

# Uncharted Waters: Emerging Security Challenges in the Southwest Pacific

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Following China's documented malign actions in the Southwest Pacific, the regional security environment has significantly changed.

American strategy in the Indo-Pacific must account for these changes, including how they have upset the regional order.

Success will see Chinese expansionism and coercion stymied, while better enabling concerted action shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. allies and partners.

**W**ithin the past three years alone, the security environment in the Pacific Islands has dramatically changed. With a particular focus on the Southwest Pacific, which broadly includes Melanesia, Australia, and New Zealand, changes to regional security dynamics are impacting U.S. strategic thinking. In the New Cold War against China, the U.S. must carefully act and navigate changing sub-regional dynamics in the Indo-Pacific. Success will see Chinese expansionism and coercion stymied, while better enabling concerted action shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and partners.

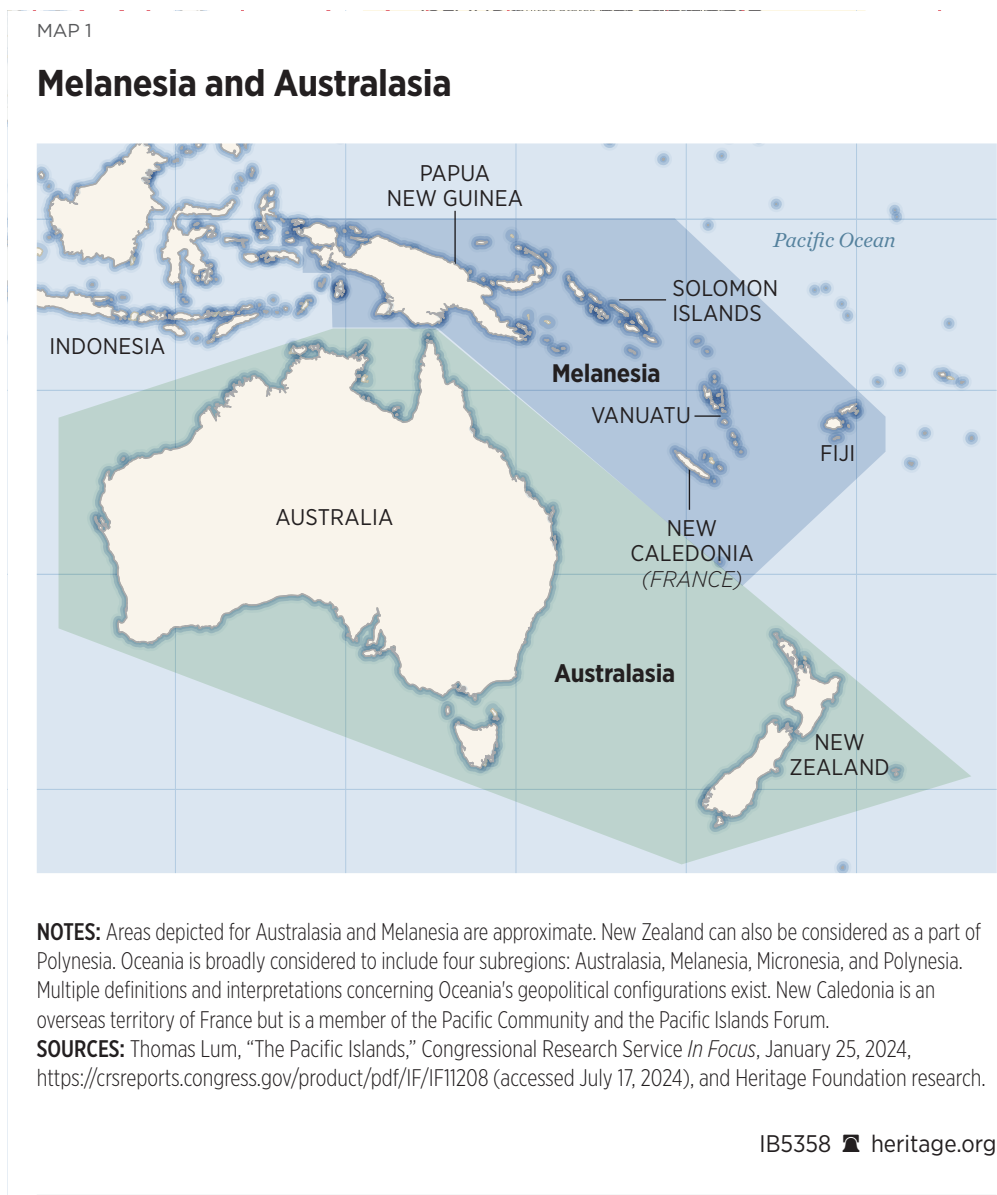
## Solomon Islands

The triggering moment that kickstarted renewed U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands was the bombshell

