

CHAPTER 5: SMALL ISLANDS, BIG STAKES: CHINA'S PLAYBOOK IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

Executive Summary

As the United States' gateway to the Indo-Pacific region, the Pacific Islands occupy a crucial position in U.S.-China strategic competition. While the United States has relationships with many Pacific Islands dating back more than a century, China's systematic efforts to build influence in the region over the past few decades have heightened the Pacific Islands' strategic significance to the United States and its allies and partners. For Beijing, the Pacific Islands region is crucial to its goals of projecting military power and hindering the United States' ability to flow forces across the Pacific in the event of a conflict in the Taiwan Strait or the broader Indo-Pacific region. In pursuit of these goals, China has sought to enhance its status in the Pacific Islands through diplomacy and strategic investments while also attempting to undermine U.S. relationships through a systematic campaign of malign influence activities, including cyberattacks, economic coercion, and disinformation.

China has become a key trade and investment partner for virtually every Pacific Island country, enabling it to wield economic leverage that helped convince several countries in the region to abandon diplomatic ties with Taiwan and support Beijing's policy preferences in international organizations. Over the past several years, China has also begun to use its economic and political influence in the region to push for new security partnerships and police cooperation agreements with Pacific Island countries, laying the groundwork for Beijing to gain access to dual-use facilities at strategic points throughout the region. If China succeeds at establishing itself as the dominant power in even a small number of the Pacific Islands, it could—alongside China's efforts to project military power in Southeast Asia—hinder the United States' ability to protect its interests in the Indo-Pacific and significantly alter the global balance of power in Beijing's favor.

Key Findings

- Beijing views the Pacific Islands region as essential to its goals of blunting U.S. military power in the Indo-Pacific, projecting its own power beyond the second island chain, and isolating Taiwan diplomatically and militarily. China has invested significant resources into a multifaceted strategy to expand its influence and undermine U.S. relationships across the region to achieve these objectives.

- Over the past two decades, China has systematically expanded high-level diplomacy, propaganda, people-to-people exchanges, media penetration, and malign influence activities in the Pacific Islands in an attempt to shape the region's information environment in ways favorable to Beijing and harmful to the United States and its allies and partners.
- China has spent decades building economic influence in the Pacific Islands. China is now a major trade partner for almost every Pacific Island country, far outpacing the United States and even overtaking traditional partners like Australia. The dependence of Pacific Island economies on exports to China and Chinese tourism have exposed the region to China's economic leverage and coercion. China has also exploited its investments in the region to engage in elite capture, entrench preferred providers in critical infrastructure, and develop control over critical resources.
- Over the past several years, China has leveraged its political and economic influence to expand security and police cooperation with Pacific Island countries, enabling Beijing to promote authoritarian security norms and potentially lay the groundwork for access to dual-use facilities.
- The United States has deep ties to the Pacific Islands that long predate the more recent efforts by China to build influence and undermine U.S. partnerships in the region. In response to China's growing presence in the region, the United States and like-minded countries such as Australia and Japan have taken significant steps to further enhance ties with Pacific Island countries.
- Nevertheless, China is working to exploit reductions in U.S. diplomatic and development assistance in the region and advance the narrative that China is the more stable long-term partner. The relative weakening of U.S. influence in the Pacific Islands could have severe implications for U.S. power projection in the Indo-Pacific, potentially hindering the United States' ability to deter Chinese military aggression in the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and globally.

Introduction

On most world maps used in the United States, the Atlantic Ocean appears at the center, while the countries of the Pacific Islands are—quite literally—marginalized, appearing only as tiny specks, many of them unlabeled, at the far edge of the page.¹ Yet the expansive territory they occupy in the Pacific Ocean has geographically put them in the middle of U.S.-China strategic competition. In the decades prior to World War II, a rising East Asian power (Japan) worked methodically to build dual-use infrastructure, engage in resource extraction, and construct defensive fortifications on islands across a large swath of the central Pacific.² After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the United States had to engage in a brutal “island hopping” campaign to fight its way across the Pacific, losing more than 100,000

American lives in the process.³ The region continues to be vital as a gateway across the Pacific. China has carefully studied the Pacific Theater of World War II for insights into how Japan could have defeated the United States, and since the beginning of the 21st century it has been aggressively expanding its political, economic, and security influence across the Pacific Islands region.⁴ China's efforts to dominate this area are part of Beijing's larger strategy—which also includes the pursuit of military bases in Southeast Asia and the militarization of the South China Sea—to challenge the status of the United States as an Indo-Pacific Power and deter U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency.*

The Pacific Islands Region Is Key to Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific

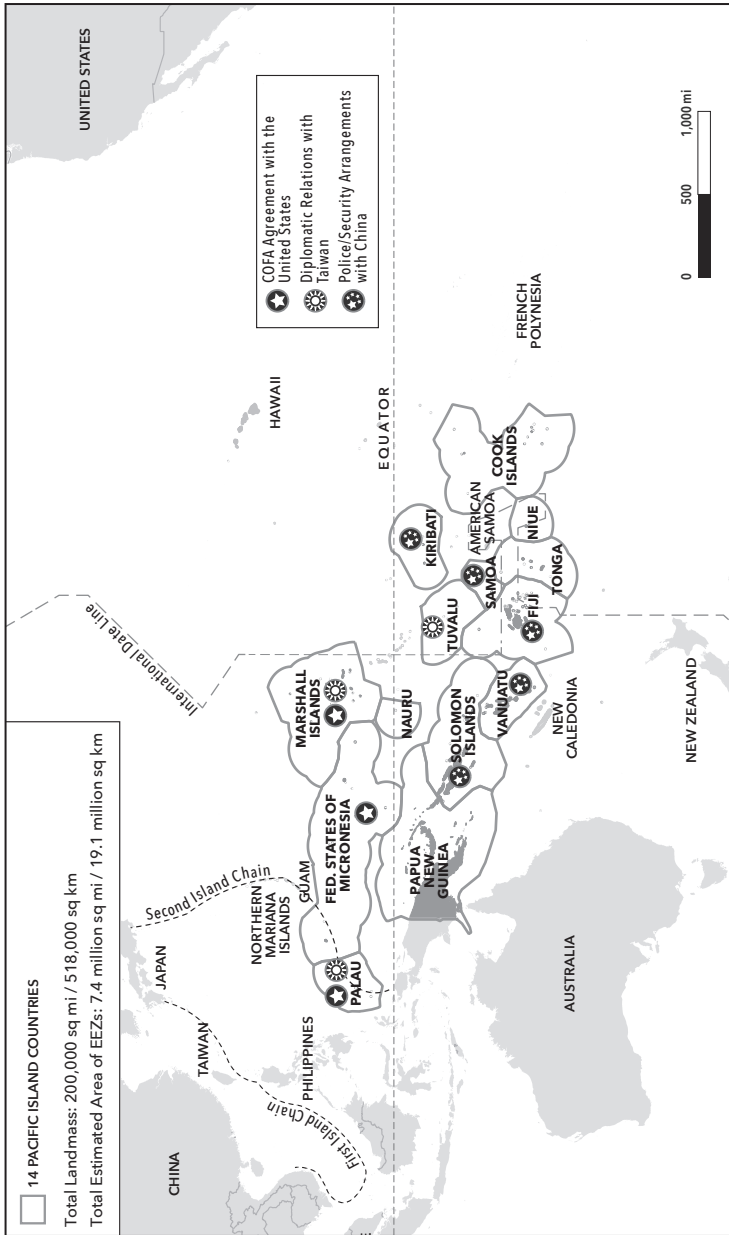
China views the Pacific Islands region as essential to its goals of blunting U.S. military power in the Indo-Pacific, projecting its power past the second island chain, and isolating Taiwan both diplomatically and militarily. While the United States has long appreciated the strategic significance of the Pacific Islands, China's increasingly assertive actions in the region have prompted the United States and like-minded countries to take steps to shore up their ties with countries in the region. Although most Pacific Island countries would prefer to remain neutral in U.S.-China strategic competition and benefit from engagement with both countries, some Pacific Island leaders have begun cozying up to China, while others have raised the alarm about the harmful consequences of China's growing influence.

The Small and Diverse Countries of the Pacific Islands Region Occupy a Highly Significant Strategic Location

The Pacific Islands region is vast—spanning nearly 15 percent of the Earth's surface—and includes 14 countries as well as the U.S. state of Hawaii and the U.S. territories of Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands.⁵ Pacific Island countries range widely in size and population. The largest Pacific Island country, Papua New Guinea, has a population of more than ten million and a total land area slightly larger than California, while the smallest, Nauru, has a population of approximately ten thousand and a total land area an eighth the size of Washington, DC.⁶ Culturally and geographically, the Pacific Islands can be grouped into three major subregions. Micronesia (located east of the Philippines) has long had close ties to the United States and is home to the U.S. territories of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands as well as the Freely Associated States of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Melanesia, which has traditionally had close ties with Australia and New Zealand, includes Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu. Polynesia, which stretches across the central and southern Pacific, includes both French Polynesia and American Samoa, among other states and territories.⁷

*This chapter's findings are based on the Commission's March 2025 hearing on "Crossroads of Competition: China in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands" and open source research.

