

State capture: Behind Sogavare's marriage of convenience with China

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Introduction

Solomon Islands has emerged as Australia's most consequential single security concern in the Pacific Island region today. The international dimension has dominated concerns in recent years due to the sudden and escalating influence of the People's Republic of China in the archipelago. Nevertheless, regional and domestic factors have contributed significantly over the decades for putting the Solomons squarely on Australia's security agenda. Ethnic divisions, fragile national structures, significant national development challenges have beset the Solomons since independence in 1978. The interplay of these pre-existing challenges is not necessarily causally related to current concerns regarding China, but they are far from unconnected. Indeed, there appears to be a mutual feedback loop developing between the lived political experience of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, his personal ambition and Chinese opportunism that has led to magnifying the security risks for the Solomons, Australia and the region.

The prospect of a domestic crisis of some description has loomed large on the Solomons' political and social horizons almost continuously since independence. Opposition to the Sogavare Government's relationship with China is serving as a lightning rod for renewed ethnic tensions but these tensions predate the change in recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019. While the Sogavare Government has put pressure on relatively weak governance institutions to protect the relationship with China, the fragility of Solomons' governing institutions is not a consequence of the Chinese relationship. Indeed, until the Sino-Solomons security agreement, Australia's primary security interest in the Solomons was supporting nation-building in a neighbour that seemed a candidate for becoming a failed state from day one. These internal factors now loom as an increasing threat to stability as Solomon Islands speeds toward passing Fiji as the second largest country in the Pacific Island region.¹

Chinese influence in the Solomons has created challenges for Australian relations with the archipelagic state across a number of fronts since Sogavare made the sudden switch in recognition. However, concerns were seriously elevated when the Sogavare Government concluded the Sino-Solomons security agreement with Beijing less than 18 months later. The complete lack of transparency and an unwillingness to acknowledge legitimate concerns for the potential consequences did nothing to allay suspicions. Even if subsequent protestations that the agreement would not result in a Chinese base were wholly credible, the potential for destabilisation of Australia's security posture is inherent in the pact itself. At the minimum, there is now an ever-present possibility of a 1983 Grenada-type scenario where two security systems could be drawn into conflict with each other due to domestic events in the archipelago.

There are many possible analytical lenses that could be used to assess the current fragility of Australian and regional security interests in Solomon Islands and their consequences. This report concentrates on how the effects of the insecurity of Solomons domestic politics shaped Sogavare's ambition to secure his personal power by linking it to a supportive external power. China was prepared to be that power especially as it also involved removing one more of Taiwan's Pacific allies. To the extent that he has tied his domestic success to his new foreign relationship, Sogavare has managed to generate an aura of uncertainty both at home and in the region. Unless the consequent escalating spiral of insecurity is short-circuited, Sogavare's path to fulfilling his personal quest for political security has the potential to draw the Australia and the Pacific Island states closer to the vortex of a dangerous Indo-Pacific strategic rivalry that the region has long sought to avoid. While there are no obvious off-ramps, the most effective responses are coming from the Solomons' regional neighbours.

Leadership, Success and Domestic Instability

Meeting the challenge of domestic instability has been a feature of Sogavare's decades-long political career. He has benefited from the country's volatile politics and also been its victim. Most of all, his view of leadership has been shaped by the uncertainty of holding onto power. Labelled 'paranoid' for his mercurial mood shifts and distrust of perceived opponents, Sogavare has been likened by critics to autocrats like Robert Mugabe for his pursuit of political success.² Between the two characterisations, paranoia appears to have more than a grain of validity given the vicissitudes of his political fortunes over a quarter century in national affairs. Conversely, however autocratic Sogavare's political ambitions might be, it is unlikely that he is on a path to becoming the Solomon's version of the kleptocratic Mugabe.

Mugabe built his career on a strong anti-colonial ideology, belonged to Zimbabwe's majority tribal group and led a majority party with strong military ties. Despite his success in Solomons' politics, Sogavare has had none of these advantages. Consequently, Sogavare has lived his entire political career on an entrepreneurial knife's edge. Although born in Papua New Guinea to missionary parents, he returned to his parent's home island of Choiseul to work. The people of Choiseul are not an especially large ethnic group with less than 5 percent of the total population of the Solomons. Strongly religious in an overwhelmingly Christian country, Sogavare is a Seventh Day Adventist which is only the fourth largest denomination supported by 12 percent of the population.³ Sogavare has never led a majority political party to give a solid political foundation to his resolute pursuit of power. Indeed, on several occasions since being first elected in 1997, he has stood without a party label.

Sogavare's political acumen has sharpened over the four periods in the office it has taken him to become the Solomons' longest serving prime minister. His first term began in 2000 only three years after he entered parliament. An ethnically based rebel militia seized Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu and forced him to resign for failing to protect the Malaitans on Guadalcanal.⁴ Sogavare lost office, but not his seat, 18 months later in the 2001 general election. Sogavare's second term also came about by violence and resignation. Severe rioting broke out in Honiara shortly after the 2006 general election in opposition to the election of Snyder Rini who had given favours to, and received support from, Chinese economic interests. Rini resigned and Sogavare returned to the premiership for another 18 months before being ousted by a parliamentary vote, mainly due to his maladroit handling of relations with Australia. His third term lasted three years from 2014 to 2017, as much as his first two terms combined, but again it ended with defeat in a parliamentary confidence vote. His present term began after the April 2019 election. On this occasion, the violence did not

precede but rather followed the election. However, the two subsequent outbreaks of rioting served as a potent reminder of the earlier times when rioting in Honiara ended careers.

Thus, Sogavare fully understands the precariousness of Solomons politics having experienced it in full measure. He has succeeded because he has honed the entrepreneurial skills of a traditional Melanesian 'big man', securing followers through his ability to acquire and distribute resources to maintain their loyalty better than other politicians over the past three decades.⁵ A main vehicle for influence is the political patronage achieved through the controversial Constituency Development Fund (CDF) system. Sogavare did not invent the CDF nor did Taiwan, the country most identified with obtaining diplomatic influence through the scheme.⁶ Nevertheless, the unaccountable and unaudited slush fund proved both a potent vehicle for buying political support and, consequently, a focus for community anger at the CDF's corrupting influence on politics. Sogavare has played both sides of this fence over time. He has publicly called for reform of the system and claimed he would phase out the cash payments to individual MPs, recently introducing a bill for some tightening of its use.⁷ Yet, in practice, he has continued and sharpened the system to his political advantage.

Initially, the CDF was created as a form of contingency funding for individual MPs to respond quickly to worthy local requests. The lack of transparency, and of auditing, allowed it to morph into a mechanism for prime ministerial manipulation. While it appears Taiwan generally respected the principle that funds would go to all 50 constituencies, reportedly, there were occasions when additional discretionary funds would be given to a particular PM to help 'stabilise' his parliamentary numbers.⁸ Chinese money has followed the established practice. However, in addition to a substantial aid package which included taking over the Taiwanese infrastructure funding for the 2023 Pacific Games, there are claims of individual direct payments to MPs to support switching recognition to Beijing.⁹ In an apparent change from previous practice, Beijing has allowed its CDF payments to be dispersed selectively in a manner that strengthens Sogavare's control within parliament by excluding 'non-government' MPs from the Chinese contributions. Dr Jimmie Rodgers, secretary to the prime minister, laid out this bias before a 2022 parliamentary committee. Rodgers reported that China had agreed in 2019 to pay funds to the Prime Minister's discretionary account for three years and that these were divided equally amongst 39 lawmakers at Sogavare's direction.¹⁰ Eleven oppositional MPs received nothing from the Chinese largesse.

Chinese financial support has allowed Sogavare a measure of stability that he has not often enjoyed in his political career. After the 2019 election, Sogavare

negotiated a majority bloc of four parties under the banner Democratic Coalition Government for Advancement (DCGA). All 33 members of the DCGA coalition are on the PM's list for discretionary Chinese-sourced funds as are six additional Members who generally lend support to the government. Not all CDF funding is dispersed through the PM's Office. While the 11 oppositional MPs appear to have been denied any of the Chinese monies paid through the PM's Office, the Ministry for Rural Development recently asserted that it has delivered its CDF programme to all 50 constituencies.¹¹ It has been alleged also that the Chinese Embassy replenished its contribution to the PM's discretionary constituency funds after the November 2021 riots to successfully shore up his parliamentary support in the face of the demonstrators' demand for Sogavare's resignation.¹²

Sogavare's dependence on Chinese money is not a simple case of political puppetry or elite capture. His gratitude to Beijing has to be tempered to some extent by the knowledge that being too closely identified with Beijing could become a career threatening liability. Nor can he ignore the objective evidence that Australia is a longer term and more generous donor to the region and especially to Solomon Islands than is China.¹³ Australia has spent billions of dollars in special crisis aid as well as development assistance and, even as Beijing has expanded its aid to the Solomons, Australia continues to outspend the PRC by significant amounts.¹⁴ When other sources of Western bilateral and multilateral aid are combined with the Australia aid, there can be

no question of Beijing being a single principal donor option for Solomon Islands. Still, just as there are constraints on Sogavare's dependence on China there are limitations for Australia. Canberra cannot engage in aid retaliation against the Solomons in pique over the growing PRC ties as these would adversely affect the ordinary people of the Solomons. Thus, insofar as aid competition is concerned, Australia has one hand tied behind its back. Without the expectation of reprisals from Australia, Sogavare has felt free to develop closer ties with Beijing with few apparent qualms about the consequences for Canberra or other Western backers leading to claims he is "playing Australia for a sucker".¹⁵

Given that Beijing's key objective was to end Honiara's recognition of Taipei, it might be asked, once this objective was achieved, why did the Chinese relationship with the Solomons not just follow the trajectory of those with eight preceding Pacific Island Forum (PIF) states that recognised Beijing? The pull and push elements in this developing relationship cannot be easily characterised after the switch in recognition. Economic promises of higher levels of Chinese assistance certainly helped to pull a willing Honiara out of Taiwan's orbit into closer, more intimate relations with the PRC. Equally, it is evident that China pushed vigorously for recognition in order to end Honiara's connection with Taipei. However, the balance of factors leading to the controversial 2022 security arrangement is rather murkier.

The Sino-Solomons Security Agreement

There are intricacies to the factors in the Solomons' relationship with China that make it difficult to know precisely who initiated the controversial security agreement. Motivation suggests strongly that it was Sogavare. He had reasons from the time he became PM again in 2019 to want physical protection against the fickleness of the public. Violence in and around the capital, Honiara, had destabilised governments the whole of his political career. The November 2021 Honiara riots particularly reinforced his fears. To avoid becoming a future victim, he wanted a guarantor against violent dissent that he could trust. So, why not Australia? Australia was already on board with a security agreement with the Solomons government since 2017.¹⁶ Indeed, it was to this agreement that Sogavare turned for help to deal with the violent civil unrest calling for his resignation November 2021. Australia responded immediately, assisted by Fiji and New Zealand. Under the 2017 terms of engagement with Papua New Guinea, PNG engaged separately. Yet, it was precisely that 2017 pact and the legacy of its progenitor – the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) – that concerned Sogavare.

RAMSI was an Australian-led regional combined military and police intervention to deal with the localised civil war on Guadalcanal that erupted in 1998. The intervention authorised under the Biketawa Declaration¹⁷, a PIF agreement to provide for a collective response to national crises, including threats to democracy, within the PIF member states.¹⁸ Ironically, a principal catalyst for this agreement was the coup earlier in 2000 that brought Sogavare to power for his initial term as PM. However, the intervention was not quite as the Australian media of the time portrayed it, with images of landing craft and troops securing "the beachhead at Red Beach".¹⁹ Most RAMSI personnel landed unopposed and unthreatened at Henderson Airfield, often to a warm welcome. 'The Tensions' had been in progress for five years by the time of the RAMSI landing – fully three years after Biketawa – raising questions as to why it was that the Declaration's mechanisms for peaceful resolution of the dispute had not been attempted before the armed intervention. Others point out that Australia was moved to act only after Solomon Islands was identified as a failing state.²⁰ This supported a certain cynicism that it took a perceived global threat of terrorism rather than any specific and substantial escalation of the civil

conflict to belatedly answer the unsuccessful plea for help made to Australia by Ulufa'alu three years earlier.²¹

The 2006 general election, the first after the RAMSI intervention, resulted in the defeat of Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza but the rioting that destroyed Chinatown and large parts of central Honiara forced the almost immediate resignation of his successor Snyder Rini. With skilful manoeuvring in the chaos, Sogavare secured his second prime ministership when the parliament convened. Rather than gratitude, the experience led Sogavare to question Australian management of RAMSI. Controversially, he appointed 'Fijian-born' Australian Julian Moti QC as his Attorney General.²² Moti advised Sogavare that the government should investigate the Australian police component of RAMSI for contributing to the course of the 2006 riots.²³ Sogavare countered Australian pushback against Moti by expelling Australia's High Commissioner Patrick Cole. Tensions between Australia and the Sogavare Government escalated further when Australian police raided Sogavare's home to find evidence against Moti while the PM was overseas.

