

## **CHINA'S CHANGING FOREIGN RELATIONS WITH SMALL AND MIDDLE POWERS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CASES OF AUSTRALIA, THE SOLOMON ISLANDS, AND CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES (CEEC)**

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*Abstract:* China's global ambition to become a carbon-neutral economy by mid-century with one of the world's most modern militaries has attracted the significant attention of scholars worldwide. However, a modern and advanced economy with Chinese socialist characteristics (announced by President Xi Jinping in 2017) has not been received well in Washington or Brussels, with China being labelled a major systemic threat by both the US and the EU. The overwhelming focus on the so-called "systemic rivalry" between the US and China and, to a lesser extent, increasing bilateral China-Russia ties has diverted attention away from China's changing foreign policy engagement with smaller powers. This paper aims to fill this gap through a comparative analysis of the illustrative case studies of China's changing relationship over the past decade with Australia, as a US-aligned middle power; the Solomon Islands, as a small but strategically significant regional state in the Indo-Pacific region; and a selected number of Central and East European states (CEEC). The main hypothesis advanced here is that China has resorted to pragmatism and diversion in its foreign policy towards those countries in order to overcome challenges posed by US sanctions, increased scepticism regarding its foreign, defence, and security policy outlook, as well as the economic rise of China. Using both primary and secondary sources, this article aims to contribute to the ever-growing scholarship on China's foreign and security policy and soft power by identifying main trends over the past ten years in Chinese

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engagement with smaller powers in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. It also seeks to illustrate how small and middle powers have responded to the intensifying geostrategic competition between the US and China in recent history, which could lead to a broader military conflict if the current levels of their global rivalry were to continue.

*Keywords:* China, Central and East European states, Serbia, Chinese foreign and security policy, Australia, Solomon Islands, Indo-Pacific region.

“Australia has had a relationship that has drifted between being fawning and being highly critical of modern-day China. This is too broad a spectrum to manage a long-term relationship – which is exactly how China views its relationships – in the long term.

*Joe Hockey, Australia’s former Member of Parliament (1996-2015) and Ambassador to the United States of America (2016-20)*

## Introduction

The global rise of China and changes in China’s foreign policy outlook and international influence under President Xi Jinping have been a topic of significant interest and debate in the scholarly literature over the past decade (Christensen 2016; Faligot 2019; Rudd 2022). During President Hu Jintao’s era (2002–2012), China’s economy more than quadrupled, living standards and life expectancy rose, and China became an economic miracle in the minds of international audiences, embracing the market economy in “the Chinese way”. The Chinese Communist Party’s elites continued to play a decisive role in the management of the economy through five-year plans, providing important stimuli to state enterprises (Chang 2014). Chinese foreign policy became closely intertwined with the development investment agenda through the establishment of new financial mechanisms (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) and China’s global initiatives (such as the Belt and Road). Collectively, these new elements underpinning China’s multilateral engagements have extended China’s influence globally like never before (Markovic Khaze & Wang 2021). This is true for both Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) and remote but strategically vital areas in the Southwest Pacific (Dimitrijevic 2016).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This region was traditionally part of the sphere of influence of a small number of Western countries (Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States).

This paper posits that China has adopted new policy approaches and adaptive policies in the face of Western *pushback* against China in its relations with selected states. Domestic factors are at play too in driving major foreign policy changes in China, but this paper's focus will be solely on international factors. This paper uses the theoretical framework of *strategic (re)alignment* to describe the main policy choices by smaller powers vis-à-vis China and the US during the era of their strategic competition. The first part of this paper unpacks this concept of pushback and geostrategic competition between the West and China, which also "burdens" policymaking by small and middle powers towards China, especially US strategic partners such as the EU members and liberal parliamentary democracies like Australia. The second part focuses on illustrative case studies from the Asia-Pacific region and CEEC. Concluding remarks will highlight that western pushback measures and China's responses in kind (in the form of counter-pushback measures) have led to an increasingly anti-multilateral, global competition for influence, which represents the greatest obstacle to China's "peaceful rise" in the future and the future of global multilateralism.

