

Freely Associated States

by Mr. Geoffrey Goudge, Major Christopher Neal, and Major Mark Swiney

Introduction

U.S. relations with the freely associated states (FAS) in Oceania are mutually beneficial agreements that the United States must continue to maintain. The FAS relationship provides the United States with free and open sea-lanes, broader access to the Pacific region, and strategic power projection in this critical region. Realizing this, China is attempting to dismantle United States partnerships through economic means to engage with and coerce its Pacific neighbors. United States allies in the region recognize the

growing influence of China in the Pacific and have expanded their involvement with the FAS to counter growing Chinese influence.¹ The United States must employ shrewd diplomatic and economic engagement efforts to ensure the ability to maintain its relationship with the FAS. The success of these efforts could have far-reaching military implications. The engagements will help the United States to assure its partners and allies of its commitment to the region while building a broad coalition to stem the rising tide of Chinese influence in the area.²



Map of the Freely Associated States³

National Security Strategy/National Defense Strategy

The 2017 National Security Strategy portrays a struggle taking place throughout the Pacific region between free and authoritarian views of the world. It also represents the need for freedom of the seas and relationships with partner nations that support forward U.S. military presence capable of deterring and defeating adversaries in the Pacific region.⁴ In the near term, China seeks hegemony within its area and displacement of the United States as the preeminent global power in the long term.⁵ Relationships with U.S. partners in the region are central to this contest. The uniquely positioned FAS support U.S. interests through longstanding, mutually beneficial agreements. The United States must maintain these critical relationships to ensure free and open seas as well as influence, access, and strategic power projection in the Pacific region.⁶

Who Are the Freely Associated States

The FAS have three member nations—the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—and share a unique relationship with the United States through agreements known as Compacts of Free Association (COFAs). Each deal is a mutually beneficial partnership between the United States and each FAS member that provides stability, security, and exclusive military access in exchange for developmental support and funding. The economic aspects of these Compacts are set to expire in the 2023/2024 timeframe.⁷

China's Regional Influence

China has rapidly increased its diplomatic and economic investment to expand its influence in the Pacific region; as a result, it is increasingly becoming a more dominant power in the region.⁸ Through greater diplomatic and economic engagement, China employs predatory lending practices to exert influence on vulnerable Pacific nations.⁹ Recently, China directed its efforts toward weakening United States ties with the island nations of Oceania. Countries of Oceania provide access to the area through their positioning in critical sea lines of communication. These islands maintain vital strategic access and reach in this region for the United States as well as for China. In effect, both countries view this as a zero-sum contest for influence, access, and strategic reach.¹⁰ While they view the Pacific region as an open ground for competition, neither nation must see the relationship purely as a zero-sum game in which a participant's gain or loss of utility is correctly balanced by the losses or benefits of the utility of the other participants. The two countries have strongly intertwined economic ties. Each country must consider that any economic successes, fail-

ures, and interruptions will have positive and negative effects for both economies as the United States works to counteract the increasing impact of Chinese influence in the Pacific.¹¹

Approach

Using the problem/solution approach, this article will provide an analysis of the current situation in the Pacific region with regard to growing Chinese influence and maintaining United States influence and presence. This article will present a case for maintaining and extending the current COFAs with the FAS and several recommendations that will reassure our partners and allies that the United States remains committed to this vital region.¹² Understanding China's use of diplomatic and economic instruments of power throughout the world is foundational to understand Chinese intentions in the Pacific region. Analysis of the Chinese engagement with the FAS and attempts to make diplomatic and economic inroads align with China's intent to further its influence and strategic power projection throughout the world and the Pacific region. In effect, the Chinese seek to create a vital buffer zone of authority that is counter to the existing state of United States regional dominance. China's current diplomatic and economic practices to coopt vulnerable Pacific Islands and reduce United States influence have increased in recent years.¹³ Analysis of the past, current, and potential future successes of the mutually beneficial agreements with the United States is pivotal in developing a long-term strategy for the future. The United States can employ several actions to strengthen its position in the Pacific region by maintaining and extending the FAS program to deepen United States ties in the area and to counter Chinese attempts to expand their influence and hegemony in the Pacific region.



U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo holds a joint press availability with Micronesia President David Panuelo, Marshall Islands President Hilda Heine, and Palau Vice President Raynold B. Oilouch, in Kolonia, Federated States of Micronesia, on August 5, 2019.

