

China's Security Agreement with the Solomon Islands

Wider Implications for Geopolitics in the South Pacific

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Abstract

This article explores the leaked security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands, which has significant implications for the geopolitical landscape of the South Pacific region. China's first-known bilateral security arrangement in the area enables potential deployment of its forces near vital shipping lanes, raising concerns about a future Chinese military base. The agreement's leaked details reveal provisions for Chinese personnel to assist in maintaining social order and providing humanitarian aid. Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have expressed apprehension, with Washington reopening the US embassy in the Solomon Islands and negotiating exclusive military use rights with other nations. This move by Beijing expands China's maritime strategic presence and bolsters its hard power in the region, while also enhancing its soft power through similar agreements with other Pacific Island nations. The establishment of Chinese naval bases in the Solomon Islands would be a significant development with far-reaching implications for the Indo-Pacific. Urgent proactive measures are needed to mitigate potential conflicts and uphold regional stability.

The leaked security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands in April 2022 had a seismic impact on the geopolitics of the Pacific Islands states and Oceania, comparable to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Europe that same year. This bilateral security arrangement represents communist China's first-known agreement in the region, granting Beijing the option to station Chinese forces near vital shipping lanes, just 1,200 nautical miles from Australia. China's involvement in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the region heightens the agreement's significance.

Leaked excerpts indicate the agreement allows the Solomon Islands to request Chinese assistance, including police, armed forces, and other law enforcement, raising concerns about a potential Chinese military base on these strategically located islands.¹ The implications have generated widespread apprehension across

¹ Daniel Hurst, "Security agreement with China 'initialled' by both countries, Solomon Islands says," *The Guardian*, 31 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

the Pacific. Notably, the Solomon Islands recently switched recognition from Taiwan to China after substantial Chinese investment, holding significance as four of the remaining 14 countries recognizing Taiwan reside in the South Pacific, including Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Nauru. In response to China's geopolitical maneuvers, opposed nations have acted swiftly.

As Oren Gruenbaum pointed out, then–New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was gravely concerned, while David Panuelo, president of the Federated States of Micronesia, said he feared the pact could put Pacific islands “at the epicentre of a future confrontation” between China and the US. Australia's Lt Gen Greg Bilton admitted that Chinese warships in the Solomon Islands would “change the calculus” for Australia's military. The US Pacific Fleet commander, ADM Samuel Paparo, warned of “potential of conflict within our region within a couple of years because of the incredible unpredictability of events.”² The recent reopening of the US embassy in the Solomon Islands after 30 years and subsequent negotiations with Micronesia, Palau, and the Marshall Islands for exclusive military use rights amplified US concerns, further heightened when the Solomon Islands refused a port call by a US Coast Guard vessel in summer 2022.

As the region's most prominent Commonwealth member, Australia responded strongly, with then–Minister of Defence Peter Dutton stating the period resembled the 1930s, stressing speaking up early to prevent consequences. This diverse Commonwealth region includes vibrant economies like Australia and New Zealand, Pitcairn Islands, the sole British Overseas Territory in the Pacific Ocean, and states leading Commonwealth climate change and blue economy initiatives.

The security agreement enabled China to expand its maritime strategic presence in the Pacific for the first time, potentially establishing its second overseas military base after Djibouti. The pact carries major ramifications for China's regional hard power, economic and military, while offering soft power advantages through similar agreements with other Pacific Island countries. A key Chinese objective is breaking the maritime encirclement of island chains to expand its Indo-Pacific presence. While no finalized agreement on Chinese naval bases in the Solomon Islands has been reached, such a development would represent the most significant Chinese move in the Pacific region since the turn of the millennium.

² Oren Gruenbaum, “Solomon Islands' security pact with China sends shockwaves across Pacific,” *Eye on the Commonwealth*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.commonwealthroundtable.co.uk/>.