Such experiences made both RAMSI and relations with Australia very personal for Sogavare who chafed at RAMSI's intrusiveness in domestic affairs. His testy relations with Australia resulted in the collapse of his second term. When Sogavare regained the prime ministership following the 2014 election, perhaps more in hope than expectation, the RAMSI Special Coordinator warmly congratulated him on his success and expressed the desire to work with him.²⁴ Sogavare appeared to mellow toward RAMSI during his third term on the pragmatic grounds that working with RAMSI would more quickly bring it to the conclusion he had wanted. Ending the regional mission in an orderly fashion took some time and involved such measures as re-arming the police which had been disarmed by RAMSI.²⁵ A bilateral non-reciprocal security agreement between Australia and Solomon Islands put the seal on RAMSI's departure by ensuring that the assistance of Australia and other PIF states could be available if needed. It was needed four years later, in November 2021.

Although Australia and other PIF states honoured the treaty swiftly, it reopened both some old wounds for Sogavare and an opportunity for the PRC. The Australia-led intervention marked the third time that Canberra's response to instability in the Solomons had benefited Sogavare politically, but he remained sceptical that he should rely solely on Australia. In the 2000 coup, Sogavare acceded to the empty premiership when Ulufa'alu was forced out after Australia declined his request for police assistance.²⁶ It was somewhat the reverse in 2006 when RAMSI restored order after the rioting that forced Rini out creating the leadership vacancy that Sogavare then

filled. In 2021, the opposition believed that Australia may have acted prematurely as the intervention could be seen "as propping up a leader that many view as corrupt."²⁷ Thus, a natural paranoia has been reinforced by Sogavare's perception of inconstancy of Canberra's involvement in Solomons affairs.

For its part, China has been willing to exploit Sogavare's troubled history with Australia to leverage a much closer security relationship with the Solomons than it has with any other PIF island state. Beijing's preparedness to push the envelope on security with the Solomons was not just because Sogavare was a potentially ready partner, however. China had its own well-founded concerns for the inadequacy of domestic security in the Solomons given the attacks on Chinatown and other Chinese properties in 2006 and 2021. These were fuelled initially by recent Chinese diaspora and investors who voiced complaints that Australian RAMSI personnel had not protected all Honiara properties equally during the 2006 riots. Particularly influential were the Chinese owners of the Pacific Casino Hotel who believed their property was allowed to be targeted.²⁸ The Pacific Casino was where Sogavare had his political headquarters and where he had negotiated his return to power during the riot. Sogavare repeated this charge after the 2021 riots when he sought to defend the need for the Sino-Solomons security pact.²⁹

The depth of Chinese trepidation regarding the inadequacy of the Solomons' capacity to maintain domestic security became apparent in the wake of the November 2021 riots. The ambassador sent a diplomatic note requesting permission to bring in an armed Chinese security team to protect the embassy and staff.³⁰ This underscored how exposed the Chinese mission felt and how different they saw their position in the Solomons to be compared with similar events elsewhere in the region. Severe anti-Chinese rioting had occurred elsewhere – Nuku'alofa in 2006³¹ and PNG in 2009³² – without creating a claim to a privileged right to protect Chinese people and assets, as has been included in the Solomons agreement. The shared interests of the PM and the PRC for security in the riot-prone capital overlapped to a significant extent; both almost equally benefited by the special bilateral security agreement. It clearly served Sogavare's desire for a security alternative and it added strength to President Xi's 'China dream' of protecting Chinese interests globally.³³

The 'Sino' in the Sino-Solomons Security Agreement

The announcement on 24 March 2022 that Solomon Islands' cabinet would be considering a broad "security agreement" with China came as a shock.³⁴ Adding to the blow was the apparent attempt to keep the agreement as secret as possible for as long as possible so that its proposed terms only came to light through an opposition leak.³⁵ The terms of the final Chinese agreement still have not been made public but, while defending the secrecy of the agreement's terms, a Sogavare source confirmed that the leaked text was virtually the same as the final text. China already had a police cooperation protocol in place but the reference to a military component in a leaked draft agreement added serious regional implications.³⁶ At the invitation of the Solomons government, China could supply armed police, military personnel, and other law enforcement forces to assist the restoration and maintenance of domestic order.

Betraying its origins in Beijing, there is an implicit claim to extraterritoriality in the assertion that the PRC can use its forces specifically to protect Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands. The inclusion of references to ship visits and rights to replenishment, stopovers and transitions though the Solomons raised fears that these could be the precursors to a permanent naval presence. It is easy to construct a scenario where a Solomons request for security assistance continued over sufficient time as to require logistical support to be hardened on shore to protect the invited Chinese personnel delivering the security assistance. Some on-shore presence also could make it more difficult for a future Solomons Islands government not to renew the pact at the end of five years. It is noteworthy in this regard that the RAMSI intervention to restore public order lasted 14 years.

Outwardly, the 2022 Sino-Solomons security agreement put China on much the same level as Australia as protector of domestic security in Solomon Islands. There is evidence that some parity with Australia was intentional. Karen Galokale, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Police, National Security and Correctional Services suggested as much noting that "anything with the PRC it will be just the same" as the policing and security arrangements with Australia.³⁷ There are differences, nonetheless. The post-RAMSI treaty is ongoing while the Sino-Solomon pact is for five years. The basic elements of the status of forces arrangement and the option for regional support have been continued in the Australian agreement while the Chinese agreement leaves status issues to be negotiated at a later date.

