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China's challenge in America's Lake

Critical geopolitics and the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact

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International Relations

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Declaration

I, Tomas Bue Kessel, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

Acknowledgment

In late February of 2018, I nervously stepped out of Auckland International Airport, eager, excited, and nervous to start my new life as a bachelor's student at the University of Auckland. I would never have imagined that journey would conclude at NMBU in Ås five years later. It has been an incredible journey, and this thesis has been the final peak.

I want to thank my teachers throughout the years, both in New Zealand as well as here in Norway. The insights, knowledge, and skills I have learnt from you, is what has ultimately enabled me to finish this project. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Stig Jarle Hansen, who has helped me and provided me with product feedback through the process of this thesis.

Any errors are mine alone.

Abstract

When China and the Solomon Islands signed a Security Pact in early 2022, it was met with dismay and distrust by the regional powers of Australia, New Zealand, and the USA, as well as Western media. The agreement was largely labelled as something that would inherently militarise and destabilise the South Pacific region. Thus, this thesis seeks to broaden our understanding of this peculiar agreement, as the already established perceptions of this event, is rooted in suspicion and negativity. The aim of this thesis is to analyse and discuss China's motives for this agreement. This will be done through three main objectives, namely, to provide security for the Solomon Islands, to protect its supply lines and larger economy, and lastly to further push China's desire for a reunification with Taiwan. The thesis will use the narrative of critical geopolitics to move away from the established belief that China is entering the "Western umbrella of influence" to challenge Western powers, but rather, something else entirely. Through the thesis, there will be discussions and examinations of themes of Chinese foreign politics that can be justly applied to the case of the Solomon Islands to appropriately move away from the perception that this agreement is something inherently bad. Thus, I will argue that whilst the Security Pact may seem as a Chinese move to challenge and poke Western powers, it can, in fact, be considered as something that is in tune with the wider affairs of Sino politics.

Acronyms and abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
FIC	The First Island Chain
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
GSI	The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper
MFA	China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs
PNG	Papua New Guinea
PIC	Pacific Island Countries
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
SP	The China-Solomon Islands Security Pact
UK	The United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	The United States

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1. Introduction

In the eyes of international relations, China's ascension to power is perhaps one of the great dramas of our century. The contemporary climate between the U.S. led West and China feels at an all-time low, with hostile rhetoric and trade wars. Initially, it was believed that China would become a "responsible stakeholder" on the world stage, expressed by the Bush administration (Zoellick, 2005). In the early years of the 2000s, the West perceived China not as a power seen to challenge their hegemon, but rather work with the already established structures and norms of the international society. Now, almost twenty years later, it seems everything but. In recent years, especially during the Trump administration and the age of Xi Jinping, the narrative has dramatically shifted. China was no longer deemed a responsible "stakeholder" and "partner", but a "threat" and a "strategic competitor" (Sevastopulo, 2017). Importantly, it would be unfair to solely blame Trump for the changing narrative, just as it would be unjust to label Xi as the sole "perpetuator" of a what may seem as a more aggressive China (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). Maybe it is a natural development, when two global powers become competitive. As superpowers and rival nations have a track-record of suspicion and animosity, the story of the Western world and China may be no different. Beijing's global footprint is ever-increasing, reaching corners that has traditionally been under the Western umbrella of influence. In the recent years, the global gaze has shifted to the South Pacific, a small and remote region that has politically been close allies to the Western bloc of the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand, but is feeling the increasing influence of China. Despite its small size, the Pacific Islands countries¹ (PIC) hold tremendous influence for international recognition of states and territories in the United Nations (UN). Russia and Georgia are competing over the islands for recognition over the Abkhazia and South Ossetia region, the United Arab Emirates is seeking support for a pro-Palestine vision, and Indonesia (although historically have more ties to the region than the mentioned countries) are offering development assistance to prevent PIC support for the independence of West Papua (Firth, 2013, p. 286). These are, however, newcomers. The traditional battleground for international recognition has been wielded between China and Taiwan, where Beijing seeks the recognition of national reunification, and Taiwan to maintain its independence. As such, China's involvement with the PIC is not

¹ One can also include the USA, Australia and New Zealand (even Japan!) as PIC, but for this thesis, it will only consider the smaller island nations. These are Kiribati, Samoa, Fiji, Tuvalu, Nauru, Palau, Vanuatu, Niue, Tonga, Tokelau and the Solomon Islands.

something new, but nevertheless remains an ire for the traditional Western actors. After all, China is now the second largest investor and donor in the region (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 353). The U.S., Australia, and New Zealand are growing increasingly wary of the Asian giant seeping into their backyard.

It is an interesting paradigm, that a new geopolitical dispute may take place in the rather overlooked region. It is a peculiar idea that a remote, militarily weak, financially poor, and geographically challenged location, could host a potential showdown between two rival superpowers. And yet, for decades, such a threat may have been unfounded. After all, China's interest in the South Pacific was mainly out of desire to reunite with Taiwan, as well as economic interest, providing aid and building infrastructure (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 361). Perhaps, China's ascension was considered a blessing by the islands, an alternative to the West and a possibility for the PIC to diversify their trading partners. Western suspicions and unease, nevertheless remained. In 2021, the Brookings Institution Press published the book "*Global China: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World*". In the chapter "*The Risks of China's Ambitions in the South Pacific*" Pacific Islander researcher Jonathan Pryke wrote "*The first risk, which has a low probability of occurring but would have profound impact, is that China is trying to use its leverage through diplomacy, debt, trade, or elite capture to establish a military base somewhere in the South Pacific... A Chinese military base a little as 2, 000 kilometres (1,243 miles) from Australia's eastern coast would force a wedge between Australia and its traditional strategic anchor, the United States*" (Pryke, 2021, p. 258). The aim of this statement was perhaps, to mute the worry that China's interest in the South Pacific may be greater than purely economic outreach and to conform to China's historic outreach in the region of economic investment and recognition of the One China Policy. However, a year later, the "low probability" scenario, the silenced worry of a military base, became reality.

In April of 2022, China, and the Solomon Islands signed a bilateral Security Pact (SP) (Kabutaulaka, 2022). The SP enables China to deploy "police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement forces" as well as the docking of their navy, on the Solomon Islands². The political foundations of the South Pacific, changed. What was once known as "America's Lake"³ (Liu, 2022) may now host Beijing's fleet. This raises questions of whether this may ignite a geopolitical competition over the South Pacific, and by extent, the larger Oceanian continent. It asks whether this illuminate a more interventionist and assertive China, which

² Appendix 1

³ Reference to the South Pacific due to heavy U.S. influence. First coined by the U.S. establishment in the 1950s

could potentially be an ignition to a new Cold War, or even a potential world war, or whether this changes and alters the international system in its entirety (Kim, 2022). Perhaps, there is nothing to worry about. It begs many questions, and so far, there has been little to no research that justly and adequately addresses the issue of this extraordinary security arrangement. As such, this dissertation will answer the following research question.

What is the political interest of China in the Solomon Islands in the contexts of the Security Pact?

As will become clear, much of the perception of the SP is that it reflects a China that is increasingly assertive and seeks to challenge the regional and traditional powers in the South Pacific, effectively militarising a peaceful region. This dissertation will therefore deviate from this narrative and analyse the SP in a different light. Thus, the objectives of this thesis will be to discuss the SP as (1) Chinese desire to provide security in the Solomon Islands, (2) Chinese interest to protect its investments in the Solomon Islands, (3) Chinese aim to achieve the One China Policy and to finally (4) reflect on how we can move forward in this changing international scene with a powerful China.

Ultimately, Western perception of the SP is characterised in a negative manner, considered an “infringement” onto their sphere of influence. Whilst it can be informative to a certain extent, it also alienates any other possibilities that may seem more reasonable or realistic. As such, rather than to give one solid answer, I aim to analyse a variety of aspects from Chinese foreign policy through the narrative of critical geopolitics, to generate possible outcomes and understandings of Sino motives of the SP.

1.1 Thesis outline

The third chapter of this thesis will conduct a literature review and elaborate on the theoretical approach as there is a logical connection between the two. Many theories were considered, but ultimately, I decided to view the questions through the framework of critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitics is an interesting one, as it is strictly speaking not an international relations theory, and it contains the rather “tainted” and perhaps outdated concept of geopolitics.

However, and as I will argue, whilst geopolitics may seem as something of the past, China's move into the South Pacific resembles that of a geopolitical chess game. However, the classical approach to geopolitics does not justly answer the questions. It seemed rather inadequate to view the SP through those lenses. Critical geopolitics, however, aims to fill the gaps missing in geopolitics, a counter perhaps, to the traditionalist view. The fourth chapter will elaborate on the methods used for the thesis. Ultimately, I will conduct a thematic analysis of aspects of Chinese foreign policy seen in their involvement in the Solomon Islands (hereafter referred to as the "Solomon Islands or "Solomon"). The fifth chapter will present the collected findings, supplemented by analysis and discussion. The sixth chapter will provide a brief reflection on China and the changing global order, and lastly conclusion. However, to understand all of this, one needs a basis. After all, the South Pacific is a rather elusive region, often avoiding the spotlight of the global eyes. As such, the following chapter will be a background chapter, laying the cornerstones for the greater understanding of this peculiar issue. What really, is the root of this interesting situation that is transpiring in this forgotten corner of the world?

2 To a forgotten coroner: The South Pacific

This chapter aims to provide concrete and key information about the South Pacific region and the various regional powers. It aims to shed some light on the South Pacific and the SP. It will also elaborate on the SP and the surrounding context to further guide the discussion and analysis later. The chapter is subdivided into two subchapters. The first chapter elaborates on the South Pacific and its political and geopolitical relevance and history. The last chapter talks about the frameworks of the SP.

2.1 The South Pacific

The South Pacific is vast, and remote, consisting of more ocean than land. There are about 10 million people living there, and eight of those in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Notably, five of China's largest cities have a higher GDP than the entire South Pacific region^{4 5}. If anything, it showcases the insignificance of the South Pacific, rather than its importance, especially in financial terms. Evidently, the consumer market for Chinese export goods is small, the respective nations' international influence is minimal, and the island nations' natural resources are but naught comparatively to other regions. And yet, despite its financial and economic shortcomings, the South Pacific is increasingly transforming into an essential centrepiece in an international political chess game. The reasons for this are many, and involves actors not only in the South Pacific, but transcends to Taiwan, Japan, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, India, Southeast Asia, and even Europe. The cluster of a handfuls of islands in a distant and remote region, has found themselves in the middle of a political powerplay. For the PIC it has opened economic opportunity and new bilateral possibilities, but for the other actors, it may be about geopolitical power and international political influence.

China's ascension to power has largely been recognisable by its global economic outreach. They are heavily invested in global development schemes and has stated its desire to follow a peaceful development plan and to co-exist within the international system peacefully (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). As such, like the South Pacific, the world has been affected by China's rapid economic growth and increasing global footprint. However, the South Pacific and its respective nations, are often forgotten, or ignored, in international relations. Historically, this

⁴ PIC GDP data retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=S2>

⁵ Chinese cities data retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1099570/china-gross-domestic-product-gdp-of-provincial-capital-cities/>

has been reflective in Chinese foreign policy as well and some might argue that it still is. After all, researchers struggle to find any coherency in Beijing's policy towards the South Pacific, and it is often mentioned as a side note in public announcements, rather than the main agenda (Pryke, 2021, p. 257). Furthermore, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has released tailored policy papers on Africa, Latin America, Asia and even the Caribbean, but not the South Pacific (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 45). Therefore, one might be better off researching and studying China's political footprint in these regions. Basically, every other continent but the Pacific. Nevertheless, the South Pacific has recently been moving increasingly into the spotlight and may very well be a catalyst for change in our world, be it for better or worse.

Sino-presence in "America's Lake" has been that of aid and development and whilst Washington and Canberra do not directly oppose Chinese presence, it has made them wary. In the last decade, Washington has increased their military and political involvement as a response to increased Chinese influence (Firth, 2013, p. 286). They have further strengthened their ties with Australia and normalised military relations with New Zealand⁶, whilst ramping up military support and increased cooperation with the wider PICs (Firth, 2013, p. 287). China on the other hand, have increased their development schemes. High-ranking visits from Chinese officials to the PIC stressed the importance of South-South cooperation and the importance of investment in sustainable development and to further oppose any "*bullying... over the small of weak countries*" (Firth, 2013, p. 287). The pattern in the South Pacific has both witnessed China and the U.S. increase their development, but only the latter has a permanent military presence. However, the vie for influence took a heated turn when China signed the Security Pact with the Solomon Islands, a nation that has traditionally been under the Australian umbrella of influence. At its core, it enables China to station armed police and dock its naval vessels on the island, only 2,000 kilometres from the Australian shore.

⁶ Disagreements around nuclear weapons caused a rift in U.S.-NZ political ties in the 1980s. Ties were normalised in the 2010s (Firth, 2013, p. 287).

2.2 China-Solomon Islands Security Pact

In its essence, the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact presents itself as a little confusing. Western powers have blamed Beijing and Honiara for militarising and destabilising the region (Gunia, 2022) whilst Chinese and Solomon Islands officials have stated it is for domestic security and mutual cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Admittedly, there were rumours and speculations around this collaboration. Prior to the agreement, China was rebuilding and investing in the airfields of the Solomon Islands (CNA Insider, 2022). Furthermore, the island of Solomon Islands island of Tulagi, coveted for its deep water and thus a desirable location for a naval base, as it was during WW2, was almost leased by a Chinese company, but was ultimately shut down by the Solomon federal government (Lu & Dao, 2022). What seem to be the spark for the SP, however, was the occurrence of a riot in the capital of Honiara that killed four and decimate the local Chinatown (Hurst, 2021). Allegedly, the riot was fuelled by anti-Chinese resentment.

Evidently, there are many motives, accusations, and claims by the involved and affected parties of this agreement. Many Western commentators took issue with the secrecy and the lack of transparency around the SP, which serves but to strengthen the suspicious narrative of



Image retrieved from Solomon Islands Britannica⁷

⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Solomon-Islands>

China. Notably, its content and existence only came to public light when it was leaked on Twitter by a New Zealand political analyst. Considering China's infrastructure involvements in the region, the pact begs the question of whether a military base in the Solomons might be next (CNA Insider, 2022). Moreover, between 2018 and 2020, China sought to establish a permanent military bases and upgrades to airfields and ports in Vanuatu, PNG, and Kiribati. These plans ultimately failed due to Australian and American intervention (Pryke, 2021, p. 257). Whereas Western actors have been critical, China has maintained its stance that it is for security, peace, and ultimately development. Nevertheless, the SP gives China plausible deniability should it indeed pursue a military base, considering the domestic political climate of the Solomon Islands. Repeatedly, the contents of the SP underline the accessibility of deployment of armed police for peacekeeping. The peacekeeping force, however, are the People's Armed Police (PAP). A force that has been notorious for their involvement in the Xinjian province, counterterrorism areas in Tajikistan, skirmishes in India, as well as partaking in military operations Afghanistan, albeit jointly with UN peacekeeping forces (Kim, 2022). Clearly, this is not an ordinary police force. Consequently, the West is naming it a measure militarise the region, whereas the Chinese says it is to protect its citizens and maintain the peace in a region where they have economic interests (Gunia, 2022). Conclusively, the impression one is left with is that of confusion and lack of understanding, as arguably, both sides have reasonable arguments. What is clear however, is that the tension in the South Pacific, is but rising, solidifying the competition of the oceans between Beijing and Washington and Canberra.

3. China and the South Pacific – a case of housekeeping

This chapter will conduct a literature review on the journals and articles written about the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact, as well as a review into the patterns of Chinese foreign politics. The review on the literature on the SP aims to identify theories and conceptualisations that has been used in the existing literature to further justify and strengthen my own reasoning for my own theories as well as the research questions. Ultimately, I seek to uncover what the political aim of the SP is, from a Chinese perspective. The literature review thus aims to discover what has already been written about the SP, to uncover the already existing beliefs of the SP. From this, the aim is to propose an alternative way of approaching this specific problem. As will become clear, the little that is written about the Security Pact often casts a shadow over China and regards the SP as something that is inherently bad and distributive of the region and Western interests. It further ignores the patterns and trends of Chinese policy and fails to analyse it within such a context. As such, I will argue, that the already existing literature on the SP is limiting as it inherently assumes only a handful of theoretical perspectives and narratives, and fails to consider Chinese motives, save their desire to exert influence and power. After the review, I will discuss and reflect around theory and touch upon some theories that could, and could not, be justly applied to this thesis. This aims to strengthen the claim for the proposed approach, critical geopolitics, as a cohesive narrative for this thesis.

3.1 The Security Pact: a case of geopolitical warfare

Because of the recentness of the SP, there is a lack of academic research on it. As such, a collection of news articles and political journals were reviewed to identify patterns of language, motive, and perception of the SP to adequately find a fitting theoretical approach for this dissertation, as well as to discover the consensus of how the SP is perceived. The texts are collected from a variety of sources, comprising numerous institutions, political journals, and news articles. Admittedly, the texts are from Western sources primarily because of the accessibility of these sources. Whilst the texts are from a range of sources, the language, and the way of portraying the SP is overwhelmingly the same. Key thematic such as “*Increased Chinese Influence*” (Liu, 2022), *Interventionist Beijing* (Kim, 2022), *Increased US-China tension* (Gunia, 2022), *geopolitical rivalry* (Gunia, 2022), *geopolitical tug-of-war* (Lyons & Wickham, 2022), *competition for Oceania* (Kabutaulaka, 2022), *counter Sino-influence*

(Kabutaulaka, 2022), are heavily repeated, underscoring a fear and worry of increased Chinese influence in the region. They largely assume a Western narrative, with a malicious viewership of Chinese “incursion” in the South Pacific. There are, however, a few different, albeit similar, types of language and concerns displayed concerning the SP. These are largely militarisation and increased Chinese competition/influence.

In the wake of the signing and revelation of the SP, then prime minister of New Zealand Jacinda Ardern told Radio NZ that “*We see such acts as a potential militarisation of the region and also see very little reason in terms of the Pacific security for such a need and such a presence*” (Gunia, 2022), whilst the then political opposition in Australia claimed “*worst Australian foreign policy blunder in the Pacific since the end of World War Two*” (Gunia, 2022). Their claims were further underpinned by comments like “*China has... disrupted Western countries dominance in the region*” (Gunia, 2022) as well as an Australian commentator labelling the Solomon Islands as “reckless” (Kaiku, 2022). Then Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne claimed it a “*potential to undermine stability in our region*” (Needham & Pollard, 2022) whilst a spokesperson for the White House said the signing “*follows a pattern of China offering shadowy, vague deals with little regional consultation in fishing, resource management, development assistance and new security practices*” (Needham & Pollard, 2022). It follows a pattern of dismay and distrust towards Beijing. It is also speculated that China was the initiator of the SP, further enforcing the belief and concern for increased military presence. As the former Australian high commissioner to the Solomon Islands said, “*I don’t think Solomon Islands went to China and said: “please can we have a security agreement?”*” (Lyons & Wickham, 2022). What ultimately does seem to be the general fear in most of the texts is not necessarily what impact the SP will have on the Solomon Islands and why Honiara might need such a thing, but rather the possibility of a Chinese naval base merely 2,000km from Australia’s eastern border. That fact or phrased differently into something like “Beijing challenging Australia” is mentioned in almost all the texts, yet only a few considers the Solomon Islands reasoning, or alternative Chinese motives. On the other hand, China and the Solomon Islands have denied future Chinese military presence, despite the SP enabling such a scenario (Liu, 2022). The possibility for increased militarisation of the region, is further underpinned by the West’s worry for increased competition in the region, which could lead to unwarranted armed conflict. Claims such as “*competition for Oceania*” and the need to “*counter Sino-influence*” are being underscored (Kabutaulaka, 2022) as well as “*increased geopolitical rivalry between China and the U.S.*” (Gunia, 2022), “*China vs USA and Australia*” (Lyons & Wickham, 2022), and “*the tide is turning*” (Australian National University, 2022).

The increased fear of Chinese involvement also has some texts consider, or maybe re-consider, the importance of the U.S. and Australia to increase their regional geopolitical footprint. It is cemented that Australia is indeed Solomon Islands traditional and historic partner, and it is therefore a blow and surprise to Australia that such an agreement could happen (Australian National University, 2022). Furthermore, it is underscored that Washington must increase its influence and seek out other bilateral agreements to counter Sino influence, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)⁸ (Smith, 2021) and Partners in the Blue Pacific⁹ (The White House, 2022), as well as the U.S'. enactment of its Indo-Pacific Strategy (Kabutaulaka, 2022). The strategy states that “*the United States is determined to strengthen our long-term position in and commitment to the Indo-Pacific*” and its further push for a Western-dominated rules-based order (Kabutaulaka, 2022). It is a strategy and a policy aimed to counter Chinese influence in the Pacific and to push for a Western “order” in the region (The White House, 2022). A core it seems, that is perhaps the driver for these characterisations, terms, descriptions etc., is pinned in the fear and worry of a potential Chinese military base in this region, something considered “highly unlikely” in the introduction chapter (Pryke, 2021, p. 258). Whilst almost every source exclusively highlighted the worry of Chinese presence and what that might mean to the U.S., Australia and New Zealand, there were a lack of sources that considered the Solomon Islands’ narrative, where only *one* is exclusively narrated from Honiara’s eyes. Furthermore, when the Solomon narrative is mentioned, it is often left in the end, as a side note, and considers the negative impact the SP will have on the islands, rather than the opportunity or plausible reason behind it. It states that Solomon Islands’ sovereignty will be “*undermined*” (Lyons & Wickham, 2022), describes the Solomon Islands as “*reckless*” (Kaiku, 2022), worries that the Chinese police could “*crush Solomon Islands opposition*” and the conviction that Solomon Islanders will lose their freedom and be the “*Hong Kong of the South Pacific*” (Stoakes, 2022). Consequently, Solomon Islander PM reacted to Western response, saying it was “*insulting*” that Western leaders branded the nation as “*unfit*” to manage its own sovereign affairs (Gunia, 2022). Only one text did not consider the SP maliciously, calling for calm and to stop overreacting (Myers, 2022). After all, an actual naval base would be highly unlikely, emphasising that the South Pacific is not a main priority of China (Myers, 2022). What is evident in the literature, is the clear presumption of a shift in policy in the South

⁸ Military dialogue between Australia, Japan, India and the U.S. with New Zealand, Vietnam and South Korea as complimentary partners.

⁹ Partnership between Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, the U.S.. Presumably established as a counter to the SP as it was signed (Kalimuddin & Anderson) merely two months after it (The White House, 2022).

Pacific. It may seem as though Western actors are becoming increasingly aware of a shifting tide not just in South Pacific politics, but also global politics. China's "assertiveness" and "imposition" on "Western waters" are met with worry and the perception that Beijing is signalling a shift of the regional, and even the global, status quo. As underlined by the Australian National University: "*the tide is turning*". The SP is met with hostility and worry, and it is interesting to see that almost all the texts exclusively discussed and presented the SP through means that would imply increase hostility and changing political atmosphere. There is a clear lack of analysis and reflection around the root cause of the SP, and it is quite surprising that very few looked at the presumable root cause of the SP: the Honiara riots. Rather, it seemed as though the narrators jumped to conclusion of geopolitical warfare, competition, and shifting regional hegemony.

Besides Western coverage of the SP, Chinese and Solomon Islands officials have made some remarks, which turns out to be quite the contradiction from the Western tongue. In May 2022, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, together with his counterpart of the Solomon Islands Jeremiah Menele, held a press conference in Honiara addressing the SP. Here, they emphasised three core principles surrounding their new agreement¹⁰ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Whilst Western media were critical of how this would affect the Solomon Islands, the Parties¹¹ of the SP underlined in The First Principle to fully respect the national sovereignty of the Solomon Islands. This is underpinned by Article 1 in the SP that underscores that Chinese assets can only enter the Solomon Islands upon request by the latter¹². The Second Principle underlined the importance to maintain social stability of the Solomon Islands. This is in reference to the riots that killed four people merely months before the agreement was signed. Interestingly, this was hardly underscored in Western media. Arguably, from an objective point of view, if four people die, and an area of the capital is destroyed in a riot, there is need for security. The Third Principle is a little more reflective of Western worry, where it is stressed that the agreement is in parallel with regional agreements. Furthermore, Yi underscored that China supports PIC in strengthening security cooperation and working together. The Western worry stems from the possibility that the SP may very well translate into a future military base. Nevertheless, there is a clear disconnect between how the Western media and elites sees the SP, and how the Chinese and the Solomon Islands does. On one end, it is considered a geopolitical move, on the other, it is merely for domestic stability and security.

¹⁰ Appendix 2

¹¹ China and the Solomon Islands

¹² Appendix 1

Notably, the conception of the SP and the South Pacific as a whole, is not a one-off incident. As underlined by Pacific Islands scholars like Terence Wesley-Smith or Denghua Zhang, when China is discussed in Western media and academia, there is an overwhelming focus on what this means for the Western orientated world and how this challenges the U.S. There is little analysis into how the developing world, as well as the South Pacific is affected by China's rise (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 359). Much of the existing literature concerns itself with what China's rise might mean for the U.S., and not the opportunities and positives it can bring the developing world (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 359). This makes the depiction of the SP perhaps a little more understandable as well. Importantly, one cannot fault research and journalists entirely. If you are from the West, you are subject to a Western narrative. However, putting the West and East towards one another, as the narrative of the SP has, is not healthy and alienates productive and healthy discussions.

Conclusively, the overwhelming consensus and understanding is that the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact, is a threat generator for the region and something that may pursue a militarised region, rarely exploring other narratives and outcomes. The depiction of the SP can be heavily put in the context of a classical geopolitical narrative, which takes root in more traditional international relations theory like realism (Agnew, 2010, p. 571), or other mainstream theories like constructivism. Importantly, I am not claiming that Western worry is unwarranted. A militarised region is a legitimate concern, and it is to be taken seriously. However, only a hostile consideration of the agreement is not productive and is limiting in that it does not necessarily consider other alternatives and possible outcomes and scenarios. Furthermore, one might be in danger of reproducing historical perception of global politics and cling onto a "Cold War" mentality where geographical space is divided into "us and them". As such, the adopted consideration of the SP is limiting in its nature that it does not propose other alternatives for why this SP might have happened and considers it as something that is undeniably a geopolitical warfare enacted by Beijing. It also fails to consider the contents of the SP. Whilst the overwhelming discussion have been about what it means geopolitically, there has been little to no discussion about "protection of institutions"¹³ as well as a legitimate bilateral partnership between two nations. The content that is discussed however, is the potential future presence of the navy and the PAP, and geopolitical competition. These are concerns indeed, but the literature fails to adequately consider alternative reasons for why, for example, the navy and the PAP might be there, or why China is pursuing such an agreement,

¹³ Appendix 1

other than to challenge Western hegemony. This is by nature limiting and may spark worries and fears that may very well be unfounded. As such, the next subsections will discuss theory. I will propose a handful of theories that can be identified in the existing literature, and thus explain why I will not use them.

3.2 Constructivism

Perhaps one of the most “mainstream” theories in IR today, is constructivism. A constructivist approach holds that our understanding of the world, are based on a collective understanding. It underlines the belief that IR consists primarily of social facts, and those facts are only validated through human agreement (Adler, 1993, pp. 322-323). If there had not been a collective understanding of state-borders, there would be no state-borders. If there were no collective understanding that students raise their hand when wanting to answer a question in class, they would not do such a thing. If there were no collective understanding of the South Pacific as “America’s Lake”, perhaps the Western world would have reacted in an entirely different manner to the SP. This last example pivots the characterisation of the SP towards this line of theory. The notion that the South Pacific is “America’s Lake” runs deep through the reviewed texts, although it is not necessarily underscored directly. It is the collective and constructed thought that the South Pacific is inherently under the Western umbrella of influence. As such, one might understand why the characterisation of the SP is tainted by negativity, but also surprise. After all, how could a nation that is in America’s very own lake, agree to such an agreement with China. How can a nation, that is under the Western wing, agree to have the Chinese navy dock at their shores. Another problem with Western perception of the South Pacific, is the neglect in considering the Solomon Islands sovereignty. This may seem like a bold claim, nevertheless, characterisations of the Solomon Islands such as “reckless” (Kaiku, 2022) or that they are contributing to militarise the region, may be quite condescending. It is a failure in addressing what is perhaps the underlying reason for the Solomon Islands to indulge in such a deal: to maintain domestic stability. None of the domestic issues facing the island nation was adequately addressed, which further seeps into the idea that the South Pacific and the Solomon Islands is “Western” by default, by the collective understanding of the commentators and Western powers. This becomes ever-more prevalent when considering the Solomon Islands’ relationship with the USA. Washington closed its embassy in Honiara in 1993 (Shie, 2007, p. 323). And yet, the expectation may seem as though the islands nation

should still submit to a Western orientated regional policy, because of the historical and traditional features. Maybe the Solomon Islands should, but what this shows is that the narrative of constructivism has been largely adopted in the existing literature. The characteristics of the SP by Western media, showcases a reality in which the South Pacific as well as the Solomon Islands, “belongs” to the Western umbrella of influence, and it is my very argument that such a perception is limiting and unproductive. As such, I deviate away from this theory. Submitting to the constructed idea that the Solomon Islands is part of the West by default, is what has arguably generated the one-sided perception in the first place.

3.3 Classical Geopolitics & critical realism

Like constructivism, tendencies of classical geopolitics¹⁴ are seen through the reviewed texts. Arguably, one could most definitely use a geopolitical lens to examine this agreement, and justly so. However, there are some underlying problems with geopolitics. First and foremost, it is past its time. Whilst it’s easy to throw out the term, as seen in the review, like “geopolitical tug-of-war”, its definition and content is limiting to this discussion. In academia, it is a term often associated with a past age, and the term is rather tainted because of its association with Nazi-Germany, WW2, and the Cold War (Kuus, 2010). Furthermore, when scholarship was added to it during the Cold War, it was often narrated through the eyes of the West (primarily the U.S. and the UK) against the East (Kuus, 2010). As such, it puts space and regions into a pre-defined box. You are either West or East, capitalist or communist, democratic, or undemocratic. It generates the idea of “us and them” inherently creating malicious perspectives of the other. Such a trend is very evident in the review. “Them” are now coming into an area that is “Us”. This is further underlined by the little consideration that is given the Solomon Islands and its sovereignty. By international law, the Solomon Islands can pursue such an agreement if they please. Yet, a geopolitical mindset has cemented the Solomon Islands as part of “Us”, generating the resentment of Chinese involvement, as they are “Them”. Perhaps a better idea for an article would be to question precisely why the Solomon Islands chose China as a favourable partner over the West. This is, however, not widely discussed. Notably, the regeneration of an “us and them” narrative inherently limits good and reflective discussion and thus fails to generate diverse understanding of an event, like the SP. A geopolitical narrative also assumes that the global power relations are static, and in doing so, nations are constantly

¹⁴ Can also be called traditional or linear geopolitics (Kuus, 2010)

struggling to climb the power hierarchy of this anarchist world (Kuus, 2010). This is also very reflective in the review, where rhetoric like “the tide is turning” is perpetuated.

Whilst the topic of discussion is on geopolitics, one might also include the theory of realism. Albeit different, the theories still go together. Arguably, a realism approach of some form could be justly applied to this thesis. To simplify, it is rooted in the state, and that the state is the ultimate power, and whatever a state does, is to strengthen its international standing and status (Anderson, 2020). Indeed, the SP is a bilateral agreement that consists of two states, and thus, could perhaps be viewed through this lens. Take for example critical realism. Considered a “philosophical realism” by its father Roy Bashkar, its headline is to separate between the “observable” and the “real” world (Anderson, 2020). The observable is what we see from stars to trees. The “real” is the world in which we theories and construct in our minds. In its core, it explains how unobservable events create observable events (University of Warwick, 2020). As the critical realist Kurki underlined, “*ontology must flow*” (Hall, 2009). By its nature, one could then pose the question that because of a Eurocentric narrative on the political landscape in the South Pacific, analysts, and journalists etc., are blinded by another reality that has, in fact, generated this SP. This is, however, also problematic. The empirical evidence from the Solomon Islands considering its riots suggests there is a need for a security agreement. This is very much an observable event, even though it has not been adequately addressed. As such, from its very inception, this theory presents itself with flaws. Whilst that is said, it could still very much be an applicable theory because of its aim to open various possibilities to look beyond the already existing structures of reality to uncover new discussions for what might cause an event. However, its philosophical and contemplative nature, as underlined by Bashkar, makes me question whether it will do the research question just, as this dissertation seeks not to indulge in a philosophical debate.

3.4 Ontological security

For this section, I would like to change my course of reflection. Whilst the points about constructivism, geopolitics and in parts critical realism, discusses their existence in the already existing literature, ontological security may not be as apparent. Admittedly, ontological security is a very viable narrative to apply to the question of the SP, especially from a Chinese perspective. Nevertheless, this reflection aims to justify why this viewpoint has not been chosen, despite its viability.

A popular definition of ontological security is “a sense of continuity and order in events,

outlined by Anthony Giddens (Herrington, 2013). Wendt describes it as a predictability in relationships to the world, which in turn would create a desire for stable social identities (Herrington, 2013). Essentially, it is understood as states seeking to ensure their security of self and self-conception (ontological security) as well as their physical security, such as protecting their territorial integrity of the state. It assumes that foreign political actions are enacted by a desire to preserve its own identity. As will become clear, the later analysis will include a discussion on Taiwan and how that might fit into the narrative of the SP. Fundamentally, Taiwan and the One China policy is very much about China's self-preservation and their respective identity. However, it can be challenging to apply it to other dimensions of the SP, such as economy, and protection of Solomon Island's institutions. How are economic investments in the Solomon Islands part of a greater Chinese self-realisation? It may be hard to justify. Furthermore, it may not be as detailed as other narratives. Whilst much of China in the South Pacific is rooted in Beijing's realisation of the One China policy, it is also rooted in a common identity of South-South cooperation and developing nations working together. What will become clear, is that critical geopolitics helps understand this notion well, whereas ontological security might lack this element. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the South Pacific can help preserve Chinese identity. It is perhaps a redundant claim that China needs the South Pacific to preserve itself, as an ontological point of view might suggest. Thus, it may concur as limiting, and perhaps, not as insightful as other narratives.

As such, I propose an alternative approach, critical geopolitics. Admittedly, I do remain in the field of geopolitics, however, and as will become clear, critical geopolitics aims to not be a supplement of geopolitics, but rather a critique of it – it ultimately aims to fill the gaps of what is limiting a geopolitical viewpoint.

3.5 Critical geopolitics

Critical geopolitics is an interesting narrative, as it promises different ways of viewing geopolitics. Traditional geopolitics is often rooted in a Eurocentric balance-of-power conception of world politics (Kuus, 2010). Essentially, much of what dominated the global world in the twentieth century. As such, critical geopolitics seeks to distance itself from the "territorial trap" that is often eluded from a classical geopolitical narrative, a conception that certain territories belong to a state because of the natural order of the international hierarchy (Kuus, 2010). Notably, whilst classical geopolitics has state as the core actors, critical

geopolitics further intends to understand world politics in ways in which elites and non-state actors construct the spaces of political action. Essentially, it seeks to elaborate how a space is constructed or perceived by elites, and how this leads to an action (Agnew, 2010, p. 569). A fundamentality rooted in critical geopolitics however, which is also probably its most important element, is that whilst it adds to the scholarship and understanding of geopolitics, it is perhaps best understood as a critique to it, rather than a supplement. Ultimately, much of critical geopolitics tries to “rebrand” much of the essence of geopolitics to propose a more fitting and contemporary scholarship. For example, whilst geopolitics separates the world into concrete categories, the notion of “Us and Them”, critical geopolitics seeks to destabilise this assumption to further prompt debate and action towards the conceptualisation of the global society (Kuus, 2010). Like geopolitics, critical geopolitics is also concerned with space. However, critical geopolitics aims to explain how political actors use international politics to present the space of geopolitics as a “world”. It effectively turns the classical geopolitics upside down and suggests that geopolitics and world politics can no longer be explained from an objective and pre-given understanding of space (Fard, 2021, pp. 41-42). This is heavily rooted in the notion that whilst geopolitics is rooted in Western understanding of the world, it does not suffice in this “new world order” where the reigning superpowers cannot be separated from one another, as was the case before (Fard, 2021, p. 27). Fundamentally, critical geopolitics seeks to prompt discussion about how we have perceived traditional geopolitics and thus, world politics, ultimately opening new pathways of understanding our world. As such, whilst examining critical geopolitics, it is important to note that it is not an extension of classical geopolitics, but an alternative, or even critique, to it. It is not about producing core texts for geopolitical claims, but rather study contemporary geopolitics critically.

Critical geopolitics loosely emerged in the 1990s at a conjunction between political geography and international relations. The timing is interesting, as it was the time of the end of the Cold War, which quite possibly illuminated the end of classical geopolitics as well (Klinke, 2009). Therefore, a quintessential piece of critical geopolitics is the dismantling of the classical geopolitical interpretations of territory and space, also dubbed as the “territorial trap” (Kuus, 2010). It is an interpretation that has been the result of many bloody conflicts in the 20th century, which consequently has also led to the tainted reputation of geopolitics, despite its, perhaps, increasing relevance. Importantly, the rise of China and its politics is often placed within such a narrative, or framework rather, where it is perceived as “just another rising power” trying to make its way in the competing international structure and that its global footprint is fundamentally driven by its desire to exert more influence and power (Agnew, 2010, p. 570).

The initiation of the SP was perceived this way. Critical geopolitics, however, looks at how for example visual images (i.e. maps), language (political rhetoric, metaphors, etc) and political performance (economy, foreign policy, military etc) places a nation within the geopolitical world (Agnew, 2010, p. 571). As such, it differentiates from a traditional view, where geopolitics is performed through power and an international hierarchy. Furthermore, such a framework neatly works in with the SP. Arguably, Western powers adopted a classical geopolitical narrative, claiming that the SP ultimately militarises the region, and is therefore wrong. On the other hand, critical geopolitics offer an alternative to this, where one might view other reasons for Chinese “expansion” into the South Pacific. Conclusively, it can be difficult to categorise and “place” critical geopolitics as it consists of a wide range of scholarship and academia. It can also be hard to discuss it without diving into a wider philosophical debate about our interpretations of the world and its political geography. It is, however, possible, to put it in a contradiction to classical geopolitics, as to illustrate the difference and further underscore the essentialities of this narrative (Klinke, 2009). Ultimately, the critical geopolitical narrative seeks to disenchant the traditionalist views of classical geopolitics, and to function as an alternative, a counter perhaps, to how we view the world (Kuus, 2010).

As critical geopolitics entail a variety of issues and concepts, this thesis will focus around two themes that can be categorised in alignment with the SP and China in the wider South Pacific: **space** and **identity**. Interestingly, these concepts are also at the core of classical geopolitics, and crucially illustrates how venomous classical geopolitics can be, as well as displaying the distance and different interpretation that the critical narrative assumes. The following sub chapters will briefly discuss these concepts to grant a better overview, and further a better understanding of the critical framework.

3.5.1 Space

As space is important to classical geopolitics, it is also important to critical geopolitics. I have previously mentioned the “territorial trap”, but without any clear definition. Perhaps this concept would be better introduced here, as it neatly explains the divergence between the classical and the critical. A classical geopolitical viewership assumes that global spaces are divided between nations and spheres of influences, thus, global power is seen as static: you are either X or Y (Kuus, 2010). The critical assumption, however, questions any simple understandings of geographical space and global politics (Klinke, 2009). Instead, it investigates

how spaces are made meaningful through the social construction of space. It is not so important that the UK is not politically part of Europe through Brexit because it is a disconnected island, but that it *think* of itself as an island, separated from Europe. It is not important that the space of the South Pacific is not geographically close to the majority Western powers, but that it *thinks* of itself as close, and thus part of the Western bloc. Ultimately, critical geopolitics aims to advance a drift between a rigid territorialisation of spaces, and goes to show that state power is not excluded to its control and influence of spaces, and that their initial outreach is not necessarily for global control and dominance, as a classical approach might suggest, but might be something entirely different (Kuus, 2010). Crucially, critical geopolitics asks *how* state power is practically produced and exerted. A classical viewpoint would argue that states are at the centre of geopolitics, but the critical angle would examine how political subjects are formed in the first place (Kuus, 2010). Consequently, it departs from the assumption that states and its identities produce foreign policy, but rather, are forged through the practices of its foreign policy. To exemplify, much of China's outreach to the PIC (and smaller Central American countries for that matter) has been driven by its desire for national reunification with Taiwan, such as with the Solomon Islands. Therefore, some of China's contemporary global identity is derived from its global outreach to gain support at home. Hence, the "geopolitics" China is conducting may not be to assert space under its control, but rather gain their favour for a domestic related issue. This links neatly to the next sub-chapter, identity, as another centrepiece of critical geopolitics. This component too, is subject to constant evolvment and perception.

3.5.2 Identity

Identity is close to the core of critical geopolitics. Like the critical understanding of space, identity is not understood as something that is pre-given, but constantly negotiated, or re-negotiated (Klinke, 2009). Therefore, what critical geopolitics adds to the existing literature, is the spatial construction of a social identity. This can be understood through nationhood, ethnic groups, and an understanding of a constructed identity amongst oneself, categorised as the "familiar", and the others as "others" or "them", often leading to malicious viewership of the different. This is ever present in the South Pacific and can be seen through the West's discontent with increased Chinese influence in the region. Based upon the geographical space of the South Pacific and its historic ties to Western agencies, it has been dubbed "America's Lake", constructing a collective identity amongst the PIC, and tying them to the West. The

PICs are demographically, culturally, and linguistically, different from the West. Yet, there is nevertheless a notion that is “belongs” to the West, considering its one-sided influence in the region for the past century. As such, due to the historical ties and presence of Western actors since WW2, it is the understanding and belief that the PICs political identity is intertwined with the Western world. Hence, “America’s Lake”, or Australia’s critique of the SP because of the understanding that the Solomon Islands is their “historic partner”. On the other hand, China has increased their partnership with the region, advertising an alternative identity: South-South cooperation (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 46). As the West has been nourishing an identity with the PIC for centuries, China is actively seeking a common ground and shared identity through the idea that both parties are developing nations and thus, need to work together. The identity of the PICs is then suddenly not seen as a cluster of islands under the U.S. umbrella, but rather a partner in the developing world, working together with other partners of the developing world, to become developed. This can also be flipped. China, for example, may conduct its geopolitics in accordance with Western policies, however, how Beijing espouses its geopolitics is also neatly linked to its own identity.

3.5.3 Political elites

Admittedly, it may seem a little ironic to use critical geopolitics as a lens. As much as it criticises classical geopolitics, it is still part of that school. The limiting nature of geopolitics is what have generated the initial literature on the SP in the first place. Thus, the danger of applying a critical geopolitical lens is that it simply re-generates the already existing notion of the SP. The strength of critical geopolitics, however, is that it proposes different ideas to existing tenants of geopolitics, such as the presented case for “space” and “identity”. It also promises to understand world politics not just from a state-centric view, but other factors, as contemporary global politics is not just generated by the state any longer. However, this may also seem contradicting. As already mentioned, the SP is an agreement between two countries, *states*, so how then, can critical geopolitics be a just lens? Importantly, and what will become clear in the discussion, is that critical geopolitics is concerned with how the elites, construct a world image to conduct its policies. Elites, by this definition, can be academic, to journalists to politicians (Kuus, 2010). This is, however, also a critique, as it may be a continuation of elitist behaviour and perception in the global society. For example, a feminist political geography takes issue with classical and critical geopolitics because the elites conducting geopolitics are

overwhelmingly men, such as in the cold war (Kuus, 2010). However, whilst this is a solid critique of critical geopolitics, this thesis does not seek to embark on a philosophical and critical debate about gender in the field of geopolitics, and ironically, its male-dominated critique may very well be quite fitting to this specific study. Moreover, as geopolitics is Eurocentric, this “elite-criticism” is often targeted at democratic countries. Ideally, in a democratic country, every single citizen regardless of social status, has a political say. Technically speaking, a low-income farmer in a rural town in Vermont can become the president of the United States. Donald Trump for example, was by many favoured because he was not considered part of the American “political elite” and the “establishment”. As such, the criticism of critical geopolitics is that it reconstructs how the elites preserve the world and characterises it. However, in a Sino context, the elites are the sole contributor to how China perceives the world. Their leaders are inherently of the elite status. Since the death of Mao in 1976, China has had four leaders. These leaders emerge after many years of working in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) among the policy making elites. When they had gained enough experience, reputation, and status, they emerge as leaders. When they claimed office, there were no learning on the job. They had already been part of the elite and prestigious political system. Its politics then, as well as its geopolitical outreach, is then but a continuation of their predecessors’ policies, effectively an “elitist” approach (Ross, 2009, p. 14). Fundamentally, the elitist agency of the CCP constructs China’s politics, and it is a consistent process. Critical geopolitics feeds into this. As such, it will help conceptualise China and the SP going forward.

Conclusively, the already existing literature on the SP has shown that there is a very one-sided perception of the agreement, largely rooted in tendencies of classical geopolitics. The agreement is seen as a spark to militarise the region, challenge traditional powers, a starter of a new cold war and so on. Such beliefs are limiting, and I therefore propose the narrative of critical geopolitics. The heterogeneity of critical geopolitics makes for a fitting narrative. It is not about producing core texts for geopolitical claims, but rather study contemporary geopolitics critically. By examining China and the SP through this narrative, I aim to generate other potential reasons for this SP that is not rooted in the belief that China wants to “take over” the South Pacific but may very well be fuelled by something else entirely.

4. Method

This chapter outlines the research methodology and conceptualisation of this dissertation. The aim of the dissertation is to discover the political aim of the SP and whether this agreement can be contextualised into a broader regional or international context. Therefore, the aim is not to only present other possibilities for the SP, but how the SP fits into a wider context of China's international outreach. Firstly, it will discuss why the Solomon Islands is of interest and why the study of the SP is important. Secondly, it will give an overview of the general research method, or research strategy, that is applied in this study and the justification of it. Finally, it will explain the collection of data, and further explanation for why the sampled data was collected. In the third and final section, I discuss the limitations and challenges of this study, primarily rooted in the lack of accessibility and research conducted on this topic, but also the wider South Pacific as a whole.

4.1 Method

How can we appropriately approach the research question in methodological terms? All research involves a set of presumptions about how one can study the world, and what knowledge we can generate about it. The nature of the research questions neatly categorises this thesis in an interpretivist approach to geopolitics, social sciences, and international relations. An interpretivist approach assumes that there are “numerous” realities. In essence, the world is unique to each researcher and the world is observed subjectively (Bryman, 2012, pp. 35-37). This can be neatly exemplified through classical- and critical geopolitics. As explored, an essence in critical geopolitics is to move away from the static thinking of geopolitics. The key claim to critical geopolitical scholars is that whilst classical geopolitics proclaims to understand “geographical facts”, it in fact disconnects from geographical complexities to simply generate simplistic geographical assumptions, which leads to the conception of the “Us and Them” (Kuus, 2010). However, by looking at geopolitics critically, one can disenchant such binary approach to create a new arena for discussion and action. Thus, offering a richer account of space and power than those accounted for by mainstream media and geopolitical analysts. Repeatedly, this is the core of critical geopolitics, to “counter” classical geopolitics which in turn leads to the interpretivist approach of this study. As such, interpretivism does not lend itself easily to analytical tools that sees the world as given, as one

objective reality assumed by all. It rather understands it that actors attach meaning to their actions and based upon their understanding and conceptualisation of the world (Bryman, p. 30). Therefore, this study leans itself on an interpretivist approach to what knowledge and outcomes we can generate about geopolitics and international relations. This leads to a more complex and perhaps in-depth understanding of how social realities are made possible, not why A led to B in strict casual terms. As such, the knowledge we generate about Chinese aims for the SP is based upon subjective interpretations of the world. With that premise, this study will contribute with an interpretation of reasons for the Chinese aim with the SP, that is not rooted in one reality, such as to wage geopolitical warfare on the West, but based upon various interpretations and understandings, thus generating various reasons for why this SP may have transpired.

With an interpretive focus on the creation of reasoning through various narratives, a discourse analysis is applied as the analytical tool for this thesis. A discourse analysis draws on data from already existing literature and studies (Bryman, 2012, p. 36). As this thesis seeks to discuss political motives and reflect around whether it has an impact on the wider international community, such an approach was deemed most appropriate. A qualitative research strategy is recognised by epistemological approach by understanding the social world through the various and diverse members of that world. In this case, the East and West, or China, the Pacific and Australia/USA, and the ultimate purpose – to examine the relationship between the various actors, and ultimately its consequence on the international political scene. This allows for a neat critical geopolitical assumption of the geopolitics in the South Pacific, that deviates from the static power conception that is often present but enables research of various alternatives. A discourse analysis can help us better understand the Sino geopolitical motives to generate other realities and understandings. Importantly, this does not mean that this thesis aims to generate causes for the peculiar event in the South Pacific, but rather to understand it. As the thesis places itself in the interpretivist category, the emphasis becomes on understanding and discuss other possibilities, rather than explaining and solidify a concrete reason for the SP.

For the text collection, I will analyse a variety of scholarly and political text that cover the political sphere of the South Pacific and the tenants of Chinese foreign policy applicable to the SP. The text collection will be from a variety of scholarly institutes and think-tanks such as the Lowy Institute, Brookings Institute, and universities, as well as political articles, journals, and news outlets. They are retrieved from various online sources, such as the NMBU online library Oria, the online library Jstor and Google scholar, as well as political reports and journals.

The data collection aims to lay a foundation for the motives behind the SP, as well as how it can be further understood in a global context. I will draw on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are highlighted as interviews and press conferences done by relevant political figures in relations to the research question, such as direct quotes from Chinese government officials and interviews with Solomon Islands officials (Bryman, 2012, p. 545). Secondary data is pre-existing research that has been collected by another researcher (Bryman, 2012, p. 13). What may transpire as problematic however, is that secondary data are research done for another research purpose and is thus not customised and tailored to the specific research question(s). Therefore, the use of secondary can be problematic. But it can also be a valuable asset, as it can allow for an understanding of Chinese political outreaches globally, that in turn can be conceptualised to the narratives of the SP, and thus gain a better understanding of it. Secondary sources were also considered an advantage because of its ease of access and considered the most appropriate considering the limitation of primary data. As such, and as will become clear, much of the reasonings and discussions around the SP is often drawn on by comparing it to other Chinese political outreaches, such as in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. As such, I use secondary data to identify a pattern in Chinese foreign politics to discuss the research question justly and adequately. The foundation is identified by identifying political factors implied in the SP. These are highlighted as China's economic incentives in the Solomon Islands, as well as its strategic ambition. Therefore, the data collection from the discourse analysis, identifies important elements of Chinese economy that can be applied to the SP, as well as the strategic benefit of the SP, by looking at the wider geopolitical ambitions of Beijing, and how the Solomon Islands fit into this agenda.

I will use the method of thematic analysis to generate my understanding and findings. A thematic analysis is the process in finding and recognising themes that are recurring (Bryman, 2012, p. 623). It is a method for analysing qualitative data that includes reading through literature to identify and look for patterns to find a set theme. For example, as seen in the literature review, "geopolitical warfare" and "Sino-challenge" are themes that are consistently appearing in texts regarding the SP. Similarly, I aim to use a similar strategy to find patterns of Chinese foreign policy that can adequately explain and explore other reasons for the SP than what is already presented in the existing literature. A thematic analysis will also help identify data and relative literature that can be used to help understand the agreement in question. It will conceptualise the region historical political landscape, as well as China's historical approach to foreign policy. It will also look at recent developments within the international political scene that can perhaps be an indicator into the recent developments of the region.

4.2 Limitations

Lastly, it is important to underline some limitations to this study. Primarily, it is the general lack of research done on the SP. Often, they are news articles and political journals, rather than in-depth research. Thus, much of the research is generated by looking at Chinese approaches globally, to draw links between the SP and the South Pacific. Whilst this can prove to be useful, it can also be problematic, and a rather thin comparison, as a comparison between the South Pacific and for example Africa or the Middle East, may not generate solid understandings. Simultaneously, this can also be considered a strength. A lack of study adds to the research and in turn, may give a broader scope as well as a freer understanding of the SP.

Another fundamental issue is that we do not know who initiated the security pact. As underlined in the appendix, it is signed under a bilateral partnership, but Western commentators believe it was sought after by China. Presumably, had the Solomon Islands initiated this agreement, the narrative and approach of this thesis would drastically change. However, if China initiated it, which presumably they did consider their previous attempts to get such an agreement with other PICs, the narrative largely shifts again. Nevertheless, they analysis will largely presume China to be the initiator considering its track record of its desire of such agreements. But with that being said, it is also important to remember that should the Solomon Islands be the instigator, the tale may very well be different.

4.3 The Solomon Islands

Admittedly, it can be hard to justify and wonder why a study of the Solomon Islands is important. Most people outside the Pacific have probably never heard of it, and it is a remote and distant land that does not boast much global and regional influence. Nevertheless, it has caught the attention of China, and it seemingly complicates the political sphere of the South Pacific, rattling the traditional powers of the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand. Historically, Chinese involvement has been that of aid and investment, up until the event of the SP. As already established, the overwhelming consensus on this agreement amongst Western agencies and actors, is that it is inherently something “bad”. It is put in a box of geopolitical gameplay and seen as a Sino challenge of regional hegemony. Consequently, there has been little room for alternative discussions and reasonings for this agreement. To exemplify this paradox, the SP holds maintenance of peace in the Solomon Islands as a core principle, yet it seems as though this element, and other details, have been conveniently “ignored” or “forgotten” in its

evaluation. Thus, a primary cause for studying the case of the Solomon Islands is to uncover other reasons for this pact that is actually rooted in the contents of the agreement. After all, submitting to only one perspective, is limiting, and it can also be damaging. China is becoming an ever-important actor in the international community, and I do not believe that a one-sided negative and suspicious reaction to Chinese foreign politics is healthy. It may very well cause unintended tension and conflict. Another important element to the SP, is China's changing foreign policy. As will become clear, China's approach to global affairs has been that of peaceful co-existence and development. Why, then, are we suddenly presented with a security pact, in an area that is presumably, geopolitically unimportant to China? This becomes even more strange, when considering the notion of a security agreement. It is, in fact, rather uncommon for China to indulge in bilateral security agreements. Therefore, this situation presents a unique and rare depiction of Chinese foreign policy that deviates from its more "normal" pattern. By contextualising the SP in a wider context and to understand it in a wider scope of Chinese foreign policy, it can perhaps lead to a deeper understanding of China's alleged shift in its global outreach. Just maybe, the SP is not actually about the Solomon Islands, but something else entirely. This second point, however, is contradictory to my own argument. The existing literature are already making the case that the SP is about something else, and not the Solomon Islands. The difference, however, is that whilst the literature sees it as a move to challenge Western hegemony, I will explore whether it may actually link to Chinese domestic interests instead, offering an alternative path to that of a static power relation to international politics.

As such, the study of the SP presents itself with two important factors. Firstly, is the general lack of academic study into the SP, and when it is covered, often in news articles and shorter political journals, it is under the conviction that China is challenging Western regional hegemony. This dissertation thus aims to add to this discussion, by deviating away from this narrative and produce alternate reasons for the SP. Secondly, the SP by nature goes away from what is considered "normal" Chinese foreign policy. Therefore, it begs the question of whether this scenario may be a change in Sino politics, consequently impacting the international society as we know. Conclusively, the importance of the study of the SP is then multi-layered. It is to uncover other potential reasons for the enactment of the agreement, as well as to examine whether this is an increasing shift in Chinese foreign policy.

5. Central Kingdom and the Solomon Islands

The aim of the next chapter is to answer the research question and analyse the findings. The analysis will be based on a discourse analysis conducted on relevant Chinese foreign political approaches, highlighted in the contents of the Security Pact. The literature review underscored that there is a general lack of diverse narratives linked to the SP. It is usually regarded as a move by China to challenge Western hegemony in the region and fails to discuss other relevant components included in the SP, such as the protection of Solomon Islands' institutions and mutual benefits and cooperation. Consequently, the following chapter aim to generate a variety of potential reasons for China's aim of the SP that is not rooted in a traditional geopolitical narrative.

This chapter will first introduce the patterns of Chinese foreign policy, primarily its stance on peaceful development and co-existence within the international community, but also how it has later shifted to a more assertive stance, as well as something that is perhaps in the core of Chinese politics: the One China policy and reunification with Taiwan. It may be hard to understand how all this fits into the narrative of the SP, and whilst it may seem questionable, it is nevertheless important factors of Chinese foreign policy that in one way or another, can be attributed to the Chinese scheme in the Solomon Islands and the wider South Pacific.

The next section will discuss the political motives for China and the SP based upon the data and literature presented. The overwhelming perception of the SP is that it in one way or another, is there to challenge Western powers and hegemony in the South Pacific. Therefore, the discussion will deviate from such a narrative, and discuss primarily three components of the SP that deviates from the already dominating consensus. Firstly, the SP will be discussed in line with its initial intent, (1) to provide security and protect its interests in the Solomon Islands. Secondly, (2) as an economic incentive to protect China's supply lines and projects in the Solomon Islands, and lastly (3) as a measure to counter Western influence to further optimise a future reunification with Taiwan. Finally, the end of the chapter will reflect and contemplate on what we can learn from China and the SP, and how we might move forward in our ever-changing international system.

5.1 Tao Guang Yang Hui, 中国, and the World

This subchapter seeks to underscore some key themes of China in the international community. It is important to understand how China exists in the global society as a backbone for the wider understanding and examination of the SP. It seeks to underline China's economy as a centrepiece for their global outreach, its contemporary focus on security politics, but also how Beijing has transformed from a rather silent actor to a nation that is now supposedly "challenging" the West in the South Pacific.

Initially, I presumed Chinese motives for global outreach to be rather obvious, which also proves to be true; because of its vast population and its need to feed its economy and people. Considering its need to fuel its economy, middle-class and tremendous population, it is to no surprise that a centrepiece in Chinese foreign policy is its pursuit for raw materials and resources to feed its economy, but this is also multi-layered (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 356). Naturally, with such an expansive economy and population, the need for raw materials is essential. However, what is also worth underlining is China's general lack of its own natural resources, where it is rather poor, despite its geographical size. This goes to demonstrate the importance for Beijing to look globally for resources as it cannot be self-sufficient. It is pragmatic in nature, as it enables China to "ignore" the affairs of the international community and focus on its own growth (Heginbotham, 2007, p. 203). In essence, it allows Beijing to pursue economic growth internationally whilst concerning itself with its various problematic internal affairs (i.e. Hong Kong, Taiwan, other border issues etc), effectively excluding itself from other country's politics (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 356). Yet, this is also oversimplified, and China is very much involved in other country's affairs. Beijing's infamous coercion tactics are a great example. They are also involved in their surrounding areas competing over natural resources, in Southeast Asia, the Russian Far East, India and so on (Kaplan, 2010, pp. 27-30). The importance is not that China excludes itself from the world. That would indeed be a very redundant claim, but it demonstrates that it does not mingle in other country's affairs the same way the West does, but remains close at home, historically at least. It does not seek to spread values, like the West aims to spread democracy, human rights and so on. The focus of its involvement: supply lines and resources for its economy (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 356). Thus, it is in China's best interest to support these supply lines, which is often found in developing nations, for example, the Solomon Islands. However, whilst economic pursuit is a pinnacle of China's global outreach, it can be understood only as part of a larger equation. What shows to

also be an underlying factor for China's global outreach, and quite frankly some of its contemporary problems regarding its borders for example, is, in fact, rooted in their political psyche; it is China's unique historical claim as a global superpower. They have invoked this historical right in their dispute with their neighbours as well. To exemplify, the contestation over the South China Sea or the troublesome case of Taiwan is all underpinned by Beijing's historical claim to these areas (Kalimuddin & Anderson, p. 118). Even its name, 中国, the "Central Kingdom¹⁵", is a derivative from the nations' belief as being the world's centre. However, Western imperialism, the so called Hundred-Years-Humiliation¹⁶ and further overshadowing during the Cold War, ensnared them to the concept of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* - a tactic of "hide capabilities and bide time" (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). It was adopted during President Deng Xiaoping's tenure after the end of the Cold War. Considering other nations power and influence, he encouraged a pathway of non-assertiveness for his predecessors as well (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). This was not so much about avoiding the costs and burden of global leadership, but rather to develop and exist peacefully in an international environment that hosted actors that were much more powerful than them. In other words, Beijing submitted to the already existing structures of the international system, to pursue financial growth (Kaplan, 2010, p. 24). Importantly, this "submission" was not something that transpired right after the fall of the USSR but can also be traced to the age of the Cold War. It was also in accordance with its relationship to the USA.

Whilst initially losing its P5 membership in the UN, Beijing normalised ties with Washington in 1972, and further liberalised its economy in 1979 (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 355). This was perhaps the start of its legendary economic growth. By 1980, they had joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, two essential institutions in the Western-orientated international society. What this seeks to illustrate, is the Chinese realisation of ascension in global politics and development was dependent on friendly relations and cooperation with America and the West (Ross, 2009, p. 14). The post-Cold War era translated this cooperation into *Tao Guang Yang Hui*. The seeds of its policies are bearing fruit today. By 2010, Beijing surpassed Japan's economy to become the second largest in the world, and today, an integrated and one of the most important countries in the global and economic affair.

¹⁵ Or the Middle Kingdom

¹⁶ A hundred-year period that saw Chinese power diminish. European powers claimed much of their land, most prominently Macau to Portugal, Hong Kong to the UK, Northern Manchuria to Russia. Later, became subject to Japanese imperialism and conquest. Essentially it is an era seen as the "dark ages" as it removed China's as a hegemon.

