

# The Pacific's Strategic Blind Spot: US Indo-Pacific Command's Problem of China in the Western Pacific

A Monograph

by

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## Abstract

### The Pacific's Strategic Blind Spot: US Indo-Pacific Command's Problem of China in the Western Pacific

The United States has enjoyed a significant amount of influence in the western Pacific since the end of World War II. The foothold gained for the US military across the region has enabled US power projection throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Recently, China has been encroaching on US influence in the region as part of its expansion policy. To supplant the United States as the preeminent power in the western Pacific, China gained economic leverage over the Pacific island nations through predatory lending and increased diplomatic engagements with the regional leaders. US Indo-Pacific Command is receiving more attention as the nation transitions from the counter-insurgency operations across the Middle East into great power competition with China.

The operational environment is changing from the status quo that enabled the US military's freedom of movement, to one of competition across the Pacific islands. US Indo-Pacific Command faces solving the economic problems of the island nations through the military instrument of power. The challenge is to create incentives that attract allies in the region in the face of Chinese incentives that are enticing in the short-term. The United States can maintain its influence through expanding engagements like Pacific Pathways and finding ways to bolster other sectors of the island nations' economies, like the tourism industry.

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## Abbreviations

A2AD – anti-access area-denial weapons

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

COFA – Compacts of Free Association

CPC – Communist Party of China

FAS – Freely Associated States

FONOPS – Freedom of Navigation

FSM – Federated States of Micronesia

PLA – People’s Liberation Army

RMI – Republic of the Marshall Islands

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## Introduction

The competition between the United States and China has manifested itself in various ways throughout the past. Over the last three decades, China has sought a return to former greatness as the dominant power in the Asia-Pacific region. The foreign policy efforts of China have shifted from the “peaceful rise” policy of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to the more assertive “smile and take” policy of President Xi Jinping. The underlying factors pushing for this shift are the reunification of “Chinese” territories and the self-image China holds as being the “middle-kingdom” that is the center of the world.<sup>1</sup> Han-centrism characterizes interactions between China and nations on its periphery as the justification to do as it pleases due to the culture’s superiority over others.<sup>2</sup> In the context of competition over influence in the Asia-Pacific region, China has marketed itself and its economic power as a viable alternative to the United States. Still, many nations fail to accept their impending subjugation if China supplants the United States as the dominant power in the region.

The strategic focus on the US Indo-Pacific Command’s (INDOPACOM) area of responsibility atrophied due to the ongoing conflicts against Islamic extremists in the Middle East. This loss of focus on the Pacific enabled China to gradually erode US influence and create weapons systems directly targeting US military power within the region. Because the US military’s access to the region drives US influence, the military foothold in the region is critical to American prosperity in Asia. Given the limitations on China’s military power projection capabilities to predominantly the first island chain, the country has used coordinated efforts to leverage non-military influence over the western Pacific nations to limit the United States’ use of the region as a power projection platform. If China can marginalize US military forces in the

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine, *Modern China: Continuity and Change, 1644 to the Present*, Second. (New York City, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 78.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Friend and Bradley A Thayer, *How China Sees the World: Han-Centrism and the Balance of Power in International Politics* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, an imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 4.

second-island chain, it will complete the envelopment of US forces within the INDOPACOM region.

#### Statement of the Problem

The Compact of Free Association (COFA) is the agreement that governs the US relations with each of the Freely Associated States (FAS), offering the US military exclusive and secure access to the land, sea, and air routes of the region. The FAS is located north and northeast of Australia and the east of the Philippines and comprised of the independent countries, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). These states occupy an ocean area roughly the size of the continental United States.<sup>3</sup> The United States maintains its foothold in the Pacific through the COFA agreement.

The US military gained its foothold in the western Pacific by establishing air and naval bases, acquiring training spaces through the COFA agreement, and the ongoing security guarantee of the Bretton-Woods agreement. If China can limit US influence and freedom of maneuver, this opens the pathway for China to increase its aggressive actions and dominate Asia.

At this point, there is research evidence to illustrate the importance of the western Pacific to supporting US national interests. Still, the United States has failed to recognize the criticality of the situation entirely. INDOPACOM must find creative ways to provide solutions to the problems China is solving for the Pacific Island nations and alter the footprint of forces in the region. Without a cohesive strategy to reduce China's growing influence, the United States faces the genuine possibility of having a subordinate role to China in the Asia-Pacific region.

#### Research Questions

What is US Indo-Pacific Command's operational approach to counter China's expansion into the western Pacific region? What are the characteristics of the western Pacific operational

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 3, accessed January 3, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2973.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2973.html).

environment in terms of China and the United States' competing desired systems? What problems emerge from the competing interests in the environmental frame that INDOPACOM must solve?

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to assess INDOPACOM's operational approach to counter China's expansion into the western Pacific region. Through an examination of the environmental frame, it is apparent how vital access to the western Pacific is to the United States. Access and influence in the western Pacific enable the United States to project power into the broader Asia-Pacific region. Due to the western Pacific's distance from China and its closer periphery, it was not the primary focus area for INDOPACOM in the discussion of great power competition with China. Because of this oversight, it has waned in importance in the broader context of the US military's focus on counterinsurgency fights throughout the Middle East. However, access to the western Pacific is just as essential to project power into Asia in times of relative peace as it is in the event of a large-scale war. Access to the region allows the United States to maintain pressure on China by supporting regional allies and partners, enabling the United States to maintain the current favorable balance of power in the region. Examining China's actions on its periphery, and the various means the nation has used to gain influence in the region provides INDOPACOM insight into problems the command has neglected. The efforts to solve these problems aim at reducing Chinese influence and access. Setting these conditions in the western Pacific to preempt or circumvent Chinese actions allows US freedom of movement for any military options the national command authority wishes to pursue. Additionally, understanding China's perspective and its treatment of other nations provides insight for options to counter Chinese activity in other regions.

#### Significance of the Study

US control within the Pacific region has atrophied over approximately twenty years of the Global War on Terror. The US government made strategic choices regarding budgetary concerns, military capabilities, and economic policies not focused on great power competition

with a near-peer competitor. China's ability continued to grow unchecked while the United States concentrated efforts elsewhere in the world. The lack of attention on the competition with China led to a strategic gap and a severe challenge to the United States' status as an off-shore balancer. This monograph seeks to understand the differences in China's and the United States' vision for the western Pacific and identify the problems that must drive INDOPACOM's operational approach. The recommended solutions are areas where INDOPACOM can focus efforts to gain and maintain US influence and access within the region.

### Theoretical Framework

Since the signing of the Bretton-Woods agreement at the end of World War II, the United States has been the guarantor for the freedom of navigation throughout the global commons. This benevolence allowed countries devastated by war to focus on rebuilding their economies without having to dedicate large amounts of capital to building and operating navies to support international trade. However, as the United States became the only global superpower after the Cold War, it focused more on countering violent extremist organizations instead of great power competition. Meanwhile, China began the tactic of "salami-slicing" as the United States was distracted from power politics. The Chinese expansion is encroaching on Pacific areas that have historically been open-access due to the United States' role after Bretton-Woods.<sup>4</sup> The friction between China and the United States has risen as the two powers inherently disagree on the role China plays in the Pacific. China has taken non-military steps through diplomatic and economic engagement to counter the military access and influence the United States enjoys in the western Pacific. This study uses a framework of design to identify the environmental frame for both the United States and China within the western Pacific, and how China is attempting to change the environment to challenge the current system's validity. Utilizing the Pacific Theater in World

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Haddick, *Fire on the Water: China, America, and the Future of the Pacific* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 77.

War II as context, it becomes apparent how vital access to the western Pacific is in maintaining the United States' ability to project power into Asia. INDOPACOM must take steps to ensure US influence in the region does not diminish in the face of China's dream of controlling the Asia-Pacific region. These steps will require an adjustment to INDOPACOM's operational approach that will present points of contention between the United States and China. INDOPACOM must assess its problem frame to determine which problems must be solved and which issues are only mitigated through a concerted effort between US government agencies. The priority of effort will be how to use the US military instrument of power to solve problems in non-military arenas.

### Hypothesis

In the great power competition between China and the United States, INDOPACOM overlooked the western Pacific and focused on the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) modernization and the impact that created within the first island chain. China's encroachment of the western Pacific through non-military means went unnoticed until the strategic focus of the United States shifted back to great power competition in Asia. The encroachment presents a significant challenge to the US military status quo in the region. It threatens the US military's ability to conduct operations and freedom of movement within the region. By using non-military means to indirectly challenge the United States, and deliberate mechanisms to ensure economic dependency of the island nations, China can expand its regional influence and work to increase the operational reach of the PLA. INDOPACOM must find alternative answers to the economic development solutions China is trying to provide the Pacific nations. Solutions that do not come with the same negative repercussions as the ones China is offering. These solutions work to simultaneously garner closer ties to the US allies and limit China's expansion.

