

CHAPTER II



PACIFIC SMALL STATES, BIG STAKES

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The United States engages Pacific Island countries to support their ability to protect their sovereignty and sovereign rights against external threats and aggression.

– Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 2025

Scattered across Oceania’s vast blue, the Pacific microstates may be small in size, but they are strategically indispensable.¹ From Palau to the Cook Islands, these sovereign states form a

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vital arc in the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly defined by intensifying competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Once a peripheral to global power politics, these microstates now stand at the center of a shifting strategic landscape.

Yet this contest in Oceania transcends the U.S.-China rivalry. It is also a struggle over diplomatic recognition, influence, and legitimacy—seen in Taiwan's efforts to retain allies, China's campaign to isolate it, and Australia and New Zealand's initiatives to anchor regional stability. With their geostrategic location, sovereign agency, and equal standing in global institutions, Pacific microstates are no longer on the sidelines—they are swing states in a crowded geopolitical arena.

Historically overlooked by Washington, these nations have been actively courted by Beijing through infrastructure projects, financial inducements, and persistent diplomatic outreach. To remain competitive, the United States must move beyond episodic gestures and overreliance on allies. What is needed is a sustained, sovereign-centered strategy secured in long-term partnerships and shared priorities.

Adopting the United Nations (UN) Secretary General's 1967 definition of microstates—sovereign countries characterized by exceptionally small populations and limited resources²—this chapter focuses on the 13 Pacific microstates recognized by the United States with populations under one million: Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Samoa, the Solomon Islands,

Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Cook Islands, Niue, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau. Despite their scale, these states wield significant influence in domains from maritime governance and fisheries to undersea cables and strategic basing.

This chapter argues for a U.S. strategy that effectively matches its presence with its promise in the region. It proposes a four-pillar framework for sustained security cooperation: (1) robust maritime governance led by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), (2) strengthened U.S.-European Union collaboration on maritime domain awareness, (3) a strategic expansion of Civic Action Teams (CAT) across the region, and (4) targeted deployments of U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs units. These initiatives represent a durable, sovereignty-respecting approach to building resilience and trust—one designed to meet the challenges of the moment and reinforce America's strategic advantage.

Strategic Importance of Oceania in the Sino-U.S. Rivalry

Amidst the vast blue expanses of the Pacific Ocean, the microstates emerge not just as sovereign entities but as pivotal actors in the grand strategic competition between global powers. Their unique blend of diplomatic agility, geostrategic position, and stewardship over crucial natural resources places

them at the heart of the contest for influence between the United States and China.

Despite their small size, Pacific microstates wield the same sovereign rights and privileges as larger nations under international law. Their voting power in global institutions—especially the United Nations—amplifies their diplomatic weight, while their location astride key sea lines of communication enhances their military and commercial relevance. They are not merely passive terrain; they are strategic agents capable of shaping, enabling, or disrupting regional alignments.

In this evolving contest for influence, Pacific microstates leverage their sovereignty and global voice to shape international conversations around development, recognition, and environmental sustainability. As custodians of vast maritime zones, they are stewards of oceanic resources and gatekeepers of critical transit routes. Their role in defending international norms—from freedom of navigation to sustainable resource management—places them in the crosshairs of today's most consequential geopolitical contest.

To secure an enduring edge in the Indo-Pacific, the United States must recognize that relationships with these microstates are not peripheral—they are central. Their engagement is not optional—it is essential. And the path forward requires moving beyond episodic attention or third-party delegation to sustained, bilateral, and strategically minded cooperation.

Diplomatic Influence and UN Engagement of Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest size, Pacific microstates possess full sovereignty under international law and wield influence in global governance far beyond their geographic footprint. Each holds equal voting rights in the UN General Assembly, allowing them to help shape international norms and decisions, particularly on issues central to their interests, such as sustainable development, environmental resilience, and maritime governance.

