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Commonwealth business boss warns on China's influence as leaders skip forum



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Australia has a chance to regain support in the Pacific after being “asleep on the watch” while China extended its reach, the head of the Commonwealth’s business forum has declared on the eve of a key meeting that is tipped to tighten alliances among member states.

The Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council chairman, Lord Jonathan Marland, said Australia was in a good position to counter Chinese influence because of its shared interests with many of the 56 nations attending the Commonwealth gathering in Samoa.



Lord Jonathan Marland has warned that China has trapped some African states in debt. GETTY IMAGES

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is due to arrive in the Samoan capital of Apia on Thursday afternoon for two days of [meetings with leaders](#) including United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir

Starmer, with negotiators hoping to produce an agreement to intensify action on climate change.

Security is also on the agenda, with Albanese tipped to discuss a [policing agreement](#) that demonstrates Australian support for Pacific nations.

Marland, a Conservative Party minister and trade envoy before he took the reins at the Commonwealth's business network a decade ago, said he was seeing stronger action by Australia in the Pacific after China had gained ground over many years.

"What has struck me about being here is how Australia – and, indeed, New Zealand – are now committing to really supporting these islands in a much more positive way than they have in the past," he said.

"They've kind of been asleep on the watch and allowed the Chinese to come in and establish very strong positions.

"And it's no question that these islands would much rather have the support of the Australians and the Chinese. There are much more shared interests – and there's the Commonwealth relationship, among other things."

About 3000 delegates are expected to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in the Samoan capital on Friday and Saturday, where King Charles III will preside over the gathering for the first time as sovereign and head of the Commonwealth.

But there are growing concerns that CHOGM is losing relevance because some leaders have chosen to stay away, among them Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Rather than fly to Samoa, [Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa have headed to an alternative summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) in the Russian city of Kazan.

Marland said Commonwealth countries in Africa had learnt the cost of signing up to Chinese infrastructure plans under the Belt and Road Initiative because it had left them saddled with debt.

"It was very easy money for these countries because China brought in cheap infrastructure. There weren't too many questions asked. And they were able to build at speed. Meanwhile, the West stood and watched," he said in an interview.

Marland said the AUKUS alliance would help Australia in the region.

"Part of the good thing about having the Commonwealth in the Pacific is that AUKUS is a subject that is now implanted in the minds of a number of Commonwealth countries," he said.

Marland was an insurance company founder and treasurer of the Conservative Party before entering politics and serving as a minister under Conservative prime minister David Cameron. He resigned as a minister in 2013 and remains a member of the House of Lords, where he sits on the international agreements committee, which is examining the AUKUS alliance among other matters.

He also backs a Commonwealth trade deal that would break down barriers between countries ranging from the UK and Australia to Malaysia, Botswana and Rwanda.

He said he made no criticism of countries that chose closer ties with China.

“It’s not for us to preach to other countries about how they should and shouldn’t run their lives,” he said.

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