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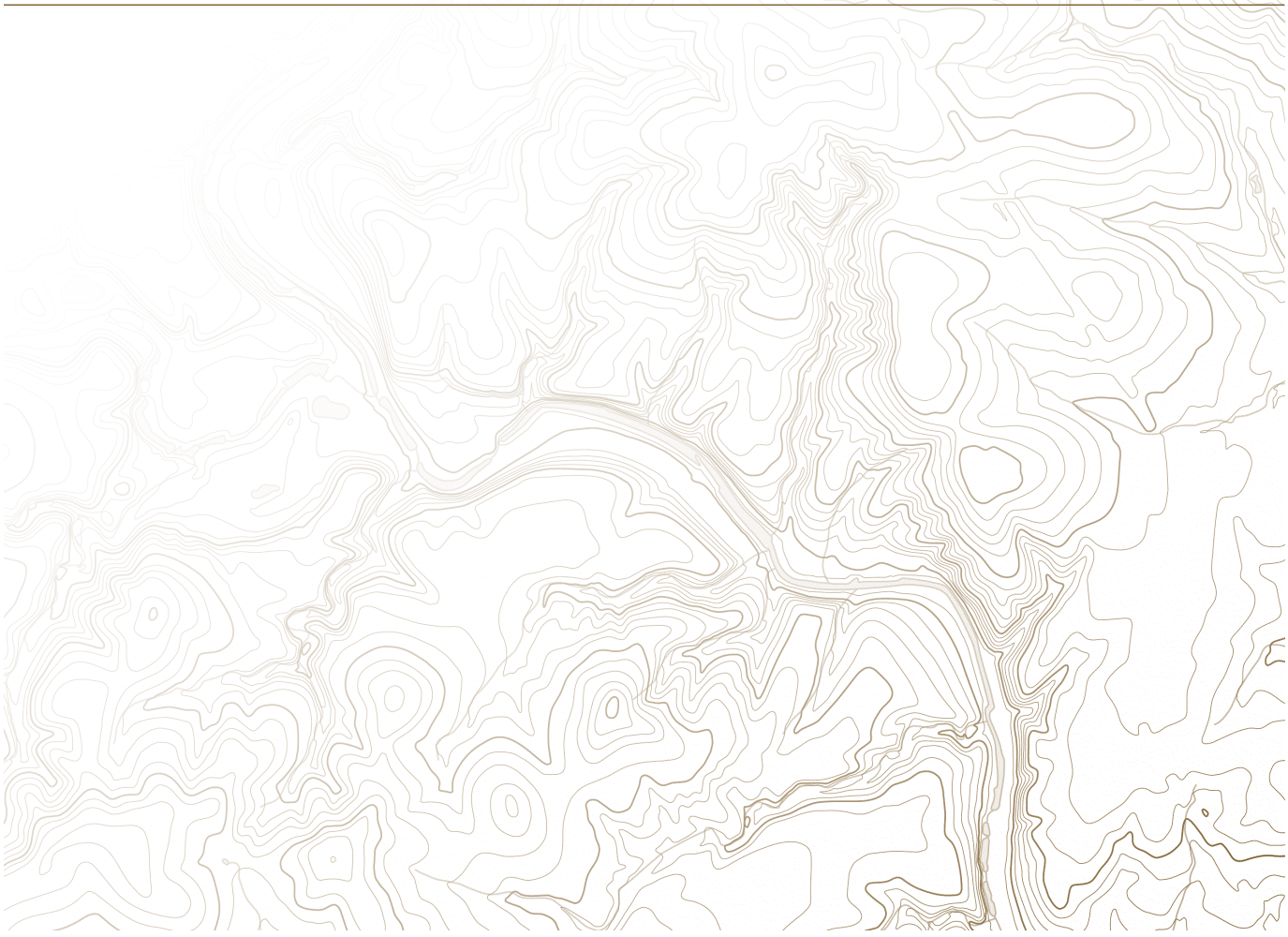
CHINA'S "GUERRILLA" FRAMEWORK TO RESHAPE THE PACIFIC



ISW INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR | AEI | COALITION DEFENSE OF TAIWAN

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Cover: The People's Liberation Army (PLA) Liaoning aircraft carrier sails past a rainbow in Hong Kong, China, on Friday, July 7, 2017. The carrier will visit Hong Kong between July 7 and 11. Photographer: Justin Chin/Bloomberg via Getty Images

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CHINA'S "GUERRILLA" FRAMEWORK TO RESHAPE THE PACIFIC

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Table of Contents

8 Introduction: The Pacific Battleground
9 Section I: The Pacific Islands and the PRC's Maritime Doctrine
9 Mahan's Definition of Sea Control
10 Defining the Problem: "Island Chains" and the PRC's Primary Adversaries
12 Mahan for the New Era: The PRC's "Guerrilla" Maritime Strategy
14 Learning from History: PRC Guerrilla Strategy and the Pacific Theater
16 Building a Guerrilla Maritime Force
19 Section II: Surveil, Project, Divide: The Peacetime Mechanics of PRC Guerrilla Strategy
20 Surveil
23 Project
24 Divide
25 Isolating Taiwan in the Pacific
27 Section III: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations
33 Endnotes

SURVEIL, PROJECT, DIVIDE:
CHINA'S "GUERRILLA" FRAMEWORK TO RESHAPE THE PACIFIC

Introduction: The Pacific Battleground

Oceania encompasses three subgroups of Pacific island nations — Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia — and contains a total population of approximately 46 million people.[1] The region carries significant strategic value for the United States despite its relatively small population, hosting two Five Eyes intelligence-sharing partners (Australia and New Zealand) and countries in Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States (the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau).[2]

Oceania played a key role in facilitating US power projection in Asia during the Cold War and has underpinned US power projection since.[3] Oceania likewise holds strategic and economic value for Taiwan; three Pacific Island nations (out of only twelve countries globally) maintain full diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC).[4] Oceania will likely play a similarly decisive role in any conflict between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) due to its central location between the two states and the vast amounts of maritime traffic that passes through the region.[5]

The United States and its allies no longer have exclusive influence over the Pacific Basin as they did during the Cold War.[6] Pacific nations exercise much greater autonomy today than they did in the 20th century, and receding US attention in the region has opened the door to other actors. The United States does maintain an enduring military presence in Guam, Wake Atoll, Okinawa, and the Marshall Islands.[7] The United States' COFAs with the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau also allow the United States to maintain a strong security presence in each island nation.[8] The United States is far from maintaining a cohesive Pacific bloc that excludes the influence of other great powers, however. The current diplomatic environment in the Pacific region is more open to non-US influence than at any time since World War II, a situation that the PRC looks to use to its advantage.

The PRC is conducting what it understands to be a "guerrilla" maritime strategy in the Pacific to undermine the United States' ability to maintain control of regional waters. This strategy is "guerrilla" in nature, in PRC parlance, because it blends overt military action and developments with seemingly innocuous political and economic influence. This influence aims to gradually create conditions for the PRC to threaten key sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and undermine US efforts to exert sea control. The PRC seeks to undermine US control of the sea in Oceania to enhance its regional position ahead of a Taiwan contingency, wherein sea control in the Western Pacific will be critical to the outcome of a conflict.

This paper analyzes PRC discussions of maritime strategy, naval procurement priorities, and PRC understandings of guerrilla warfare to construct a picture of PRC guerrilla strategy in the Pacific. This paper also analyzes historical examples the PRC has studied to illustrate its understanding of the importance of SLOCs and how an inferior military can contest control of the sea in the Pacific region. The paper then outlines how the PRC has enacted this guerrilla campaign through its force generation, covert operations, political influence, and economic development across the Pacific. The paper ends with several recommendations centered around US force generation and policy in the Pacific region designed to counter the PRC's guerrilla strategy.

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Section I: The Pacific Islands and the PRC's Maritime Doctrine

Military competition between the PRC and the United States will continue to unfold primarily in the maritime domain. Control of the sea has supported US global hegemony since the end of World War II, and it remains a critical enabler of US economic and military success.[9] The PRC believes that its economic growth and political power are contingent on its maritime power. According to PRC theoretical journal Qiushi, "throughout the history of the rise and fall of major powers in the modern world, the ocean has always been the strategic fulcrum that leverages the destiny of the country."[10] As the PRC aims to extend its regional influence and impose its will on international order, it is looking to the sea as the primary locus of enhancing national power.

The benefits of maritime power for a nation's economy and political influence are not a new notion. American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan first articulated this principle in The Influence of Sea Power Upon History in 1890, and this principle has since underpinned US naval strategy.[11] Several US scholars have argued that Mahan has taken on greater significance in PRC maritime strategy in recent years due to Mahan's emphasis on securing maritime trade for the sake of economic development.[12]

There are several key areas where PRC maritime thinking has attempted to move beyond Mahan, however, particularly in its approach to sea power in the Western Pacific and Oceania. The PRC has attempted to formulate a theory of "guerrilla" maritime strategy that combines overt military development with covert political and economic influence to gradually undermine the United States' ability to establish sea control in key areas of the Pacific, eschewing the Mahanian emphasis on decisive battle and a superior surface fleet.

The PRC's guerrilla strategy seeks to undermine US sea control in the Pacific and create favorable conditions for a PRC effort to seize Taiwan. The PRC conducts manifold influence operations in the Pacific; however, many of which serve diverging objectives and may fall outside the scope of this analysis. This paper aims to synthesize the activities that are most critical to the mission of sea control in the Pacific and that will have the greatest influence on a PRC-US conflict over Taiwan. This paper aims to demonstrate that the PRC — in many ways — understands such a conflict to have already begun through the prism of PRC guerrilla warfare at sea.

Mahan's Definition of Sea Control

Establishing sea control, the operational function of a navy, allows for the use of a particular waterway or sea area for friendly forces while denying this use to the enemy. Enduring sea control over critical waterways creates significant strategic effects that Mahan described as follows.

> "It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive, and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy's shores. This overbearing power can only be exercised by great navies."[13]

Defining the Problem: "Island Chains" and the PRC's Primary Adversaries

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has two major objectives: securing sea control of the PRC's immediate waters to aid PLA operations during a Taiwan contingency and contesting regional maritime supremacy while maintaining a strong global maritime presence. The first goal requires an intensely myopic focus on the PRC's immediate waters, while the second goal necessitates a broad outlook and force structure tailored to missions on the high seas. PLA strategy documents translate this quandary as "near seas defense" and "far seas protection," claiming to commit to both concepts simultaneously.[14]

The PRC faces several obstacles to achieving these major objectives, particularly beyond the first island chain and in Oceania. These obstacles primarily take the form of several "island chains" that stand between the PRC and the open ocean. The island chains are both geographic and geopolitical constraints, as they physically limit freedom of maneuver and provide strong positions for the PRC's adversaries to secure or deny control of the sea.

