

Culture on the Front Line: Building Indo-Pacific Resilience through Cultural Property Protection Training

Description

Editor's Note: This article was submitted as part of the Irregular Warfare Initiative's [2025 Writing Contest](#), in which authors were invited to explore how the United States and its partners can use irregular warfare to strengthen security cooperation, build trust, and enhance resilience among Indo-Pacific nations, particularly those with limited conventional military capacity. We have edited this piece after its selection. This piece stood out for its innovative framing of cultural property protection as a strategic instrument of irregular warfare, linking heritage preservation to trust-building, resilience, and regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Irregular Warfare (IW) planning often prioritizes influence projection and security partnerships over cultural infrastructure. Yet, in regions with limited conventional military capacity, such as portions of the Indo-Pacific, this approach neglects a key variable in both resilience and trust-building: cultural property. As such, cultural property protection (CPP) efforts, led by the modern-day "Monuments Men" of U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations Command (Airborne), represents an underutilized means for enhancing regional cooperation, countering illicit finance, and strengthening societal resilience to coercion and malign influences—all of which exemplify IW in the Indo-Pacific.

This analysis (1) examines the utility of CPP as an unconventional force multiplier, (2) review precedent cases where antiquities trafficking has funded conflict, and (3) propose the use of U.S. Army Civil Affairs (CA) Heritage and Preservation Officers to provide CPP training. It concludes with a finding that CPP, when framed as a function of trust-building and partner capacity, offers a scalable, cost-efficient path to strengthening security cooperation with key partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Strategic Relevance of CPP

Cultural Property Protection is often dismissed as [tangential to national security](#). However, in irregular warfare, where legitimacy, memory, and community identity are domains of competition, heritage sites and artifacts should be more aptly recognized for what they truly are: strategic assets or liabilities depending on their specific context.

The looting or destruction of cultural property does not merely erase history; as seen [in Syria](#), disrupting cultural property can destabilize community cohesion, fund armed groups, and have lasting impact on regional stability. This dynamic is not new. During World War II, both Axis and Allied powers recognized culture as strategically significant. The Nazis systematically plundered art and antiquities to finance the war and assert ideological dominance. The Allies established the [Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives \(MFAA\) program](#), known as the “Monuments Men,” to protect and recover cultural property as a means of safeguarding European identity and restoring legitimacy in liberated territories. The war revealed a truth that remains relevant today: cultural heritage is not peripheral to security but central to the struggle for legitimacy and stability.

A similar construct applies in today’s Indo-Pacific region. Cultural heritage influences the legitimacy of governments, the resilience of populations, and the narratives that underpin strategic competition. As such, CPP takes on importance for security strategy and is not simply preservation work.

Illicit Trafficking

Echoing the Nazi regime’s use of art looted from occupied Europe to finance its war efforts, the trafficking of antiquities has become a known revenue stream for insurgent and terrorist organizations. For instance, during its territorial control [in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State](#) brought in an estimated [\\$10–20 million annually](#) through the illicit excavation and sale of antiquities. In another example, armed groups in [Mali](#) and [Libya](#) have taxed or trafficked cultural goods to sustain operations since the early 2010s.

This convergence of organized crime and ideological violence creates a transnational threat that exploits cultural sectors in fragile states. Within the Indo-Pacific, disaster vulnerability and weak site protection compound the existing threats to cultural heritage sites. For instance, heritage sites in the Indo-Pacific are frequently [exposed to](#) earthquakes, cyclones and typhoons, floods, sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and tsunamis, which cause physical damage, weaken structures, and create opportunities for looting. Moreover, many heritage sites in the Indo-Pacific are located in remote or politically peripheral zones, operating under constrained budgets, limited staffing, and with minimal legal enforcement or surveillance. This combination of factors makes [sites in Southeast Asia](#) attractive to looters, smugglers, and illicit excavations.

Indo-Pacific Demand, U.S. Capability

Despite the strategic implications, many Indo-Pacific partners lack their own specialized CPP units. The [participation of ASEAN member states](#) in CPP training at the Center of Excellence for Stability

Policing Units in Vicenza, Italy, highlights an institutional gap and a willingness to engage. This creates an opportunity for the United States to fill a capability void, one that U.S. Army Civil Affairs Heritage and Preservation Officers possess the expertise to deliver through CPP training, particularly when partnered with other U.S. government agencies and host nation civil institutions.

Deploying CPP Mobile Training Teams for IW

We propose the activation of U.S. Army Civil Affairs (CA) Mobile Training Teams, composed of U.S. Army Reserve Heritage and Preservation Officers and other CA personnel, to deliver Cultural Property Protection training throughout the Indo-Pacific in particularly vulnerable and strategic locations, such as the Philippines and Thailand.

