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중국, 솔로몬제도와 군사협력 추진...호주·뉴질랜드 '화들짝'

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협정 초안 유출...호주·뉴질랜드 우려 솔로몬 제도 "군사기지 요청 안 할 것"

중국이 남태평양의 섬나라 솔로몬 제도와 안보 협정을 추진하는 사실이 드러나면서, 이웃 국가인 오스트레일리아와 뉴질랜드가 긴장하고 있다. 협정이 체결되면 중국이 앞마당인 동중국해를 넘어 미국과 곧바로 마주할 수 있는 남태평양에 진출할 수 있다는 점에서 관심이 모인다.

지난 24일 트위터에 에이(A)4 용지에 인쇄된 중국과 솔로몬 제도의 안보협정 초안 사진이 올라왔다. 이 문서엔 중국이 자국민의 안전과 사업을 보호하기 위해 솔로몬 제도에 무장한 군대를 파견하고 해군기지를 설치할 수 있는 권리를 갖게 되는 내용 등이 담겼다.

중국이 남태평양에서 해양 작전에 나설 수 있는 근거와 명분을 갖게 되는 문서가 공개되자 지역 맹주인 오스트레일리아가 긴장했다. 오스트레일리아 <에이비시>(ABC) 뉴스는 이날 오후 해당 문서가 진본이며, 아직 공식 체결되지는 않은 것으로 확인했다고 보도했다. 다음날인 25일 오스트레일리아 정부는 마리스 페인 외무부 장관 명의의 성명을 통해 공식적인 우려 입장을 밝혔다. 페인 장관은 "중국과 솔로몬 제도간에 제안된 안보 협력 협정 초안을 알고 있다. 우리는 정기적으로, 정중하게 솔로몬 제도 정부에 우려 사항을 제기했다. 우리 지역의 안정과 안보를 훼손하는 모든 행동에 대해 특히 우려한다"고 밝혔다.

뉴질랜드의 저신다 아던 총리도 28일 한 라디오 방송에 출연해 중국과 솔로몬 제도 사이의 안보 협정이 "태평양 지역을 군사화할 수 있다"며 "중국이 솔로몬제도에 군 병력을 배치할 이유는 거의 없다"고 말했다.

협정 당사자인 중국의 태도는 분명해 보이지만, 솔로몬 제도의 태도는 다소 유동적이다. 중국 외교부 왕원빈 대변인은 28 일 정례 브리핑에서 “중국과 솔로몬 제도의 협력은 국제법에 부합하며 사회 안정에 유리하고 지역과 국가의 이익 증진에 도움이 된다”며 “중국과 태평양 섬나라의 호혜 협력을 방해하려는 어떠한 시도도 실현될 수 없을 것”이라고 말했다. 하지만, 머내시 소가바레 솔로몬 제도 총리는 29 일 “우리는 새로운 친구로부터 어떤 압력도 받지 않았다”면서도 “솔로몬 제도에 군사 기지를 건설하도록 중국에 요청할 의도가 전혀 없다”고 말했다. 앞서 중국 선텐 그룹은 2019 년 중국이 솔로몬 제도와 수교한 뒤 이 나라 안에 있는 툴라기 섬을 75 년 동안 임대하기로 지역 정부와 계약을 맺었었다. 하지만, 솔로몬 제도 중앙정부가 반대하며 무산된 적도 있다.

안보 협정 초안 문서는 솔로몬 제도의 한 정치인에 의해 유출된 것으로 알려졌다. 2019 년 솔로몬 제도가 대만과 단교하고 중국과 수교할 때 이를 강하게 비판했던 솔로몬 제도 말라이트주 주지사의 한 고문이 문서 유출의 주인공이라고 <에이비시> 뉴스가 전했다. 소가바레 총리는 협정 초안을 유출한 이에 대해 “미치광이”라고 비난했다.

중국군이 솔로몬 제도에 진출하면, 태평양에서 벌어지는 미-중 간 대결에 영향을 미칠 것으로 보인다. 미국은 지난해 9 월 오스트레일리아, 영국과 안보 결사체인 ‘오커스’(AUKUS)를 출범시켰다. 이 결사체의 핵심 내용은 오스트레일리아가 핵추진 잠수함을 보유할 수 있도록 지원하는 것이다. 이런 상황에서 중국이 오스트레일리아의 코앞에 해군기지를 건설하면 지역 내 갈등은 증폭될 수밖에 없다. 솔로몬 제도에는 2 차 세계대전 때 오스트레일리아를 견제하려면 일본군과 이를 저지하려던 미군 사이에 격전이 벌어졌던 과달카날섬이 포함돼 있다. 이 전투에서 일본군이 막대한 피해를 입고 패퇴하며, 미국은 전체 태평양 전쟁에서 승기를 잡게 된다.

