



Working Paper



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# Geopolitical competition, bilateral aid, and the collective interests of Small Island Developing States



RESILIENT  
SUSTAINABLE  
ISLANDS

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## Abstract

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash and the 2020 pandemic, fears have grown regarding intensifying geopolitical instability typified by rising nationalist-authoritarianism and multilateral decay. From the perspective of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), these shifts are disorienting. Increased Chinese investment has been welcomed in many SIDS but it has also sparked the attention of the US and other Western actors, increasing geopolitical tensions and aid competition.

One unacknowledged feature of this competition is its potential effect on the collective 'SIDS agenda', due to the differential impacts these tensions are having across SIDS regions, in a world where their unity is more crucial than ever.

This paper asks if enhanced aid cooperation and coordination could attenuate rising tensions and avoid forms of damaging aid competition that compel SIDS to choose sides. Three propositions for trilateral cooperation between the US and its allies, China and SIDS are proposed:

1. starting small and focusing on less-sensitive sectors with greater shared interests: such as climate change adaptation, disaster risk management, public health, and agriculture
2. enabling SIDS to play a more active role in initiating, negotiating and implementing trilateral projects
3. channelling more development assistance through regional and international organisations, to depoliticise aid and reinforce multilateralism



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# Abbreviations and acronyms

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<b>ABAS</b>	Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS
<b>ACP</b>	African, Caribbean and Pacific
<b>ADB</b>	Asian Development Bank
<b>AIS</b>	Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea
<b>AOSIS</b>	Alliance of Small Island States
<b>BRI</b>	Belt and Road Initiative
<b>CBI</b>	Caribbean Basin Initiative
<b>CBSI</b>	Caribbean Basin Security Initiative
<b>CELAC</b>	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
<b>EEZ</b>	exclusive economic zone
<b>IDA</b>	International Development Association (World Bank)
<b>IOR</b>	Indian Ocean Region
<b>MDB</b>	multilateral development bank
<b>MSG</b>	Melanesia Spearhead Group
<b>SDT</b>	special and differential treatment
<b>SIDS</b>	Small Island Developing States
<b>SIE</b>	Small Island Economies
<b>SVE</b>	small, vulnerable economies
<b>TMSC</b>	Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation
<b>UNCTAD</b>	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
<b>UNFCCC</b>	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

# Executive Summary

Over the last three decades, the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) policy agenda has become a prominent feature of multilateral diplomacy, especially on climate change. SIDS have successfully argued that size-related capacity constraints create unique vulnerabilities that necessitate special and differential treatment (SDT) from the international community. This success is evidenced by the creation of the SIDS grouping in the UN system and the institutionalisation of the UN SIDS conference, the fourth of which was held in Antigua and Barbuda in May 2024 and led to the adoption of the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS). But much has changed in the decade since the previous SIDS conference held in Samoa, including, most obviously, escalating geopolitical tensions between China and the US.

This paper examines the implications of intensified great power competition for the SIDS agenda. It finds that concerns about changing patterns of development assistance and investment are common to all three SIDS regions – in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS), the Caribbean and the Pacific alike. But they have been interpreted in different ways:

- In the Pacific, the potential for armed conflict is the paramount concern for both China and the US.
- Similar concerns are apparent for those SIDS located in the Indian Ocean.
- In the Atlantic, SIDS located along the west coast of Africa and those in the Caribbean are heavily focused on economic development by attracting foreign investment from China while facilitating migration, either to Europe or the US.

There is a paradox here: flows of aid and investment to the Caribbean and Pacific are comparable, yet the US has broadly welcomed (or not contested) China's presence in its own 'backyard' precisely because this is not accompanied by sustained strategic competition. In the Pacific, China's presence has provoked much greater consternation due to the evident potential for significant military escalation.

This matters from the vantage point of SIDS, because regional variation has the potential to undermine their collective interests over the 10-year lifetime of the ABAS. The lesson is that this effectively creates a zero-sum game: while individual SIDS can benefit substantially from leveraging increased attention from either China or the US, the net effect is likely to be negative overall and therefore detrimental to the types of collective action that have delivered multilateral success since 1992.

To be better placed to deal with the challenges ahead, SIDS and their partners will need to resist the temptation to leverage short-term advantages by aligning with specific great powers. Instead they should invest in the long-term survival of the multilateral system because it generates positive benefits for them collectively. This implies that bilateral donors also have a responsibility to provide resources and design support programmes to SIDS, either individually or as a group, in ways that mitigate, rather than reinforce, the negative effects of shifts in the international system.

# 1 Introduction

The 39 countries that we now call Small Island Developing States (SIDS) created that label within the UN system in the early 1990s to draw attention to their unique economic conditions and the ways in which climate change would exacerbate their inherent vulnerabilities (Corbett et al., 2019). This UN grouping was part of an attempt to generate a coordinated ‘SIDS agenda’ that encompassed states spread across three regions who saw themselves as having similar characteristics and economic problems as a result of their history, small population size and island geography.

The SIDS agenda has had mixed success over the last three decades (see Bishop et al., 2023; 2024b). The most substantial gains have come in the realm of global environmental policy, while SIDS have had less influence on global economic and trade regulation, certainly in terms of securing special treatment (Corbett et al., 2021; Lindsay, 2019). But the SIDS label has remained prominent in the consciousness of international organisations, for whom SIDS are important clients.

The ‘SIDS agenda’ has been enabled by, and is dependent on, a permissive liberal order because of the key norms of (a) sovereign equality, (b) non-interference, and (c) the right to development (Sharman, 2017; Corbett, 2023; Bishop et al., 2021; 2024a). This order underpins the UN and Bretton Woods institutions, with whom SIDS have worked to champion their agenda. The SIDS agenda has promoted awareness of the impacts of climate change, but also created space to consider security challenges beyond great power competition, including via multiple debates on the climate–security nexus in the UN Security Council, alongside a brief window for potential consensus decision-making at the UN that coincided with the end of the Cold War. This was a period in which SIDS security began to be taken seriously in both intellectual and policy terms (see Sutton and Payne, 1993), before then fading from view as intensifying neoliberal globalisation saw questions of vulnerability and economic development take precedence (Bishop, 2012).

