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THE COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

by

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THE COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, China has undertaken a concerted effort to achieve soft power dominance in geostrategic and periphery countries across Oceania. China is now on pace to bypass the West in the competition for strategic influence among the nations of Oceania. While the United States and its allies tend to work aboveboard in building relationships and strengthening alliances, China's less-reputable tactics, though highly criticized, are steadily drawing in new partners. There is international concern that as China's regional influence grows it will someday convert its influence into diplomatic and economic—and potentially military—dominance that will serve to challenge and, perhaps, supplant the current international order. Through the lens of a single case study of the Solomon Islands, this research sought to demonstrate which factors are the most important in determining the outcome of the competition for influence in Oceania. This research examined the factors that contributed to the Solomon Islands' recent diplomatic and policy shifts in favor of China. This research suggests that China's use of coercive diplomacy and economic-based leverage were the most consequential factors and that the most effective way for the United States to compete with China's growing influence in the Solomon Islands, and Oceania more broadly, will be to do so with and through its like-minded regional partners and allies in a manner that is as multilateral, stable, and reliable as possible.

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LIST OF A LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Australian Federal Police
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
IFM	Isatabu Freedom Movement
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MEF	Malaitan Eagle Force
MPG	Malaitan Provincial Government
PIF	Pacific Islands Forum
PPF	Participating Police Force
PRC	People’s Republic of China
RAMSI	Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands
RSIPF	Royal Solomon Islands Police Force
SIAF	Solomons International Assistance Force
SIG	Solomon Islands Government
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

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I. THE COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE IN OCEANIA

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

In the last two decades, China appears to have undertaken a concerted effort to achieve soft power dominance in geostrategic and periphery countries across Oceania. By playing the “long game,” China is on pace to bypass the West in the competition for strategic influence among the nations of Oceania. While the United States and its allies tend to work aboveboard in building relationships and strengthening alliances, China’s less reputable tactics, though highly criticized, are steadily drawing in new partners. There is concern that as China’s list of partners and regional influence grows, it will someday convert its influence into regional diplomatic and economic—and potentially military—dominance that will serve to challenge and, perhaps, supplant the current international order.¹ Debt-trap diplomacy, strategic investment, security cooperation, and the promise of mutual gain all seem to have their part to play. This research seeks to demonstrate which factors are the most important in determining who will win the competition for influence in Oceania.

This research investigates the great power competition between the West and the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) in the context of Oceania by examining the factors that contributed to the Solomon Islands’ diplomatic and policy shifts in favor of the PRC over the last two decades. There is a wealth of existing research on the PRC’s aspirations to increase its influence in Oceania; however, there are differing views on why some Oceanian states are increasingly siding with China. Some analysts believe that China’s use of coercive economic and diplomatic measures is driving weak and poor states into China’s camp by force.² Another perspective is that China’s economic investment in the region is creating financial

¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Chance,” *Prospect Magazine*, March 17, 2005, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/chinaschance>.

² Statement of Admiral John C. Aquilino, U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 117th Cong. (2022), 4, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/INDOPACOM%20Statement%20\(ADM%20Aquilino\)%20_SASC2.PDF](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/INDOPACOM%20Statement%20(ADM%20Aquilino)%20_SASC2.PDF); Susan Windybank, “The China Syndrome [China’s Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific],” *Policy: A Journal of Public Policy and Ideas* 21, no. 2: 32, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.3316/ielapa.200506143>; Ethan Meick, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States,” Staff Research Report (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018), 14.

incentives for alignment.³ However, others think the answer may be more nuanced and tied to Western inattentiveness or inadequacy.⁴ This thesis, in part, sought to address which of these explanations is the most valid based on an examination of the existing primary and secondary source literature. For the West to reestablish relationships in the region and prevent China from further expanding its sphere of influence, it will need to present itself as a reliable and enduring alternative to China through persistent and protracted diplomatic engagement and regional investment with and through its partners and allies in the region.

This research finds that China's use of coercive diplomacy and economic-based leverage appear to have been the most consequential factors in determining the outcome of the competition for influence in the Solomon Islands. Given the West's general aversion to this type of coercive approach without significant justification, this research found that the most effective way for the United States to compete with China's growing influence in the Solomon Islands, and Oceania more broadly, will be to do so with and through its like-minded partners and allies in the region. This research finds that although China appears to have gained overwhelming leverage in and over the government of the Solomon Islands, this leverage is shallow, fragile, and will be routinely tested in Solomon Islands democratic elections which, for as long as the country remains a democracy, will continue to threaten China's soft power in the region. If the United States pursues regional influence more overtly, unilaterally, or by wielding economic or diplomatic leverage—as China does—rather than by protracted engagement and investment with and through its regional allies and partners, it will likely establish insubstantial and frail influence that would be difficult and costly to sustain. In order for the United States to effectively compete with China, it will be important for America's renewed commitment to the region to be as multilateral, stable, and reliable as possible.

³ Nadège Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order" (National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2020), 41; Meick, "China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands," 1; Bertil Lintner, "A New Battle For the Pacific," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 167, no. 31 (August 5, 2004): 30–31, ProQuest.

⁴ Scott Leis, "America's Overlooked Pacific Island Partners," *Diplomat* (Rozelle, N.S.W.), 2017; Thomas R. Matelski, "America's Micronesia Problem," *The Diplomat*, February 19, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/americas-micronesia-problem/>.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Oceania is no stranger to great power competition. In the early twentieth century, many of the Pacific islands were thought to be lacking in resources and to possess limited potential for settlement.⁵ Yet as new modes of transportation and technology emerged in the lead up to World War Two, these islands' importance became more apparent. The islands of Oceania became strategic maritime terrain during the war, and many of its islands served as unsinkable aircraft carriers, logistics nodes, and staging bases in the American fight against imperial Japan. Over a relatively short period of time, much of Oceania was colonized by Western powers, recolonized by the Japanese empire, and liberated in the allied war effort in the Pacific. Formerly obscure and unfamiliar islands became household names and were host to some of the most ferocious battles of the second world war.⁶ Many have since gained their independence and joined the international order as sovereign states. Today, the vast majority of the states in Oceania are democracies and important partners that find themselves living along strategic trade and security crossroads. Now, in the twenty-first century, a Chinese great power has emerged in the Far East. However, this great power competition is not a kinetic fight between the Western free world and Japanese imperial expansionists. It is a competition for influence taking place under the umbrella of a well-established international order between the dominant U.S., which helped establish and seeks to preserve that order, and a rising China, which intends to supplant it.⁷

With the help of its regional partners and allies, the United States has enjoyed an extended period of regional hegemony over the Pacific. However, the People's Republic of China (PRC), having recently risen to great power status, seeks to challenge Western hegemony in the Pacific and to increase its sphere of influence in a manner that threatens

⁵ M. Ruth Megaw, "The Scramble for the Pacific: Anglo-United States Rivalry in the 1930s," *Historical Studies* 17, no. 69 (October 1, 1977): 458, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314617708595565>.

⁶ Clinton Fernandes and Sinclair Dinnen, "Solomon Islands," in *Hot Spot: Asia and Oceania* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 201, ProQuest.

⁷ "Winning the Competition for Influence in Central and Eastern Europe: U.S. Assistant Secretary of State A. Wess Mitchell," Atlantic Council, October 19, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/winning-the-competition-for-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe-us-assistant-secretary-of-state-a-wess-mitchell/>; Dawn C. Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing's Alternative World Order* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2022), 251.

to upset the current balance of power. According to President Biden's recent National Security Strategic Guidance, "the alliances, institutions, agreements, and norms underwriting the international order the United States helped to establish are being tested."⁸ The U.S. is becoming aware that the potential for Chinese militarization of the Oceanian islands is not the only factor threatening to undermine regional stability.

China is consolidating its ability to exert control and influence over the islands of Oceania, which are, one by one, entering into bilateral agreements with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Aside from economic and diplomatic agreements China has already entered into with many Oceanian states, to the dismay of the West, the Solomon Islands entered into a security agreement with the PRC in the spring of 2022. Although this is the first security agreement between an Oceanian state and the PRC, it is not the first time the Solomon Islands has sought foreign assistance with its security needs. From 2003 to 2017, Australia, New Zealand, and twelve other nations from across Oceania responded to Solomon Islands' request for aid in dealing with an ethnic conflict that had grown beyond its ability to control.⁹ The multilateral intervention was dubbed the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). RAMSI successfully helped the Solomon Islands overcome a violent internal conflict and empowered the government with the time necessary to rebuild its capacity to effectively govern. In the process, numerous police and high-level government officials were incarcerated for corruption, theft, or for illegal or immoral actions committed during the ethnic conflict.¹⁰ However, the recent security agreement between the Solomon Islands and the PRC may indicate a desire by the current Solomon Islands government—well known for its illiberal practices—to take a

⁸ Joseph R. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," *White House Press Releases, Fact Sheets and Briefings / FIND* (Washington: Federal Information & News Dispatch, LLC, 2021), 8, ProQuest.

⁹ "Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.ramsi.org/>.

¹⁰ Walter Cameron Malau et al., "Fraud Interpretation and Disclaimer Audit Opinion: Evidence from the Solomon Islands Public Sector," *Managerial Auditing Journal* 36, no. 2 (2021): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1108/MAJ-04-2018-1867>; Fernandes and Dinnen, "Solomon Islands," 217.

harsher approach toward dissidents in the future while avoiding the close political scrutiny of another RAMSI-like intervention.¹¹

The strategic importance of influence among the Oceanian nations is a matter of national security for the United States and its regional allies. As the U.S. President has said, “the United States has no closer or reliable ally than Australia,” and that ally is now finding itself encompassed by new partners of a hostile Chinese regime.¹² According to one analyst, the “Solomon Islands offer a prime location from which to exert control over surrounding sea and air space, potentially threatening longitudinal and latitudinal lines of communication between and among the U.S. and its Pacific allies, including Australia.”¹³ This is a strong motive for Beijing to continue to progress its regional efforts.¹⁴

Recognizing the drivers that led to the recent distance some Oceanian nations have pursued from the West in exchange for closer ties with the PRC may enable the United States and its allies to offset the otherwise unchecked gains made by the CCP in Oceania. If neglected, the economic and security arrangements between the states of Oceania and the CCP will likely result in a regionally dominant China with national security and strategic policy implications that threaten Western democratic values and national security across the Pacific. The West’s response to China’s moves in the Pacific will likely determine the outcome of the twenty-first century’s great power competition.

¹¹ Fernandes and Dinnen, “Solomon Islands,” 214–16; RAMSI, “Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands”; Euan Graham, “Assessing the Solomon Islands’ New Security Agreement with China,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (blog), May 5, 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2022/05/china-solomon-islands>; Chris Chappell, “China’s Growing Military Expansion in the Pacific,” *China Unscripted*, accessed July 19, 2022, <https://www.listennotes.com/sv/podcasts/china-unscripted/164-chinas-growing-military-vRXIL-0Vhlp/>.

¹² Patrick Wintour, “US Has ‘No Closer Ally Than Australia’, Biden Says After AUKUS Pact,” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/21/us-has-no-closer-ally-than-australia-says-biden-after-aukus-pact>.

¹³ Graham, “Assessing the Solomon Islands’ New Security Agreement with China.”

¹⁴ Rory Medcalf, “Australia and China: Understanding the Reality Check,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March 4, 2019): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2018.1538315>.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature provides several perspectives regarding the factors contributing to the expansion of Chinese influence in Oceania, but prior to examining the various perspectives concerning these factors it is important to define what constitutes influence in the context of the current international order. The literature that addresses influence as it applies to international relations is extensive, especially regarding China's pursuits in Oceania. However, the term *influence* is often used without first specifying what it really means. The most prominent and recurring definition for influence in the literature comes from Robert Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, who described it as “a relation among human actors such that the wants, desires, preferences, or intentions of one or more actors affect the actions, or predispositions to act, of one or more other actors in a direction consistent with—and not contrary to—the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders.”¹⁵ They also explained that “influence” can often be used interchangeably with the term “power.”¹⁶ However, their definition is perhaps too broad for the scope of this thesis. Meierding and Sigman refined the definition to be more applicable within the context of international relations by positing that influence is relational, causal, and purposive in that it concerns two actors, instigates behavioral change, and attempts to steer this change in behavior in a direction favorable to the would-be influencer.¹⁷

The subject of power and its broad definition in both the traditional and modern senses have been extensively explored by scholars. One of these scholars, Joseph Nye, explained that there is significant variance in the way the term “power” is used and discovered that there was a lack of a descriptive term for power that explained “the distinction between power over other countries and power over outcomes.”¹⁸ To resolve

¹⁵ Robert A. Dahl and Bruce Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, Sixth edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 17.

¹⁶ Dahl and Stinebrickner, 12.

¹⁷ Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (August 11, 2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogab011>.

¹⁸ Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 156, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

this, he coined and defined the terms “soft power” and “hard power.”¹⁹ He defined soft power as “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants,” which “rests heavily on three basic resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority).”²⁰ The CCP understands that the skeptical—if not completely anti-Chinese—narrative about China’s motives and actions in the international arena is based on both fact and fiction, and so it has gone to great lengths to propagate an image of itself that is more appealing and upright than the West claims it to be.²¹ Though hard power is an important tool for great powers, it has not been applied by China within Oceania since the inception of the PRC and is therefore beyond the scope of this study. This research adopts Nye’s definition of soft power in the assessment of influence activities in Oceania and will use the terms influence and soft power interchangeably.

1. Chinese Influence in Oceania

The literature is primarily focused on the last two decades of China’s diplomacy with Oceanian states in parallel with China’s rapid rise to great power status and the broad approach China has taken to conduct its engagement with the Oceanian states. This approach ranges from providing basic humanitarian aid or grants, rather than loans, in the aftermath of natural or economic disasters, to more coercive forms of engagement that have been given labels such as “visit diplomacy,” “checkbook diplomacy,” “stadium diplomacy,” and “debt-trap diplomacy.”²² Much of the attention of scholars and

¹⁹ Nye, “Soft Power.”

²⁰ Nye, 166; Joseph S. Nye, “China and Soft Power,” *South African Journal of International Affairs* 19, no. 2 (August 1, 2012): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2012.706889>.

²¹ Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order,” 25; Anne-Marie Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, Series on Contemporary China, v. 26 (Singapore: World Scientific Pub. Co., 2010).

²² Ching Kwan Lee, “Global China at 20: Why, How and So What?,” *The China Quarterly* 250 (June 2022): 313, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022000686>; Windybank, “The China Syndrome [China’s Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific],” 31; Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 145; Rachel Will, “China’s Stadium Diplomacy,” *World Policy Journal* 29, no. 2 (2012): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0740277512451487>.

researchers has been concentrated on the variety and massive scale of China's engagement interactions with the Oceanian states and on whether they are overt or covert, in good-will or bad-faith, or coercive or tactful; but the connection between China's actions and the supposed influence they garner as a result often goes unaddressed.

Much of the literature considers China's efforts to be primarily coercive and presumes that this coercion is the key to explaining China's rapidly growing influence in the region. However, other researchers argue that influence is not so simply realized. While a state may be compelled to take an action or modify specific policies through coercive means, the type of relationship that develops between a coercer and a target state is likely to be fragile and unstable. One scholar argued, to this point, that if a would-be influencer's actions were "viewed by the target state as subversive or illegitimate, it is likely to react by moving away from the target state."²³ How, then, has China been so successful at drawing in partners and in sustaining decades-long bilateral relationships with so many states across Oceania if their efforts have been primarily coercive?

2. Chinese Motivations

Before taking a closer look at the factors contributing to China's growing influence in Oceania, it is first important to understand what China stands to gain through its efforts in the region. Analysts claim that while China's economic investments in, diplomatic engagement with, and trade and security assurances to the states in Oceania are yielding short-term economic benefits for China, these moves are strategically tied to its long-term interests. Some scholars suggest that the CCP's primary motive is to completely diplomatically isolate Taiwan in order to more quickly realize its aims of absorbing Taiwan into the PRC.²⁴ Of the thirteen countries that still officially recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state, four are in Oceania and the remainder are Caribbean and South American

²³ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>.

²⁴ Windybank, "The China Syndrome [China's Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific.]," 31; Lintner, "A New Battle For the Pacific," 30; Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 89.

nations.²⁵ That number is down from six Oceanian states since 2010, making Oceania “disproportionally important to both the ROC and the PRC.”²⁶ A separate perspective some analysts hold is that China is pursuing diplomacy in the developing part of Oceania to benevolently provide an alternative model—a “China-model”—for economic development that is a “combination of economic freedom and political oppression,” which is in some cases more attractive to fledgling governments and illiberal elites.²⁷ Others take this one step further and believe that the PRC primarily seeks to use this China-model to challenge the alleged hegemony the U.S. enjoys and project power through in the South and West Pacific.²⁸ However, the motive attracting much of the attention of U.S. political and defense officials in recent years is what some researchers explain is a Chinese bid to supplant the current international order.²⁹ This claim is a more cumulative one in that it attributes China’s attempts to export its development model, its orchestration of its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its use of state institutions such as the United Front Work Department (UFW), described by the China’s president as a “magic weapon,” to influence “academic and policy discourse” abroad as a sweeping campaign to add to its voting bloc of support in international forums and challenge the overarching international

²⁵ “Taiwan’s Efforts to Join World Health Assembly Goes in Vain,” *Economic Times*, May 22, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/us/taiwans-efforts-to-join-world-health-assembly-goes-in-vain/articleshow/91748977.cms?from=mdr>.

²⁶ Brady, Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific.

²⁷ Suisheng Zhao, “The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 19, no. 65 (June 1, 2010): 422, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670561003666061>; “The China Model: Unexceptional Exceptionalism,” Hoover Institution, December 4, 2020, 6–7, <https://www.hoover.org/research/china-model-unexceptional-exceptionalism>.

²⁸ Meick, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands,” 19; Mark Beeson, “Comparative Hegemony: How Serious Is the China Challenge?,” *Global Asia* 11, no. 2 (June 2016), https://www.globalasia.org/v11no2/feature/comparative-hegemony-how-serious-is-the-china-challenge_mark-beeson.

²⁹ Statement of Admiral John C. Aquilino, 4; Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order,” 2; Susannah Luthi, “Meth, Vanilla and ‘Gulags’: How China Has Overtaken the South Pacific One Island at a Time,” *Politico*, accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/08/29/tonga-china-south-pacific-influence-506370>.

order that was established by the West.³⁰ Regardless of which of these are China's primary motives in the region, states each have many interests, and these are all likely to be on China's list of priorities.

3. Factors

a. Coercive Diplomacy

China is known to have attempted—and in some cases has succeeded—in using many forms of coercive diplomacy throughout Oceania to gain influence. Jentleson explained that coercive diplomacy is a diplomatic strategy that relies on the coercer's ability to incentivize a target state to take actions, particularly policy actions, in response to an offered reward or threatened penalty.³¹ He explains that “carrots may be included” in the coercive strategy, “but, by definition, so too are sticks. The sticks can include economic sanctions as well as military force.”³² China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs fervently asserts that the U.S. is both the innovator and main perpetrator of coercive diplomacy while maintaining that the PRC practices the “right to make necessary and legitimate responses to actions that undermine China's sovereignty, security and development rights and interests.”³³ This counterclaim by Beijing is more of an admission

³⁰ Alexander Bowe, *China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*, Staff Research Report / U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018), 15; Laura Rosenberger, “The Interference Operations from Putin's Kremlin and Xi's Communist Party: Forging a Joint Response,” *The Asan Forum* (blog), May 8, 2018, 4, <https://theasanforum.org/the-interference-operations-from-putins-kremlin-and-xis-communist-party-forging-a-joint-response/>; Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo, Steven Chung-Fun Hung, and Jeff Hai-Chi Loo, *China's New United Front Work in Hong Kong: Penetrative Politics and Its Implications* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 221, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8483-7>; Rolland, “China's Vision for a New World Order,” 40; Lintner, “A New Battle For the Pacific,” 30; Windybank, “The China Syndrome [China's Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific],” 314; Meick, “China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands,” 14; Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 89–90.

³¹ Bruce Jentleson, “Coercive Diplomacy: Scope and Limits in the Contemporary World,” *Stanley Center for Peace and Security*, December 2006, 2, <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/coercive-diplomacy-scope-and-limits-in-the-contemporary-world/>.

³² Jentleson, 2.

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Reality Check: Falsehoods in U.S. Perceptions of China” (Beijing: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, June 19, 2022), https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202206/t20220619_10706059.html.

than a denial of coercive diplomatic practices when one considers that China's interests are so broadly defined.

In Oceania, China's carrot-and-stick approach appears to present thinly veiled prerequisites to doing business. China has threatened to mobilize its large diaspora population of ethnic Chinese voters at the polls in Oceanian states against politicians who do not support China's regional goals.³⁴ States in Oceania that primarily depend on exports to China for income and at the same time oppose Beijing's policies or politics find themselves becoming the targets of informal trade sanctions that can sever those states' access to China's massive consumer base.³⁵ Oceanian states that choose to diplomatically recognize Taipei, as opposed to Beijing, lose PRC investments, infrastructure development assistance, humanitarian aid, and even find themselves unable to approach the international community for assistance with internal violent crises in the face of the PRC's often-wielded UN Security Council veto power.³⁶ However, China's coercive diplomacy practices are not always disincentive *sticks*. Some of the *carrots* the PRC uses to incentivize policy changes that favor Beijing's interests include buying off current and former elites, guaranteeing no-strings-attached security assistance, and giving states access to the global

³⁴ Amy Searight, "Countering China's Influence Activities" (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020), 3, JSTOR.

