Pacific Islands Maritime Domain Awareness
Policy Recommendation Report

Foreword by
Dr. Satohiro Akimoto

Introduction by
The Honorable Randall G. Schriver

SASAKAWA USA
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA
Pacific Islands Maritime Domain Awareness

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Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA (Sasakawa USA) is a non-partisan 501 (c)(3) organization dedicated to deepening the understanding of and strengthening the relationship between the U.S. and Japan for the benefit of a free and open international community. Its activities mainly focus on security and diplomacy, through exchanges, dialogue, analysis, publications, and networking.

Cover photograph: Aerial view of the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands taken on December 15, 2021. (Brandi Mueller/Getty Images)

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Foreword

Working in tandem, the U.S. and Japan have strengthened the bilateral security alliance at a faster pace than ever before. Japan, in particular, has aggressively bolstered its defense posture and capabilities, while expanding the outer limits of their pacifist constitution. As a result, Japan has begun to further increase military interoperability with the U.S. to increase coordination with like-minded countries and to instill routine coordination at a deeper level. Of course, the U.S. welcomes Japan’s efforts to play a more expanded and proportional role in the framework of the bilateral security alliance.

As the U.S.-Japan security alliance strengthens and elevates the effectiveness of deterrence, it increasingly spans a wider geopolitical and geoeconomic area than before. The scope of the alliance now extends beyond East Asia to the Indo-Pacific, which brings with it global ramifications, such as striving to defend universal values of democracy, human rights, free enterprise, and rule of law, together with allies and friendly nations. The global nature of the U.S.-Japan security alliance is particularly important when supposedly accepted international norms, such as sovereign rights and human rights, are unilaterally attacked by dictatorships with brutal force. Smaller nations do not have the means to defend themselves on their own.

The South Pacific has been a strategically important region ever since European seafarers began to venture into the region in the early 16th century. While land areas and populations are negligible on a global scale, the South Pacific provides strategically important maritime corridors and base locations. This point was made significantly more critical with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982 as the convention gave exponentially larger maritime administrative areas to the island nations by defining exclusive economic zones for rights for fishing and other natural resources. Even if the small island nations prefer to be left alone in the ocean, there is no escape from global competition for them.

Both the U.S. and Japan have had their respective engagements in the South Pacific. The U.S. established partnership with the Freely Associated States (FAS), a former U.S.-administered United Nations Territory founded after World War II. Japan formalized its recognition of and engagement with the South Pacific by establishing the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) in 1997. Japan has consistently engaged 19 Pacific Island nations using the PALM platform, including summit meetings hosted every three years in Japan. While the U.S. and Japan have historically operated in the region independently from one another, it makes sense for the two countries to jointly tackle the increasingly aggressive Chinese overtures directed at these island nations. Together the U.S. and Japan can deter forms of Chinese economic enticement and coercion that work to expand
China’s diplomatic influence, by assisting the island nations to effectively deal with serious challenges of a global nature, such as the effects of climate change. This ultimately will lead to greater stability and peace in the region.

One critical issue in which the U.S. and Japan can, and must, work with Pacific Island nations, is how to make regional maritime domain awareness (MDA) more realistic, robust, and effective. Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA was delighted to partner with Hon. Randall G. Schriver, chairman of the Project 2049 Institute, director of Sasakawa USA's Pacific Islands MDA program, and a member of Sasakawa USA's Advisory Board, to take a serious look at the issue of MDA in the South Pacific. Together with program advisors Dr. Alfred Oehlers, professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, and Ambassador Kurt Tong, managing partner at the Asia Group and a member of Sasakawa USA's Advisory Board, two major conferences were held in Washington, D.C. and Honolulu.

I visited the Republic of Palau last October and exchanged views with President Surangel Whipps Jr., who has close ties with the U.S. and maintains diplomatic relations with Taiwan. I also observed the U.S. efforts to expand the old airstrip on Peleliu, which was originally constructed by the Japanese Imperial Navy for strategic purposes. The U.S. and Japan fought bloody battles in the South Pacific during World War II. Now, it is time for the two allies to work hand in hand in the region to support the island nations’ safe and prosperous navigation of the beautiful, but dangerous ocean. I hope this report will inform many who are interested in stability, peace, and prosperity in the region.

Dr. Satohiro Akimoto  
Chairman and President  
Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA
Introduction

“Guided by our shared values; anchored by our common commitment to democracy and the rule of law; inspired by the innovation and technological dynamism of our economies; and rooted in the deep people-to-people ties between our countries, the Japan-U.S. relationship is the cornerstone of a free and open Indo-Pacific region.”

— Japan–U.S. Joint Leaders’ Statement: Strengthening the Free and Open International Order, May 5, 2023

The U.S.-Japan alliance is a deep and multifaceted bilateral relationship that is global in nature and spans a breadth of interests as broad as the Pacific Ocean. Japan is one of the world’s largest economies and strongest democracies, making the U.S.-Japan relationship a cornerstone of a free and open Indo-Pacific. As Pacific Ocean powers and stakeholders, Japan and the United States have clear interests in ensuring that Pacific Island (PI) nations remain strong, independent, and sovereign. They are valuable partners, and the alliance deserves increased focus. The most recent Japanese National Defense Strategy, announced in December of 2022, states that, “With Pacific Island countries, Japan, as an important partner country, will engage in cooperation including capacity building through collaboration with countries including the ally and like-minded countries.”

For the United States, the PI nations – particularly the Freely Associated States (FAS) – have long been recognized as valued partners, though the time, attention, and resources devoted to the relationship sometimes fall short of a minimum threshold these countries merit. This is true of alliance cooperation as well. Despite their stated interests, the United States and Japan have not always prioritized cooperation related to supporting partners in the Oceania region. That should change, and the reprioritization of the PI partnerships needs to happen at the speed of relevance. From threats to rule of law and ecological security, to the competing investments and activities of China, the challenges faced by the PI nations are of growing urgency.

At the core of any endeavor to address the sovereignty and value of the PI nations should be a comprehensive approach to strengthening regional maritime domain awareness (MDA). For MDA to be effective, we must create a routinized, multilateral network with all stakeholders working together to address the challenges that the region faces today and

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will continue to face in years to come. MDA is already a key point of focus for the Quad. At the 2022 Tokyo Summit, the Quad leaders welcomed the new Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA).\(^2\) Creating a common operating picture for the PI is at the top of the IPMDA’s diverse agenda, and one that can be actualized through cooperation between the Quad and PI governments and organizations.

With the established bilateral involvement of the United States and Japan as regional stakeholders, and the Quad’s intention to support MDA expansion, we have a real window of opportunity to improve the regional security environment and support the free and open qualities of Oceania. Quad commitments and new diplomatic missions like the recently announced U.S. Embassy in Solomon Islands are just the beginning. By being more intentional with existing resources, enhancing specific initiatives in the MDA space, and leveraging multilateral networks to increase MDA, we can take substantive steps towards helping our PI partners address issues that they themselves prioritize.

Thanks to our partners at Sasakawa USA and at the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, we hope this report contributes to supporting a forward-leaning PI agenda. Thank you also to the practitioners who are tirelessly fighting the challenges of the maritime domain day in and day out and those who graciously shared their time, expertise, and valuable insights at our Washington, D.C. and Honolulu, HI conferences. The needs, interests, challenges, and opportunities identified for the United States, Japan, and our regional allies to better support the security of our PI partners are not the end of this conversation, but a strong start to what we hope will become a priority in dialogues in Washington and across the Pacific.

The Honorable

Randall G. Schriver
Chairman, Project 2049 Institute

Executive Summary

The Freely Associated States (FAS) are critical allies and partners to the United States (U.S.) and Japan. The FAS and other Pacific Island (PI) nations are vital to ensuring a regional liberal order rooted in universal values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law in the Pacific. The challenges in the PI are many and the existing maritime security toolkits available for PI states are underutilized. There are existing and emerging technologies that relate to regional security, and present real opportunities for bolstering U.S.-Japan cooperation.

