

Austronesian Identity as “Networked Deterrence” in the Indo-Pacific

Description

Editor’s Note: This article earned third place in the Irregular Warfare Initiative’s [2025 Writing Contest](#), “Irregular Allies: Strengthening Regional Partnerships through Unconventional Means.” Authors were asked to respond, in 800 words or less: How can the United States and its partners use irregular warfare to strengthen security cooperation, build trust, and enhance resilience among Indo-Pacific nations; particularly those with limited conventional military capacity?

The following piece stood out to our selection panel for its originality, clarity, and relevance. It offers concrete recommendations on how cultural identity, trust-building, and unconventional partnerships can serve as the foundation for “networked deterrence” in the Indo-Pacific. We have lightly edited the piece after its selection.

For the other winning articles in our contest, look back to our winners’ announcement [here](#).

Small Indo-Pacific states are on the front lines of Beijing’s gray zone playbook, finding themselves [subject](#) to malign influence, economic coercion, and maritime encroachment. If these nations falter under pressure, it could harm U.S. strategic interests by fracturing regional cooperation, limiting access to critical sea lanes and the Western Pacific, and weakening collective responses to crises, including a potential conflict over Taiwan.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. and its Indo-Pacific allies should embrace “[networked deterrence](#),” a human-centered deterrence where intentional layers of trust, shared culture, and empowerment work in unison to counter China’s preferred strategic approach. At the heart of this human-centered irregular warfare concept lies a potent tool: Austronesian identity.

Connecting the Island Chains: Taiwan to Tuvalu

The Austronesian identity [stretches](#) across the first, second, and third island chains uniting disparate yet strategically vital partners like Taiwan, New Zealand, and the Pacific Island Countries alongside U.S. states and territories such as Hawaii and Guam. Common linguistic, navigational, and cultural heritage create inherent but underappreciated linkages.

Taiwan has already taken the lead in strategically elevating Austronesian identity by spearheading the [Austronesian Forum](#), which brings together 15 members, some of whom recognize Taiwan and others who do not, with Taiwan as a “non-state cultural partner.” Given Taiwan’s leadership in the forum, the United States can lend support indirectly and from a less prominent position by encouraging broader participation from allies and partners. Although Beijing will object to any engagement with Taiwan, subnational governments like Hawaii can expand participation, strengthening cultural ties while cleverly sidestepping diplomatic friction points.

Framing Taiwan as an Austronesian cultural partner instead of a contested political actor offers strategic benefits. It chips away at Beijing’s [narrative](#) that Taiwan is globally isolated and inextricably linked to the Chinese mainland, and strengthens public affinity for Taiwan across the region. Citizens who see the Taiwanese people as cultural cousins will be more inclined to resist disinformation or support Taiwan in a future crisis. In this way, heritage becomes a tool for information warfare by proactively telling a story of solidarity before malign actors can spin one of division.

Military Cultures Underpin Deterrence

Building on these cultural linkages, deterrence also depends on the shared military traditions and practices that reinforce solidarity in the face of coercion. Beijing will continue working to fracture solidarity, obscure aggression, and flood the region with narratives that cast Taiwan as isolated, illegitimate, or already lost. To counter Beijing, the United States should promote joint trainings and cultural exchanges that empower local actors to defend against foreign interference and strengthen regional cohesion.

A military exchange initiative grounded in shared cultural identity could connect U.S.-based Austronesian service members, especially in Hawaii and Guam, with their counterparts in Taiwan and other strategic Pacific Island Countries. These exchanges would strengthen trust among defense communities and demonstrate solidarity rooted in shared heritage.

Exchanges could include joint training in disaster response, civil-military relations, and maritime domain awareness, while also creating space for dialogue about traditional navigation, oral history, and language preservation. This approach to security cooperation not only enhances readiness, but also deepens enduring relationships and adds to Taiwan’s legitimacy.

Deterrence in Action

The Marshall Islands, after enduring waves of cyberattacks and coordinated fake-news campaigns, signed a [security pact](#) with Taiwan in June 2025 focused on [maritime domain awareness, cybersecurity, and counter-disinformation](#) training. This agreement recognizes that information threats require a whole-of-society response. A similar model should be scaled across the region, particularly in the other two Pacific Island Countries that recognize Taiwan: Palau and Tuvalu.

According to a Pacific Forum analysis, even a [\\$5 million](#) initiative could provide basic cyber training, harden communications infrastructure, and help localities safeguard defenses against hostile influence. These are low-cost, high-impact steps that build resilience both at the state level and even the community and household level.

Policy Recommendations

To implement human-centered networked deterrence, U.S. policymakers should:

1. Elevate the Austronesian Forum as a key venue for Indo-Pacific cooperation. Support language revitalization programs, cultural exchanges, and regional gatherings that include Taiwan and other subnational governments like Hawaii, with allies sharing the costs.
2. Launch culturally grounded military exchanges drawing on the U.S. Austronesian population. Military service is deeply rooted in Hawaii and Guam. The United States should build on this tradition by developing exchange programs that connect Austronesian service members with counterparts in Taiwan and other strategic Pacific Island Countries.
3. Scale localized training programs, like those piloted in the Marshall Islands, to help small nations build community-led defenses against disinformation and gray-zone coercion.
4. Frame Taiwan as a cultural partner in public messaging. Avoid language that pressures states into formal recognition. Instead, support Taiwan's soft power as a steward of Austronesian heritage.
5. Integrate these efforts into existing tools, like the [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) and [National Guard State Partnerships](#), to signal clear commitment to local cultural engagement as a pillar of networked deterrence.

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Main Image: Children look through items received during Operation Christmas Drop Dec. 9, 2014, at Ulithi Atoll, Micronesia. U.S. Air Force photo. Courtesy of [DVIDS](#).

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Date Created

2025/09/23