³⁵ Richard McGregor and Peter Cai, "Revealed: China's Plan to Wean Itself Off Australian Iron Ore," *Australian Financial Review*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/revealed-china-s-plan-to-wean-itself-off-australian-iron-ore-20210520-p57tir>.

³⁶ "South Tarawa Island, Republic of Kiribati – Chinese Space Facilities," *Global Security*, August 2018, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/space/world/china/kiribati.htm>; Nichols, "China Restores Ties with Kiribati, Site of Space Tracking Station," *Reuters*, September 27, 2019, sec. Emerging Markets, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-kiribati-idUSKBN1WC2KB>; John Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows: Statebuilding as Peacebuilding in Solomon Islands* (ANU Press, 2010), 49, JSTOR; Windybank, "The China Syndrome [China's Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific.]," 32.

trade economy through the BRI; and “China does not ask for ‘good governance’ as a precondition.”³⁷

b. Social and Financial Investment

The literature broadly depicts the CCP as a regime that does not hesitate to invest in poor and developing countries, even, and perhaps especially, in states that tend towards defaulting on foreign debt. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has found that the international model most states use for assessing risky investments would be difficult to apply to the CCP’s investment strategy.³⁸ Some scholars argue that China makes risky investments in small developing nations knowingly and with the intent to allow the state to default on its loan for China to acquire strategic assets as collateral; this practice has earned the affectionate label of debt-trap diplomacy.³⁹ Others see China’s no-strings-attached style of investing as a way to intentionally provide opportunity for corruption and illiberal governance, where money is given to elites to influence policy reform, such as diplomatic recognition swaps from Taipei to Beijing, or to create individual incentives for overlooking Chinese business exploitation, such as export tax exemptions and foreign

³⁷ Graham, “Assessing the Solomon Islands’ New Security Agreement with China”; Freedom House, “Solomon Islands: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report,” 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/solomon-islands/freedom-world/2022>; “Australia Accuses China Of Paying Bribes To Win Deals,” *Agence France Presse*, April 24, 2022, sec. AFP News, <https://www.barrons.com/news/australia-accuses-china-of-paying-bribes-to-win-deals-01650775206>; Kirsty Needham, “Solomon Islands Prime Minister Survives No-Confidence Vote after Riots,” *Reuters*, December 6, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/solomon-islands-prime-minister-faces-no-confidence-vote-after-riots-2021-12-06/>; Edward Cavanough, “China and Taiwan Offered Us Huge Bribes, Say Solomon Islands MPs,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/08/china-and-taiwan-offered-us-huge-bribes-say-solomon-islands-mps>; Amy Remeikis, “Sam Dastyari Quits as Labor Senator Over China Connections,” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2017, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/12/sam-dastyari-quits-labor-senator-china-connections>; Searight, “Countering China’s Influence Activities,” 8–9; Joseph Daniel Foukona, “Solomon Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 32, no. 2 (2020): 598, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cp.2020.0057>; Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracy Beattie, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Coercive Diplomacy” (Australian Strategic Policy Institute International Cyber Policy Centre, September 1, 2020), <http://www.aspi.org.au/report/chinese-communist-partys-coercive-diplomacy>.

³⁸ Daniel Law and Shaun K. Roache, “Assessing Default Risks for Chinese Firms: A Lost Cause?,” *IMF Working Papers* 2015, no. 140 (June 26, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513597584.001.A001>.

³⁹ Nicolas Lippolis and Harry Verhoeven, “Politics by Default: China and the Global Governance of African Debt,” *Survival* 64, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2078054>.

employment and contracting preferences.⁴⁰ Often these financial incentives come at the expense of the citizenry within a target state.

A growing number of scholars are beginning to question the legitimacy of debt-trap allegations against the PRC. There are multiple cases of China forgiving or renegotiating debt with states from the developing world both globally and within Oceania.⁴¹ China tends to offer lending rates that other global leaders criticize for being “low-ball,” while the PRC touts the rates as one way that China is, and the West is not, giving a chance to developing states.⁴² Accusations about China’s long range plan for its assistance and investments in Oceania over the last two decades do not change the fact that these funds were sorely needed and came at a time when the West had its attention fixed on the conflict in the Middle East rather than on the small, relatively peaceful Pacific island nations.

It is important to note that China is not inherently the only party that stands to gain from its approach to bilateral agreements. States partnering with China are entities with their own interests and motives who choose whether or not to engage in diplomacy, trade, and other forms of international relations according to their own rationales. Richard Olney astutely observed in the late 1800s that “the relations of states to each other depend not upon sentiment nor principle, but upon selfish interest.”⁴³ Though this realist take on international relations may seem harsh, there is truth in Olney’s observation. The nations of Oceania that have entered into bilateral agreements with the PRC have done so as sovereign states. Many have benefitted from the investment, trade, education, and training that China has offered economically, infrastructurally, and diplomatically. New Chinese-

⁴⁰ ABC News, “How Chinese Money Is Buying Solomon Islands: Four Corners,” YouTube, August 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfXX0QaNLWw>.

⁴¹ Bob Jurriaan Van Grieken and Jaroslaw Kantorowicz, “Debunking Myths about China: The Determinants of China’s Official Financing to the Pacific,” *Geopolitics* 26, no. 3 (May 3, 2021): 884, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2019.1654459>; Fergus Hanson and Mary Fifita, “China in the Pacific: The New Banker in Town” (Lowy Institute for International Policy, April 1, 2011), 8, JSTOR; Kevin Acker, Deborah Brautigam, and Yufan Huang, “Debt Relief with Chinese Characteristics,” Working Paper, China Africa Research Initiative (Washington, D.C.: School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 2020), 3, <http://www.sais-cari.org/publications>.

⁴² Will, “China’s Stadium Diplomacy,” 39.

⁴³ Richard Olney and Thomas F. Bayard, “Letter from Richard Olney to Thomas F. Bayard,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1896, 1895), 558–59, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1895p1/d527>.

constructed stadiums, government buildings, and economic infrastructure have enabled some Oceanian states to enhance the capacities of their states, as have Chinese sponsored military and police training and Pacific Island student exchanges.⁴⁴

The IMF and Western nations are selective when making investment decisions, particularly when it comes to foreign infrastructure development aid.⁴⁵ China's approach is different in this aspect: it explicitly pushes for infrastructure development to come as part of its foreign aid and investment packages.⁴⁶ One scholar suggests this approach "stems from its experience as a developing country."⁴⁷ The smaller states of Oceania have always had needs and interests that rely heavily on foreign assistance, and those needs did not disappear when the Twin Towers fell in New York in September of 2001. As the United States focused on its new enemies in Afghanistan and Iraq, China stepped in to assist by providing not only monetary aid, but also assistance in the form of police, student, and medical training and education and other personnel exchanges. In fact, Western states welcomed and encouraged Chinese aid in Oceania in the early 2000s while calling on China to take on a greater role in the region.⁴⁸ However, had the West foreseen China's rapid rise to great power status or expected that China might one day pose a legitimate threat to regional stability and the international system, it might not have given China a twenty-year lead on regional diplomacy.

c. Reliable Partnership and Protracted Engagement

Some literature points to China as a great power, inspired by its recovery from a "century of humiliation" to share its development model with the developing world through

⁴⁴ Brady, Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific, 9–36.

⁴⁵ Abdul Abiad, David Furceri, and Petia Topalova, "IMF Survey : The Time Is Right for an Infrastructure Push," IMF, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sores093014a>.

⁴⁶ Murphy, China's Rise in the Global South, 171–72.

⁴⁷ Murphy, 83.

⁴⁸ Anthony L. Smith, "Banking on a Constructive China: Australia's China Debate," *ban* (Honolulu, HI: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, December 1, 2003), 9, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA592018>; Graeme Dobell, "China and Taiwan in the South Pacific: Diplomatic Chess Versus Pacific Political Rugby," *Lowy Institute*, January 17, 2007, 12, <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1345149/china-and-taiwan-in-the-south-pacific/1957295/>.

protracted engagement and without any intent to change the current international structure.⁴⁹ The CCP's message varies over time, but generally Chinese government sources claim that it is devoted to "safeguarding sovereignty and independence and preserving peace and stability in the region," rather than to upsetting that stability.⁵⁰ Some of the literature depicts China's regional investments, its symbolic elevation of sovereign elites and government officials, its numerous bilateral agreements, its messaging campaigns, its no-strings-attached approach to providing assistance without infringing on state sovereignty, and its responsiveness to the needs of the Oceanian nations as benevolent, and this literature argues these actions should be taken at face value.⁵¹ Other scholars tend to be highly skeptical of accepting anything Beijing says or does without first considering China's potential ulterior motives and highlight how China's occasional benevolence is only in pursuit of its own interests.⁵²

Some literature suggests that the West is falsely propagating an image of an unstable and unreliable partner in the CCP.⁵³ In some cases, scholars have found that the U.S., not China, has undermined its own relationships with Oceanian states, which felt that the West neglected them for the last two decades.⁵⁴ Some scholars argue that, for the last twenty years, China has been a reliable and stable partner for those it has done business with when compared with the West, whose priorities have shifted with every election cycle or crisis.⁵⁵ However, this position appears to disregard several cases of significant

⁴⁹ Denghua Zhang, "The Concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' in China's Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 200, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.231>.

⁵⁰ "Speech at the Opening of the First Ministerial Conference of the China-Pacific Island Countries" (Fiji, April 5, 2006), http://english.gov.cn/2006-04/05/content_245681.htm.

⁵¹ Zhang Yunling, "China and Its Neighbourhood: Transformation, Challenges and Grand Strategy," *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 835–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12653>; Feng Liu, "The Recalibration of Chinese Assertiveness: China's Responses to the Indo-Pacific Challenge," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 13–14, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz226>.

⁵² Zhang, "The Concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' in China's Diplomacy," 202.

⁵³ Van Grieken and Kantorowicz, "Debunking Myths about China," 881–82.

⁵⁴ Bruce D. Klingner, "Rebalancing to the Pacific: Asia Pivot or Divot?," *The Heritage Foundation*, October 7, 2014, <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength-topical-essays/2015-essays/rebalancing-the-pacific-asia-pivot-or-divot>.

⁵⁵ Yunling, "China and Its Neighbourhood"; Liu, "The Recalibration of Chinese Assertiveness," 12.

protracted engagement and social and financial investment in the region by U.S. allies and partners such as Australia and Taiwan which often have shared regional interests with America.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

This literature review suggests that there are three overarching factors that contribute to China's growing influence among the nations of Oceania. These factors are coercive diplomacy, social and financial investment, and reliable and protracted diplomatic engagement. Although these factors do not appear to be mutually exclusive in all cases, analysis of the literature suggests that these three are fundamental in determining short and long-term outcomes for would-be influencers. This thesis explores three hypotheses related to these factors in the context of the Solomon Islands in an effort to suggest potential competition inroads for the United States to consider and prioritize in its quest to offset the expansion of its named competitor's sphere of influence in Oceania.

1. Hypothesis 1: China's Consistency Has Stabilizing Effects

China's consistency in its use of coercive diplomacy provides a unique form of regional stability. The CCP's message is more or less clear to all parties: if you take a public stance that China deems to be undesirable, you will be sanctioned and your ability to engage with China or Chinese businesses will be negatively impacted. Some well-known off-limits subjects include formal or informal opposition to the PRC's territorial claims, actions in Xinjiang, or pandemic response.⁵⁶ For example, diplomatically recognizing Taiwan as a sovereign state or alleging that the PRC is committing human rights abuses against the Uyghurs are both taboo topics that the CCP considers to be breaches of its sovereign rule over the people within its borders. Violations of these taboos often result in threats, intimidation, and unilateral sanctions. Although, from a Western perspective, not addressing these topics might seem like condoning injustice, the CCP treats these issues as fundamentally Chinese and whose handling of them is therefore inherent to Chinese sovereignty. The pre-condition to doing business with China and accessing China's

⁵⁶ Hanson, Currey, and Beattie, "The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy," 3.

massive consumer economy or investment portfolio is tacit acceptance of these stipulations. Recently, the smaller Oceanian states, especially those who have been on the receiving end of the more punitive forms of China's coercive diplomacy, have tended to see these terms as minimally intrusive and reasonable pre-conditions in their pursuit of what China has to offer: growth. The prerequisite, therefore, for many of these states to engage with China is to submit to and align with China's policies, especially the "one-China principle," which is effectively to consent to China's influence.⁵⁷

2. Hypothesis 2: China's Influence is Fragile

The influence that flows from China's regional investments is fragile. Chinese investment practices in Oceania are a double-edged sword that depend heavily on the partner government's ability to keep people in power that support Chinese interests. The islands of Oceania are known to possess untapped mineral, timber, fish, and liquified natural gas wealth, all of which are of interest to China.⁵⁸ China's investments in the communications infrastructure and extractive capacity of Oceanian states provides places like the Solomon Islands with lucrative prospects. The Chinese-funded construction of infrastructure projects across Oceania brings with it possibilities for business, tourism, and trade access to the global market, which may give new importance to the little-understood and obscure region, although there is some speculation about whether these "win-win" opportunities really benefit everyone involved.⁵⁹ On one hand, China's investments in Oceanian infrastructure, businesses, and people provide win-win opportunities for this remote and resource-rich region; on the other hand, China's tendency to provide target state government elites with opportunities for corruption and to employ Chinese labor has historically provoked unrest among the citizens of some Oceanian states. China's track record for supporting unsustainable resource extraction practices and contracting foreign laborers has contributed to declining support from non-elites who depend on these

⁵⁷ Murphy, *China's Rise in the Global South*, 172.

⁵⁸ Meick, "China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands," 7.

⁵⁹ Rolland, "China's Vision for a New World Order," 17.

businesses for employment and care about the preservation of natural resources.⁶⁰ The influence China stands to gain from its regional investments has often depended on the ability of target state elites to keep the support of their constituents in the course of their dealings with China. Because of this, China has taken actions to finance and support elites who are politically aligned with China's interests when they experience wavering support from their constituency.

3. Hypothesis 3: Autocracy in China Increases Responsiveness

China's autocratic approach to diplomacy enables the PRC to be highly responsive to the needs and interests of Oceanian states. The CCP does not suffer from the same pendulum-like swings in political priorities that Western liberal democracies commonly experience. Although the interests of the CCP do evolve over time, there is stability in dealing with a one-party government. While the U.S., due to the nature of its democratic government, often undergoes massive shifts in diplomatic, economic, and political priorities, China has been a steady and resilient partner to those Oceanian states, and especially to state elites, who have been willing to accept China's pre-requisites for diplomacy.

China's protracted engagement with Oceanian states since the late 1990s has steadily strengthened its relationships. The intercultural knowledge and trust states cultivate by dealing with each other over long periods of time is not something that can be immediately built simply by standing up an embassy or funding a new infrastructure project. These relationships are central to long-term mutual trust and influence.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

The research framework for this thesis draws heavily upon Meierding and Sigman's work on understanding the mechanisms of influence.⁶¹ Their research was directed at explaining how a state can first acquire and then sustain influence over another state. Their

⁶⁰ ABC News, "How Chinese Money Is Buying Solomon Islands: Four Corners."

⁶¹ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition."

findings suggest that states can wield their *power resources* to conduct *influence activities*—actions that may generate influence—by mobilizing *power mechanisms* which translate influence activities into influence in and over a target state. They define power resources as “a state’s material and ideational assets, including its military capabilities, economic wealth, power in international organizations, and cultural output.”⁶² Their findings are reinforced by Nye’s work, which found that the strength of one state’s soft power over another is heavily impacted by the would-be influencer’s culture, political values, and foreign policies.⁶³

Meierding and Sigman’s work identified five key power mechanisms that contribute to how one state can gain influence over another. They organized each of the five mechanisms into one of two categories with *reward* and *punishment* classified as *leverage mechanisms*, and *expertise*, *attractiveness*, and *recognition* classified as *affective mechanisms*.⁶⁴ They define leverage mechanisms as those that “produce influence in a target state by changing the costs or benefits of complying with the influencer’s preferences,” whereas affective mechanisms “generate influence by changing the target’s perceptions of the influencer and of the states’ bilateral relationship.”⁶⁵ This thesis applies Meierding and Sigman’s findings related to these influence generating mechanisms to ascertain which factors are most important in determining the outcome of the competition for influence in Oceania, using the Solomon Islands as a case study.

This thesis diverges slightly from Meierding and Sigman’s research, however, which focused on factors related to security sector influence activities in the context of Africa, namely “operations, basing, training, and equipment.”⁶⁶ This research examines alternative factors—coercive diplomacy, social and financial investment, and protracted engagement—which the literature suggests are more applicable in the context of Oceania,

⁶² Meierding and Sigman, 3.

⁶³ Nye, “China and Soft Power,” 153.

⁶⁴ Meierding and Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,” 3–6.

⁶⁵ Meierding and Sigman, 6.

⁶⁶ Meierding and Sigman, 10.

specifically in the case of the Solomon Islands. Using their framework, this research asks: **what influence activities have been undertaken within the Solomon Islands over the last two and a half decades, which power mechanisms has each would-be influencer mobilized, and to what effect?**

The Solomon Islands is a prime example of an Oceanian state that suffered a form of punitive coercion by China in the early 2000s, and yet it has puzzlingly drawn nearer to the PRC every year since. In 2000, Solomon Islands' trade with the PRC accounted for only 12.1% of all exports and less than 2% of its imports; yet by 2020, the PRC was the Solomon Islands' biggest trade partner, accounting for 64.4% of its exports and 34.4% of imports.⁶⁷ The Solomon Islands' security deal with China represents a watershed breakaway from decades of neighborly assistance from its regional partners. What we know about the current security agreement with China is that it has characteristics that appear to resemble some of the objectives RAMSI endeavored to help the Solomon Islands achieve, though it is notably lacking in state accountability requirements.

Since the 2011 announcement by former U.S. President Barack Obama regarding America's intent to make a "Pacific pivot" in response to China's increasing influence in the region, East Asia and Oceania have become primary regions of interest to the West.⁶⁸ Many of the Oceanian nations are developing, neutral states that have found themselves in the middle of a modern great power competition. America's closest and most reliable ally, Australia, and numerous other states in the region spent fourteen years assisting, investing in, and directly aiding the Solomon Islands through the RAMSI state-building mission. Because of their efforts, the Solomon Islands' overall statistical capacity score from The World Bank had grown from 32 to 52 on a 100-point scale during the years of RAMSI from 2006 to 2017, propelling the Solomon Islands upward from the lowest ranked state in

⁶⁷ "Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners: Solomon Islands," Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/slb?deltaTimeSelector1=deltaTime10&yearSelector1=exportGrowthYear6>.

⁶⁸ Mark E. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia," In Focus (Congressional Research Service, March 28, 2012), 1–2.

the region to fifth out of the fourteen Oceanian states.⁶⁹ It was perhaps the most catered-to state in Oceania in the last two decades. Because of its status as a prime beneficiary of regional assistance, its recent security agreement with the PRC caught the entire region and the U.S. by surprise. This research investigates the factors that led the Solomon Islands to grow closer to China in spite of significant engagement and investment from the West and other regional partners.

The Solomon Islands is in some ways a special case, but it also shares common domestic characteristics with many of the other developing Oceanian states and is therefore an important case study which, through in-depth analyses, yields significant findings pertinent to the rest of Oceania. Importantly, like its developing neighbors, the Solomon Islands represent key strategic terrain that, if under the control of a hostile regime, might enable the severance of strategic lines of communication between the U.S. and Australia. This fact alone ultimately makes the Solomon Islands a nation of strategic importance to U.S. foreign policy. In the context of the current great power competition, much may depend on America's ability to understand and respond to the factors that have contributed to increasingly close ties between the Solomon Islands and China. This research aims to contribute to that understanding.

This thesis uses a multitude of sources to investigate factors relevant to the influence competition in Oceania. Books, scholarly articles and publications, theses, government and nongovernmental organization reports, journals and other peer-reviewed works form the foundation of this study's research. In addition, due to the contemporary nature of the dramatic shifts in Solomon Islands foreign policy and government decision-making, news articles, podcasts, and social media are also referenced to supplement the foundational research.

⁶⁹ "Statistical Capacity Score – Solomon Islands, Australia, Micronesia, Fed. Sts., Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Samoa, Palau, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru, Tonga," The World Bank, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IQ.SCI.OVRL?contextual=region&end=2020&locations=SB-AU-FM-FJ-PG-MH-NZ-VU-WS-PW-KI-TV-NR-TO&start=2020&view=bar>.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is organized into three chapters following this introductory chapter. Chapter II is a case study of influence activities in the Solomon Islands from the beginning of the ethnic conflict in 1998 to the initiation of the first phase of RAMSI's withdrawal from the Solomon Islands in 2011. Chapter III is a continuation of the Solomon Islands case study from 2011 to 2022 in the months following the signing of the security agreement between the PRC and the Solomon Islands. In Chapters II and III, I examine the evolution of state influence in the Solomon Islands within the two categories of Meierding and Sigman's power mechanisms: leverage mechanisms, which this thesis suggests are represented in Oceania by coercive diplomacy and social and financial investment, and affective mechanisms, as represented by protracted engagement with the Solomon Islands. The fourth chapter summarizes the research findings and reflects on their pertinence to other developing states in Oceania and the potential implications of those findings to U.S. foreign policy.

