

# Strategic Competition in the Pacific

## A Case for Kiribati

COL BUD FUJII-TAKAMOTO, USAF

### Abstract

An analysis of the politics of the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) calls into question the United States' grand strategy for dominance across the Pacific Ocean. The United States is clearly losing influence, and access to the Pacific Islands region is no longer guaranteed. This article examines recent developments in the island nation of Kiribati within the context of strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Increasing economic and political alignment between Kiribati and the PRC indicates a loss of US and Western influence. If the PRC can succeed in gaining political allies in places such as Kiribati, then it may be able to succeed with other PICs to create pockets of increased risk to the United States' ability to project military power across the Pacific.

\*\*\*

In May 2021, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Pacific island nation of Kiribati partnered to rebuild a World War II-era runway on Kanton Island, 3,000 km southwest of Hawaii.<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly for peaceful commercial purposes, the move sparked fear in analysts of a PRC military base with a commanding position in the middle of the Pacific from which the People's Liberation Army (PLA) could threaten the United States, Australia, and New Zealand with ballistic missiles.<sup>2</sup> Although such a move would have significant strategic implications, other analysts consider it a remote possibility and conclude the PRC probably has more practical designs for the islands, including access to fishing areas and tourism.<sup>3</sup> Despite Beijing's ultimate strategic intentions being unclear, the PRC's activity is consistent with a strategy of enlarging the country's geopolitical boundaries as far east into the Pacific Ocean as possible, a so-called Island Chain Strategy.<sup>4</sup> The PRC's growing influence among the Pacific nations is evident. Kiribati and the Solomon Islands severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of the PRC in September 2019, and the Chinese embassy in Kiribati reopened in May 2020.<sup>5</sup> If the number of countries that recognize Taiwan is any sort of scorecard, it shows the growing dominance of China, as a mere 14 small countries still recognize Taiwan, four of which are located in the Pacific Islands.<sup>6</sup> Although the United States is primarily concerned with strategic competition with China and

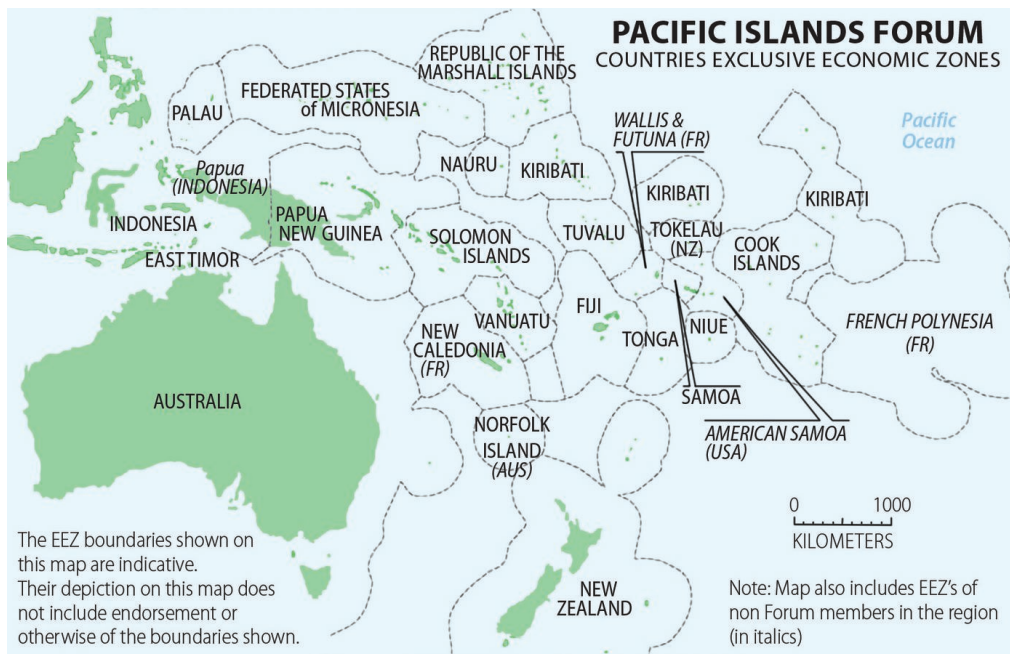
Russia, in aggregate the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) say they are more concerned with climate change and look to leverage relationships with all of the regional powers for assistance, including the United States, China, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and France.<sup>7</sup> The concerns of the great powers and those of the PICs do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, strategic competition makes finding common ground between the West and the PICs even more pressing, else the PRC finds a way to contest the free and open Indo-Pacific.

One of the key questions in studies of US grand strategy is where to draw the line of our security perimeter.<sup>8</sup> From a political science perspective, offensive realists would draw the line in the Pacific Ocean at the so-called First Island Chain, or the chain of islands stretching southward from Japan through the Philippines to Indonesia. Defensive realists would say only sovereign territory counts; therefore, Alaska, Guam, and Hawai'i are the farthest west that the United States should be ardent about. These considerations all assume, however, that the United States gets to decide. Our adversaries obviously possess the ability to act in their perceived interests, and in many ways, the PRC is pushing back our physical defensive perimeter to the Third Island Chain, the chain of islands stretching from Alaska through Hawai'i south to New Zealand. With the inking of the infrastructure deal for Kanton Island Airport, the United States and its regional partners should be very worried that the front lines of strategic competition with the PRC are now in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

The United States considers Taiwan an important international partner and seeks to preserve democracy in Taiwan while allowing the PRC and Taiwan to peacefully settle their political differences.<sup>9</sup> If the PRC attempts to forcibly conclude the issue, the United States is likely to attempt to aid Taiwan in repelling the invasion through the use of overwhelming military force, primarily via air and sea power augmented with the other war-fighting domains.<sup>10</sup> The PRC's integrated air defense system has advanced in capability over recent decades to the point where the PLA can credibly contest US air superiority for several hundred kilometers off China's eastern coast as well as credibly threaten the sanctity of US military bases in Guam, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea. The United States and its international partners have so far concentrated on defeating the PLA defenses with their own advanced technologies and organizational innovations such as adaptive basing, strategies eerily reminiscent of the island-hopping campaigns of World War II. In total, the US government's grand strategy in the Pacific has primarily focused on deterring and countering PRC aggression as far westward in the Pacific as possible. With the emerging partnership with Kiribati and other Pacific Island nations, however, China has turned geopolitics in the Pacific Ocean on its head, and if the United States does

not aggressively move in opposition, the PRC may soon have a military base of operations in the Western Hemisphere.