중국은 2019 년 대만 수교국이었던 솔로몬 제도와 외교 관계를 맺는 등 이 지역에서의 세력 확보를 위해 노력하고 있다. 36 년 동안 이어온 대만과의 외교 관계를 끊고 중국과 외교 관계를 새로 수립한 솔로몬 제도는 이후 친중 세력과 친대만 세력이 부닥치는 등 사회적 갈등을 빚고 있다. 지난해 11 월 발생한 최대섬

말라이타에서의 폭동도 내부 지역 갈등과 함께 친중-친대만 세력 간의 갈등이 바탕이 됐다. 당시 시위대가 경찰서를 불태우고 일부 상점을 약탈하는 등 폭동 양상으로 번지자, 오스트레일리아와 파푸아뉴기니가 군대를 파견하기도 했다.

https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/international/international_general/1036678.html, 한겨레

Not too late, but Australia must reach out to Solomon Islands now

Peter Jennings

Beijing's interest in Pacific military bases is to make it harder for the US to move forces across the sea and closer to the Chinese mainland.

This is a modern version of Japan's wartime strategy: protect the homeland by dispersing your own forces and hit the enemy's supply lines as they try to get closer.

A bonus for China is that a military base in the Solomon Islands would complicate Australia's defence.

The battle of the Coral Sea in 1942 is remembered as the first major fight between aircraft carriers, but it was fought in an unsuccessful attempt to stop Japanese forces lodging in the Solomon Islands.

Geography doesn't change. Imagine a point, say 15 years from now, when Australia has built its nuclear submarine port on the east coast.

Scott Morrison says that this port will "enable regular visits from the United States' and United Kingdom's nuclear-powered submarines".

If China establishes a military presence in the Solomons, we could in 15 years see People's Liberation Army maritime surveillance aircraft using Honiara to keep a permanent surveillance cap over our east coast.

Beijing could have installed signals intelligence systems able to suck up electronic emissions from Cairns to Melbourne and an over-the-horizon radar system to track ship and aircraft movements.

What if China covertly brought into the Solomons anti-aircraft missile batteries or a stock of sea mines able to be laid by Chinese "civilian" fishing boats?

Some may see this as exaggerating the threat, but Xi Jinping does not lack strategic imagination. A Chinese military base in Honiara crosses a line that Canberra cannot permit. Moreover, Washington will share these concerns and expect Australia to find a way to stop this agreement being finalised.

The Australian national security establishment will be worried and will be looking for ways to dissuade the Solomon Island government from agreeing to the deal.

The broader context is decades of Australian benign neglect of the region.

In truth we don't have a close or privileged relationship with many Island governments.

Based on DFAT's latest figures, Solomon Islands has \$244m invested in Australia, compared to only \$70m worth of Australian investments there.

China is the Solomon Islands' top export destination, taking 66.8 per cent of Honiara's exports. Australia languishes at 13th place, taking only 0.9 per cent of goods.

Australia's biggest interest in the Solomon Islands is low-cost seasonal labour. We shouldn't be surprised if Honiara concludes that, for all the talk about being family, Australia is just not that engaged. We turn up with police and soldiers when Honiara riots, but China turns up, and stays, with bags of money.

The good news is that the Solomon Islands is a lively and loud democracy and there will be plenty of people in parliament and in the country offended by a draft treaty that cedes so much unchecked power to China.

It is possible that the agreement will be voted down in Honiara's national parliament.

The onus is on Australia to come up with a compelling reason for Honiara to see us as their best possible security partner.

The offer to establish an Australian naval base would be a good start. How about jointly offering with the Americans a series of long-term military construction, engineering and medical visits to help the country's decaying infrastructure?

The Americans do a superb job of linking state National Guard units to small countries, building relationships through regular deployments doing civil construction work. Why not designate ADF reserve units to similar roles?

In earlier years, the Defence reaction was to oppose the idea of naval basing or engaging in engineering or construction tasks other than in response to natural disasters. Now we have a strategic need to change that mindset.

This amounts to yet another task for the Defence checklist and another reason why our military spending needs to double from its current 2.1 per cent floor. Consider it the price of regional leadership. The Chinese will eat our lunch for us if we can't or won't make the effort ourselves.

<https://www.aspi.org.au/opinion/not-too-late-australia-must-reach-out-solomon-islands-now>, ASPI(Australian Strategic Policy Institute),

AUSTRALIA MUST STOP VIEWING THE PACIFIC AS ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD TO FIX

COMMENTARY | 1 APRIL 2022

As the nation heads toward an election, recent events in the Solomon Islands are a reminder that strong economic relationships with Pacific countries are important to security. Originally published in the Australian Financial Review.