A more important difference may well be in potential domestic consequences. Australia has had regional support and is a known quantity to Solomon Islanders. Given that China and 'new' (post-independence) Chinese have been at the centre of the most serious civil disturbances, Chinese intervention could look more like a foreign occupation force regardless of the

justification for an intervention. Worse would occur if an excuse were concocted for intervention to protect a Chinese undertaking threatened by a local community which denied the project a social licence. This prospect looms large in the mind of Malaitan Premier Daniel Suidani who has refused all Chinese aid to his province to the annoyance of Sogavare.³⁸

Any Chinese armed force (police or military) appears likely to generate a negative public reaction under current circumstances but one perceived to be illegitimate is one of the more likely catalysts for a Grenada scenario. Unlike the situation in 1983 Grenada, where the head of state and the head of government took opposing positions on inviting intervention, there is a Pacific wrinkle that could allow the Solomons civil society to request regional assistance against a Chinese intervention presence. The Biketawa Declaration might recognise a genuinely supported request by Solomon Islands notables and public to the PIF leaders to meet a threat to democracy if Chinese forces were being used to prop up an unpopular government or put down a micro-nationalist revolt [see appendix 1].

A rather more plausible Grenada scenario might be drawn from the question of what would Sogavare have done at the height of his annoyance with RAMSI in 2006-2007 if he had the option of seeking Chinese assistance to replace RAMSI? These concerns beg the question why, given such risks, was Beijing willing to buy into a possible confrontation with Australia and the rest of the region by entering into such a security pact with Solomon Islands?

There are good grounds for believing that China saw an opportunity to test the waters for a place in the region as an acceptable security partner. Perhaps Sogavare was such a willing partner in, or even instigator of, the security pact but, it seems, Beijing believed it could serve as a template for the region. Within months of first leaked news of the Sino-Solomons agreement, Foreign Minister Wang Yi had the draft of a regional security cooperation proposal to hawk around China's Pacific allies. It did not go well. The plan was leaked and immediately criticised by Pacific leaders.³⁹ In the event, a series of bilateral meetings ended with a collective decision to not consider Beijing's proposals at that time, thus undermining the intention to build upon the Sino-Solomons security agreement. It was an embarrassing lesson in regional diplomacy underscored by the obvious failure of the PRC's diplomatic missions to sell the Foreign Minister's message before he reached the region. Worse came later in the year when the region collectively agreed to an American-led 'Partners in the Blue Pacific' (PBP) regional initiative for closer cooperation.⁴⁰

Whatever Chinese expectations were for leveraging the Sino-Solomons security agreement more broadly, Wang's attempt appears to have been fatally premature, at best. Not only was his regional tour underprepared

for success, but it also amplified concern for the Sino-Solomons security agreement by providing tangible evidence that China aspired to a broader security presence in the region. Predictably, the heightened sense of insecurity Wang's agenda generated provoked reaction by Australia and other Western regional powers to address perceived weaknesses in the region's security architecture. Since the Wang tour, Australia has opened negotiations for a mutual defence pact with

PNG (September)⁴¹, has concluded a status of forces agreement with Fiji (October)⁴² and, in December, added a bilateral security agreement with Vanuatu.⁴³ In addition to the apparent setback for the PRC, these developments along with the PBP initiative serve as an implicit regional rebuke to Sogavare by his Melanesian neighbours for playing the China security card.

A Regional Security Dilemma?

When Sogavare chose to become an active player in the shifting geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, he created the wicked problem expressed in John Herz's escalating 'security dilemma'.⁴⁴ Herz claimed the pursuit of security can have the unintended consequences of greater overall defence insecurity. He expressed this conundrum as a 'dilemma' since, when one state increases its defences against a perceived threat, other states feel less secure and so increase their military capacity to countervail the first state's measures. Thus, a compounding loop of escalating insecurity is established making all states feel less secure in an insecure system. Western responses to the Chinese security initiatives in and through the Solomon Islands raised the prospect that the region is now on the first rung of Herz's security dilemma. Significantly, the Solomons have been at the centre of two of the three events raising the Herz prospect.

The first event occasioning this prospect arose in the wake of the Kingdom of Tonga's establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1976.⁴⁵ Despite responses including an immediate fourfold increase in aid from the West, Moscow made no reaction. Thus, insecurity proved largely one-sided throughout the remaining 15 years of the Cold War in this region. A second occasion arose in 2003 when the 'global war on terror' appeared to flare as a genuine threat in the region after the Solomons was identified as a failing state.⁴⁶ The linkage between terrorism and failed states was enough to provoke the belated RAMSI response to the tensions on Guadalcanal.⁴⁷ Again, the

security dilemma dissipated over time in the absence of any credible sources of significant terrorism in the region while, on the ground, RAMSI focused on the localised civil disorder, not on terrorism.

The April 2021 Sino-Solomons security agreement has set in motion the third and most credible train of events that could realise Herz's security dilemma in the region. The trajectory of escalating defensive measures and countermeasures has not been necessarily initiated by this agreement, but it has had a galvanising effect much as did the Tongan recognition of the USSR. It reified the prevailing Western insecurity regarding China rising in the region. There is a greater likelihood this time that perceived insecurity will take off to become the escalating geopolitical competition that the PIF states have feared.⁴⁸ China, despite the disappointment of Wang Yi's ill-fated 10-day visit to the Pacific in late May 2022, has signalled that it wants an equal place in regional affairs on par with the region's traditional friends and that this equality has a security component.

While it is too early to see any significant Chinese response to recent Western security initiatives, Beijing is making an appeal to regional sentiment to resist Western 'militarisation' of the region.⁴⁹ Just how far this nascent spiral of defensive measure and countermeasure will go depends not only on possible escalation with the Solomons but also events in the regional arena and the broader Indo-Pacific context within which this rivalry is embedded.

Democracy, Regionalism and the Pacific Games

Pacific Island regionalism has been an important, albeit underrated, factor in the Solomons post-WWII development through its participation in the Pacific Island regional system. The Pacific Community (SPC), the oldest and largest regional organisation has delivered substantial technical assistance since 1947. As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum, Solomon Islands has helped to shape the region's agenda directly as well through that of the spin-off Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) which is headquartered in Honiara. The FFA has been critical to protecting the Solomons'

fisheries as well as ensuring an effective economic return for the resource. The South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) not only provides advice to the Solomons on environmental matters but serves as an important conduit for funding from the Global Environment Facility to the region. The value to Solomon Islands of all this multilateral assistance, mainly from Western sources, rarely figures in the usual public commentaries regarding aid to the Solomons. Yet these bodies play vital roles in delivering day-to-

day services including human security assistance, needed by Solomon Islands.

