

Solomon Islands' 'Friends to all: enemy to none' foreign policy: reconceptualising international friendship

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, states from various parts of the world have embraced the concept of a 'friends to all, enemy to none' foreign policy. Such states include Namibia, the Philippines, Singapore, Bangladesh, and Papua New Guinea. Solomon Islands, in the south-west Pacific Ocean, has also maintained this stance consistently and fervently. Despite the frequent use of the term 'friendship' or 'friend' in the diplomatic rhetoric of states, the concept of a 'friends to all foreign policy' remains underanalysed in the field of International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis. Drawing on Oelsner and Koschut's framework for international normative friendship, this article finds that Western-oriented IR conceptions are limited in explaining Solomon Islands' policy of friendship. It is argued that Solomon Islands pursues what this article labels 'pragmatic friendship.' This form of friendship is influenced by the cultural and religious contexts of Melanesian society and is both normative as well as strategic. The addition of this term expands International Relations theory to incorporate a non-Western perspective and illustrates how small states can effectively manoeuvre geopolitical competition between major powers.

KEYWORDS

Friendship; pragmatic friendship; Solomon Islands; non-Western perspectives; foreign policy

Introduction

In 1956, American political scientist Norman D. Palmer famously contended that while people make friends with people, it is rare that nations make friends with nations. Yet, over the course of more than six decades, numerous states have publicly embraced foreign policies rooted in the notion of a 'friends to all' approach. For instance, in 2015, the late President of Namibia, Geingob (2015), stated that 'I have often said that Namibia is a Child of International Solidarity, friend to all and enemy to none'. Similarly, in 2023, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. articulated that the Philippines pursues a 'friend to all and enemy of none' foreign policy (Republic of the Philippines 2023). Singapore (Singapore Government 2023) and Papua New Guinea (Post-Courier 2024) have similarly committed to such a policy, while Bangladesh, whose first president, Sheikh

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Mujibur Rahman, articulated the policy of ‘friendship to all, malice to none’, continues to uphold this foreign policy stance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bangladesh 2022). Notably, Solomon Islands – a country of over 900 islands in the south-west Pacific Ocean – continuously and consistently maintains the centrality of ‘friends to all and enemy to none’ foreign relations (Agovaka 2024). These pronouncements seem to challenge the relevance of Palmer’s initial assertion and highlight the increasingly common embrace of ‘friendship’ in international relations. This trend points to the necessity of scrutinising the concept’s significance for foreign policy practice and for theorising within the field of International Relations (IR).

As a rule, there are two observations that can be made about ‘friendship’. First, ‘friend’ or ‘friendship’ features regularly in the statements and speeches of governments as they discuss their relationships with other states (Berenskoetter 2007, 648). Indeed, at the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation held in Beijing in September 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned the word ‘friend’ (or its derivatives) no less than ten times (The State Council Information Office PRC 2024). In Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s remarks at the 2024 United Nations ‘Summit of the Future’, he repeatedly addressed the audience and other leaders as ‘friends’ (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2024). At the Asia Summit, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong emphasised the importance of ‘working with our friends and partners’ (Wong 2024), while at the 78th General Assembly Debate, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke of ‘friends and partnerships around the world’ and specifically singling out ‘friends from Namibia’ (Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations 2023).

The second observation about the concept of ‘friendship’ is that despite the frequency at which the concept features in speeches and official government documents, it is rarely analysed in IR (Patsias and Patsias 2014, 163). Berenskötter and Hoef (2017, 1–2) concur with this assertion, suggesting that the angle of friendship has similarly been neglected in the literature on Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Devere, Mark, and Verbitsky (2011, 47) also note that ‘the role of friendship does not feature prominently in the literature on diplomacy or diplomatic culture’. Koschut and Oelsner (2014) acknowledge that recent years have seen the field of IR more concerned with focusing on research on friendship, which compensates for earlier years where the concept lacked a clear definition and systematic analysis (Koschut and Oelsner 2014, 4). Smith and Fallon (2024, 23) second this interpretation, adding that recent studies ‘have made a concerted effort to think theoretically and analytically about friendship’.

While the increased attention to the concept is necessary, a further problem is that until recently, the scholarship on friendship has drawn mainly on Western texts and experiences¹ (Berenskötter and Hoef 2017, 11). This analytical myopia led Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 206) to pose the question: ‘what is happening beyond the West?’ Building on this question, Berenskötter and Hoef (2017, 11) reason that there is a need to broaden the analysis of friendship and go ‘beyond the Western context to enhance the conceptual toolbox and understand the various manifestations of friendship in world politics’. This is especially important since it is not a given that friendship means and exists in the same forms in different regions.

This article is concerned with analysing how ‘friendship’ exists in one such non-Western instance, namely, in the foreign policy of Solomon Islands. Solomon Islands is particularly interesting to examine since it is a state that has boldly adopted a ‘friends to all, enemy to

none' policy, most persistently so after it switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in 2019. By analysing the case of Solomon Islands from 2020 to 2024 – specifically from a government perspective – the purpose is to demonstrate some of the restrictions of IR theorising on friendship and how examining a non-Western case broadens the theoretical richness of the concept. The article begins by reviewing the different conceptions of friendship in IR literature, with the aim of highlighting the issues and tensions with these conceptualisations. Following this, Koschut and Oelsner's four indicators of international friendship are placed within a theoretical framework, which is subsequently applied to the case of Solomon Islands to establish the presence and nature of friendship in its relations with four particular states with which it has significant diplomatic, economic or security arrangements, namely Australia, China, the United States (US), and Japan. Based on the application of the framework, the article proposes the addition of a third type of friendship, namely 'pragmatic friendship', which is undergirded by the religious and cultural beliefs of the Melanesian society in Solomon Islands. This type of friendship falls between the Western conceptions of a 'strategic' or 'normative' friendship. Such an alternative conceptualisation is not only important because it contributes a non-Western perspective on friendship; it also demonstrates how a 'friends to all, enemy to none' foreign policy is a strategy used by small states² to manoeuvre the geopolitics of major powers effectively.

Strategic, normative, or something else? Limitations of conceptions of friendships

In the literature on friendship in IR, there are essentially three conceptions that prevail. First, there is the realist understanding, where friendship is seen as an instrumental alliance between two states. Berenskoetter (2007, 653) explains that for realists, 'there is no room for friends, only for allies bound together temporarily to oppose a common threat, that is, a state with more military capabilities'. This echoes the earlier sentiment of Palmer (1956, 87–88), who suggested that states rarely form deep and lasting friendships and cooperate only to further their self-interest. Realist conceptualisations, arguably, fall under what Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 13–14) label as 'strategic international friendships'. Such types of friendship are characterised as being based purely on rational self-interest and are, at the core, highly instrumental and functional. Wolfers (1965, 25, 27) defines these relations through the concept of 'amity', which is not rooted in emotional conditions but rather in active cooperation.

While realists find difficulty in imagining friendship (Berenskoetter 2007, 653), liberalism, guided by the principles of autonomy, independence, and a 'rules-based order', permits a minimal form of friendship. However, although liberalism moves beyond the zero-sum thinking of realists, friendship remains a relationship based on principles and interdependence, as opposed to emotional bonds or selfless care for the other (Berenskoetter 2007, 653). Wendt (1999, 298–299) explains that friends are those states that (a) do not go to war with one another and (b) will fight together as a team should there be a war. Considering this, according to Berenskoetter (2007, 654), 'friendship understood as an intimate relationship simply falls off the conceptual map'.