II. SOLOMON ISLANDS: 1998–2011

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on influence activities in the Solomon Islands from the beginning of the ethnic conflict in 1998 to the beginning of the first phase of the RAMSI withdrawal from the Solomon Islands in 2011. During this time period, Taiwan, China, and Australia each sought to gain influence in the Solomon Islands by a variety of means and with varying degrees of success. Taiwan used its financial resources as leverage to achieve its primary objective of ensuring that the Solomon Islands maintained its diplomatic recognition of the government in Taipei. China saw the Solomon Islands as one of the last remaining regional holdouts recognizing the legitimacy of the government in Taipei, and so it sought to coerce the Solomon Islands into revoking diplomatic recognition of Taipei in favor of Beijing by using its status as a permanent member on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to prevent an international response to the Solomon Islands' requests for assistance with their increasingly violent ethnic conflict. Australia observed the growing instability in the Solomon Islands and feared that it might spread and potentially threaten Australia's regional security interests, and so it sought to address the core issue in the Solomon Islands that it believed most contributed to the failure of the Solomon Islands state and the outbreak of violent ethnic conflict: the failing state. To achieve this, Australia responded to the Solomon Islands' requests for aid and led and organized a regional coalition to provide assistance and to set the conditions necessary for the restoration of stability, government legitimacy, and state capacity in the Solomon Islands.

As Taiwan, China, and Australia pursued their interests in the Solomon Islands, they each encountered obstacles that hindered or otherwise negatively impacted their efforts to gain influence. The zero-sum dispute between Taiwan and China for diplomatic recognition from the Solomon Islands was one of these obstacles. However, the primary obstacle Taiwan and China faced, and will likely continue to face, in their pursuit of influence was the enmity that Solomon Islanders had for late-20th century ethnic-Chinese

immigrants to the Solomon Islands, often referred to as *waku* or *wakus*,⁷⁰ many of whom significantly impacted domestic politics and businesses in ways harmful to local native Solomon Islanders.⁷¹ During this time period, this ethnic tension became pronounced in ways that threatened to upend Taiwan's efforts and created concerns for China over the conduct and treatment of its diaspora. Taiwan's abetment of corruption in the Solomon Islands government was at risk of exposure, and China was concerned that its foreign policy goals might be negatively impacted by the culturally insensitive and brash behavior of the ethnic-Chinese *waku* diaspora and the resulting potential for political backlash.⁷² Australia's main hurdles to achieving influence and regional security by way of intervention in the Solomon Islands were in overcoming local wariness for western intervention rooted in Solomon Islands' colonial legacy and in applying law and order justly without drawing the ire of powerful politicians.

Public perception and the perceptions of key elites within the Solomon Islands government (SIG) were pivotal in determining the extent and durability of Taiwan, China, and Australia's influence in the Solomon Islands. As these external actors mobilized various power mechanisms in order to attain influence and shape the behavior of the Solomon Islands state, their ability to sustain any influence successfully gained was heavily dependent on their ability to maintain a positive image in the eyes of both the public and the elites. China and Australia in particular understood perception as key, and both took very different, yet deliberate, approaches to cultivating their state's image. China's initial tactic in managing its image with the people of the Solomon Islands was far more indirect than Australia's head-on confrontation of any misconstrued notions of Western involvement as a sign of neocolonialism.

⁷⁰ Waku is a Solomons Pijin term used when referring to people in the Asian community in the Solomon Islands which are predominantly people of ethnic Chinese descent. It was originally used by the ethnic Chinese residents of the Solomon Islands and is "derived from a Cantonese phrase 'Wah Kiu', which translates literally to 'residing outside'" as seen in Clive Moore, "No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: Asian Involvement in the Economic and Political Process," in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 64.

⁷¹ Moore, 64.

⁷² Graeme Smith, "Chinese Reactions to Anti-Asian Riots in the Pacific," *The Journal of Pacific History* 47, no. 1 (2012): 97, JSTOR

During this time period, three key events took place that served to either facilitate or obstruct the influence activities of each of these three foreign state actors: the five-year Solomon Islands ethnic conflict that began in 1998, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2011, and the 2006 parliamentary elections. Details concerning Solomon Islands domestic politics and the interests of both the public and key elites relating to these events are discussed in this chapter to provide context for the influence activities that Taiwan, China, and Australia undertook in the Solomon Islands.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Sections B and C provide contextual information on three key events in Solomon Islands history and information related to Solomon Islands domestic politics and corruption which affected or were impacted by foreign or domestic actors. In pursuit of influence, Taiwan, China, and Australia each mobilized various *leverage mechanisms*—*reward* and *punishment*—and/or *affective power mechanisms*—*expertise*, *attractiveness*, and *recognition*—which shaped the behavior of the target state, the Solomon Islands, to varying degrees of success. In section D, we take a step back to analyze the influence activities undertaken in the Solomon Islands by Taiwan, China, and Australia through the lens of Meierding and Sigman’s influence development process as discussed in the research methodology section of Chapter I. Each of the evident power mechanisms mobilized by Taiwan, China, and Australia are examined in the context of the key events that played out in the Solomon Islands during the 1998–2011 time period. This analysis is followed by a brief conclusion in the final section of this chapter.

Of note, this thesis does not provide an in-depth historical account of each event discussed. Rather, it seeks to characterize the key events that took place in the Solomon Islands during the given time periods in a manner that provides context for an assessment through the lens of the research methodology discussed in Chapter I. Also, this thesis often makes references to islands and cities with names that are not common knowledge to most readers unfamiliar with the Solomon Islands. See Figure 1 for a map of the Solomon Islands as a point of reference.

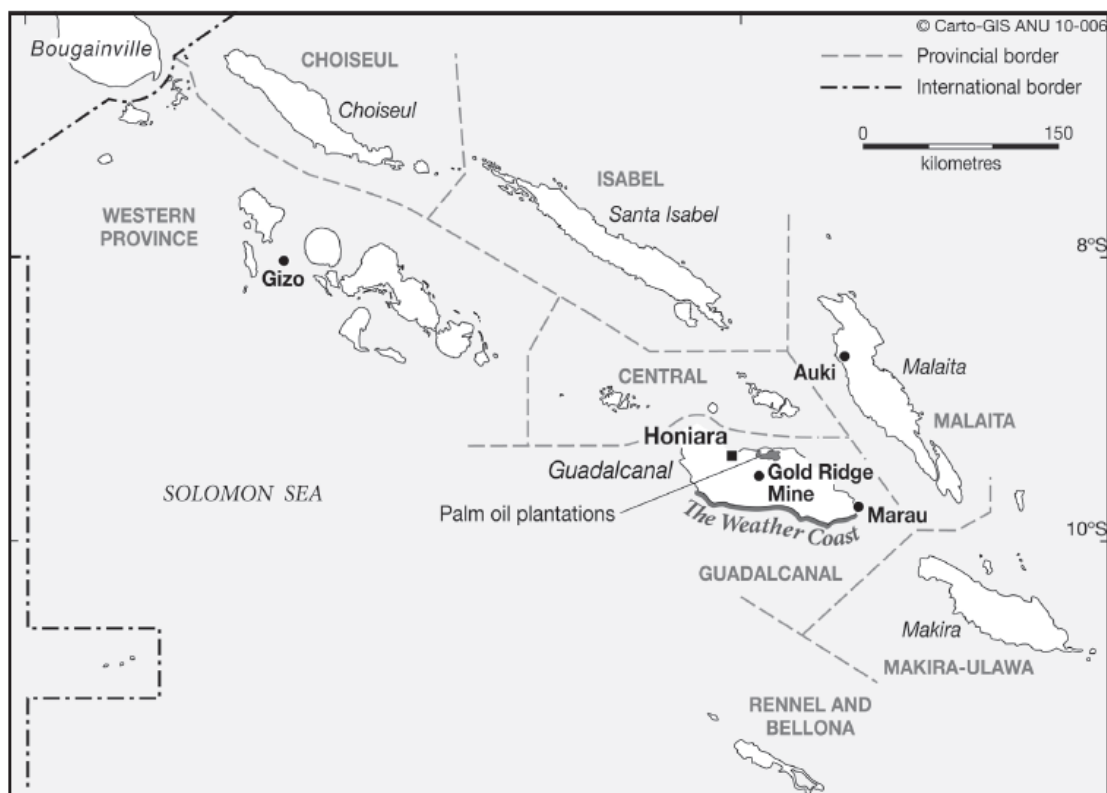


Figure 1. Map of Solomon Islands⁷³

B. KEY EVENTS: 1998–2011

1. The Ethnic Conflict: 1998–2003

The ethnic conflict in the Solomon Islands was a brutal five-year campaign primarily between two militant groups that erupted over extreme domestic exploitation, “economic [factors], related to infrastructural under-development, use of labour, control of land, changes exacerbated by the influences of Christianity and government, and shifting power relations.”⁷⁴ The conflict grew so violent, and the capacity of the state grew so weak, that the SIG was forced to resort to appeals for international assistance with bringing the conflict under control. After Australia declined to unilaterally respond to the SIG’s

⁷³ Source: John Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows: Statebuilding as Peacebuilding in Solomon Islands* (ANU Press, 2010), xiii, JSTOR.

⁷⁴ Clive Moore, “The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour: Historical Origins of the Recent Solomon Islands Crisis,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 42, no. 2 (2007): 212, JSTOR; Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 18.

requests, the SIG sought aid in 2002 through the UNSC.⁷⁵ China used this opportunity to punitively thwart the Solomon Islands' requests for assistance due to the SIG's continued diplomatic recognition of the government in Taipei by making it known to the other members of the UNSC that any decision by the UNSC to respond to the SIG's request would be vetoed by China, as was its right as a permanent member on the security council.⁷⁶ The SIG had signaled that it might pursue a swap of diplomatic recognition to Beijing on numerous occasions since 1978, but never seriously and most often as an effort to coerce Taiwan into providing more and more discretionary funding and financial assistance.⁷⁷ However, Beijing's gambit at the UNSC threatened to compel the SIG to reconsider whether its efforts to tread water through its deteriorating domestic situation were worth maintaining its diplomatic recognition of Taipei. Meanwhile, the domestic instability in the Solomon Islands was reaching a breaking point.

The origins of the tensions between the people native to Guadalcanal and those who immigrated there from the other islands are multidimensional and complex, but the exchanges of hostilities were mainly between the two main ethnic groups, Malaitans and the people of Guadalcanal, also known as Guales.⁷⁸ Urbanization and development on Guadalcanal, the largest of the Solomon Islands and home to the national capital city of Honiara, in the late 1990s brought in large numbers of workers internationally and especially from the other islands in the Solomon Islands archipelago, mainly from the island of Malaita.⁷⁹ Notably, in the lead up to the clashes, local Chinese business owners—*wakus*—were targeted by Malaitan groups.⁸⁰ This was due to resentment for a “[*waku*] stranglehold on retail and wholesale business,” although the *wakus* only accounted for less

⁷⁵ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 49.

⁷⁶ Braithwaite et al., 49.

⁷⁷ Moore, “No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: Asian Involvement in the Economic and Political Process,” 88.

⁷⁸ Moore, “The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour,” 211.

⁷⁹ Moore, 213.

⁸⁰ Matthew Allen, “Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,” in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 48.

than one percent of the Solomon Islands population.⁸¹ The Malaitan groups believed the *wakus*’ outsized business successes demonstrated a dimension of the domestic inequity and unfairness that the government allegedly sponsored, or had at least failed to effectively address. The targeting of local *wakus* during times of national struggle is a recurring issue that would later, in the wake of the 2006 riots, begin to draw the attention of the Chinese government, specifically the Guangdong Office for Overseas Chinese Affairs.⁸² China’s response to the targeting of its diaspora in the Solomon Islands is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The Guadalcanal militants—the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM)—believed that their land and prospects had been unfairly taken by settlers from the other Solomon Islands, and that they needed to expel these settlers, most of which were Malaitan, from Guadalcanal in order to rectify what they perceived as domestic injustice which the government in Honiara was incapable of addressing.⁸³ Importantly, much of the land owned by Malaitans was legally purchased, but legal ownership was seen by the IFM to be unjust and in violation of the historical ethnic Guadalcanal people’s rights to the land. By the end of the conflict, over twenty thousand Malaitans had been expelled from Guadalcanal by force.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Moore, “No More Walkabout Long Chinatown: Asian Involvement in the Economic and Political Process,” 70–72.

⁸² Smith, “Chinese Reactions to Anti-Asian Riots in the Pacific,” 96.

⁸³ Patricia O’Brien, “The Deep Roots of the Solomon Islands’ Ongoing Political Crisis,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (blog), December 10, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/deep-roots-solomon-islands-ongoing-political-crisis>; RAMSI PAU, “Helpem Fren Documentary – Part 1 – Rebuilding a Pacific Nation,” YouTube, September 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvyqPhuHbD8>.

⁸⁴ Moore, “The Misappropriation of Malaitan Labour,” 213; Jon Fraenkel, Joni Madraiwiwi, and Henry Okole, “The RAMSI Decade: A Review of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, 2003–2013,” Independent Report, July 14, 2014, 15, <http://devpolicy.org/pdf/blog/Independent-RAMSI-Review-Report-Final.pdf>.

Some scholars believe the Solomon Islands state was failing long before the start of the ethnic conflict.⁸⁵ However, most agree it was a failed state by the conflict's end.⁸⁶ Widespread political corruption,⁸⁷ partisan police participation in the violence, and economic stagnation that produced a large population of out-of-work youth became a deadly combination that made it difficult to slow the fomentation of violence.⁸⁸ As the ferocity of the conflict escalated, elements of the Solomon Islands police force joined with the IFM's militant rival, the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), to stage a coup in June of 2000, resulting in the kidnapping and later resignation of then Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu, and the subsequent elevation to Prime Minister of Mannaseh Sogavare.⁸⁹ Once the Solomon Islands government realized it could not bring a halt to the violence by itself, it made several requests to the Australian government for armed security assistance, beginning in 2000, which the Australian government declined to respond to for nearly three years.⁹⁰

By 2002 and after yet another parliamentary election, the ethnic conflict had grown so severe that newly elected Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza felt he had no other choice but to seek outside assistance from the greater international community.⁹¹ He submitted two requests to the United Nations (UN) for assistance with bringing the violence to an end. However, ever since the Solomon Islands had gained their independence and statehood, the state had given diplomatic recognition to the government of Taiwan rather

⁸⁵ Shahar Hameiri, "The Trouble with RAMSI: Reexamining the Roots of Conflict in Solomon Islands," *The Contemporary Pacific* 19, no. 2 (2007): 409, JSTOR.

⁸⁶ Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 12; Clive Moore, "The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17)," *The Journal of Pacific History* 53, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223344.2018.1472521>.

⁸⁷ Political corruption is not unique to the Solomon Islands, but the specific form of Solomon Islands corruption was and is likely an outgrowth from the Solomon Islands' patronage-based political culture.

⁸⁸ Clive Moore, *Happy Isles in Crisis: The Historical Causes for a Failing State in Solomon Islands, 1998–2004* (Canberra, A.C.T: Asia Pacific Press, 2004), 63; Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth, eds., *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 223; Jon Fraenkel, "The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections," in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 156.

⁸⁹ Fernandes and Dinnen, "Solomon Islands," 208.

⁹⁰ Fernandes and Dinnen, 214.

⁹¹ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 49.

than to Beijing. Although the UN sent investigators to the Solomon Islands to determine the extent of the crisis, the issue was never brought before its Security Council for a formal vote. This, according to Braithwaite *et al.*, is due to the permanent membership of the PRC on the UNSC and the knowledge by the other UNSC members that any issue involving a vote to aid a state which diplomatically recognized Taiwan as sovereign would be vetoed by China.⁹² They chose not to devote UNSC time to the issue, given the likely futility of attempts to sway the PRC's position on the matter.

2. The Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands

Without help from the UNSC, the deteriorating situation in the Solomon Islands appeared as though it would not be resolved favorably without a regional bilateral or multilateral response effort. While much of the West's collective attention was focused on the war on terror in the Middle East, the Prime Minister of Australia noticed the spreading regional instability and was concerned that it might one day threaten Australian interests or potentially even the Australian homeland. He therefore sought to respond to what the Australian Strategic Policy Institute labeled the "greatest risk for state failure in the region...[creating] a potential haven for terrorist groups," the instability in the Solomon Islands.⁹³

Knowing that some might perceive a unilateral intervention by Australia in the Solomon Islands as a neocolonial endeavor, the Prime Minister of Australia sought to ensure that the response would be a multilateral effort with as many regional partners as possible.⁹⁴ The ministers of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) endorsed the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) under the auspices of the Biketawa Declaration of 2000 which, when combined with the formal request for assistance from the governor general of the Solomon Islands, provided the legal grounds and regional consent

⁹² Braithwaite *et al.*, 49.

⁹³ Braithwaite *et al.*, 49.

⁹⁴ RAMS PAU, "Helpem Fren Documentary – Part 1 – Rebuilding a Pacific Nation."

and participation necessary to restore order in the Solomon Islands with a regional coalition in support of the aptly-named Operation *Helpem Fren*.⁹⁵

By the time the first foreign personnel set foot on Solomon Islands soil in July of 2003 in support of the Australian-led RAMSI, several hundred people had been killed and many more wounded, a Solomon Islands prime minister had been taken hostage and was forced to resign in a coup, the police force had divided along ethnic lines to participate, to varying degrees, in the conflict, and numerous political purges of opposition groups on all sides of government had taken place, leaving the country in a state of near complete incapacitation.⁹⁶

In July of 2003, 2,200 police, military, and civilian personnel from the ten PIF states of Australia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Samoa arrived in the Solomon Islands to restore order.⁹⁷ RAMSI's priorities were "the tension trials,"⁹⁸ reestablishing the rule of law and restoring integrity to the management of government finances,"⁹⁹ while also maintaining a focus "on three 'cross-cutting' issues, of 'capacity development', gender equity and anti-corruption."¹⁰⁰ The state building effort, however, could not be feasibly attempted without first bringing an end to the violence.

It is now known that merely the announcement of RAMSI itself was enough to halt the majority of lawlessness and violence that had plagued the island nation for years, and

⁹⁵ RAMSI, "Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands." *Helpem Fren* is Solomon Islands pidgin for "help a friend."

⁹⁶ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 20; Allen, "Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara," 41.

⁹⁷ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 51; RAMSI, "Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands." Of note, there appears to be, through RAMSI, the formation of a regional coalition in parallel to the neighboring Southeast Asian coalition called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Though, in comparison, RAMSI was a temporary endeavor and was, at its core, in conflict with ASEAN norms, especially of non-interference. This is likely why no Southeast Asian nation participated in RAMSI, nor should any Southeast Asian nation be expected to participate in a similar endeavor in the future absent significant normative changes within ASEAN.

⁹⁸ "Tension trials" refers to the problems, especially the violence and corruption, associated with the ethnic conflict.

⁹⁹ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 7.

¹⁰⁰ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, 12.

that “all warlords [involved in the ethnic conflict]...made up their minds that they would urge their fighters to surrender their weapons and renounce violence before RAMSI landed.”¹⁰¹ Within the first month of RAMSI, an amnesty period for firearm turn-in—with an advertised ten-year mandatory prison sentence for non-compliant armed militants as incentive—was imposed by the Solomon Islands Government (SIG)-RAMSI team, resulting in thousands of surrendered firearms, the photos of which helped to initiate momentum for Operation *Helpem Fren* and garnered immediate positive public sentiment from those affected by the years of ethnic conflict and violence.¹⁰² By December of 2003, over 1,300 militants and police participants in the violence as well as most of the major militant leaders from both sides of the conflict had been arrested.¹⁰³

Although RAMSI’s efforts to disarm militants would continue for years to come, no new major outbreaks of violence would occur until after the 2006 elections. By the end of 2003, RAMSI was able to quickly turn its primary focus away from peace building and toward state building. By 2011, after effectively restoring law and order to the Solomon Islands, RAMSI would begin its years-long withdrawal and turnover of control back to the SIG.

3. The 2006 Elections: Black Tuesday and the April Riots

The 2006 Solomon Islands elections attracted the attention of the Chinese government and drove the PRC to take a surprising stance relative to its diaspora living abroad. In the leadup to the 2006 elections, unrest was stirring over allegations that SIG officials had taken bribes which influenced or threatened to influence policy decisions that negatively impacted or exploited local Solomon Islanders and their businesses to the benefit of foreign or *waku*-owned businesses.¹⁰⁴ When the results were tallied and the new Prime Minister was announced, tensions flared into violence. The new Prime Minister,

¹⁰¹ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 53.

¹⁰² Braithwaite et al., 51.

¹⁰³ Braithwaite et al., 55.

¹⁰⁴ Braithwaite et al., 72, 101.

