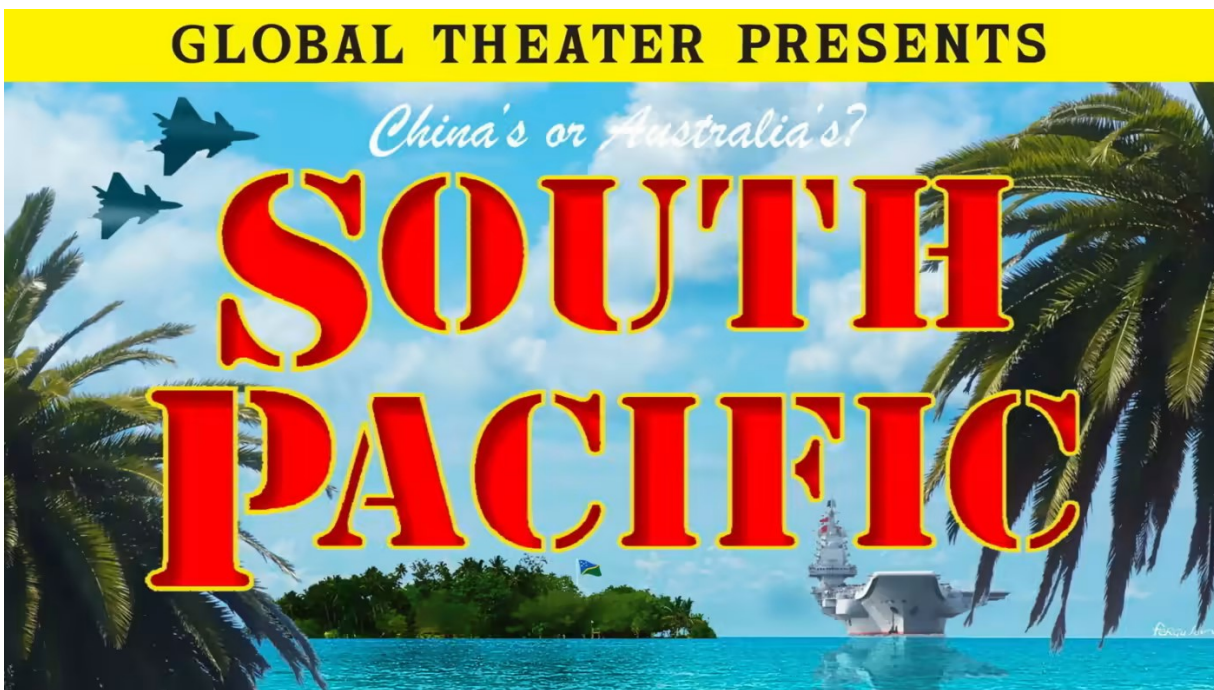


Opinion **Asia maritime tensions**

## Australia, China and the judgment of the Solomons

Geopolitical rivalry spills into the South Pacific as Canberra and Washington battle Beijing's rising influence

**GIDEON RACHMAN**



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**Gideon Rachman** YESTERDAY

If you wanted to nominate a country in the world with zero strategic significance, the Solomon Islands might sound like a good shout. An archipelago of almost 1,000 islands in the southern Pacific with a total population of about 700,000, the Solomons seem safely distant from great power politics. The country's head of state is the British monarch, but the last visit by the sovereign was 40 years ago. China is more than 6,000km away; Australia, roughly 2,000km away.

Despite their remoteness, the Solomon Islands have become an unlikely flashpoint in the growing strategic rivalry between China and the west. The signature of a security pact between the Solomons and China in April sparked alarm in Washington and Canberra.

Kurt Campbell, a senior White House official, jumped on a plane in an unsuccessful bid to repair the damage. Penny Wong, Australia's foreign minister, argued that the previous government, led by Scott Morrison, had by its negligence committed the country's "worst foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since world war two".

Australian and American concern about the Solomons is driven by their anxiety about Chinese ambitions in the Pacific. After decades of rapid military expansion, the Chinese navy has more ships than the US fleet. Under President Xi Jinping, China has already built military bases in the South China Sea. Beijing's pact with the Solomons

already built military bases in the South China Sea. Beijing's pact with the Solomons is mainly about domestic security. But the Americans and Australians fear that China intends to establish a naval base in the South Pacific, with the Solomons the likeliest venue.

Asked why an expanding Chinese presence in the South Pacific matters, Australian officials point to history and geography. The Solomon Islands were the scene of one of the fiercest battles of the second world war — the battle of Guadalcanal — in which more than 7,000 Americans died reclaiming the islands from Japan. A young John F Kennedy was on a US navy patrol boat that was sunk off the Solomons, and he swam ashore to one of the remoter islands.

The reason that the Americans fought Japan in the Solomons is the same reason that the islands are regarded as strategically significant today — they lie across the sea lanes between Australia, east Asia and the western US. The strategic lessons of the second world war, when Japanese planes bombed the northern port of Darwin, are seared into Australia's approach to the world.

If China were ever to follow the pattern of imperial Japan and directly challenge US military power in the Pacific, the likeliest flashpoint is Taiwan. US and Australian officials think it distinctly possible that Xi's China will attempt to invade or blockade Taiwan within the next five years. President Joe Biden has said several times that the US would come to the defence of Taiwan. In Canberra recently, as a guest of the Lowy Institute think-tank, I found a widespread assumption that, in the event of a US-China war, Australia would be drawn into the conflict. A Chinese base in the South Pacific would significantly complicate Australia's strategic calculations.

A recent meeting between Xi and Anthony Albanese, the Australian prime minister, was the first between Chinese and Australian leaders in six years. It dialled down tensions a little, as did a meeting between Xi and Biden. But the Australians and Americans still assume that China is determined to dominate the Indo-Pacific. They are equally determined to prevent that happening.

The clearest sign of this joint determination to push back against Chinese ambitions came with the signature last year of [Aukus](#), a security pact between Australia, the UK and the US. Its centrepiece is Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines, whose range and sophistication would greatly expand Australia's capacity to take part in wars far from its shores.

Aukus has been denounced as warmongering by both China and Russia. But the Australians argue that the pact is intended to keep the peace, by maintaining the

balance of power.

Making that case to Australia's neighbours in the Indo-Pacific is tricky. President Joko Widodo of Indonesia recently told me that his country had no intention of becoming "a pawn" in a new cold war. In Canberra, Wong acknowledges that sentiment but says she believes that Australia and its neighbours "have a shared interest in a region that is non-hegemonic".

China has certain advantages in a battle for regional influence. It is the largest trading partner of most of the countries in the Indo-Pacific. And, in poor countries such as the Solomons, Chinese wealth can help achieve what is delicately referred to as "elite capture".

The Australians and Americans are now trying to bolster their own influence in the Solomons. The US has announced that it will soon open an embassy. Australia has delivered vehicles and rifles to the Solomon Islands police force, some of whose members had been sent for training in China.

But even as they grapple with modern geopolitics, the Solomons are plagued by the legacy of the second world war. Unexploded bombs litter the islands and still claim lives. If the Aukus nations are looking for projects that might win hearts and minds, they might usefully focus on clearing up the damage from the last great power conflict to sweep over the Solomon Islands.

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