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The China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Pact



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The China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Pact

Introduction

In April 2022, China and the Solomon Islands signed a bilateral defence pact. The signing of this deal has caused great distress within Australia and the US, drawing sharp reactions from both the countries. The news of possible pact of this kind broke into the media in the month of March and apprehensions were raised at that time as well.

China has been steadily gaining traction in the Western Pacific particularly since 2013 when Xi Jinping came to power.¹ The Pacific Islands are part of China's Belt and Road initiative. China's engagement with the Pacific is driven by strategic interests in the region, under-cutting Taiwan's influence, and seek resources and raw materials.² In 2019, in a major diplomatic win for Beijing, Solomon Islands made a drastic shift in its long-held foreign policy when it cut ties with Taiwan and establish ties with China. China's inroads

into the Pacific Islands compete with US's traditional influence.

Details of the Pact

The ‘*Inter-governmental Framework Agreement on Security Cooperation*’ was signed in April 2022. The draft describes the scope of bilateral agreement in following words³:

‘Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people’s lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response or provide assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties; China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.’

As is clear from the above statement, China, by way of this bilateral security pact will be able to deploy armed police and soldiers on the islands. It is also reported that the pact allows base access to PLA-N vessels.⁴ The executive authorities would be the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Ministry of Police, and National Security and Correctional Services of Solomon Islands.⁵ As per the draft, the Solomon Islands would submit requisition about the expected numbers of Chinese police, armed police and military personnel after explaining the internal security situation; the main duties of the personnel; and the duration of the mission. The expenses for the mission would be ‘*settled through friendly consultation by the Parties.*’⁶ The agreement will come into effect upon the date of signing; and shall be valid for five years; with a provision for automatic renewal for another five years; unless either party submits a written request to terminate it.⁷ The pact would also allow

for stationing of Chinese troops to safeguard Chinese investments in the Solomon Islands. Another feature of the pact is that Beijing's prior permission will be required to share information on joint security plans.⁸ Article 5 of the draft deals with confidentiality clause and is worded as follows⁹:

'Without the written consent of the other party, neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to third party. Unless otherwise agreed upon, cooperation information, including media briefings, shall be released upon mutual agreement by the Parties.'

Article one of the draft mentions about China's 'own needs' under which it can dispatch its ships. It has raised the question-what could be Beijing's needs? The agreement has thus led to concerns that this pact would eventually lead to a Chinese base in the Solomon Islands. The Solomon Islands are only 2000 kms away from Australia. Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare clarified that he is aware of the regional sensitivities and that the agreement would not establish a Chinese military base.¹⁰ The official statement read out as follows:

[The] Government is conscious of the security ramifications of hosting a military base and it will not be careless to allow such initiative to take place under its watch.¹¹

According to China, this deal is a 'normal exchange and cooperation between two sovereign and independent countries' and that it is part of the bilateral comprehensive cooperation. The agreement, is based on the principles of equality, mutual benefit and 'respecting the will and actual need of Solomon Islands.' Further, the aim of the agreement is 'promoting social stability and long-term tranquility in Solomon Islands.'¹²The Chinese foreign ministry had explained the brief features of the pact in its regular press briefing as follows¹³:

- A. Bilateral cooperation in maintaining social order.
- B. Protection of peoples' lives and property.
- C. Humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

According to the Chinese spokesperson, the bilateral agreement is open, transparent, and inclusive; and does not target any third country. In the same press conference, a representative from Reuters sought more clarification from Wang Weibin, the official spokesperson- on whether the actual security agreement is yet to be signed (since this is a framework agreement), and if Chinese officials would visit Solomon Islands in the month of May to sign the final agreement (as has been stated in the parliament of Solomon Islands). The spokesperson neither emphasised any further, nor entertained the question if Wang Yi had recently visited the Solomon Islands. There is no clarity at this moment as to when the agreement goes into effect.¹⁴ It is also reported that the text of the agreement is kept secret as per Beijing's preference.¹⁵ There have been some concerns about command structure of this deal, and possible role of the Chinese police officers, and if they would employ the same tactics used in Hong-Kong. Recently, the High Commissioner of Solomon Islands to Australia Robert Sisal assured that the operational command would remain with Solomon Island police.¹⁶ On the question of the future of Australia's security role, the High Commissioner is quoted as follows¹⁷:

'We are not seeking to move away from Australia but seeking more cooperation with China.'

