

Landpower, Homeland Defense, and Defending Forward in US Indo-Pacific Command

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Abstract

Homeland defense does not begin at the water's edge, at least not on the east and west coasts of the United States. In the twenty-first-century geopolitical environment, the definition of *homeland defense* must now extend well beyond North American shores. The network of US military forces stationed throughout the Indo-Pacific provides a strong military presence in the region that deters potential aggressors and protects US interests. This builds and strengthens partnerships with countries in the region and allows the United States more deployment flexibility. The Chinese government is extending its reach throughout the Pacific, and the United States must do the same. The US military must harden its overseas facilities and continue to expand those facilities to other locations. This will allow greater operational depth and build resilience through sustainment redundancy.

It was a beautifully clear fall day in Calumet, Colorado, a small, rural town on the front slope of the Rockies. It was a quiet little town, significant only to those who live there. But after that terrible day in the fall of 1984, Calumet became significant to the rest of the country and signified the indomitable American spirit. The sound of large aircraft engines broke the stillness that morning. Unusual, but not enough to cause any alarm . . . until hundreds of paratroopers began landing all over town. The citizens were surprised and amused, assuming a military unit from nearby Fort Carson had landed in the wrong area. Surprised amusement quickly turned to horror, as the soldiers began to fire on the crowd gathering to watch. Rather than US soldiers on a misguided exercise, the troops were Soviet Spetsnaz, and the assault on Calumet was the opening salvo of Operation Red Dawn, which saw the *Soviet Union* capture much of the United States before suing for peace.

Alert readers will have recognized the proceeding vignette as one of the opening scenes from the 1984 movie *Red Dawn*, which imagined an airborne assault on the American heartland. The film premiered during the heightened tensions of the Cold War, as US and Soviet relations deteriorated and the Soviet economy began

to collapse.¹ While this movie presents a classic nightmare scenario for homeland defense, and one that fires the imagination of all and the fears of many, such a scenario is neither likely nor logistically possible.

The homeland faces significant and credible external threats from ballistic missiles, terrorists, and cyberattacks, all of which render the islands at the nation's periphery even more vulnerable. The worst-case scenarios of Pearl Harbor, 9/11, or even a *Red Dawn*-type attack cannot be discounted, but they should not be the sole planning focus. Instead, homeland defense means not just establishing protection for the continental United States (CONUS), although that is necessary, it also means extending the umbrella of protection to US territories and neighboring areas. Moving forward, a broader appreciation of homeland defense in the Pacific relies on understanding the region's historical military importance, approaching the problem with a joint mind-set, identifying the current territorial situation, and analyzing the threat the United States must counter.

We've Been Here Before: A Historical Look at the Region

Pearl Harbor jolted the US military, catching it unprepared and ill-equipped for immediate offensive action. After the loss of the Philippines, Wake Island, and Attu and Kiska early in World War II, the United States adopted a hemispheric defense based on a triangle stretching from Alaska through Hawai'i to Panama. This vast swath of ocean and coastline, under the control of the Western Defense Command, offered little in the way of defensive sources.

US bases in Hawai'i were still repairing the damage from the Pearl Harbor attack; the Panama Canal zone offered very few available forces, though some units were shifted from CONUS to guard the critical canal immediately after Pearl Harbor. Alaska contained very few military forces at all. The triangle offered a large area for US Navy ships to patrol to defend the West Coast of the United States, especially the critical aircraft construction facilities in California and Washington.²

The Aleutians proved to be one of the first important strategic areas for the United States. In 1911, Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that a US fleet concentrated at Kiska would deter Japanese intentions in the Pacific. The potential for land operations in the North Pacific gained prominence, fueled by memories of US military involvement in Russia during the Bolshevik War from 1918 to 1920, still fresh in the Soviet Union's collective military consciousness. Modern Arctic watch-

¹ *Red Dawn*, directed by John Milius (MGM, 1984), 1:54.

² Henry G. Gole, *The Road to Rainbow: Army Planning got Global War, 1934–1940* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 62–63, 154–55.

ers will find the views of airpower theorist Billy Mitchell hauntingly familiar—Mitchell cited this region as the only place where Japanese, Russian, and US spheres of interest came together.³

As part of its global war strategy during World War II, the United States provided crucial support to the Allies through lend-lease shipments to the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. Initially, planners intended for lend-lease materials destined for the Soviet Union to follow the standard North Atlantic shipping routes to Britain, then proceed around the North Cape to Murmansk. However, the relentless wolf packs of the German Navy rendered this route untenable.

The planners devised a second route, originating from the East Coast, circumnavigating the African continent, and ascending into the Persian Gulf. From there, they unloaded supplies in Iran and transported them overland. Although this alternative path was more secure than the North Atlantic route, it significantly extended delivery times.

The third route, initially met with resistance by Soviet premier Joseph Stalin, traversed the Pacific from the West Coast along the Great Circle Route to Vladivostok, passing directly through the Aleutians, notably Dutch Harbor. Additionally, the United States orchestrated the delivery of newly manufactured airplanes from Great Falls, Montana, to Fairbanks, Alaska, where Soviet pilots assumed control and flew the aircraft to Siberia. This underscored the critical importance of the North Pacific route in the overall strategic calculus.⁴

The primary lend-lease route from the US West Coast to Siberian ports in the Soviet Union passed through the Aleutians adjacent to Dutch Harbor to Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula or to the Port of Vladivostok. More lend-lease material flowed to the Soviet Union through the Aleutian route than through the north Russian and Persian Gulf corridors combined. This area was also exposed to potential Japanese attacks.

