

Navigating the Pacific: Solomon Islands Attempt to Gain Influence in the Middle of China-US Rivalry

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The Pacific Islands Region is in the spotlight due to rising tensions between China and the U.S. This situation has escalated with China offering security pacts to Pacific Islands states in 2022. Despite most Pacific states rejecting the offer, the Solomon Islands, as the only country to accept it, caused concern for the U.S. and its allies. Considering that the Solomon Islands lack the traditional power to support their decision to align with China against the U.S. and its allies, it is an intriguing issue to delve into. This research aims to analyze the phenomenon by using qualitative-descriptive methods and the concept of Small States. This will give us a new way to understand how small states in the Pacific Ocean maneuver amidst the US-China rivalry by analyzing strategic indicators they can utilize rather than solely focusing on domestic circumstances to comprehend their decisions. We found that the Solomon Islands' ability to take such a risk stems from two sources of power: particular-intrinsic and derivative power. Intrinsically, the Solomon Islands hold geopolitical importance, being strategically crucial for both China's Belt and Road initiative and the U.S.'s attempt to retain its regional influence. Derivatively, the Solomon Islands' sole position to accept the security pact is highly valued by China. This will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship among them, and the Solomon Islands can benefit in security and economic terms. This research sheds light on how a small state navigates its interest in the epicenter of rivalry between two great powers.

Keywords: *China-US rivalry; Pacific Islands Region; small states; Solomon Islands*

Introduction

The Pacific Islands Region has become one of the most contested regions in the world, with China and the United States (U.S.) at the center of this geopolitical competition. Since 2013, China has demonstrat-

ed a keen interest in this region as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and in its efforts to diminish Taiwan's international recognition (Herr, 2019; Liu, 2022). China's influence in the region is primarily exerted through various sectors, including econom-

ic aid, trade partnerships, and investments in disaster mitigation (Meick et al., 2018; Nazarudheen, 2022).

In response to China's growing influence, the U.S., as a rival power, has taken a series of measures aimed at countering China's presence in the region under its Pivot to Asia policy (Šebok, 2014). The most recent move by the U.S. involves the formation of a new alliance to enhance security in the Pacific Islands Region by establishing a nuclear-powered submarine fleet known as AUKUS. This alliance comprises major countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the U.S. (Novita, 2022; Panda & Swanström, 2021).

In response to AUKUS, China extended security pacts to every Pacific island country. However, out of the 12 states that received the offer, only one country accepted it—Solomon Islands (Al Jazeera, 2022; Ivarature, 2022; The Associated Press, 2023). China contends that this security pact is aimed at strengthening Solomon Islands' police and law enforcement capabilities while also permitting Chinese navy ships to make regular port visits to the region from the Solomon Islands (Grossman, 2023).

Although the majority of Pacific Island countries declined China's offer, Solomon Islands' unique position as the sole state authorizing China's navy presence through this agreement has caused disturbances in the region, especially among the U.S. and its allies. The disturbance caused by these events led the U.S. to convene a summit with the Pacific Islands countries in September 2022. The primary objective of the summit was to

persuade Pacific Island leaders that the U.S. would strengthen its partnership and support in the region (The Guardian, 2022). Despite participating exclusively through its Prime Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, the Solomon Islands openly rejected signing the summit's outcome, known as the US-Pacific Partnership (Miller, 2022; Needham et al., 2022).

Solomon Islands' refusal to endorse the U.S. proposal, while the majority of Pacific Islands countries accepted it, has made the Solomon Islands an even more intriguing subject for discussion. The current situation places the Solomon Islands in the position of a lone wolf amidst the rivalry between two great powers. Given that the Solomon Islands is a small state without the necessary capabilities to support its position, this situation could potentially jeopardize its survival at any moment. Solomon Islands lack military strength, economic power, and regional alliances, as the majority of the region is aligned with the U.S. (CIA, 2023). Solomon Islands' decision to align itself with China also does not guarantee its security, as the security pact is still relatively new.

The dire situation faced by the Solomon Islands can be viewed through the lens of structural realism. According to Waltz (1979, in Burchill et al., 2022), in the so-called anarchic international system, states tend to seek more power to ensure their survival and shape their behavior in patterned ways. However, since the possession of resources by states can be relative to each other, this leads to the existence of hierarchic systems. Then, the hierarchic results in polarity among states – the number of great powers

in the system.

When states encounter the emergence of great powers, they have two options: to either balance or bandwagon. Balancing refers to a state's ability to influence the distribution of power in the international system to counter the great power's position, often by forming alliances or seeking more power. Meanwhile, bandwagoning is a state's choice to align with great powers when they are unable or unwilling to maintain equilibrium with the dominant power (Ian, 2003, p. 1). In the context of the Pacific Islands Region, the U.S. and its allies have maintained a position of hegemony for a long time while China attempts to balance its influence. Thus far, Pacific Island countries, being small states, have tended to bandwagon with the U.S. However, the Solomon Islands' tendency to align with China indirectly put them in a position to balance against the U.S.

