

**Solomon Islands Low (Moderate)**

Concerns about freedom of the media in the Solomon Islands remain, including in relation to China's funding of the Solomon Star newspaper. According to Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, a recent request for \$210,000 worth of equipment was linked with an explicit promise by the paper to give "positive coverage to China's development assistance to Solomon Islands."<sup>1</sup> Critical coverage of the Solomons' relationship with China has resulted in threats and intimidation of journalists, one aspect of concerns raised in Freedom House's 2023 report about freedom of the press and government transparency in Solomon Islands.<sup>2</sup>

More broadly, the Solomons' increased cooperation with China has culminated in the signing of nine agreements under a "comprehensive strategic partnership", during Prime Minister Sogavare's trip to China in July 2023. One of these deals is a police cooperation agreement which will see China provide further assistance to enhance Solomon Islands' law enforcement capacity.<sup>3</sup> The Solomon Islands government dismissed concerns raised by the US, Australia and New Zealand, and referred to aspects of the pact such as improvement of traffic control, police equipment, and completion of the Forensic Autopsy Lab.<sup>4</sup> Drone training and cybersecurity may also fall under the agreement,<sup>5</sup> and the pact intends to plug gaps in policing exposed during the 2021 riots.

Despite Australia's previous involvement in and support for the Solomon Islands as part of RAMSI, which restored law and order to the country from 2003 and helped build a foundation for longterm security and stability, Sogavare has called for a review of a 2017 security treaty with Australia, under which policing support was provided during the 2021 riots.

Prime Minister Sogavare also suggested during his trip to China that the Solomons may set up its own military force to avoid future dependence on outside forces to help maintain stability.<sup>6</sup> While Australia's Defence Minister has offered to partner with the Solomons and support the set up of a military, others have raised serious concerns about the militarisation of the country. Suggestions include better resourcing the existing police force to maintain law and order, investing in youth and economic opportunity, addressing inadequate health care and education, and ensuring disaster preparedness in light of climate change effects.<sup>7</sup> Others have questioned the human security impact and civil society actors have raised concerns about the impact of militarisation and disruption to the country's tentative peace and stability, especially given the history of ethnic tensions, gun violence, weak accountability, and the strong potential for future violence.<sup>8</sup>

It has also been argued that establishing a military would not be effective in addressing many of the identified security threats as outlined in the 2020 National Security Strategy, such as climate change and transnational crime.<sup>9</sup> A military would also be competing for limited resources which could further worsen the current under-resourcing of the police force. Further, public trust in governance and institutions is low and there does not appear to be widespread public support for a military force.<sup>10</sup>

Recommendations

The Solomon Islands government should:

1. Ensure freedom and independence of the media.
2. Continue to work with regional partners security sector reform and to pursue reform in an open and inclusive fashion mindful of potential risks.

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Islands news outlet pledges to promote China's generosity, ABC News, 3 August 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-03/solomon-islands-news-outlet-pledges-to-promote-china/102682024>

<sup>2</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/solomon-islands/freedom-world/2023>

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Islands signs controversial policing pact with China, The Guardian, 11 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/11/solomon-islands-signs-controversial-policing-pact-with-china>

<sup>4</sup> Solomon Islands denies policing deal with China poses 'threat' to Pacific security, The Guardian, 14 July, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/14/solomon-islands-china-policing-deal-pacific-security>

<sup>5</sup> Solomon Islands denies policing deal with China poses 'threat' to Pacific security, The Guardian, 14 July 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/14/solomon-islands-china-policing-deal-pacific-security>

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Dziedzic, Defence Minister Richard Marles happy for Australia to support Solomon Islands defence force, ABC News, 19 July 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-19/australia-happy-to-support-solomon-islands-defence-force/102622652>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Nick Sas, Chrisrita Aumanu-Leong, Mackenzie Smith, Australia brought peace to Solomon Islands through RAMSI, but critics say its latest moves are 'militarising' the country, ABC News, 24 July 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-24/solomon-islands-ramsi-australia-troops-intervention-20-years/102637024>

<sup>9</sup> Alan C. Tidwell, Meg Keen, Anna Powles, Jose Sousa-Santos, Anouk Ride, Solomon Islands: Invest in people and police before military, Lowy Interpreter, 28 July 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/solomon-islands-invest-people-police-military>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid