

CHINA LEASES AN ENTIRE PACIFIC ISLAND FOR 75 YEARS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The island of Tulagi served as a South Pacific headquarters for Britain and then Japan. During Second World War, its natural deepwater harbour across from Guadalcanal made it a military gem soldiers fought and died for.

Now Tulagi, part of the Solomon Islands, is about to move into Chinese hands.

Under a secretive deal signed last month with a provincial government in the South Pacific nation, a Beijing-based company with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party has secured exclusive development rights for the entire island of over 1,000 people and its surroundings.

The lease agreement has shocked Tulagi residents and alarmed U.S. officials who see the island chains of the South Pacific as crucial to keeping China in check and protecting important sea routes.

“The geography tells you that this is a good location,” said Anne-Marie Brady, a China scholar at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. “China is expanding its military assets into the South Pacific and is looking for friendly ports and friendly airfields just like other rising powers before them.”

The South Pacific region is rich in natural resources, and China’s investments have provoked worries in the U.S. and Australia that the projects could give Beijing an opening to establish a military foothold for everything from ships and planes to its own version of the GPS.

China is also pushing to end the region’s status as a diplomatic stronghold for Taiwan.

The Solomons cut ties to Taipei and allied with Beijing just a few days before the Tulagi deal. A second Pacific nation, Kiribati, followed suit the same week.

Even compared to previous Chinese development deals in nearby countries — including a wharf in Vanuatu — the Tulagi agreement is remarkable for both its scope and the lack of public input.

The renewable 75-year lease was granted to the China Sam Enterprise Group, a conglomerate founded in 1985 as a state-owned enterprise, according to corporate records.

A copy of the “strategic cooperation agreement,” obtained by the *NYT* and verified by two people with knowledge of the deal, reveals both the immediate ambitions of China Sam and the potential for infrastructure that could share civilian and military uses.

Infrastructure plans

Signed on September 22, the agreement includes provisions for a fishery base, an operations centre, and “the building or enhancement of the airport.” Though there are no confirmed oil or gas reserves in the Solomons, the agreement also notes that China Sam is interested in building an oil and gas terminal.

These are just the explicit possibilities. The document also states that the government will lease all of Tulagi and the surrounding islands in the province for the development of “a special economic zone or any other industry that is suitable for any development.”

The provincial governor who signed the deal, Stanley Maniteva, could not be reached for comment. Noting that laws and landowner rights would be respected, he told local reporters this week that the agreement had not been completed.

A military installation would carry strategic and symbolic significance. Some U.S. officials believe China’s efforts in the region echo the period before and during the Second World War, when Japan wrested control of island assets, which were won back in turn by American and Australian troops in bloody battles.

But it is also a matter of feasibility: China goes where there is value and interest. With the U.S. pulling back in much of the world under President Donald Trump’s America First policy, Beijing is often knocking on doors left open. NY Times

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