The PRC continues to view the US presence in the Pacific through the prism of US Cold War policy. The United States used Oceania to prevent its adversaries from projecting power in the Pacific, while simultaneously maintaining forward bases from which the United States could deploy to the continent of Asia if necessary.[15] The PRC accordingly conceptualizes the "Island Chains" beyond its coastline as geostrategic positions designed to contain the PRC to its littoral zone and enable US force projection in PRC waters.[16] PLA writings typically describe two island chains that stand between the PRC and the open seas. The PLA defines the first island chain (FIC) as running from southern Japan, through the Ryukyu and Senkaku (Diaoyu) islands, to Taiwan and the Philippines, and culminating at the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.[17] The PLA defines the second island chain (SIC) as extending from central Japan to the Mariana Islands, Guam, Palau, and culminating at New Guinea and northern Australia.[18]

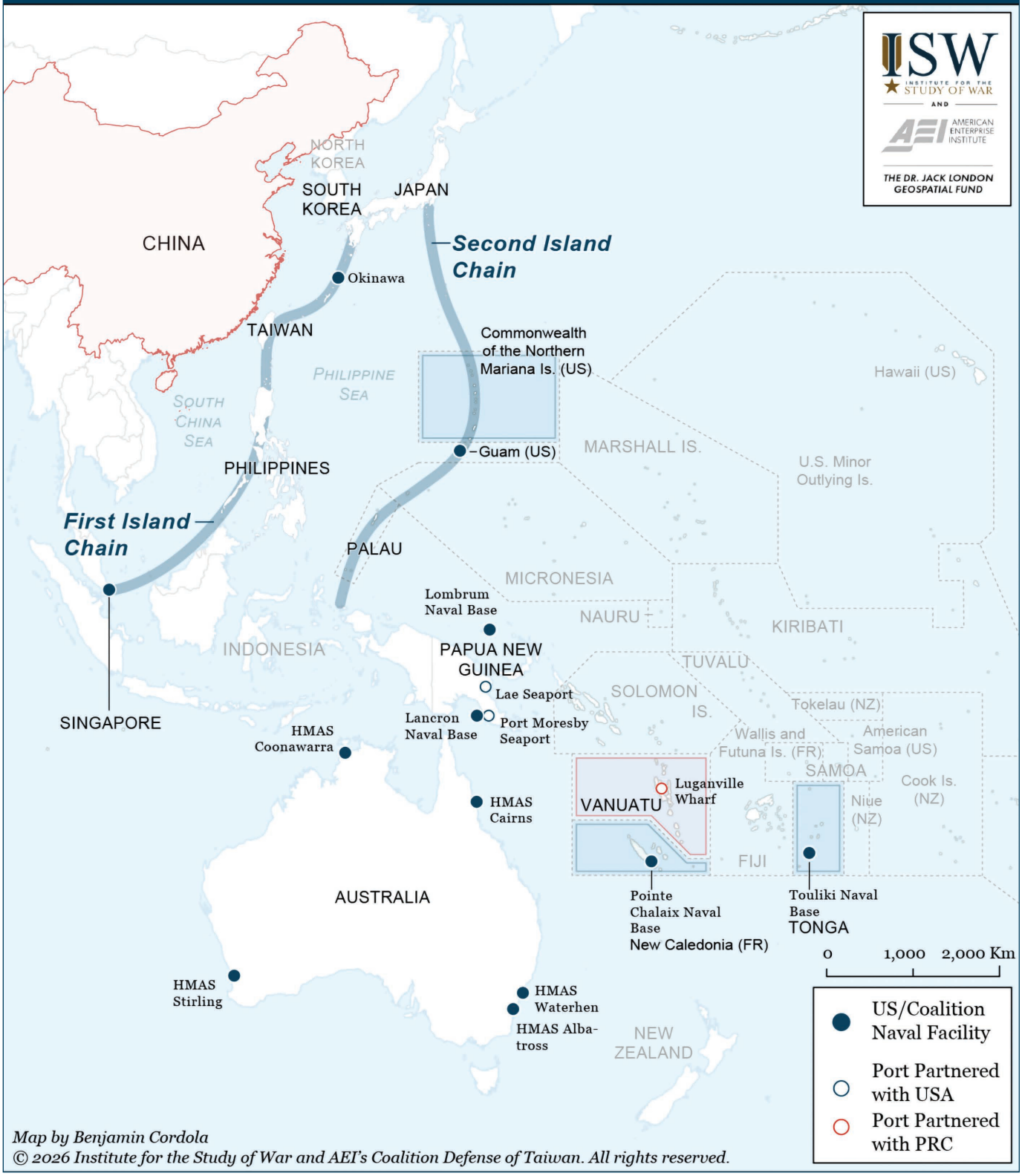
PLA writings note that the US presence in both island chains limits the PRC's ability to achieve its maritime objectives. In the PRC's understanding, Taiwan forms the linchpin of the FIC, while the Philippines, Japan, and Korea support this center of gravity by hosting US forward deployments.[19] Japan and Korea also deploy capable surface combatants that can contest PRC efforts to exert sea control in the Western Pacific.[20] The SIC acts as a site of power projection and forward deployment for the United States that supports the FIC, with the territory of Guam — today an ongoing focus of PRC espionage efforts — at the center.[21]

The island chains pose an operational problem for the PLA because they significantly limit the PLAN's freedom of maneuver. The PLAN cannot transit through the island chains without being easily tracked by its adversaries and put in range of shore-based systems or land-based air power.[22] A fleet in being that is contained within its immediate waters has little military use and may be easily targeted by standoff munitions.

The PRC also faces the problem of constructing an expensive battle fleet that makes any effort to break through an adversary cordon risky. PRC maritime strategist and scholar Hu Bo points to the example of the Imperial German High Seas Fleet to illustrate this point; the High Seas Fleet, although formidable, could not break through the British blockade in the North Sea, ensuring it had no bearing on the outcome of World War I after the inconclusive Battle of Jutland.[23] Maritime strategy scholar Toshi Yoshihara has similarly suggested that the PLAN's expansion and modernization have turned the PLAN into a "risk fleet" like the German Navy in World War I.[24] Yoshihara suggests that the cost of the PLAN's exquisite systems will be too great to risk in an operation that aims to break out of the FIC in wartime.[25] The FIC and SIC threaten to contain the PLA to the PRC's immediate waters and prevent the PLAN from contesting control of the sea in the Pacific, granting the United States regional control of the sea.

The island chains ultimately pose a major quandary for the PRC because they strengthen the US' ability to intervene in a Taiwan contingency and thus frustrate any PRC efforts to break through the

PRC Threat Perception in Oceania



Map by Benjamin Cordola

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FIC. PLAN strategy documents emphasize that the annexation of Taiwan would collapse the FIC and strain the SIC's ability to contain the PLAN.[26] Hu Bo notes, however, that the PLA's efforts to "step out" of its containment are necessary to support ongoing lines of effort against Taiwan.[27] The PRC must, therefore, break through the island chains to collapse them, a task which is constrained by the island chains themselves. **PRC maritime strategy thus proceeds from a perception of relative weakness regarding the PRC's geostrategic position.**

The PRC also believes that US naval superiority poses a major obstacle to PRC efforts to undermine the positions of the US and its allies on the island chains. Hu Bo stated in 2020 that the PLAN remains decisively outmatched in a symmetric maritime conflict against the United States, despite the strides in modernization the PLAN has made in the 21st century.[28] PLAN Senior Colonel Zhang Junshe similarly stated in 2019 that although the PLAN will be a "world-class" force by the mid-21st century, it will not necessarily be the world's *best*, suggesting the PLAN will remain second to the US Navy even by 2049.[29] PRC scholars point to US proficiencies in aircraft carrier operations, submarine operations, and naval logistics as evidence of a glaring gap between the US Navy and the PLAN.[30]

A third obstacle to PRC efforts to weaken the island chains and project power beyond its immediate waters is the PLAN's limited ability to sustain long-range deployments. The PLA does not operate any military bases in the Pacific Basin, making any PLAN deployment beyond the FIC necessarily short-lived, limiting PLAN effects on enemy sea control.[31] The PLAN also has limited experience conducting replenishment at sea for its surface fleet, an essential capability to project power during peacetime and sustain combat operations beyond the FIC in wartime, particularly when lacking overseas basing.[32] The PLAN deploys a limited number of auxiliary vessels capable of supporting long-range naval deployments, although ISW-CDOT assesses the PLAN is taking steps to expand its auxiliary hull count.[33]

PRC maritime strategy thus proceeds from a perception of relative weakness regarding the PRC's geostrategic position.

The PRC is undertaking a significant shipbuilding effort to close the gap between the PLAN and the US Navy and is introducing platforms that emphasize greater operating range to improve its ability to undermine US sea control in the Pacific region.[34] It is unclear whether these efforts will result in PRC regional naval superiority, however. The PRC would be unable to do so for decades, however.[35] **PRC maritime strategy in the interim must, as a result, innovate ways to mitigate the PLAN's shortcomings and circumvent the strong position of the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Relative weakness will likely prevent the PRC from establishing enduring sea control beyond its immediate waters. These weaknesses will not *necessarily* prevent the PRC from taking steps to undermine US sea control and prepare the ground for frustrating US naval forces from achieving their objectives during a conflict.**

Mahan for the New Era: The PRC's "Guerrilla" Maritime Strategy

Analyses of modern PRC maritime strategy in the Pacific have sought to understand the theoretical basis for the PRC's rapid expansion of its surface fleet and its introduction of high-end warfighting platforms capable of long-range power projection. US scholars have discussed a "turn to Mahan" in the PRC that has informed a newfound emphasis on sea control and long-range naval deployments.[36]

The PRC is consciously aiming to move *beyond* Mahan in several key areas to address the difficulties it faces in the maritime domain, however. The PRC aims to leverage changing dynamics in naval warfare alongside its ability to deploy civilian assets and economic influence to gradually shape the operating environment in the Pacific *without fully surpassing the US Navy in warfighting capability*. The PRC has developed this strategy by melding Mahan's emphasis on sea control with the PLA's understanding of guerrilla warfare that blurs the line between

military and civilian assets and emphasizes striking the enemy's strategic depth while avoiding a decisive engagement. **The essence of the PRC's guerrilla maritime strategy is to shape the Pacific battlefield to the PLAN's advantage through military and civilian means before a full conflict occurs.**

Contemporary PRC writings display a deeply Mahanian influence in terms of their emphasis on control of the sea as a driver of economic success, which in turn strengthens sea control.[37] The PRC's 2019 National Defense White Paper places significant emphasis on cultivating a long-range maritime presence to safeguard the PRC's sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and facilitate global commerce.[38] Wu Zhengyu, a prominent PRC international relations scholar, stated in a 2018 article that the "Chinese understanding" of Mahan emphasizes the primacy of the maritime economy to national prosperity and the need for naval supremacy to secure national interests.[39]

Several PRC scholars and PLA documents eschew Mahan's reflections on the requirements for naval supremacy, however. The scholars suggest that technological developments present a unique opportunity for second-rate naval powers to contest regional sea control. Hu Bo, in a 2018 article on the "post-Mahan" world, states that "the saying 'whoever controls the sea controls the world' is outdated," and suggests naval forces must share responsibility for establishing sea control with air and land forces.[40] Wu Zhengyu similarly states that the presuppositions of Mahan's philosophy are outdated and innovations in international governance allow the PRC to leverage its strong economy to construct bilateral relationships that will enhance the PRC's sea power without having to become the world's preeminent *naval* power.[41]

PLA reflections on naval doctrine similarly diverge from Mahan's emphasis on decisive battle as the means to wrest control of the sea away from an opponent. PLA documents advocate a "guerrilla" approach to the maritime domain and emphasize a growing capability for inferior forces to contest sea control. The PLA's 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* states that the PLAN "must concentrate its elite maritime forces to persist in *guerrilla operations* in the open seas, and strive to be fast and effective."[42] A January 2025 article in the PLA journal *Military Art* similarly suggests applying Mao Zedong's doctrine of "People's War" on the far seas.[43] The PLAN historically adopted a guerrilla warfighting strategy, having been far weaker than its adversaries for most of its history.[44] This strategy manifested itself in the use of submarines or small attack craft to bypass large surface fleets and raid enemy commerce and shipping.[45]

The PLAN's rapid modernization means the nature of its guerrilla methods will likely take a different shape than their historical precedents, however. PRC maritime strategists and PLAN personnel have suggested the PLAN's modern surface fleet, composed of advanced, multi-mission combatants, could participate in guerrilla warfare on the open seas. Hu Bo has suggested that the PLAN's aircraft carriers could operate in this fashion, pointing to the mobility of the PLAN's surface fleet as a key asset to conduct a campaign against enemy island bases to prevent an external intervention during a Taiwan scenario.[46] Senior PLAN Captain Xu Qi similarly stated that modern naval warfare is characterized by "nonlinearity."[47] Xu stated that the mobility and operating range of a modern surface fleet allow for rapid strikes on the enemy's "strategic depths" rather than direct naval engagements.[48] Xu and Hu's statements indicate how the PLAN understands the guerrilla operations prescribed in the *Science of Military Strategy*: naval warfare in the missile age allows surface forces to target the enemy's strategic depth rather than their surface fleets. The primary role of a surface fleet does not have to be the maintenance of sea control, as Mahan prescribed, and instead can focus on undermining the enemy's efforts to establish sea control itself.