Snyder Rini, was widely thought to have been put into power by *waku* businessmen.¹⁰⁵ In the wake of the violent riots that broke out in opposition to the election announcement, many local *wakus*, including children, were injured; and 90 percent of Honiara's *waku* businesses in the Chinatown district were looted and burned.¹⁰⁶ In response, new coalitions were formed in parliament to push through a vote of no-confidence for the new Prime Minister. Meanwhile RAMSI officials scrambled to bring an end to the riots.

Snyder Rini was previously the deputy to Prime Minister Kemakeza, who was wildly unpopular in the Solomon Islands during his tenure.¹⁰⁷ Kemakeza was selected in 2001 by parliament under inauspicious conditions in the height of the ethnic conflict and allegedly largely due to bribes paid to members of parliament for their votes.¹⁰⁸ The previous prime minister, Mannaseh Sogavare, who served from 2000–2001 and who had himself been dismissed from his post as finance minister in 1998 for allegations of a financial nature, had dismissed Kemakeza in 2000 for the alleged misappropriation of a twenty-five-million-dollar loan from the Taiwanese government and for embezzlement.¹⁰⁹ This scandal, however, did not prevent Kemakeza's victory in the 2001 election. Kemakeza's unpopularity was shared with Snyder Rini.

There are numerous reasons why many prominent Solomon Islands politicians have been able to overcome, at least temporarily, political scandals that might otherwise prevent a politician from being elected to public office. One of the most prominent of these reasons is that, as in the 2006 election, the fifty available Solomon Islands parliamentary seats were contested at the general election by an average of approximately nine candidates per seat, with election winners rarely winning their seats with more than thirty percent of the popular

¹⁰⁵ Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, "Chinese Reactions to Anti-Asian Riots in the Pacific," 96.

¹⁰⁷ Allen, "Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara," 47.

¹⁰⁸ Fraenkel, "The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections," 157. Claims have been made that bribe payments as high as 50,000 SI dollars were paid to individual members of parliament for their votes in the election of Prime Minister Kemakeza.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, "Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara," 47; Fraenkel, "The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections," 153.

vote.¹¹⁰ This dynamic is very likely responsible for the inherent dissatisfaction among the majority of the electorate who inevitably find themselves being represented by someone for whom they did not vote.¹¹¹ Accordingly, the many candidates represented many different political parties who, without joining a coalition in parliament after being elected, would otherwise be powerless in the halls of parliament. Among many other controversies that surrounded the 2006 elections, allegations of the use of patronage politics and bribery in order to form coalitions once the members of parliament were elected have been made against politicians, prominent businesses, and foreign governments, “particularly local Asian businessmen and the Republic of China (Taiwan).”¹¹²

The general dissatisfaction of the majority of Solomon Islands voters after the 2006 parliamentary election led to a public feeling of powerlessness in the affairs of the government. When this feeling of powerlessness was combined with the knowledge that foreign interests, or *waku* interests, were potentially influencing the national government and the method by which the government was to be held accountable in the Solomon Islands democracy, its elections, it should come as no surprise that when the announcement was made that new prime minister would be the “heir apparent” to the exceedingly unpopular former Prime Minister Kemakeza, Snyder Rini, chaos might ensue.¹¹³ Allen explains that Snyder Rini’s election was symbolic in being “the final act in a process of mass political disempowerment” of the Solomon Islands voters.¹¹⁴ The public’s reply to Snyder Rini’s address to the crowd outside parliament was “insults, jeers, and shouts of ‘Asian money, Asian money.’”¹¹⁵ The public’s perception was that Rini would serve as a continuation for Kemakeza’s style of governance, which allegedly favored Asian investments and foreign-inspired policy moves over domestic empowerment, further

¹¹⁰ Allen, 42; Fraenkel, 160.

¹¹¹ Fraenkel, “The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections,” 162.

¹¹² Allen, “Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,” 42.

¹¹³ Allen, 48.

¹¹⁴ Allen, 48.

¹¹⁵ Allen, 44; Fraenkel, “The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections,” 148; Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 174.

demonstrating the lack of legal accountability for the “big fish” in the apparently corrupt system.¹¹⁶

Riots erupted, stones were thrown, and tear gas canisters were cast in reply, Chinese businesses in Chinatown were looted and burned, police vehicles were set alight, the Pacific Casino Hotel (home of Sogavare’s political camp) was burned down, and many, including children, police officers, and especially ethnic Chinese people were injured.¹¹⁷ These riots “were the first mass destruction of its kind ever seen in Honiara,” and have since been referred to as Black Tuesday.¹¹⁸ Of note, some members of parliament were arrested and were found to have participated in the premeditation of and recruiting for the violence and damage that was done.¹¹⁹ In the wake of the chaos, opposition members within parliament, led by Mannaseh Sogavare, formed a new coalition that ensured a vote of no-confidence would move forward against Snyder Rini, leaving him no choice but to resign after having been in office for just over one week.¹²⁰ In the end, the riots and violence had lasted for two days, the political instability for eight, and the stage was set for a new 2006 parliamentary election a few weeks later that would place Sogavare back in the prime minister’s seat for his second term.

Because of the widespread targeting of the Chinese diaspora and their businesses in the riots, which even led some to flee back to China, PRC media outlets took notice.¹²¹ However, China’s position on the violence against its diaspora was shockingly contrary to the common Western opinion that the *wakus* and their businesses were simply collateral

¹¹⁶ Sinclair Dinnen, “Dilemmas of Intervention and the Building of a State and Nation,” in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 15; Fraenkel, “The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections,” 162.

¹¹⁷ Allen, “Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,” 44.

¹¹⁸ Tarcisius Tara Kabutaulaka, “Westminster Meets Solomons in the Honiara Riots,” in *Politics and State Building in Solomon Islands*, ed. Sinclair Dinnen and Stewart Firth (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2008), 96.

¹¹⁹ Fraenkel, “The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections,” 149; Allen, “Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,” 45–46.

¹²⁰ Allen, “Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara,” 46; Fraenkel, “The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections,” 148.

¹²¹ Smith, “Chinese Reactions to Anti-Asian Riots in the Pacific,” 96.

damage in the riots. China's Guangdong Office filed a report that condemned the corruption, bribery, and "improper behavior" of the low "quality" Chinese diaspora in the Solomon Islands, and laid blame for the violence on the general conduct of the *wakus* themselves, which China felt was unfavorably impacting its ability to pursue its interests in the region.¹²²

The internal Chinese Government report condemning the conduct of its diaspora in the Solomon Islands highlighted a new and important obstacle to successful Chinese influence activities abroad and may have been a pivotal event in shaping China's approach to overseas Chinese affairs. The report highlighted that Chinese foreign affairs were being negatively impacted by the bad conduct of Chinese immigrants abroad, and made multiple recommendations for preemptively resolving similar issues in the future including limiting the number of Chinese migrants that would be permitted to immigrate to any single location, and for the investment of funds that might otherwise be used for evacuating diaspora in similar circumstances into language and cultural awareness training prior to migration.¹²³ The role this specific event had to play in China's overall approach to overseas Chinese affairs and migrant management after 2006 is a subject worthy of further investigation and research.

C. RAMSI, CORRUPTION, AND CONFLICT WITH SOGAVARE

The effects of RAMSI's efforts to restore the citizens' trust in the SIG and its institutions by seeking to bring an end to political corruption, embezzlement, and other financial exploitation of Solomon Islanders by those in power became apparent almost immediately. The tax revenue collected in "December 2003 was 40 percent higher than for the previous highest month of the year" due to increased voluntary citizen compliance with tax law, which had long been avoided because of the general knowledge among the people of the Solomon Islands that the treasury was being misappropriated for the personal gain of corrupt politicians.¹²⁴ With citizen compliance with tax law skyrocketing, the next step

¹²² Smith, 97.

¹²³ Smith, 98–99.

¹²⁴ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 56.

would be tackling debt. While the SIG financials were being managed by RAMSI administrators, the debt held by the Solomon Islands state fell from well over one hundred percent of its GDP to nearly fifty percent within five years.¹²⁵ The public support for the Australian-led RAMSI increased accordingly.

Thousands of arrests were carried out by RAMSI for all manner of charges including murder, theft, corruption, embezzlement, and violations of firearms laws and mandates. However, perhaps the most impactful arrests were those of former MEF leader and convicted murderer Harold Keke in 2003 and former Prime Ministers Alebua and Kemakeza for corruption in 2007.¹²⁶ It is important to note that Kemakeza was the originator of the request for RAMSI. RAMSI became aware of Kemakeza's criminality early on in, and perhaps before, the RAMSI mission, but chose to wait until his term in office ended in 2006 before indicting him due to his part in enabling RAMSI's "free hand to run the show."¹²⁷

After Kemakeza's release from prison, in an interview with RAMSI, he remarked on the positive role RAMSI was playing in rebuilding a favorable future for the people of the Solomon Islands, especially, he admitted, as it related to the arrests of corrupt officials like himself.¹²⁸ Although many local Solomon Islanders and politicians like Kemakeza could reflect favorably on what RAMSI had accomplished for the Solomon Islands, not everyone shared this sentiment. Some SIG politicians, such as Mannaseh Sogavare, viewed a protracted RAMSI, after its initial successes were played out, as an infringement on the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands and its people.¹²⁹

The memory of one incident between RAMSI and Sogavare in 2007 would later threaten to undermine the relationship between Australia and the Solomon Islands,

¹²⁵ Braithwaite et al., 56.

¹²⁶ Braithwaite et al., 71.

¹²⁷ Braithwaite et al., 55.

¹²⁸ RAMSI PAU, "Helpem Fren Documentary – Part 3 – Rebuilding a Pacific Nation," YouTube, September 18, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0yVmR1VgBjo>.

¹²⁹ Solomon Times, "Declined Support for RAMSI Expected: Sogavare – Solomon Times Online," October 27, 2008, <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/declined-support-for-ramsi-expected-sogavare/2901>.

heedless of the goodwill RAMSI had garnered through Operation *Helpem Fren*. Sogavare has been active in the SIG since the mid-1990s, and his activities have been called into question on numerous occasions. He served as the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance from 1994 to 1996 and then, after his election to parliament, became the minister for finance and treasury in 1997.¹³⁰ Sogavare was relieved in 1998 by then-Prime Minister Ulufa'alu from his position as the finance minister for granting tax exemptions and duty remissions without authorization.¹³¹ One scholar, Clive Moore, found that between 1994 and 1997 tax exemptions of up to one hundred percent were being granted by the finance ministry to “political cronies” and local companies, many of which have since been revealed as “fronts for Asian companies.”¹³² Many of the people who benefited from these exemptions and remissions held powerful positions in the Solomon Islands business sector, most notably in the fishing and logging industries.¹³³ Two years after being relieved from his duties as finance minister, and just weeks after the 2000 coup against Prime Minister Ulufa'alu, Sogavare was elected as Prime Minister. Notably, during his term as Prime Minister, Sogavare realized that some of the financial reforms set into motion by his predecessor, Ulufa'alu, were justly applied. The grim state of SIG finances drove Sogavare to look to Taiwan for over twenty million dollars in financial assistance in exchange for

¹³⁰ “Hon Manasseh Damukana Sogavare: National Parliament of Solomon Islands,” National Parliament of Solomon Islands, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.parliament.gov.sb/profile/hon-manasseh-damukana-sogavare>.

¹³¹ Jon Fraenkel, *The Manipulation of Custom: From Uprising to Intervention in the Solomon Islands* (Wellington N.Z.: Victoria University Press, 2005), 93.

¹³² Moore, *Happy Isles in Crisis*, 58–71. There was a notable lack of information available in literature, news, or other records that could be found which could detail the specific reasons for which Sogavare was dismissed from his post in 1998 as Minister for Finance. Although this event occurred in the late 1990s when the world was slowly joining the online community which potentially explains the lack of accessible records, the vast majority of available media which mentions Sogavare's dismissal is non-descript and simply states his dismissal as an event that transpired without context. Several sites do not maintain archives earlier than 2001, others have been deleted or return 404 errors. Some, less reputable online documents state that Sogavare himself has stated that even he is unaware of the reasons for his dismissal. The Solomon Islands parliament website also does not specifically address the context of this event. The fact that the sitting prime minister, as of the time of writing this thesis, is Mannaseh Sogavare himself may be correlated with the mysterious absence of documents related to his dismissal, but there was no specific evidence found which could be used to demonstrate a conspiracy to remove this information from public record. Moore's findings related to tax exemptions and duty-free benefits for “fronts for Asian companies” and political cronies are attributed to the finance ministry in general, rather than to Sogavare directly.

¹³³ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 72.

continued diplomatic recognition in order to prevent SIG financial collapse.¹³⁴ Taiwan bought an extension on the Solomon Islands' continued diplomatic recognition of the government in Taipei by agreeing to Sogavare's offer. After this, Sogavare served as prime minister for one year until the election of Prime Minister Kemakeza in 2001, whereafter he retained his seat in parliament.

In 2006, Sogavare was able to again politically maneuver in chaos, unrest, and political disorder to find himself in a position of power. In the lead up to the disastrous events of the Black Tuesday general election, the parliamentary coalition who had originally backed Sogavare gave their support to Snyder Rini, former deputy of Kemakeza, when it became apparent Sogavare would not have the needed support for reelection.¹³⁵ After Rini was announced Prime Minister and the resulting riots and political turmoil ensued, many of those in Rini's camp, sensing the impending negative political ramifications of maintaining their support for Rini, switched their backing to Sogavare, enabling him to retake the prime minister seat for his second term in 2006.¹³⁶ Perhaps ironically, Sogavare then appointed former Prime Minister Ulufa'alu as his Minister of Finance. Sogavare's appointment of Ulufa'alu, who was well known for his anti-corruption efforts and attempts to address SIG finance issues during his time as prime minister, makes sense in that during this time period RAMSI was targeting embezzlers in the SIG. Appointing Ulufa'alu to manage the finance ministry would assure the avoidance of RAMSI's scrutiny.

Just over a year into Sogavare's second appointment as prime minister, RAMSI made a critical error. In 2007 Sogavare had appointed a Fiji-born lawyer, Julian Moti, to be his new attorney general.¹³⁷ Moti was a wanted man in Australia at the time; he was suspected of committing a crime of a sexual nature years before in Vanuatu.¹³⁸ Moti's entry to the Solomon Islands was alleged by the Australian government to be illegal.

¹³⁴ Braithwaite et al., 48.

¹³⁵ Fraenkel, "The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections," 174.

¹³⁶ Fraenkel, 174.

¹³⁷ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 18.

¹³⁸ These charges were later dismissed in Australian courts.

Because of this, the RAMSI-appointed Australian commander of the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force ordered a police raid on Sogavare's office in pursuit of evidence that might support the Australian government's allegations.¹³⁹ Outraged by the raid and what appeared to be a foreign sponsored and targeted violation by RAMSI, Sogavare spoke out against RAMSI and began boycotting RAMSI and Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) events, which compelled the Solomon Islands parliament to make known their "objections to Sogavare's leadership... and triggered a successful 'no-confidence' vote."¹⁴⁰ This event became a black eye for RAMSI, and served to undermine RAMSI's objectives for some time in the public eye. More important contemporarily, however, is the lasting impression which the raid undoubtedly left on Sogavare regarding any future potential Australia-led intervention efforts. Later in the second decade of the 21st century, when the security situation in the Solomon Islands would again show signs of decline, Sogavare would begin looking for an alternative provider of security assistance—a Chinese provider—that would not demand liberal governance or transparency in state financial practices in exchange for security guarantees. This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter III.

D. POWER MECHANISMS

Having given an overview of the major events between 1998 and 2011, in this section I analyze the power mechanisms which were at play during this time in the Solomon Islands, specifically in the lead up to and during the ethnic conflict, throughout the early years of RAMSI, and in the events surrounding Black Tuesday and the 2006 elections. Meierding and Sigman identify the power mechanisms of "reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, and recognition" and explain that states are capable of gaining influence in and over other states by effectively mobilizing them.¹⁴¹ Three key regional powers, namely Australia, Taiwan, and China, each conducted influence activities in the Solomon Islands during this time period. Each of these three state's interests may be summarized as

¹³⁹ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 18.

¹⁴⁰ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, 18.

¹⁴¹ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 3.

follows. Australia desired regional stability, Taiwan sought to preserve its diplomatic recognition by the Solomon Islands, and China sought to subvert that recognition.¹⁴² Using Meierding and Sigman’s influence development process chart (Figure 2), Australia, Taiwan, and China’s interests in the Solomon Islands coincided with the depicted desired *target state behavior changes*.¹⁴³ The diverse power mechanisms each of these three states mobilized resulted in complex outcomes that would shape the future of Solomon Islands foreign policy decisions for years to come.

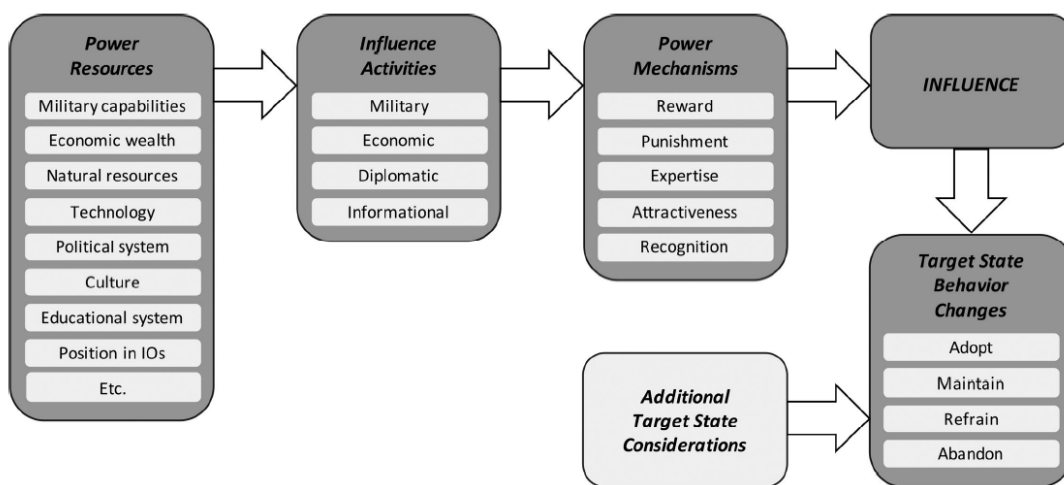


Figure 2. The Influence Development Process.¹⁴⁴

1. Leverage Mechanisms: Reward and Punishment

Taiwan appeared to have primarily mobilized *leverage mechanisms* between 1998 and 2011 in the Solomon Islands. Its *economic wealth* in the form of financial assistance, aid, and relief to the state of the Solomon Islands and slush funding was its most commonly

¹⁴² Lintner, “A New Battle For the Pacific,” 30.

¹⁴³ Meierding and Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition,” 5.

¹⁴⁴ Source: Meierding and Sigman, 5.

wielded *power resource*.¹⁴⁵ In the cases covered in this chapter, Taiwan's money served to mobilize the *reward power mechanism* to influence the SIG to *maintain* their diplomatic recognition for the government of the ROC. In 2000, Prime Minister Sogavare requested twenty million dollars in financial assistance from Taiwan in exchange for continued diplomatic recognition.¹⁴⁶ This is possibly the most direct and overt example of how Taiwan's *economic influence activities* in the Solomon Islands served its interests, albeit temporarily. Regardless of what the money coming from Taiwan was applied toward, Taiwan's approach to achieving its interests in the Solomon Islands was primarily through *financial investment*. It is important to note that though Taiwan's financial investments can be primarily categorized as leverage mechanisms, there was some overlap with the affective mechanisms. Some of the aid given to the SIG by Taiwan went toward "rural development projects, educational scholarships, and urban infrastructure development" and also served to fund a hospital and police force training.¹⁴⁷ However, the limited nature of this training was overshadowed by the primary purpose of Taiwan's aid, which appears to be the appeasement of the SIG in exchange for diplomatic recognition. Overall, Taiwan's approach to financially incentivizing the SIG to maintain its diplomatic recognition for the government in Taipei was limited and beginning to falter.¹⁴⁸

These particular Taiwanese rewards appear to have been the more favored approach by the SIG, however, who continued their diplomatic recognition of Taipei while they withstood the combined weight of China's rewards and *punishment*, which were being mobilized concurrently. The Solomon Islands increasing economic dependence on its exports to China for the first decade of the 21st century certainly had some bearing on Solomon Islands policy makers. If Taiwan had not continuously provided financial aid and other discretionary funding to the SIG, China would have been the obvious other option

¹⁴⁵ Transform Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Kevin Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, Pacific Series (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 2021), 327.

¹⁴⁶ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 48.

¹⁴⁷ Brady, Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific, 13.

¹⁴⁸ Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 325.

for aid, and only at the low cost of a diplomatic recognition swap. Additionally, China's position at the UNSC concerning the Solomon Islands' request for assistance during the ethnic conflict was coercive in nature. Because of the Solomon Islands' continued diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, China made clear that any UNSC resolution to aid the Solomon Islands would be vetoed.¹⁴⁹ This punitive leverage mechanism forced the Solomon Islands to weigh the benefits of maintaining its diplomatic recognition of Taipei against the cost of maintaining such a policy stance. Had RAMSI not stepped in to help the SIG recover from its imminent collapse, this cost might have been too much to bear. The Australian-led response to the Solomon Islands' ethnic conflict inhibited China's coercive gambit at the UNSC and delayed China's ability to diplomatically isolate Taiwan from the Solomon Islands by many years.