Regional Reactions

The deal has caused alarm in Australia. The official statement from the foreign ministry expressed 'disappointment' and concern on the lack of transparency about this deal, its potential to undermine regional stability, and has sought additional information on the agreement.¹⁸ Domestic opinion has been highly critical. Rory Medcalf has questioned that if Australia has been unable to shape favourable outcomes in its neighbourhood, in a small nation where it has a historic role, how can it be expected to influence strategic matters elsewhere?¹⁹ Considered a failure of Canberra's statecraft, the deal is seen as China's neo-colonisation of the Pacific. There is criticism that the deal has put Australia on a defensive, since it is a potential Chinese military base close to Australia's northern border, and it impacts Australia's abilities to fight wars

abroad.²⁰ Former Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull, who had successfully dealt with Sogavare and other Pacific Island nations in order to limit China's influence; expressed his disappointment that the world will see this deal as a failure of Australian foreign policy. Questions are raised over whether Australia deployed its full diplomatic resources and attention to the Solomon Islands. Labour Leader Penny Wong sees this as Australia's biggest failure in the last 70 years.²¹ Australian Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce has described the situation as highly undesirable-as another Cuba in the making; off Australia's coast.²²

This deal has just come about when Australia is heading into a parliamentary election on May 21. This deal will become an election issue. Some argue that China has cleverly thought about the timing of this deal; and that China will quickly execute the deal's provisions during a time when Australia will be under a caretaker government.²³ Security experts argue that the Chinese would build a military base as rapidly as under four weeks, at a speed similar to its reclamation activities in the South China Sea, and one may see large aircraft and ships landing with materials.²⁴

The impression was created in the media that the US immediately dispatched a delegation to the Solomon Islands. However, the US delegation's visits to the Pacific Island States (Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands being the last on the trip) were already planned. Therefore, the correct way to put it is that the security pact came abruptly before the scheduled US visit. In fact, it is reported that the news of the security deal broke out just few hours after the White House announced Campbell's visit to the Solomon Islands.²⁵ The US delegation was headed by Kurt Campbell, Indo-Pacific coordinator of the Biden administration. The delegation conveyed about US's commitment to the Solomon Islands, (expedite opening of embassy and concrete steps for the welfare of its people), advance cooperation on unexplored ordinance, launching a programme on maritime domain awareness, measures on public health and covid-19 relief and vaccines, initiation of a dialogue on return of the Peace Corps; and measures on climate change.²⁶ The delegation also conveyed to Prime Minister Sogavare about the potential risk of this deal to

the US and its allies and its possible impact on regional security environment. Further²⁷:

'If steps are taken to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power-projection capabilities, or a military installation, the delegation noted that the United States would then have significant concerns and respond accordingly. In response to these enumerated concerns, Prime Minister Sogavare reiterated his specific assurances that there would be no military base, no long-term presence, and no power projection capability, as he has said publicly. The United States emphasized that it will follow developments closely in consultation with regional partners.'

The US and Solomon Islands agreed to launch a high-level strategic dialogue 'at this critical juncture'.²⁸

Former CIA officer and military strategist Matthew Kroening sees this deal less as a direct threat to the US but more of a reflection of China's military activities in the region; and the US's response or the lack of it.²⁹ Assuming that China builds a military base at Solomon Islands, Kroening thinks that it has no value in a conflict with Taiwan or any utility to project power. Additionally, the nuclear submarines that would come to Australia under the AUKUS shall be deployed to tackle threat of PLA-N ships if and when they set sail for another destination. Strategically, the deal serves as an optic wherein countries are building close relations with China, in what was once a US dominated space; and this is what Kroening sees as Washington's actual concern.³⁰ He adds that the US has ignored and neglected its relationships in the Indo-Pacific; specifically, more so towards smaller nations. China's military activities in South Pacific, Latin America and Southeast Asia have increased as US had put these regions on lower priority when it was focused on Iraq and Afghanistan.³¹ One gets a sense that the challenge before Washington would be when Indo-Pacific countries are firm about maintaining good relations with all countries; or in other words, the US strategic and economic preeminence is being challenged through policy preferences of regional countries.

A seven-member high-level delegation from Japan comprising of members from foreign ministry, defence and parliament visited Honiara over the weekend. President Sogavare assured the Japanese Vice-Foreign Minister Kentaro Uesugi that the security pact with China does not threaten Japan or the region, and that the pact is aimed at domestic matters. Reportedly, Japan has communicated that while it respects sovereignty of Solomon Islands, it also desired regional peace.³² It is expected that the Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi would visit Palau, a Pacific Island nation in the month of May. Palau has diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Soon after the news of the agreement broke out, Hayashi was quoted as saying³³:

'This agreement, the details of which have not yet been fully disclosed, could have an impact on the security of the Pacific region as a whole.'

