



Security Nexus Perspective

SMALL STATES AND THE GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

By Andrea Malji

In an era of intensifying regional and great power rivalry, the world's smallest states have found themselves occupying some of the most strategic spaces on the global chessboard. From the atolls of the Pacific to Caribbean microstates, countries with populations smaller than many cities are shaping and being shaped by the shifting balance of power. Their votes in international forums, access to maritime routes, and willingness to host foreign projects can carry disproportionate weight in the contest for global influence.

States like Kiribati, Maldives, Dominica, and the Solomon Islands illustrate how aid, infrastructure, and diplomatic recognition have become tools in a renewed struggle for strategic alignment. China's expanding footprint through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), coupled with renewed engagement by the United States, India, and its allies, has turned these nations into sites of strategic competition. This article examines how small states manage the cross-pressures of sovereignty, development needs, and external strategic competition. The direction of Indo-Pacific geopolitics will not be determined solely in Beijing, Washington, or New Delhi, but equally through decisions made in Honiara, Tarawa, Malé, and Roseau.

Solomon Islands

In September 2019, the Solomon Islands [severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan](#) and recognized Beijing, signaling a major realignment in Pacific politics. Less than three years later, in April 2022, Honiara signed a [security agreement with China](#). The text, leaked weeks later, included a provision allowing Chinese naval vessels to refuel and resupply in the archipelago and, if requested, for Chinese forces

to protect Chinese projects and personnel. The pact jolted policymakers across the region. For the first time, a small Pacific Island nation, just around 1,000 miles from Australia, opened the door to a potential Chinese security presence deep in the South Pacific.

The Solomon Islands decision was not an isolated event. In recent years, Beijing has steadily chipped away at the region's political alignments, persuading countries to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of Beijing. Only three Pacific Island nations, the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Tuvalu, now formally recognize Taipei. Each defection has chipped away at Taiwan's international legitimacy while simultaneously expanding China's regional influence.

Beyond engagement with Beijing, the Solomon Islands leadership has actively leveraged external competition to extract tangible concessions from all sides. [Canberra has committed hundreds of millions of dollars to police training, equipment, and stabilization assistance](#). [Washington has reopened an embassy and increased programming](#). Meanwhile, Beijing has delivered visible infrastructure, from [stadiums](#) to [policing equipment](#). However, the opaque information surrounding the China-Solomon security pact raises enduring questions about how much agency small states retain once deep security dependencies crystallize.

The 2022 China-Solomon Islands Security Agreement was not without internal backlash, however. Following the agreement, [widespread internal political turbulence followed](#). News of the China pact contributed to protests and rioting, reflecting unease among parts of the population. The turmoil was [especially pronounced in Malaita Province](#), whose local leadership had previously rejected Chinese aid and maintained informal ties with Taipei. In response to unrest and international scrutiny, Solomon Islands officials [publicly downplayed](#) the agreement's military implications, reiterating that no basing rights had been granted and [insisting that the security pact was limited to protecting Chinese projects](#) if explicitly requested. The episode illustrated that foreign alignment decisions in the Solomons are mediated not only by great-power incentives, but also by domestic legitimacy constraints and the specter of internal instability.

Kiribati

The Solomon Islands' diplomatic switch did not occur in isolation. Its decision marked the beginning of a broader realignment, and within days, Kiribati executed a parallel shift. For decades, Kiribati, a Pacific island state of just over 100,000 people but with one of the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zones spanning [3.5 million square kilometers](#) of ocean, was largely peripheral to great-power politics. Its foreign policy was historically guided by economic necessity rather than strategic alignment. That changed dramatically in 2019, when Kiribati [severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan](#) and recognized Beijing, citing [promises of infrastructure investment, development aid, and renewed access to the Chinese market for fisheries](#). China quickly deepened its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, signing a Memorandum of Understanding in 2020, offering cooperation in fisheries, economy, trade, tourism, education, and healthcare.