However, despite Beijing's "passive" stance and its maintenance of peaceful development as well as historic friendliness towards the USA, China was, and is, adamant on its most core policies; the One China policy. This often goes in contradiction to the USA and the West. The importance of Taiwan is not only a historical issue, but also underscored contemporarily in its 2011 *White Paper for Development*. Although a comprehensive document, they include four "non-negotiables" – keys topics where China will not compromise. These are highlighted as (1) **state sovereignty**, (2) **national security**, (3) **territorial integrity**, and (4) **national reunification** (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 35). The One China Policy is ultimately at the very heart of Chinese foreign politics. As such, even as China was dependent on friendliness with the U.S. to thrive in the international society and focused on peaceful development, they were still adamant on their stance on Taiwan (Ross, 2009, pp. 11-13). Neither has China been hesitant to show military force regarding this issue. Whilst not directly clashing with American or Taiwanese forces, they have deployed their military as a display of force on multiple occasions (Ross, 2009, p. 14). Despite tensions over the decades, the Sino-USA relationship remained, surviving periods of resentment and disagreements. It nevertheless illuminates a reality in which China might pose as an agent for peaceful development and cooperation, and that is indeed an image many are opting to see, but they are simultaneously very clear on what is their interests and have not been hesitant to show it. This is also reflective of their "non-negotiable". Another contradicting factor to the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* concept, is China's use of military force. Naturally, if a nation would present itself as a nation of "peaceful development and cooperation" one might think that use of force would not be that prevalent. And yet, since 1949, there is only one nation that has been engaged in more hostilities than China (Ross, 2009, p. 10). Usurpingly, the gold medallist is the USA. Importantly however, Sino deployments have conformed to the patterns of international law, something underlined as important by CCP leaders, and has been in its defence and strengthening of its own geographical areas, such as the Vietnam intervention in 1979, and can be in one way or another, linked to the "non-negotiables" (Ross, 2009, p. 10). As such, it is important to underscore that whilst China is indeed pursuing a stance of peace, prosperity, and global harmony, they are also relenting in terms of their core principles.

Nevertheless, China's, for a lack of a better word, hibernation, in the international sphere was not to last. This is something that cannot be solely attributed to China's "sudden" economic growth or Xi's more aggressive tenure than his predecessors but can perhaps be understood as a carefully constructed plan spanning back to the early 2000s, and perhaps even longer. A critical geopolitical lens would suggest that the elites have changed how China

reaches out to the world and how they play the international chess game. Whilst it was important to underscore coherence within the international structure and something that was followed by the CCP leaders, they are changing their tone. After all, Chinese leaders have been adamant that *Tai Guang Yang Hui* was never to be permanent. (Doshi, 2021, p. 26).

5.1.1 Assertive China and Security Politics

The dismantling of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* is perhaps where China's contemporary reputation as assertive, recognised with labels such as "wolf warrior diplomacy", and conductor of "debt trap diplomacy", were drawn and where the story of the SP starts. The increasing narrative in the West, is mirrored by an uneasy perception of China's "expansionism", a reality that was considered quite alien only two decades ago. When the global balance of power shifted, or at least weakened the then status quo of Western hegemony, in the financial crisis of 2008, China's strategy also changed. The following year, then President Hu Jintao amended the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* concept, stressing the importance for China to "actively accomplish something" (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). A few years later, Xi, moved away from the "hide and bide" strategy, but not purely of his own ambition (Center for China Analysis, 2023, p. 1). Rather, it is better understood as a consensual party census carefully generated over the past decades by the elites of the CCP (Doshi, 2021, p. 26). Furthermore, the Chinese strategical shift did not suddenly occur the day Xi took office either, neither did it occur the day of the financial crack in 2008, but rather being the initial spark that would later fuel the change. Rather, in 2017, five years into Xi's presidency, when the Western world saw a pattern of protectionism and withdrawal from the global world with Brexit and Donald Trump. Shortly after those events, Beijing stated that the world was experiencing "great changes unsees in a century" and now was the time to push and implement the grand Chinese strategy globally (Doshi, 2021, p. 27). A critical geopolitical lens tells us that this shift was not necessarily a consequence of a sudden vacuum in international politics, but rather a carefully planned plan the elites of the CCP and China had been constructing for years. Their century long tactic was amended, but only when the traditional powers retreated and weakened. Thus, China did not necessarily strongman its way into a greater global position, in competition with other powers, but rather filled a vacant seat. In 2022, Xi distanced China even further from the notion of "peaceful development", and instead stressed the reality of growing strategic threats and the need for the military to prepare for war (Center for China Analysis, 2023, p. 1). This statement was perhaps foretold,

considering Beijing's increased focus on naval capabilities, infrastructure investment linking countries to China (i.e., Silk Road Initiative), economic coercion (Doshi, 2021, p. 26) and its growing territorial assertiveness. These are all elements that is seen through Xi's presidency but have roots in his predecessor's policy (Doshi, 2021, pp. 27-30). It is also a characterisation of what is increasingly becoming the staple of Chinese foreign policy and the narrating voice of the 21st century. This is further underpinned by China's increased focus on security politics, like our SP. But it is not only a regional and bilateral affair, but also global.

The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper (GSI) was proposed by Xi in 2023, "calling on countries to adapt to the profoundly changing international landscape in the spirit of solidarity and address the complex and intertwined security challenges with a win-win mindset" (MFA, 2023). Though more comprehensive, the language in its outline is strikingly similar to the SP and the Three Principles, with buzzwords like "*common vision*", "*respecting the sovereignty...of all countries*", "*stay committed to...the UN Charter*" (MFA, 2023). It is also in tune with Beijing's historical approach in the international sphere, of peaceful co-existence. In the same breath, several principles of this Concept are outlined, which is very much intact with what, arguably, a Western nation would propose. It underlines the importance of international cooperation between major powers, gradual dismantling of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass-destruction, numerous realisations of global and regional commitments, strengthening of the UN's power in combating regional and global terrorism, and so on (MFA, 2023). Clearly, China is taking on more of leader role, in what they labelled a "changing international landscape". The rhetoric used in this newly proposed international concept, seems very much in tune with their historic stance of peaceful co-existence, only this time, China is willing to head the reins. What all these examples illustrate, is that China's central position is becoming increasingly solidified and cemented as a concrete reality and they are shifting to a more leading role.

Conclusively, we can see China engaging in the structures of the international community. It is their "submission" to the Western-orientated world, that enabled them to climb to where they are now, but that also translates to respect and dependence on the international structures. They are also subject to international norms and laws, as their history has shown. As illuminated through the "non-negotiables", their One China policy, and thus their security, is an essential piece. As such, we can understand much of China's global outreach through its desire to envision and a reunified China. Lastly, which is perhaps its most recognisable feature, and perhaps the easiest to understand, is its pursuit for economic growth which is an underlying factor for many of its political incentives.

5.2 China in America's Lake

As China's general global involvement has been established, this subchapter will look at Chinese interests in the South Pacific to highlight and discuss Sino motivations.

Beijing has stated that their means of influence in the South Pacific, is that of prosperity, partnership, and peace (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 45). Traditionally, they have pursued such a path through three main means: visit diplomacy, economic leverage, and practising non-interference (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 45). This is arguably something that is also seen in China's outreach to other developing regions, however, an essential reason for China's interest in the South Pacific in the first place, is a little different. Whilst interaction with the South Pacific is naturally fuelled by economic possibilities it is underpinned by the pursuit for international recognition of the One China policy (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 360). Out of the thirteen countries that recognise Taiwan, four of them, are in the South Pacific and historically this number was even higher (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 45). Until 2019, the Solomon Islands was also on that list. Therefore, a simple way of cementing Chinese interest in the Solomon Islands and the wider South Pacific, is through its pursuit of a realisation of the One China policy, as well as economic incentives. Historically, Taiwan had a larger stronghold amongst the PICs, as they boasted a more competitive economy towards China. Contemporarily however, the PICs are increasingly leaving Taipei for Beijing because of more lucrative deals (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 33). Importantly, such an approach is not excluded to the South Pacific and the recognition of the One China Policy but can also be traced to other developing corners of the world, where developing nations are siding with China on its other controversial issues. Importantly, Taiwan is not the only hot topic of Chinese policy, it also entails the "concentration camps" of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjian, coercion over Hong Kong, and annexation of Tibet, as well as other accusation of violation of human rights and unethical surveillance. Africa makes for a great example. Whilst only one (eSwatini) African country recognises Taiwan, an overwhelming majority supports China on the other controversial issues (Dickens, 2021). Only two countries (Liberia and eSwatini) have signed a UN statement rebuking Chinese violation of human rights in Xinjian (Bartlett, Why African Nations Are Mostly Silent on China's Rights Record, 2022). Whereas the West has characterised the events in Xinjian as "concentration camps" targeting the Uyghur Muslim minority, African leaders are backing China's stance, enforcing that they are "re-education camps" (Dickens, 2021). Even representatives of Muslim majority countries like Sudan and Burkina Faso, enforced the idea that these were, indeed re-education camps (Dickens, 2021). Simultaneously, China is Africa's largest trading partner, indulging in

infrastructure development, and aid, as well as having forty-six African signatories on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (China-Lusophone Brief, 2022). One may wonder whether they are chained to China's political will, such as the questions of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. For example, every African country is a member of the increasingly influential Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), except eSwatini, the one nation that recognises Taiwan (Steger, 2018). Similar trademarks are also seen in Latin America. As with Africa, China is Latin America's largest trading partner and whilst more Latin American nations support Taiwan compared to that of Africa, this support has also dwindled (Roy, 2022). As such, China's economic outreach to the South Pacific, follows perhaps, a similar pattern of what can be seen in other developing regions; showered with aid and economic benefits in return for recognition and support for China's "controversial". Nevertheless, the cause for Chinese interest in the South Pacific has been debated. Professor Henderson of the University of Canterbury argues that China is incorporating the PIC into a larger Chinese dominated Asia-Pacific (Henderson & Reilly, 2003, p. 94). Southeast Asia and Oceania analyst of the U.S. Department of Defence, Tamara Renee Shie, argued in similar fashion as Henderson, stating that China sought to replace U.S. as the regional hegemon (Shie, 2007, p. 322). Professor Wesley-Smith of the University of Hawai'i argued that China sees the South Pacific as a "training ground" in any future challenges towards Western hegemony, be it regionally or globally (Wesley-Smith, 2013, p. 353). On the other hand, these statements are countered. Professor Yongjin Zhang of the University of Bristol argues that China's approach to the PICs is no different than their relationship to other developing nations (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 33). What is clear however, and something that is often emphasised by Chinese officials, not just to their global approach, but also to the South Pacific, is that they are following a policy of peaceful development and co-existence with the international structure. At a diplomatic meeting in Fiji in 2022, Chinese foreign minister Yi, further strengthened this notion by saying "*...the common development and prosperity of China and all the other developing countries would only mean great harmony, greater justice and greater progress of the whole world*" (Al Jazeera, 2022). As such, one can see a clear stance in Chinese approach to the South Pacific, that is also reflected in their policies towards other countries as well as holding true to their rhetoric and stance of development and prosperity. But the case of the SP ultimately complicates this narrative. Whilst one might see the security agreement only to be for development and domestic security, it nevertheless alters the narrative of peaceful development, seen through the eyes of the West. Admittedly, it can be a tough pill to swallow. To put it informally, why sign an agreement that ultimately enables your military and navy to be present in an area that has

historically been influenced by your supposed rival, when the common rhetoric is “peace and prosperity”? This idea is also enforced when contextualising the SP in a broader context, China’s failed attempt for a permanent military base in the South Pacific (Pryke, 2021, p. 257) as well as the failure to gain regional security agreement with the other PICs (Al Jazeera, 2022). The entire debacle of the SP also deviates from what we normally see of China in the South Pacific but may be a symptom of their increased assertiveness. It ultimately leads to the burning research question: what is China’s political ambitions with the SP? Is it in tune with its rhetoric of peaceful development, to maintain and protect peace in the Solomon Islands, is it so simply protect its supply lines, or is it China becoming generally more assertive in an effort to realise its One China Policy and greater global influence?

5.3 Security Pact as Security Pact

The most natural thing to explore first is the idea that the security pact is indeed nothing but a security pact. After all, it was on those premises that it was signed and designed. It may seem like a paradox, to analyse the agreement within the context of what it is aimed to do, it should perhaps be a given. Surprisingly, this is not the case. As such, this sub-section aims to analyse it as such, and reflect around whether it is a reasonable cause to pursue such an agreement. As with much of the coming analysis, the critical geopolitical narrative assumes that the SP is a continuation of a shared identity between the two actors, in South-South cooperation as well as a mutually beneficial agreement, as is underlined the Article¹⁷. The spatial conceptualisation of the South Pacific is therefore not considered a ground for geopolitical gameplay, but to safeguard Chinese as well as Solomon Islands’ interests.

The nature of a Chinese security agreement inherently feeds into the Western perception of the SP. It is indeed interesting, as only a handful of countries have such, or similar security agreements with Beijing. Moreover, these are not rooted in a desire to protect financial supply lines or the recipient nations’ peoples but are rather historical and ideologically driven. The most infamous is its agreement with North Korea dating back to 1961 and renewed in 2021 (Vu, 2021). Interestingly, it only states that China will defend North Korea should it attack first and has previously sanctioned Pyongyang over the violation of the treaty (Vu, 2021). Secondly, is the Sino-Russo treaty. However, the agreement does not underscore any military and armed

¹⁷ Appendix 1

policies except Article 7, which talks about a de-militarisation along their respective borders (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2001). Lastly, it is the relationship with Pakistan, which can be understood as a counter to India and their challenge towards Beijing (Lalwani S. P., 2023). China is also the head of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which is the largest intergovernmental organisation in the world. It has eight member states (India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), four Observer States aiming to become a full-fledged members (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) and nine “Dialogue Partners” (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia) (United Nations, 2021). In tune with China’s historical foreign outreach, the SCO was founded on the basis of combating regional terrorism, ethnic separatism, and religious extremism (United Nations, 2021). Ultimately, being more concerned with problems at home than abroad. Notably, since its inception in 2001, one of the top priorities has been regional development as well (United Nations, 2021). What all these have in common, is that they are geographically close to China, has a clear geopolitical strategic point considering China’s border-related and domestic issues, and have close ideological and historical ties (except perhaps the modern SCO). This is also in accordance with Chinese patterns of displaying willingness and strength in questions close at home. Furthermore, only one talks about active use of military, and that is for defence, and the other, talks about de-militarisation. Lastly, there is China’s military base in Djibouti, notable as China’s first overseas military base opened in 2017 (Whitehead, 2021). This operation is arguably not similar or comparable to that of the SP. The SP has caused much concern because of the location in “America’s Lake”, a region exclusively dominated militarily by the West. Djibouti hosts not only Chinese, but French, American, Spanish, Italian, as well as Japanese and German troops (Whitehead, 2021). In short, this is because of the African nation’s relative peace in a conflicted region as well as an important trading route, not only for the West and China, but the world (Whitehead, 2021). This highlights the interest of global nations, as well as the strategic location of Djibouti considering its vitalness shipping lanes. As such, every permanent Chinese deployment or security agreement or something of the same fashion, seems to have a clear purpose that can in one way, or another be easily justified by some apparent factor. Then, there is the peculiar situation of the Solomon Islands. It seems odd indeed, but it may very well be natural for China to attain such an agreement as well. It is the idea of “responsibility to protect”.

