

which is under the Chinese Global Security Initiative (GSI) model and the economic model of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁵ SLS performs within these securitized frameworks by taking certain strategies to preserve its autonomy amid external pressures. They deny the dominance on one hand and try to deal with military hedging at the same time, pursuing a strategy for economic hedging.⁶ The core of these strategies is driven by political denial of getting involved with any of the securitized frameworks.

Regional Security Complex (RSC) here plays a vital role in shaping the SLS strategy. Within its RSC, SLS faces more threats to uphold its autonomy than the great powers operating within any securitized frameworks in the Indo-Pacific Region.⁷ The tendency through which SLS tries to preserve its autonomy is a fundamental question. As the RSC is driven by amity and enmity within a particular pattern of interaction, some states attempt to overpower the status quo and try to dominate others' behavior, or in other ways, small states tend to overpower the hegemonic status quo in its pursuit of autonomy.⁸ In that case, within an RSC, SLS need to mitigate the hegemonic threat of its regional power and, at the same time, the pressures from great powers to choose a particular side.

The thing is that how small state converge their strategy for pursuing their self-preservation in both cases needs to be investigated. The converging strategy needs to be addressed while their dealings with the regional power, and at the same time, the great powers, to evaluate the effectiveness of their strategy.⁹ Though not all the SLS are in the same region, and their hegemonic strategy against the regional power is not the same, they often pursue a pattern in which they operate with their hedging strategy.

⁵ Summers, Tim. 2023. "Maritime Politics as Discourse in the Indo/Asia-Pacific." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11 (3): 572–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1886977>.

⁶ Ralph, Jason. 2025. "International Society as an Ontological Security Provider: A Framework for Analysis." *International Theory*, October 3, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100146>.

⁷ Kusumadewi, Hemalia, and Wishnu Mahendra Wiswayana. 2024. "MULTILEVEL HEDGING FOR MIDDLE-REGIONAL POWER: INDONESIA ASCENT TOWARD POWERHOOD THROUGH HEDGING." *Indonesian Journal of International Relations* 8 (2): 393–414. <https://doi.org/10.32787/ijir.v8i2.591>.

⁸ Lim, Darren J, and Rohan Mukherjee. 2019. "Hedging in South Asia: Balancing Economic and Security Interests amid Sino-Indian Competition." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19 (3): 493–522. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz006>.

⁹ Doyle, Timothy, and Dennis Rumley. 2019. *The Rise and Return of the Indo-Pacific*. Oxford University Press.

So, the objective of this article is to explore how SLS hedges against the risk of joining with any securitized Indo-Pacific frameworks. And at the same time, how they are dealing with the regional power struggle. That means, while pursuing the strategy of desecuritization, does it help the SLS to deal with its regional security complex?

The Paradox in Pursuing a Multi-Domain Strategy

The primary objective of SLS is to maintain its strategic independence. Achieving this requires managing systemic pressures from great powers outside the region and, at the same time, addressing a sovereignty threat from within its RSC. A more immediate and existential threat comes from a regional power's tendency to dominate others, which is more pressing than the influence of distant great powers. Geography significantly influences how the sovereignty threat is handled, while other factors related to an SLS's internal balancing capabilities push it toward a securitized framework that aims for passive hedging.¹⁰

Passive hedging focuses on reducing threats posed by SLS's regional dominance through a strategy of political denial. This means that engaging more closely with a distant great power entails the risk of bandwagoning, which could disrupt the ongoing hegemonic interactions among states in an RSC.¹¹ Political denial is crucial here, as the SLS must maintain a degree of ambiguity to avoid directly threatening the regional power's interests.

Additionally, SLS can effectively pursue political denial if it succeeds in managing the contested securitized framework. This approach is driven by an active hedging strategy, where SLS rejects a zero-sum perspective in the Indo-Pacific region. Instead, it views the securitized frameworks as rooted in imposed constructs that often marginalize smaller littoral states and their interests.¹² Therefore, SLS adopts certain strategies as its means of hedging against any securitized framework. Notably, the tendency of BRI member states to welcome trade and economic partnerships from QUAD members plays a role. Many SLS companies heavily

¹⁰ Liu, Hongsong, and Ahmed Bux Jamali. 2021. "India's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Pragmatic Balancing between the United States and China." *Pacific Focus* 36 (1): 5–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12178>.

¹¹ Scott, David. 2021. "Small Island Strategies in the Indo-Pacific by Large Powers." *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies* 8 (1): 66–85. <https://doi.org/10.2307/48603079>.

