

More ASPI junk ‘research’ on China’s ‘influence’ in Solomons

The propaganda drumbeat against Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare goes on, as he continues to set an example of national sovereignty for the rest of the Western Pacific region by refusing to trash its relations with China at the USA’s and Canberra’s behest. Most recently, Solomon Islands representatives reportedly neutered what was intended to be an anti-China “Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership” at the 29 September US-Pacific Island Countries Summit in Washington until all references to China, and to an implied requirement to “consult” with the USA on security matters, has been removed. Meanwhile the US State Department had commissioned its agents at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) to produce a report¹ which claims that China, with the collusion of the Solomon Islands government, is taking over the country’s public political discourse, sowing “false narratives” about Western political interference via social and conventional media, “suppressing” contrary information, and coercing into silence any local journalists and media organisations that won’t toe its line.

Anyone who reads ASPI’s report, however, would have to admit that the State Department really isn’t getting its money’s worth. Not only does it follow ASPI’s usual standard of providing no real evidence to back up its claims, but it even admits that most of the Chinese “information operations” it does claim to have identified—which, when viewed dispassionately, appear to be nothing more than run-of-the-mill public relations practices—had little to no impact. What ASPI and its masters seem really to be worried about is that their own stranglehold on news and social media, which has heretofore allowed them to spread their own propaganda virtually unchallenged, will increasingly break down as Solomon Islands’ engagement with China expands.

As the *Australian Alert Service* has reported, the governments of Australia, the USA and Taiwan have been working to undermine and oust Sogavare’s government ever since he switched diplomatic recognition from

Taiwan to Beijing as the seat of government of China in 2019.² After he defied Australian and US pressure and signed a security cooperation treaty with China in April of this year, the Australian government and media also launched a propaganda campaign to delegitimise him in the eyes of the Australian public, in preparation for a potential uprising or military intervention to remove him.³ ASPI’s report, titled “Suppressing the truth and spreading lies: How the CCP is influencing Solomon Islands’ information environment”, was published by its International Cyber Policy Centre (ICPC) on 5 October, no doubt timed so it would be circulating in the news when Sogavare arrived in Canberra for a meeting with Australian PM Anthony Albanese the following day.

The mainstream media, of course, obliged by uncritically parroting ASPI’s allegations verbatim. The 5 October *Australian Financial Review*, for example—presumably having been sent an advance copy (or a cheatsheet to copy and paste from), as its article preceded the publication of the report itself by several hours—described the report as “A detailed study of media, Facebook posts and official statements by Chinese diplomats [which] showed that the Chinese Communist Party pushed ‘false narratives’ after riots in the capital, Honiara, in November 2021 and following the leaking of a China-Solomon Islands security deal in March this year.” But it doesn’t. What it actually shows is simply Chinese officials and state-owned media presenting their own viewpoint on current events (that is, doing their jobs), which ASPI casts as illicit simply because it is China doing it. And it does so on the basis of a so-called analytic framework invented by one of the report’s co-authors, in which truth and facts are categorised as “disinformation” if they happen to concur with the designated adversary’s position.



ASPI’s report, stamped with the logo of its Washington DC office.

‘Not intended to assess truthfulness’

According to the report, “the CCP has used its propaganda and disinformation capabilities to push false narratives in an effort to shape the Solomon Islands public’s perception of security issues and foreign partners ... [with] a strong focus on undermining Solomon Islands’ existing partnerships with Australia and the US. Although some of the CCP’s messaging occurs through routine diplomatic engagement, there’s a coordinated effort to influence the population across a broad spectrum of information channels ... [including] Chinese party-state media, CCP official-led statements and publications in local and social media, and the amplification of particular individual and pro-CCP content via targeted Facebook groups.”

The authors arrived at this conclusion via “quantitative analysis of publicly available data from a range of sources, including articles from Solomon Islands media outlets, articles from party-state media and Facebook posts in public groups and local media pages based in Solomon Islands.” This included a “simple categorical analysis” of comments on Facebook in response to articles posted by leading Solomon Islands media outlets the *Solomon Star*, the *Island Sun* and the *Solomon Times*; posts by the Chinese Embassy; and public posts by Pacific Islands-based pages and groups that shared links to Chinese “party-state media” (ASPI’s dysphemism for Chinese public broadcasters) in the 12 weeks following the beginning of the Honiara riots on 24 November 2021, and in the six weeks after a draft of the China-Solomon Islands security agreement was leaked on 24 March. “Relevant comments were categorised as being positive (pro) or negative (anti) towards a particular country or group, such as ‘the West’, which had to be explicitly stated in the comment. Comments that referred to more than one grouping (China, the West, or the Solomon Islands Government) were categorised for analytical purposes based on the dominant subject of the comment.”

Their analytic approach for this report, the authors say, “drew upon a previously published framework, titled ‘information influence and interference’, used to understand strategy-driven, state-sponsored information activities.” A footnote attributes that framework to co-author Dr Miah Hammond Errey, a former senior analyst at ASPI’s ICPC and now director of the Emerging Technology Program at the University of Sydney’s United States Studies Centre, in a paper titled “Understanding and assessing information influence and foreign interference”, published in the Winter (August) 2019 issue of the *Journal of Information Warfare*.