Figure 1: Map of the Pacific Island Countries



Note: The 14 Pacific Island countries refer to Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. There are three permanently inhabited U.S. territories in the region: American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. EEZs are depicted using the standard 200 nautical mile baseline from countries' coastlines.

Source: Various.⁸

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA)

The United States maintains Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with three Pacific Island Countries: Republic of the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau—which are referred to as the “Freely Associated States” (FAS).⁹ The COFA agreements grant the United States full military access to all three countries along with the “right of strategic denial,” which permits the United States to deny third parties access to their territory, airspace, and territorial waters.¹⁰ In turn, the FAS receive U.S. economic assistance and security guarantees, and FAS citizens have the right to work and reside in the United States and serve in the U.S. military.¹¹ The United States initially signed COFA agreements with the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia in 1982, followed by Palau in 1986.¹² In 2023, the United States and each country agreed to extend their COFA agreements for another 20 years.¹³ The United States’ close partnerships with the FAS are essential to its defense posture in the Indo-Pacific and ability to respond rapidly and effectively in the event of a military conflict in the region.¹⁴

The Pacific Islands region has enormous geostrategic and military importance to both the United States and China. From the perspective of U.S.-China competition, among the most strategically important geographical features in the Pacific are two “island chains” that have long been important to the United States’ defense posture in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ The first island chain stretches through Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines—all important U.S. allies and partners.¹⁶ The second island chain encompasses the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia—all of which are either U.S. territories or Pacific Island countries closely tied to the United States through COFA agreements.¹⁷

The United States’ military infrastructure and access rights along the second island chain would be essential during a potential conflict in the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, or elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁸ U.S. military bases, fuel storage facilities, and distribution centers in Guam would likely serve as the “gas station, repair shop, and command center” for U.S. forces during a confrontation with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).¹⁹ The U.S. military is currently in the process of enhancing its facilities in COFA states, such as a \$400 million upgrade to airfield facilities on the island of Yap in the Federated States of Micronesia as well as an over-the-horizon radar facility and significant upgrades to port facilities in Palau.²⁰

The United States has also increased defense cooperation with Pacific Island countries beyond the second island chain. The United States signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Papua New Guinea in 2023 to pave the way for expanded bilateral and multi-lateral military exercises.²¹ In November 2024, the United States signed a defense agreement with Fiji to enhance logistics cooperation and begin negotiations on a Status of Forces Agreement, enabling the two countries’ militaries to work more closely together.²²

Beijing views the United States' strong position in the Pacific Islands region—and especially along the first and second island chains—as essential to what it sees as a U.S. “containment” strategy targeted at China.²³ Cleo Paskal, a non-resident senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, testified before the Commission that as long as U.S. territories and COFA states along the second island chain “remain outside Beijing’s control, there will be limits on its aggression, expansion, and ambitions.”²⁴ The Pacific Island countries located beyond the two island chains could potentially also provide great strategic value to China, as they could serve as resupply points as well as locations for radar, satellite tracking, intelligence gathering, and weapons systems—making them valuable locations for monitoring and potentially targeting ships transiting the Pacific and disrupting the flow of forces in a conflict.

China’s Overarching Goals in the Pacific Islands Are to Blunt U.S. Power and Project Its Own Military Might across the Indo-Pacific

Beijing’s primary strategic goals in the Pacific Islands region are to gain the ability to impede the flow of U.S. forces and logistics across the Pacific Ocean during a potential conflict and to be able to project power beyond the second island chain. Beijing also sees the Pacific Islands region as essential to its long-term goal of projecting military and economic power on a global scale. Chinese academic experts have argued that the Pacific Islands occupy an “extremely important position” within Chinese strategic planning due to their geographic location as gateways to Oceania and South America.²⁵ The high strategic value Beijing places on the Pacific Islands is informed by decades of Chinese research on the Pacific Theater of World War II, including extensive counterfactual analysis on what Japan could have done differently to defeat the United States.²⁶ Cleo Paskal testified before the Commission that Beijing has concluded that its ability to take Taiwan by force might be contingent on denying the United States ready access to the first and second island chains as well as its treaty allies in East Asia and the South Pacific.²⁷ Therefore, China’s strategy to counter the United States in the Pacific Islands has focused on undermining U.S. partnerships and building Chinese influence in the region in order to be in a position to pressure Pacific Island countries not to support the United States in the event of conflict.²⁸

Beijing Has Pressured Pacific Island Countries to Abandon Taiwan

In addition to the region’s immense geostrategic and military significance, Beijing also sees the Pacific Islands as crucial to its goal of diplomatically isolating Taiwan. Beijing has successfully pressured some Pacific Island countries to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing, including Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019 and Nauru in 2024.²⁹ Only three Pacific Island countries still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan: Palau, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands.³⁰ China has wielded a variety of economic carrots and sticks to convince these last holdouts to switch recognition. In 2017, China penalized Palau for its continued refusal to recognize

Beijing by restricting Chinese tourism to the country—significantly harming Palau’s economy, which had become dependent on Chinese visitors.³¹ (For more on Chinese tourism in the region, see “Expanding Trade Has Deepened Pacific Islands’ Dependence on China” below.) In 2024, Palau attributed a cyberattack to China after attackers stole 20,000 documents from the Palau government and posted them on the dark web just hours before a celebration of a large aid agreement was to take place at the U.S. Embassy in Palau.³² To entice the Marshall Islands, China has offered to lower import taxes for Marshallese-flagged ships entering Chinese harbors in return for switching diplomatic recognition—a significant incentive because the Marshall Islands has the world’s third-largest ship registry.³³ These efforts have thus far been unsuccessful, with the leaders of both countries recently expressing the close and enduring nature of their relationships with Taiwan.³⁴

The United States and Its Allies Have Deepened Their Engagement with the Region

The United States and like-minded countries such as Australia and Japan have long engaged the Pacific Islands and have deepened that engagement as China has more aggressively courted influence in the region. In 2023, the United States, the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau agreed to renew their respective COFA agreements, preserving the United States’ exclusive, unfettered military access to this strategic area of the Pacific for another 20 years.³⁵ Under the renewed COFA agreements, the United States will provide a cumulative total of \$7.1 billion in assistance to the three COFA states over the period of the agreements.³⁶ In December 2024, Australia signed multimillion-dollar deals with Nauru and Papua New Guinea that affirm Australia’s status as their “major security partner,” providing Australia with the right to withdraw funding should they sign security agreements with third countries outside the “Pacific Family.”³⁷ That same month, Australia reached an agreement to provide the Solomon Islands with \$118 million to expand its police force.³⁸ In addition to the United States and Australia, Japan has continued to work through platforms such as the Pacific Island Leaders Meeting to expand its cooperation with Pacific Island countries on priority issues for the region, including climate, sustainable fishing, and connectivity.³⁹

Many Pacific Island Countries Hope to Benefit from Increased Attention Due to U.S.-China Competition, but Some Regional Leaders Remain Wary of Excessive Chinese Influence

In the context of escalating U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry, the leaders of many Pacific Island countries hope to avoid taking sides while benefiting from aid and investment from China, the United States, and U.S. allies and partners. Australian National University Professor Graeme Smith testified before the Commission that “the mantra ‘friends to all, enemies to none’ is heard so frequently as to be open to parody, but it reflects the genuine connection of many Pacific nations to the non-aligned movement.”⁴⁰ Regional leaders such as Meg Taylor, former secretary general of the Pacific Islands

Forum, have explicitly argued that Pacific Island countries have an opportunity to play China and the United States off of one another to maximize investment from both. As Taylor stated in 2019, “In general, forum members view China’s increased actions in the region as a positive development, one that offers greater options for financing and development opportunities—both directly in partnership with China and indirectly through the increased competition in our region.”⁴¹ The Solomon Islands, for example, has exploited geopolitical competition in the region to attract large new investments from both China and Australia.⁴² As the host of the 2025 Pacific Islands Forum meeting, the Solomon Islands broke with precedent by excluding all dialogue partners—including the United States, China, and Taiwan—from participating in the meeting.⁴³ Analysts argued that the Solomon Islands’ decision to exclude all dialogue partners was a “compromise” that enabled it to accommodate Chinese demands to exclude Taiwan while avoiding the appearance of choosing sides.⁴⁴

Yet some leaders in the Pacific Islands—particularly in countries that have COFA agreements with the United States and in U.S. territories—have been highly critical of China’s growing influence. In March 2023, then-President of the Federated States of Micronesia David Panuelo issued a scathing criticism of how China was attempting to build influence in the region to attempt to secure Pacific Island countries’ acquiescence to China’s positions on issues ranging from Taiwan to deep-sea mining.⁴⁵ In March 2025, William A. Parkinson, a local senator in Guam, stated, “We are a tiny island but we are too strategically important to be left alone. Stay with America or do we let ourselves be absorbed by China?”⁴⁶

China Is Taking a Multifaceted Approach to Deepening Ties with the Pacific Islands and Undermining U.S. Influence

In order to achieve its geostrategic and military objectives in the Pacific Islands, Beijing has invested significantly in a decades-long, multi-vector campaign to build political and economic influence throughout the region. Beijing’s systematic approach to increasing its leverage over Pacific Island countries has involved high-level diplomacy, soft power initiatives, trade deals, and strategic investments as well as malign influence activities.

