

Protecting the Corridor of Freedom to America's Asian Border

CLEO PASKAL

Abstract

Guam and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)—constituent parts of the United States—sit in such proximity to the Asian coast that the CNMI shares a maritime border with Japan. Stretching between them and Hawai'i are three independent countries—Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands—which have voluntarily granted the United States exclusive and extensive defense and security rights. This “corridor of freedom” across the central Pacific, earned through the blood of Americans during the island-hopping campaign of World War II and the goodwill of locals, is what enables the United States to extend its defense perimeter to Taiwan as well as to treaty allies Japan and the Philippines. The corridor of freedom is the bedrock of US defense strategy in the Pacific. The People's Republic of China (PRC) perceives this relationship as a threat to its own power projection goals and has diligently worked to undermine the United States' position in the region. If the United States is to maintain this Pacific buffer with Asia and keep Americans on Asia's coast secure without again resorting to kinetic conflict, it will require a new “block-and-build” approach.

Where does America's western boundary lie? Many Americans might instinctively point to Hawai'i or perhaps the westernmost Aleutian Island, Attu. However, the correct answer extends more than 3,000 miles farther west, crossing the International Date Line, to Guam (making it, technically, America's easternmost boundary). Guam lies west of New Zealand and is closer to Darwin, Australia, than to Honolulu. Just north of Guam lies the American archipelago of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), which extends about 300 miles further north until its exclusive economic zone meets that of Japan.

Approximately 50,000 people reside in the CNMI, with the largest population center located on Saipan. That island, positioned just more than 1,600 miles east of Taiwan and roughly 1,400 miles southeast of Okinawa, Japan, has found itself at the forefront of global geopolitics for more than a century due to its proximity to Asia. Understanding a bit of this historical context—knowledge that local policy makers are well-versed in and that influences their present decision making—is instrumental in comprehending the ongoing dynamics in America's Pacific homeland and what potential futures may unfold there.

Back to the Future

During the mid-seventeenth century, Spain colonized large sections of the western and central Pacific, including what is now the CNMI and Guam. Today, Spanish surnames and Roman Catholicism are strongly represented across the region. After the Spanish-American War (1898), Spain ceded Guam to the United States, with President William McKinley subsequently tasking the US Navy with governing the territory.¹

Military-Civil Fusion, German Style

What is now the CNMI, along with several other Spanish possessions— parts of which now comprise Palau and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)— were sold by Spain to Germany in 1899.² Germany subsequently initiated more targeted economic development efforts across the region. Engaging in a military-civil fusion, a practice frequently observed in the area, the German-Netherlands Telegraph Company laid submarine telegraph cables in 1906, connecting Yap to Manado, Yap to Guam, and Yap to Shanghai, thus circumventing the existing British-controlled Pacific telegraph cables. Consequently, Yap, located in what is now the FSM, emerged as a significant German naval communications hub prior to the outbreak of World War I.³

In 1914, Japan seized Germany's western and central Pacific island territories. Following the war, the League of Nations officially awarded Tokyo the South Seas Mandate, consisting of what is now the CNMI and the countries of Palau, the FSM, and the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI).

¹ Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain, 10 December 1898, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/>.

² German-Spanish Treaty, 12 February 1899, <https://history.state.gov/>.

³ Elizabeth Bruton, "German cable telegraphy in World War One: Yap Island," *Innovating in Combat* (blog), 3 April 2014, <https://blogs.mhs.ox.ac.uk/>.