### Methodology

Using design methodology clarifies INDOPACOM's environment and enables identifying solutions to the identified problems of China's expansion into the western Pacific. A design methodology is applied by framing the western Pacific environment through the broader

context of the Asia-Pacific region and understanding the differences in the United States' strategic interest and China's strategic interest in the region. The tension between the competing desired states identifies the problem frame INDOPACOM must solve. The operational approach INDOPACOM takes is the solution frame, aimed at addressing or mitigating the identified problems created by the tension between the United States and China.

#### Organization of the Study

Five sections divide this research study. Section one includes the background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, theoretical framework, research questions, hypothesis, and methodology of the study. Section two defines the environmental frame, focusing on the US desired system for the western Pacific and explaining China's current actions as a means to achieve its desired system in the western Pacific. This section provides a strategic context for both China and the United States' actions in the region and the western Pacific's role in the larger struggle between the United States and China for access to the Asia-Pacific region. Section two also emphasizes the military importance of the western Pacific through the lens of the World War II Pacific Theater. Section three defines INDOPACOM's problem frame, identifying friction points that have allowed China to increase its influence in the region. Section four identifies potential solutions and provides recommendations for INDOPACOM's operational approach to the western Pacific.

## The Environmental Frame

### The FAS Physical and Economic Environment

Map of the Freely Associated States



Source: Provided to the RAND Corporation by the United States Department of State.<sup>5</sup>

As stated previously, the FAS are a collection of islands in the western Pacific. They are comprised of the independent countries of the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Their location contains sea lines of communication linking US military forces to Australia and Guam, and Guam to the

<sup>5</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 7.

Philippines. The area covers 3,473,751 square miles, and despite the small population numbers and limited natural resources, the region is crucial to the promotion of the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy.<sup>6</sup>

Each Freely Associated State has a distinct history, culture, political system, and economic trajectory. Still, within the United Nations, the voting records for the three nations rank as some of the most consistently aligned with positions taken by the United States.<sup>7</sup> The primary means of intergovernmental interaction with the United States is through the COFA agreement. The US Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs retains overall fiscal management responsibility for the US assistance to the FAS. At the same time, the US Department of State handles government-to-government relations. Economic assistance to the region is primarily in the form of grants and contributions to the Compact Trust Funds, individual trust funds for the three FAS member states. Other US federal agencies also provide national services and discretionary spending. However, the current construct of Compact Trust Funds is set to expire in the fiscal year 2023 and will change to a new disbursement system. The change to economic funding has caused points of uncertainty among the COFA states recently. After the fiscal year 2024, the Compact Trust will restructure, and disbursement of economic aid is anticipated to decline, creating budgetary shortfalls the FAS nations will not be able to cover.<sup>8</sup>

The Republic of Palau is the least populous nation in the FAS, with only 22,000 people. However, it has the most robust private sector economy based on tourism, which constitutes 42.3% of its annual revenue. The nation also has a per capita income of \$13,000 but receives foreign aid and federal programs from the United States, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan, totaling \$265 million annually. Palau is also one of the five nations in the Pacific region that recognizes

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<sup>6</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ix.



the Taipei government and not Beijing.<sup>9</sup> Palau's third-largest trading partner is the United States, with \$20M annually, followed by China with \$18 million annually. Chinese tourists equal approximately 50% of Palau's annual tourist visitors.

FSM is the most populous nation in the FAS, with 103,643 citizens.<sup>10</sup> The United States is FSM's largest trading partner just behind South Korea, with \$46 million annually. China is a close third with \$38 million, but after FSM signed a memorandum of understanding with China to join the BRI, the gap between the United States and China's trade will narrow.<sup>11</sup>

The RMI is the US military's most strategic partner in the region, hosting several bases to include missile testing sites and space observation and tracking sites. The Department of Defense has leased these locations through the year 2066 with the option to extend until 2086. RMI receives approximately \$21 million per year in funding, and the total funding reaching \$1.5 billion before renegotiation occurs.<sup>12</sup> FSM's government, and specifically its president, has received a high level of attention from Beijing recently in efforts to bolster diplomatic relations with the country.<sup>13</sup>

#### US Strategic Guidance from the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy

The National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy are two high-level policy documents that shape the direction of US interests. Four pillars are the basis of the National Security Strategy: protect the American people, homeland, and way of life; promote American prosperity; peace through strength; and advance American influence.<sup>14</sup> The interests the pillars drive are guideposts to the implementation of the national instruments of power. The

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<sup>9</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence.*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>14</sup> Donald J. Trump, "National Security Strategy" (The White House, December 17, 2017), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

National Defense Strategy focuses on the use of the military instrument of power and how that interplays with other instruments of power. The line of effort in the National Defense Strategy that directly applies to the Asia-Pacific region and specifically the western Pacific is strengthening alliances and attracting new partners.<sup>15</sup>

The pillar to protect the American people, homeland, and way of life merges the economic and security interests of the United States. From a military interest, the COFA provides a “super-highway” to connect forces in Hawaii to power project into the Asia-Pacific theater.<sup>16</sup> The COFA agreement also allows the US military to lease critical training space across the region and the ability to dictate which foreign militaries can operate within the region.<sup>17</sup> Also, the individually purchased rights for commercial access to the various nations’ economic exclusion zones (EEZ) drives the US economic interests in the region. The total annual trade is worth \$1.6 billion and ranks the United States as the western Pacific’s sixth-largest trading partner. Finally, the struggling economic situation in the region, specifically Samoa, is concerning to the United States. The island nation is the gateway to Australia’s east coast and has come under increasing economic pressure from China to repay loans for economic development. The inability to repay the loans provides China economic leverage over the Samoan government. The predatory lending to depressed economies of the Pacific island nations places China in a position of advantage to exert greater influence.<sup>18</sup> With the influence and leverage China is gaining, it becomes difficult for the United States to maintain the status quo. Maintaining the status quo in the region is a US military priority. The military foothold enables the US access across the entire Asia-Pacific

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<sup>15</sup> Department of Defense Headquarters, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” January 19, 2018, 5, Accessed October 10, 2019 <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Grossman et al., *America’s Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence.*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, *China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report (Washington DC: US Government Publishing Office, June 14, 2018), 2.

region. Economically the status quo is significant because it provides a means of influence and access to Asian markets, which are the US economic interests in the region.

Promoting American prosperity is a change from previous administrations' policy documents that focused on liberal-democratic ideals and held American prosperity as a byproduct of that system. The current administration's policy has seen a pull-back from multilateral trade partnerships, like the Trans-Pacific Partnership, into more bilateral trade agreements under the "principled realism" umbrella. The attempts to restore faith in the "American economic model" has had an effect that leaves some island nations in the region concerned about the United States' commitment to the region.<sup>19</sup> In an attempt to strengthen the relationship between the FAS and the United States, President Trump hosted all three leaders of the FAS nations at the Whitehouse to discuss issues within the region and to ensure strong diplomatic ties remain open. The historic event demonstrates the United States' commitment to the region.<sup>20</sup>

To maintain peace through strength, the third pillar of the National Security Strategy, the western Pacific, and the COFA nations are undoubtedly vital. Having access to the region enables US military power projection that is essential to sea and air control. The area contains multiple airfields suitable for use by US military aircraft, and many of the islands include lagoons deep enough to support larger ships for the movement of personnel and equipment.

Additionally, the area is a critical component for military exercises to maintain readiness and for conducting freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS), ensuring open access to the global commons for all commercial traffic. Nevertheless, the most critical aspect of the COFA agreement is the exclusive rights the US military enjoys, and the ability to determine which foreign militaries can operate in the COFA region.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Trump, "National Security Strategy," 17.

<sup>20</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.