Guerrilla warfare is a technical term in PRC military history that remains in use in modern PLA literature. Mao's concept of "People's War," in particular, is an authoritative concept in contemporary PLA writings.[49] People's War prescribed guerrilla methods for the Red Army, and later the PLA, when it was incapable of winning a direct, conventional engagement with its primary adversary.[50] The enemy's strategic depth and lines of communication are the center of gravity during the guerrilla phase of People's War.[51] Guerrilla forces fighting a People's War do not hold territory in the way conventional forces do, but their actions prevent enemy conventional forces from

using the territory they have nominally seized.[52] Guerrilla forces under People's War avoid direct engagements and focus on preventing enemy conventional forces from achieving their objectives while degrading their strength.[53] The final phase of People's War occurs when the guerrilla phase has created sufficient conditions for friendly conventional forces to counterattack the enemy.[54]

A Maoist guerrilla strategy blurs the lines between soldier and civilian, and military and economic policy to defeat a more militarily powerful opponent. Maoist guerrilla forces blended into civilian populations, using them for refuge from Japanese or Kuomintang (KMT) forces and enrolled many civilians into the Maoist war effort during World War II and the Chinese Civil War.[55] Maoist forces also enacted large-scale land reform campaigns in infiltrated areas of the enemy's rear to secure loyalty and establish "base areas" that guerrilla forces could operate from.[56] Mao believed that these tactics would gradually degrade enemy conventional forces while increasing the combat power of friendly forces, laying the groundwork for a large-scale counterattack to secure decisive victory.[57] **A guerrilla campaign in PRC military parlance thus synthesizes military, civilian, and economic efforts to set favorable conditions for a future conventional confrontation.**

PRC sources acknowledge that People's War can no longer directly emulate the actions of the Red Army during the Chinese Civil War.[58] Modern PLA writings discuss a "People's War under modern conditions" that emphasizes military-civil fusion and whole-of-society mobilization to defeat a more powerful military.[59] The United States must approach PRC maritime strategy in Oceania under these terms.

Learning from History: PRC Guerrilla Strategy and the Pacific Theater

The last major maritime conflict in the Pacific region occurred during World War II. Study of the conflict yields critical lessons for the PRC's guerrilla maritime strategy. Understanding PLA lessons learned from World War II provides a clearer picture of how the PLA believes guerrilla operations at sea could unfold in a future conflict in the Pacific.

The primary lessons of World War II for the PLA are 1) the operational fragility of island chain defenses and 2) the ability of an inferior fleet to deny a superior fleet sea control at decisive moments of a campaign.

PLA discussions of World War II in the Pacific focus on the Southwest Pacific Campaign of 1942 and 1943 and the Battle of Guadalcanal that formed the campaign's climax. This campaign is significant for the PLA and Taiwan because it illustrates the operational weaknesses of an island chain defense posture and key relationships between SLOC security, amphibious logistics, and sea control.[60] Modern PRC influence operations also target areas of Melanesia, where the Southwest Pacific Campaign unfolded, that maintain contemporary strategic importance.

Japanese strategy at the outset of World War II focused on expanding rapidly into the Pacific Islands between Hawaii and Japan to provide a defensive bulwark for its SLOCs. These SLOCs connected Japan with critical resources in the conquered Dutch East Indies it needed to sustain its armed forces.[61] Japan planned to outlast the United States by forcing the United States to assault several islands across the Pacific, gradually degrading US forces and their will to fight.[62]

Japan also sought to secure air and naval bases across the Pacific to facilitate its efforts to exert sea control and blunt any US advance.[63] The search for such bases drove the Southwest Pacific Campaign in 1942. Japan intended to strengthen its position in the Pacific by securing air and naval bases in the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia to cut the SLOCs connecting the United States and Australia, preventing Allied coordination against Japan's island chain bulwark.[64] The US decisions to engage the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) in the Battle of the Coral Sea and to establish an air base at Guadalcanal were largely spurred by a desire to keep the connection to Australia intact.[65]

PRC and PLA discussions of Guadalcanal focus on how asymmetric fleet tactics allowed an inferior fleet to disrupt sea control during the campaign. The Battle of Guadalcanal was a six-month campaign

The Pacific Theater of WWII: Japanese Expansion Through 1942



Map by Benjamin Cordola

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Note: Countries are shown as they were in 1942

Data Sources: Britannica, The National WWII Museum, Natural Earth

on land, air, and sea, which began a series of US offensives that ultimately unhinged Japan's defensive strategy. The battle commenced after the US Navy dealt the IJN a crippling blow at the Battle of Midway in June 1942.[66] PRC sources discussing the battle emphasize that, despite facing a theater-wide disadvantage at sea, IJN forces contested control of the sea during most of the Guadalcanal Campaign using asymmetric methods — such as the IJN's proficiency in night-fighting and the support of land-based aviation — to mitigate US Navy advantages.[67] One article in the PLAN journal *Navy Today* highlights innovative Japanese tactics at the Battle of Savo Island that frustrated US efforts to establish sea control around Guadalcanal.[68] These discussions emphasize that IJN inferiority did not inherently prevent it from denying control of the sea to the US Navy.

PRC and PLA discussions of Guadalcanal likewise argue that Japanese failures stemmed from its misidentification of the campaign's center of gravity. PRC naval analyst Liu Yi argues that Japan's tactical successes at sea did *not* influence the campaign's outcome because Japan sought to deal decisive blows to the US Navy rather than target US seaborne logistics and SLOCs.[69] Guo Yuanfei, Bai Wenjie, and Chi Luoming of the PLAN noted that the Battle of Savo Island was operationally insignificant because of Japan's failure to target US SLOCs following its tactical success.[70] Guadalcanal thus illustrates the lesson that an inferior fleet can deny sea control to a superior adversary provided it recognizes that interdiction of SLOCS, rather than the destruction of the enemy's fleet, is critical to the campaign's success.

PRC sources also discuss the operational fragility of an island chain defense posture and the risks of decisive fleet engagements. American victories at Midway, Guadalcanal, and the Philippine Sea rapidly eroded the IJN's ability to contest sea control throughout its defensive bulwark in the Pacific.[71] The United States could isolate and ultimately seize or bypass each island fortress due to uncontested sea control. This allowed US and allied forces to penetrate Japan's defensive belts, severing the SLOCs between Japan's homeland and its resource extraction areas.[72] Japan's strategy to wear down US forces through an island-based defense in depth was rendered defunct as a result. A 2015 article in the PRC journal *Modern Ships* suggests that the IJN's decision to seek a decisive engagement with the US Navy undermined its strategy by jeopardizing its ability to contest sea control and ensuring its defensive bulwarks could not be easily bypassed.[73] Other PRC sources further criticize the Midway Campaign as a product of outdated naval thinking that clung to battleship-era dynamics and decisive surface engagements.[74] These observations reflect a critical lesson for the modern PLAN: contesting sea control without risking the surface fleet in a single decisive engagement can allow an inferior navy to prevent an adversary from achieving its objectives. These observations also suggest that if the PRC can deny the US sea control in the west Pacific, the first and second island chains will be less effective in obstructing PRC power projection.

The lessons the PRC has taken from the war in the Pacific support PRC theoretical discussions of a guerrilla maritime strategy. The PRC sees the Pacific War as a refutation of the Mahanian principle that the center of gravity of naval warfare resides in the enemy's surface fleet.[75] PRC sources criticize the IJN for retaining an emphasis on the decisive battle from the age of the battleship, failing to see how dynamics of sea control had been reshaped by technological innovations in naval aviation and land-based air power.[76] These technological innovations opened the door for a naval strategy that eschewed a decisive battle and adopted a sea-denial strategy that could have strengthened Japan's island chain defenses rather than leaving them vulnerable. PRC sources view Japan's failure to recognize these technological shifts and their strategic implications as the ultimate cause of its defeat in World War II.

Building a Guerrilla Maritime Force

The PRC has taken concrete steps to implement its reflections on a guerrilla war at sea and design a force capable of prosecuting one. PLAN technological developments aim to leverage asymmetric advantages that could allow the PLAN to hold critical US and allied SLOCs at risk without engaging the US surface fleet in a decisive battle. The PLAN aims to combine exquisite systems with military-civil fusion to create several threat vectors that could force the US Navy to overextend its assets in the Indo-Pacific. Such overextension could prevent the United States and its allies from effectively securing sea control during a Taiwan contingency.

The PLAN has focused its conventional weapons procurement on securing an asymmetric advantage in combat range. Modern PRC naval analysts emphasize that the age of missile combat in naval warfare has created opportunities for second-rate naval powers to create tactical advantages using long-range sea, air, and land-based fires.[77] Beijing's extensive network of land-based anti-ship missiles that can strike US surface vessels as far east as Guam is the foundation of its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) complex.[78] The PRC has also invested in fielding a large arsenal of sea-based and air-based anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles intended to allow its surface fleet to engage US vessels at much greater ranges than a US surface combatant can respond.[79] The PRC's

> The PRC sees the Pacific War as a refutation of the Mahanian principle that the center of gravity of naval warfare resides in the enemy's surface fleet.

anti-ship missile suite further outclasses US anti-ship missiles in terms of their low time-to-target, allowing a PLAN surface fleet to strike US surface vessels before they can fire their own missiles.[80]

The PRC is also investing heavily in its nuclear submarine fleet, which could allow the PLAN to maintain a pervasive presence beyond the first and second island chains. Such a presence could threaten US SLOCs and force the US to disperse its surface and submarine fleets to counter a PRC undersea threat, decreasing the assets available for penetrating the PRC's A2/AD network. Commander of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) Rear Admiral Michael Brookes stated that the PRC could field up to 40 nuclear-powered submarines by 2035.[81] Commander of US Navy Submarine Forces Vice Admiral Richard Seif likewise stated that the PRC's growing undersea fleet could greatly constrain US freedom of maneuver in the Pacific.[82] ISW-CDOT has assessed that the PLAN's new Type 09V guided missile nuclear-powered submarine (SSGN) poses a unique problem for the US Navy in the region due to its operating range and ability to field significant numbers of long-range anti-ship missiles.[83] A May 2026 article from the PLA's National University of Defense Technology suggests using SSGNs to degrade US fleet air defense before a larger missile salvo is fired.[84] Below is an illustration of how the PRC could leverage its investments in long-range anti-ship missiles and modern nuclear submarines to contest a US Navy deployment near Guam through overlapping fields of fire, based on reported maximum ranges of each armament in the open source. Such an approach would align with a "guerrilla" strategy aimed at leveraging critical tactical advantages to disrupt and degrade the actions of a superior navy.

