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Cleo Paskal
Foundation for Defense of Democracies

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ISLAND-HOPPING WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

What the PRC Is Doing in the Pacific Islands, Why It Matters, and Why the Time Has Come to “Block and Build”

Cleo Paskal

As James Lilley, former U.S. ambassador to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), often said, China has a habit of telegraphing its punches.¹ So we have a pretty good idea about why Beijing wants influence—to the point of control—in the Pacific Islands.

In his 2011 book *The Pacific Islands in China’s Grand Strategy: Small States, Big Games*, Professor Jian Yang writes, “China’s growing involvement in the South Pacific is part of China’s growing involvement worldwide. . . . The discussion of Chinese involvement in and policy toward the South Pacific should be placed within this bigger picture. An isolated study without understanding China’s grand strategy and overall foreign policy goals can be misguided.”²

Yang is a credible source. He is from China, and he worked with Chinese military intelligence for around fifteen years before immigrating to New Zealand, where he became a university professor and then a member of the New Zealand Parliament. During his time in New Zealand politics, Yang traveled to China with Prime Minister John Key and also facilitated high-level meetings with Chinese officials for New Zealand politicians, including one with Guo Shengkun, Politburo member and one-time minister of public security.³

Cleo Paskal is a nonresident senior fellow for the Indo-Pacific at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. From 2006 to 2022, she was an associate fellow at Chatham House, London.

What, then, according to Yang, is China’s grand strategy? He explains that it is derived from “China’s concept of ‘comprehensive national power’ (*zonghe guoli*, [or] CNP), which was adopted in the 1990s and has constituted the foundation of China’s foreign policy.”⁴

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COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL POWER

Understanding China's concept of CNP is key to understanding the breadth and depth of Beijing's foreign-policy strategy. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), CNP is an actual number. Captain Bernard Moreland, USCG (Ret.)—who served as USCG liaison to Beijing—has explained as follows:

One of the important things to understand about CNP is that it is an objective metric. Beijing constantly calculates and recalculates China's CNP relative to other nations the same way many of us watch our 401(k) grow. The [CCP is] obsessed with engineering and calculating everything and believe[s] that all issues can be reduced to numbers and algorithms. This is what they mean when they euphemistically refer to "scientific approaches."

For us in the West, concepts like "national power" are subjective vague concepts. We often talk of our own national power, but to us it's a byproduct of a strong economy from pursuing prosperity, or a strong military from pursuing defense. We don't build power for the sake of power. That idea is foreign to us. For the Chinese Communist Party, Comprehensive National Power as measured by a CNP score is a goal in itself and pursuit of CNP justifies just about anything.⁵

Elements that add to a country's CNP numerical value can comprise access to resources (all the usual ones, such as fossil fuels, but also niche strategic resources, such as lithium) or control over them (or both), naval strength (including dual-use platforms), research and development (including stolen intellectual property), human capital, financial capital, soft power, influence over global rules and norms, strategic positioning, and much more.

In the context of Oceania, things that score points for China in CNP calculations include the expected big-ticket items such as getting a country to switch its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China, as Kiribati and Solomon Islands did in 2019. This is not just a diplomatic win for Beijing; if a country does not recognize China, it means there is no official Chinese diplomatic post there from which to operate the sort of influence and espionage activities that convinced the United States to shut down China's consulate in Houston, Texas.⁶ Seemingly small items also contribute to the larger CNP picture. These pieces might be, for example, a Huawei data center in Papua New Guinea, a couple of hundred Samoan athletes training in China, a Chinese police liaison officer based in Fiji, or a Chinese-owned shop located opposite the entrance to a barracks in Tonga.

These influence activities can be facilitated by China's large embassies across the region, with staffers who speak the local language and have seemingly limitless funds for influence and entertainment. This effort, in turn, is supported by a focused study of the region. Since 2012, at least six Oceania-specific research centers have been set up in China, including Liaocheng University's Research

Center on Pacific Island Countries, which as of 2020 had a full-time staff of close to forty researchers.⁷ In most Pacific Island countries there are also financial relationships with key business leaders, the favoring of certain members of the media, control of large sections of the retail sector—including in the relatively remote areas—and more.

Additionally, there are less obvious levers. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seems to be evolving, and now is being subsidized by others—including the United States—instead of only the Chinese government. PRC companies seemingly have mastered World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) bidding systems, resulting in, for example, a reported 80 percent of ADB infrastructure projects in 2019 in Papua New Guinea going to Chinese construction companies. There were similar numbers for Chinese companies in Vanuatu, although those mostly were funded through the World Bank.⁸ This can give the CCP-linked companies control over key economic levers, and at the same time allow the introduction of unvetted workers from China.

Chinese organized crime also supplements PRC efforts in foreign countries. This deployment (or at the very least sufferance) of criminal elements to advance CCP objectives is something that is becoming more prevalent—or at least more visible—and it was overt during the crackdown in Hong Kong in 2019.⁹ Here is one example from the Pacific Islands, according to the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project's December 2022 report on the CCP and triads in Palau:

In 2019 and 2020, Palauan law enforcement detained and deported hundreds of mostly Chinese citizens working in illegal online gambling operations based in the country. The operations are just the latest in a string of questionable ventures by ethnic Chinese business people in the country, including U.S.-sanctioned senior triad figure Wan Kuok Koi, also known as “Broken Tooth.” Palauan authorities believe the plans are interlinked, and tied to influence efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The Chinese push into Palau has been facilitated by long-time Chinese expatriates in the country, as well as members of the local elite. Among these prominent locals have been two former presidents.¹⁰

Across the region, the PRC strategy seems to entail the use of unrestricted warfare tactics, including bribery and blackmail, to undermine sovereignty and increase PRC CNP. This approach can be described as entropic warfare, as in some cases China actively seeks to destabilize and weaken target countries to make them easier to dominate and control.¹¹ The dictionary definition of *entropy* is “a process of degradation or running down or a trend to disorder.”¹² Entropic warfare paralyzes a target country's (political, legal, economic, social [and ultimately, if it has one, military]) ability to respond or to defend itself, allowing Beijing to get the target to submit without an overt attack.

THE ISLAND-CHAIN DEFENSE CONCEPT

Why all the effort to gain control in the Pacific Islands? A core part of China's CNP is developing a world-class military—spearheaded by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)—that is capable of challenging, and eventually displacing, the United States as the world's preeminent naval power. The Chinese navy is well on its way to accomplishing that, at least in certain areas.¹³

American naval strategist Paul Giarra has explained as follows:

Between 2016 and 2020, the Chinese navy has added to its fleet essentially the equivalent of Japan's entire current surface fleet. . . .