As mentioned earlier, it is not clear that military basing in the Pacific Islands is the PRC's immediate intent, but the United States should not doubt that the PRC would seize the opportunity if given a chance. To gain and maintain influence with the PICs, the United States and its international partners must work to cooperatively engage the island nations to address their needs, rather than selfishly engulfing them in concerns of strategic competition. The recent developments in the island nation of Kiribati are an important microcosm of the broader political intricacies of the PICs, which also include the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Fiji, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Republic of Marshall Islands (RMI), Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The main area of concern in this article is the geographic area covered by the economic exclusion zones (EEZ) of the PICs. For reference, figure 1 shows a product released by the Australian government of the EEZs of the members of the Pacific Islands Forum, which includes Australia and New Zealand.



**Figure 1. Pacific Islands Forum countries exclusive economic zones, including 14 PICs<sup>11</sup>**

While the geographic region described above confines the physical concerns, the discussion must also incorporate out-of-region influences, mainly the United States and the PRC, but also Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. The political realities of this region are complex with many overlapping and sometimes com-

peting interests. While sea levels continue to rise, PICs can sometimes feel trapped in the middle of the US–PRC transpacific bickering but are taking advantage of opportunities to turn the strategic competition to their advantage.

The argument in this article starts from the strategic context and links the interests of the United States with those of smaller nations such as Kiribati to find win-win solutions that ultimately serve to help the United States prevail in strategic competition with the PRC. The international relations of the PICs are best reviewed within the global strategic context of competition between the United States and the PRC, the locally existential threat of climate change, and the current global challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the umbrella of activities such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the PRC has embarked on a global influence campaign aimed at creating economic benefit, alienating Taiwan from the global community, and opportunistically projecting military power. Within the current context, the grand strategic intentions of both the United States and the PRC overlap in the PICs, where both great powers lobby to cultivate influence.

The United States and the PRC are making influence efforts with countries throughout the Pacific Ocean, and the PICs represent opportunities for the PRC to gain economic partners while diminishing US influence. While the United States and PRC jockey for position, however, the politics of the region are changing. In the wake of post–World War II decolonization, some of the island nations are asserting their independence from the former colonial powers while the PRC is attempting to woo them into Beijing’s sphere of influence. Kiribati is but one example of a PIC willing to negotiate deals with the PRC to gain foreign aid funds while conceding diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Although not a guaranteed future, these deals open the door to a PLA presence in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Despite official denials of intentions to create a military presence in Kiribati, a change in the situation in the coming years may provide the PRC the opportunity it needs to expand its global footprint—just as it did in Djibouti.<sup>12</sup>

An analysis of the politics of the PICs calls into question the United States’ grand strategy for dominance across the Pacific Ocean. The United States is clearly losing influence, and as time advances, regaining influence will become a monumental task. Access to the geography of the PICs is no longer guaranteed and if the PRC succeeds in establishing a military presence in the region, the risk calculus for the United States and its international partners will need to shift from forward power projection to the defense of the homeland. The sanctity of the US mainland, inasmuch as it existed to this point, is rapidly disappearing, and the US populace will begin to feel systemic fear in ways it has not had to consider since the depths of the Cold War. As much as the United States is working to contain PRC aggression, Beijing is working to undermine the United States’ influence. The PRC is engaged

in true whole-of-government political warfare, an all-the-time activity that erodes the United States' power, evident in ceding geography and the shrinking of the US buffer zone. PRC success in places such as Kiribati creates pockets of limited access for US power projection across the Pacific, like holes in Swiss cheese. Once the holes in the cheese line up, this may become the tipping point at which power projection becomes an unacceptable risk.

### **The Strategic Context**

As described by economists and military strategists alike, the PRC is an economic power competing with the United States for global supremacy.<sup>13</sup> The PRC has already surpassed the United States as the top economy in the world when measured in purchasing power parity, and while the United States still leads the world politically, militarily, and culturally, our relative power advantage is declining.<sup>14</sup> According to some realist scholars, the shifting global power distribution naturally leads to a state of conflict between the competing great powers.<sup>15</sup> Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, the PRC is aggressively attempting to revise the international order from one with American characteristics to one with Chinese characteristics using all forms of national power.<sup>16</sup> The PRC leverages its status as a significant trading partner for many countries to gain political concessions on issues such as human rights and Taiwanese independence, while using programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative to physically entrench itself into the politics of developing nations. While evidence of this abounds in the PRC's near abroad, Beijing's political ambitions increasingly encroach on the American sphere of influence—thus a defining feature of the PRC's attempt to create an international order with Chinese characteristics is economic influence leveraged into political advantage.<sup>17</sup>

The PRC uses several economic tools to support its political efforts. To begin with, the PRC uses trade relations and the attractiveness of the huge Chinese domestic market to hold organizations accountable to Beijing's political views.<sup>18</sup> In a similar fashion, acceptance of PRC development funds is often coupled to political issues such as reunification with Taiwan.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the PRC is using economic power to expand political influence into areas typically seen as American dominated, raising the risk of great-power conflict in the Western Hemisphere.

The national use of economic power for political ends is not a new tactic, but the sheer size of the PRC's import and export markets means that when Beijing decides to retaliate against organizations with views contrary to those of the Chinese Communist Party, the consequences can be in the millions to billions of dollars. The PRC's status as the largest trading partner of more than 120 countries gives it tremendous leverage to demand political concessions, particularly since it surpassed the United States in 2012 as the "world's largest trading economy."<sup>20</sup> For example,

in 2010, the PRC ceased imports of Norwegian salmon as retaliation for the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, and just last year the PRC attempted to bully Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen by banning imports of Taiwanese pineapples.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, in 2019, after a general manager in the US National Basketball Association (NBA) publicly supported prodemocracy protests in Hong Kong, Chinese Communist Party officials suspended NBA broadcasts in China for a year.<sup>22</sup> The corporate leadership of the NBA, seeking broadcast access to the financially lucrative domestic market of 1.4 billion Chinese citizens, fumbled through the response to the incident and immediately attempted to distance themselves from the general manager's perceived inappropriate comment.<sup>23</sup>