This phenomenon actually contradicts the basic assumption of structural realism, which emphasizes the importance of traditional power in analyzing state behavior in the system. Since the Solomon Islands lack almost all forms of power – military, economic, and size of the country – this perspective is unable to explain the behavior of the Solomon Islands as a state seeking to balance the great powers. Therefore, it is necessary to examine what kind of power the Solomon Islands could exercise to pursue their interests, and opting to align with China might be an interesting topic.

The contestation between major powers in the Asia Pacific region, its impact on the region, and the responses of regional

governments, including the Solomon Islands, have been the subject of numerous studies. In his study, Mihai Sora (2022) examines the impact of intensified competition among major powers on the continuation of geopolitical stability in the Pacific Islands. The United States-Australia alliance is concerned about China's growing strategic influence in the region. Sora suggests that regional countries may welcome the presence of external forces, particularly when considering the potential impact of increased investment by Australia, the United States, and Japan in response to China's presence. Nevertheless, this circumstance possesses a tendency to exert a destabilizing influence on smaller nations and hamper the attempts of investor countries in the effort to expand their sphere of influence.

Adrien Rodd (2016) conducted a study that examined the impact of the historical consequences of Western colonialism on two Pacific nations, specifically Fiji and Solomon Islands. Rodd observed that some Asia Pacific nations, such as Fiji and the Solomon Islands, continue to face challenges in establishing domestic stability in their political, institutional, and economic domains due to the enduring impact of colonialism. The disparity between indigenous values and the desired Western societal framework has led to the issue. Therefore, both nations are presently engaged in efforts to implement shifts aimed at enhancing the acknowledgment and incorporation of indigenous values within constitutional frameworks.

Another research conducted by Joseph Daniel Foukona (2020) analyzed the

Solomon Islands' domestic developments, focusing on the debate regarding its diplomatic relations with China and Taiwan. Foukona explained that the matter of diplomatic relations with China and Taiwan was a subject of intense debate within the domestic sphere. The appointment of Sogavare as prime minister in 2019 sparked a lot of debate subsequent to the Solomon Islands' decision to shift to China. Despite the controversy, Sogavare and supporters of the government justified the decision as a collective endeavor that placed the state's interests at the forefront. In addition, Foukona's research revealed evidence suggesting collusion between government officials and Beijing in relation to the activities of various Chinese corporations in the Solomon Islands.

Jon Fraenkel and Graeme Smith (2022) conducted a more in-depth examination of the connection between Solomon Island and China, which decided to enhance collaboration by means of a security agreement. The 2022 agreement, widely regarded by many parties, particularly Australia and New Zealand, serves as a crucial basis for China's plans to establish a naval base in the Pacific region. Nevertheless, Fraenkel and Smith argue that the viewpoints articulated by the governments of both nations and many media outlets mostly center on the geopolitical landscape, neglecting the domestic context. China may have the potential to actualize these goals. Nevertheless, this outcome is probable solely if there is a rise in commercial reliance on China and a decrease in internal polarization.

The literature review concludes that previous studies have primarily focused on explaining the effects of contestation among major powers within the Asia Pacific and the responses of regional countries, particularly the Solomon Islands. By observing the domestic context, researchers have tried to elaborate on how domestic political upheaval influenced Solomon Islands policy. Apart from this, prior scholarly investigations have also sought to comprehend the correlation between the Solomon Islands and the Beijing Axis while also exploring the potential for establishing Chinese military bases in the Pacific region by enhancing this collaborative effort. Nevertheless, previous research has yet to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Solomon Islands' response to the presence of major powers.

This research will analyze how the Solomon Islands, with its status as a small country, maneuvers to reap benefits from competition between major actors in the region. Nevertheless, it is crucial to comprehend that the actions of domestic players are not solely driven by profit and loss considerations but also take into account strategic indicators that can be utilized to gain their interests. One approach that could be used to analyze this issue is by employing the small-state concept, which Tom Long coined. To do so, this research uses qualitative explanatory methods that attempt to seek causal-process tracing of a specific case by applying a relevant theory (Blatter, 2012).

The research aims to shed light on 'how Solomon Island navigates its interests amidst the China-US rivalry in the Pa-

cific Ocean Region?’ To answer the former question, the authors start the discussion by explaining the small state conceptual framework, followed by how China’s growing influence and the U.S. shifting toward the East, then how the Pacific Islands countries respond to the rivalry, particularly on Solomon Islands interests and their growing relations with China, and finalize with the small states’ power utilization by the Solomon Islands under US-China Rivalry.

Small States Framework

Long (2022) argues that in specific situations, small states are capable of exercising power in creative ways and can have a significant impact through a relational approach. Small states can achieve three types of power. First is particular-intrinsic power, which is in the form of material and resources possessed by small states but will only be perceived as power when given meaning by other states or when it serves specific goals. This power denotes the strength inherent to a small state, stemming from its distinct assets or resources. Unlike conventional forms of power like military might or economic prowess, particular-intrinsic power considers the individual advantages unique to a small state, such as dominion over strategic territories or possession of valuable natural reserves.