The Chinese navy is building larger and more formidable surface combatants far faster than anyone else, with at least eight hulls already launched of a brand-new class of large surface warships. It is starting to deploy its new carrier force in ways reflecting [America's] own practice. Its growing amphibious force is a tangible threat to its neighbors. The PLA [People's Liberation Army] Navy is on track to have nearly twice as many surface ships as the U.S. Navy before the end of this decade.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the PLA Air Force also is developing its long-range overwater capabilities quickly.

But here is the problem for China: to employ its powerful new navy, it must have secure, safe, ready access to the Pacific. That is where the island-chain defense concept comes in.¹⁵ The need for control over these islands was fundamental during World War I, formed the basis for much of Japan's interwar strategy, and was bloodily apparent during World War II. The current strategic framework for viewing the Pacific Islands built on those experiences and has shaped U.S. policy ever since.¹⁶

World War II in Oceania

In 1948, General Douglas MacArthur, USA, convinced George Kennan, then serving as the State Department's director of policy planning, that the United States needed to have a "striking force" in "a U-shaped area embracing the Aleutians, Midway, the former Japanese mandated islands, Clark Field in the Philippines, and above all Okinawa. . . . From Okinawa [the United States] could easily control every one of the ports of northern Asia from which an amphibious operation could conceivably be launched."¹⁷ Over time, this developed into a conceptual framework of concentric, roughly north-south, island chains hemming in the maritime ambitions of continental Asian powers—the island-chain defense concept.

Chinese strategists adopted and adapted the American framing, with a view toward breaking the chains. The founder of the modern PLAN, Admiral Liu Huaqing, referred to the first island chain (broadly Japan, through Taiwan and the Philippines, to Malaysia) as a "metal chain" through which China would need to burst to achieve its destiny.¹⁸

FIGURE 1



Source: "The Pacific Theater, 1941–45," *National Park Service*, www.nps.gov/.

Making things even more difficult for Beijing, as Chinese strategists look beyond the first island chain, they see a second one, running from Japan down through Iwo Jima, onward to Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI; the Mariana Islands except Guam), southward through the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM; the Caroline Islands except Palau) and Palau, on to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, and then to Australia. This is known as the second island chain.

The Island Chains as Depicted in the PLAN's 2012 Handbook

There is also a broadly defined third island chain running from Alaska through Midway and Hawaii, on to Kiribati, and ending in Tonga or New Zealand,

FIGURE 2



Source: Erickson and Wuthnow, "Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks," p. 8, fig. 2, reproducing PLAN Headquarters, *Handbook of PLA Navy Personnel* [in Chinese] (Beijing: Haichao chubanshe, 2012), p. 95; map available at www.andrewerickson.com/.

depending on how one views the island configuration. Islands along the second and third island chains saw some of the most desperate and hard-fought battles of World War II. These islands are where the tide turned for the Allies.

If you are a Chinese strategist, you assume that China can—with planning and effort—“break” the first island chain. In fact, this is a prerequisite. It is why one should not underestimate how serious China is about capturing Taiwan. If Taiwan falls, the first island chain is broken, and the PLA gains an unsinkable aircraft carrier and launching point for operations in the Pacific and beyond. If China controls Taiwan, it is easier to expand from there—up the Ryukyus and down the Batan Islands. That eventually could allow China to subordinate—or at least intimidate—Japan and the Philippines. Tokyo understands this, which is one reason why it is doubling Japan’s defense budget.¹⁹

At the same time that China is working on Taiwan, it also is trying to leapfrog the first island chain by using political warfare. If Beijing can burrow itself into the second and third island chains, it will disrupt American (and Japanese and Australian) defense plans and potentially could break down the first island chain’s defenses from behind.

Understanding how important breaking the chains is for PLA strategy and operations is fundamental to understanding how the Pacific Islands fit into China’s grand strategy—and how much effort Beijing is pouring into expanding its CNP across the region.

PUSHING THE UNITED STATES BACK TO HAWAII

From a U.S. perspective, what specifically does China want to accomplish in the region? In 2008, Admiral Timothy J. Keating, USN, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that a senior Chinese officer had suggested to him, “Why don’t we reach an agreement, you and I? You take Hawaii east. We’ll take Hawaii west. We’ll share information, and we’ll save you all the trouble of deploying your naval forces west of Hawaii.”²⁰

Getting effective control of the Pacific Islands is an essential part of pushing the United States back to Hawaii. China has been making a concerted attempt to do just that, and then, as the Japanese did in the 1930s, to hunker down across the Pacific Islands. But, having learned from the Japanese experience, the Chinese government is using political warfare to pursue this goal, and thus is staying under the threshold of what would require a military response.

China’s efforts are well funded and broadly successful. They generally follow a predictable sequence. First, the PRC establishes a commercial presence with Chinese nationals (who, according to China’s 2017 National Intelligence Law, legally are obligated to support the government’s intelligence operations).²¹ Where possible, there is a targeting of key industries such as fishing, lumber, and

mining. There are also highly publicized infrastructure projects and “gifts.” This economic engagement usually includes two other elements: a focus on projects that give China a strategic edge—for example, ports, airports, and telecommunications—and corruption (including working with Chinese organized crime).²²

This braided approach of commerce, strategy, and criminality often leads to the weakening of the rule of law and state institutions. Such entropic warfare can contribute to political and social fragmentation, even chaos, and can facilitate the rise of a domestic constituency ready to serve as PRC proxies in exchange for backing. It also lays the groundwork for (potentially violent) transnational repression.

One of the most reported examples of a major milestone on this trajectory is the China–Solomon Islands security deal, which allows for the deployment of PLA troops in the Solomon Islands to maintain social order and to protect Chinese citizens and major projects.²³ Less reported, but just as concerning, is the fact that the pro-PRC prime minister of Solomons used a Chinese slush fund to pay off thirty-nine of the fifty members of the parliament. That was enough votes to amend the constitution and postpone the elections that were scheduled to be held in 2023.²⁴ This move potentially sets the stage for the social disorder that Prime Minister Manasseh D. Sogavare (who is unlikely to retain power if free and fair elections are held) could use to invite in PLA troops, postponing elections even longer.

The Solomons parliament building is on the island of Guadalcanal and was built with U.S. money to honor the Americans who died at the Battle of Guadalcanal. A commemoration of the eightieth anniversary of that battle was held in the summer of 2022. The event was attended by U.S. ambassador to Australia Caroline B. Kennedy, whose father, John F. Kennedy, was saved by two Solomon Islanders after his boat was rammed by the Japanese in World War II. Sogavare did not show up for the commemoration.²⁵

CHINA’S GREATER EAST ASIA CO-PROSPERITY SPHERE

China’s ambitions go well beyond Solomons. In May and June 2022, at a time when many countries involved still had COVID-19 entry restrictions in place, China’s foreign minister Wang Yi and his entourage were waved in to eight Pacific Island countries (PICs). During that trip, in keeping with the PRC’s penchant for telegraphing its punches, Wang circulated two draft agreements among leaders of the PICs, giving a sense of Beijing’s comprehensive ambitions for the region.²⁶

Wang proposed a “China–Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision” supported by a “China–Pacific Island Countries Five-Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022–2026).”