Beyond retaliation for disagreeing with Chinese politics, the PRC often links development projects to political alignment. In his pursuit of a revised international order with Chinese characteristics, Xi Jinping initiated the BRI to extend the PRC's economic and political reach across Eurasia, with ambitions also in Africa and across the Pacific Ocean.<sup>24</sup> These development activities in lower-income nations include port leases in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Pakistan, an airport in Kiribati, and a military base in Djibouti.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Kiribati, the 2021 agreement to upgrade the airport on Kanton Island came after the election of pro-China President Taneti Maamau and the switch of Kiribati's diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, Kiribati's actions are part of a larger trend of the PRC chipping away at the remaining vestiges of Taiwan's international political legitimacy. Following a brief respite during the presidency of Ma Ying-Jeou, the PRC resumed its campaign to eliminate Taiwan's formal diplomatic ties after Tsai Ing-wen took office.<sup>27</sup> The number of countries with formal diplomatic ties to Taiwan has been in steady decline since 1990. Many of the recent defectors from Taipei to Beijing are small countries like Kiribati who depend on foreign aid to keep their struggling economies afloat, which of course the PRC exploits to their advantage. For instance, in 2016, São Tomé and Príncipe, a low-income West African nation, assumed diplomatic relations with Beijing when Taipei denied a request for aid.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, shortly after the Solomon Islands swapped diplomatic relations from Taiwan to the PRC in 2019, their prime minister, Manasseh Sogavare, signed five agreements with the PRC, including a multi-million-dollar BRI project.<sup>29</sup>

Beijing's increasing political influence, underpinned by economic power, is encroaching on the traditional American sphere of influence. The BRI's tendrils extend from West Africa all the way to the South Pacific and even onto the North American continent. Following the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the PRC and Nicaragua in 2021, the two countries signed a "memorandum of understanding under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative."<sup>30</sup>

Although the PRC maintains only one genuine overseas military base in Djibouti, places such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Equatorial Guinea are at risk of becoming future People's Liberation Army bases due to financial instability.<sup>31</sup> BRI and BRI-type activity has also opened the door to PLA bases in Fiji, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.<sup>32</sup> The airport infrastructure deal in Kiribati is especially worrisome because the island is only 3,000 km from Honolulu, well within range of a Chinese medium-range ballistic missile attack.<sup>33</sup> PRC success in emplacing battlements throughout the Pacific Ocean region between the First and Third Island Chains will severely dampen the United States' military freedom of maneuver in an already risky defense of Taiwan scenario.<sup>34</sup> A PLA base in Central America would be even more disastrous, akin to the Cuban missile crisis of the 1960s. Thus far, aside from Djibouti, the countries the PRC is partnering with have been as adamant as the president of Kiribati in denying any intention to host a PLA base.<sup>35</sup> In the future, however, these economically vulnerable countries may not have a choice but to concede to PRC demands if some unforeseen crisis eliminates their ability to negotiate and forces them to accept a PLA presence.

Thankfully, Djibouti remains the only overseas location of a PRC military base, and the PRC has thus far only been able to make political gains with countries in the developing world vulnerable to the PRC's economic influence. Economic power begets political power, however, and the PRC's rise to surpass the United States in one economic measure with continued growth in the others indicates that Beijing's power will continue to grow correspondingly. As the PRC wields its economic influence for political gain more effectively and with more powerful nations, these interactions will define the future of international relations.

On the ground within the PICs, however, strategic competition between the United States and the PRC provides island leaders an opportunity to thwart the locally existential threat of climate change. The effects of climate change include "sea level rise, increasing frequency and intensity of droughts and storms, ocean acidification and consequent damage to coral reefs and fisheries."<sup>36</sup> Much of the PICs' land area are low lying atolls rising a scant few feet above sea level making them highly susceptible to sea level change.<sup>37</sup> The PICs have responded to sea level rise in various costly ways. In 2014, the government of Kiribati purchased land in Fiji as a form of insurance as somewhere to go if sea level rise forces migration, and the Kiribati people constantly have to battle nature as their environment rapidly changes.<sup>38</sup> Many of Tuvalu's residents are already moving to New Zealand, and the former prime minister of Tuvalu called for restitutions from the international community that accelerated climate change in the first place.<sup>39</sup> The major powers in the region have responded with aid to the PICs because they know a failure to contribute will lose them an opportunity for influence.<sup>40</sup> Done right, climate change aid

helps create influence with a region that collectively ranks among the world's poorest countries. Done poorly, however, the United States will lose the region to other geopolitical influences willing to outspend and outwork it.

Another important factor in the strategic context is the COVID-19 pandemic. Although in the United States the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be transitioning to an endemic phase, for countries such as Kiribati, the effects of the pandemic are only just beginning. Kiribati managed to minimize the spread of COVID-19 by enacting strict border closures and quarantine requirements in March 2020.<sup>41</sup> During the Omicron surge of December 2021 to February 2022, however, Kiribati reopened its borders and started experiencing the full brunt of the pandemic.<sup>42</sup> Many countries have been stepping up to help the resource-starved countries, including the United States.<sup>43</sup>

### **Competing Geopolitical Strategies**

While the evidence presented gives an indication of the PRC's activities for the Pacific Islands, Beijing's specific strategic aims remain obscured. Based on the current evidence, several potential outcomes exist. First, Beijing's economic influence succeeds in eliminating the last vestiges of international political legitimacy for Taiwan. Just 14 countries still hold formal diplomatic ties with Taipei, four of which are PICs and targets for geopolitical competition. Second, Beijing uses its ties with select PICs to expand its defensive buffer with the United States. While Taiwan is still the primary concern in this scenario, the intent of the PRC's influence is to expand military access out to the Third Island Chain while bypassing the necessity for basing on the western side of the First and Second Island Chains. As a form of geopolitical maneuver warfare, this has the potential to encircle US basing in the western Pacific and simultaneously place threats within easy reach of the United States' strategic stronghold in Hawai'i. Third, agreements between the PRC and select PICs grants Beijing de facto control over fisheries, deep sea mining areas, and trade routes placing them in a "tribute state" relationship to the PRC.<sup>44</sup> Of the three scenarios, only the second involves direct, zero-sum competition with the United States, but any move by Beijing in the Pacific Islands is likely to be perceived by the United States as a challenge to its hegemony.

