

Pacific Island countries' seesawing security diplomacy

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December 7 2023

Note: This article appeared in *The Diplomat* on December 7 2023.

The recently announced security agreement between Australia and Tuvalu, and the [signing](#) of a security pact by Australia and Papua New Guinea, have been [touted](#) as an Australian 'win' in its strategic competition against China for influence in the sensitive domain of security cooperation with Pacific island countries (PICs).

They came soon after a series of developments in the region that had raised anxieties in Canberra. Among the higher profile announcements, in late October, the Solomon Islands said it would invite [additional Chinese police](#) to help provide security for the just-concluded Pacific Games. This followed Vanuatu's requests to [water down](#) a security agreement with Australia, Fiji [reconsideration](#) of its decision to scrap its controversial police cooperation agreement with China, and Timor-Leste's [signing of](#) a strategic partnership agreement with Beijing and request to the Chinese government to help the nation build police and defence facilities.

These developments have reinforced a narrative, [set out](#) by Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Birmingham, that intense strategic competition with China is likely to be enduring, compelling Australia to 'step up' its regional diplomacy. Yet such a narrative also perpetuates a fallacy – that PICs' decisions on security partnerships are largely determined by which competing power out-politics and outbids the other.

The problem of reducing the notion of 'strategic competition' to a diplomatic match-off between Canberra and Beijing, measured by 'wins' in forging security agreements with PICs, is that it dangerously downplays both the exercise of agency, and the premium placed upon its retention, among the latter. In particular, it fails to consider that PICs might have their own reasons for pursuing a strategy of diplomatic seesawing between rivals, or what has been [called](#) 'dynamic equidistancing.'

Grasping this reality can help Canberra avoid anxiety that each small diplomatic shift in Beijing's direction could prompt an inexorable transformation of the strategic architecture of its neighbourhood – an anxiety that could lead to rash and reflexive responses. It can also help Canberra better align its security aspirations with that of its regional partners, thereby mitigating the risk of responses that could damage Australia's regional leadership credentials.

Diplomatic seesawing: The cases of Fiji and Timor-Leste

One recent example of diplomatic seesawing in the security realm is the case of Fiji.

Fiji, until this year, had one of the most intimate security relationships with China in the southern Pacific. In 2011, the two sides signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) on police cooperation that involved the deployment of Chinese officers on Fijian soil. Since then, the island nation has been the region's most

frequently visited port of call for People's Liberation Army ships. In late 2018, Beijing gifted the island a [hydrographic survey ship](#) – one of many gifts that also included police vehicles, drones, and other surveillance and digital equipment. Under the reign of the China-friendly former Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, the nation received roughly \$300 million in aid from Beijing during 2011-2018.

This year, however, Fiji demonstrated the brittleness of ostensibly deeply ingrained partnerships. Leading up to his victory, which ended Bainimarama's more than 15-year reign, Fiji's then-prime ministerial candidate Sitiveni Rabuka [said](#), 'We appreciate what China has done in the past,' but 'the pendulum has now come back and we should now be getting to our comfortable niche with Australia,' which he described as having similar political values and institutions.

After coming to power, Rabuka promptly dumped the policing agreement set out in the MoU with China. In June, he signed a defence agreement with New Zealand, and in October, he visited Australia, securing an aid package, cooperation on cybersecurity, and a deal to [purchase](#) 14 Bushmaster Protected Military Vehicles.

Yet things have not gone all Australia's way. Having initially appeared to cancel the police cooperation agreement with China, Rabuka more recently indicated that it is merely suspended and is still being reconsidered. In early October, several months after Fiji sealed a defence deal with New Zealand, a Chinese navy ship visited the island for the stated purpose of strengthening maritime cooperation. In June, Fiji reversed a decision to elevate the status of Taiwan's representative office. In early November, the country formally [withdrew](#) from an international statement calling on Beijing to end the persecution of Muslim minorities in its Xinjiang province.

A similar pattern has played out – sometimes in the reverse direction – in other nations in the region. For example, last year Australia signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Timor-Leste, which was built on the two nations' longer running Defence Cooperation Program and the joint Hari'i Hamutuk military exercise. Yet this September, shortly after the latest Hari'i Hamutuk exercise, Timor-Leste's newly appointed Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao [signed](#) a joint statement with China's President Xi Jinping announcing the upgrade of the two nation's ties to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership,' including enhancing military cooperation. Soon after, Timor-Leste's President José Ramos-Horta revealed that his government had taken the initiative to ask Beijing to develop police and military infrastructure.