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2022 report that China signed a security agreement with the Solomon Islands. Final terms remain secret, though a leaked draft indicated that

- The Solomon Islands could request Chinese “police, armed forces, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces” to “[maintain] social order”;<sup>1</sup>
- China could undertake military activities “according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands,” including “ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in the Solomon Islands”;<sup>2</sup>

- Chinese “relevant forces” are authorized to “protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands”;<sup>3</sup> and
- Neither party will “disclose the cooperation information to a third party.”<sup>4</sup>

During then-Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare’s visit to China in 2023, China and the Solomon Islands signed a police cooperation deal, in addition to eight other agreements.<sup>5</sup> The policing agreement focuses on “[enhancing] cooperation on law enforcement and security matters,” thereby contributing to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.”<sup>6</sup> The Solomon Islands and China released a joint statement in which the Solomons supports “China’s position on issues related to Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet,” and reaffirmed that “Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory.”<sup>7</sup>

In May 2024, former Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Jeremiah Manele was elected Prime Minister. Manele oversaw the country’s switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019.<sup>8</sup> Time will tell how Manele guides Solomon Islands’ foreign and security policy, though there is currently no indication that he will shift from the country’s enhanced ties with China.

The overall trajectory of the Solomon Islands–China relationship is not promising for U.S. and allied interests. The leaked language in the 2022 security deal could be interpreted to grant China permission to preposition supplies for its military, potentially to include a military base.<sup>9</sup>

If China is aiming to expand its military footprint in the Southwest Pacific, which seems likely,<sup>10</sup> then it could directly threaten U.S. and allied interests in a region in which China has previously not enjoyed a significant presence. If a logistics hub is established in the Solomon Islands, then it would be China’s second overseas military base after Djibouti,<sup>11</sup> though it appears that China—despite consistently denying it would happen—is now docking warships in Cambodia’s Ream military base that has a dry dock and aircraft carrier pier.<sup>12</sup> It is also possible for China to forward deploy assets, such as sensors, to monitor the movements of U.S. and allied forces in the region.

## Papua New Guinea

Following the Solomon Islands’ enhanced engagement with China, interest in Papua New Guinea (PNG), which was already a focus of the Trump Administration’s engagement in the Pacific Islands, increased.<sup>13</sup> In 2023, the U.S. signed a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with PNG

MAP 2

## U.S.–Papua New Guinea Defense Cooperation Agreement Facilities and Areas

The sites shown below are available for U.S. forces and contractors to use for mutual visits, exercises, aircraft usage, staging and deploying forces, prepositioning supplies, and other purposes.



\*Includes Port Moresby Seaport and Port Moresby International Airport.

**SOURCES:** U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Papua New Guinea,” signed May 22, 2023, p. 13, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/63374-Papua-New-Guinea-Defense-08.16.2023.pdf> (accessed July 17, 2024).

and an agreement to counter illicit transnational maritime activity, which notably focuses on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.<sup>14</sup>

Notable provisions of the U.S.–PNG DCA include:

- PNG providing “unimpeded access to and use of Agreed Facilities and Areas to U.S. forces, U.S. contractors, and others as mutually agreed”;<sup>15</sup>
- Using facilities and areas for mutual visits, exercises, aircraft usage, vehicle maintenance, staging and deploying forces, prepositioning supplies, and humanitarian and disaster relief;<sup>16</sup> and

- Free movement for U.S. aircraft, vehicles, and vessels within PNG's territory and territorial waters.<sup>17</sup>

China has taken notice. In January 2024, PNG Foreign Minister Justin Tkachenko stated that PNG was in “early stages” with China regarding a “policing and security” agreement.<sup>18</sup> Shortly after, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma warned PNG against agreeing to such a deal, as China’s “commitment in defense of investment comes with a high cost” and that China was “not interested in a modern rules-based order.”<sup>19</sup> *China Daily* was quick to dismiss Washington’s and Canberra’s “unease” as having “set the proverbial cat among pigeons,”<sup>20</sup> which is quite ironic.<sup>21</sup> As of now, no security agreement between PNG and China has been publicly announced.