The Japanese Kurile Islands lay within easy striking range from the Aleutians, closer to them than to Tokyo.⁵ If the Japanese were to capture Dutch Harbor on the island of Unalaska, much of mainland Alaska would also be vulnerable. A foothold in southeast Alaska would put the Japanese within three hours of the United States.

³ Dean Allard, "Naval Views on the North Pacific Before and During World War II," in *Alaska at War, 1941-1945: The Forgotten War Remembered* ed. Fern Chandonnet (Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995), 4.

⁴ William A. Jacobs, "American National Security in the Asian and Pacific War," in *Alaska at War, 1941-1945: The Forgotten War Remembered* ed. Fern Chandonnet (Anchorage: Alaska at War Committee, 1995), 15-16.

⁵ Allard, "Naval Views on the North Pacific," 3, 10.

In June 1942, seven months after Pearl Harbor, the Japanese again did the unthinkable—Japanese Army troops landed on Attu and Kiska islands in the Aleutian chain. Not since the War of 1812 had foreign invaders occupied American soil. By attacking in the Aleutians, the Japanese aimed to divert US attention and resources away from Midway, disrupt key lines of communication for lend-lease, and occupy US soil to gain a psychological victory. The strategy was partially successful, and the United States devoted an entire division to liberating the two islands, which required nearly a year of planning, training, and preparation.

These same historical areas are rising in importance today. The necessity for defending far-flung Pacific islands remains as pertinent now as it was in the 1930s and 1940s, albeit with more precisely defined security requirements. Attu and Kiska contained few residents at the time and are now completely uninhabited, yet they remain key strategic locations from which to stage forces in the event of deployment. Eareckson Air Station on nearby Shemya Island hosts the Cobra Dane radar used to detect intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches.¹³ With this historical backdrop in mind, the United States must embrace a broader definition of homeland defense.

A Broader Definition of Homeland Defense and a Joint Mind-set

The homeland is no longer a sanctuary. This statement has been echoing through the Defense Department (DOD) for years, the mantra elevating the importance of homeland defense and expanding the national security conversation. Adversaries now possess the capability to target bases both within CONUS and overseas, as well as their surrounding communities, using cyberattacks, inciting protests, and engaging in criminal activities. Consequently, the DOD must harden and protect installations against cyber and physical attacks.

The *Army Installations Strategy* requires facilities to “possess active and passive protection measures that preserve critical assets, capabilities, and activities essential to meeting *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) requirements.”⁶ The 2022 *NDS* warns that the “scope and scale of threats to the homeland have fundamentally changed.”⁷ Consequently, the defense establishment has begun to study the challenges of defending the homeland more closely.

One often-overlooked aspect of homeland defense involves safeguarding regions of the United States situated beyond the CONUS. Apart from Alaska, Hawai'i

⁶ *Army Installations Strategy: Supporting The Army in Multiple Domains* (Washington: Department of the Army, September 2020), 10.

⁷ 2022 *National Defense Strategy* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2022), 5, <https://comptroller.defense.gov/>.

(including Midway), and US territories such as Guam, American Samoa, Wake Island, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, the United States also undertakes the responsibility of defending specific Pacific Island nations through bilateral agreements.

In 2020, Alexander Gray, the Director for Oceania and Indo-Pacific Security at the National Security Council, testified before Congress regarding the strategic importance of US territories in the Pacific and the challenge posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC) within this expanded concept of the homeland. Before outlining specific regional issues, he expressed his frustration at the lack of US "focus on Beijing's efforts to penetrate, influence, and subvert territories for which the United States Government is directly responsible."⁸ Beyond this underlying responsibility that the country must protect its territory and citizens, Gray asserted that US territories and possessions are likely to be instrumental in long-term plans to compete with the PRC.

Identifying potential threats poses the most challenging obstacle, given the wide variance in opinions among decision makers regarding the perceived dangers. How a particular analyst or policy maker defines the *homeland* shapes their arguments or conclusions. Recommendations for refocusing on the homeland will vary drastically among individuals who view the term as encompassing solely the 50 US states and those who include the various territories. Therefore, defining the *homeland* is a prerequisite for future national security conversations.

For the DOD, this expanded notion of homeland defense presents a joint problem. The Navy's role is obvious, given the Pacific theater's composition of numerous island nations and vast expanses of water. Similarly, the importance of airpower is also straightforward, not simply as ship killers or bombers but also as a means of strategic transport for personnel and supplies. In fact, what historically made some of these areas so strategically critical was the simple fact that there were working runways on them—staging points that allowed the US military to leapfrog across the great Pacific Ocean.