### **The US-led Western *pushback* measures against China**

Western experts have long debated about whether and when China has stopped being "an apolitical" economic giant in international affairs to become a country that is increasingly asserting its influence overseas through hard and soft power tools of diplomatic statecraft at the peril of Western interests (Hillman & Sachs 2021; Brattberg 2021). For more than a decade, returning Chinese students who were educated at western universities, including in Australia, have become an important domestic asset for obtaining insights into Western knowledge about critical 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in the science, engineering, and information technology sectors.<sup>3</sup> In the US in particular, there were also rampant accusations of intellectual property theft that made a fortune for Chinese companies, from the video gaming sector in 2012 to healthcare, hi-tech, pharmaceutical, media, energy, automotive and other industry sectors ever since (O'Leary et al. 2019, pp. 8-9). As a result of enormous perceived

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<sup>3</sup> According to ICEF Monitor, "the number of returning students [from the West to China] as a proportion of outbound students in each year increased from 55% in 2011 to nearly 80% in 2016." (ICEF Monitor, 2018)

losses (estimated at more than a trillion dollars for the US economy), intense domestic lobbying in the US has led to various pushback policies against Chinese economic interests and the increasing soft power influence of China in the world (National Bureau of Asian Research 2017). This pushback trend, which has become particularly pronounced during the second Obama Presidency (with Obama's *Pivot to Asia* policy that some academics saw as a China containment policy), coincided with Xi Jinping's consolidation of power (Davidson 2014).

This paper argues that Western pushback measures against China have intensified since the second Obama Presidency. Key aims of such efforts are: (a) to address in the practical sense key areas of policy concern in which there was no concrete action taken by either the US authorities or the Chinese Government before 2012; (b) to build domestic mechanisms within the US and its allies to counter what was perceived by the Western intelligence community as China's "foreign interference" or influence operations (Faligot 2019, p. 272); and (c) to restrict access to Chinese companies (such as technological giant Huawei) in the critical infrastructure sectors in the West. For its part, the Chinese Government has consistently denied such accusations, including economic espionage and intellectual property theft; interference in foreign universities and/or intimidation of Chinese international students and diaspora in the West; or more generally, soft power projection, which has often been conflated with the term "propaganda" by many Western observers of Chinese development policy (CNA 2019; Charon & Vilmer 2021). However, there were still areas of mutual interest where China constructively cooperated with the US, such as in the arena of combating transnational crime, as acknowledged by President Obama (The White House 2015).

Ever since the US first classified China as a strategic threat in its December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), Sino-American cooperation has become strained (Christensen 2020). This has had a flow-on effect on both traditional US allies (such as Australia) and smaller powers whose policymaking domains have increasingly become burdened by the US-China strategic competition (Jakobson & Gill 2017). The question of sovereign decision-making became a rhetorical question since close allies of the US, like Australia, were drawn into the broader competition on Washington's side. On the other hand, China also increased its influence through economic means globally and has gradually responded in kind.

### China as a “strategic threat” in the US Defence Security Strategy

While the idea of unified, Western pushback measures against Chinese economic and political interests may not be new (Friedberg 2005), the coordinated measures taken by Western governments towards restricting Chinese companies are unprecedented on a global scale. The premise of such pushback is that international relations are characterised today by competition for influence, strategic assets, and resources waged by non-democratic states, including China, against the interests of Western liberal democracies and the rules-based international order. Western pushback measures against China include sanctioning measures at the legislative and parliamentary level; at the governance level within nation-states; and in the foreign and strategic policy realm, affecting both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. This paper’s concern is the last realm; however, the other two areas remain equally important and warrant deeper academic investigation in the future.

In the foreign and strategic policy realm, China, along with Russia, was publicly singled out as a *strategic* threat to US interests in key policy documents from the second Obama Presidency onwards. The decline of the US strategic position in the world due to its protracted involvement in the wars in the Middle East at the same time as China’s global power was rising was, for example, noted in the 2018 US Defence Security Strategy (DSS). This document stated that:

“Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security. China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics...” (US Department of Defence 2018).

Therefore, US strategic policy has determinedly shifted its focus from the post-2001 *War on Terror* era, dominated by the US-led global counter-terrorism efforts and strategic partnerships for the wars in the Middle East, to a new era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*. The 2018 US DSS noted that four countries that have become the US’s key strategic competitors are China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran – all of which are non-democratic regimes. Such a characterisation had an immediate effect on Washington’s strategic allies, leading many other countries and blocs to view China as a strategic competitor in the spirit of *strategic alignment* with the US, including the European Union (European Commission 2019). For Australia, the pushback measures and China’s responses in kind have led to a major decline in bilateral relations and political tensions between

Canberra and Beijing, which have not been resolved, despite a change of federal government from the Coalition to Labour in May 2022.

The elevation of China to a strategic competitor's level by the US had a major impact on its partners and their relationship with China, as will be investigated in the next section. On the other hand, China wielded greater influence than ever before over its development partners, including in Europe, successfully eroding a common EU position on the issue of human rights in China in 2017 and Hong Kong in 2021 (Euractiv 2021; Reuters 2017). This has led a German politician to question whether the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy statements should be reformed to reflect qualified majority voting rather than being based on consensus.<sup>4</sup> In 2021 and 2022, the EU and NATO, respectively, classified China as a strategic competitor. This development may incite China to respond in kind by increasing pressure on its development partners to resist Western pushback measures against China – as the example of the Solomon Islands has shown in recent months (to be discussed later in this paper).