The fourth pillar, advancing American influence, combines efforts from all the instruments of power. Across the whole-of-government, diplomatic, information, military, and economic initiatives are underway to reposition the United States at the forefront of the international order in the Pacific. Contrary to the Chinese narrative, “the United States has never pursued a strategic objective of becoming a hegemon of Asia.”<sup>22</sup> A multi-polar region is acceptable, given that it does not erode America’s influence gained. To ensure that erosion does not happen, maintaining US commitments to its regional partners, such as Taiwan, is critical.<sup>23</sup> As the United States rebalances its focus to the region from other areas of the globe, its position as an offshore balancer provides opportunities to maintain access are available. The key to maintaining that balance is to have regional nations join together to create a coalition strong enough to counter, or bandwagon against, China. Through force-projection from regional facilities on Asia’s periphery, the United States can maintain regional diplomatic and economic influence.<sup>24</sup>

The National Defense Strategy focused on reforming the Department of Defense to operate effectively within the context of great power competition. The “increasingly complex global security environment, characterized by overt challenges to the free and open international order and the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations,” has all but eliminated unilateral US action.<sup>25</sup> The integrated nature of the world and global security commitments precludes the US military from the capacity of taking unilateral action against a strong competitor like China. This complicated situation forces the United States to operate in

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<sup>22</sup> Godwin, “China as a Regional Hegemon?”, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 96; *ibid.*, 99; The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, May 2015), accessed October 10, 2019, [english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm); Godwin, “China as a Regional Hegemon?”, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Headquarters, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America,” 2.

coalitions and drives the demand to maintain existing alliances and attract new partners. In today's world order, sovereign nations decide if and with whom they align themselves. The fluidity of alliances is similar to the constructivist framework that facilitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s and early 1990s. When national leaders decide that the interests of their country no longer align with the current alliance construct, either the alliance structure changes or the alliance members leave to seek a more advantageous solution.<sup>26</sup> The subjective nature of alliances is the driving factor in determining the motivations of the members. One motivation the US military provides is the security guarantees to its partners; this is the reason the National Defense Strategy places expanding partnerships and building alliances as a significant line of effort. In the hopes that by maintaining its promises, the United States can attract other nations with which to ally.

#### US Strategic Interest in the western Pacific

The recent repositioning to the Pacific is a new manifestation in the great power competition between the United States and China. Since the culmination of World War II and the signing of the Bretton-Woods agreement, the United States has relied upon the international order created upon Western liberal-democratic ideals. This international order survived the tumultuous tensions of the Cold War and has morphed to be synonymous with "American ideals." However, China, as a strategic competitor, has begun to challenge the current international order in the Asia-Pacific region, offering an alternative to nations who want to explore other options.

China has repeatedly pushed the narrative that they are a nation seeking cooperation and opposed to hegemonism. At the same time, China accuses the United States of maintaining a "cold war mentality" and using power politics to undermine the authority of international institutions seeking to maintain peace and stability. The accusation of US hegemonism is the crux

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<sup>26</sup> Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966), 174.

of China's argument for its alternative option to the current world order. It is the justification for their actions as a rising power. By definition, a region with two great powers cannot have a hegemon because a hegemon would be able to dominate both the continental and maritime components of Asia, which the United States cannot accomplish. Neither China nor the United States can achieve hegemony status in Asia due to the substantial cost of expansion and weakening of both nations.<sup>27</sup> Though it is undeniable that the United States enjoys a significant power position in Asia, seeking anything other than a robust offshore balancer is a stretch. The US interests in the Asia-Pacific region all stem from the "principled realism" of the National Security Strategy. This section seeks to assess the US interests in the western Pacific region through the lens of the National Security Strategy's four pillars and the applicable tenets of the National Defense Strategy. Additionally, seeking to understand the specific interests of the US military in the western Pacific and how the geography is so vital in the event of a large-scale Pacific war.

The COFA agreement helps shape the United States' interest in the western Pacific and its environment. The objectives for the region are sustainable economic development and regional stability, supporting regional organizations, and addressing environmental, transnational crime, and fisheries challenges.<sup>28</sup> The COFA agreement forms the bedrock for interaction and US influence. The region's economic concerns center around the limited natural resources and developing broader tourism industry. The vast fisheries located within the island nations' economic exclusion zone are the primary resource of the island nations, and the United States has major commercial fishing interests in those fisheries it accesses by purchasing fishing rights through the individual Pacific island nations.<sup>29</sup> While the United States edges out China in trade

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<sup>27</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 95-86.

<sup>28</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9.

partnership with the FAS, the United States lags behind China as the sixth overall trading partner across the western Pacific region. The \$1.6 billion annual trade with the Pacific islands leaves the United States with a considerable margin to improve its influence.<sup>30</sup>

The US military interests, again center around the COFA agreement and the benefits that agreement provides. In addition to the COFA agreement, Micronesia is home to several US territories. Micronesia contains US training areas and regional military bases. Guam's location in Melanesia is the source of US power projection into the greater Asia-Pacific region.<sup>31</sup> In the context of lessons learned from World War II, power projection across the Pacific Ocean is a daunting task.

The generation of combat power and then projecting that power across the vast distance of the Pacific Ocean to gain a foothold is costly in terms of time, resources, and lives. The United States relies on the COFA agreement to mitigate these power projection costs and solidify its presence in the Pacific region. The island of Guam is home to the majority of the US military's permanent footprint in the western Pacific. However, Andersen Air Force Base only hosts rotational strategic bomber units for periodic deployments. The permanent units are predominately combat support units, unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft, mobility operations for aerial port activities, and a US Navy helicopter squadron. The combat units that deploy to the island are on a rotational basis for military exercises and regional presence. The base provides the ability to move US combat assets into and out of the theater without causing diplomatic issues or fear of retaliation by China. The fear of retaliation against regional nations for hosting US forces and the geostrategic proximity of periphery nations to

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<sup>30</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3; Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?", 83.

China is a factor in the level of partnership between the United States and Asian nations within China's missile range.<sup>32</sup>

The ability to utilize the area and determine which militaries have access provides the US military insulation from other countries seeking to expand their power in the Pacific.<sup>33</sup> The military bases and training areas utilized by all branches of the US armed forces, and allow the US military to rapidly expand the footprint of military forces in the region to project power further into the Asia-Pacific from the East. The strategic testing sites and space control facilities on various locations among the islands enables the use of strategic US assets without interference from other geopolitical competitors. The COFA agreement and access to the FAS provide the ability to rapidly generate combat power, such as strategic bombers, naval surface vessels, and subsurface vessels. The rapid power projection provides continued pressure on China and supplements the US forces within the first island chain.

The facilities in Japan and on the Korean peninsula are at a much higher danger level in a large-scale war with China, so access through the second island chain adds to the US military's survivability in large-scale combat.<sup>34</sup> Losing this foothold leaves few strategic off-ramps in conflicts with China. If the United States loses its access to the western Pacific, fighting to regain that access in a high-intensity conflict leaves few strategic off-ramps to de-escalate the fighting. Keeping US forces out of the region may not be enough pressure on China to quell the fighting.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Dandan Li, "China Says US Allies Face Retaliation If They Host Missiles," *Bloomberg News*, August 6, 2019, sec. Politics, accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-06/china-says-u-s-allies-face-retaliation-if-they-host-missiles>.

<sup>33</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 18; Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 96.

<sup>34</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 17; Zicheng Ye, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*, trans. Steven L Levine and Guoli Liu (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 123.

<sup>35</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 96; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 19.



The risk to US military operations based out of the FAS has been increasing due to Chinese influence and their political footholds gained in the region. The concern that the Compact nations might end their participation should be a concern to US leaders. Issues like slow payment of promised funds and the increase of indebtedness or dependence on China for economic purposes present real vulnerabilities. Over time, the economic growth of China in the western Pacific through tourism and lending to FAS leaders is a significant threat to the United States' ability to continue military operations from the region without Chinese interference.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to basing and training areas, the FAS citizens also serve in every branch of the US military at a higher per capita rate than American citizens. As an advantage of the COFA, FAS citizens are also able to travel to and reside in the United States visa-free.<sup>37</sup> The challenges to the US military in the region are a combination of constraints placed on INDOPACOM from congressional and budgetary oversight, and from the capabilities the PLA can employ against US forces. Therefore, without a regional foothold to project power into the Asia-Pacific, China has the potential to become more aggressive, similar to its actions before September 11, 2001.<sup>38</sup>

#### A2AD Threat, Taiwan, and the Continued US Support to Pacific Region Allies

Within the Asia-Pacific region, one of the most strategically important partnerships is the support of Taiwan's separation from China. The increases in China's A2AD capabilities have raised the stakes for US support, even in the event of an unprovoked attack.<sup>39</sup> China has continuously worked, through non-military pressure, to reduce Taiwan's diplomatic space. Two of the FAS nations, Palau and RMI, still recognize the Taiwanese government instead of Beijing,

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<sup>36</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 18; Ibid., 17.

<sup>37</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Malik J. Mohan, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses After 11 September," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 2 (August 2002): 254, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798597?seq=1>; *ibid.*, 255.