The thousands of US service members stationed in South Korea and Japan provide a strong deterrent in the region. However, the significance of landpower in the area extends beyond the conventional massing of forces or staging of advanced military equipment to dissuade adversaries. GEN Charles Flynn, the commanding general of US Army Pacific, recently commented that because armies "play a cen-

⁸ Alexander B. Gray, "China's Threat to U.S. Pacific Territories and How Washington Should Respond" (Testimony, Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs, Committee on Natural Resources, US House of Representatives, Washington, DC, 16 May 2023), <https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/>.

tral role in territorial defense and protecting their national sovereignty,” he believes landpower is “the security architecture that binds this region together.”⁹

Landpower plays a critical role in building relationships and demonstrating a persistent presence in the region with allies and partners, a prerequisite to deterring the PRC. The US Army uses a variety of programs and units to demonstrate this presence. For more than 30 years, the Army National Guard has administered the State Partnership Program (SPP). In coordination with the combatant commanders, this program pairs National Guard units with military units of partner countries, facilitating long-term relationships and developing partner capacities. GEN Joseph L. Lengyel, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, 2016–2020, explained that these military-to-military engagements with partner nations build personal bonds and enduring trust: “The goal of the SPP is developing and maintaining important security relationships between the United States and other nations sharing a long-term view of common interests.”¹⁰ In the Indo-Pacific, the SPP includes 14 nations paired with 11 states and Guam. This includes larger nations such as Thailand and Vietnam, as well as smaller island nations such as Fiji and Timor-Leste. Palau will join the program starting in 2024.

The US Army has been steadily enhancing its presence in the region, spearheaded by US Army Pacific Command’s Operation Pathways, which establishes “interior lines through tailored forces and equipment, exercises strategic systems for force projection and increases experimentation, accelerating capability integration in real-world conditions.”¹¹ Bilateral and multilateral exercises in the region have bolstered relationships and facilitated access and forward defense for the US military.

Talisman Sabre in 2023 demonstrated the multilateral desire to advance “a free and open Indo-Pacific by strengthening relationships and interoperability among key allies and enhancing collective capabilities to respond to a wide array of potential security concerns.”¹² This extensive military exercise, involving the United States and Australia, included participation from other regional actors. In the past year, the exercise expanded to incorporate island nations such as Tonga, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and several others.

Similarly, during Super Garuda Shield, the Philippines hosted a multinational exercise with seven participating nations and twelve observing nations. The exercise

⁹ Christopher Hurd, “USARPAC: Landpower Essential in Defending Indo-Pacific,” *DVIDS*, 20 October 2023, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

¹⁰ Joseph Lengyel, “Securing the Nation One Partnership at a Time,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 3, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/>.

¹¹ “Campaigning,” U.S. Army Pacific, 2024, <https://www.usarpac.army.mil/>.

¹² “Exercise Talisman Sabre,” Department of Defense, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

featured “an amphibious exercise, airborne operations, an airfield seizure exercise, and a combined joint field training that culminates with a live fire event.”¹³

While fighting an envisioned conflict or addressing a security challenge is the foundation of most exercises, simply getting the US military forward into the Pacific theater is a difficult task. To refine this essential capability, a recent bilateral exercise between the United States and Japan evaluated the deployment process, focusing on the “reception, staging, onward-movement, and integration of US forces deploying to Japan.”¹⁴ Through such endeavors, among others, General Flynn contends that the Army is creating “joint interior lines” by “building forward positions to create enduring advantage, to create operational reach and to build operational endurance for the joint force.”¹⁵

To complement the series of multilateral wargames, the Army maintains a persistent presence through bilateral training opportunities. The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne) also enjoys a long association with nations of the Indo-Pacific region. Stationed at Joint Base Lewis–McChord (JBLM) with one battalion deployed in Okinawa, 1st SFG(A) conducts training with partner and ally special operations forces. Moreover, the group has engaged in combat operations with the Armed Forces of the Philippines during the Global War on Terror.

The 5th Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB), also based at JBLM, is the newest addition to the security cooperation enterprise. Activated in 2020 as one of six regionally aligned SFABs, the 5th SFAB has established relationships with Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Maldives, Japan, Mongolia, and Malaysia. The SFAB provides a dedicated team of active-duty advisors that conducts conventional small-unit training with US partners in short rotational deployments.¹⁶ The first commander of the 5th SFAB, COL Andrew Watson explained: “We’re there to achieve interoperability, share how we do things, learn how they do things, have a conversation to build our relationship, and sustain access in the Pacific.”¹⁷

¹³ “It’s Not Called Super Garuda Shield for Nothing!,” *DOD News*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/>.

¹⁴ Sean Kimmons, “Orient Shield 23 Exercise Enhances U.S.-Japan Readiness, Deterrence,” US Indo-Pacific Command, September 27, 2023, <https://www.pacom.mil/>.

¹⁵ Hurd, “USARPAC.”

¹⁶ For more on the 5th SFAB, listen to COL Brandon Teague, commander 5th SFAB, interview by Dr. Ernest Gunasekara-Rockwell, *Indo-Pacific Visions* (vodcast), Episode 13, 30 January 2024, <https://www.dvidshub.net/>.

¹⁷ Thomas Brading, “Security Force Assistance Brigade Soldiers Complete First Mission to Indo-Pacific,” *Army News Service*, 8 September 2020, <https://www.pacom.mil/>.

Apart from a handful of organizations dedicated to the Indo-Pacific theater, there exists an institutional knowledge gap concerning US territories and their strategic importance. This deficiency hampers the effective application of a broader definition of homeland defense. Therefore, homeland defense entails more than merely securing US territories, although such measures are imperative; it also entails extending protective measures to neighboring areas. Moving forward, a broader appreciation of homeland defense in the Pacific relies on understanding the region's historical military significance, the present territorial dynamics, and the threats confronting the United States.

