
SOLOMON ISLANDS POISED TO SWITCH ALLEGIANCE FROM TAIWAN TO CHINA

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The Solomon Islands intends to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan and align itself with Beijing, the leader of a high-level government team representing the South Pacific archipelago has said.

The switch, which still needs to be formalised, would be a prize for China in its bid to peel away allies from what it considers a wayward province with no right to state-to-state ties. Only 17 countries now recognise Taiwan.

The Solomons foreign relations committee began hearings into the issue this week, looking into the question of whether to sever existing ties with Taiwan. The committee will present their report to parliament for deliberation.

Solomons lawmaker Peter Shanel Agovaka told a parliamentary committee that after four decades of independence and a long-term alliance with Taiwan, it was time to make a change.

We cannot sit for the next 40 years with our friends Taiwan. It is time that we make new friends - its time that we should move on with our life, Agovaka said on Wednesday, according to a recording of the meeting in the capital Honiara.

Our new relationship will deal with a One China policy; a One China policy that recognises only Beijing as the official government administration, he said in the recording, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters.

The meeting was open to the public, but the recording has not been broadcast.

Agovaka is a senior minister and leader of a government team convened recently to speak directly with Beijing.

However, on Friday Taiwan warned the Solomon Islands that relationships with China has left some Pacific nations in a debt trap.

Chinas expansion in the Pacific has made many countries to fall into the trap of debt, Joanne Ou, spokeswoman for Taiwans foreign ministry, told Reuters.

The flashy infrastructure that China promised has caused serious damage to the local ecosystem and infringed their sovereignty, she said.

China and Taiwan have fought a tug-of-war for diplomatic recognition in the South Pacific for decades, with some island nations switching allegiances for financial gain.

The South Pacific has been a diplomatic stronghold for Taiwan, where formal ties with six of the 16 island nations make up more than a third of its total alliances.

In June, the Guardian learned that the Solomon Islands planned to make a decision about whether to transfer its allegiance to China within 100 days - bringing it to mid-September.

The timeframe for the decision was set out by the Solomon Islands foreign minister Jeremiah Manele during a bilateral meeting with Australian prime minister Scott Morrison on Monday, but the sensitive discussion was not meant to be made public.

Solomon Islands has been assessing its Taiwan alliance since new prime minister Manasseh Sogavare took control after a general election in April and started looking for ways to improve the countrys economic prospects.

The former British protectorate, an archipelago of just over 600,000 people, relies on timber exports to generate income.

The Solomons have recognised Taiwan since 1983. It is the largest of the Taiwan-aligned Pacific countries, with access to the airfields and deepwater ports dating back to World War Two.

But, a diplomatic shift threatens to divide the island nation, with 16 MPs citing potential compromised freedoms as a reason against the switch in an open letter last month, while the countrys university student population is largely backing Taiwan.

Anti-graft agency Transparency Solomon Islands has urged caution in changing ties over concerns that the Solomons will not be able to hold firm against Beijings interests.

China is offering to bankroll a development fund for the Solomons to help with a transition away from Taiwan, which currently provides an annual \$8.5 million contribution to the island nation.

The Lowy Institute said in a report last month that Canberra and Washington are concerned about the Solomons switching recognition to Beijing.

A switch by any one (of the states that recognise Taiwan) may stimulate others to abandon Taipei, the Australia-based think-tank said.

The number of nations recognising Taiwan has been dwindling, with El Salvador in Central America, Burkina Faso in West Africa and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean, all switching to China last year.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/06/solomon-islands-poised-to-switch-allegiance-from-taiwan-to-china>

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