

SPECIAL REPORT

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*An American Strategy  
for the Pacific Islands*

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/sr296>

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# The Pacific Pivot: An American Strategy for the Pacific Islands

*Andrew J. Harding*

**A**s a Pacific state with Pacific borders and an escalating rivalry with China, the U.S. must continue to partner with the Pacific Islands in new, innovative ways. The U.S. must adopt a clear-eyed approach about putting American interests and objectives in the Pacific Islands first, while prioritizing engagement in areas of common interest. The U.S. should note carefully that China poses a significant threat to both U.S. and regional interests by seeking to usurp the values many Pacific Islanders hold true and replace them with its own authoritarian vision for the region. If successfully executed, U.S. national strategy in the Pacific Islands will advance a more secure, prosperous, and free region for Americans and Pacific Islanders alike.

Competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China has generated new interest in the Pacific Island region. While broadly welcomed by the Pacific Islands, America's reengagement in the Pacific Islands lacks the long-term, strategic framework necessary for guiding U.S. engagement and presenting a clear vision of America's interests throughout the region.

Furthermore, America's interest in the Pacific region has generated new leverage for Pacific Island states. With renewed American attention, these states benefit from increased numbers of interested development and security partners and can play the United States and China, as well as other major states, off each other to maximize their own interests. If the United States does not carefully navigate these relationships, it risks ceding influence and access to China, thereby granting Beijing a potential foothold in the Indo-Pacific that can threaten U.S. national security interests and complicate possible future military operations in Asia, if and when needed.

This *Special Report* proposes a comprehensive, national strategy for U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands region.<sup>1</sup> The report argues that

American policymakers should consider the Pacific Islands a region worthy of increased U.S. engagement and resource allocation. While focused on making the case for and to Americans, the strategy also incorporates Pacific Island, allied, and partner interests and perspectives to emphasize shared interests, potential areas of cooperation, and long-lasting engagement opportunities. The strategy presents U.S. policymakers with a transformative pathway to maximize U.S. interests, build stronger, long-term partnerships with the Pacific Islands and regional allies, and counter Chinese ambitions in the Pacific.

## **The Modern Role of the Pacific Islands in U.S. National Security Strategy**

Our strategic frontier then shifted to embrace the entire Pacific Ocean, which became a vast moat to protect us as long as we held it. Indeed, it acts as a protective shield for all of the Americas and all free lands of the Pacific Ocean area.

—General Douglas MacArthur<sup>2</sup>

Most Americans associate the names of the Pacific Islands with World War II, and, today, many of these island states are once again in the geostrategic crosshairs. Recent developments, such as the 2022 leaking of a secret security deal between China and the Solomon Islands<sup>3</sup> and 2023–2024 urgency to renew key sections of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements with three Pacific Island allies,<sup>4</sup> have helped to focus American policymakers' minds on modern threats to U.S. interests. This recent realization, however, underscores a larger policy gap for Washington: Across multiple decades, the U.S. took for granted, largely disregarded, or even forgot about the Pacific Islands.<sup>5</sup>

In the New Cold War between the U.S. and China, such inattention is no longer tolerable. The Pacific Islands deserve an increase in attention—and resources—from Washington.<sup>6</sup> The single most important factor that drives this renewed interest in U.S. engagement with the Pacific Islands is their pivotal location, which is important to U.S. efforts to deny China's regional hegemonic ambitions that directly threaten American security, prosperity, and freedom.

In other words, Americans should primarily care about U.S. engagements with the Pacific Islands because the U.S. needs free and open access to transportation to the Western Pacific for a variety of reasons. Not least, it may

MAP 1

## The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944

During World War II, the United States pursued a two-pronged offensive across the Central and Southwest Pacific to push back the Japanese advance. An estimated more than 109,000 Americans died during battle in the Pacific.



**SOURCE:** The National WWII Museum, “The Pacific Strategy, 1941-1944,” <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/pacific-strategy-1941-1944> (accessed August 30, 2024).