The deal has also caused apprehensions in the Southern Pacific nations. These nations fear that China's potential military build-up can be threatening. David Panuelo, the President of Micronesia wrote to his counterpart Manasseh Sogavare to reconsider the agreement.³⁴ Sogavare has not taken international criticism kindly, he sees it as insulting; he responded that Panuelo instead should be more worried about climate change.³⁵

China has raised questions on Kurt Campbell's visit and US's motives, and also accused it of sensationalisation and deliberately stroking tensions. Given the fact that US had no diplomatic contact with either Solomon Islands for 29 years or with Fiji for 37 years; China asked if this visit came with ulterior motives. Further, China has said that the Pacific Island countries are not a backyard of anyone or pawns in geopolitical chess. These countries needed to diversify their developmental cooperation; and subtly warned the US against interrupting cooperation between China and the Pacific Island Countries.³⁶ Chinese experts reiterate this sentiment and stated that China is a major force for international cooperation and this fact is a '*major trend of our time*' to which Australia is oblivious to.³⁷

Australia's Traditional Role in the Solomon Islands

Earlier, Australia would dispatch its security personnel to quell law and order situation in the Solomon Islands. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) was a result of the Solomon Islands' request for external intervention. It also enjoys support of the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) where RAMSI troops are also drawn from PIF members.³⁸ Under RAMSI through a USD 2 billion *Operation Helpem Fren*, Australia had deployed peacekeeping mission in the Solomon Islands from 2003-2017, i.e., for a period of 14 years. Now, China would be playing that role as well. In fact, China for the first time had sent its personnel to train Solomon Island police force after the November riots. This was after and in spite of Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea having been regularly sending their troops.³⁹

At this stage it is unclear if the security pact will diminish Australia's traditional law and order role in the Solomon Islands. However High Commissioner Sisilo in a radio interview assured that⁴⁰:

'We are not seeking to move away from Australia but seeking more cooperation with China.'

Nonetheless, the diplomat reiterated that the pact is a result of failure to protect Chinatown in the capital city of Honiara, and that the deal with China serves to bolster capabilities of its police forces.⁴¹

Australia and Solomon Islands are neighbours and enjoyed close interactions. Traditionally, the elites in Solomon Islands go to study in Australia.⁴² It has relied on Australian aid for its economy, though now China has emerged as another source.⁴³ Since 2009 there has been a steady cut in Australia's aid to Solomon Islands: in 2019, the aid was worth USD 129 million, which is a 43 per cent cut. The decline in aid is due to end of RAMSI programme. Interestingly, the cut to Solomon Islands appears as an exception because the overall Australian aid to the Pacific Island nations has increased by 24 per cent

in the decade between 2009 to 2019.⁴⁴ Despite the cuts, Australia contributes to 65 per cent of all foreign aid received by the Solomon Islands. The Chinese role was largely related to offering concessional loans for large infrastructure projects. But things began to change in 2018 when Chinese aid to Pacific Islands peaked, and specifically in the case of Beijing-Honiara ties, 2019 was the watershed year-Honiara snapped ties with Taiwan, and since then various Solomon Island government documents mention about how China would extensively contribute to ‘*donor-funded development budget lines*’.⁴⁵

As already mentioned, the China-Solomon Islands security deal is reflected poorly on Australia and even on New Zealand. It is felt that Australia and New Zealand should have done better on intelligence. But fundamentally, Canberra’s mistake was that it continued to engage only with the Sogavare government, without any connections with the provinces or other stakeholders.⁴⁶

Domestic Politics in the Solomon Islands

To better understand the genesis of the security deal, it is necessary to go back in time and understand the domestic politics of the Solomon Islands. In 1998 Solomon Islands witnessed civil war which broke out between the main island of Guadalcanal and the province of Malaita. About 20,000 Malaitans were forced out of the Guadalcanal Island by the armed youth movement. The United Nations brokered a peace deal called Townsville Peace Agreement in the year 2000.⁴⁷ ‘*An agreement to end hostilities between the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement*’ was signed on 15 October 2000 in Townsville, Australia. The conflict goes back to 1988 when peaceful demonstration had started over the government’s inaction to address people’s grievances. Eventually it turned into an armed movement of the youth. Six peace agreements were signed from June 1999 to May 2000. A ceasefire was agreed to on 2 August 2000 and peace talks began six days after.⁴⁸ The agreement sought to grant more autonomy to Guadalcanal and Malaita province, by way of establishing a constitutional council within 28 days of signing of the agreement, to rewrite the constitutional provisions to provide