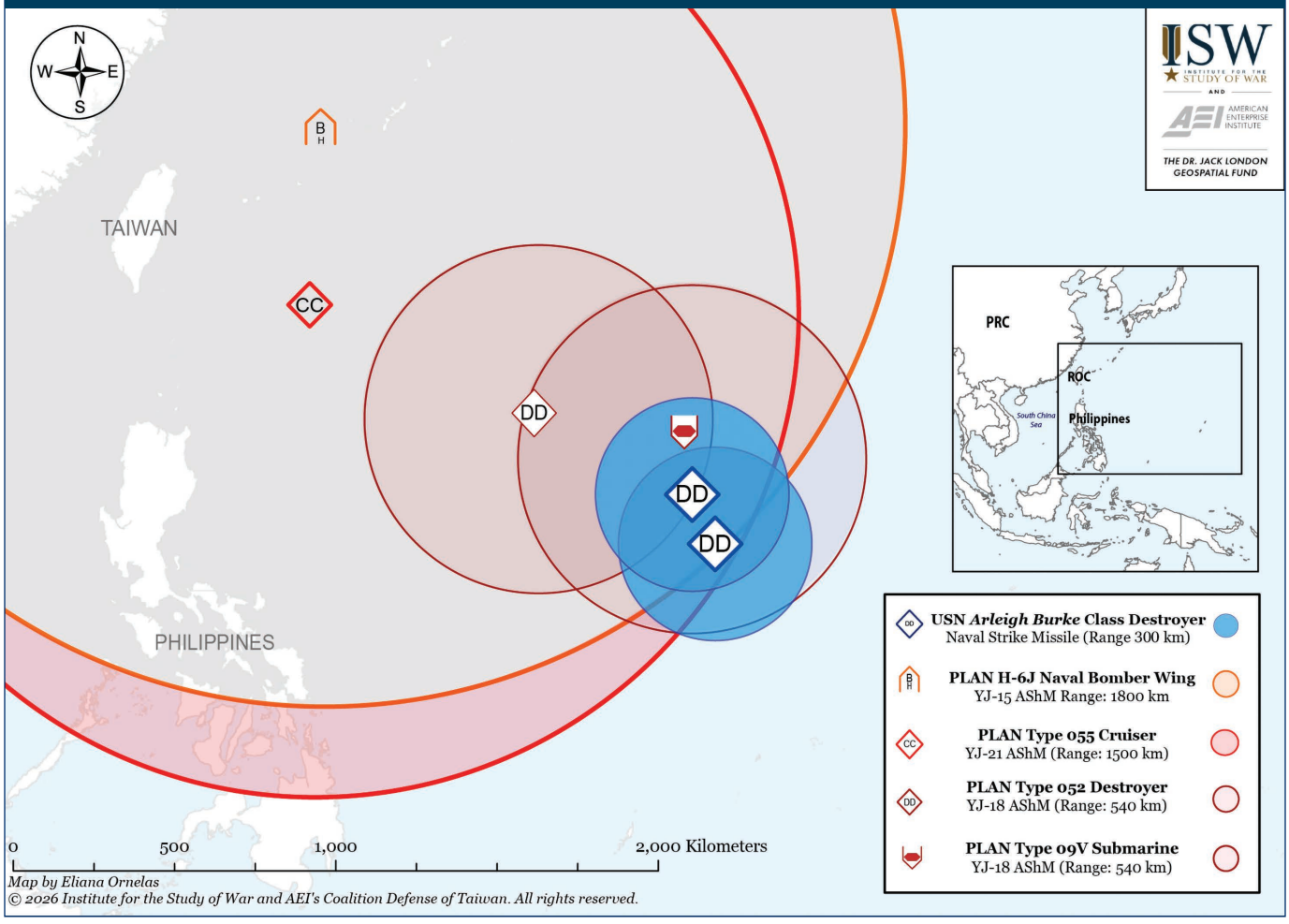
The PRC's ability to leverage civilian assets to offset its military disadvantages will likely underpin its guerrilla naval strategy. The PLAN remains inferior to the US Navy in several categories, including naval aviation, missile defense, anti-submarine warfare, and replenishment at sea.[85] The PRC has shown that it may be preparing to use civilian assets to mitigate some of these disadvantages. ISW-CDOT reported in January that the PRC has armed the civilian vessel *Zhong Da 79* with as many as 64 vertical launching system (VLS) cells, an identical missile armament to the PLAN's Type 052D guided-missile destroyer (DDG), that can be concealed in shipping containers.[86] The PRC journal *Ordnance Industry Science and Technology* published an article in April suggesting that such vessels could "serve as firepower nodes in vital sea areas and chokepoints."[87] The PRC could pre-position such armed civilian assets throughout the Pacific to threaten SLOCs or supplement the armament of its conventional surface fleet. Such deployments could impose significant targeting dilemmas for the US Navy, because it would have to consider PRC civilian vessels as potential combatants. This dilemma could strain the US surface fleet by forcing it to divert high-end systems across a wide area of the Pacific to counter a clandestine PRC threat.[88]

The PRC may also rely on civilian assets to make up for existing limitations in long-range surface deployments. The PLA has practiced using civilian tankers to conduct replenishment at sea on multiple occasions.[89] Several US think tanks have pointed to replenishment at sea as a major limitation for long-range deployments due to the PLAN's limited number of dedicated auxiliary oil replenishment (AOR) vessels and lack of experience conducting replenishment at sea.[90] The island chains would pose a significant problem for PLAN replenishment at sea because AORs would have to pass through each island chain to maintain a long-range wartime deployment, rendering replenishment vulnerable to interdiction.[91] The PRC could leverage civilian vessels to offset this problem, forcing an adversary to consider targeting civilian vessels throughout the Pacific because they could potentially replenish military vessels. The PRC could also use container-concealed VLS cells on civilian vessels to reload the VLS cells on its surface fleet, giving the PLAN a significant advantage in deployment longevity over the US Navy.[92] The PLAN has only demonstrated the capability to refuel and replenish from civilian vessels, and it is unclear if at-sea missile reloading is feasible for the PLAN. It is nonetheless likely that the PRC will leverage civilian assets to sustain out-of-area PLAN deployments to create a more pervasive threat on the surface.

The PRC has also expressed interest in using civilian vessels as a makeshift early warning system at sea and to confuse US targeting. A 2023 article in the PLA journal *Military Art* suggests leveraging civilian vessels to conduct "reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance" to limit the effectiveness of US drones in the air and undersea.[93] The article further states that using a "large volume" of civilian vessels for maritime reconnaissance will force the US to make difficult targeting decisions.[94] Ship tracking data from Starboard Maritime Intelligence indicates that two research vessels associated with the PRC's Institute for Applied Acoustics, the *Rui Li* and *An Ji Hai*, may perform this role for the PLAN. Both vessels deploy infrequently, and their deployments to the South China Sea have coincided with the presence of a US or UK carrier strike group in the area on five separate occasions. **The PLA will thus likely rely on civilian assets to conduct maritime reconnaissance and further expand the list of vessels the US will have to consider as a potential combatant in wartime.**

The PRC's guerrilla maritime strategy derives from an acknowledgement of weakness, but also a recognition of unique PRC strengths. The PRC's ability to organize civilian assets to make up for military shortcomings and prioritize select capabilities to create asymmetric tactical advantages is the bedrock of its modern guerrilla efforts, particularly in maritime force generation. The PRC's development of long-range anti-ship missiles, advanced nuclear submarines, and military-civil hybrid capabilities could combine to create a guerrilla sea denial architecture that is more comprehensive than the PRC's much-vaunted A2/AD bubble alone. The land-based A2/AD system's

Hypothetical surface engagement between the PLAN and the US Navy in the west Pacific



Map by Eliana Ornelas
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extent is limited to the SIC, whereas the PRC's guerrilla forces could extend the area that the PRC can contest sea control deeper into Oceania and potentially astride the SLOCs that any US campaign in the Indo-Pacific theater will rely upon.

A future conflict in the Pacific theater would center on competing logistics systems, with the United States military fighting in a theater thousands of miles from its shores.[95] The US Navy, in particular, will likely rely on establishing sea control between Hawaii and the SIC to create safe areas where it can resupply its surface vessels and organize its forces before attempting to penetrate the PRC's A2/AD network between the first and second island chains.[96] The PRC is constructing a guerrilla force that could threaten this haven and its supply lines, limiting US efforts to extend its control of the sea closer to the PRC.[97]

The PRC must prepare the Pacific battlefield in advance through non-military means to implement the military component of its guerrilla strategy, however. The US has grown accustomed to treating the Pacific Basin as a bastion that supports its power projection in Asia.[98] The PRC is seeking to contest this assumption. Peacetime operations to surveil the Pacific, project influence throughout the region, and divide the US-island coalition underpin a PRC guerrilla maritime strategy that leverages economic and diplomatic influence to gradually undermine US regional sea control. The battle for the Pacific is already ongoing, and the US must understand the implications of PRC activity in Oceania and the broader strategy it facilitates.

> The PLA will thus likely rely on civilian assets to conduct maritime reconnaissance and further expand the list of vessels the US will have to consider as a potential combatant in wartime.

Section II: Surveil, Project, Divide: The Peacetime Mechanics of PRC Guerrilla Strategy

PRC activity in Oceania ranges from seemingly routine economic development projects to more overt military actions like missile testing and long-range naval deployments. These individual tactical actions serve the same overarching strategic goal: creating favorable conditions for the PRC to erode US control of the sea beyond the first and second island chains or raise the costs of establishing such control. Existing scholarship has narrowly focused on the individual tactical actions the PRC has enacted across the Pacific, rather than on the greater strategy that they serve.[99] This section outlines the structural unity of the PRC's "guerrilla" influence operations, which are intended to synthesize seemingly disparate events into a single framework to reshape the political topography of the Pacific battleground.

Separating PRC influence operations in Australia and New Zealand from PRC operations in smaller Pacific island nations makes it difficult or impossible to see the synergistic effects they are intended to create across the theater. The scale of PRC operations in Australia and New Zealand is necessarily greater than PRC lines of effort in other Pacific Island states, but this distinction at the tactical level obfuscates how these lines of effort cohere under the same guerrilla strategy. PRC influence operations in Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Island states aligned with the US and

Taiwan, for instance, all aim to deny US forces basing and logistics nodes across the Pacific to undermine US regional control of the sea. Distinguishing these efforts due to differences in scale obscures their similarity in form and risks misinterpreting the strategic objectives the PRC is pursuing in Oceania.

PRC strategy accounts for Oceania's simultaneous constraints and opportunities, ultimately emphasizing breaking the coalition between the United States and its regional partners. The PRC appears to be following what ISW-CDOT assesses to be a framework of *surveilling* the region, *projecting* power, and ultimately *dividing* Pacific coalitions to reduce its own strategic vulnerability. This tripartite strategy serves to shape the Pacific battlefield in the PRC's favor by creating conditions for future military operations beyond both island chains and undermining the US coalition in the theater.[100]

Surveil:

The PRC is conducting surveillance operations undersea and on key features in the Pacific to enhance its ability to contest sea control beyond the first island chain. These surveillance efforts are clandestine or occur under the guise of civilian research operations, but are designed to prepare the Pacific battleground for a future conflict. Surveillance can range from the deployment of human assets to the use of research expeditions to gain an understanding of the regional maritime landscape. PRC research ships undertake scientific research, including bathymetric analysis potentially useful for military operations.[101] PRC ships have also performed seabed mapping in the waters around Guam, as indicated by their "lawnmower" patterns of movement.[102]

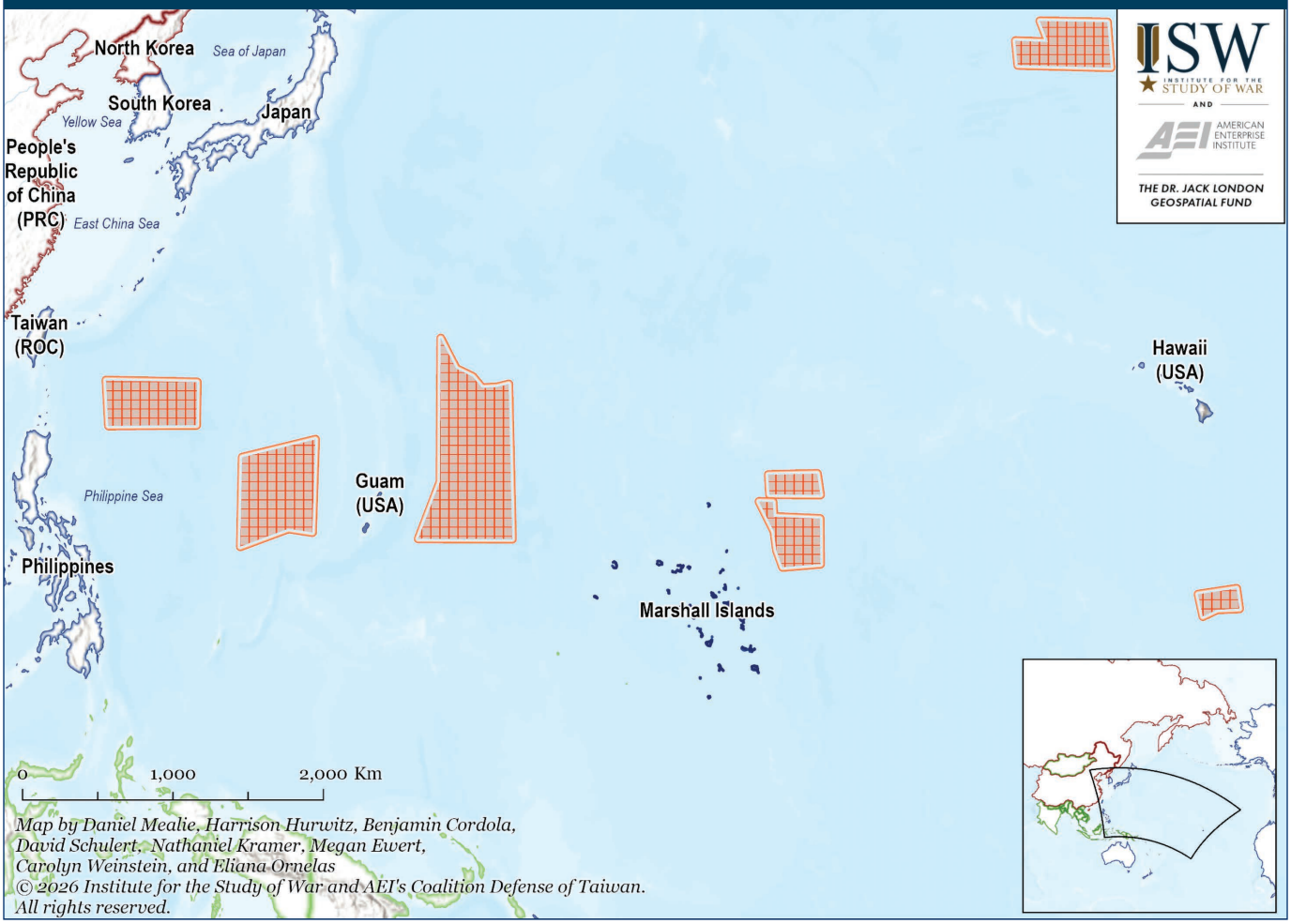
The PRC may use such seabed mapping as a means of gathering intelligence on the location of Guam's undersea internet cables. Guam is known as the "great switchboard of the Pacific" due to the numerous internet cables connecting it to other regional countries and the United States.[103] The PRC may be conducting intelligence-gathering activities to prepare to cut critical cables connecting Guam to other regional actors. PRC ships have been observed cutting undersea internet cables globally, a tactic ISW-CDOT has identified as a means of isolating and coercing adversaries by cutting off communication and internet access.[104] PRC researchers created a cable-cutting device capable of operating at depths of 4000 meters, equipped for the submersible *Fendouzhe*.[105] Such a device could feasibly be used for civilian purposes, including seabed clearing; the PRC is likely setting conditions to deploy such devices to isolate its adversaries informationally, however. PRC efforts to cut cables support a "guerrilla" strategy focused on degrading and disrupting adversary communications rather than winning by symmetric means on the battlefield.

