

CHINA-SOLOMON ISLANDS SECURITY DEAL: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

By
Muhammad Ali Baig
Research Associate

&
Danish Shakoor
Intern
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Arshad Ali

June 20, 2022

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

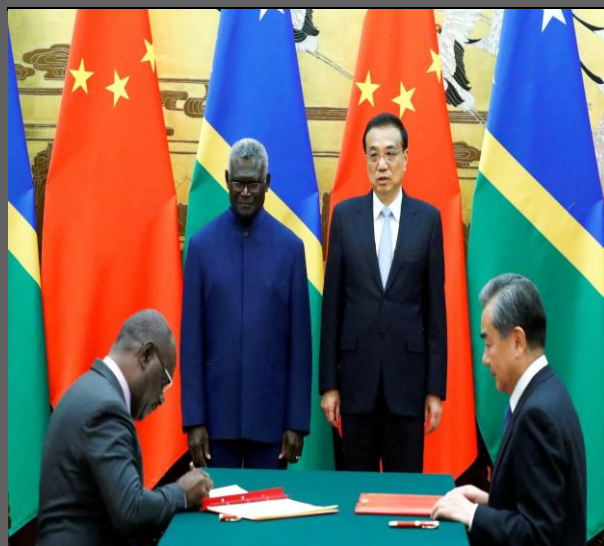


Image Source: The Japan Times¹

On March 24, 2022, *Reuters* reported that China and the Solomon Islands were considering signing a bilateral security agreement.² It was officially signed on April 19, 2022.³ The details of the agreement were not made public by the Solomon Islands government. However, the close version of the pact was leaked from within the Solomon government in late March 2022. The Government of Solomon Islands maintains ‘One China Policy’ since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two on September 21, 2019.⁴ The Chinese Foreign Minister cleared China’s position regarding the security deal and argued that “China-Solomon

- 1 Ben Westcott, “U.S. and Australia Pressure Solomon Islands on China Military Pact,” *The Japan Times*, April 13, 2022, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/13/world/solomon-islands-china-military-pact/>.
- 2 Kirsty Needham, “Exclusive Solomon Islands Considers Security Cooperation with China - Official,” *Reuters*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-solomon-islands-considers-security-cooperation-with-china-official-2022-03-24/>.
- 3 Kirsty Needham and Martin Quin Pollard, “U.S. Concerned after China Says It Signs Security Pact with Solomon Islands,” *Reuters*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-officials-travel-solomon-islands-sign-agreements-parliament-told-2022-04-19/>.
- 4 “Solomon Islands Foreign Minister, The Hon Jeremiah Manele, Calls for Unity of the Country in Response to Malaita Provincial Premier’s Statement That Challenges Solomon Islands ‘One China Policy,’” *Solomon Islands Government Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade*, June 10, 2020, <http://www.mfaet.gov.sb/media-center/press-releases/foreign-affairs-news/182-solomon-islands-foreign-minister,-the-hon-jeremiah-manele,-calls-for-unity-of-the-country-in-response-to-malaita-provincial-premier’s-statement-that-challenges-solomon-islands-“one-china-policy” .html>.

Islands security cooperation is aboveboard and frank, not imposing on others, not targeting third parties and not intending to establish military bases.”⁵

However, the majority of the Western media reported that the aim of the pact is to establish a naval base in the region allowing it to expand its naval presence in the South-Western Pacific.⁶ By the virtue of the said agreement China gets the license to deploy the police and military on the islands. Nonetheless, Beijing and Honiara have denied any such possibility.⁷

Particularly frustrated by the deal are the United States (U.S.), Australia, and New Zealand. The backdrop of the deal could be found back in 2019, when the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands Manasseh Sogavare cut ties with Taiwan and moved towards Xi Jinping’s China.⁸ Despite the fact that Australia and Solomon Islands signed a bilateral security treaty in August 2017, another assumption hypothesized that Canberra has been inefficient in recognizing the sense of the security gap in the region, especially after the Honiara riots last November, 2021.⁹ China on the other hand was quick to realize this gap.