Even less visible are the number of multilateral associations and arrangements intended to help maintain good government and preserve democratic values. These associations include the Commonwealth of Nations, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (which supports a twinning arrangement between the Solomons and the Parliament of New South Wales), and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The Commonwealth of Nations is particularly significant since it has a capacity to impose sanctions for breaches of democratic order under the Harare Declaration and direct democratic support through the Millbrook Programme.⁵⁰ The Solomons contributed inadvertently to a regional version of Harare. The coup against Ulufa'alu was one of the two coups in the region that led the 2000 PIF Leaders' Meeting to adopt the Harare-inspired Biketawa Declaration to help protect democracy in the region.

One manifestation of regionalism has been a significant and visible driver of Solomons politics for the past five years. In 2017, Solomon Islands won the right to host the Pacific Games for the first time in 60 years since the inaugural South Pacific Games were held in Suva in 1963. The Games were originated during the colonial period and were intended to be a social vehicle for drawing the disparate islands of the Pacific more closely together as a self-identifying region. However, as with major international sporting events, the economic benefit of staging the Games can become a primary justification for the host. Sogavare has identified this objective at the highest level nationally. He has asserted that the 2023 event "has become the centre piece of our economic recovery" and added that it has already delivered more than a billion dollars' worth of investment into the economy.⁵¹ China is giving the largest share with significant amounts to build the athletes village and the centrepiece \$74 million dollars grant to build a new stadium.⁵² In a real sense, Sogavare has linked his political future to the economic bounce he expects from the Games. The connections can be seen in some of his key decisions to date.

The importance of the intertwined threads of personal ambition, Chinese interests, and economic aspirations for the Games are illuminated by the political jeopardy Sogavare is willing to risk to ensure the Games are a success under his watch. For the opposition, the most serious of these has been the postponement of the scheduled 2023 election for a year to guarantee the Games would be held while he is in office. Sogavare forced a successful vote to change the constitution to reschedule the May 2023 election to 2024. He claimed that the government could not fund both the Games and an election.⁵³ There is little evidence that he tried to secure additional funding for the election in contrast to funding for the Games. Indeed, a belated Australian offer, on the eve of the parliamentary vote to change the constitution, was met with outrage. Sogavare levelled

a charge of 'interference' because of its timing.⁵⁴ He subsequently admitted he would accept the electoral assistance as long as it was for a 2024 date after the Games.

A secondary argument held that there were administrative challenges in holding the 2023 election in May and the Pacific Games in November. This does not stand close scrutiny. The original dates for the Honiara Games were in July 2022 scarcely two months after the expected May election date. This did not appear to be an issue until the Covid-19 pandemic. The Honiara 2023 Pacific Games Organising Committee requested a four-month delay in June 2021 in order to allow for construction delays due to Covid.⁵⁵ This extended the distance between the May 2022 election and the Games which should have made holding the election as scheduled even less problematic. Presumably a longer delay could have been sought but it would not have solved the problem for Sogavare of having to face an election that he might lose. Moving the election date did.

In addition to concern for the political consequences of rioting in Honiara, Sogavare has felt it necessary to allay fears that the capital might not be safe for Games visitors. He has made a point of promising all participating countries that the government had taken steps "to ensure your teams are looked after, protected, and safe".⁵⁶ Keeping this promise will require a substantial policing effort. It is projected that 500 guards will be needed for the sporting venues with another 175 guards at the Games Villages while ancillary venues would require 200 guards.⁵⁷ Providing this level of security for the Games has been a significant common motivator for both Sogavare and Beijing in developing their controversial closer policing cooperation which includes training with assault weapons and crowd control machinery.⁵⁸ The Solomons' Leader of the Opposition, Matthew Wale, saw a domestic version of Herz's security dilemma when Australia responded to China's police cooperation by supplying the assault rifles. He noted: "It is clear Australia is anxious that, if they do not supply guns, then China will."⁵⁹

Internal opposition to the Games has focused on two key issues – democratic values and economics. Opposition Leader Wale has argued against spending so much on sport when the country needed hospitals and other measures to deal with Covid-19.⁶⁰ Using tens of millions of aid money on stadia, housing and related infrastructure might prove useful at the time, but not necessarily be well used afterwards. Since all the Games investments will be in and around Honiara there is a limit to the reach of their benefits especially compared with hospitals and classrooms distributed elsewhere in the archipelago. Not raised in public debate, the risk to the Games delivering a substantial boost to the economy is subject to another 'black swan' event such as Covid. The regional transport systems are still not fully recovered. Any shock to the

airlines could make it difficult to sell sufficient seats for financial success, especially for a destination not on major international routes.

Whether the Games will be as lucrative as Sogavare expects, or worth the political risks he has taken, can be questioned. The economic motivation loomed large in the decision to switch recognition from Taipei to Beijing. In addition to the personal bribes, the PRC promised a large aid package which included taking over the Games project from Taiwan with even greater funding provided as a grant, not a loan.⁶¹ A study of the economic benefits of the 2003 Pacific Games for Fiji found that tourism was a key sector to benefit from hosting the Games.⁶² Solomon Islands tourism ranks fairly low regionally and tends to be classed mainly 'business tourists' including a high percentage

of expatriate aid workers and consultants rather than the greater number of leisure travellers that broaden the visitor contribution to the national economy.⁶³ The financial risks were exemplified by the tortured path to the 2019 Games. After a World Bank report outlining the economic difficulties for Tonga, Prime Minister Akilisi Pohiva cancelled hosting two years before the Games were scheduled, believing it would be a "costly mistake".⁶⁴ Pohiva was concerned also that Tonga could not afford the massive maintenance cost of the infrastructure needed for the event. The World Bank recently raised similar concerns for the Solomons, despite the large volume of external support underwriting the Games reducing the government's direct exposure.⁶⁵

Finding a Way Forward

Within months of switching its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, the Solomons entered into a security arrangement with China that shocked the region. The Sino-Solomons security agreement sharply deviated from the trajectory of longer-term relations with China taken by the eight previous Pacific Island countries to recognise China. Understanding the reasons for this drastic departure is important for at least two reasons. On the one hand, many official and media commentaries have interpreted the Solomons' action as signalling new and perilous Chinese aspirations to change pre-existing relations in the region toward a greater security role in Australia's close strategic environment. Alternatively, the issue could be seen essentially as a self-inflicted wound in Canberra's relations with an important neighbour that has turned septic. This review does not rule out radically changed Chinese intentions toward Pacific Island countries. However, the speed and timing of the security agreement suggest that it was an opportunistic response motivated more by domestic circumstances than a carefully laid trap by Beijing.

