

March 11, 2025

Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands (colloquially, the Solomons) is a Pacific Islands Country (PIC) in the Melanesian sub-region roughly 2,000 miles northeast of Australia. Solomon Islands is a heterogenous society, with over 70 language groups spoken by over 700,000 inhabitants, on six major islands. The Solomons has the third-largest economy in the Pacific Islands and is one of the most aid-reliant countries in the world.

Solomon Islands is strategically significant to U.S. Indo-Pacific interests due to its geographic location between several sea-lines of communication, including between the U.S. and Australia. Solomon Islands also has proximity to U.S. military installations in Micronesia, such as U.S. Army Garrison Kwajalein and Guam, that are critical to U.S. regional defense posture. The Solomons was the site of the first offensive campaign by the United States in the Pacific during World War II. An estimated 1,600 U.S. servicemembers were killed in the 1943 campaign, and Solomon Islanders played an important role in the war effort. Unexploded ordnance (UXO) from the war remains buried throughout the country. In the post-war era, U.S. engagement with the Solomons waned. In 1993, the United States closed its embassy in the country as part of a deficit reduction plan (it was reestablished in 2023).

Over the past decade, the government of the Solomons has increased diplomatic and security ties with the People's Republic of China (China, or PRC), and switched official diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 2019. China is the Solomon Islands' largest trading partner and second-largest aid partner (behind Australia). Some Members of Congress have expressed concern that a 2022 security pact between the Solomons and China threatens U.S. strategic and diplomatic interests in the region.

Political History

Solomon Islands gained independence from British colonial administration in 1978 and formed a parliamentary constitutional monarchy under the British crown, holding Commonwealth Realm status. Since independence, politics have been punctuated by a weak state structure and endemic corruption; public officials may rely upon traditional patronage networks to accumulate power outside of formal institutions. Membership in political parties is fluid, and there is a history of no-confidence votes in the parliament to challenge the prime minister's authority.

The Solomons is administratively broken down into nine provinces and one capital territory in Honiara. There are rifts between some provinces and the central government, and ethnic tensions among island groups periodically have led to conflict. In 1998, long-simmering tensions between the peoples of the islands of Guadalcanal, home to Honiara,

and Malaita, the country's most populous province, erupted in civil war, with competing militias fighting for power.

At the request of the government of Solomon Islands and under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)'s 2000 Biketwawa Declaration, Australia led a 2003 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), a multinational peacekeeping and stabilization initiative. RAMSI remained operational until 2017, providing phases of military, law enforcement, and development assistance.

Following RAMSI's wind-down and exit in 2017, then-Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare signed a security agreement with Australia to provide for rapid deployment of Australian security forces, at Honiara's request, in the case of civil conflict. Australia is the Solomon Islands' top aid partner and is projected to provide \$103.6 million (AUD) between 2024 and 2025 in official development aid.

Figure 1. Solomon Islands at a Glance



Source: Congressional Research Service.

The current government is led by Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele (a former foreign minister), who was elected in May 2024. Manele survived a motion of no confidence after eight months in office over allegations of providing unfair tax exemptions and economic mismanagement.

Relations with the PRC

Prior to 2019, Solomon Islands was a diplomatic partner of Taiwan (the Republic of China). The reelection of Sogavare as prime minister (for the fourth time) precipitated a months-long foreign policy review that resulted in a

diplomatic switch to the PRC, citing the Solomons' development needs as motivation.

In 2021, riots erupted in Honiara. Initially peaceful protests motivated by inter-island tensions and the diplomatic switch to the PRC devolved into chaos, and protesters attempted to storm the parliament building and depose Sogavare. Honiara's Chinatown was left in shambles and total property damage from the riots is estimated at \$534 million (SBD). The government of Solomon Islands invited Australian peacekeepers to bolster the local police force.

In 2022, the Solomon Islands and the PRC signed a bilateral security agreement that allowed for the potential deployment of PRC security forces in the Solomons to maintain "social order" at the request of the government. Some officials in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand voiced concern that the agreement could allow China to establish a naval presence in the region. The Solomons government has denied that it would permit foreign military installations in its territory and denounced criticisms of its alignment with China, claiming that it is an infringement of its sovereignty. In 2023, China and Solomon Islands signed a law enforcement agreement.