<sup>39</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 100.

despite their growing economic ties to Beijing. The countries have come under continued economic pressure from Beijing to switch the island nations' diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. China charges higher port fees for Palauan, and RMI flagged ships in Chinese controlled ports, and bans travel to the island nations through state-sponsored travel agents as non-approved destinations for Chinese citizens.<sup>40</sup> The United States must continue to support Taiwan. The support is a powerful signal to the rest of the region of US commitment. To illustrate the growing diplomatic pressure China is using to reduce Taiwan's diplomatic space, in May 2017, Fiji closed offices in Taiwan after a state visit to Beijing and foreign investment from China. In February 2018, Papua New Guinea withdrew its recognition of Taiwan after increasing Chinese economic influence. The nations of the region judge the strength of US promises by their commitment to Taiwan under the increasing pressure. As a strong democracy for the region, Taiwan is vital to international security, and to the current US allies and partners in the region, signaling support is culturally significant. Recently, the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, decided to end the security pact with the United States due to increased Chinese influence and strategic US miscalculations on the relationship.<sup>41</sup> Keeping and attracting allies is vital in the face of growing overtly nationalist sentiment from China. To maintain their grip on power, the CPC leaders are beholden to the nationalist influence of domestic politics. The nationalism bolsters the CPC legitimacy and therefore requires the government to remain tough on Chinese sovereignty issues, creating an increasing number of situations that place the United States at odds with China. The friction between the United States and China is one of great power competition, and the

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<sup>40</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 20; Jim Gomez, "Philippines Notifies U.S. It's Pulling Out of a Major Security Agreement," *Time Magazine* (Manila, Philippines, February 11, 2020), accessed February 27, 2020, <https://time.com/5781892/philippines-us-visiting-forces-agreement/>.

diplomatic requirements to support the alliances are just as important as the military support in gaining and maintaining partnerships.<sup>42</sup>

#### Recent History's Impact on the U.S.-China Strategic Relationship

Before the events of September 11, 2001, the United States was losing influence in the Asia-Pacific region as China's rise seemed to be supplanting its position. In April 2001, a US spy plane collided with a PLA Air Force jet near Hainan Island, resulting in an apology from then-President George Bush to President Jiang Zemin. The apology fed the constructivist idea in the region that the United States is not as powerful as it once portrayed, and China was the new power in Asia.<sup>43</sup> At the time, China was heavily focusing on infrastructure and hydrocarbon projects across the region. It established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as a significant partnership with Pakistan. The growing Chinese economy gained the nation a significant role as the predominant power in Asia and provided a basis to expand its international status. China attempted to portray itself as a responsible international actor but had begun to emerge as an aggressive nation within the region.<sup>44</sup>

Immediately after the events of September 11, 2001, China was among the first nations to publicly support the United States but sought to work through existing international organizations and the United Nations Security Council to tackle the Islamic extremist problem. As power

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<sup>42</sup> Robert D Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 436; Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, "China's Nationalist Heritage," *The National Interest*, January 2, 2013, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/print/article/chinas-nationalist-heritage-7885>; Ye, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*, 124.

<sup>43</sup> Mohan, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses After 11 September," 255.

<sup>44</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 88; Mohan, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses After 11 September," 254.

transitioned from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao, China hoped to use the US Global War on Terror as a platform to internally strengthen the CPC's hold on power against internal opponents.<sup>45</sup>

However, the result of the United States' rapid power projection into Asia left China with significantly reduced influence across the continent. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, acknowledged in 2002 that "Asia had become a region susceptible to large-scale military competition and the United States needed to improve access to regional facilities and its capability to conduct long-range operations with minimal theater support."<sup>46</sup> Before China could mount significant resistance to the US military footprint in Central Asia, the United States emerged more united and stronger with the international community. China's perceived US military expansion and presence around its periphery in Asia as part of a strategy to "encircle and contain China," feeding the Chinese nationalist narrative that the country needed to assert its place in the region.<sup>47</sup> The continued polarization between the United States and China over issues of predatory lending, territorial claims over islands in the South and East China Seas, and human rights violations drove the two nations farther apart. China's behavior has continued unabated, even after unfavorable rulings from the international organizations China seemingly supported, which pitted the international community against China and placed regional countries in a strategically tough geopolitical position.<sup>48</sup>

#### The Importance of the Western Pacific for Access to Asia

The context of the Pacific Theater in World War II demonstrates how important the western Pacific region is to access the rest of east Asia. The critical factor for the context of

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<sup>45</sup> Mohan, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses After 11 September," 260.

<sup>46</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 90.

<sup>47</sup> Mohan, "Dragon on Terrorism: Assessing China's Tactical Gains and Strategic Losses After 11 September," 271.

<sup>48</sup> Jane Perlez, "Tribunal Rejects Beijing's Claims in South China Sea," *The New York Times* (Beijing, July 12, 2016), accessed February 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/13/world/asia/south-china-sea-hague-ruling-philippines.html>.

access to Asia is the tyranny of distance that is the Pacific Ocean. The distance as the crow flies from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo is approximately 300 miles farther than the distance from New York City to London. In terms of the movement of personnel and equipment from the continental United States into the Pacific Theater, it is nearly double the distance from the European Theater of World War II. Adding to the complexity, the terrain in the Pacific Theater consists of relatively small islands, and the approach for amphibious landings do not provide much in terms of military concealment to protect the forces landing on the beaches. These terrain issues prolonged the Pacific campaign and made capturing the fortified islands from the Imperial Japanese forces a costly affair for the Allies in defeating Japan.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of time, the war in the Pacific Theater was much different from the European Theater. Recruiting, training, equipping, and deploying troops from the United States slowed the speed that the United States could respond to the attack at Pearl Harbor and the overwhelming force the Japanese used to seize much of the western Pacific. The battles of the Pacific Theater at the beginning of the war between the United States and Japan were predominantly naval engagements that the Japanese Imperial Navy won. It was not until the Battle of the Coral Sea and the Battle of Midway that the US Navy was able to stop a significant advance from the Japanese Navy.<sup>50</sup>

The War Department knew that it would not be able to cover the distance of the Pacific and push Japanese forces back to Japan without a distributed campaign. The two-pronged approach led by General Douglas MacArthur and Admiral Chester Nimitz from the periphery of Australia and the South Pacific through Melanesia, Micronesia, and the Philippines to attack the islands of Japan. However, the time required to achieve victory in the Pacific was significantly

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<sup>49</sup> Harry A. Gailey, *War in the Pacific: From Pearl Harbor to Tokyo* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 143.

<sup>50</sup> John Prados, *The Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun* (New York City, NY: Penguin Group, 2012), 35; Gailey, *War in the Pacific: From Pearl Harbor to Tokyo*, 170.

longer than the European Theater's primary actions of the Normandy invasion to defeat Germany. US forces landed on Guadalcanal in August of 1942, eight months after the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>51</sup> It would be another seven months before the island was secured, and the US advance could continue through the Solomon Islands.<sup>52</sup> Admiral Nimitz's assault to take Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands took place in November of 1943, ultimately leading to US access into the Marshall Islands in May 1944. The seizure of this terrain enabled the construction of airfields that the US Army Air Corps used to attack Japan and support the leapfrog maneuver of US soldiers and marines to continue advancing closer to the islands of Japan.<sup>53</sup>

Once the Mariana Islands and the Marshall Islands were secured in 1944, and with the staging of equipment completed, US forces prepared to begin the assaults on Japanese territories, starting with the island of Iwo Jima in February of 1945. After the capture of Iwo Jima and the two airfields within 600 miles of Japan, the execution of the Okinawa invasion began in April 1945.<sup>54</sup> The Battle of Okinawa lasted from April 1 to June 21, 1945, and consumed a considerable amount of resources in terms of equipment, lives, and time, more than planners had originally expected.<sup>55</sup> When the Japanese finally surrendered after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, the war in the Pacific Theater came to a close.<sup>56</sup> General MacArthur said, after 1,364 days of bloody conflict, "The entire world is finally at peace. The holy mission has been completed."<sup>57</sup>

Significant casualties, equipment losses, and morale of the fighting men in the Pacific characterized the slow movement of Allied Forces from the Solomon Islands and the Marshall

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<sup>51</sup> Prados, *The Islands of Destiny: The Solomons Campaign and the Eclipse of the Rising Sun*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Gailey, *War in the Pacific: From Pearl Harbor to Tokyo*, 327.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 411, 421.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 494.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 497.

