

# Leadership Change in the Solomon Islands: Implications and Recommendations for the United States

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Prime Minister Matthew Wale's rise to power creates a strategic opening for the United States and its allies to counter Chinese influence in the Solomon Islands.

The 2022 China–Solomon Islands security agreement threatens U.S. interests by enabling Chinese military access, intelligence collection, and regional influence.

Regardless of leadership, the Solomon Islands will continue to balance relations with China due to deep economic dependence, limiting the chance for full realignment.

In May 2026, then-Solomon Islands Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele was removed from office by a vote of no confidence following internal political divisions and resignations.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, long-time opposition leader Matthew Wale was elected prime minister.<sup>2</sup> Although internal fragmentation served as the primary mechanism that led to the change in leadership, many observers in the United States are interested in understanding the change's implications for U.S.–China competition. Described as a “China hawk,”<sup>3</sup> Prime Minister Wale's election is a welcome development for the United States and its regional allies in the effort to mitigate Chinese malign influence in the Pacific Islands.<sup>4</sup> This *Backgrounder* assesses the implications of Prime Minister Wale's election for the United States.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3969>

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## Background

The United States and its Indo–Pacific allies have focused on the Solomon Islands as a primary country of concern regarding Chinese malign influence in the Pacific Islands since it established diplomatic relations with China in 2019. The decision to recognize China, made under the leadership of then-Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, is suspected to have been driven by expectations of security and economic assistance, made possible by successful Chinese lobbying efforts, and a belief that Taiwan was “completely useless” for the Solomon Islands’ interests.<sup>5</sup> Sogavare is largely credited with driving the Solomon Islands’ recognition of China. Multiple concerns have been raised not only about the process to change diplomatic relations<sup>6</sup> but also about how Sogavare may have participated in potentially corrupt practices related to *highly* questionable real estate holdings.<sup>7</sup>

For years, Chinese engagements with the Solomon Islands went under the radar. The real wake-up call came in 2022, when China and the Solomon Islands, under Sogavare’s leadership, signed a wide-ranging security agreement.<sup>8</sup> Based on a leaked draft of the agreement from 2022, published by Pacific security scholar Dr. Anna Powles on X, government officials and policy analysts across the United States, Australia, and other countries have raised concerns about potential Chinese military activities covered under the agreement.<sup>9</sup> Notably, it took current Prime Minister Wale multiple days *after* his election to gain access to the text of the agreement—he even had to *remove officials* from office in order to read the agreement.<sup>10</sup> Even then, Prime Minister Wale has not disclosed the official text of the agreement due to the agreement’s nondisclosure clause.<sup>11</sup>

Assuming the draft text is even remotely similar to its finalized text, there are multiple reasons why the agreement threatens U.S. and allied interests:

**1. Most Important, the 2022 Agreement Sets the Foundation for Chinese Military Access to the South Pacific.** The deployment of Chinese military or security personnel has the potential to normalize a rotational or even quasi-permanent presence of the People’s Liberation Army less than 2,000 kilometers from Australia. China could also pursue dual-use access to ports in the Solomon Islands. In the event of a U.S.–China contingency, China could attempt to deny or contest U.S. and Australian access to the Solomon Sea, Coral Sea, and the South Pacific Ocean. Such a concern is not hypothetical: In August 2022, within five months of the China–Solomon Islands security agreement entering into force, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel was unable to complete a scheduled port call in the Solomon Islands “because the Solomon Islands government did not respond to a

request for it to refuel and provision.”<sup>12</sup> The British navy “declined to comment” on reports that patrol vessel HMS *Spey* “was declined port access” as well.<sup>13</sup> China could also complicate sea lines of communication, logistics, force projection, and, in effect, “break” the U.S. defense architecture along the Second Island Chain.