The primary challenges to PI security are ambiguities in existing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) frameworks, Chinese malign regional activities; the rule of law challenge posed by illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and climate threats. From international forums to private consultations, PI leaders and organizations consistently identify climate threats and violations of their sovereign waters as two of the most significant challenges to their immediate and long-term security. IUU fishing threatens every facet of PI security, including their economies, environment, and rule of law. At its core, rule of law is an issue of sovereignty, which the Chinese government threatens in the PI through diplomatic, economic, and military means. China is also the world’s largest carbon emitter, with the U.S. coming in second, which has profound impacts on global climate stability. The PI are uniquely vulnerable to climate change, and already experience climate challenges as a result.

Unfortunately, while the U.S., Japan, and like-minded actors including the Quad and AUKUS members (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) share common interests in maintaining a free and secure Indo-Pacific, current policy and resource allocation are insufficient for addressing the breadth of PI challenges. Furthermore, these challenges are multifaceted in both cost imposition and needed resources, covering a breadth of PI nation interests from sovereignty over exclusive economic zones (EEZ) to food security and economic growth. Existing lines of effort from IUU fishing interagency coordination, to multilateral Coast Guard exercises and enforcement cooperation could be leveraged in tandem with new regional allocations and partnerships.

Considering the challenges, the following measures are recommended for expanding maritime domain awareness and enforcement throughout the PI states:
1. Uphold the commitments made in the recently renewed Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements and dedicate resources to solidify security and defense commitments with the PI nations.

The U.S. government (USG) must provide the committed resources to their three COFA partners and continue to reassure partners of the U.S. defense commitments. Ambiguities in COFA commitments resulted in strains on bilateral ties with COFA partners during the negotiation period. Narratives that undermined U.S. commitments in the region needs to be improved.

2. Leverage and maximize existing lines of funding and resources to build MDA and rule of law enforcement capacity in the PI nations and waters.

The U.S. government should assess funding opportunities in U.S. institutions with established or potential strategic regional applications, then leverage these available funding lines and resources. Bilateral cooperation with Japan across entities such as Coast Guards and between aid organizations should be maximized and expanded to increase MDA and enforcement capacities.

3. Routinize and standardize interagency and multilateral network operating procedures to maximize MDA and enforcement capacity.

The U.S. government should assess silos within the USG entities and expediently remove barriers that hinder cooperation and collaboration. MDA networks should not be reliant upon personal connections, but rather standardized and routinized frameworks for communication.

4. Improve dialogue between allied powers and PI states, communicating U.S. and like-minded interests to PI states while also listening to PI needs and priorities.

The U.S. government should openly and proactively communicate policy intent to PI populations. In turn, PI states want more direct communication with the USG and should have an increased voice in multilateral decision-making.

5. Embrace and fuse emerging technologies across platforms and across like-minded states to maximize the agility of MDA and enforcement efforts.

The U.S. and Japanese governments should coordinate regional surveillance, at sea and air, to increase capacity for PI intelligence bodies. This also means ensuring that technologies transferred, or high-tech products sold, to PI states are sustainable in the
long term, attending to agility of update capacity, presence of maintenance practitioners, and extra parts.

6. Broaden the scope and rate of PI defense and security capacity-building efforts while elevating the roles and voices of existing regional bodies.

The U.S. and Japanese governments should not only increase their resource application in the PI region, but also broaden the scope of mechanisms that are used to support regional defense and enforcement efforts alongside PI partners and other regional actors.
Setting the Stage

“The security of America… and the world depends on your security and the security of the Pacific Islands.”

— President Joe Biden to Pacific Island Leaders, U.S.-Pacific Islands Summit, September 29, 2022

“Our cooperation today is unprecedented, rooted in our shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and a peaceful and prosperous world, guided by our shared values including the rule of law.” So declared the leaders of Japan and the U.S. on January 13, 2023, after a joint summit that focused primarily on security challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Months before, in September of 2022, President Joe Biden held the first U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, D.C. to better engage with the PI states and renew bilateral relations. Conversations centered around trade, diplomacy, and security and yielded the eleven-point “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership.” The landmark Summit demonstrated a renewed and U.S. focus on the PI states, one that must be acted upon through a new era of regional commitment.

The PI countries reside within the largest and deepest ocean that the world has to offer. Throughout history, their waters have served as both pathway and destination for those seeking food, land, and abundant resources outside of their own borders. The PI countries stand as both independent, individual nations and as the collective bridge between the East and West. They also possess resources that have attracted world leaders and traders from around the world, both historically and in the 21st century. 60 percent of the world’s tuna supply lies within the Central and Western Pacific regions, a significant portion of which are sourced from PI EEZs. These EEZs extend up to 200 nautical miles and many contain other lucrative resources.

As in decades past, the security of the PI countries is threatened by the competing interests of world powers and the individual interests of those scouring the waters for resources. With growing concerns over the integrity of PI economic and physical security and the imminent threat of environmental crises, the needs of the PI nations are also increasingly spotlighted on the global stage. The U.S. and Japan share critical interests in

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the PI, including common goals of maintaining a free, traversable Pacific region, one governed by the rule of law and supported by collaborative efforts towards climate adaptation. If the increasing needs of the PI states are to be addressed, multilateral cooperation must be strategically leveraged before the interests outlined above are compromised for both PI nations and their partners.

Figure 1: Map of the Pacific Islands
Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

Both the U.S. and Japan have consequential legacies in the PI. U.S. diplomacy and trade first began in the region in the mid-19th century. Maritime trading routes passed through the Pacific region and traders needed supply ports on the route. As trade relations flourished, U.S. diplomatic relations with the region followed. The strategic significance of the PI countries also made them ideal locations for U.S. military bases. By the turn of the 20th century, the U.S. had begun establishing military bases throughout the region, having fully annexed Hawai'i. The Japanese Empire also occupied islands throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. After World War I, several islands were assigned to Japan as protectorates by the League of Nations under the “South Seas Mandate.” The PI were also sites of significant battles in World War II.

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After the war ended, the United Nations established the U.S. as leader of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, a relationship which ended in 1986\(^7\) to be replaced with COFA\(^8\) between the U.S. and three PI countries: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. These countries became known as the FAS for their unique status as independent nations with special relationships with the U.S., encompassing defense agreements, immigration status, and other benefits. While years of colonization, the battles of world wars, and the negative ecological impacts of projects like U.S. nuclear tests in the Bikini Atoll lived on in the collective memory of PI citizens, the U.S. has endeavored to be a positive supporter of FAS partners in years since.

The U.S. and Japan are viewed as valuable economic and regional security actors by the PI nations today. In the decades since World War II and since holding protectorate status over PI nations, the Japanese government has established itself as a legitimate partner in trade, diplomacy, and aid for several PI countries and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), a multilateral organization including all the PI states among its membership. The PIF first established the Pacific Islands Centre in Tokyo, Japan in 1996. Japan held the first Japan-South Pacific Islands Forum Meeting in 1997, a second meeting in 2000, and continues to be a partner and one of the most significant development funders to PI countries today. Both the U.S. and Japan maintain aid and diplomatic relations with PIF member states bilaterally and multilaterally to address regional security, economic development, climate change, and rule of law priorities.

The PIF member states have long been and continue to be strategic and essential partners for the U.S., Japan, and the international community, who collaborate to develop and implement MDA measures to address challenges in the PI today. Regional actors including Australia and New Zealand take active roles in protecting PI sovereignty and borders, while other actors like China could do more to curb their country’s activities in IUU fishing and other harmful practices. The opportunities for MDA cooperation are vast, the interests and value of the region are significant, and the need for increased focus on the PI is both urgent and ever-increasing.