-
- 5 “Wang Yi Expounds on Three Principles of China-Solomon Islands Security Cooperation,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China*, May 26, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220526_10693195.html.
 - 6 Damien Cave, “China and Solomon Islands Draft Secret Security Pact, Raising Alarm in the Pacific,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/world/asia/china-solomon-islands-security-pact.html>; Patricia M. Kim, “Does the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact Portend a More Interventionist Beijing?,” *Brookings*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/06/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>; Michael E. Miller, “China Pushes Pacific Deal, as Australia Scrambles to Repair Regional Ties,” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/26/solomons-china-wang-yi-pacific-australia/>.
 - 7 John Ruwitch, “Leaked Draft of an Agreement between China and the Solomon Islands Has U.S. Concerned,” *NPR*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/28/1095365212/leaked-draft-of-an-agreement-between-china-and-the-solomon-islands-has-u-s-conce>.
 - 8 “Why Is the Solomon Islands-China Security Pact Causing Alarm?,” April 20, 2022, *Al Jazeera*, accessed June 10, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/20/explainer-solomon-islands-china-security-pact-concern>.
 - 9 “Bilateral Security Treaty,” *Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, August 2017, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/solomon-islands/Pages/Bilateral-security-treaty>.

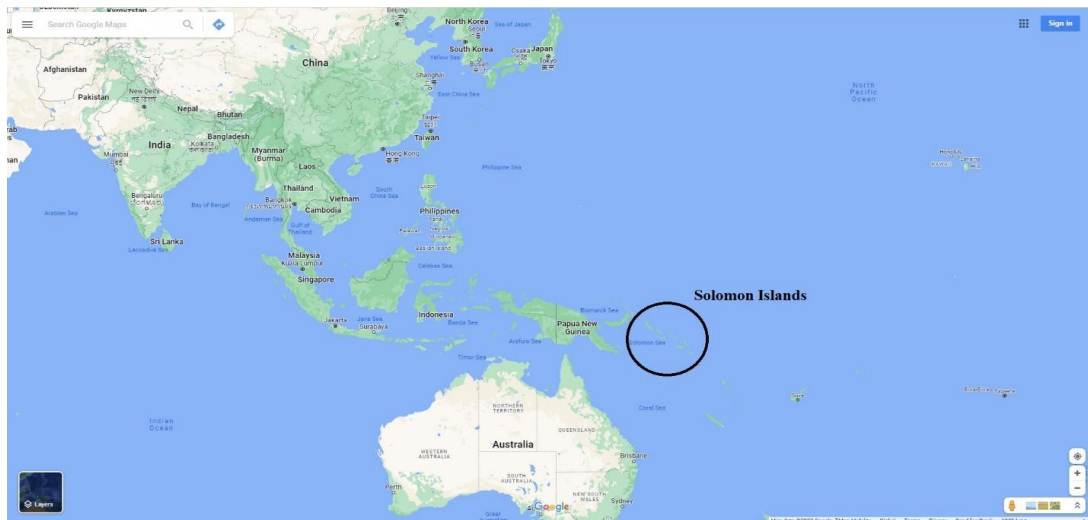


Figure 1: The location of Solomon Islands, nearly 9000 kms away from India.¹⁰

It is apprehended in the West that Chinese presence in the region would directly challenge the Western hegemony in the Pacific. The Australian coastline, at about 1429 km from the islands, has a direct stake in all of this.¹¹ More importantly, keeping in mind the trade war between Australia and China for two years, things will not improve with China sitting right next to Australia. The incumbent Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese also built his election campaign upon the narrative that Australia has committed a blunder by allowing China to set its foot in the Solomon Islands.¹²

Both Canberra and Wellington believe that the security of the Pacific should remain the sole responsibility of regional powers. Prime Minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern was quick to react to the deal and called it “gravely concerning.”¹³ Moreover, it can be argued that the agreement came as a response to the trilateral alliance under the auspices of AUKUS involving Australia, United Kingdom, and the U.S.¹⁴ It is interesting to note how India, being a member of the Quadrilateral

¹⁰ “Solomon Islands,” *Google Maps*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.google.com/maps/@1.5973847,145.886018,4z>. [image adapted].

¹¹ “Distance between Australia and Solomon Islands Countries,” *Distance Calculator*, 2022, https://distancecalculator.globefeed.com/Distance_Between_Countries_Result.asp?fromplace=Australia&toplace=Solomon%20Islands.

¹² Paul Karp, “Morrison and Albanese Clash on Solomon Islands-China Pact in First Leaders’ Debate of Federal Election,” *The Guardian*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/20/morrison-and-albanese-clash-on-solomon-islands-china-pact-at-first-leaders-debate-of-federal-election>.

¹³ Patricia O’Brien, “The ‘Framework Agreement’ with China Transforms the Solomon Islands into a Pacific Flashpoint,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/framework-agreement-china-transforms-solomon-islands-pacific-flashpoint>.