**2. Second, a Chinese Security Presence in the Solomon Islands Can Enhance Chinese Intelligence Collection and Surveillance.** The expanded presence of Chinese security personnel would probably aid any Chinese attempts to conduct signals intelligence (SIGINT), develop relations with targets for human intelligence (HUMINT), and support broader intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance operations (ISR) on land and at sea. During a U.S.–China contingency, China could compromise U.S. and allied intelligence designed to support regional combat operations. Outside of conflict, China could gather intelligence that gives it advantages in decision-making or can allow it to counter U.S. and allied activities.

**3. The Agreement Sets a Precedent for Security Cooperation that China Could Attempt to Replicate Across the Pacific.** Following the Solomon Islands agreement, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Pacific Island leaders to, in part, convince them to join a Chinese model for regional security.<sup>14</sup> The 10 Pacific Island countries rejected Wang’s “sweeping trade and security communique” due to a lack of consensus.<sup>15</sup> But other approaches are possible, including China focusing on specific Pacific Island countries it may have strong relations with, or more directly linking developmental assistance to security cooperation. As a result, the United States and its allies, primarily Australia and New Zealand, will be pressured to compete across the Pacific by strengthening current security relations with Pacific Island countries while elevating security cooperation where possible. Recently, Australia has entered into new security agreements with Pacific Island countries, including forming a new defense alliance with Papua New Guinea,<sup>16</sup> and New Zealand has sought to reinforce its own existing defense and security agreements, namely with the Cook Islands.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, for the first time since joining the Pacific Islands Forum as a development partner in 1993, Taiwan was not allowed to engage in policy discussions at the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting hosted by the Solomon Islands. What was previously a non-issue, even with Chinese participation, became an issue when China used its influence within the Solomon Islands to exclude all non-members from the 2025 meeting, including China.<sup>18</sup> This decision hurt Taiwan far more than China because Beijing’s primary priority was to eliminate Taiwanese international representation and diplomatic engagements. China’s motives connect to its broader goal

of eliminating Taiwanese diplomatic recognition around the world and,<sup>19</sup> ultimately, absorbing the island under the control of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, concerns have also been raised internationally about the treatment of the late Daniel Suidani. Suidani was a democratically elected official representing the province of Malaita in the Solomon Islands. While opposing the One China policy that the Sogavare government imposed throughout the country, Suidani maintained his support for Taiwan, welcomed U.S. investments into Malaita, and opposed the expansion of Huawei telecommunication equipment into his province.<sup>21</sup> In retaliation, the Sogavare government removed Suidani from his provincial office without due process.<sup>22</sup> Despite risks to his safety, Suidani continued to pursue legal remedies against his removal, though there is reason to believe that China supported efforts to keep Suidani out of office.<sup>23</sup>

Suidani died in October 2025.<sup>24</sup> Concerns have been raised about the medical treatment, including potential Chinese interference, that he received (or did not receive) both leading up to his passing and years prior.<sup>25</sup> Daniel Suidani's case demonstrates how Chinese malign influence leads to the corruption of representative democracy, the removal of political opposition, and a disregard for the human rights of freedom-loving leaders in the Pacific—concerns that The Heritage Foundation's vision of a "Pacific Charter" addresses.<sup>26</sup>

## Prime Minister Wale

The election of Prime Minister Wale presents an opportunity to change the trajectory of the Solomon Islands. To be clear, Manele's no-confidence vote was primarily driven by the breakdown of his political coalition, legal tensions, and accusations of corruption—not geopolitical competition.<sup>27</sup> That said, Prime Minister Wale has been a consistent vocal opponent of the China–Solomon Islands security agreement and has voiced broader concerns about the Solomon Islands' relationship with China, including suggesting that the Sogavare government was "the puppet of China."<sup>28</sup> More broadly, patterns associated with Chinese engagement, including opaque financing, elite capture,<sup>29</sup> and weak regulatory safeguards, may contribute to governance challenges that ultimately yield political instability.