Third is a conceptualisation proposed by Berenskoetter (2007), where friendship is undergirded by a commitment between two states towards building a common world

(arguably encapsulating more of a constructivist perspective, although Berenskoetter suggests that the definition is not aligned with IR theories). Berenskötter and Hoef (2017) further explain that friends are focused on a shared idea of international order, or a 'shared worldview'. Koschut and Oelsner (2014) concur with this line of thought, arguing that friendship has the potential to be an agent of change since it reveals alternative forms of order and patterns of interaction. Friendship understood in this sense may be likened to what Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 14) define as 'normative international friendship'. This 'thick' friendship develops between states that have strong ideational and emotional bonds, and it is not based on instrumentalism but 'is manifested as an emotional and moral disposition' (Booth and Wheeler 2008, cited in Koschut and Oelsner 2014).

To adopt the third definition, one would commit to understanding friendship as a relationship built on bonds where there necessarily is a sharing of ideological commitments (or worldviews). However, there are states, such as Solomon Islands, that pursue a friendship with two geopolitical and ideological rivals, namely, China and the United States. Hence, Berenskoetter's definition of friendship is difficult to reconcile in the case of Solomon Islands, which cannot share an ideological commitment to a common world with two actors who have different worldviews.

Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 15) suggest that there is an alternative type of friendship, which they label the 'Swiss Option', where states avoid choosing sides and try to convince others of their inherently good intentions. Indeed, Wolfers (1965, 26) originally describes this as a state of 'minimal relations' where states decide to 'go alone' and 'minimize political contacts with other nations'. Such an explanation is initially appealing in the case of Solomon Islands, given its repeated assertion that it will not pick between partners, under the policy mantra of 'friends to all, enemies to none'. Under these principles, Solomon Islands 'will not align [themselves] with any external power(s) or security architecture [...] Solomon Islands will not be coerced into choosing sides' (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat 2022). This is often reiterated, as it was on 5 June 2023, when the government confirmed that '[they] shall not be forced to take sides and participate in power politics [...] Solomon Islands as a country must and will always abide by its policy of friends to all and enemy to none' (MFAET). However, Koschut and Oelsner (2014) go on to suggest that it is not convincing to categorise such relationships as 'friendships',³ and that states engaged in such practices should rather be thought of as 'mediators' or 'honest brokers'. Furthermore, it is not quite accurate to suggest that Solomon Islands seeks to 'minimize political contacts with other nations', as Wolfers (1965) suggests states adopting this type of relationship do. If anything, Solomon Islands maximises political engagement with other states. Accordingly, there is very little space to conceptualise Solomon Islands' foreign policy in terms of normative friendship.

Under a Western framework, the only options left for Solomon Islands, if one were to try and argue that it pursues friendships, are that its friendships fall under the realist or liberal conceptions and are, therefore, of the strategic type referred to earlier. Indeed, it seems logical to insist that Solomon Islands pursues friendships (as opposed to just 'partnerships' or 'relations'), since the word 'friend' or 'friendship' is especially prominent in its official government speeches and press releases. The government has made it clear that its engagement in the international arena is driven by a 'friends to all, enemy to none' approach, and speeches directed towards other actors are almost, without exception, marked by phrases of 'friends', 'new friends' and 'old friendships'. Indeed, the leaders

of Solomon Islands speak of building ‘bridges of cooperation and highways of friendship and partnership in [their] region and beyond’ (Sogavare 2021).

It thus seems fitting to suggest that the rhetorical reference to friendship does have a deeper meaning. However, following a process of elimination, this forces the conclusion that Solomon Islands pursues a strategic, instrumental and functional friendship, which is arguably not genuine friendship, since there is no alignment with an ideological worldview. Dominant IR theories tend to draw a distinction between instrumental relationships based on self-interest and utility, and genuine friendships more closely aligned with Koschut and Oelsner’s (2014, 15) concept of ‘normative friendship’. Solomon Islands’ relations with other states and its foreign policy, guided by the dictum, ‘friends to all, enemies to none’, are thus reduced to instrumentalism in Western theories. This leads to only one of two conclusions: either Solomon Islands does not authentically pursue friendships, or Western conceptions of friendship in international relations are too limited in explaining friendship beyond Western-oriented contexts. It is this tension that serves as the focal point of this article.

An analytical framework for assessing the presence of friendship

To determine whether Solomon Islands pursues ‘genuine’ friendship, one needs to analyse the presence and character of friendship (or lack thereof) within the foreign policy and foreign relations of Solomon Islands. The presence of such indicators in the relationships of Solomon Islands with China, the US, Australia and Japan would suggest that it pursues an authentic or genuine friendship, while the absence thereof would suggest that the relationships could be defined as strategic friendships. Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 20) suggest that there are four indicators that can be studied to locate and study international friendship. First, *symbolic interaction*, which is marked by bilateral social bonds between states as manifested in summits, meetings and commemorating events. This is often accompanied by institutionalised forms of cooperation, such as intergovernmental institutions, transnational networks and joint trade and cultural exchange. Second, *affective attachment* refers to the process by which friends construct an emotional history together by attaching positive emotions to mutual events, symbols, practices and institutions.

Oftentimes, this relationship is ‘special’ or ‘unique’ and marked by a foundational event (Eznack and Koschut 2014, 81). Importantly, attachments between states are stronger than the sum of the material and strategic benefits derived from the relationship (Eznack and Koschut 2014, 80). Third, *self-disclosure* is a pivotal indicator. Friends expect each other to disclose more information than towards other parties and display a larger tolerance towards each other’s ‘bad news’. This larger amount of information exchange manifests through joint cabinet meetings or the exchange of diplomatic and military personnel. The final indicator is *mutual commitment*. This refers to the shared understanding that conflict between them will be settled peacefully and that, should tension arise with other actors, friends will protect each other. Mutual commitment also includes a strong sense of solidarity in foreign policy decisions. These indicators are used as a robust structure to examine the presence and character of international friendship in the Solomon Islands’ foreign policy. Specifically, the framework (as outlined in Table 1 below) explores whether Solomon Islands’ approach

Table 1. Framework for assessing the presence of international friendship.

Indicator	Description
Symbolic Interaction	Is there evidence of symbolic gestures, such as official visits, commemorating events and institutionalised forms of cooperation, such as trade or cultural exchanges?
Affective Attachment	Are there indications of an emotional bond between states based on a shared identity, history, or foundational moment, and is the relationship based on more than just material and strategic benefits?
Self-Disclosure	Are there indications of a disclosure of more information or instances where Solomon Islands shows leniency towards perceived 'bad news' from its partners?
Mutual Commitment	Are there indications of peaceful conflict resolution, expressions of solidarity or alignment on key issues?

reflects a distinct or alternative understanding of friendship, which may diverge from Western conceptualisations.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative approach, analysing the official government documents and speeches published by Solomon Islands on their government website between 2020 and 2024. While speeches are the primary sources, publicly available online interviews with the prime ministers – such as those conducted by news outlets – were also incorporated to complement and enrich them. A keyword search for each state was conducted on the website. While all speech titles were reviewed for relevancy, only those that explicitly addressed or described the bilateral relationship between Solomon Islands and the respective state were selected for further examination. The analysis was conducted using the operationalised framework, with the researcher assessing the presence or absence of the specified indicators. Importantly, in some instances, a particular manifestation of an indicator, such as Solomon Islands expressing support of the 'One China Principle', was reiterated annually. While the researcher took note of these recurring mentions, they were not discussed repeatedly in the analysis.