2. Affective Mechanisms: Expertise, Attractiveness, and Recognition

Australia, through RAMSI, drew upon nearly every listed *power resource* to conduct diplomatic and economic influence activities by mobilizing their *expertise* and *attractiveness power mechanisms* which generated influence in the Solomon Islands and ensured the *abandonment* of corrupt political and financial practices that threatened to destabilize the region, at least temporarily. Australia understood the importance of optics in working with its neighboring states, nearly all of which were formerly colonized by Western powers not far detached from the Australian government. The Australian approach was far more direct and open than what Taiwan had undertaken. After Australia stepped in with RAMSI, China was made out to be a diplomatic bully. Meanwhile Taiwan appeared to be funding illicit schemes that allegedly robbed Solomon Islands voters of their ability to hold their representatives accountable in democratic elections. Australia's answer to the Solomon Islands' request for aid was a massive coalition of regionally based, mostly non-western partners which, together, efficiently uprooted the main perpetrators of violence, and tamped down on government corruption for years.¹⁵⁰ The arrival of the relatively well-equipped and diverse coalition force built from regional military, police, and civilian

¹⁴⁹ Windybank, "The China Syndrome [China's Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific.]," 32.

¹⁵⁰ Brady, Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific, 12.

workers with the shared intent of restoring stability to the Solomon Islands imbued a sense of *attractiveness* among Solomon Islanders that was powerful enough to bring the violence to an end almost immediately. RAMSI's sharing of *expertise* in its training of police and finance officials also led to a greater mutual understanding between Solomon Islanders and the representative governments of RAMSI, especially that of Australia.

The influence gained among Solomon Islanders and the SIG by RAMSI was significant because of the nature of the *affective mechanisms* which it mobilized. RAMSI was primarily a *social investment* which played out through direct and *protracted engagement*. Even when RAMSI faced accusations of overstepping its role in Solomon Islands domestic policy, the goodwill it had gained by bringing an end to the hostilities of the ethnic conflict, by imprisoning violent criminals, militant leaders, and corrupt politicians, and through the day-to-day interactions of RAMSI personnel with their counterparts in the SIG and Solomon Islands Police Force was enough to prevent the RAMSI mission from being totally undermined when issues such as the raid on Sogavare's office arose.¹⁵¹ RAMSI was so effectively implemented that even former Prime Minister Kemakeza, after he had been released from prison, stated in an interview "when I was in prison, I saw a few magistrates, a few lawyers, a few very high business people also sent to prison for whatever [sic], so I think it's a good sign that the cross section of people have faced justice and ended up behind bars, like myself."¹⁵² He saw the good that RAMSI did in restoring law and order to his country and held no ill will against RAMSI, even though he himself was caught up by the enforcement of the law by the SIG-RAMSI team.

In the short-term, RAMSI was highly effective in gaining influence that resulted in behavioral changes within the Solomon Islands and by the SIG. This thesis argues, however, that the lasting impact that the Australia-led intervention would have on some members of the SIG, such as Mannaseh Sogavare, would negatively manifest later in the second and third decades of the 21st century. In 2022 and during Sogavare's fourth term as Prime Minister, China would offer an attractive alternative to foreign, particularly

¹⁵¹ Fernandes and Dinnen, "Solomon Islands," 216.

¹⁵² RAMSI PAU, "Helpem Fren Documentary – Part 3 – Rebuilding a Pacific Nation."

Australian-led, intervention in support of Solomon Islands security interests that Sogavare would view favorably in light of RAMSI's gaffe raid on his office in 2007. Australia would later regret antagonizing Sogavare. China's alternative security arrangement is discussed further in Chapter III.

The limited training that Taiwan provided to the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF) does constitute the mobilization of the *expertise* power mechanism, however it is unlikely that Taiwan was the only entity capable of providing this expertise. Furthermore, this provision was overshadowed by the police force partnership with RAMSI. In effect, RAMSI nullified the necessity for the RSIPF to continue to receive training from Taiwan and broke off this potential conduit for influence building by the government in Taipei.

China mobilized its *attractiveness* power mechanism in a surprising way, which was likely the first major step toward realizing its aims of diplomatically isolating Taiwan from the Solomon Islands. China's report on the violence against its diaspora in the wake of the 2006 elections was significant in that it condemned the behavior of the diaspora rather than lay blame on the SIG, racism, or other cultural or ethnic bias in the Solomon Islands against the *waku*. The writer of the report has since been consulted on several occasions by Chinese state affiliated media when similar "anti-Asian riots" occur beyond China's borders.¹⁵³ This may be indicative of the value the Chinese government places on the report's findings and recommendations. The association that the report makes between foreign public perceptions of ethnic-Chinese people and their impacts on the ability of the Chinese government to accomplish its foreign policy goals abroad is also significant. It remains to be seen whether the Chinese government was successful in reining in the Chinese diaspora to make better diplomats out of Chinese migrants to the Solomon Islands. However, the Guangdong Office for Overseas Chinese Affairs report is revealing in that it shows how important the cultivation of China's image abroad is to the CCP. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, China would continue to promote its image in the

¹⁵³ Smith, "Chinese Reactions to Anti-Asian Riots in the Pacific," 99.

Solomon Islands and would achieve notable, history-making successes by doing so. This is discussed further in Chapter III.

E. CONCLUSION

Taiwan's financial investments, China's coercive diplomacy, and Australia's social investment and protracted engagement all garnered influence that shaped SIG policymaking considerations. Given Dahl and Stinebrickner's definition of influence, as discussed in Chapter I, all three of these actors gained influence over the Solomon Islands in that each of their "wants, desires, preferences, or intentions...[affected] the actions, or predispositions to act, of [the Solomon Islands] in a direction consistent with—and not contrary to—the wants, preferences, or intentions of the influence-wielders" to varying degrees.¹⁵⁴ Taiwan used its finances to encourage the SIG to maintain their diplomatic recognition for Taipei during this time period. China affected the SIG's predispositions for action related to their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan to the point that on at least one occasion the prime minister of the Solomon Islands extorted Taiwan for cash in exchange for sustained diplomatic recognition. Australia achieved its desire for regional security through RAMSI's state building efforts in cooperation with the SIG. China was the only party whose aims were not fully realized in the short term. However, the lasting impacts of China's UNSC stance, its growing dominance over the Solomon Islands export economy, and the continued existence of China as a similar and increasingly powerful and attractive alternative partnership to that offered by Taiwan would later find itself in contest with Australia's interests as well when, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, China would heavily mobilize affective mechanisms in competition with Australian security interests.

The lasting impediment to China and Taiwan achieving overwhelming influence in the Solomon Islands was not necessarily the members of the SIG whose allegiances were allegedly for sale; it appears to have been the citizens of the Solomon Islands themselves. For years, Solomon Islanders were confronted with ethnic Chinese businesses that

¹⁵⁴ Dahl and Stinebrickner, *Modern Political Analysis*, 12.

overwhelmed and controlled the markets. The public's jeers and cries of "Asian money, Asian money" after the 2006 election of Snyder Rini were not unfounded.¹⁵⁵ Solomon Islanders felt that they were losing control of their country to foreign interests, Asian interests in particular. Although RAMSI helped to quell the 2006 riots and bring the violence to an end, these tensions remain recurrent issues for China and Taiwan through to the present day. Unfortunately for China, Solomon Islands citizens do not always differentiate between Taiwanese and Chinese interests and are more likely to put them both in the same category as foreign or *waku* actors whose interests are not aligned with those of the native citizens of the Solomon Islands.

Due to the customarily patronage-based nature of Solomon Islands politics, it was easiest to shape SIG policy on diplomatic recognition in the first decade of the twenty-first century through financial investment, either illicitly or through other more legitimate means. Taiwan capitalized on this. However, the resulting corruption which emerged from the money flowing into the SIG contributed to the state plunging into chaos. SIG consent to foreign intervention was likely the only way to stabilize the deteriorating situation in the Solomon Islands and to promote domestic reforms and effective anti-corruption efforts that would prevent the total collapse of the state. RAMSI's successes toward these ends provided room for the SIG to recover and yielded tangible regional benefits and influence for Australia that positively impacted Solomon Islands-Australia bilateral diplomacy. However, as China's interests expanded further abroad in the following decade, the close Solomon Islands-Australia relationship developed through RAMSI would not remain unchallenged. China would begin to take an increasingly overt approach to providing alternatives to what Taiwan and Australia could provide. China would later seek to usurp Taiwan as the primary financial investor in the Solomon Islands and would propose a—supposed—no-strings-attached security agreement alternative to the long-standing arrangement between Australia and the Solomon Islands. This is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁵ Allen, "Politics of Disorder: The Social Unrest in Honiara," 44; Fraenkel, "The Impact of RAMSI on the 2006 Elections," 148; Brady, *Looking North, Looking South China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*, 174.

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III. SOLOMON ISLANDS: 2011–2022

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on influence activities in the Solomon Islands from the beginning of the Australia-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands' (RAMSI) phased withdrawal in 2011 to the months following the signing of the security agreement between the governments of the Solomon Islands and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2022. China, Taiwan, and Australia continued to pursue influence in the Solomon Islands during this time period through a variety of means including coercive diplomacy, social and financial investment, and protracted engagement and by mobilizing *leverage* and *affective power mechanisms* which prompted behavioral changes in the Solomon Islands Government (SIG). Australia's successful efforts, through RAMSI, led to the restoration of stability in the Solomon Islands and contributed to the establishment of a bilateral security treaty in 2017 between the two governments after RAMSI's withdrawal. Taiwan and China used their financial resources to continue their competition for the SIG's diplomatic recognition until 2019, when the SIG made the decision to sever its diplomatic relationship with Taiwan. As China gained a commanding hold over the Solomon Islands' economy it was able to reach a security agreement with the SIG in 2022 which strained the relationship between Australia and the Solomon Islands and challenged the status quo of regional security in general.

Three key events are discussed in this chapter which took place in the Solomon Islands between 2011 and 2022 and demonstrate instances of influence activities conducted by Australia, China, and Taiwan, to varying degrees of success. The first is the withdrawal of RAMSI, which occurred in stages from 2011 to 2017. After 2011, Australia's primary interest evolved from restoring regional stability, which it largely achieved prior to 2011, to ensuring that regional stability would be sustained after Australia and its partners in RAMSI withdrew from the Solomon Islands. This research finds that RAMSI's successful restoration of capacity and legitimacy to the Solomon Islands state and its institutions, and of law and order to the Solomon Islands in general, resulted in the development of significant and durable Australian influence with the people of the Solomon Islands and

helped Solomon Islands officials to mostly overcome their wariness of intervention efforts by Western states formerly associated with colonialism. This was evidenced by the signing of a bilateral security treaty between the SIG and the government of Australia shortly after RAMSI's withdrawal.

The second key event is the Solomon Islands' decision to swap diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019. Both Taiwan's and China's primary interest prior to 2019 was in influencing the SIG to diplomatically recognize themselves over the other. This research finds that Taiwan's long-wielded tactic of providing financial aid and discretionary funding in exchange for diplomatic recognition paved the way for an increasingly wealthy China to outbid Taiwan, using Taiwan's own approach against it. It was also apparent that although Taiwan had used other aid and investment programs which benefited local Solomon Islanders, likely in an effort to balance negative public perceptions of its illicit dealings with the SIG, the goodwill Taiwan may have cultivated was not enough to dissuade SIG officials from favoring the lucrative economic prospects offered by China.

Lastly, this chapter characterizes the events leading up to and after the SIG signed a security agreement with the PRC in 2022. After Beijing won the contest for the Solomon Islands' diplomatic recognition, its interests shifted toward challenging the regional security architecture in Oceania. This research finds that although the security treaty with Australia represented an assurance of lasting peace and stability in the Solomon Islands, key SIG officials saw the treaty as inadequate. This is likely due to Australia's implicit requirement for good governance by the SIG and appears to have driven the SIG to seek an alternative security provider in China, which would be far less likely to scrutinize SIG practices or finances in the event of a request for security assistance.

While Australia, Taiwan, and China each found varying degrees of success in their influence activities, influence by foreign actors in the Solomon Islands appears to have been most effectively gained by exploiting the Solomon Islands' pork-barrel political culture to acquire the favor of powerful and illiberal officials in the SIG.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows. Section B provides contextual information relating to the three key events that took place in the Solomon

Islands between 2011 and 2022. In section C I analyze the influence activities that relate to the key events previously discussed, again through the lens of Meierding and Sigman's influence development process. This analysis is followed by a brief conclusion in section D.

B. KEY EVENTS: 2011–2022

1. RAMSI's Transition and Withdrawal (2011–2017)

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, RAMSI began to wind down operationally and to shift its primary focus toward the transition of authority and responsibility for the maintenance of law and order back under the sovereign control of the SIG and its Royal Solomon Islands Police Force (RSIPF). Within a year of RAMSI's initial deployment of military, police, and civil service personnel in 2003, the violence and disorder that had plagued the island nation for five years prior had been brought to a halt. The end of this militancy ended the requirement for any significant foreign military presence, and RAMSI quickly transformed into a "protracted police deployment...[and] a longer-run civilian engagement in the ministries of the Solomon Islands Government" focused on state building.¹⁵⁶ By 2011, RAMSI was widely recognized as a success in that it not only achieved its initial aims of bringing the violence associated with the "tension trials" of the ethnic conflict to an abrupt end and reestablished the rule of law, but also seemed to have effectively addressed the regional security concerns the Australian government had for the so-called 'arc of instability' on its near periphery.¹⁵⁷ RAMSI had rapidly isolated and removed the people that most directly contributed to the failure of the Solomon Islands state by taking control of the state apparatus upon its arrival, and then, after strengthening the courts and legal system, by systematically capturing or ousting

¹⁵⁶ Jon Fraenkel, "Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," *The RUSI Journal* 164, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2019.1605018>; Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 35.

¹⁵⁷ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 7–12; Fraenkel, "Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," 57; Moore, "The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17)," 169; Rebecca Strating, "Enabling Authoritarianism in the Indo-Pacific: Australian Exemptionalism," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May 3, 2020): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2020.1744516>.

criminal and militant group members, corrupt politicians, and other contributors to the violent domestic unrest with the approval, albeit occasionally ambivalent approval, and cooperation of the SIG.¹⁵⁸

RAMSI did not want to overstay its welcome in the Solomon Islands. Having completed its primary objectives in the Solomon Islands, RAMSI's transition and withdrawal became a priority. The potential for the Solomon Islands people and government to perceive any unnecessary extension of the RAMSI mission as a form of multilateral neocolonialism weighed heavily on RAMSI decision makers. With RAMSI's transition as the new objective, a plan to strengthen and legitimize the Solomon Islands state and its institutions to be able to stand on their own, without RAMSI, had to be made. Beginning in May of 2011, official dialogues between RAMSI officials and the SIG were held to discuss the future plans for RAMSI's transition.¹⁵⁹ However, although RAMSI had done much in the way of restoring the image and accountability of the Solomon Islands state and the RSIPF, domestic distrust would not be immediately overcome. While the RAMSI transition began in 2011, RAMSI's official conclusion and withdrawal from the Solomon Islands was not complete until June of 2017.¹⁶⁰

The reason for the six-year long withdrawal period appears to have been primarily due to the public's lack of trust in the RSIPF. As discussed in Chapter II, during the ethnic conflict, many personnel in the RSIPF joined in the hostilities and violence, and on some occasions joined or assisted militant groups on both sides of the conflict to varying degrees. Perhaps the most notable instance of this was in June of 2000, when members of the RSIPF partnered with the Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF), one of the predominant militant groups in the ethnic conflict, to stage a successful *de facto* coup.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 96; Fraenkel, "Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," 56; Moore, "The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17)," 171.

¹⁵⁹ RAMSI, "Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands."

¹⁶⁰ RAMSI.

¹⁶¹ Fraenkel, "Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," 55; Moore, "The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17)," 169.

Restoring the RSIPF became a precondition of sorts to RAMSI's departure. RAMSI did not want its state building efforts to fail immediately after its withdrawal, which seemed a potential—even likely—outcome if the withdrawal occurred without first preparing the RSIPF to preserve and make progress on RAMSI's gains. Key to this was in restoring the lost legitimacy of the RSIPF in the eyes of the people of the Solomon Islands. After RAMSI's arrival, the RSIPF was effectively disarmed and sidelined by RAMSI's Participating Police Force (PPF), which was comprised of police forces from the many nations who participated in RAMS, the majority of whom were Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers.¹⁶² Key personnel from the PPF, sometimes also referred to as RAMSI Police Forces, “including the deputy police chief, were sworn in to line positions in the RSIPF” to enhance integration with the local police and provide opportunities for the RSIPF to work toward restoring its image, capabilities, and legitimacy.¹⁶³

While training and rearming the police forces to empower them with the capability to enforce the law and maintain order was important, restoring the trust that was lost in the RSIPF institution was critical. The process for increasing the RSIPF's autonomy and responsibility was carried out in stages. Beginning in 2011, RAMSI police forces began their withdrawal from some of the more isolated provincial police posts and turned control of the outposts over to the RSIPF.¹⁶⁴

In November of 2011, the RSIPF was tested. Following the 2011 election of Gordon Darcy Lilo as the new Prime Minister, unrest in Honiara threatened to grow out of control. Given the history of the 2006 Black Tuesday riots that came in the wake of the election of former Prime Minister Snyder Rini, sensitivities in the Solomon Islands during election events, especially in Honiara, were understandably high.¹⁶⁵ However, the RSIPF was

¹⁶² RAMSI, “New Police Act 2013 Officially Launched,” Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.ramsi.org/new-police-act-2013-officially-launched/>; Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, “Independent RAMSI Review Report,” 36.

¹⁶³ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, “Independent RAMSI Review Report,” 36.

¹⁶⁴ RAMSI, “Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.”

¹⁶⁵ “Lilo Sworn in Amidst Protests,” *Solomon Times*, November 17, 2011, <https://www.solomontimes.com/news/lilo-sworn-in-amidst-protests/6650>.

credited with efficiently and effectively quelling the “near-riot” before the situation could deteriorate beyond its ability to control it.¹⁶⁶

As confidence in the RSIPF grew, shortfalls in police equipment, infrastructure, and even housing became more easily justified expenses for the states involved in RAMSI. In 2013, the states contributing to the RAMSI mission expanded the RSIPF boat fleet by four hundred percent with their gifts of thirty-two boats, ten of which were new ‘ray boats’ with a price tag of over SBD\$7 million¹⁶⁷ given by Australia.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, RAMSI initiated the Police Accommodation Project, which provided housing and new police headquarters buildings from which the RSIPF could live and operate.¹⁶⁹ The housing and office situation for the RSIPF had deteriorated in and after the ethnic conflict to the point that officers were forced to become “integrated into the local communities” for their living arrangements which likely contributed to their ineffectiveness and the lack of regard Solomon Islanders generally maintained for the police.¹⁷⁰ These investments in the personnel and infrastructure of the RSIPF “paved the way for the RSIPF to re-establish the formal law and order role in Solomon Islands.”¹⁷¹

The issue of rearming the RSIPF began to attract public attention in the Spring of 2014. At the time, a new Police Act was launched to prescribe a code of conduct for members of the RSIPF and was designed to ensure accountability within the institution.¹⁷² The new Police Act codified the legal authorities of the RSIPF and set the framework for

¹⁶⁶ *Solomon Times*, “Lilo Sworn in Amidst Protests”; RAMSI, “Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands.”

¹⁶⁷ Solomon Islands Dollars. In 2013 the exchange rate was far more favorable for the Solomon Islands than it was at the time of writing this research. The present day exchange rate may make this gift seem far less substantial than it was in reality at the time of giving.

¹⁶⁸ Graham McBean, Lovatt, and Dom Byrne, “On the Road to Transition,” ed. Graham McBean, *Australian Federal Police: Platypus Magazine*, October 2013, 23, <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUFPPlatypus/2013/18.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Graham McBean, Lovatt, and Dom Byrne, “Toward a New Partnership,” ed. Graham McBean, *Australian Federal Police: Platypus Magazine*, October 2013, 28, <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/AUFPPlatypus/2013/18.html>.

¹⁷⁰ McBean, Lovatt, and Byrne, 26.

¹⁷¹ McBean, Lovatt, and Byrne, 28.

¹⁷² RAMSI, “New Police Act 2013 Officially Launched.”

the institution's powers and, importantly, the limits on those powers. Because of the history of RSIPF abuses during the ethnic conflict, the RAMSI Special Coordinator announced RAMSI's intention to slowly phase the rearmament of the RSIPF, saying, "the RSIPF has developed a less lethal capability. But without a limited lethal force capability the RSIPF will never be able to operate independently as a law enforcement agency."¹⁷³ RAMSI officials remained cognizant of the public's wariness of the increasingly autonomous and capable police force and took additional steps to build public confidence in the RSIPF in a variety of ways, including closely monitoring and scrutinizing the staged rearmament process, which lasted several years. Additionally, with assistance from the Australian Ambassador for Women and Girls, RAMSI funded the launch of a children's story book called "The Adventures of Sammy and Susie in the Happy Isles."¹⁷⁴ The children's book was designed in part to address domestic issues such as alcohol abuse and family violence, but was primarily "intended to promote positive messages and lessons for young people, and to show how community leaders can cooperate with police early to resolve problems before they escalate."¹⁷⁵ The effect the children's book campaign had on improving public perceptions of the RSIPF is not immediately apparent. However, the book launch demonstrates the multidimensional approach RAMSI took toward empowering and legitimizing the RSIPF amongst the populace in pursuit of an effective and lasting transition and withdrawal.

