



Security Nexus Perspective

THE SOVEREIGNTY ILLUSION OF REFUSING ACCESS, BASING, AND OVERFLIGHT

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Summary

The argument here is not that refusal is wrong, but that refusal is often misread as costless simply because its costs arrive on a different timetable than its gains. Refusing an agreement on access, basing, and overflight (ABO) produces immediate, visible gains on territorial and reputational dimensions while generating delayed, diffuse costs on decisional and political dimensions. These costs do not surface at the moment of refusal but accumulate over years as the strategic environment shifts in ways the refusing state can no longer influence. The result is a sovereignty illusion: saying no looks like independence, but structured engagement is what keeps options open. Sri Lanka's post-Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) trajectory toward Hambantota shows the mechanism in practice. The alternative is differentiated engagement, which means decomposing any ABO request into separable elements, accepting those whose sovereignty costs remain bounded, and refusing those that generate lock-in, while preserving the negotiating leverage that outright refusal destroys.

Introduction

Picture 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 pre-position logistics equipment. His phone is ringing. A senior official from a competing power's embassy is asking for a meeting. Whatever he decides, he will have to justify it to his parliament, his neighbors, both great powers, and eventually his own people under conditions he cannot fully predict.

He says no. The request feels like a threat to his country's independence, and refusing it feels like defending that independence. He returns to parliament to a standing ovation. The press reports that sovereignty has been vigorously defended. His approval ratings rise.

What he did not see was the decisional account opening on the same day. A competing power moved into the access arrangement his refusal vacated, on terms less controllable and less reversible. His leverage in the next negotiating round was lower because the partner he refused had deprioritized his requests. His regional alignment signal had shifted in ways that constrained which forums he could anchor. These costs arrived diffusely, across departments and across years, never concentrated enough to generate the clear accountability the original refusal had produced.

The companion paper in this series on access, basing, and overflight (ABO) established that sovereignty cost is determined more by agreement design than agreement existence, and that refusal costs are real but materialize slowly, making them routinely underpriced.¹ Sovereignty in the ABO context operates across four dimensions: territorial (physical control of land, airspace, and waters), political (freedom from external coercion), decisional (autonomy over strategic choices), and reputational (control over how others read your alignment signals). This paper explains why that underpricing happens, traces four ways through which refusal generates costs that its advocates do not see coming and offers a more effective alternative.

Why Refusal Feels Like Victory

The systematic underpricing of refusal costs is a structural feature of how sovereignty costs distribute across the four dimensions and across time. Territorial and reputational gains from refusal are immediate and visible. Decisional and political costs are delayed and diffuse. That asymmetry is built into the decision itself.

When a state refuses an ABO request, territorial sovereignty is preserved on the day of refusal. No foreign footprint expands. No Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) carve-out materializes. Reputational gains follow quickly with domestic audiences reading the refusal as independence asserted, non-aligned forums signaling approval, and regional neighbors updating their assessments within the news cycle of the decision.

The costs that matter most arrive on a different schedule. The space vacated by refusal may not be filled for months or years. The leverage lost at the negotiating table only becomes apparent in the next round of diplomacy. The ripple effects on neighboring states' decisions accumulate quietly over time. The domestic political costs of non-engagement only surface when conditions deteriorate in ways a structured relationship might have cushioned. By then, the connection to the original refusal is rarely obvious.

Governments facing elections and parliamentary accountability will consistently overvalue what refusal delivers immediately and undervalue what it costs later. That is not a failure of analysis. It is the rational response to how the incentives are structured.

Four Pathways from Refusal to Cost

Four mechanisms translate the visibility asymmetry into concrete sovereignty loss. Each can operate on its own, but in practice, they tend to reinforce each other. Not every refusal triggers all four, but most trigger at least one, and the most damaging cases trigger two or more in sequence.