Another matter to monitor is the political status of Bougainville, currently a region within PNG. Formally known as the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, there is a legitimate possibility that the region could become the world’s newest country by 2027. The means to get there, however, could prove challenging. PNG’s national government has not made serious progress in recognizing Bougainville’s independence, following a referendum that witnessed nearly 98 percent of Bougainvilleans voting in favor of independence.<sup>22</sup> There is past precedent of violence between Bougainville and the national government.<sup>23</sup> Concerningly, Chinese money seems to be available to politicians that may be willing to support Chinese interests in Bougainville, including access to mining and critical minerals.<sup>24</sup>

A localized conflict, though currently unlikely, would have regional implications, such as the potential disruption of Melanesian trade routes or political unrest in PNG and the Solomon Islands. China could take advantage of such opportunities to advance its interests by financing select politicians and leaders, promising financial support in exchange for Bougainville’s diplomatic recognition and support, or even placing Chinese police forces on Bougainville and surrounding islands.

## Australia

Due to its geography, Australia has largely focused its defense strategy on its near abroad and regional contingencies. Australia has since recognized, however, that technological advances, particularly China’s high acquisition rates of long-range missile systems,<sup>25</sup> means that this is no longer the case. The Australian government today is more clear-eyed about the security threats China poses and the need to focus on threats in the broader Indo-Pacific.

The formation of AUKUS—a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—represented a significant shift in Australia’s strategic thinking. Originally announced in 2021, with implementation largely beginning in 2022,<sup>26</sup> AUKUS includes two pillars: the purchasing and eventual construction of nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarines and a broad technology-sharing and development agreement between the three signatories.

Australia will first purchase several *Virginia*-class submarines from the United States and will later construct a new nuclear submarine domestically, currently known as SSN-AUKUS, with U.S. and U.K. submarines visiting and rotating through Australia this decade.<sup>27</sup> All three countries are making investments into their submarine industrial bases to expand necessary capacity—and Australia is even investing in America’s submarine industrial base as part of the agreement.<sup>28</sup>

In 2023, Australia released its Defense Strategic Review, described as “the most substantial and ambitious approach to Defense reform recommended by any Australian Government since the Second World War.”<sup>29</sup> To summarize, the review:

- Contends that Chinese military advances mean the United States is no longer the “unipolar leader of the Indo-Pacific”;<sup>30</sup>
- Refocuses Australia’s attention from “low-level conflict from small to middle regional powers” to “potential threats arising from major power competition”;<sup>31</sup>
- Replaces Australia’s “deterrence of denial” approach, which refers to more low-level, local threats to a “strategy of denial” approach, which refers to more high-level, regional threats;<sup>32</sup> and
- Supports the development of new asymmetric warfare capabilities and infrastructure for the eventual arrival of SSN-AUKUS nuclear submarines.<sup>33</sup>

Building off the Defense Strategic Review, Australia’s 2024 National Defense Strategy:

- Accurately acknowledges that U.S.–China strategic competition will “have the greatest impact on the regional strategic balance” and that “China has employed coercive tactics in pursuit of its strategic objectives”;<sup>34</sup>

- Reaffirms the need to adopt a Strategy of Denial;<sup>35</sup>
- Focuses Australian defense spending on naval acquisition and reorganizes the army toward littoral and amphibious combat operations;<sup>36</sup> and
- Outlines multiple avenues for enhanced engagements with allies and partners in the Indo–Pacific.<sup>37</sup>

With these strategy documents, Australia has more explicitly aligned with U.S. strategic thinking toward the Indo–Pacific, broadly—and China, specifically. Having an Australia more clear-eyed about the regional threat environment will allow the U.S. and Australia to better coordinate efforts to hedge against new and increased Chinese activities in the Southwest Pacific. It also allows the U.S. to prioritize deterrence in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea as Australia ramps up its engagement in the Southwest Pacific.

## New Zealand

Like Australia, New Zealand’s geography has shielded it from threats of large-scale conflict. Unlike Australia, however, U.S. and New Zealand defense relations have fluctuated. Since the start of the decade, defense ties have improved between Washington and Wellington, and China is a significant factor.