Great power competition has now returned as a determining factor of international politics. As strategic competition between the US and China escalates, and SIDS embark on implementing the ABAS, it is pertinent to ask: what does this great power rivalry mean for their collective agenda?

To answer this question, the authors reviewed academic and policy analysis from across the three SIDS regions to identify patterns and themes related to geopolitical competition between China and the US. Although there is literature on this topic, particularly in the Pacific, analysts rarely look across the SIDS group or consider the implications for their collective agenda. This regional comparison is the paper’s core contribution.

The analysis reveals a picture of clear similarities: the US–China question is animating debate everywhere and is refracted through perennial SIDS concerns about sovereignty and viability. But there are also marked differences, which reflect geographic location and interests. These variations have implications for collective action by SIDS.

At least three overlapping hypotheses may offer some explanation of the differentiation.

- **Location matters:** The Pacific and (to a lesser extent) Indian Ocean SIDS are located between the two great powers, whereas the Atlantic SIDS, in the Caribbean and West Africa, are further away from one or the other and therefore have less geopolitical significance.
- **US relative decline:** Waning American financial support post-2008 and a ‘development crisis’ in many SIDS has created a vacuum that an economically stronger China has filled with aid, soft loans and infrastructural investments, as part of its broader desire to export capital, technology and expertise. Washington is content effectively to free ride on this resource provision in the Caribbean and West Africa, but not in the Pacific or Indian Ocean.
- **Chinese ascendancy:** As its economy increasingly rivals that of the US, Chinese engagement in Pacific and Indian Ocean SIDS is shifting from being largely commercial and trade-related to a more militarised posture. In time, we would anticipate this trend to also follow in the Atlantic, at which point, the US will respond more decisively.

The paper presents evidence to support all three hypotheses and concludes by cautioning that the US–China question may lead to an increasing fragility in the SIDS coalition at the precise moment that solidarity is needed to secure sustained development and climate justice at the multilateral level. Ironically, it may also lead to decay in the very multilateral system on which these public goods rest.

To substantiate these claims, the paper starts with a summary of the rise of the SIDS agenda. This history is important because it illustrates the benefits SIDS have gained from collective action, and reveals the ways in which a permissive liberal order enables this to both occur and have a positive impact. The rest of the paper focuses on the interests and agendas of key players in the three regions: China, the US, regional middle powers, and SIDS themselves. The paper concludes by considering key implications for collective action around a coordinated SIDS agenda, and cautions that the remarkable success that has been achieved by SIDS as a group could be derailed by uncoordinated unilateral responses from the US and its allies.

## 2 The rise of the SIDS agenda

Decolonisation precipitated a steady increase in SIDS' membership of international organisations in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Corbett et al., 2021). For the most part, their participation was sporadic and coordinated on a regional basis or around single issues, such as efforts by the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States to protect and renegotiate preferential market access for the remnants of the sugar industry (Corbett and Connell, 2014). The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Commonwealth Secretariat and other agencies undertook economic analysis to highlight the distinct development problems and challenges of small island nations (Sutton, 2001; 2011). But, overall, during this period, SIDS acted in concert with other developing and newly independent countries, rather than as a distinct and identifiable group with common interests that required special and differential treatment (Getachew, 2019).

This changed in the late 1980s due to several interrelated factors. The first, and most significant, was the emerging scientific consensus around climate change and the rush to coordinate a global response, culminating in the 1992 Rio Conference. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) was created in the lead-up to that conference (Ashe et al., 1999) and was successful in highlighting how small islands would be the first and worst affected by global warming. AOSIS also precipitated the first UN SIDS conference in 1994, at which the label 'SIDS' and its definition were created (Corbett et al., 2019). This label was used from the mid-1990s onwards to draw attention to the growing economic problems that SIDS faced, exacerbated by the creation of the WTO in 1995, which put an end to preferential access to the EU for sugar and other plantation exports (Lindsay, 2019), and reinforced SIDS' vulnerabilities to exogenous market fluctuations. A global tourism boom in the 1980s replaced agriculture in many SIDS and brought with it much higher levels of GDP per capita. But this industry is even more volatile than sugar – as witnessed during the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic – increasing differences between SIDS and other emerging economies (Hinds, 2022).

As these shared economic and environmental challenges and vulnerabilities became more pronounced in the 2000s, SIDS' foreign policy agendas became more aligned and the coordination of their negotiating positions intensified. In response, international organisations began providing greater recognition to SIDS' unique conditions in their structures and processes (Corbett et al., 2021).

The SIDS label now resonates across the UN system and within multilateral development banks (MDBs): the Asian Development Bank (ADB), for example, has a 'Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations and SIDS Approach' and Action Plan (2021–2025) for how to work with its most vulnerable client countries. The World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) has a Small Island Economies (SIE) Exception, which allows many SIDS that would not otherwise be

eligible to receive grants and highly concessional finance from this fund. The WTO also created the ‘small, vulnerable economies’ (SVE) category to recognise similar size-related challenges.

These procedural changes went largely unnoticed by larger states, however, with the exception of the annual UNFCCC conferences, where AOSIS became an increasingly prominent negotiating bloc (Betzold, 2010; Bishop and Payne, 2012). Larger states sent very low-level delegations to the inaugural 1994 SIDS conference, for example, and have often deemed small states explicitly – and SIDS agendas implicitly – as little more than ‘irritants’ (Lewis, 2009). Nevertheless, the SIDS agenda has persisted against the odds, with SIDS becoming the moral voice of climate action and leadership in myriad areas of global policy, including on oceans.

## 3 US–China competition in SIDS regions

This section examines in greater detail the challenges for SIDS of a shifting geopolitical context. Starting with the Pacific, where the tensions are sharpest, the authors consider the various positions and involvement of different large states with direct interest in – and relationship with – these regions.