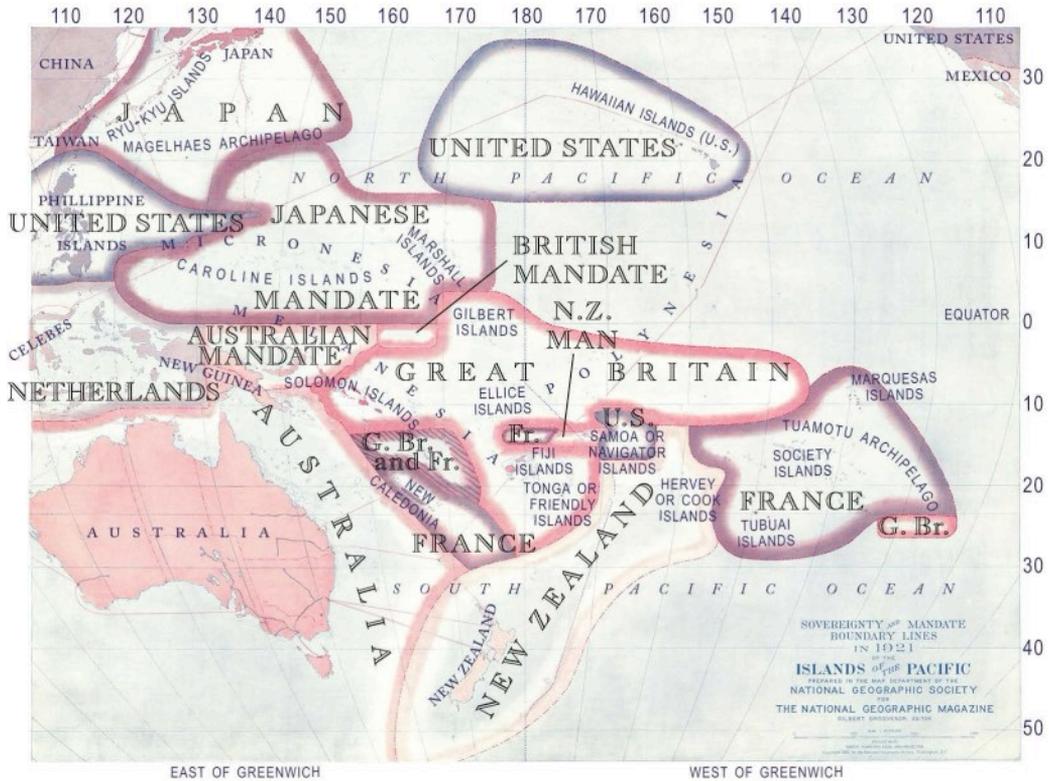


Figure 1. Sovereignty and mandate boundary lines in 1921 of the islands of the Pacific. (Source: National Geographic Society, Wikimedia Commons, 18 December 2014, [https://en.wikipedia.org/.](https://en.wikipedia.org/))

Military-Civil Fusion, Imperial Japanese Style

Over a span of three decades, Japan exerted colonial influence in the region including through the establishment of schools, clinics, and businesses. Japanese migrants, hailing from various regions including Okinawa, relocated to the islands under the Mandate. Koror, in what is now Palau, served as the administrative hub, with periods during the interwar era witnessing a greater Japanese population in Koror than indigenous Palauans. Despite the predominantly civilian nature of the Japanese presence, particularly in the initial stages, apprehensions soon surfaced.

In 1921, Maj Earl “Pete” Ellis, USMC, wrote *Advanced Base Operations in Micronesia*, describing the likely need to fight Imperial Japan in the Pacific and de-

lineating the requisite strategies and tactics for victory.⁴ He wrote, “Japan is a World Power, and her army and navy will doubtless be up to date as to training and materiel. Considering our consistent policy of non-aggression, she will probably initiate the war; which will indicate that, in her own mind, she believes that, considering her natural defensive position, she has sufficient military strength to defeat our fleet.”⁵ Pete Ellis died in Koror, where Japanese officials had him under watch, in 1923.⁶

Less than two decades later, Imperial Japan had entrenched itself in the central Pacific islands of the South Seas Mandate. Some industries in the region covertly transitioned to wartime production, and military infrastructure underwent development. For instance, in the CNMI, a local business on Saipan purportedly claimed to be clearing ground for a baseball field, when in reality, it was constructing an airfield runway.