Prime Minister Wale is a long-standing figure in Solomon Islands politics. He was first elected to Parliament in 2008 and fell short of becoming prime minister during elections in 2019 and 2024.<sup>30</sup> Since 2019, Wale has been viewed as the primary opposition leader against the Sogavare and Manele

governments, prioritizing “pillars of change,” “anti-corruption,” and “elite capture.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Wale has supported ideas to redistribute resources to rural provinces, increase funding for and reduce costs of medical care and education, and increase accountability for political parties, as well as to more closely align the Solomon Islands with its traditional partners, such as Australia and the United States.<sup>32</sup> After becoming prime minister, Wale warned that “changes are necessary and may be painful,” noting that the Solomon Islands is “not immune from the impasse of these geopolitical events.”<sup>33</sup> Three weeks later, his first foreign visit as prime minister was to Australia.<sup>34</sup> Wale has also suggested interest in the establishment of a “Pacific-wide security treaty.”<sup>35</sup>

More broadly, Prime Minister Wale has been described as “a vocal and often colourful” leader who has “often [sparred] with leaders and fellow MPs about the direction of the country.”<sup>36</sup> According to Pacific scholar Dr. Tess Newton Cain, Wale “has become more measured in recent years.”<sup>37</sup> Lowy Institute research fellow Dr. Connor Graham suggested that Prime Minister Wale would likely pursue a “cautious recalibration rather than reversal” with China while focusing on the domestic “cost of living and the impending energy crisis” as he balances ambition with “economic reality.”<sup>38</sup>

## Implications for the United States

With the election of Prime Minister Wale, there are multiple implications for U.S. interests in the Solomon Islands and across the Pacific Islands region.

**The United States and Its Allies Have a Strong Opportunity to Significantly Improve Relations with the Solomon Islands.** Prime Minister Wale has stated that he wants to “reset” relations with Australia and has already started negotiations on a “comprehensive treaty” that will likely include elements of security cooperation.<sup>39</sup> Although Prime Minister Wale will likely prioritize the Solomon Islands’ relationship with Australia, the United States will have new and expanded engagement opportunities with the Solomon Islands to better contribute to security and economic development. Australia is a *far* more preferable partner for the Solomon Islands than China and would likely encourage security and, in particular, economic engagements with the United States. Opportunities to enhance cooperation will likely revolve around bilateral, multilateral, and international development finance, strengthening cybersecurity and protection for national infrastructure, and expanding digital connectivity, among others.

**Australia Will Likely Succeed in Negotiating an Australian–Solomon Islands Comprehensive Treaty.** Prime Minister Wale and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese jointly declared that “Pacific peace and security is best led and handled by the Pacific,” most likely a reference to opposing external intervention in Pacific Island security, while the two countries seek a “transformational change” in relations.<sup>40</sup> Although negotiations will continue, provisions could reasonably address the enshrinement of Australia as the Solomon Islands’ primary security provider; Australian defense and policing access to the Solomon Islands; labor and immigration mobility; environmental and climate programs; funding for education and economic development; and sports and cultural diplomacy, among other topics. This treaty will probably share similarities with Australia’s recent treaties in the Pacific, including the 2023 Australia–Papua New Guinea Bilateral Security Agreement (which differs from the 2025 Pukpuk Treaty on mutual defense),<sup>41</sup> the 2024 Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union Treaty,<sup>42</sup> and the 2024 Australia–Nauru Treaty.<sup>43</sup>

**The Solomon Islands Will Probably Seek to Adjust, but Not Eliminate, Its Relationship with China.** It is true that Prime Minister Wale will “review” the China–Solomon Islands security agreement and has signaled interest in reducing China’s role in Solomon Islands security affairs.<sup>44</sup> It is also true, however, that, without a long-term alternative, China will remain an important partner for the Solomon Islands. Shortly after his election, Prime Minister Wale met with Chinese Ambassador to the Solomon Islands Cai Weiming. The Chinese embassy readout stated that Wale “highlighted China as one of [the Solomon Islands’] most important bilateral partners” and “stressed that his government will continue to firmly adhere to the one-China principle.”<sup>45</sup> The numbers support the first claim. In 2024, China was the Solomon Islands’ top export market, accounting for roughly \$400 million of exports,<sup>46</sup> which is nearly 60 percent of total Solomon Islands exports.<sup>47</sup> Australia was the second-largest export market at close to 15 percent, worth just over \$90 million.<sup>48</sup> China also supplied around 40 percent of the Solomon Islands’ imports, accounting for just over \$200 million in 2024.<sup>49</sup> Singapore was the second-largest source of Solomon Islands imports, supplying just over \$100 million in goods, or around 20 percent.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, even with new leadership, the Solomon Islands will have to balance its economic relations with China as it elevates relations with Australia, the United States, and perhaps other countries. Furthermore, China has a track record of weaponizing economic dependence in the Pacific Islands to achieve Chinese interests, such as it did with Palau’s tourism sector when

