THE CHINA–SOLOMON ISLANDS SECURITY AGREEMENT: CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

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Revelations during the 2022 Australian federal election that the Solomon Islands government was in the process of concluding a secret security agreement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) sounded alarm bells in security circles. It generated dire predictions of a future Chinese naval base and permanent deployment of Chinese troops in the Solomons, seriously affecting Australia's national security. Alarmist voices predicted Solomon Islands was becoming a 'Cuba' off our coast[1] and the then prime minister, Scott Morrison, gave ominous warnings about 'red lines' that must not be crossed.[2] This politically driven rhetoric shifted attention away from very real concerns about the broad potential application of the agreement.

The leaked draft text of the *Framework Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Solomon Islands on Security Cooperation*,[3] which knowledgeable sources advise is not significantly different from the final text, only sets out mechanisms by which Chinese security forces (military, armed police, or police) could be deployed to Solomon Islands. It says nothing about cooperation, training, providing equipment, exchanges, or other modes of cooperation. These are covered in a separate 2019 agreement.[4]

This is not out of order; Australia has the *Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of Solomon Islands Concerning the Basis for Deployment of Police, Armed Forces, and other Personnel to Solomon Islands*,[5] signed on 14 August 2017. This was the only other such security agreement Solomon Islands had at the time. (An agreement with Papua New Guinea was signed on 8 February 2023 to formalise the deployment of Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary members for policing duties there,[6] details of which are not yet known but are unlikely to have the implications raised by the agreement with China.) The agreement with China enables a much broader range of Chinese deployments but is scant on details — just over four pages, compared with more than twelve pages in the Australian agreement. The Australian agreement sets out clear formal procedures for Solomon Islands to initiate and terminate deployments, as well as command and control arrangements, legal arrangements, and

authorities — all designed to preserve Solomon Islands' sovereign control over any deployments. The agreement with China lacks such details or protections.

The broad scope of potential application of the agreement with China is of particular concern. The scope of cooperation is set out in Article 1[7] in two distinct parts.

Solomon Islands–Initiated Chinese Deployments

The first half of Article 1 provides for the Solomon Islands government, for 'its own needs', to request China send police, armed police, military personnel, and other law enforcement and armed forces to the Solomons 'to assist in maintaining social order, protecting peoples' lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or to provide assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the parties'. The term 'maintaining social order' has a much broader meaning in China, and the provision for 'other tasks agreed upon by the parties' opens a wide range of possibilities.

It is likely the agreement was conceived by China with one eye on diplomatic competition with Taiwan for influence in the Pacific. Until 2019, Solomon Islands recognised Taiwan rather than the PRC, and the switch has been controversial; it was identified as a trigger for the targeting of ethnic Chinese businesses in the November 2021 riots.[8] Significant elements in the Solomon Islands opposition are unhappy with this decision and remain supportive of Taiwan; indeed, the government of Malaita Province, the most populous of Solomon Islands' nine provinces, continues to maintain links with and accepted COVID-related aid from Taiwan in 2020, ignoring Chinese protests.[9] The security agreement could be seen as helping to bolster the government of Manasseh Sogavare against pro-Taiwan elements.

The most obvious application of the agreement is in the case of civil conflict or serious breakdown of law and order such as during the riots in 2021. These are the kind of circumstances in which the Solomons would have

traditionally turned to Australia, with support from other Pacific nations. Why, then, did the Solomon Islands government look elsewhere for such assistance? It is likely that the Chinese side offered this assistance, pointing to the targeting of ethnic Chinese businesses in the 2021 riots, and asserting its understandable interest in helping protect fellow Chinese.

In this context, it is important to recognise that there are some circumstances in which Australia would be unwilling to send troops to help the Solomon Islands government. For example, should the Solomons experience a constitutional crisis whereby a government was trying to hold on to power illegally, or if it faced a largely peaceful popular uprising, Australia might have qualms about being called on to help forcefully 'restore order', whereas China might not. At the same time, there is concern that China might be more inclined to provide support under the agreement to help prevent the return to government of a pro-Taiwan party.[10] While I am not suggesting this came into the thinking of the Sogavare government, the agreement could be used to underpin a drift to more authoritarian rule.

China-Initiated Deployments

The second half of the scope of cooperation set out in Article 1 allows China, 'according to its own needs', to make ship visits, stopovers, or transits, carry out logistical replenishment, and use Chinese forces 'to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands'. There are no equivalent provisions in the agreement with Australia. It is very unusual — if not an infringement of sovereignty — for an agreement of this kind to allow a country to undertake military or security activities in another country 'according to its own needs'.