The Territorial Situation in the Indo-Pacific

Island chains denoting imaginary boundary lines carve up the vast area of the Pacific theater into three distinct sections extending eastward from mainland China. While the specifics of each line are not universally agreed upon, they are generally recognized as follows: the first chain encompasses Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia; the second chain originates from Japan, extends south through the Marianas and Guam, and further south to Micronesia; and the third chain is centered on Hawai'i (see fig. 1).¹⁸

More recently, literature has also explored the potential existence of a fourth and fifth island chain to address Chinese potential influence in the Indian Ocean. These boundaries extend westward, with the fifth chain commencing at Camp Lemonnier Djibouti and encompassing the eastern coast of Africa.¹⁹ Overall, these boundaries provide a framework for understanding and prioritizing the region geographically, establishing benchmarks for comparison.

Viewed through this lens, the PRC aims for regional dominance within the first chain, challenges the United States within the second, and modernizes its navy to operate within the third and beyond.²⁰ Often overlooked in these geographical discussions is the strategic significance of the Arctic.

¹⁸ Wilson VornDick, "China's Reach Has Grown; So Should the Island Chains," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, n.d., <https://amti.csis.org>.

¹⁹ VornDick, "China's Reach Has Grown"; and JS Sodhi, "Island Chain Strategy: Steps to Checkmate China," *Financial Express* (blog), 18 June 2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/>.

²⁰ VornDick, "China's Reach Has Grown."



Figure 1. Island chains

The Arctic has regained military significance due to climate change, following a period of neglect after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The melting polar ice cap has opened potential new commercial routes through the Arctic, spurring competition among many nations. This competition has taken on a military dimension as Arctic nations such as Russia build military facilities in the Arctic, and non-Arctic nations such as China seek to expand their presence through multi-use commercial, scientific, and military facilities.²¹

All US military units assigned to the Arctic are based in Alaska. The sheer size of Alaska presents a daunting challenge for homeland defense planning. Alaska is one-third the area of the entire CONUS, yet its population of 700,000—roughly half the population of Hawai'i—is concentrated in major cities, with vast expanses characterized by very low population densities elsewhere.

Alaska boasts significant active military forces, but they are all aligned to the Indo-Pacific theater. The US Army stations the 11th Airborne Division along with various enablers in Alaska, while the Air Force maintains two fighter squadrons, one airlift squadron, one refueling squadron, and a command-and-control squadron. In addition to the search-and-rescue aircraft stationed at Kodiak, the US Coast

²¹ Camilla T. N. Sørensen, "The Evolving Chinese Strategic Approach in the Arctic Following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," in *International Competition in the High North*, ed. Michael E. Lynch and Howard G. Coombs (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2024), 153–61, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/>.

Guard operates 15 ships, 52 small boats, and 17 aircraft for maritime security missions in and around Alaska.

If Alaska faces a homeland defense threat after deploying the DOD units, there exists limited protection for them and no designated units to replace them. The Alaska Army National Guard numbers only about 1,734 Soldiers, supplemented by 2,120 Airmen in its Air Guard.²² Additionally, the state maintains the Alaska State Defense Force and the Alaska Naval Militia, which could potentially be deployed within the state to safeguard critical infrastructure such as the Alaska pipeline and the 49th Missile Battalion facility at Fort Greeley.

Hawai'i is the center of gravity of the Pacific defense, serving as the headquarters for several key commands, including US Indo-Pacific Command, Pacific Fleet, Pacific Air Forces, Space Forces-Indo-Pacific, US Army Pacific, and the Defense Logistics Agency-Indo-Pacific. Pearl Harbor serves as the homeport for approximately 25 Navy vessels and is a naval shipyard as well as a maintenance facility. The Navy also maintains the world's largest instrumented, multi-domain range, the Pacific Missile Range Facility (PMRF) Barking Sands.²³

Nearby Hickam Field hosts three airlift squadrons, two fighter squadrons, and a refueling squadron (both active and Reserve), as well as command-and-control for Air Force operations throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Hawai'i is home to the 25th Infantry Division and various enabler units under the US Army's purview.²⁴

The Army's newest formation, the Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF), adds a novel and innovative dimension to landpower. The MDTF provides "theater-level maneuver elements designed to synchronize precision effects and precision fires in all domains against adversary antiaccess/area denial (A2/AD) networks in all domains, enabling joint forces to execute their operational plan (OPLAN)-directed roles."²⁵ Indo-Pacific Command hosts the 1st MDTF (JBLM) and the 3rd MDTF (Hawai'i), with plans for another MDTF to be stationed in the Indo-Pacific region. Departing from the traditional landpower force structure, the MDTF employs long-range precision effects, including long-range fires, cyber, intelligence, and electronic warfare (see fig. 2). MDTFs are designed to be scalable and easily

²² Alaska Department of Military and Veteran Affairs, "FY 2018 Department Overview," January 2018.

²³ "Welcome To Pacific Missile Range Facility Barking Sands," US Navy, n.d., <https://cnrh.cnric.navy.mil/>.

²⁴ Luke A. Nicastro, *U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R47589 (Washington: Office of Congressional Information and Publishing, 6 June 2023), 37, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/>.

