

Solomon Islands PM visits Australia, NZ in shift away from China

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The new prime minister of the Solomon Islands, Matthew Wale, installed by a special parliamentary vote on May 15, undertook his first international visit to Australia and New Zealand in early June.

After years of tensions over the Pacific archipelago's strategic ties with China, the trip was designed to reassure the regional imperialist powers of his government's reliability. The Solomon Islands, a former British colony, occupies a key strategic location in the Southwest Pacific and was a major battleground in World War II, including the six-month 1942–43 Battle of Guadalcanal.

Like other impoverished Pacific nations, it is confronted with Washington and its local allies, Australia and NZ, seeking to secure unchallenged economic and geostrategic dominance over the region. Amid advanced US preparations for war against China, the Pacific Island states, which depend heavily on Beijing for financial and aid support, are being drawn into an intensifying geopolitical confrontation.

The Solomons have been on the front line since the government of Manasseh Sogavare signed a security pact with Beijing in 2022. The pact was met with open threats of military intervention and regime change by Washington and Canberra. Sogavare defied the threats, welcoming Chinese financial aid and policing support.

In talks with Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on June 3, Wale made clear a sharp pivot by his government. He declared he wanted to "reset" the relationship with Canberra, agreeing to start negotiations on a comprehensive treaty with Australia and promising to "review" the country's agreement with China.

Wale, who leads the Solomon Islands Democratic Party (SIDP), was a fierce critic of the China pact when it was signed, but later softened his tone in light of the country's critical economic relationship with Beijing.

The joint statement issued by Wale and Albanese declared that officials from both countries would

promptly begin negotiations on the new treaty. They asserted it would bring "transformational change" and see a "significant enhancement of the bilateral development assistance partnership between the two countries."

The two leaders stated that "Pacific peace and security is best led and handled by the Pacific." This language is routinely employed by Australia as part of its push to assert hegemony in the region and exclude China. Canberra has already signed a web of strategic agreements, including with Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu and Nauru, and another this week with Vanuatu, which give Australia veto rights over the islands' foreign policy decisions. "We have said very clearly we want Australia to be the security partner of choice in our region," Albanese emphasised.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported that Wale also raised the concept of a Pacific-wide security treaty. Wale made it clear he believes China should not play a major role in Pacific security, and that there should be a "Pacific-led" security architecture. He agreed to sign a long-stalled MOU to join the Australian-led anti-China Pacific Policing Initiative (PPI) and push ahead with a delayed \$A190 million policing agreement signed by his predecessor, Jeremiah Manele.

Wale's discussions with New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Foreign Minister Winston Peters on June 8 were less specific, but similarly focused on regional security and closer cooperation. Peters, a strong advocate of increased US power in the Pacific, said in response to reporters' questions on Wale's promise to review the pact with China: "We don't know about how significant that will be until we find out what was in it."

China's Foreign Ministry has downplayed the strategic implications. When questioned about Wale's statements, spokeswoman Mao Ning emphasized continuity in bilateral relations, stating that Beijing stands "ready to expand pragmatic cooperation with the new government

of the Solomon Islands across all fields.”

Wale, who entered parliament in 2008 and has been principal opposition leader since 2019, took over the premiership following a prolonged parliamentary crisis which saw the collapse of the Manele-led government after just two years in office.

Manele, who had succeeded Sogavare following the April 2024 election, was ousted following a no-confidence vote. Manele maintained his predecessor’s pro-China stance while embarking on a “free market” economic agenda aimed at attracting corporate investors. It included a new, regressive value added tax (VAT), which would increase costs of living for already impoverished workers and farmers in the country.

Manele’s coalition government fell apart in March when several members of the People First Party, complained that Manele had given favourable treatment to members of his Ownership, Unity and Responsibility (OUR) Party. The defectors, including 12 cabinet ministers, formed a new opposition group of 28 MPs in the 50-seat House. Manele initially refused to stand down, but the Court of Appeal finally ordered a new leadership election.

Wale narrowly defeated Manele’s pro-China ex-foreign minister Peter Agovaka 26 votes to 22 in the leadership contest. Washington promptly congratulated Wale, stating that the US looked forward to working “to grow our cooperation.”

The ousting of Manele likely reflected both foreign policy differences and concerns about his ability to suppress rising anger in the working class over austerity and inequality. Nearly 400 port workers held a one-day strike on April 9, reportedly causing millions of dollars in losses, and on May 20 bus drivers in Honiara went on strike. A planned strike by the country’s nurses was called off by the union bureaucracy on May 2.

In this regard, Wale’s decision to join Australia’s PPI is significant: the policing unit was established for deployment throughout the Pacific to suppress popular unrest.

Domestic politics in the Solomons has always been subject to intense neo-colonial interference. A previous Sogavare administration was ousted in 2006–07 as a result of Canberra’s machinations, during the protracted Australian-led military occupation of the Solomons, the 2003-2017 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which left the country wracked by an economic and social crisis.

After shifting diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to

China in 2019, a new Sogavare government was destabilised by a right-wing separatist movement in Malaita province, encouraged by Washington. The Malaitan forces led a failed coup attempt in November 2020 that involved three days of anti-Chinese looting and arson in the capital Honiara.

The turmoil around the Solomons’ China policy continued under Manele. As chair of the regional Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), his government blocked Taiwan from attending the body’s annual gathering last August. The US State Department said it was “disappointed” with the decision.

A vast gulf separates the political elite in the Solomon Islands from the majority of its 858,000 inhabitants, who have no say in the government’s foreign policy manoeuvres or domestic horse-trading. Despite being rich in natural resources, the country has the lowest per capita income in the Pacific region and many of its people are reliant on subsistence agriculture.

Wale, who has appointed a 24-member Cabinet including several defectors from Manele’s coalition, has made vague promises to address corruption and unemployment. He had called for “free education,” but told the *Island Sun* on June 23 that “we don’t have enough revenue” to introduce it this year.

While the new administration will do nothing to address collapsing living standards and rundown public services, the country’s ruling elite is aligning itself with the US-led militarisation of the Pacific directed against China.



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