### **The “burden” of Western pushback against China on smaller powers: making strategic alignment choices**

The new geostrategic era of *Inter-state strategic competition* has placed a foreign policy “burden” on smaller powers. These countries are put to a difficult test of partnerships in needing to choose whether to back (in the spirit of *strategic alignment* with the US) the Western pushback measures against China or whether to adopt or promote policies that are seen as being accommodating to China's interests and thus may be undesirable by the Western countries. Neutrality towards strategic competition, as during the Cold War, is difficult to achieve because the balancing space of smaller powers in the era of *Inter-state strategic competition* has been continually shrunk. At this point, it would be useful to explain what is meant by “strategic alignment” in the context of US-China global competition for power and influence.

The debate on alignment in the discipline of International Relations is not new. Academics assessing great power competition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century generally discussed alignment policy choices in different schools

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore, differences over China policy within the EU might provide an impetus for further internal reform within the bloc (Venne 2022).

of thought within the Realist school of International Relations (see, for example, Narizny 2003). The strategic alignment in the context of this paper dealing with foreign policy choices by small and middle powers towards China refers to either supporting a US-led pushback against China or accommodating China's interests contrary to the pushback logic. Moreover, while the US and China are quick to point out that they are committed to multilateralism in international affairs, it is argued here that a geostrategic competition between a great power (US) and an emerging great power (China) presents a burden for smaller powers in their bilateral relations with both of those powers and defies the logic of sovereign decision-making since many smaller powers are dependent on external trade with larger powers such as the US, the EU, and China. China's policy adaptation in the face of Western pushback policies is a growing subject of research. So is the response by selected small and medium-sized powers, which will be examined next.

Academic Thomas S. Wilkins has studied the shifting paradigm of international security cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, describing alignment as a concept distinct from alliance and a superior one as it reflects the contemporary dynamics in international relations (Wilkins 2012). Academic Alexander Korolev, an international authority on the foreign policy choice of *hedging*, has found that small states do not have the luxury of *hedging* as US-China competition intensifies and plays out more viciously than before in different regional contexts (Korolev 2019). Therefore, the policy option left available to smaller states is either *bandwagoning* with the interests of one preferred power, or the policy choice of *strategic alignment* as argued here. The latter is a more comprehensive term. It presupposes a reorientation of a country's foreign and economic policy and positioning (including in international affairs) towards favouring one position in this competition, whereas countries wishing to preserve neutrality will be "double burdened" by the foreign policy and strategic alignment choice pressures from both sides.

In the EU context, academic Alicia G. Herrero has found that Europe is facing three main policy choices in the era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*. This includes: (1) the EU to continue to safeguard and promote multilateralism, with the danger that the bloc might remain alone amongst other trade blocs to do so; (2) closer alignment with the US's position towards China and sole reliance on the Transatlantic Alliance, which might become a very "costly option" as the EU might lose its preferential trading access to China; and (3) to move its centre of gravity

towards China in a policy of *rebalancing towards China* (Herrero 2019). Many policymakers in Europe and globally have also discussed similar options for the EU as a single entity. However, the failure to recognise the variable *diversity of strategic choices* by individual EU members, especially in the face of Black Swan unexpected events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, points to the fact that the seemingly binary policy choice of *strategic alignment* is a far more complex and under-studied phenomenon than it has been recognised so far in the academic literature.

### **China's relationship with CEEC: a sub-regional approach of 16+1**

Before 2012, China had been modestly increasing its trade with individual CEE countries, but its approach was predominantly bilateral in nature (Fung et al. 2009). Faced with increasing diplomatic pressure from the US during the Obama Administration, China developed a new policy platform in its relationship with the former communist states of Eastern Europe in the form of a "16+1" sub-regional approach. This initiative was officially launched in April 2012, during the last year in power for Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. This was a separate policy dialogue platform from the regular bilateral EU-China summits, as the EU was the largest trading partner of China at the time (and also of smaller powers in the neighbourhood, including in the Balkans, which were becoming more open to Chinese investments).<sup>5</sup>

Since the inaugural 16+1 summit in Warsaw in 2012, the China-CEEC platform has held nine annual leaders' summits and virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> The sheer number of topics discussed at the summit and associated meetings was expanded over time to cover topics as diverse as education and cultural diplomacy (e.g., the celebration of Chinese Language Day), the green economy, digital transformation, and regional infrastructure projects. For CEE countries that were traditionally not familiar with East Asia, this platform provided an opportunity for greater familiarisation between China and CEEC and for

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<sup>5</sup> Some EU members regard the 16+1 forum as China's attempt to divide the EU's common policy towards China (Standish 2021).

