



America's Strategic Play in the Pacific

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While pundits and policymakers in Washington lock horns over a new strategic direction to counter China, the Department of Defense (DoD) is quietly working to blunt the People's Liberation Army (PLA) advance into the Pacific Ocean. The plan is simple: work with allies and partners throughout the Pacific region to maintain America's military presence and limit the PLA's operational capacity therein.

The Pentagon's strategy isn't a grand plan to collapse the regime in Beijing. Rather, it's a practical recognition of the PLA's growing capabilities and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) appetite for global domination, as well as the actual barriers that stand in China's way. Geography plays a key role here, for the Pacific Ocean is most unfavorable to China, hemming it in with successive land barriers, or island chains, as defense planners call them. Holding these island chains won't save America from great power competition, but it would certainly constrain China's advance. Conversely, bolstering these island chains undergirds America's power projection into the Indo-Pacific, where, unlike China, it plays an "away game."

What's at Stake

Obviously, deterring a Chinese invasion of Taiwan is of paramount importance, particularly with the recent uptick of PLA incursions into Taiwan's airspace and territorial waters. But beyond the first island chain (Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines) lies a collection of islands most Americans have never heard of: the Pacific Island countries that span across the ocean from Papua New Guinea to Polynesia. Many of these islands are small. Most are remote. Eighty years ago, they were a critical front in World War II but have since fallen out of the limelight. Today, however, policymakers ignore them at America's peril, for China is seeking to buy off these islands and, in so doing, breakthrough their defensive perimeter into the Pacific and stymie the U.S. military's access to East Asia.

The CCP views these islands through the prism of its broader geopolitical gambit – namely, to leverage its economic dominance and sideline the United States. Chinese cash has followed this recognition; from 2007 to 2017, Chinese trade with Pacific Island nations grew by a factor of four. By and large, Beijing is now the largest trading partner with these governments. China has also poured foreign direct investment into the region as it pulls more and more nations into its global One Belt, One Road initiative.

Beijing often wields its commercial heft to isolate Taiwan and pick off its alliances – thus weakening the first island chain. Indeed, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati broke off diplomatic ties with Taipei last year in favor of relations with the People's Republic of China.

In Micronesia, however, the U.S. has the upper hand.

Why These Islands Matter for America

East of the Philippines and north of Papua New Guinea, this Pacific region includes Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Marshall Islands – each of which have freely associated with the United States for decades under agreements called Compacts of Free Association (COFAs). These nations are not formal American territories, as each government conducts its own foreign policy, but all rely on Washington for federal assistance and government programs, from the U.S. National Weather Service and the Postal Service to the Departments of Homeland Security and Transportation. Washington has also underwritten billions of dollars of economic assistance to these island-nations since the 1980s in the form of grants and trust funds.

Even so, the relationship exceeds financial aid. Under the compact agreements with these nations (collectively the Freely Associated States, or FAS), the United States has an explicit defense obligation to defend the FAS from attack. As a former State Department official explained to Congress in 1998, "we are completely responsible for their defense and are obligated to defend them as if they were part of the U.S."

In return, America retains certain defense planning privileges in this region. Of particular importance is the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on the Kwajalein Atoll within the Marshall Islands. This site, which defense officials have characterized as a "national treasure," is one of the Pentagon's most valuable overseas bases. Its equatorial location supports critical space tracking capabilities like Space Fence, a ground-based radar that can detect space debris as small as a marble. Practically, DoD uses this precise tracking to protect American satellites that support critical functions like GPS navigation, communications, and missile tracking. In 2015 Air Force officials described Space Fence as "the most significant improvement in near Earth [space situational awareness] in nearly 50 years."

Beyond space domain awareness, the Reagan Test Site's unique location also supports America's nuclear deterrence. At 4,200 miles west of Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, Kwajalein is optimally placed to support both missile defense testing and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) testing. Defensively, this allows DoD to assess the Ground-based Interceptor (GBI) program, which is America's only defense against an incoming nuclear attack. Offensively, Kwajalein can track the targeting precision of America's nuclear missiles, specifically the Minuteman III.

But more important than one island or facility are America's right of "strategic denial" and its "defense veto." The former authority empowers Washington to deny foreign militaries access to the islands and their territorial waters; the latter constrains the FAS governments themselves from taking actions incompatible with America's defense obligation and authority.

Before China's military rise, government officials in Washington questioned the strategic payoff of America's relationship with the FAS. In 2002, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) suggested to Congress that Micronesia and the Marshall Islands "currently play no role in U.S. strategy in the Asia Pacific Region," and went on to note that even the Pentagon characterized the compact terms as obligations, not assets.

Today, in light of the PLA's growing capabilities, the DoD views these islands as one of its greatest strategic advantages against China. In the 2019 "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report," U.S. defense planners singled out "leveraging existing access in the Compact States" as a critical element of maintaining military access in the region. The same year, the U.S. Army conducted military exercises in Palau, and in 2020 Secretary of Defense Mark Esper reinforced the region's importance with a rare visit to the island.

Behind these words and actions lie dual strategic missions: denying sea dominance of the Pacific Ocean to the PLA and maintaining Washington's presence there. In the words of RAND analyst Derek Grossman, the FAS is "tantamount to a power projection superhighway running through the heart of the North Pacific into Asia, connecting U.S. military forces in Hawaii to those in the theater, particularly to forward-operating positions on the U.S. territory of Guam." This geographic reality makes the FAS and their territorial waters bigger than the sum of their parts. They are the crux of the second island chain.

What Comes Next

The Trump administration is currently working to extend economic assistance and programs under America's compact agreements with the FAS that are set to expire in 2023 for the Marshall Islands and FSM and in 2024 for Palau. Secretary Pompeo has visited the region to reinforce America's commitment, and President Trump has met with these leaders at the White House. Even so, Congress, and certainly the next administration, need to be ready to expeditiously process the negotiations when they conclude, for any delay could signal an open door to Beijing.

Until the United States settles on a broader grand strategy to counter the CCP, constraining China's geopolitical advance is crucial work that, in large part, depends on bolstering the second island chain. These tiny atolls are vital in the broader great power competition now unfolding between Beijing and Washington. America must hold the line.

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