



China’s development of potential military bases in our neighbourhood

China’s interests in the Pacific date from the 19th century and are now pervasive. China has developed ports and airfields on islands across the region, built government and commercial infrastructure, and provided several Pacific Island states with low-interest development loans, disaster relief and assistance with maintaining security. Chinese commercial interests and its diaspora have penetrated deeply into the region. Hence, China is able to exert increasing influence in Australia’s neighbourhood.

Australia, itself, has not been exempt. China now has five research stations in Antarctica, including three in the Australian Antarctic Territory. In 2015, a Chinese firm, Landbridge Group, leased the strategic Port of Darwin for 99 years.

Similarly, Papua New Guinea and China recently have discussed upgrading port facilities on Daru Island in the Torres Strait, Kikori on the Gulf of Papua, and at Wewak and Vanimo on the northeast coast. On Manus Island, a Chinese state-owned enterprise is upgrading Momote Airport. The airport is situated near Papua New Guinea’s main naval base at Lombrum, which Australia and the United States are upgrading.

In Vanuatu, China upgraded the wharf facilities at Luganville in 2018. The wharf now could dock large warships. This strategically-located port was a major American military base in World War II and, now upgraded, could be converted into a naval base.

Over the last two decades, Fiji and Tonga also have benefited from Chinese development assistance and the People’s Liberation Army now has a military attaché in Suva.

In April, China and the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement which will allow China to send police and military forces to the Solomons to protect infrastructure funded by China and protect Chinese citizens and their businesses should civil unrest recur. It also permits Chinese naval vessels to visit Solomons ports, including for resupply. The actual wording of the agreement remains secret, but it appears to establish the political foundation for a Chinese military base in the Solomons. The Solomons prime minister, Manasseh Sogavare, however, insists that the Solomons will not allow China to establish a military base there.

Nevertheless, this development is potentially a major security risk for Australia as the Solomons sit astride our maritime lines of communication (LoC) from our east coast to Asia and North America. Our undersea communications cables across the Pacific also could be exposed to interdiction. Japan captured the Solomons in 1942 when it decided that it did not have the uncommitted combat power to capture and sustain an occupation of Australia (so as to deny Australia as a base to the United

States for its counter-offensive against Japan). Interdicting the LoC across the Pacific from the archipelago some 2000km east of Queensland was Japan’s next best option.

In responding to this latest development, Australia probably should continue to use quiet, empathetic diplomacy, consistent with the ‘Melanesian Way’, to monitor the situation and dissuade the Solomons from expanding the agreement with China.

More broadly, the expansion of Chinese influence in Australia’s neighbourhood could be seen as benign for the mutual benefit of both China and the states it is assisting. Given China’s recent assertive activities in Asia, however, especially the way it has developed military forward operating bases in the South China Sea, many of its activities in our neighbourhood equally could be seen as precursors to the development of similar bases here.

Regardless, Australia now needs to take the Pacific Islands community and its concerns far more seriously than it has recently. Most particularly, it needs to act urgently to address the climate change crisis, the number one concern of the Pacific community. This should involve both mitigating the causes and adapting to the changes, including providing permanent residency in Australia for Pacific Islanders, especially those displaced by rising sea levels.

Australia’s status as by far the leading aid donor in the Pacific notwithstanding, increased investment in diplomacy and boosting aid funding to the Islands will need to be a high priority. Radio Australia’s diminished news services into the Pacific also will need to be re-established and expanded.

In addressing these issues, Australia will need to work not only with the Pacific Island states but also with other Pacific powers, especially New Zealand, France and the United States. A particular need will be to expand the security forces of Pacific Islands Forum member states and develop interoperability among them.

There are implications, too, for Australia’s defence strategy. Serious consideration is needed now to establishing defence forward operating bases on Australian soil proximate to the Solomons, say at Norfolk Island, Townsville, Cairns, RAAF Base Scherger (near Weipa), and Thursday Island.

Further, in World War II, the Manus Island naval base was used by the Americans to isolate the Japanese base at Rabaul and it is well-placed strategically to interdict any Chinese maritime LoC to the Solomons should Papua New Guinea, assisted by Australia, wish to use it in this way.

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