Islands to New Guinea, the Mariana Islands, and the Philippines before finally being able to attack Japanese territory. To put the cost into perspective, the total US population at the start of World War II was 129,200,000, approximately eleven percent, or 16,354,000 served between the European and Pacific theaters.<sup>58</sup> In the Pacific Theater, the victory cost a total of 55,600, killed or missing, 162,232 wounded, and 32,000 prisoners of war.<sup>59</sup> In a modern context, the total number of killed, wounded, and missing approximates the total population of Tallahassee, Florida, or Salt Lake City, Utah. In addition to the human cost, not including ground combat equipment such as tanks or trucks, the United States lost 4,533 aircraft, ten aircraft carriers, two battleships, ten cruisers, seventy-one destroyers, ten escorts, and fifty-three submarines. In contemporary dollar figures, the cost of the Pacific Campaign was \$4.1 trillion, which is eighteen percent of the current US economy.<sup>60</sup> With the wars across the Middle East, fighting another conflict this costly would place an enormous strain on the US economy and way of life.

The template for large-scale combat in the Pacific Theater of World War II has little similarities in fighting today's wars. The weapons systems from World War II, while lethal, were limited in ways current weapons systems are not. Primarily, the infosphere consisted of print media and radio, which had a marginal impact on the opposing side's forces or population. The world had yet to enter the space age, so munitions were limited by the distance the propellant could drive the round, and those rounds were not precise in today's terms. Finally, mission-type orders accomplished the majority of the command and control over distributed forces. After the initiation of battle, the large maneuver units faced limited coordination and requests for support. The robust command, control, communications, and computer systems that the modern US

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<sup>58</sup> John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 254.

<sup>59</sup> Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants*, 256.

<sup>60</sup> Doug Whiteman, "The Financial Facts You Never Learned About World War II," *Moneywise* (July 4, 2019), accessed February 25, 2020, <https://moneywise.com/a/financial-facts-about-world-war-ii>.

military relies upon did not exist. The capabilities of China to challenge the United States across all domains, simultaneously, is a critical vulnerability US forces will have to overcome in the event of a large-scale war in the Pacific.

Due to limitations through the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Agreement, the United States could not develop missiles with ranges between 1,000km and 5,500km. China did not endure these types of constraints, and the shifting strategic security environment forced a change in US policy and the withdrawal from the agreement.<sup>61</sup> China's military modernization focused on programs that would be able to range bases in the western Pacific, with the specific purpose of targeting areas of sanctuary and power projection for US forces.<sup>62</sup> Through advancements in intermediate-range ballistic missiles and intercontinental ballistic missile technology, China's missiles can reach the continental United States within thirty minutes.<sup>63</sup> In addition to the advanced missile technology, China has developed weapons to target US command and control processes such as anti-satellite technology, jamming, and other electronic warfare capabilities.<sup>64</sup>

Aside from China's development of kinetic weapons systems, the PLA is seeking to reduce the US military's operational space further using soft power. As part of the PLA expansion into expeditionary operations, China is seeking more significant military interaction and exchanges with western Pacific militaries and their personnel. Combined with the "forward edge defense" shift in PLA doctrine, it would suggest that Chinese strategists envision a more significant role for the PLA overseas. By using "cultural diplomacy" aimed at desensitizing

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<sup>61</sup> Haddick, *Fire on the Water*, 157.

<sup>62</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 100.

<sup>63</sup> Ian Williams, *More Than Missiles: China Previews Its New Way of War* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 16, 2019), accessed February 23, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/more-missiles-china-previews-its-new-way-war>.

<sup>64</sup> Sam J. Tangredi, "Anti-Access Strategies in the Pacific: The United States and China," *US Army War College Quarterly* 49, no. 1–2 (Summer 2019): 12; Williams, *More Than Missiles: China Previews Its New Way of War*.



populations to the presence of the PLA and a means to conceal any aggressive intentions, the PLA attempts not to draw attention to their actions.<sup>65</sup>

The US military's array across the western Pacific is well within China's various missile ranges. Additionally, the US Navy's surface fleet is vulnerable to anti-ship missile technology. The combination of China's advanced precision strike capabilities, its counter-space technology, and information warfare capabilities present a significant risk not only to forces within the region but those in the presumed sanctuary at their Continental US garrisons. The advantage the United States possesses is the COFA agreement and the authority within international law to grant or deny access to another nation's military. This authority allows for a "clear strategic line of communication" across the Pacific. Coupled with the continuous modernization of its military capabilities, technology, and doctrine, the United States can counter Chinese actions by maintaining a foothold in the region.<sup>66</sup> The double-edged sword of China's rhetoric remains challenging for the United States and regional nations to decipher. The Chinese military strategy speaks to the unlikelihood of large-scale war and trends towards a peaceful world. However, as China's military capabilities increase, they push the US military farther to the periphery due to the increased threat. With the vacuum created by the US military's retrograde, the PLA becomes more heavy-handed and belligerent towards weaker nations.<sup>67</sup>

The US Desired State for the Western Pacific

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<sup>65</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019" (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2019), 16; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 14; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 3; Ronald C Keith, *China from the Inside Out: Fitting the People's Republic into the World* (New York City, NY: Pluto Press, 2009), 143; Michael Barr, *Who's Afraid of China? The Challenge of Chinese Soft Power* (New York: Zed Books, 2011), 137.

<sup>66</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 18; Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 99.

<sup>67</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*.

The United States' desired state for the western Pacific primarily seeks to maintain the access gained through the COFA agreement and a reduced dependency of the Pacific island nations on China for economic development. The US military's access drives the other US instruments of power in the region by maintaining pressure on China to conform to the current international order. The modernization of the PLA's A2AD capabilities threatens the US military's ability to project power further into the Asia-Pacific region by placing assets and personnel at higher risk. The economic dependencies Pacific island nations have developed with China continue to complicate the delicate balance of American and Chinese influence in the region. The increasing Chinese influence threatens long-term access for the United States.

#### China's Strategic Goals

To fully understand the system China operates under, one must understand the context and the driving direction of the nation's strategy. The goal to realize "National Rejuvenation," as presented by President Xi Jinping to the nineteenth Party Congress, is the basis of China's national narrative. The narrative focuses on the reunification of all Chinese territories and regaining China's position as the preeminent regional power.<sup>68</sup> "It is a Chinese Dream of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>69</sup> National Rejuvenation has morphed to encompass whatever the needs of the CPC are at the time.<sup>70</sup> Recently, regaining its preeminent power has translated to seeking control over the Asia-Pacific region as a means of national prestige and access to natural resources to feed China's enormous economic requirements.

#### Chinese Self-Perception and its Place in the World

To understand China's behavior when interacting with other nations, understanding how China sees the world and its role in the world is essential. China sees itself and the surrounding

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<sup>68</sup> Ye, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*, 15.

<sup>69</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>70</sup> Newmyer Deal, "China's Nationalist Heritage."

geographic areas as a series of four concentric rings of threats. The center ring is China itself, which it views as critical to the security of the Chinese system.<sup>71</sup> The second ring is the fourteen nations that border China, five of which it has fought wars within the modern era. The third ring is the six geopolitical regions around China, and the fourth is the rest of the world.<sup>72</sup> The notion of China being at the center of the world has roots in ancient China. They viewed their country as the "middle kingdom" and colored all interactions with non-Chinese as civilization interacting with barbarians. The perceived superiority anchors any cultural contact as lesser and "socially endorses China to take whatever actions they desire. Understandably, this forces the nation to interact within the international system, but explains their behavior with other nations on their periphery."<sup>73</sup>

Modern China has claimed Han victimization since before the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained power. This victim mentality has shaped China's acceptance of the international order and explains why the government picks and chooses the rulings from international organizations that are in their favor.<sup>74</sup> These Chinese actions center around their simultaneous positive and negative self-image. Gaining global status is an overriding policy objective but measured in terms of disrespect to the nation. Using national humiliation as the socialization framework pushes the population in line with the national narrative and generates internal support.<sup>75</sup>

The roots of China's nationalism date back to the turn of the twentieth century to Sun Yat Sen and his contemporary intellectuals.<sup>76</sup> That nationalism has morphed into the Han-centric

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<sup>71</sup> Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>73</sup> Elleman and Paine, *Modern China*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>75</sup> Callahan, *China the Pessimist Nation*, 23; *ibid.*, 59; *ibid.*, 152.