¹⁴ Larissa Stünkel and Marc Lanteigne, “The Geopolitical Aftershocks of the China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement,” *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/the-geopolitical-aftershocks-of-the-china-solomon-islands-security-agreement/>.

Security Dialogue or Quad, and a strategic ally of the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific is going to be impacted by this new security deal.

Championing Diplomacy through Economic Prowess

The contemporary Chinese foreign policy towards its neighbours is one driven by President Xi Jinping's rhetoric of creating a win-win situation for all the stakeholders. For instance, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) continues to serve as the epicentre of such a foreign policy orientation. Apart from the prosperity pledge it is the anti-colonial sentiment that creates room for China to have a direct role in the Pacific. China's "Friendship Association" scheme also known as *Youxie* determines Chinese people's association-cum-friendship with foreign countries. As in 2018, Tonga's Princess Royal Salote Mafile'o Pilolevu Tuita proposed the Pearl Maritime Road Initiative at a gathering of "Friendship Association" which would extend the BRI project into South-West Pacific.¹⁵

A digital Silk Road is being rolled out in the Pacific with Chinese embassies acting as the ground stations for the Beidou Satellite Navigation System. China also extends military support to Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga along with a frequent supply of humanitarian aid.¹⁶ Also, Solomon Islands and China are supposed to cooperate on a number of projects under the BRI which include fisheries, lumber, mining, and disaster management.¹⁷

How does the Security Deal impact India?

There are a number of assumptions that the China-Solomon Islands Security Deal likely will have a significant yet diverse geo-political impact in the Asia-Pacific. In June 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping said "that the vast Pacific Ocean has enough room to accommodate the development of the two great powers in the world, namely China and the United States."¹⁸ It was a clear signal that the Pacific cannot remain the backyard of the U.S. anymore. Also, it was at the same time when the U.S. was developing its rebalancing strategy in Asia Pacific. India is a key ally of the U.S. for its strategy in the Indo-Pacific with China as the peer competitor.¹⁹ India sits at more than 9000 kms from the Solomon Islands hence the Chinese presence over there does not pose any real threat to India. But it

¹⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, "China in the Pacific: From 'Friendship' to Strategically Placed Ports and Airfields," *The Strategist*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-in-the-pacific-from-friendship-to-strategically-placed-ports-and-airfields/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Miller, "China Pushes Pacific Deal, as Australia Scrambles to Repair Regional Ties."

¹⁸ "Xi Jinping Starts China-US Presidential Meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama," *Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana*, June 8, 2013, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegy/eng/zgyw/t1049439.htm>.

¹⁹ Weixing Hu and Weizhan Meng, "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response," *The China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 143–76.

could be rightfully debated that with the growing Chinese footsteps in the South-Western Pacific, the long-time focus on the Indo-Pacific could start gaining considerable traction.

India, Quad, and China-Solomon Islands Security Deal

It will also impact India-U.S. relations which are defined by the contemporary bond of strategic necessity. Also, recently the Indian continuation of trade with Russia even after the invasion of Ukraine led to the U.S. officials expressing disappointment.²⁰ But it is worth recognizing that India might actually realize the true nature of its bond with the U.S. Hence if not directly then indirectly the Solomon Islands deal could have some considerable implications for India in the broader picture. Further, India is also a key member of the Quad that has been revived in 2017 and is at the forefront of containing China in the Indo-Pacific.

Also, it could very well be argued that China will use the Solomon Islands deal to stall the diplomatic and political maneuvers of the Quad whenever possible. In the aftermath of the deal, the American, Australian, and Japanese representatives were dispatched on the Islands to diplomatically convince them against the deal. It is worthy to note here that everyone was there but the Indian officials. It is alleged that the Indian High Commissioner in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands was suggested to come later. It is indeed a very unusual event in diplomatic spheres, if it turns out to be true. It might just be a hint towards how India is going to be impacted through the Chinese presence on the Solomon Islands.²¹

It was traditionally believed that the Oceania would remain “a relatively benign American Lake” within the Pacific;²² however, following China’s growing footprint in the Pacific as well as the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), not only the American Lake likely will be challenged, but could pose considerable restraint on India’s dream of making the Indian Ocean as India’s Ocean.

²⁰ “India to Face ‘significant Consequences’ for Aligning with Russia: US,” *Business Standard*, April 8, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-to-face-significant-consequences-for-aligning-with-russia-us-122040700130_1.html.