Second, derivative power refers to the ability of small states to achieve their interests by maintaining a special relationship with great powers. This power pertains to a small state’s capacity to wield influence by persuading larger states to take actions that align with its interests. It hinges on the re-

lationship between the small state and the major power. Derivative power enables the pursuit of significant objectives that might otherwise be beyond the small state’s capabilities. The methods of derivative power can vary depending on the objectives of the small state and its relations with the major powers. Derivative power provides small states with the opportunity to amplify their influence through the lens of a major power, albeit potentially relinquishing some control over outcomes.

Third, collective power is the capability of small states to influence the international system by engaging in joint actions, either through international institutions or regional cooperation (Long, 2022). Tom Long (2016) defines collective power as a relationship between a small state and associated non-great powers. Long stated that collective power works in several ways, such as institutionalism with small states grouping to achieve common goals or collective power can be used to achieve one state’s interest by leveraging its allies to align their attention to said state interest. One of the main roles of collective power for small states is to promote and expand norms to the broader international community. Therefore, it is not bound to specific actors, which makes collective power a means for small states to be “active” on the global stage.

China’s Growing Influence & The U.S. Shifting Strategic towards The East

As the Pacific Islands Region becomes the center of contestation between great powers to extend their influence, China

and the U.S. have also turned their concern to the region. In recent years, China has played more important roles in the region dynamics through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including aid and infrastructure projects (Li, 2022). In fact, China has funded more than 100 aid projects in the region, donated 200 batches of in-kind support, and trained more than 10,000 professionals since the 1970s. Between 2008 and 2020, China also provided nearly USD 3.148 billion in the region, which was channeled through different kinds of cooperation both bilaterally and regionally. This maneuver certainly attracts attention from the U.S., which also considers the Pacific Islands Region important for its economic and geostrategic interests.

The Pacific Islands Region has actually been an important area for such a long time. In World War II, as Japan was first beginning to expand, Oceania saw fierce fighting between Japan and the allies over strategically located airfields and naval bases in the area (Myers, 2020). Japanese control over the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and other areas of the Central Pacific threatened Australia. It attracted the attention of the United States to refocus military efforts from Europe to the Pacific in order to prevent Japan's rapid expansion. In spite of their initial setbacks, the Allied forces managed to stifle the Japanese attempts to exert their control over the region. Ultimately, the United States and its allies' military installations in the Pacific were one of the crucial factors in the victory of the Allies in the region.

Since the war ended, there were no signs that this region would be sidelined.

In fact, the Pacific is increasingly becoming a favorite for great powers to exert their influence in economics, politics, and security. As the largest maritime area in the world, the Pacific Ocean links 21 APEC countries, which represent 62 percent of world GDP and 48 percent of world trade (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2023). Its strategic location also played an important role in global security dynamics. Though it appears that worries about superpower competition intensifying in the area have faded with the end of the Cold War, some analysts believe that significant power struggles are about to resurface (Hegarty & Tryon, 2013).

China's growing influence with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project has a significant potential to alter regional dynamics. Under Xi Jinping, China has implemented more proactive and assertive policies towards the Pacific Ocean. In order to meet the leaders of Pacific Island nations, President Xi personally traveled to Fiji. He invited Pacific countries to board the Chinese "express train" of development, citing that the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Maritime Silk Road of the twenty-first century would provide them with infrastructure, scholarships, medical teams, tourism, and communication in areas like human security and climate change (Li, 2022). With those potentials, most of the Pacific countries decided to join BRI in 2018, especially Solomon Islands and Kiribati, which are known for their ties with Taiwan and decided to switch diplomatic recognition to China in 2019 and 2020. Since then, there have been many projects, both state-led as well as

local and provincial-led initiatives, designed to strengthen the relationship between China and the countries in the region.

The BRI project has provided China with the ability to challenge Australia's presence, which has raised concerns from Western allies, especially the U.S. For the last few years, Australia's concern toward China has been rising from observation to anxiety. In the Australia White Paper of 2003, China was only perceived as an economic opportunity that could not match the U.S.'s ability to influence the global environment (Smith & Wesley-Smith, 2021). However, China's expanding role in international relations, simultaneously with the U.S.'s declining influence globally, has led to Australia's changing attitude towards China's existence.

The U.S. previously tended to ignore the Pacific region. However, due to the rising China, the U.S. then shifted its attention from the Middle East to the Asia Pacific by introducing the 'pivot to Asia' (Lieberthal, 2011). The policy goal was to inspire respect for Washington's ability to pull off this extremely impressive diplomatic performance as well as confidence in America's ability to continue leading the region. The decline of the U.S. has been a concern for many countries in the region. Therefore, through this policy, the Obama administration was trying to embody the optimism, values, tenacity, and leadership of the U.S. It will be important to form alliances with other regional players to endeavor to curtail China's political sway or even challenge economic might (Šebok, 2014). Some people could argue that this policy will be successful or not. Either

way, it demonstrates the notion that the U.S. is starting to feel uncomfortable with China's existence regarding its traditional role in the Pacific region.