Since then, several concrete China-backed projects have moved from pledge to delivery. China granted and delivered maritime logistics assets, including [a ferry project](#) to strengthen inter-island shipping and supply chains. Chinese state-linked firms have also broken ground on core transport infrastructure, including the [Buota Bridge](#) and associated causeway and road upgrades linking South and North Tarawa. Beijing has also expanded functional cooperation beyond construction, [financing post-disaster reconstruction](#), [providing concessional development funds](#), and [signing fisheries cooperation agreements](#) that bring Chinese firms deeper into the tuna sector. In total, China has not just promised future partnership but has already entrenched itself through MOUs, assets, public-works projects, and financial instruments that now anchor Kiribati's infrastructure and logistics system to Chinese capital and implementers.

The government under President Taneti Maamau has also grown more explicitly pro-Beijing. Although it rejoined a year later, in 2022, Kiribati briefly [withdrew from the Pacific Islands Forum \(PIF\)](#) amid rising tensions over regional leadership, a move many interpreted as aligning with [China's preference for bilateral rather than collective Pacific diplomacy](#). In 2021, Kiribati [withdrew from the Pacific Islands Forum \(PIF\)](#) amid rising tensions over regional leadership, a move widely interpreted as aligning with [China's preference for bilateral rather than collective Pacific diplomacy](#). China's support has also included [potential rehabilitation of Kanton Island's runway](#), which lies roughly halfway between Hawai'i and Australia. However, this project has not advanced since a China-backed feasibility study in 2021.

The Maamau administration has framed its partnership with China as a pragmatic development decision, while regional observers view it as emblematic of Beijing's broader push for influence across the Pacific. As one of the few nations straddling critical trans-Pacific sea lanes, Kiribati's choices carry weight well beyond its size, demonstrating how small states can shape the strategic geometry of the Indo-Pacific and influence the broader balance of power among major players.

Maldives

The Maldives has become a focal point of external engagement in the Indian Ocean as both China and India have deepened their economic and security ties with the archipelagic state. Its location along critical sea lanes and its reliance on external partners for infrastructure, finance, and maritime capacity have made the Maldives the center of sustained outside attention. Over the past decade, external activities have moved well beyond traditional development assistance into areas with clear strategic implications, including defense cooperation, dual-use infrastructure, and persistent diplomatic courtship.

China's involvement in the Maldives has expanded over the past decade through infrastructure financing, diplomatic engagement, and security cooperation. Beijing financed and built major flagship projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, most notably the [China–Maldives Friendship Bridge](#) linking Malé and Hulhulé. Chinese firms have acquired [long-term leases on atolls](#) and [invested in tourism-related infrastructure](#), while defense engagement has taken the form of [capacity-building](#),

[equipment transfers](#), and [high-level military exchanges](#). The Maldives also restored full diplomatic momentum with Beijing following the elevation of ties to a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#).

Despite increasing ties with China, India remains the Maldives' principal security partner and first responder in crises. New Delhi has [provided key platforms](#), most visibly an offshore patrol vessel and a landing craft in 2023, and a maritime surveillance aircraft. India also provides training to the Maldivian personnel who operate them. It is also [financing and building a Coast Guard harbor](#) at Uthuru Thila Falhu (UTF). Beyond defense, India has underwritten big-ticket connectivity through the \$500 million [Greater Malé Connectivity Project](#). Beyond this, New Delhi has backed major development works, including roughly \$220 million for [land reclamation and coastal protection](#) in Addu City, as well as grant funding to [expand inter-island ferry links](#) and improve maritime transport. Indian financing also extends to the [Hanimaadhoo International Airport upgrade](#) and more than \$100 million in [water-supply and sanitation improvements](#), alongside assistance in sectors such as [education, health services, and professional training](#).