Primary Regional Challenges

As keyholders to critical resources and passageways, the diverse PI states and the partners who strive to support their sovereignty face significant challenges. PI leaders consistently identify climate threats and violations of their sovereign waters as the two primary challenges to address both in the short- and long-term. IUU fishing sits at the nexus of both challenges. The externalities of IUU fishing are often environmental degradation and overfishing of resources, cutting into PI fishing industry revenues, and threatening the sustainability of supply for the future. The act of IUU fishing, and the complicity or participation of regional powers, directly undermines PI sovereignty and rule of law. Chinese flagged fishing vessels represent by far the highest proportion of IUU fishing aggressors, and some fishing vessels are deployed for political and security objectives. Fishing only scratches the surface of Chinese government attempts to undermine PI state sovereignty, which extends to conducting regional military activities and attempting to influence PI diplomatic relations with other countries. The U.S. and Japan have made notable efforts to address the challenges enumerated below but these challenges are nonetheless still significant. Before these challenges can be most effectively addressed, the U.S. and like-minded allies must clarify ambiguities in bilateral and international frameworks as a baseline for effective cooperation and partnership with the PI states.

Ambiguity in MDA Frameworks

MDA is the “effective understanding of anything associated with the global maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment...”9 The U.S. government uses this framework to coordinate policy initiatives and tools across government agencies and throughout USG partnerships and alliances. The extension of interagency MDA frameworks to international cooperation could bolster existing networks for sharing maritime intelligence and cooperatively implementing programs that address maritime challenges and security issues. Addressing the increasingly urgent challenges faced by the PI today will require increased MDA cooperation and greater focus on the voices and needs of PI countries within both the U.S.-Japan bilateral relationship and in multilateral spaces. An MDA mandate is essential but dauntingly broad in scope. When adopted by numerous national and international actors, the start and end points of jurisdiction can lead to redundancies and disjointed network collaboration.

There is also ambiguity regarding the extent to which the U.S. is committed to defending the FAS under COFA Title 3, which outlines the security and defense relationship between the United States and COFA states. How should indigenous capabilities be addressed? Would Title 3 be applicable to cyberattacks? Is the sovereignty of an island’s EEZ an issue of defense, security, or rule of law? The bounds of Title 3 responsibilities have yet to be tested but must be understood as the threats facing the PI grow in breadth and sophistication.

Numerous USG bodies are involved in MDA efforts. USG processes to expand MDA can sometimes be disjointed or overlapping in lines of effort, failing to maximize resources and joint potential. This is partially due to cultural differences and silos that exist between government agencies and military services in the U.S. Currently, multiple U.S. government agencies are involved in the security of the Indo-Pacific. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), the U.S. Navy, and several other agencies all address facets of IUU fishing. The U.S. Interagency Working Group on IUU fishing, which strives to overcome these differences around the world and consolidate overlapping lines of effort, made commitments through a five-year work plan to coordinate counter-IUU mechanisms in partnerships that include the Department of Defense, Department of State, USAID, USCG, and other bodies.

Three years into the five-year plan, gaps still remain in the coordination of lines of funding and assistance, but opportunities to fill these gaps continue to develop.

The U.S. and PI states use fusion centers to exchange data and share information throughout the region, which is a critical function for MDA and an opportunity to utilize multilateral intelligence efforts in the region. However, there is a lack of synergy between fusion centers. Some intelligence officers receive calls from multiple fusion centers asking the same questions, not only wasting time and resources, but revealing the deficit in communication and coordination among the centers. Data and intelligence sharing are critical to all aspects of MDA; faulty or inefficient communication yields missed opportunities. The expansion of stakeholder partnerships only adds value if those partners are part of a cohesive network.

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10 See Appendix for more on specific, available toolkits.
Successful implementation of networks to coordinate MDA also requires an understanding of the landscape of the countries that are within existing cooperative partnerships. Generalizing the needs and contexts of PI nations, by failing to recognize the diverse interests of the Northern and Southern islands and among all types of government across the states, or underestimating the importance of factors like ethnonationalism and varying perspectives of partner states, has hindered the effectiveness of U.S. and Japanese regional involvement in the past and can raise questions of the credibility of partnered intent. To be effective partners, the U.S. and Japan must be perceived as reliable, inclusive, and competent in macro-level policymaking and in-country presence.

The existing array of U.S. involvement, multilateral cooperation, and lines of funding are useful towards the common goal of improving regional MDA. When these multilateral networks are not coordinated, or when frameworks and scopes of responsibility become ambiguous, they cannot sufficiently address specific priorities or maximize data sharing potential to put MDA into action and move towards the next step: defense of sovereignty from actors that threaten it and enforcement of rule of law against actors that exploit the MDA ambiguity and limited resource capacity.

The People’s Republic of China

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has increasingly focused its cooperation with the PI across several facets of bilateral relations, including trade, development, and security measures, leading to expansion in both diplomatic efforts and investments to improve bilateral relations but also malign behaviors in pursuit of critical interests. The PRC, under General Secretary Xi Jinping, has made significant inroads in the region through the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, as well as through ongoing PRC ship incursions in PI waters and coercive attempts to manipulate PI international relations. By capitalizing on gaps in needs for the PI states that the U.S. and like-minded countries had not adequately addressed, China has exponentially increased its regional role in recent years. The U.S. and Japan did not substantively increase their engagement with the PI when some nations began turning towards China, even when the PI leaders themselves alerted their partners that China was infringing upon their sovereignty. Today, three primary interests drive PRC investment in the region: (1) Competition with Taiwan over

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Taiwanese diplomatic recognition, (2) Exploitation of natural resources, and (3) Regional military and security objectives.

**Competition with Taiwan over Taiwanese diplomatic recognition.** China takes the issue of Taiwanese diplomatic recognition in the PI as a serious threat to its own global standing and uses coercive measures to influence the stance of the PI countries. To the PRC’s detriment, Taiwan is an active regional partner. Many Taiwanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are involved in relief efforts and other forms of collaboration with PI states, while the Taiwanese government itself maintains relationships within the PIF and provides annual funding to support the PIF secretariat.\(^{14}\) As it currently stands, Tuvalu, Palau, and the Marshall Islands maintain official diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In response to this recognition, the PRC deploys tailored, coercive approaches to punish these PI nations. These approaches can include cutting back on Chinese tourism, threatening ports of entry, and leveraging diplomatic ties through “elite capture.” Through this latter method, the Chinese government aligns interests with official government leaders and a small group of influential elites to enable activities that may not benefit the PI populations writ large, but benefit the select few. The PRC manipulating critical PI interests likely will not drive Taiwanese NGOs and fishing industry presence out of the PI region, but it will threaten both Taiwan’s status recognition and critical long-term PI security.

**Exploitation of natural resources.** Chinese demand for Pacific resources is strong, and the PRC uses exploitative practices to meet that demand. China has the largest number of Distant Water Fishing (DWF) vessels in the world and deploys DWF fleets across Oceania, many of which engage in IUU fishing in the PI. Chinese overfishing and coral destruction have led to the depletion of fisheries (e.g., skipjack tuna) and other critical resources that compromise the livelihood of the Pacific Islanders. PRC-flagged ships frequently violate the rule of law and engage in ecologically harmful practices that undermine PI sovereignty and rob the PI countries of incomes derived from fishing.

**Regional military and security objectives.** The PRC appears to take an increasing interest in regional military development to protect critical access to Pacific resources and passages through EEZs and on PI shores. The Solomon Islands adopted the One China Principle in 2019, dropping official recognition of Taiwan, in what the Solomon Islands Prime

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Minister Manasseh Sogavare called a switch to “the right side of history.” In May of 2022, China and the Solomon Islands signed a security pact with three principles, including cooperative development of regional security. Later that summer, rumors emerged that the Solomon Islands had agreed to allow the Chinese PLA to construct a base on its shores as a part of the agreement. While the Solomon Islands government has denied that particular measure, other parts of the China-Solomon Islands security pact have come to fruition, such as the July 2023 assistance package deploying Chinese armed police to the Solomon Islands to help mitigate urban unrest. Whether or not China begins basing in the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, or other islands, the agreements and subsequent steps taken illuminate China’s longer-term regional strategy. In the event of a conflict scenario, PRC capabilities in regional military deployment, basing, and access to resources in PI nations would present a significant threat to U.S. territories and the integrity of regional security. Furthermore, existing Chinese government presence in the form of onshore operatives and vessels threatens PI sovereignty over EEZs and shores, and poses a potential threat to the U.S., Japanese, and allied free access to the PI region.