Elements of the vision statement included the following:²⁷

- law-enforcement cooperation, incorporating “intermediate and high-level police training”
- “cooperation on network governance and cyber security,” including a “shared future in cyberspace”
- the “possibility of establishing [a] China–Pacific Island Countries Free Trade Area”
- enhancement of “cooperation in customs, inspections and quarantine”
- creation of “a more friendly policy environment for cooperation between enterprises”
- setting up of Confucius Institutes and training of young diplomats
- establishment of “China–Pacific Island Countries Disaster Management Cooperation Mechanism,” including a pre-positioned “China–Pacific Island Countries Reserve of Emergency Supplies”

The action plan included the following:²⁸

- “a Chinese Government Special Envoy for Pacific Island Countries Affairs” (who has since been appointed)
- a “China–Pacific Island Countries Ministerial Dialogue on Law Enforcement Capacity and Police Cooperation” (also completed)
- “assistance in laboratory construction used for fingerprints testing, forensic autopsy, drugs, electronic and digital forensics”
- “[e]ncourage[ment of] and support [for] airlines to operate air routes and flights between China and Pacific Island Countries”
- “send[ing of] 200 medical personnel” in the next five years
- sponsoring of “2500 government scholarships” from 2022 to 2025

Combined, the vision and action plans are a blueprint for influence (if not control) of key levers of CNP. It often is reported that Wang’s “failure” to get the countries to sign on to the two documents was a setback for China, but it is doubtful that Beijing ever thought that was in the cards. Otherwise, Wang would have held his group meeting with the PIC foreign ministers at the end of his trip, after he had a chance to speak to more of them individually, rather than in the middle. Also, four of the countries in the region recognize Taiwan. Those signing on to Beijing’s deal would have been striking a sudden blow by proxy against their neighbors.

That is not the way things usually are done in the Pacific, and China would know that. It has think tanks dedicated to studying the region, has trained hundreds (if not thousands by now) of Pacific Island bureaucrats, and has generational, focused intelligence on key leaders and their families. What Wang likely was doing by floating the vision and action plan ideas was drawing out those who oppose China to enable them to be isolated and targeted and, at the same time, seeing who was willing to be compliant so they could be identified and rewarded.

Then-FSM president David Panuelo was one of the leaders concerned about PRC activities that Wang's Pacific gambit exposed for targeting. After seeing Wang's proposals, Panuelo wrote to other Pacific Island leaders that it was the "single-most game-changing proposed agreement in the Pacific in any of our lifetimes."²⁹ He added, "I am aware that the bulk of Chinese research vessel activity in the FSM has followed our Nation's fiber optic cable infrastructure, just as I am aware that the proposed language in this agreement opens our countries up to having our phone calls and emails intercepted and overheard." The intention, he wrote, was

to shift those of us with diplomatic relations with China very close into Beijing's orbit, intrinsically tying the whole of our economies and societies to them. The practical impacts, however, of Chinese control over . . . our security space, aside from impacts on our sovereignty, is [*sic*] that it increases the chances of China getting into conflict with Australia, Japan, the United States, and New Zealand, on the day when Beijing decides to invade Taiwan.

To be clear, that's China's long-term goal: to take Taiwan. Peacefully, if possible; through war, if necessary.³⁰

The clarity of Panuelo's statement marked him as someone Beijing would not like to see in power. Perhaps coincidentally, he lost his reelection bid in 2023. Additionally, while the multilateral vision and action plan went unsigned publicly, Wang did sign a series of bilateral deals, some of which echoed elements of the proposed vision, in many of the countries he visited.³¹ Some were formalizations or expansions of existing areas of cooperation, but some were new, such as agreements on fingerprint laboratories. There seemed to be a focus on gaining access in agriculture (land), fisheries (seas), aviation (air), and disaster response (amphibious, pre-positioning).

Apart from undermining democracy in the region and creating proto-proxy states, PRC influence operations are having a concrete effect on the U.S. ability to operate in the region. Washington is being blocked out of some ports quietly, likely by pro-PRC elements. On 26 January 2023, Vanuatu failed to issue timely clearance for USCG cutter *Juniper* (a 225-foot buoy tender) to enter Port-Vila to commence planned shiprider operations aimed at illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The ship, running out of fuel and unable to continue waiting, diverted to Fiji instead.³²

This was not the first time a USCG cutter was blocked from entry in a Pacific port. In August 2022, the USCG cutter *Oliver Henry*, which was also on an IUU fisheries patrol, could not obtain entry to refuel in the Solomon Islands. The Solomons government then declared a moratorium on naval-vessel visits from the United States and most other countries.³³

In both cases, national governments blamed overwhelmed domestic bureaucracies. However, that rang hollow given the high-profile nature of the incidents, the subsequent lack of effort to correct the issue (indeed, doubling down, in the case of Solomons), and the fact that these patrols are for something that all the countries in the region say they want (help with illegal fishing).

THE FREELY ASSOCIATED STATES—PUTTING THE “FREE” IN FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC

While Oceania as a whole is of interest to China, one region is a particular focus for Beijing: the three countries that make up the U.S. Freely Associated States (FAS).

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), FSM, and the Republic of Palau are, by far, the most supportive strategic allies of the United States. Through their compacts of free association (COFAs) with the United States, the three FAS voluntarily have granted the United States unique, extensive defense and security access in their sovereign territories. In the words of the COFAs: “The Government of the United States has full authority and responsibility for security and defense matters in or relating to the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia [and Palau].”³⁴ This includes control over key aspects of strategic decision-making, such as the prerogative for the United States to set up and operate military bases in the countries and to have a right to veto other countries’ military access to the region.³⁵

Given the locations of the FAS, the COFAs have come to form the often-unacknowledged foundation of U.S. defense architecture in the Pacific. With over a thousand scattered islands and atolls, the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of the three countries combine with the adjacent U.S. territories of Guam and the CNMI to cover a contiguous maritime area around the size of the continental United States, right through the heart of the central Pacific, allowing for unfettered resupply of the U.S. territories and treaty allies along the first and second island chains. Adding an additional layer of security, two of the FAS, Palau and the RMI, recognize Taiwan. But, through political warfare, China is jumping that castle wall.