By the time of the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan thought that many pieces were in place. Following the assault on Hawaii, Japan invaded Guam, thereby asserting complete control over the central Pacific.⁷ Consequently, two decades after Ellis’ initial writings, the US military revived his island-hopping strategy to navigate through this “veritable ‘cloud’ of islands and reefs,” where, as Ellis observed, “Perhaps there is no other area in the world where navigation is more difficult than in that under consideration.”⁸

To reach mainland Japan, the United States had to circumvent the most heavily fortified islands of the Mandate, steering south and west before positioning itself to head north into the central Pacific. This strategic maneuvering necessitated major battles in locales such as Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and Tarawa (Kiribati) before advancing to the Mandate proper, where battles were fought in Kwajalein (RMI), then onward to Truk Lagoon (FSM), Peleliu (Palau), and elsewhere in the region.

Finally, in 1944, US forces seized Saipan and Tinian in what is now the CNMI. Tinian swiftly transformed into the world’s busiest airport as waves of B-29s took off to bombard Japan, including the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and

⁴ Earl Hancock Ellis, “Advanced Based Operations in Micronesia,” *US Department of the Navy*, 23 July 1921, <https://www.ibiblio.org/>.

⁵ Ellis, “Advanced Based Operations in Micronesia,” 37.

⁶ Brett Friedman, *21st Century Ellis: Operational Art and Strategic Prophecy for the Modern Era* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2015).

⁷ David Vergun, “Battles of Guam: From Defeat to Victory,” *Department of Defense*, 15 September 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

⁸ Ellis, “Advanced Based Operations in Micronesia,” 31.

Nagasaki in August 1945. By the war's conclusion, more than 100,000 Americans had perished in the Pacific Theater.

What Now?

Following the war, the fate of the Pacific islands, where so many Americans had fought and died, was decided by the Allied Powers. While the islands in the southern Pacific were predominantly entrusted to regional colonial powers—Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand—for governance, those in the central Pacific had demonstrated their paramount importance to US security. Geographical considerations positioned them as either Asia's potential threat to the United States or America's bulwark against Asian aggression.

Ultimately, the United Nations bestowed upon the United States the administration of the central Pacific region—the same territory that had formerly comprised the Japanese South Sea Mandate—designating it as the world's sole Strategic Trust Territory.⁹ This expansive area, stretching from west of Hawai'i to the Philippines and north toward Japan, was roughly the continental United States in size, encompassing what is now the CNMI, Palau, the FSM, and the RMI.

In the 1960s, amid the waning era of colonialism and the burgeoning global push for independence, the Congress of Micronesia was established on Saipan, comprising delegates from across the Trust Territories.¹⁰ Through deliberations and ballots, the region eventually fragmented into the CNMI, Palau, the FSM, and the RMI. The CNMI entertained but ultimately dismissed the notion of independence, formally aligning with the United States as a commonwealth in 1986.

The memory of World War II sacrifices and apprehensions regarding Soviet activities in the Pacific motivated many US political leaders during the Cold War to diligently foster enduring and robust relations with the region. This endeavor culminated in Palau, the FSM, and the RMI being offered a distinctive relationship with the United States through Compacts of Free Association (COFA). In 1986, the United States forged separate COFAs with the RMI and the FSM; Palau consented to a COFA in 1994.¹¹

Under their respective COFAs with the United States, the three Freely Associated States (FAS) voluntarily extended uniquely extensive defense and security

⁹ "UN Trusteeship Council Documentation," *Dag Hammarskjold Library*, n.d., <https://research.un.org/>.

¹⁰ Norman Meller, *The Congress of Micronesia: Development of the Legislative Process in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

¹¹ "Compacts of Free Association," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, accessed 12 April 2024. <https://www.doi.gov/>; and William Chapman, "In Palau, Even God is Said to Oppose Micronesian Unity," *Washington Post*, 16 July 1978, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

access to the United States within their sovereign territories. As articulated in 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].”¹²

This includes control over key aspects of strategic decision making, such as the prerogative for the United States to establish and operate US military bases within these countries and to wield veto over other countries’ military access to the region.¹³ In broader terms, apart from defense and security provisions, the COFAs also afford citizens of the FAS the right to work in the United States, serve in the US military, and receive financial support and services (such as the postal service) from the US government. The financial and service provisions undergo renegotiation every 20 years and were formally renewed in 2024.

