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HIGHLIGHTS

Amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, both sides are now competing to draw smaller countries to their side in a manner reminiscent of the Cold War.

In an age of resource scarcity, the U.S. should adopt a more calculated, reciprocal foreign policy that prioritizes building relations with small powers—a more capable subgroup of 73 countries that are often erroneously lumped together with the Global South.

To build relations with small powers, the U.S. should leverage existing mechanisms (e.g., MCC, DFC, and EXIM), develop collaborative frameworks (e.g. FORGE and Pax Silica), lower commercial barriers, deepen strategic engagement, and scale intelligence sharing.

WINNING THE MIDDLE: WORKING WITH SMALL POWERS TO RESIST A COERCIVE CHINA

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THE NEW COLD WAR

Meeting President Donald Trump in May 2026, China's leader Xi Jinping asked whether the United States and China could “transcend the ‘Thucydides Trap’ and forge a new model for relations between great powers?”¹ This ancient Greek reference was a subtle acknowledgment that China's precipitous rise has created a bipolar world order—a great power struggle that “might prove more enduring, more wide-ranging, and more intense than any other international competition in modern history, including the Cold War,” writes Wang

Jisi at Peking University.² Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver concurs: “We are in a period of long-term strategic competition [with China] defined by the fundamentals and structural issues associated with our relationship.”³

In a manner reminiscent of the first Cold War, Washington and Beijing are now competing to entice smaller countries to their side. “China and the U.S. each represent one pole, with many ‘middle countries’ in between,” observes Shi Yuanhua of Fudan University. “Middle countries represent key targets for China's diplomacy and

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competition with the U.S.”⁴ A 2023 German Marshall Fund study identified “global swing states” whose relative power can assist or constrain Washington or Beijing.⁵ Ken Moriyasu of the Hudson Institute recently called for a reorientation of U.S. foreign policy priorities, writing that “swing states already pursue a strategic hedging policy. American strategy should reinforce this instinct by expanding the partnership options available to them.”⁶

To entice these countries, China uses inducements and coercion while promulgating strategic narratives to attract economic, political, and military elites around the world.⁷ Beijing leverages its disproportionate material capabilities to achieve what it calls “win-win” outcomes. In Washington, however, analysts use terms like “elite capture,” “debt trap diplomacy,” and “sharp power” to characterize Beijing’s approach.⁸ Numerous studies have detailed how Beijing exploits personal relationships, economic inducements, and strategic narratives to spread its influence around the world.⁹

The United States has been less strategic. Successive administrations underwrote a development policy ecosystem that often conflated altruism with U.S. interests.¹⁰ But while the United States has formidable resources, they are not infinite, and strategic competition with China necessitates a more calculated prioritization. Pivoting away from an aid-based model focused on the Global South offers opportunities to create more reciprocal, reliable, and stable economic and strategic partnerships with more capable small powers.

WHO ARE THE SMALL POWERS?

Power is concentrated at the top of the international system in a small number of great powers, followed by a larger number of middle powers, then a still larger number of small powers, followed by the Global South, a category which includes the most countries but has the least amount of power.¹¹ Those at the top of the pyramid, like those at the bottom, form natural clusters. But without a yardstick to measure national power, differentiating the countries in the middle has remained a largely subjective exercise.

“Scholars have struggled to agree on the essential dispositional characteristics of this category of actors, stunting theoretical progress,” observes John de Bhal, who describes existing definitions of middle powers

as “highly elastic and ambiguous.”¹² The term “small powers,” which refers to those that are less powerful than middle powers but not the weakest countries, is equally nebulous. The problem, explains Tom Long, is that “there is no consensus on what constitutes a small state... leading to confusion over how to recognize one.”¹³ Small powers’ diverse geographies and historical legacies have often led researchers to group them with the Global South. But while both clusters constitute “small countries,” those in the former are distinguished by their superior capabilities.

