

Solomon Islands Moderate

The Solomon Islands has been at the forefront of geopolitics in the Asia Pacific region over recent months, due to its increasingly close relationship with China. The strengthening of the relationship follows the nation's diplomatic allegiance switching from Taiwan to China in 2019, and a serious outbreak of violence in November 2021.¹

The Solomon Islands government has signed a security agreement with China which includes provision for Chinese police to train Solomon Islands security officers.² Concerns have been raised about the possibility of Chinese police being employed within the Solomons' police force, alongside broader concerns about the potential for a Chinese military base being established on the islands.³

The ABC recently investigated Chinese investment and influence in the Solomon Islands. In addition to a lack of government transparency, increasing Chinese activity was found to be causing unrest and division between local communities, along with environmental damage in areas where Chinese companies are involved in mining and forestry industries.⁴ The effects on employment of local workers, and wider concerns about security with access to deep-water ports and airstrips, have also been raised.

In June, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with leaders from ten Pacific Island countries, as China continued its push for diplomatic and strategic allies which, according to a research fellow at ANU, would help China with voting at the UN on issues such as Xinjiang, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and with economic development and security.⁵ Also in June, Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited the Solomon Islands to meet with Prime Minister Sogovare, where she announced further vaccines donations and an expansion of the labour scheme.⁶ This was followed by a warm greeting between the newly elected Australian Prime Minister and Mr Sogovare at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meetings in July.⁷ There was also notable resistance from Pacific nations to China's attempts to intervene and more broadly to its desire for control in the region. Nonetheless China's relationship with the Solomon Islands continues to grow, causing tensions within the country and anxiety across the region.⁸

China has also funded several venues for use at the Pacific Games in November 2023, which the Solomon Islands is hosting. The government has submitted a bill proposing to delay its elections until after the Games are held. The opposition say the community does not approve of any plan to delay the election.⁹ It is possible that moves such as these will worsen the existing public mistrust in the government.

Similarly, recent measures to restrict freedom of the media are concerning. The Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation (SIBC) says the government has ordered it to censor its news and not to report content critical of the government.¹⁰ Previously a state-owned enterprise, SIBC is now fully government funded, raising concerns about its independence and ability to accurately report.

Some journalists have cited the relationship with China as one impetus for moves to restrict media freedom. 35-year journalism veteran Dorothy Wickham wrote in May that journalists have been chased away by police, and that secrecy by the government is at an all-time high. In relation to the security pact with China, she wrote that "The government has refused to release the text of the deal. They have also refused to give interviews, while texts to longstanding contacts in the government go unanswered and calls unreturned."¹¹ This lack of transparency on government dealings, combined with crackdowns on the media, are indicators of a government with little respect for strong and open

governance, and the fundamental rights of its population. Such indicators can point towards a growing risk of violence and atrocities.

Recommendations

The Solomon Islands Government should:

- Respect freedom of the media and withdraw the order to not publish anything critical about the government.
- Consult openly with communities about policies and decisions that may affect them including consideration of locally owned industry and employment of workers.
- Ensure new projects in the Solomon Islands are subject to environmental risk assessment and any impact managed effectively.
- Ensure the security sector complies with international standards on human rights.

¹ Mihai Sora, Australia's Early Intervention can Help Solomon Islands but the Roots of the Conflict Run Deep, Lowy Institute, 26 November 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-s-early-intervention-can-help-solomon-islands-roots-conflict-run-deep>

² Lice Monovo, Chinese police to give 'management and leadership' training to Solomon Islands officers, The Guardian, 2 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/02/chinese-police-to-give-management-and-leadership-training-to-solomon-islands-officers>

³ Stephen Dziedzic and Edwina Seselja, Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare 'insulted' by reaction to security treaty with China, ABC, 29 March 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-29/manasseh-sogavare-responds-to-leaked-security-treaty-with-china/100946614>

⁴ Pacific Capture: How Chinese money is buying the Solomons, Four Corners, ABC, 1 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/pacific-capture-how-chinese-money-is-buying-the/13998414>

⁵ Denghua Zhang, What does China want in the Pacific? Diplomatic allies and strategic footholds, The Conversation, 3 June 2022, <https://theconversation.com/what-does-china-want-in-the-pacific-diplomatic-allies-and-strategic-footholds-184147>

⁶ Patricia A. O'Brien, In the Solomon Islands, Wong takes first tentative steps in repairing a strained relationship, The Conversation, 20 June 2022, <https://theconversation.com/in-the-solomon-islands-wong-takes-first-tentative-steps-in-repairing-a-strained-relationship-185200>

⁷ Jessica Collins, What happened at the Pacific Islands Forum, Lowy Interpreter, 15 July 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-happened-pacific-islands-forum>

⁸ Jessica Collins, What Australians fear with China pressing in the Pacific, Lowy Interpreter, 30 June 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-australians-fear-china-pressing-pacific>

⁹ Kirsty Needham, Solomon Islands government seeks to delay election to host games, Reuters, 9 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/solomon-islands-government-seeks-delay-election-host-games-2022-08-09/>

¹⁰ Annika Burgess, Solomon Islands orders national broadcaster SIBC not to report content critical of government, ABC, 2 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-02/solomon-islands-sibc-anti-government-censorship-press-freedoms/101288396>

¹¹ Dorothy Wickam, In 35 years of reporting from Solomon Islands, I've never seen the secrecy of the last few months, The Guardian, 3 May 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/03/in-35-years-reporting-from-solomon-islands-i-have-never-seen-such-secrecy-as-the-last-few-months>