



***THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF
THE PACIFIC ISLANDS TO TAIWAN***

BY MICHAEL WALSH AND JOHN
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In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there have been heightened concerns that a Taiwan contingency involving the People’s Republic of China (PRC) could play out in the not-too-distant future. This year’s Department of Defense [Annual Report](#) on China to the US Congress asserts that PRC leadership views unification as pivotal to its policy of “Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” and its piecemeal pressure tactics against Taipei has led US President Joe Biden to openly state that the United States would defend Taiwan in the event of an invasion.

The PRC’s ambitions seem to pose a direct threat to Taiwan’s autonomy, and subsequently to regional peace in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

There are those who think that the US government’s ability to deter or defend against an invasion of Taiwan is at risk due to the changing balance of power between the two superpowers. As Hudson Institute senior fellow Bryan Clark wrote in a [recent report](#), Defending Guam, the US armed forces “can no longer

plan to defeat the PLA [People’s Liberation Army] in a fire-powered duel over Taiwan.”

Instead, the US government needs to find creative ways to undermine “PLA confidence” and exploit “decision-making advantages to gain an edge,” he said.

Among other things, this requires establishing a widely distributed, multilayered network of civilian and military infrastructure across Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

The United States is working hard to deter the existential threat posed to Taiwan by the PRC while making the necessary preparations to successfully defend Taiwan if those efforts fail. Should the United States not be able to deter such an attack, then the US armed forces and the US intelligence community must be able to effectively and efficiently prevent missile strikes and cyberattacks from taking out critical infrastructure targets essential to the defense of Taiwan over an extended period.

To thwart these sorts of attacks, the United States may need to rely on civilian and military infrastructure located in and around the Freely Associated States of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia.

A key part of that military infrastructure currently is the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site (RTS) in the Marshall Islands. Its radar, optical, and telemetry sensors are not just useful for conducting missile tests and space exploration missions, they are also expected to play a critical role in supporting missile launches, space reconnaissance, and surveillance operations during a defense of Taiwan.

Without the RTS, the US armed forces and US intelligence community probably would find it far more difficult to protect allied and partner forward-deployed forces and space-based assets from hypersonic and ballistic missile attacks, among other advanced threats during the defense of Taiwan. That is why it is essential to protect the submarine cable and artificial satellite systems that connect the RTS to allied and partner military and intelligence facilities around the world, including the US Army Cyber

Command, US Army Space and Missile Defense Command, and Joint Region Marianas.

For decades, the United States has maintained special relationships of free association with the Freely Associated States by way of the Compact of Free Association (COFA). These international agreements not only recognize the Freely Associated States as sovereign states with the authority to conduct their own foreign affairs, they also simultaneously grant the authority for their defense and security to the United States.

Under these terms, the United States has the freedom to make use of civilian and military infrastructure required to protect its national security interests across a wide range of scenarios, including the defense of Taiwan.

The COFA must be renewed soon, and the Freely Associated States governments have indicated they are not satisfied with the proposed terms that have been put forward by their US counterparts.

This spilled into the public domain when the Marshall Islands government [called off](#) a scheduled COFA negotiating meeting. Then all the Freely Associated States ambassadors released a [letter expressing concern](#) about their ability to reach a successful outcome based on what has been proposed by the Biden administration.

As one might imagine, these moves raised several eyebrows during the US Pacific Island Country Summit. Whatever is going on behind the scenes, it seems that the negotiations might be going off track.

Meanwhile, the US pivot toward Pacific regionalism has introduced a new dynamic into the negotiations. These developments should concern Taipei, as the collapse of negotiations would weaken the deterrent effect of the Taiwan-US security partnership.

As all these diplomatic maneuvers play out, the government of Taiwan does not appear to be doing enough to convey to domestic and foreign audiences the importance of the successful negotiation of these international agreements. That needs to change.

First, Taiwan needs to work collaboratively with the United States and other partners to address the development needs and climate-change concerns of the Freely Associated States. Second, Taiwanese diplomats and policymakers need to work closely with their US counterparts on the shared assumption of the critical role that the territories of the Freely Associated States would play in the defense of Taiwan. Third, Taiwanese diplomats and policymakers need to ensure that their Freely Associated State counterparts understand the potential negative consequences that the termination of the COFA could have on regional stability, and by extension their own national interests.

At the same time, the Taipei government needs to start thinking far more systematically about its own national security. The United States already has the National Security Strategy and Pacific Partnership Strategy. Taipei needs to make similar strategic planning investments.

The United States has begun to renew its identity itself as a Pacific nation. Taiwan would be wise to explore the merits of following suit. This could unlock benefits that entail from a shared identity.

Either way, Taipei needs to think long and hard about why the Freely Associated States matter to Taiwan. For too long, the central government's focus has been on diplomatic recognition. That still matters, but increasingly less so.

We have entered an era of renewed major power competition with a struggle for world order on the side. In this world, there needs to be a shift in focus toward defense and security.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.