



AS IT IS

Chinese Company Looks to Buy Solomon Islands Seaport

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A Chinese state-owned company is negotiating to buy a forestry **plantation** with a port and World War II airstrip in the Solomon Islands. The United States and its allies are concerned that China wants to create a naval stronghold in the South Pacific country.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) reported Monday that a delegation from China Forestry Group Corporation visited the plantation in 2019. The plantation, or tree-growing farm, covers most of Kolombangara Island. The Chinese delegation asked questions about the size of the port and deepness of the water during its visit. But it showed little interest in the trees.

The plantation is currently owned by Kolombangara Forest Products Ltd. (KFPL). It is owned by Taiwanese and Australian shareholders. The company's board wrote to the Australian government in May warning of the risks to Australia of such a sale, ABC reported.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade wrote back to the board last week saying it was "not intervening," ABC reported.

Foreign Minister Penny Wong's office said in a statement to *The Associated Press* that Australia was continuing to work with KFPL on the possible sale.

"We value our position as Solomon Islands' first security and development partner of choice, and we are committed to working together to face our shared **challenges**," the statement added.

KFPL Chairman Matthew English declined to comment on the possible sale. But one KFPL official told AP that the board wanted the Australian government to make an offer or help an Australian company make an offer.

The U.S. and its allies' have grown more concerned over China's growing influence in the South Pacific Ocean area. In 2019, the Solomon Islands changed its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.

Earlier this year, China and the Solomons signed a security agreement. That has created fears of a Chinese military presence less than 2,000 kilometers off Australia's northeast coast.

Australia already has a security treaty with the Solomon Islands. Australian police have been keeping peace in the capital Honiara since rioting late last year.

Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare said that China will never be permitted to create a military base in his country. His office did not respond to a request for comment on Monday.

Silas Tausinga is a Solomons lawmaker who represents an area near Kolombangara. He said China has a strong desire to have military power in the Solomons.

"...Australia should be worried about it," Tausinga told ABC.

I'm Dan Novak.

Dan Novak adapted this story for VOA Learning English based on reporting by The Associated Press.

Words in This Story

plantation — *n.* a group of trees that have been planted together

challenge — *n.* a difficult task or a problem

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