In 2025, Solomon Islands is slated to assume the chair of the PIF, the region's primary multilateral organization, and host the PIF Leaders Meeting in Honiara. During the previous meeting in Tonga, the joint communique was altered to remove references to Taiwan after the PRC delegation (which observes as dialogue partner, as do the United States, Australia, and others) objected. Some observers alleged that China and the Solomons colluded to remove references to Taiwan to dispute its right to attend the PIF Leaders Meeting as a development partner, a title Taiwan has held since 1992.

Some analysts suggest that Solomon Islands hosting the PIF Leaders Meeting may facilitate greater PRC influence over the 2025 proceedings, and Taiwan media sources allege at the previous Leaders Meeting that the Solomons was acting on China's behalf to block Taiwan from attending in Honiara. Manele has noted that 2025 will be a contentious year for the PIF as the organization conducts a Review of Regional Architecture. A proposed "Forum Partnership Mechanism" would create a tiered engagement system between the PIF and its forum partners that could potentially leave Taiwan diplomatically sidelined.

U.S.-Solomon Islands Relations

The United States and the Solomons established relations in 1978 and signed a Status of Forces Agreement in 1991. The Solomon Islands has no standing military force. The United States has provided U.S. Coast Guard exchanges, international training courses to Solomon Islands national security officials, and humanitarian support through Defense Department exercises like Pacific Partnership. U.S. non-security foreign assistance to Solomon Islands has historically included disaster risk reduction, agribusiness, and public health programs, including a 2022 Millennium Challenge Corporation program with the Solomons to address natural resource management and economic growth. At the time of writing, it is unclear what, if any, of

this assistance has continued or has been terminated as a result of the Trump Administration's pause on foreign assistance funding.

The Biden Administration reopened U.S. Embassy Honiara in 2023 as part of a larger bid to expand U.S. diplomatic presence in the region. Prior to the embassy reopening, a U.S. delegation visited Honiara and warned that the United States would "respond accordingly" to any PRC military presence in the Solomon Islands.

In November 2024, Prime Minister Manele issued a statement congratulating President Trump on his election, noting that the United States and Solomon Islands shared a special bond of friendship forged in WWII. Manele said he looks forward to fostering a deeper and broader relationship with the United States. During the first Trump Administration, former Vice President Mike Pence cancelled a planned meeting with Sogavare after Honiara cut ties with Taipei. Some analysts say Manele is more moderate than his predecessor, but unlikely to spurn ties with China.

Legacies of War

The continued presence of UXO from WWII remains an ecological and human safety hazard. Since 2011, the United States has provided \$6.8 million towards establishing a national capacity within the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force to identify and destroy explosive remnants of war. In 2022, the Department of State provided \$1 million to launch a UXO removal project, and in 2024, the U.S. Marines participated in Australian-led Operation Render Safe 2024-2 to remove UXO from Solomon Islands.

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) has operated in partnership with the government of Solomon Islands to account for missing military personnel from WWII. In 2022, DPAA conducted its first ever underwater recovery mission in the Solomons.

Select Issues for Congress

In the last decade, Congress has sought to bolster U.S.-Solomon Islands relations and to discourage relations with China. Recent congressional delegations to the Solomons included a 2023 House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party delegation that met with Solomon Islands officials and explored options for greater health diplomacy in the region.

Some Members of Congress have sought to disincentivize the Solomons from its relationship with Beijing through legislation; in the 118th Congress, the House-introduced Defund China's Allies Act of 2023 (H.R. 2511) included Solomon Islands in a list of countries that would have been barred from receiving U.S. foreign assistance until they set full diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Looking forward, Congress may inquire about how the U.S. freeze on foreign assistance has impacted U.S.-Solomon Islands relations, and about the executive branch's plans for attending the 2025 PIF Leaders Meeting in Honiara.

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