A recent example illustrates their significance: in the 2023 UN General Assembly vote calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, five Pacific microstates—Fiji, Tonga, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Nauru—joined the United States and a small group of nations in voting against the resolution.³ While General Assembly outcomes are non-binding, they are widely interpreted as expressions of international consensus and carry political and diplomatic weight. Building international coalitions in a forum that counts each vote equally illustrates the Pacific microstates' capacity to influence major international decisions and underscores their strategic importance.

Beyond the UN General Assembly, Pacific microstates also serve on influential bodies such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), where countries like the Solomon Islands have shaped global development discussions.⁴

Through these roles, they influence policy agendas, secure resources, and advocate for issues that affect small island developing states. Their active engagement across the UN system ensures they are not merely observers but contributors to international governance.⁵

Additionally, their membership in other multilateral institutions—such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the Commonwealth, and specialized regional groupings—expands their diplomatic footprint and reinforces their collective voice.⁶ These platforms amplify their ability to negotiate aid, forge strategic partnerships, and shape the future of the region.

Taiwan's Recognition and Sovereignty

The strategic autonomy exercised by Pacific microstates is especially visible in their approach to diplomatic recognition—most notably regarding Taiwan. Despite concerted efforts by China to isolate Taiwan diplomatically through infrastructure investment and economic inducements, several Pacific Island microstates continue to maintain formal ties with Taipei.⁷ This decision reflects the sovereign agency of these nations and their capacity to exercise independent foreign policy choices despite considerable external pressure.

Currently, three Pacific Island countries recognize Taiwan as a sovereign entity (Table 11.1), and this recognition grants Taipei meaningful diplomatic access and influence in international forums. The enduring support of these

microstates provides Taiwan with both symbolic and practical legitimacy, especially in multilateral institutions where each country holds equal voting rights. Their decisions challenge Beijing’s strategic calculus and demonstrate that even the smallest states can play pivotal roles in shaping diplomatic alignments.

These dynamics also highlight the region’s significance as a diplomatic battleground—not just for the United States and China, but also for the Taiwan-China contest over international recognition. The ability of microstates to act as swing votes in global governance institutions elevates their importance in shaping not only bilateral ties but also the broader strategic environment of the Indo-Pacific.

Table 11.1: Pacific Microstate Participation in International Forums and Diplomatic Recognition of Taiwan

Country	UN Member	The Commonwealth	Pacific Island Forum	Diplomatic Recognition
Federated States of Micronesia	X		X	PRC
Fiji	X	X	X	PRC
Kiribati	X	X	X	PRC
Marshall Islands	X		X	Taiwan
Nauru	X	X	X	PRC
Niue			X	PRC
Palau	X		X	Taiwan
Samoa	X	X	X	PRC
Solomon Islands	X	X	X	PRC
The Cook Islands			X	PRC
Tonga	X	X	X	PRC
Tuvalu	X	X	X	Taiwan
Vanuatu	X	X	X	PRC

Source: Kevin D. Stringer and Madison Urban, created for this publication

Geopolitical Positioning and Strategic Routes

Beyond their diplomatic relevance, Pacific microstates occupy territory of enduring strategic importance. Situated across the maritime expanse between East Asia, Australia, and the Americas, these nations lie along the sea lanes of communication that underpin Indo-Pacific trade and military mobility. Their geographic location—between the first and second island chains that shape strategic planning across the region—grants them outsized importance in peacetime competition and potential contingencies.

Historically, the concept of the first and second island chains was central to Cold War containment strategy in the Indo-Pacific. These maritime corridors continue to shape regional defense architectures today.⁸ Any expansion of adversary influence or physical presence beyond these chains would complicate U.S. and allied operations, creating operational depth for coercion or force projection into the Central Pacific.

Emerging concerns over potential basing arrangements, dual-use port development, and airfield modernization underscore how geographic positioning is once again becoming a lever of influence. For example, a 2023 PRC delegation to Kanton Island in Kiribati raised questions about China's interest in revitalizing dormant infrastructure for a potential strategic purpose.⁹ Just 3,000 kilometers from Hawaii, the site would offer proximity to U.S. installations in

the Central Pacific, complicating regional defense planning if access were granted to a peer competitor.