PRC surveillance of the Pacific and collection of bathymetric data, principally around Guam and beyond the SIC, would likely also facilitate PLAN nuclear submarine deployments designed to interdict US and allied SLOCs in Oceania.[106] Threatening these SLOCs would significantly complicate US deployments throughout the Pacific and force the United States to divert significant resources toward countering the PLAN's undersea threat in ways that would detract from its efforts to aid Taiwan during a conflict.[107] PRC surveillance and undersea data collection around Guam, Wake Atoll, and Hawaii strongly suggest that the PRC envisions operating its submarine fleet throughout Oceania. Such surveillance forms a critical part of the PRC's overall guerrilla strategy as it can conduct these operations under the guise of civilian research while simultaneously preparing the Pacific battlefield for future submarine deployments.

A future conflict in the Pacific theater would center on competing logistics systems, with the United States military fighting in a theater thousands of miles from its shores.

The PRC likewise uses human assets in addition to maritime surveillance efforts, particularly against US-aligned actors in the region. PRC nationals access Guam — a US territory and the site of key US military installations — via the Northern Mariana Islands, where they have historically faced fewer visa restrictions and can board small craft sailing to Guam.[108] US authorities have reported such infiltrations for

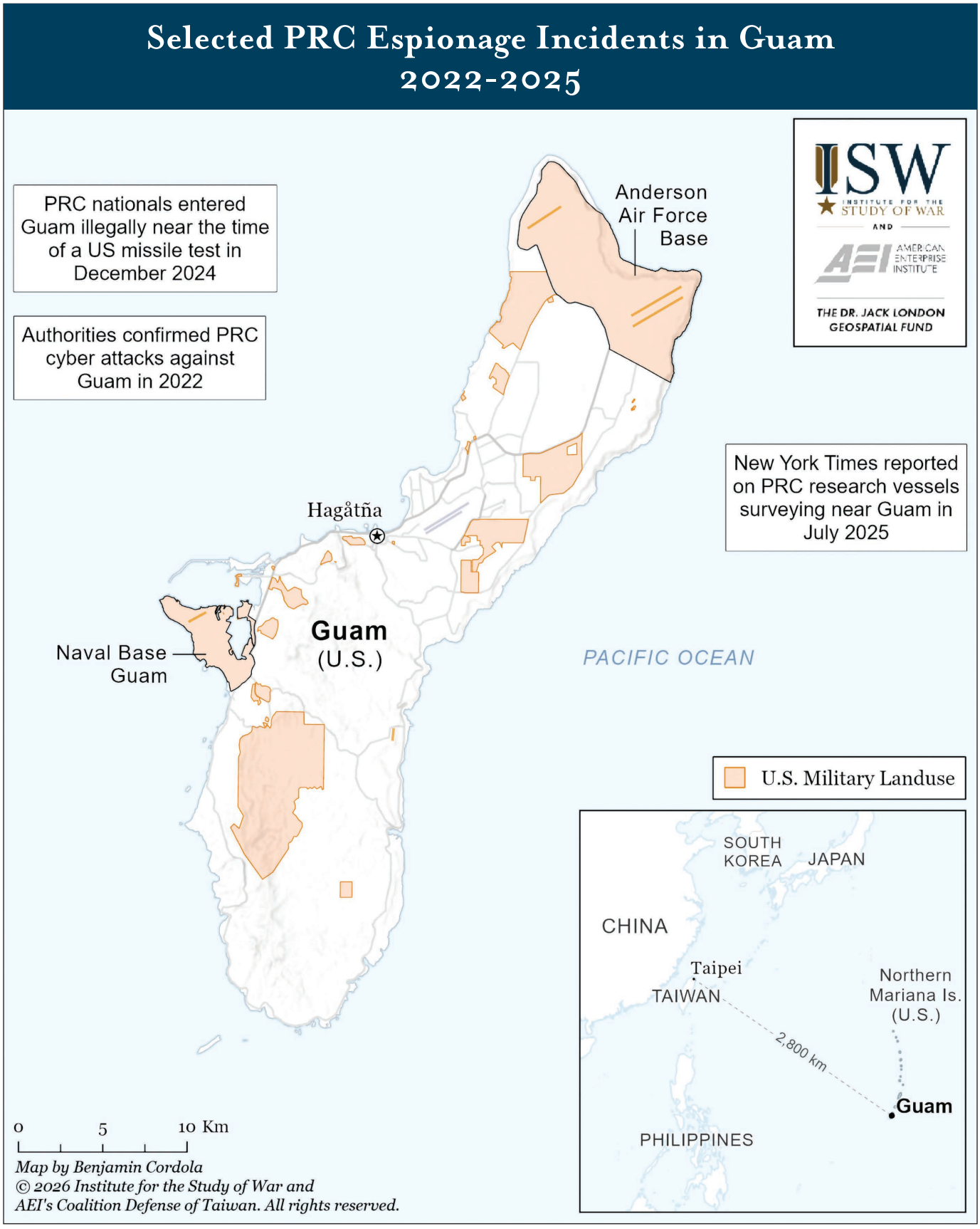
PRC Dual-use Research Efforts in the Pacific Between May 2020 and December 2025



several years. The PRC may be growing more aggressive in its tactics, however.[109] Several PRC nationals attempted to access restricted sites on Guam near the time of a US missile test in December 2024.[110] News of a PRC cyberattack on Guam, which may have begun as early as 2022, broke in 2025.[111] PRC surveillance activities and cyberattacks in and around Guam risk directly undermining US security and the security of Taiwan.

The PRC believes Guam forms the linchpin of the SIC and is thus the center of gravity of US sea control between the first and second island chains. Guam would likely play a key role hosting US soldiers, equipment, and logistics during a Taiwan contingency.[112] PRC preparations to operate around Guam and enhance its surveillance networks on the island are critical to any future military operations

> The battle for the Pacific is already ongoing, and the US must understand the implications of PRC activity in Oceania and the broader strategy it facilitates.


Selected PRC Espionage Incidents in Guam
2022-2025
PRC nationals entered Guam illegally near the time of a US missile test in December 2024
Authorities confirmed PRC cyber attacks against Guam in 2022
New York Times reported on PRC research vessels surveying near Guam in July 2025
ISW
INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR
AND
AEI
AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE
THE DR. JACK LONDON GEOSPATIAL FUND
Anderson Air Force Base
Hagåtña
Guam
(U.S.)
Naval Base Guam
PACIFIC OCEAN
U.S. Military Landuse
SOUTH KOREA
JAPAN
CHINA
Taipei
TAIWAN
Northern Mariana Is. (U.S.)
2,800 km
Guam
PHILIPPINES
0
5
10 Km
Map by Benjamin Cordola
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the PRC may conduct in Guam's vicinity. PRC submarines could attempt to choke off Guam from resupply and prevent the US from easily establishing sea control in the area. The PRC could also use its ballistic missile arsenal to strike key naval facilities on Guam, possibly aided by PRC clandestine surveillance efforts on the island, to limit its ability to support US sea control efforts in the Pacific.

PRC surveillance activities take place throughout Oceania, however. The Five Eyes intelligence-sharing network, which includes Australia and New Zealand, has identified countering PRC espionage as an intelligence priority following incidents of PRC spying and transnational repression targeting US allies.[113] Former Micronesian President David Panuelo has similarly highlighted the risks of PRC espionage.[114] PRC surveillance efforts thus indicate a coordinated PRC effort to gather intelligence on multiple states in support of a regional "guerrilla" campaign, especially in US-aligned countries.

Project:

The PRC is aiming to develop civilian infrastructure to support efforts to project power, contest sea control, and possibly disrupt maritime traffic in key areas of the Pacific. The PRC's guerrilla maritime strategy allows it to pursue these aims in the Pacific without securing purpose-built military infrastructure in the region. PRC influence efforts lay the groundwork for military maneuverability and PRC access to key strategic sites, especially in locations where the PRC has established an economic presence. PRC influence in Oceania supports its ultimate goal of denying the US uncontested sea control via "guerrilla" means. PRC "projection" efforts in this case are not merely power projection in the traditional sense but also seek to develop dual-use infrastructure that PRC clandestine assets could use in a future conflict.

The PRC has undertaken a significant effort in the past decade to secure civilian partnerships with key ports across the Pacific Islands. PRC civilian corporations, many of which have significant links to the PLA, have participated in port renovations or are major stakeholders in ports in Australia, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa.[115] Vanuatu's Luganville Wharf, in particular, was made possible through a $97 million loan from a PRC bank in 2014.[116] The Wharf's expansion allows it to support larger vessels, including warships.[117]

The PRC's civilian capture of port infrastructure throughout the Southwest Pacific has raised fears that the PRC will soon establish a permanent military base in the region.[118] These fears mischaracterize the nature of PRC strategy in the Pacific, however. PRC military infrastructure in the Pacific would represent a conventional approach to power projection and sea control in the region that the PLAN cannot sustain with its existing limitations in blue-water operations compared to the US Navy.[119] Overt military infrastructure in the Pacific would, furthermore, alert foreign nations to the growing PRC threat in the Pacific, an eventuality that PRC guerrilla strategy actively seeks to avoid. The PRC's development of a guerrilla maritime force that can rely on civilian assets for critical missions allows the PRC to lean on civilian infrastructure in the Pacific without having to develop a conspicuous military footprint in the area.

PRC maritime strategy, as outlined, explicitly discusses leveraging the PRC's economic strength as an alternative to developing the world's preeminent battle fleet. The various ports with PRC influence and investment in the Pacific were not chosen at random.[120] Each port sits astride critical SLOCs between the US and its allies, global trade routes, and maritime chokepoints.

PRC presence and influence in Pacific ports could provide it the option to prepare the ground for executing a guerrilla campaign without developing military-grade infrastructure in the area. The PLAN likely will not rely on foreign ports to conduct resupply missions during wartime or to serve as a haven against US assets in the region, given the risks involved for the PLAN and its prospective host countries. The PRC could, however, use its commercial access to foreign ports to preposition dual-use assets across the Pacific, including civilian vessels armed with VLS or those capable of conducting replenishment-at-sea for mobile PLAN assets. **The PRC's demonstrated willingness to deploy civilian assets for military purposes means that PRC influence operations in the region cannot be cleanly bifurcated into those with a military application and**

those without. Wherever the PRC has secured the ability to send civilian shipping or PRC-affiliated commercial organizations have invested in port infrastructure, there is potential for the PRC to place assets that contribute to its efforts to undermine US control of the sea in the Pacific theater.