Historical Context

The region’s strategic importance to the United States long has been evident. After World War I, the League of Nations handed many of Germany’s Pacific Ocean

possessions, including much of what is now the FAS and the CNMI, to imperial Japan under what was known as the South Seas Mandate. For the decades leading up to World War II, Japan administered this vast area as a colony, with the main administrative seat in what is now Koror, Palau. The Palauan language still has many Japanese loanwords, and, owing to intermarriage, Japanese ancestry and surnames are common across the region.

In the 1930s, Japan put great effort into establishing ports and airfields with, at least, dual-use capabilities. It also put in extensive defensive fortifications and communications systems and streamlined the resource-extraction process. By the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, with the intention of pushing the United States out of the Pacific, it already was prepared and dug in across what is now the FAS and the CNMI. Japan invaded Guam on 8 December, defeating the U.S. garrison on the island by 10 December.

Liberating the region from imperial Japan resulted in some of the most horrific fighting of the war. Countless locals suffered and died, islands were destroyed, and the devastating U.S. military losses in battles such as Peleliu (Palau), Angaur (Palau), Truk (now Chuuk, FSM), Kwajalein (RMI), and Guam shaped generations of Americans.

After the war, again acknowledging the region's uniquely important location on the front line between Asia and the Americas, the area now covered by the FAS and the CNMI was included in the only United Nations Strategic Trust Territory and was placed under U.S. administration.³⁶ While it administered the Marshall Islands, the United States conducted sixty-seven nuclear tests within them. If that explosive power was spread out evenly, it would equal approximately one Hiroshima explosion a day for twenty years.³⁷

In spite of this, as they gained independence under the shadow of the Cold War, the people of what were to become the FAS chose to enter into COFAs with the United States. In 1986, the United States reached separate COFA agreements with the Marshall Islands and with the Micronesian island groups of Yap, Chuuk, Kosrae, and Pohnpei to form, respectively, the RMI and the FSM.³⁸ Palau ultimately agreed to a compact in 1994.³⁹

The CNMI considered but rejected independence and formally joined with the United States as a commonwealth in 1986. It had been proposed that the Northern Mariana Islands join with Guam, and while there was a considerable degree of public support in the Marianas, this did not happen, because leaders in Guam ultimately rejected the idea.

The United States currently has a range of different political arrangements with polities in Oceania. There are the "unincorporated United States insular area[s]" (also known as territories) of American Samoa, Baker Island, Guam, Howland Island, Jarvis Island, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef, Midway Atoll, the

CNMI, and Wake Island. Palmyra Atoll, which includes about fifty small islands a thousand miles or so south of Honolulu, is America's only incorporated insular territory.⁴⁰ The EEZs of the Pacific Islands of America (PIA) (excluding Hawaii) combine to cover over 750,000 square miles, or roughly the size of Mexico.⁴¹ The memory of the sacrifices of World War II and concern over Soviet activities in the Pacific motivated many American political leaders to work to ensure the continuation of deep and strong relations with the PIA and to establish the compacts.

There was an acknowledgment that the PIA paid deeply for being America's real Pacific "coast." For example, when President Ronald W. Reagan, who was instrumental in passing the compacts, landed in Guam in 1984, he said, "[Guam] may be nearly 9,000 miles from our Nation's Capital, but it's a real pleasure to know that we're among fellow Americans. . . . In times of crisis, few Americans have been more steadfast in the defense of our shared values and few have made more sacrifices to preserve them."⁴² It is worth remembering that Chinese media call China's DF-26 missile the "Guam killer."⁴³

However, especially after the end of the Cold War, some in the U.S. defense and strategic communities gradually seem to have forgotten why the FAS are important. There is, as former reserve head of intelligence for USMC forces in the Pacific Colonel Grant Newsham has said, "a focus on the 'castle wall'—on building up and working with Japan, Philippines, Australia, and others—assuming the People's Liberation Army [PLA] will conveniently come pouring off the coast of China and into our crosshairs. Meanwhile, China is setting up well behind our western-most defenses."⁴⁴

The east–west chain formed by the FAS is what makes the north–south first and second island chains possible. China knows this. For the same reason the PIA and the FAS are important to the United States (they give Washington a strategic bridge to the coast of Asia as well as a buffer against Chinese advances), they are especially important to China. If the United States maintains its position there, the rest of China's plan does not work.

And so, there are also persistent, high-priority PRC political warfare efforts to get the FAS to abandon, or at least downgrade, their defense and security relationships with the United States and to get Palau and the Marshalls to abandon Taiwan.⁴⁵ The following are some examples of that sort of activity in each of the FAS and an indication of the possible U.S. response.

Federated States of Micronesia

It is also worth remembering that many Pacific islands have been on the front lines of history for a long time. Over the last 130 years, parts of the FSM have been ruled by Spain, which sold them to Germany (after Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War), which lost them to Japan (after its defeat in World War I), before the United States gained control in World War II. Then they

passed to the United Nations, which gave control back to the United States. The FSM became independent in 1989—finally getting its own say—and now has a COFA with the United States. It also has signed on to China's BRI. Each change—often decided by factors far outside the control of the FSM people—left a deep impression on the country's inhabitants, and the fight for real control continues.

On 9 March 2023, FSM president Panuelo wrote another letter.⁴⁶ This one described how PRC bribery affected FSM national security and how the PRC actually was working to create the conditions to break up the country itself by supporting separatist movements:

Senior officials and elected officials across the whole of our National and State Governments receive offers of gifts as a means to curry favor. The practical impact of this is that some senior officials and elected officials take actions that are contrary to the FSM's national interest, but are consistent with the PRC's national interest. . . .

So, what does it really look like when so [many] of our Government's senior officials and elected officials choose to advance their own personal interests in lieu of the national interest? After all, it is not a coincidence that the common thread behind the Chuuk State secession movement, the Pohnpei Political Status Commission and, [to a] lesser extent, the Yap independence movement, include[s] money from the PRC and whispers of PRC support.

In his letter, Panuelo outlined what would be required for the FSM to recognize Taiwan, in effect offering the United States a rare opportunity to transform and reinforce regional security by closing down a forward operating base in the PRC's political warfare offensive: Beijing's embassy in the FSM. This would have, over time, blocked the sort of PRC-instigated economic and social disruptions (entropic warfare) that Panuelo described, and it would have given the FSM the space to build its economy and society in a resilient and sustainable manner. It also would have meant that all three FAS recognized Taiwan, reinforcing each other politically and creating opportunities for cooperation that would increase strategic depth, such as patrols against IUU fisheries that include Taiwanese representatives and are conducted throughout FAS waters. Additionally, it would have been a major psychological boost to those trying to fight PRC influence—a counter to the PRC's inevitability narrative, which tries to inculcate the idea that resistance is futile.

