

RESEARCH NOTE

A New Security Agreement With China Turns Solomon Islands Into New Focus of Global Geopolitical Rivalry

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Solomon Islands lies less than 2,000 kilometers off the Queensland coast and beyond the Second Island Chain. A permanent military presence in the country would vastly expand China's capacities in the South Pacific.

Source: DRI



Executive Summary

Draft documents leaked in March show China may soon sign a security agreement with Solomon Islands

The possibility of a Chinese military presence in Solomon Islands was received with alarm in Australia

If implemented, the agreement could change Australia's military posture and allow China to break through the Second Island Chain

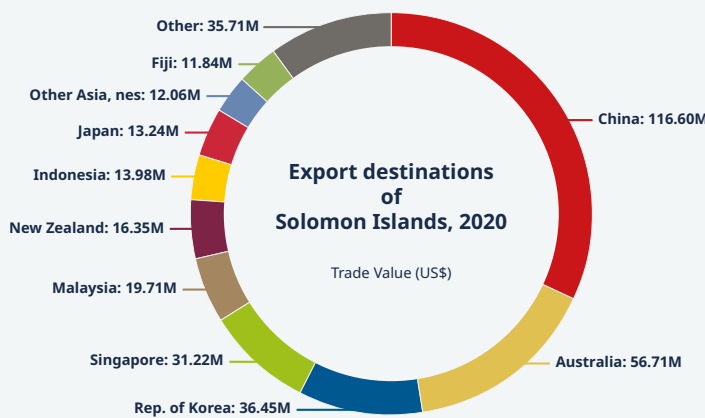
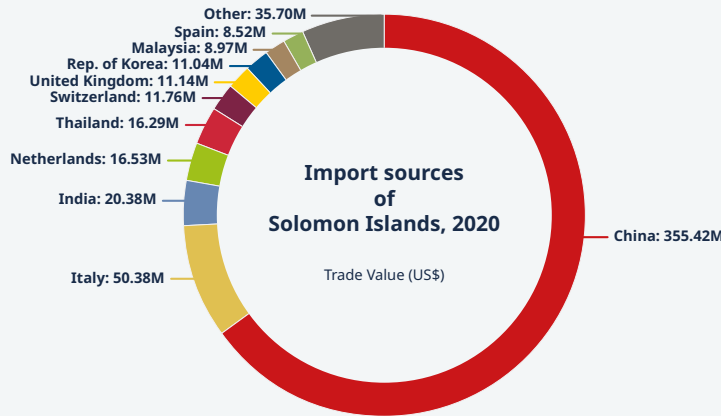
The South Pacific is increasingly a focus of global geopolitical rivalry

We should expect new interest and investment in the region from Washington

Background and Analysis

Draft documents leaked in late March showed Chinese military personnel and equipment could be stationed in Solomon Islands, following a bilateral security arrangement between the South Pacific Island nation and China. The documents were first published online by an adviser to the Malaita Provincial Government Premier Daniel Suidani, who has been a fierce critic of an earlier decision to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan.

One day later, the Solomon Islands Government released a statement on the need to expand the country's security arrangements. It mentioned China eight times, Australia six times and the United States once. On March 31, the Chinese Ambassador to Solomon Islands and the Permanent



Solomon Island's major export and import partners in 2020

Source: UN Comtrade, Visuals: DRI

Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade of Solomon Islands initiated elements of the cooperation framework, which must now be legally scrubbed and await signatures of the two foreign ministers.

In Australia the prospect of a Chinese military presence in Solomon Islands was received with alarm. One of Australia's most senior military officers warned that if China manages to station warships in Solomon Islands it would "change the calculus" for Australia's military.¹ The South Pacific country lies less than 2,000 kilometres off the Queensland coast.

China's official position on the security deal stresses that it is consistent with in-

ternational law and customary practice, conducive to maintaining stability in the islands and promoting regional peace and stability. It depicts concerns by some "individual countries" as an "attempt to disrupt and undermine mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Pacific Islands" which is "doomed to fail."²

The security agreement's provision that "China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of the Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands" raised concerns that China may be planning to establish a naval base in the islands.

