



Security Nexus Perspective

# THE SOVEREIGNTY ILLUSION OF REFUSING ACCESS, BASING, AND OVERFLIGHT

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## Summary

Saying no to an ABO request feels like sovereignty protection. It rarely is. Refusal produces immediate gains on territorial and reputational dimensions while generating delayed, compounding costs on decisional and political ones. By the time those costs surface, the connection to the original refusal is rarely obvious. Sri Lanka refused US military access agreements and ended up leasing Hambantota Port to China for 99 years. The Solomon Islands allowed three decades of Western disengagement to accumulate, then signed a secret security agreement with Beijing on Beijing's terms. New Zealand paid twenty-five years of diplomatic costs for a single nuclear-access refusal, then recovered without reversing it. The pattern across all three is the same: the state that believed it was protecting sovereignty found that someone else had authored the terms of the relationship that filled the space it left open. The alternative is *differentiated engagement*. This involves negotiating which elements of an ABO request to accept and which to refuse, before the leverage to do so is gone.

## Introduction

A foreign minister in a mid-tier Indo-Pacific state has a formal ABO request on his desk. A major ally wants to rotate aircraft through a domestic airbase and pre-position logistics equipment. His phone is ringing. A competing power's embassy wants a meeting. Whatever he decides, he will have to justify it to his parliament, his neighbors, and both great powers.

He says no. It feels like defending his country's independence. He returns to parliament to a standing ovation. His approval ratings rise.

On the same day, a decisional account opens that he cannot see. A competing power begins moving into the space his refusal vacated, on terms less controllable and less reversible. His leverage in the next negotiating round drops because the partner he refused has deprioritized him. His regional alignment signal shifts in ways that constrain his forum options. These costs arrive diffusely, across departments and years, never concentrated enough to generate the accountability the original refusal produced.

The companion paper in this series established that sovereignty cost is determined more by agreement design than agreement existence, and that refusal costs materialize slowly, making them routinely underpriced.<sup>1</sup> Sovereignty operates across four dimensions: territorial (control of land, airspace, and waters), political (freedom from coercion), decisional (autonomy over strategic choices), and reputational (control over how others read alignment signals). This paper explains why those costs stay invisible until it is too late, traces four mechanisms through which refusal generates them, and offers a more effective alternative.

### Why Refusal Feels Like Victory

Territorial and reputational gains from refusal are immediate. No foreign footprint expands. No SOFA carve-out materializes. Domestic audiences read refusal as independence asserted. Non-aligned forums approve. Regional neighbors update their assessments within the news cycle.

Decisional and political costs run on a different clock. The access vacuum may take months or years to fill. The leverage lost at the negotiating table only surfaces in the next diplomatic round. Ripple effects on neighboring states accumulate quietly. Domestic costs of non-engagement appear only when conditions deteriorate in ways a structured relationship might have cushioned. By then, no one traces it back.

The dangerous part is that governments facing elections consistently overvalue what refusal delivers today and undervalue what it costs over time. That is not a failure of analysis. It is the rational response to how political incentives are structured.

### Four Ways Refusal Costs More Than It Appears

*Someone else fills the space.*

Saying no to one partner does not protect the space. It makes it available to someone else. The same geographic position or port access that made the original request attractive is still there. Another actor will come asking, usually on harder terms. Refusal does not protect the space. It just changes who occupies it.

*You lose your best bargaining moment.*

The moment before refusal is the moment of maximum leverage. The requesting party wants access, has no alternative yet, and will negotiate. Once the refusal is public, that window closes. The diplomatic capital that could have secured time limits, non-exclusivity, and genuine exit rights is spent instead on a sovereignty statement that produces no structural protection. For most hedging states there is no second chance. For states with persistent value, such as Indonesia, which controls the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda straits, it can afford to wait because demand never disappears.

*Your neighbors are watching.*

Refusal sends a signal beyond the two governments involved. Competing powers read it as availability for alternative partnerships. Neighbors recalibrate their own decisions. Vietnam's deepening defense cooperation with the United States after 2016 and the Philippines' EDCA expansion after 2023 both reflect a regional signaling environment shaped partly by other states' access choices. One government's refusal changes the landscape for everyone around it.