Someone Else Fills the Space

Saying no to one partner does not make the strategic space disappear. It just makes it available to someone else. The same geographic position or port access that made the original request attractive is still there after the refusal. Another actor will eventually come asking, often on terms the host state finds harder to control, harder to exit, and less transparent. Refusal does not protect the space. It just changes who occupies it.

You Lose Your Best Bargaining Moment

The moment before a refusal is the moment of maximum leverage. The requesting party wants access, has not yet found an alternative, and is willing to negotiate on terms. Once the refusal is public, that window closes permanently. All the diplomatic capital that could have been spent securing time limits, non-exclusivity, environmental protections, and genuine exit rights is instead spent on a public sovereignty statement that produces no structural protection at all. Refusal, framed as sovereignty protection, forecloses the one moment at which sovereignty protection could actually have been negotiated into the agreement. States with exceptional geographic leverage, such as Indonesia's control of the Malacca, Lombok, and Sunda straits, are a partial exception since demand for their access never fully disappears. For most hedging states, that cushion does not exist.

Your Neighbors Are Watching

A refusal is never just a decision between two governments. Neighboring states, regional institutions, and competing powers all draw conclusions from it. Rival powers may read it as a signal that the refusing state is open to alternative partnerships, and move accordingly. Neighbors recalibrate their own decisions based on what they see. Vietnam's deepening defense cooperation with the United States after 2016, and the Philippines' Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) expansion after 2023, should be understood in part within a regional signaling environment shaped by other states' access decisions. One government's refusal changes the strategic landscape for everyone around it.

Saying No Gets Harder to Undo

The domestic political gains that refusal generates create their own momentum. The foreign minister who came home to a standing ovation cannot quietly reopen negotiations in the same term without looking like he reversed himself. His successor inherits a political environment where the original refusal has become a point of national pride, a benchmark every future decision gets measured against. What started as a strategic choice becomes a constraint. The longer it sits, the harder it is to move.

Overflight rights deserve particular attention because they appear routine in peacetime but carry contingency implications that neither party typically prices at signing. A state that grants overflight

access to one power has made a decision with wartime consequences it may not have intended. Cambodia illustrates this through the Dara Sakor International Airport project, built by Chinese state-linked companies near Ream Naval Base² with runway dimensions that analysts assess as militarily significant³. Phnom Penh did not frame these arrangements as granting contingency overflight rights. The sovereignty cost was not visible at signing. It is visible now and the operational implications exist regardless of the framing.

Sri Lanka provides the clearest available illustration of multiple pathways activating in sequence, and of the access vacuum being filled before the decisional costs become visible.

Sri Lanka: The Access Vacuum and Its Occupant

The Rajapaksa government's decision to decline SOFA and Access and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) renewal with the United States was framed as sovereignty protection and non-alignment. On territorial and reputational dimensions, the gains were immediate: no foreign military access agreements, no major power alignment optics. The framing was coherent on its own terms.

What followed was a sovereignty outcome more severe than the refusal's advocates had priced: deeper dependence through Hambantota⁴. The port, financed under Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) terms that embedded debt-service obligations the Sri Lankan economy could not sustain, was transferred on a 99-year lease to China Merchants Port Holdings in 2017. The SOFA refusal and the BRI financing decisions overlapped rather than ran in strict sequence, but together they narrowed the exit options available to Colombo. Refusal was not the sole cause of Sri Lanka's later dependence. Domestic political economy, Rajapaksa governance choices, and broader BRI financing dynamics all contributed. But refusal narrowed one available pathway and reduced Colombo's leverage as alternative forms of external engagement expanded. Regardless of whether Hambantota constitutes a debt trap in the technical sense debated in the literature⁵, the decisional sovereignty loss was more severe than any structured US agreement would have produced, and the refusal materially contributed to a more severe sovereignty loss.