²⁵ *Army Multi-Domain Transformation: Ready to Win in Competition and Conflict*, Chief of Staff Paper #1 (Washington: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 16 March 2021), 12, <https://api.army.mil/>.

modified to support the combatant commander’s requirements, so the structure in figure 2 is a description of capabilities rather than a standard force structure.²⁶

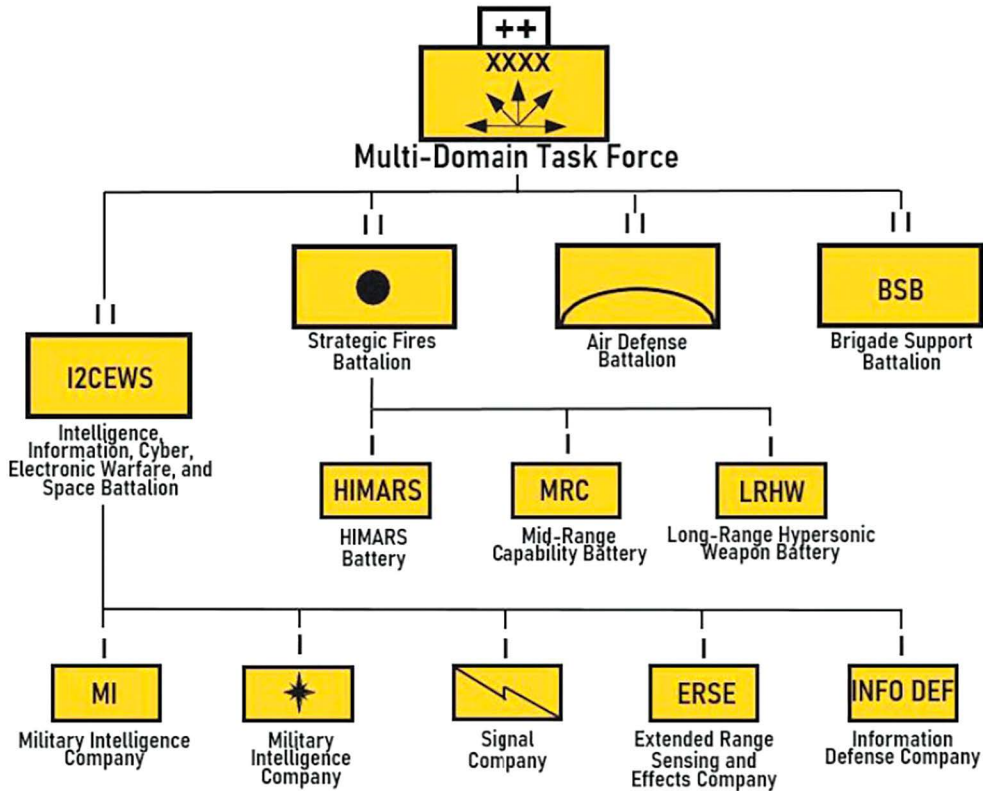


Figure 2. Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF) example task organization

Once the epicenter of a pivotal naval battle during World War II, Midway Island is located 1,300 miles from Honolulu—geologically but not politically part of the Hawaiian Islands. The Midway Naval Air Facility ceased operations in 1993, yet the airfield retains the potential for reactivation if required. Presently, Midway falls under the administration of the US Fish & Wildlife Service, with fewer than 100 employees stationed on the island.

While technological advancements have surged since the last US military campaign in the Pacific, geographical obstacles persist across the vast theater. Consequently, places such as Wake Island hold strategic importance as vital homeland defense sites. This US territory, under the jurisdiction of the US Air Force, is situ-

²⁶ *Army Multi-Domain Transformation.*

ated between Hawai'i and Guam and has historically functioned as a trans-Pacific refueling site. The island's most important feature is its 9,800-foot runway. Recently, the Air Force committed USD 87 million toward upgrading this strategic air bridge, undertaking modernization efforts to upgrade the runway for C-17 Globemaster III operations.²⁷

The US territory of Guam, heralded as the point where America's day begins, holds similar military significance for Pacific theater operations. With a population of 153,836 US citizens, their safety is no less important than the safety of those residing in CONUS. Positioned 3,800 miles from Hawaii, 2,000 miles from Darwin, 1,700 miles from Taiwan, 1,600 miles from Manila, and 1,500 miles from Tokyo, Guam occupies a central position in planning for Pacific operations.

Guam boasts one of the largest air bases in the Pacific and was a hub for the Navy and Army Air Forces during World War II. During the Vietnam War, Guam played a crucial role as a forward staging area for B-52 bombers. Presently, Guam is assuming renewed importance as Marines relocate forces from Okinawa to Camp Blaz. Moreover, Guam hosts the Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system, positioned to deter ballistic missile threats from China or North Korea. Additionally, Guam accommodates a strategically significant naval base, reestablishing itself as a bastion for US military power projection and homeland defense.²⁸

Unfettered access to the facilities on Guam provides the United States with a strategically vital location for supporting continuous operations in the region as well as a logistical hub for ship repair and theater-level resupply. Nonetheless, advancements in missile technology are heightening the island's vulnerability. Positioned just beyond China's main missile threat zone (for now), Guam serves as a staging ground for US military capabilities (see fig. 3). The Chinese-made DF-26 missile possesses the range to target the island with either conventional or nuclear warheads, earning it the nickname "Guam Killer" or "Guam Express."²⁹ Patty-Jane Geller, a former analyst for nuclear deterrence and missile defense at the Heritage Foundation, urged the DOD to act quickly and send more air-and-missile defense systems to counter the growing PRC missile threat, noting that "time is of the essence for defending Guam."³⁰

²⁷ Mila Cisneros, "AFCEC Leads Major Airfield Modernization at Wake Island Airfield," Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center Public Affairs Office, 15 October 2020, <https://www.afcec.af.mil/>.

²⁸ "Census Bureau Releases 2020 Census Population and Housing Unit Counts for Guam" (press release, US Census Bureau, 28 October 2021), <https://www.census.gov/>.