While the U.S. may have underappreciated the significance of Chinese inroads in the PI region and generalized the needs and interests of PI countries, the PRC deepened regional ties through tailored approaches that recognized the diverse interests of each. The U.S. and Japan have the potential to cooperate and leverage their own tools to proactively engage PI states and to address the threats that the PRC poses to PI security, sovereignty over territorial waters, and protection of EEZs. Two ways to do this are by addressing specific impacts of malign PRC activities and the threats that these activities pose to PI security, rather than focusing on China’s regional engagement at-large or categorizing all PRC influence activities as “bad,” and by combating PRC disinformation that attempts to sway public opinion and undermine PI state sovereignty.

**Rule of Law**

Fisheries and fish supply are vital to the economic development and sustainability of the PI nations. IUU fishing poses significant, multifaceted threats to the PI region and undermines rule of law at both domestic and international levels. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as of 2022, 20 percent of all fish caught and sold were sourced through IUU fishing methods. These practices pose immediate threats to the ecological security and food security of the Pacific region and

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16 United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.
could cause long-term damage to international fish supply chains. In addition to the security issues already mentioned, IUU fishing (1) enables additional crimes, including trafficking in drugs, weapons, and persons; (2) undermines revenue for legal fishers operating in the region; and (3) violates the sovereignty of PI nations.

**Enabling of additional crimes.** IUU fishing often leverages or enables mechanisms for other criminal activities such as tax evasion or trafficking in drugs and persons. In 2018, the USG convened the Task Force on Human Trafficking in International Fishing Waters. The Task Force’s 2021 report included the finding that vessels engaged in IUU fishing were also more likely to violate workers’ rights, which can manifest as forced labor, a form of human trafficking. COVID-19 quarantine policies helped reduce IUU fishing due to restricted movement and port access, but with COVID restrictions ending, IUU fishing incidents will likely increase. PI leaders also expressed concerns about PI EEZs serving as illegal drug trafficking routes. Some IUU vessels are in the drug-dealing network, the extent of which needs to be explored, including involvement in opioid trafficking supply chains to the PI and to the Americas.

**Undermining of legal fishery revenues.** IUU fishing undermines revenues for countries in PI governance. The skipjack tuna industry alone was worth almost $10 billion per year prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Pacific Islands Forum Fishing Agency (FFA), 60 percent of the world’s skipjack can be found within the Western and Central Pacific Ocean areas, most of which are within PI EEZs.17 About 23,000 jobs in the PI are reportedly directly related to fishing. However, despite being the sovereigns of this vast landscape and being heavily reliant on it for employment, PI states do not benefit from the majority of tuna sales or consumption. Tens of thousands of vessels engage in fishing, particularly Chinese, Taiwanese, South Korean, and Japanese-flagged vessels. Chinese vessels are by far the most numerous and are the most significant perpetrators of IUU fishing activities. When facing this degree of competition, legal fishers who want to avoid IUU methods struggle to sustain their businesses and often end up turning to criminality.

PI nations currently do not have the naval capacity to patrol every nautical mile of their expansive waters. Even in the presence of multilateral information sharing structures, information sharing proves to be inadequate as a sole, primary mechanism of cooperative IUU monitoring. PI nations are calling for both increased efficiency in information sharing frameworks and more enforcement assistance, including training, from the international community. Australia and the USG have both conducted traditional patrolling in the Pacific, but their activities had limited impact on the extensive criminal

17 Hamilton, “Major Tuna Industry Status Report.”
activities in the region (e.g., only about 30 out of every 1,000 ships engaged in IUU fishing are indicted). “Naming and shaming” tactics, with the support of commercial sensing data, have been used to counter IUU fishing. However, when these tactics are not matched with resources or enforcement mechanisms, sharing of this information can feel unproductive or burdensome to some PI states.

**Violations of PI state sovereignty.** Great powers are failing to adequately respond to the high costs of IUU fishing for the PI states. The PRC does not take actions against IUU fishing or most other illegal activities unless those activities impact national interests. Since China's General Secretary Xi Jinping has articulated the challenge of food security in the populous country, IUU fishing is potentially beneficial to immediate Chinese domestic interests. The Chinese government has the capacity to trace and control the direction of fishing vessels. This has been evidenced in the Chinese government's control over and use of fishing vessels to provide aid to Island nations with only a few days' notice. If IUU fishing were to pose a greater cost to PRC national interests, the Chinese government's regulation practices — or lack thereof — could shift. The USG hesitates to take firm action in the region before it fully understands China's regional strategy, which can at times seem ambiguous and unpredictable. Furthermore, the USCG has limited ships with which to patrol the entire Pacific region, making full MDA surveillance and enforcement inviable. The IUU fishing industry is critical to the livelihoods of Pacific Islanders, so partners must not neglect the emphasis that PI countries place on the industry. Losing regional competition to malign actors in IUU fishing syndicates is not a risk that the U.S., Japan, or like-minded actors can afford to take.

**Climate Threats**

IUU fishing is not the only threat to the ecological security of the PI. PI states are some of the most at-risk countries in the world for disastrous climate change impacts. Already, rising sea levels threaten the borders of most of the islands. These impacts, combined with the unsustainable rates of resource extraction and export in the PI, paint a bleak picture for the future of the region.

The PI nations desire their allies to place a heavier focus on climate change, rising sea levels, agricultural challenges, and the needed resilience to face these problems. Despite the significant threat that rising sea levels in the Pacific pose to U.S. military outposts and the territorial viability of Japan and other regional allies, the U.S., Japan, and other like-minded states have not fully committed to countering climate challenges in the PI region or elsewhere. China and the U.S. are the top two global carbon emitters, meaning that on a macro level, they should be most heavily responsible for mitigating climate change.
impacts in the PI. Instead, the U.S. is not perceived as a reliable actor when it comes to addressing climate change or responding to the negative externalities of activities like past nuclear testing in the Bikini Islands. While many efforts are being made by U.S. agencies and nonprofits to build resilience, issues of sustainable energy sourcing and the immediacy of rising sea levels continue to be inadequately addressed. The PIF prioritizes addressing climate change, as seen in the 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent, creating a gap between Western and PI interests that the PRC is stepping in to fill.\textsuperscript{18} The PI nations want to elevate these concerns at an international level and have been doing so without substantive progress from the international community for years.\textsuperscript{19} The PRC, in turn, takes this opportunity to project itself as a responder to climate concerns and an amplifier of PI voices on the international stage, despite its own lack of credibility as a positive climate actor.

Some actors are striving to address the immediate and long-term climate change resilience needs of PI states with emerging technologies and capacity-building training, including USG agencies and nonprofit organizations (see Appendix). In December 2023, Australia committed $100 million to the Pacific Resilience Facility to fund climate resilience and energy sustainability.\textsuperscript{20} While these efforts are substantive, more can be done. Countries like Tuvalu are especially vulnerable to climate change, with some models projecting that the islands will be completely submerged in coming decades.\textsuperscript{21} Human populations in the PI will face “intolerable risks” by 2060.\textsuperscript{22} The threat of climate change and the profound nature of this threat’s implications, which are exacerbated by the negative externalities of


IUU fishing and malign foreign government activities, are among the greatest challenges that the PI states will face in the decades to come.
U.S.-Japan Pacific Interests in Bilateral and Multilateral Spaces

Advancing a free and secure Indo-Pacific is one of the U.S. and Japan’s most significant shared interests and is already on the bilateral agenda. Both the U.S. and Japanese governments have identified MDA cooperation and capacity building as critical to PI security. On January 13, 2023, President Biden hosted Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida to discuss joint defense capabilities. Much of this conversation centered around military cooperation and opposition to China, with leaders agreeing to bolster their growing bilateral cooperation in the PI, including through the Partnership for a Blue Pacific (PBP). At the 2+2 meeting two days prior, U.S. and Japanese defense ministers referenced the PI, promising to promote economic and security cooperation through various methods including potential defense equipment transfers.