There was a recognition that America’s Pacific islands bore a heavy burden as the nation’s veritable Pacific “coast.” For example, when President Ronald Reagan, a key advocate for the COFAs, visited Guam in 1984, he remarked, “[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.”¹⁴ Additionally, it is noteworthy that Chinese media often refers to China’s DF-26 missile as the “Guam killer.”¹⁵

Since the conclusion of the Cold War, some within the US defense and strategic circles appear to have lost sight of the significance of the FAS in homeland defense. There has been a noticeable emphasis, particularly within the Department of Defense, on nations situated along the western periphery of the Pacific, notably Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and others. This emphasis is evident in treaties such as AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom, and the United States), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Australia, Japan, India, and United States), and a renewed focus on longstanding bilateral defense agreements with Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. Implicitly, there has been an assumption that the central Pacific corridor of freedom, which has facilitated unhindered movement for the United States from North America to the western Pacific, would endure in perpetuity.

¹² Compact of Free Association Act of 1985, Pub. L. 99-239 (99th Congress), 99 Stat. 1770, codified as amended at 48 U.S.C. §1681, <https://www.congress.gov/>; and Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, Pub. L. 99-658 (99th Congress), 100 Stat. 3672, codified as amended at 48 U.S.C §1681, <https://www.congress.gov/>.

¹³ Thomas Lum, “The Compacts of Free Association,” *In Focus*, 25 April 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks on Arrival at Guam International Airport in Agana” (speech, Agana, 25 April 1984), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/>.

¹⁵ Bill Gertz, “Army Deploying Iron Dome Missile Defense to Guam,” *Washington Times*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/>.

At the same time, akin to Imperial Japan's understanding, the PRC recognizes that asserting control over the central Pacific would severely impede the United States' capacity to resupply its partners and its own possessions and bases. Consequently, Beijing has dedicated significant efforts over numerous years to undermine the enduring bonds forged in blood between the United States and the people of the central Pacific 80 years ago. Of the three, Palau and the RMI additionally maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan, rendering them even higher priority targets for the PRC.

China's Braided Approach to Influence

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wields an arsenal of political warfare weapons aimed at infiltrating and exerting influence over target countries, including the FAS and the CNMI. Through a combination of public and private loans, bribery, blackmail, coercion, investment, and influence, the CCP and its proxies seek to undermine support for the United States. These various tools are strategically intertwined to present Washington with complex security dilemmas. Efforts are intensified upon identifying vulnerabilities, while simultaneous endeavors persist across other fronts. Major operations are usually "braided," with three mutually reinforcing strands: commercial, strategic, and criminal activities.¹⁶

Marshall Islands: Attempt To Set Up a "Country-Within-a-Country"

One example of Beijing's braided approach involved a case featuring two individuals of Chinese origin attempting to subvert the government of the Marshall Islands. The RMI hosts a pivotal US military base at Kwajalein, and the Marshallese have made substantial sacrifices to bolster America's defense, enduring the fallout of 67 nuclear tests conducted by the United States while under its administration.

In 2016, Chinese citizens Cary Yan and Gina Zhou obtained Marshall Islands passports and embarked on a campaign to undermine the sovereignty and integrity of the Marshall Islands. They engaged with RMI officials in both New York City and the RMI itself, proposing the establishment of a semi-autonomous region within the RMI. By around April 2018, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) controlled by Yan and Zhou convened a conference in Hong Kong, attended by select members of the RMI legislature. The NGO financed the travel, accommoda-

¹⁶ Cleo Paskal, "Preserving US Interests in the Indo-Pacific: Examining How US Engagement Counters Chinese Influence in the Region," *Testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs*, 16 May 2023. <https://www.fdd.org/>.

tions, and entertainment of the RMI officials. During the conference, with the backing of the legislators, the NGO publicly launched an initiative to establish the Rongelap Atoll Special Administrative Region (RASAR). Rongelap Atoll had endured the consequences of radioactive fallout from US nuclear testing during the Cold War, and locals were enticed by the prospect of economic development. If implemented, RASAR would have brought about substantial changes to the laws governing Rongelap Atoll, including the relaxation of immigration regulations.