The PRC has shown increased willingness to deploy to the Southwest Pacific area. The PRC hospital ship *Peace Ark* frequently visits Pacific Island states. These visits can test efforts to sustain long-range naval deployments to the area. The PLAN deployed two guided missile destroyers to the Southwest Pacific in October 2024 and docked them at Luganville Wharf in Vanuatu.[121] A PLAN task force circumnavigated Australia in February 2025.[122] These deployments may be indicative of the PRC's increasing reach in the Southwest Pacific, *in spite of* its lack of military infrastructure in the region. The PRC's increased civilian footprint in the Pacific is, as a result, a critical enabler of its overarching guerrilla strategy to reshape the Pacific battleground in its favor.

Divide:

PRC activity in the Pacific reflects a systematic intent to prevent US and allied coalition building. The PRC aims to disrupt the US-led coalition in the Pacific, which could strain the US ability to secure sea control in the region. Disruption of coalitions, including ones that link Taiwan to Pacific security partners, represents the final aim of the PRC's guerrilla strategy in the Pacific.

PRC diplomatic and economic policies aim to isolate Taiwan from its allies and partners, including the United States, while laying the groundwork to block the United States from intervening in a Taiwan contingency. The PRC's position of relative weakness in the maritime domain compared to the United States necessitates its attempts to limit US regional cooperation and coalition building. The PRC further understands that a key force limitation for the US in the Pacific region is access to basing, which the US will likely rely on its regional partners to provide, in part.[123] PRC coalition-breaking in the information and economic domains aims to limit US power projection vectors before a kinetic conflict occurs, thereby evening the odds between the PLA and US military.

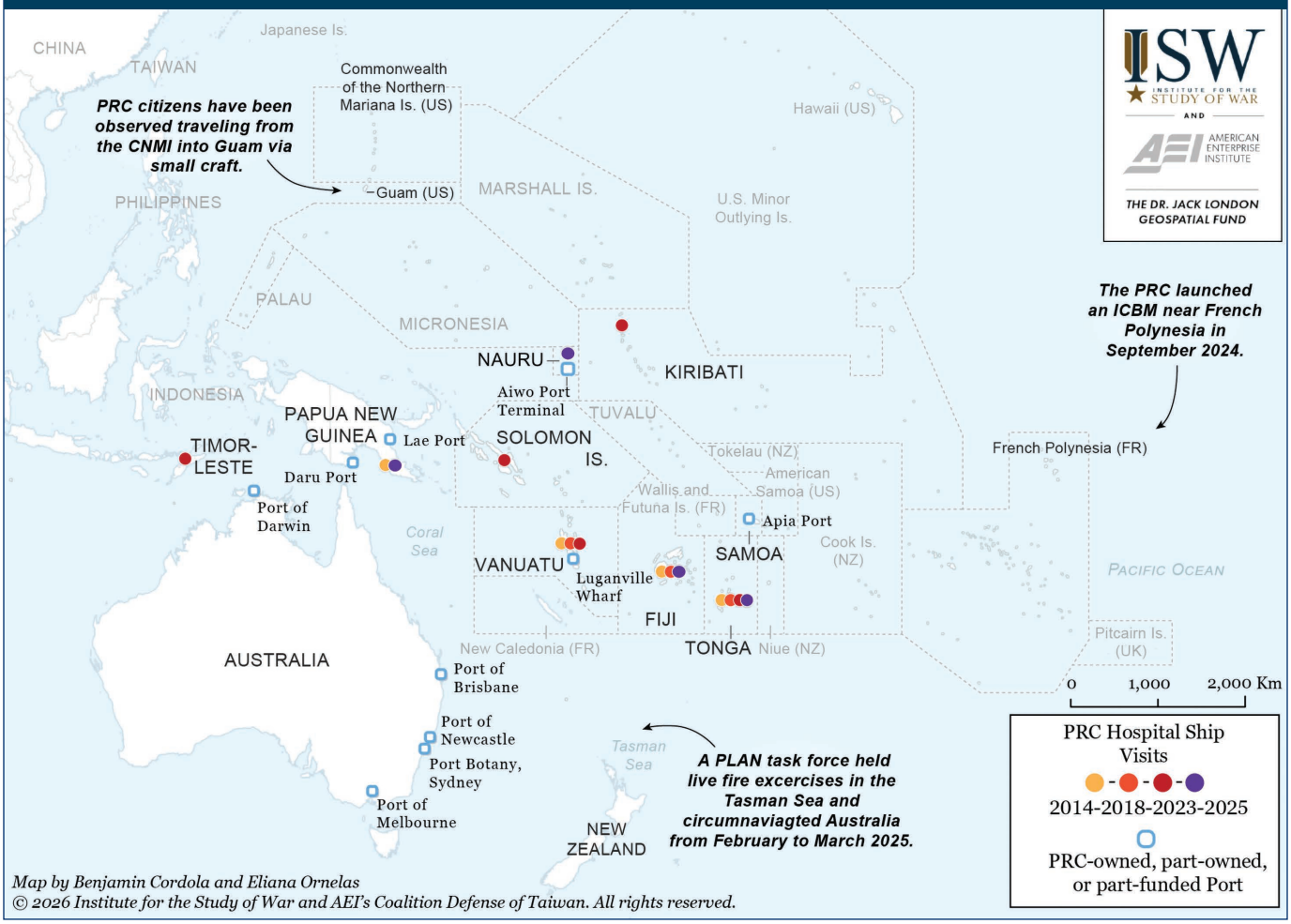
The US military has access to naval and air base architecture across the Pacific region. The United States maintains a permanent military presence in Guam, Wake Atoll, and Kwajalein Atoll.[124] US COFAs with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau give the United States exclusive military access to these states.[125] The United States also maintains a rotational presence in Australia and the Philippines and has access to ports and airports in Papua New Guinea.[126] This network is the basis for US efforts to deploy and sustain forces in the Pacific theater during wartime, and relies on US partnerships with its key allies in the region.

The PRC likely aims to improve relations with some of these states to discourage them from granting extensive access to the United States during wartime or impose costs on these states to deter such access. The PRC has extended internal security assistance to several Pacific Islands states, including Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu.[127] The PRC has also sought to develop close economic ties with New Zealand and the Cook Islands, with the latter signing an economic agreement with the PRC in February 2025.[128] The PLAN's deployment to the waters around Australia and New Zealand also serves a coalition-breaking goal by demonstrating the PLA can maintain a presence in either nation's surrounding waters.[129] The PRC has frequently used naval deployments around the Philippines to associate Philippine-US cooperation with military escalation and to discourage further cooperation.[130]

The PRC may attempt to make the case to several Pacific Island states that overt military cooperation with the United States is not worth losing economic and humanitarian aid connections with the PRC. The PRC formed an economic partnership

The PRC's demonstrated willingness to deploy civilian assets for military purposes means that PRC influence operations in the region cannot be cleanly bifurcated into those with a military application and those without.

PRC Presence and Activity in the Pacific 2014-2025



Map by Benjamin Cordola and Eliana Ornelas
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with Micronesia, Vanuatu, Naoero, Kiribati, and Fiji in November 2025.[131] The PRC has also provided medical aid, one of the Pacific Islands' most requested forms of assistance, to several Pacific Island states over the past decade.[132] These efforts on their own, to be sure, are unlikely to shatter US alliances and deprive the US of the capability to assert sea control. They represent, however, gradual PRC efforts to interlink itself with key US partners in the region, possibly creating difficult trade-offs for these states which may be forced to decide between maintaining partnerships with the PRC or allowing their infrastructure to be used for military operations in the Pacific. The PRC follows a similar method in its approach to coercing Taiwan's diplomatic allies, imposing costs on Taiwan's would-be allies to discourage coalition-building in a "guerrilla" effort to disrupt ties between Pacific partners.

Isolating Taiwan in the Pacific

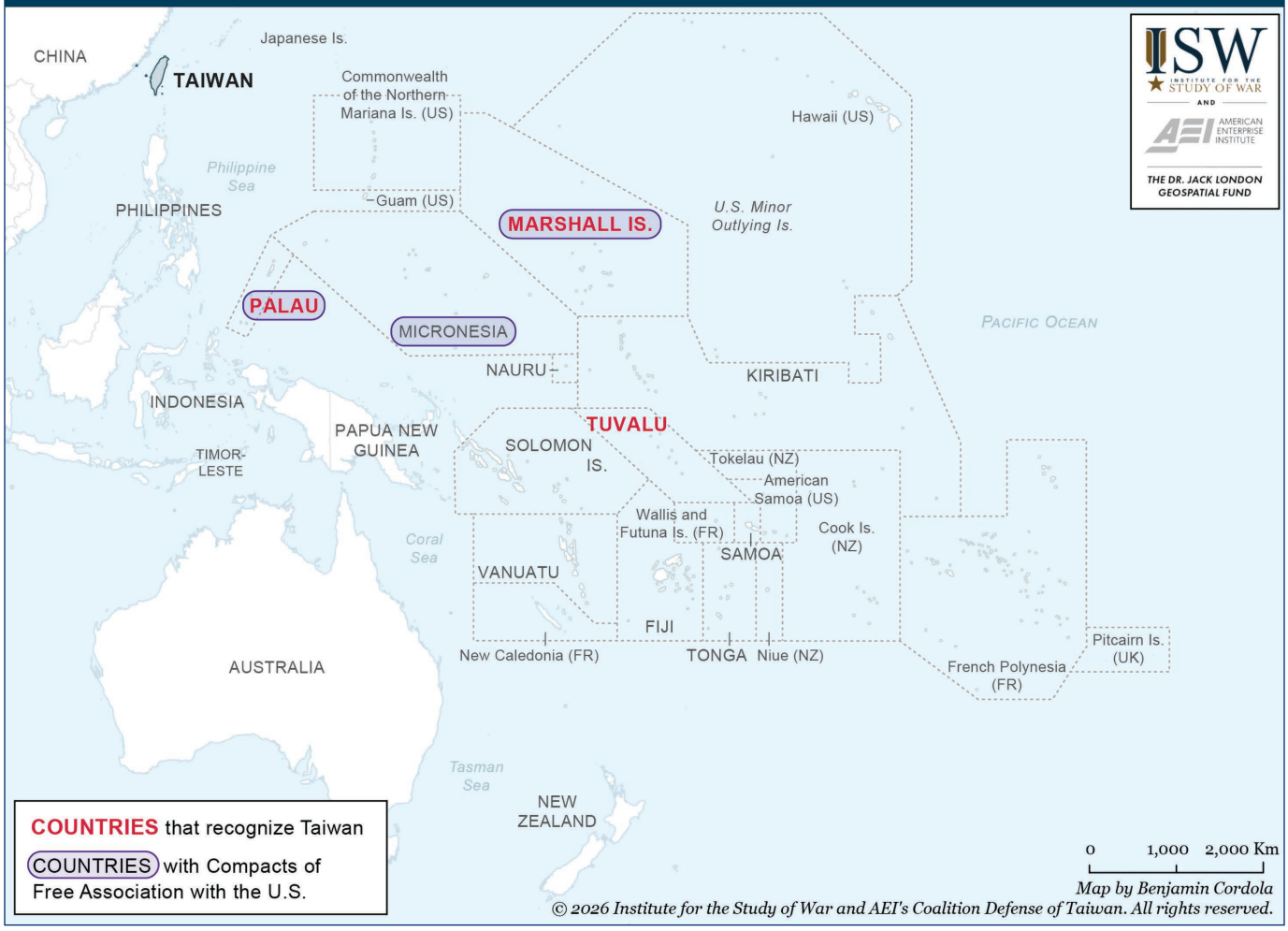
PRC coalition-breaking efforts create a secondary effect: dividing Taiwan from its diplomatic partners and punishing states that back Taiwan diplomatically. The PRC uses economic inducements to sway Pacific countries away from recognizing Taiwan, as exemplified by Naoero. Naoero's poor economy and environmental challenges have driven it to seek support from its Pacific neighbors. This has in turn given the PRC economic leverage and enabled Naoero to trade diplomatic recognition of the PRC for economic support, part of the PRC's larger efforts to gain influence and diplomatic recognition in the Pacific. Naoero changed its diplomatic recognition between the ROC and PRC several times: in 2002 Naoero switched from recognizing the ROC to recognizing the PRC, switched back to

the ROC in 2005, and then back to the PRC in 2024.[133] These diplomatic switches often coincided with promises or threats from the PRC. The PRC reportedly agreed to help Naoero with debt relief and provide Naoero a $60 million grant after its 2002 switch; whether this debt relief materialized is unclear, however.[134] After Naoero switched its recognition back to the ROC in 2005, PRC-backed initiatives in Naoero announced in 2003 or 2004 never came to fruition.[135] The PRC then began providing Naoero with economic aid again shortly after it switched its recognition back from the ROC to the PRC again in 2024.[136]

The PRC similarly uses coercion to punish states that maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan. One such partner of Taiwan, Palau, experiences harassment by PRC vessels that enter its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Palauan President Surangel Whipps Jr. commented on a PRC vessel's entry into Palau's waters following a PRC missile test in the South Pacific in July 2026.[137]

PRC efforts to erode recognition of Taiwan among small Pacific nations likely achieve little to no concrete military outcome. Small Pacific nations lack the military power needed to come to Taiwan's defense should the PRC decide to blockade or annex it. The PRC's coalition-breaking efforts thus illustrate its "guerrilla" strategy of disrupting supply lines that militarily powerful actors such as the United States would need to defend Taiwan. These efforts echo PRC coercive statecraft worldwide, exemplifying actions the PRC also takes against larger countries more militarily capable of aiding in Taiwan's defense.

