

Solomon Islands and Vanuatu PMs visit Beijing amid escalating Pacific tensions

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Jeremiah Manele and Charlot Salwai, the prime ministers of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, visited China over the past two weeks. Beijing is seeking to increase its bilateral ties with Pacific nations amid an escalating diplomatic confrontation and drive to war by the United States and its imperialist allies.

Manele arrived on July 11 for a six-day visit while Salwai was there from July 7. The leaders met separately with Chinese President Xi Jinping before proceeding to Tokyo for a three-day Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM10), a precursor to the Pacific Islands Forum summit in Tonga next month.

During Manele's first overseas trip to Australia in June, he requested funding to recruit local police so the island nation could "look after ourselves." Solomon Islands has security ties with China and Australia, although the new government is reviewing its security arrangements, Manele said.

Earlier this month, New Zealand's Foreign Minister Winston Peters inaugurated a \$A36.55 million upgrade to the Segi Point Airfield in the Solomons' Western Province, funded by New Zealand and Australia. The strategic airfield was originally built by US Marines in 1943 to support amphibious assaults against Japanese forces in World War II.

Before Salwai departed for Beijing, China handed over a massive newly built presidential palace in Vanuatu. In a lavish ceremony in the capital Port Vila, Chinese officials presented the palace and new finance and foreign ministry buildings, costing an estimated \$A31 million, six years after Beijing agreed to fund the project.

China is the largest external creditor to Vanuatu after a decade of infrastructure building, while Australia is its biggest aid donor. The opening of the palace was preceded by the release of Vanuatu's foreign policy white paper reaffirming its "non-aligned" status. The same week, a patrol boat donated by Australia to Vanuatu's police force for maritime surveillance arrived in Port Vila.

Manele stated that China sets an "example" for developing countries, saying it "upholds multilateralism, avoids forming

exclusive cliques or playing geopolitical games, does not require other countries to take sides, and calls on the international community to strengthen unity and cooperation."

The Solomon Islands has drawn closer to China since its 2019 diplomatic switch from Taiwan to Beijing under Manele's predecessor, Manasseh Sogavare. Manele said that due to participation in China's Belt and Road initiative, the country had made "significant progress" in infrastructure construction.

China will now provide more than \$A30 million in "budgetary support," but it is unclear whether this is a grant or a loan. A direct grant would be a shift from Beijing's usual practice of providing concessionary loans. Last year Sogavare bitterly accused Australia and New Zealand of withdrawing millions in promised funding for the financially struggling country.

Aiming a diplomatic shot at Canberra, Manele emphasised that "one bilateral partner cannot shoulder all the country's development goals and priorities." His official statement added that "the development needs of the country are broad, and so the need to have all bilateral and multilateral partners on board."

In Fuzhou, the capital of Fujian province, Manele visited the China-Pacific Island Countries Police Training Center—a new facility set up as part of Beijing's broader push to cement itself as a security player in the Pacific. This is something Australia, New Zealand nor the United States "want to see," according to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC).

Australia's Pacific Minister Pat Conroy has declared that China should have "no role" in Pacific policing, while New Zealand has called Beijing's presence "unnecessary and unwelcome." Australia is establishing a competing regional police training centre in Brisbane as part of its own push to control escalating police activities across the Pacific.

Pacific nations increasingly find themselves at the centre of intensifying geostrategic rivalry involving the United States and its local imperialist allies, Australia and New

Zealand. In Vanuatu a political crisis that prompted a snap election in August 2022 erupted over the signing of a security pact with Canberra.

The pact was signed during a regional tour by Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong to advance the US-led campaign to line up Pacific states behind Washington's confrontation with Beijing. It cited a determination to "enhance strategic engagement" between the two countries, a phrase that provides vast scope for military activities directed against China.

The neo-colonial pact allows for a dominant Australian military presence, stating: "Where the Parties have mutually determined that a mutual security activity requires the presence of Australian Defence Force, Australian Federal Police or Australian Border Force personnel in Vanuatu, the Parties shall facilitate such a presence."

Salwai was installed as Vanuatu's prime minister in October 2023 after his predecessor Sato Kilman lost a motion of no-confidence, after only a month in office.

The government's just released National Foreign Policy document describes Vanuatu as "unwillingly" thrust into power competition in the Pacific and the great demands thus placed on its diplomacy. There are numerous references to Vanuatu's position as a member of the non-aligned movement and the document highlights an ongoing dispute with France over the Matthew and Hunter Islands, which are claimed by Vanuatu.

In Beijing, the two governments signed 13 Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), marking a "significant step forward" in bilateral relations. According to the *Daily Post*, the MOUs cover a wide range of developments with an emphasis on infrastructure projects, including major improvements in Port Vila and enhancing Vanuatu broadcasting and television.

Salwai also asked the Bank of China to set up operations in Port Vila to provide a yuan clearing facility to help reduce prices of Chinese-made goods, currently paid for in US dollars. The request comes as the US and Australia scramble to maintain control of the financial sector in the region, with western banks quitting due to small populations and vast distances that mean little prospect of profits.

Both island nations are former colonies which remain deeply impoverished and subject to regular interventions from the US, Australia and New Zealand as well as global financial institutions such as the IMF and Asia Development Bank. Despite populations of just 756,700 (Solomon Islands) and 338,400 (Vanuatu), they straddle vital strategic areas of the Pacific which saw intense fighting in World War II.

With US President Obama's 2011 "Pivot to Asia," many Pacific nations including Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands and Fiji, were brought onto the "front line"

of Washington's confrontation with China. More than a decade later, the danger of a US-led conflict is escalating and the entire region has become a focal point of imperialist intrigue and militarisation.

A recent *Guardian* analysis which examined agreements and partnerships covering security, defence and policing with 10 Pacific countries revealed Australia as the dominant partner—accounting for more than half the deals—followed by New Zealand, the US and China.

According to the report there are more than 60 agreements in defence and policing. The US has at least eight security agreements in place. Last year, it signed a pact with PNG that gave Washington "unimpeded access" to bases, plus a defence and security agreement with Fiji. The US also retains its dominant military footprint in the northern Pacific.

For its part, the Solomon Islands operates a variety of strategic, security and policing agreements with China, Australia, New Zealand, PNG and the US. A bilateral treaty with Canberra allows the deployment of Australian police, defence and civilian personnel to Solomon Islands. New Zealand also has military personnel stationed there.

Besides its own security treaty with Australia, Vanuatu operates policing agreements with Australia, New Zealand and China. Opening in 2023, a new Vanuatu Police and Justice precinct was built in collaboration with the Australian and UK governments.

All the diplomatic manoeuvring portends vast preparations for looming wars accompanied by police-state repression across the Pacific. None of the local populations have had any say in any of this. Yet social discontent driven by inequality, extreme poverty and anti-colonial sentiment, is erupting, as seen in the riots in both PNG and New Caledonia this year. Broadening class struggles across the entire Pacific are on the agenda.



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