The selected timeframe of 2020–2024 ensures a focus on recent diplomatic engagements, allowing for an up-to-date analysis. Furthermore, the period was also based on the availability of publications on the Solomon Islands government portal, where most documents accessible were from 2020 onward, with limited or no earlier records. In terms of the state selection, Australia, China, the US and Japan were chosen for two reasons.

First, the selected states are key partners in Solomon Islands' external relations and have diplomatic, economic or security arrangements with the island. Australia, for example, was the first country to establish diplomatic relations with Solomon Islands after it gained independence in 1978 and has played a notable role in providing security to the island through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) from 2003 to 2017. It also has a Bilateral Security Treaty in place with the Islands signed in 2017 (Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade *n.d.*). Notably, official rhetoric toward all four states consistently includes the term 'friend' or 'friendship', suggesting that Solomon Islands considers them to be friends, which makes them ideal cases to analyse the presence of 'authentic' friendship. Secondly, the US and China represent competing worldviews, which puts a strain on Solomon

Islands' friendship with these states. Australia and Japan are furthermore aligned with the US but also have trade relations with China, adding a further level of complexity to Solomon Islands' relationships with these states. It should be noted that the state-framing employed in this article is not intended to deny the plurality of actors⁴ involved in Solomon Islands' external relations but rather constitutes a deliberate and bounded choice aligned with the article's core aim of examining friendship as articulated and performed within formal state-to-state relations.

Contextualising Solomon Islands and its government

The Solomon Islands, an archipelagic state comprising over 900 islands, is situated in the southwest Pacific Ocean (Solomon Islands Government 2024g). Its half-a-million population is dispersed over six main islands, with 85 per cent of the population living in rural communities (Dinnen and Peake 2017, 30). Solomon Islands is considered a least developed country, which was supposed to graduate from this category in 2024, although this has now been rescheduled to 2027 (UN DESA 2023). One of the major obstacles⁵ to its development is the persistence of ethnic conflict and riots,⁶ notably from 1998 to 2003, when young Guadalcanal men violently terrorised, intimidated and chased over 20,000 non-Guadalcanal people (specifically, Malaitan 'settlers') off their land and into the capital of Honiara on the belief that they had illegally acquired the land that actually belonged to the Guadalcanal (Allen 2005, 57; Allen 2018, 86; Fraenkel 2015, 402; Hegarty 2003, 5). The Malaitans had settled in Guadalcanal after the Second World War (Hameiri 2012, 412).

The ethnic conflict lasted well into the year 2000, with the government of Bartholomew Ulufa'alu attempting to resolve the conflict. However, in a coup staged by the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), the serving Prime Minister was deposed, and Manasseh Sogavare began his first term as Prime Minister (Kabutaulaka 2002, 2). Yet the parliamentary ballot that brought him to power was reported to have been marred by threats and intimidation (Allen 2018, 88). Tensions ensued, and the inability to achieve stability led to the deployment of a multinational Peace Monitoring Council (PMC), of which Australia and New Zealand were a part. This was a result of the Townsville Peace Agreement (TPA), brokered by Australia and signed in October 2000, which, among other things, tasked the PMC with overseeing demilitarisation (creating 'weapons-free villages'), reconciliation and rehabilitation (Hegarty 2003, 6). During these initial tumultuous years, Australia emerged as an important security partner, which established a foundation for enduring affective attachment and symbolic interaction in future diplomatic relations.

However, in 2003, following further outbreaks of violence, it was evident that more measures were required (Allen 2005, 57), and subsequently, the Australian government led a multilateral Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), after Prime Minister Kemakeza flew to Canberra directly to appeal to the Australian Prime Minister (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2025; Hameiri 2012, 412). This mission, authorised through the Pacific Islands Forum's Biketawa Declaration of 2000 (Fraenkel 2015, 403), was codenamed Operation Helpem Fren, which is Pijin for 'helping friend', where the task of the mission was to support restoring peace in Solomon Islands. With tensions resurfacing yet again after the 2006 elections, RAMSI remained in the

Solomon Islands until 2013, when the security situation was stabilised (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2025; Fraenkel 2015, 414). Until 2017, RAMSI would remain as a policing mission in support of maintaining peace in the Islands. Still, Australia's involvement in Solomon Islands through RAMSI was not without contestation. As Allen (2008, 53) notes, growing frustration with the mission contributed to the unrest that culminated in the 2006 riots. In the period leading up to the riots, RAMSI was variously portrayed by different groups as 'the anti-Christ', an 'invasion of the island by foreign military forces', and, by the Malaita Ma'asina Forum, 'an exercise in recolonisation and Australian occupation' (Allen 2008, 50–51).

Australia continued to play a significant role in Solomon Islands in the years that followed, but in 2019, a significant shift occurred in the latter's the foreign policy, with the Islands deciding to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.⁷ Solomon Islands had first established diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1983,⁸ four years after gaining independence. This alignment was shaped by Cold War dynamics; as Aqorau (2021, 327) notes, Solomon Islands was drawn to Taiwan as a democratic state, distinct from communist China, and as an influential actor with extensive diplomatic ties. The 2019 reversal marked a decisive reorientation, formalised by then foreign minister and current Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele, who travelled to China in 2019 to cement these new ties (Needham 2024). This event may therefore help explain the emergence of the Solomon Islands' 'friends to all' foreign policy. Indeed, explicit reference to 'friends to all' appears only after the Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition to China in 2019. However, it should also be noted that, as far back as 1983,⁹ the Prime Minister declared that assistance from traditional friends was boring and advocated for forging new relations (Wesley-Smith and Portner 2010, 138). Such statements could be interpreted as early indications of a more inclusive foreign policy. Statements made over the years at the UNGA, such as in 2009, also hint at this approach to foreign policy, with the Solomon Islands thanking New Zealand and China, as well as the European Union, for their support (Fono 2009).

The time span with which this article is concerned, namely 2020–2024, featured Sogavare as Prime Minister for the first four and a half years of this range, while Manele came into power as Prime Minister in the last half of 2024. Sogavare, in particular, has a contentious personal history, with some suggesting that he has 'autocratic tendencies', is a 'magnet for controversy' and is known for his angry outbursts in parliament (RTL 2024). He is said to have a deep distrust of Australia and the United States, with a specific resentment towards the former, as a result of their 'interventions' in the country from 2003 to 2017,¹⁰ which he considered as 'trampling on the sovereignty of Solomon Islands' (RTL 2024). Whereas Sogavare's predecessor, Allan Kemakeza,¹¹ who served as Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006, was widely characterised as adopting a more compliant approach to his dealings with RAMSI, Sogavare, by contrast, openly challenged the mission (Fraenkel 2015, 411), cloaking himself 'in the mantle of defender of Solomon Islands sovereignty' (Dinnen 2008, 20). Some observers interpreted his stance as an attempt to undermine reform efforts and shield political and business interests (Dinnen 2008, 2). It has been noted that Manele is a less polarising figure than his predecessor, Sogavare, who had been prime minister on four different occasions: 2000–2001, 2006–2007, 2014–2017, and 2019–2024. Manele – with experience as a career diplomat, public servant, opposition leader and foreign minister – is anticipated

to conduct a more ‘business-as-usual approach’ to the country’s relationship with China (Habru and Habru 2024). However, both have pursued a pro-Chinese foreign policy course (Needham 2024).

