

## CHINA ENGAGES IN OCEANIA THROUGH SECURITY PACT WITH SOLOMON ISLANDS

### WHAT HAS HAPPENED?

On 19 Apr, Chinese Foreign Ministry has confirmed that it had signed a five-year security deal with the Solomon Islands. The pact, signed by two foreign ministers, Wang Yi, and Jeremiah Manele, opens the way for China to deploy security forces in Solomon, as well as for the Chinese navy.

### BACKGROUND

China has been engaging with the South Pacific for more than three decades through regional forums, such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (EDCF). The Chinese government provides approximately \$1 million annually to the EDCF secretariat. In 2020, China established a \$1.9 million fund to support the region's COVID-19 response. In 2021, China and Pacific Island countries held the inaugural foreign ministers' meeting and vowed to boost cooperation in areas including poverty reduction and climate change.

Solomon Islands have been growing its proximity with Beijing over the past two years. In 2019, Honaira established formal diplomatic ties with Beijing and ceased its relations with Taiwan

Officials of Solomon Islands and People's Republic of China had initiated elements of the bilateral security cooperation framework over the few years.

China had offered police training missions in 2021, when riots broke out in Solomon. Since then, there is a presence of Chinese police on the islands. They have been conducting police training missions for the Solomon Police.



## EMERGING RELATIONS BETWEEN SOLOMON ISLANDS AND CHINA

Solomon has confirmed that it is expanding security arrangements with China. The agreement comprises the bilateral cooperation on maintenance of social order, protection and safety of people's lives and property, humanitarian assistance and natural disaster response. The pact aims to help Solomon Islands strengthen capacity building and safeguarding its own security.

### The agreement outlines:

Solomon Islands could also place a request before Beijing to send law-enforcement personnel and police to help in peace maintain peace and order in times of conflict in the island.

There is also provision for China to make ship visits, carry out logistical replenishment and have stop-over and transitions in Solomon Islands.

Chinese security personnel would guard any Chinese navy vessels docked in the Solomon Islands.

Honiara has emphasised that any strategic partnership with China would include a developmental perspective. Solomon's Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has also cited the pact will allow China to send police and military personnel to the Solomon Islands for assistance in maintaining social order. However, Sogavare told parliament that the proposed security agreement would not include a Chinese military base. Delegation from the Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China (PRC) is about to visit Solomon Islands in mid-May to sign multilateral agreements and cooperation with the Solomon Islands government.

Douglas Ete, chairman of the public accounts committee and lawmaker for East Honiara regarded the upcoming visit by Chinese Delegation significant, as the two nations would increase trade, education, and fisheries cooperation.



## AUSTRALIA GETS CONCERNED

### RELATIONS BETWEEN AUSTRALIA & SOLOMON

- Australia has been the longest chief defence partner and biggest aid contributor to the Solomon Islands. It has expressed concerns with Solomon, after signing of the security pact between China and Solomon.
- Australia has been concerned about China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region and has been trying to ramp up aid spending to counter the presence of China in the region.
- In 2018, it launched the 'Pacific Step Up' policy to re-engage with the Pacific nations. It has set up a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure fund which is widely seen as a counter to China's developmental aid and loans in the region.
- In 2021, when riots broke out in the island, Australia had sent troops to Solomon and had re-established a previous long-term policing mission.

## REACTIONS FROM AUSTRALIA

Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marise Payne in a dialogue with her Solomon Islands counterpart raised deep concerns over the security arrangement between China and the island nation.

The minister stated, "Australia has been consistent and clear in stating our respect for Solomon Islands' sovereign decision-making, however, we have reiterated our deep concerns about the security agreement with China, including the lack of transparency."

Officials from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) have used bilateral talks with China to raise "serious concerns" about the nation's new security pact with Solomon Islands.

