

China's Aspirations in Forging a Strategic Nexus in the South-West Pacific

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Abstract

Since the presidency of Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China has made efforts to establish essential corridors across the world. These strategic corridors are made possible in countries by providing assistance in areas such as infrastructure development, security cooperation, and trade. However, the underlying motivation behind such ambitions is the creation of a power projection for Beijing in the world order. The case of Djibouti can be taken as one of the primary examples to display such motivations. The Southwest Pacific, being one of the most strategic locations, especially for the US, has always been a part of China's strategic objectives. To achieve such objectives, China aims to enhance regional cooperation with the island states of the region as well as establish itself as the ideal partner on crucial development and security issues. In 2018, the Australian media claimed that China had asked for permission to deploy a permanent military presence in Vanuatu, which is fewer than 2,000 km from Australian territory, although no formal agreement had been drafted. However, the growing sphere of influence on the Solomon Island has raised concern to the traditional partners of the region, the United States. Such concerns have arisen as an outcome of an array of political developments between the Solomon Islands and China, especially after switching diplomatic relations from Taipei to Beijing in 2019. Since then, the Solomon Island has been considered a potential for China to establish a military base in the region. Although such a situation has been negated under the customary tenure for land on the island, however, recent developments about Bina Harbour have aroused new questions, particularly with reference to the leaked document, which was also deemed sceptical by many regarding China's role in the Solomon Islands. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted involvement of China in the Island as well as its growing presence in the region. Through comprehensive analysis and contextualisation, this research sheds light on the evolving dynamics and the strategic significance of the Solomon Islands and Bina Harbour in particular and brings a comparison to the approach made by China in other regions.

Keywords: China, Solomon Islands, Bina Harbour, Southwest Pacific, Strategic Development

1. Introduction

Serving as a critical front line between the continents – Asia and the Americas, the South-West Pacific region has found itself under the radar of Beijing, trying to create its foothold after successfully establishing one in Africa. Alternatively referred to as Oceania, the South-West Pacific region consists of islands which comprise 15 per cent of the world's surface. These islands, which are a component of the Second and Third Island Chains hemming in China, were frequently on the front lines of the Pacific Theatre during the Second World War. It still has military facilities like the French facility in New Caledonia and the American station in Guam. Although extensive, its imprecisely defined maritime region led to its consideration of having limited significance in the colonial era (Baker, 1992). It was also practically overlooked by the successive US administrations in the post-war era by adopting a "benign neglect" approach in the immediate aftermath of the war (Young, 1988) as well as after the Cold War, where the general strategic assessment of the region displayed to be less crucial and relatively secure (Paskal, 2018).

However, China's emergence in expanding its strategic horizons changed the perception of the region. Beijing, which perceives the South-West Pacific as an area of new opportunities to enhance its global position, rapidly became one of the region's top aid contributors, providing \$171 million in aid to its island states by 2017 (Say, 2019). Despite the fact that China is not the leading donor in the region, the manner in which it delivers its aid, particularly through enormous infrastructure projects financed by concessional loans, stands out (Pryke, 2020). Consequently, this has attracted attention to the region as a focal point for competition among major powers. Following that, China successfully concluded a security agreement with the Solomon Islands in March of 2022 and subsequently endeavoured to build upon this achievement by engaging in negotiations for another security agreement with ten other governments of Pacific Island nations in May 2022. Although a failure, such initiatives indicated Beijing's determination to challenge Australia's supremacy in Oceania and the United States' control over the Pacific. The prevailing perspective posits that this burgeoning trend is advancing at an accelerated pace that surpasses what might conventionally be regarded as a typical manifestation of China's expanding economic and geopolitical influence.

The objective of this study is to analyse the strategic initiatives led by Beijing in the South-West Pacific region and examine its efforts to build a presence through infrastructure development in the Pacific Island States. This study employs a qualitative method to comprehensively understand Beijing's approach to establishing diplomatic relations with regional leaders. Moreover, the present study aims to conduct a thorough analysis of the case of Djibouti in 2017, specifically focusing on its recent interactions with the government of the Solomon

Islands. The objective is to identify and examine the similarities in objectives between these two instances, particularly in connection to Djibouti's previous endeavours.