In 2021, the Solomon Islands once again experienced deadly riots when protesters from Malaita marched to the national parliament in Honiara, demanding the Prime Minister’s resignation. This unrest was largely driven by grievances over the 2019 shift in diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, with Malaita remaining a pro-Taiwanese province. Tensions were further exacerbated by growing dissatisfaction over the capture of state resources by the logging industry, where foreign-owned companies are reported to fund politicians’ lobbying campaigns in exchange for favourable conditions such as tax remissions, duty exemptions or access to land (Donald 2022). Aqorau (2008, 246) documents several instances of bribery, including an account in which a former Minister for Mines and Energy was approached to approve the application of a Chinese prospecting company in exchange for substantial financial inducements that could support forthcoming election campaigns. In response to the 2021 riots, police officers and soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea were deployed, while China also pledged to provide police training (The Guardian 2021).

Locating ‘genuine friendship’ in Solomon Islands relationships

The patterns of friendship cannot be understood in isolation from the historical trajectories outlined above. Indeed, the diplomatic relationships of Solomon Islands, are deeply shaped by the legacy of the Battle of Guadalcanal in restructuring ties with the US and Japan; its history of ethnic conflict, which led to what certain leaders deemed to be foreign intervention by Australia; and the emergence of China as an alternative development partner. The following analysis therefore interprets symbolic interaction, affective attachment, self-disclosure and mutual commitment not as abstract indicators but as intimately tied to the Solomon Islands’ past.

Symbolic interaction

Symbolic interaction refers to the shared symbols, social bonds and meanings between states, often reinforced through activities such as summits, meetings or commemorative events. Indeed, this indicator plays a central role in Solomon Islands’ foreign relations, with frequent high-level engagements occurring. Australia and China stand out as key partners. In 2022, the Prime Minister of Australia, Anthony Albanese, met with the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands, Manasseh Sogavare (Solomon Islands Government 2022a). This was followed by a high-level meeting between Sogavare and Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister in 2023 (Solomon Islands Government 2023d). In 2020, Sogavare was invited as the guest of honour in China’s national day celebrations in Honiara (Solomon Islands Government 2020b), while in 2022, the foreign minister of China visited Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Government 2022d), and in 2023, Sogavare visited China on an official visit (Solomon Islands Government 2023c). Notably, the relationship between the two states was characterised as a ‘permanent friendship’, language not commonly used to describe the relationship between Solomon Islands’ ties with any of the other states considered in this article.

In contrast, while the US has strengthened its engagements in recent years, there were fewer instances of symbolic interaction with Solomon Islands. Key developments include the welcoming of the US National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific in 2022 (Solomon Islands Government 2022h), the reopening of the US diplomatic mission in Honiara in 2023 (Solomon Islands Government 2023a) and a 2024 meeting between a US delegation and the foreign minister of the Island (Solomon Islands Government 2024b). This suggests that the relationship with the US may be less entrenched than the relationship with China and Australia. At the same time, the reopening of the embassy can also be interpreted as a response to growing US concern over China's expanding influence in Solomon Islands, following the Islands' switch to diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019. In the case of Japan, in 2022, there was an official meeting between Sogavare and Japan's vice-foreign minister (Solomon Islands Government 2022c), while later in the year, the Japanese Minister of Defence made a courtesy call to Sogavare during the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands Government 2022f). In 2023, the foreign minister of Japan had an official state visit to Solomon Islands (Solomon Islands Government 2023c). Japanese interaction with the Islands is mostly tied to historical memory: during the Second World War, the Japanese lost over 31,000 men, 38 ships and 683 aircraft (The National WWII Museum n.d.).

The presence of the symbolic interaction indicator suggests that Solomon Islands pursues friendship with all four states analysed. Australia, a longstanding security partner¹², and China, an emerging development partner, stand out as the most actively engaged countries, while Japan and the US, in particular,¹³ engage comparatively less frequently. Noteworthy is the framing of the relationship with China as a 'permanent friendship',¹⁴ which suggests a deeper relationship.

Affective attachment

Affective attachment is defined by the framework as referring to emotional bonds that exist between states, transcending mere material and strategic considerations, and often include a shared identity, history or foundational moment. Solomon Islands' affective attachment with Australia is arguably relatively strong, with Australia being referred to not only as a friend or partner but also as a close neighbour (Solomon Islands Government 2022a). Moreover, the rhetoric often emphasises familial ties through phrases such as 'Solomon Islands and Australia are family with connected futures' (Solomon Islands Government 2024c). Such ties are reinforced with references to the 'sister-relationship' between the Australian city of Brisbane and Honiara. Australia is also consistently characterised as a 'partner of choice', reaffirming the unique ties between the two states (Solomon Islands Government 2022g). The relationship is rooted in shared history, with Australia being a longstanding security provider for Solomon Islands. This was exemplified through the commemoration of an Australian Federal Police officer¹⁵ who was killed during the RAMSI (Solomon Islands Government 2022i).

Affective attachment features in the relationship between China and Solomon Islands, although it is not necessarily built on history, as in the case of Australia. Rather, the bond seems to be based on the recognition of the contemporary challenges associated with

development. Solomon Islands expresses gratitude that ‘a powerful country like China listens to a small, vulnerable country’ like itself on climate goals (Solomon Islands Government 2020a). China was also the first state to provide Solomon Islands with Covid-19 vaccines (Solomon Islands Government 2023e), and the only partner ever – according to Solomon Islands – to suggest helping Solomon Islands reach its sustainable development goals (Solomon Islands 2023f). Furthermore, like Australia, there have also been efforts to formalise¹⁶ the sister relationships between provinces in Solomon Islands and those in China, which once again allude to the rhetorical use of familial terminology (Solomon Islands Government 2024a). The relationship between China and Solomon Islands is also described as one that will ‘last forever’ (Solomon Islands Government 2023b). Despite the absence of historically entrenched bilateral ties, an emergent affective attachment has begun to shape the dynamics of interaction between the two states.

The relationship between the US and Solomon Islands is also marked by affective attachment, particularly due to the shared historical memory of the Battle of Guadalcanal during the Second World War. Manele, who succeeded Sogavare as the Prime Minister of Solomon Islands in the spring of 2024, stated that the two states share a special relationship that was forged during the Second World War (Solomon Islands Government 2022c). However, beyond this, there is limited alternative evidence of contemporary emotional connections. There appears to be little to no reference to a shared regional identity, as seen in Australia, or kinship, as observed in China. This suggests that the relationship with the US is characterised by episodic, rather than continuous, affective attachment. This may further be linked to the ‘darker side’ of the history between Solomon Islands and the US, where the consequence of the fighting that took place on the island of Guadalcanal during the Second World, was islands littered with unexplored war-era bombs and landmines (Harding and Pohle 2022). These bombs have not only caused numerous casualties but have also impeded development, as the construction of new buildings is complicated and delayed by their removal. Solomon Islanders feel frustrated with the inadequate response to cleaning up this ‘mess’.¹⁷

Solomon Islands’ affective attachment with Japan has deep historical roots, which date back to its independence in 1978, when Japan became one of its earliest diplomatic partners (Solomon Islands Government 2022c). This may be referred to as the foundational moment in the relationship. The Battle of Guadalcanal in World War II serves as a further historical reference point for the relationship between the two states (Solomon Islands Government 2022f). Indications of an emotional bond between the two states are also evident in the celebration of the 64th birthday of the Japanese Emperor by Solomon Islands, which hints at a relationship that transcends material and strategic benefits (Solomon Islands Government 2024f). Affective attachment features in all of the relationships above; however, it is most deeply entrenched with Australia and China. The US-Japan relationship is based on a strong historical foundation but is less embedded in emotional discourse.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure as an indicator refers to a relationship characterised by states sharing more information with one another than they would with other partners, as well as a higher tolerance or leniency to potential diplomatic challenges. Solomon Islands

demonstrated self-disclosure by providing additional insight on the security deal signed with China in 2022 to concerned partners, notably Japan and Australia. In communications with Japan, Solomon Islands reassured its partner that the security pact poses no threat to Japan or the region and was only intended to address domestic threats (Solomon Islands Government 2022c).