¹² Summers, Tim. 2023. "Maritime Politics as Discourse in the Indo/Asia-Pacific." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11 (3): 572–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2021.1886977>.

depend on China for their raw materials and on Western destinations for their exports.¹³ While this type of hedging focuses on diversifying economic dependency, it remains a concern if the domestic economies of SLS are not also diversified. Again, military hedging is a denial strategy that involves limited security engagement with members of the securitized frameworks by avoiding extraordinary measures.¹⁴ This strategy's effectiveness relies on refusing securitization demands, such as not joining formal security alliances and not hosting military access, like permanent military bases. SLS pursues a desecuritization strategy, combining these three denial approaches as part of its overall hedging strategy.

The goal is to provide multiple options at once to maintain their strategic independence. It is a deliberate action driven by a rational choice to avoid falling into a bandwagon trap. This strategy works well for the SLS if the persistent hegemonic pattern of RSC is set aside.¹⁵ That's why achieving effective strategic autonomy cannot happen until the RSC factor is addressed.

What desecuritization requires varies based on how the threat is perceived. This means that who they see as the main threat no longer depends on the referent threat setup by any of the securitized frameworks.¹⁶ Similarly, whether SLS is more worried about its main threat within its RSC is also no longer decided by outside powers. This creates a dichotomy in whether great powers recognize the hegemonic status quo of any regional power within the RSC. Alternatively, whether a regional hegemon feels threatened by the presence of a great power in its region is also a key discussion point. Therefore, the idea that SLS autonomy is at risk if its bandwagon is challenged because SLS's tendency to perceive threats remains a dominant factor in its fight for self-preservation.

¹³ Institute, Griffith Asia. 2021. "Small-State Responses to Strategic Dynamics in the Indian Ocean." *Griffith Asia Insights*, August 2. <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/asiainsights/small-state-responses-to-strategic-dynamics-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

¹⁴ Khan, Shahab Enam. 2022. *A Commentary on Bangladesh's Need for a Maritime Doctrine*.

¹⁵ Pardesi, Manjeet S. 2020. "The Indo-Pacific: A 'New' Region or the Return of History?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74 (2): 124–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693496>.

¹⁶ Speller, Ian. n.d. *Maritime Strategy and Policy for Smaller Navies*.

Case 1: The Bay of Bengal

A similar paradox is observed in the SLS behavior in this region. As this region is primarily dominated by the RSC of India, the SLSs in this area try to balance their relations with India, while a tendency to avail opportunities from the extra-regional powers is observed.

The political and military denial strategy for the SLSs in this region portrays a similar pattern in their interaction with India.¹⁷ While the small littoral states repeatedly stress public denial that their land won't be used for any military purposes by any extra-regional powers. But from the Sri Lankan case, it is evident that the 99-year port lease to China caused instability within the RSC.¹⁸ In the case of Bangladesh, its security dilemma with India following the regime change tries to be managed by the political and military denial strategy, but at the same time, proximity with the US as well as China has been enhanced, with confidence to avail multiple options.¹⁹ Being part of BRI, Bangladesh's evolving proximity with the US shapes its aspiration for strategic autonomy through pursuing a hedging strategy that also causes instability in the India-dominated RSC.

Case 2: South China Sea

The fundamental threat to the SLS of this region is from the regional hegemon, China, which is trying to be balanced with a strategy of political denial of bandwagoning with any extraregional powers. But the fundamental principle of this strategy is driven by strategic calculation of cost-benefit analysis of economic hedging with the dominant powers, at the same time, military denial of not actively engaging with any of the sides.

Vietnam's Bamboo diplomacy is a good performing model for the desecuritization strategy. This model is rooted in engaging with both regional and extra-regional great powers, being part of their economic blocs, and having a performing military denial policy.²⁰ The object of

¹⁷ Lim, Darren J, and Rohan Mukherjee. 2019. "Hedging in South Asia: Balancing Economic and Security Interests amid Sino-Indian Competition." *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 19 (3): 493–522. <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcz006>.

¹⁸ Ralph, Jason. 2025. "International Society as an Ontological Security Provider: A Framework for Analysis." *International Theory*, October 3, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971925100146>.

¹⁹ Cranston, Ca., and Robert Zeller. 2007. *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*. BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204514>.