The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency characterized RASAR as “a multi-year scheme that included establishing a non-governmental 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 US-defended Marshall Islands.”¹⁷ It was only through the convergence of the pandemic and US law enforcement efforts that the plan was thwarted.¹⁸

In November 2020, Yan and Zhou were arrested in Thailand and subsequently extradited to the United States to face charges of conspiring to violate the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), violating the FCPA, conspiring to commit money laundering, and committing money laundering.¹⁹ Yan and Zhou each pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to breach the antibribery provisions of the FCPA, resulting in Yan receiving a 42-month sentence and Zhou a 31-month sentence.²⁰ As part of the plea bargain, the United States relinquished the opportunity to pursue the case at trial, which could have served as a potent deterrent. This also meant that, by the spring of 2024, both Yan and Zhou had completed their sentences and had been deported back to the RMI, where they are currently at liberty.

These events in the RMI epitomized a classic braided attack. Initially, the approach appeared ostensibly commercial, with the creation of an autonomous economic zone, RASAR, in an area yearning for development. Secondly, the commercial aspect aimed to achieve the strategic objective of establishing a “country-within-a-country,” providing the PRC with a platform to undermine

¹⁷ “ERO New York City removes noncitizen aggravated felon to the Marshall Islands,” US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 27 April 2023, <https://www.ice.gov/>.

¹⁸ Mike Koehler, “Yan Sentenced To 3.5 Years for Marshall Islands Bribery Scheme,” *FCPA Professor* (blog), 17 May 2023, <https://fcpaprofessor.com/>.

¹⁹ “US Attorney Announces Extradition Of Two Defendants Charged With Bribing High-Level Officials Of The Republic Of The Marshall Islands” (press release, US Attorney’s Office Southern District of New York, 2 September 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/>.

²⁰ “Defendant Sentenced To 42 Months In Prison For Conspiring To Bribe High-Level Officials Of The Republic Of The Marshall Islands” (press release, US Attorney’s Office Southern District of New York, 16 May 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/>; and “Former Head of Non-Governmental Organization Sentenced for Bribing Officials of Republic of Marshall Islands” (press release, Department of Justice, 16 May 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/>.

Marshallese sovereignty, influence its ties with Taiwan and the United States, and execute other operations. Lastly, the braid was completed through criminal activities, exemplified by the bribery of government officials in the case of RASAR.

All these maneuvers were cloaked in layers of protective information operations, leveraging traditional news media, social media, social gatherings, trips to China, and more. These efforts were bolstered by a robust intelligence network that furnished China with valuable insights into whom to target and how best to do so.

The CNMI—China's Backdoor into the United States

Similar activities are unfolding within America's Pacific homeland. In the CNMI, since 2009, PRC nationals have been granted entry into the islands without visas, entering as tourists under a "discretionary parole" system. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese tourists constituted approximately 40 percent of all visitors, with some high rollers also visiting CNMI's PRC-affiliated casinos.

According to CNMI Governor Arnold Palacios, due to the need for economic development,

We turned to Chinese gambling, legalizing casino gaming on Saipan even after the venture previously failed on Tinian. An exclusive license was nevertheless awarded to a Chinese casino operation that has been mired in litigation and criminal investigation practically from the start...The Chinese casino on Saipan at its peak raked in billions of US dollars in monthly rolling chip volumes from just 16 VIP tables, outdoing even the glitziest casinos in Macau.²¹

This boosted the economy but also, according to Palacios, "was fraught with controversy—from human trafficking to birth tourism, labour abuse, money laundering, and public corruption."²²

Chinese individuals have been discovered attempting to illicitly reach Guam by boat, utilizing the US postal service to distribute illegal drugs, and illegally buying US driver's licenses.²³ Chinese organized crime constitutes an integral part of the

²¹ Quoted in Cleo Paskal, "Northern Mariana: Time to close China's backdoor into the U.S.," *Sunday Guardian*, 3 September 2023, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/>.