By RAMSI's ten-year anniversary in 2013, the Australian government was beginning to seriously consider deadlines for its withdrawal. "Canberra's concerns about the poor state of the police" were used to construct achievable and feasible criteria for RAMSI's departure with a deadline in mind: the end of the four-year budget cycle in June of 2017.¹⁷⁶ The SIG and RAMSI jointly signed a four-year drawdown strategy that prioritized indigenous capacity development and laid out measurable benchmarks for the

¹⁷³ RAMSI.

¹⁷⁴ RAMSI, "Policing Story Book for Children Launched in Honiara," accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.ramsi.org/policing-story-book-for-children-launched-in-honiara/>.

¹⁷⁵ RAMSI.

¹⁷⁶ Fraenkel, "Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands," 57.

PPF to help the RSIPF to work toward, such as “[be able to] respond to existing and emerging community based crime threats, effectively and efficiently,” and “manage and maintain a professional police training academy.”¹⁷⁷ The Australian government agreed to fund the AU\$315.6 million drawdown strategy in its entirety.¹⁷⁸ Of note, prior to the ethnic conflict, Australia provided an average of AU\$13.3 million in aid to the Solomon Islands annually.¹⁷⁹ By the end of the RAMSI mission, Australia’s annual aid packages had increased to well “over AU\$200 million a year,” not including other costs associated with RAMSI for which Australia provided 95% of funding.¹⁸⁰

For the remainder of the drawdown period, the RSIPF would become increasingly autonomous, capable, and legitimate. Although the RSIPF would be assisted by the RAMSI PPF for several environmental and minor political crises between 2013 and 2017, no serious issue forced RAMSI to deviate from completing its transition as planned. Additionally, the RSIPF was credited with several notable achievements as it matured towards its autonomy from PPF assistance, including but not limited to the collection of evidence and conduct of an independent investigation that led to the arrest of alleged murderer Edmund Sae.¹⁸¹ The RSIPF would go on to provide security assurance for parliamentary elections, national celebrations, and sporting events, all while partner force military and police personnel continued with their planned withdrawals.¹⁸²

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which had originally endorsed the RAMSI intervention in accordance with the Biketawa declaration in June of 2003, endorsed

¹⁷⁷ “SIG and RAMSI Jointly Sign Strategy for Next Four Years of Assistance to RSIPF,” Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, accessed January 14, 2023, <https://www.ramsi.org/sig-and-ramsi-jointly-sign-strategy-for-next-four-years-of-assistance-to-rsipf/>.

¹⁷⁸ Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands,.

¹⁷⁹ Moore, “The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17),” 170.

¹⁸⁰ Moore, 170; Fraenkel, “Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands,” 52.

¹⁸¹ Notably, Sae was later found not guilty of murder. However, he was also charged and convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to serve twenty years in prison.

¹⁸² Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, “Report to the Pacific Islands Forum: Activities of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)” (Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands, 2015), 2–3, <https://www.ramsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/RAMSI-Activities-Report-2015.pdf>.

RAMSI's withdrawal in the Fall of 2016, leading to the official end of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands in June of 2017.¹⁸³

Two weeks after the withdrawal, the SIG and Australian government signed a bilateral security treaty that would enable a rapid Australian response to any potential future Solomon Islands request for security assistance.¹⁸⁴ The Australian Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, met with PIF and SIG leaders in Honiara to commemorate RAMSI and remarked on RAMSI's successes and the way forward for the Solomon Islands.

RAMSI restored law and order, it stabilised government finances, it promoted longer-term economic recovery and it revived business confidence, and it rebuilt the machinery of government. RAMSI helped create the environment that allowed a relatively young nation, brought to its knees by conflict, lawlessness and economic collapse, to stand on its own two feet again and declare to the world that it was ready to resume responsibility for its own destiny. It is now time to preserve those gains... But what have we, the nations of the Pacific, learnt? One of RAMSI's core strengths and a major contributing factor to its success has been that it was a regional mission with regional endorsement and regional oversight. It supported "Pacific Style" solutions for "Pacific Style" challenges... And my commitment here today is to tell you that Australia sees itself, more than ever, as an integral part of the Pacific. As former Prime Minister John Howard observed when the Government he led decided to help a neighbour in need fourteen years ago, "there is no exit strategy from our region." The circumstances of RAMSI's birth were grave in the extreme. May we not see another circumstance like that.¹⁸⁵

By 2018, RAMSI had achieved more than what it originally set out to do. It improved the relationship between the SIG and all RAMSI partner nations, especially Australia. The subsequent security treaty between the SIG and Australia was significant, but also symbolic of a lessening of Solomon Islands' wariness of Australian intervention as the activity of a supposed neo-colonizer. Overcoming that image paved the way for

¹⁸³ RAMSI, "Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands."

¹⁸⁴ "Bilateral Security Treaty," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed January 21, 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/bilateral-security-treaty>.

¹⁸⁵ "Statement by Minister for International Development and the Pacific Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti – Wells" (Honiara: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, June 29, 2017), <https://solomonislands.embassy.gov.au/honi/280617.html>.

Australia to become the primary source of bilateral crisis response assistance to the Solomon Islands in the future and enabled the Australian government to maintain influence in SIG affairs for the purpose of sustaining regional stability without maintaining a physical presence in the country.

2. Swapping Recognition: From Taipei to Beijing (2019)

The changing balance of foreign state influence over the Solomon Islands became increasingly apparent in 2019. In April of that year, Manasseh Sogavare was again elected, for the fourth time, to serve as the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands. His government almost immediately set in motion one of its most prominent policies, to review the relationship between the SIG and the government in Taiwan.¹⁸⁶ Less than six months after the review began, “the Solomon Islands Government in September 2019 severed its 36-year diplomatic relations with Taiwan.”¹⁸⁷

The reasons for the Solomon Islands’ decision to swap diplomatic recognition are multifaceted, but most appear to stem from two basic motivations: corruption and rational economics. The idea of swapping diplomatic ties to Beijing had been discussed by Sogavare himself at least as far back as 2000 when his government, in the wake of the ethnic conflict, openly exchanged continued diplomatic recognition for Taipei for over twenty million dollars in much-needed financial assistance.¹⁸⁸ Taipei’s acquiescence to the blatant extortion might be interpreted as weakness, but Taipei’s interest in maintaining diplomatic recognition from as many states as possible was served, albeit temporarily, by providing the funds. This is not an isolated occurrence for Taiwan. Aside from the nearly ninety million dollars provided by Taiwan to the poorly regulated and disreputable Solomon Islands ‘Constituent Development Funds’¹⁸⁹ between 2011 and 2018, Taiwan

¹⁸⁶ Aqorau, “Solomon Islands’ Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China,” 340.

¹⁸⁷ Aqorau, 342.

¹⁸⁸ Braithwaite et al., *Pillars and Shadows*, 48.

¹⁸⁹ Constituent Development Funds are described by Aqorau as “a discretionary fund that is allotted to each of the country’s MPs for investing in their electorates (with minimal oversight).” In a country like the Solomon Islands where patronage politics are the norm, access to discretionary funds fuels corruption and can lead to favorable conditions for the reelection of incumbents.

has openly given money directly to members of parliament in other Oceanian states as well.¹⁹⁰ As an example, Taiwan was reported in 2010 to have established a monthly stipend of four thousand U.S. dollars for each of the members of Nauru's parliament in exchange for continued diplomatic recognition.¹⁹¹ Aqorau explains that these types of Taiwanese investments fuel bad governance.¹⁹² In this case, the decision to switch came amid allegations by Solomon Islands Premier of Malaita that Chinese representatives offered him, and likely others, a sum of one million dollars to "accept the switch to China."¹⁹³ China appears to have capitalized on Taiwan's long-standing tactic for purchasing support, and, if allegations are true, outbid Taiwan by a significant margin. Notably, Prime Minister Sogavare refused to investigate these Chinese bribery allegations made by the Malaitan Premier.¹⁹⁴

Of note, Taiwan's investments in the Solomon Islands between 2011 and 2019 were not solely corruption-fueling slush funds. Taiwan also heavily invested in education, agriculture, and healthcare infrastructure.¹⁹⁵ However, the legitimacy and credibility that Taiwan may have built among the rural populace through these types of investments appears to have been overshadowed by its less scrupulous investment practices and, more importantly, by Chinese trade and aid. As discussed in Chapter I, between 2000 and 2020, Solomon Islands annual imports from China increased from 2% to 34.4% while exports increased from 12.2% to 64.4% of total Solomon Islands imports and exports.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile Taiwan's share of the annual Solomon Islands import and export markets rarely

¹⁹⁰ Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 333.

¹⁹¹ Paul Maley, "If You're Willing to Pay, Nauru Can Be Amazingly Accommodating," *The Australian*, August 14, 2010, www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/if-youre-willing-to-pay-nauru-can-be-amazingly-accommodating/news-story/849d6b8eafa27aa86b2dcff0d697f559; Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 322.

¹⁹² Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 331.

¹⁹³ Gareth Harvey, "60 Minutes: China's 'Soft Invasion' of the Pacific," *Nine News*, November 17, 2019, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/60-minutes-china-soft-invasion-of-south-pacific/71cddbe3-9afa-4b81-bd68-05f0d944c622>.

¹⁹⁴ 60 Minutes Australia, "Investigation: Why Is China on the Move in the South Pacific?," YouTube, November 17, 2019, loc. 5:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzCqQKnF9Oo>.

¹⁹⁵ Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 330.

¹⁹⁶ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners: Solomon Islands."

exceeded 2% over the same time period.¹⁹⁷ Regardless of how much goodwill Taiwan was able to build among Solomon Islands citizens through its social and financial investments, Solomon Islands diplomacy takes place within a top-down system; and the SIG, which is at the top, appears to have been intent on siding with China.

By 2019, Taiwanese aid to and investment in the Solomon Islands could no longer compete with the PRC's. In fact, it is likely that Taiwan hadn't been economically competitive in the Solomon Islands with China for decades. Due to the PRC's mostly uncompromising stance on states who maintain diplomatic recognition for Taiwan, and due to the increasing economic leverage China was beginning to have over Solomon Islands' economy, the SIG was being pushed into a corner. In the early stages of the SIG's review of its ties with Taiwan in 2019, Prime Minister Sogavare remarked, "we are under a lot of pressure to rethink this relationship."¹⁹⁸

Taiwan, China, and local Solomon Islanders were not the only sources of this pressure. The United States and Australia made their concerns over the portending diplomatic swap known in public statements and through the reassessment of promised financial aid to the Solomon Islands. However, the two states took contrary tactics. Australia's approach was to increase assistance to the Solomon Islands by AU\$250 million dollars, while the United States reassessed its planned assistance and hinted at curtailment.¹⁹⁹ China immediately seized the opportunity to offset the potential delay or cancellation of American aid by "offering US\$8.5 million in development funds" which would more than compensate for the hypothetical loss of American assistance.²⁰⁰ It appears as though the purpose of Australia's tactic was to both symbolically display that its relationship with the Solomon Islands would be secure regardless of its diplomatic

¹⁹⁷ Observatory of Economic Complexity.

¹⁹⁸ ABC News, "Diplomatic Battle Underway in the Solomon Islands," June 12, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/am/diplomatic-battle-underway-in-solomon-islands/11204750>.

¹⁹⁹ Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China," 341; Straits Times, "US Reassessing Aid to Solomon Islands After Taiwan Ties Cut," September 19, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/australianz/us-re-assessing-aid-to-solomon-islands-after-taiwan-ties-cut>.

²⁰⁰ Reuters, "U.S. Reassessing Aid to Solomon Islands After Taiwan Ties Cut," *Reuters*, September 18, 2019, sec. APAC, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-diplomacy-usa-solomons-idUSKBN1W32RL>.

recognition decision and to monetarily offset China's financial advantage over Taiwan, though these goals were never openly stated.²⁰¹ America's reassessment of planned financial aid was aimed at demonstrating that the "decision by the Solomon Islands to change its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China has consequences," though it appears that China's offer more than made up for those consequences.²⁰²

Although some Western governments, such as the United States and Australia, expressed concerns over the potential future consequences of the Solomon Islands' decision to cut ties with Taiwan in favor of Beijing, they had little ground to stand on. Both Australia and the United States recognize Beijing as the government of China, though each maintains an ambiguous policy regarding the status of Taiwan.

"Most MPs wanted to see a deeper engagement in their foreign relations and were therefore attracted by the potential for increased Chinese investments."²⁰³ The SIG review of the Solomon Islands-Taiwan relationship resulted in a recommendation for the swap; switching to China made fiscal sense, though "the issue was never debated in parliament."²⁰⁴ Sogavare and his coalition had enough control in parliament to move forward without allowing for a debate with the opposition. China is demonstrably wealthier than Taiwan and is the administrator of a massive trade network, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For a small state undergoing financial hardship, many of whose people lack access to roads and electricity, the potential development and access to consumers offered by China's BRI is objectively more favorable than Taiwan's dwindling contributions to the Constituent Development Fund and Taipei's relatively minor agricultural investments.²⁰⁵ Aqorau, a former legal advisor and Deputy Secretary in the

²⁰¹ Australian Associated Press, "Australia Pledges \$250m to Solomon Islands as China's Influence in Pacific Grows," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/03/australia-pledges-250m-to-solomon-islands-as-chinas-influence-in-pacific-grows>.

²⁰² Reuters, "U.S. Reassessing Aid to Solomon Islands After Taiwan Ties Cut."

²⁰³ Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China.," 342.

²⁰⁴ Aqorau, 342.

²⁰⁵ Aqorau, 325–26.

Solomon Islands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, explains that although the BRI is not the only way the SIG could achieve its development goals, “China’s global power and outreach is a matter of interest for politicians who want to see the villages in their constituencies connected with roads and electricity. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers possibilities that are more difficult to obtain from other donors.”²⁰⁶ Unfortunately for Taiwan, access to the BRI is contingent on states’ adherence to the PRC’s one-China policy. Given Australia’s apparent continued commitment to the Solomon Islands regardless of their diplomatic stance on Taiwan and the PRC’s offer to compensate for other potential financial complications that might result from their decision to switch, the benefits appear to have outweighed the risks of siding with their largest trade partner and donor, the PRC.²⁰⁷

3. The Solomon Islands–China Security Agreement (2022)

Public outrage toward the Sogavare government for its decision to swap diplomatic recognition did not grow out of control until nearly two years later. In November of 2021, nearly a thousand people gathered in Honiara to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Mannaseh Sogavare.²⁰⁸ Sogavare’s response to the protest was the declaration of a city-wide lockdown, which was shortly followed by the eruption of violent riots.²⁰⁹ Looting and arson swept across the small city, particularly the Chinatown district, with such severity that Prime Minister Sogavare was compelled to contact the Australian government and formally request assistance in accordance with the bilateral security treaty between the

²⁰⁶ Aqorau, 343; “Transform Aqorau Biography,” Lowy Institute, accessed February 10, 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/people/contributor/bio/transform-aqorau>.

²⁰⁷ “Morrison Pledges \$250m for Solomon Islands Infrastructure in Pacific Push,” ABC News, June 2, 2019, [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-03/scott-morrison-pledges-\\$250-million-for-solomon-islands/11172062](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-03/scott-morrison-pledges-$250-million-for-solomon-islands/11172062).

²⁰⁸ “Solomon Islands PM Blames Violent Anti-Government Protests on Foreign Interference,” *Guardian*, November 26, 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/26/solomon-islands-leader-blames-violent-anti-government-protests-on-foreign-interference>.

²⁰⁹ Edward Cavanough, “Australia Deploys Troops to Solomon Islands as Riots Continue,” *Al Jazeera*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/25/rioters-defy-curfew-in-solomon-islands-as-pm-faces-calls-to-quit>.

two states.²¹⁰ Australia’s rapid response and deployment of over one hundred police and Australian Defence Force personnel enabled the RSIPF to regain control of the city within a few days.²¹¹ The riots largely resembled the violence that broke out in the capital in the wake of the 2006 parliamentary election, also referred to as the Black Tuesday riots. One notable exception is that buildings in Chinatown which flew the Taiwanese flag were spared from the flames in 2021.²¹² Although the decision to sever diplomatic ties with Taipei in favor of Beijing had taken place over a year prior to the 2021 riots, “tensions between the Malaita Provincial Government and the Solomon Islands’ national government, led by Sogavare,” over the diplomatic swap manifested in the violence that emerged in November of 2021.²¹³ “Demonstrators [were] also calling for the government to limit ties with China, [to] respect the rights of self-determination of the Malaita people, and to resume development projects in Malaita province.”²¹⁴ These three issues were linked to a common source of the crowd’s frustration, and it was the same source in 2021 as it was in 2006: foreign—in this case, Chinese—interference in the domestic affairs of Solomon Islands.

Prior to the riots, but after the decision to cease diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, Christianity and inter-island ethnic tensions expressed themselves in a surprising way in the Solomon Islands in response to the diplomatic recognition swap. The Malaitan Premier, Daniel Suidani, explained in his 2022 interview with *China Unscripted* that Malaita had been concerned for years about the SIG getting too close to China and that the SIG was not approaching its relationship with the PRC democratically, thus ignoring the will of the

²¹⁰ *Guardian*, “Solomon Islands PM Blames Violent Anti-Government Protests on Foreign Interference.”

²¹¹ *Guardian*.

²¹² Nick Sas, “‘They Must Not Come, in Any Way’: The Little Island Saying No to China,” *ABC News*, July 10, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-11/solomon-islands-china-deal-malaita-province-resistance/101223756>.

²¹³ Cavanough, “Australia Deploys Troops to Solomon Islands as Riots Continue.”

²¹⁴ Wayne Chang and Jonny Hallam, “3 Burned Bodies Found in Solomon Islands’ Chinatown Following Days of Violent Protests,” *CNN*, November 27, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/26/asia/solomon-islands-protest-fourth-day-intl-hnk/index.html>.

people, the Malaitan people in particular.²¹⁵ One month after Sogavare's government announced the decision to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the Malaitan Premier and his provincial government drafted and signed the 2019 Auki Communique in response.²¹⁶ The Auki Communique explained the position of the Malaitan Provincial Government (MPG) on developmental goals for the province and reaffirmed the MPG's views on the constitutionally guaranteed rights of Solomon Islanders such as the rights to life, liberty, freedom of expression and assembly, the right to protect property, and the right of freedom of religion. The communique was the subject of harsh criticism for some of its assertions such as that the MPG "further observes the entrenched Christian faith and the belief in God by Malaitan and MOIan²¹⁷ peoples and therefore rejects the Chinese Communist Party – CCP and its formal systems based on atheist ideology."²¹⁸ The document announced the MPG's intent to place a moratorium on Chinese business on Malaita, effectively barring the national government's diplomatic swap to Beijing from being enacted on Malaita, the second largest and most populous of the Solomon Islands.²¹⁹ The MPG continues to diplomatically recognize Taiwan in protest of the SIG's decision, and continues, as of the time of writing this thesis, to accept aid and development assistance from Taiwan in spite of the national policy on the matter.²²⁰ In defense of his provincial government's decision, Premier Suidani explained "they are a communist nation. We are very mindful of involving the Communist Party here... They must not come, in any way."²²¹

Despite the security treaty activation that prompted a rapid and effective Australian police and military response to the SIG's request for assistance with the November 2021

²¹⁵ China Unscripted, "China's Atheism Makes It a Dangerous Partner," YouTube, May 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3YIx7Zji2w>.

²¹⁶ Wilson Saeni, "Malaita Launches 2019 Communique," *Solomon Star News* (blog), October 18, 2019, <https://www.solomonstarnews.com/malaita-launches-2019-communique/>.

²¹⁷ MOIan is shorthand for 'Malaitan Outer Islands' people.

²¹⁸ Malaita Provincial Government, "Malaita Provincial Government Auki Communique," Twitter, November 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/cleopaskal/status/1465130915588419595>.

²¹⁹ Malaita Provincial Government; Amruta Karambelkar, "The China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Pact," Brief (Vivekananda International Foundation, June 2022), 14.

²²⁰ Sas, "They Must Not Come, in Any Way"; Saeni, "Malaita Launches 2019 Communique."

²²¹ Sas.

riots, and notwithstanding the domestic pushback from the MPG, a draft security agreement between the SIG and the government of the PRC was leaked online in March of 2022. The leaked draft agreement was comprised of seven articles on five pages of text which detailed the scope of the agreement, its intended confidentiality, and the ways in which either government should approach the other in the case an event required the mobilization of security assistance; and it included processes and timelines for requesting assistance and terminating the agreement.²²² The alarm in the West over the unsigned draft agreement was mainly in response to Article 1 which stated:

Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response or provide assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties; China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.²²³

The method by which the Australian government became aware of the text of the draft agreement between the SIG and PRC was a source of concern and disappointment for Australia.²²⁴ Aside from a long historical relationship between Australia and the Solomon Islands, the most recent two decades of history was characterized by a successful regional assistance mission which restored law and order to the then conflict-torn island nation, billions of dollars in financial aid and development assistance, and a strong bilateral security treaty which came into being after RAMSI's successful conclusion and had already been activated and honored as recently as four months prior to the leak in response

²²² "(Draft) Framework Agreement Between The Government of the People's Republic of China And the Government of Solomon Islands On Security Cooperation," Twitter, March 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/AnnaPowles/status/1506845794728837120?s=20&t=h4DpRVQS2VOEGoSpG7hgwG>.

