Solomon Islands' prime minister visits China, extends "strategic partnership"

Patrick O'Connor
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Solomon Islands' Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare concluded Sunday a week-long diplomatic visit to China.

The delegation included 15 members of the Pacific country's 50-seat parliament. Beijing and Honiara signed a joint statement on the two countries' "comprehensive strategic partnership," as well as multiple new agreements, including on police and security matters.

Officials in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand responded with separate statements expressing concern over these initiatives, and aggressive demands for greater "transparency" on the bilateral agreements between China and the Solomons. These reflected the allied imperialist powers' collective effort to prevent any South Pacific country from developing relations with China.

Solomon Islands is an underdeveloped archipelago nation of just 750,000 people, north-east of Australia, independent from Britain since 1978. During World War II, it saw some of the fiercest battles for control of the Pacific between the US and Japan, including the Battle for Guadalcanal. The country is now an important part of Washington's drive for geo-political and military dominance over the region, as it prepares for military action against China.

The Solomon Islands' government in 2019 joined the vast majority of UN member states in recognising Beijing, not Taipei, as the legitimate government of China. This was nevertheless met with threats from senior American officials—Republican Senator Marco Rubio urged sanctions to "crash" the country's economy.

In November 2021, US-financed separatist forces in the Solomons' province of Malaita staged an unsuccessful coup attempt. This was followed by the signing of a Solomons-China security pact, which was met with open threats of American military intervention (see: "Solomon Islands drafts military agreement with China, defying US-Australian threats").

Sogavare's visit to China last week, his second since the establishment of diplomatic ties, underscores the crisis confronting US and Australian imperialism.

The Pacific nation prime minister made little effort to conceal his bourgeois nationalist government's orientation towards Beijing, as a means of offsetting Washington and Canberra's longstanding domination.

On landing in China on July 9, he told officials that it was "good to be home." Last Tuesday, Sogavare met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. In the televised part of the discussions, the Solomon Islands' prime minister hailed Xi's "visionary leadership."

Without specifically mentioning the US, Sogavare added: "Mr President, we watch all the bullying that is happening in the world today—I admire where you stand amidst all those very trying times. And Mr President, you are taking the lead, and Solomon Islands and the small island Pacific countries admire the stance that you're taking."

In multiple official events, Sogavare stated his agreement with the one-China policy, that Taiwan was an integral part of China.

In a 28-minute interview with state broadcaster China Global Television Network, Sogavare made thinly veiled references to the powers that have long dominated Solomon Islands—the US, Britain, and Australia.

"They fear that they are losing grip of small island states," he explained, "Solomon Islands, for example, we have been with these people for more than 45 years [since independence]—yesterday, the day before—if we

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remain like that forever [then] that's not good for a country that's fast growing in population, but not in development. And so we do what is best for this country, and we enter into these diplomatic relations [with China] as the best decision we came up with in our existence as a nation."

The Solomon Islands-China joint statement on "Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Featuring Mutual Respect and Common Development For a New Era," featured a range of commitments that have been met with undisguised hostility in Washington and Canberra.

The Sogavare government declared its support for "China's position on issues related to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, etc., and opposes interference by any country in the internal affairs of other countries under the pretext of democracy or human rights." Beijing in turn signed an agreement to "enhance cooperation on law enforcement and security matters," and the "two sides agreed to step up protection of the safety and lawful rights and interests of each other's nationals and institutions in their countries."

According to a report in the *South China Morning Post*, this agreement authorises China to maintain its police presence in Solomon Islands for at least another three years.

China also elaborated its promotion of "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiatives in the Pacific country, including "practical cooperation in a wide range of areas including trade and investment, agriculture, forestry, fishery, rural development, infrastructure including disaster resilient infrastructure, energy and minerals."

China is currently the largest trading partner of Solomon Islands. Last week's signed agreements raise the prospect of expanded Chinese investments in resource sectors previously dominated by Australian corporations, including in gold mining.

A spokesperson for the US National Security Council responded: "We encourage the parties to release these texts immediately to increase transparency and inform discussions about the impacts of these agreements on regional security."

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong: "We are concerned that this development [on security agreements between Solomon Islands and China] will invite further regional contest. Solomon Islands and China should provide transparency of their intentions to Australia and the region by publishing the agreement immediately, so the Pacific family can collectively consider the implications for our shared security."

The Australian Labor government's paternalistic rhetoric about the "Pacific family" has no basis in international law and reflects its attempt to enunciate a 21st century version of the Monroe Doctrine in the South Pacific. Canberra insists that the joint priorities of US and Australian imperialism ought to determine the international relations of all smaller states in the region.

Sogavare responded in a press conference held yesterday on his return to Honiara. He said the "narrow and coercive diplomatic approach of targeting China-Solomon Islands relations, and I want to use this word, is unneighbourly… this is nothing but interference of foreign states in the internal affairs of Solomon Islands."

Sogavare accused the Australian and New Zealand governments of failing to deliver on millions of dollars of promised aid, adding that Beijing had pledged to cover the shortfall. He declared that "nothing will stop this sovereign country" and, if requested, "it takes only a nine hours' flight from China to land forces here."

The geopolitical logic of US and Australian imperialism is a stepped up "regime change" operation against the democratically-elected Solomon Islands government. As the US steps up its confrontation and preparations for war with China, it is determined to block any expansion of Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific.

The *World Socialist Web Site* directly warned of this in January 2020—shortly after the diplomatic switch to Beijing—but there is little question that provocative and violent efforts will be increased as Canberra's strategic standing deteriorates further. The *Australian* newspaper last week in an editorial, "Sogavare kowtows to Beijing," concluded menacingly that the Solomons' prime minister was demonstrating "great naivety" in "opening the door to China."

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