China's growing existence and the U.S.'s contradictory approach will likely raise the tension in the Pacific. China's BRI expansion through vast and effective cooperation with the Pacific Ocean countries will further strengthen its position in the region. This also signifies China's growing political and economic influence, which will become increasingly difficult to contain. Washington policy analysts have proposed several times the idea of hedging maneuver as an ideal strategy to respond to China (Logan, 2013). But, hedging means that the U.S. has to invest with low but likely returns in order to prevent potential bigger losses. The decision to cooperate with China will narrow the power gap between both sides. This strategy will become problematic because the longer it goes, the stronger China will be, and the more Washington will need to prepare itself with military instruments if the engagement fails to pay off. Based on this logic, the assertive approach by the U.S. is indeed the most rational way to answer China's opposition in the Pacific, though it will raise tension in the region. In the next section, we will elaborate further on China's growing influence, the U.S. maneuver to contain it, and what this 'rising tension' means to the countries in the region as a whole.

The Pacific Islands Countries' Response to the Rivalry

The Pacific Islands Region, also viewed as having geopolitical advantages for China's ambitions, is seen as a low-risk, high-reward investment to achieve both symbolic and tactical victories. China has deepened trade deals and enhanced power projection with exclusive ports and economic zones. This, in turn, aids China's One China policy by reducing Taiwan's diplomatic allies in the region. Furthermore, strengthened ties between China and Pacific Islands countries could give China an intelligence advantage due to the region's proximity to Hawaii, which, in turn, poses challenges for the U.S. and its allies in projecting military presence and power in the region (USIP China-Freely Associated States Senior Study Group, 2022).

The threat of China encroaching on Australia's backyard and U.S. soil has prompted both parties to establish a strategic security alliance called AUKUS, which also includes the United Kingdom, in 2021. AUKUS aims to enhance security and defense interests for all parties involved (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). The creation of AUKUS can be seen as a deterrent to China's influence in the Asia-Pacific region. However, in the latest development, AUKUS is planning to create sustainable nuclear submarines. The presence of such a vessel could destabilize security in the Pacific Islands (Nelson et al., 2023).

The Rarotonga Treaty, a regional treaty on non-proliferation of nuclear power in the Pacific Islands Region, was established

in 1985 and has been ratified by the majority of Pacific Islands countries, including Australia (Papadimitropoulos, 1988). The plan to develop nuclear-powered submarines by AUKUS has left many Pacific Island countries anxious and feeling somewhat betrayed by Australia, given that Australia has ratified the treaty. The treaty primarily focuses on the prohibition of acquiring, assisting, and using nuclear weapons. Even though AUKUS has consistently stated that nuclear energy is only intended for powering submarines, many Pacific Island countries still need to be concerned about the true intentions behind it.

The competition between great powers to gain influence has caused polarisation, with both states offering economic and security benefits to the region. China has been active in the economic sectors and soft diplomacy through its aid and BRI projects since 2018. Meanwhile, the U.S. and its allies introduced the FOIP Strategy, or Free and Open Indo-Pacific, in 2016, which addresses multi-sector opportunities and challenges in the Indo-Pacific and inherently aims to contain China's rising influence (Chanlett-Avery et al., 2018). This polarisation has stirred significant upheaval in the region, which affected Solomon Islands and Kiribati, switching their allegiance to China and severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2019 (Foster, 2021; McDougall, 2022).

This move occurred just before both countries joined the BRI project. In addition to these two countries, many others already established diplomatic recognition with China when they joined the BRI Projects (Li, 2022). Many Pacific Island countries have

chosen to align with China in BRI, such as the Federal States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu, primarily due to the economic benefits they could achieve. However, in terms of security, the majority of the states still choose to side with the U.S. and its allies, although China has tried to persuade Pacific Island countries to join China's side through a security pact offer. Among all the states that received the offer, only the Solomon Islands accepted it. The move sent shockwaves across the region, particularly among Pacific Island countries with close historical ties to the U.S., because this could be a breakthrough for China to solidify its influence in the region (Liu, 2022).

In regards to China emerging as a new power, states have two options to navigate this phenomenon. They can choose to balance against the great power by aligning with the new emerging power, or they can bandwagon with the existing great power to maintain the status quo. Solomon Islands' recent change in diplomatic ties from Taiwan to China and its decision to side with China in terms of security can be viewed as a means of balancing U.S. hegemony in the region. Despite being perceived as a small state on the global stage, Solomon Islands actually has a lot more to offer to both the U.S. and China. That is why the Solomon Islands should get more of the spotlight as a key player in the US-China rivalry in the Pacific, as their behavior contradicts the existing assumption that small states are bound to bandwagon with the traditional hegemon.

Solomon Islands Interests and Their Growing Relations with China

China's engagement in the Solomon Islands raises numerous questions because it represents a shift in the international order that the United States, Australia, and Taiwan previously influenced. China and the Solomon Islands collaborated by signing onto the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Program, a policy initiated by Chinese President Xi Jinping. The BRI is divided into two pillars: the land trade route known as the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the sea route called the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road. This collaboration aligns with China's initiatives in the Solomon Islands Islands' national development strategy for 2016-2035 (Szadizewski, 2021).