*Saying no gets harder to undo.*

The political gains from refusal create their own momentum. The minister who returned to a standing ovation cannot quietly reopen negotiations in the same term. His successor inherits an environment where the original refusal has become a point of national pride. What started as a strategic choice becomes a constraint.

Overflight deserves particular attention. Rights that appear routine in peacetime carry contingency implications that neither party prices at signing. Cambodia's Dara Sakor International Airport, built by Chinese state-linked companies near Ream Naval Base<sup>2</sup> with runway dimensions analysts assess as militarily significant,<sup>3</sup> was never framed as a contingency overflight decision. That sovereignty cost was invisible at signing. It is not invisible now.

Sri Lanka and the Solomon Islands show the same pathways activating through different mechanisms. Sri Lanka refused structured agreements and left a vacuum. The Solomon Islands experienced a vacuum when it endured 30 years of U.S. diplomatic absence. Both ended up with Beijing authoring the terms of the access relationship that filled the space.

### **Sri Lanka: The Vacuum and Its Occupant**

The Rajapaksa government declined Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) renewal with the United States and framed it as sovereignty protection. On territorial and reputational dimensions, the gains were immediate: no access agreements, no alignment optics.

What followed was worse. Hambantota Port, financed under BRI terms the Sri Lankan economy could not service, was transferred on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017.<sup>4</sup> The SOFA refusal did not cause Hambantota alone. Domestic mismanagement and BRI financing dynamics contributed, but refusal narrowed the exit options and reduced Colombo's leverage as Chinese engagement deepened. Whether Hambantota constitutes a debt trap in the technical sense<sup>5</sup> is beside the point. The decisional sovereignty loss was more severe than any structured US agreement would have produced, and the refusal materially contributed to it.

The mechanisms ran in sequence. The SOFA refusal created a vacuum filled on worse terms. Colombo entered BRI negotiations with less leverage than it had held in SOFA discussions. Regional signaling confirmed Sri Lankan availability for alternative alignment. Domestic politics prevented renegotiation once the port lease occurred. The 2022 economic collapse and IMF bailout were the moment the decisional costs surfaced publicly, precisely five years after the port transfer and more than a decade after the original SOFA decision.

### **The Solomon Islands: When Absence Becomes Invitation**

Sri Lanka made an active choice. The Solomon Islands made no choice at all, and the outcome was the same.

The United States closed its embassy in Honiara in 1993 and did not reopen it until January 2023.<sup>6</sup> Nearly thirty years of absence allowed China to build diplomatic, economic, and security relationships without competition. When the State Department notified Congress of plans to reopen in February 2022, it acknowledged that the absence had severely constrained engagement and that the window to prevent China from becoming strongly embedded was narrowing. That notification arrived after the security agreement with Beijing had already been negotiated.

The agreement, signed in April 2022 and never publicly released,<sup>7</sup> was not a deliberate strategic pivot toward China. It was the downstream product of a vacuum thirty years in the making. The leaked draft, described by knowledgeable sources as not significantly different from the final text,<sup>8</sup> allows China to deploy police, military

personnel, and armed forces to maintain social order and protect Chinese personnel and assets, with deployment scope determined according to China's own needs.<sup>9</sup> No equivalent provision exists in Solomon Islands' arrangement with Australia. Standard security cooperation agreements require host-nation consent for each deployment. The Chinese text inverts this, creating a standing authorization triggered by Beijing's judgment, not Honiara's request.

The operational consequences were quick. In August 2022, USCGC Oliver Henry (WPC-1140), a Coast Guard fast response cutter conducting illegal fishing patrols in Solomon Islands' exclusive economic zone, was denied a routine logistics stop in Honiara. The government did not respond to the US request for diplomatic clearance. The vessel diverted to Port Moresby to refuel.<sup>10</sup> Solomon Islands then announced a moratorium on all foreign naval visits. A security agreement that had not yet produced visible Chinese military presence had already restructured which partners could operate from Solomons territory and on what terms.

Prime Minister Sogavare staked his political survival on the China relationship. External pressure from Australia, the US, New Zealand, and Pacific partners was reframed domestically as interference in Solomons sovereignty.<sup>11</sup> The rhetoric that justified signing the agreement was deployed to resist scrutiny of it. Even after a change of government, the agreement remained in place and unpublished.