## NEW ZEALAND GETS ALARMED

- New Zealand has spoken out strongly about the security deal between China and Solomon Islands. The prospect of a military base being constructed in the Pacific has worried officials in Wellington, who warned in December that such a move would be a "most threatening" development that would "fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region.
- New Zealand's High Commissioner in Honiara has raised the issues with the Solomon Islands Government and is expected to raise this directly with China.
- New Zealand joined Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Fiji in sending Defence Force and police personnel to Solomon Islands to help restore order after riots occurred in Honiara.
- Some New Zealand officials were expected to remain in the country until the end of Apr.



New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden commented, "New Zealand is gravely concerned about the possible militarization of the Pacific following a decision by the Solomon Islands government to form a security partnership with China." Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta cited the deal could destabilise the Pacific's security and would not benefit New Zealand.

Jacinda Arden, the New Zealand Prime Minister, has spoken of Beijing's "growing assertiveness" in the Pacific region as she challenged the motive for a security pact between Solomon Islands and Beijing. Arden added that New Zealand and Beijing had a "mature relationship" and must continue to work together on areas of mutual interest.

### UNITED STATES TRYING TO TAKE A PRO-ACTIVE APPROACH

The visit by US Officials was designed to renew engagement between Honaira and Washington.

US has donated more than 52,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to the Solomon in Apr 2022, following a donation of 100,000 doses in 2021

Washington has been helping Solomon to eradicate unexploded weapons from the Second World War, while the US coast guard is tackling illegal fishing in the nation.

In Feb, the US said that it was planning to re-open its embassy in the Solomon Islands amid brewing concerns about China's ambitions in the region. White House's top Asia official, Kurt Campbell has visited Solomon Islands in late Apr, accompanying Daniel Kritenbrink, the top state department Asia official. This rare high-level visit emphasizes the apprehension raised in Washington over the Pacific nation's security pact with China. The visit came just days after China and the Solomon confirmed they had signed a security pact.



## REACTIONS FROM THE UNITED STATES

The Biden administration has warned the Solomon Islands that the United States will take unspecified action against the South Pacific nation should its recently concluded cooperation agreement with China pose a threat to U.S. or allied interests. The White House said the message was delivered directly to the country's leadership by a visiting senior U.S. delegation.

The White House delegation to Solomon had expressed concern that the deal with China raises questions about its scope and purpose and questioned about the transparency in the agreement and cast doubt on Solomon Islands' officials' claims that the deal was purely domestic.

## ASSESSMENT

- China has long been trying to assert its presence in the Asia-Pacific, including building up its navy and constructing military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea.
- China's growing presence in the region is also demonstrated by its substantial aid over the past decade. China was the second-largest donor in the Pacific, after Australia. China has been criticised for establishing economic colonies with easy loans and huge investments in infrastructure and trade on the condition of severing ties with Taiwan.
- It has been alleged that China is influencing local elections by buying-off politicians with bribes, thus making way for what is termed as debt-trap diplomacy. China's role is relevant not only in the infrastructure and construction sector in the Pacific islands, but also in key service sectors such as telecommunication and seaport projects.
- The refusal of Malaita province, the country's most populous, to accede to the government's 2019 diplomatic switch to China remains an open tender as the Prime Minister of Solomon Island, Manasseh Sogavare claimed the switch to China had contributed to the 2021 riots. Sogavare appears to have overlooked these considerations and is neglecting the alarming threats of internal unity, security and stability issues for the nation.
- The Solomon Islands are considered strategically important to Australia and New Zealand for shipping lanes and economic ties. As a result of the pact, both the countries are anticipating huge Chinese presence in the area which might pose economic and strategic threat to both New Zealand and Australia.
- Chinese foreign ministry had categorically denounced the AUKUS pact and claimed it will be exacerbating the arms proliferation in the Asia-Pacific region.
- The free trade agreement between India and Australia will be strengthening the Quad as, Business to Business (B2B) and people-to-people (P2P) engagements will be extensively carried out in the region.
- The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a US-led initiative to solidify ties with key economies in the Asia-Pacific by building a supply chain. It is widely seen as an effort to counter China's influence in the Asia-Pacific, as IPEF excludes China.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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