited into the country by Honiara

with sweeping powers, including immunity from the country's laws.

After Sogavare's call for a review of the pact, Australian Broadcasting Corporation reporter Stephen Dzedzic tweeted that, "initial info I'm getting suggests Sogavare is ****not**** pushing for substantial changes that would have a material impact on Aus security cooperation in Solomon Islands."

This appeared to be confirmed the following day, when Marles declared that a review of the pact was "a really exciting opportunity to revitalise the security agreement between our two countries."

Regardless of any alterations to the legal basis of Australia's military-police presence in Solomons, there is no doubt that the Labor government will continue to aggressively pursue efforts to undermine China's standing in the country.

Beijing's security pact remains in place, with Chinese police now a visible force in Honiara. Last Wednesday, the same day that Marles landed in Solomons, China's ambassador Li Ming featured in a ceremony at police headquarters held to mark the donation of additional Chinese security equipment. This included two police vehicles, night-vision devices, drones, and a wireless signal jammer.

Washington no doubt remains highly concerned over the erosion of its influence in the strategically important Pacific country. Ever since 1945, US imperialism has delegated to Australia primary responsibility for ensuring that rival powers are shut out of the south-west Pacific. Several American foreign policy establishment figures were sharply critical of Canberra's operations in Solomon Islands and its perceived failure to prevent China from enlarging its role in the region. Such discussion blatantly disregards international law, under which the sovereign government of Solomon Islands has the right to enter into treaties with whichever country it chooses.

In 2020, when Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing, the US backed a renegade provincial leader in Malaita, Daniel Suidani. Suidani declared that he did not recognise the "switch" and maintained his relations with Taiwan while barring Chinese investment in Malaita, in direct violation of Solomons' law. In return he and his separatist forces known as Malaita For Democracy (M4D) were provided with financial and logistical support by

Washington.

This has not produced the hoped-for results, however. In November 2021, an M4D-organised attempt to violently overthrow the Sogavare government failed. Last February, Suidani was removed from his position as Malaitan premier through a no confidence motion in the provincial assembly. In March, the central government declared him disqualified from sitting in the assembly, a measure that appears to block his possible return to office.

Suidani subsequently demonstrated his role as a stooge of American interests by accepting a sponsored visit to Washington, denouncing Sogavare and Beijing before various audiences including the Heritage Foundation.

While the intensifying great power rivalries in Solomon Islands receives continued coverage, entirely unreported is the immense social and economic crisis afflicting ordinary people in the country. Australian imperialism spent nearly \$3 billion in its RAMSI operation, but invested virtually nothing on the basic needs of the population.

On the same day of Richard Marles's visit, local media outlets reported that regular electricity blackouts in Honiara will likely continue until October, due to malfunctioning generators. This will further increase hardship in the capital, where residents already pay the world's highest prices for electricity.



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