Australia had maintained a security agreement with Honiara since 2017.<sup>12</sup> The architecture for differentiated sovereignty-protective engagement existed throughout. What was missing was sustained presence. Thirty years of absence produced the same result as a deliberate refusal: a state with a valuable strategic position, no structured relationship with the power most aligned with its interests, and an access framework written by someone else.

### **The Alternative: Structured Engagement**

The answer is not simply to say yes. It is to deconstruct the request. Any ABO ask can be broken into components, such as presence, access, logistics, pre-positioning, integration, exclusivity, duration. These need to be assessed separately and only those elements whose sovereignty costs stay bounded should be accepted. Elements that generate lock-in should be refused. Obviously, this approach works best for states with geographic or economic leverage to negotiate on. For states without it, the framework still identifies the problem clearly even when the solution space and options are narrower.

New Zealand is the clearest evidence that this works. On 4 February 1985, Prime Minister David Lange refused port access to USS Buchanan, the first operational act of what became the Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act 1987.<sup>13</sup> The territorial and reputational gains were real. The costs arrived within days. Washington suspended intelligence-sharing under ANZUS, cancelled joint exercises, and downgraded New Zealand from ally to friend. This categorization held for twenty-five years. None of these consequences appeared in the discourse that produced the standing ovation.

New Zealand's recovery is what matters analytically. The 2010 Wellington Declaration, signed by Secretary Clinton and Foreign Minister McCully, restored the bilateral strategic partnership without requiring Wellington to reverse the nuclear-free legislation.<sup>14</sup> The 2012 Washington Declaration restored full defense cooperation. New Zealand recovered political and decisional sovereignty without dismantling the original territorial refusal. However, that path had been available throughout and the twenty-five-year freeze was the cost of discovering it late. A bounded refusal on a specific dimension, held within an ongoing relationship, produced a recoverable outcome. Thirty years of Solomons disengagement did not.

## The Sovereignty Illusion of Refusing Access, Basing, and Overflight

The practical test on territory is whether rotational access differs from permanent basing. A state can accept rotational access while refusing basing, accept logistics while refusing C2 integration, and accept pre-positioned equipment with inventory limits while refusing the construction that makes temporary arrangements permanent. The practical test holds as these are real distinctions, not rhetorical ones.

On decisional freedom, the test is whether approval authority is genuine or has become a formality. Singapore kept it genuine by exercising it when it declined MNNA status in 2003 and declined to host a US 1st Fleet.<sup>15</sup> This demonstrated that the access relationship ran on Singapore's terms.<sup>16</sup> A right of refusal that is never exercised stops being a right.

On political exposure, the protection is avoiding exclusivity. Accepting rotational access from one partner while keeping economic and diplomatic relationships with others open is not choosing sides. It is managing exposure. Exit provisions that remain credible throughout the life of an agreement, not just on paper at signing, are the operational test.

On reputation, structured engagement requires framing. The state needs to communicate what it agreed to. For instance, access not alliance or logistics not loyalty. Singapore has sustained this for decades while maintaining engagement with regional forums. It is also the work that keeps options open.

### Conclusion

The foreign minister who said no and came home to a standing ovation had managed the visible dimensions of sovereignty well. He had not managed the account that opened on the same day and kept accumulating.

Refusal is a legitimate instrument. Some proposals are structurally predatory. Some refusals preserve leverage by denying normalization. The problem is not refusal. It is that refusal costs arrive on a different timetable than refusal gains, which means they are systematically underpriced at the moment of decision.

Sri Lanka's active refusal produced a vacuum that generated a worse sovereignty outcome than structured engagement would have. The Solomon Islands' passive disengagement produced the same result more slowly. New Zealand's bounded refusal on a single dimension, eventually managed through differentiated engagement, produced a recoverable outcome. The difference is not the willingness to refuse. It is whether the state had a framework for understanding what refusal costs, what recovery requires, and what could have been negotiated before the window closed. The companion paper<sup>1</sup> provides that framework. The foreign minister who uses it before he refuses is managing sovereignty. The one who says no because no is the visible answer is performing it.

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