<sup>6</sup> In-person leaders' summits included Warsaw (2012), Bucharest (2013), Belgrade (2014), Suzhou (2015), Riga (2016), Budapest (2017), Sofia (2018), Dubrovnik (2019) and Beijing (2021).



the closer development of business ties. For China, it provided an opening into the non-traditional European markets, with CEEC being included in the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping. While some of the founding EU members, such as Italy, also supported the BRI (Kuo 2019), there has been a lot of pressure put on CEE small and middle powers to avoid further entanglements with China on this front once the US classified China as a strategic threat.

In 2021, China blacklisted five MEPs and imposed targeted “counter-sanctions” against a selected number of EU diplomats and politicians. This move, which can be described as a “counter-pushback”, followed a decision by the US and the EU to impose targeted sanctions against Chinese public officials and organisations from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) because of human rights violations against the Uyghur minority, which China denied (Banks 2021). While this could be interpreted as another step in the Western pushback measures against China, the EU and the US cooperated on human rights issues well before the announcement of the era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*. This indicates, again, that strategic alignment is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by simply pointing to the coordinated actions by Western countries and blocs on every issue. However, China’s counter-pushback policies, as in the case of human rights counter-sanctions, indicate that Chinese foreign policy is adapting to the new environment with unprecedented policy approaches.

### ***Strategic (Re-) Alignment by the EU Member States weakening the 16+1 platform***

The China-CEEC summitry framework was expanded from the original 16 to 17 members, with Greece formally entering the summitry in 2019 as the only state not falling under the narrow CEEC definition of being post-Communist.<sup>7</sup> In May 2021, when Lithuania left this platform, the China-CEEC dialogue reverted to its original name, 16+1 (Lo 2021). While Lithuania cited unfulfilled expectations as one of the reasons for exiting the grouping, it seems more likely that its government’s *strategic re-alignment* and pivot to Washington was the primary cause for this move. The Lithuanian foreign minister urged all EU members to leave the

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview of Sino-Greek relations, including information about their strategic partnership, see Georgiadis 2022.

16+1 group, stating that negotiations with China on trade and investment should be done under EU auspices rather than on a sub-regional basis (Take 2022). In addition, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian representatives visited Taiwan in November 2021 for a working visit to the 2021 Open Parliament Forum, which was also addressed (virtually and/or in person) by parliamentary speakers from the Czech Republic, Belize, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It is interesting to note that Lithuania's closer relations with Taiwan came about in response to Taipei's deeper engagement with Eastern Europe on the democracy promotion front and with respect to foreign aid assistance, as will be explained below.<sup>8</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwanese-made medical supplies assisted some CEE countries in the face of a major *Black Swan* event, the COVID-19 pandemic, which caught the world's governments off-guard and caused medical protectionism not witnessed in the EU before. Soon after exiting the 17+1 platform, Lithuania sent about 20,000 UK-made *Astrazeneca* vaccines to people in Taiwan in a move that indicated warmer relations between Vilnius and Taipei. Since the population of Taiwan exceeds 23 million, this rather symbolic move was a display of Lithuania's strategic re-alignment and positioning towards China's most contentious foreign policy issue in a way certain to infuriate the Chinese Government.

In April 2022, the EU-China held its 23<sup>rd</sup> bilateral summit during which the EU leaders sought China's support to assist in stopping the war in Ukraine launched by Russia under the guise of a "special military operation" in February 2022. The EU leaders noted on this occasion their disappointment with China's sanctioning measures against Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and "coercive measures against the EU Single Market and the Member States" (European Commission 2022). In June 2022, more than three months into the war in nearby Ukraine, there were signs that another EU member, the Czech Republic, was considering leaving the China-CEEC framework. In the view of analyst Tim Gosling, such a move "could be a boost for the government's pledge to reassert Prague's Western orientation" (Gosling 2022). This turn in foreign policy priorities by small powers such as Lithuania and the Czech Republic could indicate their strategic re-alignment in support of the US-led Western pushback measures against China in times of high international tensions. It may also involve placing a higher value on the US treaty

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<sup>8</sup> Taipei's more than half-a-century-long diplomatic recognition battle with Beijing has been thrown into a new spotlight during the era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*.

commitment to Taiwan in the event of a military conflict in the Straits which other NATO members may choose to support as well on Washington's side.