2. Literature Review

This article utilises a theoretical framework or conceptual model that integrates three analytical concepts: sovereignty, power, and economic diplomacy. Morgenthau and Thompson (1997) argue in their scholarly publication titled "Politics Among Nations, The Struggle for Power and Peace" (6th ed.) that the concept of sovereignty encompasses the principles of independence, equality, and integrity, which can be further comprehended as independence, equality, and unanimity.

The acquisition and consolidation of power represent a fundamental aim within the domain of politics, wherein governments universally accord it utmost importance as their central objective and coveted result. According to Baldwin, there are four unique approaches that a nation can employ to effectively exercise its power to enhance its influence or achieve hegemony over a state or another geographical entity. Baldwin (2013) posits that four discrete modalities might be utilised, namely the symbolic approach, financial approach, military approach, and diplomatic method. China is expanding its influence in the South Pacific region by using its economic might and strategic resources that are considered vital by Pacific nations. Furthermore, Morgenthau elaborated on his conceptualisation that the international political system is distinguished by the pursuit of three discrete manifestations of power – The continual status quo policy, imperialism, and prestige (Pham, 2008). This kind of influence is characterised by the adherence to the One China Policy and the preservation of China's sovereignty over the South China Sea.

In addition, this article will employ the economic diplomacy approach as a theoretical and analytical framework to analyse and elucidate China's goals and interests in the South Pacific region, particularly in establishing extensive trade and investment relations in the "Pacific Theatre" area. Milner and Tingley (2013) argue in their publication titled "Geopolitics of Foreign Aid" that economic diplomacy consistently maintains its position as the primary instrument in international politics, serving two key aims. The primary aim of economic diplomacy is to facilitate commerce and foster bilateral interactions between nations. The secondary aim of economic diplomacy is to serve as a political tool for attaining state power and enhancing its reputation. The field of economic diplomacy holds significant consequences for the geopolitical landscape within the realm of international relations.

Economic diplomacy pursued for political objectives can be understood as a manifestation of international trade politics. This entails the prioritisation of national interests in commercial relations and investments with external entities, exemplified by initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which involves the provision of grants and soft loans. Hence, it can be argued that the regulation of foreign trade will consistently remain within the purview of the state. The political viewpoint of international commerce pertains to the ideological framework embraced by adherents of Mercantilism.

Furthermore, the study also heavily draws upon the concept of soft power, as articulated by Joseph Nye. Soft power is influencing the interests and preferences of others to align them with one's objectives, employing seduction rather than force. Certain scholars make a direct connection between exerting influence and the concept of soft power (Nye, 2005).

3. Research Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methodologies, with a particular emphasis on the collecting and analysis of primary and secondary sources. Qualitative research frequently relies on inductive reasoning for conclusions. Qualitative research methods encompass various sorts, including the descriptive-interpretive approach. The author employs this strategy as it serves at the initial stage of the research process. This involves meticulously gathering data and watching the phenomena, followed by analysing and drawing conclusions to address the research topic.

The qualitative technique is employed as a research methodology to inform the public about the underlying nature of Chinese soft aid and their strategy towards exerting influence in the region. This approach aims to shed light on the fact that the loans received by the country are not devoid of China's national interests. To enhance the comprehensiveness of their study findings, the authors seek to acquire primary data by examining and gathering written materials authored by political observers located outside of China. The study incorporates primary data alongside secondary data sourced from the media. Specifically, the mainstream media in the Pacific South region disseminates findings from interviews conducted with influential political figures from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and China. Additionally, relevant information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, government publications, research articles, magazines, websites, and other pertinent sources are included in the analysis.

4. Historical Construct

Throughout the Cold War, from 1945 to the early 1990s, the South-West Pacific was considered solidly 'West-friendly', with major American and British diplomatic and military engagement in the region (Paskal, 2018). The region has been subject to a policy of "benign neglect" from consecutive US administrations, resulting in a lack of attention and consideration towards its foreign and security affairs. Simultaneously, it is important to recognise that the constant attitude of the United States towards the southern Pacific since the early 1950s has been supported by cogent justifications, including significant security concerns in the Northwest Pacific and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Second World War resulted in the United States Navy emerging as the dominant naval force in the southern Pacific region. In terms of diplomacy, the United States and Western regional interests have been effectively pursued through a collective security arrangement known as the ANZUS alliance, involving Australia and New Zealand. This alliance primarily entrusted Canberra and Wellington with the responsibilities pertaining to political and security matters (Young, 1998).