²¹ Cleo Paskal, “Is Chinese Pressure Making Solomon Islands Stall Indian Envoy’s Visit?,” *The Sunday Guardian*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/chinese-pressure-making-solomon-islands-stall-indian-envoys-visit>.

²² Anne-Marie Brady, ed., *Looking North, Looking South: China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific* (London, UK: World Scientific, 2010), 9.

Conclusions

It was rightly noted that “great powers choose their strategic partners in a significantly cautious manner”²³ – China is no exception. It could be concluded that the China-Solomon Islands Security Deal is going to play a prominent role in the evolving geo-politics of Asia-Pacific. A lot will change in terms of U.S.-China rivalry once the threads start to unfold. On the other hand, India’s assumption of being the Indo-Pacific tiger will certainly be challenged in the days to come.

It is clear that the growing Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) as well as the Indo-Pacific is the beginning of new politico-diplomatic options for a lot of nations, especially for the island-nations such as the Solomon Islands. Such Chinese ventures are the brainchild of President Xi Jinping’s vision to build a new 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the proposed Pearl Maritime Road Initiative, and its commitment to share the rewards of development with the nations of Oceania (Figure 2). However, these actions are greatly hindering the action-space of Quad countries, especially shriveling the Indian ambitions in the IOR and the Indo-Pacific.

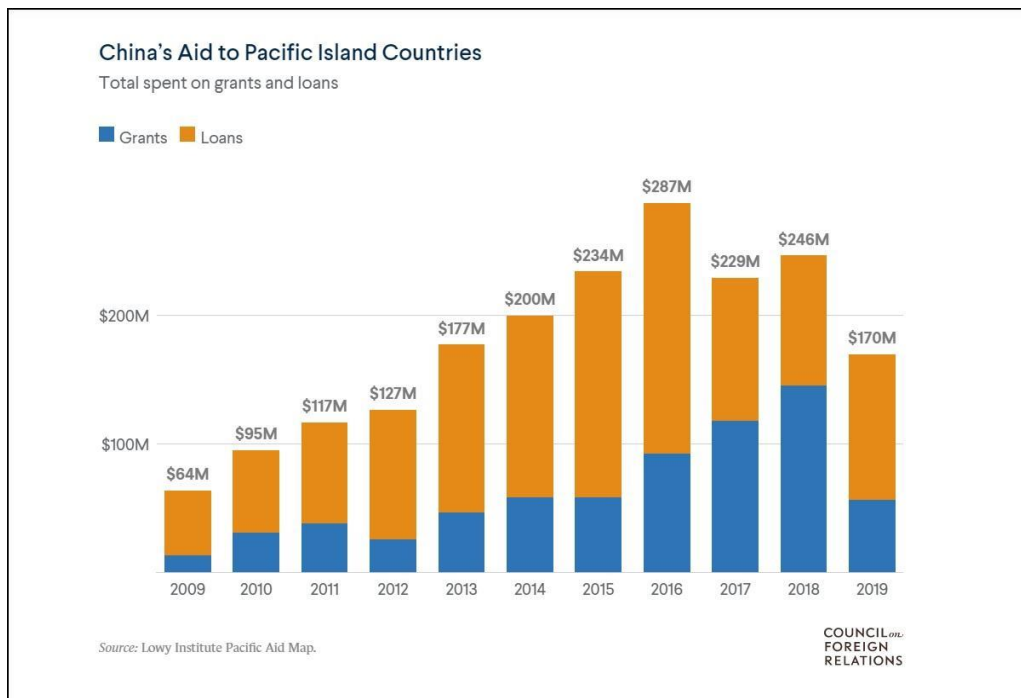


Figure 2: China’s loans and grants to Oceanic nations from 2009 to 2019.²⁴

²³ Muhammad Ali Baig, “Hitler’s Downfall and the Collapse of the Thousand Years Reich: Multi Fronts and Incapable Allies,” *Open Military Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 17.

²⁴ Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific>.

Contemporarily, the Indian leadership has chosen the same role vis-à-vis China, as Pakistan chose in relation to the former Soviet Union during the Cold War. Nonetheless, in strategic terms, China has an advantageous position with its continued rhetoric of connectivity and serving as the global manufacturing hub.²⁵ In hindsight, it is not ambitious to assume that this security deal would have a long-lasting impact for India. The Quad is a strategic security agreement and India being a member of it would reap all the ramifications of the developments taking place around it.

²⁵ Please see: John Pilger, *The Coming War on China*, DVD, Documentary (Dartmouth Films, 2016), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6197028/>.

