Autumn 2019 witnessed pressure brought to bear on the Republic of China (ROC) in the Pacific. On 16 September, the Solomon Islands ended its alliance with Taipei and officially recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Just four days later, the government of Kiribati followed suit. Elections in the Marshall Islands in late November witnessed the pro-Taiwan government of that country losing power to the opposition party.

In a 16 September public response, ROC President Tsai Ing-wen, explained that the switch by the Solomon Islands was part of an ongoing strategy by Beijing to isolate the island internationally.

“Over the past few years,” Tsai said, “China has continually used financial and political pressure to suppress Taiwan’s international space.” Tsai gave the Solomon Islands switch her sternest condemnation, “as not only a threat to Taiwan, but also a brazen challenge and detriment to international order.

“I want to emphasize that Taiwan will not engage in dollar diplomacy with China in order to satisfy unreasonable demands,” she continued, warning the Solomon Islands that “China’s promises of financial assistance often come up empty.” In effect, this was also a warning about the debt dependencies that Beijing has been successful in creating elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, especially as part of China’s vaunted Maritime Silk Road initiative. Case in point: Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

President Tsai’s made another public announcement on 20 September, stating that, “we truly regret the Kiribati government’s decision. The Kiribati government’s choice to leave the true friend they had in Taiwan to act as China’s pawn is a major mistake.” She gave the decision a domestic slant, arguing, “China has chosen this time to strike a series of blows against Taiwan because only slightly more than 100 days remain until our presidential election.”

Chinese coercion

“I must tell everyone that according to our current intelligence, China will continue to seek to suppress and coerce Taiwan in the months before the election.” The political consequences were clear in the PRC’s state-run media. A 20 September editorial by the communist mouthpiece The Global Times noted that “the more ‘allies’ Taiwan loses, the less space there will be for Taiwan in the international community to pretend to be a country.” September’s double blow to Taiwan’s international space followed on the heels of earlier losses suffered by the ROC government in Latin America and Africa, after Sao Tome & Principe, Panama, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador switched their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

The context for these Pacific switches was indeed Beijing’s resumption of the diplomatic tug-of-war over recognition, which it suspended so long as the

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Kuomintang (KMT) party held executive power on the diplomatic island. Since the KMT notionally aspires to effect a unified China, a degree of economic convergence with Beijing was accomplished during the administration of former ROC President Ma Ying-jeou, best exemplified by the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement signed in 2010. The return to power in May 2016 of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—a party that espouses a Taiwanese identity for the island nation—saw a reversal of the KMT policy of economic integration with China through a diversification of Taiwan’s economic interests, most notably by pursuing an Indo-Pacific pivot.

This pivot has been channeled culturally through the reactivation of the Austronesian Forum; economically through the New Southern Policy outreach to Southeast Asia, Australia and India; and geopolitically through strong support given to the Free and Open Indopacific (FOIP) concept espoused by Japan and the United States.

Relations between Taipei and Beijing have deteriorated as Taipei continues to offer public words of support for demonstrators in Hong Kong. Beijing’s increasing pressure on the former British colony makes Taipei all the more skeptical about the “one country, two systems” formula that China implemented in Hong Kong and has been trying to sell to the people of Taiwan.

Tsai said, in relation to the Solomon Islands’ diplomatic switch, that, “by luring away our diplomatic allies and stepping up pressure on us across the board over the past few years, China has sought to damage the morale of the Taiwanese people and force Taiwan to accept ‘one country, two systems’.”

Immediately afterward, on 20 September, concerning Kiribati’s switch of recognition, Tsai rejected Beijing’s attempt “to tell the people of Taiwan that we cannot support Hong Kong, and that we can only choose a president who will bow to China.”

“I want to firmly tell China that we have only three words to say in response to ‘one country, two systems’: not a chance,” the president affirmed.

Beijing’s response to the switch by the Solomon Islands and Kiribati was of course jubilant. On 20 September, Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng
Shuang reiterated Beijing’s oft-repeated position: “there is but one China in the world and the government of the PRC is the sole legitimate government representing the whole of China. Taiwan is an inalienable part of China’s territory.”

Gang added that “Pacific island countries including the Solomon Islands and Kiribati decided to recognize the one-China principle, sever diplomatic ties with the Taiwan authorities, and establish or re-establish diplomatic relationships with China,” which “fully shows that the one-China principle meets the shared aspiration of the people and is an irresistible trend of the times.”

 Taiwanese accusations of dollar diplomacy were denied by Geng, even as he went on to detail significantly “unprecedented development opportunities” for the Pacific island nations, as a benefit from their newfound relationship with Beijing.

Politically, the switch of recognition from Taipei to Beijing by the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, followed by the opposition party’s victory in the Marshall Islands elections, have an effect on Taiwan’s diplomatic space, internationally and in the region. In terms of Pacific allies, only four remain: Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands. Consequently Taiwan’s ease of operations in the Austronesian Forum has been weakened to some extent, as has its links with the Pacific Islands Forum. There has been a delicate shift in emphasis under the DPP of stressing Taiwan’s identity as a Pacific island state, rather than as a Chinese one. However, the more fellow island states in the Pacific derecognize Taipei, the weaker this cultural and political conception of Taiwan as a Pacific oceanic country will become.

Remaining Pacific Allies gave immediate support to Taiwan. Nauru’s President Lionel Aingimea, who took office in August 2019, said his country “has enjoyed a close relationship with Taiwan for almost four decades and he looks forward to it continuing well into the future,” adding, “Nauru considers its relationship with Taiwan as that of family, and we stand with Taiwan in upholding democratic values and the rule of law.”