The Commonwealth Approach

Given the agreement's wide-ranging implications, examining key Commonwealth countries' responses proves instructive. While covering every nation falls outside this article's scope, certain aspects bear highlighting. Commonwealth members like Australia and the United Kingdom raised concerns about growing Chinese presence in the South Pacific and Oceania. In June 2022, the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative aimed to address these concerns and contain Chinese expansion in the Pacific. The Partners in the Blue Pacific, comprising Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan, focuses on development assistance, committing more than USD 2 billion, and fostering partnerships with Pacific countries on climate change, connectivity, maritime security, health, prosperity, and education. The group held its inaugural ministerial meeting at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022.³

However, China appears willing to match or exceed the Partners in the Blue Pacific's financial commitments. For instance, a Chinese state-owned company undertakes a project expanding the Honiara port in the Solomon Islands, funded by the Asian Development Bank as part of a larger USD 170-million infrastructure initiative. This project alone represents 20 percent of the Partners in the Blue Pacific's total pledged budget.⁴

Australia's strong response to the Solomon Islands agreement stems from its significant engagement in the region, particularly in efforts to stabilize the islands following the civil war of the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵ In September 2022, Australia's foreign minister, Penny Wong, highlighted Canberra's "commitment to establish an Australia-Pacific Defence School and to double the aerial surveillance component of the Pacific Maritime Security Program to help tackle illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing."⁶

In November 2022, the United Kingdom's minister for the Indo-Pacific, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, made her first overseas visit to Vanuatu and Australia,

³ "Readout of The Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Ministerial" (briefing transcript, US Department of State, 22 September 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

⁴ Kirsty Needham, "China firm wins Solomon Islands port project as Australia watches on," *Reuters*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁵ Reuters, "US Coast Guard vessel unable to enter Solomon Islands port to refuel while patrolling for illegal fishing in the South Pacific," *ABC News* (Australia), 26 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

⁶ Penny Wong, "Speech to the Pacific Way Conference, Papeete, French Polynesia" (transcript, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21 October 2022), <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/>.

including participation in a meeting of the Pacific Community. This visit signaled London's renewed efforts to engage with the forum as a "metropolitan" member.⁷

Pacific Islands Forum Actions

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is a regional intergovernmental organization where Commonwealth of Nations members play significant roles. The United Kingdom, for instance, is one of five dialogue partners within the forum. Notably, the Commonwealth of Nations Secretariat has been an observer since 2006.

Despite limited integration in terms of security, through the auspices of the PIF members have participated in annual meetings with global partners since 1989. China's direct engagement with the Solomon Islands follows its efforts to strengthen the region's security architecture, exemplified by the 2018 Boe Declaration.

At its 51st meeting in Fiji in July 2022, the forum introduced the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, focusing on seven areas including political leadership, climate change, and peace and security. The region experiences a regionalization process driven by economic interdependence, political exchanges, and institutional development.⁸

The concept of a "rules-based order" mentioned in the forum's document poses a challenge to China's influence in the region. However, it is the responsibility of regional groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and other Indo-Pacific countries to take further steps in this direction, capitalizing on the strength of collective action. Here is the relevant passage from the document in full: "The regional security environment is becoming increasingly crowded and complex due to multifaceted security challenges and a dynamic geopolitical environment. The established rules-based order for peace and security as set out in the Boe Declaration faces increasing pressure, and the Pacific region is not immune."⁹

Notably, during her visit, US Vice President Kamala Harris addressed the forum, announcing new embassies in Kiribati and Tonga, both Commonwealth members. Growing momentum among member states to strengthen the organization as an institution aligns with such US support, particularly responding to China's agreement with the Solomon Islands.

⁷ Anne-Marie Trevelyan, "2022 Speech to the 12th Conference of the Pacific Community in Vanuatu" (transcript, UKPOL, 25 November 2022), <https://www.ukpol.co.uk/>.

⁸ "Commonwealth Secretariat," Pacific Islands Forum, n.d., <https://www.forumsec.org/>.

⁹ *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022), <https://www.forumsec.org/>.

Between Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands: Bougainville and Beyond

The Solomon Islands agreement holds special significance amid the intriguing Melanesian geopolitics, specifically the New Guinea Islands Region encompassing the Bismarck Archipelago and Bougainville Island, one of Papua New Guinea's (PNG) four regions. Despite lying northwest of the Solomon Islands geographically, Bougainville is an autonomous PNG region, aiming for full independence by 2027. In 2019, with support from the US, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, an independence referendum occurred, with the majority voting to establish Bougainville as the world's newest country.¹⁰ Oceania has witnessed significant conflicts, including tribal fighting in Highland communities and the Bougainville conflict, making PNG the most conflict-affected nation in the region since World War II.