²⁹ Chris Panella, "China Could Strike Far More than Just Flattops with Its Growing Arsenal of 'carrier-Killer' Missiles, Defense Expert Says," *Business Insider*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.businessinsider.com/>.

³⁰ Patty-Jane Geller, "Missile Defense for Guam Needed to Improve Deterrence in the Indo-Pacific," *Heritage Foundation*, 19 July 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/>.

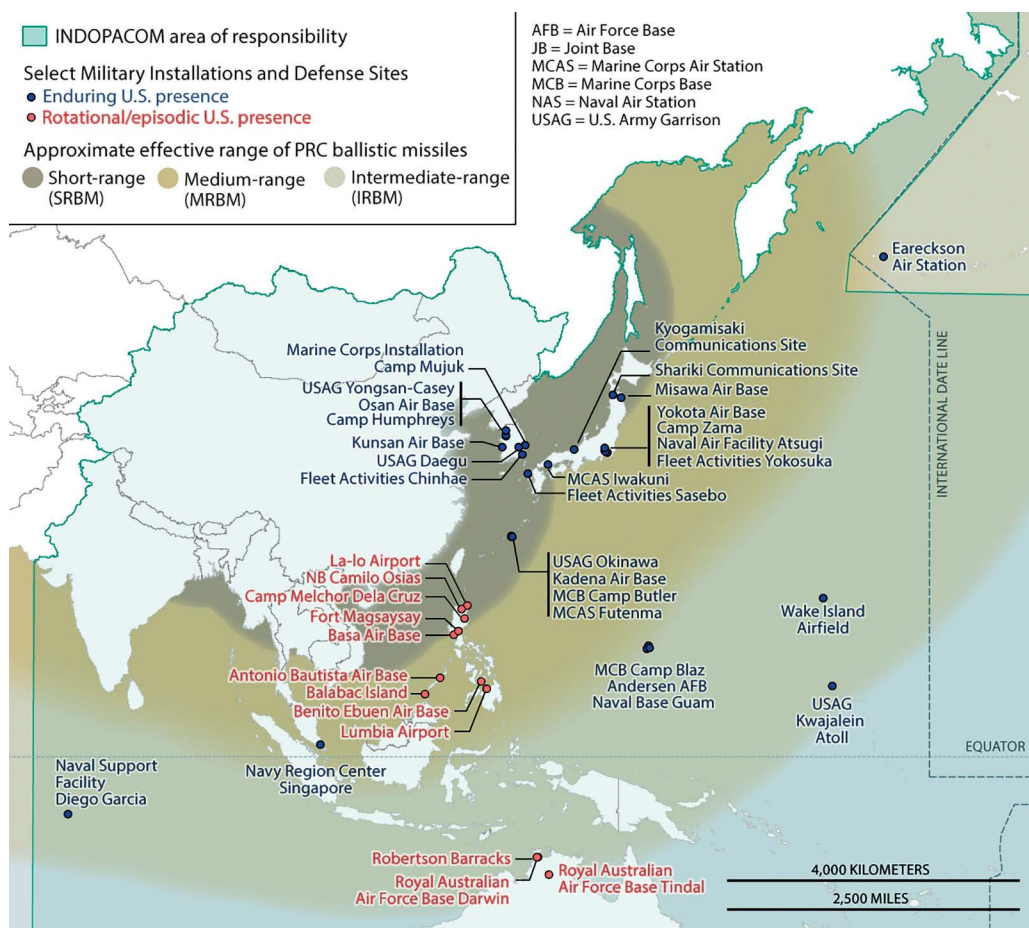


Figure 3. Missile ranges in the INDOPACOM AOR

American Samoa, with a population of 49,710, lies 3,750 miles from Honolulu and 3,500 miles from Guam, serving as a potential base for US forces.³¹ In 2023, Governor Lemanu Peleti Mauga emphasized the territory’s strategic significance to Congress, stating, “American Samoa may be small in population numbers, but our location, as the southern-most jurisdiction of the United States based in the South Pacific region, is critically important to our strategic defense and national security,” adding that the territory “is well known to be the most successful recruiting station

³¹ “Census Bureau Releases 2020 Census Population.”

for the US military.”³² Despite its modest population, American Samoa has consistently led the nation in per capita enlistments over the past decade, with the Army recruiting office on the island frequently ranking first out of more than 800 stations.³³ American Samoa does not host any active-duty military units but does accommodate a few small reserve component units.

The geometry of geography in the Pacific presents a difficult truth: protecting the homeland does not begin on the east or west coasts of the United States nor is it limited to the island areas just discussed. National responsibilities—whether military, legal, ethical, or moral—include defending other democracies and partner nations in the Pacific islands that could easily fall to enemy forces and then require significant efforts to liberate. Chief among these sovereign partners are the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau (see fig. 4).

The US Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), with a population of 47,329, holds strategic significance but remains susceptible to non-military advances from China.³⁴ Governor Arnold Palacios recently acknowledged in Congressional testimony that the current conditions make the “Commonwealth acutely vulnerable to [Chinese] exploitation.”³⁵ He concluded that “this time, it’s not Marines who are needed to liberate [the CNMI] and give it a chance to come out of the darkness, it’s forensic accountants, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) agents, special investigators and others who can shine a light on corruption—the fuel that drives PRC expansion.”³⁶

Marianas Islands such as Saipan and Tinian were vital assets for the United during World War II, serving as staging bases and airfields for bombing missions that contributed to the downfall of Imperial Japan. The Air Force has recently begun repairing and renovating the base on Tinian. The United States has committed to reinvesting in these WWII-era airfields, clearing out vegetation and spending “\$26 million for airfield development, \$20 million for fuel tanks, \$32 million for parking

³² Lemanu Mauga, “The Testimony of the Governor of American Samoa” (Testimony, United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington, DC, 9 February 2023), 9, <https://www.energy.senate.gov/>.

