

Beijing's Indo-Pacific Arc of Power Crystallizes



Commentary

[Beijing](#) now has in place a basic architecture of power projection targets throughout Southeast Asia, from Burma in the West to Indonesia, Timor-Leste, as well as Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific.

They each represent decades of work for the Chinese Communist Party of China (CCP) and are now coming into a degree of clarity.

Some targets, such as Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, have waxed and waned as possible CCP success stories. All regional states in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the South Pacific

have been targeted. Each represents a different challenge for Beijing, but the overall pattern is designed to give China dominance of strategic sea lanes and strategic commodities, from food to minerals and energy.

The CCP must now be expected to begin reviving—on a more visible level—its campaign to gain strategic dominance in Timor-Leste after the election there on April 19 of a new president, José Ramos-Horta, one of the original independence leaders who had earlier served as the country's second president.

Beijing's campaign in Timor-Leste will bookend China's current major campaign to gain a foothold in the Solomon Islands, 2,350 miles to Timor-Leste's east. Significantly, [the CCP's](#) strategic outreach programs in Burma (also known as Myanmar), Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands represent a cohesive umbrella of resource-rich countries immediately to Australia's north. Beijing has also developed discreet but positive relations with Bangladesh and Thailand.



(From L to R) Prime ministers, state counselors, premiers, and trade ministers or secretaries from Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, New Zealand, India, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines pose for a group photo during the 3rd Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, on Nov. 4, 2019. (Manan Vatsyayana/AFP via Getty Images)

The pattern of power projection mirrors Japan's Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere strategy of the 1930s and early 1940s, which also targeted control of strategic resources from Southeast Asia and Australia.

Beijing's battle for influence in Timor-Leste—which will emerge as a new battleground on a par with its current Solomon Islands campaign—began even before the country's independence from Indonesia in 2002. Those CCP operations began when East Timor was still a Portuguese colony, before it was seized (just as Portugal granted it independence) by Indonesia under former President Suharto's legislation on June 17, 1976, to integrate the territory as Indonesia's 27th province.

Timor-Leste, strategically placed within the Southeast Asian sea lanes, is too significant a target for the CCP to ignore. Especially as the incoming president, José Ramon-Horta, has promised to call early parliamentary elections to oust the administration of Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak.

Ramos-Horta and his alliance partner, former President Xanana Gusmão, are both left-leaning and have made a career of playing hard politics against the country's foundational ally, neighbor, and donor, Australia, with which Timor-Leste shares extensive offshore energy fields.

All the successive governments in Timor-Leste have depended on Australian military and economic support to varying degrees. Still, they have fought for a greater share than would typically be considered reasonable of the seabed gas deposits, which are divided between the Australian and Timor-Leste exclusive economic zones (EEZs).

Moreover, all Timor-Leste administrations since independence in 2002 (and their predecessor revolutionary groups during the Portuguese and Indonesian eras) have maintained strong links with Socialist International networks, which, in turn, have strong links to Beijing, especially after the collapse of the USSR.

In particular, Timor-Leste has maintained seemingly illogically close ties with a country without territory, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which claims but does not occupy Moroccan Western Sahara. The SADR and its "ruling" group, the Polisario, is a front for the Algerian government to gain land access from Algeria across Western Sahara to the Atlantic. Algeria's closest strategic ally is China. Not coincidentally, the key union movements supporting the Australian Labor Party (ALP) have long also supported the Polisario and the earlier East Timorese revolutionary groups.

The Asia Times on April 20 noted: "A change of government [in Timor-Leste] could lead to renewed enthusiasm for a seemingly stalled onshore gas processing megaproject that would likely only find China wanting to assist financially with its development."

"On the face of it, Timor-Leste's cooperation with China is limited. In 2020, Timor-Leste exported just US\$1.1-million worth of goods to China, and imported US\$190-million from it. ... But China has built the presidential palace, foreign ministry, and defense buildings in Dili, the

capital, and friendly overtures have been made by both sides.”

Ramos-Horta has repeatedly scoffed at suggestions that China was gaining strategically significant leverage over Timor-Leste in recent years. However, the reality is that he will be approached about financing not only the stalled Greater Sunrise gas field project, but the related issue of onshore processing of the liquefied natural gas.

Gusmão, who will feature heavily in the background or foreground of the next administration, championed the Tasi Mane project, a corridor of petroleum infrastructure along the southwest coast of Timor-Leste where the LNG would be processed.

Certainly, Ramos-Horta—like Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in the Solomon Islands—has to tread carefully to balance the threats and promises of both Beijing and the Washington-Canberra axis. Beijing has been accustomed to working gradually but relentlessly, trying to stay under the radar as much as possible.



The aftermath of a looted street in Honiara's Chinatown, Solomon Islands, on Nov. 27, 2021. A leaked document indicates China is looking to boost its military presence in the Solomon Islands, including ship visits, in a development raising the alarm in nearby Australia and beyond. On March 24, 2022, the Solomon Islands revealed that it had signed a policing cooperation agreement with China. But more concerning to Australia was the draft text of a broader security arrangement leaked online. (Piringi Charley/AP Photo)

Lately, it has not been possible for China to avoid alarming Australia and the United States in the Solomons. And now Timor-Leste is likely to further awaken Canberra and Washington.

Noted Canadian strategic analyst Cleo Paskal, who focuses heavily on [Indo-Pacific](#) events, said on April 20, "The PLA is essentially putting pieces in place to create its own version of a first island chain to hem in and isolate Quad/AUKUS/Five-Eyes member Australia."

She noted that the response of Canberra to the buildup of Chinese influence and penetration in the Solomons was to "double down" on

Sogavare, which, in effect, repudiates the mass of Solomon Islanders who have opposed Sogavare's security deal with Beijing. Sogavare, she said, had been attempting to postpone the 2023 elections because of his unpopularity and opposition to the Chinese security pact with the Solomons.

Paskal also cites Tongan analyst Tevita Motulalo, who said that "security policy" [in much of the South Pacific] was to bring in more Chinese influence in order to get Washington (and Canberra) to pay attention to the locals' needs. The same could be said for Timor-Leste's policies.

In the meantime, however, the CCP has built a comprehensive arc of influence down into the Indo-Pacific. It is pushing the line of engagement between China and the AUKUS alliance further south toward Australia.

For Beijing, economic contraction at home does not equate to strategic contraction abroad. China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI, also known as "One Belt, One Road") funding may contract elsewhere, but it now focuses on its momentum in the Indo-Pacific.