### 3.1 The Pacific

Escalating geopolitical tensions between the China and the US in the Pacific over the last decade have provided island nations with welcome leverage over both great powers and middle-sized regional players, such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Taiwan. Geopolitical competition has also brought with it greater attention from a host of countries that previously showed little regard for the region, including old European colonisers and oil-rich Middle Eastern states. The upshot is that the Pacific has assumed a prominence in world affairs that is unprecedented since the end of the Second World War. This attention has altered the region’s relationship with the other SIDS and the broader SIDS agenda.

#### China’s influence

China has a mix of interests and motivations in the Pacific region. The first and most prominent relates to diplomatic competition with Taiwan. Three of Taiwan’s remaining 12 diplomatic allies are from the Pacific – Marshall Islands, Palau and Tuvalu – with Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Nauru all making the ‘switch’ to China in recent years. The second relates to economic opportunities. The endowment of fishery resources in the region and rich natural resources such as minerals and timber in PNG, Fiji, and Solomon Islands also appeal to the Chinese state and Chinese companies. For these reasons, Pacific SIDS have been important recipients of China’s South–South cooperation. China provided \$114.6 million in aid, including grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans, to Pacific partner countries in 2008, rising to a peak of \$384 million in 2016 (Lowy Institute, 2024).

In general, Pacific SIDS’ leaders welcome China’s increased actions in the region, as this activity ‘offers greater options for financing and development opportunities – both directly in partnership with China, and indirectly through the increased competition in our region’ (Taylor, 2019). Many Pacific islands leaders see a rising China as an important partner, especially in the areas of trade and aid, and as a means of increasing their leverage with traditional development partners such as the US, Australia and New Zealand (Ng Shiu et al., 2023). But they also try to balance their relations with China and ‘traditional’ powers: for example, at the Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG) Leaders’ Summit held in Port Vila in August 2023, MSG Director General Leonard Louma

called for the sub-region to avoid taking sides in the great power competition (Anthony, 2023). Some Pacific leaders have highlighted the need to take a collective approach in engaging with China, especially via the Pacific Islands Forum.

## The US response

The US has, unsurprisingly, responded to China's increased presence in the Pacific by strengthening its own strategic posture and increasing development assistance. The US singled out Pacific SIDS as countries of particular concern within the panorama of its growing Sino-competition. Not only do they occupy a strategic location within the air and sea lanes that facilitate communication between the US and its allies and partners in Asia and Australia; Washington itself possesses several territories in the region: Guam and The Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands in the north Pacific are both US territories, and Guam is home to Joint Region Marianas, consisting of US Naval Base Guam and Andersen Air Force Base.

Guam is a vital staging post: US strategic policy expects the territory to play a central role in any putative conflict with China, particularly over the Taiwan Strait, with the island described as the 'tip of the [US] spear' (Kuper, 2022). The US has also sought to renew compacts of free association with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. The Pacific freely associated states are militarily significant, with Marshall Islands hosting the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense test site on Kwajalein Atoll, and the US has plans to build an over-the-horizon radar facility in Palau. Under the US–Papua New Guinea Defense Cooperation Agreement signed in 2023, the US has also gained access to bases in Papua New Guinea, including the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, which the US has upgraded in partnership with Australia (State Department, 2023).

In an effort to mitigate China's influence, the US has also reinvigorated its bilateral and multilateral development assistance to the Pacific SIDS. Its 2019 'Pacific Pledge of the Indo-Pacific Strategy' included a funding commitment of \$100 million, accompanied by a more determined diplomatic campaign (State Department, 2020). In February 2019 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attended the Micronesian Presidents' Summit, and in May 2019 President Trump hosted the presidents of Palau, Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia at the White House – the first time that leaders of the three Pacific freely associated states were hosted by a US President.

American efforts to reengage with Pacific SIDS gained pace under the Biden administration. Several high-level diplomatic visits by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Security Council Indo-Pacific Coordinator Kurt Campbell were accompanied by significant funding pledges. In September 2022, President Biden convened the first-ever US–Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, DC. His administration also released USAID's 2022–2027 Pacific Islands Strategic Framework in August 2022 (the first of its kind to focus specifically on the Pacific) (USAID, 2022) and, in September 2022, its first Pacific Partnership Strategy (White House, 2022d).

These policies were followed by the ‘Roadmap for a 21st-Century US–Pacific Island Partnership’ which Biden released at the September 2022 summit (White House, 2022c). In that roadmap, the administration pledged \$810 million in additional expanded programmes in the region. But, while this headline amount sounded impressive, the funds include \$600 million over ten years to meet Washington’s obligations under the South Pacific Tuna Treaty and are dependent on Congressional approval. The Biden administration also opened a new embassy in Tonga in 2023 and pledged to open embassies in Kiribati and Vanuatu, among other initiatives.

## US allies

Increased geopolitical competition between the two great powers has been viewed with trepidation by middle-sized regional players, who stand to lose relatively stable influence. As observed by Firth, Australia and New Zealand’s influence in the region has shifted because ‘the rise of China, the return of the US and the proliferation of other external players have given Island leaders a new confidence’ (2013: 292). It has also brought renewed interest from old European colonial powers to the region, with former PIF Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor highlighting that China’s presence ‘has triggered a range of Pacific-focused strategies and aid programmes in our region’ (Taylor, 2020).

Australia is the largest provider of development assistance to Pacific Island countries, providing around 40% of the total (Lowy Institute, 2024). As a maritime nation, some of Australia’s most important sea and air lanes of communication run through the Pacific, which has motivated Australia’s long-term pursuit of ‘strategic denial’, a policy that aims to restrict real or potential adversaries – in this case, China – from pursuing their military objectives in the Pacific. These concerns have been apparent for decades but have escalated markedly in recent years. At the 2017 Pacific Islands Forum leaders’ meeting, then-Prime Minister of Australia Malcolm Turnbull announced Australia’s intention to ‘step up’ its Pacific policy (Fox, 2017). Progress was undermined, however, by the Morrison government’s reticence to undertake serious action to address climate change. A change of government in May 2022 altered this stance and helped improve Australia’s image and relationships with Pacific SIDS, but the government continues to approve new coal and gas projects, something that Pacific SIDS have asked it not to do.