State Department Photo by Ron Przynucha

U.S. Partnership with Freely Associated States

The United States provides FAS access to many U.S. domestic programs. This includes—

- ◆ Hazard mitigation under the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- ◆ Representation to the International Frequency Registration Board of the International Telecommunication Union.
- ◆ Disaster response and recovery.
- ◆ Some U.S. Department of Education programs, including the Pell Grant.
- ◆ Services provided by the National Weather Service, U.S. Postal Service, Federal Aviation Administration, and Federal Communications Commission.¹⁴

Additionally, COFAs allow citizens of FAS to live and work in the United States, and U.S. citizens and their spouses to live and work in the FAS.¹⁵ The aligned agreement permits military operations within the COFAs and grants land to operate bases while denying encroachment of other foreign militaries in the region without U.S. permission. In turn, the United States becomes responsible for protecting its affiliate countries and for administering all international defense treaties and affairs, though it may not declare war on their behalf.¹⁶ Further, the U.S. military maintains the responsibility and authority for defense and security matters relating to the FAS. Citizens of the FAS may serve in the U.S. armed forces, and there are high levels of military enlistment by FAS citizens. FAS citizens also retain the right to enter, study, and work in the United States without a visa for an unlimited period.¹⁷

The FAS Compacts renewed in 2003 for a 20-year term. The Compacts include \$3.5 billion in funding and provide the island governments with funding for immigrant expenses and infrastructure repairs, among other financial assistance. The Compacts also offer necessary financial support in fiscal years 2004 through 2023 via the Department of the Interior. The Compacts require the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands to target funding in six sectors of development: education, health, environment, public-sector capacity building, private-sector development, and infrastructure. Education, health, and projects directly affecting health and safety are priorities.¹⁸ Palau is the exception. Palau's association with the United States requires an official evaluation of terms on the 15th, 30th, and 40th years of the Compact's effective date. The first review occurred in 2010, which resulted in the signing of the Palau Compact Review Agreement. The agreement included additional economic assistance through 2024, which is the next

anticipated Compact review. The Compacts are unique to U.S. support strategies and are not intended for full FAS financial support, but rather they are a way for the islands to improve their essential government services and infrastructure. The economic aid allows the nations to reform fiscal policies and evaluate their business processes.

The Compacts with the FAS guarantees the United States exclusive military access to these countries and their surrounding waterways. The agreements also permit access to the Kwajalein military facility. Along with the potential for future basing options, the FAS Compact allows a long-term military interest within the area. The Compact is a strategic influence because of the multiple islands within the region that cover a large area and parallel vital sea-lanes. The FAS are located between Hawaii and Guam. Their location is critical because of the defense relationship within the Pacific region, creating an arc from South Korea through Thailand and on to Australia.¹⁹ The FAS also create a prepositional location for forward operations to the Pacific, if needed, for future U.S. operations.

Expanding Chinese Influence

The FAS are at an international crossroads that span all the instruments of power and demand a whole-of-government approach from the United States to assure continued presence and influence in the region. The United States must engage in diplomacy to counter the expansionist and destabilizing efforts of China. Information will shape not only the strategic but also the operational environment. Military presence and engagement will increase influence and assure allies in the region, and will further complicate the decision space of China. Economic strategies will continue to build and expand upon the bonds the United States has cultivated to varying degrees of success since the end of World War I. The analysis herein highlights the current situation as being below the level of armed conflict and focusing on the diplomatic and economic instruments of power as the most prudent to counter Chinese aggression.

China's Belt and Road Initiative has taken on the status of a national strategy, focusing the economic power of the nation's state-backed financial institutions and industries toward Forward Direct Investment and "in the geo-strategically vital region of the Freely Associated States...China is increasingly competing with the United States for influence."²⁰ The FAS face a precarious set of decisions that will have long-term effects not only for their development and sovereignty but also for the stability of the region and beyond. The FAS form a strategic center of gravity for the region, and it is surmised that "Beijing seeks to incorporate the FAS into its signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by

boosting investment and economic assistance.”²¹ By forcing inroads into the financial markets of the FAS, China is creating a strategic pressure point that has shifted the focus to the Indo-Pacific area of responsibility. To that end, “during 2012–2017, the total value of overseas mergers and acquisitions (M&A) cases undertaken by Chinese firms rose from U.S. \$43.4 billion to U.S. \$119.62 billion.”²² As the renewal date for the COFAs nears, the FAS are at a crossroads and must decide whether to remain aligned with the United States and Western ideals or to shift to a pro-China footing that will restructure the region. The COFAs agreed upon by the United States and the FAS collectively have been beneficial; however, they also open a choke point for Chinese intervention.