As mentioned, what initially sparked the signing of this agreement, was the riots in Honiara generated by resentment towards the wealthier Chinese minority. Historically,

Australia has been the traditional partner, supplying with relief efforts and police, something they also did in November of 2021 as well. In total, they sent 100 police and soldiers to help quell the riots (Needham, Explainer: -What is behind unrest in the Solomon Islands?, 2021). Nevertheless, four people were killed and Chinatown was destroyed (Needham, Explainer: -What is behind unrest in the Solomon Islands?, 2021). As such, one might question the effectiveness of the Australian officers, something that was emphasised by Dr. Wang Yiwei of the Renmin University of China. In an interview regarding the SP, he said “*Last year, during the Solomon riots, there were only around 100 police officers. How could they maintain order? So objectively, they are in need.*” (CNA Insider, 2022). Moreover, former Solomon Islands prime minister Danny Philips claimed that the Australian deployed forces had been instructed not to protect Chinatown, further underpinning Yiwei’s statement, as well as emphasising the genuine need for a security agreement (Wickham, 2022). Save the point of security, Yiwei stresses importance of the bilateral relationship between the two nations, underlining Chinese investments, construction projects involving Chinese actors, as well as tourism, as another agent for the need of a security agreement. Moreover, protecting its overseas citizens is an important element to Chinese foreign policy, not just in the Solomon Islands, but globally.

The 2018 State Council Report on the Protection of Overseas Chinese Rights and Interests stated that “*...overseas Chinese have an irreplaceable important role in realising the Chinese dream*” (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 10). The Chinese dream being the revitalisation of Chinese society and achievement of national glory (Kalimuddin & Anderson, p. 116). Overseas Chinese are regarded as an important resource, a bearer perhaps, of the country’s international interests (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 9). Furthermore, considering prior attacks on Overseas Chinese in for example Afghanistan or Pakistan, or the rescue mission the PLA conducted in 2006 in East Timor (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 9), and now, of course, in the Solomon Islands, China has become increasingly wary of the security of their citizens. In fact, Overseas Chinese have a right to request assistance from China to meet their security needs in their host country, should there be a genuine security hazard (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 6). Considering the Overseas Chinese as an economic resource seen from the eyes of Beijing, as well as their right to be guaranteed safety by the Chinese government, one might suggest that the SP is there to strengthen and live up to the promises of Beijing. This is not just the case in the Solomon Islands and the South Pacific, but also in for example, the Middle East. There are about one million Chinese living in this region (including Iran, Turkey, Israel, North Africa, and Sudan), and China have increasingly tried to better the security for its citizens (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 2). Whilst there is no security agreement like our SP, there are other approaches. For example, much of the

concern for security amongst the Overseas Chinese in the Middle East was psychological harm, because of the bias they had of the region prior to moving there, such as that of war, terrorism, and civil unrest (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 7). As a countermeasure, the elites of China focused their rhetoric on trade and economics, hoping to alter the perception Chinese have of the region (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 9). Save their change in how they talk about the Middle East, they are also involved in other policies and agreements to bolster the security for Chinese citizens, such as increasing their evacuation capabilities (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 15). China's evacuation skills consist of hard- and soft capacities. The hard capacities are like "hard power". It contains their ability to use military, risk prevention capabilities, financial capability, any means that use China's direct or "visible" sources to prevent harm. Soft capacities consist of the government's power to reduce harm, such as their relationship with respective nations, bilateral agreements and so on (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 15). Since the 2018 convention, China has focused on its soft capacities by establishing institutional schematics to manage its overseas protection system. On the hard end, the PLA has begun to expand its capabilities for longer overseas missions with an emphasis on evacuation of Chinese citizens (Zhang D. , 2023, p. 16). Like the case in the Middle East, it seems as though the SP is both a work of its soft and hard capacities. Soft is reflected through the rhetoric of equal partnership and mutual benefit, and hard, through the capability of the Chinese military to intervene in the Solomon Islands. As such, the security agreement with the SP may not be as "out of the ordinary" as one might presume, or a measure to challenge Western powers, but rather in line with Chinese foreign policy. Fundamentally, security for its Overseas Chinese is an important element in Beijing's foreign policy, which is also highlighted in the "non-negotiables". Therefore, the SP may be just for security, rather than a geopolitical move as case in the Middle East shows a pattern that can also be seen in the Solomon Islands. Both regions are prone to violence, both places have a sizeable Chinese minority, and both are important economic partners to China. Therefore, whilst the SP can be considered a deviation from Chinese foreign policy, it could, in fact, be considered as something that is consistent with Chinese policy as well. After all, the security agreement is drafted with a country that has a history of riot and violence towards Chinese citizens and settlers. Furthermore, economic prosperity is an important trademark of modern China, and evidently, their overseas citizens are considered an important asset. Just like China adapted to meet the security needs of its people in the Middle East, one might argue that they are doing so now in the Solomon Islands.

And yet, whilst there are similarities, the Middle East and the Solomon Islands are quite different, and the comparison might be unjust. As mentioned, both the Solomon Islands as well

as the Middle East are considered important trade partners for China, and thus the emphasis on security. One does not need to be an economist to rationally come to this conclusion regarding the Middle East, however, the Solomon Islands is of a different nature. How financially important is this cluster of small islands really? Considering the language used by Beijing around the SP and its consideration of its Overseas Citizens as an economic asset, one might consider the Solomon Islands as an important economic partner. The SP underlines the importance of maintaining the peace and protecting its institution spearheaded by Chinese communication of mutual economic benefit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). But it is also a bizarre predicament. How can such a small island nation be of economic importance to the Asian giant? What is this economic benefit? By exploring the economic nature of the bilateral partnership between the Solomon Islands and China, perhaps this can lead to a deeper understanding of the security incentives of the SP.

Conclusively, a centrepiece in Beijing's Pacific involvement is to secure resources for its large population. This is further reflected in the SP, where one of the aims are to "maintain social order", and a further mutually beneficial partnership between the two (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). One may presume that the incentives for Beijing to pursue the SP is to protect its bilateral partnership with the island nation and protect its supply lines, especially considering the anti-Chinese riots that has occurred. China is also one of the most important trading partners in the region. Furthermore, in response to questions and worries regarding the SP, the Chinese minister of foreign affairs Wang Yi, stated that "*China has come to the South Pacific region to build roads and bridges and improve the people's lives, not to station troops or build military bases*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Thus, considering the historical stance of *Tao Guang Yang Hui*, Chinese emphasis on economic growth and the riots on the Solomon Islands causing harm to Chinese businesses, perhaps the SP is but a consequence of financial interests, and not regional influence.

5.4 A mutually beneficial partnership?

Beijing has stated the importance of South-South cooperation and for developing countries to work together, which has been much of their rhetoric to the PICs as well (Firth, 2013, p. 287). A critical geopolitical narrative and its conceptualisation of identity as constantly being re-negotiated would cast the SP as an extension of a relationship between two nations who have found a common identity as developing nations. The space of the South Pacific is by this narrative also considered an arena for economic prosperity and opportunity, rather than a ground for geopolitical powerplay. As such, one might consider the SP as but an extension of the Chinese-Solomon Islands partnership and South-South cooperation, rooted in economic prosperity for both partners. China's interest in the Solomon Islands is also further strengthened by Solomon Islands rich natural resources, comparatively to its regional neighbours (Nautilus Institute , 1994).

China has been present in the Solomon Islands for quite some time, but its development and perhaps interest in the island nation heightened in 2019, when the Solomon Islands cut ties with Taiwan, in favour of China (Silk Road Briefing, 2019). In return, China promised \$730 million to financial aid and has taken on multiple infrastructure projects in the country since (Lu, In Solomon Islands, Some Wary of Beijing-backed Construction, 2022). One example is the 2023 Pacific Games stadiums project where Chinese companies have won five of the seven construction projects (Lu, In Solomon Islands, Some Wary of Beijing-backed Construction, 2022). Moreover, the Solomon Islands was also inducted into the BRI with an aim to make it an attractive destination for Chinese tourism (Silk Road Briefing, 2019). Ultimately, what can be understood as the core of the SP is to protect the investments and institutions present on the Solomon Islands, which in-turn would benefit both parties.

Ultimately, 60% of the Solomon Island’s export (including Hong Kong) goes to China, 99% being rough wood. The Solomon Islands is also heavily dependent on Chinese imports, though not as one sided. (Field, 2021)

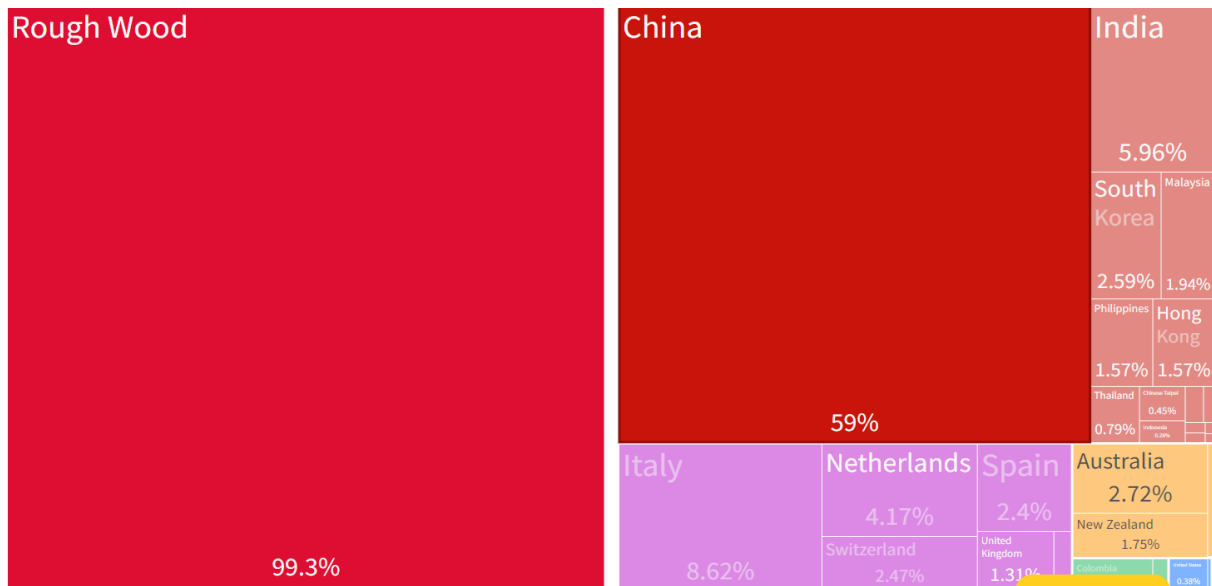


Image retrieved from *The Observation of Economic Complexity*. Latest data available, from 2021. Displaying SI exports¹⁸

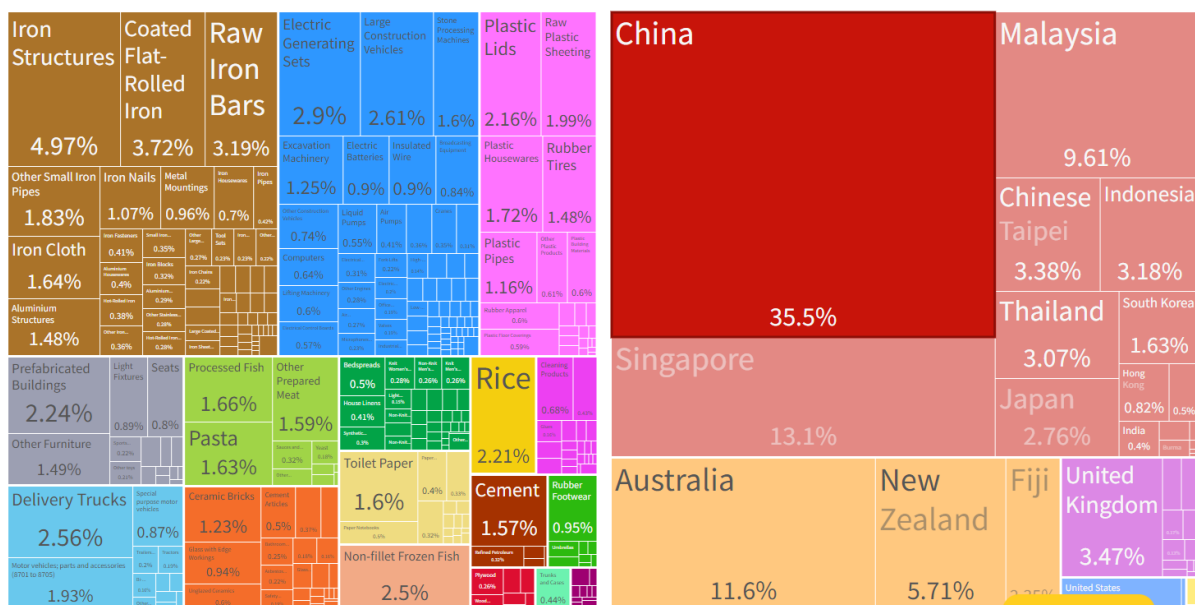


Image retrieved from *The Observation of Economic Complexity*. Latest data available, from 2021. Displaying SI imports¹⁹

¹⁸ Retrieved from <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/slb?depthSelector1=HS4Depth&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0>
¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/slb?depthSelector1=HS4Depth&yearlyTradeFlowSelector=flow0>

About 36% of Solomon Island's imports come from China. Evidently, this heavily demonstrates reliance on the Chinese, from the perspective of the Solomon Islands, but also of Chinese interests. This further leads with the narrative that the SP is but a result of China wishing to maintain domestic stability to protect its own supply lines and interests. However, such an assumption does not address certain issues. Evidently, Solomon Islands is heavily reliant on Beijing, but that cannot be said for China. In 2021, China exported \$167 million to the Solomon Islands, and the import value from the islands were at \$283 million (OEC, 2023). Respectively, the Chinese export to the Solomon Islands constitute 0,07% of their total global export and 0,14% of their global imports (OEC, 2023). Furthermore, the rough wood import, which constitutes 99% of the Solomon Islands export to China, is only the 32nd most imported product in China. Solomon Islands' rough wood export consists of only 0,02% of the total rough woods exported to Beijing, the majority coming from New Zealand and the USA (OEC, 2023). Based on these numbers, and to put it quite bluntly, the Solomon Islands does not mean *anything* to China in financial terms. It certainly questions the need for a security agreement that underlies mutual prosperity. Even considering China's ambition to protect its supply lines, the Solomon Islands is such a small piece in that equation. Admittedly, this feeds into the geopolitical narrative of Western literature. It is indeed hard to justify such an agreement in a nation that means so little financially. However, one can broaden the scope. China may not only be interested in the Solomon Islands, but the wider South Pacific. By contextualising the SP in such a context, it may very well seem more plausible. Such a reflection also enables the discussion, including and perhaps justification of why China's navy has been granted access on Solomon shores. China has stated that they are not interested in a military base and want to effectively protect the institutions of the Solomon Islands (Liu, 2022). The Solomon Islands and the South Pacific is not resource rich comparatively to other regions, but they do offer something China is hungry for. It is the world's most fertile fishing ground (Field, 2021).