The key element is the role played by the Solomon's PM Sogavare, whose political ambitions have been shaped for a quarter century by attempting to meet the challenging demands of nation-building while exercising leadership in an environment of social instability. It has been to his credit that he has managed to become the longest-serving Solomons' prime minister, by dint of political entrepreneurship and personal persistence. On the flip side, these two strengths have been expressed in a willingness to put personal ambition above national cohesion and taking risks with the democratic process. In many ways, Sogavare's path to political success has not been out of character with that of most of his predecessors. Corruption has been a factor connecting both the economy and politics of the Solomons since independence. What has been novel is the presence of a corrupting influence with the deep pockets and

the international, as well as domestic, objectives of President Xi's China.

Arguably, Taiwan's primary interest in the Solomons was also international. Its primary goal for more than three decades was to keep its diplomatic recognition. Domestic objectives generally appeared limited to national development assistance to maintain good faith with the politicians it supported by contributions through constituency development funding. China's key international objective might have been met when Sogavare engineered the switch in recognition from Taipei. This was essentially the case when Tonga switched recognition in 1998. Even the double reverses of Kiribati and Nauru appeared to be restricted to recognition rivalry.⁶⁶ Yet, in the case of the Solomons, the PRC was prepared to move swiftly and to devote significant resources to obtaining much greater international objectives when the opening presented itself. In the event, the opportunity existed not because China did more for the Solomons than any other country or had a pre-set plan to gain an underserved strategic advantage from its unwitting host. As much as China was prepared to develop significantly closer ties with the Solomons, the host government had to be receptive. And, for his own reasons, Sogavare has been.

The grudges Sogavare nursed for some 14 years from his troubled relationship with RAMSI resurfaced when the post-RAMSI security pact with Australia was activated to deal with the November riots in Honiara, calling for his resignation. Sogavare, in particular had reason to fear the Honiara rioters. Like the Parisian mobs in the 18th and 19th centuries, rioters in the capital had forced political change a number of times in the short period the Solomons had been an independent country. If he did not fully initiate the proposal for the Sino-Solomons security agreement, Sogavare was a willing interlocutor for the arrangement. He wanted a guarantor apart from Australia for his political security

as well as from the instability in the capital. China was prepared to provide both. Chinese money contributed to creating and holding together Sogavare's DCGA government and the Sino-Solomons security agreement offered the non-Australian option for armed police and military force to quell political volatility in Honiara.

Given the circumstances that coalesced around Sogavare's desire for alternative security options and China's willingness to take the risks of providing such assistance, there are limits to what Australia might do bilaterally to rebalance its security relationship with the Solomons. Australia has always outspent the PRC in aid to the Solomons. More of the same is unlikely to change circumstances with the Sogavare-led DCGA government.

The 14 years of active on-the-ground engagement and the multi-billion dollars that Australia invested through RAMSI in promoting good governance, growth and stability did not deter Sogavare from accepting the blandishments of the PRC. Indeed, some of that experience served to drive him further in the direction of China. That the institutionalised corruption of the CDF system survived the RAMSI intervention to emerge even stronger was an unfortunate statement on the RAMSI's record in fighting corruption.⁶⁷ Being somewhat normalised made it easier for Beijing to use this vehicle to amplify its influence on individual politicians overtly, although public opinion still regarded both the system and China corrupt for using it. Equally, unlike Taiwan, Australian disapproval of the democratic defects in the CDF makes the scheme virtually inaccessible to Canberra to use itself for countering Chinese influence in the Solomons.

Perhaps the most important consideration in terms of reacting to the events of the last three years is not to overreact. Australia's relationship with the Solomon Islands is not binary — a zero sum game where every Chinese advantage comes at the expense of an Australian loss. Nor is the current Solomons course set in concrete. Sogavare has yet to survive a full term of government, thus far in his political career. Nor has he won a consecutive second term. Moreover, twice Sogavare has been removed from office for mismanaging relations with Australia and for his leadership style. Still, Chinese help has been vital in gluing together the most stable coalition of support that he has ever enjoyed.

This support is likely to continue as Sogavare's Chinese backers have a lot to lose if he and the DCGA government does not go full term. This was evident in the Chinese money which helped guarantee support for changing the constitution to extend the life of the parliament by a year. Nevertheless, despite being democratically suspect, this act of political self-protection was accomplished through legal means. There is no reason yet to believe the deferred election will not be held properly on the new 2024 date. This is not to say that Sogavare will not pursue tactics to allow him a favourable pitch on which to contest this election.

He has made an effort to restrict Facebook, a principal information source in the far-flung archipelago, as well to exert some editorial control over the SIBC, the national broadcaster, and to deny journalists entry to the country.⁶⁸ These measures show an intent, but the Solomon Islands are too fractured for media manipulation to be effective, leading the opposition to characterise Sogavare's efforts more as 'paranoia'.⁶⁹

Although the alarmists in some quarters imply that China has secured pole position in the race for influence in the Solomons, this is partially true, perhaps, but only in Honiara. Even in the capital, the presumption of growing PRC influence has provoked counterbalancing Western action as in the US decision to re-open its embassy and other powers upgrading staff and programmes in the capital. In the rest of the country, Australia enjoys some key advantages through language, its lengthy aid presence, and NGO involvements in education and religion.

While there have been issues with Australian private investment in the Solomons, these have not generated the same ethnic-based antagonism as with 'Asian' corruption in the logging industry or to Chinese aid as in Malaita. Moreover, recent practical schemes such as recruiting seasonal workers from the Solomons have served to increase Australia's soft power footprint across the archipelago. This scheme is not sufficient to solve the challenges of the Solomons' 'youth bulge'. [see appendix 2]. Nevertheless, it offers a way of extending economic opportunities beyond the government programmes centred on Honiara.

