Beat: News

China Seeks to Normalize Its Global Security Presence

In the Solomon Islands

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China's recently inked security agreement with the Solomon Islands is the latest in a series of moves by Beijing to normalize its international security role. At the end of March, the Solomon Islands initialed a draft Framework Agreement with China to allow the deployment of Chinese police or military forces to the island nation to manage crises. The deal, similar to one inked with Australia in 2017, facilitates the deployment of security forces should the Solomon Islands request them. In November 2021, Australia and New Zealand deployed security forces to the island nation to help the government deal with violent protests, many of which targeted Chinese commercial interests. The Solomon Islands government argues that the new deal is part of its "friends to all, enemies to none" policy, but a leaked draft has stirred consternation among other members of the Pacific Island Forum, most notably Australia and New Zealand.

For the Solomon Islands, the agreement with China fits within a series of moves to expand the country's diplomatic, economic and security relations and balance its dependence on neighboring Australia, which led the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003-2017.

* In 2019, Honiara changed diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to mainland China, which has since granted the Solomon Islands government access to Chinese funding. But it's come at the cost of exacerbating internal tensions between residents of the main island of Guadalcanal and those of nearby Malaita — the latter having closer economic ties with Taiwan.

* In 2020, the Solomon Islands government announced its "friends to all, enemies to none" policy, seeking to further dilute Australian influence.

* In March 2021, Honiara invited Chinese police to the island to train the local police forces, signed a memorandum of understanding on police cooperation, and initialed the broader security framework with China.

Familiarizing the World With China's Military.

For Beijing, the new Solomon Islands agreement marks a new step toward the normalization of Chinese security assistance and involvement abroad. While China has used its military as a tool of coercion with its neighbors, most notably in the South China Sea and along the disputed Indian border, Beijing has been cautious about using its military as a foreign policy tool. Chinese leaders have highlighted their non-interference and win-win activities abroad, providing economic assistance and investment with minimal political demands. This contrasts with Russia and the United States' use of military force abroad as a common element of foreign policy. But Beijing's self-restraint has eroded over the past decade as China's rise and global reach increases both its global power and influence, as well as its vulnerability to far-flung supply chains and markets.

In 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping promised at the United Nations to set up an 8,000-strong peacekeeping force for U.N. missions, expanding the roughly 3,000 Chinese peacekeepers already deployed at the time. Several years prior, Beijing had shifted from only supplying police to supplying military units to U.N. missions as a way to start normalizing Chinese security forces abroad while also offering those forces real-world training and experience. In 2017, China inaugurated its first overseas military base in Djibouti after several years of joining international anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. In recent years, China has stepped up its joint defense and anti-terrorism training with fellow Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries in Central Asia. Reports that China is training and building border posts for Tajik security forces suggest Beijing may also be stationing a small contingent of its own inside Tajikistan as part of its regional counterterrorism operations.

Each step China has made has been paired with assertions of regional and international cooperation. China has one of the only purpose-built hospital ships that it deploys on green diplomacy missions. As of Dec. 31, China had 2,235 forces committed to U.N. peacekeeping missions — nearly double the 1,261 forces that the other four permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC)

had committed to such missions at that time combined. And when looking solely at troops, China boasts 2,158 — more than double the remaining four permanent UNSC members combined. Beijing's work in Central Asia has also been paired with Belt and Road investment and multilateral coordination. The Chinese base in the East African country of Djibouti emerged in part from cooperative multilateral anti-piracy operations.

Changing the Narrative.

The new Solomon Islands agreement is paired with economic assistance and police training. It also raises the potential for collaborative security operations with Australia and others, should Honiara request assistance from several partners simultaneously. For the moment, the closer a country is to China, the more likely Beijing is to use the military as a tool of direct coercion. Beijing is still likely to use its military power as a less active tool of influence and presence in further-flung areas. But Beijing is clearly seeking to normalize the presence of Chinese security and defense forces abroad in an effort to shift the narrative from one of Chinese expansion to one of acknowledging Chinese presence.

This idea of normalizing Chinese security forces abroad is a significant component of Beijing's expanding global power and its assertion of its right and responsibility to shape global security and stability. Moving in this slow-but-steady fashion is supposed to make each new step seem less aggressive and thus less likely to trigger a significant counter-action. The agreement with the Solomon Islands has triggered a major outcry from Australia and New Zealand, but the argument is primarily against the potential for a future Chinese naval base on the islands. Australia and New Zealand also argue that Pacific neighbors can take care of themselves without Chinese interference, particularly when it takes place right in their own backyard. But this argument appears to have only reinforced Honiara's view that it needs China to counterbalance the colonial mindset of its much larger nearby neighbor. And Honiara has emphasized that it is not allowing a Chinese naval base, merely a port for replenishment stops — something many countries around the region offer for warships from numerous nations.

A Precursor to Future Agreements?

The issue of an increased Chinese naval presence on the Solomon Islands (which sits astride key maritime routes northeast of Australia) has gotten the most attention following the agreement — particularly as Australia prepares a new naval base on its eastern coast for its future nuclear submarine fleet. But the agreement for the deployment of security forces may be more concrete, and thus more significant.

As a growing global power, with economic reach and attendant vulnerability across the globe, China is unable to simply rely on claimed non-interference and economic levers to secure its expanding national interests. At the same time, Beijing remains cautious in its military outreach, fearing both being painted as just the latest in a string of global imperialists or finding itself drawn into numerous conflicts across the globe — something that has happened to all other big powers.

The Solomon Islands arrangement gives Beijing a constrained place to test its new security commitment. At the same time, it may prove enticing to other small countries seeking to enhance their internal security and diversify their external security relations. The Solomon Islands deal may thus eventually become a model for Chinese security assistance elsewhere — perhaps in Central Asia, South Asia or Africa, where Beijing has relied on local security forces or private contractors.

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