Ultimately, whilst the Solomon Islands land sources does not offer a great deal to China, its waters, and the South Pacific waters, do. Overfishing in the China seas have resulted in Beijing extending its fishing navy past its waters and into the South Pacific, as well as to South America and Antarctica for that matter. As the Chinese middle-class grows and the demand of fish rapidly increases, its fishing fleet has also expanded by more than 500% since 2012 (Field, 2021). Furthermore, according to WCPFC records from 2016, more than 600 vessels of the 1300 foreign-operated ships licensed to fish in the South Pacific, was Chinese (Field, 2021). If anything, it demonstrates China's economic power and presence in the region. However, Chinese vessels have also increasingly been in the spotlight for illegal fisheries. Island nations

such as Palau and Vanuatu have detained Chinese vessels, as well as other nations like Vietnamese vessels, for illegal fishing (McDonald, 2020). Consequently, China has banned several of its vessels for indulging illegal fisheries, yet it remains a problem as these vessels often goes rogue and continue its practice (McDonald, 2020). Here, there is an interesting correlation with China's ascension to superpower status, the narrative of critical geopolitics and its identity component, and its economic interests. As a critical geopolitical narrative would suggest, a nation's identity is forged through its foreign policy, and thus its image and reputation. Notably, China is sensitive about its image. Nations that have criticised China, has often been met with sanctions, including respected countries like Norway, South Korea, and Australia (Zhang K. , 2021, pp. 34-37). Evidently, Beijing wishes to be seen in a positive manner. Furthermore, the lessons learned from the depletion of the China Sea, has seen Beijing take measures to reduce its intake of fish, such as reducing the consumption of certain fish as well as pausing the fishing of certain fish to allow for reproduction (Field, 2021). Three things are learned from this; China is a fishing superpower in the South Pacific, they wish to be seen in a positive manner internationally, and they want a more controlled fishing policy to combat depletion. A naval presence in the South Pacific could see this reality come true. A reality where China does not seek to impose itself on this region, but rather work within its already existing boundaries to help uphold international law, further underscored by its desire to work within the structures of the international system. By doing so, their reputation might change from that of a nation of illegal fisheries, to one who combats it. This would also be a centrality to China's primary focus of economic outreach and development, and thus serve in its best interest. As previously stated, protection of its supply lines is important, and a naval presence in the South Pacific controlling and maintaining a structured fishing policy, would see this come true.

Fishing is important for China and one of its most fertile sources is the South Pacific. As such, it would be a rational conclusion to presume that the SP is another element to help control, maintain and restrict fishing within the context of international law. What is problematic however, is that if the SP was indeed to protect the larger fishing industry considering its importance to the Chinese economy and supply lines, why is that not highlighted in the SP? Why was it not underlined in the joint press conference between the two Parties' foreign ministers? Maybe it is understood that the SP is by default part of a wider scheme to protect fishing. Perhaps that is a fact that does not need to be stressed. But it also questions the entire notion of the SP being part of a wider fishing scheme, despite the illustration by officials that it is for mutual prosperity. As such, this brings the discussion to another dimension. The

SP promise to protect and maintain peace in the Solomon Islands, but why then does ships need to pass through and conduct “logistic replenishment”, if we presume that fishing is not an element. What does that even mean in this equation? The SP is part of the Chinese supply lines, but why does a nation that constitutes less than 0.5% of Chinese economic output, require a security agreement. If, supposedly, to combat illegal fishing and contain fishing in general, was part of the wider arrangement, why is that not being stated. Could the SP then, be put in a wider context? The next subsection questions whether the SP can be part of a wider Chinese political scheme, to strengthen its prospect of reunification with Taiwan.

Conclusively, the proposition of the SP as a financial pact is multi-layered, and depending on the viewpoint, presents different opinions and ideas. If one is to look at it from a financial viewpoint to protect its investments in the Solomon Islands, it comes off as unsatisfactory. However, by examining the SP as a wider reign to protect illegal fisheries in the region, the reasonings for the SP seems more equitable. After all, it is a wider region where China is heavily invested for its fishing, and has tried to limit its overfishing, as well as combat illegal fisheries. The issue, however, is that it is not mentioned in the SP or press conferences. As such, perhaps the SP is part of a grander Sino scheme. As much as the SP can be regarded as something that is purely economically driven within the region of the South Pacific, it nevertheless poses geopolitical questions and further alters the course of what has traditionally been the pattern of Chinese foreign politics. As uncovered, security is also an important component for China, and not just in the Solomon Islands, but also globally. Maybe then, the SP is in fact, not about the Solomon Islands or the South Pacific, but rooted in a wider global equation.

5.5 Global Security Pact: The Island Chain Strategy & Taiwan

This subchapter will discuss whether the SP is not so much centred around the Solomon Islands and the South Pacific, but more at achieving goals at home. Critical geopolitics assumes that China is using its foreign policy to construct its identity at home. Within this context, the SP can be considered as a deterrent, especially considering Western influence in the region and their stance on Taiwanese independence. The space of the South Pacific is therefore not to challenge the existing powers to achieve greater influence so that they may climb the international ladder, but rather gain influence to achieve their domestic goals.

Since “contemporary” China’s inception in 1949, its “One China” policy has arguably

been one of its most important policies (Zhang D. , 2017, p. 35). In 2019, Xi went as far as to threaten a forced reunification with the island by 2050 (Tang & Charter, 2019). Naturally, there are numerous hinderances in achieving this goal, both historical and contemporary, but especially Western influence. Taiwan is not just a small island off the Chinese coast, but produces 92% of the world's logic semiconductors, used in modern technology like phones and computers, as well as military technology (Buchholz, Advanced Microchip Production Relies on Taiwan, 2023). As such, it is in the West and the U.S.' interests to keep Taiwan away from China, to safeguard the island for their own strategic advantages. The importance of USA-Taiwan relations is further underpinned by U.S. officials like Nancy Pelosi visiting the island in 2022 (Kuo, Cunningham, Abutaleb, & Pannett, 2022) as well as the Taiwanese president's visit to the U.S. in 2023 (Feng & Ruwitch, 2023). Moreover, the U.S. government has coined Taiwan as a "leading democracy" and a "technological powerhouse" and considered a key American partner in the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Evidently, Taiwan is a wanted piece, both for the Washington and Beijing, but for different reasons. Whilst the U.S. describes it as a democratic nation and strategic partner, China sees it as an integrated part of their nation. But how then, does the SP and the Solomon Islands fit into the equation of this dispute?

There is one Western strategy aimed at containing Sino influence into the wider Pacific, where the SP might function as a countermeasure. It is the Island Chain Policy, comprising of the first, second, and third island chain. It is a geographical chain of islands initially constructed by the U.S. to prevent USSR power projection into the Pacific during the Cold War, but in later years, its purpose served to prevent such an action from China. The First Island Chain (FIC), which is also the most prominent one, consists of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese Archipelago, Ryuku Islands, northwest Philippines, and finally, Taiwan (O'Hanlon & Yeo, 2023, p. 1). In the early 2000s, it essentially contained China within its EEZ. Evidently, the island chain strategy has hindered China from fully exerting its power beyond its initial waters, and Taiwan, being part of that chain, also works within this mechanism. It also demonstrates a case of encirclement by the U.S. and its allies. However, it seems unlikely that a chain of islands can hinder Chinese power projection and its increasing naval powers. After Chinese Air Force crossed the FIC in 2016, officials stated that "*it no longer poses a constraint to Chinese military forces*" (Panda, 2016). Nevertheless, it depicts an encirclement of the Chinese navy, and its inability to fully project its naval forces. The SP, however, alters this reality, as it may now enable China to dock their vessels beyond the FIC, deep into the Pacific, and into "American" and "Australian" waters. Chinese desire for such a possibility is further underpinned by China's

previous failed attempts to attain a military base in Vanuatu, PNG, and Kiribati (Pryke, 2021, p. 257). Importantly, the SP enables not only China to project power beyond the FIC, but even beyond the second island chain and close to the third island chain. It is, however, unlikely that the SP would function as a military base for future Sino South Pacific conquest, but it could serve as a deterrent to the Western navy, should they choose to annex Taiwan. However, the equation is not that simple. Whilst much of the SP has been underlined by worry of increased Chinese influence, we easily forget Western influence in the region.

Like China, the West is also ramping up their presence and power. There is the QUAD alliance, a military dialogue between Australia, Japan, India, and the U.S., with potential inclusion of South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand, that has already conducted military operations together (Rajagopalan, 2022). Then there is the Partners in the Blue Pacific between the U.K., Australia, the U.S., Japan, and New Zealand (The White House, 2022) as well as Australian acquisition of nuclear submarines funded by the U.S., and the UK (Galloway, 2022). All these multilateral happenings are taking place in relatively close proximity to China and encompasses countries from four continents. This, at an age when Chinese rhetoric over Taiwanese reunification is becoming more assertive. Most notably, and perhaps importantly as well, these dialogues and partners were established before the China-Solomon Islands partnership. Evidently, the list of Chinese allies grows thin, and whilst the focus is largely on the worry of Chinese influence in the South Pacific, and their political aim and desires, Western influence is easily forgotten, or maybe conveniently ignored. Moreover, the mentioned



Western partnerships and dialogues are strikingly like that of an encirclement, a contemporary island-chain-strategy perhaps. As such, it makes one wonder whether the SP is but a reaction to Western measures and their attempt to counter, contain or reduce Chinese influence.

Admittedly, the notion that the SP can counter-measure Western powers also seems redundant and unlikely. The SP does not allow China to dock its navy on the Solomon Islands whenever they please, as illustrated in the SP as well as the Three Principles. It is subject to a mutual bilateral partnership, respect for each other's sovereignty and international law. The Chinese navy can only be present upon request by the Solomon Islands²⁰. Thus, the notion that Beijing can project their navy whenever they see fit as a measure to threaten Western powers, falters. It is also questionable whether Honiara will allow Chinese vessels at their shores to provoke Western agents. After all, whilst the Solomon Islands is increasing its partnership with China, they are also firmly trading and involved in diplomatic missions with the West as well. As such, whilst the SP allows for Chinese navy in the region, they are still subject to the approval of Honiara, and would still be heavily outnumbered by the Western navy in the region. After all, the SP is but a bilateral partnership between two sovereign nations subject to international law. Thus, it is hard to see the SP actually challenge Western South Pacific hegemony. At least, by its own. To take this discussion further and perhaps make it a little more interesting and thought provoking, one can look at the case of the SCO.

The SCO was founded on the principles of regional stability but has transformed into the largest intergovernmental organisation in the world, both in terms of land area and population (United Nations, 2021). China's "regional" security cooperation now includes nations in Europe as well as the Middle East and North Africa. Though not part of the SCO, China's security arrangements, now also reaches the South Pacific through the SP. Moreover, the SCO is looking into including Iran as well, a long-term adversary of the West (United Nations, 2021). All this, at a time when Xi has stated that China must "prepare for war" (Center for China Analysis, 2023, p. 1). By putting the SP next to the SCO, could it be questioned whether it is an attempt to expand Sino global outreach and influence onto something that could be globally changing, or at least a counter to Western military powers? This could also be in line with its GSI proposal for a broader, a global perhaps, security arrangement. The hypothesis here is that considering the SCO and its expanse, such as the inclusion of Iran, as well as the acquisition of bilateral security agreements in the South Pacific and the attempt to attain such achievement with the wider PICs, perhaps the SP is part of a wider Chinese strategy that aims

²⁰ Appendix 1

to challenge and counter Western influence, that in turn could make the reunification with Taiwan more plausible. It is an interesting thought, but admittedly, poses more problems than solutions. It has already been established that it seems unlikely that the SP can counter Western influence, and the same problems arises when looking at the SCO. Even if the organisation was part of a grander scheme to counter Western influence and even go to war against its adversaries, the SCO hosts close Western allies. India, for example, is part of the SCO, but also a part of the QUAD, an organisation that has already conducted joint military exercises (Rajagopalan, 2022). Also, considering the border clashes between those two nations recently, it is hard to picture them allying for a potential war (Davidson & Hassan, 2022). Then there is the case of Turkey, which is a NATO member. As such, it can be hard to justify the SCO as well as the SP as a counter to Western military influence and NATO. It is a provocative thought nevertheless, and maybe something that should require more attention and research. Irrespective of Taiwan and the presented discussion, it does however showcase China's increasing global footprint and its initiation in multilateral agreements not spear-headed by Western countries. A pattern of its changing behaviour in the international sphere.

Conclusively, the effectiveness of the SP as a singular entity aiming to counter Western influence towards Taiwan, might be a hard sell. What it does, however, is exclude Western allies away from the U.S., most notably, Australia and New Zealand. This is also a pattern of foreign policy that we increasingly see from Beijing. By isolating Australia, China may ascend to a greater position in the South Pacific to maybe realise their regional security agreement, which in turn, could pose as a stronger threat towards Western actors should there be a conflict between China and Taiwan. The SP may then simply be a way to disconnect Australia and New Zealand from the USA, which could perhaps be a way of realising its One China Policy or just get greater South Pacific influence in general. The SP may also be symbolic towards Australia, in an effort to force it back to the Chinese economic fold. After all, Australia, it seems, is one of the few countries that seem resistant towards China's coercion tactics.

5.5.1 Global SP: The Australia Problem

“There has been foreign interference in Australian politics and so we say, the Australian people stand up!”

Then prime minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull announced in December 2017 (Kassam, 2021, p. 247). This was in response to a political scandal in which a Chinese political donor and businessman had been warned by an Australian senator that he may be under surveillance (McKenzie, Massola, & Baker, 2017). This further led to various domestic policies that restricted Chinese operation in Australia, such as the exclusion of Huawei in its 5G network development (McGuirk, 2022). The effects of the events of late 2017 and 2018 was but a starting point of deteriorating bilateral relations. However, the magnitudes in those days, were unmatched as to what was to come. In the early stages of the pandemic, Canberra called for an international inquiry spearheaded by the WHO into the origin of the coronavirus (Hurst, 2020). Naturally, it was met with ferocity from Chinese officials who imposed heavy sanctions on Australian exported goods, such as an 80% tariff on imported barley (Kassam, 2021, pp. 248-249). Perhaps this was but a tipping point of the already deteriorating relations, but it is also in accordance with Chinese pattern of punishing those who criticises the regime. Presumably, Beijing may have wished for Canberra to yield its position, and to once again, come into the fold for its economic benefit. Instead, whilst China increased their assertiveness, so did Australia. Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly as well, the sanctions backfired. Whilst the newly imposed tariffs estimated to cost Australian farmers 330 million AUD, it costed China 3.6 billion AUD (Tillett, 2020). The initial assumption, from both parties, would be that the Australian economy would really struggle considering its heavy reliance on the Chinese market. However, Australian exported goods are also vital to the Chinese economy and contrary to what many may believe, Chinese import markets are not necessarily that diverse. 60 percent of iron ore imports, roughly half of its liquefied natural gas imports and around 40 percent of its coal imports are from Australia, and they were all met with sanctions (Kassam, 2021, p. 249). Thus, Beijing’s history of using coercion as a tactic to their advantage, failed. Furthermore, it resulted in Australia hardening their resolve towards China, with a joint consensus on both political wings to strive for a more restrictive policy towards Beijing and to diversify their markets (Westcott, 2022). This was further fuelled by an overwhelming figure of 94 percent of Australians expressing the desire for the government to find alternative markets and to reduce its economic dependency on China (Kassam, 2021, p. 251). As such, one may start to wonder

whether the SP is to, whilst not perhaps threaten Canberra, but in the very least rattle them. This becomes ever-more plausible when linking it up to the previous point of Australia being a part of the QUAD, Partners in Blue Pacific, its acquisition of nuclear submarines, being the second largest Western military actor in the South Pacific as well as increasing its military budget by 8% (Mair, 2022). Save the deterioration and military aspect, the SP may also be an attempt to strongman Australia back into Chinese economic dependency. As such, the political thought behind the SP may also be an attempt at bringing Canberra to its knees, something their economic sanctions failed to do. Such a dent may also weaken the island chain strategy, or at least show the Western powers that “we are here”. Perhaps, the SP is but a measure to punish or push back against Australia, which in turn would greatly weaken the Western led organisations in the region.