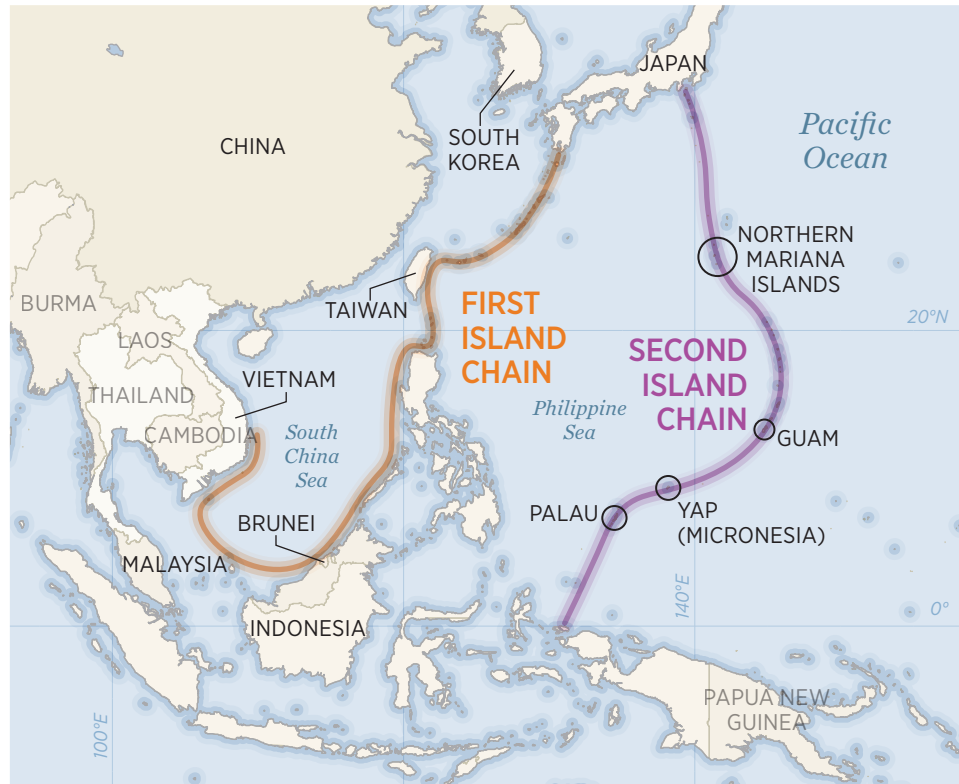
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one day need to surge forces, assets, and resources through the Pacific—the Micronesian subregion, in particular—into conflict zones in Asia to defend U.S. allies, interests, and citizens abroad. It also must keep vital trading routes between the U.S. and East Asia free and open. Beijing’s effort to dominate its immediate region and beyond has resulted in actions to increase its influence across the Pacific Islands to deny U.S. access to the region.


The current era of great power competition between the U.S. and China requires elevating the Pacific Islands to a higher level of importance when considering resource allocation. To justify greater, but still fairly modest, expenditures, the U.S. must first articulate a clear explanation for how the

MAP 2

## Two Pacific Island Chains



SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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Pacific Islands fit into broader U.S. interests and contribute to America's security and prosperity.

**National Interests and Regional Objectives.** U.S. engagement with the Pacific Islands should advance at least one, if not more, of four vital national interests:

1. Safeguard America and the American people;
2. Bolster deterrence vis-à-vis China and, if needed, combat capabilities;
3. Improve the economic well-being of the American people; and/or
4. Strengthen regional attitudes and perceptions toward America, i.e., enhance “soft power.”<sup>7</sup>

The following objectives in the Pacific Islands would contribute to the achievement of the above U.S. interests:

- Secure a safe, free, and open Indo–Pacific led by like-minded allies and partners;
- Maintain American leadership, in close coordination with allies and partners, in regional security affairs;
- Contribute to bilateral relationships and regional institutions that support national sovereignty and economic development; and
- Minimize Chinese influence and activities that corrupt political institutions and threaten the democratic rights, freedoms, and well-being of Pacific Islanders.

The remainder of this section details how the Pacific Islands are directly relevant to America’s vital national interests. The policy recommendation section provides actionable items that expand upon the strategy’s identified objectives.

**Protecting the U.S. Homeland.** The United States is a Pacific state with Pacific borders. Beyond the West Coast of the continental U.S. and Hawaii, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, and American Samoa are permanently inhabited U.S. territories with U.S. citizens. China has engaged in provocative activities that have threatened some of the territories’ safety and taken advantage of immigration loopholes that should be closed.<sup>8</sup> Above all else, America’s priority in the Pacific is to defend its people, territories, and way of life.

As former U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategy Nadia Schadlow notes, “Control over borders, and the power of sovereignty that such control represents, have always served as a central element of state power. And a central element of a state’s power—as well as perceptions of its power—have always been tied to a state’s ability to control and defend its territorial integrity.”<sup>9</sup> Failure to preserve America’s territorial integrity throughout the Pacific directly challenges American sovereignty and welcomes competition.

