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WHITE PAPER

# Democratic Resilience and Governance Stability in Pacific Island Nations

*Institutional Capacity, External Pressure, and the Policy Framework for Small State Governance Security*

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## RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE STATEMENT

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- **In April 2022, the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with the People's Republic of China. The governance failure that produced this outcome was not primarily a failure of political will — it was a failure of institutional technical capacity to evaluate complex international agreements.**
- **Institutional technical capacity — the ability of government agencies to independently analyze complex policy questions, evaluate international agreements, and develop evidence-based domestic policy — is the single strongest predictor of democratic governance resilience in Pacific Island nations across available governance quality metrics.**
- **The China-Pacific security engagement strategy specifically targets Pacific Island governance vulnerabilities — particularly technical capacity gaps and economic dependency — in ways that democratic resilience policy must address to be effective.**
- **Available policy interventions can meaningfully strengthen Pacific Island democratic resilience: technical capacity building, economic diversification support, governance monitoring, and direct diplomatic engagement that treats Pacific Island governments as policy partners rather than policy recipients.**

In April 2022, the Solomon Islands government signed a security agreement with the People's Republic of China — an agreement that, in the words of one senior Solomon Islands official who requested anonymity, "was signed by a government that did not have enough institutional capacity to fully evaluate what it was signing."<sup>1</sup> The governance failure that produced this outcome was not primarily a failure of political will or national interest calculation. It was a failure of institutional capacity — the analytical, legal, and administrative resources that make it possible for a small government to make fully informed decisions about complex international agreements.

## I. The Pacific Island Governance Context

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Pacific Island nations govern under conditions that have no exact continental analog.<sup>2</sup> They maintain full sovereign governance responsibilities with government workforces that are small fractions of the size required to fulfill those responsibilities at continental governance standards. A Pacific Island nation of 150,000 people may maintain a national government with fewer full-time professional staff than a mid-size U.S. county government. The analytical, legal, and administrative functions that large governments perform through dedicated specialized agencies must be performed in Pacific Island governments

by generalist staff who cannot develop the specialized expertise these functions require.

**ISPI's analysis of democratic governance resilience in Pacific Island nations identifies institutional technical capacity as the primary protective factor against external pressure. Governments with the analytical capacity to independently evaluate international agreements are significantly less susceptible to the conditionality and information capture strategies that external actors deploy — because they can identify the implications of proposed relationships that capacity-dependent governments cannot.**

## II. The External Pressure Landscape

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### Economic Dependency and Conditionality

Pacific Island nations that depend on a small number of external economic relationships are susceptible to conditionality pressure from those relationships in ways that more economically diversified states are not.<sup>3</sup> An external actor that controls a relationship representing a significant portion of a small government's revenue has meaningful leverage over that government's policy decisions — leverage that can be applied to influence governance outcomes in directions that serve the external actor's interests rather than the Pacific Island nation's citizens.

### China's Pacific Engagement Strategy

China's Pacific engagement strategy systematically offers economic relationships, infrastructure investment, and security assistance to Pacific Island governments — relationships that provide genuine development value while simultaneously creating economic dependencies that generate conditionality leverage and political relationships that can influence governance decisions. The security agreements China has negotiated with Pacific Island nations include provisions for law enforcement training, equipment provision, and technical assistance that provide real operational value to capacity-constrained Pacific Island agencies while establishing presence, intelligence access, and alignment obligations.

## III. The Institutional Capacity Framework

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Building institutional technical capacity in Pacific Island governments requires investment in three specific dimensions: legal analysis capacity (trained legal professionals with international law expertise for independent evaluation of international agreements), economic analysis capacity (trained economists for independent assessment of economic relationships), and administrative

coordination capacity (structures enabling complex policy decisions across government agencies).

## IV. Policy Recommendations

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1. Fund Pacific Island government technical capacity building through dedicated USAID, State Department, and allied government programs — specifically targeting the legal, economic, and administrative coordination functions where capacity gaps create the most consequential governance vulnerabilities.
2. Develop Pacific Island-specific democratic resilience assessment frameworks that account for the specific governance challenges of small island states rather than applying continental governance frameworks that assume larger government capacity.
3. Commission ISPI and similar institutions to conduct ongoing Pacific Island governance monitoring research — tracking institutional health indicators and identifying emerging vulnerabilities before they produce consequential governance failures.
4. Engage Pacific Island governments directly in U.S. Pacific security policy development — creating policy input channels for island governments whose governance perspectives and community safety expertise inform the regional security framework they are part of.
5. Support Pacific Island economic diversification as a governance resilience strategy — reducing the economic dependency that creates conditionality vulnerability alongside its development rationale.

## V. Conclusion

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Pacific Island democratic governance resilience is substantially a function of institutional capacity — the ability of Pacific Island governments to independently analyze the decisions they must make and govern effectively on behalf of their citizens in an environment of deliberate external pressure. Building that capacity is the most consequential democratic resilience investment available. ISPI accepts commissions for governance resilience assessments, institutional capacity analysis, and Pacific Island governance monitoring research. Contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me or visit [ispiglobal.com/commission](https://ispiglobal.com/commission).

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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

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