To help make these distinctions, the author and Sisi Meng at Cornell University developed the Comprehensive National Power Index (CNPI), which measures and ranks nearly all countries annually based on their military, economic, and soft power capabilities.¹⁴ Applying a cluster analysis to the CNPI reveals how nations are distributed across the four groupings: great powers, middle powers, small powers, and Global South. Since 2013, the U.S. and China have been the only two great powers, while middle powers are predominantly European nations with large populations, developed economies, and strong institutions. In 2023, twelve of the nineteen middle powers were European (e.g., Germany, UK, France), five were Asian (e.g. Japan, India, Turkey), one was Oceanian (i.e., Australia), and one was North American (i.e., Canada).¹⁵

Small powers far outnumber middle powers, totaling 73 countries in 2023. This diverse cluster includes landlocked states (e.g., Austria, Armenia, Czechia, Paraguay), small but highly developed states (e.g., Singapore, Switzerland, UAE, Israel, Kuwait), microstates (e.g., Monaco, Andorra), and developed island states (e.g., Cyprus, Malta). Geographically, they span Europe (27), Asia (20), South America (10), Africa (8), North America (7), and Oceania (1). Politically, they range from liberal democracies like Denmark to autocracies like Egypt. Yet, despite their strategic locations, extensive resources, and materials capabilities small powers have received far less attention than the Global South.¹⁶

WORKING WITH SMALL POWERS: A STRATEGIC TOOLKIT

Having identified the small powers (see Appendix), this section offers policy recommendations on how the United States might work with them to build mutually

beneficial strategic partnerships. Fieldwork conducted last year in Morocco, Czechia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Colombia reveals how each country's external behavior is not merely a response to pressure from Washington or Beijing, but is also substantially shaped by its own distinct history, identity, and the interests of local actors. Nor does less power imply a simpler policy process—domestic decision-making within these states is often as complex and consequential as it is in great and middle powers.¹⁷ While small powers have fewer foreign policy priorities, their limited capabilities heighten their exposure to existential risks, compelling them to focus on their particular region or sector of interest. During the Cold War, countries like Egypt and Vietnam exercised considerably more agency in their relations with great powers than is generally understood.¹⁸ Today, small powers like Czechia continue to derive strength from their unique resources, national identities, ties with non-threatening powers, and collective action with likeminded partners.¹⁹

Economic Partnership

For small powers looking to upgrade their infrastructure, the United States can offer a compelling alternative to Chinese financing. This does not mean replicating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but rather fully utilizing existing policy tools and funding mechanisms to offer a competitive alternative to China's state-backed finance, underwriting investments that reduce global dependence on PRC-controlled supply chains.

- **Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC):** Enacted in December 2024, the MCC Candidate Country Reform Act raised recipient income ceilings, which expanded eligibility to include upper-middle-income countries. Still, the MCC portfolio remains under-leveraged; only three of 73 small powers received funding in 2025.²⁰ With an eye towards countering Beijing, Congress should consider amending the MCC statutory language; shifting from a selection process that requires the recipient country maintain democratic governance standards to a framework prioritizing strategic investments in viable, high-quality projects with reliable local partners in low-corruption jurisdictions.

- **International Development Finance Corporation (DFC):** Unlike the MCC, the DFC already has the regulatory flexibility to work with small powers regardless of their domestic political system. While the DFC has traditionally prioritized low-income states, its current portfolio—which includes 39 small powers—signals a pivot toward higher and middle-income countries.²¹ To maximize U.S. strategic and financial returns, the DFC should expand its investments in infrastructure, energy, and critical mineral projects in small powers.
- **Export-Import Bank (EXIM):** EXIM finances U.S. exports by extending loans, loan guarantees, and credit insurance to foreign buyers doing business with American firms. Through its China and Transformational Exports Program (CTEP), EXIM offers transparent financing to creditworthy small powers for viable projects. Still, more could be done to align EXIM with U.S. national security goals by enhancing its tolerance for higher-risk, strategically vital investments. One model is Export Finance Australia, which operates both a commercial account and a national interest account. The latter allows Canberra to direct financing into sectors deemed critical for national security (e.g., critical minerals, defense procurement, and strategic infrastructure), with the government incurring the gains or losses.²²

Small powers are playing an outsized role in the emerging competition over strategic supply chains. Many possess critical mineral deposits, processing capacity, or specialized positions within the semiconductor and advanced technology ecosystem. These countries are not simply raw material suppliers; they are essential partners in building resilient global supply chains.