China Has Systematically Expanded Diplomatic Efforts in the Pacific Islands

Over the past two decades, China has devoted significantly more resources than the United States toward diplomacy with the Pacific Islands. China conveys the importance it places on the region through frequent high-level visits and meetings. General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping has met face-to-face with Pacific Island leaders 32 times since 2014 and made two visits to the region, traveling to Fiji in 2014 and Papua New Guinea in 2018.⁴⁷ In 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited the region and proposed a China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision, which offered deeper collaboration on policing, security, data networks, and cybersecurity as well as the creation

of a free trade area.⁴⁸ While Pacific Island countries rejected the agreement, China has continued to expand its diplomatic engagement with the region in recent years through frequent high-level contacts.⁴⁹

Diplomatic initiatives such as the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, which was first convened in Fiji by China's then-Premier Wen Jiabao in 2006 and has been held periodically since, create space for minister-level discussions on joint economic initiatives.⁵⁰ China continued to use gatherings like the Third China-Pacific Islands Foreign Ministers' Meeting on May 28–29, 2025, chaired by Foreign Minister Wang Yi, to promote itself as an alternative to the United States for trade and climate partnership and to oppose support for Taiwan.⁵¹ The United States has also made efforts to increase high-level engagement with the Pacific Islands. In 2022, then-President Joe Biden hosted the U.S.-Pacific Islands Summit in Washington, and then-Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the region in both 2022 and 2023.⁵² Nevertheless, no U.S. president has visited a Pacific Island country, and U.S. presidents rarely hold one-on-one meetings with Pacific Island leaders.⁵³ While the United States has taken steps in the past few years to open new embassies in the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, in many Pacific Island countries, Chinese diplomats outnumber their U.S. counterparts by a ten-to-one ratio.⁵⁴ Chinese embassies are often the largest missions in a country, staffed with diplomats who are proficient in local languages.⁵⁵

China has also invested in research and education about the Pacific Islands to equip new generations of Chinese diplomats, scholars, and businesspeople to expand the country's influence throughout the region. Beijing Foreign Studies University offers courses in all Pacific Island languages.⁵⁶ China has multiple think tanks dedicated specifically to the Pacific Islands, and there are more than 50 scholars studying the region at Liaoning University in Shandong alone.⁵⁷ China has also opened several Confucius Institutes at universities in the region that provide opportunities for Pacific Islander students to learn Mandarin and scholarships for them to study in China.⁵⁸ Confucius Institutes, which have close ties to the CCP's Propaganda Department and United Front Work Department, are an integral part of China's overseas influence operations and have been used to pressure host universities to censor teaching, research, and activities that paint China in a negative light.⁵⁹ The former Prime Minister of Fiji, Mahendra Chaudhry, has argued that Confucius Institutes serve as vehicles for Chinese "indoctrination" in the Pacific Islands region.⁶⁰

China Has Attempted to Shape the Information Environment in the Pacific Islands

In addition to formal diplomacy, China has also adopted a range of tactics aimed at shaping the information environment in Pacific Island countries to promote Chinese propaganda and sow distrust in the United States. As it has in other regions, China has provided all-expenses-paid trips to China for journalists and academics from the Pacific Islands.⁶¹ The Solomon Islands, which

switched its recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, has long been a target of these programs. Desmond Rave, the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force's media officer, said his April 2025 trip convinced him that many criticisms of China are "purely negative propaganda."⁶² China has also sought to shape local discourse by exerting influence over traditional local media outlets and propagating its own disinformation campaigns.⁶³ In 2022, the Chinese government gave \$133,000 to the *Solomon Star*, a major newspaper in the Solomon Islands, on the condition that the paper would portray China "as the most generous and trusted development partner in Solomon Islands."⁶⁴ When confronted about the case, the *Solomon Star* published a reply stating that many other media outlets in the country had similarly sought Chinese government funding.⁶⁵

China has flooded the Pacific Islands with disinformation targeting the United States and its allies and partners. For example, Chinese-controlled media outlets disseminated false claims that the United States and Taiwan instigated riots in Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands, which broke out in protest of the country's decision to recognize Beijing instead of Taipei.⁶⁶ Chinese state media outlet *Global Times* falsely blamed the United States and Taiwan for inciting the unrest, and its accusations were then echoed by the *Solomon Star*.⁶⁷ China also manufactured rumors about U.S. interference ahead of the Solomon Islands' 2024 election.⁶⁸ For example, the *Global Times* published an article titled "Allegations of US Interference Emerge Ahead of Pivotal Election in Solomon Islands," which was rife with disinformation, including unsubstantiated rumors that the United States intended to topple the Solomon Islands' government.⁶⁹ The article also suggested that the United States intended to incite "another" riot ahead of the elections.⁷⁰ These allegations are particularly ironic as officials in the Solomon Islands have called out numerous instances of China attempting to use bribery and coercion to interfere in its domestic politics.⁷¹

China Has Sought to Exploit Reductions in U.S. Development Assistance to Present Itself as the More Reliable Partner to Pacific Island Countries

The Pacific Islands is the most aid-dependent region in the world, and Beijing has sought to capitalize on the recent cuts in U.S. assistance to the region by reiterating China's commitment to providing developmental assistance to Pacific Island countries. Local media throughout the region have warned about the potential negative consequences of cuts to U.S.-funded programs in areas such as health and climate change.⁷² China has sought to exploit this concern for propaganda purposes. In a recent interview, China's Ambassador to Fiji, Zhou Jian, stated, "Regardless of whether other countries alter their foreign aid policies, China will continue providing PICs [Pacific Island countries] with sincere, no-strings-attached assistance as we always have."⁷³ During a meeting between China and the foreign ministers of 11 Pacific Island countries in Xiamen, China, on May 28–29, 2025, China vowed not to make "empty promises" with regard to foreign as-

sistance and agreed to “continue to do all it can to support and help Pacific Island countries with economic development and improving people’s livelihood.”⁷⁴ China’s recent statements about aid to the Pacific Islands have often focused on climate change, which consistently ranks as the region’s top priority.⁷⁵ Drawing an implicit contrast with the United States, China’s May 2025 Joint Statement with Pacific Island countries called for “full and effective implementation of the Paris Agreement,” asked that “advanced economies” take the lead on climate mitigation, and promised that China would continue providing “help and support” to the Pacific Islands on climate issues.⁷⁶

U.S. Foreign Aid Has Supported Palau’s Efforts to Build Resilience against Chinese Malign Influence

U.S. foreign assistance has been crucial to helping Palau, which has defense ties and a COFA agreement with the United States and is one of three remaining Pacific Island countries that recognize Taiwan, build resilience against intense Chinese pressure to switch its allegiance. China has subjected Palau to an influence campaign aimed at undermining the country’s role in the United States’ regional defense posture. In recent years, Chinese actors have hit Palau with numerous cyberattacks.⁷⁷ Individuals linked to China’s United Front Work Department and to China-linked criminal organizations have leased land near military installations and bribed Palauan officials to support China’s interests.⁷⁸ Individuals with ties to the Chinese government are executing an aggressive influence campaign that appears to be focused on blocking U.S. military installations in Palau, which reportedly involves bribes to government officials.⁷⁹ Many of the same individuals are also reportedly involved in other criminal activity, such as drug smuggling, online gambling operations, money laundering, prostitution, kidnappings, and a gruesome killing with the corpse carried away in a suitcase.⁸⁰

The United States has been a significant financial supporter of Palau’s government in the past several years with \$80.4 million in financial support to Palau’s government planned for the fiscal year that began in October 2024. This would equate to approximately 57 percent of Palau’s expected government revenue and 23 percent of its projected total gross domestic product (GDP).⁸¹ While the vast majority of U.S. foreign assistance to Palau is provided through the U.S. Department of the Interior as part of the U.S.-Palau COFA agreement, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) historically also provided grants for programs related to disaster preparedness, electoral integrity, and digital resilience.⁸²

U.S. foreign aid to Palau has been focused on helping Palau build resilience against various forms of Chinese malign influence:

- Palau’s President Surangel Samuel Whipps Jr. has stated that Beijing has attempted to manipulate national elections in Palau, “erode leadership, disrupt vital services, and weaken confidence in government;” he has also stat-