Protecting agency and sovereignty, relegating partners to suitors

Such trends have fed a narrative that PICs have learned that there are benefits to be gained from playing rival powers off against each other. In particular, Timor-Leste, now facing a fiscal cliff, and in desperate negotiations to secure gas refinery projects from the lucrative Sunrise field in the Timor Sea, has been [accused](#) of 'playing the China card' to get more aid and commercial concessions from Canberra. A similar narrative could perhaps be applied to Rabuka, who [told](#) an Australian audience that Fiji is 'friendly with China, now, and the U.S., always,' and told Canberra, 'don't abandon us again.'

But there are problems with this narrative. The first is that the stakes in asymmetric security partnerships, which can pose risks to the smaller nation's very sovereignty, are often too grave to be bartered off for temporary material gains. The second issue is that while using security to encourage great power rivalries can loosen rival powers' purse strings, raising the heat of geopolitical tensions presents larger dangers to PICs both individually and collectively.

On the first point, PICs want security cooperation since it gives access to capabilities that can secure and extend the sovereignty of fragile governments. Yet this can foster dependencies, and allow, in the case of training and other arrangements, foreign interactions with the very state organs that uphold the government and its institutions. The key challenge for PICs, as such, has been shaped around managing these partnerships so that needed capability gains achieved through security collaboration do not, in either a direct or latent way, impinge upon PICs' sovereignty and agency.

One way PICs have been able to manage this is by exploiting strategic competition to re-relegate established partners to suitors, which can be achieved by pivoting back and forth between rival partners. A trigger for such shifts is sometimes an instance in which the senior partner begins to take liberties. In the case of Fiji, the

tide arguably began to turn against Beijing in 2017, when Chinese police ignored their local counterparts and repatriated 77 Chinese suspects without an extradition order, [angering](#) local police, members of the judiciary, and now-ascendent opposition parliamentarians. Other states also took notice.

Playing both sides: The case of the Solomon Islands

Yet the larger state doesn't need to abuse its power for such a partnership to become problematic to a weaker neighbour. Another factor is time itself, or the natural consequences of an asymmetric partnerships' institutionalization. Long-term unbalanced partnerships can heighten interlinkages and dependencies, and, in concert with regular exhibitions of the senior powers' superior capabilities, often gradually see asymmetries manifest through hierarchies. The longer an agreement stands, the more politicians in opposition, who see the fruits of the agreement through a different lens, are likely to exploit these concerns for political gains.

Arguably for this reason, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), the 14-year Australian led intervention to prevent the collapse of the Solomon Islands' government, would have been problematic if it failed, but was essentially problematic because it succeeded. Ultimately, it was frequently criticized by Manasseh Sogavare, the Solomon Islands' current prime minister, who feared Australia's domination of the mission would undermine the islands' sovereignty.

This long partnership, and the Australian-led Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF) which followed in 2021, forms the backdrop for the Sogavare government's dramatic security pivot toward China, culminating in a controversial decision to sign a secretive security pact with Beijing last April. This has been followed by a raft of agreements with Beijing on areas including equipment donations, police training, and the temporary posting of Chinese officers in the Solomon Islands. Sogavare has matched these developments with stern criticisms directed at both Canberra and Washington for disrespecting the agency of his nation.

Yet Sogavare's criticisms have on occasion presented a stark contrast with his government's actions on security collaboration. In late June, Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles announced that the Australian-led SIAF, which was enacted through the two nations' bilateral security treaty and formed as a result of civil unrest in late 2021, would be extended.

Australia also recently sent [100 police](#) to the islands to boost security in the lead up to the Pacific Games. In announcing the latter, a spokesperson for Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said Australia remains the Solomon Islands' '[primary security partner](#).' Australian Federal Police (AFP) continue to regularly provide technical and operational assistance to the Royal Solomon Islands' Police Force (RSIPF) through the RSIPF-AFP Policing Partnership Program.

Ultimately, Sogavare's strategy has in recent times revolved around shifting to-and-fro between Canberra and Beijing for security cooperation, as opposed to locking in exclusive agreements with either. A similar pattern of seesawing security pivots can be seen in the [case](#) of Kiribati – another nation that was seen to have slipped into China's orbit after it, like the Solomon Islands, switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019.

Enmeshment: Turning down the heat of rivalries

Sogavare's actions have not been without criticism – including from other PIC leaders. Speaking on Sogavare's security deal with Beijing, Timor-Leste's President Ramos-Horta late last year said, 'Don't bring in extraterritorial, regional, interest powers that might not be welcomed by our neighbours.' He claimed, 'Any rational Timorese leader would never do anything without taking into consideration the sensitivities of your neighbours.' Perhaps ironically, Ramos-Horta this year revealed that he had invited Beijing to help build defence facilities in Timor-Leste.