The ‘step up’ has also included a focus on security, with the creation of the Pacific Security College in Canberra, which aims to strengthen the capacity of Pacific security officials, and the Pacific Fusion Centre in Vanuatu, which promotes regional maritime domain awareness. Australia has rolled out its Pacific Maritime Security Programme, under which it has been providing 23 Guardian-class patrol boats to 12 Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste since 2018. Notably, in cooperation with the US and Papua New Guinea, Australia has redeveloped the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, which is well located to provide forward support to Australian and US vessels operating in the Western Pacific.

Australia has also sought to formalise its security presence through bilateral security agreements, including a security treaty with Solomon Islands in 2017, the Fiji–Australia Vuvale Partnership in 2019, a security agreement with Vanuatu in 2022, a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership with Papua New Guinea in 2020 and a security treaty, the ‘Falepili Union’, with Tuvalu in 2023. The Falepili Union has been the most controversial. Under the treaty Tuvaluan citizens will be progressively offered migration access to Australia as climate change effects worsen. In exchange, Australia has agreed to provide Tuvalu with a security guarantee and has acquired an effective veto over Tuvalu’s security and defence policy, raising concerns about its impact on Tuvalu’s sovereignty.

Given its location, New Zealand shares many of the same strategic concerns as Australia, although it has been less explicit in its disquiet about China’s increasing presence in the Pacific Islands region. New Zealand is demographically and culturally distinct, however, with large Indigenous Māori and diaspora Polynesian populations encouraging the government to emphasise its ‘Pacific identity’. New Zealand also has relationships of free association with Cook Islands and Niue, while Tokelau is a non-self-governing territory of New Zealand.

Like Australia, in 2018 New Zealand fleshed out a new Pacific policy – the ‘Pacific reset’ – intended to deepen its relationships in the region (Peters, 2018). This policy included an increase in development and climate spending, accompanied by efforts to increase security cooperation. New Zealand has been aided by its strong commitment to climate action. However, just as with the US, there is often a gap between New Zealand’s rhetoric and the reality of its policy implementation. Much of the promise of the Pacific ‘reset’ had not materialised by 2021, so New Zealand announced a new ‘Pacific Resilience’ policy intended to refresh its regional relationships (Mahuta, 2021). This policy included further climate finance commitments, as well as an emphasis on cultural competence in New Zealand’s engagements in the Pacific.

In the face of growing pressure from China, Taiwan has made huge efforts to consolidate its diplomatic relations with Marshall Islands, Nauru (unsuccessfully), Palau and Tuvalu via high-level visits. President Tsai Ing-wen visited Palau, Nauru and Marshall Islands in March 2019. In return, Marshall Islands President David Kabua (March 2022), Nauru President Joseph Kun (November 2022, October 2023), Palau President Surangel Whipps Jr (March 2021, October 2022) and Tuvalu Prime Minister Kausea Natano (September 2022) visited Taiwan. In November 2023, Taiwan’s Deputy Foreign Minister Tien Chung-kwang attended a dialogue with delegations from these partner countries in the Cook Islands during the 52nd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting.

Foreign aid – for agriculture, fisheries, infrastructure, government scholarships, technical cooperation and climate change – is an important aspect of Taiwan’s relations with Pacific SIDS. Taiwan even provided medical equipment to the Solomon Islands’ Malaita provincial government, led by Premier Daniel Suidani, who was critical of the central government’s decision to sever ties with Taiwan. Taiwan has also been keen to highlight the strong historical, cultural and linguistic links between Pacific SIDS, including through the 2021 Austronesian Forum.

Other external players – specifically Japan, the UK, EU, Indonesia, and India – have also increased their engagement with Pacific SIDS:

- Among the former colonial powers, Japan introduced its ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ strategy in 2016 to counterbalance China’s influence.
- The UK has made greater efforts to uplift its relations with Pacific SIDS post-Brexit, opening three diplomatic missions in Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu in recent years.
- EU countries, and especially member states France and Germany, both of whom are (or were) colonial powers in the region, have increased their presence. France appointed its first ambassador for the Indo-Pacific region in 2020, and in July 2023 Emmanuel Macron became the first French president to visit non-French Pacific islands – Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.
- Indonesia has strengthened its political and economic relations with Pacific Island nations, especially Melanesian countries such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Its main interest is to reduce the latter’s support for the pro-independence movement in West Papua.
- As a rising great power, India’s presence in the Pacific region is limited but also growing to compete with China. Its main focus is on Fiji, which has a large Indian diaspora, and on Papua New Guinea. President Modi visited Fiji in November 2014 and Papua New Guinea in May 2023 to host the third summit of the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation, where he pledged to bolster cooperation with the region in the areas of health, information technology, renewable energy and infrastructure.

## The Pacific SIDS response

In the face of growing geopolitical tensions and the increasing presence of different powers in the region, Pacific SIDS have responded by using China’s global and growing regional presence to ‘contemplate alternatives to long established networks of power and influence, as well as entrenched models of economic and political development’ (Wesley-Smith, 2013,p 352). They have urged China to align with their policy priorities, such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, and to act more on climate change. In response, during his visit to the Pacific during May and June 2022, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that China would establish six new China–Pacific cooperation centres covering the areas of climate change, disaster prevention and reduction, agriculture, fungus grass technology, poverty reduction, and a reserve of emergency supplies (China MFA, 2022).

In parallel, Pacific SIDS have chosen to act cautiously when it comes to engaging with China in policing and security arenas. For example, they refused to sign two broad cooperation agreements with China during Wang Yi’s visit in 2022. Non-government actors in the Pacific have differing perceptions of China: those who have benefited from their countries’ closer relations with China, such as exporters to China and recipients of Chinese government scholarships, tend to be positive; but, by contrast, civil society groups have expressed concerns about debts with China, the lack of transparency about China’s motivations and Chinese aid negotiations, limited

local employment/business opportunities in Chinese businesses, and environmental pollution (see, for example, Zhang (2022)).