States that offset the power base of China and are beneficial to United States policy and interests.

- ◆ **Motivations of Chinese Aid.** Chinese aid was “motivated from the start by ideology and it’s still influencing its decision today.”²⁴ If the United States focuses on free and open trade markets, which is not the case with China, a war of ideals that moves the FAS further away from a pro-United States footing is profoundly concerning.
- ◆ **Lack of Oversight.** There is no oversight of the actions of the Chinese Communist Party, which gives the Chinese uncontested freedom to bribe political and business leaders in the region with no downside to their efforts.



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Plan of the Silk Road with its maritime branch on display at Shenzhen City Planning Exhibition Hall in January 2017. The Silk Road and its maritime branch are one part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The issue currently facing the region is that the Federated States of Micronesia is the only associated state that “recognises China over Taiwan, participates in BRI, and was accorded a state visit to Beijing. This visit had a lasting positive effect on [the Federated States of Micronesia’s] FSM’s perception of China.”²³ This use of soft power on a long-term U.S. partner is a subtle yet bold gambit aimed at dividing the partner nations and limiting freedom of action for the United States. In his 2019 *Pacific Inquiry* article, Wai Yi Ma highlights several points that require counter moves from the United States in terms of Chinese activities:

- ◆ **Recognition of the One China Policy.** Taiwan is a stable democracy in the region with strong ties to the United

- ◆ **Controversy around Chinese Aid.** “Chinese aid is controversial because the traditional aid providers claimed that Chinese aid is undermining their painstaking work on reform supported by good governance and accountability.”²⁵ The United States, for better or worse, has some semblance of moral authority and a history of supporting stable democratic governments. However, if the perception of Chinese aid is that it is free flowing with no strings attached to moral obligations, corruption may become more prevalent and affect the relations of the area of responsibility.

- ◆ **Chinese Aid Is Difficult to Track.** “China is not a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development...as an aid provider; therefore, it is difficult to track Chinese aid.”²⁶

China’s revisionist actions may undermine free-market institutions that came about as a result of post-war efforts. The leap forward into an association with the FAS would serve to address the Chinese fears of encirclement and lack of reach in the region diplomatically, economically, and militarily. If China were able to construct bases and develop a forward presence for aircraft and naval assets, it would present the United States with the inverse of what United States containment is attempting to produce. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development is doing more

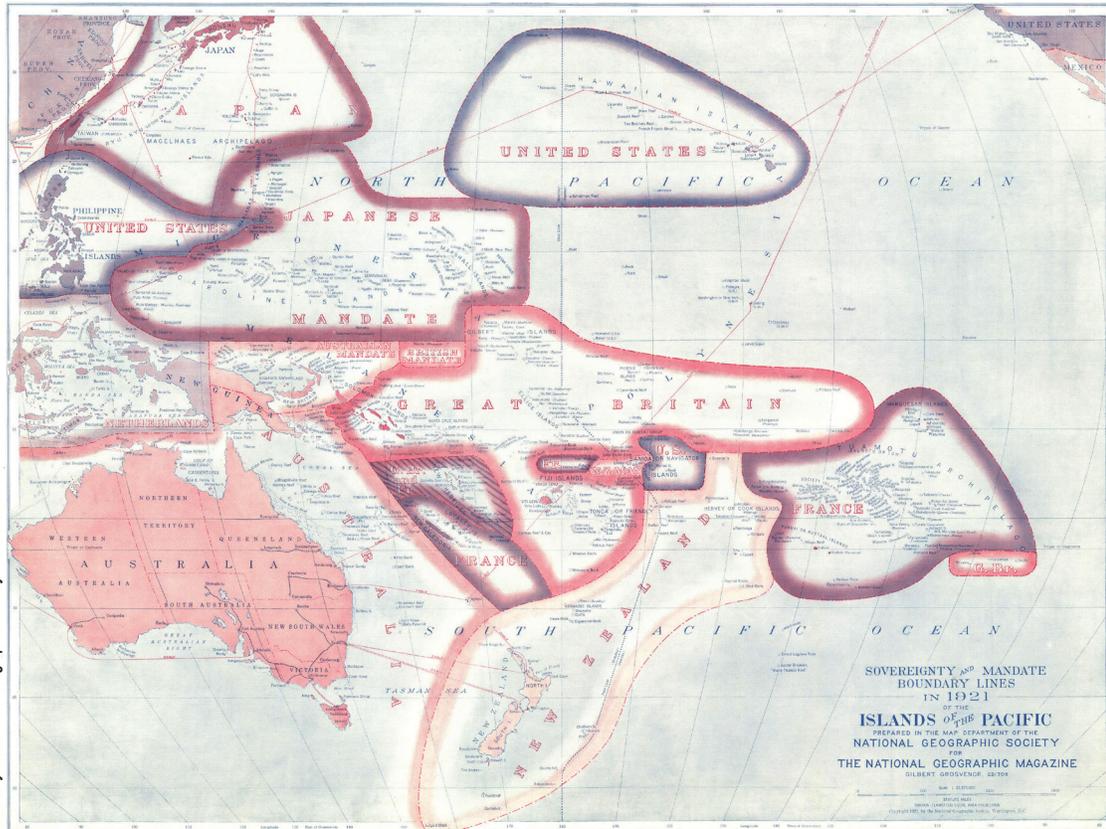
than addressing fishing rights and providing seemingly endless streams of aid packages. This is brinkmanship that will shape the political and economic landscape or will allow the reshaping of the region to a contentious hot spot that, when added to the complexities the United States faces around the globe, will only stretch even further the capabilities and capacity of the United States.