The Czech Republic's move to distance itself from the 16+1 was followed by a visit of the Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to Taiwan in 2020, despite a diplomatic protest from China. In an interview conducted with *The Diplomat*, Vystrčil said that there has been an attempt to form a larger grouping of countries that would leave the 16+1 summitry. His comments also indicated some degree of consultation with the US politicians on this topic, as per:

"We are actually discussing this issue on the Senate level [regarding leaving 16+1], as well as in the course of our meetings with the congressmen and senators here in the United States of America. Personally, I consider the 16+1 format to be non-functional because it was a format that was introduced by China only to increase its influence in this part of the world....If we were to leave it in a larger group, it would be more significant." (Tiezzi 2022).

Furthermore, in August 2022, Estonia and Latvia have officially announced their departure from the 16+1 forum. A notably increased scepticism by the EU member states from CEE towards this summitry framework in recent years, it can be concluded, came about during the multipolar era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*, amid more active engagement from Taipei in Eastern Europe. The increased salience of global issues such as Russia's war against Ukraine puts additional pressure on smaller powers to re-align their strategic interests with the US against China, which is being seen in Eastern Europe as Russia's appeaser. The decision to become more politically involved in the diplomatic contest between Taipei and Beijing by those countries constitutes a process of strategic alignment with the US-led Western pushback measures against China and a strong commitment to Washington's defence security pillar.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, what is generally perceived in the EU as a lack of concrete action from Beijing on the issue of Russia's war against Ukraine, i.e., China's cautious thread on this front, is likely to further alienate some EU members from the 16+1 platform. Its further weakening would result in a

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<sup>9</sup> This is a realm that is new to many CEECs since they were part of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War and tended to follow the Soviet policies on China.

revision of China's approach to the 16+1 format as Beijing would probably then focus on the areas which appeared to be more receptive to Chinese investments and economic presence over the past decade, such as the national governments in the Balkans, as the next section will discuss.

### **The Balkan countries within CEEC: a partial success story?**

A distinct group of countries within the 16+1 framework which has been more successful in attracting Chinese state-backed investments and loans on favourable terms includes Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, as well as Greece and Hungary. Although several of these countries are also members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), their ability to receive favourable loans from China for major infrastructure and reconstruction projects has been well documented in the academic literature.<sup>10</sup> The Balkan countries were hit particularly hard during the European Sovereign Debt crisis (2008-2010), which dramatically reduced Foreign Direct Investment inflows from the West into the region, prompting regional governments to look to faraway countries like China for new partnerships and loans, including for large infrastructure projects which are a precondition for development.

Hungary and Greece (both EU and NATO members), as well as Croatia (an EU and NATO member) and Serbia (an EU candidate and militarily neutral state) from the former Yugoslavia, have been particularly successful in attracting larger infrastructure and construction projects and preferential loans from China. In turn, the EU institutions have been increasingly warning them about their investment links to China even though the EU still has not ratified an investment agreement with China (which is planned for 2023 or beyond; see Lee 2021). While in the current era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*, at least theoretically, a strategic re-alignment of some of these states against China may be possible, it appears that, for the time being, they are likely to remain the front-runners from the 16+1 platform in this regard. In part, this can be explained by China's Belt and Road initiative and its declared ambition

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, there has been a proliferation of academic literature in recent years on China in the Balkans, and the negative consequences this might have on the EU's soft power in the Balkans and the membership prospects of the remaining EU candidates and potential candidate states to join the EU. For a detailed survey of the academic literature on this subject, see Markovic Khaze & Wang 2021.

to build better maritime and road cross-regional connectivity to facilitate the faster transport of goods and services globally.

When it comes to NATO members from the CEEC grouping, it is important to briefly examine NATO's position on the international rise of China. Defence analysts Markus Kaim and Angela Stanzel have observed that China did not feature prominently in NATO's strategic documents until recently, during the era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*. They specifically remarked that:

“For a long time, the dominant view was that the Alliance and Beijing were pursuing a number of common interests, e.g., in the areas of crisis management, counter-piracy, and the countering of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Only China's rise on the international scene and the resulting rivalry with the US in recent years have led to Beijing's foreign policy appearing on the Alliance's agenda.” (Kaim&Stanzel 2022).

The rise of China in terms of a potential threat from its increased military spending was flagged in the West as early as 2009 during the first term in office of Labour Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who was a China expert prior to entering politics. In the Defence White Paper of 2009, the Rudd Government argued that China's rapidly increasing military spending, “beyond the scope of what would be required for a conflict over Taiwan”, was the cause of national concern, requiring Australia to endeavour on a massive defence spending programme to expand its future defence capability (Department of Defence 2009).<sup>11</sup> Although this key strategic document was met with much scepticism in Australia at the time, including dissent from Australian intelligence agencies, the Obama Administration sounded the alarm on the same issue in US defence and security assessments not long after.