Similarly, in 2022, Solomon Islands held a meeting with Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to discuss its security partnership with China¹⁸ (Solomon Islands Government 2022c). During this meeting, it was noted that ‘trust is being cemented between the two sovereign states’. Solomon Islands officials were also briefed by Australia on developments related to AUKUS and other defence-related policies (Solomon Islands Government 2022b). Beyond security matters, Solomon Islands’ relationship with Japan also illustrated diplomatic tolerance. Following the stabbing of a Japanese Navy officer by a Solomon Islands national in 2022, the government organised a traditional reconciliation ceremony to acknowledge the incident (Solomon Islands Government 2022e). Japan’s acceptance of this cultural approach to diplomacy was evident in its characterisation of this ceremony as one that ‘confers our friendship’.

Solomon Islands also demonstrated a significant degree of self-disclosure with China. In an exclusive interview conducted with China Global Television Network (CGTN) in 2023, Sogavare expressed a strong emotional connection, stating that returning to China felt like returning home. He also shared a self-critical national narrative, remarking that the Solomon Islands has been wandering in the wilderness for 36 years, framing China as the corrective path (CGTN 2023). Sogavare further expressed tolerance towards China by defending the bilateral relationship against critics, noting that he found it difficult to understand why signing defence agreements with China was questioned by other states.

Mutual commitment

Mutual commitment, which reflects a state’s willingness to align on key issues, express solidarity and engage in peaceful cooperation over conflict with one another, appeared in several parts of Solomon Islands’ diplomatic engagements from 2020 to 2024. In its relationship with Japan, Solomon Islands offered explicit assurances of continued backing ‘on very important international issues of mutual concern’ (Solomon Islands Government 2022c). Tensions arose over Japan’s decision to release treated nuclear wastewater into the Pacific, but this disagreement unfolded within diplomatic channels. Relations with China also hinted at mutual commitment, with Solomon Islands expressing policy alignment by supporting its Global Development, Global Security and Global Civilisation initiative (Solomon Islands Government 2023e). In an interview with CGTN, Sogavare described the establishment of diplomatic ties as one of the most important and best decisions in the country’s history, insisting it was the right choice and from which Solomon Islands will never turn back (CGTN 2023). His remarks also pushed back against narratives portraying China as undermining democratic values or practising ‘debt-trap diplomacy’, suggesting a degree of solidarity with Beijing. A similar tone emerged in Prime Minister Manele’s interview with CGTN, where he affirmed that Solomon Islands ‘fully subscribes to the five principles of peaceful coexistence articulated in the June Beijing declaration’ (CGTN 2024).

Towards an expanded concept of friendship

The presence of the above-mentioned indicators in the relations between Solomon Islands and Australia, China, the US and Japan suggests that the island pursues an authentic international normative friendship with these states. In that sense, reducing Solomon Islands' relations to mere instrumentalism would be reductionist and an inaccurate representation of its relationships. Yet a strong case can be made for broadening Western conceptions of friendship to include a type of friendship that is 'pragmatic' yet not devoid of the normative dimension. 'Pragmatic friendship' does not denote an instrumental, purely interest-driven relationship, which the word 'pragmatic' can often imply. Rather, it refers to a state-to-state friendship that is both practical and normatively grounded, shaped by cultural, religious and relational worldviews that underpin the Solomon Islands' foreign policy identity. In this understanding, pragmatism reflects a relational logic through which the Solomon Islands navigates practical realities while sustaining multiple friendships and managing differences in ways that uphold reciprocity, humility and collective well-being.

This broader conceptualisation also resonates with longer intellectual traditions, namely, the 1955 Asian-African Conference (also known as the 'Bandung Conference'). Prefiguring the non-aligned, inclusive and relational friendship that is argued for here, the Bandung Final Communique's emphasised 'good neighbourliness', abstention from exclusive defence alignments, the equality of 'all nations large and small' and the potential for pursuing cooperation with a wide array of states (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia 1955). Against this backdrop, the following section introduces the concept of 'pragmatic friendship,' which is rooted in Melanesian religion and culture. Such a friendship is characterised by three specific concepts: 'selective alignment', 'multi-directionality' and 'non-exclusivity'.

Religious and cultural foundations

Key to understanding how Solomon Islands conceptualises friendship is locating the centrality of Christianity in its foreign policy identity, which was especially pronounced during the premiership of Sogavare,¹⁹ whose religious faith has been termed 'a defining part of his public persona in the deeply Christian nation' (RTL 2024). As a point of departure, Brydon and Lawihin (2014, 195) note that in Melanesian society, the epistemology is essentially religious. Chafetz, Spirtas, and Frankel (1998, viii) suggest that actors possess a 'self-concept' that may be based on affiliation to a religion, nationality or ideology. This becomes known as a social identity, which is a mental construct that describes and prescribes how the actor – in this case, the state – should conduct itself (Chafetz, Spirtas, and Frankel 1998, viii). This identity provides the state with a mechanism for understanding itself in relation to the external environment and how its relationship with the external environment can be understood (Chafetz, Spirtas, and Frankel 1998, ix). Ozkan (2021, 4) argues that religious experiences shape the boundaries of thinking and action for actors, creating a 'strategic mentality' that informs the behaviour, thoughts and actions of an actor.

In the case of Solomon Islands, Christianity is deeply embedded in the very makeup of its identity and foreign policy. In a 2019 speech to the nation, Prime Minister Sogavare

stated that ‘as a Christian country, our first duty is to God’ and that ‘our Christian faith, values and diversity in culture, heritage and tradition define who we are as individuals and collectively as a nation’ (Solomon Islands Embassy 2019). Christianity is not merely a private matter but a fundamental guiding principle in the country’s diplomatic engagements. For example, one of the ministries of the government is the ‘Ministry of Traditional Governance, Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs’ (MTGPEA), with the ‘Peace and Ecclesiastical Affairs Division’ specifically responsible for supporting ecclesiastical institutions (Solomon Islands Government 2024e). In 2023, the government funded, for example, a 79-member interdenominational delegation to Jerusalem. The MTGPEA provides funding to churches to implement social programmes (U.S. Department of State 2023).

In the 2019 speech, Sogavere also referenced verses from Philippians 2:3-6, where it is stated that ‘do not do anything from selfish ambition [...] but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves [...] look out for one another’s interests, not just for your own’ (Solomon Islands Embassy 2019). This provides insight into how friendship can be conceptualised through a Christian lens – a prominent identity of the Island – where relationships are guided by humility, selflessness and collective well-being. Importantly, friendship is not solely based on mutual benefit but also rooted in moral responsibilities of considering the well-being (interests) of others rather than simply pursuing self-serving goals. This suggests that Solomon Islands’ ‘friends to all, enemy to none’ foreign policy can be interpreted as an extension of the Christian relational worldview. Friendships are functional but also imbued with moral consideration. Solomon Islands’ engagement with multiple powers (with opposing worldviews) is not contradictory but rather premised on a moral commitment to building constructive relationships.