The PRC will likely act opportunistically in pursuit of all three possible outcomes. Reunification with Taiwan remains a clear political objective for the PRC, one which President Xi makes mention of frequently. Despite the rhetoric, Beijing would be completely irrational to pass up a chance to settle the dispute peacefully if an opportunity presented itself. If reunification must be accomplished forcefully, then the United States is expected to intervene and use some combination of bases throughout the PICs to project military power when the forward



bases in the First Island Chain become unusable. Through a combination of economic ties, political influence, and military might, if the PRC creates restrictions against access to geography in the PICs, the risk to the forces of the United States and its international partners can be increased to unacceptable levels.

The Biden administration's apparent focus is on the Indo-Pacific, having released the *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* in advance of the publication of a formal national security strategy.<sup>45</sup> The PICs hold a place of import in the Biden administration's Pacific strategy with announcements to "meaningfully expand our diplomatic presence" in a previously neglected region on the front lines of the battle against climate change.<sup>46</sup> Regional engagement will be the way the United States resists the expanding PRC influence with the PICs. The US Indo-Pacific strategy may indicate to Beijing a willingness to cede ground that has already been taken, however. No PIC is specifically mentioned within the strategy, and while the document calls out the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the Freely Associated States (FAS), these are existing arrangements up for renegotiation in the next couple of years with no guarantee of renewal.<sup>47</sup> The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) is also specifically discussed, but no mention is made of leveraging the organization to beneficially tie the members to the West since Australia and New Zealand are the major power anchors within the group. Perhaps this is too specific for such a high-level document, but given the recent turmoil with countries such as Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, failing to mention non-traditional partners gives the impression of neglect, may signal to Beijing an opening for stronger political connection, and may also signal to those countries that they need to rely on the PRC for their foreign aid.

## Decolonization

The lack of nuance in the United States' approach to the PICs, at least in the high-level documents and US organizations that deal with the region, reflects a lack of understanding of the region's complexity. The history of the PICs is a study in strategic competition, and historical highlights can contribute to additional contextual understanding of the region.

European explorers such as Ferdinand Magellan have been in contact with the cultures of the Pacific Islands since the 1500s.<sup>48</sup> Captain James Cook made further contact with the Pacific Islands cultures in the 1760s and 1770s.<sup>49</sup> British colonization followed about a decade later, and then a smattering of European empires claimed territory over the next century and a half.<sup>50</sup> Following the defeat of the Japanese Empire in World War II, a trend of decolonization slowly spread throughout the Pacific Ocean that continues to the present day.<sup>51</sup>

During the Cold War the United States held dominance in the Pacific Islands region along with a few other colonial powers that still held territory in the region. Colonial influences still dominate. The United States holds territory in American Samoa, Baker Island, Guam, Howland Island, Jarvis Island, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef, Midway Atoll, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palmyra Atoll.<sup>52</sup> The United Kingdom holds territories in the Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno Islands.<sup>53</sup> France holds French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna.<sup>54</sup> These are legitimate sovereign lands of the nations. As former British colonies, however, many of the PICs are still ideologically aligned through the Commonwealth with ties to the British monarchy. Australia and New Zealand are the most notable member countries of the Commonwealth who grew to be powers with regional influence on par with that of the United States. Fiji, Kiribati, Malaysia, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu are also Commonwealth members.<sup>55</sup> Nine of the 14 PICs present themselves as ideologically aligned with major Western powers and are generally democratic in nature. In addition, although Japan is no longer an empire, Tokyo still influences the region through its economic and political ties. Taiwan also maintains economic and diplomatic relations, struggling to keep formal ties with the remaining four PICs that recognize its sovereignty: Nauru, Palau, the RMI, and Tuvalu.<sup>56</sup>

The politics of the region are changing. The FSM, Palau, and the RMI are up for renegotiation of the COFAs with the United States in 2023 and 2024. The COFAs are US bilateral treaty agreements with the FSM, Palau, and the RMI giving the United States exclusive military basing rights. In return, the countries receive US funding and territory-like migration privileges to and from the United States. It is highly likely that the FAS will renew the COFAs in 2023 and 2024, but the PRC can spoil the negotiations with economic incentives. Keeping in mind the strategic significance of the FAS in Pacific Ocean geopolitics, the countries are in a high-leverage position to extract larger concessions from Washington, else the United States opens the door for PRC influence.

The main international organization within the PICs, the PIF, is also changing. Kiribati and Nauru joined the FSM, Palau, and the RMI in initiating a departure from the PIF due to a disagreement about the power-sharing arrangement within the PIF.<sup>57</sup> Australia and New Zealand both anchor the PIF as the countries with the largest resources, but within the PIF, each state gets one vote in a similar arrangement to the UN.<sup>58</sup> The threatened defection of the FSM, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, and the RMI from the PIF show the PICs attempting to demonstrate independence away from the influence of the former colonial powers. It also demonstrates instability in the type of multilateral institutions the United States

champions and further opens the door to the bilateral relationships that the PRC favors. If Beijing can also incentivize the RMI and Palau to give up formal diplomatic relations with Taipei, the PRC can simultaneously diminish US and Taiwanese influence.

## **Kiribati**

In 1942, the Gilbert Islands became the site of Operation Galvanic, the first major operation in ADM Chester Nimitz's Central Pacific campaign to penetrate the Japanese antiaccess/area-denial defensive perimeter that stretched all the way to the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The strategic importance of the Gilbert Islands remains despite a change in ownership. The Gilbert Islands currently belong to Kiribati, an island nation straddling all four global hemispheres along the equator and the international date line.<sup>59</sup> For a geographic overview, Kiribati's land area is tiny, totaling a mere 811 square kilometers, a third the size of the US state of Rhode Island.<sup>60</sup> According to international law, however, Kiribati commands an economic exclusion zone of 3.5 million square kilometers, or an area similar to the size of India.<sup>61</sup> Kiribati's access to prime fishing areas in the middle of the Pacific Ocean as well as access to resources along the seabed is vital for the economic survival of the otherwise resource-starved country of 119,000 people.<sup>62</sup>

The lack of resources drives a dependence on imports and foreign aid. The PRC is Kiribati's largest trading partner and provides a myriad of goods that the island nation needs to function, from fishing ships to rice.<sup>63</sup> In this way, Kiribati is not unlike other nations in that a significant portion of the country's imports pass through or are produced in China. Kiribati is also considered a member of the Global South as the world's 14th least-developed country and accepted a total of \$71.69 million of foreign aid in 2019, 37 percent of Kiribati's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>64</sup> Per capita GDP was a mere \$1,614 in 2019 and grew at less than 1 percent from 2019 to 2020.<sup>65</sup>