According to Young (1998), the policy of benign neglect in the perspective of American security objectives can be seen as "understandable and arguably appropriate" since the only specific U.S. objectives were to maintain secured communication from the North Americas to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Apart from that, their only need was the protection of their territorial interests, such as the American Samoa, as well as to maintain its pro-West disposition. Hence, their interest in the South and specifically in the South-West Pacific region was primarily acquiescent and influenced by the security concerns in the broader Asian and Indian Ocean regions. Furthermore, until a relatively recent point in time, this geographical area had remained unburdened by the presence of external powers with potentially hostile intentions seeking to establish influence within the region. Also, before the commencement of the decolonisation process in the South Pacific in the early 1970s, the security of Western interests was further upheld by the notable circumstance that all the small islands in this vicinity were under the governance of either ANZUS or NATO member nations.

Upon the attainment of independence by island republics, the Soviet Union expeditiously undertook measures to develop communication and engagement. During the mid-1970s, diplomatic connections with non-resident entities were established, which subsequently paved the way for negotiations regarding research and fishing agreements. These negotiations culminated in the signing of a one-year fishing agreement with Kiribati in 1985, followed by another agreement with Vanuatu in 1987 (Dorrance, 1990). The level of Soviet engagement had an upsurge after Gorbachev's 1986 address in Vladivostok, wherein he articulated a heightened Soviet inclination

towards the Asia-Pacific area. The inaugural Soviet embassy in Papua New Guinea was established in March 1990, marking the commencement of official diplomatic relations between the two nations. However, the Soviet Union's endeavours in the islands were carried out with restricted resources and minimal expenses. It is highly likely that the Russian government, which assumed the Soviet diplomatic network in 1991, will continue to adopt a more subdued strategy in the foreseeable future. In the years 1986-87, Libya engaged in a limited involvement within the region, chiefly characterised by interactions with Kanak separatist factions in New Caledonia and the establishing of diplomatic ties with Vanuatu (Young, 1998).

The involvement of the Soviet Union and Libya elicited a heightened level of interest from the Western countries. Australia, being the primary contributor of help to island states, allocates over \$300 million annually for this purpose. It is worth noting that a significant portion, over 80 per cent, of this aid is directed towards Papua New Guinea, which was once under Australian colonial rule. However, it is noteworthy that Australia also augmented its aid to other island states during the period spanning from 1984 to 1987. Specifically, the assistance provided grew by nearly 40 per cent, rising from \$40 million to \$56 million per year. During this period, New Zealand experienced a proportional increase in its overall aid allocation to the islands, rising from around \$50 million to slightly around \$70 million. The United Kingdom has effectively halted a prolonged decrease in its provision of aid to the islands. The United States exhibited a longstanding pattern of generosity towards its island territories, as evidenced by its notable increase in economic assistance to the South Pacific states. Specifically, the financial aid provided by the United States rose from \$3 million in 1986 to \$8.7 million in 1988 (Young, 1998). Additionally, a substantial amount of \$10 million per year was allocated over a span of five years for a regional fishing agreement that was successfully negotiated in 1987. This agreement effectively resolved a significant point of disagreement between the United States and the islands. France also raised its expenditures for the autonomous island governments and initiated efforts to foster enhanced interaction between its Pacific Island territories and other island entities. Japan, a nation with established commercial and fishing interests in the area, significantly boosted its diplomatic and assistance endeavours in the islands beginning in 1987. This was consistent with its broader growth of regional and international influence. The level of Japanese support experienced a significant increase from negligible amounts in the late 1970s to above \$90 million in 1988, and it is expected to continue growing in the future. Several additional players have also entered the region, including South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Israel, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), and Vietnam, each driven by their respective interests. The islands in the early 1970s witnessed a considerable fight for diplomatic recognition and influence between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, driven by their global rivalry and the various chances presented by external powers.

Hence, in the words of Young, it was becoming apparent that during the Cold War era, Washington's long-standing relations with the Pacific Island States, especially in the South West Pacific, were coming at stake (Young, 1998). With such a condition, along with the opportunities created by external actors, the expanding significance of the region created a multitude of contention in the further years, especially between the West and China.