²² Paskal, "Northern Mariana."

²³ Alex Wilson, "Chinese citizens use Northern Marianas as illegal pathway to Guam, authorities say," *Stars and Stripes*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.stripes.com/>; "CNMI Customs confiscate \$700K 'ice' at post office," *Islands Business* (Fiji), March 23, 2022. <https://islandsbusiness.com/>; and "Bureau of Motor Vehicle Chief and PRC Citizen Sentenced to Federal Prison for CNMI Driver's License Fraud Scheme" (press release, US Attorney's Office, Districts of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, 18 December 2023), <https://www.justice.gov/>.

PRC's operations, engaging in bribery, enforcement, smuggling, blackmail, and various other illicit activities. While afforded a degree of autonomy in generating income and establishing networks, Chinese criminals operate under the implicit understanding that they must be of utility to Beijing when called upon. In accordance with China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, every Chinese citizen and organization is legally mandated to support the government's intelligence operations.²⁴

Consequently, the emergence of PRC-linked businesses in strategic locations lacking commercial justification warrants scrutiny. For example, the US Air Force recently disclosed plans to invest more than USD 400 million on the CNMI island of Tinian. Meanwhile, a Chinese-linked casino has just opened on Tinian's dual-use harbor, prompting inquiries into the choice of location and timing. Governor Palacios has requested federal government aid in probing corruption in the CNMI. However, progress has been slow, despite the potential for a handful of proficient investigators and assertive attorneys to furnish the CNMI with greater security than any number of C-130 transports could.

What To Do?

What is needed is a “block-and-build” approach, where malign Chinese influence is blocked while simultaneously building domestic economic and legal security. The United States must deter and defend against the PRC's political warfare with equal determination and intensity as it dedicates to preparing for potential kinetic conflicts. Neglecting to confront Chinese aggression in America's Pacific homeland, particularly in what can be deemed the crisis phase of the conflict spectrum, heightens the risk of succumbing to a *fait accompli*. This, in turn, would render any subsequent confrontation with the PRC more difficult and costly.

Given the advanced stage of the PRC's malign influence and gray-zone aggression in the western Pacific, it is prudent to assume that any major projects aimed at enhancing economic, political, or security autonomy (build)—particularly those reducing the island territories' and COFA nations' dependence on China—will be targeted by PRC agents and impeded through various tactics. Unless such targeting is blocked, it will be very hard to build.

One way to block Chinese coercion, influence, and bullying is to target the strand of the “braid” that bolsters their commercial and strategic leverage and grants the CCP an unjust advantage: corruption. Currently, there is seldom significant repercussions for accepting Chinese funding. Typically, there is no financial loss, forfei-

²⁴ PRC National Intelligence Law (as amended in 2018), trans. China Law Translate, 27 June 2017, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/>.

ture of assets, loss of status, or visa restrictions to the United States, among other consequences. The longer honest leaders and citizens remain unsupported, the more they are worn down, and their numbers dwindle. Furthermore, local investigators and prosecutors often encounter difficulties in prosecuting high-profile cases due to the close-knit nature of local societies.

Several measures warrant consideration, including conducting public investigations into CCP corruption and criminal activities in the FAS, Guam, and the CNMI by relevant US agencies and departments. This may involve endorsing the appointment of special prosecutors with specific mandates to investigate corruption. Additionally, there should be bolstered support for local institutions, such as Palau's National Security Coordination office, which play a pivotal role in domestic security coordination and enhancing security and defense collaboration with international partners, particularly the United States.