A presidential republic, Kiribati's current pro-China president was reelected in 2020 for his second four-year term.<sup>66</sup> President Taneti Maamau's time in office since 2016 has been a series of key events in Kiribati's changing alignment from the West to the PRC. In 2019, Kiribati swapped recognition of Taiwan to the PRC, and in 2020 a Chinese embassy opened in the islands.<sup>67</sup> Also in 2020, shortly after making a state visit to Beijing and sitting down with President Xi, President Maamau signed a BRI Memorandum of Understanding committing Kiribati to economic cooperation with the PRC.<sup>68</sup>

2021 was another eventful year for Kiribati. While the rest of the world was struggling through the second year of the pandemic, Kiribati inked an agreement with the PRC to upgrade Kanton Island Airport, originally built by the United

States during World War II.<sup>69</sup> Finally, just prior to the end of the year, Kiribati opened a key maritime reserve to China for fishing, punctuating the growing friendly relationship between the countries.<sup>70</sup>

The deals with China for the airport infrastructure project and the access to fisheries show that rather than merely being a pawn in the geopolitical games of the Global North, Kiribati is willing to deal with anyone who shows up with an open wallet. Although the relationship currently seems to favor Kiribati, the PRC gains access to fisheries, a tourism destination, and another ally in the campaign to politically isolate Taiwan from the rest of the international community. From a certain perspective, the alignment between Tarawa and Beijing seems to provide an opening for PLA force projection in a geographically central position in the Pacific Ocean. Not only is Kanton Island Airport just 3,000 kilometers southwest of Hawai'i, but it also sits along key transpacific trade routes and lines of communication.<sup>71</sup>

Like many PICs that have partnered with the PRC, Kiribati has emphatically denied any possibility of allowing a PLA base.<sup>72</sup> The PRC has also thus refrained from even hinting at a military expansion further east into the Pacific, but it can be assumed that Beijing recognizes the strategic importance of creating footholds throughout the region, particularly as the PLA transitions from primarily a homeland defense force to a maritime force capable of competing with the United States for supremacy in the Pacific. A PLA base in Kiribati would provide several benefits. First, from parts of Kiribati, current PLA missile systems can threaten US forces in Hawai'i as well as the lands of key US partners Australia and New Zealand. Second, political alignment between Tawara and Beijing could prevent basing and overflight access, frustrating US plans to use an adaptive basing strategy in the defense of Taiwan against a PRC invasion. Third, a base in Kiribati combined with other battlements throughout the region could contribute to an extension of the PLA's integrated air defense system east past the Second Island Chain toward the Third Island Chain.

As mentioned, the militarization of any of the PICs seems unlikely for the foreseeable future. Caution is warranted, however, because the PLA base in Djibouti was also not originally designed into the PRC's grand strategy but rather emerged as the opportunity and need presented itself.<sup>73</sup> Situated along the Babel-Mandeb on the southeastern end of the Red Sea opposite the Suez Canal, Djibouti is located next to a chokepoint for global commerce. Many countries have poured money into the relatively poor African nation over the years, particularly in the twenty-first century in conjunction with the US military's Global War on Terror campaigns. As the foreign presence matured, so too did Djibouti's infrastructure, which subsequently allowed the country to accommodate further

development. Aside from the United States and the PRC, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Saudi Arabia have a presence in Djibouti.

Although the PRC and Djibouti established diplomatic relations in 1979, the PLA's presence in Africa did not begin until 2008 as part of an experiment to involve the PLA Navy (PLAN) in UN counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>74</sup> As the PLAN's confidence grew, so did its need for a base of operations in the region to increase its effectiveness, thus the PLA followed Japan's 2011 example of securing a maritime presence by way of Djibouti.<sup>75</sup> A commercial port, opened in 2012, was joined in 2017 by an ambitious military port, the PRC's first overseas military outpost.<sup>76</sup>

The government of Djibouti saw its country as an African version of Singapore with a preponderance of its wealth coming from international trade. Spurred on by foreign interest and investment resulting from the ongoing security and counterterrorism operations, President Ismail Omar Guelleh embarked on a long-term effort to modernize Djibouti's economy in partnership with foreign entities.<sup>77</sup> Subsequent to Xi Jinping's BRI, Guelleh unveiled "Djibouti 2035," a coordinated long-term development plan to turn Djibouti into "the Lighthouse of the Red Sea: a Commercial and Logistic Hub in Africa."<sup>78</sup> This modernization effort provided the PRC the opportunity it needed to partner with Djibouti and gain its first overseas military base.<sup>79</sup>

The PRC succeeded in obtaining an overseas military base not through some long-term scheme that it patiently cultivated over decades. Rather, the PRC was able to make a deal with the government of Djibouti at a time when Djibouti needed investors. The US-led military build-up in Djibouti led to other foreign governments taking a stake in commercial and military operations there as well.<sup>80</sup> This infusion of capital led President Guelleh to envision a revitalized Djibouti using the Singapore model, which further opened the country up to foreign investment. The PRC was inspired by an East Asian neighbor to permanently project force via an overseas military base simultaneous to Xi Jinping's BRI launch, and Guelleh launched Djibouti 2035 to take advantage of BRI funding. The commercial port led to an adjacent military logistics base, and in hindsight it is apparent that the PRC made a series of opportunistic decisions to develop the first of possibly many overseas PLA bases.

Again, the creation of a PLA base in Kiribati has not been announced and both Beijing and Tarawa emphatically deny any plans for the militarization of the islands. A lot can change in ten years, however, and in 2011 there were no plans for a PLA base in Djibouti. Many Western analysts fear that PLA bases could also one day appear somewhere in the increasingly-aligned-with-Beijing PICs, and given the disastrous strategic implications, they are right to worry.

## **Conclusion**

The defining feature of strategic competition between the United States and the PRC is the struggle for economic spheres of influence leveraged into political advantage. Under the umbrella of the BRI, the PRC is expanding its influence eastward across the Pacific Ocean encroaching upon the US sphere and raising fears of increased threat to US states and sovereign territories. The United States and its allies and partners are clearly losing influence with the PICs, but merely having goals such as “strengthening relationships,” “seek[ing] to be an indispensable partner,” and “partner[ing] to build resilience” are inadequate.<sup>81</sup> More specific actions are needed.