Several of the mechanisms operated in sequence. The SOFA refusal created an access vacuum that was filled on worse terms. The leverage paradox meant Colombo entered BRI negotiations with less structural leverage than it had held in SOFA discussions. Regional signaling confirmed Sri Lankan availability for alternative alignment approaches. Domestic politics constrained renegotiation once the port lease occurred. The 2022 economic collapse and International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout marked the moment the decisional costs surfaced publicly, five years after the port transfer and more than a decade after the original SOFA decision.

A Better Option: Structured Engagement

The alternative to outright refusal is not simply saying yes; it is *structured engagement*. One works through the four-dimensional framework to identify which parts of an ABO request create long-term dependency and which do not. Accepting the latter while refusing the former is the safest choice for hedging nations.

The practical starting point is to break any ABO request into its component parts, including presence, access, logistics, pre-positioning, integration, exclusivity, and duration, and assess each one

separately. Accept only those elements whose sovereignty costs stay bounded across all four dimensions. This approach is most available to states with geographic, coalition, or economic leverage to negotiate on. For states without it, the framework identifies the problem clearly even where the solution space is narrower. Where the requesting power has ready alternatives and limited patience for conditional terms, the negotiating window may be shorter than the framework assumes, which is another reason to enter it before refusal forecloses it entirely. Djibouti, which hosts simultaneous basing arrangements with multiple competing powers, represents a different boundary condition entirely, one where the access vacuum argument largely inverts, and where managing competing presences rather than avoiding them becomes the operative challenge.

On territory, rotating forces through a base is a very different commitment than permanently stationing them there. A state can accept rotational access while refusing basing, accept logistics support while refusing command-and-control integration, and accept pre-positioned equipment subject to clear inventory limits while refusing the construction that makes a temporary arrangement permanent. These are not small concessions dressed up as sovereignty. They are genuine distinctions that determine whether an agreement locks a state in or leaves it room to maneuver.

On decision-making freedom, the test is simple: does the state still control when and how its facilities are used, or has that approval become a formality? Singapore shows that keeping approval authority genuine requires exercising it, seen in choices such as declining Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status in 2003 and declining to host a US 1st Fleet⁶, both of which illustrated that the ongoing access relationship operated on Singapore's terms, not Washington's⁷. A right of refusal that is never used stops being a real right.

On political freedom, the key protection is avoiding exclusivity. A state that accepts rotational access from one partner while keeping its economic and diplomatic relationships with others open has not chosen sides. It has managed its exposure. Where financial or trade linkages are unavoidable, the priority in negotiations should be exit provisions that remain credible throughout the life of the agreement, not just on paper at signing.

On reputation, structured engagement requires more active communication than outright refusal does. The state needs to deliberately frame what it has agreed to, meaning access rather than alliance, and logistics rather than loyalty, while maintaining consistent engagement with regional forums and parallel relationships with other powers. Singapore has sustained this over decades. It is demanding work, but it is the work that keeps options open.

Conclusion

The foreign minister who said no and returned to a standing ovation had managed the visible dimensions of sovereignty with precision. What his framework did not price was the account that opened on the day of refusal and continued accumulating long after the applause ended.

Refusal is a legitimate instrument. Some access proposals are structurally predatory. Some refusals preserve leverage precisely by denying normalization. The problem is not that states refuse. It is that refusal is systematically mispriced because its costs arrive on a different timetable than its gains. A state that reflexively refuses ABO engagement without mapping which dimensions it is protecting and

which costs it is deferring is not preserving autonomy or sovereignty. It is producing the appearance of autonomy while its structural substance migrates to an account it is not monitoring.

Sri Lanka discovered that refusal materially contributed to an access vacuum that produced a more severe decisional sovereignty loss than structured engagement would have imposed. The framework in the companion paper provides the analytical tools to execute differentiated engagement before the cost arc becomes visible rather than after.¹ The foreign minister who understands, before he refuses, exactly which dimensions he is protecting, which costs he is deferring, and which leverage he is foreclosing is managing sovereignty. The one who says no because no is the domestically visible answer is performing.

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