Bibliography

Allison, Graham. "Destined for War: Can China and the United States Escape Thucydides's Trap?"

The Atlantic, September 24, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

Baig, Muhammad Ali. "Hitler's Downfall and the Collapse of the Thousand Years Reich: Multi Fronts and Incapable Allies." *Open Military Studies* 1, no. 1 (2020): 11–23.

Brady, Anne-Marie. "China in the Pacific: From 'Friendship' to Strategically Placed Ports and Airfields." *The Strategist*, April 20, 2022. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/china-in-the-pacific-from-friendship-to-strategically-placed-ports-and-airfields/>.

———, ed. *Looking North, Looking South: China, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*. London, UK: World Scientific, 2010.

Cave, Damien. "China and Solomon Islands Draft Secret Security Pact, Raising Alarm in the Pacific."

The New York Times, March 25, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/24/world/asia/china-solomon-islands-security-pact.html>.

Distance Calculator. "Distance between Australia and Solomon Islands Countries," 2022.

https://distancecalculator.globefeed.com/Distance_Between_Countries_Result.asp?fromplace=Australia&toplace=Solomon%20Islands.

Hu, Weixing, and Weizhan Meng. "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response." *The China*

Review 20, no. 3 (2020): 143–76.

Business Standard. "India to Face 'significant Consequences' for Aligning with Russia: US," April 8,

2022. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/india-to-face-significant-consequences-for-aligning-with-russia-us-122040700130_1.html.

Karp, Paul. "Morrison and Albanese Clash on Solomon Islands-China Pact in First Leaders' Debate of

Federal Election." *The Guardian*, April 20, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/20/morrison-and-albanese-clash-on-solomon-islands-china-pact-at-first-leaders-debate-of-federal-election>.

- Kim, Patricia M. "Does the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact Portend a More Interventionist Beijing?" *Brookings*, May 6, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/06/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>.
- Liu, Zongyuan Zoe. "What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific." *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 4, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific>.
- Miller, Michael E. "China Pushes Pacific Deal, as Australia Scrambles to Repair Regional Ties." *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/26/solomons-china-wang-yi-pacific-australia/>.
- Needham, Kirsty. "Exclusive Solomon Islands Considers Security Cooperation with China - Official." *Reuters*, March 24, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-solomon-islands-considers-security-cooperation-with-china-official-2022-03-24/>.
- Needham, Kirsty, and Martin Quin Pollard. "U.S. Concerned after China Says It Signs Security Pact with Solomon Islands." *Reuters*, April 20, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/chinese-officials-travel-solomon-islands-sign-agreements-parliament-told-2022-04-19/>.
- O'Brien, Patricia. "The 'Framework Agreement' with China Transforms the Solomon Islands into a Pacific Flashpoint." *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 31, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/framework-agreement-china-transforms-solomon-islands-pacific-flashpoint>.
- Paskal, Cleo. "Is Chinese Pressure Making Solomon Islands Stall Indian Envoy's Visit?" *The Sunday Guardian*, May 21, 2022. <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/chinese-pressure-making-solomon-islands-stall-indian-envoys-visit>.
- Pilger, John. *The Coming War on China*. DVD, Documentary. Dartmouth Films, 2016. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6197028/>.
- Ruwitch, John. "Leaked Draft of an Agreement between China and the Solomon Islands Has U.S. Concerned." *NPR*, April 28, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/04/28/1095365212/leaked-draft-of-an-agreement-between-china-and-the-solomon-islands-has-u-s-conce>.

Google Maps. "Solomon Islands," June 15, 2022.

<https://www.google.com/maps/@1.5973847,145.886018,4z>.

Stünkel, Larissa, and Marc Lanteigne. "The Geopolitical Aftershocks of the China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement." *The Diplomat*, April 13, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/the-geopolitical-aftershocks-of-the-china-solomon-islands-security-agreement/>.

Westcott, Ben. "U.S. and Australia Pressure Solomon Islands on China Military Pact." *The Japan Times*, April 13, 2022. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/13/world/solomon-islands-china-military-pact/>.

Al Jazeera. "Why Is the Solomon Islands-China Security Pact Causing Alarm?" April 20, 2022.

Accessed June 10, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/20/explainer-solomon-islands-china-security-pact-concern>.

Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana. "Xi Jinping Starts China-US Presidential Meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama," June 8, 2013.

<https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cegy/eng/zgyw/t1049439.htm>.