

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a series of responses to speculation that the Solomon Islands might break diplomatic ties in favor of Beijing.

On Aug. 22, the government reassured the public, saying that 15 Solomon Islands lawmakers expressed support for maintaining ties with Taiwan. Earlier this year, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Hsu Szu-chien (許舒楙) told a news conference that then-acting Solomon Islands prime minister Rick Houenipwela would “review, rather than switch,” diplomatic relations.

Taiwan would offer the Solomon Islands a loan of NT\$900 million (US\$28.79 million) to build a stadium as part of its commitment to the country, Hsu said.

Financial incentives are not the only way that ties with Taiwan help its allies, but even in this regard investments from Taiwan are of much greater benefit than those from China.

Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Montenegro, the Maldives and Djibouti have all found themselves unable to repay Chinese loans and have been forced to make harmful concessions. Taiwan’s aid to its allies in the areas of education, medicine and agriculture are carried out as humanitarian assistance efforts, and the loans and donations it provides come without strings attached. Solomon Islanders are largely aware of this and, through posts on social media, many have expressed concern about a potential switch in diplomatic ties.

Chinese investments have also been the cause of environmental destruction in many countries. On Aug. 28, Reuters reported on spills at a Chinese nickel plant in Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) Basamuk Bay. The report cited Madang Governor Peter Yama as telling a local newspaper that the spill was “the worst environmental disaster in PNG history.” A resident who took photographs published with the report said that by pumping waste into the ocean, the plant has “destroyed many species of fishes and reefs” since starting up in 2012.

An influx of Chinese tourists also spurred ally Palau to close one of its key tourist attractions, Jellyfish Lake, in 2017 after large numbers of swimmers were blamed for contributing to plummeting jellyfish numbers, Reuters reported in August last year.

Allies are critical to stability

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The large number of Chinese tourists also caused rent and commodities to skyrocket in Palau, making things unaffordable for many Palauans. While some industry operators have benefited from Chinese tourism, Beijing has shown that it is willing to ban tourist destinations on a whim for political reasons, as it has with Palau since 2017 and as it did with Taiwan last month. In both countries, Chinese tourists have also typically not spent a large amount of money per person, often traveling with tour groups that arrange for transportation and accommodation.

Palauan President Tommy Remengesau, who in 2015 declared most of Palau's territorial waters a marine sanctuary, hopes to develop its tourism industry in a way that protects its environment and prioritizes "quality versus quantity" to attract tourists, Reuters said.

The US Department of Defense's first *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, released on June 1, identified Taiwan as one of the US' strategic partners in the region. The report called for other US partners to "facilitate increased Taiwanese access to international spaces" and urged "other nations to more closely network with Taiwan in those spaces."

China has been seeking to increase its influence in the Asia-Pacific, which might pose a threat to regional environmental and political stability. Taiwan and the US, who have shared interests, must seek to effectively communicate with these countries the risks of embracing China too closely and the benefits of maintaining strong ties with like-minded democratic nations. The ministry must cooperate with US officials to engage political and industry leaders to secure their support.

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