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THE SOVEREIGNTY CALCULUS: AN ACCESS, BASING, AND OVERFLIGHT DECISION FRAMEWORK FOR HEDGING STATES

By Deon Canyon

Summary

A foreign minister signing an access, basing, and overflight (ABO) agreement without a clear account of what sovereignty he is trading is making a decision he cannot fully evaluate. Sovereignty in the ABO context operates across four distinct dimensions: decisional, territorial, political, and reputational. Each has a different cost profile, a different reversibility threshold, and a different set of negotiating levers. Decisional sovereignty deserves assessment first because its erosion is the least visible and the least recoverable. By the time its cost surfaces, the structural conditions that produced it are too entrenched to unwind. Singapore demonstrates that all four dimensions can be managed simultaneously through deliberate agreement architecture. The Solomon Islands shows what happens when they are traded without adequate assessment of downstream interactions, particularly when the requesting power structures the agreement to serve its own access needs rather than the host state's sovereign interests. The question for any hedging state entering ABO negotiations is not whether to grant access, but on what structural terms.

Introduction

Imagine a foreign minister in a mid-tier Indo-Pacific state. On his desk sits a formal request from a major ally asking for permission to rotate military aircraft through a domestic airbase and to pre-position logistics equipment. The request is framed as routine and comes with proposed aid commitments. His phone has been ringing and officials from competing great powers asking for a meeting.

Whatever he decides, he will justify it to his parliament, his neighbors, both great powers, and eventually his own people under conditions he cannot predict. What he needs, and what existing frameworks rarely provide, is a clear account of what sovereignty he trades when he signs and what sovereignty he risks when he refuses.

The Indo-Pacific is experiencing rapid expansion of distributed basing arrangements, rotational access agreements, and enhanced defense cooperation agreements (EDCA) and frameworks. From Chinese security cooperation agreements across Pacific Island states to US EDCA site expansions in Southeast Asia and new access negotiations across Micronesia and Polynesia, every hedging state faces some version of this dilemma. The analytical tools available to those governments remain underdeveloped relative to the strategic stakes.

Sovereignty in the ABO context is not a single value to be preserved or surrendered. It is a composite of four distinct dimensions, each with different exposure profiles depending on agreement structure, state geography, and the trajectory of regional competition. Understanding these dimensions and how they interact is the essential first step for any state navigating the terrain between major power competition and domestic political constraint.

Why Existing Tools Fall Short

Most analytical work on ABO agreements is written from the perspective of the requesting power. The familiar questions are about deterrence extension, escalation dynamics, and alliance management. These are important, but they are the wrong questions for a foreign minister in Manila, Suva, or Dili. Hedging states are more interested in whether an ABO agreement serves its interests and at what cost to which dimensions of sovereign authority.

The existing literature on overseas basing (Harkavy, 1989; Cooley, 2008), hedging strategy (Kuik, 2008, 2023; Goh, 2005), and sovereignty (Krasner, 1999) explains bargaining dynamics and the gap between formal and practical sovereignty well. What it does not explain is what host states actually trade in sovereignty terms when they sign, or how to evaluate specific agreement structures against specific sovereignty thresholds. States refuse access on sovereignty grounds without specifying which dimension they are protecting. States grant access without mapping which dimensions they are trading or when those trades become irreversible. The framework developed here addresses that gap directly, reversing the analytical vantage point from requesting power to host state.

Four Dimensions of Sovereignty

Sovereignty in the ABO context breaks into four decision-sufficient dimensions: control over territory, freedom from external coercion in policy conduct, autonomy over strategic choices, and control over how audiences interpret alignment signals. These four capture the consequential dimensions that are most decision-relevant in ABO negotiations. They differ in both consequence and recoverability, which is why the sequence of assessment matters.

Decisional Sovereignty

Decisional sovereignty is the autonomy to determine when, with whom, and under what conditions a state employs its foreign policy and security instruments. It is the dimension where hedging states pay the highest and least-acknowledged price.

The mechanism is structural. Once an ABO agreement is in place, the host state enters an adversary's targeting calculus regardless of its formal non-belligerent status. Exit costs rise as infrastructure develops and operational relationships deepen. The alignment signal constrains future hedging options in ways not visible at inception.