- **The Forum on Resource Geostrategic Engagement (FORGE):** China's near-monopoly on processing rare earth elements threatens advanced technology supply chains. Established in 2022, the Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) formed an initial multilateral framework to secure global supply chains for critical minerals, including lithium, cobalt, and rare

earths. At the Critical Minerals Ministerial in February 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio introduced the FORGE as the successor to the MSP, broadening engagement to include key resource-rich small powers—such as Morocco, Ukraine, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Peru, Ecuador, South Africa, the Dominican Republic, and the Philippines. As a preferential trade-and-investment framework, the FORGE introduces coordinated “reference prices” (border-adjusted price floors) to insulate investments from predatory pricing by Chinese suppliers. To accelerate mine development and processing under this framework, the FORGE should adopt a bilateral-first strategy focused on small powers. Prioritizing partnerships with these better resourced countries can enhance project speed and resilience while ensuring the reliable enforcement of environmental and financial standards.

- **Pax Silica:** Launched in December 2025, this multilateral strategic partnership aims to protect the critical supply chains and technological advancements that are driving the artificial intelligence revolution.²³ While FORGE targets the upstream extraction of critical minerals, Pax Silica secures the mid- and downstream technology sectors through coordinated public-private investments. The initiative seeks to reduce members’ reliance on Chinese-refined rare earths while streamlining the production, packaging, and distribution of advanced AI hardware. By unifying export controls and investment screening, the Pax Silica aims to insulate strategic supply chains from China-related disruptions. While key partners like Singapore, Israel, Finland, and the Philippines have already joined, other crucial small powers states remain outside the framework. Malaysia, for instance, should be integrated for its semiconductor packaging and testing capacity, while Brazil and Chile should be brought in to secure the upstream lithium and mineral reserves required to counter China’s processing dominance.²⁴

Business facilitation represents another important, albeit often overlooked, dimension of U.S. engagement. While China has lowered its barriers to commercial interaction with small powers, existing U.S. rules governing travel, procurement and market access can make doing business in America unnecessarily cumbersome.

- **Business Visas:** Restrictive visa policies can be an encumbrance for companies seeking to do business in the United States. China has actively sought to lower its own barriers and now grants visa-free access to the passport holders of 43 small powers.²⁵ By contrast, only 27—predominantly European—small powers enjoy visa-free access to the United States.²⁶ To facilitate commerce, the Department of State should pursue reciprocal arrangements that increase the number of small powers whose nationals are granted visa-free entry. Another approach, based on the Global Entry system for U.S. citizens, could grant known businesspersons from select countries visa-free access or multi-year, multiple-entry visas.
- **Set-Aside Contracts:** The government uses “set-aside contracts” to reserve specific federal procurement opportunities exclusively for small and medium sized U.S. businesses. The current framework effectively precludes foreign firms from participating, however. To incentivize collaboration between American companies and their counterparts in small powers, Washington should work with these countries to establish reciprocal agreements that allow firms from each side to jointly apply for set-aside contracts.

Strategic Engagement

Building strategic relations with small powers requires stepping up Washington’s diplomatic engagement. According to a 2026 Pew Research survey of 36 countries, U.S. influence is declining vis-à-vis China, which keeps its embassies well-staffed and actively cultivates relationships with local political elites.²⁷

- **Appoint Ambassadors:** Personnel is policy, and the lack of American representation in many small powers prevents meaningful U.S. engagement. As of this writing, of 196 total ambassadorial positions, 98 remain vacant including 28 in small powers (see Appendix).²⁸

To signal commitment and safeguard U.S. interests, the Executive Branch and Congress should prioritize staffing these diplomatic posts in small powers with qualified personnel.

- **Reestablish Moral Authority:** Washington's democracy-promotion ecosystem — anchored by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its sister organizations, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) — remains a vital instrument of American soft power. In 2025, NED distributed \$26 million in grants (roughly 84% of its budget) to support political party development, civil society, independent media, and election oversight across dozens of small powers.²⁹ Congress should shield these institutions from political interference, increase their funding, and expand their engagement with partners based in small powers.
- **Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and INTERPOL:** The U.S. should deepen security partnerships with small powers that hold institutional leadership roles in the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and INTERPOL — such as Morocco (GCTF co-chair) and Singapore (host of INTERPOL's Global Complex for Innovation).³⁰ Offering targeted U.S. technological and financial support in consultation with reliable small powers, can enhance both institutions' capabilities while ensuring they remain independent. This approach helps constrain Beijing, which has weaponized INTERPOL's Red Notice system to pursue political targets around the globe.³¹