²²³ "(Draft) Framework Agreement Between The Government of the People's Republic of China And the Government of Solomon Islands On Security Cooperation"; Karambelkar, "The China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Pact," 5.

²²⁴ Paul Karp and Kate Lyons, "Chinese Draft Security Deal with Solomon Islands Didn't Blindside Australia, Morrison Says," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/chinese-draft-security-deal-with-solomon-islands-didnt-blindside-australia-morrison-says>.

to the November 2021 riots. In fact, Australian personnel that comprised most of the Solomons International Assistance Force (SIAF) had been on the ground in Honiara assisting the RSIPF for months after the November riots and were still in the country when the draft SIG-PRC security agreement was leaked.²²⁵

Australia's security treaty with the Solomon Islands appeared to many to be strong enough to make the security agreement with China unnecessary and redundant. However, the Solomon Islands Prime Minister explained "his nation's current security treaty with Australia was 'inadequate' because it 'did not manage to contain the November riots.'"²²⁶ Sogavare's claim was based on former Prime Minister Danny Philip's assertion that Australian forces supporting the SIAF response to the November riots were specifically "instructed not to protect Chinese-built infrastructure," a claim which is refuted by the Australian government.²²⁷ Sogavare's remarks appear to have discounted the SIAF's efforts, which were still ongoing at the time of his statement, in restoring peace and security to Honiara within seventy-two hours of the riots breaking out.²²⁸

Sogavare's past dealings with RAMSI's intervention and his recent history watching the SIAF response linger likely also contributed to his interest in finding an alternative security provider. Security assistance from China would not likely be accompanied by foreign-led anti-corruption campaigns or invasive and scrutinous analysis of the SIG's finances and governance.

²²⁵ "AFP Marks First Year of Solomons' International Assistance Force," Australian Federal Police, November 25, 2022, <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/afp-marks-first-year-solomons%E2%80%99international-assistance-force>; Andrew Greene, Stephen Dziedzic, and Evan Wasuka, "Leaked Documents Suggest Solomon Islands Plans to Allow Chinese Military Presence," *ABC News*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-24/draft-leak-chinese-military-base-solomon-islands/100937632>.

²²⁶ Anthony Galloway, "Solomon Islands Prime Minister Lashes Australia Over AUKUS Security Pact," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29, 2022, sec. Federal, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/solomon-islands-prime-minister-lashes-australia-over-aucus-security-pact-20220429-p5ah7x.html>.

²²⁷ Dorothy Wickham, "Australia Rejects Claim Its Security Forces in Solomon Islands Were Told Not to Protect Chinese-Built Buildings," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/21/australia-rejects-claim-its-security-forces-in-solomon-islands-were-told-not-to-protect-chinese-built-buildings>; Karambelkar, "The China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Pact," 14.

²²⁸ Galloway, "Solomon Islands Prime Minister Lashes Australia Over AUKUS Security Pact."

Although Western countries, including Australia and the United States, continued to express concerns over the potential for the pending SIG-PRC security agreement to evolve into a persistent Chinese military presence not far from the northern coast of Australia, Sogavare acknowledged the formal signing of a security agreement with China in April of 2022, though the official document and any changes from the originally leaked draft that it may contain remain confidential and unknown to the West.²²⁹ In response to the West's concerns, Sogavare explained the signed agreement would "not include the establishment of a Chinese military base," though many remain skeptical of the Prime Minister's ability to prevent a development of that kind from materializing in the future given the ever-increasing Solomon Islands' financial and trade dependence on China.²³⁰

There is reason to assume, contrary to his claims that the security agreement was simply an effort to make up for the supposed inadequacy of the bilateral security treaty between Australia and the SIG, that Sogavare's motivation for pursuing a closer relationship with China was in part rooted in his personal resentment for dependence on Australian security assistance. In the early years of RAMSI, Sogavare made known his opposition to a protracted foreign assistance effort in the Solomon Islands, claiming that, beyond the initial assistance provided that ended the violence of the ethnic conflict, RAMSI was a breach of Solomon Islands sovereignty.²³¹ On this matter, Dinnen writes, "[f]or his critics, Sogavare's assertions of sovereignty concealed a less benign personal agenda aimed at undermining RAMSI's efforts to strengthen the rule of law and the accountability of state institutions that had been eroded after years of corrupt and incompetent leadership."²³² The 2007 Australian-led RSIPF raid on then-Prime Minister Sogavare's

²²⁹ Jill Robbins, "China: Security Agreement with Solomon Islands Officially Signed," *Voice of America*, April 19, 2022, <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/china-security-agreement-with-solomon-islands-officially-signed/6536258.html>.

²³⁰ Robbins; Aqorau, "Solomon Islands' Foreign Policy Dilemma and the Switch from Taiwan to China," 344–45; Wickham, "Australia Rejects Claim Its Security Forces in Solomon Islands Were Told Not to Protect Chinese-Built Buildings"; Galloway, "Solomon Islands Prime Minister Lashes Australia Over AUKUS Security Pact."

²³¹ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, "Independent RAMSI Review Report," 25; Dinnen, "Dilemmas of Intervention and the Building of a State and Nation," 20.

²³² Dinnen, "Dilemmas of Intervention and the Building of a State and Nation," 21.

office discussed in Chapter II was interpreted by him as a clear personal, jurisdictional, and national violation of privacy and sovereignty.²³³ Although during his third stint as prime minister in 2014, Sogavare appeared to the Australian government to have had “a striking change of heart” regarding his support for RAMSI, in context, this newfound benevolence was only on display over a year after RAMSI’s four-year withdrawal timeline had been mutually agreed upon by SIG and RAMSI officials.²³⁴ With the withdrawal already well underway, and given RAMSI’s unquestionable successes over the previous decade, there was no reason for Sogavare to antagonize RAMSI in 2014. By 2022, with RAMSI long-gone, the prospect of having multiple security assistance options, especially one sponsored by a powerful and illiberal government that would not demand good governance as a prerequisite or end state for assistance, was another likely motivating factor.

C. POWER MECHANISMS

In this section I carry forward the analysis of power mechanisms mobilized by external states in the Solomon Islands that was completed in Chapter II. This analysis, again based on Meierding and Sigman’s identified power mechanisms of reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, and recognition, examines the evolution of the approaches each external influencer took in light of the previously discussed time period, this time focused on the period between 2011, when RAMSI initiated the first stages of its withdrawal, and 2022, in the months following the signing of the security agreement between the Solomon Islands and the PRC. The three events discussed earlier in this chapter form the basis of the context from which this analysis was completed.

The three key regional powers from Chapter II in the 1998–2011 time period—namely, Australia, Taiwan, and China—remained the same primary actors from 2011 to 2022. However, there were other notable would-be influencers that were more involved after 2011 than had been in the past. The United States, in particular, became highly interested in the developments between the Solomon Islands and the PRC between 2019 and 2022. Although the United States’ interests were especially peaked at the time of the

²³³ Fraenkel, Madraiwiwi, and Okole, “Independent RAMSI Review Report,” 18.

²³⁴ Fraenkel, “Reassessing the 2003–17 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands,” 59–60.

2019 Solomon Islands diplomatic swap and in the months following the signing of the Solomon Islands-PRC security agreement, the scope of American influence activities during this time appears to have been extremely limited, and thus, unlike Australia, Taiwan, and China, the United States will not be discussed as a primary actor. Since the 2022 security agreement was signed, the United States government has taken a much closer look at its foreign policy regarding the Solomon Islands.²³⁵ American policy decisions concerning the Solomon Islands and Oceania are still unfolding as of the time of writing this thesis and so remain mostly beyond the scope of this research, though the future of American foreign policy in Oceania will be addressed in the conclusion chapter.

Each of Australia, Taiwan, and China's primary interests in the Solomon Islands appear to have evolved during the 2011–2022 time period. Prior to 2011, Australia's primary interest was in reestablishing regional stability by addressing the primary causes of the then-failing Solomon Islands state. Australia largely achieved this by 2011. Because of this, Australia's primary interest in the Solomon Islands shifted to the sustainment of that recently established regional stability. Taiwan's primary interest prior to 2019 was in preserving the diplomatic recognition it received from the Solomon Islands. After the Sogavare government severed its relationship with Taiwan, Taiwan's focus shifted away from wooing the national government and toward supporting the provincial government of Malaita which continues, in isolation, to recognize Taiwan to this day. Taiwan's primary interest in the Solomon Islands appears to have become the cultivation of a more positive image of Taiwan, through its existing ties with the MPG, in the hopes of inspiring a future reversion of the diplomatic recognition swap. China achieved its interest in diplomatically isolating Taiwan from the Solomon Islands in 2019. Since then, China's primary interest appears to have shifted towards challenging the existing regional security architecture in Oceania, and specifically in the case of the Solomon Islands in challenging the bilateral security treaty between the Australian and Solomon Islands governments. The various power mechanisms leveraged by each of these states resulted in several history-making

²³⁵ White House, "Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership," The White House, September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership/>.

outcomes that will likely have regional impacts far beyond the Solomon Islands for years to come.

1. Leverage Mechanisms: Reward and Punishment

Taiwan and China both mobilized *leverage mechanisms* from 2011 to 2022. In the case of Taiwan, its long-held policy of drawing on its *power resource* of *economic wealth* to provide financial assistance and Constituent Development Funds to capitalize on the patronage-based political culture in the Solomon Islands failed to produce the desired results in the long-term. The willingness of Taiwan to acquiesce to blatant extortion efforts by the SIG likely demonstrated its desperation, and thus its weakness, as a partner. Although the cash *rewards* for the SIG's continued diplomatic recognition served to incentivize the SIG to *maintain* its diplomatic recognition for Taiwan for a time, the negative publicity associated with Taiwan's funding of corrupt policymakers served to undermine its image in the eyes of local Solomon Islanders both inside and outside the government. Additionally, Taiwan's practice of coercive diplomacy, primarily through its mobilization of the *reward power mechanism*, served to establish and reinforce a precedent that Solomon Islands diplomatic loyalty was for sale. This precedent was later capitalized on by the PRC. Taiwan's increasing inability to compete with China's financial aid and assistance packages culminated in the failure of Taiwan's efforts. This outcome is in line with Meierding and Sigman's assessment that "behavioral changes prompted by leverage mechanisms are not self-sustaining."²³⁶ The wealth and potential in China's *power resources* dwarfed those of Taiwan and appear to have made the diplomatic recognition swap an inevitable outcome.

China's rapid rise was on display in 2010 when it "leapfrogged Japan to become the world's second-largest economy," behind only the United States.²³⁷ China's rapidly increasing wealth was put to use in the Solomon Islands as a *reward* to incentivize the

²³⁶ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 6–7.

²³⁷ Justin McCurry and Julia Kollewe, "China Overtakes Japan as World's Second-Largest Economy," *The Guardian*, February 14, 2011, sec. Business, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/feb/14/china-second-largest-economy>.

abandonment of Taiwan as a partner. When the United States made public its intent to reconsider its planned financial assistance packages to the Solomon Islands in light of the then-ongoing SIG review of the SIG-Taiwan relationship, the PRC offered a financial assistance package that would more than make up for the entire American assistance package, should it have been rescinded. This *reward* likely contributed to the confidence with which the SIG later made its decision to sever ties with Taiwan. Also, the promise of access to China's massive global trade network and consumer population via the BRI served to act as an additional *reward* that would influence the SIG to *adopt* Beijing's version of the one-China policy.

Although there was no direct evidence found to demonstrate whether Taiwan or China mobilized the *punishment* mechanism in the three events discussed in this chapter, the development of the Solomon Islands' overwhelming financial dependence on the PRC likely serves as a significant deterrent for any potential future action by the SIG that might threaten China's interests in the region, including any potential reversion of diplomatic recognition to Taiwan. This looming *punishment*, though unspoken, is extremely powerful. If the PRC were to economically reprimand the Solomon Islands, as it did Kiribati in 2004, the small island country would not recover quickly, or perhaps at all without significant assistance and new bilateral trade agreements.²³⁸ The PRC, on the other hand, would suffer very little in the short-term, if at all, which contributes to the effectiveness of China's influential *leverage* over the Solomon Islands.

Australia provided a massive amount of financial and other assistance to the Solomon Islands during this time period. However, unlike China and Taiwan, little of it appears to have been directly associated with either the *reward* or *punishment power mechanisms*. Between 2011 and 2017, while RAMSI was still ongoing, Australia was able to directly influence policymaking in the Solomon Islands, but much of that influence was geared towards attempts to ensure a lasting and legitimate SIG would emerge and remain long after RAMSI's inevitable conclusion. Australia was not directly involved in the zero-sum contest between China and Taiwan for diplomatic recognition, but it did attempt to

²³⁸ Windybank, "The China Syndrome [China's Growing Presence in the Southwest Pacific.]," 31.

offset China's financial advantage over Taiwan during the SIG's review of the SIG-Taiwan relationship by increasing its assistance package by AU\$250 million dollars, though this intent was not openly stated. This apparently half-hearted effort was unsuccessful likely due to two factors. The first is that this new promise of increased aid was unlikely to persist for long, especially given the potential aid that would begin flowing in from China. Second, Australia's one-China policy states that "the Australian Government does not recognise the ROC as a sovereign state and does not regard the authorities in Taiwan as having the status of a national government."²³⁹ With this in mind, it would be difficult for Australia to openly criticize any other state for adopting a similar policy. Therefore, after RAMSI, Australia did not possess the *political power resources* necessary for a *diplomatic influence activity* that might mobilize a *leverage mechanism* on this matter to effectively influence the SIG's decision without endangering Australia's own relationship with its largest trading partner, China.²⁴⁰

2. Affective Mechanisms: Expertise, Attractiveness, and Recognition

Unlike the aforementioned leverage mechanisms, *expertise*, *attractiveness*, and *recognition* are *affective mechanisms* which, according to Meierding and Sigman, "do not simply change the costs or benefits of compliance with the influencer's behavioral preferences. Instead, they generate influence by reshaping the target's perceptions of the influencer or of the states' bilateral relationship, in a more favorable way."²⁴¹ China, Taiwan, and Australia each mobilized affective mechanisms in efforts to achieve their interests, all to varying degrees of success.

Taiwan's influence activities were not entirely leverage-based. Taiwan's social and financial investments in Solomon Islands' education, agriculture, and healthcare sectors were influence activities that mobilized the *expertise* and *attractiveness power*

²³⁹ "Australia-Taiwan Relationship," Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/taiwan/australia-taiwan-relationship>.

²⁴⁰ "Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners: Australia," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed January 27, 2023, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/aus?yearSelector1=exportGrowthYear25>.

²⁴¹ Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 7.

mechanisms. Although the image of Taiwan was negatively impacted by its alleged behind-closed-doors financial support for corrupt politicians, the interpersonal relationships it built through actions such as sending doctors, health teams, and agricultural specialists and materiel to Solomon Islands provinces certainly helped to balance its image. Additionally, Taiwan is a liberal democracy, as opposed to its autocratic and communist Chinese neighbor. In this regard, Taiwan is able to mobilize an *attractiveness power mechanism*. While its less-than-liberal foreign policy practices in the Solomon Islands have worked against it in the past, the fear of a communist alternative to the support provided by Taiwan has influenced the Provincial Government on Malaita to rebuke the national government's severance of its ties to Taipei and to *refrain* from joining the rest of the provinces in swapping diplomatic recognition to Beijing, though the continued financial assistance and support from Taiwan enjoyed by Malaita might also be interpreted as a *reward* for *maintaining* its policy position of diplomatically recognizing Taiwan.

Although there were several examples given in this chapter relating to the negative views many Solomon Islanders held toward the PRC, the *attractiveness* of the potential for economic growth and development offered by China's BRI is undeniable. Unfortunately for Taiwan, and for Solomon Islanders for that matter, the SIG is not the most liberal government and, as explained in this chapter and the last, has often made decisions that go against the will of the majority. After conducting its review of the SIG-Taiwan relationship, the leaders of the SIG appear to have determined that the best way to retain domestic political power, increase their country's economic potential, and provide opportunity for Solomon Islanders to improve their standards of living was to sever ties with Taiwan. The economic prospects of a stronger partnership with China, the Solomon Islands' largest trading partner, far outweighed the economic potential, or detriment, which might come in *maintaining* a continued association with Taiwan.

The security agreement between the SIG and the PRC appears to also have come about as a result of the *attractiveness power mechanism*, but for a less obvious reason. Arguably, the two most controversial political decisions in the last two decades of Solomon Islands history were the choices to sever diplomatic recognition for Taiwan and to sign a security agreement with the PRC. Both of these decisions were made by Prime Minister

Mannaseh Sogavare’s government, and both not long after the withdrawal of the Australian-led RAMSI. Sogavare’s experience with RAMSI appears to have been generally negative. In the early years of RAMSI, Sogavare called for a speedy withdrawal after seeing that law and order had been quickly and successfully restored in his country. He saw a protracted foreign intervention in SIG affairs, beyond the assistance provided to help end the violence of the ethnic conflict, as an affront to the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands. Several years later, allegations against one of Sogavare’s political appointees led RAMSI police to conduct a raid on his office in search of evidence supporting their investigation. And in 2022, five months after Sogavare was compelled by riots, violence, and unrest in Honiara to request Australian assistance with the RSIPF response, Sogavare characterized the treaty on which the response was based as inadequate. Notably, though the riots had ended months earlier, Australian SIAF personnel were still in the Solomon Islands when Sogavare made this claim. Given Sogavare’s aversion to protracted foreign intervention in his country, the continued presence of SIAF personnel long after their initial deployment and success in ending the riots likely contributed to his decision to sign the SIG-PRC security agreement.

The SIG-PRC security agreement is also *attractive*—that is, to the Sogavare government—in that it provides a security alternative to Australia, one that will not likely result in Chinese scrutiny of the SIG’s governance, or finances, or unsavory political appointees if China is called upon to respond to a security crisis. Additionally, the agreement represents future lucrative business prospects. The ship visits, logistical replenishment, and stopover and transition mentioned in Article 1 of the leaked draft security agreement imply the construction of infrastructure and inflow and through-transit of personnel that will bring capital and potential for employment—which is sorely needed—to the Solomon Islands.²⁴² The *attractiveness* of these prospects and alternatives appear to have been strong motivators that led the SIG to *adopt* the SIG-PRC security

²⁴² “(Draft) Framework Agreement Between The Government of the People’s Republic of China And the Government of Solomon Islands On Security Cooperation”; Moore, “The End of Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (2003–17),” 175.

agreement, thus enabling the PRC to pose a real challenge to the security architecture in the region.

Between 2011 and 2017, Australia continued to draw upon its power resources in support of its efforts to *maintain* the regional stability it established through RAMSI. Australia's *expertise* and *attractiveness mechanisms* were mobilized highly effectively and served to strengthen the relationship between the Solomon Islands and Australia and led to the *adoption* of a bilateral security treaty between the two states that would streamline the process to coordinate and deploy a crisis response force in answer to future threats of instability or violence beyond the RSIPF's ability to manage. The fourteen years of RAMSI are remembered by most in the Solomon Islands as having been a necessity that helped pull the Solomon Islands out of crisis before it deteriorated beyond the point of no return. RAMSI's many successes and massive *financial* and *social investments* in Solomon Islands have earned Australia, and to a lesser extent the other PIF states that contributed to RAMSI, a significant amount of *recognition* by Solomon Islanders and SIG officials alike, with few exceptions. RAMSI helped the people of the Solomon Islands (mostly) overcome misconstrued notions of their Australian neighbor as a potential neo-colonial invader and contributed to the *adoption* of the Australia-Solomon Islands bilateral security treaty after RAMSI's conclusion. However, Australia's *expertise*, *attractiveness*, and *recognition* were not enough to prevent the SIG from seeing China as an *attractive* alternative security assistance provider.

The influence gained—or lost—by China, Taiwan, and Australia between 2011 and 2022 appears to be most clearly represented by the SIG's decision to sever its ties with Taiwan in 2019 and to enter into a security agreement with the PRC in 2022. Taiwan's mobilization of *leverage* and *affective mechanisms* seems to have garnered very little influence over the SIG. Regardless of Taiwan's shortcomings in its dealings with the SIG, the PRC grew into a far more wealthy, powerful, and influential partner for the SIG. China's capitalization on the diplomatic inroads built by Taiwan's protracted use of coercive diplomacy and the *reward leverage mechanism* was outmatched by the Solomon Islands economic dependence on China and on access to China's BRI which was contingent on the SIG's revocation of diplomatic recognition for the government of

Taiwan. The *affective mechanisms* mobilized by Australia in the Solomon Islands, though powerful, were not designed to be mutually exclusive of China's advances and security interests. This enabled the SIG to hedge between Australia and the PRC without having to choose one security partner over the other. After RAMSI's withdrawal, much of Australia's influence in SIG affairs appears to have declined, but Sogavare will likely have to continue walking a fine line between the two if he seeks to ensure neither partner abandons him. However, as China continues to increase its diplomatic and economic leverage over the Solomon Islands and its politicians, the tensions between Australia and the PRC may one day manifest in the eventual cutting of ties by Australia, regardless of how long Sogavare retains the prime minister seat.