more autonomy to the provinces. The Prime Minister had to appoint members to the constitutional council after consulting all provincial governments.⁴⁹ In the agreement there were provisions for financial assistance and devolution of the national provident fund to the provinces; as well as measures on land acquisition/ownership on Guadalcanal Island. In a specific time frame the national government was also supposed to address the socio-economic issues of Malaitans that were displaced from Guadalcanal.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, part IV of the agreement (on power-sharing) was never implemented. The end result is that Solomon Islands have transformed into a highly centralised system around Honiara, with the provinces at the capital's mercy. Citizens want Article IV implemented; they do not see Manasseh Sogavare as their true representative. Sogavare is unpopular and it is said that he will lose in the 2025 election. Hence, he is said to be attempting to postpone the elections, resort to emergency provisions by creating a false security situation and remain in power with the help of China.⁵¹

Peter Hooton's piece in *The Interpreter* explains this issue in greater detail. Solomon Island's preference for China is seen to be a result of two factors- the islands' need for assistance on climate change, its developmental needs and its domestic politics. Sogavare had previously accused Australia of interfering in its internal politics.⁵² Unrest erupted during a latest occurrence in November 2021, when Australia had dispatched its troops to quell the riots in the capital city of Honiara.⁵³ The cause of these riots is noteworthy. It has been a result of persistent tensions between the Sogavare government and the provincial government of Malaita over the country's decision to switch diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China. This was said to be an extremely unpopular decision in the Pacific island-state. Most of the rioters in the capital city had come from the Malaita islands.⁵⁴ According to Peter Kenilorea Jr, member of the opposition, the November' 21 rioters had the perception that the national government was trying to topple the regional administration.⁵⁵ China town was up in flames.⁵⁶

Daniel Suidani is the premier of the Malaita province and he has been critical of his country's policy towards China. His province had continued to maintain informal ties with Taiwan during the pandemic, and received covid

relief equipment. Suidani's actions had angered both China and his country. Suidani was reportedly in Taiwan for five months for medical treatment.⁵⁷ He has banned Chinese companies from his province and had accepted aid from the US.⁵⁸ During the November riots when Australia had sent its forces, Suidani had expressed displeasure for he believed that Australia's action (of sending in troops) was like a moral boost to Prime Minister Sogavare. Malaita sees itself as the true upholder of democracy and hence is it critical of Australia's 'support' to the Sogavare government.⁵⁹ Australia however, clarified that it does not take sides and wishes for stability in Solomon Islands.⁶⁰ Daniel Suidani is joined by Matthew Wales, the leader of the opposition who had called for the Prime Minister's resignation. Wale held that in the two decades of rule under Sogavare, only the foreigners had benefited from the country's resources.⁶¹

At a recently held webinar, Solomon Islands former Prime Minister Danny Philip made a statement which claimed that the Australian forces that were deployed last year to quell riots were instructed not to protect the Chinese settlements. Philip alluded to a statement from 'a very senior officer from the *Australian High Commission*' where the said officer told Solomon Islands government that his forces were not there to protect Chinese investments and infrastructure.⁶² The Australian government has dismissed these allegations, and has stated that their forces under RAMSI are under the command of the Solomon Islands police force.⁶³ This however, brings out another angle to the security deal with China, wherein Chinese may have some justification to send in their forces. Whether these allegations were true or not will become clearer later. Yet despite this, for the moment both China and the Solomon Islands can project this issue as argument in favour of the bilateral security pact. Coming back to the current security pact, it is argued that China's actions in maintaining law and order would be restricted to safeguarding its people and investments in the Solomon Islands.⁶⁴

Peter Kenilorea is the head of Foreign Relations Committee of the Solomon Islands; and he does not see any great advantage that the pact can bring to his country. He is quoted as saying that much of the domestic unrest in the Solomon Islands is a factor of or restricted to the current government

leadership, otherwise the islands are peaceful. He sees China as the only gainer from the bilateral security pact. Another politician Dr Transform Aqorau has said that nobody outside the government had seen the copy of the agreement.⁶⁵

Recently, while speaking in the parliament Sogavare raised the issue of how Australia kept Pacific Island states in the dark about AUKUS; how consultation with Pacific Island States about presence of nuclear-submarines would have made the deal transparent; how Solomon Islands did not react ‘hysterically’ or ‘theatrically’ upon learning about the AUKUS. He reiterated his claim that Australian forces failed to protect Chinese embassy and settlements during the November riots. He said that the security pact with Australia was therefore ‘inadequate’.⁶⁶