5. China's Increasing Footprints

The involvement of China in the South-West Pacific is based on three fundamental objectives: securing its influence, enhancing its access to resources, and limiting the West and its allies' capacity to ensure geographical constriction (Say, 2019). Such motivations were observed as per the Australian press claiming in 2018 that China asked for approval to establish a permanent military presence in Vanuatu, which is just around 2,000 km from Australian territory (Wroe, 2018) as well as outlined the interest in reconstructing a port on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, which served as an Allied naval station during the Second World War. In both cases, Beijing was obliged to seek elsewhere (Harding and Pohle, 2022). However, the Solomon Islands after switching its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, became the potential candidate for Beijing to secure its influence (Lyons, 2019).

The potential for diplomatic recognition of the Solomon Islands from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China was accommodated due to the three main factors. One notable aspect pertains to the magnitude of trade and the extent of the trade surplus with China, which stands in stark contrast to the substantial trade deficits incurred with Australia and Singapore, the primary suppliers of fuel imports. However, a significant proportion, if not the entirety, of shipments to China comprises round logs acquired through commercially unsustainable forestry practices. The involvement of international forestry corporations in the sector has been associated with the decline of efficient governance and the adoption of ecologically unsustainable logging methods. The company under scrutiny is marked by a significant degree of controversy since the escalating demand for round logs in China contributes to the worsening deforestation situation in the Solomon Islands. Furthermore, it was also asserted that the timber business in the Solomon Islands has engendered a pervasive culture of corruption through the practice of offering bribes to authorities, politicians, and communities (Aqorau, 2021). The existence of a trade surplus between the Solomon Islands and China can be attributed to a sector that is

associated with governance and environmental concerns. Despite the engagement of the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands, there has been an increase in corruption among government officials. In the year 2018, the legislative body known as Parliament passed legislation aimed at combating corruption. However, the degree to which this legislation has been successful remains questionable as a result of limitations in available resources. According to Transparency International, there was a decrease in the Corruption Perceptions Index from 44 to 42 points in the year 2019. The government's capacity to manage environmental repercussions arising from forest exploitation and mining is weakened by the presence of feeble state institutions. Additionally, Chinese enterprises pose compliance issues in this regard (Aqorau, 2021).

The subsequent element pertains to the influx of recent Chinese immigrants, who currently hold a prominent position within the retail industry (Lyons, 2019). The majority, if not all, of the prominent commercial locations in Honiara are possessed by these recent immigrants, hence generating heightened levels of resentment among the indigenous population. The individuals in question have acquired a reputation for engaging in corrupt practices, specifically utilising bribery as a means to navigate official institutions in order to get licenses, work and residential permits, as well as planning permissions. These actions serve to intensify the existing erosion within the public sector. Despite the occurrence of the Honiara riots in 2006, during which numerous newly established Chinese firms were subjected to arson and looting, the presence of Chinese enterprises has witnessed a subsequent rise and expansion into various provinces. The retail sector in the Solomon Islands has witnessed a significant presence of Chinese enterprises, leading to a consolidation of Chinese interests. This phenomenon has potentially resulted in the integration of the Solomon Islands' economy, employment opportunities, trade, and business activities with China. In contrast, the level of integration between Taiwan and the Solomon Islands in the commercial sector is limited (Aqorau, 2021).

The third determinant is the sisterhood affiliation between Guadalcanal Province and Guangdong Province in China. This relationship has facilitated a more profound and comprehensive engagement between provincial government officials and politicians from Guadalcanal and their Chinese counterparts, surpassing the level of interaction observed with Taiwan. The administrative body formerly known as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Guangdong Province, which has since been incorporated into the United Front Work Department, assumes the responsibility of overseeing the Chinese population residing in the Solomon Islands (Aqorau, 2021). This encompasses individuals of Chinese heritage, including those originating from Taiwan and Hong Kong, such as John Leong. The presence of Solomon Islanders in many public domains, such as shops, roads, rural regions, logging camps, and warehouses, holds significant importance for them. Solomon Islanders can

engage in regular interactions with them due to their prominent position within the community. While their participation in the community has created employment opportunities for Solomon Islanders, it is important to acknowledge that certain practices they have introduced have undermined effective governance in the public sector. Furthermore, corruption arises as a result of the prevailing local conditions that foster its occurrence (Aqorau, 2021).