However, Washington failed to seize this critical opportunity. As part of creating a future strategy, it is important to understand why neither the State Department nor any other arm of the federal government actively followed up on Panuelo's offer.

Republic of the Marshall Islands

A recent case involving two Chinese-origin individuals who tried to bring down the government of the RMI—and what the Department of Justice (DOJ) did

about it—is just as worthy of inquiry. The RMI recognizes Taiwan and is home to an important U.S. military base at Kwajalein. The Marshallese people sacrificed dearly to contribute to America’s defense—specifically, enduring sixty-seven nuclear tests that the United States conducted.⁴⁷ The RMI will hold elections in late 2023. As seen in the FSM, U.S. focus on kinetic defense has not been matched by a concern for defense against China’s political warfare. In fact, in some cases the United States takes misguided and short-sighted actions that only make things easier for the PRC.

An example is the case of PRC nationals Cary Yan and Gina Zhou. Yan and Zhou obtained RMI passports and then set about trying to undermine the country’s sovereignty and integrity. The details of the incident laid out below come from DOJ documents. By December 2016, Yan and Zhou were meeting with RMI officials in both New York City and the RMI itself, proposing the development of a semiautonomous region within the RMI.

Around April 2018, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) controlled by Yan and Zhou hosted a conference in Hong Kong attended by, among others, members of the RMI legislature. The NGO paid for the travel, accommodations, and entertainment of the RMI officials. There, the NGO, with the support of the legislators, publicly launched an initiative to establish the so-called Rongelap Atoll Special Administrative Region (RASAR). RASAR was to be created by legislation (the RASAR bill) that, if enacted by the RMI legislature, significantly would change the laws on Rongelap Atoll, to include relaxing immigration regulations.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement described RASAR as “a multi-year scheme that included establishing a nongovernmental organization and allegedly bribing officials in the Republic of the Marshall Islands with the intention of establishing a semi-autonomous region, akin to Hong Kong, in the U.S.-defended Marshall Islands.”

According to the DOJ’s sentencing submission, Yan

played a long game. He acquired a[n] unaffiliated NGO, in order to position himself to bribe numerous RMI officials. When those initial bribes failed to accomplish Yan’s goal of establishing the RASAR, he sought to boot the RMI’s then-President from office. And although that attempt failed, when there was a change in administrations, Yan worked with the officials he had bribed to try again. It was only the combination of the pandemic and the charges in this case that ultimately foiled Yan’s efforts.⁴⁸

On 16 November 2020, Yan and Zhou were arrested in Thailand. On 2 September 2022, they were extradited to the United States, and in New York they were charged with conspiring to violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), violating the FCPA, conspiring to commit money laundering, and committing

money laundering. At the unsealing of the indictment against Yan and Zhou, Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite Jr. said, “Yan and Zhou allegedly engaged in a multi-year scheme to bribe elected officials in the Marshall Islands and to corrupt the legislative process.”⁴⁹ U.S. attorney Damian Williams added, “Yan and Zhou’s bribes blatantly flouted the sovereignty of the Republic of the Marshall Islands and its legislature.”⁵⁰

The maximum penalties for these charges are five years in prison for conspiring to violate the FCPA, five years in prison for each violation of the FCPA, twenty years in prison for conspiring to commit money laundering, and twenty years in prison for committing money laundering. Yan and Zhou each pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to violate the antibribery provisions of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, with Yan getting forty-two months and Zhou thirty-one months in prison.⁵¹ This might seem like a win, yet because of the pleas, and consideration for time served, their actual sentences were light considering that they tried to take over a country—one that is a key component of America’s defense architecture and one of Taiwan’s few official friends.

The DOJ also surrendered the opportunity to take the case to trial, which could have served as a powerful deterrent to future political warfare and would have made public the names of the Marshallese who were bribed. As in the case of Panuelo’s Taiwan offer being made and then ignored, Washington turned what could have been a major “blocking of malign influence” win into a loss that was worse than if there had been no opportunity at all.

Nor, according to RMI officials, have case details been passed to RMI authorities so that Yan and Zhou, and the officials they bribed, can be prosecuted in the Marshall Islands. This potentially leaves some of those corrupt officials free to run in the November 2023 elections. More concerning, Zhou’s sentence was so light that she had finished serving her time soon after the case was closed, and the United States deported her back to the Marshall Islands. She is currently there, walking free, able to reestablish her linkages with local elites, and showing by her mere presence that there is little downside to taking or giving Chinese bribes. She is expected to be joined soon by her coconspirator, who is also likely to be deported back to the Marshalls by the United States after he has served his time. He may even get there in time to vote in the November 2023 elections.

This is not an unusual occurrence. Across the FAS, there are Chinese-deemed “undesirables” that the FAS governments cannot themselves deport. In some cases, the PRC refuses to admit that the undesirables are PRC citizens (because keeping them in-country aids PRC entropic warfare). In other cases, the given FAS country simply does not have the money or political weight to deport them. So they stay, undermining the government from within—sometimes, as in this case, abetted by the actions of the DOJ.

Republic of Palau

There are leaders across the FAS who, although beleaguered, still are fighting to block malign influences and build their countries. One is President Surangel Whipps Jr. of Palau. Palau recognizes Taiwan—and was the target of an elaborate political-warfare operation by China to try to change that.

The PRC first worked to build up Palau's dependence on Chinese tourism. In 2008, there were 634 Chinese tourists in Palau, less than 1 percent of all tourists. By 2015, it was more than ninety-one thousand, or around 54 percent (much of that growth occurred at a time when the U.S. Congress was sending mixed messages about renewing COFA funding).⁵² Then, in 2017, China pulled the plug, making it clear that, unless Palau switched its support from Taiwan to China, the tourists would not come back. This devastated the economy of Palau and left empty and crumbling Chinese-leased real estate and developments across the country—a formidable display of entropic warfare. Palau stood firm; however, doing so was not easy, especially after COVID-19 added a second hit. In June 2023, President Whipps gave concrete examples of what he thinks his country needs:⁵³

Our biggest challenges are trying to build a diversified, resilient economy, combat[ing] climate change, and combat[ing] the influence of [the] Chinese in Palau.

Our economy was devastated by Covid. Tourism isn't back. We are at 30 percent of pre-Covid numbers. Palau's GDP [gross domestic product] fell, so we were accessible [i.e., eligible] for [GDP-level-linked] DFC [U.S. International Development Finance Corporation]. But why were we even taken off DFC? We shouldn't need measures like that to keep us out.

One of our main challenges is direct investment. The largest direct investor in Palau is still China. It's a challenge to try to not open up direct flights from China back to Palau. I'm going to Japan next week to talk about direct flights, but they might not be back until next year. Right now, there are two flights a week from Taiwan, they are full. They can't increase.