Five structural accelerators drive lock-in:

1. Partner-financed infrastructure that creates sunk costs neither party wants to absorb.
2. Integrated command, control, and communications systems that make operational separation technically complex.
3. Routine access drifting from approved to presumed
4. Pre-positioning that creates de facto permanence regardless of legal form
5. Rising domestic political cost of exercising refusal rights as the alliance deepens.

Individually each is manageable, but together they can foreclose exit within a decade of agreement inception. This is what distinguishes decisional sovereignty from the other three dimensions.

Territorial costs are visible at signing. Political costs emerge over time. Reputational costs can be managed. Decisional costs accumulate silently, and by the time they surface, the conditions that produced them cannot be unwound.

Territorial Sovereignty

Territorial sovereignty is the physical control and legal jurisdiction a state exercises over its land, airspace, and maritime zones. It is the dimension most commonly invoked in ABO debates and the most open to structural mitigation through agreement design.

Permanent basing carries real territorial costs through Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) carve-outs, ambiguity of environmental liability, and land-use constraints that can persist for decades. Rotational access and overflight rights involve far less exposure. They may require only pre-notification protocols, facility-sharing, and logistics support, none of which fundamentally alter legal jurisdiction.

Territorial sovereignty costs of rotational access are frequently overstated in domestic political discourse. The qualification is that rotational arrangements can still generate meaningful costs when infrastructure development or materiel pre-positioning creates de facto permanence despite the legal framing.

Political Sovereignty

Political sovereignty is the effective freedom of the state from external coercion in the conduct of domestic and foreign policy. Effective is the operative word. Political sovereignty depends not only on formal legal independence but on the credible capacity to resist coercion from any external actor, ally or adversary alike. A state that has expelled a treaty partner but cannot resist pressure from a third party has not preserved its political sovereignty in any meaningful sense. Political sovereignty describes freedom from coercion. Decisional sovereignty describes the shrinking menu of choices through which that freedom is exercised.

Exclusive agreements carry higher political sovereignty costs than non-exclusive ones. Agreements linked to aid or trade create dependency asymmetries that can be leveraged coercively. The key negotiating variables are exclusivity, economic dependency linkage, and exit credibility. A state that secures non-exclusive, economically decoupled access with clearly defined revocation rights trades far less political sovereignty than one that accepts bundled security and economic packages.

Reputational Sovereignty

Reputational sovereignty is a state's control over how external and domestic audiences interpret its alignment signals. It is distinct from general reputation. A state can maintain an excellent international standing while losing the ability to shape the narrative of its own strategic identity across competing audience relationships.

Hedging states operate in a triangular perception environment. Domestic populations may read ABO agreements as compromises of national independence. Regional neighbors treat them as alignment signals. Major powers read both agreements and refusals as indicators of reliability and risk tolerance. Reputational sovereignty erodes when states lose control over which of these readings dominates. Observable indicators include declining invitations from non-aligned forums, elite discourse in regional capitals characterizing the state as aligned, and reduced diplomatic leverage in multilateral settings. Unlike the other three dimensions, it is managed primarily through narrative and institutional behavior rather than legal architecture, which makes it more recoverable but also more demanding of sustained diplomatic effort.

Two Cases: The Same Region, Different Calculations

Singapore and the Solomon Islands face structurally different versions of the same problem: how to manage access agreements with major powers without foreclosing sovereignty options. Singapore has managed this through deliberate agreement architecture across decades. The Solomon Islands

signed a security cooperation framework with China in April 2022 without adequate assessment of the sovereignty dimensions being traded. Both cases are assessed across all four dimensions and across time, since the most consequential sovereignty costs materialize after the decision, not at it.

Singapore: The Architecture of Managed Exposure

Singapore hosts significant US access and logistics infrastructure, including naval facilities at Changi and air access at Paya Lebar, while maintaining extensive economic and diplomatic relationships with China. Neither major power characterizes Singapore as unambiguously aligned with the other. The legal foundation is the 1990 Memorandum of Understanding, renewed in 2019 for a further fifteen years, which provides US access to Singaporean facilities without constituting a basing agreement (Singapore MOU, 1990). Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated publicly in 2022 that Singapore is not a US ally, will not conduct military operations on its behalf, and will not seek direct US military support (Lee, 2022).

On the territorial dimension, Singapore offers rotational access, logistics support, and facility-sharing rather than extraterritorial US installations. Legal jurisdiction has not been ceded. Infrastructure and pre-positioning have not reached a scale that creates de facto permanence. Territorial exposure is real but bounded.