The engagement with Beijing presented a promising opportunity for the Solomon Islands, particularly in the area of infrastructural development. This positive prospect was materialised through a contract awarded to Huawei for the construction of an advanced underwater cable network, aimed at bolstering the country's telecommunication infrastructure (Kekea, 2022). As a result of such interactions, a loan was extended to the Solomon Islands to support the construction of mobile telecommunication towers. The \$66 million loan was facilitated by the Exim Bank of China with an interest rate of one per cent for infrastructure development by Huawei to build 161 mobile towers across the state (Paskal, 2023) which also solidified their influence in the region. While the project creates a sense of connectivity and development, especially for the rural areas, it was observed that the deal could create financial risks for the Solomon Islands. Furthermore, KPMG, a financial consultant giant, warned about the risk for financial outcomes for the same (ABC News, 2022). Nevertheless, the ongoing project reflects the significant impact of China on the islands.

While observing Solomon Island's foreign policy, the PRC plays a huge role which concretes their influence in the area. The attainment of observer status by the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) during the 2015 Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) conference was a notable triumph for Papuan nationalists, with support from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. This achievement is particularly noteworthy considering the limited financial resources available to Papuan nationalists. The level of political backing received from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands within the Melanesian Spearhead Group has emerged as a central topic of discussion in regional deliberations. The lack of support from these countries necessitates a reliance on regional civil society for the internationalisation of the Papua issue, which may potentially lack the necessary influence to impact Indonesia's foreign policy. Nevertheless, the expression of apprehension by a country such as the Solomon Islands in relation to Papua presents a significant obstacle to Indonesia's authority and control over the area.

The diplomatic legitimacy of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) in the global context is reinforced by the formal endorsements it has received from recognised diplomatic channels, notably from

countries such as the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The aforementioned endorsements serve to elevate the Papua issue outside the confines of the Melanesian bloc, so opening up the possibility of engaging in negotiations within the Pacific Island Forum, which encompasses a total of 18 nations. The Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Sogavare, has assumed a significant role as a mediator, vigorously advocating for the resolution of the Papua issue within the Pacific forum. The Pacific Coalition on West Papua (PCWP) functions as a forum for the politicisation of the West Papua matter, with the objective of attaining diplomatic support from the 18 Pacific States. The endeavors of Sogavare in promoting the interests of Papua throughout the Pacific region are closely linked to the financial support offered by Chinese enterprises (Mesak et al., 2020).

China, via the state-owned firm Sam Enterprise Group (Mesak et al., 2020), has provided significant financial support to Prime Minister Sogavare and other members of the political elite in the Solomon Islands as part of a geopolitical manoeuvre. The provision of financial assistance encompasses the facilitation of travel logistics and the coordination of many undertakings for the political elite, signifying a strengthening nexus between the economic and political realms. The Chinese state-owned firm has been awarded official permission and approval to undertake the development of Tulagi Island for the sake of economic and security investments. This has been facilitated by a 75-year lease agreement bestowed upon the enterprise by the government of the Solomon Islands. This agreement, which was made in close proximity to the diplomatic transition from Taiwan to China, exemplifies the interconnectedness of economic, political, and security factors within the realm of foreign policy (Mesak et al., 2020).

The endeavour of Prime Minister Sogavare to establish diplomatic ties with China is intricately connected to a dedication to uniform development and enhanced collaboration in investment. The economic and commercial agreement with China, encompassing financial assistance and concessional loans, is not solely a fiscal arrangement but rather intrinsically connected to political and security factors. The participation of countries in China's Belt and Road Initiative necessitates their adherence to the One China Policy, thereby highlighting the intricate nature of the diplomatic transition made by Sogavare without prior consultation with the inhabitants of the Solomon Islands (Mesak et al., 2020).

The diplomatic transfer occurred expeditiously and smoothly, mostly ascribed to the considerable impact of China's financial diplomacy on the government and political elite within the Parliament of the Solomon Islands. As a component of the diplomatic agreement, the government of the Solomon Islands made a commitment to

accept aid packages up to a sum of 500 million US dollars. The financial assistance granted to Prime Minister Sogavare and other members of Parliament was underscored in a report conducted by the Lowy Institute, with a total sum reaching as high as 220,000 US dollars. The gratuity fund is regularly employed by Sogavare to provide financial backing for his campaign over the Papua issue in the South Pacific.