it sought to punish the island nation for not ending diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which may disincentivize any major or immediate changes to economic policy and trade.<sup>51</sup>

**It Is Currently Improbable that the Solomon Islands Will Re-establish Diplomatic Relations with Taiwan, but It Is Not Impossible.** In 1983, five years after becoming an independent state, the Solomon Islands established diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Even while maintaining formal ties with Taiwan, the Solomon Islands' trade was generally geared toward China as its economy expanded. Taiwan's role was primarily aid-driven, rather than market-driven. After 36 years, in 2019, the Solomon Islands switched recognition from Taiwan to China, resulting in deeper ties with China on trade, infrastructure, and security cooperation. The significance of this history is that the Solomon Islands has traditionally recognized Taiwan, so with the election of a prime minister who is open to a reset of international affairs, it is reasonable to speculate about what opportunities may now exist for Taiwan. In the near term, it is unlikely that the Solomon Islands reverses diplomatic relations because China has clear and embedded structural advantages in trade and development finance. In the long term, however, and assuming Prime Minister Wale's government is open to the idea, it is theoretically possible for Taiwan to become a desirable alternative that meets the national interests of the Solomon Islands and results in the re-establishment of diplomatic relations.

## Recommendations for the United States

The United States should take full advantage of the opportunity to strengthen its relationship with the Solomon Islands under Prime Minister Wale's leadership. As relations reset, the U.S. Department of State should:

**Hold a Bilateral Meeting with Prime Minister Wale on the Sidelines of the 2026 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting.** U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Christopher Landau has demonstrated a strong interest in U.S. engagement with the Pacific Islands, most notably through his hosting of the February 2026 Honolulu Investment Summit.<sup>52</sup> Deputy Secretary Landau also has a strong track record of visiting Pacific Island countries, which includes Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa.<sup>53</sup> With Palau hosting the 2026 Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in late August and early September, as well as reinviting non-voting members, a strong U.S. delegation, ideally headlined by Deputy Secretary Landau, would be a presence that signals U.S. interest and commitment to the region. If Deputy Secretary Landau leads the U.S. delegation, a sideline

meeting with Prime Minister Wale would serve as an excellent opportunity to enhance U.S.–Solomon Islands relations and identify areas of future cooperation. Before the meeting and through cooperation with the Solomon Islands, technical teams should prepare a package of initiatives that would support U.S. and Solomon Islands interests, particularly economic interests, which could also include countering illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, expanding U.S. Coast Guard cooperation, safeguarding telecommunications infrastructure, combating illegal narcotics, and supporting public–private partnerships.<sup>54</sup>

**Support the Termination of the 2022 China–Solomon Islands Security Cooperation Agreement.** The China–Solomon Islands security agreement was signed and, according to the leaked draft, entered into force upon signature in April 2022.<sup>55</sup> Under the assumption that the final text of the agreement states, as the leaked draft does, that it is “valid for a period of five years” and can be terminated with a notice of “at least six months prior to the expiry date,” the Solomon Islands could invoke the agreement’s termination provision by notifying China of such a decision in October 2026.<sup>56</sup> In other words, Prime Minister Wale could potentially terminate the security agreement in April 2027 by providing written notice to China roughly within the next three months. The United States should communicate its support for terminating the security agreement to Prime Minister Wale and other relevant Solomon Islands officials. The United States should coordinate with its Five Eyes partners Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom to prepare support for the Solomon Islands in the event that China attempts to retaliate against the decision and impose costs. If the final agreement materially differs from the leaked draft, then the United States should reassess available options regarding termination.