Therefore, it is argued here that the US-led Western pushback measures against China are not just economic in nature but deeply political and have military-security considerations. Although the military cooperation angle between China and countries like Serbia is not going to be discussed here at length, China's increased security and military

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<sup>11</sup> The first time the rise of China and its military modernization were publicly affirmed in the Australian Government's defence documents was in the 2007 Defence Update, which was done under the Coalition Government of Prime Minister John Howard.

presence in the Balkans (e.g., through joint police patrols with Serbia in September 2019 and, most importantly, the delivery of the Chinese-made FK-3 air defence surface-to-air missile system to Serbia in April 2022) is now a permanent feature in the discussions between Western governments, EU institutions and the Serbian Government. Although Serbia is a militarily neutral country with close partnership links with NATO, the logic of strategic alignment with the Western pushback measures necessitates that this country too will not remain immune to increased criticism by the West and diplomatic pressure to 'choose sides' because of its close relations with China, including in the military-security domain. It is also likely that the EU will continue to pressure Serbia to abandon some of the joint projects with China, which the Serbian Government is likely to resist for the foreseeable future.

### **China's troubled relationship with Australia: From close economic partners to strategic competitors in the Southwest Pacific**

Unlike countries from the CEEC grouping, the majority of which had no significant independent dealings with China during the Cold War (apart from a few countries like Albania, with political and military ties to Beijing, and socialist Yugoslavia), Australia has had a long history of engagement with China since the early 1970s. As a close US ally and middle power, Australia was among the first countries in the Asia-Pacific region to adopt and extend Western pushback policies against China. A very brief history of diplomatic relations between the two countries is presented below, followed by a discussion about the changing position of the Australian government towards China in the Southwest Pacific region.

Unlike many European countries during the Cold War, Australia was a latecomer in recognising the People's Republic of China. In December 2022, Canberra and Beijing will officially mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations. However, the history of Chinese migration to Australian shores precedes the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 and the Chinese Communist state in 1949. Following the Second World War, Australia steadfastly refused to recognise Beijing, instead supporting Taipei's seat in the United Nations until many decades later, when it switched to the One-China Policy. This was a manifestation of Australia's post-war pivot to the United States of America since the United Kingdom (UK) recognised Beijing in 1950.

On December 22, 1972, during the same year of US President Richard Nixon's monumental rapprochement with China (and a visit to Beijing that February), Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's Labour Government officially "recognised the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China".<sup>12</sup> As early as 1954, however, Whitlam was the first Australian Member of Parliament to seek the recognition of China—probably along the lines of the UK model (Au-Yeung et al. 2012). As the Leader of the Opposition, Whitlam took a historic trip to China in July 1971 (Whitlam Institute 2022). At that time, Australia actively sought ways to expand bilateral relations with Asian countries considering the UK's renewed interest in joining the European Economic Community (EEC); their turn to the EEC was perceived as a major loss for Australian trade interests at the time, with major consequences for its future national identity (Markovic 2009; Markovic Khaze 2017). With the cessation of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Australia's turn to building links with the Chinese government expanded on three main levels: federal government level; state government level; and the level of local councils and institutions. However, Australian institutions have ever since maintained non-diplomatic economic relations with Taipei, which have intensified over the past decade.<sup>13</sup>

A major crisis in the relationship between Australia and China came with the bloody events at Tiananmen Square in 1989, which led the Australian Labour Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, to issue 27,000 special permanent settlement visas for Chinese students (Fang & Weedon 2020). Thirty years later, in 2020, the Coalition Government under Scott Morrison issued Tiananmen-style visas for Hong Kong residents, with the government considering cancelling an extradition treaty with that territory (Bagshaw 2020). Therefore, Australia is no stranger to standing up on the international scene on the issue of human rights in China. This trend, again, should be seen separately from the US-led Western pushback against China, which is more recent in nature than Australia's differences with China over political dissent and human rights. Australia has in the

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<sup>12</sup> For Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's historic speech in the Australian Parliament on the PRC's recognition, see PM Transcripts (2022); for historical background, see Pitty 2005 and Kendall 2008.

<sup>13</sup> For a historical background on Canberra's relationship with Taipei, see Atkinson 2012.

past maintained a separate track of bilateral dialogue with China on human rights, called the Human Rights Diplomacy approach, which predates the period of current tensions (Fleay 2008).

During the nine years in power of the Australian Coalition successive governments (with Prime Ministers Tony Abbott 2013–15, Malcolm Turnbull 2015–18, and Scott Morrison 2018–2022), Australia's relationship with China deteriorated to the lowest point in the history of their bilateral relations. This period coincided with the *Inter-state Strategic Competition* phase in US-China relations, characterised by the rise of China in international affairs and Jinping's era. Just like the EU members in the CEEC group, Australia was put in a position to choose sides, and it did. This attitude, which is part of Australia's strategic alignment with the Western pushback measures, can be summed up by the comments of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who wrote:

“...Many countries [are presented with] a binary challenge in which they must choose sides between China (often already their largest economic partner) and the United States (often their only hope for security against Chinese coercion).” (Rudd 2022, p. 263).