On April 10, 2024, President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida released a joint statement enumerating new measures to strengthen defense, industrial, economic, and diplomatic cooperation between Japan and the United States. The statement also reaffirms U.S. and Japanese intentions to support Indo-Pacific priorities as articulated in the 200 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. It reiterates The Quad’s commitment to the PIF and the PBP, and it highlights Google’s recent announcement to invest $1 billion in digital connectivity through a project dubbed North Pacific Connect. Through this initiative, Google will work with Japan’s NEC Corporation to improve digital infrastructure between the United States, Japan, and PI Nations. The statement also notes that the U.S. and Japan plan to build upon the October 2023 U.S.-Australia joint funding commitment for subsea cables by contributing additional funds for subsea cables in the

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Pacific, including a $16 million investment in cable systems for the Federated States of Micronesia and Tuvalu.

The U.S. has specific and deeply vested interests in the Pacific. The U.S. maintains a military presence throughout the FAS, which includes facilities in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, U.S. territories including Guam, and in the future, Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia. These facilities provide vital support to U.S. territories and if needed, could do so for Taiwan and other regional partners. The U.S. and FAS relationships uniquely center around the COFA, which are the most significant regional agreements that the U.S. maintains with any PI nations. The Compacts allow the U.S. to maintain EEZ access around the FAS and in turn gives PI citizens protection and access to migrate to the U.S., and to engage in work and education. However, in the 1990s, bureaucratic errors prevented COFA state citizens from accessing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and other critical social services. While some benefits have recently been restored, barriers to accessing and understanding these programs endure. FAS citizen veterans of the U.S. military struggle to obtain their health benefits while residing in their PI homes. These logistical problems must be urgently addressed, and the needs of FAS citizens must be met to ensure that the U.S.-FAS relationship grows in strength. The successful renewal of the agreements is one of the U.S.’ top priorities in relations with PI countries.

In the PI region, cooperation between the U.S. and Japan could strengthen mechanisms for transparency in the PIF. Actors, organizations, or individual entities that violate the rule of law and threaten regional sovereignty should be held accountable. The U.S. and Japan already maintain MDA toolkits that can be packaged and shared with the PIF countries to cooperatively address transparency threats and failures. These include automatic identification systems (AIS) and radio frequency (RF) capabilities for vessel tracking that are useful but with limited availability (see Appendix). In light of Chinese fishing fleets circling Japan’s Senkaku Islands and irritating the Japanese Coast Guard, maritime security and MDA already sit at the forefront of U.S.-Japan relations. The two countries continue to conduct joint Coast Guard exercises to address Pacific security issues, a skill and framework that could be expanded further east from Japan’s borders into

PI state EEZs. This would require increased Coast Guard resourcing to conduct exercises and adequately support PI partners.

On the development front, USAID and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) already play significant roles in the region. USAID and JICA operate in 12 PI countries, conducting capacity-building projects from educational initiatives to infrastructure development. Primary foci include sustainability of the fishing industry, climate resilience, and disaster responses. Japan, as a fellow island nation, primarily focuses on shared regional expertise as a baseline for PI development projects. One ongoing project, titled “Project on Pacific Islands Capacity Enhancement for Achieving SDG 14” (United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 – Life in Water), focuses on Fijian fishery sustainability in conjunction with Fiji’s Ministry of Fisheries. USAID’s work in the PI, framed through a five-year plan, focuses on stability, climate resilience, and democracy in the PI. Internal political stability shapes domestic circumstances that impact a country’s economic development and human development, in turn impacting the industries and disaster readiness that overlap with primary Japanese regional foci.

While the aforementioned capacities and cooperation are significant, recently stated bilateral and multilateral priorities on MDA have not translated into immediate or comprehensive increases in actions. A push for U.S.-Japan cooperation with the PI and with one another in the Indo-Pacific is timely. Japan is striving to evolve into an increasingly active presence in regional defense. The Japanese government is working to expand its defense capabilities and streamline its operations. Silos within its defense forces are a recognized challenge that is actively being overcome. The Japanese government plans to set up a new Joint Operations Command by 2025, overseeing and integrating the

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air, land, and sea branches of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (JSDF). The Japanese government has also committed to increasing its defense budget from one percent to two percent of broadly calculated GDP. Japan will include defense-related infrastructure spending within that budget, including civilian airports and seaports that would be used for military readiness and access, along with Coast Guard expansion. Additionally, adjustments in Japanese defense law will now allow the Japanese government to approve lethal exports on a country-by-country basis. Friendly nations could receive exports, including ammunition and high-tech weapons, as evidenced by the recent announcements of Japanese transfer of Patriot missiles to the United States and the Diet’s approval of exporting new-generation fighters. The PI states should rank high on that list, as stated in the Japanese National Defense Strategy.

Several configurations of U.S. allies are engaged in emerging Pacific cooperation. As PIF members, Australia and New Zealand regularly engage in aid and security activities throughout the islands. The Quad is engaged in the region, with clear goals towards expanding and deepening Indo-Pacific commitments. The newest forum for collaboration is the PBP, which began in June of 2022 with the goals of delivering results for the PI, bolstering Pacific regionalism, and expanding opportunities for the PI states to engage on the global stage. The founding members—the U.S., Japan, United Kingdom (UK), Australia, and New Zealand—gathered at the first PBP Ministerial in September of 2022 to discuss their roles as vested PI stakeholders. The countries provide a collective $2 billion in development aid to the islands annually but have recognized the need for increased efforts and coordination among all partners involved. Canada, Germany, and South Korea are included as partner nations, and they have helped

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35 “National Defense Strategy.”


Pacific Islands Maritime Domain Awareness Policy Recommendation Report
coordinate significant resources in elevating the security and international standing of PI nations.

In September 2023, member countries gathered at the second PBP Ministerial, where they discussed the continued importance of upholding the PIF's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. They also identified four crucial issues of importance: (1) improving regional resilience for natural disasters and climate change; (2) improving coordination between Pacific partners and stakeholders on cybersecurity issues under the planned Pacific Cyber Capacity Building and Coordination Conference (P4C); (3) protecting the ocean resources of the Blue Pacific Continent; and (4) cooperating to improve maritime domain awareness and protect fisheries through coordinated opposition to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.
MDA: A Networked Service and Enforcement Capacity

At its core, MDA serves to protect sovereignty through information sharing and transparency. The USG views transparency as a public good, and MDA has the potential to be delivered as a service to any country facing actors that threaten transparent processes. To this end, the U.S. must make continuous efforts to partner with PI countries to build the capacity to confront threatening organizations and states. Whether addressing climate change and natural disasters or fishing vessels and threats to sovereign borders, PI countries need to leverage whole-of-government approaches to address threats on every level.

To succeed, MDA must be an ongoing cooperative framework and service, not a series of one-off aid packages or product sales. PI states need tools that they can sustain, maintain, and operate. If technology transfers and training or long-term commitments do not accompany those gifts, “aid” can become a burden for the receiving country and eventually fall into disuse. The Sea Dragon surveillance planes provided by the U.S. to Palau provide one clear example of this problem. While useful for MDA purposes, the gifted planes were not accompanied by training of Palauan aviation mechanics to repair or maintain the planes. Furthermore, replacement parts for the planes are not indigenously produced and are costly to import. Tools like Sea Dragon aerial surveillance planes expand a country's MDA capacity, but when not accompanied by needed technology transfers or ongoing funding for upkeep, can become useless or burdensome.