In this context, the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) serve as a cornerstone of U.S. access and presence in the region. These treaties—linking the United States and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau—provide Washington with exclusive military access and denial rights while offering economic assistance and migration privileges in return.¹⁰ Facilities such as the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on Kwajalein Atoll and the emerging over-the-horizon radar system in Palau illustrate how geography and partnership converge to shape strategic advantage.¹¹

By virtue of their location, Pacific microstates are more than diplomatic voices—they can be either geostrategic enablers or obstacles in the evolving Indo-Pacific security competition. U.S. security cooperation with these nations must therefore account not only for their sovereignty and development needs but also for their growing relevance in shaping access, presence, and influence in a contested region.

Undersea Cables and Transmission Security

The Pacific microstates sit astride the vital arteries of global communications: undersea fiber-optic cables. These cables, often overlooked in traditional security discussions, carry the majority of the world's internet and financial data and are increasingly viewed as critical infrastructure in both the

economic and military domains. Many of the main cable routes connecting North America, East Asia, and Oceania traverse the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of Pacific Island countries—giving these microstates a key role in maintaining the integrity of global communications.

These routes link major economies through narrow corridors, threading through the EEZs of Pacific microstates. The network's physical vulnerability, however, is an underappreciated risk. Cables can be damaged by seismic activity, deep-sea trawling, accidental anchor strikes, or deliberate interference—each with potential consequences for regional stability and global markets.¹²

Recent reports of Chinese survey vessels operating near cable routes, including within Palau's EEZ, have drawn scrutiny.¹³ These activities raise concerns not only about mapping and surveillance, but also about the future risk of disruption—whether as an act of gray-zone coercion or in the early stages of conflict. Similar operations have been observed elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, notably in Taiwan, further validating the view that submarine cables are emerging targets in an era of strategic competition.¹⁴

The precedent for targeting these systems is not hypothetical. During the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Russia has been accused of tampering with undersea cable infrastructure, exposing how non-kinetic disruption can serve broader strategic aims.¹⁵ This underscores the need for greater resilience, situational awareness, and cooperative monitoring.

Recognizing the strategic value of these cables, the Quad countries—Australia, India, Japan, and the United States—launched the Quad Partnership for Cable Connectivity and Resilience. This initiative aims to promote best practices, enhance shared awareness, and support legal and regulatory frameworks that protect undersea infrastructure.¹⁶ While early in implementation, it signals growing alignment among like-minded partners on a threat that is increasingly transnational in scope.

For Pacific microstates, this infrastructure presents both a risk and an opportunity. Their geography makes them stakeholders in this evolving security domain. Proactive engagement with trusted partners, especially through technical collaboration and situational monitoring, will be essential to preserving their sovereignty and enhancing national resilience. For the United States and its allies, strengthening undersea cable security must become a pillar of broader security cooperation within the Pacific.

Economic Relevance and Resources in Pacific Microstates

Despite their modest landmasses and populations, Pacific microstates command vast and strategically significant maritime territories. Thanks to their dispersed islands and atolls, these nations exercise sovereign rights over expansive EEZs. Take Kiribati, for instance: its land mass encompasses merely 811 square kilometers—smaller than Hong Kong—yet

it boasts one of the globe's most extensive EEZs, covering an impressive 3.55 million square kilometers.¹⁷ This sprawling maritime domain thrusts Pacific microstates into the forefront of pivotal areas such as global fisheries, the pursuit of essential minerals for the green energy transition, and the intricate web of maritime trade connecting Northeast Asia and Oceania.

Fisheries and Maritime Trade

The Pacific's EEZs are essential to global fishing industries, particularly for tuna, a commodity that significantly bolsters regional economies and international food supplies.¹⁸ Approximately one-third of the world's tuna catch is sourced from this region, including from the waters of Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Tokelau, a territory of New Zealand.¹⁹ For countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, fishing access fees can constitute over 45% of government revenue.²⁰

In response to concerns over illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, the South Pacific Tuna Treaty—linking the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the 13 Pacific Island countries—plays a critical role in regulating access, ensuring sustainability, and reinforcing sovereignty.²¹ These partnerships underscore the geopolitical and economic stakes of fisheries management in an increasingly competitive region.