MIHAI SORA

Pacific countries often say they do not want to be drawn into geopolitics. All have adopted a “friends to all and enemies to none” foreign policy. However, the proposed security agreement [between China and the Solomon Islands](#) shows that geopolitics is well and truly thriving.

Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare has said the Solomon Islands, a nation of about 700,000 people, was not taking sides. But the agreement has an immediate effect on every country in the region and it is very much connected, at least on the Chinese side, to geostrategic ambitions. An agreement such as this changes the regional order.

In Australia, security analysts watched the story unfold with a mixture of dread because of the potential blow to Canberra's strategic interests, and vindication that years of assessments about China's military intent in the Pacific had seemingly been confirmed overnight. In the political arena, accusations came thick and fast that the federal government had “dropped the ball” in the Pacific and that diplomacy in the region had failed.

Some who had in the past been critical of the motivations behind Australia's Pacific Step-Up – narrowly defined as pushing back against China's influence in the Pacific

– were now saying it had not done enough. There were calls for greater Australian leadership.

Sogavare has said a security treaty with China was finalised and ready to be signed. Details of the draft agreement were leaked last week and reveal proposals granting potentially extensive reach into the Solomon Islands for Chinese security personnel and military assets. Transparency provisions set out that the Solomon Islands government would not be able to disclose activities carried out under the agreement without permission from China.

Sogavare has been strident in his defence of the proposed agreement, incensed by criticism that it would destabilise the region, or suggestions that the Solomon Islands had been coerced or duped into striking the bargain with the Communist power.

He insists he is walking into the partnership with eyes wide open. There are domestic security dividends in such a deal for Sogavare, whose latest term in power has been filled with [instability and unrest](#) in the capital Honiara. Ironically, it is partly because of his push to bring the Solomon Islands and China closer together.

The final details are yet to be revealed. Regardless of its contents, a security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China implies a degree of trust and closeness in the two countries' relations – much like AUKUS does between Australia, Britain and the US.

Pursuing new opportunities

As Australia heads towards an election, [recent events in the Solomon Islands](#) serve as a reminder that our relationships with Pacific countries are important to our security.

Australia demonstrates leadership in the region by being the largest aid donor and primary guarantor of security in the Pacific, not least of which through our comprehensive contributions to regional COVID-19 and natural disaster responses. Australia's climate change policies have for years fallen far short of regional

expectations. However, climate change can hardly explain Solomon Islands' security partnership with China, the world's biggest emitter and largest producer of coal.

It is important for Australia to continue to provide development assistance to the Solomon Islands and other Pacific countries. But for Pacific countries to transition to economic independence, Australia should pursue opportunities for greater economic integration with the region.

In its approach to the Pacific, China has used the language of economic cooperation. It has not tried to outspend Australia on aid in the Pacific and, if anything, appears to have scaled back this arm of statecraft in recent years. Despite controversies around Chinese business practices in major resource and infrastructure projects throughout the region, China remains the main customer for Pacific goods and resources.

China has substantial economic relationships with Pacific Island countries. The sheer scale of China's economy always promises more opportunities over the horizon. It would be folly to write off the success with which China has gained traction in the Pacific as "briefcase diplomacy" or the naivety of Pacific nations.

The Australian government has recently committed to stabilising the shrinking aid budget, alongside some rhetorical contortions to demonstrate increased allocations for the Pacific. If the objective is to grow Australia's influence in the Pacific, or to hedge against further Chinese strategic incursion in the region, more of the same – with a little bit extra on the side – will not cut it.

Current standard won't cut it

Australia should not just view the Pacific as its neighbourhood to fix. The Pacific is a region of global geopolitical significance. Perhaps, rather than more Australian leadership, now is the time for more partnership with the region. Australia may be able to draw some lessons from the Compacts of Free Association that northern Pacific states have with the US, granting them enhanced access to the US labour market and other health and economic benefits along with close defence co-operation.

Likewise, as the US plans to open its embassy in the Solomon Islands and develop its engagement in the region, it could benefit from Australia's expertise and on-the-ground relationships throughout the Pacific.

Increasing Australia's influence in the Pacific can't just be about increasing aid dollars. Australia needs to reconsider how it invests in its relationships with Pacific countries and how it contributes to their priorities of achieving sustainable economic prosperity.

The existential threat of climate change to many communities in the Pacific is one issue that does need to be addressed. But beyond this, Pacific countries require economic partnerships that are deeper and more substantial than what the current labour scheme can offer them.

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-must-stop-viewing-pacific-its-neighbourhood-fix>, Lowy Institute