U.S. Foreign Aid Has Supported Palau's Efforts to Build Resilience against Chinese Malign Influence—*Continued*

ed that Palau's location places it "under constant threat... the best way to combat this is through partnership with like-minded nations who believe that peace comes through strength, and presence is deterrence."⁸³ USAID has provided numerous grants to promote election integrity and independent media in Palau.⁸⁴

- In 2020, the United States partnered with Australia and Japan on a \$30 million project—\$3.8 million of which was provided by USAID—to expand reliable and secure digital connectivity in Palau by connecting the island to transpacific undersea fiber optic cables.⁸⁵ According to reports, there have been several recent instances of Chinese research vessels suspiciously lingering over undersea cables near Palau.⁸⁶ (For more on China sabotaging undersea cables as a gray zone pressure tactic, see Chapter 2, "U.S.-China Security and Foreign Affairs (Year in Review).")
- In 2021, the U.S. Department of the Interior announced a \$2.7 million technical assistance program grant to remove all Huawei technology from Palau's core mobile networks and replace it with trustworthy telecommunications equipment that meets internationally recognized standards.⁸⁷

U.S. support for resilience-building activities in Palau has been crucial to helping the country resist China's efforts to undermine its sovereignty. It is likely that China will further increase its malign influence activities in Palau to exploit any significant changes or reductions to U.S. foreign assistance, which could severely harm Palau's democracy and threaten the integrity of the U.S. security architecture in the region.⁸⁸

China Leverages Deeper Economic Ties to the Pacific Islands to Achieve Its Strategic Aims in the Region

Alongside its efforts to increase its diplomatic influence in the Pacific Islands and control the region's information environment, China has spent decades building economic leverage in Pacific Island countries. While commercial interests may have provided some of the original impetus for Chinese firms to explore opportunities in the region, the CCP now seeks to leverage expanded economic ties to achieve its geostrategic aims in the region, often wielding the sheer volume of its trade and investment as a weapon and deploying unscrupulous measures such as bribery.

China Expands Economic Engagement with Pacific Island Countries Primarily Due to the Region's Strategic Value Rather than Its Economic Significance

The small size and scattered nature of the Pacific Island countries are defining characteristics for their external economic relations. The combined GDP of the Pacific Islands represents far less than 1 percent of the global total.⁸⁹ Niue has the smallest GDP

among Pacific Island countries at an estimated \$31 million.⁹⁰ Only four of the Pacific Island countries have an annual GDP above \$1 billion: Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea.⁹¹ Exports of natural resources, remittances from overseas Pacific Islanders, and inbound tourism represent vital sources of income for these countries, but small populations make it difficult to achieve scale in industry and trade.⁹² After an initial rebound in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, growth has moderated to pre-pandemic levels.⁹³ The Pacific Islands are expected to face further headwinds, including reduced investment and natural disasters that could lead to subdued growth moving forward.⁹⁴

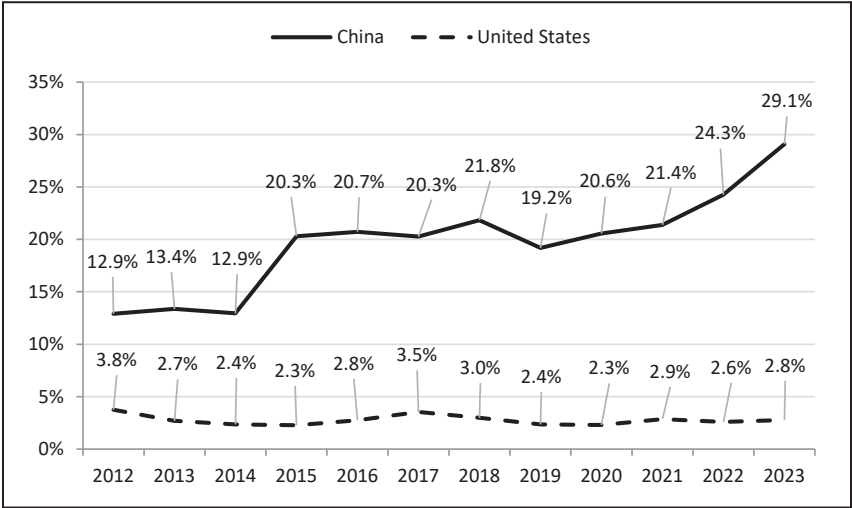
Considering the region's relatively low economic importance to China, China's continued high level of economic engagement with the Pacific Islands is reflective of the strategic importance of the region. Historically, Pacific Island economies have benefited from robust and longstanding economic ties with regional partners, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States.⁹⁵ After decades of small-scale Chinese business activities in the region, China now constitutes an important and growing market for Pacific Islands' exports of natural resources and inbound tourism, driven by a confluence of private and state interests under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁹⁶ Despite the growing awareness of the risks that accompany closer economic ties to China, Pacific Island leaders have also sought to leverage Chinese infrastructure investment to boost their economies.⁹⁷

China Cultivates Multiple Sources of Economic Leverage over the Pacific Islands

China has accumulated significant economic leverage over Pacific Island countries by expanding trade, investing in strategic sectors, and promoting tourism to the region. China is now the largest regional trading partner to the Pacific Islands as a whole, exposing them to potential geopolitical pressure and economic coercion. Other than sheer magnitude, several features of China's economic ties with the region are notable:

- *The region is dependent on trade with China.* China's share of total goods trade with Pacific Island countries grew from roughly 13 percent in 2012 to 29 percent in 2023 (see Figure 2). China is also the largest trade partner for four of the 14 countries, including three out of the four largest Pacific Island economies (Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu), and is in the top three trading partners for 12 out of 14 Pacific Island countries (see Table 1).

Figure 2: United States’ and China’s Share of Total Pacific Islands Trade, 2012–2023



Note: This figure excludes trade between Pacific Islands countries in calculating the percentage of total trade.

Source: CEPII, “BACI: International Trade Database at the Product-Level,” January 30, 2025.

Table 1: United States’ and China’s Goods Trade with Pacific Island Countries in 2023

	Trade as Percent- age of Total		Trade Surplus (Deficit) with China (millions USD)	Rank as Trade Partner	
	China	United States		China	United States
Cook Islands	7%	2%	(11.6)	3	Not in top 5
Fiji	13%	12%	(479.3)	3	4
Fed. States of Micronesia	18%	14%	5.3	2	3
Kiribati	17%	1%	(37.7)	2	Not in top 5
Marshall Islands	42%	1%	(3,506)	1	Not in top 5
Nauru	2%	1%	(6.0)	Not in top 5	Not in top 5
Niue	<1%	14%	<0.1	Not in top 5	2
Palau	24%	11%	(42.0)	2	4
Papua New Guinea	27%	1%	2,260	1	Not in top 5

Table 1: United States' and China's Goods Trade with Pacific Island Countries in 2023—Continued

	Trade as Percent- age of Total		Trade Surplus (Deficit) with China (millions USD)	Rank as Trade Partner	
	China	United States		China	United States
Samoa	16%	8%	(98.2)	3	Not in top 5
Solomon Islands	49%	1%	74.5	1	Not in top 5
Tonga	20%	6%	(56.7)	3	4
Tuvalu	28%	1%	(41.9)	2	Not in top 5
Vanuatu	21%	2%	(110.1)	1	Not in top 5

Source: CEPIL, “BACI: International Trade Database at the Product-Level,” January 30, 2025.

- *Both China and the Pacific Islands have actively fostered bilateral trade opportunities.* The Pacific Islands have encouraged trade with China through Pacific Trade Invest (PTI), the lead Pacific trade and investment organization with a mandate from Pacific Islands Forum leaders to facilitate the expansion of economic linkages with the world.⁹⁸ PTI has offices in China, Australia, Europe, and New Zealand. In return, Chinese officials have hosted Pacific Islands leaders in China to discuss deepening economic cooperation.⁹⁹
- *China dominates exports of natural resources from the Pacific Islands, which is the main driver of economic growth for the largest Pacific Island countries.*¹⁰⁰ China has established a dominant position in the timber trade in the Pacific Islands, with timber among the top three exports to China from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu in 2023.¹⁰¹ Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu exported 89 percent, 93 percent, and 99 percent of their wood products by value to China, respectively.¹⁰² China also dominates the mining industry in Papua New Guinea, which exported \$2.8 billion in mineral fuels and nickel—41 percent of its total exports of these materials—to China in 2023.¹⁰³
- *China has structured its investments to cement access to extraction rights in the Pacific Islands.* China has invested in Papua New Guinea’s gold and nickel mines, often extending loans to local operators that help Beijing cement access to critical minerals output through its state-owned enterprises (SOEs).¹⁰⁴ In the mining sector, in particular, Chinese loans are typically structured as limited recourse tied to the assets of the project, and Chinese stakeholders are guaranteed a share of the mine’s output.¹⁰⁵
- *Natural resource extraction in partnership with Chinese firms has contributed to severe environmental degradation and illegal land reclamation.* Illegal logging and deforestation are

widespread issues in the Pacific Islands' timber industry, impacting Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands, and China is a primary buyer of these timber products.¹⁰⁶ Myriad issues—including illegal reclamation of land from rightful landowners and tax evasion—plague the logging industries in these countries.¹⁰⁷ Chinese exporters have often sourced timber from illegally operated land leases in Papua New Guinea, looking the other way when questions over origin arise.¹⁰⁸ Disputes over control and environmental issues in mining operations have sparked dissatisfaction with Chinese-owned mines in Papua New Guinea.¹⁰⁹ While Western firms operating in the Pacific Islands are not free from blame, China's sheer size in natural resource extraction and its volume of imports from the region makes it an important stakeholder and gives it outsized influence on governance in these industries.