The Pacific microstates also sit astride sea lanes critical to regional trade. Maritime routes connecting Japan, South

Korea, and China with Australia and New Zealand pass through their waters. With Japan ranking among Australia's top trading partners, and the region's maritime traffic increasing in both volume and strategic significance, maintaining freedom of navigation through these waters is vital not only to regional allies but to the broader international system.

Mineral Resources and Deep-Sea Mining

Beneath the seabed of the Pacific lies significant mineral deposits—especially polymetallic nodules rich in cobalt, manganese, and rare earth elements. These materials are essential for the advanced manufacturing of high-performance batteries and next-generation electronics. While regulatory frameworks remain under development, international interest in these resources is accelerating.²²

Exploratory mining research has occurred, sampling locations within the EEZs of Fiji, the Cook Islands, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Palau, and others.²³ The area between Hawaii and Guam, particularly within the Marshall Islands' maritime domain, has emerged as a promising site for cobalt extraction.²⁴ As terrestrial sources of critical minerals face supply chain challenges and political instability, particularly in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, these undersea reserves represent a potential strategic alternative.²⁵

However, interest in seabed mining has sparked debate over environmental stewardship and regulatory oversight.²⁶ Balancing resource extraction with fragile marine ecosystems will require cooperative governance, scientific transparency, and regional agency.

Maritime Trade and Strategic Chokepoints

In addition to their natural resource wealth, Pacific microstates control access to critical sea lanes of communication. These maritime corridors facilitate the movement of goods across the Indo-Pacific, including energy supplies and manufactured goods. Their positioning within the first and second island chains elevates their strategic relevance, not just for economic security but also for regional military posturing and power projection.

Maritime chokepoints surrounding the Solomon Islands, for example, are critical to the commercial lifelines of U.S. allies such as Japan and Australia.²⁷ Should these waters become restricted or militarized, it could severely impact the regional balance of power. For this reason, Pacific microstates are increasingly recognized not only as economic stakeholders but as guardians of freedom of navigation in one of the world's most strategically consequential maritime zones.

U.S. Policy Neglect and Recalibration

In the aftermath of the Cold War, U.S. engagement with the Pacific microstates declined significantly. With global attention diverted to other regions, these strategically located island nations received minimal policy focus from Washington. Into this vacuum stepped China, steadily expanding its diplomatic, economic, and security presence across Oceania.²⁸

The shift became starkly visible in 2019 when the Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. This diplomatic pivot—and the broader perception of rising PRC influence—prompted a reassessment of U.S. posture in the region.²⁹

Shifts in Diplomatic Recognition

The most jarring wake-up call came in 2022, when the Solomon Islands signed a security pact with China. While the full terms remain undisclosed, a leaked draft suggested the potential for Chinese security forces to operate within the islands “to protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects.”³⁰ Given the country’s proximity to vital sea lanes and Australia’s east coast, the agreement triggered concern in both Washington and Canberra.

This development occurred against the backdrop of a turbulent history. From 2003 to 2017, the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), led by Australia and

supported by several Pacific states, worked to stabilize internal unrest.³¹ Yet, just two years after RAMSI ended, violence returned. In 2019, widespread protests erupted over the government's decision to recognize Beijing,³² and by 2021, political and ethnic unrest flared again, with rioters targeting Honiara's Chinatown.³³ A multinational police intervention—primarily from Australia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and New Zealand—was once again required to restore calm.³⁴

This context lends gravity to the Solomon Islands' alignment with Beijing. While the agreement ostensibly addresses internal security, it opens the door to a broader PRC military presence in the South Pacific, with long-term implications for regional balance.