United Nations and the Trust Territory, which placed the responsibility for the defense of the FAS nations with the United States. With the desired end state always being self-governance, the United States embarked on a lackluster course that drew extensive criticism and required numerous course corrections over the years. Ultimately, COFAs outlined and strengthened the bonds of all parties concerned.

However, those articles will soon expire. If they are not renewed, the United States will lose a strategic asset to a global power competitor that has its eyes set on regional and global expansion to the detriment of United States, its ideals, and economic interests.

Recommendations

The United States should support/renew the FAS Compacts in 2023 (2024 for Palau) and continue funding and support to counter Chinese attempts to seize influence from the United States.²⁸ The United States must also recommit to its alliances



Courtesy of National Geographic Society/Wikimedia Commons

Sovereignty and mandate boundary lines of the islands of the Pacific as outlined in the Japanese Mandate and depicted on a 1921 National Geographic map of the area.

History often repeats itself through similar variations on themes played out on the world stage. The history of FAS is a perfect example of this construct. President Woodrow Wilson and the often ineffective League of Nations noted the strategic importance of the FAS and saw to provide some governance to the region. The South Seas Mandate placed the FAS nations under the control of Japan at the end of World War I. “The many islands and atolls provided airfields and deepwater lagoon anchorages that contributed to sea and air control, making them valuable for both power projection eastward, to Midway and Hawaii, and southward to Indonesia and Australia.”²⁷ U.S. forces employed island-hopping tactics during the World War II Pacific campaign to counter fortifications like those developed on the FAS islands. The attempts to contain the expansionist goals of Japan were akin to the current situation with China, with the level of armed conflict being the only difference. The end of World War II brought about the formation of the

in the Pacific through both diplomatic and economic engagement. The status of these commitments could have lasting military implications.²⁹ Continuing U.S. support to the FAS now and in the future is critical to U.S. interests, influence, strategic power projection, and geographic positioning in the region. The FAS nations are also peaceful, stable democracies. Extending the COFA agreements beyond their expiration will send a powerful signal of reassurance to U.S. allies and partners in the Pacific. Additionally, the COFAs should be used as a template to further United States negotiations in the region and to ensure that other island nations remain within the United States sphere of influence and do not succumb to Chinese control.

While China’s spending in the FAS increased, the United States currently outspends China in the FAS by a ratio of 10 to 1. Allies and partners—Australia, Japan, and Taiwan—are collectively contributing substantial sums of economic aid by a ratio of 3 to 1. China may increase spending to fill

the gap and gain influence if the COFAs expire or a reduction of United States assistance is implemented.³⁰ Economic aid can serve as both carrot and stick to motivate partners to support U.S. interests in the region. Simply put, “money talks” and equals influence. In other words, the United States must work to continue its economic assistance and diplomatic engagement with the FAS as part of a broader strategy to maintain its position with the FAS and the Pacific region.

*The United States must also leverage relationships with allies to ensure Compacts remain in place long term.*³¹ The United States must develop a broad coalition to enlist the aid of its established allies and partners in the region.³² There are many opportunities to work together on shared security concerns. The 2017 National Security Strategy depicts the intent of the United States to work with allies in the region to ensure better insulation from fluctuations and disasters for fragile island nations.³³ China seeks to undermine United States influence and alliances wherever possible in the Pacific. It is critical to reestablish U.S. commitment to the system of alliances the United States developed in the post-World War II and Cold War eras.³⁴ Allies such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Taiwan realize the importance and role of the FAS in maintaining the balance of power in the region to keep free and open seas and to reduce growing Chinese influence. However, each country engages with the region differently and in line with its interests. Many United States allies are wary of Chinese efforts to establish military bases in Oceania and seek more profound engagement efforts to help buffer against continuing Chinese expansion.