- *Tourism is a vital revenue source for the Pacific Islands, and China is supporting initiatives that will deepen Pacific Island countries' dependence on Chinese tourism.* The tourism industry comprises upward of 40 percent of the economy in the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Palau, and Fiji and at least 5 percent in every other country except for Papua New Guinea and Nauru.¹¹⁰ Countries in the region have experienced major economic hardship during prior interruptions to tourism, including the COVID-19 pandemic and other disruptions to regional air travel.¹¹¹ While Chinese tourists remain low as a percentage of total arrivals—2 percent in 2023—the proportion of Chinese visitors can be significant in certain countries, and China has launched a number of initiatives with Pacific Island countries to grow outbound tourism to the region.¹¹² China's efforts include negotiating for new commercial flight routes to the Pacific Islands from the Mainland, providing training to local industry participants to help ensure standards of service for Chinese tourists, and funding airport upgrades to relieve capacity constraints on the number of arrivals.¹¹³

China Seeks to Monopolize Untapped Undersea Critical Minerals

China has sought to secure privileged access to untapped critical mineral resources by including clauses in its proposed security agreements for the region that grant access to seabed mining rights. China holds the largest number of exploratory licenses for deep-sea mining with the International Seabed Authority.¹¹⁴ While the three existing licenses issued by the Cook Islands for exploration in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) are not held by Chinese entities, the Cook Islands and China signed a memorandum in February 2025 to deepen cooperation and communication on seabed mining.¹¹⁵ Likewise, Kiribati's relevant ministry held talks with the Chinese ambassador on "deep ocean resources" in March 2025.¹¹⁶ In addition to seeking exploration licenses, China has also reached out to international seabed mining companies seeking to establish processing partnerships.¹¹⁷

China Seeks to Monopolize Untapped Undersea Critical Minerals—*Continued*

The Pacific Ocean's seafloor is rich in minerals that are used for energy and defense technologies—including nickel, cobalt, copper, and manganese—and that hold the potential to diversify global supply chains currently dominated by China.¹¹⁸ However, there are significant regulatory and technical barriers slowing the progression of seabed mining. The seabed mining industry is still in the exploratory phase, as regulations governing the extraction of these minerals in international waters and set by the International Seabed Authority are incomplete.¹¹⁹ Many Pacific Island countries have called for a moratorium on seabed mining, largely due to environmental concerns, despite the potential associated revenues.¹²⁰ If China successfully positions itself as the dominant player in seabed mining in the Pacific Ocean, it could help Beijing maintain its chokehold on critical mineral supply chains.

China Exploits Its Economic Leverage over Pacific Island Countries as a Tool of Political Influence

In recent years, China has sought to wield its economic leverage over Pacific Island countries as an instrument of political pressure—especially on the issue of diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. The CCP uses Chinese business interests entrenched in the Pacific Island economies as a source of bargaining power to achieve its geopolitical interests, especially when Chinese companies have a large market share and the industry is politically powerful in the target country.¹²¹ In the years before Kiribati switched its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China (PRC), Chinese companies had reportedly built up significant ownership and influence in the fishing industry, from which the Kiribati government receives the majority of its revenue.¹²² These close ties in commercial fishing likely influenced Kiribati's decision to recognize Beijing. According to the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, Kiribati received no development finance from China up until 2020, after which it received \$64.1 million over the next three years.¹²³ As noted above, tourism is important to many of the Pacific Island economies, and China has used tourism as a tool of economic coercion, with ministries such as the China National Tourism Administration issuing travel warnings or imposing direct restrictions to halt travel to particular countries.¹²⁴ For example, by 2017, Chinese tourists had grown to represent 54 percent of visitors to Palau.¹²⁵ However, in November of that year, China instituted a ban on tourist groups to Palau in an attempt to pressure the country to swap its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China.¹²⁶ Despite the subsequent huge drop, Chinese tourists still make up the largest share of foreign arrivals to Palau as of 2024, and China continues to offer hotel and tourism development deals as an enticement for Palau to drop ties with Taiwan.¹²⁷

China Seeks Inroads into Correspondent Banking in the Pacific

Global financial institutions have exited markets in the Pacific Islands, leaving fewer options for Pacific Islanders to access vital financial services, and China is eager to step in. Traditionally, the largest providers of banking services in the Pacific Islands were Australian or local banks. However, high compliance costs and low profitability have led international banks to close branches and cancel correspondent banking services in the Pacific Islands.¹²⁸ Correspondent banking relationships—a system where local banks act as intermediaries for other banks that do not have a direct presence in the market, often to facilitate funds transfer, currency exchange, and settlement—are particularly important to the region. Access to financing is a key concern for Pacific Island exporters and has worsened since 2014.¹²⁹ Correspondent banking infrastructure underpins financial flows in the region, including tourism, overseas remittances, and access to low-cost financing for trade and investment.¹³⁰ The Pacific Islands lost 60 percent of their correspondent banking relationships between 2011 and 2022.*¹³¹ Although economic ministers raised concerns about the closure of correspondent banks in the Pacific Islands Forum in both 2021 and 2022, correspondent banking relationships have continued to decline, according to the Forum's analysis.¹³²

In place of departing global banks, Chinese institutions have offered to step in. For instance, the Bank of China announced its first Pacific Islands branch in Papua New Guinea in June 2023, and it has explored opening branches in Nauru and Vanuatu.¹³³ Four months later, the United States and Australia announced the launch of the first Pacific Banking Forum.¹³⁴ The inaugural forum was held in July 2024, during which the countries pledged support for rebuilding the presence of Western financial institutions in the Pacific.¹³⁵ The World Bank also initiated a project in late 2024 providing temporary correspondent banking solutions and training to improve compliance standards in an effort to retain international banks.¹³⁶ In May 2025, Australia announced a plan to maintain its status as the financial service provider to the government of Nauru by replacing Bendigo Bank Agency with the Commonwealth Bank of Australia.¹³⁷

China's BRI Projects Further Its Strategic Aims in the Region

China's BRI lending in the region provides openings for corruption, which is perceived as a widespread issue in the Pacific Islands.¹³⁸ Despite the presence of other bilateral and multilateral lenders in the region, Chinese lenders or contractors are sometimes the only option, leading to poor outcomes, including shoddy construction work and heavy debt burdens. The legacy of China's BRI lending remains mixed.

- *Although China's development finance in the region has fallen in recent years, China remains a significant provider of loans and*

*The most recent data on this issue was released by Swift in 2022.

grants to almost all Pacific Island countries. China has provided a significant amount of development finance to the region, trailing only Australia in the years leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁹ Chinese grants and loans to the region totaled approximately \$15 billion in the years from 2000 to 2021, peaking at \$3 billion annually in 2009 and seeing another surge between 2016 and 2018 before falling to \$426 million in 2021.*¹⁴⁰ Of the 14 Pacific Island countries, only Tuvalu and Palau—two of the three countries that still recognize Taiwan—have yet to receive official Chinese lending.†¹⁴¹

- *China's lending to the Pacific Islands from 2007 to 2018 was differentiated by large average project sizes, geographical concentration, and a focus on infrastructure.* During this time, the average commitment amount per development project reached tens of millions of dollars and financed the buildout of mines, liquefied natural gas pipelines, hydropower plants, energy grids, and roads.¹⁴² Together, Papua New Guinea and the Marshall Islands were the recipients of 84 percent of China's lending to the region. Papua New Guinea received \$7.1 billion total, including over \$800 million for energy projects and over \$4.9 billion for industry, mining, and construction, paralleling the vast amount of natural resources exported from Papua New Guinea to China.¹⁴³ Over \$4.5 billion flowed to the transport sector in the Marshall Islands, primarily representing bilateral and syndicated loans for ships.¹⁴⁴
- *The pace of Chinese BRI lending in the region and globally has slowed, as China—under competitive pressure from other regional players and dealing with a domestic economic slowdown—shifts its attention from making large infrastructure loans to a more targeted approach.*¹⁴⁵ From 2019 to 2021, China's lending to Pacific Island countries other than Papua New Guinea and the Marshall Islands totaled 44 percent of its assistance to the region, a sharp increase from the prior decade, and average project size has declined sharply.¹⁴⁶ China provided over \$160 million in official loans to the Solomon Islands and Kiribati each, both of which shifted diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019.¹⁴⁷ Senior Chinese leaders have encouraged firms to pursue more targeted projects partly in hopes of improving public perception of BRI and China's standing in the region.¹⁴⁸
- *Chinese SOEs dominate bids for construction contracts and further Chinese state interests.* Chinese SOEs dominate infrastructure development projects in the Pacific Island countries. For projects under the BRI, Chinese SOEs generally control

*This is a small fraction of the total \$1.5 trillion in global Chinese development aid and loans disbursed during this time period. The William and Mary AidData database was last updated through 2021, and a more recent comprehensive dataset is not publicly available. Data from the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map indicates that Chinese grants and loans to the region may have ticked up slightly in 2022. *AidData*, accessed June 18, 2025; Riley Duke and Alexandre Dayant, "China's Pacific Aid Is Rebounding and Recalibrated," *Lowy Institute*, November 21, 2024.