Renewed U.S. Engagement Strategies

In response, the United States began recalibrating its Pacific strategy, including diplomatic gestures like former Secretary Blinken's 2022 visit to Fiji—the first by a U.S. Secretary of State in nearly 40 years—and President Biden's historic address to the Pacific Islands Forum.³⁵ Additionally, the U.S. reopened or established embassies in Tonga and Kiribati, and a new envoy was appointed to the Pacific Islands Forum.³⁶

In parallel, the United States unveiled its first-ever Pacific Partnership Strategy and convened the inaugural U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit. These efforts signaled a new intent: to move beyond episodic engagement and toward sustained, multidimensional partnerships focused on mutual priorities.³⁷

Yet, as former diplomats and analysts have noted, speeches and symbolism alone will not secure influence. As Dr. Anne-Marie Schleich, a former German ambassador to several Pacific microstates, observed:

The U.S. re-engagement with Pacific Island countries will not be judged by high-ranking visits or new embassies but by its willingness to address their primary concerns ... and contribute towards sustainable development [in tangible ways].³⁸

The Need for Credible, Sustainable Commitments

While traditional U.S. engagement—through foreign assistance, development initiatives, and security partnerships—has long supported stability in the Pacific, today’s strategic environment calls for adaptive approaches. Evolving national priorities and institutional restructuring, including changes to agencies historically active in infrastructure development and resilience initiatives, present both challenges and opportunities for recalibrating U.S. efforts in the region.

Pacific partners consistently express interest in long-term collaboration focused on maritime security, fisheries governance, infrastructure connectivity, and employment-generating initiatives. These are domains in which the United States brings substantial experience and trusted capabilities, particularly through institutions such as the U.S. Coast Guard,

civic action programs, and multilateral security cooperation mechanisms.

Pacific microstates are not passive actors in global competition. They are active and capable stewards of their own national interests, seeking partnerships that respect their sovereignty and support their aspirations. As strategic rivalry intensifies, the United States can reinforce its standing by demonstrating credible commitment, not only through shared values but also through continuous, tangible delivery.

Security Cooperation Recommendations for The United States

The Pacific's strategic geography—marked by dispersed island nations, expansive maritime domains, and contested lines of communication—places Pacific microstates at the forefront of geopolitical maneuvering. These nations may be small in population and territory, but they sit astride critical sea lanes, submarine cables, and resource-rich EEZs. Their voices carry weight in international forums, and their partnerships have become central to shaping regional norms.

To build enduring influence and reinforce regional stability, the United States must adopt a comprehensive security cooperation strategy tailored to Pacific contexts. This approach should be rooted in respect for sovereignty, a shared commitment to resilience, and pragmatic engagements in areas where U.S. capabilities align with Pacific priorities.

A four-pillar strategy is proposed:

*Pillar One: Maritime Security Cooperation Led by
USCG and NOAA*

The USCG, in coordination with NOAA, is well-positioned to lead a maritime cooperation initiative that advances shared priorities in fisheries governance, maritime law enforcement, and environmental stewardship. This approach emphasizes civilian-led engagement in a region where conventional military presence can raise sensitivities.

IUU fishing, vessel tracking violations, and unauthorized resource exploitation remain serious concerns for Pacific microstates.³⁹ USCG and NOAA can help enhance partner-state capacity through combined patrols, vessel monitoring systems, training exchanges, and institutional support for maritime governance.

NOAA's technical expertise in ocean monitoring, fisheries management, and maritime resilience offers critical tools to Pacific Island partners seeking to safeguard marine resources. Collaboration, such as the April 2024 USCG-Samoa agreement that enables joint enforcement activities within Samoa's EEZ, reflects a model for scalable engagement.⁴⁰

*Pillar Two: U.S.-EU Strategic Collaboration on
Maritime Governance*

Building on shared interests and for burden-sharing, the United States should deepen maritime cooperation with the European Union (EU), particularly in capacity-building, information sharing, and domain awareness. The EU has a demonstrated track record of technical assistance, including vessel surveillance and maritime domain integration, and maintains a strong normative framework on sustainable fisheries and resource security.