China's assistance to the Solomon Islands covers nine provinces and rural areas, focusing on agriculture, fisheries, education, infrastructure, and health sectors. Infrastructure projects include ports, railways, bridges, stations, and reactivation of mining projects. China's BRI policy was further bolstered by the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015, which is open to all countries (Rustam, 2020).

China's growing interest in the Pacific Islands Region, particularly in the Solomon Islands, is influenced by several factors. First, the Solomon Islands are strategically located in the Pacific Islands Region Ocean. They share their eastern border with Papua New Guinea, their southern waters with Micronesia, and their southwestern waters with Nauru and the Marshall Islands. To the East, they border the Coral Sea and Australia.

These geographical conditions are considered strategic, as they position the Solomon Islands as a key sea route that connects the Pacific Islands Region with the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and China (LDKPI, 2020).

Figure 1. Belt and Road Initiative Map



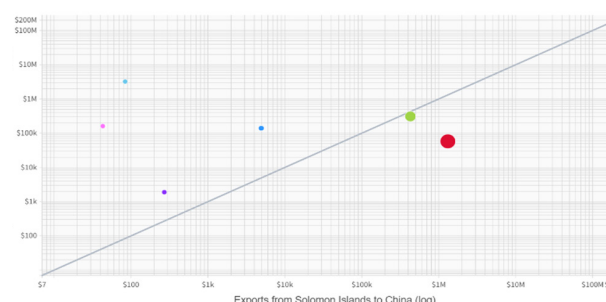
Source: Makarova et al (2019)

Based on the map, the Pacific Islands Region's geopolitical position spans a wide area and is surrounded by important countries bordering the Pacific Ocean. In addition to economic interests, China also aims to establish cooperative relationships to ensure maritime security, as this is closely tied to the security of the BRI trade that traverses the Pacific Sea route. When viewed through the lens of China's Ocean White Paper, titled 'China's Ocean Development Report,' it becomes evident that China has ambitions for maritime expansion. This vision was articulated by the Secretary-General of the Communist Party of China and President Hu Jintao during the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2002.

Second, the Solomon Islands possess three significant natural resource capabilities, including fisheries, notably as a producer of tuna, mining, and timber. In the agricultural sector, superior products include sweet pota-

toes, cassava, coconuts, and the like. According to World Bank data from 2017, Solomon Islands exported wood commodities to China, amounting to 87%. This figure was significantly higher than Taiwan's, which was still in the process of establishing diplomatic relations at the time. China and the Solomon Islands share an interdependent relationship, where China relies on the Solomon Islands to sustain its economy and industry. At the same time, the Solomon Islands gain promising market opportunities in China. Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) reveals several key commodities for the Solomon Islands that are leading exports to China and vice versa, from China to the Solomon Islands. Data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) below reveals the cooperative relationship between China and Solomon, particularly in the field of exports.

Graphic 1. Export Activity from China to the Solomon Islands and Vice Versa



Source: OEC (2021)

The graph illustrates several dynamics of export cooperation between China and the Solomon Islands. Both China and the Solomon Islands export various commodi-

ties, including other rubber products, motor vehicle parts and accessories, jewelry imitation, engine parts, other processed fruits and nuts, and swan wood. Solomon Islands' two most valuable exports to China are other processed fruits and nuts, with an export value of \$428,000, and swan wood products, valued at \$1.31 million. China's largest exports to the Solomon Islands include motor vehicle parts and accessories, totaling \$3.22 million, and other processed fruits and nuts, amounting to \$309,000. Based on the graph, China and the Solomon Islands are interdependent in their respective markets. Swan wood products represent the largest market for the Solomon Islands in China, while China's most significant market in the Solomon Islands is motor vehicle parts and accessories. Wood products continue to be the Solomon Islands' leading commodity, with the largest trade value reaching \$282 million in 2021. Over the last 26 years, the Solomon Islands' exports to China have seen an annualized growth rate of 25.2%, increasing from \$814,000 in 1995 to \$283 million in 2021. Over the last 26 years, China's exports to the Solomon Islands have experienced an annualized growth rate of 20.6%, rising from \$1.29 million in 1995 to \$167 million in 2021.

Third, for a small country with significant conflict potential, security is a top priority in Solomon Islands' foreign policy. In terms of military capabilities, Solomon Islands only has a police force and lacks armed forces compared to other countries such as Fiji and Tonga. According to the research on "Assessing the Solomon Islands' New Security Agreement with China" (Graham,

2022), Solomon Islands security motivation in shaping its security policy is driven by regime security, meaning that the current ruling government determines security cooperation. Solomon Islands' decision to establish security cooperation with China can be outlined as follows.