Renewing the US COFAs with the FSM, Palau, and the RMI is an important first step. Yes, the smaller countries are in a strong negotiating position to exact a hefty price, but the alternative to COFA renewal is to push the countries further into the PRC’s sphere of influence and cede a geostrategic position. Failure to renew the COFAs may also result in the RMI and Palau switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC as the loss of US financial support will force an economic partnership elsewhere.

More broadly, the PICs do not want to be pawns in the strategic competition between the United States and the PRC, but rather are looking to leverage their position to gain outside assistance to combat the existential threat of climate change. The United States needs to interact with the PICs in such a way that recognizes their need on the front lines of climate change and welcomes their partnership in maintaining a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific.”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, like Kiribati, the PICs can be considered part of the Global South, and the West needs to cultivate rapport to break the narrative that the PRC has more in common with the PICs than the West. Acknowledging the history of Western colonialism and building toward a common future based on shared values will help to keep the PICs ideologically aligned where purely economic interests may not.

A speaker at the Air War College noted that the PRC’s transactional form of economic diplomacy often fails to produce long-term results and countries are increasingly wary of Beijing’s coercive diplomatic tactics.<sup>83</sup> Kiribati’s emerging partnership with the PRC suggests this conclusion may be premature, and the United States must acknowledge its trailing position in the Pacific and work hard to reverse its decline in influence first by understanding Kiribati’s concerns and addressing those concerns over long horizons. If the United States is to “meaningfully expand our diplomatic presence” in the Pacific Islands as the Indo-Pacific strategy states, then an important step in building a relationship with Kiribati is to open an embassy in Tarawa.<sup>84</sup> Relationships are the key to lasting influence,

and although they can be built over distance via electronic means, true person-to-person connection requires meeting face-to-face on a continual basis. The relationship with the Government of Kiribati needs to be nurtured with the kind of care and attention that cannot be given from 1,300 miles away in Fiji.<sup>85</sup> As an early step in a long-term Indo-Pacific strategy, an embassy in Tarawa would meaningfully demonstrate to not only the I-Kiribati but the rest of the world that the PICs matter and the United States is prepared to put their concerns first.<sup>86</sup>

Actions beyond relationship-building are necessary to supplant PRC influence in Kiribati and a US Embassy in Tarawa can act as a conduit for coordinated US action behind I-Kiribati leadership.<sup>87</sup> To start, President Maamau's 20-year development vision focuses on creating prosperity for I-Kiribati despite the obvious societal challenges.<sup>88</sup> In this vision, climate change is both a threat and an opportunity because although sea level rise will inevitably drown the islands, the I-Kiribati can rise to the occasion to delay the inevitable for as long as possible. By supporting Maamau's vision of developing an educated workforce, building a climate change resilient infrastructure, and creating economic prosperity in an area of the world long neglected, the United States can empower the Kiribati government to take command of its future.<sup>89</sup> Most importantly for the United States, though, is to exercise patience and support I-Kiribati leadership by providing resources, experience, and knowledge for as long as it takes to accomplish the mission.

Establishing a COFA with Kiribati is another possible long-term solution. While there are flaws in the existing US COFAs with the FAS, the treaties commit US resources to the island nations over the kind of timelines necessary to turn long-term visions into reality. A COFA with Kiribati is an opportunity to expand upon the spirit of mutual respect enshrined in the existing agreements and the focus provided by a dedicated US ambassadorial team in Tarawa will be vital toward ensuring a mutually-beneficial agreement that secures US interests for long-term strategic competition with the PRC.<sup>90</sup>

What could a US-Kiribati COFA do that the existing agreements do not? First, it could secure exclusive rights to US military basing in the islands in the same manner as the COFAs with the FAS. Whereas the 1979 US-Kiribati Treaty of Friendship merely allows the United States to voice its opinion with the Kiribati government on matters of militarization, exclusivity prohibits third-party militaries from establishing basing so long as the first two parties abide by the agreement.<sup>91</sup> In addition, a COFA opens the door for an expanded US naval presence and further US Coast Guard deployments to cover Kiribati's 3.5 million square kilometer EEZ. Building on the existing shiprider program led by the US DOD's Indo-Pacific Command, maritime enforcement of the South Pacific Tuna Treaty supports the sustainable and legal use of Kiribati's fisheries.<sup>92</sup>

To avoid the mistakes of the PRC's transactional style of diplomacy, a mutually-beneficial COFA would provide the I-Kiribati American privileges while preserving the sovereignty of the Kiribati state. Most importantly, as the government of Kiribati manages climate change in the islands, a COFA immigration provision would remove impediments against climate-induced migration in the same way it does for the FAS. This shows the United States' commitment in solving the problems created by its legacy of pollution. A US Embassy in Tarawa would provide a dedicated workforce ready to share the burden of managing the transition with the Government of Kiribati over the next several decades, giving options in the way Kiribati manages its steadily disappearing territory.

US influence and freedom of maneuver across the Pacific is under challenge. The future is uncertain, and it is impossible to know where the PRC will attempt to take the opportunity to project its military power. A loss of political influence with the PICs does not necessarily equate to the construction of a PLA base, but it does create increased risk that may prevent the United States coming to the aid of its Indo-Pacific partners and allies. The loss of credibility that would result from such a failure is perhaps the most damaging eventuality that America cannot afford. 🌐

#### **Col Bud Fujii-Takamoto, USAF**

Colonel Fujii-Takamoto is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He is a career pilot with a background in electronic warfare and uncrewed aerial reconnaissance. A 2000 graduate of the US Air Force Academy where he majored in electrical engineering, Col Fujii-Takamoto's varied research interests has led him to graduate degrees in business administration, counseling and leadership, and military strategy, plus graduate certificates in nuclear deterrence and nuclear weapons effects, policy, and proliferation.

#### **Notes**

1. This article was inspired by Laura Keenan's insightful 2021 Strategy Bridge article, "The Lion and the Mouse: the Need for Greater U.S. Focus in The Pacific Islands"; Cleo Paskal's October 2021 analysis in testimony to the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia and Nonproliferation entitled "The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands" was also especially helpful in framing the argument; Laura Keenan, "The Lion and the Mouse: The Need for Greater U.S. Focus in the Pacific Islands," 2 Sep 2021, The Strategy Bridge, <https://thestrategybridge.org/>; Cleo Paskal, "The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands," House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, 2021, <https://docs.house.gov/>; Jonathan Barrett, "China Plans to Revive Strategic Pacific Airstrip, Kiribati Lawmaker Says," Reuters, 5 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

2. "China Extends South Pacific Reach by Funding Runway Project," Nikkei Asia, 19 May 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/>.