There are, of course, differences within and between Pacific countries. The ‘switch’ in Solomon Islands was contentious and heightened longstanding Malaitan grievances, leading to calls for secession (Cavanaugh, 2023). Likewise, the Tuvaluan government’s decision to sign into a Falepili Union with Australia was opposed by the then-opposition. But by and large, Pacific leaders have skilfully leveraged this increased attention in the region to get their priorities reflected in multilateral agreements and statements, especially on climate change.

In summary, the Pacific region is generating greater global attention than at any other time since the Second World War as a result of its geographical location between two increasingly hostile superpowers. There are diverse interests operating within the region, but the increased attention also signals growing differentiation between the Pacific SIDS and the other SIDS, with potential implications for their collective agenda.

### 3.2 Africa and the Indian Ocean

SIDS located in Africa and the Indian Ocean are grouped together as the ‘AIS region’ for the purposes of the SIDS agenda. But the breadth of this label is perhaps the most emblematic of the differences between SIDS. Put crudely, the Indian Ocean SIDS fall squarely within the ‘Indo-Pacific’ framing of the security challenge, and thus their reaction to rising great power competition is broadly analogous to that of their Pacific counterparts. By contrast, most African SIDS, situated as they are in the Atlantic Ocean, have more in common with Caribbean SIDS on this issue. But both groups have their own distinct view of the geopolitical tensions, and this reflects their membership of larger regions, i.e. Asia and Africa. More pertinently, the reaction of Indian Ocean SIDS to rising geopolitical tensions between the US and China is also framed by the proximity of India and its influence on regional affairs.

#### The regional powers: China, US and India

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is similar to the Pacific in that geopolitical competition has led to increased securitisation. But the nature of this securitisation is different for geographical reasons. Whereas the Pacific is located between China and the US, the IOR is significant because up to 80% of China’s energy imports move through the region, and over a third of the world’s bulk cargo traffic use its shipping lanes and trade routes (Jaishankar, 2016). The IOR has three of the seven global ‘choke points’ for oil transportation: the Malacca strait (located between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore), the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab El-Mandeb Strait. This geography and its significance to the US, China and India is at the heart of the geopolitical struggle (Gurjar, 2019; Baruah, 2021; Bukhari, 2022).

Energy security is China's primary interest in the region, and this has resulted in a significant focus on the Malacca Strait, or what has been dubbed China's 'Malacca dilemma' (Hornat, 2016; Nguyen et al., 2022). To protect their energy interests, China has built strategic relationships along the sea lanes of the IOR via the Malacca Strait to Southern China. These engagements are seen in their Maritime Silk Road narrative, the 'Blue Book', and the 'String of Pearls', a geopolitical metaphor used by Western analysts to explain China's involvement across the region (Barton, 2021).

Historically, India has been more influential than China in the IOR by virtue of its location. It views China as one of its largest geopolitical threats due to its growing influence in the IOR (Brewster, 2018; Singh, 2022). India has sought to counter this, including via strengthening its relationships with IOR SIDS. A key mechanism for this has been a Trilateral Maritime Security Cooperation (TMSC), which was signed with Maldives in 2013, and extended in 2014 to include the Seychelles and Mauritius (McDougall and Taneja, 2020).

The US also has strategic interest in safeguarding sea lanes for their energy imports and to protect trade routes. Since the Cold War, it has secured them via its military installation on Diego Garcia in the Chagos Islands, the ownership of which is contested, and in the Persian Gulf (Butt and Siddiqui, 2021). In order to establish the UK-US military facility in the Chagos Islands, the entire population was displaced between 1967 and 1973. In 2019, the International Court of Justice, in an advisory opinion, ruled on the legal consequences of separating the Chagos archipelago from Mauritius in 1965:

The Court finds that the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed when that country acceded to independence and that the United Kingdom is under an obligation to bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible. (ICJ, 2019)

In late 2024, the UK finally announced that it would return the archipelago to Mauritius, with the exception of Diego Garcia (Harding, 2024), which is considered one of the vital US bases and 'central to America's future Indo-Pacific strategy for a long time to come' (Harris, 2022).

France, Italy, Japan and the US all have bases in Djibouti, primarily to combat piracy in the Bab El-Mandeb Strait. France is also a resident power in the IOR by virtue of its overseas provinces, Mayotte and Reunion islands, and has strong support from India in its Indo-Pacific approach. The two allies are 'committed to working together and want to contain China's expansionism and aggressive behaviour' in the region (Bharti and Singh, 2023).

## The SIDS response

These trends have meant that the geographical location of IOR SIDS and their exclusive economic zones (EEZs) is becoming more significant. By and large, they have adopted a similar strategy to

Pacific SIDS, seeking to leverage this competition and the attention it generates for economic benefit. The main difference is the role that India plays, especially in Mauritius where a significant proportion of the population is of Indian ancestry. As a state with close historical ties to Mauritius, India has opposed US interests in Diego Garcia by supporting the Mauritian government in their decades-long dispute with Britain over sovereignty to the Chagos Archipelago (Johannessen, 2022).

By and large, both Mauritius and Maldives have retained a strong relationship with India while at the same time remaining open to Chinese investment. Maldives has benefited from infrastructure projects such as the 1.39 km Sinamalé Bridge, although the financial strain of repayment is viewed by some as a debt trap. Mauritius has benefited from free trade agreements with both powers. The Seychelles and Mauritius have ‘received attention from senior Chinese political leaders and hosted People’s Liberation Army Navy vessels for port visits’, which has led to ‘speculation’ about establishing naval sites (White, 2020). The rivalry between China and India has been described as ‘a tit-for-tat in the battle for influence in the Indian Ocean islands’ (O’Shaughnessy, 2023).