Interestingly, the report provides links to virtually all its other sources, but not this one, despite it being [freely available online](#)—almost as though they didn’t want their audience to read it for themselves. Especially, one would think, the passage which states: “The information influence and interference assessment tool is *not intended to assess the truthfulness of communication or to prove truthfulness of information—or disinformation.*” (Emphasis added.) Which is to say, it would seem Dr Hammond-Errey not only does not care who has the right of the matter (something we have come to expect from an ASPI ICPC analyst), but regards the truth as disinformation if it supports the adversary’s (in this case China’s) side of the argument.

The logical consequence of this and the “simple categorical analysis” method outlined above, is that once a Chinese diplomat or media outlet makes a factual argument, any Solomon Islander who knows or deduces that same truth, and states it publicly, is assessed by ASPI to have fallen under their “influence”, even if the facts of the matter—for example, that certain Solomon Islands politicians opposed to Sogavare and China make no secret of being on the payrolls of the Taiwanese and US governments—are well known and not in dispute.

Little impact

The rest of the ASPI report is the usual hodgepodge of assertions without evidence, misrepresented sources, and overwrought conclusions not actually supported by the data from which they are supposedly drawn. It states that following the Honiara riots, “the CCP pushed a fabricated narrative that accused Australia, the US and Taiwan of instigating the riots, fomenting unrest, and smearing the relationship between Solomon Islands and China”, for which ASPI claims it had “no evidence”. The Chinese state-owned media reports it cites as examples, however, made their case by citing: Sogavare’s statement in November 2021 that the riots had been instigated by Opposition Leader Matthew Wale and “encouraged by other powers ... [which] are discouraging Solomon Islands to enter into diplomatic relations with [China]”; the fact, as reported by Australia’s ABC News, that since 2019 the US State Department had begun bypassing Sogavare’s government and pouring tens of millions of dollars in “aid” directly to Malaita Province, whence the rioters had come; that Malaita’s separatist leader Premier Daniel Suidani purports still to “recognise” Taiwan, in exchange for which he has accepted money, material aid and personal favours unauthorised by the national government; and that senior Australian and US officials had visited Honiara in March and April this year with the openly stated purpose of convincing Sogavare not to sign the security cooperation agreement with China, which both the Biden Administration and Australia’s then-PM Scott Morrison declared a threat to their national security—Morrison even going so far as to call the imagined prospect of a Chinese military presence in Solomon Islands a “red line” and issue thinly veiled threats of an Australian-led, US-backed military intervention in response. In all, a far higher evidentiary standard than Australian media (or ASPI) are wont to adhere to.

Even so, the report acknowledges that these so-called party-state media articles “had little impact on

and penetration into the Solomon Islands' online information environment. They were rarely shared in public Facebook groups and, when they were shared, received mostly anti-China comments in response. Unlike CCP media releases and editorials published in local media, party-state media articles were rarely republished by local media outlets, which favoured content from Western media sources.... The 67 [Chinese state media] articles were shared only a combined 11 times on public Pacific Islands Facebook pages ... and received a total of 90 comments in response." ASPI's real complaint is whilst the majority of social media comments relating to the riots and leaked draft security agreement "were negative towards China and the Solomon Islands Government ... there was an overall decline in anti-China Facebook commentary and an increase in pro-China and anti-West commentary" in the weeks following both events. The most substantial rise in anti-West commentary occurred in the wake of the leaked draft security agreement, when as noted above, Australian and particularly US officials were publicly trying to bully Sogavare into scrapping the deal. This would surely offend any self-respecting people—but according to ASPI, it can only be the result of Chinese brainwashing.

As for the allegation that China is suppressing contrary viewpoints and co-opting and "coercing" local media across the Pacific Islands region, ASPI's sources include an anonymous blog post by someone claiming to be a reporter for the Papua New Guinea *Post-Courier*, who claimed to have evidence that the Chinese embassy there has been bribing managers, editors and journalists at his and another paper, and threatening others into silence—but provided only a photograph of an innocuous 13 April email to the *Post-Courier's* editor from a political attaché, responding politely and professionally to items regarding the China-Solomon Islands security agreement published in that day's paper. Its other "evidence" comprises complaints about a few cancelled press passes at a meeting between Chinese and Fijian officials; a *Guardian* story which claims that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi did not take questions from local media at an event in Timor-Leste (though hilariously, an article it cites regarding Fiji says that in fact he did); and an article in ASPI's own online publication *The Strategist* whingeing about China offering financial aid for cash-strapped and pandemic-hit local news services, licensing state media content to local broadcasters (like the ABC used to do, before Canberra cut funding for its international services), and inviting local reporters on press junkets to China that don't sound much different than those routinely arranged by other governments, including Australia's—and which, indeed, ASPI advocates Canberra do more of, to combat China's influence.

In all, the title of ASPI's report, "Suppressing the truth and spreading lies", is more descriptive of its own contents than of anything China has done.

Footnotes

1. This is not supposition: it is acknowledged on the report's inside front cover that "Funding for this report was provided by the US State Department", and ASPI is listed as an agent of US influence on the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department's Foreign Influence Transparency Register.

2. "[Solomon Islands crisis is largely of Australia's making](#)", AAS, 12 Dec. 2021.

3. "[Stage being set for regime change in Solomon Islands](#)", AAS, 11 May 2022.

By Richard Bardon, *Australian Alert Service*, 19 October 2022