3. Jonathan Pryke, "The Risks of China's Ambitions in the South Pacific," Brookings, 20 July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.



4. Wilson Vorndick, "China's Reach Has Grown; So Should the Island Chains," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 22 Oct 2018, <https://amti.csis.org/>.

5. Christopher Pala, "Pro-China Kiribati President Loses Majority over Switch from Taiwan," *The Guardian*, 24 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/>; Nectar Gan, "China Opened an Embassy on a Tiny, Remote Pacific Island. Here's Why," CNN, 27 June 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/>.

6. "Countries That Recognize Taiwan 2022," World Population Review, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>.

7. "Boe Declaration on Regional Security," *Forum Sec*, 5 Sep 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/>.

8. Christopher Hemmer, "U.S. Interests and Security Strategy: Key Debates," Air War College Lecture, National Security and Decision-Making Lecture 1 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air War College, 21 Oct 2021); Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

9. "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States," White House, Feb 2022, 12–13, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

10. "The Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region," Strategy Report (Washington, DC: US Department of Defense, 1 June 2019), 31, <https://media.defense.gov/>.

11. Geospatial & Earth Monitoring Division of Geosciences Australia, *Pacific Islands Forum Countries Exclusive Economic Zones* (Canberra, Australia: Australian Senate, Sep 2009), <https://www.apf.gov.au/>.

12. Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGategno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base," China Studies, Center for Naval Analyses, July 2017, <https://www.cna.org/>.

13. This section was initially created and used by the author for an unpublished United States Air Force Air War College paper and is reproduced here with slight modifications.

14. World Bank, "GDP, PPP (Current International \$) - China, United States," <https://data.worldbank.org/>.

15. John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2003), 1; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Amitav Acharya, "Thinking Theoretically about Asian IR," in *International Relations of Asia*, ed. David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, Second Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 62–68.

16. Xi Jinping, "Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China," Xinhua, 1 July 2021, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/>.

17. "Defining feature" is a reference to Ashley Tellis as referenced by David Shambaugh, "International Relations in Asia," in *International Relations of Asia*, ed. David Shambaugh and Michael Yahuda, Second Edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 12.

18. David Zweig, "China's Political Economy," in *Politics in China: An Introduction*, ed. William A. Joseph, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 293.

19. Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, "China's Relations with Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East," in *China & the World*, ed. David L. Shambaugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 293–94.

20. David Zweig, "China's Political Economy," 293.

21. Bruce Gilley, "Deng Xiaoping and His Successors: 1976 to the Present," in *Politics in China: An Introduction*, ed. William A. Joseph, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019),

142; Jacques deLisle, "China's Legal System," in *Politics in China: An Introduction*, ed. William A. Joseph, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 255, 260; Echo Huang and Isabella Steger, "Norway Wants China to Forget about the Human Rights Thing and Eat Salmon Instead," Quartz, 14 June 2017, <https://qz.com/>; Betty Hou, "China's Ban on Taiwan Pineapples Backfires as New Buyers Step In," Bloomberg, 6 Aug 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/>.

22. Charlie Campbell, "The China-NBA Spat Underscores Just How Far Sino-U.S. Relations Have Deteriorated," Time, 9 Oct 2019, <https://time.com/>.

23. Charlie Campbell, "The China-NBA Spat."

24. Chas Freeman, Jr., "China's National Experiences and the Evolution of PRC Grand Strategy," in *China & the World*, ed. David L. Shambaugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 52.

25. Michael Yahuda, "China's Relations with Asia," in *China & the World*, ed. David L. Shambaugh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 284.

26. Jonathan Barrett, "China Plans to Revive Strategic Pacific Airstrip."

27. Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan," in *Politics in China: An Introduction*, ed. William A. Joseph, Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 550.

28. "African Island Nation Sao Tome Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Taiwan," BBC News, 21 Dec 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/>.

29. "Solomons' PM Returns from China Trip with Praise," Radio New Zealand, 15 Oct 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/>.

30. "Nicaragua Joins China's Belt and Road Initiative," Silk Road Briefing, 16 Jan 2022, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/>.

31. Yahuda, "China's Relations with Asia," 276–77; Michaël Tanchum, "China's New Military Base in Africa: What It Means for Europe and America," European Council on Foreign Relations, 14 Dec 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/>.

32. People's Daily Online, "Success Stories of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands," National Development and Reform Commission, People's Republic of China, 27 July 2021, <https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/>.

33. Jonathan Barrett, "China Plans to Revive Strategic Pacific Airstrip."

34. Cleo Paskal, "The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands," House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation, 2021, <https://docs.house.gov/>.

35. Jonathan Barrett, "Kiribati Says China-Backed Pacific Airstrip Project for Civilian Use," Reuters, 13 May 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

36. "Environment," US Agency for International Development, 19 April 2022, <https://www.usaid.gov/>.

37. Rob Taylor, "Pacific Islands Take Steps to Counter Rising Sea Levels," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 Nov 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/>.

38. Laurence Caramel, "Facing the Rise of the Pacific, Kiribati Buys 20 Km<sup>2</sup> of Refuge Land in Fiji," *Le Monde*, 15 June 2014, <https://www.lemonde.fr/>; Simon Donner, "The Kiribati People Battle Sea Level Rise," *Scientific American*, 1 March 2015, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/>.

39. Apisai Ielemia, "A Threat to Our Human Rights: Tuvalu's Perspective on Climate Change," *UN Chronicle*, <https://www.un.org/>.