Previous attention has mostly focused on the provision for ships' visits, but the text allowing Chinese forces to 'protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands' is equally alarming. As China rolls out increasing numbers of projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the scope to activate this provision to deploy Chinese security forces to Solomon Islands to protect its investments increases. The agreement potentially

allows China to station security personnel in Solomon Islands for an open-ended period to protect any projects it is building or operating. In northern Laos and Myanmar, the BRI has led to the establishment of special economic zones that appear to exercise a form of extraterritoriality[11] in which China administers all aspects of the zone, including security.

It is striking that the agreement lacks any details for the processes or constraints on Chinese-initiated deployments, with only a vague requirement for 'consent'. This contrasts with requirements for Solomon Islands–initiated deployments set out in Article 3 of the same agreement, which include formal written requests from Solomon Islands, including details of the security situation, the type and number of forces requested, the duties of the personnel to be sent, and the duration of the mission. No such provisions apply to China-initiated deployments; there is only some form of 'consent', which can come from the Solomon Islands Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Police, or the National Security and Correctional Services.

The vagueness of the wording even leaves open the possibility of a blanket consent — for example, for Chinese vessels to come and go as they please. Given China's well-known proclivity to use inducements to secure support for its objectives, and the leverage that China's increasing investments in the Solomons will give it, gaining such consent would seem to be not difficult. As things stand, this is a fundamentally unequal agreement that heavily favours China's interests without protecting Solomon Islands' sovereignty.

A Chinese Naval Base

Much has been made of the potential establishment of a formal Chinese naval base under the security agreement, though Prime Minister Sogavare has ruled out such a possibility.[12] Yet, China could gradually establish a de facto base under the current provisions of the agreement. It enables Chinese naval ship visits at China's discretion — unlike naval ship visits by the United States and Australia, which are conducted on the explicit invitation of the host government. The agreement with China provides for port visits to

carry out unspecified logistical replenishments (opening the possibility of armament replenishments). This is no small thing; during World War II, the ability to replenish in friendly neutral countries like Spain[13] was invaluable to the German navy. To support such visits, it is reasonable to assume China will invest in docks, fuel resupply, and warehousing, which could end up being effectively 'dual-use' facilities, designed to support Chinese naval vessels alongside commercial ones. The agreement could then enable China to deploy security forces to protect these facilities, creating a de facto base without the need to formally create one.

The agreement should also be seen in the context of the draft 'Blue Economy' agreement[14] now being discussed between China and the Solomons, which inter alia encourages cooperation on 'distant water fishing'. The Solomons could become a forward base for China's distant water fishing fleet, which is notorious for its noncompliance with regional and global fisheries agreements. This also opens the possibility that Chinese maritime security vessels could operate deep in the Pacific to protect the illegal activities of their fishing fleet, as they do in the South China Sea.[15]

A Question of Intent?

Some may question whether China intended the agreement to have such broad potential application; however, China has a large and highly skilled foreign ministry with vast experience in negotiating international agreements, and an agreement of this significance would have attracted high-level scrutiny. The language is deliberately vague and open-ended. It is not credible that this was unintended.

A good indicator of the intent of the agreement can be found in its secrecy provisions. Article 5 provides that '[w]ithout written consent of the other party, neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to a third party'.[16] This means that, without Beijing's approval, the details of the agreement must be withheld from not only foreign governments like Australia, but also the Solomon Islands parliament and people (as releasing information to either the parliament or the public would mean

US Military Personnel onboard a high-speed vessel in Honiara, Solomon Islands
Source: US Pacific Fleet, Flickr

third countries automatically had access). The secrecy provisions extend to 'cooperation information', which could apply to the very existence of a Chinese deployment. This kind of opacity does not suggest benign intent.

The potential strategic importance of some of China's targeted investments also casts doubt on its intent. For example, in 2019, China and Solomon Islands signed a memorandum of understanding providing for a Chinese state-owned company, AVIC Commercial Aircraft, to upgrade nearly three dozen airfields across the Solomons.[17] While it is doubtful there is a sensible business case for such large investments, this would potentially enable China to assess and upgrade airfields to a level sufficient for military use — and deploy Chinese security personnel to protect them. As China invests in other strategically important infrastructure, from ports to underwater optical-fibre cables, its security presence has the scope to continue growing — in a country that has no formal armed forces of its own.