First, the Sogavare government believes that China's presence can act as a barrier to Western intervention, which has the potential to trigger conflict in the South Pacific. The Sogavare government perceives three reasons why the West could trigger conflict. The riots in the Solomon Islands targeting the Chinese community from 24 to November 27, 2021, were addressed by Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in a statement. He expressed doubt about Australia's ability to protect the Chinese community during the Honiara riots (Kabutaulaka, 2022). The rioters were from Mailaita and demanded the cancellation of diplomatic relations with China, advocating for a return to Taiwan. The security guarantee to the Solomon Islands is risky due to Australia's changing role as a security guarantor and its relationship with China, despite being an ally of the United States. This raises concerns about potential conflicts.

Then, the security agreement between the Solomon Islands and China has raised concerns in Australia. The Australian government has accused China of planning to build a military base in the Solomon Islands due to China's significant investment in improving access to the port and Exclusive Economic Zone. Australia is concerned that the investment could result in the conversion of

port facilities into Chinese military facilities (M.J Vinod, 2024). Prime Minister Sogavare responded to the allegations by asserting that the security pact agreement did not include the construction of a military base. The agreement focuses on the Solomon Islands requesting assistance from China in maintaining social order, providing humanitarian aid, conducting disaster response, and logistical replenishment. Chinese forces may also be used to protect China's safety and major projects in the Solomon Islands.

Last, in view of the geopolitical and geostrategic upheavals in the South Pacific between the West and China, the China-Solomon Islands security pact became Solomon Islands' strength to overcome and contain the possibility of potential militarisation upheavals that would disrupt the security stability of the Solomon Islands region that the West could trigger.

Second, there needs to be more satisfaction with the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) in maintaining security in the Solomon Islands. Even though the Solomon Islands accepted Australia's presence, it did not become the primary security actor in Solomon. Third, the Solomon Islands are interested in establishing security cooperation with China as a preventive measure against conflict due to concerns about the security of ethnic Chinese, who have a major influence on the Solomon economy. Fourth, the Solomon Islands' trust in China has positioned Chinese police security in an important role, as they have trained local colleagues from Solomon in techniques related to maintaining security.

Based on the description above, it becomes apparent that three main urges drive the Solomon Islands' interest in cooperation with China. First, from a geographical standpoint, the Solomon Islands gain a strategic advantage by being situated on the global trade route within China's BRI program. This positioning offers Solomon the opportunity to integrate into global trade, particularly with the Chinese market. Additionally, the Solomon Islands receives assistance in the form of infrastructure development. Second, China's involvement in the Solomon Islands provides significant economic benefits. The Solomon Islands gains access to the Chinese market with uncomplicated regulations, facilitating integration into export activities. Notably, wood commodities are the largest exports from the Solomon Islands to China. Third, security cooperation with China yields several advantages for the Solomon Islands. It allows the Solomon Islands to counter Western influence, which could trigger conflict in the South Pacific. This cooperation serves as a preventive measure against ethnic conflicts, addressing the Solomon Islands' fears of future conflicts. Furthermore, China assumes a pioneering role in Solomon's security landscape following the failure of Australia's RAMSI.

Small States' Power Utilisation by the Solomon Islands Under US-China Rivalry

Particular-Intrinsic

When discussing power in international relations, something usually comes to mind: intrinsic powers such as population, territory, GDP, and military capabilities. These indicators are commonly used to understand countries' classification as great power, middle power, or small states. The problem with this idea is that when we use these indicators to categorize, it prevents us from seeing the context extensively and realizing that there is something these small states have that could be utilized to gain their very own interest.

In the book "A Small State's Guide to Influence in World Politics," Tom Long (2022, p.62) argues that "...though small states lack many of the normal categories of capabilities, they may possess particular forms of intrinsic power". Different from intrinsic power, particular intrinsic power is something that a state possesses but cannot utilize until other states give it meaning or have a specific goal.

As discussed before, the Solomon Islands' strategy to respond to China-US rivalry raises the question of how a small country in the middle of nowhere has enough courage to go against the mainstream. When the majority of Pacific countries choose to side with the Western allies, the Solomon Islands tend to side with the new emerging force in the region, China. From the surface, this policy might seem risky considering the West

(i.e., Australia and the U.S.) are still holding the title of 'traditional hegemony' of the Pacific, which is demonstrated by the fact that there are still many countries tied with them.

Analyzing from the perspective of the Solomon Islands, the competition between these great powers poses a big opportunity for them to utilize. China has shown a strong interest in the region as one of the important routes for its Belt and Road Initiative project. Many countries in the region, like Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Solomon Islands, have already joined and gained many benefits from BRI, both in the form of physical infrastructure and cultural education development (Li, 2022). Among those countries, the Solomon Islands might be one of the largest beneficiaries, and it has the closest relationship with China as the only country siding with them. Using small power theory analysis, these circumstances could give an extra advantage to the Solomon Islands for their very own interests.

The Solomon Islands is a particular intrinsic power that could be understood when put in the context of BRI and China-US rivalry. As Tom Long (2022) said, intrinsic power only becomes valuable when it is given meaning and applied to specific goals. That explains the Solomon Islands' decision to choose Beijing amidst the forceful Western response. The Solomon Islands also benefited from the security pact with the conclusion of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Island (RAMSI); with the unrest that happened recently domestically, this security pact gave the Solomon Islands power to handle domestic issues with China

helping Solomon Islands police force, this security pact, in turn, gives China clearance to put military presence in the country to help with improving local police.