Discourse Power

U.S.-China geostrategic competition is also a struggle of narratives. Through its propaganda and United Front work Beijing shapes how foreigners perceive China, the United States, and the international order.³² Some small powers are already pushing back on Beijing's increasingly sophisticated efforts to manipulate their information environments.³³

- **Countering PRC Propaganda, Disinformation, and Malign Influence:** The United States should partner with like-minded small powers

to counter PRC hacking, AI deepfakes, and disinformation campaigns. The 2024 U.S.-Czechia MOU on countering Chinese and Russian information manipulation offers a replicable model for tracking and exposing adversarial information operations.³⁴ To scale this framework, Washington should pursue similar bilateral arrangements with small powers that have robust information ecosystems, educated populations, and mature media and civic institutions. Resources to support these collaborations can come from the State Department-led Countering the PRC Malign Influence Fund (CPIF), which was established by Congress in 2024 with a \$325 million annual budget and a mandate to fortify media and civil society against Chinese propaganda.

- **Reconstitute and Refocus Information Outreach:** Skepticism toward global media outreach is at least partially warranted, given the dysfunction that has long plagued the U.S. Agency for Global Media.³⁵ Still, legacy outlets like Radio Free Asia and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty remain trusted information sources in unfree societies and must be preserved. These platforms should be modernized, and their messaging should be adapted to more effectively counter adversarial Chinese propaganda. Digital engagement metrics should be tracked across platforms to demonstrate effectiveness and guide resource allocation.

Intelligence Sharing

The United States generally maintains its most robust intelligence-sharing relationships with longtime allies, such as the Five Eyes network and Israel, or partners under threat like Ukraine. Washington should scale up existing mechanisms and consider creating bespoke bilateral exchange frameworks with select small powers facilitated by regular working-level meetings. This strategy could help synchronize sensitive threat-sharing with the diplomatic and economic engagement discussed above.

While the U.S. maintains the world's largest intelligence apparatus, small powers offer valuable depth on localized threats. Their services are often highly professionalized with a sharp focus on regional security

– attributes that can help diversify U.S. sourcing, improve assessment timeliness, and eliminate analytical blind spots. Regularized bilateral intelligence-sharing mechanisms create force multipliers through more equitable burden-sharing, they strengthen confidence in strategic assessments and provide collective resilience against PRC influence. Success depends on identifying small powers with aligned security objectives and establishing well-specified protocols for technical collaboration and intelligence sharing.