³³ “Military Service ‘Part of Our Makeup as a Warrior People,’” *Reserve & National Guard Magazine* (blog), 10 June 2022, <https://reservenationalguard.com/>; and Tracey Leong, “American Samoans’ Strong Military Tradition,” *KIRO 7 News Seattle*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.kiro7.com/>.

³⁴ “Census Bureau Releases 2020 Census Population.”

³⁵ Cleo Paskal, “Northern Mariana: Time to Close China’s Backdoor into the U.S.” *Sunday Guardian*, 3 September 2023, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/>.

³⁶ Paskal, “Northern Mariana.”

aprons, \$46 million for cargo pad and taxiway extension, and \$4.7 million for a maintenance and support facility.”³⁷

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements between the United States and the Republic of Palau (Palau), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) also provide critical basing opportunities across a sector of the Pacific Ocean larger than the CONUS, while denying this basing to other nations. In return, the citizens of these nations enjoy many of the benefits of US citizenship, including eligibility to join the US military and access to certain federal programs and services. However, leaders of these critical partners express alarm over the recent failure of the US Congress to approve new funding packages and caution that China is actively seeking to sway their allegiances. Despite enjoying bipartisan support, the proposed USD 2.3 billion in supplemental funding remains stalled in Congress due to requirements prioritizing southern border security over international military or humanitarian assistance.³⁸

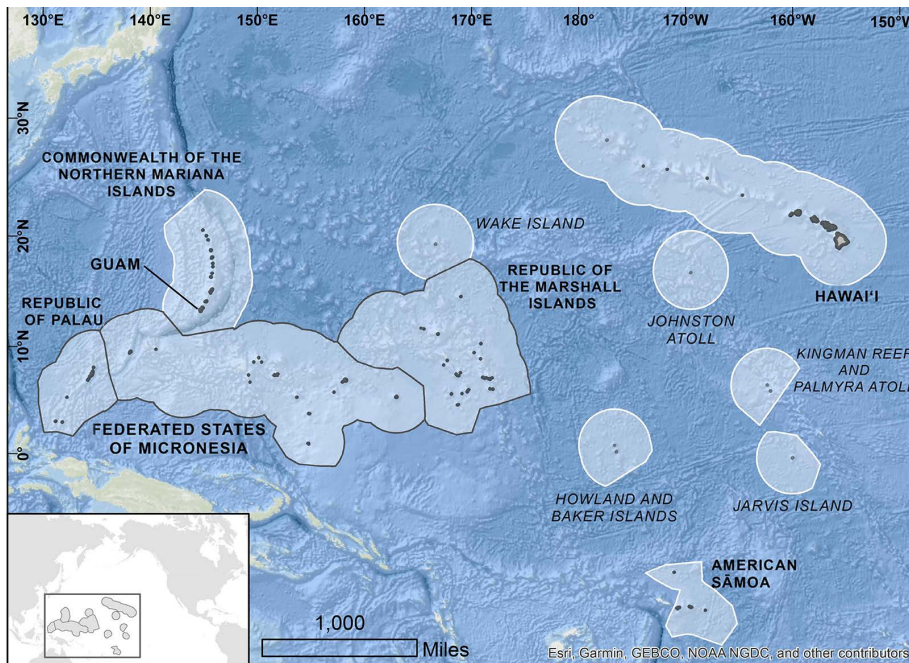


Figure 4. US Associated Pacific Islands

³⁷ Seth Robson, “Air Force Plans Return to WWII-Era Pacific Airfield on Tinian,” *Stars and Stripes*, December 27, 2023, <https://www.stripes.com/>.

³⁸ Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik, “The Compacts of Free Association, Congress, and Strategic Competition for the Pacific,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 31 January 2024, <https://www.csis.org/>.

In 2021 the US government reached an agreement with the FSM to build new military facilities. The following year, both governments reached an agreement for US Coast Guard patrols across the islands to deter Chinese maritime interference, while also providing support for the rehabilitation of the commercial airport on Yap Island to facilitate its use by the US military.³⁹ These developments afford the US military greater flexibility for Pacific operations. Additionally, the US Air Force's Tactical Mobile Over-the-Horizon Radar is presently under construction in the Republic of Palau, with completion slated for 2026.⁴⁰ President Surangel Whipps Jr. reported in 2023 that Chinese survey vessels had begun operating in Palauan waters, particularly around sensitive areas hosting fiber optic cables, prompting a call for US assistance: "The United States is responsible for our security, and we would also inform them that we need them to engage and help us in deterring any unwanted activities."⁴¹

Whipps also requested a permanent deployment of Patriot missile batteries to defend Palau's 18,000 residents, contending that the Air Force's new radar system will become an inviting target for the Chinese. However, this proposal encountered a setback when the Palauan Senate passed a resolution rejecting it. Opposition within the Senate was spearheaded by pro-Chinese Senator Hokkons Baules, who asserted that the deployment of Patriot missiles would pose a threat to Palau's sovereignty. Additionally, some residents, mindful of Palau's turbulent history during World War II, expressed concerns about the nation once again becoming a battleground. Cleo Paskal, senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), observed that "For those that are pushing 'the US is making us a target of a military target and isn't helping with our schools or health care system,' this plays right into that argument."⁴²