Countries of Oceania and Their Recognition of Taiwan as of 2026



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SELECTED PRC SHORT-OF-WAR COERCION EFFORTS IN OCEANIA

SURVEIL	PROJECT	DIVIDE
➢ Physical infiltration near sensitive military sites (Guam).	➢ Construction of dual-use infrastructure throughout the region.	➢ Present dilemmas to US allies in the Pacific.
➢ Undersea surveys by PRC research ships (Guam).	➢ Significant investment in foreign ports and port expansion projects.	➢ Cultivate economic ties with friendly states who grant military access to the US (Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand).
➢ Miscellaneous research activities with military applications.	➢ Military exercises (Australia/ New Zealand) and military diplomacy visits (Peace Ark and other PRC vessel visits).	➢ Impose costs on hostile states that provide basing to the US military to discourage further cooperation (Australia).
		➢ Isolate Taiwan from its diplomatic allies (secondary goal of PRC maritime guerrilla campaign).

Section III: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The United States government and military have stated that the PRC represents the most serious security challenge the United States has faced since the Cold War.[138] The challenge the PRC poses is unique both in the scale and complexity of its military development and global influence. PRC military modernization in all domains of modern warfare is well documented.[139] Manifold analysis has also been conducted on the PRC's expanding political and economic influence in Oceania and throughout the world.[140] Understanding PRC strategy in the Pacific is uniquely complex, however, because its military development and influence operations are

The PLAN's deployment to the waters around Australia and New Zealand also serves a coalition-breaking goal by demonstrating the PLA can maintain a presence in either nation's surrounding waters.

mutually supporting and reinforcing. The PRC has identified that it is relatively weak militarily and geostrategically in comparison to the United States, but it is relying on a strategy that gradually undermines US advantages and places the PLA in the best possible position to frustrate US objectives in the region. In Oceania, this manifests in the development of a PRC military-civil hybrid strategy designed to undermine US control of the sea and SLOC security.

The guerrilla campaign for control of the sea in the Pacific region has already begun. The PRC is deploying all elements of national power and combining military and civilian assets to shape the Pacific battlefield in its favor and develop a strategy that defeats US efforts to maintain control of the sea that would support an intervention during a PRC invasion of Taiwan. PRC activity in the Pacific aims to break US-aligned coalitions, especially those germane to the defense of Taiwan and US regional force projection. The United States should reexamine its Pacific policy while simultaneously reapproaching how it conceptualizes PRC strategy and plans to counter it. The United States and its allies and partners should respond to PRC activity in Oceania with a multilateral approach that synthesizes military, diplomatic, and intelligence efforts. The following recommendations address PRC surveillance, projection, and division in Oceania and its guerrilla efforts to create favorable regional conditions ahead of a full-scale armed conflict.

- **Update US Navy operating concepts to counter PRC efforts to deny sea control in the Pacific.** Technological advances in anti-ship missile technology and PRC advances in sea control denial through guerrilla methods likely mean the US Navy cannot rely on establishing sea control throughout the Pacific theater to facilitate US support for Taiwan during a contingency. In short, the US Navy will not have the freedom of maneuver on the high seas it has relied on to conduct military operations in Iran and Venezuela.[141] The US Air Force has responded to a similar challenge in the proliferation of air defense technology by relying on "pulsed airpower" to establish temporary air superiority during military operations rather than attempting to establish enduring air dominance.[142] The US Navy can similarly tailor its operating concepts and force structure to implement "pulsed sea control," rather than relying on an enduring surface presence that the PRC is preparing to counter. A "pulsed sea control" concept could combine electronic warfare systems with US Navy surface and undersea forces to temporarily blind PRC assets operating around the SIC and its A2/AD network, allowing the US Navy to establish temporary sea control and execute operations in support of Taiwan, and subsequently withdraw beyond the range of the PRC's land-based systems. Such an operating concept would limit the PRC's ability to prevent the United States from impacting the battle for the Pacific through a strategy of denial.

- **Reorient US Navy procurements to counter the unique threat that the PLAN poses to US maritime hegemony.** A significant gap exists in current US naval procurements that neglects medium-sized, multi-role surface combatants that the US would likely need to defend critical SLOCs in the Pacific against an emerging PLAN guerrilla threat. The US Navy is currently prioritizing the development of a lighter surface combatant based on the *Legend*-class Coast Guard cutter and a large surface combatant with the *Trump*-class battleship.[143] The US shipbuilding industry is currently struggling to meet the Navy's demands for its principal multi-role surface combatant, the *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile destroyer.[144] US shipbuilding will likely have difficulty delivering the *Trump*-class at pace and

The United States should reexamine its Pacific policy while simultaneously reapproaching how it conceptualizes PRC strategy and plans to counter it.

at scale, which may cause problems for the US Navy. The US Navy is scheduled to retire more vessels than it will commission in the next few years.[145] The lack of such surface combatants could increase the PRC's ability to strain the US Navy by dispersing its guerrilla forces across the Pacific to threaten US SLOCs, forcing the US to divert its limited exquisite systems away from the Taiwan problem set. The US Navy should, as a result, invest in a medium-sized surface combatant capable of anti-surface warfare (ASuW) and anti-submarine warfare (ASW) to prevent PRC guerrilla forces from diverting key assets away from Taiwan.

- **The US Navy could consider reorienting its surface procurements toward guided missile-carrying unmanned surface vessels (USV) and anti-submarine unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) that prioritize operating range.** It is unlikely that existing limitations in the rate of US shipbuilding will improve in the next decade. It thus behooves the United States to consider where its existing advantages in emerging technologies can make up for the lagging production of its heavy industry in comparison to the PRC. In particular, the US could consider expanding the Navy's existing Modular Attack Surface Craft (MASC) program to include a wider array of unmanned vessels that emphasize containerized armament.[146] These vessels could help fill the gap in capable ASuW vessels that can be produced at scale. Without such vessels, or similar ones, the US Navy will likely struggle to maintain its existing distributed maritime operations (DMO) concept after concentrating armament and sensors on the *Trump*-class.[147] The Navy should not completely eschew manned craft, however, and should consider the development of a vessel akin to the Lightly Manned Autonomous Combat Capability (LMACC) that can be scaled quickly and has demonstrated tactical value against PLA platforms in computer simulations.[148] The US Navy could also increase its requests for procurement of the Orca XLUUV or smaller UUVs that can be deployed from surface vessels or submarines to extend their area of influence.[149] Developing these platforms would allow the US Navy to rapidly scale its surface forces ahead of a conflict with the PRC and ensure its most capable vessels are not forced to counter an asymmetric threat across the Pacific and can focus on the Taiwan problem set. The principle behind future US Navy procurements outside its major surface combatant programs should, in part, be to create a symmetric option for commanders who need to meet a low-level threat across the Pacific emanating from civilian or militia vessels. This initiative could take several forms,
- **The US military can also consider fielding land-based anti-ship Tomahawk cruise missiles in Guam to limit PLAN operations beyond the first island chain without risking the surface fleet.** The US military does not have to accept the PRC's current anti-ship missile superiority or accept the PRC's unique "home field" advantage that allows it to supplement its surface fleet with land-based anti-ship missiles. The US Navy could field an anti-ship variant of the Tomahawk cruise missile that would match the PLAN's high-end anti-ship missiles in maximum range.[150] A land-based anti-ship Tomahawk system in Guam would also support the US Navy in executing "pulsed sea power" missions, as it would provide anti-ship firepower that is more survivable against the PRC's A2/AD network than surface vessels. The US defense industrial base would need to accelerate the production of these munitions well in advance of a conflict, as it is likely that hundreds, if not thousands, of such munitions will be expended in a relatively short timeframe.[151] The United States should begin stockpiling exquisite munitions like the anti-ship Tomahawk cruise missile to ensure it can sustain high-tempo operations in the Pacific during wartime.

- **Continue to securitize Guam against PRC infiltrations, cyberattacks, and short-of-war coercion; maintain restrictions on PRC visa-free travel to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI).** Guam is a critical point of US access to the Pacific, and PRC nationals traveling into Guam via the CNMI pose a significant espionage risk. The United States restricted visa-free travel from the PRC in October 2026, enacting a barrier to one potential source of PRC surveillance.[152] Guam itself should shore up its defenses against cyberattacks and suspicious activity by PRC research ships, including by possibly purchasing "dark vessel" detection software. Canada produces a Dark Vessel Detection System that it has since provided to Taiwan and the Philippines. Systems such as this could insulate Guam against surveillance by PRC vessels operating without automatic identification systems (AIS).[153]

  Efforts to improve internet resilience would further securitize Guam and other Pacific states against PRC attempts to sabotage undersea connectivity infrastructure. Suspicious ship movements near Guam suggest a possible PRC intent to sever undersea internet cables, a strategy the PRC has similarly used against Taiwan. The US and allies should maintain and heighten efforts to protect Guam's internet access, potentially by enacting measures Taiwan has used to protect its own internet cables (including patrols near the cables and ship registries that record suspicious vessel movement).[154]

- **Augment US diplomatic efforts in Oceania.** The United States and allied nations already maintain basing and airstrips across Oceania; an expanded *diplomatic* presence in Oceania could deepen ties capable of forestalling PRC economic involvement, however. The United States maintains embassies in Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, and Micronesia but not in Tuvalu, French Polynesia, Naoero, Kiribati, or the CNMI.[155] PRC embassies in Oceania include those in Australia, Fiji, Micronesia, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Naoero, Samoa, and Tonga.[156] The United States uses the Compact of Free Association (COFA) to provide aid and maintain diplomatic links with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Palau. Most Pacific countries lack this special relationship to the United States, however. Naoero is not a US COFA state and has experienced economic challenges that incentivized it to seek aid from the PRC or other great powers, although Australia remains its main backer.[157] Palau's membership in COFA has likely insulated it from many of the economic challenges experienced by Naoero and given it greater leverage against the PRC, which it has used to remain a staunch ally of Taiwan. US diplomatic engagement in Oceania could facilitate further political and economic ties, especially as Pacific states continue to seek aid from the PRC, Taiwan, and other regional partners.

  The Solomon Islands offers a case study of improving bilateral relations in a nation historically aligned with the PRC. The United States reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands in 2023 following the PRC's announcement of its security deal there.[158] The United States and Solomon Islands in July 2026 similarly discussed reopening US Peace Corps operations in the Solomons, as well as US Coast Guard patrols alongside local forces around the Solomons.[159] US Pacific policy should take a proactive rather than reactive approach, however, opening diplomatic channels before the PRC announces security deals or other regional ties that provoke concern.