There are two variations on this pattern. The first is that the closeness of the relationship between India and Maldives has varied depending on the government in power. While the two countries share cultural links, Maldives is overwhelmingly Islamic. China has recently undertaken several projects in Maldives, including leasing islands (Thakur, 2023). The second is that Seychelles retains strong historical links with France but has also developed its relationship with India, including signing an agreement in 2015 for the establishment of military facilities on Assumption Island. China’s influence is smaller by comparison (McDougall and Taneja, 2020).

SIDS located on the east coast of Africa have also been drawn into the power play taking place in the IOR. For example, ‘China is perhaps one of the few nations, if not only, to send high-level delegation and visits to the island of Comoros, a strategically located nation but widely neglected by the international community’ (Baruah, 2023). African SIDS on the west coast, including Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé and Príncipe, which are part of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, have also ‘received special attention from China’, but have used this to ‘strengthen and diversify partnerships with these countries in the field of trade and investment’ (Madeira, 2017). This focus on development, trade and investment stands in contrast to the securitisation of the Indian Ocean and Pacific, and is analogous to the way great power competition is playing out in other parts of the world, including the Caribbean.

In sum, the IOR rivalry has China on one side and the US and France on the other, with SIDS and India taking the geostrategic middle ground. While IOR SIDS can benefit from this, they need to be cautious in how they manage their leverage – especially because, while energy security and oil transshipment is important to all contesting parties, for the SIDS agenda fossil fuels and their negative impact on global temperatures remain the primary security concern.

### 3.3 The Atlantic and Caribbean

There are several large powers operating in the Atlantic and Caribbean, playing prominent roles as development partners and with longstanding diplomatic, cultural and historical ties to these SIDs. The main ones in the Caribbean are the US, UK, France and the Netherlands – with all four still possessing non-sovereign territories in the region, too – as well as Canada and, increasingly, China. Since the Second World War, the European powers have generally acquiesced to the reality of US hegemony in the region (see Bishop, 2013).

Contemporary geopolitical tensions do play out between the US and China, but not as dramatically as in the Pacific context. This low-intensity situation gives Caribbean countries less leverage in playing both sides. But it also means that they can establish deeper ties with an increasingly powerful China and extract economic benefits, while maintaining sufficient stability in their US relationships to ensure that there is little risk of their powerful neighbour resorting to the invasive tactics used during the Cold War years. This is because the ideological contours of US–Soviet bipolarity, which prompted American attempts to destabilise pro-socialist governments in Jamaica and Grenada in the 1970s and 1980s, are no longer a salient feature of great power competition.

#### China's influence

The relationship between China and the Caribbean began in the mid-to-late 1800s with the importation of Chinese labour into plantations after the abolition of African slavery (Green, 2017). As such, many countries have longstanding Chinese populations whose Caribbean heritage stretches back generations. Moreover, during the 1970s, and soon after their own independence, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados all established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). It took longer for economic ties to catch up, in part because Beijing's own opening-up and reform process under Deng Xiaoping was a lengthy endeavour, and many smaller islands did not accede to independence until the 1980s.

Nonetheless, substantive economic relationships were initiated as early as 1994, with China and Jamaica signing a bilateral investment treaty in that year, and other countries following suit. However, China's cultural, economic and diplomatic expansion into the region shifted gear from the mid-2000s – attendant with its wider 'rise' and global expansion – with significant investments in hotel development, road networks, and other infrastructure-type activities (Bernal, 2010). This was accompanied by a flurry of diplomatic activity: as both Vice-President and President, Xi Jinping made a series of high-profile visits to Caribbean countries – notably Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago – from the late 2000s and into the 2010s. During this period, there was a discernible sense that Beijing offered financing and investment that could fill a gap characterised by relative US withdrawal from the region's development panorama as it retreated into security concerns post-9/11.

China's contemporary relationship with Caribbean SIDS aligns with its broader strategic interests in expanding its trade and investment opportunities (see Bernal, 2010). Caribbean SIDS are significant for China in three broad ways: (i) diplomatically, as part of the Communist Party's wider push to create a multipolar world; (ii) economically, in that they represent sources of investment for excess Chinese domestic capital and labour (Gonzalez-Vincente, 2019), and are thus critical to China in sustaining its own economic growth; and (iii) politically, in that they help Beijing demonstrate that it is having developmental impacts in the Global South, and thus help to shine a more positive light on its state-led development model among Western countries. The size of loans and investments in Caribbean SIDS are negligible on China's balance sheet, but can increase its global standing as a benevolent superpower.

China's engagement in the Caribbean is not simply about self-interest and strategy. A crucial and deeply held part of Beijing's self-image is as a 'developing country' and leader of the Global South (Bishop and Zhang, 2019). In this sense it is committed to the norm of sovereign equality. Moreover, despite some Caribbean SIDS still having diplomatic relations with Taiwan – St Lucia has switched back and forth under different governments, for example – there is a substantial degree of solidarity between China and the region, reflective of both the enduring diplomatic ties between the PRC and many Caribbean countries, and their longstanding Chinese communities. In Jamaica, especially, its sizeable and influential Chinese population means that it is viewed by actors in Beijing as an important cultural and economic entry point to the Caribbean.

More than a dozen Caribbean SIDS have signed up to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. However, since 2005 China has been making loans and investments to Caribbean countries under its various global infrastructure initiatives and its aid, financial and investment outreach strategy. China's latest loans to the region included \$121 million to Barbados and \$192 million to Guyana in 2022, both for road infrastructure projects (Myers and Ray, 2023). The primary interest of Caribbean states is in economic diversification and infrastructure development, and for both they need to borrow money. In some Caribbean SIDS, external public debt with China is sizeable. Suriname has the largest percentage of its debt owed to China at 38% in 2021, followed by Guyana with 18% (up from 11% in 2016), St Vincent and the Grenadines with 10% (up from 7% in 2016), and Jamaica, whose level of debt with China is stable at 6% (Myers and Ray, 2023). Chinese finance has not always translated into economic diversification, however, with projects still largely focused on natural resource extraction, tourism, and infrastructure. The former two are traditional development areas for Caribbean SIDS. Some Caribbean countries export raw materials to China, only to spend more on Chinese manufactured goods (Gallagher and Porzeczanski, 2010). CARICOM's imports from China were \$3 billion in 2022, while its exports to China stood at \$400 million (Trade Map, 2023). Infrastructure development in the Caribbean is now dominated by Chinese corporations.