The key strategic base at Kwajalein Atoll in the RMI houses the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, serving as the designated impact area for ICBMs test-fired from the CONUS.⁴³ The atoll is home to 42,415 Marshallese citizens, as well as 2,500 American citizens. The test site facilitates missile testing and launches, space reconnaissance and surveillance operations, and scientific experiments utilizing radar, optical, and telemetry sensors stationed on the atoll. Operated

³⁹ Mar-Vic Cagurangan, "US, FSM initiate talks on establishing 'defense sites' in Micronesia," *Pacific Island Times*, 25 October 2022, <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/>.

⁴⁰ Kelsey D. Atherton, "A new radar installation in the Pacific will let US forces look over the horizon," *Popular Science*, 5 January 2023, <https://www.popsci.com/>.

⁴¹ Mari Yamaguchi, "Palau Leader Stresses Need for US Help to Deter China in the Pacific," *The Diplomat*, 16 June 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

⁴² David Brunnstrom and Kirsty Needham, "US missile defense proposal stirs debate in Palau," *Reuters*, 20 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

⁴³ Nicastro, *U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific*, 39.

by the DOD, the site caters to the US Strategic Command, US Air Force, US Space Force Space Surveillance missions, NASA space transportation, and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency programs.

Contested Space: Great-Power Competition in the Pacific

China, as the current pacing threat, has already extended its reach into the islands of the western Pacific and has expanded its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to many of these island nations. The postwar era brought independence to many of the former colonial possessions and protectorates in the Pacific, and with sovereignty came name changes for many. These changes, coupled with diminished US interest in the sparsely populated areas of the region, have obscured the burgeoning threat. China has expanded its influence into these islands to counter US presence in the region. While tiny islands or remote island chains with unfamiliar names may hold little interest for Americans initially, China's involvement has brought attention to these locales, many of which are soaked with American blood.

- **Solomon Islands** (Guadalcanal, Vella Lavella, New Georgia): The Solomon Islands signed a security pact with the PRC in 2022, following Honiara's severance of ties with Taiwan and recognition of the PRC in 2019. Despite a 30-year absence, the United States reopened an embassy in the Solomons, but its arrival came too late to influence the security pact.⁴⁴
- **Kiribati** (Gilbert, Phoenix, Lines Islands capital): Kiribati straddles both the equator and the International Date Line, situated approximately 2,000 miles from Hawai'i. Having also severed ties with Taiwan and embraced the PRC in 2019, Kiribati solidified its stance with a memorandum of understanding (MOU) linking its "Kiribati 20-year vision" to the BRI the following year. The ruling government, with Chinese assistance, plans to build two "transshipment hubs" (major ports)—one hub on Tarawa Atoll in the west and the second on Kiritimati (Christmas) Atoll in the east. The islands of Kiribati, averaging a mere two meters above sea level, face the looming threat of becoming the first nation lost to climate change. Given the nation's modest economy, insufficient to support such grandiose endeavors, the port development project serves as a likely cover for the establishment of Chinese bases.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Kate Lyons and Dorothy Wickham, "The deal that shocked the world: inside the China-Solomons security pact," *The Guardian*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

⁴⁵ Steve Raaymakers, "China Is Expanding Its Island-Building Strategy into the Pacific," *National Interest*, 14 September 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/>.

- **Vanuatu** (New Hebrides): Vanuatu, located 1,000 miles off Australia’s north-east coast, established relations with the PRC in 1982 and supports Beijing’s “island building” strategy. Presently, China is in the process of constructing a commercial wharf capable of accommodating deep draft naval vessels on the island of Espiritu Santo, alongside upgrades to the adjoining international airport. Rumors suggest China may contemplate the placement of its inaugural forward defense installation in the Pacific on the island.⁴⁶

Overall, it is imperative to thoroughly assess these strategically crucial territories and their adjacent regions. Embracing a more comprehensive definition of homeland defense constitutes the initial stride toward achieving this goal.

Conclusion

The network of defense installations spanning the Pacific offers critical security measures, but they must not be regarded as a Maginot line, lest the adversary treat them as such. It is imperative to establish and maintain relations throughout the region and do so in ways that are mutually beneficial to both the United States and the island nations throughout the Pacific. As recent wargames and exercises have shown, any fight in the Indo-Pacific theater is not only inherently joint but also dependent on allies and partners in the region. In fact, simply getting forces deployed across the expansive Pacific Ocean in a contested environment is likely to prove a difficult venture. Consequently, the United States must emphasize relationships and identify issues that are important to potential client states.

This begins with understanding the historical significance of the region, appreciating the nuances of each territory and protectorate, and having a broad and realistic conversation about the threats in the area. It is time for the United States to embrace a broader definition of homeland defense that includes critical areas in the Indo-Pacific. Doing so is not only vital for a future strategy for competing with China but also for shaping security cooperation activities, supporting sustained engagement strategies, and addressing climate change mitigation. This deterrence is vital for the US territories and the surrounding areas, and US presence must grow if the US military is going to revamp its role in the Pacific. 🌐

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⁴⁶ David Wroe, “China eyes Vanuatu military base in plan with global ramifications,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/>.

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