The expansion of the Papua crisis beyond the Melanesian bloc community necessitates a significant allocation of financial resources. The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, which have been designated as Least Developed Countries by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), encounter difficulties in securing adequate funds for international lobbying efforts on behalf of Papua simply through their domestic financial resources. Both nations are subject to the three classification requirements, namely Gross National Income below \$1,035 per day, Human Development Index below 60 per cent, and economic instability. Although it may be tempting to oversimplify the situation by attributing the funding of the Papua issue entirely to certain countries, it is important to recognise the significant and intricate role that China's financial support plays in moulding diplomatic ties and providing assistance to political campaigns in the South Pacific region (Mesak et al., 2020).

6. Security Strategy: An Interventionist China?

China's engagement has fostered stronger political ties with the Solomon Islands government, paving the way for an agreement on security cooperation between the two nations. China's expanding military presence is accompanied by a corresponding shift in its strategic orientation (Sora, 2022). Chinese policymakers have gained knowledge that Pacific Island governments exhibit greater openness towards security agreements that de-emphasise Beijing's military objectives and instead provide tangible advantages in return. The aforementioned estimate is presumed to have influenced the formation of the security pact between China and the Solomon Islands, and it proved to be effective (Sundaramurthy, Yu, and Fiala, 2022).

However, the draft version, which was leaked to the press, brought global concerns, especially with the part that reads: "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 project in Solomon Islands." Such measures are not rare, as they illustrate how Chinese assets abroad are inevitably compelling the Chinese

state to intervene in overseas affairs. It has also allowed China an opportunity to showcase itself as an engaged security provider, offering support to Honiara in the form of Chinese police or military forces upon request to help uphold domestic stability and security (Sundaramurthy, Yu, and Fiala, 2022).

To understand the clear picture, the aforementioned agreement allows the Chinese Navy to use docking and replenishment services in the Solomon Islands, perhaps serving as a foundation for a facility that has the potential for future expansion (Sundaramurthy, Yu, and Fiala, 2022). It is highly probable that China intends to create a lasting military presence, albeit in a manner that affords both parties the ability to disavow its categorisation as a military post. Furthermore, the strategy has a resemblance to the United States' approach to its military presence in Asia over the past few decades. During this period, the United States has mostly focused on securing access agreements and implementing rotating deployments, as opposed to establishing permanent bases (Sora, 2022).

Furthermore, China and the Solomon Islands have recently entered into an agreement pertaining to police cooperation, marking a significant milestone in their efforts to enhance their bilateral relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" (Reuters, 2023). This development comes four years after the Solomon Islands transitioned its diplomatic allegiance from Taiwan to China. During the meeting between the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Manasseh Sogavare, and the Chinese Premier, Li Qiang, in Beijing, a total of nine agreements were signed, including a significant police cooperation pact. This event highlights the foreign policy pivot of the Solomon Islands (Associated Press, 2023). The noteworthy aspect of Beijing's dedication to assist Honiara in "sustaining societal harmony" through a bilateral agreement is that Chinese security personnel have typically been deployed to international conflict areas in recent times either as part of United Nations peacekeeping missions or as participants in multinational law enforcement initiatives aimed at countering terrorism, piracy, drug trafficking, and other criminal activities. Their involvement has not traditionally involved the explicit objective of supporting a specific government's authority. Chinese authorities frequently emphasise the notion that their nation represents a novel form of significant global influence, characterised by steadfast opposition to military interventions. Beijing and the elites also hold the belief that the decline of the United States can be attributed, in part, to its perceived misadventures as a global security provider. Consequently, they maintain that China is not inclined to assume a similar position (Kim, 2022).

It is noteworthy that Beijing has experienced a notable rise in its peacekeeping and law enforcement endeavours overseas during the last twenty years. This has been done with the dual purpose of enhancing China's reputation

as a "responsible power" and furthering its specific objectives, such as safeguarding Chinese citizens and investments in foreign territories, expanding its jurisdiction to monitor and extradite Chinese nationals in international contexts, and ensuring border security against extremist organisations (Kim, 2022). The significant influence behind the decision to safeguard Chinese residents and businesses can be attributed to the recent turmoil in the Solomon Islands, which specifically targeted Chinese enterprises. Fueled by Sogavare's official recognition of China instead of Taiwan, the disturbances led to the expansion of the PLA's influence into a strategically significant region was unquestionably a pivotal component. However, the agreement made by Beijing to offer direct security assistance in order to aid a foreign government in safeguarding against "internal threats" in return for promoting Chinese interests suggests a potentially concerning change in China's approach. Historically, China has predominantly relied on providing loans, investments, and economic incentives as a means of cultivating alliances and exerting influence on the global stage rather than directly involving itself in civil conflicts (Kim, 2022).