By and large, SIDS with greater natural resources tend to attract more loans and investments from China (Bernal, 2016), particularly those that have large extensions of land that can be leased as a form of in-kind repayment for debt. In this way, Caribbean integration with China is passive

but reinforces dependence on commodity exports (Gonzalez-Vicente and Montoute, 2020; Phillips, 2009). This creates problems for Caribbean SIDS seeking loans and investment to diversify their economies, while remaining tied to a traditional export model – something reinforced by Chinese dominance in global markets, both for relatively simple commodities and for advanced high-tech goods and services (Hopewell, 2022).

China is also attempting to increase its contribution to regional security by providing further options to Caribbean SIDS to match the presence of the US. According to its Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022–2024) with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), China aims to work with the region and wider hemisphere on issues of transnational organised crime, illicit arms traffic and illicit financial flows, and intends to ‘promote dialogue and cooperation in combating all forms of terrorism and its financing...’ (China MFA, 2021: para. 3). It also intends to ‘[e]xpand bilateral and multilateral cooperation against corruption, trafficking, money laundering, tax evasion and illicit financial flows...’ (China MFA, 2021: para. 7), among other areas that are traditionally the domain of the US within the region. The extent to which these will be implemented in the Caribbean – as opposed to mainly in Latin America – remains to be seen, but given that the US stance on these issues is similar to China’s, Beijing’s focus implies a degree of complementarity rather than competition. Nonetheless, the fact that these initiatives exclude the US as a partner is indicative of China’s intent.

## The US response

The proximity of Caribbean countries to the US, with The Bahamas a mere 50 miles from Florida’s east coast, has long made the region a critical component of Washington’s economic, political, and security concerns (Payne, 1998). The relationship between the US and its Caribbean neighbours has remained consistent over issues of trade, security and development aid, except during periods of geopolitical tensions with other large powers, be it Russia during the Cold War – the enduring legacies of which still plague the anachronistic policy towards Cuba (Badella, 2014) – or more recently, though to a much lesser extent, China.

As China’s presence has become more visible, however, an excitable media has begun to talk of a ‘new Cold War’ (Elliott, 2022) and some scholars even warn that intensified ‘strategic realignment’ may destabilise the region by forcing countries to choose (MacDonald, 2022). But the reality is that, since Reagan’s Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), a palpable sense of benign (and, in some cases, malign) neglect has been felt (Payne, 2000). As the region faded in strategic importance to the US, development aid – beyond piecemeal financing for security interventions related to the drug trade – has waned dramatically. Indeed, viewed retrospectively, the CBI initiated not a new expansive era in US–Caribbean relations, as promised by Reagan, but the contours of a gradual narrowing of Washington’s interest (Serbin, 1999). The upshot is that, for the past two decades, the US has engaged in largely reactive policy, almost entirely in security cooperation, especially

around drugs and weapons trafficking. It is no surprise, then, that the successor to the CBI, under Obama, was called the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI).

The real puzzle, then, does not relate to whether a new era of bipolar US–China could be emerging, but why it has *not* done so. Relative American disengagement over the past two decades unquestionably opened up space for greater Chinese investment, but what is intriguing is that – in Washington’s rhetorical ‘backyard’ – this has provoked mainly passive acquiescence. This could change rapidly, and we may well be on the cusp of an assertive US response, but it seems unlikely. This is arguably due to the lack of any meaningful ‘developmental’ rationale to US policy in recent years, alongside a pattern of Chinese engagement that is developmentally focused.

A combination of sustained American neglect for the past two decades and increased Chinese financing has presented an opportunity for the former to effectively free ride on the latter in terms of the provision of this vital public good. Interestingly, this is not explicitly recognised by most observers, particularly Western ones, who tend to view the relationship as exploitative and zero-sum rather than potentially positive sum (see Montoute, 2013, for a balanced evaluation). But it inverts the conventional critique in the academic international relations literature that, by exploiting (but not leading) the liberal international order, China is free riding on US benevolence (see Kennedy, 2015). Although some fear the emergence of a new Cold War in the Caribbean (MacDonald, 2022), it is difficult to see how ingrained patterns might change under a second Trump presidency from 2025 onwards. There is, in fact, every reason to suspect that unless Beijing expands its strategic security posture threatening core US interests, the prevailing *modus operandi*, with Chinese capital filling spaces vacated by the US, will likely endure.

## The Caribbean response

Despite being small, Caribbean countries have never been passive recipients of American (or Chinese) dominance, and often deploy innovative strategies to influence these great powers (see Payne, 2000; Bernal, 2017). By and large, they continue to view the US as their natural trading and investment partner due to proximity, language, history, cultural affiliations and the huge numbers of their people circulating between the region and North America. So, while they engage with China economically and commercially, they do not do so in a way that risks threatening core US interests. When it comes to security, however, Caribbean countries have long deferred to American power. The most infamous of these are the various Shiprider Agreements of the 1990s which essentially gave the US coastguard unrestricted power to board and search vessels operating in Caribbean waters as a means of stemming illicit activities such as drug trafficking (Vasciannie, 1997).

Crime and insecurity are major issues for Caribbean SIDS governments, and, at the political and technical level, there is a broad sense that there are shared interests in stemming the drug trade. However, most weapons arrive in the region *from* the US (Fabre et al., 2023), so despite its avowed commitment to security provision, it is American gun policy – alongside an unwillingness

to create legal regimes for illicit drugs – that is driving the insecurity the US purports to resolve (Baird et al., 2023).

