

Backyard Jitters: Australia, China's Military and The Solomon Islands

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Global Research, March 29, 2022

Region: [Asia](#), [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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The impression given was that of a temple burgled by blaspheming reprobates. But Australian politicians were having none of it. A [draft official document](#) published online by an adviser to the Malaita Provincial Government of Premier Daniel Suidani suggested that China was considering some military presence in The Solomons. In its current form, Beijing would be able to send police, armed police and military personnel.

The Canberra establishment got antsy: What were those wicked freedom-hating representatives of the Middle Kingdom up to? This was, after all, part of the Australian backyard they were poking their noses in. The [response](#) was predictable and quick: a promise of AU\$20 million in extra aid, the creation of a spanking new radio network, budget support and an extension of the Solomons International Assistance force.

Spoon-full measures about sovereignty were readily distributed through the press outlets and public. Australian Trade Minister Dan Tehan, the sober side of government paranoia, [suggested](#) that The Solomons was at risk of losing its sovereignty to China. Australia, in contrast, had made sure that everything it had done enhanced “the sovereignty of Pacific nations, to make sure everything we’re doing is to help and support them when it comes to their sovereignty.” The great regional helper, and local hope.

This was so clotting in arterial richness it ignored the fact that Australia's own sovereignty, auctioned off to US troop rotations, base expansion, nuclear-powered submarines and Pine Gap, is not an example to emulate.

Australia's Pacific backyard has become, over time, a default extension of US power, with Australian personnel keeping their eyes peeled at the incursions of any rivals. Australia's relationship with the Pacific is also one governed by a traditional donor-charity relationship, lately characterised by a hunger for interference.

The most prominent interference in The Solomons, even if it came in the form of a request by various officials in the country, was the 2003 intervention by Australia to arrest the

implosion of what was uncharitably termed a “failed state”. Prime Minister John Howard [stated](#) in July 2003 that, “We know that a failed state in our region, on our doorstep will jeopardise our own security.”

Cheering on this change of heart for an intervention was the Australian Strategic and Policy Institute, Washington’s cashed-up megaphone in Canberra. The situation had, [wrote](#) Elsin Wainwright with stern warning, “paralysed the country’s capital, stifled its economy, disrupted government, discouraged aid donors, and inflicted suffering and hardship on its people. It had virtually ceased to function as an effective national entity.”

The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was marketed as an exercise of generous paternalism, speckled with good traces of self-interest. It signalled a sharp departure from Australia’s previous policy that had been more disposed to the sovereignty of South Pacific states, if only because keeping one’s hands clean was a good idea.

With Canberra now more concerned about the possible exercises of independence by their Pacific neighbours, the desire to guide and meddle is stronger than ever. In late 2017, the Solomon Islands again featured in aggressive Australian efforts [to influence the award](#) of the contract to build an undersea internet cable between Honiara and Sydney.

The sovereignty of the island state was less significant than ensuring that China’s Huawei Marine were not involved in the process. Jonathan Pryke of the Lowy Institute’s Pacific Island Program [summed the matter up](#): “This was seen as a red line that Australia would not cross and so we jumped in with a better deal providing the cable as a grant that would be implemented with a procurement partner of Australia’s choosing – that wouldn’t be Chinese.”

Local politics is also playing its part. Solomon Islands Opposition Leader Matthew Wale has not been shy in claiming that the Australians have been asleep. Last year, [he attempted](#) to wake Canberra from its slumber regarding a potential national security agreement with Beijing. “I have intimated as much to the Australian High Commissioner and officials that this was in the offing, even as far back as last year – the indications were there and the Australian government did nothing about it – so I’m extremely disappointed.”

The penny should have dropped in November when Canberra hastily deployed police and military personnel to Honiara to help pacify anti-government riots. At the time, Beijing had made murmurings of a possible deployment of law enforcement personnel. This did not prevent a team of Chinese police officers [being sent](#) to the Solomon Islands last month, wordily known as the People’s Republic of China Public Security Bureau’s Solomon Islands Policing Advisory Group. Their mission: to aid the local police force to improve their “anti-riot capabilities”.

Wale is hoping that the bilateral security agreement between Honiara and Canberra can be refashioned and expanded as a weapon against any Chinese military presence. In a rather rambling statement, he claimed that his country had “benefited from that treaty with Australia, what does that treaty not able to give us, maybe that should be a subject of discussions with Australia, New Zealand as opposed to going into a new treaty altogether with China.”

The concern about Beijing is not uniformly shared, even within the ranks of the Australian government. Liberal MP Warren Entsch [is optimistic](#) about the inevitable demise of the

Beijing-Honiara draft agreement. “There’s lots of things happening there that we can continue to work with them”. He regularly came across “Chinese announcements, but at the end of the day I’m yet to see anything come to fruition.”

Some of the politicians of the South Pacific are already realising that money and rewards can be made from such concerns. Paranoia can provide a rich quarry to mine. It’s time to cash in, and the governors of Solomon Islands should be advised to do so. To obtain resources and aid from both Beijing and Canberra would suggest an advanced form of admirable, sparkling cunning.

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