To understand Solomon Islands’ conceptualisation of pragmatic friendship, it is vital to expand beyond Christianity to consider some of the broader spiritual worldviews that underpin Melanesian and Pacific identities. In Melanesian²⁰ society, a person is not considered a person unless engaged in relations (Leenhardt 1979). A person thus does not exist as a unitary individual but is a construction created through relations (Robbins 1994, 38). Important, therefore, is the fact that a person cannot create value if they do not have adequate relationships. Similarly, without engaging in relationships, Solomon Islands would be disconnected from the structures that generate value.

Such an understanding of personhood is fundamentally linked to the *wantok system*, which undergirds Melanesian culture (Kabutaulaka 2015, 131) and, according to Siota, Carnegie, and Allen (2021, 36), influences how ‘things get done in SI [Solomon Islands]’. Nanau (2011, 35) explains that this system is a way of organising a society for subsistence living that ensures the survival of all members of the group. It specifically emphasises reciprocity and the necessity of caring for the needs of others, with the understanding that this will be returned (Lawson 2013, 17; Nanau 2011, 35). Put differently, Brydon and Lawihin (2014, 195) explain that *wantok* implies ‘serving and mutual assistance’. In particular, Renzio (1999, 19) proffers that two of the defining features of the *wantok system* are a common language (since *wantok* literally translates to ‘one talk’) and a shared belief in the principle of mutual reciprocity. A key defining feature of *wantok* is the primacy of the community, which takes precedence over the individual²¹ (Brydon and Lawihin 2014, 195). Indeed, in the seminal work of Hau’ofa (2008, 85), he

explains that in Oceania, ‘we do not spurn individualism; we choose to give priority to the collective’.

In Melanesian society, relationships bear value through equal exchange where persons are equal in relationships through the exchange of equal things (Robbins 1994, 39). Applied to the context of international relations, what is important for Solomon Islands is not ideological alignment but rather reciprocal exchange. In addition, Melanesian personhood is not static or innate; one becomes a person through relationships and acts of exchange. In this sense, relations with other states are seen as dynamic and evolving. Instead of committing to permanent alignment with one state, friendship is constructed through ongoing engagement with several states.

Similarly, in Melanesian society, perspectives can exist ‘at once as analogues and as (potential) transformations of one another’ (Strathern 1992, 100). This could be interpreted as implying that rather than treating different perspectives as isolated worlds of knowledge that cannot co-exist or interact, they are better understood as analogues – distinct yet interconnected and capable of existing simultaneously (Strathern 1992, 100). Brigg (2009, 151) explains that in Solomon Islands’ social organisation, there is no fundamental obligation to exclude others or perceive them as adversaries or threats. Drawing on the work of Harrison (2007, 75), Brigg (2009, 151) reasons that interaction in Solomon Islands is defined by ‘establishing and transacting exchange across difference’. Once again, this lends itself to the idea that opposing worldviews and ideological non-alignment do not preclude genuine friendship. Varying ideological stances are thus an inherent part of friendship.

According to Teariki and Leau (2024, 137–138), one of the foundations of Pacific worldviews is that of holism. Indeed, reflecting on the work of Narokobi, Dobrin and Golub (2020, 157), they stress that the Melanesian Way is seen as ‘a holistic ideal, “a total cosmic vision of life”’. Holism refers to the interconnected nature of living entities, such as people, and non-living entities including the environment and the spiritual realm. Together, these differing entities make up the ‘whole’, and each part has a crucial role in ensuring the universal well-being. Should any part become weakened or lack harmony, then it could jeopardise the ‘whole’ (Teariki and Leau 2024, 138). Importantly, no part can alone ensure its own well-being. Such a worldview can inform how relationships with other states are perceived. Friendship is not merely transactional but a deeply relational bond that is based on the understanding that all friends are needed to ensure the well-being of the island. Solomon Islands, by itself, cannot ensure its own well-being. Rather it relies on its relationships with other states to maintain harmony in security, economic stability, and environmental well-being. In this sense, friendship should not be viewed through the lens of self-interest but rather as a means of sustaining the collective well-being of all.

It is, of course, equally important to acknowledge that invoking holism at the level of the state in Solomon Islands requires a critical awareness of how contemporary political and economic dynamics complicate this worldview. Indeed, in Solomon Islands, ‘environmental well-being’ and ‘harmony’ have been undermined by a state deeply entangled with – and in many respects captured by – the logging industry. Logging has long been a crucial source of foreign currency in an import-dependent economy, and in rural communities, it is often the only way to generate essential income. Since the early 1980s, this has created a political economy in which local big-men use payments

from foreign logging companies to consolidate power, while these politicians reciprocate through favourable regulatory treatment (Hameiri 2012, 407). Some have argued that RAMSI promoted liberal market-led economic growth, though it put in place investment-friendly policies, which unintentionally led to a massive boom in logging activities (Hameiri 2012, 415). This does not invalidate the existence of holistic principles but rather points to the coexistence of multiple, at times contradictory, logics that inform Solomon Islands' foreign relations.

A further important element of a Pacific worldview is the relational model. In Melanesian societies, people are not viewed as unitary individuals but rather as a product of relationships (Strathern 1988, 131; cited in Robbins 1994). Moreover, Melanesians tend not to operate within a structured society where individuals assume fixed places; rather, they exist in a fundamentally relational space, which is an ongoing process of forming, maintaining and modifying relationships (Robbins 1994, 37). An important aspect of sustaining relationships is exchange, which is not merely about material transactions but fundamentally an act that defines people's roles and identities (Burridge 1975, 98; cited in Robbins 1994).

Solomon Islands' view of friendship is informed by this relational model. Friendship is not a static category but must be maintained through interaction. Hau'ofa (1994, 36) emphasises the notion of reciprocity, which assumes a social centrality and can be considered 'the core of all oceanic cultures'. Friendship is not confined to a one-way or fixed direction between two states but can evolve and shift in multiple directions. Rather than aligning purely with one state in a friendship, multiple friendships are pursued and modified as time progresses. Furthermore, since persons cannot be defined independently, their identity is continually shaped by their friendships. In this sense, states, such as Solomon Islands, pursue many friendships that contribute to their sense of self. Finally, the centrality of exchange and reciprocity to the creation of persons means that friendship in Solomon Islands is undergirded by a deeply normative dimension. Exchange is not merely transactional but produces identities. Based on the above discussion of some of the central elements of the Melanesian worldview, the next section outlines what this article postulates to be three of the key concepts that constitute a pragmatic friendship.

Key concepts of a 'pragmatic friendship'

Selective alignment

In the dominant Western conceptions of normative friendship, there tends to be an emphasis on alignment. Solomon Islands does not fully subscribe to the worldview of one state but instead adopts particular elements of it. This can be conceptualised as 'selective alignment', in which certain elements of different ideational worldviews are adopted based on the state's priorities and needs. For example, in the case of China, Solomon Islands may align with a developmental worldview that emphasises economic growth and state-led modernisation. Thus, it attaches great importance to the SI-PRC relationship that is united by the shared ideals of 'mutual respect, peace and collective achievements in sustainable development' (Solomon Islands Government 2023e). With respect to the US, Solomon Islands highlighted a commitment to a 'rules-based' international order and regional stability, stating that both states share a worldview 'for a peaceful

and prosperous world and especially a peaceful Pacific Islands region’ (Solomon Islands Government 2024d). When viewing friendship from a Solomon Islands perspective, it may be suggested that genuine friendship does not require complete ideological alignment as a necessary condition. Rather, through ‘selective alignment’, there can be pragmatic alignment. What needs to be stressed, however, is that pragmatic friendship does not negate authentic friendship.