Australia is highly active and focused on the broader Oceania region, and historically has been the largest donor to the area. Australia is primarily concerned with the effects of instability spilling over to its borders but has limited involvement with the FAS. The United States and Australia are also working to establish a new joint naval base on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island as an attempt to counterbalance China’s growing influence in the region. New Zealand’s interests are similar to Australia’s and they have called for greater United States engagement in the Pacific region. New Zealand’s stated interests are to “improve the prosperity, stability, and resiliency of the region and its people.” Taiwan’s interests are to further education in the region and continue engagement with the island nations that still diplomatically recognize Taipei over Beijing. Oceania is home to 6 of Taiwan’s 17 remaining political allies. China has actively worked to get more countries to drop their recognition of the legitimacy of Taiwan in the international space, and these efforts are another reliable driver of its economic involvement in the region. Taiwan has attempted to compete against the much larger resources of China by offering more inclusive packages that benefit the broader region. Japan maintains close ties with the island nations of Oceania despite its colonial history in the region. It also advocates for the rule of law and climate protections. Japan is a significant donor to the FAS and recognizes China’s growing influence. Nations of Oceania perceive Japan as a positive, steady-ing influence with a strategy of mutual respect. While each country has differing motivations for its relations with nations of Oceania and the FAS, the United States needs to recognize these varied interests and work with its allies in a concerted effort that will ensure continued long-term cooperation with the FAS.³⁵



U.S. Army National Guard photo by SGT Michael Tiefen

Soldiers from Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 69th Infantry Regiment, New York Army National Guard, acting as an opposing force defend their positions during the final battle of Exercise Talisman Saber at the Shoalwater Bay Training Area, Queensland, Australia, on July 19, 2017.

The United States can diplomatically engage with China and the Pacific region to shape the future of the region. The United States must increase diplomatic engagement with the broader region, including China, on a host of issues. Despite current friction between the United States and China, significant economic ties exist between the two powers. A stable, prosperous Pacific region is in the best interests of both countries. The United States must commit diplomatic resources and continually engage with China. While it may not yield profound breakthroughs, it will help to mitigate inevitable friction and disagreements between the two nations. Where possible, the two powers should work together to solve

regional problems. Opportunities abound to address non-traditional security challenges like humanitarian crises, natural disasters, human trafficking, and narcotics. Efforts such as these will help to paint U.S. commitment in the region as earnest, long-term sustainability, and not just posturing to improve military access and positioning in the region.³⁶

Many United States regional partners are hesitant to choose a side because of their economic ties with China and its growing power in the region and the need to remain engaged with their much larger neighbor.³⁷ Given this geographic reality, the United States should continue diplomatic engagement in the region with larger countries, such as India, and with regional nations' organizations like the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the Pacific Islands Forum.³⁸ The United States increased its relationship with India, becoming its largest arms supplier to counterbalance China's ascendant regional power. Involvement with groups of nations is essential in building coalitions with disputes against China.³⁹ The United States should also consider re-entering the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Enhancing relations through these organizations and agreements gives the United States a seat at the table to shape the rules of the game for economic influence in the region. Continuing engagement and working to strengthen countervailing coalitions and financial organizations would push back against Chinese mercantilist practices and allow these coalitions to come to fair, widely beneficial agreements for all players in the region. Without United States backing, many of these smaller nations lack enough economic power to avoid bullying by China in favor of their interests.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The United States requires a mutually beneficial relationship with the FAS to maintain strategic reach, open sea lines of communication, and the ability to project power. Chinese investment within the Pacific region will continue to be a vital concern because of China's encroaching influence on the FAS and United States partnerships. The United States must continue diplomatic, economic, and military strategies to prevent China from shaping the territory and to empower the FAS against the expanding Chinese influence in the region. Achieving a secure United States and FAS alliance is accomplished by invigorating FAS Compacts, engaging diplomatically with China and the Pacific region, and leveraging relationships with allies to ensure a strategic advantage within the Pacific region. ✨



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Fort Huachuca Museum



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<https://history.army.mil/museums/TRADOC/fortHuachuca/index.html>