I've just been to Korea trying to get Koreans to start direct flights because Korea is about five hours away. Korean tourists are among the top tourists going to Guam. One airline was interested in Palau but they said the runway wasn't quite long enough for the large aircraft. It means a 30 percent penalty in cost—it'll cost 30 percent more than flying to Guam. That makes Palau less interesting.

Meanwhile, for several years, the U.S. government said our runway wasn't quite long enough for F-35s.

We proposed a solution to the United States, and to Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Korea—help us extend the runway to 3,000m from 2,100m. It would help in deterrence. We believe peace comes through strength, but a strong[,] a resilient economy also provides deterrence.

That's the sort of area where there is a synergy, where we can do what's good for defense and for the economy. It's an opportunity where maybe we can encourage investment from others in the region, other investment instead of China. We really need to work with others in the region to encourage investment. We need partnerships. This year finally for [the] first time Japanese investment in tourism will surpass everyone else—there is a new Japanese hotel being built. We want to see U.S. investment here—a U.S. hotel. We are really trying to bring others here.

We have pressure to open up direct flights to Macau and Hong Kong from Cambodian carriers. Japan is slow, Korea is slow, Taiwan is slow—China is saying “give us more flights.” It's hard to say we won't accept them because hotels are empty, boats are empty.

Another concern is that, if not handled by others, environmental crises could be opportunities for China to act. The PRC has used humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as a reason to deploy and embed, as seen in Tonga following the devastating volcano eruption in 2022. According to Whipps,

FEMA accessibility is really important to Palau. It's Russian roulette out here. Look at what just happened to Guam. Those [tropical] systems move up to Guam, down to Yap, down to Palau.

If something happens, it [is] a matter of who's closest to our door. Who's fastest to respond? When that disaster happens, who will jump out to say “here we are to help you”? The last typhoon, we got more assistance from the Federated States of Micronesia than the United States.

Palau has tried to innovate and find solutions to the challenges. As an example, it set up a national-security coordinator (NSC) office, but in spite of it proving its worth repeatedly to the United States, it gets little support.⁵⁴

Similarly, there is an enormous untapped resource in the FAS: the large number of FAS citizens who are American military veterans. Properly organized, perhaps as a variation on reserves but answerable to the FAS governments, they could be invaluable in crises and serve as bridges to U.S. responders. According to Whipps,

There has been some traction on addressing the needs of veterans, but they really need it to be enacted. Why [do] veterans . . . in Philippines and Canada receive more benefits than . . . ones in the FAS?

We want them to retire back in the islands—wouldn't it be wonderful if they return to Palau and receive full benefits in Palau? Then they can be comfortable while contributing to the economy and security of Palau.

It [is] an economically small thing for the U.S. but huge when it comes to improving the lives and security in Palau. Something like 5 percent of graduating high school students join the U.S. military. We are happy to let them come and recruit, but when they are done, please take care of them. Please don't forget them.

That means being able to see a local doctor here and get the care they need. There are rules that make it difficult, like to get counselling online you need to be on U.S. soil. Also, many have to pay for [their] own tickets to get to Guam for assessment. The United [Airlines] flight to Guam is, per mile, among [the] most expensive in world. In the last years, two veterans have taken their lives in Palau.

A View from the Pacific Islands

As revealed above, many Pacific Islanders have a better understanding of China and geostrategic issues than some of the top experts in Western think tanks. They have come by this knowledge painfully and over a long time.

Regional leaders, like many others around the world, have been trying to balance interests without toppling over. This dynamic has a long history as well. The current king of Tonga is a direct descendant of King Tupou I (1797–1893), who successfully kept his country independent, in part by playing foreign powers against each other by signing reciprocal treaties with France (1855), Germany (1876), and the United States (1886).⁵⁵

However, as China's hegemonic intentions become clearer, regional leaders—having seen where this path leads—are becoming more concerned and more vocal. In a recent speech, Ambassador Amatlain Elizabeth Kabua, permanent representative for the RMI to the United Nations, said,

We are concerned about being caught in the middle of a bad tug-of-war. In recent years, there has been increasingly high-level attention to our region, and while we welcome the engagement, we have [the] motivation to distinguish between someone who is interested in building a durable partnership to help us grow as a people and as a nation—which we welcome and encourage—or someone who is interested in our area just for their own expansion.⁵⁶

In that context, the complaint most often heard about the United States in Oceania is, “Where are you?”⁵⁷

THE UNITED STATES IS A PACIFIC ISLAND NATION

Recently, there have been strong congressional bipartisan initiatives and leadership on the Pacific Islands. The Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus was established in 2019 to help educate members on the importance of the Pacific Islands and to implement “sound national security in the Indo-Pacific over the next generation.” Caucus co-chair Edward E. Case said, “If we leave [the Pacific Islands] to themselves, if we disengage, if we ignore, if we don't show up—they will have no choice but to take different directions. And I believe that if we do engage on a coordinated basis, if we do show up, if we do assist, if we do treat them with a mutual respect, that they will choose to continue down the path that has, I think, been beneficial to most of this world. But it takes effort. It doesn't take just coasting along. It takes concerted, coordinated effort.”⁵⁸

There are strong indications of that effort. Under the previous administration, the National Security Council got its first Oceania director, and in a historic first, President Donald J. Trump hosted the three presidents of the COFA states in the Oval Office in May 2019.⁵⁹ In May 2021, Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus co-chairs Amerish B. Bera, Edward Case, Bradley J. Sherman, and Donald E. Young introduced legislation called the Boosting Long-Term U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Act, or the BLUE Pacific Act, with the aim of “establish[ing] a comprehensive, long-term U.S. foreign policy in the Pacific Islands amidst growing international engagement in the region.”⁶⁰

At the bill’s introduction, Co-chair Bera noted that the “United States is a Pacific nation, and our security and welfare are inextricably tied to those of our friends and allies in the South Pacific. . . . For years, we have regrettably drifted away from this part of the world with which we share longstanding historical ties and which serves as an essential link between our nation and the Indo-Pacific.”⁶¹

Also in May 2021, Representative Bera joined Representative Young and Senators Brian Schatz and Lisa Murkowski in introducing the Honoring Our Commitment to Elevate America’s Neighbor Islands and Allies Act, or the Honoring OCEANIA Act. Representative Bera’s press release announcing the legislation stated that this “bipartisan and bicameral bill would elevate all of Oceania in U.S. foreign policymaking to help deliver a robust diplomatic and development commitment to support the long-term growth, governance, and resilience needs of the region.”⁶²

There are congressional proposals to support NSC positions in all three FAS and to ensure that there are Pacific experts in relevant U.S. government agencies. Years after the United States closed embassies in the region in the “end of history” fog, embassies have reopened in the Solomon Islands and Tonga, some Peace Corps personnel have returned, and a defense cooperation deal with Papua New Guinea has been signed, among other activities. While this is moving in the right direction, it is worth noting that, given the PRC’s CNP zero-sum accounting, anything that is good for the United States, or that increases regional independence, China likely considers bad, and it will be targeted. That is why for any of the above to be effective, another element is needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS: BLOCK AND BUILD

Fundamentally, the United States needs to follow a “block and build” approach. In such a construct, partners, with the support of allies if needed, block malign Chinese influence while simultaneously building domestic (including economic) security.