Multi-directional and non-exclusive friendships

The idea that complete ideological alignment may not be necessary implies that a state can pursue friendship in a multi-directional and non-exclusive manner. Intrinsic to this is the Melanesian culture, where personhood is seen as a product of social relations. Similarly, Solomon Islands cultivates friendship with multiple partners with the understanding that the state is continuously shaped by its relations with others. Along with this, friendships are based not on ideological compatibility but on values stemming from Solomon Islands’ religious and cultural views. Hau’ofa (2008, 85) explains that at the heart of Oceania society are values that include cooperation, openness to community and transmission of knowledge and skills. In this sense, Solomon Islands’ relations with the US do not suggest that China needs to be excluded as a friend. Rather, Solomon Islands can have a meaningful relationship with China in terms of its developmental needs and with Australia on security matters.²² In the case of China, as mentioned earlier, it may also share values such as the centrality of communal interests.

Furthermore, the nonexclusive nature of this pragmatic friendship implies that friendship does not have to be conceived of in a zero-sum manner, where deepening ties with one actor mean distancing relations with another. Indeed, the Melanesian worldview of holism emphasises interconnectedness and interdependence. Therefore, friendship is not about choosing one party over the other but rather about creating reciprocal relationships with numerous partners. Solomon Islands’ security cooperation with Australia does not mean it cannot pursue cooperation (even in the same field) with China. For example, while receiving security assistance from Australia, Solomon Islands has also engaged in security cooperation with China, as evidenced by the 2022 security pact signed with Beijing (Government of Solomon Islands 2022). Furthermore, while Solomon Islands receives developmental assistance from China, it has also garnered such support from Japan, which funded the construction of the Honiara International Airport, the Kukum Highway Road Project, and the Kiluúfi Hospital improvement (Solomon Islands Government 2024f).

A ‘friends to all’ foreign policy as a strategy for small state diplomatic engagement

A ‘friends to all’ foreign policy, which comprises ‘pragmatic’ friendship, has increasingly been used as a preferred foreign policy strategy by small states. A pragmatic friendship is, as noted, based on maintaining multiple friendships and fluid partnerships. This is an approach that has been adopted by small states to ensure that opposing major powers remain interested in maintaining relations (Marggraff 2025, 73). Cultivating friendship with both states can lead to competitive assistance, investment and aid. For example, in 2021, Australia sent military troops to quell riots in Honiara (Fraenkel 2023). Initially,

it was announced that the troops would only stay for a few weeks. However, when Prime Minister Sogavare hinted that he may turn to China for additional assistance, Australia announced that it would extend its deployment until the end of 2023 (Futaiasi *et al.* 2023, 4). In this sense, when major powers compete, small states gain bargaining power. This can also be interpreted as ‘hedging’, which in the context of small island states, McDougall and Taneja (2024, 237) describe as maintaining flexibility without overcommitting.

By refraining from alignment with the worldview of any single major power, the Solomon Islands gains greater strategic autonomy, making it easier to make choices grounded in perceived national interest rather than in external pressures. Solomon Islands can thus engage multiple actors simultaneously (as in the case of the security support discussed earlier), weighing the value of different partnerships and agreements. This approach enhances its ability to make independent choices – regardless of whether in the economic, security or diplomatic domain – and demonstrates its agency.

Conclusion

This article set out to reconceptualise ‘friendship’ in IR by examining how Solomon Islands has enacted its ‘friends to all, enemy to none’ foreign policy. The literature on friendship has made meaningful advances in developing a framework for the study of the concept. Yet until recently, it has received insufficient scholarly attention in IR and was too much anchored in Western ideas that privilege ideological affinity, exclusivity and stable alignment. The Solomon Islands case illustrates that such assumptions fail to capture the relational logics that underpin friendship in Melanesian and Pacific contexts.

An application of Koschut and Oelsner’s four indicators of international friendship revealed that Solomon Islands meets the normative indicators of friendship despite the absence of deep ideological alignment with any single partner. The article advances an expanded and more relationally grounded conception of friendship in the form of ‘pragmatic friendship’. As applied here, this term signals neither mere diplomatic platitude nor instrumentalist thinking. Rather, it emerges from Melanesian and Christian worldviews, in which personhood, identity and value are constituted through relationships, reciprocity and exchange. Friendship, in this context, is multi-directional and non-exclusive, shaped by culturally embedded understandings of obligations oriented toward humility and collective well-being.

Foregrounding these relational dynamics not only broadens the conceptual vocabulary available for analysing friendship in international relations but also unsettles the assumption that genuine friendship requires exclusivity or ideological congruence. The Solomon Islands case suggests that authentic friendship can be enacted through selective alignment, plural partnerships and relational obligations that allow states to sustain multiple, overlapping friendships simultaneously. This contribution carries both analytical and practical significance. Conceptually, it demonstrates that non-Western relational worldviews offer alternative pathways for theorising international friendship, thereby enriching the broader IR literature. Practically, it shows how a small state employs pragmatic friendship as a diplomatic strategy to navigate great-power rivalry, preserve agency and extract value from competing external partners. Thus, international friendship must be understood as a diverse and context-dependent practice. Incorporating a non-

Western relational perspective enables the development of a more comprehensive and nuanced theory of friendship, thereby broadening the horizons of friendship studies in International Relations.

Notes

1. An exception to this is Oelsner's (2014) chapter on the 'Construction of International Friendship in South America'.
2. A substantial body of literature has examined the position and behaviour of small states. Early contributions tended to depict small states as largely devoid of power or meaningful agency, existing in chronic dependence on larger and more influential actors (Schwarzenberger 1964; Vandenbosch 1964; Vital 1967; Rothstein 1968; Keohane 1969; Knudson 2002). More recent work, however, challenges this depiction by highlighting the ways in which small states, and specifically small island developing states, can exercise creative forms of agency (Bueger and Wivel 2018; Otto 2022; Tarte 2022; Morgan 2022), make autonomous decisions (McDougall and Taneja 2020, 2024) and even have power in certain instances (Marggraff 2025). In addition, other scholars argue that the study of small states is analytically important because they offer valuable insights into processes such as democratisation (Veenendaal and Corbett 2015; Corbett and Veenendaal 2019) as well as how small states can strategically leverage system-level rules and norms to mitigate the constraints associated with their small size (Baldacchino and Antat 2023; Baldacchino and Corbett 2023; Ruwet et al. 2023). While this article acknowledges and draws upon these evolving debates, its primary aim is to advance the concept of 'friendship' within IR; hence, the analysis is situated within the theoretical literature on friendship in IR. The focus, however, does not preclude occasional references to the strategic behaviour of small states. Indeed, as is demonstrated here, the deployment of friendship can itself be understood as a strategy through which small states articulate and enact agency.
3. Koschut and Oelsner (2014, 205) make a clear conceptual distinction between states that are 'being friends' and 'friendly states'. The latter is an attitude towards other states, and does not necessarily include reciprocity or solidarity, as would be the case in friendship. As such, they suggest that 'friendliness' does not qualify as friendship.
4. This article recognises that Solomon Islands does not necessarily act as a coherent or impersonal actor in practice. An example is Daniel Suidani's tenure as Premier of Malaita Province from 2019 to 2023, during which he pursued diplomatic initiatives independently of the national government. Suidani's Washington tour and his endorsement of US development packages illustrate the role of sub-national actors in shaping Solomon Islands external relations, pointing to the multiplicity of actors involved (Solomon Star 2019; Wasuka 2021). Similarly, political authority at the national level is often highly personalised, with leaders' individual styles and approaches significantly shaping policy and international engagement (Kabutaulaka 2024; Gunawan et al. 2025).
5. Other obstacles include unsustainable and unregulated logging practices (Minter and van der Ploeg 2023, 114). Logging, in particular has generated significant environmental and social harms, with (Gegeo et al. 2025, 135) explaining that in Malaita people 'often bewail the destruction of [their] environment by logging and mining companies as being tantamount to penetrating and defiling the sacrosanctity of the indigenous socio-cultural ontology of Malaita society'. Beyond its symbolic and cultural consequences, unsustainable logging has also produced tangible livelihood impacts: in some areas, it has altered the colour of topsoil, making it more difficult for local populations to locate crabs and thereby undermining subsistence activities (Gegeo et al. 2025, 136). Apart from logging, Aqorau (2021, 323) also points to some of the other challenges facing Solomon Islands, such as limited employment opportunities, loss of biodiversity and habitat through climate change and health threats posed by noncommunicable diseases.