In August 2023, New Zealand released its first-ever National Security Strategy. The document:

- Acknowledges that “[t]hreats are reaching New Zealanders more directly,” when, in the past, New Zealand was “largely protected from threats by geography”;<sup>38</sup>
- Acknowledges China has “become more assertive and more willing to challenge existing international rules and norms” and “exploited cyber vulnerabilities”;<sup>39</sup> and
- Identifies the “China–Solomon Islands security agreement and ongoing attempts to create new groupings in the Pacific” as examples of “China’s ambition to link economic and security cooperation, create competing regional architectures, and expand its influence with Pacific Island countries across policing, defence, digital, and maritime spheres.”<sup>40</sup>

New Zealand's 2023 Defense Policy and Strategy Statement reflects key elements of the country's National Security Strategy. The document:

- Accurately assesses the “wider Indo-Pacific” to be “the central global theater for strategic competition” with Taiwan and tensions in the South and East China Seas serving as “potential triggers” for conflict;<sup>41</sup>
- Views China as both an “essential” partner in “addressing many global challenges” and an “increasingly powerful” actor that is “using all its instruments of national power” to expand its influence in the Pacific “at the expense of more traditional partners such as New Zealand and Australia”;<sup>42</sup>
- Upholds a regional framework toward defense interests that places a significant emphasis on the Pacific Islands and Australia, which is New Zealand's only formal ally; and
- Considers the U.S. a “crucial defense partner” but primarily defines the relationship through the Five Eyes partnership, rather than a stand-alone relationship.<sup>43</sup>

New Zealand is on track to expand its defense profile even further. For example, New Zealand officials are interested in elevating its role in the Five Eyes intelligence network, AUKUS, and NATO.<sup>44</sup>

Differences between the U.S. and New Zealand, however, do remain. The restoration of a formal defense alliance is not currently on the horizon, and New Zealand's language toward China, while trending in the right direction, is not as explicit as found in American, or even Australian, documents.<sup>45</sup> The trajectory, however, is explained by New Zealand's accurate understanding that China's malign activities and interests in the Southwest Pacific now possess direct challenges, and even threats, to New Zealand's security.

## Recommendations for the United States

Following recent security developments in the Southwest Pacific, the U.S. should:

- **View the Southwest Pacific as a contested security environment in the broader Indo-Pacific theater.** Before 2022, the Southwest Pacific was generally considered to be peaceful with the occasional risk



of localized or limited regional conflict. Australia has historically been perceived by the West as Melanesia's security guarantor, but China's security deal with the Solomon Islands challenged this notion. With China's interest in securing security and policing deals with PNG and potentially other Pacific Islands, as well as America inking a DCA with PNG, the region has quickly turned into a competitive region that can shift over time.

- **Coordinate with Australia and New Zealand on assessments about Chinese capabilities and threats.** Australia and New Zealand's historic new defense publications underscore how, even though each country may have differences in how they perceive China, they both recognize that China poses risks to their security interests that require a change in strategic thinking. Furthermore, the more Australia and New Zealand enhance defense cooperation with the United States, the more integrated these states will be in viewing China's advances in the Southwest Pacific as a threat and acting in response to China's actions. Examples could include exploring future avenues for New Zealand to participate in AUKUS Pillar II,<sup>46</sup> conducting more frequent joint military exercises,<sup>47</sup> and collaborating on defense technology and procurement.<sup>48</sup>
- **Compete for Pacific Island partnerships.** Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S. would be wrong to assume that the Pacific Islands will automatically view them as their preferred security partners. The Solomon Islands case shows that if China can influence governments and support the Pacific Islands' own interests, then these states are open to partnering more closely with China. Comparatively, PNG shows the opposite: If the U.S. and its partners can provide a compelling case to be the security partner of choice, then the Pacific Islands could be receptive to signing security agreements.
- **Neutralize Chinese advantages in the Southwest Pacific.** It is no secret that Pacific Island states are leveraging U.S.–China competition to their benefit.<sup>49</sup> This means that the U.S. will need to deal with the reality that some Pacific nations will willingly choose China as a partner. In response, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, will need to assess how China could exploit access, especially militarily, and educate local partners about the risks of security partnerships with China. Examples could include warning both public

and private entities of Chinese exploitive practices and diplomatically engaging Southwest Pacific governments on the risks Chinese agreements may pose.

## Conclusion

Following China's documented malign actions in the Southwest Pacific, with a particular emphasis on its actions in the Solomon Islands in 2022, the regional security environment has significantly changed. American strategy in the Indo-Pacific must account for these changes, including not only how they have upset the regional order, but also how allies, partners, and regional capitals are responding to China's actions. Fitting into America's broader engagement with the Pacific Islands, the U.S. should continue to monitor developments, enhance cooperation with regional partners, and counter Chinese advances to protect American security and prosperity.

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