Similarly, Tuvalu’s Foreign Minister Simon Kofe
told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, “the government is quite happy to continue our relationship with Taiwan. I don’t expect any changes.” Visiting Taiwan, Kofe told a Reuters interviewer on 21 November that “Tuvalu and Taiwan diplomatic ties are the strongest they’ve ever been,” and that alongside the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Nauru, “together with our partners, we will be able to counter the influence from mainland China.”

**Principles and values**

Similarly, in the immediate aftermath of the switches to Beijing by the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, Palau’s President Tommy Remengesau told reporters that his country had no plans to switch. “We are friends with Taiwan because our principles and values are similar, [as are] our aspirations for democracy and freedom,” Remengesau said. The Marshall Islands parliament passed a resolution confirming existing diplomatic ties with Taipei and expressing “profound appreciation to the people and government of Taiwan.” However, the parliamentary elections in November 2018 in the Marshall Islands saw the pro-Taiwan government of President Heine lose its majority.

Geopolitically, this shift by the Solomon Islands and Kiribati strengthened China’s position in the southern Pacific. What of Taiwan’s position in the western Pacific? Looking out from Taiwan across the Philippine Sea, Taiwan’s oceanic neighborhood, is the second island chain made up of Bonin Islands (administered by Japan), the Northern Marianas (US Commonwealth), Guam (US territory) and Palau. Westwards from the Northern Marianas lie the Marshall Islands, and to their west, the Hawaiian chain (US). Any switch by Palau and the Marshall Islands would severely circumscribe this friendly strategic avenue for Taiwan, surrounding the island nation with states that recognize Beijing. Unfortunately for Taiwan, its position vis-à-vis the Marshall Islands has also weakened.

China’s push into the Pacific is only partly motivated by Beijing’s desire to squeeze Taiwan. It is also part of a wider strategy to extend the military projection power of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) farther into the Pacific. By flipping ROC allies, the PRC
benefits by potentially gaining access to deep-water ports and airstrips in the Pacific, as well as possible satellite monitoring stations. The former was in play with Beijing’s current proposals for the development of Rongelap atoll in the Marshall Islands, the latter in play during Kiribati’s earlier period of recognizing Beijing, from 1980-2003.

Tacit concerns about China’s growing presence in the South Pacific have already generated policy announcements in 2019 of a “Pacific step-up” from Australia and a “Pacific Turn” by New Zealand. Australia and the United States have also moved towards joint cooperation in setting up naval facilities in Papua New Guinea at Manus, to forestall Chinese moves. Meanwhile, Tokyo has moved to buttress its own links through its Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting mechanism, drawing together Japan and the Pacific basin island states, including the French possessions of New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The United States moved to shore up its own position with the Western Pacific islands in 2019, including US President Donald Trump’s historic May meeting in Washington with the presidents of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau, and the first-ever trip by a Secretary of State (Mike Pompeo) to Micronesia in August. The Global Times recognized the wider geopolitical consequences in a 16 September opinion piece titled “Abandoning Taiwan reflects a trend.” In it, the communist party-run newspaper argued that the Solomon Island’s “shift from the island of Taiwan to Beijing will irritate some Americans,” who may interpret the change as “an expansion of China’s sphere of influence … refusing to recognize such natural consequences of China’s rise.”

Efforts may backfire

Beijing’s success in peeling away the Solomon Islands and Kiribati from Taipei may yet backfire, in several ways. First, the cessation of Taiwanese assistance programs in the Solomon Islands and Kiribati will potentially free up some financial and human capital resources that Taipei could usefully apply elsewhere in the Pacific basin; or indeed elsewhere in Australasia, Southeast Asia, and Southern Asia, which is the geographic focus of Taiwan’s flagship New Southbound Policy.
Second, one unexpected consequence of these Pacific switches, in combination with the continuing turmoil in Hong Kong, has been to weaken support for unification within Taiwan, and to strengthen the already growing sense of Taiwanese identity. This is expressed politically as a boost in support for Tsai.

Third, PRC successes in flipping small island states might be triggering wider regional support for Taiwan, especially from the United States. This seemed already indicated in the holding of the first Pacific Islands Dialogue in Taipei on 7 October, co-hosted by Taiwan (led by ROC Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu) and the United States (led by State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands Sandra Oudkirk).

The event also involved ambassadors from Taiwan’s remaining Pacific allies, as well as representatives from Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. While warning about China’s authoritarian expansionism, Wu called on sympathetic countries to “realize the value of Taiwan’s presence in the Pacific, and push back strongly against China’s efforts to erode that presence,” pointing out that, “Taiwan, the US and other democratic actors share similar interests in ensuring that the Pacific remains free and open.”

The US Senate unanimously passed the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act on 31 October, in order to discourage any further de-recognition of Taiwan.

Fourth, if the PRC continues to cull the number of countries that recognize the ROC, and if Taipei finds itself with no allies, then that might lead to a fundamental reconsideration of whether Taiwan wishes to try and maintain this nominal claim. This may lead Taipei to then replace the unrecognized and increasingly anachronistic title of ROC by moving from de facto to de jure independence as a Republic of Taiwan. Of course, any such move would raise the stakes to the highest level and bring with it the specter of coercive forcible annexation by the PRC, and the severest of testing of America’s resolve to intervene to protect this struggling democratic ally.