

## OPINION

# *Don't believe the alarmist soundbites on the China-Solomons security deal*



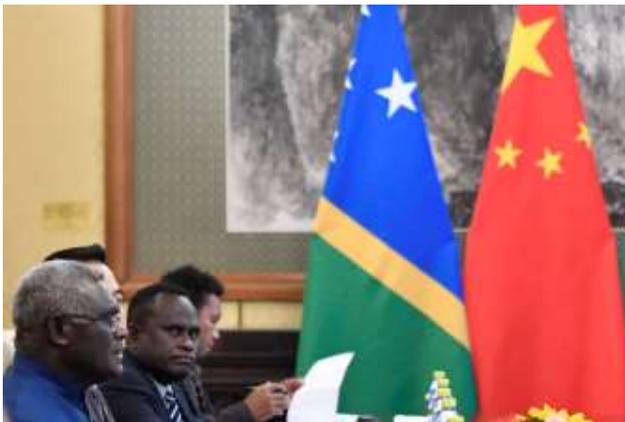
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May 9, 2022 — 5.00am

Forged in the furnaces of contested regional geopolitics and an Australian election campaign, debates about the security agreement between Solomon Islands and China are red hot.

Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has delivered a series of biting speeches blasting Australia for what he says is hypocrisy, disrespect and foreign interference. Meanwhile, Washington and Beijing are trading diplomatic barbs over the agreement, accusing each other – either by implication or directly – of imperilling regional security.



China deal ... Solomon islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.CREDIT:AP

On the hustings, Australia's major political parties have used news of the security agreement to bludgeon each other. Labor has accused the government of monumental foreign policy failure, which it has said is unrivalled in the Pacific since World War II. The Coalition says the development is a striking demonstration of our dangerous times, which it claims the ALP is constitutionally unfit to navigate.

Despite rhetorical sound and fury, both Labor and the Coalition are on shaky ground in their over-egged efforts to make political mileage off Beijing's security agreement with Honiara.

Yes, the security agreement deserves public scrutiny – not just in Australia but also in Solomon Islands, other Pacific countries, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Yet the way many Australian politicians and pundits have characterised the new security agreement is wildly speculative.

Rather than the imminent stationing of a People's Liberation Army aircraft carrier strike group at Honiara, the agreement so far seems to only allow for certain specific forms of security co-operation. Principally, potential Chinese contributions to stabilisation missions at Solomon Islands' request and PLA navy replenishment with Honiara's approval.

Despite these limited and defined areas of co-operation, much of the public debate has focused on hypothetical developments that are far beyond the current deal's scope. Although possible in the future, the agreement doesn't mean the PLA will have a rotational presence in Solomon Islands. And the deal doesn't imply the PLA will have anything close to a permanent military base in Solomon Islands.

Any such enduring PLA presence would likely require new agreements and much more negotiation between Beijing and Honiara. Moves by these capitals to reach such an agreement would likely face strong political headwinds – not just domestically in Solomon Islands but also regionally among a range of Pacific countries.

Some of the more concerned commentary has even raised the prospect of the PLA using facilities in Solomons Islands to threaten Australia's critical maritime supply lines in potential conflict scenarios. Even if the security agreement included the establishment of a permanent PLA base in Solomon Islands (which it doesn't), China using this military outpost to conduct an anti-shipping campaign against Australia would be wildly ambitious.

Successfully blocking Australian shipping from Solomon Islands would likely require naval and air force infrastructure orders of a magnitude larger than what's there now. It would also demand the massive forward deployment of large numbers of PLA navy and air force platforms. The security agreement doesn't permit anything akin to either of those outcomes.

In an imagined conflict scenario in which China was seeking to sink civilian vessels supplying Australia, a PLA base in Solomon Islands would likely

become a military liability for Beijing. It would be extremely hard for the PLA to resupply this base with the necessary fuel and equipment given its distance from China. Such a base would also be perilously exposed to Australian and allied forces.

Does all this mean that the Solomon Islands-China agreement poses no potential threats to Australian interests? In a word, no.

China's defence diplomacy is making inroads in much of the South Pacific and South-East Asia and the PLA is now a regular presence in Australia's immediate maritime approaches and the Indo-Pacific more broadly.

The new security agreement could incrementally increase these trends. Beijing is poised to build more political influence in Honiara and China is likely to seek to do the same elsewhere in the region via any other security agreements it inks.

China's agreement with Solomon Islands could also provide the PLA with new opportunities to gather intelligence and monitor Australian military forces. Canberra should therefore not ignore the possibility that it will evolve in ways that further undermine Solomon Islander, Australian and regional interests.

However, an effective long-term strategy to respond to the scale and scope of China's military ambitions in the Indo-Pacific should start with a realistic assessment of what Beijing has actually gained via its agreement with Solomon Islands. Dire warnings about the catastrophic failure of Australian foreign policy or the imminent threat of the PLA make for striking soundbites.

But they neither accurately appraise the threat posed by the new security agreement, nor prepare Australians for the long and complex task of shaping the nature and scale of the PLA's presence in the region in the years and decades to come.

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