One has to assume that any major project designed to give the FAS or other Pacific islands economic or political independence, especially one that will make

them less reliant on China, will be targeted by PRC agents for slowing down through a variety of political warfare and gray-zone tactics (including those described by former FSM president Panuelo), ranging from bureaucratic stalling to unfair competition, and from information warfare to lawfare. Unless that targeting is “blocked,” projects will be very hard to “build.”

At the same time, blocking PRC malign influence alone will not work. The region is still hurting from COVID-19-linked economic collapse, and if there is only blocking but no building, social disruptions caused by increasing desperation could become destabilizing and open up new pathways for the PRC that will be extremely difficult to block.

We know this from kinetic warfare. To make headway, you have to both attack and defend. Sit in your bunker and just defend, and you will never get anywhere; attack without cover, and you will not last long. The same is true for political warfare. While attacking the problems (economic development, access to health care, and others), you have to defend against malign activity that sees your activity as a threat. The PRC treats this as war; the United States should take it no less seriously.

Given the complexity of the Pacific, as well as the different potential partners in each area, a first step is to stop thinking of the Pacific Islands as a bloc and start looking at the regions separately to see better how they view their own positions, which will reveal the partners that are the most viable in each area. For example, Japan has better knowledge about and connections in Palau than does Australia or New Zealand. Indeed, some in the strategic community in Palau want closer ties with the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, given that those countries are facing similar maritime-incursion challenges and are seen to be more assertive about sovereignty than other, more traditional partners.

Given the limited scope of this article, recommendations here will focus mostly on the Micronesian region (Guam, Northern Marianas, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, FSM, Nauru, and Palau). This is the area of highest strategic importance to the United States, with the closest relationships, and the most likely to be involved directly in case of conflict with China.

As referred to earlier, under the compacts the United States has an “obligation to defend the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia [and Palau] and their peoples from attack or threats.”⁶³ Beijing has managed to stay below the “triggering” threshold of the tools in the compact that could help the FAS block and build because of Washington’s self-imposed limits on defining what a threat or attack looks like—which, at this stage, given what is being ignored, seems to involve something as overt as a World War II–style amphibious storming of the beaches. This needs to change.

Beijing considers the three FAS to be high-value targets. All are only an election away from being absorbed into China’s version of the Greater East Asia

Co-Prosperity Sphere. There are leaders willing to take principled and courageous stands for democracy, Taiwan, and the U.S. relationship, and they are the ones warning about what may happen next. But they may not be around for long. As seen in Solomons, all China has to do is capture a couple of dozen of the elite in one of the FAS to blow a hole in the foundation of the U.S. defense architecture in the Pacific.

What should the United States do? All the usual “should have been done already” recommendations: fully return the Peace Corps to the region, expand consular services, apologize to the RMI for the nuclear testing, sort out the treatment of U.S. military veterans from the FAS, get better connectivity and transport into the region to make it easier to connect with the United States, and stop arguing over the relatively tiny amounts of U.S. government spending involved in the COFAs (compared with the incalculable cost of trying to “win them back,” if such even were possible). The items in this list are easily available, as the issues have been languishing, in some cases, for decades.

But underpinning these existing issues is the need to do the following:

1. Acknowledge that the relationship between the United States and the FAS is unique, forged by mutual sacrifice, and essential for U.S. security. (A State or Defense Department posting to the FAS should be considered as important a career milestone as one in Paris, as this really is the front line.) Lumping the FAS together under the general “Pacific Islands” category is inaccurate and insulting, given the nature of the relationship. Other PICs will understand privileging the FAS, and in fact doing so might make a closer relationship with the United States seem more attractive to them. Incredibly, no sitting U.S. president has visited a PIC. If such a visit happens, it should be to one of the FAS.
2. Understand that democracy is under attack across the region and needs to be defended. In Solomons, officials have allowed elections to be delayed. Beijing is portraying this as a sales point for establishing a close relationship with China to other protodictators. Allowing that election interference to stand in Solomons puts democracy elsewhere at risk. Free and fair elections need to happen in Solomons as soon as possible. Additionally, in the FAS, government officials must pay careful attention to election integrity—especially as both the RMI and Palau have elections coming up. Reportedly, China helped its favored candidate get elected in the Maldives by funneling money to the expatriate Maldivian community in Sri Lanka to garner the extra votes needed to win. The RMI and Palau have no way to monitor campaign spending in their substantial expat communities, many of whose members are in the United

States. Help from Washington could make a significant difference. If democracy is going to be built, malign influence needs to be blocked, especially with regard to elections.

3. Back those fighting for the things considered to be shared values and—as odd as it may seem even to have to say this—that are in the U.S. interest. It is inexplicable that U.S. officials passed over Panuelo's offer to recognize Taiwan. Had that happened, it would have undermined China's whole inevitability narrative about peeling off countries from Taiwan one by one. China is fighting the free world on a political-warfare battlefield (for now), and we are (at best) on the defensive. When someone is willing to make a courageous move on the basis of principles, and the United States does not support it, this lack of action hands China another example to demonstrate why Washington should not be taken seriously.
4. Do not outsource American interests. Since the end of the Cold War, there seemingly has been an inclination to defer to Australia and New Zealand on many Pacific Island issues. Apart from not honoring the unique bilateral relationships the United States has with the FAS, this plan clearly has not worked, or the region would not be in its current position. In many areas and sectors, Australia and the United States work together well and have the same priorities; however, they are different countries, and some divergence should not be a surprise. For example, U.S. security concerns in Solomon Islands well could take second place in Australian decision-making to Canberra's desires to have a better trade relationship with Beijing. Additionally, as long as Washington keeps bilateral priorities in mind, working with a wider range of allies that are welcome in the PICs can be beneficial. Japan, in particular, is doing excellent, if quiet, work across the region. Taiwan and India also have much to offer.
5. Build on the strategic importance of the area, and bring military dollars to the region so that locals receive some tangible benefit. The United States and its fellow Quad members (Australia, Japan, and India) should treat Micronesia as a priority for engagement. This could include establishing a common headquarters for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the region. The Quad also should hold exercises in the region, including ones that address IUU fishing operations. The United States should accept Palau's offer of expanded basing, or at least an expanded runway.
6. Military engagement in the FAS need not be larger, but it should be more appropriate. If that is not possible, at least (or also) the United States

should field permanent, compact, small teams led by young officers who pay attention to those around them and adapt easily. Permanent presence is essential to avoid the ephemeral “cargo cult” effect that is engendered by U.S. forces periodically showing up and then leaving, or generals and admirals dropping by for a short visit and leaving, thinking everything is fine. Additionally, contractors should be limited and supervised carefully to ensure they are not damaging trust. Locals rarely differentiate between U.S. military contractors and the United States itself, and poor behavior by contractors reflects on the country as a whole.