The President of the United States should:

**Nominate, and the U.S. Senate Should Confirm, an Ambassador to the Solomon Islands.** Although the United States reopened its embassy in Honiara in 2023, it has yet to confirm an ambassador to head the U.S. diplomatic post.<sup>57</sup> (And for that matter, there are currently no Senate-confirmed ambassadors posted in the Pacific Islands.) The lack of an ambassador hurts U.S. competitiveness because, in a region and culture that places particular emphasis on relationship building, the United States is restricted in its ability to represent the country at the highest political level and signals a lack of interest in the relationship.<sup>58</sup> The President, supported by the White House Presidential Personnel Office, should nominate an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United

States of America to the Solomon Islands to signal elevated importance on the U.S.–Solomon Islands relationship from the White House. After doing so, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee should quickly hold a hearing for the nominee and, if reported favorably out of committee, move the nominee for full Senate confirmation.

The U.S. Department of War and the U.S. Department of State should:

**Prepare a Policy Memo to Determine a U.S. Policy on a Pacific-Wide Security Pact.** Although this idea is in an infancy stage, and ultimately may not materialize, Prime Minister Wale’s interest in a “Pacific-wide security treaty” should be examined.<sup>59</sup> Such a proposal raises complex questions about feasibility, substance, and, ultimately, how such a pact would affect U.S. interests. Of course, the United States already has bilateral security agreements with each of the three Freely Associated States—the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—through its Compact of Free Association agreements. Should the concept begin to materialize, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of War for Indo–Pacific Security Affairs and the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs should coordinate and prepare an initial policy memo that assesses the advantages and disadvantages of U.S. support for the establishment of a Pacific-wide security pact. The policy memo should also outline nuances of feasibility, structures, opportunities, and challenges. After deliberation and with necessary reviews, a formal U.S. policy position should be established and then be communicated to allies and partners throughout the region.

The National Security Council (NSC) should:

**Form a Policy Coordination Committee (PCC) to Assess Long-term Opportunities and Develop Policy Options Should the Solomon Islands Decide to Re-establish Diplomatic Relations with Taiwan.** As part of this interagency process and contributions from departments and agencies, the PCC would determine what the United States can independently provide to meet any assessed requirements and identify shortfalls requiring external support. A viable proposal would likely need to include at least three conditions: (1) a guaranteed economic proposal that includes immediate liquidity and visible projects; (2) a trade arrangement that reasonably substitutes a change in Chinese market access and safeguards against costs imposed by Chinese retaliatory actions; and (3) sufficient political support from members of Parliament coupled with safeguards against Chinese elite capture or interference. If viable, regional coordination, primarily with Five Eyes partners, should commence to operationalize any proposals.

The Intelligence Community (IC) should:

**Assess the Implications of China's Sustained Presence in the Solomon Islands.** An IC report should assess the security, economic, and intelligence risks related to China's continued presence in the Solomon Islands under the new government. The IC should also identify opportunities and challenges, assess potential scenarios and outcomes, and consider potential next steps. Furthermore, the IC report should include a section that assesses factors that could affect a decision by the Solomon Islands to re-establish relations with Taiwan. This report should be designed to inform relevant departments and agencies that have an interest in U.S.–Solomon Islands relations. The IC should coordinate with Five Eyes partners as appropriate and distribute the final report to appropriate departments and agencies.

## Conclusion

The election of Prime Minister Wale serves as a timely and important opportunity for the United States and its allies to reset relations with the Solomon Islands to support regional security and prosperity. The United States should be proactive and not squander the opportunity to support Prime Minister Wale in his ambitions to align more closely with U.S. allies and regional priorities.

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## Endnotes

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