The election of the Labour government under Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has offered new hope of reviving some aspects of the Australia-China relationship, which was particularly close in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the economic and investment front.<sup>14</sup> The new government minister for Defence, Richard Marles, met with the Chinese counterpart General Wei Fenghe on the margins of the Shangri-La security dialogue in Singapore in June 2022. This was the first high-level diplomatic contact between the two countries in almost three years. However, the Pacific region remains a hot spot for Australia-China tensions, as Australia recently blocked the efforts by the Chinese Government to engage the Pacific islands in a new regional group, perhaps modelled upon the CEEC summitry that was successfully established a decade ago. By strategically re-aligning itself with Washington's defence pillar towards China, Australia has placed itself on the collision course with China in the Southwest Pacific, which is likely to intensify over the coming years.

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<sup>14</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Chinese students came to study in Australia every year before the intensification of the *Inter-state Strategic Competition* during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was officially declared by the World Health Organization in January 2020 (Kupfersmidt 2020).



### **China as a development partner in the Southwest Pacific region**

The Southwest Pacific region, which is located North-East of Australia, is a highly diverse area composed of Micronesian, Melanesian, and Polynesian countries, with a combined population of about 2.5 million people scattered over hundreds of islands (which make up 15% of the world's surface). China has been present in the strategically important Southwest Pacific region for many decades, with tensions with the West over the status of Taiwan, sustainable fisheries, and development policies more generally occasionally coming to the fore of international media reports.<sup>15</sup> Only over the last decade have Western observers from outside the region become more critical about China's increased role and influence over small island states (see, for example, Pryke 2020). During President Hu Jintao's era, China's role and influence in the Southwest Pacific region grew exponentially, with uneven results because of the ongoing Beijing-Taipei tensions (for further reading, see Shie 2007; Zhang 2017; Oosterveld et al. 2018).

In the Southwest Pacific, Taipei's diplomatic struggle for recognition over Beijing has been playing out for many decades. In 2005, for instance, six South Pacific nations afforded diplomatic recognition to Taiwan (Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu). In 2019, China succeeded in getting the Solomon Islands and Kiribati to reverse their position on Taiwan and adopt a One-China policy. This move is not unusual given China's long diplomatic history in the region, but this development occurred in the times of the US-China trade war and the strategic re-alignment by smaller powers towards supporting US-led pushback measures against China in global affairs. Some countries in the Southwest Pacific, therefore, are choosing to support China alongside Western countries as a key development partner. This is likely to lead to internal divisions within those countries as pro- and anti-China sentiments play out domestically and in regional institutions. In 2021, several Pacific nations threatened to exit the 51-year-old Pacific Islands Forum, with Kiribati announcing this move in July 2022. It is likely that Southwest Pacific countries will continue to be caught up in geopolitical

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<sup>15</sup> The Pacific region is familiar with the Taipei-Beijing diplomatic contest as the small island countries were switching their allegiance between the two for many decades, often driven by economic interests.

tensions between the West and China, as this region has become the latest battleground for influence between Washington and its allies and Beijing.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Western pushback trends, China has recently signed a new security agreement with the government of the Solomon Islands (in May 2022) and has also attempted to engage with nine other countries in the Southwest Pacific on a sub-regional level. The Solomon Islands Government said the deal with China was necessary for their “internal security” and the fight against climate change, in order to explain the leaked documents (Kekea 2022). The previous Australian Coalition governments were climate change sceptics at heart. However, this issue of climate change is the question of national survival for most Pacific Island states, which are particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels, cyclones, and environmental disasters.<sup>17</sup> With climate change emerging as the main security threat to the Pacific Island Forum members, it is likely that China’s role in the region will continue to increase as China continues to promote renewable energy, infrastructure projects, and better connectivity in this region. Its increased role and influence will inevitably invite countermeasures from Australia, Japan, and the US and some EU members who are historically active in the same region. However, the disappearance of the Pacific Island states will only exacerbate threats to Australia’s border security and may also increase other types of threats from issues such as pandemics, transnational crime and terrorism, and climate change refugees. On the climate change front in the Southwest Pacific region, the new Australian Labour Government and China might become unexpected bedfellows. Yet, the logic of the era of interstate strategic competition will dictate that containment and deterrence of China, rather than accommodation and cooperation with China, are most likely to come out of this trend, including in the Southwest Pacific (just as it was witnessed in the 16+1 forum).