<sup>76</sup> Newmyer Deal, "China's Nationalist Heritage."

hyper-nationalism of today, driving the symbiotic reinforcement of the CPC's influence over the domestic population. Reactions from the government and population center around the perceived role of China and the international responses or limitations to that cultural space forms the basis of Chinese foreign policy. This policy explains how China's interactions with the western Pacific nations and the expansion of its sphere of influence focuses more on China's international interests and less on overall cooperation.<sup>77</sup> However, China views its rise and the actions taken to secure that rise as beneficial to their neighbors as well as themselves, because by making China stronger, it can benevolently care for other lesser states.<sup>78</sup>

#### Gaining Control in the Asia-Pacific Region

For the Chinese, gaining control over the Asia-Pacific region satisfies the desire to restore a previously held position before the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. During this time, China exercised authority over all the nations on its periphery and enjoyed a hegemonic status across Asia.<sup>79</sup> A principle change the CPC would like to make supporting their efforts is shifting the balance of international power towards an alternate international order and the need to reform governance systems. The goal to move away from current Western-dominated liberal democratic international norms simultaneously weakens US influence.<sup>80</sup> The primary driver to reduce US influence is to push the United States as far out of the Chinese threat rings as possible. From a Chinese perspective, the United States occupies all four of the threat rings. As the largest exporter and third-largest importer of Chinese goods, the United States has considerable influence in the innermost ring. The US military forces surround China with bases, ongoing operations, and partnerships on the periphery. China perceives the continued US presence in the last two rings as

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<sup>77</sup> Friend and Thayer, *How China Sees the World: Han-Centrism and the Balance of Power in International Politics*, 4.

<sup>78</sup> Ye, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*.

<sup>79</sup> Elleman and Paine, *Modern China*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019" (US Government Printing Office, 2019), 1.

the United States' strategic encirclement of China. China sees the control, counter, and prevention of US military activities in the western Pacific as a primary line of effort to achieving its regional power.<sup>81</sup>

The CPC seeks to transition China from what it sees as a developing nation into a fully modernized country by pursuing three mutually supporting lines of effort. First, international security, territorial integrity, and reunification efforts strive to regain territory lost due to a loss of global status. The second line of effort is combating massive unemployment and underemployment. Third, and arguably the most important to the CPC, is balancing economic development with political stability, and enhancing international prestige and influence.<sup>82</sup> Some academics argue back and forth about China's rise precipitating a large-scale war with the United States. However, a war would negate the economic gains China has pursued in the past two decades.<sup>83</sup> It is more likely that China will seek to secure those gains and allow the United States to access the region on Chinese terms. China's goal is to ultimately, "seek to engage the United States in a long-term competition aimed at supplanting US influence in maritime Asia."<sup>84</sup> The overarching goal is to create a system that is analogous to an Asian Monroe Doctrine, where China dictates the type of US involvement.<sup>85</sup> However, this is only plausible if China possesses the military capabilities to enforce such exclusion, necessitating this modernization and expansion of the People's Liberation Army and its military capabilities.

Military modernization has become a tenet in China's military strategy to facilitate a peaceful realization of the Chinese Dream. The PLA presented a plan "to unswervingly follow a path of peaceful development, pursue an independent foreign policy of peace and national

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<sup>81</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 84.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>83</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans," *Foreign Policy*, no. 146 (February 2005): 46–50.

<sup>84</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 92.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 96.

defense policy that is defensive, opposed to hegemonism, and power politics in all forms, and will never seek hegemony or expansion."<sup>86</sup> The mismatch between rhetoric and action has made China unpredictable to its neighbors and necessitated a strategy in the periphery nations of hedging against China's actions. They see China's growing power and choose to hedge against the worst possible outcome, the exclusion of Western countries from the region. If the United States were unable to project power into China's close areas, nations like Vietnam and Japan would be left to fend for themselves in the face of increased Chinese aggression.<sup>87</sup> China's vision for 2035-2050 is to realize the China Dream and become a strong socialist country with a "world-class military" who is prosperous and modern. China has undertaken its hedging strategy until it can fully achieve its goals. Due to US military strength, a confrontation would hold dire consequences for nearly every aspect of China. Therefore, the strategic moves made are to exclude the United States by applying as much diplomatic and economic leverage as possible.<sup>88</sup> This exclusion is the nexus of China's indirect approach throughout the western Pacific.

Increasing indirect efforts within the western Pacific serves multiple purposes to create a system of Chinese control across the greater Asia-Pacific region. In addition to reducing the US military's operational space, the western Pacific provides a means of diminishing Taiwan's diplomatic recognition and furthers the strategy of reunification of the island under CPC control.<sup>89</sup> China's use of indirect means to envelop the US military forces in the Asia-Pacific region to exercise greater control and strengthen its efforts of reunification of territories begins with eroding the benefits gained by the COFA.

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<sup>86</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>87</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?", 92.

<sup>88</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 1.

<sup>89</sup> Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Report (Washington DC: US Government Publishing Office, June 14, 2018), 6.

The security guarantees that the United States provides to the Asia-Pacific region directly benefits China. This security guarantee enables China to focus its efforts on providing nations additional assistance in the diplomatic and economic arenas instead of directly competing with the United States to provide security. Therefore, China seeks to exclude the United States from the other areas of competition while still maintaining an American security footprint in the region, but a footprint that China can control and challenge. Removing the US would force a rebalancing of regional nations against China. China seeks to reduce US influence and force the United States into a reactive posture, responding to Chinese military actions. To achieve the reduction of US influence, limiting US regional access is vital. The critical component of United States regional access is the western Pacific and the second island chain within the third ring of threats.

#### The Reunification of China's Territories

The reunification of what China perceives as its sovereign territories has been a dream of the nation since the time the CPC gained power. The reunification of territories along China's periphery is a critical requirement for China to increase its international status and secure its economic future. The two efforts the CPC has decided upon is the decrease of Taiwan's diplomatic space through making other governments dependent on China; and increasing military capabilities to the point that the nations who are supporting Taiwan would suffer significant losses in defense of Taiwan's independence. China appears to view Taiwan's diplomatic allies in the region not only within the context of its longstanding competition with Taiwan but also as an impediment to Chinese efforts to develop broader diplomatic ties and general influence.<sup>90</sup>

Increasing leverage over another nation through interdependencies is not a new tactic in international relations. It has been the reason many countries seek to disperse those dependencies

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<sup>90</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 23.

or avoid them altogether. China has focused on the western Pacific nations recently to create economic leverage. Disproportionate to their size, the western Pacific nations wield "considerable diplomatic influence in the United Nations."<sup>91</sup> In the diplomatic arena, seven nations recognize the legitimacy of the Republic of China. This recognition creates barriers within the existing international framework for China to fulfill significant national interest items of reunification for "lost" territories. Currently, the nations that recognize Taiwan are Kiribati, RMI, Nauru, Palau, the Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. These nations have come under increasing diplomatic and economic pressure by China seeking to gain a position of advantage over countries it sees as part of its "greater periphery" and a vital component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The pressure is part of China's strategy to restrain US political, military, and economic influence in the region by active diplomacy expanding China's regional and economic influence.<sup>92</sup>

Taiwan has lost five diplomatic supporters since 2016, due to direct pressure from Beijing on the international shipping markets. Countries with diplomatic ties to Taipei pay higher port fees, and China has acquired many of these "strategic fulcrum ports" around the world. Within the FAS, Palau and RMI's recognition of Taiwan have made them targets of Chinese diplomatic and economic pressure. According to Zhang Ying of the Beijing Foreign Studies University, with the rise of the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party into power, Beijing must "increase its diplomatic offensive and influence to counter Taiwan independence forces." Using economics and trade will "enhance [China's] influence and narrow the international living space of Taiwan independence forces. Several Chinese international relations and foreign studies institutes have cited the linkage between the BRI with the Pacific as a means of reducing Taiwan's international space. The economic bullying of Palau's tourism industry by China resulted in a \$42 million loss as a result of China banning state-sponsored tourism to Palau. This revenue loss is roughly equal

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<sup>91</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 7; Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 92.



to the entire economic aid package provided by the United States and Taiwan.<sup>93</sup> The Pacific island nations are baited into an economic trap, one that is inescapable without economic development that is independent of Chinese offerings.<sup>94</sup>

#### China's Military Modernization Efforts

To counter the United States' ability to safeguard Taiwan and the other territorial reunification, China has sought to advance its military capabilities to match those of the United States. China's drive to match the US military's capabilities has been an underlying motivator for President Xi and his vision for the PLA. The modernization of the PLA has come with significant economic investment to acquire new military technology from other nations or by in-house research and development efforts. The PLA's purpose is to target what China sees as the critical vulnerabilities of the US methods to wage war. The most significant developments have been to increase and extend the Chinese anti-access area-denial (A2AD) capabilities to encompass the near seas and the second island chain. The technological increases in missile technologies, clandestine submarines for anti-surface and land-attack missions, and increasing the lethality of the Chinese integrated air defense system fall under the "active defense" reactive posture of the PLA.<sup>95</sup>

It is unclear if Beijing will attempt to use these capabilities to exclude the United States from the region. However, it does seek to increase the risk calculus for US intervention in "internal Chinese affairs."<sup>96</sup> The indirect approach is China's military bedrock for seizing and maintaining power. The impediments to reunification each have a line of effort applied to them,

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<sup>93</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence.*, 38.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 26–32.