By the context of particular intrinsic power, the Solomon Islands holds a geopolitical advantage; the country was located strategically between Australia and the U.S. states of Hawaii; with the now-signed security pacts, many wonder if China's military presence could lead to a permanent military base, the western especially Australia has seen the region as a buffer zone (Wallis, 2021). With the considerable failure of RAMSI, the focus of the Solomon Islands on security, and the geopolitical advantages that the Solomon Islands poses, Solomon Islands have strong bargaining power with the major powers in the region in terms of securities and economics trade.

We believe that the Solomon Islands' decision to balance U.S. hegemony in the region by siding with China as a means of deterrence, the creation of AUKUS and the plan of developing nuclear-powered submarines are seen by the Solomon Islands as a threat and a violation to Rarotonga Treaty. If the region still chooses to side with the U.S., they would not have the capabilities to stop AUKUS; thus, Solomon Islands' decision to side with China not only as a means to deter but also to gain for themselves is seen as fully utilize their particular-intrinsic with China seeing the partnership between Solomon Islands is a massive gain while the U.S. seen the reality that Solomon Islands has now choose their rival as a major blow both to the U.S. interest and influence in Pacific Region.

This move also shows that the Solomon Islands play a major role and have significant influence in the middle of China-US rivalry in the Pacific Region.

Derivative

In the context of the Solomon Islands, derivative power is evident through their growing relations with China in recent years. As China seeks to counter the hegemony of the U.S. and its allies in the Pacific Islands Region, the Solomon Islands' decision to accept China's security pact offer will be favorable to China. Given that the Solomon Islands is the only country in the Pacific Islands region that accepts China's offer, their relationship with China is highly valued. This opens up opportunities for the Solomon Islands to influence China's policies, particularly in the realms of security and the economy, which could benefit them.

Solomon Islands' interest in security is driven by concerns about securing themselves not only from external threats but also from domestic riots. Externally, the Solomon Islands is in a disadvantaged position as the U.S. and its allies aim to deploy nuclear-powered submarines to monitor the Pacific Islands Region. This threat could be mitigated by aligning with China, as China's security pact with the Solomon Islands would serve as a deterrent to potential adversaries. It is important to note that the Solomon Islands is situated in the heart of the Pacific Islands Region, which would significantly enhance the deterrent effect on the U.S. and its allies. By doing so, the Solomon Islands could influence China to seek protection from the threat

posed by U.S. nuclear-powered submarines.

On the domestic front, the Solomon Islands has frequently experienced riots. As the Solomon Islands government seeks to maintain the trust of its people, it is imperative to stabilize these domestic conflicts. Prior to signing the security pact with China, the Solomon Islands received assistance from Australia in managing domestic conflicts through the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). However, since RAMSI failed to meet the Solomon Islands' expectations in stabilizing riots, the Solomon Islands needed an alternative. China provided the answer, as the Solomon Islands could leverage China's assistance in maintaining internal stability. Given China's interest in gaining influence in the Pacific Islands Region to counter the US, Solomon Islands can request additional support from China to protect its government from riots.

From the Chinese perspective, if the Solomon Islands were to make both demands to China, the possibility of them being applied would be significant. As per Long (2022), when the relationship between small states and great powers is built around mutual benefits regarding a specific issue, achieving derivative power becomes more likely. This argument could be applicable to the relationship between China and the Solomon Islands, especially as China faces pressure from the U.S. and its allies to secure their assets in the Pacific Islands Region. Consequently, this could lead to more open relations between China and the Solomon Islands, aimed at advancing their respective interests. In sum, China would likely have

a clearer understanding of the Solomon Islands' goals in this issue.

Solomon Islands' interest in the economy can be seen in their approach to BRI. China's Belt and Road Initiative has become one of the most influential economic cooperation programs in the world. To date, 149 countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China. These countries span various continents: in Sub-Saharan Africa, there are 44 countries; in Europe and Central Asia, there are 35 countries; 25 countries are in East Asia and the Pacific; in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are as many as 21 countries; 18 countries are in the Middle East and North Africa, and Southeast Asia, there are 6 countries. Solomon Islands signed the BRI MoU on October 1, 2019, and belongs to the lower-middle-income group (Wang, 2023).

The cooperation between the Solomon Islands and China through the BRI program provides substantial benefits, particularly in two main areas: the economy and security. Economically, the Solomon Islands have become a trading partner that can integrate into the Chinese market, with the largest export commodity being wood. Additionally, the duty-free treatment for 97% of the Solomon Islands' exports eases the process of exporting to China. This treatment is highly advantageous for the Solomon Islands, given its status as a country with a middle to lower-income economy (Solomon Government, 2021).

Through BRI cooperation, China is committed to assisting the Solomon Islands in the form of infrastructure development,

mining projects, and agreements related to the rental of Tulagi Island as a seaport for the benefit of the BRI initiative. Moreover, there is a sister city cooperation between Guangzhou province and Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. China's commitment offers significant benefits to the Solomon Islands, not only bolstering its economic growth but also sustaining its development and progress.

