

Kiribati Denies Chinese Upgrading of Airstrip Is Military Related

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OE Watch Commentary

The excerpted 13 May Chinese language article for sohu.com, which reports on international affairs and has no clear political affiliation, discussed Chinese activities in the Pacific Ocean island nation of Kiribati. The article emphasized that Kiribati's government denied that China's upgrading the country's airstrip was for military purposes, while asserting that the project was only intended to improve transportation and promote tourism. However, the article acknowledged that China had a strong diplomatic reason for building the airstrip. It was a reward to Kiribati for its ceasing relations with Taiwan and establishing relations with China in 2019.

According to the article, Kiribati opposition politicians have raised concern that China will use the airstrip for military purposes and turn Kiribati Island essentially into a Chinese maritime aircraft carrier. As the article notes, historically Kiribati airstrips have served military purposes, including during World War II and in ensuing decades. However, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, like Kiribati's government, asserted the airstrip is only intended to further domestic transportation links and exemplifies mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Kiribati.

Despite these assurances, there is also skepticism in Australia. The Sydney-based daily newspaper The Sydney Morning Herald, for example, reported on 5 May that the plans for the airstrip had still not



Kiribati Island.

Source: Vladimir Lysenko (I.), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kiribati\(003\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kiribati(003).JPG), Attribution: CC x 4.0

been made public and that Kiribati was in a strategic location between Asia and the Americas. It further noted how a Kiribati opposition politician had inquired about whether China's plans in Kiribati related to China's Belt and Road Initiative. According to the article, any significant Chinese military build-up on Kiribati would provide China a foothold deep into areas that had been firmly aligned with the United States since World War II. In addition, the article asserts China has growing interest in Pacific Ocean islands. As evidence of this, not only has Kiribati established relations with China and seen some Kiribati politicians increasingly align with China, but also the same trends have become prevalent in the Solomon Islands.

“The government of Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, stated that China helped the country upgrade the airstrips and bridges on Kanton Island ‘for civilian use only.’”

Source: “基里巴斯：中国帮助升级南太平洋机场仅为民用 (Kiribati: China Helps Upgrade South Pacific Airstrip for Civilian Use Only),” sohu.com (on-line gaming platform that also reports on international affairs), 13 May 2021. https://www.sohu.com/a/466237372_115479

The government of Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, stated that China helped the country upgrade airstrips and bridges on Kanton Island “for civilian use only,” aiming to improve transportation and promote tourism. In response to this, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that China, at the invitation of the Kiribati government, is studying plans to upgrade and improve the airstrip to facilitate domestic transportation within Kiribati. The cooperation between China and Kiribati adheres to the concept of “mutually beneficial cooperation.”

In 2003, Kiribati “established diplomatic relations” with Taiwan; in September 2019, after Kiribati “severed diplomatic relations” with Taiwan, China and Kiribati resumed diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level.

Source: “China plans to revive strategic Kiribati airstrip,” smh.com.au (Sydney based daily newspaper with online edition), 5 May 2021. <https://omrmz.org/omrweb/publicacoes/or-109/>

Any significant build-up on Kanton, located 3000 kilometres south-west of Hawaii and US military bases there, would offer a foothold to China deep into territory that had been firmly aligned to the US and its allies since World War II. “The island would be a fixed aircraft carrier,” said one adviser to Pacific governments, who declined to be named because of the sensitivity of the project.

In late 2019 Kiribati severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of China, in a decision overseen by Maamau, who went on to win a closely contested election on a pro-China platform. The diplomatic shift, which mirrored events in the Solomon Islands, was a setback for self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as a province with no right to state-to-state ties.