

## Understanding the Political Anatomy of the “Forward Edge”: The Case of Guam

By **Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, Ph.D.**

In 2022, many eyes are turning to the Pacific Islands once again, especially in the wake of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s tour of the Pacific. While it seems the United States has interest in enhancing its presence in the entire Pacific, it has had a unique foothold in the subregion of Micronesia for decades. This sub-region, comprised of the unincorporated territory of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and the three Freely Associated States (Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia) have very close relationships to the United States that are pivotal to the future of security in the larger region.

**Kenneth Gofigan Kuper**, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam and Director of the Pacific Center for Island Security, dissects the political anatomy of Guam and explores the interplay between the island’s status as a US territory and key US strategic concerns in the Pacific.

The islands of Micronesia are a comfortable sub-region that the US can rely on for military operations and planning. Thus, it is important to dissect the political anatomy of the region to understand how the islands became core to military plans in the current era of great-power politics. In this piece, I dissect the political anatomy of Guam and show how being a territory interplays with the island’s importance to current key development and planning. I argue that the future of strategic competition can be seen via plans for or activities in Guam. More importantly, I argue that the people of Guam themselves need to follow these pivotal issues that will carve the security landscape of their homes.

Guam is no stranger to being caught in the middle. It was U.S. soil occupied by the Japanese during World War II, where the indigenous CHamoru people suffered brutality from the Japanese military. Today, the US military occupies 27% of the island’s land, where the island hosts two large military bases as well as the newly opened Marine Corps Base “Camp Blaz.” It has been the launching point for B-1s, B-2s, and B-52s, nuclear-powered submarines are homeported in Guam, and it is the stage for military exercises such as Valiant Shield.

Today, Guam is as important as ever before. Admiral Aquilino of INDOPACOM stressed this in a statement to the House, saying, “Guam’s strategic importance is difficult to overstate.” The island, a mere 212 square miles, is not just critical for military operations, but also serves as a point of deterrence and a place to reassure allies in the Indo-Pacific Region. At the top of the list of priorities for INDOPACOM is the establishment of more robust missile defense for Guam. The Missile Defense Agency recently sent a team to the island to scout locations for potential 360-degree missile defense architecture. Guam’s strategic location and proximity to Asia makes it an ideal location for US power projection. Vice Admiral John Hill, Director of the Missile Defense Agency, argued Guam’s importance, saying “Location does matter, and if you just go look at where Guam is on the map, it is inside an area that is absolutely tactically relevant.” Thus, it is clear that Guam will remain a critical US base as it serves as the US military’s foremost operating location in the Western Pacific.

However, the island’s location alone is not enough to understand how Guam is used in this manner. One

must also understand Guam's political status. Guam is an unorganized, unincorporated territory of the United States. As a territory, it falls under the "plenary power" of the US Congress, has no voting representation in the House of Representatives, no representation in the Senate, and no electoral college votes. Guam is essentially powerless when it comes to military decisions affecting the future of its security. This is useful for US unilateralism. In Guam, there is consultation, but not mutual consent regarding military developments and planning. U.S. Major General Dennis Larsen once said about the island, "This is American soil in the midst of the Pacific. Guam is a US territory. We can do what we want here and make huge investments without fear of being thrown out." Guam's political status is a huge enabling factor for the way the US military is able to operate in the island.

Guam has been a forward edge deterrent, a spot to ensure commitment to allies, and a laboratory for experimentation for actual homeland defense of the United States. Thus, to follow what is happening in Guam serves as a window into the larger defense picture of the US.

The people of Guam need to think about this political anatomy in considering its future. As it stands, Guam is a territory with no institutional power and is concurrently serving as a core for US military activity in the region. This becomes concerning considering how unsure the defensibility of the island actually is. In a two-part series hosted by the Hudson Institute, "Defending Guam," experts warned that the US needs to ensure Guam does not become a "one shot, one kill" location. Bryan Clark of the Hudson Institute expressed that Guam may not be defensible at some level and that "You have to defend Guam, but you also have to come up with a way to continue air operations from Guam in the face of enemy attacks that are successful." The Chinese understand that neutralizing Guam will be important for any advantage over the US. For example, they have an Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile (IRBM), the DF-26, that has been labeled the "Guam Killer." Thus, the people of Guam need to consider the multiple implications of the buildup of missile defense architecture in the island. Is this buildup of missile defense going to make the island safer or put it more in harm's way? There are those who would vociferously argue for both sides of this issue.

In this manner, Guam is also being used as a method to experiment with new military weaponry, systems, and plans. Returning to Vice Admiral John Hill, he writes on Guam missile defense, "So, what we learn on Guam is also something that can be applied here. Because you got to remember, Guam is really about the size of Chicago, right? So, I think it's very applicable to what we'll do in the United States." Collectively, this shows that Guam has been a forward edge deterrent, a spot to ensure commitment to allies, and a laboratory for experimentation for actual homeland defense of the United States. Thus, to follow what is happening in Guam serves as a window into the larger defense picture of the US. Understanding and analyzing plans and developments in and for Guam is important as the island serves as a microcosm of the defense ecology.

However, when the people of Guam consider how the island fits into US defense architecture, they need to always keep a keen eye open to how Guam's political status as an unincorporated territory underpins the dynamics of the situation. Ultimately, they must critically interrogate what being the "tip of the spear" and the "forward edge of the Indo-Pacific" means for their security. They must follow the issue but for more pressing reasons than most. Quite simply, their lives and futures hang in the balance.

*Kenneth Gofigan Kuper*, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Micronesian Studies at the University of Guam and Director of the Pacific Center for Island Security, can be contacted at [kennethkuper@gmail.com](mailto:kennethkuper@gmail.com).