†The Marshall Islands, given its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, has not signed a BRI Memorandum of Understanding with China. However, it has received loans in the shipping industry from Export-Import Bank of China and other Chinese financiers. "Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset, Version 3.0," *AidData*, 2023; "China's Influence on the Freely Associated States of the Northern Pacific," *United States Institute of Peace*, September 2022, 29.

the contracting process.¹⁴⁹ Even when the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or other non-Chinese bilateral donors are funding a project, Chinese state-owned construction firms often undercut competitors to win construction services contracts.¹⁵⁰ Even countries that recognize Taiwan are reliant on Chinese SOEs to implement construction projects financed by non-Chinese lenders.¹⁵¹ Chinese firms have also helped build connections with local officials and serve to further China's geo-economic interests in the region.¹⁵² In one instance, lobbying by a Chinese SOE reportedly played a role in the Solomon Islands' 2019 decision to switch recognition from Taiwan to China.¹⁵³ In interviews with employees at Chinese SOEs, Peter Connolly, adjunct fellow at the University of New South Wales, found that China requires SOEs to prioritize state interests above profit.¹⁵⁴ This alternative tool of furthering state interests has allowed China to maintain its influence in the Pacific Islands even as total Chinese funding has declined.¹⁵⁵

- *Chinese investments are associated with corruption.* Numerous reports have alleged that China directs aid money or bribes to political elites in the Pacific Islands in exchange for awarding contracts or access to natural resources to Chinese companies.¹⁵⁶ Chinese SOEs also use unscrupulous business practices such as providing low bids to win the project, followed by raising the price during the implementation, a practice that erodes fiscal capacity of local governments and leads to higher tax burdens for the population.¹⁵⁷
- *Pacific Island elites are incentivized to leverage Chinese investment and aid for political gain, even if the investment does not necessarily benefit long-term local development.* China's BRI lending has often been directed into highly visible infrastructure projects that lead to an outsized return in local recognition compared to the total proportion of money required.¹⁵⁸ Governments may also award bids to Chinese companies because they promise faster completion, even if that sometimes comes at the expense of quality.¹⁵⁹ Local politicians can then claim credit for projects completed during their terms, thus winning favor with local populations.¹⁶⁰ In addition, Chinese lenders make fewer requirements for good governance, financial reform, human rights, and democracy compared with non-Chinese lenders.¹⁶¹
- *Some Chinese projects have provided marginal benefits to local populations and, at times, caused outright harm to local economies.* Chinese companies have on multiple occasions undercut their competitors using lower input and labor costs by hiring a local Chinese workforce or bringing in Chinese laborers.¹⁶² In Papua New Guinea, the proliferation of ancillary Chinese businesses that accompanied construction projects led to increased competition for locally owned firms; local employees of the businesses also accused them of poor working conditions.¹⁶³
- *Over a decade of BRI lending has saddled the Pacific Islands with debt owed to China while constraining access to financing for future development.* Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu have some of the highest debt payments in the world relative to GDP.¹⁶⁴

The Export-Import Bank of China is Vanuatu's largest external creditor, comprising 31 percent of total debt.¹⁶⁵ Over half of Tonga's external debt is owed to China.¹⁶⁶ While concerns China would force distressed sovereign borrowers to cede ownership of important infrastructure have largely not played out in the Pacific Islands, China remains an obstacle to debt relief, as it often refuses to offer major concessions.¹⁶⁷ The Export-Import Bank of China does not forgive foreign debts and makes only modest concessions on repayment dates or interest rates.¹⁶⁸ According to the World Bank, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are all at high risk of debt distress.¹⁶⁹ In response, Pacific Island countries including Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga have canceled some planned borrowing and applied greater scrutiny to new deals, including those with Chinese lenders.¹⁷⁰

China Advances Its Security Presence in the Pacific

After spending decades building political and economic influence in the Pacific Islands, China is now using this leverage to expand its military and security presence in the region.¹⁷¹ Beijing has invested in developing ports, airfields, and information and communications infrastructure purportedly for civilian use, but they are constructed in such a way that they have dual-use capabilities that could be drawn upon to support PLA operations, creating implications for any future conflict with the United States and its partners.¹⁷² China's pursuit of dual-use infrastructure in the Pacific Islands—alongside its construction of Ream Naval Base in Cambodia and continued militarization of the South China Sea—are key components of its broader strategy for projecting military power across the Indo-Pacific and challenging U.S. access to the entire region. (For more on China's military power projection in Southeast Asia and the South China Sea, see Chapter 4, "Crossroads of Competition: China and Southeast Asia.")

The PLA Navy's Ability to Operate across the Region Is Growing, Enabled by Dual-Use Infrastructure

The PLA Navy has been steadily increasing its ability to operate in the Pacific for over a decade, and deployment of PLA warships to the region may soon become routine as China fulfills its plans to build its blue water navy and expand access to the infrastructure necessary to resupply it. The PLA Navy routinized drills in the Western Pacific and has increased the scale and duration of recent deployments, achieving a milestone in May 2025 when two aircraft carriers simultaneously operated past the first island chain and into the second.¹⁷³ Meanwhile, the PLA Navy has been familiarizing itself with the operating environment in the Pacific Islands region through naval diplomacy, humanitarian assistance missions, as well as the deployment of intelligence-gathering and satellite-tracking vessels. China has also prepared to deploy its Coast Guard in the region. As China becomes increasingly confident in its ability to compete with the United States in the far seas, it is acutely aware that the Pacific Islands would play a critical logistical role if the

United States were to intervene in a Taiwan contingency or other Indo-Pacific conflict scenario.

China made an unprecedented demonstration of its ability to project force into the “far seas” of the South Pacific in February 2025 when it conducted live fire exercises in the Tasman Sea in an attempt to intimidate Australia and New Zealand.¹⁷⁴ The PLA Navy had sent a task force of an advanced Type 055 destroyer, a frigate, and a replenishment vessel around New Guinea, transiting through the Coral Sea, potentially accompanied by a nuclear submarine.¹⁷⁵ The exercises demonstrate Beijing’s willingness to use the PLA Navy to challenge Australia within its sphere of influence, and represent the beginning of what is likely to be an increased presence in the South Pacific.¹⁷⁶

China’s capacity to project power in the Pacific will require infrastructure to sustain it, and the BRI port and airfield projects across the region could serve PLA needs. Often located on or near the sites of U.S. WWII bases, underscoring their strategic significance, these projects have raised alarm about their potential to evolve into basing arrangements. One such example is Luganville Wharf in Vanuatu; soon after its completion in 2017, Australian media reported that China was in early talks for basing access at the facility.¹⁷⁷ Projects like this have made Vanuatu one of the countries most indebted to China among Pacific Islands, which China could use as leverage for access.¹⁷⁸ While Australia has worked to strengthen defense ties with Vanuatu, China continues its close engagement, choosing it as the resupply stop for its first deployment of Type 055 destroyers to the South Pacific in the months prior to the Tasman Sea exercises.¹⁷⁹ Papua New Guinea and Samoa are likewise highly indebted and are also key sites for upgrades to ports and wharves, potential dual-use facilities that could accommodate Chinese warships in addition to large cargo vessels.¹⁸⁰ Although leaders around the Pacific have tried to provide reassurances that the refurbished facilities are for civilian use and their countries will not host bases, the PLA Navy’s port visits are already demonstrating their dual-use potential.¹⁸¹

China Has Used “Nonwar Military Operations,” Research Vessels, and Military Support Missions to Acclimate Pacific Island Countries to Its Presence

The PLA Navy has conducted a variety of nonwar military operations in the region in recent years, including bilateral training in 2023 with Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia; four missions between 2014 and 2023 by the PLA Navy hospital ship *Peace Ark* that included stops in the region;* and the deployment of a PLA Navy supply ship and a PLA Navy amphibious dock landing ship in response to the 2022 eruption of the Hunga Tonga volcano.¹⁸²

* *Peace Ark* visited Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea in 2014 following participation in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises; visited French Polynesia on its way to South America in 2015; visited Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Tonga in 2018; and visited Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands in 2023. *Peace Ark* saw over 5,700 visitors and treated almost 1,000 patients during the 2023 Vanuatu port visit, according to Vanuatu media. A new hospital ship, *Silk Road Ark*, left for its first mission in September 2025, with stops in Nauru, Fiji, Tonga, and Papua New Guinea. “PLAN Hospital Ship *Silk Road Ark* Sets Sail for Mission Harmony 2025,” *China Military Online*, September 12, 2025; Andrew Orchard, “China’s Navy in Pacific Island Ports,” *Diplomat*, September 16, 2023.