Overall, maintaining vibrant, robust, and comprehensively understood relations with the FAS is imperative, rather than treating them as periodic crises to be managed. The COFAs stand apart from any other relationship the United States maintains and serve as a gauge of the importance the US attaches to the Pacific Islands region as a whole.

Block and Build: Fisheries as a Case Study

Fisheries represent a sector where implementing a block-and-build strategy would yield mutual benefits for both the mainland United States and the Pacific Island territories and the FAS. China possesses a sizable fishing fleet, showcasing its dual-use capabilities, evident in how the fleet has been utilized to assert China's territorial claims in the Philippines and Japan. Furthermore, the PRC holds the notorious distinction of being the world's foremost offender for illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing every year since 2019.²⁵ As explained by President Surangel Whipps, Jr., of Palau, stopping Chinese IUU fishing is "very important because we know that—yeah, they fish, they may be interested in other activities . . . The type of fishing they do is so destructive . . . they'll just destroy ecosystems."²⁶

China will not stop cease such activities voluntarily and may already be leveraging its influence with Pacific Islands governments to undermine patrols and enforcement efforts. US Coast Guard (USCG) vessels conducting IUU patrols have

²⁵ Graeme MacFadyen and Gilles Hosch, *The IUU Fishing Risk Index: 2023 Update* (Poseidon Aquatic Resource Management Limited and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, December 2023), <https://globalinitiative.net/>.

²⁶ "The United States and Palau's Strategic Partnership: A Conversation with President Surangel S. Whipps, Jr.," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 17 July 2023, <https://www.fdd.org/>.

encountered challenges regarding permission to access ports in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, hampering their operational effectiveness.²⁷ In 2022, the Solomon Islands blocked all US and other naval visits to the country, with the exception of the politically expedient visit by the American hospital ship USNS *Mercy*.²⁸

Beyond maritime enforcement, the United States must devise a strategy to safeguard the implementation of any enforcement policies, including addressing local corruption and providing support to local governments resisting pressure from Beijing. This necessitates active involvement and support from the US government, involving intelligence sharing regarding corruption within local leadership and a comprehensive political warfare campaign, complemented by substantial economic measures, aimed at fostering an environment where IUU fishing operations are untenable.

Few countries, if any, can confront China unilaterally. Pacific Island territories and nations recognize the urgency of addressing IUU fishing, and they require practical assistance rather than mere reminders of the issue. Their limited resources hinder their ability to confront Chinese maritime aggression.²⁹ However, even in America's corridor of freedom, the primary tool for countering PRC gray-zone aggression, the USCG, faces significant challenges. To illustrate the disparity, while the USCG is endeavoring to patrol the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean west of Hawai'i, it possesses only approximately three medium-endurance cutters—with the possibility of deploying another one within the next year.³⁰ Additionally, it operates three fast-response cutters with shorter ranges—with the potential for four more to be received and deployed soon.³¹ In essence, there are at most seven USCG vessels tasked with covering the entire western Pacific. This constitutes a formidable task for such a limited fleet, especially considering that some ships will inevitably be in port at any given time. To put it into perspective, it is akin to patrolling the entire United States with just seven police cars, each traveling at a speed of 30 miles per hour. Without the capacity to intercept, search, and detain, it is akin to observing a shoplifter (if they do not spot you first) without intervening.

²⁷ Cleo Paskal, "The US is blocked from ports in PRC-Influenced Solomons, Vanuatu," *Sunday Guardian*, 4 February 2023, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/>.

²⁸ Benjamin Felton, "Solomon Islands Blocks All Naval Port Visits After U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Denied Entry," *USNI News*, 30 August 2022, <https://news.usni.org/>.

²⁹ *The Pacific Security Outlook Report 2022-2023* (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum, 2022), <https://pacificsecurity.net/>.

³⁰ Gidget Fuentes, "Coast Guard Moving Cutter to Pacific as Regional Missions Expand," *USNI News*, 15 February 2023, <https://news.usni.org/>.

³¹ "US Coast Guard Asks for Four More Cutters for Indo-Pacific Missions," *Maritime Executive*, 28 March 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/>.