6. The roots of the ethnic tensions in Solomon Islands can be traced to the policies of the British colonial administration, the difficulty in constructing a nation-state, the failure of governments to address crucial socioeconomic and political issues (Kabutaulaka 2002, 4) and disputes over land rights and land use (Gegeo et al. 2025, 131).
7. As Wallis et al. (2023, 474) note, the 2019 shift was not a ‘snap decision’. The authors contend that indications of a possible switch can be traced as far back as 1982. More immediately, in 2019 then Prime Minister Ricky Houenipwela declared that his party would review Solomon Islands’ diplomatic ties with Taiwan if re-elected (Wallis et al. 2023, 474).
8. While legitimate concerns have been raised that Solomon Islands’ new relationship with China is contributing to a deterioration in governance, Aqorau (2021, 325) observes that similar challenges characterised the country’s earlier relations with Taiwan. Taiwanese-funded projects were often of limited quality, and investment had a minimal impact on the daily lives of Solomon Islanders. Political elites frequently leveraged the relationship for domestic political gain, undermining good governance and public well-being. High-quality investment has limited influence on the daily lives of Solomon Islanders, and Solomon Island politicians used the relations with Taiwan to gain political mileage at the expense of good governance and the well-being of the people.
9. Kabutaulaka (2010, 138) suggests that Solomon Islands’ foreign policy slogan – ‘friends to all, enemy to none’ was already present from when the Islands gained its independence from Great Britain in 1978.
10. Gegeo et al. (2025, 135) suggest that RAMSI prioritised the restoration of a Western liberal state model, rather than a decentralised state structure identified in local reports as the desired pathway for political transformation.
11. Kemakeza, although complying with RAMSI, was unpopular with the public. During Sogavare’s first tenure, he was removed from government for misleading the cabinet and misappropriating funds from a Taiwanese bank (Allen 2008, 47).
12. Tekiteki and Kabutaulaka (2025) argue that Australia enacts the role of a ‘strategic protector’ in the Pacific, positioning the region as falling within Australia’s sphere of responsibility to be safeguarded, especially in response to China’s growing influence.
13. It is also worth noting several instances of what might be considered ‘unfriendly behaviour’ from Solomon Islands towards the US. While a detailed discussion falls outside the scope of this article, a few illustrative examples highlight these dynamics. In 2023, Prime Minister Sogavare did not attend the Pacific Islands summit hosted by the United States yet took the opportunity to praise development cooperation with China (Reuters 2023). The previous year, Solomon Islands denied access to a US Coast Guard Ship (GlobalSecurity.org 2022), while Sogavare also failed to attend a dawn service for a World War II battle that was organised by the US (Needham 2022).
14. The concept of friendship in Chinese diplomacy has roots in the Maoist era. Since at least 1952, China has routinely referred to foreign counterparts as ‘old friends’ (‘old friend of the Chinese people’ - zhōngguó rénmin de lǎopéngyǒu) as deliberate element of its foreign policy (Ye 2013, 366). This practice of cultivating friendships serves as a strategic tool for building relationships with individuals whom the Chinese state perceives as capable of advancing or protecting China’s interests (Skidmore 2023).
15. In 2004, Adam Dunning was fatally shot while on patrol. Allen (2008, 51) suggests that his death brought RAMSI into the spotlight, highlighting public awareness of the mission’s limitations and growing frustration. The shooting, in particular, demonstrated that RAMSI did not, after all, have machines that would find all of the guns that hadn’t been surrendered’ (Allen 2008, 51).
16. In 2021, Guadalcanal Province in Solomon Islands signed a historic sister-province agreement with the Guangdong Province in China. This friendship builds on ties dating back to the mid-1980s, during which Guadalcanal Province received assistance in areas such as agriculture and transportation (Solomon Star 2021).
17. The relatively tentative nature of the relations between the US and Solomon Islands may also be attributed to what Raymond and Blaxland (2021, 91–92) describe as the influence of

historical memory. Analysing the case of US-Thai relations, they demonstrate how, despite the currently close military-to-military relations between the two states, these ties remain shaped by enduring recollections of ‘interference, social problems and negative geopolitical legacies’. Therefore, even though ‘the West is admired’, it is simultaneously also ‘resented as an irresistible force that threatened Thai sovereignty and traumatised Thai monarchs in the colonial era’ (Raymond and Blaxland 2021, 90). In this sense, Thai perceptions of the US are filtered through lingering memories of Western encroachment during the colonial era.

18. In April 2022, in a decision to expand its security cooperation with more states, Solomon Islands signed a Security Cooperation with China (Solomon Islands Government 2022j). Wallis et al. (2025, 7) note that the agreement generated concern among Solomon Islands’ other partners that feared that it could potentially enable China to exert coercive influence through the establishment of a mechanism permitting the deployment of Chinese military or police forces to Solomon Islands.
19. In an online speech by Sogavare, he refers to his Christian background, explaining that he was a child of a missionary couple who went to Papua New Guinea in the early 1930s (Will-fafale 2024). He also refers to the fact that he did not realise that ‘God was making Way’, while he was facing difficulties during his upbringing, reinforcing the centrality of Christianity to his leadership style.
20. Melanesia, alongside Polynesia and Micronesia, were originally geographic and cultural terms constructed by explorers, colonisers and anthropologists to refer to and divide the subregions of the Pacific. In particular, ‘Melanesia’ literally means ‘black island’, referring to the colour of the inhabitants in this region (Lawson 2013, 4). Considering this, the term has received considerable scrutiny, particularly regarding how its continued use may perpetuate colonial depictions. However, this article continues to use this term, aligning with Lawson’s (2013, 21) argument that ‘Melanesia’ has acquired ‘a positive meaning for many of those to whom it applies, providing a basis for the assertion of an identity that is confident and imbued with pride, thus clearly transcending its origins and establishing a new “reality”’.
21. The importance of the community is a trait that is shared with actors such as China, which undergirded by Confucianism, similarly advocate for the centrality of the community (Huang 2024).
22. This relates to the earlier comment made on the Bandung Conference of non-aligned states. In the Final Bandung Communique, it is explicitly stated that cooperation with the participating countries does not preclude cooperating with countries situated outside the region. The non-exclusivity referred to in this section, therefore stems from the spirit of the Bandung Conference.

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