D. CONCLUSION

The economic leverage the PRC now wields over the Solomon Islands appears to dwarf the potential competing interests other states might have in pursuing great power competition in the Solomon Islands. Although the United States, Australia, and Taiwan may attempt to further mobilize other *power mechanisms* to gain influence in the Solomon Islands, the overwhelming leverage-based influence China now holds and is able to sustain over the SIG will likely outmatch efforts by other would-be influencers.

China's coercive diplomacy, which it applied through leverage mechanisms, and Australia's social investment and protracted engagement continued to enable each to gain influence in the Solomon Islands between 2011 and 2022. Taiwan's financial investments, however, fell short on this front in 2019. The influence gained by Australia led to the signing and later activation of a bilateral security treaty, and China used its influence to compel the SIG to abandon Taiwan and to sign a bilateral security agreement. Australia, through RAMSI and in partnership with the SIG, achieved its goal of reestablishing regional security, and the security treaty between the two that followed RAMSI's withdrawal contributes to the sustainment of that stability. China also achieved its aims of further diplomatically isolating Taiwan and of challenging the security architecture in the region.

However, China's primary avenue for influence in the Solomon Islands is through the SIG, not through the people. China's lasting challenge, as long as the Solomon Islands continues to be a democracy, will likely remain the people of the Solomon Islands. The resurgence of riots in 2021 that led to the second decimation of Honiara's Chinatown, the countless interviews of Solomon Islanders with grievances against *waku* and Chinese business practices in the Solomon Islands, and the Malaitan Provincial Government's continued refusal to accept and recognize the government in Beijing over the government in Taipei are just a few examples of the challenges that China faces. Although Sogavare was able to successfully delay the planned 2023 elections for a year, elections in the Solomon Islands are inevitable, and unless the Sogavare government finds a way to cancel or permanently postpone them, the people will soon have an opportunity to make their voices heard without having to riot to do so.²⁴³

Australia's interests did not appear to contest those of Taiwan or China during the 2011–2022 time period. Although the security agreement between the SIG and the PRC poses a challenge to the future of regional security, that challenge has not yet led to an increase in regional instability. The growing great power competition between the United States and China may lead Australia or China to attempt to mobilize additional *leverage mechanisms* in the Solomon Islands in an attempt to compel it to lean further one way or the other, but for now that does not appear to be necessary. The interpersonal relationships that RAMSI built with the people of the Solomon Islands and, in particular, the RSIPF by mobilizing *affective mechanisms* appears to have led to a significant amount of Australian influence over the Solomon Islands, though it has not yet attempted to wield that influence for any reason other than the *maintenance* of stability. Australia's influence appears to be most prominent outside of the government, with the people. Should Australia attempt to wield its influence in the Solomon Islands to compel the SIG to choose between Australia and the PRC while Sogavare remains in power, the result will likely be increased distancing between the SIG and the Australian government. Since the Australian government appears

²⁴³ Kirsty Needham, "Solomon Islands Votes to Delay Election Despite Opposition," *Reuters*, September 8, 2022, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/solomon-islands-set-vote-election-delay-despite-opposition-2022-09-08/>.

to remain fully committed to ensuring peace and stability in the Solomon Islands, this would be an unlikely policy direction for Australia to take.

After China's primary aim of diplomatically isolating the government of Taiwan from the SIG was achieved, it turned its efforts to challenging the regional security architecture. The SIG's signing of the SIG-PRC security agreement appears to represent a partial achievement of this objective by China. So too does the concern from Western states regarding their agreement. The United States and Australia's primary concern with the SIG-PRC security agreement was in the potential for China to build and operate a naval or other military base in the Solomon Islands because of it. Australia appears to have temporarily hindered China's ability to do so with former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's remarks in April of 2022 when he said that the development of a Chinese military base in the Solomon Islands was a "red line" for Australia.²⁴⁴ He admitted, though, after speaking with Prime Minister Sogavare on the matter, that Sogavare "clearly shares [Australia's] red line."²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Georgia Hitch, "PM Says China Building Military Base in Solomons Would Be 'Red Line' for Australia, US," *ABC News*, April 24, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-04-24/scott-morrison-china-naval-base-solomon-islands-red-line/101011710>.

²⁴⁵ Hitch.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research sought to determine which factors would be the most important in determining the outcome of the competition for influence in Oceania through the lens of a detailed single case study of the influence activities which have been undertaken in the Solomon Islands over the last two and a half decades. This thesis applied Meierding and Sigman's framework for assessing foreign influence in the Solomon Islands, which was either gained or lost by states that drew upon their available power resources to mobilize power mechanisms in order to achieve that influence. In Chapters II and III, this research identified six key events in Solomon Islands history which provided opportunities for states with interests in Solomon Islands foreign and domestic affairs to garner and wield influence to shape the direction of the Solomon Islands' diplomatic and policy shifts. Meierding and Sigman's Influence Development Process was central to the analysis of influence in this research and can be referenced in Figure 3.

The detailed case study analysis in this research appears to partially validate Hypothesis 1, and to fully validate both Hypothesis 2 and 3 from Chapter I. Hypothesis 1 was that China's consistency in its application of coercive diplomacy tends to lead toward regional stability. This was partially true in the case of the Solomon Islands in that China's approach resulted in a formal security agreement that, according to the current Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, assures the security of the state in areas not otherwise covered by the security treaty with Australia. If true, the security agreement with China is not redundant to the security treaty with Australia, rather, it is supplementary and therefore contributes to regional stability by reducing the potential for future local conflict to destabilize the region at large. However, this hypothesis is partially false in the context of great power competition. Regional stability is affected by the interests of international actors geographically located outside of the region. Tensions between the United States and China increased as a result of China's growing influence in the Solomon Islands, in part due to the geographic significance of the

Solomon Island chain. While the region may be more stable and secure at a glance, the clashing regional interests of extra-regional actors threatens regional stability.

Hypothesis 2 stated that China's influence is fragile. This research found that this is accurate in the Solomon Islands due to China's reliance on continued political support from key actors who govern increasingly illiberally and whose ability to remain in power is subject to democratic elections. Additionally, China capitalized on Taiwan's tactic of buying political support in the SIG, which exacerbates the incentive for SIG officials to participate in corruption and allows for this approach to be taken by other would-be influencers with the financial resources to outbid China. Hypothesis 3 was that China's autocratic approach to diplomacy enables it to respond to the interests of states more rapidly than its democratic competitors. This was true in the Solomon Islands, where China was able to implement policies that appealed to SIG interests and won over support from SIG officials before China's Western competitors, such as Australia, could effectively formulate diplomatic or policy responses.

The findings in this research have implications for United States foreign policy relative to the ongoing great power competition taking place in Oceania, and perhaps further abroad. In this chapter, I first provide a summary of the findings in this research. In the section following the summary of findings, I discuss possible outcomes for the influence competition in Oceania between China and the West and explain, based on the findings, how the U.S. and China might effectively seek to become more influential in the region. In the final section, I identify recommended subjects for future research.

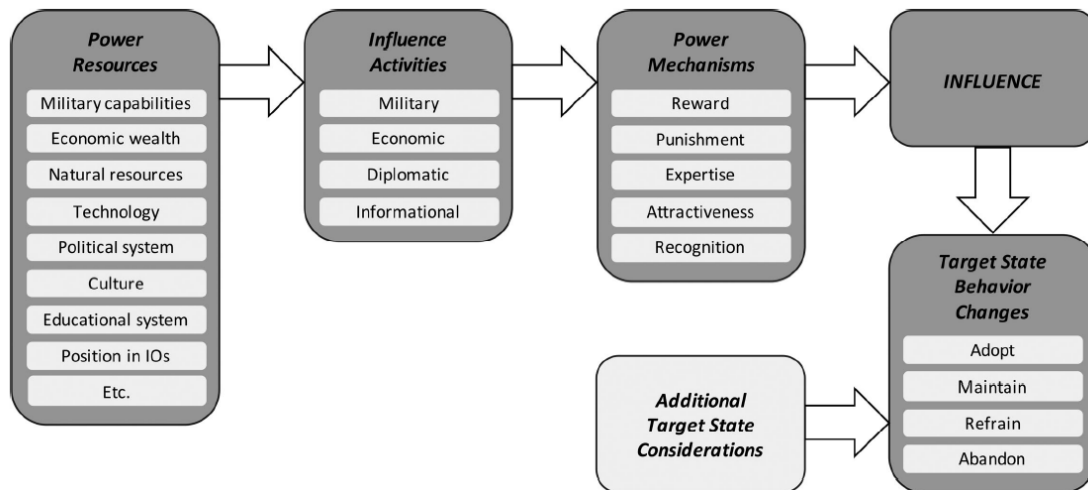


Figure 3. The Influence Development Process (Copy of Figure 2).²⁴⁶

A. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This research found that China, Taiwan, and Australia each drew upon their power resources to mobilize power mechanisms to garner influence in and over the Solomon Islands. Although power resources drawn upon by each of these three states often included cultural, educational, political, and national resources, the power resource most often mobilized was that of economic wealth. Influence activities which China, Taiwan, and Australia conducted by drawing on their power resources appeared to be primarily economic in nature, though China and Taiwan often performed diplomatic influence activities as well. The most commonly mobilized power mechanism by both China and Taiwan was that of *reward*. These rewards served to either entice or bribe Solomon Islands elites to make foreign policy decisions which would favor one or the other. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Taiwan primarily used financial rewards to influence the Solomon Islands government (SIG) to maintain their diplomatic recognition for the government in Taipei by capitalizing on the Solomon Islands' patronage-based political culture. Protracted provision of discretionary funding to SIG officials by Taiwan fueled corruption and provided an inroad for China to draw upon its vast economic wealth to outbid Taiwan. Taiwan was no longer able to maintain

²⁴⁶ Source: Meierding and Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," 5.

the façade of a reliable partner and investor. Meanwhile China maneuvered to become the Solomon Islands' largest trading partner and thus enabled the SIG to become economically dependent on China. With few exceptions, China focused its diplomatic and economic influence activities on the SIG and Solomon Islands elites while paying little attention to non-elites. In this way, over the first two decades of the twenty-first century China established overwhelming economic leverage over the Solomon Islands which likely drove the SIG to sign a security agreement with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2022 in spite of its relationship and security treaty with its neighbor and partner, Australia.

Australia primarily conducted diplomatic and informational influence activities in the Solomon Islands, though an argument can be made that by Meierding and Sigman's definition, it also conducted a military influence activity through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Unlike China and Taiwan, Australia did not seek to mobilize leverage mechanisms in the Solomon Islands. Leverage mechanisms tend to be coercive in nature, and Australia sought to restore, legitimize, bolster, and guide the SIG rather than compel it. Because of this, Australia did not have the leverage that might have been necessary to dissuade the SIG from making policy decisions that conflicted with Australian interests, such as entering into a security agreement with China. This lack of leverage with the SIG was compounded by several political and diplomatic missteps by RAMSI officials such as the raid on Prime Minister Sogavare's office that was discussed in Chapter II. Although these incidents did not necessarily lead the SIG to completely turn away from Australia, they likely contributed to the increased distancing from Australia which SIG officials have recently pursued in favor of China.

Perhaps the most relevant finding in this research is tied to the competition between Australia and China in the Solomon Islands. China appears to have been in competition with Australia, and the West in general, without Australia being aware it was party to the competition. Additionally, Australia's commitment to the vision for a *free and open Indo-Pacific*, which stresses the idea that "countries will be able to choose their own path and their own partners," might have prevented it from effectively competing even if it had known it

was being opposed in the Solomon Islands.²⁴⁷ The SIG-PRC security agreement appears to be a redundant measure, in light of the already existing bilateral security treaty between the SIG and Australia. Australia had no reason to assume the SIG was seeking other security partners, particularly not a security partner with values such as those of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which diametrically oppose those guaranteed by the Solomon Islands' constitution, nor one with apparently belligerent intentions which might once more bring conflict to the shores of Guadalcanal. Additionally, Australia's commitment to respect for state sovereignty would have prevented Australia from attempting to preventatively coerce the SIG out of following through on its sovereign decision to enter the security agreement with China.

Once China had established sufficient leverage over the SIG, China's interest in the Solomon Islands became clearer given its position in the overall context of the competition for influence playing out in Oceania. The SIG-PRC security agreement has enabled China to challenge the existing regional security framework in Oceania, and potentially enables China to have a military foothold geographically between its great power competitor and their closest ally, the United States and Australia.

China's use of coercive diplomacy and economic-based leverage appear to have been the most consequential factors in determining the outcome of the competition for influence in the Solomon Islands. Although Australia appears to have garnered a significant amount of influence in SIG affairs, this influence is largely based on Australia's *expertise*, *attractiveness*, and the *recognition* it received based on its part in restoring law and order to the Solomon Islands between 2003 and 2017. However, in the process of acquiring this influence, Australia antagonized key elites in the Solomon Islands, likely in pursuit of just causes, and those elites have become increasingly important in determining history-making national policy decisions which have largely favored the partner with a heavy wallet and 'big stick' over the one with more benevolent intentions, given that the benevolent partner would likely remain a friend regardless of the insult. Additionally, the top-down and patronage-based

²⁴⁷ Anthony J. Blinken, "A Free and Open Indo-Pacific," U.S. Department of State, December 14, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-free-and-open-indo-pacific/>.

nature of Solomon Islands politics appears to characteristically align more closely with China's version of diplomacy than with the West's.

B. POSSIBLE OUTCOMES

Although the SIG appears to have effectively hedged to settle its domestic issues, by signing the security agreement with the PRC it has found itself at the center of great power rivalry in the Pacific. Now with the issue of diplomatic recognition for Taiwan effectively off the table and with the domestic stability of the Solomon Islands guaranteed by both China and Australia, the new challenge for the Solomon Islands appears to have grown both beyond its control and its borders. While the competition between the United States and China intensifies, the SIG's struggle in the coming years will likely be in finding ways to pursue its own interests without overtly antagonizing either great power or its regional middle power neighbor and partner, Australia.

As discussed in Chapter I, China seeks to challenge, and perhaps supplant the current international order. China's challenge to regional security in Oceania represented by its security agreement with the Solomon Islands, its planned refurbishment and expansion of an airstrip in Kiribati, and its attempts to secure and refurbish port infrastructure in other Oceanian states will likely contribute to achieving this aim.²⁴⁸ The influence China has garnered in Kiribati is perhaps a more foreboding example of what may one day come in the Solomon Islands, where the government of Kiribati appears to have become overtly complicit in enabling Chinese security interests in Oceania to the point that domestic press is entirely censored on the subject of China, and foreign press is banned from entry—on pain of imprisonment—altogether.²⁴⁹

The primary obstacle to Chinese influence across Oceania appears to be democracy. China has tended to target elites and government officials who are willing to accept Chinese

²⁴⁸ Craig Singleton, "Beijing Eyes New Military Bases Across the Indo-Pacific," *Foreign Policy* (blog), July 7, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/china-pla-military-bases-kiribati-uae-cambodia-tanzania-djibouti-indo-pacific-ports-airfields/>; Brian Harding and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, "China's Search for a Permanent Military Presence in the Pacific Islands," *United States Institute of Peace* (blog), July 21, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/chinas-search-permanent-military-presence-pacific-islands>.

²⁴⁹ 60 Minutes Australia, "Investigation."

money or assistance, or both, to remain in power. Additionally, once Chinese businesses secure contracts to develop or construct infrastructure or resource extraction capacity, they tend to do so at the expense of local employment and business. This, as has been demonstrated in this research, tends to inflame local discontent with Chinese activities. In the Solomon Islands, there has not been a national election since 2019, before the Sogavare government secured a security agreement with the PRC and severed ties with Taiwan in spite of heavy local opposition. Sogavare's government was able to amend the state constitution in 2022 to delay the planned 2023 elections, citing a lack of government resources as reason for the postponement, until after the Pacific Games which will occur in November of 2023.²⁵⁰ Many have interpreted this move by the SIG as a step toward autocracy in imitation of its now-close partner, the CCP. However, despite delays and if a free and fair election moves forward, the people of the Solomon Islands will have an opportunity to make their discontent heard with their vote.

This provides an opportunity for both China and the United States to pursue influence in Oceania. China's interests in the Solomon Islands, and Oceania more broadly, will likely be best served if China is able to ensure key government officials who are sympathetic to Chinese interests remain in power. Key to this in states, like the Solomon Islands, with democratic governments will likely be in cultivating a more positive image of China among the local population, or in continuing to capitalize on pork-barrel political culture. China has an opportunity to solve, or drastically reduce, unemployment issues in the Solomon Islands by pushing Chinese owned businesses in the Solomon Islands to provide employment and worker training opportunities to locals, and, perhaps more importantly, by offering to pay those local employees competitive wages. While this action will not likely change the minds of all locals opposed to Chinese interests, it may be sufficient to sway public opinion enough to favor and re-elect politicians with ties to China.

²⁵⁰ Reuters, "Bill to Delay Solomon Islands Election Until December 2023 Prompts Concern," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/09/bill-to-delay-solomon-islands-election-until-december-2023-prompts-concern>; Damien Cave, "Solomon Islands' Leader, a Friend of China, Gets an Election Delayed," *The New York Times*, September 8, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/world/asia/solomon-islands-election-delay.html>.

The United States' opportunity appears likely to be more effective if it approaches influence indirectly. America has long neglected the majority of Oceanian states, Solomon Islands included. If the United States becomes suddenly more overtly interested in the Solomon Islands, its actions are more likely to be interpreted as self-serving than benevolent. For a state whose people have long been concerned with foreign influence in their state's affairs, increased American activities in the archipelago will be seen for what they are, a competition with China for influence, which will likely result in negative sentiment and distancing. However, America's regional partners and allies, especially Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, have been persistent and reliable partners to most Oceanian states for decades. If the United States seeks to ensure the Indo-Pacific remains "free and open," it should do so in Oceania through its like-minded partners whose actions are far less likely to be negatively perceived. By drawing on its vast power resources, especially that of economic wealth, the United States has the ability to bolster regional infrastructure development, regional security, regional health and medicine, regional trade networks, and more through its partners. By doing so, the United States and its partners and allies can provide viable, competitive alternatives to those offered by China and its CCP.

The United States may also be successful in taking a more overt approach to gaining influence in Oceania, though there are many potential drawbacks to this method. There was little evidence of a concerted effort by any Western states to establish and wield leverage in or over the Solomon Islands in the last two decades. Partners of the United States, such as Australia, still maintain significant economic ties to the Solomon Islands in the form of trade, financial aid and assistance, and investment which represent possible inroads for the establishment of coercive leverage over the SIG. However, in the event of significant coercive sanctions the people of the Solomon Islands would likely be the first to suffer, rather than the elites. It would be difficult for the West to justify taking coercive action against the SIG at present without violating the general Western position on the rights of sovereign states, especially in the free and open Indo-Pacific. Separately, if the United States or its partners pursued influence along the same reward-based leverage inroads China uses in an attempt to outbid the PRC, it would likely be negatively perceived both in the Solomon Islands and domestically in America. While this method of gaining influence would probably have the

most rapid and obvious initial results, the influence gained would likely be as shallow and fragile as the leverage-based influence China enjoys in the Solomon Islands presently.

C. AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research identified that China's approach to overseas affairs and migrant management might have been affected by events related to the aftermath of the 2006 Solomon Islands parliamentary elections in the wake of the Black Tuesday riots. The Guangdong Office for Overseas Chinese Affairs filed a report that remarked on the negative impacts poor behavior by overseas Chinese immigrants had on Chinese diplomacy and interests. The report recommended that the Chinese government should limit the number of migrants which should be permitted to go to any single destination and recommended financing for cultural and language training for potential migrants prior to departing China. These recommendations were intended to enable the Chinese government to ensure its migrants would become better ambassadors for China. Investigation into whether these recommendations were implemented is warranted. If China has indeed begun to moderate outbound migrant behavior, it may indicate a stronger commitment by China to face-saving tactics for acquiring soft power.

Lastly, this research briefly identified Kiribati as a place where overwhelming Chinese influence has led to near isolation from foreign press. There exists a significant amount of research on the subject of Kiribati's past diplomatic dealings with China up until 2019 when it too, like the Solomon Islands, severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan.²⁵¹ Admittedly, this research did not wander far beyond the shores of the Solomon Islands, but a comparative case study between Kiribati and the Solomon islands, especially one that applies the same power mechanism-based framework from Meierding and Sigman, to expand upon this research may highlight other trends and inroads for influence building and competition in Oceania which might be less apparent in the single case study on which this thesis is based.

²⁵¹ Kate Lyons, "Taiwan Loses Second Ally in a Week as Kiribati Switches to China," *The Guardian*, September 20, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/20/taiwan-loses-second-ally-in-a-week-as-kiribati-switches-to-china>.

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