Key Issues

GROWING TIES BETWEEN CHINA AND THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

Even before Solomon Islands shifted its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in 2019, economic ties between the two countries had been growing. Solomon Islands was the first Pacific Island country to receive China-made Sinopharm vaccines, reportedly through bilateral channels. Economic ties have further strengthened since the two sides signed a non-reciprocal duty-free trade agreement in 2020, which now includes an agreement on economic and technological cooperation, Belt and Road cooperation, poverty reduction and infrastructure development. Beijing contributed \$90 million to Solomon Islands' \$342 million "constituency development program" while also announcing support to the country for hosting the Pacific Games in 2023. Chinese companies have made their presence felt in the Solomon Islands, especially in the strategic Guadalcanal province, where the state-owned China State Railway Group secured a \$825 million project to build

power and port facilities, roads, rail and bridges. Nevertheless, public sentiment is often at odds with the national government's pro-China position. Divisions between the country's largest and most populous Malaita province and the national government over relations with China have caused domestic tensions, in a country where memories of civil war remain fresh.

GEOPOLITICS OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Official Chinese documents propose two routes for the Maritime Silk Road, the maritime section of China's broad geopolitical initiative, the Belt and Road. The East Route would start from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific. The West Route would pass through the South China Sea and terminate in Africa and Europe. Why would China place the South Pacific on an equal footing with Europe as the final destination of a central sea route? There are different reasons for that centrality. First, the South Pacific is the world's most fertile fishing ground and some of the last unspoiled fisheries can be found there.³ Obsessed with ensuring its food security for the future, China wants to acquire dominance in the region before anyone else gets a chance. Second, valuable mineral deposits have been identified across the South Pacific. Deep-sea muds rich in rare earths and accessible to seabed mining could become the target of intense strategic competition. Last but not least, the South Pacific lies beyond the so-called "second island chain." The "island chain" strategy, first conceived at the beginning of the Cold War, proposes to deny China access to the Pacific. By breaking through the second line of defense in the West Pacific, China will be able to expand its capacities to operate in the Pacific, as well as track and watch American naval forces in the vast Pacific theatre.

What's Next

Two of Australia's top intelligence chiefs have travelled to Solomon Islands to meet Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and raise the government's concerns over the security agreement that the Pacific Island nation intends to sign with China.⁴ A statement issued by the Prime Minister's office after the meeting stated that China remains an "important trading partner for both countries" and makes it clear that the government is not prepared to abandon efforts to strike security pacts with more countries.

The Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea James Marape told Australian media that other states in the region were "conscious" of events in Solomon Islands and wanted to discuss the matter at the Pacific Islands Forum leaders meeting this year. Other statements reinforce the view that most countries in the region would prefer the issue went away and blame Honiara for bringing a global geopolitical contest to their doorstep.

American official Kurt Campbell, the National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, will travel to Solomon Islands this week, in a regional tour including several other stops. From our conversations with US officials in Washington, we expect Campbell to stress the risks of a Chinese military presence for security in the South Pacific and to dangle the possibility of more economic support for Solomon Islands and other countries in the region. Campbell has stressed in the past how the South Pacific can become the epicenter for increased tensions between China and the US across the wider Indo-Pacific.⁵ The AUKUS pact - under which the United States and Britain have agreed to help Australia acquire nuclear submarines - has trig-

gered a reaction from Beijing, and for Campbell the US remains insufficiently engaged in the South Pacific.

In our view, the possibility that China will open a naval base in Solomon Islands remains remote. More consequential is the provision that China can send armed personnel to the country to protect its citizens and assets. The provision could become a template for agreements with other countries in the future.

¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-31/defence-general-warnings-chinese-military-solomon-islands/100954752> ² https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202203/t20220325_10655688.html ³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/14/why-the-worlds-most-fertile-fishing-ground-is-facing-a-unique-and-dire-threat> ⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-07/australian-intelligence-officials-meet-with-solomon-islands-pm/100972282> ⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-most-likely-see-strategic-surprise-pacific-official-2022-01-10/>