On the political dimension, non-exclusivity is the structural mechanism that preserves Singapore's options. No single power holds effective veto over Singaporean foreign policy. The arrangements are decoupled from the economic dependency that would enable coercive leverage.

On the decisional dimension, operational approvals remain case-by-case. Singapore has exercised refusal rights often enough to keep them credible. When named as a potential host for a U.S. 1st Fleet, Singapore publicly declined (Cancian and Saxton, 2021). In 2003 it refused a U.S. offer to be designated a Major Non-NATO Ally, a status accepted by the Philippines and Thailand (Yale RIS, 2024). These are the operational evidence that Singapore's right of refusal is practiced, not merely legal. A right of refusal that is never exercised is not a constraint on lock-in. Singapore maintains the practiced version.

On the reputational dimension, the language is deliberate. "Enhanced defence cooperation" and "logistics access" accurately describe functional reality while managing audience perceptions. Parallel engagement with China and consistent ASEAN forum participation sustain the non-alignment narrative. Reputational sovereignty here is continuously produced, not passively held.

Singapore's record demonstrates that all four dimensions can be managed simultaneously through agreement architecture designed to do so. The costs are calibrated and kept within acceptable thresholds in parallel. Singapore's specific arrangements are not replicable elsewhere; they reflect a unique geographic and economic position. The four-dimensional management approach, however, is.

The Solomon Islands: Agreement Architecture Without Sovereignty Assessment

The Solomon Islands provides the clearest available case of what happens when an ABO-adjacent security agreement is signed without adequate sovereignty assessment across all four dimensions. The April 2022 Framework Agreement on Security Cooperation between Solomon Islands and China was negotiated and signed with minimal transparency, constrained domestic deliberation, and no publicly articulated framework for evaluating what sovereignty was being traded (CSIS 2022, O'Brien 2022).

The structural background matters. Solomon Islands switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in 2019, a decision driven partly by economic incentives and partly by the Sogavare government's political calculations (Wallis and Tubilewicz 2025). The 2022 security agreement followed that switch and deepened the dependency it created. When a leaked draft circulated in March 2022, regional partners including Australia, New Zealand, and the United States expressed serious concern. The Sogavare government signed regardless, framing the decision as an assertion of sovereignty. The final agreement text was not released publicly (Al Jazeera 2022, Johnson and Yong 2025).

On the territorial dimension, the leaked framework text created substantial exposure. The agreement permitted Chinese naval vessel visits for logistical replenishment, provided for the deployment of Chinese police, military, and armed forces to maintain "social order," and granted legal and judicial immunity to all Chinese personnel (CSIS 2022, O'Brien 2022). Unlike rotational access agreements that retain clear host-state jurisdictional authority, the framework's vague trigger conditions and the immunity provisions created structural ambiguity about who exercises effective jurisdiction when Chinese personnel are present. As one Solomon Islands academic noted, it was "ironic that a prime minister who invariably extols the virtues of national sovereignty should agree to cede a fundamental sovereign function – the protection of lives and property – to a foreign force" (O'Brien 2022). The language permitting both parties to act "according to its own needs" without clearly defined constraints further eroded territorial clarity.

On the political dimension, the agreement intensified an economic dependency asymmetry that was already significant. China accounted for approximately 70 % of Solomon Islands merchandise exports at the time of signing (Cade 2023). The \$66 million Huawei telecommunications tower contract, awarded in 2022, added infrastructure dependency to the trade dependency already in place (Kabutaulaka 2022). The agreement also signaled exclusivity pressure. China's framework included provisions that neither party would disclose missions without written consent of the other, creating opacity that constrained Solomon Islands' capacity to manage third-party relationships transparently. Political sovereignty requires the credible capacity to resist coercion from any direction. The bundled economic and security relationship with China reduced that capacity structurally.

On the decisional dimension, the agreement's lock-in accelerators were embedded in its architecture. Port access provisions enabling Chinese naval vessel logistics replenishment without clear host-state

approval requirements created drift toward presumed access. C2 integration risk was present through police training programs and equipment provision, including the provision of replica weapons and riot control equipment (Kabutaulaka 2022, Associated Press 2023). Chinese police trainers were present in Honiara under the agreement's terms. The secrecy provisions structurally elevated exit costs. Any future government seeking to revoke the agreement would face not only the political cost of reversing a signed commitment but the opacity of not knowing what operational relationships had been established under provisions shielded from public view. The 2024 election of Prime Minister Jeremiah Manele, who served as foreign minister when the diplomatic switch and the security agreement were concluded, suggested that the political cost of departure had already exceeded the political cost of continuation (Pannett 2024, Yang 2024).