<sup>95</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 36; Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 92; *ibid.*, 97; Tangredi, "Anti-Access Strategies in the Pacific: The United States and China," 9.

<sup>96</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 97.

reducing Taiwan's diplomatic space, and gaining a relative advantage against the US military. However, the relative advantage can be as simple as reducing the US military's diplomatic space in the western Pacific.

Recent reports about Chinese interest in establishing a military presence in Oceania, combined with Chinese military activities in Southeast Asia, have given rise to concerns among other governments in the region that Beijing intends to go past robust diplomatic representation and “soft power” public diplomacy. Concerns about potential Chinese efforts to establish a military base in Fiji and Vanuatu demonstrate the PLA Navy’s goal to broaden its operational reach. While provisions of the COFA agreement prevent Chinese military presence without the concurrence of the United States from that region, neighboring countries in proximity to the FAS do not face similar restrictions.<sup>97</sup>

#### China's Desired System for the Western Pacific

Compared to other areas of geostrategic importance, such as the South China Sea, the analysis focusing on the FAS has been lacking. Traditionally, China has neglected this part of the Pacific as the director of the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Chen Xulong, puts it, “inconsequential to Chinese geostrategy and security in the last century.”<sup>98</sup> The region’s strategic location is astride major maritime pathways, holds an abundance of specific natural resources, and is a powerful political bloc in international organizations. These aspects all lend the western Pacific to grow in value to Chinese foreign policy as China’s interest and influence expand. The region is key to Chinese peripheral diplomacy.<sup>99</sup>

Chinese scholars view the region in terms of two threat types: nontraditional and encirclement by the United States and its allies. The nontraditional threats include political

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<sup>97</sup> Grossman et al., *America’s Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 24.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 30.

instability, piracy, terrorism, transnational crime, and natural disasters. The three-pronged approach of China to solve these threats revolve around diplomacy, military expansion, and private sector investments. China plans to continue balancing against the US influence through soft power means and as a way to relieve strategic pressure in the South China Sea.<sup>100</sup>

China's desired system for the western Pacific has multiple drivers and multiple benefits. The principal among them is the economic and diplomatic benefits the region provides. China is continually seeking access to natural resources, the increasing international prestige of restoring periphery control, and pushing China's largest competitor to operate under dictated terms. A supporting means to accomplish these ends is the expansion of the PLA into the western Pacific aimed at securing any gains China achieves.

China has made advances in recent years into eight nations across the Pacific region. These ties have come in the form of financial lending and the economic influence Chinese tourism has on local economies. The massive economic development project, BRI, has plans for the western Pacific as a part of the international trade network.<sup>101</sup> Brzezinski argues that it is the economy and the prestige of being a regional great power that is China's focus. However, with the result of US tariffs and a decrease in the Chinese economic growth rate, the focus on gaining ground in the western Pacific has increased. This focus is evident from the appointment of seasoned Chinese diplomats to the region.<sup>102</sup> China is able to pursue diplomatic and economic efforts by using the US security guarantee of the Bretton-Woods agreement to relieve them of the cost of securing its strategic lines of communication. This relief has enabled China to focus on building trade with the region. The nation is the largest trading partner of the Pacific Islands Forum with \$8.2 billion compared to the US \$1.6 billion in trade. This trade is primarily to RMI,

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<sup>100</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 30–34.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>102</sup> Brzezinski and Mearsheimer, "Clash of the Titans," 46; Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 6.

a COFA nation, and Papua New Guinea. The efforts in RMI offer the nation an alternative to the COFA agreement and reduced dependence on the United States. The Chinese investment in Papua New Guinea is to secure the abundant natural resources the island has for the Chinese economy.<sup>103</sup>

However, the reliance of China on the United States to provide the security guarantee to freedom of navigation will not last forever. These economic investments offer the PLA an opportunity to expand further into the region as a means to secure China's economic investments. Similar to the PLA's expansion in the islands in the South China Sea. China's military strategy cites the use of the PLA explicitly to be prepared for military struggle in all directions to advance its national strategic objectives.<sup>104</sup> Evidence of the impending expansion is the PLA Navy's attempts to secure basing rights in Vanuatu and Fiji, and the increased PLA Navy presence in the western Pacific under its banner of FONOPS.

Additionally, the expansion of Chinese monitoring and surveillance of the western Pacific waters with sophisticated intelligence collection assets, and increased presence in the FSM is evidence of China's desire to expand its blue-water navy capabilities out challenge previously uncontested US military space. The directive to the PLAN Marine Corps to increase its end strength to seven brigades and more than 30,000 personnel is an indicator China is setting conditions for a shift to expeditionary operations beyond its borders.<sup>105</sup>

The collection of these military actions supports China's economic development and control of the western Pacific. As previously stated, China's economy is its number one priority,

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<sup>103</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 7.

<sup>104</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*.

<sup>105</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 4; *ibid.*, 5; *ibid.*, 11; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 3; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 35.

and growing the China model for international order is a pillar of that priority. Expanding distant water fishing fleets into western Pacific waters is a ploy China uses to push its economic agenda. However, these fleets are significant contributors to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Additionally, predatory lending through the Asia Development Bank to historic US allies has created debt burdens that ensure nations are under Beijing's control.

Furthermore, and of significant concern, is Huawei's attempt to inject itself into the communications infrastructure in the region. The company had plans to install infrastructure, create a national broadband network, and run undersea telecommunications cables to connect the region with Australia.<sup>106</sup> These seemingly isolated incidents, when aggregated, are a concerning foreshadow of China's behavior towards other nations and the contempt it holds for periphery sovereignty. Over the past decade, China's lending has gone from nearly zero to over \$1.3 billion to the region. The various infrastructure and development projects within done through Chinese loans have created leverage over the Pacific island nations. The inability to repay the loans has the potential to limit Pacific governments' future expenditures on basic needs.<sup>107</sup> The lengths China is willing to go to establish itself in the center of the region's economy, and the threat it poses to the communications and independence of the various nations is alarming.

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<sup>106</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 9; *ibid.*, 12; *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence.*, 27.

## Problem Frame

The environmental frame highlighted the criticality to the United States of maintaining access to the region and how China's diplomatic and economic influence threatens that access. When taken at face value, the Chinese narrative of peaceful prosperity in the region is one that is difficult to counter. Individually, nothing the Chinese are doing in the western Pacific region is anything more than standard diplomatic and economic engagement. However, aggregated and with the understanding that China's true goal is to reduce US influence, Beijing's intent is clear: to undermine the United States' efforts within the region. Continued lack of US economic support may further erode the relationship built over the last seven decades between the United States and the FAS. If US support declines, China's cooperation will likely expand, filling the vacuum.<sup>108</sup> INDOPACOM must find creative ways to fulfill the economic needs of the FAS nations and reduce the economic dependency of the other Pacific island nations. Another problem set for INDOPACOM is finding ways to reduce China's military expansion into the region and to defeat the sophisticated intelligence collection and A2AD system China has installed in the region.

The economic situation of the western Pacific is one that is susceptible to many outside factors. Events like natural disasters in the region are uncontrollable. They have the potential to threaten the economic livelihood of all the Pacific island nations, due to their reliance on tourism and fisheries to sustain the economy. Additionally, these governments face challenges in maintaining basic infrastructure and services due to their relatively low gross domestic product and economies that are not diverse. China has been able to capitalize on the nations' need to build infrastructure and the desire to create new attractions for tourists with loans and other economic instruments designed to create dependency and influence. Meanwhile, China continues to grow

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<sup>108</sup> Grossman et al., *America's Pacific Island Allies: The Freely Associated States and Chinese Influence*, 38.

diplomatic ties with these nations by providing access to high-level Chinese diplomats, increasing the affinity for China's support and partnership.