²⁰ Wu, Xiangning, and Joseph Ching Velasco. 2024. "Navigating the Indo-Pacific: Vietnam's Hedging Strategies Amid the Geopolitical Rivalry Between China and the United States." *Asian Perspective* 48 (1)

reserving autonomy is ensured through Vietnam's successful application of this hedging strategy. But the case is not similar for the rest of SLS in the region. For Instance, the case of the Philippines, which tried to pursue an active hedging strategy under President Duterte, but failed because of the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.²¹ This exerts active hedging with a powerful regional hegemon depends on the capacity of SLS to hedge against the dominant RSC status quo. The Philippines case demonstrates the prospect of SLSs in the Indo-Pacific region failing in active hedging because of the lack of internal balancing capacity to deal with the regional hegemon.

Case 3: The South Pacific

Being dominated by the regional hegemon, Australia and New Zealand, the SLS of the South Pacific region tends to gain autonomy by using extra-regional powers. The case of Solomon Islands' security pact with China exemplifies its hedging strategy against the dominance in the RSC.²² It uses the strategy of political denial of bandwagoning within the frame of friendship to all policies. At the same time, it secures the Chinese commitment within a partnership framework, moving beyond the traditional donor-recipient relation.²³

This illustrates that, though the Small Littoral States are trying to pursue their autonomy amid great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region, the Regional Security Complex plays a crucial role in determining their struggle for self-preservation.

Conditions for a Successful Multi-Domain Strategy

This is a two-level game. SLS strategic autonomy depends on its subjective perception of threat. Whether systemic pressures from the securitized framework or the dominant RSC are their primary security threat depends on the small littoral states' capacity to deal with the threats.

Along with that, the behavior of the regional hegemon is important in that context, as SLS acts upon the threat perception of their behavior. The excessive assertive posture is

²¹ Mahmud, Nazmul Islam. 2025. "Bangladesh's Strategic Alternative." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, March 20, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2025.2481048>.

²² Schreer, Benjamin. 2020. "After the INF: What Will US Indo-Pacific Allies Do?" *The Washington Quarterly* 43 (1): 143–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1736885>.

²³ Majumdar, Sayantani Sen. 2022. "India's Littoral Strategy in the Indo-Pacific Region: Partnership and Beyond." In *Contiguity, Connectivity and Access*. Routledge.

counterproductive, as it is often difficult for SLS to mitigate the threat with its own capacity, which consequently drives it toward bandwagoning with any of the great powers. Solomon Islands' proximity to China demonstrates the failure of successful dealings with SLS, which in turn strengthened the Chinese footprint in the South Pacific region.²⁴ The Philippines' case is another lesson that has shifted its hedging strategy to bandwagoning with the US-led securitized framework, which in turn is not welcoming for China.²⁵

From the SLS perspectives of the three regions of the Indo-Pacific region, the SLS strategy is fundamentally driven by their struggle for autonomy. Their objective is clear, which is to offer multiple options, but first to secure their self-preservation. The Chinese GSI and BRI models, along with the US-led QUAD securitized frameworks, are perceived as imposed constructs.²⁶ Thereby, face resistance from domestic pressure groups of the SLSs not to join any securitized framework.

Therefore, for successful hedging, availing multiple options is necessary. And for that, availing multiple options through a multi-domain strategy is effective for the small states to become successful in mitigating the risks of falling into any of the securitized frameworks.

Table 1: Succesful Multi-Domain Strategy

Domain	Great Power Pressure	SLS Denial Strategy in the Equilibrium State	Maximized Utility
Political	To join their security framework	Political Denial	Autonomy
Economic	To join their economic bloc	Economic Hedging	Autonomy + Economy
Military	Joining their alliances/hosting military base	Military Hedging/Denial	Autonomy + Security

Source: Author's Compilation.

²⁴ J., Devakumar. 2017. "Littoral States Maritime Security: Issues and Challenges." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 22 (05): 47–58. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-2205014758>.

²⁵ Choong, William. 2019. "The Return of the Indo-Pacific Strategy: An Assessment." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 73 (5): 415–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1639134>.

²⁶ Amable, Dennis Senam. 2022. "Theorizing the Emergence of Security Regions: An Adaptation for the Regional Security Complex Theory." *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (4): ksac065. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksac065>.

Conclusion

The Small Littoral State's desecuritization strategy is primarily driven by its pursuit of autonomy and self-preservation. Whether they pursue a strategic denial and hedging strategy depends on the two-level pressure they face. The first one is from the systemic pressure of joining any of the blocs, and the latter one is focused on the persistent dominant status quo in the Regional Security Complex. That means SLS's strategic autonomy is highly dependent on the external pressures, but not independent of their internal balancing capability. That illustrates that where the SLS strategy amid great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region converges with the RSC, it is dependent on their ability to mitigate the threats to their sovereignty.