China has the world's largest fleet of civilian research vessels, many of which are active in and around the first and second island chains as well as in the Pacific Islands region more broadly.¹⁸³ While these ships ostensibly conduct seafloor surveys and other scientific research, their inherent dual-use nature enables them to gather information useful for the PLA Navy in "waters that China's navy considers strategically vital."¹⁸⁴ For example, China's research ships have been very active studying areas around Taiwan and near Guam and Palau.¹⁸⁵ A recent Center for Strategic and International Studies report stated that over 80 percent of 64 active Chinese research vessels "demonstrated suspect behavior or possess organizational links suggesting their involvement in advancing Beijing's geopolitical agenda."¹⁸⁶

PLA ships are already conducting substantive military support missions in the Pacific Islands region. The PLA Navy has been conducting missions in the Pacific for decades, particularly intelligence-gathering and support missions; it has developed relationships with some Pacific Island countries in the course of port stopovers. The PLA has made 20 visits to Fiji, including four in 2022 alone, most of them resupply stops for Yuan Wang-class satellite tracking ships.*¹⁸⁷ Fiji's deputy prime minister called the Suva port the Yuan Wang fleet's "second home" during a 2025 ceremony celebrating 31 years of the ships' visits to the country.¹⁸⁸ Although a Chinese diplomat emphasized the ships' role in the peaceful development of space during the ceremony, the fleet is under the command of the PLA Aerospace Force and supports and provides tracking information during rocket and missile launches.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, two Yuan Wang ships likely helped track China's intercontinental ballistic missile test fired into Kiribati's EEZ in September 2024, the first such test conducted by China in the Pacific in four decades, earning the condemnation of Pacific Island countries, including Fiji.†¹⁹⁰ Chinese Type 815 intelligence-gathering ships are also frequent visitors to the Pacific Islands region, often monitoring U.S. and Australian naval exercises such as the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC), among others.¹⁹¹

China Has a Deep Presence in Pacific Island Communications Infrastructure, with the Exception of Undersea Cables

Researchers have documented the use of Huawei infrastructure for government information systems, national broadband networks, and mobile communication towers in Samoa, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea.¹⁹² Huawei's links to China's military and intelligence sectors raise concerns about the possibility for China to conduct

* China operated a ground space tracking facility in Kiribati until 2003. Liu Zhen, "Could Ties with Kiribati Be a Boost to China's Space Ambitions?" *South China Morning Post*, September 21, 2019.

† China failed to warn any Pacific Island country, suggesting a lack of concern for their reaction, although it notified the United States, France, Australia and New Zealand. Camille Pohle, "Not Welcome: China's ICBM Test Raised Alarms in the Pacific Islands," *Diplomat*, October 22, 2024; Nectar Gan, "China Fires ICBM Into Pacific Ocean in First Such Public Test in Decades as Regional Tensions Flare," *CNN*, September 26, 2024.

China Has a Deep Presence in Pacific Island Communications Infrastructure, with the Exception of Undersea Cables—Continued

surveillance and cyber operations and to control communications in the region.

The United States and Australia's concerted pushback on China's efforts to make inroads in the undersea cable sector represents a success in reducing risk from China in one aspect of critical infrastructure in the Pacific.¹⁹³ In 2017, reports alleged that Huawei had promised to donate \$6.5 million to the Solomon Islands' ruling party in exchange for a contract for an undersea cable project connecting the Solomon Islands to Australia backed by the ADB.¹⁹⁴ The Solomon Islands government had abruptly switched the project's contractor from a British-American company to Huawei Marine, prompting Australia to refuse to issue a landing permit for the cable and the ADB to withdraw its approval due to violations in procurement processes.^{*195} The United States also moved to block Huawei Marine's successor, HMN Tech, from winning a contract to lay a cable connecting the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Kiribati in 2021.¹⁹⁶ The three Pacific Island countries ultimately awarded the contract to Japan's NEC Corporation, with Australia, Japan, and the United States providing grants for implementation of the project.¹⁹⁷ Despite concerted efforts to promote domestic companies on the world stage, China remains a minor player in the undersea cables industry, which is dominated by French, U.S., and Japanese firms.¹⁹⁸ Chinese firms have had to bypass connections to countries that are likely to see risks from their involvement, forcing them to focus on emerging markets in Asia and Africa.¹⁹⁹ However, China is making efforts to promote domestic cable-laying companies on the world stage, and the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology has projected that Chinese companies will be involved in the installation of 45 percent of cables globally between 2023 and 2028.²⁰⁰ Additionally, China maintains a significant presence in the undersea cable repair industry, primarily in the northwest Pacific Ocean, and launched several new cable-laying ships in 2024, which could expose cables laid by trusted vendors to hacking.²⁰¹ In response to the increasingly urgent problem of limited capacity for cable maintenance and repairs, Australia has launched a Pacific Islands subsea cable resilience center that will help strengthen maintenance capabilities.²⁰²

Policing Agreements Expand China's Presence and Influence

Because only three Pacific Island countries have standing militaries,[†] security engagement in the region is primarily conducted through police forces, making it an ideal target for Beijing's strategy of using internal security outreach to help developing countries in-

^{*}Huawei sold its stake in Huawei Marine to a Chinese cable manufacturer named Hengtong Group in 2019, and the company is now called HMN Tech. Anna Gross, "How the US Is Pushing China Out of the Internet's Plumbing," *Financial Times*, June 13, 2023.

[†]Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga. Lois Ramilo, "Island Connections: Defense and Security Cooperation with the Pacific Islands," *Asia Matters for America*, February 9, 2025.

crease “regime security.”²⁰³ China’s growing police presence in these countries serves as an additional vector of influence over their domestic politics and Chinese citizens residing there, spreads its authoritarian vision through training and equipping regional police forces, creates intelligence-gathering opportunities, and provides leverage for future access for military forces.²⁰⁴

China has made efforts to keep the nature of these security agreements secret, as exemplified by the Solomon Islands security agreement with China signed in April 2022.²⁰⁵ The negotiations around the agreement were conducted behind closed doors, but a leaked draft revealed the deal allows the president to call in Chinese police to maintain his rule and included a secrecy clause allowing China to obscure its intervention in the Solomon Islands.²⁰⁶ In return, Chinese ships would be allowed to stop and replenish supplies in the islands’ ports, and China could use its “relevant forces” to protect Chinese personnel and projects in the Solomon Islands.²⁰⁷ The deal appears to have been motivated by Prime Minister Sogavare’s desire to gain Chinese assistance in staving off any threat to his rule caused by the political turmoil and divisions between the country’s main islands stemming from the country’s switch of recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019.²⁰⁸ Evidence suggests that China has a longstanding interest in basing access in the Solomon Islands; in 2019 Chinese SOEs explored leasing and developing land in the Solomon Islands to seek out “opportunities to develop naval and infrastructure projects on leased land for the PLA Navy.”²⁰⁹

Australia views the possibility of a Chinese military presence in the Solomon Islands as a significant security threat because it could challenge Australia’s position in the South Pacific and possibly cut it off from allies like the United States.²¹⁰ Although Prime Minister Sogavare told Australia there would be no permanent Chinese military presence, there are concerns that security agreements could evolve into something resembling a basing agreement, giving China’s access to dual-use infrastructure under the agreement.²¹¹

Just a month after securing the agreement with the Solomon Islands, China proposed a multilateral development and security cooperation pact with ten countries during Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s 2022 visit to Fiji.²¹² The proposal was ultimately rejected amid concerns about how it circumvented the Pacific Islands’ consensus decision-making process and the role of the Pacific Islands Forum.²¹³ Despite this, the proposed agreement provided further details on China’s vision for security cooperation with the Pacific Island countries, which included “cooperation on law enforcement, customs, inspections, quarantine, network governance, cybersecurity, [and] laboratory construction used for fingerprint testing” and “support for drugs, electronics, and digital forensics.”²¹⁴

Undeterred by the failure of the multilateral cooperation proposal, China continued pushing for agreements with individual countries and stationed police advisory teams in Kiribati and Vanuatu in 2023 that appear to be maintaining a permanent presence.²¹⁵ In contrast to security agreements the United States and its partners

