



The Solomon Islands Crisis Shows America Needs a New Pacific Strategy

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The recent eruption of civil unrest in the Solomon Islands has prompted extensive commentary in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand seeking to understand the causes of the violence. While some of this commentary has captured the myriad issues generating dissatisfaction with the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, including discontent with his 2019 switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Beijing's corrupting role in the Solomon Islands, less attention has been paid to the larger lessons for U.S. policy in the Pacific.

The current crisis offers an opportunity for Washington to reimagine the scope of its engagement with the Pacific Islands – and understand why it will be a critical element in any policy trying to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Since World War II, the United States has adhered to an artificial, informal division of “strategic oversight” of the Pacific Islands between Washington and its two regional Five Eyes partners, Australia and New Zealand. The vast region is broadly divided into three zones – Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia – each containing several independent countries.

The three independent countries comprising the North Pacific Micronesian region (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau) are tied closely to the U.S. through Compacts of Free Association, allowing unrestricted U.S. military access and the denial of such access for others in exchange for social services payments and visa-free travel to the United States. Washington is well aware of developments in these countries, maintains a significant diplomatic and military presence, and engages with their leaders frequently – though perhaps not enough.

The two other regions, Melanesia and Polynesia, by contrast, have been largely ignored by U.S. policymakers since the end of the Cold War, with the understanding that Canberra and Wellington would assume the lion's share of responsibility for their security. Australia and New Zealand have historical, economic and, in some instances, cultural ties in those regions, and their shared conception of a free and open Indo-Pacific has enabled Washington policymakers to justify subcontracting U.S. diplomacy and statecraft in the Pacific Islands.

Yet the recent imbroglio in the Solomon Islands is revealing the folly of this approach. While Australia and New Zealand are two of the United States' most reliable partners, with the former playing an indispensable role in the growing rivalry with China, the United States' interests in the Pacific are unique to its global role and the increasing centrality of full-spectrum competition with Beijing. Outsourcing the effective representation of American interests on this front line of strategic competition to even its closest friends is fraught with peril.

Take Canberra's intervention in the recent Solomon Islands unrest. The presence of Australian personnel may stem the immediate violence; however, it is also likely to entrench the rule of Sogavare, whose corruption, pro-Beijing policies, and determination to suppress opposition to his switch of recognition from Taipei are directly contrary to U.S. interests. The U.S. deferral to Canberra on issues relating to Melanesia, including the Solomon Islands, requires reexamination.

This problem is both conceptional and institutional. Washington's overreliance on others in the Pacific Islands is exacerbated by a weakness at the very foundations of American diplomacy: embassies and consulates.

The Solomon Islands, site of the battle of Guadalcanal where so many Americans gave their lives in brutal combat to free the country, currently lacks a permanent U.S. diplomatic presence. The U.S. Embassy in Papua New Guinea attempts to fill the gap from nearly 1,000 miles away. It provides similar coverage to Vanuatu, over 1,500 miles away, where there are recurring rumors of PRC interest in port facilities. The U.S. Embassy in Suva, Fiji provides diplomatic coverage for five countries, many with significant geopolitical ramifications for the United States, including Kiribati, which similarly switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019.

The lack of a permanent diplomatic presence furthers the reliance on Canberra and Wellington, who have substantial diplomatic, intelligence, and military apparatuses in Melanesia and Polynesia. These partners share their assessments of on-the-ground developments, including the most recent upheaval in Honiara, with their American counterparts, understandably filtered through an Australian or New Zealand strategic, economic, cultural, and historical lens.

Without similar representation, U.S. diplomats lack comparable opportunity to provide actionable recommendations for U.S. policymakers in Washington that reflect the reality of American interests and strategic requirements, or even the sort of insights only possible through direct bilateral engagement.

The Honiara crisis is an opportunity for the United States to reevaluate its approach to the Pacific and act accordingly.

First, Washington should make clear that, while it disproves of violence, the U.S. has grave concerns about numerous facets of the Sogavare government's behavior, both toward domestic critics and in regards to China. Privately, the United States should encourage a constitutionally-based resolution to the present strife that does not artificially cement Sogavare's hold on power and, in turn, cement Beijing's influence in the Solomon Islands.

Second, the Biden administration should make increasing the U.S. diplomatic presence in the Pacific a major priority. Maintaining strong, independent bilateral relations with each independent Pacific Island should be a priority of the U.S. State Department, and it requires funding, personnel, and institutional support. Embassies are needed urgently in Honiara (Solomon Islands), Port Vila (Vanuatu), Tarawa (Kiribati), and Nuku'alofa (Tonga), along with in-country staff focused on the full-range of bilateral issues.

Third, the U.S. should prioritize the quick resolution of the renegotiations of the Compact of Free Association with the three Micronesian states, as recommended in a bipartisan letter signed by 15 members of Congress.

Fourth, the United States should begin immediate discussions with Nauru, Tuvalu, and Kiribati regarding their potential interest in Compacts of Free Association. These three states are particularly vulnerable to Chinese economic and military coercion, as seen with Beijing's growing influence in Kiribati. At relatively low cost, the United States would head off the sort of unrest now being seen in the Solomons, gain access to strategic locations in the Pacific while being able to deny other actors possible basing rights or dual use access (as is currently being explored by China and Kiribati).

Fifth, Washington must think creatively about expanding the full breadth of bilateral relationships with the Pacific Islands. This includes actively encouraging the Peace Corps to return volunteers to the region (where they engendered goodwill for decades), and increasing security assistance, through U.S. Coast Guard ship-rider visits, National Guard partnership programs, and rotational law enforcement missions to help with a range of issues that affect economic development and domestic security such as illegal fishing and transnational crime. It also means assisting the Pacific Islands with environmental programs that strengthen island resilience to extreme weather events.

The United States has an indispensable role to play in a secure, prosperous, and free Pacific Islands region – a region where it has been active since nearly the founding of the Republic and where it has unique national interests.

While coordinating with partners and allies is essential in this era of renewed Great Power competition, and burden-sharing is a logical response for a superpower with global commitments, Washington cannot simply assume that it shares even its closest partners' appraisal of complex, fluid events. The United States must adjust its thinking in the Pacific, and build the institutions and capabilities necessary to operate nimbly and effectively in an increasingly crowded and tense geopolitical neighborhood.

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