Expanding the toolkit entails recognizing US military support for countering illegal fishing operations in the FAS as an activity integral to these nations' national defense, for which the US bears responsibility under the COFAs. US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) can address the issue accordingly, particularly considering the dual-use nature of the PRC fishing fleet. Furthermore, established methods exist for dual-flagging US Navy ships for law enforcement duties, should the commander of USINDOPACOM opt to do so. USCG legal detachments routinely deploy on Navy vessels to combat the influx of illegal drugs into the United States. Upon encountering a suspected drug runner, the Navy ship is "re-flagged" as a USCG vessel, enabling the Coast Guardsmen to lawfully conduct law enforcement activities in support of US homeland defense policies.³²

Viewing IUU fishing through the broader lens of homeland defense, rather than aiming to apprehend every IUU vessel, permits asymmetric application of penalties. For instance, given that most IUU fishing involves Chinese vessels, the United States could apply financial and economic pressure on other Chinese entities associated with the fishing industry. This may include targeting fish processing, fish-meal production, and the sale of frozen fish originating in China but marketed in the United States. That is the *blocking*. As for the *building* efforts should also encompass fostering fishing industries in the Pacific Island territories and the FAS, prioritizing the revitalization of the US fishing fleet and processing capability within US territories.

Bottom Line

At its very core, this represents a battle of systems: authoritarianism versus democracy, playing out in one of the world's most strategically significant regions. From Beijing's perspective, without exerting some degree of control over the central Pacific, the PRC cannot effectively project power and counter US influence.³³ Conversely, from the US viewpoint, without the ability to deploy across the corridor of freedom in the central Pacific, the United States faces heightened vulnerability. This underscores the critical importance of institutions that uphold democracy, such as a free press, independent judiciary, and free and fair elections—precisely the targets of PRC influence operations in the central Pacific.³⁴ As exemplified in

³² Sam Lagrone, "Destroyers Continue to Prowl 4th Fleet as Coast Guard, Navy Rack Up \$1B in Drug Seizures," *USNI News*, 2 July 2020, <https://news.usni.org/>.

³³ Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Lessons from the Pacific War: Implications of PLA Warfighting* (Washington: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2023), <https://csbaonline.org/>.

³⁴ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999), <https://www.c4i.org/>.

Solomon Islands, each country stands merely one election away from a PRC-proxy assuming power and dismantling democracy.³⁵ Without the survival of democracy and relatively honest and consensus-driven governance, little else can succeed. All efforts by USAID, agreements signed, or visits by Pacific Island Forum officials hold limited efficacy if authoritarian leaders beholden to Beijing hold sway.

The CCP has meticulously crafted a focused, well-funded, and resourced initiative aimed at undermining the sovereignty of Pacific Island nations to expand PRC influence across the region—seeking to achieve through political and legal warfare what Imperial Japan failed to accomplish through kinetic means. Should the CCP succeed, the outcome would mirror the centralized, oppressive, and environmentally and socially damaging system one finds in the PRC. As one senior Chinese official candidly conveyed to Admiral Timothy Keating, “You take Hawaii east. We’ll take Hawaii west.”³⁶ This proposition echoes sentiments reminiscent of Pete Ellis’ era.

We stand at a familiar crossroads. Hopefully, this time, we will honor the legacy of those who came before us by choosing the path of block and build now, rather than fight and die later. 🌐

Cleo Paskal

Ms. Paskal is nonresident senior fellow for the Indo-Pacific at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Washington, DC. She has testified before the US Congress, regularly lectures and moderates seminars for the US military, and has taught at defense colleges in the United States, United Kingdom, India, Oman, and elsewhere. She is currently working on a research project about national security coordination in the US Freely Associated States of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands.

³⁵ Kirsty Needham, “Solomon Islands votes to delay election despite opposition,” *Reuters*, 8 September 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

³⁶ Donna Miles, “China Requires Close Eye as It Expands Influence, Capability,” *American Forces Press Service*, 12 March 2008, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.