Strategic Significance of the Solomon Islands

Historically, the Solomon Islands have been strategic. During WWII, the Japanese used Solomon Islands for their operations in New Guinea, and to also cut off supply lines of the allies- US, New Zealand and Australia. The Solomon Islands comprise of about 900 islands and are seen as oceanic lifelines between Australia and the US.⁶⁷ This makes it very strategic; and hence, Japan had tried to gain control in the 1940s; and it is for the very same reasons that China is now deeply interested in the Solomon Islands.⁶⁸ The island of Guadalcanal is the largest island; and it is from here that Japan had based its invasion of Papua New Guinea. Guadalcanal has played a critical role for the US during the WWII as well. A ‘Dunkirk to the British’ is what this island was to the US- when the US forces landed on it in 1942, several months after the Pearl Harbour attack to oust the Japanese, and to use it further as a strategic base in its campaigns against Japan in the Pacific.⁶⁹ It is argued that when China gains foothold in certain Pacific Islands, it can spy on US forces in Hawaii and Guam.⁷⁰

Concluding Thoughts

The timing of the deal is such that it has happened when the World's focus is on the Russia-Ukraine war. One of the reasons for which Australia is drawing domestic criticism is that Marise Payne did not act on time soon after the news of this deal had leaked. It is however said that the Foreign Minister was busy with sanctions on Russia and on matters about Ukraine War.⁷¹ Soon after the war had erupted in Europe, the Indo-Pacific countries had concerns whether this will divert US's attention back to the Atlantic. There were worries that China may use this opportunity to act on Taiwan. China has not invaded Taiwan; however, it has secured a notable diplomatic dividend in the very strategic space of the Western Pacific.

Beijing's diplomatic masterstroke had come just ahead of parliamentary elections in Australia, and one can well guess the motives behind the timing of the deal, though in reality, it won't bear consequences on the electoral outcomes.

The incumbent government under Scott Morrison has been tough on China and had been active in expanding its foreign policy; whereas the opposition Labour is held to be more accommodative of China. This security deal has led the Labour to launch scathing attacks on the Morrison government, making it look helpless and weak. Should New Delhi expect similar antics just ahead of its general elections in 2024?

Let us also examine this development in the context of AUKUS and the effect on the naval balance of power in the Western Pacific. China is re-tracing Japanese strategy to gain control of sea lanes that connect Australia and the US. For the sake of argument let us assume that the Chinese indeed construct a base fairly rapidly, their presence will be already secure, while AUKUS SSNs are still on the drawing board. Just when one presumed that AUKUS has changed regional security in favour of the US, China is attempting to turn the table. The larger context to this deal is China's inroads into the Pacific Island nations, and its ambition to dominate the north-western arc, a sort

of replication of the first-island chain-but with Australia in mind. In 2019, Kiribati also switched diplomatic ties from Taiwan to Beijing; and in 2021 there were reports of China reviving an airstrip on the Kanton Island located 3000 kms southwest of Hawaii. The US used Kanton Island for space and military tracking operations during WWII. Given the high strategic stakes involved, the US will certainly take suitable actions, and thus this deal is not a *fait accompli* as such. But suffice to presume that China will try to outdo the US in the Indo-Pacific.

This episode will be a test for US and its allies, as to where their geopolitical priorities lie. The United States is already in a retreating direction and hence its policy has been to strengthen its allies to defend themselves and also of sharing the burden by having allies and partners take up larger roles in their sub-regions. In simplistic terms, the US's network of allies and partners was seen as a force-multiplier against a China with only a handful of allies; but it is time to rethink on this premise and critically look at the current strength of US's allies and partners. Can its allies and partners be put to task in the event of an immediate contingency?

A larger and fundamental issue here is that neither US nor its allies and partners have presented any economic or developmental assistance programme in the Indo-Pacific. Most of these announcements are on paper. The fact remains that the smaller nations in the Indo-Pacific require developmental and economic assistance which comes easily from China. Irrespective of the fact that there is increasing awareness about China's intentions behind its finance and projects amongst the smaller nations, (Maldives, Sri Lanka) China will remain the major player in the absence of alternatives. China has effectively employed its three-warfare strategy in the Indo-Pacific in places with domestic political fractures, such as in Solomon Islands. Beijing will make headway in areas that do not receive adequate attention from Washington.

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