America’s special relationship with the Freely Associated States (FAS) is squarely relevant and deserving of its own privileged categorization.<sup>10</sup> The COFA agreements between the United States, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau (collectively known as the FAS) obligates the United



States to defend the FAS “and their peoples from attack or threats thereof *as the United States and its citizens are defended.*”<sup>11</sup>

**Preserve Peace Through Strength.** As the Indo–Pacific threat environment continues to worsen, access to the Pacific Islands’ geography becomes ever more important in reversing this trend. China is the greatest military threat facing the U.S. today.<sup>12</sup> The *2022 National Defense Strategy* accurately characterizes China as America’s “pacing challenge” due to China’s “coercive and increasingly aggressive endeavor to refashion the Indo–Pacific region and the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences.”<sup>13</sup> America’s interest is to deter China from starting an armed conflict and deny China’s ability to pursue other objectives that harm the interests of the U.S. Additional resources are necessary to sustain this deterrence.<sup>14</sup>

Should deterrence fail, however, maintaining an uncontested Pacific would allow the United States geographical flexibility in its responses and keep vital waterways open to surge additional resources. In support of this, the COFA agreements grant the United States unique defense privileges and rights that facilitate unrestricted access around the FAS and into the broader Indo–Pacific.<sup>15</sup> Effectively, the Pacific serves as a key supply channel for U.S. Armed Forces to respond to crises in Northeast Asia, the Taiwan Strait, and Southeast Asia.

Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) are the United States’ primary security partners in the Southwest Pacific. Through AUKUS—a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—Australia will purchase *Virginia*-class submarines from the United States and later construct SSN-AUKUS, a nuclear-powered, conventionally armed submarine.<sup>16</sup>

Australia’s recent security strategy documents indicate a strong alignment with America’s threat assessment of China and the broader Indo–Pacific.<sup>17</sup> New Zealand—a member of the Five Eyes intelligence sharing group—is also well aligned with U.S. security assessments, including with a joint concern that China’s potential “establishment of a persistent military presence in the Pacific...would fundamentally alter the strategic balance of the region and pose national-security concerns to both our countries.”<sup>18</sup> In 2023, the U.S. and PNG signed a defense cooperation agreement that granted the U.S. “unimpeded access to and use of” six facilities and areas within PNG for military purposes.<sup>19</sup>

**Promote American Prosperity.** The Pacific Islands’ geography, and their role in American prosperity, is underappreciated by many policymakers. The Pacific Island region includes many “international and interregional

MAP 3

## Strategic Significance of the Compact of Free Association States

Being as close as 1,500 miles from Taiwan, the Freely Associated States (FAS) can serve as an important staging ground for the U.S. Armed Forces in the Indo-Pacific. Through the COFA agreements, the U.S. can also deny other countries military access to the FAS without explicit authorization.

**Exclusive Economic Zones**

- Freely Associated States
- United States



**NOTE:** Distances are approximate.  
**SOURCE:** Heritage Foundation research.

MAP 4


## U.S.–Papua New Guinea Defense Cooperation Agreement Facilities and Areas

The sites shown below are available for U.S. forces and contractors to use for mutual visits, exercises, aircraft usage, staging and deploying forces, prepositioning supplies, and other purposes.



\*Includes Port Moresby Seaport and Port Moresby International Airport.

**SOURCES:** U.S. Department of State, “Agreement Between the United States of America and Papua New Guinea,” signed May 22, 2023, p. 13, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/63374-Papua-New-Guinea-Defense-08.16.2023.pdf> (accessed July 17, 2024).

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containerized shipping service linkages.”<sup>20</sup> In 2022, it is estimated that 33 million twenty-foot equivalent units of cargo transported across the Pacific Ocean, making “Trans-Pacific routes the largest shipping zone in terms of load size.”<sup>21</sup> In 2023, member economies of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) accounted for 56 percent of U.S. export destinations.<sup>22</sup> In 2021, U.S. exports to APEC totaled \$1.31 trillion, with “over \$1.07 trillion in goods and \$276.4 billion in services.”<sup>23</sup> These exports support, either directly or indirectly, an estimated 6.7 million American jobs.<sup>24</sup> Much of this trade flows through the Pacific Ocean, meaning a peaceful and secure Pacific allows U.S. exports and imports to freely flow without disruption.