Bougainville's pursuit of independence could potentially spark similar aspirations and conflicts in other peripheral areas—such as New Britain and New Ireland—within the Bismarck Archipelago of PNG. Beijing seems to have incorporated this strategy into China's approach in the Oceanic region, aiming to create a fragmented and weakened area that would bolster its own influence. If Bougainville becomes independent, other islands might follow suit, resembling the situation of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent emergence of vulnerable “mini-states.” China could leverage these circumstances to gain the support of newly independent islands.

China has been actively intensifying its efforts to win over leaders in the region, not only to counter the influence of countries like the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan but also to outmaneuver other competing actors. If China succeeds in establishing a military base in the Solomon Islands, there would be little to impede it from developing a similar facility in Bougainville or any other future independent state in the region. Chinese geopolitical strategies in the region, as observed elsewhere, appear to be part of a long-term political plan.

For instance, in Bougainville, China has sought to cultivate General Sam Kaouna, a prominent contender for the position of Bougainville's first president in the event of independence. Kaouna has presented a Chinese plan involving a USD 1 billion fund to support the transition to independence, along with offers to invest in mining, tourism, and agriculture.¹¹ However, not all islands in the region are easily swayed by China's influence. For instance, the island of Malaita has developed

¹⁰ Brian Harding and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, “The Next Five Years Are Crucial for Bougainville's Independence Bid,” United States Institute of Peace, 12 August 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

¹¹ “Does China have a master plan for the future of Bougainville?,” *60 Minutes Australia*, 18 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/>; and Joshua McDonald, “Australia, China, and Bougainville's Choices,” *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

strong ties with Taiwan in recent years, indicating a complex and diverse landscape of allegiances in the region.

New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji

The Melanesian region includes New Caledonia, Vanuatu, and Fiji—the latter two being Commonwealth members. Each has taken a different tack regarding the Sino-Solomon agreement.

Although New Caledonia opted to remain under French sovereignty in a recent referendum, its regional neighbors have disregarded the outcome, expressing concerns about the potential colonization of the area by China, as emphasized by a member of the French National Assembly representing New Caledonia. Still, the prospects of New Caledonia gaining independence seem unlikely, and it is essential to acknowledge France's presence in the region and its close monitoring of developments. China's agreement with the Solomon Islands serves as a signal to the independence movement in New Caledonia, suggesting that China might be willing to assume a similar role in the event of New Caledonia's independence, although such a scenario remains improbable.

Ni-Vanuatu leaders have welcomed the Solomon Islands agreement. However, in December 2022, Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong signed a security pact during a bipartisan visit to Vanuatu in December. The agreement aims to strengthen Australia's security ties with Vanuatu by facilitating the deployment of Australian military personnel for disaster response, formalizing defense talks, and enhancing cooperation on various security areas. This move is seen as a strategic victory for Australia in countering China's influence in the region. However, concerns have arisen that the pact may face challenges in Vanuatu's parliament, with opposition parliamentarians and some ministers pushing to delay or amend it. Internal divisions within Vanuatu's government also contribute to the uncertainty. The ratification process is expected to be slow, and there is little indication that it will be completed in the near future. The agreement also awaits ratification by Australia's parliament, with bipartisan support expected.¹²

Fiji appears to maintain a balancing act between China and the United States. With a population of 900,000; the second-largest economy, valued at USD 9.1 billion; and the third-largest land size in the region, Fiji serves as a regional hub and hosts numerous international and regional organizations. Since Fiji closed its

¹² Stephen Dziedzic, "Fears domestic Vanuatu politics could foil important security pact with Australia," *ABC News* (Australia), 4 May 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

trade and tourism office in Taipei in May 2017, China has deepened its bilateral law enforcement and military cooperation, including the deployment of its first military attaché to Fiji in January 2021.¹³ On the other hand, the United States has provided USD 118 million in COVID-19 aid for Pacific Islands, and there are reports of the Pentagon proposing a USD 27 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative to bolster US military presence in the Pacific and counter China's influence.¹⁴ Fiji could potentially be a significant recipient of this aid.

In addition to military and political concerns, the economic situation factors into China's involvement in the Melanesian islands. The Asian Development Bank is the primary creditor for countries such as Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, accounting for approximately 38 percent of their external debt, followed by China (22 percent), the World Bank (13 percent), and Australia and Japan (6 percent).¹⁵ Depending on how China leverages this financial power, it could either facilitate its expansion in the region or make missteps and errors.