Domestic politics have periodically amplified resistance to India's presence. The "[India Out](#)" campaign, which gained national traction from 2020 onward, mobilized against the continued hosting of Indian military personnel and framed Indian assistance as an infringement on sovereignty. The campaign became a [salient electoral issue](#) and was ultimately adopted by Mohamed Muizzu, who ran on an "India Out" platform and then entered office after winning the presidency. Its prominence contributed to subsequent policy adjustments, including commitments to review or reduce certain Indian deployments. These developments illustrate that external security partnerships in the Maldives are not only shaped by foreign policy choices at the executive level but are also influenced by domestic sentiment, mobilization, and the politics of sovereignty. Nevertheless, since his election, Muizzu's government has [largely abandoned](#) the "India Out" rhetoric and has begun to recalibrate, cautiously re-engaging with India after the initial rupture.

Dominica

At first glance, the tiny Eastern Caribbean island of Dominica sits far outside the map of strategic competition and certainly little presence in Indo-Pacific debates. Yet it is precisely in such seemingly peripheral jurisdictions that China has achieved some of its most durable gains. After the country [switched diplomatic recognition](#) from Taipei to Beijing in 2004, Chinese state financing and firms rapidly assumed a central role in the country's development trajectory. Major projects from the [Windsor Park Sports Stadium](#) to the [State House complex](#) and [post-hurricane reconstruction](#) on more than one occasion have anchored Beijing not just as a funder, but as an implementer embedded in Dominica's public infrastructure cycle. Engagement later expanded into [health](#), [education](#), and [training](#), integrating China into state functions in ways that attracted minimal external scrutiny.

China's role has also intersected with Dominica's economic model in less visible ways, through [concessional loans](#), [grants](#), and [turnkey construction](#). Dominica's [participation in the Belt and Road Initiative](#) and its [acceptance of PRC-linked scholarships](#) and training programs further widen touchpoints between Chinese institutions and Dominican officials. While none of these measures

constitute a military or basing presence, they cumulatively build familiarity, reliance, and procedural alignment that can translate into diplomatic support for Beijing on issues far removed from the Caribbean. Dominica thus demonstrates how influence can be accrued not through coercion or force posture, but through quiet, accumulative state-building assistance in jurisdictions rarely treated as strategic terrain.

Dominica is not a regional outlier. Similar sequences in which diplomatic realignment is followed by large-scale construction, preferential access, and security-adjacent assistance have occurred across the Eastern Caribbean, including [Grenada](#) and the development of a deep water port in [Antigua and Barbuda](#). These states are rarely invoked in assessments of China's rise, yet they supply UN votes, regional diplomatic blocs, and commercially valuable coastal access at low strategic cost to Beijing. The Dominica case, along with its Caribbean neighbors, thus illuminates a broader pattern: some of China's most resilient influence is accumulating not where analysts expect contestation, but in the quiet spaces that strategic attention tends to overlook.

Conclusion

The cases of Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, the Maldives, and Dominica demonstrate that the geopolitical competition shaping the Indo-Pacific is not confined to the capitals of major powers or to the traditional flashpoints on strategic maps. It is unfolding just as consequentially in jurisdictions whose populations are smaller than many mid-sized American suburbs. These states sit at the intersection of external ambition and domestic constraint: their ports, runways, votes, legal signatures, and diplomatic decisions now carry leverage far beyond their borders. What once appeared as marginal diplomatic footnotes, recognition switches, stadium grants, police training, or runway rehabilitation, now operate as instruments in a distributed struggle for position and access.

Small states do not determine outcomes in global politics, but neither are they passive recipients of external pressure. Their choices alter opportunity structures for larger powers, set precedents for others, and normalize patterns of access and influence that can be difficult to reverse once embedded. The strategic landscape of the Indo-Pacific is therefore being shaped not only by defense planners in Beijing, Washington, Canberra, and New Delhi, but also by leaders in Tarawa, Honiara, Malé, and Roseau. To understand the future balance of power, analysts must follow the map not only to the centers of strength but to the peripheries where quiet decisions accumulate into durable geopolitical facts.



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