- **Deepen regional military and diplomatic ties to enhance coalition building.** Military efforts must supplement diplomatic ones, and the United States can rely on existing partners and security architecture to encourage coalition-building among its allies. Australia signed the Pukpuk mutual defense treaty with Papua New Guinea (PNG) in September 2025. The agreement is aimed at enhancing defense cooperation and mutual defense amid Australia's outreach to its regional partners.[160] Australia

similarly integrated PNG into its comprehensive Talisman Sabre exercises in 2025, signaling growing cooperation with Pacific partners. New Zealand in April 2026 signed a new security pact with its state in free association, the Cook Islands, likely as a means of countering a PRC deal from the previous year. Regional security pacts should strengthen economic ties as well as security ties with the goal of deterring PRC involvement in the region. The United States can encourage regional allies to deepen their own security partnerships, supporting the formation of a region-wide coalition.

Coalition-building has become especially relevant as countries in Oceania seek to distance themselves from the PRC and realign with US and Five Eyes partners. The Solomon Islands recently announced it would review its controversial security pact with the PRC following the election of Prime Minister Matthew Wale, who was previously known for his criticisms of the PRC.[161] The Solomon Islands have accordingly drawn closer with Australia; Wale and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese signed a joint document stating that "Pacific peace and security is best led and handled by the Pacific" in 2026 following Wale's election.[162] The Solomon Islands' interest in joint US Coast Guard patrols, announced shortly after Wale and Albanese signed their agreement, illustrates the cascading nature of regional coalition-building.[163] US efforts to take the first step in coalition-building may cause other regional partners to follow suit, and vice versa.

Oceania may be initiating efforts to create a so-called "Pacific version of NATO," a coalition that the United States should support.[164] Australia signed a pact with Fiji in July 2026, inaugurating the Ocean of Peace Alliance — a mutual defense treaty that is open to other interested states in the region.[165] New Zealand has also expressed interest in joining.[166] The United States should encourage Pacific states to join and should contribute to the alliance as it grows, possibly by hosting meetings, participating in an observer capacity, or even joining the alliance as permitted. US policy in the region should accordingly support multilateral diplomacy efforts such as Ocean of Peace to secure partnerships between Pacific countries interested in reassessing ties with the PRC.

- **Maintain and enhance law enforcement collaboration with Five Eyes partners.** PRC activity in and against Australia particularly exemplifies all aspects of the surveil-project-divide framework. PRC coalition-breaking efforts against Five Eyes allies necessitate particular focus on these targets of PRC transnational repression and espionage. The United States opened an FBI office in New Zealand in July 2025, signaling inter-Five Eyes cooperation while boosting US security presence in the region.[167] Deepening law enforcement collaboration could reduce PRC espionage and transnational repression risks in the Pacific region by facilitating information-sharing. Joint law enforcement efforts could include combined training to identify and deter PRC transnational repression or exchange programs to share findings on means of deterring PRC coercion.
- **Support Taiwan's integration and ties in the region.** The PRC has taken steps to erode support for Taiwan among Pacific countries – only three of which still recognize Taiwan diplomatically – and elevate its own diplomatic standing. Economic and cultural ties between Taiwan and Pacific nations may deter the PRC from making further inroads in the region and poaching more of Taiwan's allies.[168] The United States should facilitate trade and cultural

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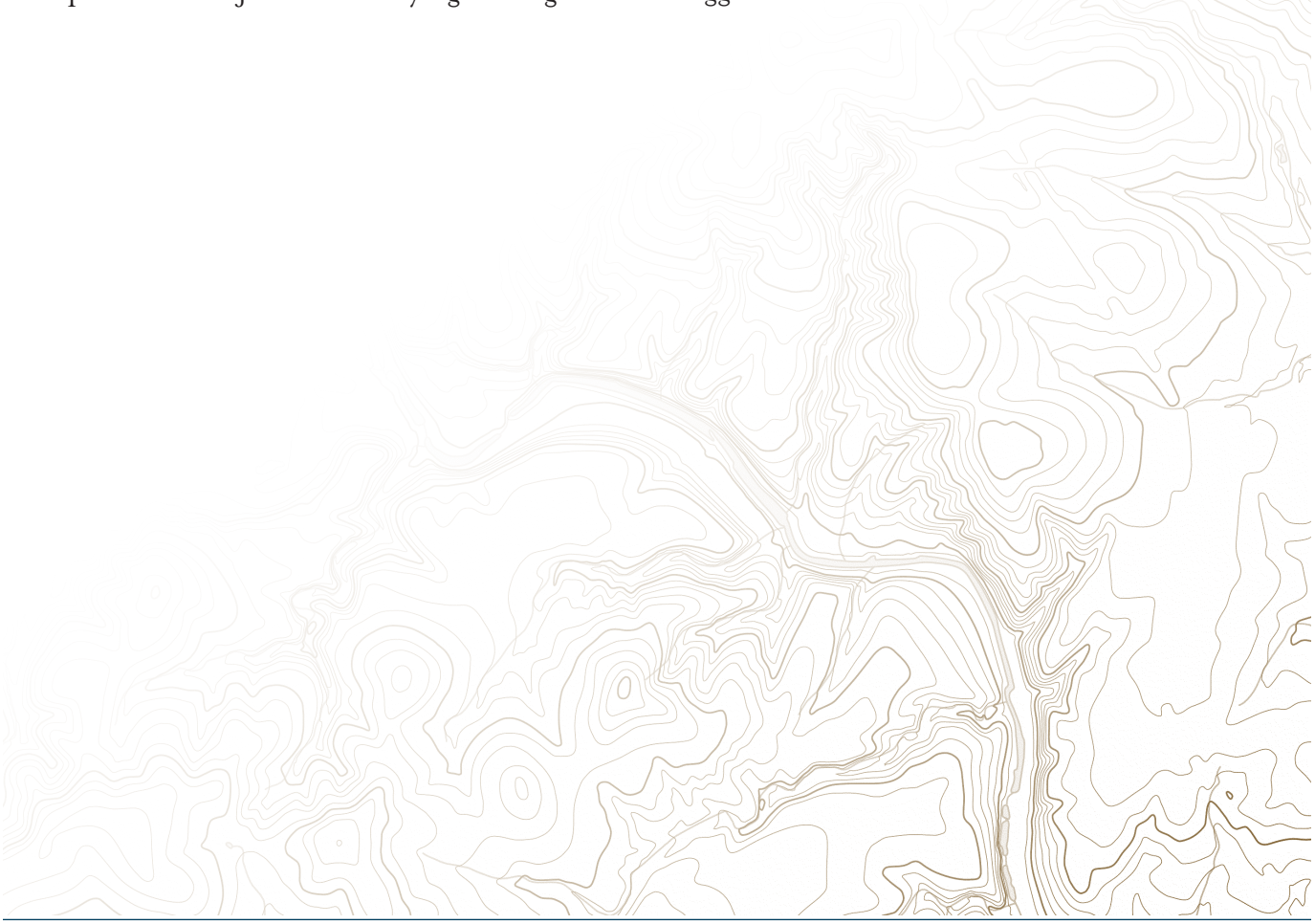
exchange between Taiwan and Pacific states, as well as between Taiwan and the United States, to counter PRC power projection and coalition-breaking efforts.

The PRC's guerrilla strategy in the Pacific threatens the United States' military and diplomatic position throughout the region. The United States retains key advantages across the theater but must not become complacent. The PRC's strategy is ultimately one of gradual erosion that creates the conditions for rapid exploitation before the effects of this erosion are fully apparent. The United States must begin to counter this threat now if it is to defeat it. Neither a wholly military nor wholly diplomatic effort is enough to defeat the guerrilla threat the PRC poses to US power and sea control in the Pacific.

The United States can only effectively counter this strategy by understanding each instance of PRC influence, power projection, and military-civil development as tactical engagements that serve the operational objective of denying US regional sea control, which in turn serves the strategic objective of the isolation or seizure of Taiwan. The recommendations of this paper are designed to bolster the US' tactical toolkit to counter the PRC across the Pacific.

The PRC's guerrilla strategy proceeds from an internal acknowledgment of weakness. The PRC aims to avoid direct engagements across the spectrum of conflict with the United States. The United States can utilize tactical engagements, such as increasing diplomatic engagement with small Pacific Island states or countering PRC armed civilian aircraft to counter the PRC's guerrilla efforts. The United States can ensure that the PRC's erosion efforts can never transition, forcing the PRC to either abandon its aggressive objectives or risk open war with a superior adversary on unfavorable terms.

The future of the Pacific is being written, and US action or complacency will determine whether this future serves the CCP's goals or curbs its aggressive intentions.



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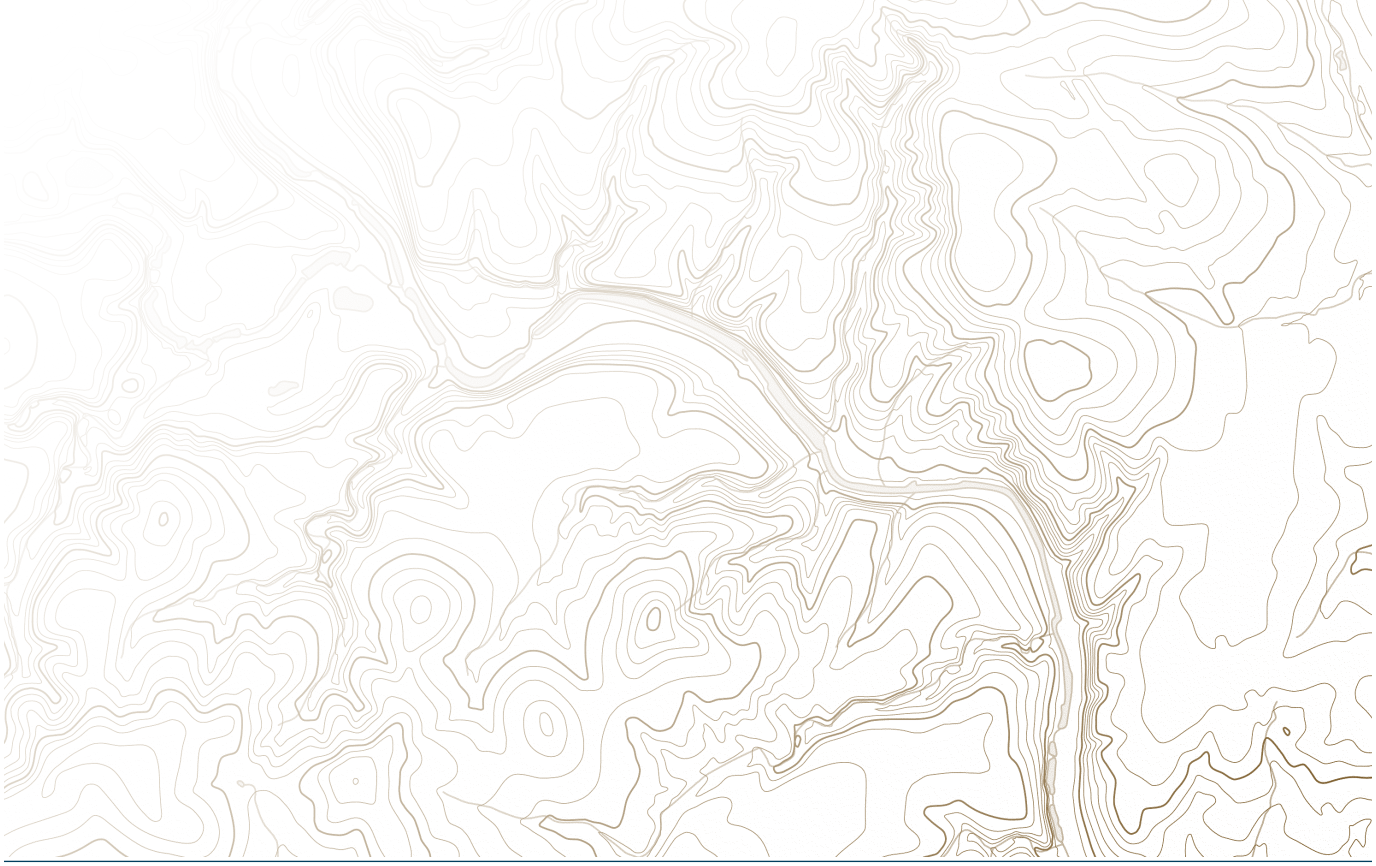
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