In recognition of these weapons flows, the Prime Minister of Jamaica, Andrew Holness, has requested US support to stem the flow of guns. At the US–Caribbean leaders’ meeting in The Bahamas in June 2023, Vice-President Kamala Harris announced that the US Department of Justice will be appointing a coordinator for firearms prosecution to enable information-sharing among Caribbean countries to help stem the trafficking of illicit firearms (Chin Loy, 2023). Therefore, while Caribbean SIDS demonstrate no intention of weakening their ties with China, they seek to simultaneously bolster their relationship with the US to address such developmental challenges.

Like in the Pacific, the tug of war between China and Taiwan is also evident in the Caribbean, with governments choosing sides based largely on the level of economic ties with China. Guyana, for example, which had signed an MoU with China on the BRI Cooperation Plan in 2018, abruptly terminated an agreement with Taiwan in 2021 after Beijing told the country to ‘correct its mistake’ and indicate its allegiance to the One China policy. Chinese firm China National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) Ltd is one of the top three oil players in Guyana. However, the response of some Caribbean countries towards China remains one of studied recalcitrance. St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines and St Kitts and Nevis maintain diplomatic ties to Taiwan, despite China’s wooing (Dominica News Online, 2023). Only recently, St Kitts and Nevis embarked on a significant state visit to Taiwan to ‘strengthen bilateral ties and explore new avenues of cooperation...’ (SKNIS, 2024).

Overall, China’s relationship with Caribbean SIDS, individually and regionally, forms part of an attempt to exert global influence through trade and investment. Caribbean SIDS will not want to break with the US, however; indeed, they would welcome any renewed US interest in the region in response to Chinese inroads.

## 4 Policy implications and further considerations for SIDS

Escalating geopolitical tensions between China and the US have had varied impacts across SIDS regions. The main similarity stems from the challenges all SIDS face in diversifying their economies and sustaining growth, and hence from their reliance on bilateral aid. The rise of China helps SIDS meet their shared diversification challenge by creating a new avenue through which countries can access finance and generate investment. But economic diversification is occurring in different ways, creating variation across SIDS regions that works against the collective SIDS agenda. Specifically, the focus on development, economic growth, trade and investment in the Atlantic and Caribbean stands in contrast to the militarisation of interests in the IOR and Pacific. Indeed, it is surprising that the US response to China has been considerably less contentious in its supposed Caribbean ‘backyard’ than in the Pacific. This may change in the future.

There is also variation within each of the SIDS regions. As outlined, the SIDS group contains the last states that recognise Taiwan, and in many SIDS, domestic politics is increasingly split between pro-China and pro-US (and allies) factions and groupings. This complexity flows through into regional affairs. But at the level of inter-regional politics, the fissure that is likely to emerge in the SIDS grouping is between Pacific and Indian Ocean SIDS on the one hand, who are firmly in the crosshairs of rising geopolitical tensions, and Atlantic SIDS on the other, who are more peripheral. When you add in the differential impacts of climate change – with low-lying atoll states primarily located in the Pacific and IOR – we can start to see the ways in which the global SIDS agenda might begin to fragment, despite three decades of successful activism by SIDS.

This differentiation within and between regions will make it increasingly difficult for SIDS to arrive at a common agenda outside issues such as oceans, climate change mitigation and access to climate finance. During the 2000s and 2010s, SIDS tried to expand their collective agenda to other policy domains – with a SIDS perspective inserted into every issue from the WTO to the IMF – but they struggled to exert consistent influence in these international organisations (Corbett et al., 2021). This increased differentiation between SIDS regions could result in their collective agenda starting to shrink.

Based on this analysis, the authors propose a set of recommendations for both large states and SIDS to counteract these worrying trends. A central precept is the promotion of trilateral cooperation between SIDS, China and the US and its allies. While this form of collaboration is increasingly difficult to envisage, especially in the more militarised Pacific and IOR, if donors can work together in their support to SIDS as a group, this could attenuate rising tensions and avoid damaging aid competition that compels SIDS to choose sides.

This trilateral cooperation can be enabled by:

- starting small and focusing on less-sensitive sectors, such as climate change, public health, agriculture and disaster risk management, where there are considerable shared interests
- enabling SIDS to play a more active role in initiating, negotiating and implementing trilateral projects. One practical step is to ensure that SIDS have ownership and host donor roundtables, reinforcing the notion that those fora are led by and for SIDS
- channelling more aid through regional agencies as a way of supporting SIDS' development agendas, with the wider effect that this would help to depoliticise aid and reinforce multilateralism at a time of geopolitical tension.

Overall, while there is clear short-term appeal in aid competition for both development partners and SIDS, over the long term a degree of détente will benefit all.

More broadly, for those Western powers that have merged 'development' and 'security' or 'foreign' policy departments (Corbett, 2017), there is an opportunity to tip the balance more squarely in favour of development. In the long term, there is much to gain by doing so. The scale of Chinese investment is such that soft power across the Pacific, Indian Ocean and Caribbean will continue to shift in Beijing's favour unless the US and its allied countries can continue to match it.

Greater aid cooperation and an improved enabling environment would then allow SIDS to do three things:

- reduce the extent of donor shopping and competition between islands for donor support, whether on an individual or regional basis
- reinforce the international institutions that serve them, especially AOSIS, so it can continue to lobby for SDT, but also the various SIDS Units that exist in international organisations
- have the confidence to collectively pursue new alliances with smaller, but influential, Asian and European powers on key issues, rather than old groupings such as the G77 by default, with action driven by developmental need rather than geopolitical imperative.

These recommendations are illustrative, not exhaustive. They serve as a reminder of what SIDS have gained from their collective agenda. While great power competition offers short-term benefits for small states to gain greater attention and resources, in the medium-to-long term it also increases the risk that their territories and waterways become sites of conflicts in which they have no direct stake. By contrast, a reinvigorated multilateralism, to which the ABAS contributes, is more likely to serve their interests in the long run – a fact that all states, large and small, should be more mindful of.

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