Of course, there is always more to do to maintain effective bilateral relations. Given that Sogavare has accepted the offer of electoral assistance for the 2024 general election, he will need to work to secure wide and informed participation through engagement with civil society as well as formal bureaucratic channels. This is likely to involve greater public diplomacy to counter the Chinese effort in this space to undermine the democratic message.⁷⁰

Good bilateral relations as well as effective popular engagement will need to be maintained to limit the options for further damage by China to Australia's interests in the Solomons. Even so, the evidence to date suggests the most constructive path to manage current levels of insecurity will be through enhanced regional engagement. The ripples from the Sino-Solomons security agreement have not spread far from Honiara. Sogavare's quest for security options have not resonated with his regional colleagues who, thus far, have played a pragmatic but supportive role in blunting overt Chinese efforts to extend its security interest in the region. Looking more closely at the way the regional leadership responded to Wang Yi's regional security proposal prior to the 2022 PIF meeting is instructive. It was neutralised first by individual states rejecting the proposed bilateral approvals and then by a multilateral collective decision. Samoa's Prime Minister Fiamē Mata'afa argued that the proposal should not

be signed by individual states until some collective decision was made.⁷¹ This contrasted sharply with the way the US-led Partners in the Blue Pacific proposal for closer ties was treated. The regional response was almost the reverse of the Wang Yi proposal.⁷² Sogavare attempted to play the Fiamme ploy for dealing with the Western-align initiative. He claimed he would not sign the PBP proposal because it had not been subject to a regional review.⁷³ However, in this case, he found that regional members would proceed to sign without him. Consequently, he went along with the tacit consensus and signed up, along with all the other PIF states at the White House meeting.⁷⁴

The subtle pressure of regional solidarity appears to have tempered Sogavare's tendency, to a degree, to run with the foxes and hunt with the hounds in his relations with China. When he is with his fellow regional leaders, he tends to be more risk averse than when he has the Chinese ambassador whispering in his ear in Honiara. This was most evident, when at the Suva PIF Leaders Meeting, he acknowledged that he was aware that a Chinese base would paint a target on the back of his people.⁷⁵ Yet, at home he heightens concerns about his closeness to Beijing and appears to undermine the Solomons' Western ties. He snubbed US Ambassador Caroline Kennedy at an important symbolic commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal, a visit which included the opening of the US embassy in Honiara.⁷⁶

The importance of regional obligations also appears to be weaker at home. Sogavare denied access to the US Coast Guard Cutter Oliver Henry and HMAS Spey on the grounds there was not time to clear the diplomatic paperwork for their entry despite both intending to assist with protecting, inter alia, Solomons' fisheries resources.⁷⁷ Yet even here, this incident served to reassert the value of regional arrangements. Sogavare intended the ban to apply to all foreign navy vessels, including those of Australia and New Zealand, until new protocols for entry were devised. However, Sogavare had to admit that the post-RAMSI treaty would exempt Australia, New Zealand and Fiji from the ban.⁷⁸

In summary, as much as international attention has focused on the implications of the Sino-Solomons security agreement, the roots of the pact run deep

into the soil of Solomon Islands domestic politics. The agreement was not inevitable or even solely attributable to the machinations of a manipulative China. For a quarter century, Prime Minister Sogavare's personal ambition and political resilience motivated him to seek opportunities for the stability and security of tenure. This made him a clever and resourceful politician with an eye for the main chance. Beijing was prepared to be that chance. However, it would be a mistake to see him solely as a puppet in thrall to China. He has shown an awareness of the need to not fully alienate long-standing Western partners like Australia or fall out completely with his regional colleagues and counterparts. The Solomons is not a well-structured and disciplined society. Corruption at the top may serve China and elite politicians for the moment, but it is a cancer that constantly erodes public trust and, as has been demonstrated, breaks out in civil unrest regularly.

As the Solomon Islands most generous supporter to a people that deserve fidelity, Australia should not minimise its importance to Solomon Islanders, whatever challenges their government poses for the present. Australia would be unwise to trust the present Solomons government to keep its assurances of not being a party to undermining Australian and regional security interests. But it would be unwise also not to help the people of the Solomons to meet the massive challenges facing them as fully as Australia can. Importantly, in this, Australia is not alone. The regional system provides a stabilising influence on the bilateral relationship.

More needs to be made of the Solomons regional connections in dealing with security. The regional neighbours have demonstrated a willingness to contribute their share to balanced relationships within the broader regional family in order to secure balanced outcomes. In the end, assisting the people of the Solomons to meet their aspirations through both the available bilateral and regional mechanisms is the surest way for Australia to help provide the domestic stability to keep the Sino-Solomons security agreement in the filing cabinet drawer until its expiry date.

Appendices

1. Malaita and Micro-nationalism

Nationhood is a work in progress for Solomon Islands. Like the rest of Melanesia, it was not a nation when it achieved independence. Arguably Britain, anxious to extricate itself from east of Suez, was more concerned getting Solomon Islanders to agree to statehood than to developing a sense of national identity. The decolonisation process was rushed with a bare two years between the granting of self-government and the granting of independence in 1978.

Fractured both territorially, encompassing almost 1000 islands, and ethnically, speaking 63 distinct languages, Solomon Islands has lacked strong institutions of national cohesion. Perhaps the only genuinely countrywide social unifier is Pijin (Solomon Islands pidgin) as the lingua franca for most people although it is the second language to tok ples (birth language) for most of its speakers. English, the Solomons official language, is a distant third.

Internally, Solomon Islanders have a strong attachment to place, principally identifying themselves by their natal island or by their parents' home island. An important related social obligation is to one's wantoks (fellow language speakers). Internationally, the demonym 'Solomon Islander' serves as an uncontested common unifier around citizenship, unlike the decades of division within Fiji over who could be identified as 'Fijian'.

While the courts and penal code appear to enjoy reasonable legitimacy, acceptance of national authority over property rights law is highly contentious. Most land is communally owned and subject to the local variant of kastom (customary rights and obligations) that applies in that part of the Solomons.⁷⁹

Malaitans, are not only the largest ethnic group in the Solomons, but they have also constituted disproportionately the largest group of migrants within the archipelago due to a long history of economic and political entrepreneurship.⁸⁰ It was their success outside Malaita especially in the public sector that led to the five years of 'Tensions' between the Malaitan migrants living in and around Honiara and the Guale of Guadalcanal. The Guale believed the tens of thousands of Malaitans on Guadalcanal had usurped their customary land rights.

The Malaitan Eagle Force mainly sought to protect their wantoks on Guadalcanal rather than create a separate homeland. Nonetheless, sentiments for great autonomy and even some thoughts of independence emerged within some Malaitan factions. These political aspirations appear to have become more open and focused over the past 15 years and accelerated significantly since the switch in diplomatic recognition to Beijing.