However, the focal point of this engagement is the Malaita province of the Solomon Islands. Being the most populous and one of the largest of the nine provinces of the Solomon Islands, was always critical of Chinese ambitions in the region. Under the leadership of Daniel Sudaini, the Auki Communique was issued in 2019, advocating for a halt on the operations of businesses affiliated with the CCP in the province, which escalated tensions between the province and the central government of Solomon Islands. However, the ousting of Sudaini under a vote of no confidence at the provincial assembly paved the way for China to resume their long south aspirations in the province. Following Sudaini's removal, the newly formed Malaita government promptly prioritised the revocation of the Auki Communiqué, which prohibited China from conducting operations within the province (Paskal, 2023). Moreover, in May 2023, both countries entered into a Memorandum of Understanding on Fisheries Cooperation, which will allow the China National Fisheries Corporations (CNFC) to invest in the Solomon Islands in areas of mutual interest (Kekea, 2023). This also includes the Bina harbour, where significant investment will be made (Sudaini and Califilu, 2023).

Although the installation of a military base has high risk, it was seen as a low probability (Kabutaulaka, 2022). However, the recent initiatives over Bina Harbour put the observation into reconsideration due to its strategic location. The Bina harbour, which serves as a strategic intermediary for expanding operations towards the middle of the United States Central Pacific defences, holds the potential to disrupt U.S. military endeavours in East Asia, including hindering support for Taiwan in the event of a conflict (Sudaini & Califilu, 2023). This development inflicts heightened attention as it recalls the development in Djibouti, which was claimed by

Beijing to be used as a supply facility and would lack a military objective or purpose. The base in Djibouti, however, transformed, evolving into a fully operational military base with the primary objective of safeguarding and advancing Chinese interests in the region. It was also noted that China deliberately refrained from employing overt military language when referring to the base in Djibouti, opting instead to use terms such as 'support facilities' or 'logistical facilities' (Headly, 2018). Of greater concern are the provisions delineated in the security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China, as revealed in the leaked text, which exhibit the same objectives.

Furthermore, China's fishing fleet, alongside the armed "Maritime Militia," has been identified as a potential component of China's expanding presence in the Southwest Pacific. Bina Harbor serves as a strategic base for these operations, which could act as a front line for the Chinese Navy and Marine Corps in the region (Sudaini & Califilu, 2023). Furthermore, China is advancing its goals in the Solomon Islands by winning a bid for reconstructing the Honiara port on the island of Guadalcanal (Paskal, 2023), as well as providing a loan of \$500 million to the government of the Island state for its project in Bina Harbour (Sudaini and Califilu, 2023). This is detrimental since the government's debt stock reached 15 per cent of GDP in December 2021, which was calculated to reach 35 per cent later on (Kekea, 2022).

7. Conclusion

China's recent activities and its diplomatic improvement with the Solomon Islands have brought concerns to the United States and other important players in the Pacific including Australia and New Zealand. This has led to the US ensuring a commitment towards the Solomon Islands by reestablishing an American Embassy in the capital city of Honiara. Additionally, the United States and its allies have intensified their involvement and interaction with the broader region. It has also led to the recent meeting of Pacific Island nations organised by Washington, where President Biden presented a comprehensive strategy encompassing collaborative efforts in the areas of climate change, maritime security, and the prevention of overfishing. The government has committed to provide \$810 million in additional assistance to Pacific Island nations over the next ten years. This funding includes a specific allocation of \$130 million to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

As China expands its strategic objectives in the South-West Pacific, specifically through its involvement with the Solomon Islands, it prompts an important inquiry about the feasibility of China successfully establishing a maritime presence in the region. Previously, this possibility was dismissed due to the customary land tenure

system on the island. However, recent developments, particularly those related to Bina Harbour, have brought this notion into re-evaluation. China's increasing influence and the Solomon Islands' alignment with Beijing instead of the AUKUS partnership and the Western bloc highlight the uncertainties surrounding the future choices of other Pacific Island nations. Indeed, it is clear that the dynamics in the South-West Pacific have shifted, transforming the region into a playground for geopolitical power struggles. China's pursuit of strategic opportunities in the region demonstrates its intention to expand its influence and assert its presence. This growing competition signifies the need for heightened attention and proactive engagement from the greater powers involved to navigate this complex and evolving landscape.

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