The Broader Pacific Context

The security agreement forms part of a broader geostrategic push. China's state councillor and minister for foreign affairs, Wang Yi 王毅, conducted an eight-nation visit to the Pacific from 26 May to 4 June 2022, bearing a string of bilateral agreements for signing, as well as proposals for broad regional cooperation agreements intended to substantially alter the balance of influence in the Pacific in China's favour.

The security agreement, which was formally signed with Solomon Islands during Wang's visit, drove a wedge between Australia and one of its erstwhile closest security partners in the Pacific. At the same time, the agreement probably bolstered Sogavare's prominence in the Pacific, positioning him as an advocate for expanded regional engagement with China.

There is no evidence Wang sought to replicate this agreement in the other Pacific nations on his itinerary, although secrecy provisions in such agreements mean it is unknown whether China had already sought or been granted similar rights from other Pacific countries. Officials from several countries on Wang's itinerary ruled out a similar security agreement, with their focus on collaboration spanning economic development — in particular, fisheries and tourism, COVID-19 response, and police training — collaboration plans similar to those that preceded the China–Solomon Islands Security Agreement. Still, through its security agreement with Solomon Islands, China may have established a benchmark for progressing relations under the BRI requiring its Pacific partners to agree to arrangements that enable access for Chinese military and security forces as the price of investment.

On 20 May 2022, the president of the Federated States of Micronesia, David Panuelo, wrote a letter to fellow Pacific Island leaders, clearly reflecting this concern.[18] He expressed alarm at the draft *China–Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision*[19] and *China–Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development*[20] circulated by China in advance of the second PRC–Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers Meeting, held via video-conferencing from Suva on 30 May. He warned that China was seeking 'control of traditional and non-traditional security', including law enforcement training, supply, and joint enforcement efforts, as well as cooperation on cybersecurity and network governance, collection of biodata through smart customs, and Chinese marine spatial mapping. The vision statement does not (as Panuelo wrote) specifically refer to 'the protection of Chinese assets and citizens', as in the Solomons agreement, but the projects detailed in it and the action plan would provide ample basis for China to press for similar access. Panuelo warned of China's 'intent to shift those of us with diplomatic relations with China very close into Beijing's orbit,

intrinsically tying the whole of our economies and societies to them', and linked this directly to drawing Pacific Island nations into a potential future war over Taiwan. Despite the very lucrative proposals on the table, the ten Pacific Island countries participating in the Suva meeting declined to sign the proposed documents, primarily due to concerns about economic sovereignty and security.[21]

This, combined with Fiji's decision on 27 May to be the first Pacific Island nation to sign on to the United States–initiated Indo-Pacific Economic Framework[22] — the Biden Administration's answer to the BRI — has taken the wind out of the sails of China's Pacific push. But Chinese largesse remains a powerful temptation for Pacific nations frustrated with the pace of their economic development. China can be expected to regroup and press forward with these countries — more likely on a bilateral basis, with security cooperation continuing to feature.

A 27 May article on Wang Yi's visit to Kiribati in the *Global Times*, which is famous for giving 'unofficial' voice to Chinese threats and warnings, offered insight into current strategic thinking in Beijing about the Pacific. The article quotes a Chinese academic, who, referring to US military bases in the north-west Pacific, said: 'If China sets up a military base in Kiribati, the US's first and second island chains would be meaningless.'[23] China is pursuing plans to upgrade an almost two-kilometre-long World War II–era military airstrip on the remote and virtually uninhabited island of Kanton, nearly 1,800 kilometres east of the Kiribati capital, ostensibly to support commercial air travel between the capital, Tarawa, and other islands,[24] but with obvious strategic value to China.

The security agreement with Solomon Islands also serves to extend Beijing's influence in overseas Chinese communities, both in Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific. China has been increasingly asserting its responsibility to protect all ethnic Chinese, not just PRC citizens. Seen in the context of the 2021 anti-Chinese riots, the Solomons security agreement represents a concrete step towards protecting these communities, creating a greater sense of psychological dependency on China, and increasing China's political influence through Chinese communities.

What Should Australia Do?

Solomon Islands is a sovereign nation well within its rights to enter any agreement with anyone it wishes. Australia could have done something to forestall the security agreement if it had cultivated a good enough relationship with the Solomons to ensure sufficient foreknowledge and consultation. At this point, the agreement is a *fait accompli*. Australia must focus its efforts on limiting any negative impacts of the agreement, both in the Solomons and across the Pacific, and restoring Australia's position as partner of first choice.