- **Czechia:** A NATO ally, Prague has emerged as Washington's most trusted Central European partner on China-related national security issues.³⁶ In 2023, the two nations renewed the U.S.-Czech strategic dialogue and signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement, establishing the legal framework for the deployment of U.S. forces on Czech territory. That year, U.S. cybersecurity analysts expanded their cooperation with their Czech counterparts on cyber threat detection, analysis, and assessment, and issued a joint software security recommendation with U.S. federal agencies. Washington and Prague subsequently signed a MOU strengthening cooperation against foreign state information manipulation, and Czechia endorsed a White House statement on 6G principles.³⁷ Prague also hosted the Czechia-U.S. Cybersecurity Dialogue—a strategic mechanism that several larger allies had sought but failed to secure. A bilateral intelligence-sharing mechanism would help synergize these existing collaborations, bringing them under one roof.
- **Singapore:** U.S.-Singapore security cooperation is anchored by a 1990 MOU and subsequent agreements granting U.S. forces access to Changi Naval Base and Paya Lebar Air Base. Singapore has been an active member in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) since 2003, serving as a core member of the PSI Operational Experts Group, and frequently hosting major multinational counterproliferation and maritime interdiction exercises such as Exercise Deep Sabre. Combined Task Force 151 has facilitated naval intelligence sharing, while a 2021 cybersecurity MOU formalized cooperation between the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and Singapore's Cyber Security Agency (CSA). These agreements, along with various undisclosed collaborations, provide a strong foundation to enhance this already robust partnership.
- **Morocco:** A Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA) since 2004, Morocco is one of America's oldest strategic defense partners in Africa and a pivotal partner for regional security and counterterrorism.³⁸ In 2020, Washington and Rabat signed a ten-year Military Cooperation Agreement focused on developing Morocco's defense capabilities, including a commitment to expanding bilateral intelligence sharing.³⁹ A bilateral Defense Consultative Committee has since been established, focused on "intelligence sharing, peacekeeping operations, and the combat against illicit trafficking and transnational threats."⁴⁰ The ongoing reduction of France's security footprint in the Sahel has created a critical intelligence vacuum that Morocco is uniquely positioned to fill. To fully leverage Morocco's local knowledge, regularized bilateral exchanges should replace periodic, irregular consultations.
- **Colombia:** Bogota has traditionally been Washington's closest security partner in Latin America.⁴¹ Since the launch of Plan Colombia in 2000, the U.S.-Colombia security relationship has expanded beyond counternarcotics and counterterrorism to include migration, trade, and environmental cooperation.⁴² In 2023, Colombia received more training and equipment from the Department of Defense than any other Latin American country.⁴³ The country also hosts the U.S.-backed multinational Joint Group Against Organized Crime, which facilitates law enforcement and intelligence sharing throughout South America. These collaborations should be consolidated and expanded—perhaps under the Shield of the Americas initiative—to counter cartel operations and the coercive influence of China, Russia, and Iran in the region. The recent election of Abelardo de la Espriella as president offers an opportunity to expand security cooperation with Bogotá at a time when the political situation in neighboring Venezuela remains fragile.

COMPETITION IN AN AGE OF SCARCITY

In an age of resource scarcity, the United States cannot be everywhere at once. Amid intensifying strategic competition with Beijing, Washington should adopt a more calculated, reciprocal approach to international relations. One strategy is to prioritize small powers—a highly capable subgroup of about 70 countries that are often erroneously lumped together with the Global South. Highly developed and regionally influential, small powers possess the material assets and institutional resilience to be durable U.S. partners. Constrained by their size, they generally do not harbor revisionist ambitions to reshape the global order but instead seek

to safeguard their sovereignty from coercive external influences.

Working with small powers can act as a force-multiplier for U.S. foreign policy. Their expertise in AI, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, and critical minerals processing makes these countries indispensable partners in countering Chinese coercion. To build these relationships, Washington should leverage existing tools like the MCC, DFC, and EXIM, scale frameworks like FORGE and Pax Silica, lower commercial barriers, deepen strategic engagement, and expand intelligence sharing. In an age of intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, small powers are not peripheral actors. As during the Cold War, the choices they make will help determine the outcome of great power competition. ♦♦

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APPENDIX: SMALL POWERS IN 2023

These 73 countries are small powers based on a cluster analysis of the 2023 Comprehensive National Power Index (CNPI). An (*) indicates a country which did not have a U.S. ambassador as of August 2026.

Albania	Finland	Morocco
Algeria *	Gabon *	New Zealand
Argentina	Georgia *	Nicaragua *
Armenia *	Greece	North Macedonia *
Austria	Hungary *	Oman
Azerbaijan *	Iceland	Panama
Bahrain	Indonesia *	Paraguay *
Bangladesh	Iran *	Peru
Belarus *	Iraq *	Philippines
Bolivia *	Ireland	Poland
Bosnia and Herzegovina *	Israel	Portugal
Botswana	Jamaica *	Romania
Brazil	Jordan	Serbia *
Brunei Darussalam	Kazakhstan	Singapore
Bulgaria *	Kuwait *	Slovakia *
Chile	Kyrgyzstan	Slovenia
Colombia *	Latvia	South Africa
Costa Rica	Lithuania	Thailand
Croatia	Luxembourg	Trinidad and Tobago *
Cyprus	Malaysia *	Tunisia
Czechia	Malta	Ukraine *
Dominican Republic	Mauritius *	Uruguay
Ecuador *	Mexico	Venezuela *
Egypt *	Moldova	
Estonia	Mongolia	

Source: American Foreign Service Association, “Tracker: Current U.S. Ambassadors”, <https://afsa.org/list-ambassadorial-appointments>.

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