The expansion of MDA as a service should be an effort to build the capacity of partners while learning from one another and adapting service offerings along the way. Enforcement is essential to asserting PI sovereignty and addressing regional threats, but must be prefaced and complemented by MDA services. Bringing more individuals into the conversation is essential to ensuring that the services provided are useful in nature and have regional buy-in. Developing on-the-ground capacity is valuable, which requires both short-term resources and long-term investment. Training and people-to-people relationship building can be a part of that investment. In response, the USG agreed to fund the Pacific Island Leaders Program at the East-West Center.37 This and similar programs for exchange of knowledge build relationships among regional young leaders, paving the way for future cooperative engagement and security solutions.

PI governments do not want maritime domain awareness to be the end of partner activities. Enforcement is also critical to imposing costs on actors posing regional threats. MDA and active enforcement can be combined through cooperative programs to monitor Pacific activities. One is the Shipriders Program, in which the USCG invites Pacific Islanders to participate in patrols, giving PI officers opportunities to exercise their enforcement powers with the assistance of the USCG. This also empowers the USCG to engage in rule of law activities on behalf of PI states, since there is a PI legal presence on board. The onset of COVID-19 jeopardized the viability of the Shiprider program and leaders and participants piloted a new “remote Shiprider” program in which officers observe the proceedings of their USCG partner via “live” video link. The information gathered on violations observed can be packaged and handed over to the authorities of the country with jurisdiction over the EEZ in which a violation occurred. Expansion of this and other remote cooperative MDA programs could expand opportunities for the U.S. and like-minded states to cooperate at a lower cost by opening options for participants who are not able to travel to the region or who can be assigned to more than one vessel or observation role at a time. PI fleets and USCG fleets are overwhelmingly outnumbered by IUU shipping vessels and other malign actors. Limited USCG vessels cannot fully enforce the rule of law against thousands of vessels engaged in military surveillance or IUU fishing activities. Programs like the Shiprider program are useful in that they combine awareness and enforcement, but do not make up for this imbalance in the supply of enforcement capacity and the demand created by threatening vessels.

Through their defense and development institutions, the U.S. and Japanese governments provide MDA services to their PI partner countries and have demonstrated capacity to build upon existing efforts. Cooperation with other regional bodies, such as the Quad and the PBP, could collectively improve the delivery of MDA as a service to PI countries. Translating that service into an agile and adaptable network that bolsters enforcement will require unprecedented levels of multilateral cooperation, funding, and commitment.
Recommendations

1. Uphold the commitments made in the recently renewed Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements and dedicate resources to solidify security and defense commitments with the PI nations.

The ambiguity of COFA commitments and associated defense requirements should not be allowed to embolden malign regional actors. The terms of the COFA agreements renewed in March 2024 should be fully implemented and upheld to ensure the continuation of these valuable bilateral agreements. Furthermore, the U.S. and Japan should consider signing an MOU with some of the PI states to define violations of sovereignty and outline the extent of their commitment in the case of these violations.

The USG renewal of the COFA agreements under the Indo-Pacific Task Force in March 2024 provided economic assistance in grants to accountable trust funds, allowed FAS citizens to live and work in the United States, and strengthened oversight of the U.S. implementation of COFA economic provisions. However, delays in renewal have strained bilateral relations, causing FAS leaders to question U.S. commitments to economic assistance.38 After COFA funding expired in September 2023 for the Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands, the U.S. did not renew its funding commitments until five months later, despite FAS leaders urging the United States to act. Bilateral MOUs are a good step in the right direction, but the fast-changing security environment and expanse of commitments needed to sustain FAS partnerships demand the regular provision of FAS resource needs. The partnerships of the COFA states must not be taken for granted. The needs of their citizens must be heard, addressed, and resolved to avoid ongoing animosity among PI populations. Defining the scope of COFA and broader regional commitments to allies is key to assuring PI partners of the reliability of allied commitments. The U.S. should address ambiguities in the defense commitments under COFA defense agreements, as the evolving nature of threats in the region requires the USG response to evolve as well.

On the multilateral level, the U.S., Japan, and potentially other like-minded actors should sign an MOU to solidify their defense commitments to FAS states. This MOU should address emerging nontraditional warfare tactics and impacts, and establish clear expectations and responsibilities of the U.S., Japan, and PI nations in the face of these threats. The goal should not be to outline the limitations of partnered assistance, but

rather to make visible commitments and resources that could be leveraged for the region as a basis for increasing capacity and building trust.

2. Leverage and maximize existing lines of funding and resources to build MDA and rule of law enforcement capacity in the PI nations and waters.

A plethora of existing resources could be tapped for PI capacity building, some of which are already used under tangential lines of effort, others that have not yet been utilized, and some that could be more efficiently utilized with coordination among different stakeholders. An assessment of funding opportunities in U.S. institutions should be used to inform a strategic regional application. Japan and the U.S. should leverage avenues for defense capacity building, such as Japan’s new policy of providing defense exports to friendly nations and Title X Section 333 of the latest National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which allows the USG to purchase services to “build the capacity of the partner.” Legislative authority to expand and include Section 333 funding could be one path towards increasing and funding PI MDA and enforcement measures. The U.S. Fiscal Year 2024 Budget includes “more than $3.2 billion in discretionary funding for State and USAID to support an open, secure, and connected Indo-Pacific,” with an additional proposed $6.5 billion in economic assistance for the FAS under COFA agreements across the next 20 years.39 These and other lines of funding including those from individual U.S. states, other USG agencies, and Japanese equivalents should be capitalized upon to maximize coverage of PI needs.

Coast Guards are the USG’s best and most versatile national assets in the PI region. Since many PI countries rely on law enforcement officials for sovereignty defense and enforcement, the mandate of the USCG makes them uniquely strong partners for PI law enforcement. U.S. Congress should increase the USCG’s budget, with designation for new vessels and increased personnel in PI waters to partner with U.S. Pacific territories and the FAS.

The U.S. and Japan should also leverage and bolster USAID and JICA’s roles in the region. The PBP should contribute more to development programs in the region designed to address everything from IUU fishing prevention to climate resilience. Aid funding

should be coordinated to avoid repetition and meet needs specifically identified by local governments and organizations.

Lines of sustainable, existing funding in the USG need to be explored and coordinated for PI application. The USG funds tangible deliverables to the Pacific region including monetary assistance, such as USAID’s Pacific American Fund to support civil society organizations and existing institutions.\textsuperscript{40} Other less direct funding lines exist through NOAA and individual U.S. states like Rhode Island that engage in coastal defense partnerships with PI states. A comprehensive report that assesses current funding opportunities in U.S. institutions would be a good place to start in coordinating the plethora of seemingly unrelated U.S. agencies and entities working in the PI states. Once funding lines have been assessed, a strategy needs to be created to coordinate resources and apply them most efficiently in the region. Engaging the U.S. military and Coast Guard to identify synergies could yield actionable outcomes. Like-minded partners should consider creating similar projects to assess funding lines and strategically leverage them in the interests of PI flourishing.

3. Routinize and standardize interagency and multilateral network operating procedures to maximize MDA and enforcement capacity.

Existing resources and new tools can only be maximized if lines of effort are coordinated and if information is shared based upon routinized networks rather than personal connections and relationships. The promise of increased Japanese defense funding could present opportunities for an expansion of Japanese Coast Guard activities in the PI. From the U.S. side, new or increased funding for projects under the lenses of rule of law and competition could provide new space for intelligence sharing and cooperative enforcement efforts. Existing frameworks for MDA must be networked into partnerships and should be clearly defined, routinized, and standardized.

Expanding and routinizing official lines of communication across regional data fusion centers would be one way to improve data sharing. U.S. fusion centers coordinate regional law enforcement and serve as information sharing depots. The Mariana Regional Fusion Center in Guam for instance receives reports from law enforcement partners, private sector entities, governments, and anonymous tips. Reported inefficiencies in communication between centers delays information sharing among U.S. and PI law enforcement entities, as well as with partner countries. Systems for sharing information

and fusing processes between centers should be routinized. Timing is key when it comes to enforcing rule of law in the PI region; delays in communication directly delay MDA and prevent maximization of enforcement capacity. Beyond the U.S. and FAS, standing PBP members should consider leveraging cloud technologies to synergize intelligence sharing processes throughout the region to turn information into useful packages for enforcers.