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<sup>16</sup> A manifestation of this trend is the Pacific Islands Forum leaders’ retreat on July 14, 2022, which coincided with the request by the Chinese Communist Party’s international office for a meeting with 10 Pacific islands on the same day (Needham 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the domestic unrest in the Solomon Islands in 2009 particularly hurt Chinese citizens and economic interest in that country, but China got more interested in this country a decade later (Smith 2012).

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the current phase in international relations is a period of *Inter-state Strategic Competition* which has intensified over the past decade between China and the West in the economic, political, military, and security realms. Smaller powers have resorted to *strategic re-alignment* policy choices in an attempt to balance between the competing interests of the US-led Western pushback measures against China and its increasingly assertive diplomacy in support of its flagship project, the Belt and Road initiative. Selective case studies from CEEC, the Balkans, and the Southwest Pacific have demonstrated that if the current levels of US-China global rivalry were to continue, this would most likely have negative consequences for the future of multilateralism as smaller powers are pressured into choosing sides between China and the West, often at the detriment of their economic needs. It will take more than imaginative and creative pragmatism for smaller powers to reconcile the competing interests of the two large powers, the United States (and its allies) and China, in international politics.

This paper has also argued that researchers should not confuse all reactions that China perceives to be against it from the prism of the Western pushback measures. Criticism relating to human rights, for example, predates the era of interstate strategic competition, with the US, the EU and Australia having had bilateral discussions on this front with China, including when discussing separate issues such as trade. The research in this paper has also shown that China has resorted to new policy approaches in response to the Western pushback measures, such as sub-regional group approaches, including towards CEE and the Southwest Pacific. China's growing influence globally using summitry on a sub-regional level and bilateral investments in economic diplomacy is likely to be countered with further Western pushback measures in the years to come. Such a binary choice might, according to some scholars of IR, bring more predictability to international relations as bipolarity did during the Cold War. On the other hand, it greatly reduces the space for independent policymaking by smaller powers in the current era of *Inter-state Strategic Competition*, harms multilateralism, and brings greater instability to multipolar world affairs.

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**PROMENE U SPOLJNOPOLITIČKOJ ORIJENTACIJI KINE  
PREMA MALIM I SREDNJIJIM SILAMA:  
KOMPARATIVNA ANALIZA SLUČAJA AUSTRALIJE,  
SOLOMONSKIH OSTRVA I CENTRALNIH  
I ISTOČNOEVROPSKIH ZEMALJA**

*Apstrakt:* Globalna ambicija Narodne Republike Kine da postane karbonski neutralna ekonomija do polovine ovoga veka sa jednom od najmodernijih vojski privlači pažnju istraživača širom sveta. Međutim, ideja o jednoj modernoj i naprednoj ekonomiji sa kineskim socijalističkim karakteristikama (koju je kineski Predsednik Ši Đinping najavio 2017-te godine) nije bila dobro prihvaćena ni u Vašingtonu ni u Briselu pa su SAD i EU navele da Kina predstavlja „sistemsku pretnju“. Preveliki fokus u istraživačkom radu na takozvano „sistemsko nadmetanje“ između SAD-a i Kine, i na povećanje bilateralnih spona između Kine i Rusije je odvučlo pažnju sa promenjenog angažmana na spoljno-političkom nivou Kine u odnosu na manje sile. Ovaj rad nastoji da popuni tu prazninu kroz komparativnu analizu primera kineskih odnosa sa Australijom, kao silom srednjeg dometa naklonjenoj SAD-u, zatim Solomonskih Ostrva, kao male regionalne sile od strateškog značaja u Indo-Pacifičkom regionu, i određenih centralnih i istočnoevropskih zemalja. Glavna hipoteza ovog rada je da je kineska spoljna politika primenila principe

diverzifikacije i pragmatizma ka tim zemljama da bi ublažila uticaj američkih sankcija, povećanog skepticizma prema njenoj spoljnoj politici, odbrani i bezbednosnoj politici, i ekonomskom jačanju Kine. Koristeći primarne i sekundarne izvore podataka autor želi da doprinese rastućem opusu naučnih radova o kineskoj spoljnoj i bezbednosnoj politici i mekoj moći, time što će analizirati glavne trendove kineskog angažmana i saradnje sa malim i srednjim silama u Evropi i Indo-Pacifiku. Takođe autor nastoji da prikaže kako su određene male i srednje sile odreagovale na povećano geo-strateško rivalstvo između SAD-a i Kine, koje može dovesti do šireg vojnog konflikta ukoliko se sadašnji trend njihovog rivalstva nastavi.

*Ključne reči:* Kina, Centralne i Istočnoevropske zemlje, kineska spoljna i bezbednosna politika, Australija, Solomonska Ostrva, Indo-pacifički region.