Daniel Suidani, Malaita's provincial premier, has refused Chinese aid to the province and targeted China as a threat to his province, the country and global order. Amongst his reasons were China's communist system, atheism and 'ambition to

dominate the world', as well as a real fear for the Solomons of debt-trap diplomacy.⁸¹

Significantly Suidani's stand attracted the backing of a micro-nationalist movement, Malaita for Democracy (M4D), seeking to link its support for Suidani to a demand for Malaitan independence.⁸² The M4D influence appeared to grow as Suidani's dispute with Sogavare escalated. In September 2020, Suidani called for a referendum on Malaitan independence.⁸³ He repeated the call in December 2021 after the November riots and sought UN support for it as a matter of international law regarding the right to self-determination.⁸⁴

A quarter of a century of grievances has helped to nurture the idea of Malaitan separatism, but it remained in the background of provincial politics until the switch in diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. While it is yet to become a serious threat to national unity, Malaita appears less a part of Solomon Islands nationhood than at any time since 1978. It has the potential to develop into a Bougainville separatist movement if a resolution to the frictions with the rest of the country is not found.

2. The Youth Bulge Challenge

Solomon Islands along with the whole of Melanesia is facing the challenge of how to manage a demographic timebomb of disproportionately young populations. This 'youth bulge' is the consequence of the wonderful improvements in health, nutrition and sanitation across this sub-region in recent decades. Somewhat less positively, the contrast with the Micronesian and Polynesian sub-regions is due to an advantage that they have enjoyed which so far has not applied in Melanesia. Most Micronesian countries have had a population outlet to their former or current administering powers, principally the United States and Australia. Generally, the Anglophonic Polynesian entities have enjoyed a similar privilege with the New Zealand, Hawaii and Australia as their main destinations.

One of the more serious aspects of the youth bulge in Solomon Islands has been the consequential high level of youth unemployment which the ILO has described as "particularly dire".⁸⁵ Allowing for the difficulties of estimating unemployment levels statistically in a country where subsistence agriculture dominates the domestic economy, one recent estimate puts youth unemployment at around 46 per cent.⁸⁶

The large share of the population under the age of 25 and the high level of unemployed young people have posed serious social stability issues especially around the capital although surveys suggest that, as a cohort, young people are not politically active.⁸⁷ The political consequences of outbreaks of unrest in Honiara have been catastrophic on several occasions. In part because of their participation in destructive rioting especially in the 2006 and 2019 disturbances in Honiara, young people have come to be perceived as 'conflict risks'.⁸⁸

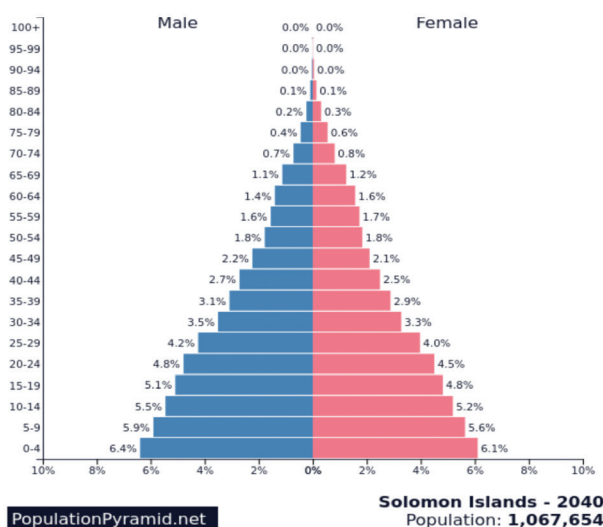
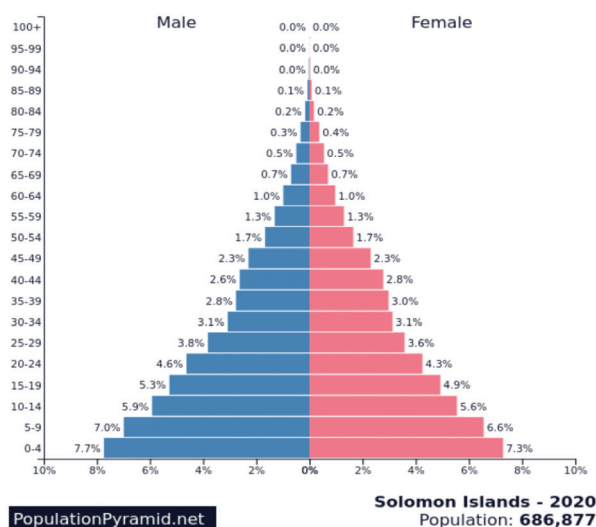
Melanesian Demographics

Country	Population below 25 (2020) as %	Population below 25 (2040) as %
Fiji	44.8	38.5
PNG	54.7	44.2
Solomon Islands	59.4	48.0
Vanuatu	59.6	47.6

Unfortunately, Solomon Islands governments have recognised challenges of the youth bulge but do not appear to have attached a high priority to addressing them. While the politicians are awash with funding to buy votes and influence policy, young Solomon Islanders struggle for any significant level of support. The Youth Development Division of the Ministry of Women Youth Children and Family Affairs' national budget is reportedly less than half the annual constituency development funds for a single member. Provincial governments bear primary responsibility but are allocated only some US \$430 to \$720 per year for youth activities.⁸⁹ International efforts including the RAMSI intervention have not made much of an impact either.

For the present, the youth bulge is the Solomons' problem. Funding education, health and job training

for these young people is both inadequate and something of a double-edged sword. The better educated and trained for work they are, the more the frustrations mount that the work is not available. The answers are not easy. If the public sector continues to be a primary engine for paid employment, the more likely official corruption will be a serious influence in the economy. A failure to work with every sector of the Solomons economy to find paths to a more robust local private sector will have consequences for Australia. If the youth cannot find an acceptable future within their own country, they will follow the example of the young people of Polynesia and Micronesia.



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There are many possible analytical lenses that could be used to assess the current fragility of Australian and regional security interests in Solomon Islands and their consequences. In this report, Dr R.A. Herr concentrates on how the effects of the insecurity of Solomons domestic politics shaped Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare's ambition to secure his personal power by linking it to a supportive external power. China was prepared to be that power especially as it also involved removing one more of Taiwan's Pacific allies. To the extent that Sogavare has tied his domestic success to his new foreign relationship, he has managed to generate an aura of uncertainty both at home and in the region. Unless the consequent escalating spiral of insecurity is short-circuited, Sogavare's path to fulfilling his personal quest for political security has the potential to draw the Australia and the Pacific Island states closer to the vortex of a dangerous Indo-Pacific strategic rivalry that the region has long sought to avoid. While there are no obvious off-ramps, the most effective responses are coming from the Solomons' regional neighbours.



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