On the reputational dimension, the Sogavare government attempted to frame the agreement as a sovereignty assertion where a small state has the right to choose its partners. That framing initially held domestically but inverted regionally. Solomon Islands' position within the Pacific Islands Forum became contested, with concerns that Honiara was acting on Beijing's behalf in multilateral settings, including efforts to sideline Taiwan at the 2025 PIF Leaders Meeting (CRS 2025). The "Friends to all and enemies to none" foreign policy posture that Solomon Islands traditionally maintained became harder to sustain as the agreement signaled alignment rather than balance. Unlike Singapore, which continuously produces its non-alignment narrative through practiced diplomatic behavior, Solomon Islands lost control of the dominant audience reading of its strategic identity.

The lesson is not that Solomon Islands had no right to sign the agreement. It did, and PM Sogavare said so explicitly. The lesson is that signing without a structured four-dimensional sovereignty assessment produced costs that the government could not fully anticipate. The territorial ambiguity, political dependency deepening, decisional lock-in, and reputational signal loss were not priced at inception. They accumulated. By the time a new government took office in 2024, the structural conditions the agreement created were entrenched enough to make departure politically implausible despite domestic and regional pressure. This is the lock-in problem in operation: not coercion at signing, but the progressive narrowing of options afterward.

By contrast, the US-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) framework offers an instructive positive reference point. Despite the political complexity of the US-Philippines alliance history, the EDCA architecture includes defined SOFA parameters, case-by-case operational approval requirements, and revocability provisions that preserve host-state refusal rights in legal form. The Marcos administration's concurrent expansion of EDCA sites and active South China Sea operational posture demonstrates that a hedging state can use structured agreement architecture to reassert strategic agency rather than surrender it. Agreement architecture, not agreement existence, is what determines the sovereignty cost.

A Decision Framework for Hedging States

Five variables indicate whether a given ABO agreement is sovereignty-preserving or sovereignty-eroding. These are an analytical checklist, not a policy prescription. Decisional sovereignty consequences should be assessed first because decisional lock-in is the least recoverable and its structural accelerators are the hardest to reverse. Table 1 presents the full assessment matrix in portrait format for working use.

1. Agreement architecture. Is the agreement revocable in practice, or does exit cost make revocation implausible? Is it exclusive? Legal structure determines actual sovereignty cost more reliably than the political narrative around it. On the decisional dimension, the critical question is whether operational approvals are genuinely case-by-case or whether the arrangement has already drifted toward presumed access. Singapore's practice of exercising refusal rights often enough to maintain their credibility is the available model (Lee 2022). The Solomon Islands framework's opacity and immunity provisions illustrate the opposite: architecture that shuts down assessment of what has been traded.

2. Threat proximity. Where a state faces active coercive pressure over its territorial claims, the decisional sovereignty cost of ABO refusal, the erosion of deterrent protection, may exceed the sovereignty cost of agreement. Threat proximity raises the floor on acceptable decisional sovereignty costs. States along the first island chain face a fundamentally different calculus than those in the second or third.

3. Economic dependency asymmetry. ABO agreements linked to aid, trade, or investment create coercive leverage that erodes political sovereignty. Where linkage is unavoidable, the negotiating priority should be credible exit mechanisms that keep revocation a genuinely available option throughout the agreement lifecycle. The Solomon Islands' 70 % merchandise export concentration with China illustrates what happens when security and economic tracks are bundled without structural separation.

4. Domestic political capacity. Governments with weak political legitimacy are more vulnerable to ABO agreements being weaponized in internal competition. Agreement framing, transparency, and parallel diplomatic engagement with competing powers are the primary tools for managing reputational sovereignty costs domestically. The secrecy surrounding the Solomon Islands framework was kept from legislators and citizens alike until a draft was leaked. It eliminated the domestic deliberation that might have surfaced sovereignty costs before they were locked in.

5. Coalition redundancy. States with unique geographic value should negotiate harder on agreement structure before signing. Their leverage is highest before the agreement is in place and lowest once operational dependency is established. Redundancy reduces leverage but also reduces lock-in risk.

If decisional lock-in cannot be bounded by design, the agreement is sovereignty-eroding regardless of how low the territorial optics appear.