5.6 Political aim of the SP

Finally, how can we justly understand the political aim of the SP through the proposed discussions? Admittedly, the most satisfactory analysis, is that the SP is indeed there for security of the Solomon Islands. While there are some holes to this perception, it falls as the most logical conclusion. Consider the Honiara riots, Chinese investments in the Solomon Islands, as well as China’s emphasis on security in its non-negotiables, as well as pursuing security for its Overseas Citizens outside the South Pacific as well. It is therefore not unthinkable that China would want to protect their citizens, which is considered an important economic asset, as well as their investments. Nevertheless, the economic aspect of the SP proves a little confusing. Solomon Islands represents such a small piece in China’s economic equation, however, when contextualising in the wider fishing category of the South Pacific it seems more plausible. What is problematic however, is that if this really was an important, it would be reasonable to include it in the SP as well as the Three Principles, which it does not. The hopes for national reunification with Taiwan may also be a plausible reason for the SP. This is underpinned by China’s historic, as well as contemporary, willingness to see the island reunite with the mainland. China’s initial reason for entering the South Pacific, was to thwart Taiwanese support and as they have increased their assertiveness towards Taiwan, it is not unthinkable that a naval base on the Solomon Islands could be part of a larger scheme to potentially annex the island, especially in terms of deterring Western forces. This is quite an interesting take and can serve for a wider and broader discussion. It is, however, unlikely that

one navy base in the Solomon Islands could have such an impact, however, considering China's persistent in trying to attain more of similar agreements, it is not unlikely that the SP in question is but a small piece of a grander Chinese scheme. This, however, is quite speculative and requires more research. Lastly, there is one small, but important, element that needs to be underlined. Evidently, there are many ways and narratives to understand this security pact, depending on your view and framework. Nevertheless, considering the general elusiveness of a country's foreign policy, both in the West and the East, a plausible conclusion would be that we simply do not know. All the presented discussion and analysis may simply be speculative, and quite frankly, they are. Consider the introduction chapter, where scholars much smarter and insightful than me, concluded in 2021 that a security agreement in the South Pacific was unlikely, and yet it happened only a year later. If anything, it shows the unpredictable nature of international affairs. As such, we may really never know why this SP came to life. Perhaps it is part of a wider Chinese policy that is being generated by their elite to fulfil some plan they have yet to announce in maybe thirty years' time, or maybe the SP is not really that big of a deal and has already overstayed its time in the spotlight. Admittedly, it is a little unfulfilling to contemplate such a conclusion. Nevertheless, the failure to predict Chinese foreign policy illuminate such a reality. We simply may not know, for maybe a few more years, if ever. What is also clear is that the topic of the Solomon Islands as well as the South Pacific requires more research. As underlined, it is an area that does not get much attention, but nevertheless serves as an important factor in the international world. The lack of research has also limited this thesis and have presented it as quite speculative. But that is, perhaps, the nature of international politics. We did not predict the Security Pact, how then, are we to predict what the aim of the Security Pact is?

6. What Now? Pax Americana's End

This chapter aims to conclude the discussion with some reflective thoughts as to how we might move forward when looking at China.

Regardless of what the SP tells us, and what China's motives are, it has shown that the global world is changing. The Pact in itself may not mean much globally, or even regionally for that matter. As is the nature of the wider South Pacific. It all is but a tiny drop in a very vast ocean. Even if we look at what the SP enables, such as the presence of the Chinese navy, as the fear is by the regional powers, they will still find themselves in waters dominated by Australian and American vessels. As such, the contents, and functions of the SP in itself is not of importance in this reflection, but what it represents is. Regardless of whether Chinese motives were financial, or to futureproof a Taiwanese annexation, or to counter Western influence, or whatever it may be, it illustrates a China willing to be louder on the global stage, a shift from its "hide and bide time" strategy. Whilst historically China was happy to exist passively within the international structures, in the shadow of other greater powers, they are now eager to be an essential player, being active in international organisations as well as being vocal in shaping international laws and norms that are yet to be defined (Council of foreign relations, 2023). Consequently, their global influence is expanding. Consider the recent Saudi Arabia-Iran deal, brokered by China. A conflict fuelled by religion, yet peace (of some sorts at least) negotiated by a country that in essence forbids religion (Gallagher, Hamasaeed, & Nada, 2023). It is quite remarkable and demonstrates the influence Xi and Beijing has amounted the past decades. The Sino machine is also affecting the West. Beijing is increasingly flirting with Europe, by trying to emphasise their importance, as well as making them less dependent on the U.S., but more on China (Center for China Analysis, 2023, p. 12). Simultaneously, Beijing has reached out to Washington to underscore and build on the mutual interest of maintaining their competitive relationship to reduce the risk of crisis, and war by any accident (Center for China Analysis, 2023, p. 12). Apart from diplomacy, Beijing is increasingly aiming to define and be a larger voice in creation of international laws and norms that are yet to be solidified, like cybersecurity. China's assertiveness towards cybersecurity and censorship is no secret, and they are increasingly using their influence and power in international institutions like the UN, to promote a more restrictive cyber policy (Council of foreign relations, 2023). On the other hand, Western powers are reactive to this new reality. The Huawei dilemma is a great example, where countries like the US, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand, have banned Huawei for spying allegations (Buchholz, Which Countries Have Banned Huawei?, 2020). Even if we leave the

SP out of the equation, the international world may seem rather heated. Similar to the presented examples, the SP reflects a reality in which China is more active, more vocal, and more adamant in the global sphere. A willingness to go to uncharted territory to perhaps shake up the established foundations. This presents the West with an interesting dilemma. Is the age of Western domination and *Pax Americana* at an end? Is that what the SP ultimately tells us? If that is the case, what does that actually translate to in practice? I believe there might be something to learn from China and their historic ascension to power. They have repeated numerous times in the past to peacefully co-exist within the international system. Whilst they have been adamant in what is important to them like the non-negotiables as well as geopolitics close to home, they, like every other nation, is subject to the norms and laws of the international society. I wonder, maybe it is time for Western actors to do adopt some of the rhetoric's of Beijing. Perhaps, it is time to come to terms with the reality that the coming centuries will not resemble a *Pax Americana*, but rather a multipolar international system centralised around Beijing and Washington. Of course, it is easier said than done. As the SP has shown, the overwhelming perception of Chinese "incursion" is met with suspicion and aggression. Perhaps they are right in doing so, but one must not be blinded and also take time to consider that, maybe, China is doing X and Y not to take over the world. It is a hard question, and I can sympathise with both arguments. What I do believe is clear, and what I hope this thesis has adequately shown, is that a variety of narratives should be considered when a geopolitical chess game is being played. The world is becoming increasingly multipolar, and perhaps the reaction to the SP tells us that we should not be so hesitant and resistant to change, and not view everything that might seem a little odd and unusual, with malicious intent. The SP is depicting an image displaying the world not solely of the West, but also the East. Maybe the SP should then, not be treated as something that is bad, or not studied in a manner that teaches us about potential Chinese motives, but rather a consequence of declining Western supremacy. Perhaps this will provide us with a broader, and more in-depth framework of the contemporary international system that can help us understand and make sense of the world more adequately as well as help us to navigate this new international world that is no longer just our own. This may also help us to peacefully co-exist in this complex and often confusing international world.

7. Conclusion

China shocked the world when they signed a bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands. Western commentators and politicians worried this incursion into “America’s Lake” would militarise a peaceful region and bring about an unwanted geopolitical rivalry between Beijing and Washington. The description and characterisation of the SP has been the root for this thesis. The reaction was rather one sided and failed to address various elements of the SP, as well as adequately discussing it in another light than something that would inherently cause a geopolitical rivalry. By studying the SP through the perspective of critical geopolitics, this thesis has attempted to broaden our understanding of the SP, as well as China’s global outreach. This, at an age when China is becoming ever-more vocal and important on the global stage but is perhaps not met with applause and welcome from the already traditional and established world actors. As such, the notion of geopolitics is becoming increasingly more popular amongst political commentators and journalists and even politicians, but to resume the geopolitical narratives that plagued the world during the Cold War, is limiting and unproductive. As such, by examining the SP through the lenses of critical geopolitics, a scholarship that locates itself within the camp of classical geopolitics but disenchant some of its doctrine and aims to supplement the scholarship by proposing more contemporary and different understandings, it has enabled us to view the SP in a different manner. The thesis asked the question, what is China’s political aim with the SP in an attempt to distance itself from the already existing perception of the SP and consider whether it is part of reoccurring tendencies in Sino politics.

There were three factors other than geopolitical gains that were underlined as a potential aim for the SP. The first element was perhaps the most obvious channel of discussion; China’s aim with the SP was to provide security for the residents of the Solomon Islands considering the recent riots in Honiara that also decimated Chinatown. It was uncovered that whilst the likes of a security agreement are rather rare, in fact non-existent, for China, their desire to protect their Overseas Citizens is not. China is involved in areas like the Middle East to protect its citizens, albeit not through a direct security agreement, but other measures. Notably, Overseas Chinese citizens have a right to request security by the Chinese government in their host countries, and they are considered an important economic asset by Beijing. Considering the lengths Chinese authorities go to protect its citizens in the Middle East, China’s very aim in the Solomon Islands might just be to protect its citizens. Like the Middle East, the Solomon Islands also host a sizeable Chinese minority. Whilst this conclusion was somewhat satisfactory, it also presented itself with problems. The Middle East, as well as most parts of the world, are

an important economic asset to China, but it is questionable whether the South Pacific can be contextualised as such. From this insecurity, the SP was discussed in financial terms. Perhaps, China's aim with the SP was to protect its investments in the area. However, this also proved to be unsatisfactory. The economic output of the Solomon Islands to China is minimal and constitutes 0,07% of their global import. As such, it can be hard to conceptualise why China wants a security agreement to protect an asset that hardly means anything to their tremendous economy. The idea of maybe the SP was there to combat illegal fisheries was aired, however this was also deemed unsatisfactory, as neither the SP nor the Three Principles underlined any combat of illegal fishing. If that was indeed a root cause, why was it never mentioned. As such, the discussion turned to the last point, of whether the SP is part of a Chinese puzzle to realise its One China policy. The SP allows for naval presence and thus power projection beyond the FIC and into the South Pacific, "America's Lake". Ultimately, Western powers are a hindrance for China in achieving this goal. This still leaves questions. It is unlikely that the SP as a singular entity could deter Western forces in their own backyard, but it becomes more plausible when considering China's previous attempts to create a regional security agreement with the other PICs, although this has until this date, failed. Lastly, it was underscored that we may never really know what the purpose is. Western scholars failed to predict the SP and deemed it "unlikely" only a year prior. How then, can we really properly know and understand the actual reasoning behind the SP? Perhaps we are overthinking it, and it really is not that big of a deal, or perhaps it is part of a wider Chinese scheme that will only come to light years later. As such, the SP presents itself as a very interesting event. It can be adequately placed in a number of Chinese foreign political patterns, one more satisfying than the other, which in turn make it complicated to truly uncover an adequate and reasonable motive for this agreement. Ultimately, it needs more research. This is not just true for the SP, and the Solomon Islands, but the PIC in general. As underscored, there is a lack of research done into the PIC, and when there is research, the countries are often bundled into one entity rather than individual countries. Consequently, the research that is available is limited, and often mantles the same narratives. Hopefully, this thesis has shed some light on different viewpoints that can be justly used to consider Chinese foreign politics in the South Pacific.

Finally, it was reflected upon whether we should start examining China differently in international politics. For the past century, if not centuries, the world has been heavily influenced and dominated by Western powers. Arguably, we have become quite comfortable with the reality that the international system we exist in, is favouring our corner of the world. Nevertheless, the SP as well as the shifting international sphere is showing that the world is

changing, and that the U.S. together with the West may no longer be the sole superpower. I believe the literature review conducted on the SP illustrate this reality well, where “change” to our regions and areas are usually met with negativity and suspicion. The fact of the matter nevertheless is that the world is becoming increasingly multipolar and just as China underlined the importance of peace and prosperity, perhaps the West should also consider such an approach. That is not to say that we are to yield on every single point of order and forfeit our global powers but come to terms with Rising China and actively try to work with the changing world order, rather than against it. After all, being a superpower, is China’s historic right.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

Framework Agreement Between The Government of the People's Republic of China And the Government of Solomon Islands On Security Cooperation

The government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of Solomon Islands (hereinafter referred to as "China", "Solomon Islands", and collectively "the Parties"), with the view of strengthening security cooperation, on the basis of mutual respect for sovereignty, equality and mutual benefit, and in compliance with domestic laws and regulations of the Parties and applicable international law,

HAVE AGREED as follows:

Article 1 Scope of Cooperation

Solomon Islands may, according to its own needs, request China to send police, armed police, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces to Solomon Islands to assist in maintaining social order, protecting people's lives and property, providing humanitarian assistance, carrying out disaster response, or providing assistance on other tasks agreed upon by the Parties; China may, according to its own needs and with the consent of Solomon Islands, make ship visits to, carry out logistical replenishment in, and have stopover and transition in Solomon Islands, and the relevant forces of China can be used to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects in Solomon Islands.

Article 2 Competent Authorities

The competent authorities for implementing this Framework Agreement shall be:

- (a) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, and Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic;
- (b) Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade, Ministry of Police, and National Security and Correctional Services of Solomon Islands.

A Party shall promptly notify the other of any change in its designation of competent authorities.

When necessary, the competent authorities may designate special departments to establish direct channels of communication.

Article 3 Submission of Request

The request shall be formally submitted in writing by Solomon Islands and forwards to China through diplomatic channels. Should China have any question regarding the authenticity or contents of the request, it may seek solution through consultation by the Parties.

The request shall contain the following items:

1. A brief introduction on the internal security situation of Solomon Islands;
2. The number of police, armed police and military personnel expected from China;
3. Main duties of the security personnel to be sent by China;
4. Duration of the mission.

Article 4 Assessment and Implementation of Request

“Upon receipt of the request, China will carefully assess the feasibility of the mission and respond officially through diplomatic channels as soon as possible.

If China agrees to perform the relevant mission, Solomon Islands shall provide all necessary facilities and assistance, including but not limited to the border entry of personnel and weaponry, intelligence and information support, logistical support, and legal status and judicial immunity of the relevant personnel. The relevant expenses shall be settled through friendly consultation by the Parties.

In light of the performance of the mission, the Parties may shorten or extend as appropriate the duration of the mission by mutual written agreement reached through consultation.

The specific details on the performance of the mission, including jurisdiction, privilege and immunity, shall be negotiated separately by the competent authorities of the Parties.”

Article 5 Confidentiality

Without the written consent of the other party, neither party shall disclose the cooperation information to a third party.

Unless otherwise agreed upon, cooperation information, including media briefings, shall be released upon mutual agreement by the Parties.

Article 6 Settlement of Disputes

Any disputes arising from the interpretation and implementation of the Framework Agreement shall be resolved by the Parties through consultation.

Appendix 2

The first principle.

“The first principle is to fully respect the national sovereignty of Solomon Islands. China-Solomon Islands cooperation is based on Solomon Islands' needs and requirements, on the premise of Solomon Islands' consent, and on the basis of equal consultation. It is never China's foreign policy, nor is it Chinese style, to impose business deals on others, interfere in Solomon Islands' internal affairs, or damage other countries' interests.”

The second principle.

“The second one is to help maintain the social stability of Solomon Islands. China-Solomon Islands security cooperation includes assistance in maintaining social order, protecting lives and property in accordance with the law as well as conducting humanitarian relief and natural disaster response at the request of Solomon Islands. The aim is to help Solomon Islands strengthen police capacity-building, offset the security governance deficit and maintain domestic stability and long-lasting peace and security. China-Solomon Islands security cooperation is aboveboard and frank, not imposing on others, not targeting third parties and not intending to establish military bases”.

The third principle.

“The third one is in parallel with regional arrangements. China supports Pacific Island Countries in strengthening security cooperation and working together to address regional security challenges. China also supports the existing regional security cooperation arrangements. At the same time, China-Solomon Islands security cooperation and the existing regional arrangements complement each other, sharing the same objectives and interests. China-Solomon Islands security cooperation conforms to the common interests of Solomon Islands and the South Pacific region.”