Joint U.S.-EU maritime initiatives could include rotational patrols, shared satellite surveillance, regional enforcement mechanisms, and training support for Pacific Island law enforcement agencies. The EU's experience in multilateral maritime partnerships—especially through its Critical Maritime Routes program⁴¹ and *Operation Atalanta*—could be adapted to the Pacific to support stability and the rule of law at sea.⁴²

France and Germany, with their strategic interests and diplomatic presence in Oceania, can serve as anchors for trilateral U.S.-EU-Pacific cooperation.⁴³ Their participation in the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) ministerial underscores their long-term engagement in the region.

Pillar Three: Civic Action Teams (CAT) Expansion

Expanding U.S. joint-force Civic Action Teams (CAT) across the Pacific microstates would deepen bilateral relationships and build local capacity. These teams, comprised of U.S. service members with engineering, medical, and logistics expertise, have operated successfully in Palau for over five decades.⁴⁴ Their nonintrusive, community-based development projects exemplify the kind of sustained presence Pacific partners value.⁴⁵

CAT programs strengthen civil-military relations, enhance local infrastructure, and increase preparedness for natural disasters or emergencies. In addition, they reflect the United States' commitment to capacity building over coercion—an approach that resonates strongly across Oceania.

A region-wide expansion of CATs would offer consistent, visible, and community-oriented U.S. engagement, while reinforcing local resilience and government capacity.

Pillar Four: USAR Civil Affairs Deployment

Civil Affairs (CA) units, drawn primarily from the U.S. Army Reserve (USAR), possess expertise in governance, public health, economic stabilization, and infrastructure development.⁴⁶ Their deployment to Pacific microstates could complement CATs by delivering specialized support aligned with partner-nation development goals.

In particular, CA teams can support health system resilience, emergency planning, governance advisory services, and public outreach campaigns.⁴⁷ These efforts are essential to microstates where national institutions are often stretched thin and local government capacities are limited.

Strategically, CA deployments foster trust, reinforce norms, and counter malign influence without the visibility of hard-power posturing. Their presence enhances day-to-day collaboration and long-term institution-building, both of which are vital in strengthening Pacific security architectures.

These four pillars—maritime cooperation, alliance coordination, civic action, and civil affairs—form a cost-effective, durable, and relationship-based strategy for the Pacific. They align with partner-state priorities and U.S. strategic interests, providing an alternative to transactional aid or episodic diplomacy.

Conclusion:

Securing Influence through Strategic Engagement

Pacific Island microstates occupy a strategic role in the Indo-Pacific. Their diplomatic independence, expansive maritime zones, and control over critical sea lanes and seabed resources make them important actors in a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. While their geographic remoteness and small populations often obscure their strategic value, they stand at the crossroads

of regional influence, institutional legitimacy, and maritime governance in Oceania.

For the United States, the imperative is clear: sustained and sovereign-centered engagement, not episodic gestures, will determine future alignment in this contested arena. The era of rhetorical partnership must yield to a strategy grounded in presence, partnership, and practical cooperation.

A security cooperation approach focused on maritime enforcement, alliance coordination, civic action, and civil affairs offers a durable and respectful framework. These efforts must not be seen as temporary interventions, but as long-term investment in regional stability, national resilience, and mutual credibility. Pacific microstates are not passive terrain in a strategic rivalry—they are sovereign decision-makers with rising expectations.

As other powers—including China—seek to secure influence through infrastructure, inducement, and information operations, the United States must respond by demonstrating a reliable partnership, not dependency or paternalism. Success will not be measured by footprint size or aid volume, but by the quality, consistency, and sincerity of cooperation.

The Pacific is not a peripheral theater—it is emerging as a central test of strategic alignment and rules-based governance in the 21st century. If the United States intends to maintain credibility and influence across this expanse of oceanic states,

it must bring more than policy—it must bring presence, trust, and the political will to match promise with delivery.

Endnotes

- ¹ This chapter, originally titled “Pacific Island Microstates and U.S. Security Cooperation: A Strategic Reassessment,” was first published in *The Indo-Pacific Mosaic: Comprehensive Security Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, edited by James M. Minnich (2025), <https://doi.org/10.71236/AXJT2495>. The current version has been updated and retitled for publication in this volume, the first in the *Strategic Edge Series*.
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