Table 1. Sovereignty Assessment Matrix for ABO Agreements. Assess decisional sovereignty first and lock-in the accelerators.

Dimension	What to Watch	Negotiating Levers
Decisional (Assess First)	<p>Access drift: Has approved access hardened into presumed access?</p> <p>C2 integration: Are command systems becoming operationally inseparable?</p> <p>Infrastructure: Is partner-financed construction creating unrecoverable sunk costs?</p> <p>Refusal credibility: When was the right of refusal last exercised?</p> <p>Exit trajectory: Is the political cost of departure rising year-on-year?</p>	<p>Require: Case-by-case operational approvals, not blanket access.</p> <p>Exercise: Refusal rights routinely, not just legally.</p> <p>Stage: Implementation with periodic sovereignty review clauses.</p> <p>Limit: Partner-financed infrastructure to defined scope.</p> <p>Preserve: Exit as a politically plausible option throughout the agreement lifecycle.</p>
Territorial	<p>SOFA terms: Do jurisdictional carve-outs extend beyond operational necessity?</p> <p>Infrastructure scale: Does development create de facto permanence despite rotational framing?</p> <p>Pre-positioning: Does materiel storage effectively anchor a continuous presence?</p> <p>Legal vs. operational: Does the agreement's legal form match its operational reality?</p>	<p>Frame: Rotational, not permanent; facility-sharing, not basing.</p> <p>Define: Jurisdictional limits explicitly in agreement text.</p> <p>Decouple: Infrastructure development from the access grant itself.</p> <p>Retain: Environmental liability and land-use authority.</p>
Political	<p>Exclusivity: Does the agreement foreclose access to competing powers?</p> <p>Economic linkage: Is security access bundled with aid, trade, or investment?</p>	<p>Negotiate: Non-exclusivity as a structural condition, not a side preference.</p> <p>Separate: Security and economic tracks formally.</p> <p>Define: Revocation rights with specified procedures and timelines.</p>

Dimension	What to Watch	Negotiating Levers
	<p>Third-party leverage: Does reduced deterrence enable coercion from adversaries?</p> <p>Exit credibility: Is revocation legally available and politically plausible?</p>	<p>Maintain: Deterrent capacity to resist third-party coercion, not only alliance-partner pressure.</p>
<p>Reputational</p>	<p>Framing: Does agreement language signal alignment more than the operational reality warrants?</p> <p>Audience management: Are domestic, regional, and major-power perceptions tracked separately?</p> <p>Forum signals: Is engagement with non-aligned forums declining?</p> <p>Elite discourse: Are regional partners characterizing the state as aligned?</p>	<p>Control: Agreement terminology; avoid "base" language where the functional reality does not require it.</p> <p>Sustain: Parallel diplomatic engagement with competing powers.</p> <p>Participate: Actively in non-aligned multilateral forums.</p> <p>Manage: Domestic discourse through transparent public framing of the agreement's scope and limits.</p>

Conclusion

The foreign minister's decision cannot be reduced to a choice between sovereignty and security. He is managing four distinct dimensions of sovereign authority across an unpredictable time horizon against domestic political constraints that will shift whether he acts or defers.

Two conclusions follow from Singapore and the Solomon Islands. First, the sovereignty cost of ABO agreements is determined more by agreement design than by agreement existence. Whether to grant access matters less than on what structural terms. The Solomon Islands signed a security cooperation framework with China in 2022 without adequate architecture to bound the sovereignty costs. Singapore has maintained access relationships with the United States for over three decades while managing all four sovereignty dimensions in parallel. The difference is not the agreement. It is the design.

Second, the sovereignty cost of ABO refusal is real but materializes slowly in the decisional dimension, making it routinely invisible in domestic political discourse and routinely underpriced. The Solomon Islands case illustrates that signing without a sovereignty framework is not a neutral default. It is a decision that limits options the government may not realize it needs.

The deepest risk for hedging states is not territorial loss at signing. It is the progressive narrowing of strategic options that occurs when ABO decisions are made without adequate attention to decisional lock-in, reputational signal management, and structural dependency over time. Hedging without structured sovereignty management does not preserve autonomy. It defers the cost of alignment while forfeiting the benefits.

Every ABO agreement is a negotiation about which dimensions of sovereignty are traded, at what rate, and under what conditions they can be recovered. The foreign minister who understands that before he sits down at the table is in a fundamentally stronger position than one who discovers it afterward.

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