In terms of China's security, China views the Solomon Islands as a strategic island, not only as a BRI sea route but also geopolitically as a factor in China's balance of power against the United States. Despite being a small island, the Solomon Islands wield significant influence over major countries like the United States and China. Through the established cooperation, the security of the Solomon Islands has become China's responsibility and intervention, enabling China to exercise security control and maintain the balance of power. Additionally, China's presence unconsciously reduces the intervention of Western countries and prevents the Solomon Islands from being drawn into conflicts in the South Pacific region.

In the eyes of China, the Solomon Islands are considered an important island that provides geopolitical and economic benefits and serves China's interests in the South Pacific. As a country with substantial financial resources, China is committed to providing maximum assistance to the Solomon Islands, as well as to other countries like Australia and others. Therefore, although the Solomon Islands may be a small island, it exerts significant influence, particularly in the realm of global powers. Large countries see the Solo-

mon Islands as an investment hub, presenting an opportunity for the Solomon Islands to enjoy economic and security benefits.

Collective Power Potential

In the case of the Solomon Islands, collective power could be achieved through the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). This institution consists of the Pacific Islands nations plus Australia and New Zealand (Pacific Islands Forum, 2024). PIF, like many other regional government organizations, discusses the challenges that are shared among Pacific Nations. PIF has formulated a plan called 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which aims to make the Pacific region more resilient to the changing world, especially in economic and environmental conditions. PIF can be seen as a form of collective power in Pacific Islands Regions since it accommodates major issues that are common among these states, particularly the climate crisis issue. It also checks a lot of boxes to Tom Long's definition of collective power.

Even though the Solomon Islands have signed a security pact with China, they have not been excluded from the PIF, nor has their membership been terminated by the institution. However, for a couple of events conducted by the PIF, the Solomon Islands opted not to attend them even when invited. These events include the US-PIF Leader Summit and the PIF Leader Meeting in 2023 (Hurst, 2023; Macmillan & Swanston, 2023). This could have been a missed opportunity for the Solomon Islands to leverage their collective power, as one means to utilize it is by minimizing the cost of conducting foreign

policy through joint action (Long, 2020). In essence, those summits serve as a form of joint action for reducing costs so that a small state does not need to spend a significant amount of funds to engage in bilateral cooperation to state their interests, compared to a multilateral format.

However, there is also a drawback when depending too much on collective power. Long (2016) mentions that a joint action institution might provide a broader audience to its members and can target multi-actor fora, but it requires limiting the freedom of small states. If the small state's interest aligns with the agenda of the institution, then they will benefit. However, when it does not, they will struggle to achieve their objectives. Therefore, in the case of the Solomon Islands, they might keep joining the summits created by the U.S. or PIF itself. However, it will only hinder their interests. In fact, by opting out and aligning themselves with China, Solomon Islands could face fewer constraints imposed by the majority interests of Pacific Islands countries, which they are more likely to need to address environmental security concerns such as the climate crisis. Meanwhile, the Solomon Islands prioritize traditional security to secure their territory not only from external threats but also to quell domestic unrest.

Conclusion

The contest between major powers in the Asia-Pacific region has been the subject of numerous studies. Still, prior research has predominantly concentrated on elucidating the consequences of contestation and the

reactions of states in the region through an analysis of their domestic circumstances in an attempt to comprehend their decision. However, we argue that it is imperative to understand that the decisions of domestic actors are not solely driven by profit-and-loss considerations but also take into account strategic indicators that can be utilized to gain their interests. Applying the small states theory as an analytical framework, we observe that the Solomon Islands' response to the China-US rivalry is substantiated by their proficiency in using particular intrinsic and derivative powers.

The competition between these major powers presents a significant opportunity for the Solomon Islands to exploit. In terms of particular intrinsic power, one can understand this by examining the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-US rivalry, as its value only emerges when given meaning and applied to specific goals. Situated along the highly valued route of the BRI, China deems the Solomon Islands exceptionally important for their regional and even global vision. The Solomon Islands also hold a geopolitical advantage due to their strategic positioning between Australia and the U.S. state of Hawaii. With recent security pacts signed with Beijing, there are concerns about whether this could lead to a Chinese military presence in the region that might provoke the Western allies. In terms of derivative power, the Solomon Islands could leverage their strong ties with China. Acting as a lone wolf—China's sole strategic partner in the region—the Solomon Islands possess considerable bargaining power towards Chi-

na to advance their security interests. This is evident in China's willingness to send its police to assist the Solomon Islands government in maintaining order. Economically, the Solomon Islands potentially stand to gain substantial benefits from China's BRI project in the region. The development of domestic infrastructure through the BRI could enhance the quality and quantity of domestic products. This development, coupled with stronger ties with China, also signifies increased access to the Chinese market. This maneuver reflects the Solomon Islands' smart policy in responding to the presence of major powers in the region. As a small state in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, they endeavor to maximize advantages for their country rather than remaining passive and trapped in the rivalry between two major powers.

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