*The countries approached with the deal were Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Niue, Cook Islands, and Micronesia. Nick Perry, “China Wants 10 Pacific Nations to Sign a Major Cooperation Agreement,” *Diplomat*, May 26, 2022.

undertake in the region, the details of the policing agreements between China and the two countries remain undisclosed, but they appear to follow the model established in the Solomon Islands, with permanent “police advisory teams” of up to 12 officers stationed on six-month rotations.²¹⁶ The Chinese police team in Vanuatu was involved in the construction of a crime database and a community policing program and has donated a significant amount of police equipment to the country, including uniforms, riot gear, motorcycles, and patrol boats.²¹⁷

China is likely to use these police teams to advance its geopolitical interests. Chinese police first arrived in Vanuatu in 2023 in the midst of a political crisis triggered by controversy over a proposed security pact with Australia, which remains unsigned.²¹⁸ China appears to shift resources from its security presence in countries around the region independent of local authorizations. In 2024, a letter from some Solomon Islands police officers accused China of transferring additional police from Kiribati and Vanuatu to the Solomon Islands to bolster security in advance of the country’s elections, although the Solomon Islands had not approved of these transfers.²¹⁹ The letter may reflect tensions between officers trained by Australia and China within the Solomon Islands police forces.²²⁰

China’s efforts to advance its security footprint in the Pacific Islands has been dealt some setbacks by the region’s determination to remain nonaligned and the United States and Australia’s increased attention. This includes a weakening of China’s first regional policing agreement, signed with Fiji in 2011 while the island was under military rule.²²¹ The deal allowed Chinese police to be embedded with Fijian police for up to six months and included training for Fijian police in China.²²² Following the democratic election of President Sitiveni Rabuka in 2022, the deal was reviewed due to concerns about Chinese presence undermining the country’s democracy.²²³ Although the agreement was ultimately retained, Chinese police would no longer be embedded in the Fijian police force.²²⁴ In 2024, Papua New Guinea decided not to sign a proposed agreement with China, and instead established a formal alliance with Australia in 2025, as well as deepened defense cooperation with the United States.²²⁵ Australia has also expanded its efforts to maintain a position as security partner of choice for the Solomon Islands and Nauru in 2024 to counter China’s considerable influence in those countries.²²⁶

The Chinese Coast Guard is Increasingly Active in the Pacific Islands Region

The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) is poised to become another significant tool of China’s non-military statecraft in the Pacific Islands region, mirroring its policing engagement with countries that have no formal military. Coast guards have long been welcomed in the region as they are equipped to deal with the non-traditional security threats Pacific Island countries find most pressing, including drug trafficking and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

In 2024, China registered 26 coast guard vessels to operate in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Conven-

The Chinese Coast Guard is Increasingly Active in the Pacific Islands Region—*Continued*

tion Area, allowing them to conduct high-seas boarding and inspections of foreign fishing vessels in the same waters where the U.S. and Australian Coast Guards maintain an active presence through security deals with Pacific Island countries.*²²⁷

The CCG's growing presence in the Pacific Islands region is concerning because it is a militarized force under the control of the Central Military Commission, which has been at the forefront of carrying out illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive gray zone activities against China's neighbors. Given the role the CCG plays in Chinese aggression in the South and East China Seas, its authorization to board ships in the Pacific is concerning, particularly due to the widespread presence of vessels from Taiwan, which might be targeted and subjected to Chinese law. It remains to be seen to what extent the CCG will police Chinese vessels; in the past, China has objected to the U.S. Coast Guard helping Pacific Island countries inspect Chinese vessels.²²⁸ Although Chinese ships are the main perpetrator of IUU fishing in the EEZs of many Pacific Island countries—representing a threat to their economic and environmental wellbeing—Pacific Island countries avoid confronting China on the issue.²²⁹

China intends to increase its influence in the Pacific Islands region's maritime governance by getting involved in shaping the rules around boarding vessels in the region, providing support for the development of the region's legal frameworks and technical standards, training seafarers and maritime officials, and providing law enforcement equipment.²³⁰ These efforts represent the maritime equivalent of China's policing engagement in the region, creating a challenge by offering an alternative to the types of support traditionally provided by the United States and its Indo-Pacific partners.

Implications for the United States

Although the United States has maintained close ties with some countries in the Pacific Islands region for well over 100 years, Beijing has made significant inroads in building greater economic and security leverage over the region in recent decades both to secure greater influence over decision-makers and to undermine their relationships with the United States. Continued U.S. support for the security, development, and autonomy of Pacific Island countries is an important cause in its own right. **Yet there is no question that China's concerted efforts to expand its economic leverage and security influence throughout the Pacific Islands have heightened the region's strategic significance to U.S.-China competition.**

*The United States have 88 inspection vessels registered with the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Convention Area; Australia has 54, while Japan has 6. Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Convention Area, "WCPFC Inspection Vessels," <https://www.wcpfc.int/register-inspection-vessels>.

The Pacific Islands region is critical to projecting U.S. power and deterring Chinese military aggression in the Indo-Pacific and is crucial for U.S. national security more broadly. The United States' continued access to the region is essential to its ability to support a military contingency in Taiwan, the Philippines, or many of its other allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. **If even one or two Pacific Island countries permitted China to place radars, deploy missiles, or develop a military base, it would present a significant challenge to the United States and its allies and partners—potentially helping China to impede the flow of U.S. forces across the Pacific Ocean and altering the military balance of power in the Indo-Pacific in Beijing's favor.**

Considering the Pacific Islands region's immense strategic importance, the significant inroads into Pacific Island countries that China has made through its holistic strategy of diplomacy, economic engagement, economic coercion, security cooperation, and malign influence activities should be of great concern to the United States and like-minded countries. China's efforts have already resulted in several countries in the region shifting their recognition from Taipei to Beijing. **Over time, China's growing trade and investments in the region could further enhance its leverage and erode the position of the United States and its allies and partners, leaving Pacific Island countries even more vulnerable to Chinese coercion.**

China's attempts to secure greater leverage over Pacific Island leaders through expanded internal security relationships, particularly those advancing Chinese norms of policing behavior focused on quelling internal dissent, should be of particular concern to the United States, as this is a part of China's larger playbook on exporting tools that support—and even advance—authoritarian behavior around the world. While many of the countries do have a serious need for basic public security support, including items as simple as police cars, the Chinese have often stepped forward to provide them at low cost and with fewer strings attached.

Additionally, China's investments in much-needed infrastructure in the region enable it to create long-term strategic advantages. They allow China to construct infrastructure in a way that can facilitate its dual use by the increasingly capable PLA Navy. They also allow China to embed technologies from firms such as Huawei into critical information and communications infrastructure in a manner that—outside of the many security concerns this creates—may help bind these countries into the Chinese technological ecosystem, creating long-term economic and strategic dependencies in its favor. In the event of conflict, China could attempt to assert control over these infrastructure assets, particularly if Chinese entities control their operation.

China's efforts to secure privileged undersea mining exploratory licenses are another avenue through which China is seeking to secure leverage over Pacific Island officials and advantage over the United States and its allies. Unless the United States and its allies work together, China will likely move into a dominant role in the deep-sea mining industry and further consolidate control over the

world's critical minerals supply while potentially creating negative environmental consequences for the Pacific Islands in the process. China is working to exploit reductions in U.S. diplomatic and development assistance in the region, casting itself as a source of global stability and a more reliable long-term partner. **Considering the small size but large strategic importance of countries in the region, the Pacific Islands is an area where a small amount of U.S. diplomatic attention and assistance can go a long way toward advancing U.S. security interests.** As then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Randall Schriver stated in 2019 regarding the need for the United States and its allies and partners to strengthen their historic ties with Pacific Island countries: "A little bit goes a long way, but you need to have the little bit."²³¹

All told, China's increasing activity in the Pacific Islands region is less about advancing its economic and cultural relationships and more about positioning itself to blunt U.S. power projection capabilities across the Pacific Ocean while enhancing its ability to project its own power. **Unless the United States—and its allies and partners—develop a concerted strategy to respond to China's increasing influence in this vital region, we may face a future with significant constraints on our ability to protect our interests in the Indo-Pacific, and with a global balance of power tilted in Beijing's favor.**

Recommendations

The Commission recommends:

- Congress pass a Pacific Islands Security Initiative bill that would:
 - Bolster U.S. Coast Guard cooperation with Pacific Island countries and provide training and resources to support Pacific Island countries' efforts to enhance law enforcement capacity, improve maritime domain awareness, and combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing;
 - Strengthen economic and security assistance to Pacific Island countries to support U.S. national security interests and the priorities of partner countries;
 - Provide dedicated funding for Voice of America and public diplomacy programs focused on investigative journalism and countering disinformation in the Pacific Islands;
 - Create rapid response teams of legal, financial, and information specialists to support efforts by Pacific Island countries to counter Chinese malign influence; and
 - Assess how to enhance U.S. deterrence in the Pacific Islands region, including the advisability of offering Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements to additional countries.

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