Conclusion: American Reengagement with a Vital Region

In terms of the United States, both the Biden administration and its predecessor, the Trump administration, have largely adopted the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" model introduced by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. However, the implications of this model for the countries of the South Pacific remain unclear. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the United States has been caught off guard by China's unprecedented actions in the Solomon Islands. The Trump administration had minimal engagement in the South Pacific, and the Biden administration has been attempting to catch up. Some analysts argue that while Pacific Islands would prefer to integrate with democratic partners, they may be forced to rely on China due to perceived neglect by Washington. Therefore, the role of the United States will be crucial. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 2022 visit to Fiji and Vice President Harris' speech at the Pacific Island Forum demonstrate how the Biden administration plans to develop mutually beneficial relationships in the future. This includes not only establishing new embassies but also implementing a new national strategy for the Pacific. For instance, the United States may support independence

¹³ "Fiji closes Taiwan office, holds talks with Beijing," *Radio New Zealand*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/>.

¹⁴ Aaron Mehta, "Davidson defends \$27B price tag for Pacific fund," *Defense News*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/>.

¹⁵ Keshmeer Makun "The Pacific has a spiralling debt problem – and this is what governments can do about it," *ABC News* (Australia), 9 July 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/>.

movements in the islands of Papua New Guinea if it believes that such support would hinder Chinese objectives.

In July 2022, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and US Ambassador to Australia Caroline Kennedy visited the Solomon Islands. The visit ostensibly commemorated the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal. Both women have personal connections to the islands, as their family members fought there during World War II. Caroline Kennedy, in particular, is well known for the story of PT Boat 109, which was commanded by her father, John F. Kennedy. Lesser known is the fact that Solomon Islanders and an Australian Coastwatcher played crucial roles in the future US president's rescue. US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy and son Jack returned the following year to recreate JFK's famous 2.4-mile swim to safety during this conflict.¹⁶ Crucially, much of the Solomon Islands remains contaminated with unexploded ordinance from the conflict. The United States should commit itself to the full removal of this material from the Solomon Islands.

While the United States discusses other defense matters less explicitly, it strives to contribute to regional integration and support citizens' rights. Such a high-level visit to commemorations of a battle that is unfamiliar to most Americans would not have occurred without the attention brought to the region by the Solomon Islands agreement.

The United States is also likely to act against IUU fishing in the South Pacific. Fishing is an existential issue for many nations in the subregion. In 2022, the United States issued a memorandum to combat IUU fishing, which the US Coast Guard considers the top global maritime security threat, surpassing piracy. China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, is notorious for violating the exclusive economic zones of its neighboring countries. It is essential to raise awareness of these facts and launch a global campaign against Chinese violations not only in terms of the environment but also in relation to other global factors, as the ramifications will extend far into the future, even after the Solomon Islands agreement has been signed.

Lastly, the partnership deal between the United States and Pacific Island leaders, established during the historic US-Pacific Island Country Summit held in Washington, DC, in September 2022, has helped rebalance the geopolitical equilibrium in the Pacific Island region. This deal includes the Solomon Islands, which had appeared to be tilting toward becoming a Chinese outpost in the Pacific. During the summit, Washington announced more than USD 810 million in ex-

¹⁶ Stephen M. Lepore, "JFK's daughter Caroline and grandson Jack recreate his heroic swim off the Solomon Islands to save himself and his stranded US Navy PT-109 crew after they were capsized by a Japanese destroyer 80 years ago," *Daily Mail*, 3 August 2023, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/>.

panded programs aimed at improving the lives of Pacific Islanders, including more than USD 130 million in new investments to support climate resilience and the development of sustainable blue economies in the Pacific Islands.¹⁷ This is particularly significant considering that climate change is increasingly becoming the defining challenge for the future development of not only the region but the entire globe, given its relationship with energy and resource security.

The effectiveness of Washington's new support remains to be seen, and it may require the assistance of its allies, particularly Japan and Australia within the new Quad framework, to effectively counter Chinese expansion in the Pacific, which regrettably appears to only be in its early stages. Additionally, the United States should explore new partnerships, including with the Commonwealth of Nations, where there are shared interests, such as addressing IUU fishing. Furthermore, the United States must be prepared to engage in long-term peace-building efforts in the Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and other areas to prevent a situation where Chinese influence leads to a destabilized subregion. ✪

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¹⁷ "Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership" (fact sheet, The White House, 29 September 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.