Silos between USG agencies lead to intra-government repetition and failures to share information. On the intelligence sharing front in particular, there is a lot of room for increased efficiency. Synergizing internal processes through USG interagency coordination should be a priority of the U.S. intelligence and military apparatus. The proposed initiation of an interagency working group to identify points of overlap and to fuse those existing lines of efforts may also be worth considering. On the international level, the U.S. participates in a Five Eyes MDA Forum, which focuses on counternarcotics, counterintelligence, and counter-IUU fishing in the region. The USG should explore ways to include Japan and PI states in intelligence sharing networks to expand enforcement capacity.

At a policymaking level, the USG should initiate new multilateral working groups to regularly address common threats and to coordinate military and intelligence activities. Meetings between the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and other PBP members at the National Security Council level could improve synergies in intelligence sharing and policymaking coordination. Working groups could be modeled after the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Working Groups that regularly convene to discuss integrated air and defense systems as well as maritime security. These groups could discuss intelligence sharing and coordination of regional capacity support for the PI states.

4. Improve communication between allied powers and PI states, projecting U.S. and like-minded interests to PI states while also listening to PI needs and priorities.

The notion of a “U.S. return to the PI countries in recent years” neglects the years of effort already made by U.S. agencies and partnerships in the region. Shortcomings in some of those efforts, whether due to lacking long-term maintenance of short-term aid or supply of non-regional experts to the region in senior-level roles, have undermined the narrative surrounding U.S. partnership in some countries. Furthermore, misunderstandings about

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the intent behind increased U.S. military presence in the PI nations and waters could easily be overcome through proactive, multilevel communication. PI citizens should not be left in the dark about the U.S., Japan, and like-minded countries’ intent of defense aid or prioritization for the PI region. Statements on the intent of increased U.S. presence, or even surrounding existing measures, should be communicated to PI authorities and in public discourse.

At the leadership level, PI government officials want more bilateral engagement with the U.S. outside of multilateral engagements with other regional powers like Australia and New Zealand. The USG should institutionalize the U.S.-Pacific Islands Country Summit as an annual event in Washington, D.C. PI countries greatly appreciated this summit, but want to see ongoing commitments and continued high-level engagement from the U.S.

The PBP could provide a valuable forum for multilateral policy creation, but the extent of the Partnership’s intended coordination has not been clearly defined or communicated in public forums. The PBP should publish their roadmap so that all stakeholders understand the long-term intentions and implications of all countries involved.

PI countries should have an active say in the U.S. creation of processes and the selection of representatives to the region. If individual contractors sent to oversee infrastructure projects or other initiatives on behalf of the U.S. are not partnering well with PI governments and workers, processes should be in place for PI states to communicate those problems back to the USG. PI country points of contact should be established with high-level embassy officials and specifically tasked with monitoring and evaluating gaps and successes within U.S. funded projects. Inviting open and honest feedback provides mutual accountability and deepens trust on both government-to-government and person-to-person levels.

MDA cooperation cannot start and end in the legislative branch or in defense measures. Concerns and obstacles to greater cooperation include Kiribati not participating at the PIF in 2023 and strong anti-U.S. sentiment surrounding the legacies of nuclear testing; issues that should not be framed through the lens of Great Power competition but rather from the perspective of intra-island dynamics and historical failures. Listening to PI partners’ needs and wants on a macro-level is essential to addressing and overcoming challenges to cooperation. Activating a multilateral “coalition of the willing” with the U.S., Japan, and other allies like Australia, to regularly hear from PI leaders on their identified needs could guide efforts for the future. Including non-elites in these conversations would be an important differentiator of this strategy from China’s “elite capture” techniques that leave the interests of the majority out of the conversation.
5. Embrace and fuse emerging technologies across platforms and like-minded states to maximize agility of MDA and enforcement efforts.

Embracing new technologies is valuable only if these technologies are accessible by the range of partners who are meant to benefit from their development. Private sector engineers who are developing applicable software should be encouraged to create mechanisms for that software to be operated on different hardware. Failure to provide broad access inhibits the scope of data collection and application of these resources, which are critical to MDA mission success.

Terms of aid should allow for both ongoing support and indigenous maintenance of technologies through technology transfer, taking into account PI needs and requests. FAS law enforcement and defense specialists identified gaps between forms of U.S. aid and the applicability of those systems to existing equipment and processes. In some cases, training and simple technology transfer could be the difference between a surveillance tool being regularly used or left to decay. The USG and private sector contractors should coordinate to assess the maintenance needs of provided technologies and agree upon terms for empowering local practitioners to keep those tools up-to-date and in working condition.

Data collection, fusion, and analysis could all be improved by leveraging emerging technologies, but this requires agile programs that can be adapted to new terminals and vice versa. Data sharing terminals must be frequently updated, and designation of USG aid funding lines should consider the need for updating both hardware and software on a regular basis. Machine learning capacity is critical to streamlining updating processes and should be included in PI aid schemes. The Department of Defense (DoD) does not regularly prioritize maritime law enforcement technologies. In recognition of the strategic threat that a compromised Pacific Ocean would pose to U.S. interests, the DoD should apply more emerging technologies to maritime law enforcement purposes.

The U.S., Japan, and partners should coordinate satellite surveillance systems, some of which are fused with other data collection technologies, to observe IUU fishing vessels and offensive actors in the Pacific. “Sea Vision” is a maritime situational awareness tool, using a system of satellites that aggregate AIS and radio frequency data to read what ships are emitting, including detection of ships in the Pacific Ocean that are “spoofing.” Technologies like satellite-based AIS (S-AIS) are critical to MDA functions. While some countries like Australia already leverage air surveillance for Pacific law enforcement, the need far outweighs the currently available resources. Other like-minded actors, including the European Union and UK, use satellites or other surveillance technologies that could be integrated into systems with the U.S., Australia, and other regional actors to aggregate data across platforms. Sea Vision is the “backbone” of the Quad’s Indo-Pacific MDA
toolkit. While useful, it is not and should not be the only technological tool in the MDA arsenal. AIS can go “dark,” meaning that backups to technology need to be accounted for as connectivity in the Pacific Ocean endures as a challenge. Advanced technology is valuable, but only if it is usable. Assessments of usability and gaps between technological advancement and feasibility of field use should be made concurrently with processes to improve the application of high-tech systems to terminals of varying degrees of sophistication.

6. Broaden the scope and rate of PI defense and security capacity-building efforts while elevating the roles and voices of existing regional bodies.

Emerging technologies and existing resources can add efficiency to a PI MDA agenda, but cannot ultimately solve deficits in partner or PI capacity. The scope of U.S., Japanese, and partner focus on PI defense and security must be expanded, and an increase in funding and resources must follow. When it comes to the enforcement of rule of law and PI sovereignty, the U.S. should aid the PI states in seizing IUU fishing or illegal shipping vessels to demonstrate their willingness to enforce consequences. Palau has already seized IUU fishing vessels in the past to send a message to fishers engaged in illegal activities. The U.S. and Japanese governments should both increase their overall Coast Guard sizes to conduct exercises and enforcement with Australia, New Zealand, and PI state counterparts. Furthermore, the U.S. Department of State and Department of Defense need to train and deploy PI specialists to serve in the region, identifying individuals with critical talent that can establish multilevel connections within PI countries. The PBP could step in to increase enforcement capacity in the region, initially focusing on certain critical ports and expanding as ships and surveillance capacity grow with time.