The PLA expansion into the western Pacific closely ties to the economic and diplomatic influence China has gained in the region. The ability for China to increase capabilities from a continental power into a maritime power offers the PLA expanded operational reach and an increase to its expeditionary posture. China's military expansion would simultaneously work to challenge the US military as the preeminent power in the region and cause other Asian nations to reevaluate the level of partnerships with the United States.<sup>109</sup> Modernization efforts for China's space capabilities, missile technology, submarine fleet, precision weapons, information operations, and information technology systems present a clear threat to US military assets within the second island chain.<sup>110</sup>

Combining the influence gained across the region with the ability to project PLA capability into the outer threat rings, China can push the United States so far away from conflict zones that it becomes too costly to fight its way back in. Coupled with the speed of warfare in the information age, advanced vectors of attack being able to reach previously assumed sanctuary, and the simultaneity of tactical actions, an island-hopping campaign as in World War II would be untenable. The risk that skirmishes must expand into a large-scale regional or global war that would result in the weakening of the world's two biggest economies is high.<sup>111</sup> Further complicating matters, China attempts to maintain normal relations with the region's multilateral organizations and continues to push the narrative of peaceful coexistence and military-to-military

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<sup>109</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implication for the United States*, 4; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 35; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 61.

<sup>110</sup> Godwin, "China as a Regional Hegemon?," 96; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 62; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 5.

<sup>111</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 87; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 4.

exchanges.<sup>112</sup> The United States must grasp the complexity of the region's linkages to China due to the country's proximity to the western Pacific. The total exclusion of China is not a feasible solution in the region.

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<sup>112</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*; Office of the Secretary of Defense, "2019 China Military Power Report," 24.



## Analysis and Conclusions

### Solution Frame

The region is a strategically crucial piece in the great power competition between China and the United States. Every action INDOPACOM pursues will either increase or decrease the likelihood of a large-scale war between China and the United States. In the infosphere, INDOPACOM can capitalize on China's actions by publicizing the incidents where China's rhetoric and actions do not align.<sup>113</sup> The actions taken to combat the economic and military problems need to be understood in the context of the risk to force and the risk to mission.

INDOPACOM is in a challenging position, as a military organization needing to provide economic solutions, there are only limited options with which to directly influence the economic situations of the island nations. Expanding US military presence in the region accompanied by an injection of US currency into those nations through service members physically visiting the Pacific nations. INDOPACOM must partner with existing regional organizations and offer a better alternative than the choice China provides.<sup>114</sup>

The region lacks the infrastructure development that the United States enjoys. A solution is to utilize engineering capabilities within the Department of Defense in cooperation with host nations to build or improve infrastructure. The partnerships allow military units to hone their skills and gain experience for future use, teach local nationals skillsets for the sustainment of their nation, provides an influx of resources into the local economy, and allows for the creation of personal relationships with western Pacific citizens. Additionally, partnering US military units and agencies with local law enforcement teaches more effective methods of combating violations to the fisheries and other activities within the economic exclusion zones. US Army Pacific

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<sup>113</sup> Ye, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*, 206.

<sup>114</sup> Callahan, *China the Pessimist Nation*, 204; Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 3.

Command created a program, Pacific Pathways, in 2014 to partner with Pacific nations for this purpose.<sup>115</sup> The program provides a good foundation for expansion to include other component commands within the INDOPACOM area of responsibility. These military units do not have to reside within the Pacific theater continually. Continental US military engineering units from the Army, Air Force, and Navy would fit well within this construct and provide further relationship building between nations.

INDOPACOM must find a means to aid the tourism economies of the western Pacific because that sector has become so vital to the host nations. There are several recreation bases and resort locations sponsored by the Department of Defense throughout the continental United States and Europe. Applying this same model to the western Pacific, it is possible to create, coopt, or subsidize existing locations within these island nations for military personnel and their families to vacation. Over time, the increased traffic from US citizens and military personnel can create American cultural diplomacy, similar to the attempts made by China in the region.

Finally, it is imperative that the commander of INDOPACOM relay the criticality of obligated funds to the Pacific island nations. Recently, it took Congress until 2014 to provide funding obligated in 2010 under the COFA agreement.<sup>116</sup> Delays like this can deteriorate the relationships between the United States and the FAS, leading them to seek assistance from China.

The risk associated with these recommended actions does not increase the overall risk to the INDOPACOM mission. The only increased risk presented could be from publicizing information and locations of recreational bases or resorts endorsed by the US military. However, these pose no more risk to the force than current social media usage by military personnel and their families. The risk to mission is also negligible. Providing infrastructure or other construction

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<sup>115</sup> Jen Judson, "Pacific Pathways in 2020 Lead to Oceania," *Defense News* (October 14, 2019), <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/ausa/2019/10/14/pacific-pathways-in-2020-lead-to-oceania/>.

<sup>116</sup> Meick, Ker, and Chan, *China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, 18.

projects does mean the assets used are unable to be employed elsewhere in the theater. These resources are unlikely to be critical to a major operation or contingency plan within INDOPACOM. Additionally, the benefits gained from the host country, by the local population, government, and potentially military forces far exceed any opportunity cost of materials.

The military options for INDOPACOM are Flexible Deterrent Option heavy. Flexible Deterrent Options are overt military actions designed to send a clear signal to China that the United States will not relinquish its influence easily.<sup>117</sup> A means to expand that influence and create goodwill across the region is to increase the number of large-scale, multilateral exercises and military events in the region, especially, including non-FAS countries. Continuing to strengthen various ties with regional nations works to exclude China's ability to expand further into the region. Increasing the number of engagements between countries provides economic benefits to the host nation. US personnel traveling to the various locations before the events and those deployed for the events provide economic benefit directly to the population, creating a positive stimulation that offers an incentive to maintain the relationship. Additionally, extensive publicized exercises and multilateral events provide key-leader public affairs opportunities increasing the prestige and legitimacy of the islands' government leaders.

Multilateral exercises primarily facilitate greater interoperability and foster relationships between the military at all levels. These relationships can be invaluable in the event of large-scale war. Furthermore, the multilateral events signal to China and other regional nations, like the Philippines, the strength and support between all the COFA agreement nations is a significant force to challenge. The increased presence from the multilateral exercises and construction efforts offer the ability to increase the footprint of rotational combat forces to the region. The increase could be a combination of covert and overt action depending on the signal desired for China.

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<sup>117</sup> Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 2020), 84.

Finally, INDOPACOM needs to focus significant efforts to defeat the technological advancements of the PLA and to defeat the surveillance measures emplaced by China under the auspices of scientific research. Principally, INDOPACOM must defeat the underwater sonar devices aimed at submarine surveillance and mitigate the space surveillance managed from the Pacific control facilities that limit the US military's freedom of maneuver within the region. Utilizing a posture like the Cold War, INDOPACOM must focus on defeating surface and subsurface surveillance and anti-submarine control. Meanwhile, the US Navy must increase FONOPS through the region to deny China the ability to control the air and sea, and simultaneously challenge China's ability to project forces.<sup>118</sup> Lastly, INDOPACOM must increase the military-to-military interactions with the FAS and the non-FAS nations to build partner capacity and solidify the relationships needed to further US regional influence. Long-term systemic interactions like military exchanges, professional military education opportunities, and other small-scale security cooperation events enable more significant interoperability and understanding between nations.

The risks associated with the military solution do have the potential to increase tensions with China depending on their interpretation and how aggressing INDOPACOM pursues the options. China will most-likely perceive a larger footprint in the region as provocative, reducing the ability to control escalation. However, if the increased footprint pays a more substantial dividend by increasing regional partnerships, this will mitigate the increased risk. Higher interoperability between countries reduces the risk to mission by increasing the chances of victory in the event of future conflict. Simultaneously, the higher the interoperability between nations and the more forces INDOPACOM has in theater, the lower the risk to future operations in the Asia-Pacific region.

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<sup>118</sup> Tangredi, "Anti-Access Strategies in the Pacific: The United States and China," 13.

The United States' success in the Asia-Pacific region is dependent on maintaining access and the status quo of the western Pacific region. By ensuring regional stability and US influence remains intact, the United States can shape the Asia-Pacific region to reduce China's capability to alter the current international order. The means with which China conducts its actions follow the tenet of Sun Tzu and the eastern philosophy of winning without fighting. China may not seek direct military confrontation, but the evolution of its military to near-peer status with the United States and the extension of its operational reach is evidence China wants to be able to exercise its military strength if necessary. The primary Chinese strategy is to contest the United States by non-military means, potentially drawing a US military response. However, INDOPACOM's success in the future is reliant on the command's ability to shape the region, removing China's ability to place the command in a reactionary position. Taking non-traditional steps to ensure the economic viability of the region creates problem conditions for China to respond to and opens the aperture for INDOPACOM to utilize the US economic instrument of power, not only US military capabilities.

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