These teams would:

- Identify at-risk cultural assets through assessments in coordination with local ministries, heritage Non-Governmental Organizations, and academic institutions.
- Deliver scalable training on documentation, emergency stabilization, trafficking prevention, and disaster preparedness.
- Support information-sharing networks for early warning of cultural site targeting, using open-source and community-based intelligence.
- Align training with existing Cultural Property Agreement goals and partner-nation legal frameworks, reinforcing trust and self-sufficiency.

Initial programs can be launched in the [Philippines](#) and [Thailand](#), two nations with demonstrated interest, institutional will, and clear cultural property vulnerabilities. Importantly, this CPP effort would not require new structures or authorities. Training missions can operate within existing Department of State Cultural Property Agreements, already in place with [Cambodia](#), [India](#), and others. These agreements restrict U.S. imports of looted antiquities and support heritage protection efforts abroad. U.S. Army Civil Affairs-led CPP training would provide operational substance to these agreements, translating diplomacy into durable capacity.

In both the Philippines and Thailand, [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#) and state-linked cultural diplomacy, such as [Confucius Institutes](#), China Cultural Centers, and broader cultural exchanges, have established non-military influence pathways. In Thailand, [Confucius Institutes](#) are extensive and serve as instruments of Chinese soft power. In the Philippines, [China's Belt and Road framework](#) includes

both economic projects and “people-to-people” engagement designed to cultivate long-term goodwill and elite networks. A CPP training effort led by U.S. Civil Affairs would offer an alternative model of partnership that emphasizes heritage protection, sovereignty, and civil-society engagement. By engaging partner-nation cultural institutions rather than only security forces, CPP emphasizes a narrative of mutual respect and shared stewardship, which strengthens regional perceptions of the United States as a trusted and legitimate partner.

[Comparable U.S. efforts](#), such as Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), Disaster Response Training (DRT), and Security Force Assistance (SFA) have successfully built partner resilience but are primarily oriented toward [physical security or emergency response](#). CPP, by contrast, operates in the psychological and cultural dimensions of stability by addressing the intangible foundations of legitimacy and identity that underpin long-term governance. Cultural Property Protection engages trusted civilian sectors, such as museums, ministries of culture, and universities, that are often untouched by traditional defense programs. In doing so, CPP expands U.S. influence beyond the security apparatus and into societal spaces where narratives, values, and alignment are formed.

In this way, CPP training offers a value-added complement to existing U.S. engagement initiatives: it represents what others may call soft power, strengthening deterrence by denial through heritage protection, advances resilience through local empowerment, and indirectly enhances U.S. posture by cultivating trust-based networks that persist regardless of military presence.

Measuring Success

Evaluating CPP’s strategic impacts should emphasize trust-based and resilience-centered indicators including:

- Increased incident reporting of cultural property crimes;
- Integration of CPP into host nation national disaster response frameworks;
- Expanded civilian–military engagement within host nation heritage sectors; and
- Requests for continued bilateral cooperation outside of defense contexts.

Measuring CPP’s effectiveness should account for the degree to which it embeds the United States as a trusted, values-aligned partner in the Indo-Pacific, particularly within nations vulnerable to coercive influence. Effective CPP engagement would enhance deterrence by reducing the space in which malign actors can exploit cultural grievances, disinformation, or heritage destruction for political ends. It simultaneously advances the U.S. position by cultivating networks, interoperability, and moral legitimacy before crisis or conflict occurs.

In this sense, CPP operates across the continuum of competition: as a tool of influence in peacetime, a counterweight against gray-zone aggression, and a foundation for legitimacy should armed conflict arise.

Conclusion

Cultural Property Protection is not merely an act of preservation; it is an act of alignment. In the Indo-Pacific, where U.S. competitors seek influence through coercion, disinformation, and transactional engagement, the United States must build relationships through shared values and mutual respect. CPP offers a practical, efficient, and moral means to do so.

By deploying U.S. Army Civil Affairs personnel to lead CPP training, the United States activates an existing but underutilized capability. This initiative would not only deter exploitation and trafficking but serve as a tangible demonstration of U.S. commitment to regional resilience, an irregular advantage that strengthens partnerships before conflict begins.

Consequences of inaction could extend far beyond the loss of monuments or artifacts. The erasure of cultural heritage undermines community identity, weakens national legitimacy, and leaves vulnerable populations more susceptible to coercion and extremist narratives. In the Pacific, where memory and identity are inseparable from sovereignty, neglecting CPP risks ceding both moral and strategic ground to competitors who understand the power of culture in shaping influence. What is at stake is not just history — it is the stability and trust upon which future alliances depend.

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Main Image: Photo by Staff Sgt. Ashley Low, available via [DVIDS](#). Soldiers from the 492nd Civil Affairs Detachment, U.S. Army Reserve, Arizona, and their Royal Thai Army counterparts stand for a photo during a cultural tour as part of Exercise Hanuman Guardian 2023 in Lop Buri, Thailand, July 16, 2023.

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