40. Naima Green-Riley, "Pacific Island Nations Want Partners That Will Help Them Fight Climate Change," *The Diplomat*, 18 Oct 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

41. Tad Walch, "Latter-Day Saint Missionaries Follow Island Protocols after Returning Home to Kiribati and Testing Positive for COVID-19," *Deseret News*, 25 Jan 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/>.
42. Tad Walch, "Latter-Day Saint Missionaries Follow Island Protocols."
43. "United States Provides Assistance to the Pacific to Respond to COVID-19," U.S. Embassy in Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu, 9 April 2020, <https://fj.usembassy.gov/>; "China to Create Fund to Help Pacific Island Countries Defeat COVID-19," CGTN, 21 Oct 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/>; Susan Lynette Ivatts and Carol Atieno Obure, "Kiribati COVID-19 Emergency Response Project," World Bank, 9 Dec 2021, <https://projects.worldbank.org/>.
44. David C. Kang, "Hierarchy and Legitimacy in International Systems: The Tribute System in Early Modern East Asia," *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (23 Nov 2010): 591–622, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2010.524079>.
45. "Indo-Pacific Strategy." The Biden administration released an interim national security strategy in March 2021 as a holdover, when typically the actual national security strategy is the first high-level document released by a new US presidential administration.
46. "Indo-Pacific Strategy," 10.
47. The Freely Associated States are the PICs with Compacts of Free Association with the US: The FSM, Palau, and the RMI.
48. K. R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste, and Brij V. Lal, *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 18, <http://search.ebscohost.com/>.
49. Howe, Kiste, and Lal, *Tides of History*, 19.
50. Howe, Kiste, and Lal, *Tides of History*, 154.
51. Howe, Kiste, and Lal, *Tides of History*, 154.
52. Jason Shvili, "What Are the US Territories?," WorldAtlas, 30 Nov 2020, <https://www.worldatlas.com/>.
53. "British Overseas Territories," *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/>.
54. "Overseas France," *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/>.
55. "Member Countries," The Commonwealth, <https://thecommonwealth.org/>.
56. Chia-nan Lin, "Taiwan, US Discuss Aid for Pacific Island Nations," *Taipei Times*, 18 April 2021, <https://www.pacificports.org/>; "Foreign Relations of Taiwan," *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/>.
57. "Pacific Islands Forum Saved from Collapse at Last Minute as Micronesian States 'Temporarily' Rescind Withdrawal," MSN, 2 Feb 2022, <https://www.msn.com/>.
58. Cleo Paskal, "How the Pacific Islands Forum Fell Apart," *The Diplomat*, 10 Feb 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/>.
59. Central Intelligence Agency, "Kiribati," *The World Factbook*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/>.
60. Central Intelligence Agency.
61. Central Intelligence Agency, "Country Comparisons-Area," *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/>.
62. 2019 Figures, "Pacific Aid Map," Lowy Institute, <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/>.
63. "Kiribati," Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/>.
64. "Pacific Aid Map."
65. "Kiribati GDP," Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/>.
66. Jonathan Barrett, "Kiribati's pro-China Leader Wins Re-Election in Blow to Taiwan," Reuters, 22 June 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>.
67. Christopher Pala, "Pro-China Kiribati President Loses Majority over Switch from Taiwan"; Nectar Gan, "China Opened an Embassy on a Tiny, Remote Pacific Island. Here's Why."

68. “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Taneti Maamau of Kiribati,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 6 Jan 2020, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/>; “China, Kiribati Sign MOU on Belt and Road Initiative after Restoring Diplomatic Ties,” CGTN, 6 Jan 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/>.
69. Jonathan Barrett, “China Plans to Revive Strategic Pacific Airstrip.”
70. Mark Godfrey, “Kiribati Receives Aquaculture Training from China While Opening Protected Area to Commercial Fishing,” SeafoodSource, 20 Dec 2021, <https://www.seafoodsource.com/>.
71. Kiln Digital, “Shipmap.org” Ship Map, <https://www.shipmap.org/>; Lin Wu et al., “Mapping Global Shipping Density from AIS Data,” *Journal of Navigation* 70, no. 1 (Jan 2017): 67–81, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0373463316000345>.
72. Jonathan Barrett, “China-Backed Pacific Airstrip Project for Civilian Use.”
73. Peter A. Dutton, Isaac B. Kardon, and Conor M. Kennedy, “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti: China’s First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint,” CMSI China Maritime Reports (Newport, Rhode Island: US Naval War College, 1 April 2020), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/>.
74. Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGatego, “China’s Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China’s First Overseas Base,” Center for Naval Analyses, July 2017, <https://www.cna.org/>.
75. Alex K. T. Martin, “First Overseas Military Base since WWII to Open in Djibouti,” *Japan Times*, 2 July 2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/>.
76. Dutton, Kardon, and Kennedy, “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti.”
77. Victor Davies, Hamid Reza Tabarraei, and Boumedienne Taya, “Djibouti: Selected Issues,” Country Report (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 18 Nov 2015), <https://www.imf.org/>.
78. “Republic of Djibouti SCAPE Strategy of Accelerated Growth and Promotion of Employment 2015–2019,” Republic of Djibouti, 2015, <https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/>.
79. Conor Kennedy, “Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy,” China Brief (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 22 March 2019), <https://jamestown.org/>.
80. Alex Martin, “First Overseas Military Base since WWII to Open in Djibouti.”
81. “Indo-Pacific Strategy.”
82. “Indo-Pacific Strategy.”
83. Air War College speaker, 7 March 2022, nonattribution per schoolhouse policy.
84. “Indo-Pacific Strategy.”
85. “U.S. Relations with Kiribati,” United States Department of State, 27 Feb 2020, <https://www.state.gov/>.
86. Nectar Gan, “China Opened an Embassy on a Tiny, Remote Pacific Island. Here’s Why.”
87. C. Steven McGann, “The United States Should Strengthen Support to Kiribati,” Center for Australian, New Zealand & Pacific Studies, 5 Dec 2019, <https://canzps.georgetown.edu/>.
88. “Kiribati 20-Year Vision: 2016–2036,” Office of the President of Kiribati, 2016, <http://president.gov.ki/>.
89. “Kiribati 20-Year Vision: 2016–2036.”
90. The US has several agreements with Kiribati including the 1979 US-Kiribati Treaty of Friendship, the 2013 Treaty on the delimitation of maritime boundaries, and the ongoing South Pacific Tuna Treaty; “No. 28230. United States of America and Kiribati,” UN iLibrary, 20 Sep 1979, 239–50, <https://doi.org/10.18356/fa656b03-en-fr>; “BOUNDARIES AND BOUNDARY WATERS: Treaty Between the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA and KIRIBATI,” 6 Sep

2013, <https://www.state.gov/>; “South Pacific Tuna Treaty,” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries, 22 March 2019, <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/>.

91. US-Kiribati Treaty of Friendship, 1979.

92. “Combating Illegal Fishing: Clear Authority Could Enhance U.S. Efforts to Partner with Other Nations at Sea,” United States Government Accountability Office, Nov 2021, <https://www.gao.gov/>; “South Pacific Tuna Treaty.”

#### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in JIPA are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.