The election of the Albanese government provided an excellent opportunity for a substantial reset of Australia's relations with the Pacific that will also help to address the challenge posed by China's diplomatic offensive. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong's decision to make her first bilateral visit — just four days after being sworn in — to Fiji was well received in the Pacific. Fiji is one of the largest and most influential Pacific Island nations and home to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretariat. Equally important was Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's attendance at the PIF Leaders Meeting in Suva in July.[25] In her first nine months as foreign minister, Wong made eight visits to the Pacific, visiting twelve of Australia's seventeen PIF partners. Australia concluded a security agreement with Vanuatu in December 2022, and announced the Pacific Engagement Visa to facilitate greater labour mobility in the Pacific in February 2023. Continuing this intensive engagement at the highest levels will be essential to Australia restoring and maintaining its position as partner of first choice for the Pacific.

The key themes articulated during Wong's visits to the Pacific resonated well: recognition of the centrality of climate change to the security and economies of the Pacific, commitment to taking real action domestically on the climate crisis, and to cooperative action through the new Australia–Pacific Climate Infrastructure Partnership; a respectful and supportive relationship that listens to the concerns of Pacific partners; valuing the contribution Pacific Island peoples have made to Australian society; and concrete measures to support Pacific aspirations, ranging from increased

Solomon Islands Parliament House, Honiara
Source: DFAT, Flickr

aid to deeper defence and maritime cooperation to expanding opportunities for Pacific workers in Australia. Wong pointedly noted during her first visit to Fiji that closer relations with Australia came 'without strings attached'.[26] The then Fijian prime minister, Frank Bainimarama, described his meeting with Wong as 'wonderful'.[27] Maintaining this very positive response will depend on continuing action to give substance to the positive atmosphere — in particular, strong action on climate change.

The Labor government's commitment to spend an additional A$525 million on development cooperation in the Pacific[28] was also a good start towards improving relations and establishing Australia as a partner of choice. But Australia will never win a dollar-for-dollar competition with China. It must focus on areas of comparative advantage, governance, and systems resilience to minimise the scope for Chinese investment to turn into political leverage, and where it can, try to deny China control over strategically important assets and infrastructure. And Australia must do a better job of mobilising aid and investments from like-minded countries to give ballast to its efforts.

Australia must carefully examine what led the Solomon Islands government to conclude its secret security agreement with China — to enable it both to take remedial action and to learn lessons for the future. From the Solomons' perspective, the agreement not only facilitates greater Chinese investment, but also provides leverage with Australia and other traditional partners to demand more aid, unconditional security assistance, and greater diplomatic clout (evidenced by the United States' announcement in Fiji on 12 February 2023 that it would reopen its embassy in the Solomons' capital of Honiara).[29]

Neutralising the Chinese security agreement with Solomon Islands, which remains the most advanced potential Chinese strategic foothold in the Pacific, should remain a high priority for the Australian government. While respecting the Solomons' sovereign right to enter into such arrangements and the economic development aspirations that underpin it, Australia must explain — both to Solomon Islands and to other Pacific nations — the specific reasons for its concern and encourage the Solomons to limit the agreement's application to protect its sovereignty. This must happen behind closed doors; Pacific Island countries do not respond well to megaphone diplomacy.

Australia could encourage Solomon Islands to consider implementing legislation that requires clear definition of the scope of any Chinese deployments and sets out processes to ensure the rigorous assessment of any proposals. The Solomons could also consider mandating transparency for any requests for the deployment of Chinese military or security forces on its soil under the agreement — or even require explicit, case-by-case parliamentary approval of any China-initiated deployments.

Australia should give more substance to its rhetoric about the strategic importance of its relationships with the Pacific by establishing serious high-level strategic consultations with every Pacific country, and even some low-level intelligence-sharing arrangements, so that each fully understands Australia's perspective, knows its own views are understood and respected in turn, and is well equipped to make fully informed decisions. Australia must make it clear that it no longer thinks of the Pacific as its 'backyard'.

Australia should also explore with Pacific Island countries how to help strengthen the capacity of their governments to navigate this increasingly complex and contested strategic environment. Capacity-building in strategic analysis and policy development, and on international law and treaty drafting, could assist Pacific countries to protect their sovereignty when entering into any future agreements.

Finally, Australia must encourage the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and other partners to become much more engaged in the South Pacific. That the United States previously had no embassy in the Solomons, allowing China to build influence, is as much an Australian foreign policy failure as it is a US one.

The security agreement between China and Solomon Islands is a fundamentally unequal one. It has the potential to significantly alter the strategic environment in the South Pacific. It is essential that Australia and other concerned nations work with the Solomon Islands government to limit its application and minimise the possibility of it being replicated elsewhere in the Pacific.

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