7. Move from a maritime domain awareness (MDA) approach to a maritime domain enforcement one. For many countries in the region, fisheries have the potential to create stabilizing economic benefits for the people; however, IUU fishing is rampant, as is drug smuggling, human trafficking, and more. There are myriad MDA workshops, but precious few resources devoted to enforcement. Locals say repeatedly, “We know about all sorts of illegal activities happening in our waters—but we do not have the capacity to do anything about it.” Following the law to seize and destroy a few of the illegal fishing boats would provide more benefit and boost more morale than a year’s worth of MDA workshops.

Given the dual-use nature of the Chinese fishing fleet, IUU fishing in the FAS should be viewed as a national-security issue for the United States. The U.S. military should be defending the EEZs of the FAS aggressively—and using American Samoa as a base to do the same in the southern Pacific. But that blocking is not enough; simultaneously, there should be efforts to help the FAS build their fisheries in a way that, as President Whipps said in reference to tourism, is diversified and resilient. That is truly the only way to keep out the malign influence.

8. Support the creation and growth of domestic, independent capacity to identify and counter challenges ranging from organized crime to environmental disasters. This has begun in Palau, where the office of an NSC has proved invaluable. The United States should support the FAS if they choose to replicate and expand the NSC concept in the other FAS.
9. Redesign and reinforce regional diplomatic and economic connections. The United States should reestablish an interagency FAS node at the State Department and (until each can get its own embassy) shift U.S. diplomatic responsibility for the Micronesian countries of Kiribati and Nauru from the U.S. embassy in Fiji (Melanesia) to the one in Majuro, Marshall Islands (Micronesia). U.S. officials should work with the

private sector to establish new commercial flight routes, possibly with Japanese or Taiwanese airlines, that allow the people of Micronesia easier access to one another's countries. (Currently, under what seems like an effective United Airlines monopoly, flights in the region are some of the most expensive per mile in the world.) This transportation option will facilitate the development of Guam, Saipan, Palau, and other regional nodes as education, health-care, and trading hubs, encouraging regional cohesion and economic development. Additionally, the United States could offer COFAs to Kiribati and Nauru (and Tuvalu). This would require convincing Australia to accept what is best for Kiribati, Nauru, Tuvalu, and regional security rather than focusing on Canberra's own narrow interests.⁶⁴

10. Pursue dirty money enterprises aggressively. The most fundamental aspect of blocking is that there needs to be a cost for taking Chinese money. Currently, there rarely is a downside to accepting that red envelope after the banquet—no loss of assets, no loss of position, no loss of visas. In fact, the U.S. government just gave a free ride back to the RMI to a person already convicted of bribing officials. Unless the money is cut off and costs are incurred, it will be very hard to achieve any other success. Under the COFAs, the United States actually is obligated to do this. As mentioned, it has an “obligation to defend the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia [and Palau] and their peoples from attack or threats”; one would think the deliberate destruction of democracy counts as a threat.

The United States could help set up special investigative units to uncover and prosecute corruption in the FAS (and do the same for the CNMI, where the governor has asked for more Federal Bureau of Investigation presence and a resident district attorney). Currently, given the degree of involvement of Chinese organized crime and the tight-knit nature of FAS societies, there is concern about going after the big fish. The 2019 murder of an American lawyer, who was the acting attorney general of the FSM, created fear across the region.⁶⁵ If welcomed by the FAS, it might make sense for the U.S. military to assist on some of the investigations. The Department of Defense has the largest American presence on the ground in the FAS, and it knows and possibly values the region the most.

At the very least, Magnitsky Act charges for human rights violations or something similar could be explored. Prosecuting a few high-profile cases could hearten honest officials and make others recalculate their cost-benefit analysis of selling out their country—and by extension, U.S.

security. (That also can mean not being shy about ensuring transparency and accountability with regard to compact funding. The people of the FAS need to know that their money is being spent for their benefit.)

When the pieces combine, the overall goal would be to create a Micronesian zone of security, prosperity, and freedom that would knit the PIA and FAS (and maybe eventually Nauru and Kiribati) together, letting the countries and territories reinforce each other socially and economically, supported by the exceptional tools made available by the compacts. If successful, then that could provide a model for others in Pacific (and even Indian and Caribbean) island nations.

To do that, the U.S. government actively must block PRC political warfare in the region while just as actively helping the PIA and FAS build their economies, thus creating the foundation for an enduring and resilient free and open Indo-Pacific. These are, in effect, suggestions for a comprehensive multinational defense to counter China's CNP, for the benefit of all those who want to stay (or become) free.

Across Oceania, but especially in the FAS, the United States is at imminent risk of having the relationships it long has taken for granted severely weakened, with the PRC using political warfare to "island-hop" east and south to set up what are effectively forward operating locations able to—yes—push the United States back to Hawaii. This has the potential to change the security dynamics of the Pacific in the most fundamental way since the end of World War II. The honest leaders of the region know it and are trying to tell us so, for the sake of their people and for the sake of America. The global community owes it to them, and to those who died the last time this happened, to listen.

There was a time when many of the most prominent leaders in the United States knew firsthand what war in the Pacific looked like and how close America's bond is with the people of the region. In 1943, as mentioned above, two Solomon Islanders helped save future president John F. Kennedy and his crew in the days after his patrol boat was rammed and sunk by the Japanese.⁶⁶ Benjamin Gilman, three-term (1995–2001) chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, flew thirty-five missions over Japan as a side gunner in a B-29 Superfortress. On two separate occasions, his plane was damaged so severely that he never would have made it back—except that he could do an emergency landing at Iwo Jima. The blood of Americans is mixed with the blood of Pacific Islanders in the soil and seas of Oceania. In 2021, RMI ambassador Amatlain Elizabeth Kabua noted that at the time her country's COFA originally was concluded with the United States, "[m]any in the U.S. Congress and government had fought in the Pacific during World War Two—they knew who we were, where we were, and why we were important."⁶⁷ To avoid the next war, we will have to learn that again.

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