Even without increased resources, deterrence capabilities can be built with existing resources. Deterrence, including sanctions of companies that violate regional laws of the sea and conduct activities like IUU fishing that threaten PI economic and ecological security, has not been maximized. The USG should sanction more fishing companies engaged in malign activities, including human rights abuses, and encourage other countries to follow suit.42

Many PI states and foreign governments are frustrated by the lack of funding for major development and security projects in the Pacific. Multi-year projects can be especially challenging for the USG to address since USG funding is annually appropriated. Inability

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to guarantee continuation of projects with changes of political leadership and resulting shifts in prioritization is an issue of U.S. credibility, giving rise to PI concerns about the viability of promised long-term plans and increasing the attractiveness of alternative offers. International partnerships with the U.S., PI leaders, and like-minded countries present opportunities for establishing and ensuring multi-year funding. Such partnerships could be leveraged to supply funding and secure technological capacity for long-term, heavy-lift investments like infrastructure development in the future. The Japanese Ministry of Defense (MOD) has expressed interest in partnering with the USG to fund infrastructure development projects in the PI states. A joint transportation infrastructure project could be developed in cooperation with local PI governments and key stakeholders. U.S. and Japanese engineers could work alongside and train local PI technicians, transferring usable technology and knowledge to benefit both individuals and local companies from start to finish. ‘No strings attached’ infrastructure projects in partnership with local entities demonstrate a valuable alternative model to authoritarian aid for PI countries – one that values democratic norms and recognizes the agency of PI actors in their own development and security processes.

Regional agencies and indigenous organizations should not be undervalued in the work that they are already doing to address the threats at the top of PI agendas. The perspectives, expertise, and interests of PIF agencies and local organizations should be amplified in local and international decision-making spaces. In November 2021, USAID committed to designating 25 percent of funding to local organizations by the end of 2025.43 Within this process of localization, USAID and other counterparts like JICA should consider how their programs are empowering and elevating the roles of regional bodies like the FFA and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. Development agencies should place continual focus on local organizations and participatory agenda-setting in order to meet PI needs and avoid widening the door for malign actors in the PI space.

Appendix: Policies, Programs, Tools, & Resources

The Sasakawa USA expert consultancy conferences in Washington, D.C. and in Honolulu, HI revealed a plethora of existing policies and tools in the PI region. Some of the following tools and resources are currently available and could be better leveraged through coordination with one another or through increased focus on the PI states.

Policies

- The U.S. and Japanese National Security Strategies and National Defense Strategies both name freedom and security in the Indo-Pacific as priorities. The majority of current U.S.-Japan cooperation in the PI comes through military-to-military cooperation and funding, which includes regionally popular Coast Guard presence. The Japanese Ministry of Defense committed to integrating branches of the Japanese Self Defense Forces by 2027 and will be allowed to increase its defense budget from one percent to two percent of broadly calculated national GDP. The distinct notation of Coast Guard as a beneficiary of defense spending demonstrates the potential for Japanese Coast Guard expansion. The USCG remains limited in capacity in the PI due to small fleet sizes and competing interests with mainland and Hawaiian coastlines. Increased Congressional allocations for the USCG in the FY2024 NDAA would benefit PI security and partnership capacity.

- IUU fishing can be addressed through environmental, economic, drug trafficking, and human rights lenses. President Biden sanctioned two individuals and their companies, including 157 affiliated vessels, for IUU fishing and human trafficking upon the basis of the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. Additionally, PI government officials have noted instances of IUU fishers also using ports to transfer drugs, including Schedule II narcotics under the U.S. Controlled Substances Act of 1970. Lines of funding designated for countering drug trafficking and human rights violations from the PRC could be considered to address IUU fishing externalities in the PI states, especially given the strong association between the PRC and IUU activities.

- Since 2004, Title X has provided more funds for U.S. partners. At that time, most of the money went to the Middle East, of which about $10 million went to INDOPACOM and $100,000-$200,000 went to the PI. In the past several years, International Military Education and Training (IMET) fell within Title X programs. With the expansion of Title X Section 333, the funding is now available

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44 “Treasury Targets Serious Human Rights Abuse.”
for capacity building in Maritime Security Information (MSI) and an exponentially larger amount is allocated to INDOPACOM.
- The Fiscal Year 2024 Budget of the U.S. Government includes $3.2 billion in broad USAID and State Department discretionary funding. Additionally, a designated $6.5 billion is proposed in economic assistance for the FAS under COFA agreements across the next 20 years.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Agencies and Programs}

- USAID has a five-year strategy plan in upgrading the U.S. presence through embassies or representative centers in the region focusing on human rights, disaster resilience, and healthcare services.
- USAID launched the “OurFish, OurFuture” Program with the University of Rhode Island, working with Australia and New Zealand, to support regional fisheries ecosystems. USAID is approaching the PI region with a broader perspective and has expanded their focus to the livelihood of fishermen.
- The U.S. Coast Guard partners with PI states through Shiprider programs that allow U.S. officials to board PI ships for purposes of cooperatively countering illicit activities at sea.\textsuperscript{46} This program adapted to virtual ship riders as a COVID-19 response measure, which also allowed each U.S. officer to engage with more than one ship.
- The USG has limited permanent presence in many PI states. The only U.S. diplomatic missions in the PI are the U.S. Embassy in Fiji and the soon-to-be U.S. embassy in the Solomon Islands. While the Secretary of State does have the jurisdiction to open new embassies and consulates within discretionary budgets, allocating such a significant budget without new funding would likely be infeasible.
- U.S. military outposts are limited to Hawaii and Guam; the U.S. does not have a permanent presence in the other PI, limiting accessibility to U.S. military assets for PI partners.

\textbf{Technological Tools}

- MDA tracking systems rely on AIS systems, which are operationalized through a self-reporting model that can be turned on and off by the vessel operators. A new

\textsuperscript{45} “Budget of the U.S. Government.”
tracking system should bolster radio frequency (RF) capabilities which cannot be turned off as operators use radars and navigation systems. RF can be tracked through HE360 with its space capabilities. RF capabilities on satellite constellations are useful for PI nations since RF could cover vast amounts of ocean. Very High Frequency (VHF) can capture 10 million square kilometers and L-band can cover about 8 million square kilometers. This can be cross referenced with AIS by overlapping with HE360 data, finding potential dark ships. Satellites have the capacity to independently geolocate the emissions and can help to counteract ships trying to spoof their location.

- In the U.S., private sector technology developers are focused on providing MDA capabilities such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and equipping Reaper and Predator aircrafts with capabilities like electronic warfare, submarine, and buoy monitoring. These toolkits can be deployed for up to 30- to 45-hour missions.

**Potential Toolkit Models**

- The Ministry of Defense Advisors (MoDA) program during the Afghan war provided U.S. consultants and partners to Afghan stakeholders. A MoDA-type PI advisors program could send advisors from the U.S., Japan, and European nation partners, providing expertise and creating opportunities for non-military multilateral cooperation.

- The Japanese Ministry of Defense expressed interest to the U.S. in developing an infrastructure development scheme for the PI, building on previous regional cooperation. The U.S., Japan, and Australia have a precedent of infrastructure funding, first for the Palau 2 fiber optic undersea cable in 2017. The cable was developed through loans from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) and Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC), as well as the Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP), and a series of agreements with BSCC to provide funds of approximately $10 million U.S. dollars, with additional financing coming from Palau's CRA CIP funds with the approval of the United States. This model partnered with a local contractor could be leveraged for future projects.

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Glossary of Acronyms

AIS – Automatic Identification Systems
AUS – Commonwealth of Australia
DWF – Distant Water Fishing
EEZ – Exclusive Economic Zone
FAO – United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
FFA – Pacific Islands Forum Fishing Agency
IPMDA – Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (a Quad initiative)
IUU Fishing – Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing
OBOR – China’s “One Belt, One Road,” ”Belt and Road” Initiative
NOAA – National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
MDA – Maritime Domain Awareness: “The effective understanding of anything associated with the global maritime domain that could impact the security, safety, economy, or environment of the United States,” and in this case, allied states.48
MOU – Memorandum of Understanding
PI – Pacific Islands
PIF – Pacific Islands Forum
PRC – People’s Republic of China
ROC – Republic of China, Taiwan
USAID – United States Agency for International Development

UAV – Unmanned aerial vehicle
UK – United Kingdom
U.S. – United States of America
USCG – U.S. Coast Guard
USG – The U.S. Government