Arguably the real concern, and where Ramos-Horta's approach differed from Sogavare's actions, was that the rhetoric and non-transparency of the latter markedly raised geopolitical tensions. Other PIC leaders have generally tried harder to walk the tightrope of exploiting strategic competition, yet not feeding anxieties to a level that would destabilize the region. After announcing his invitation to China to build facilities in his nation,

Ramos-Horta, for instance, told Australia that Beijing is ‘sensitive to the sensitivities of our neighbours’ and ‘respectful of Australia’s position.’

Similar attempts to downplay the gravity of China’s security deals have been made by Kiribati and Fiji. On this front, PICs’ attempts to manage tensions that could inflame their region can have a positive role to play in taking the heat out of competition by enmeshment – i.e., by forcing rival suitors to accept both the legitimacy and enduring reality of competitive coexistence, or bring them together through coordinated cooperation.

Yet ‘enmeshing’ powerful partners as competing suitors in a toned down, rules-bound game serves another function – preventing partnerships from morphing into something more akin to exclusive alliances. This point was raised, for instance, by Vanuatu, after its new administration put on indefinite hold the signing of a security agreement with Canberra, with some citing concerns about its impact on the island nation’s sovereignty. Vanuatu’s leadership has since [insisted](#) that the nation is neither ‘pro-West’ nor ‘pro-China,’ and that it ‘adopt[s] a non-aligned policy.’

The danger PICs see in entering an alliance is that it could make a nation the de facto enemy of its partner’s rival, potentially exposing it to acts of retaliation that could mean the very opposite of security – destabilization. Ramos-Horta’s criticism of Sogavare also reflects a general fear many PIC leaders share: that any Pacific nation, by firmly allying with one side, and especially by housing potent military assets in the region, could make the southern Pacific a geopolitical or actual battleground, eventually breaking down PIC unity and compelling all nations in the region to ‘choose sides’ for protection.

Canberra’s challenge: Not overplaying its hand

These factors should be carefully considered by Canberra for a number of reasons.

First, they do not go so far as to suggest the conclusion that Canberra should step back from strategic competition in relation to security cooperation, which could force small nations with urgent security needs into more one-sided relationships. However, in the absence of an impending conflict, Canberra should be prepared to temper its ambitions for more intimate security partnerships, and seek to better align its aspirations for security agreements with those of PICs and the Pacific community more generally.

In the case of Australia’s proposed security pact with Vanuatu, concerns that it encroached too much on the nation’s sovereignty were largely responsible for a pushback, which resulted in Vanuatu’s Parliament passing a no-confidence vote against the island nation’s former Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau.

A similar scenario could now play out in Tuvalu, with a leadership contender for next January’s presidential election, former Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga, accusing the current leadership of ‘selling the sovereignty of Tuvalu’ through its deal with Australia, and stating, ‘we cannot go on using small states like Tuvalu as pawns in the game of major powers.’

Both examples show that opportunistically winning over sympathetic leaders risks losing the broader polity, creating conditions for a potential security realignment. In the same vein, ‘winning’ a partner nation, but doing so on terms unpalatable to the wider Pacific community, could prompt a broader regional pushback, increasing opportunities for Beijing and exacerbating Canberra’s conundrums.

The second issue is that understanding the likelihood of pendulum swings in security diplomacy can ease the anxieties that could lead to reflexive or ill-considered responses to Beijing’s diplomatic gains – responses that could undermine Canberra’s regional leadership credentials. An example of the latter was Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Richard Marles responding to the Solomon Islands’ suggestion of developing its own defence force by indicating that Australia was ‘very keen’ to assist – a response that prompted concerns from other PIC leaders. Ultimately, Australia’s leadership would have been better served by emphasizing the Solomon Islands’ obligation to broadly consult on the issue with its neighbours. While there is not yet a formalized, ASEAN-style ‘PIC centrality,’ Canberra does not want to be in a situation where its pursuit of its geostrategic interests are seen to undermine PICs mutual obligations.

On this front, if denying China a military presence in the region is the baseline aim of Australia's Pacific diplomacy, Canberra needs to not only focus on outbidding Beijing in the security capabilities it provides, but also undercutting its competition in terms of the cost it exacts to PICs' most valuable commodities – their sovereignty and agency. Observing the seesawing nature of PICs' security diplomacy may prompt the conclusion that denial is best served by strengthening PICs' security autonomy as opposed to dependencies, regardless of where they may be directed at any given time. It may also lead to Canberra approaching PIC security deals with Beijing with a measure of equanimity, helping Canberra engage in a way that incentivizes good faith engagements, meets challenges with one nation with an eye on the broader region, and furthers the shift of Australia's reputation from regional player to partner.

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