The Pacific Islands also contribute to American prosperity through direct trade. The U.S. has a trade surplus with the Pacific Islands. In 2020, U.S. goods exports totaled \$548 million with imported goods totaling \$420 million.<sup>25</sup> From 2015 to 2035, multiple Pacific Island states are projected to increase global imports between 40 percent and 50 percent.<sup>26</sup> While Pacific Island economies are still developing, their geographic relevance offers economic opportunities that can contribute to American prosperity by supporting U.S. jobs via trade.

**Advance American Influence.** The Pacific Islands became recognizable to most Americans during the United States’ “island-hopping” campaign during World War II.<sup>27</sup> Key campaigns and battles occurred across modern-day PNG, Solomon Islands, the RMI, Palau, the FSM, and Kiribati, among others.<sup>28</sup> Americans fought alongside local populations against Imperial Japan. Collectively, U.S. battle deaths in the Pacific are estimated to be 109,000,<sup>29</sup> meaning U.S. blood was shed to protect America and support the Pacific Islands’ resistance against their occupiers.

This shared history is backed by various similarities and differences between Americans and Pacific Islanders. Both peoples are staunch supporters of democratic values and religious freedoms. People-to-people relationships and exchanges should—and must—form a centerpiece of U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands. For example, Palau has a higher per capita rate of volunteers serving in the U.S. Armed Forces than any U.S. state,<sup>30</sup> with the FSM<sup>31</sup> and the RMI close behind.<sup>32</sup>

The shared history, however, does include scars. Contemporary issues include the discovery and disposal of unexploded ordinances,<sup>33</sup> concerns of leaking of radioactive wastewater from the Runit Dome nuclear repository in the Marshall Islands,<sup>34</sup> and the broader legacy of nuclear testing that has resulted in disputes over owed compensation to the Marshall Islands.<sup>35</sup>

The Pacific Islands often form a reliable voting bloc that supports U.S. interests on the international stage. This is especially true with the United Nations (U.N.). For example, the Pacific Islands, collectively, have a higher voting alignment with the United States than other subregions of the world.<sup>36</sup> In 2022, the FSM and the RMI had, respectively, the seventh-highest and ninth-highest voting alignments with the United States at the U.N.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, Guam, CNMI, and American Samoa are heavily involved in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which serves as the region’s governance forum to enhance security and economic and development cooperation.<sup>38</sup> During the 53rd Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ Meeting in August 2024, Guam and American Samoa were upgraded to Associate Members in the PIF, which grants them new speaking, but not voting, rights.<sup>39</sup> CNMI remains a Forum Observer.

## The Necessity of a New Strategy

Although the United States has consistently engaged with the Pacific Islands at a modest level across decades, the 2010s witnessed a gradual build up in U.S. engagement before a more rapid increase in the 2020s.<sup>40</sup> In September 2022, the Biden Administration released a Pacific Partnership Strategy, the first-ever national and public U.S. strategy for the Pacific Islands.<sup>41</sup> The introduction of such a document is welcome, and the opening of new U.S. embassies and enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA) for the Pacific Islands are welcome initiatives.<sup>42</sup> The current strategy, however, possesses two primary shortcomings.

First, the current strategy does not explain how its listed objectives in the Pacific Islands benefit America. The document's stated primary interests are to combat climate change; maintain a free, open, and peaceful Indo-Pacific; and preserve sovereignty.<sup>43</sup> These interests are achieved through four objectives: strengthening U.S.–Pacific Island partnerships, enhancing regional connectivity, countering climate and security challenges, and empowering Pacific Islanders.<sup>44</sup> The document conveys these objectives in a manner that ranks the interests of the Pacific Islands above American interests and does not explicitly articulate why or how any of the proposed objectives or lines of effort directly benefit America's interests or the American people.<sup>45</sup>

A stronger strategy would prioritize the articulation of U.S. interests and how said strategy advances them,<sup>46</sup> rather than striving to “best meet the needs of the Pacific Islands.”<sup>47</sup> At an operational level, those implementing U.S. policies need to understand what roles they serve in achieving a desirable end state. A stronger strategy would also make the strongest public case to U.S. policymakers, and ultimately their constituents, for why resources, including U.S. tax dollars, should be dedicated to the Pacific Islands.<sup>48</sup> Having more clearly defined goals also better allows the U.S. government to assess how successful the implementation and execution of the strategy has been. Of course, a strong U.S. strategy would emphasize shared interests and benefits that best meets the needs of the Pacific Islands when appropriate.

The second—and related—shortcoming of the Biden Administration's strategy is its overemphasis on combatting the effects of climate change as a *vital American interest*. The first U.S. interest identified in the document is to partner with the Pacific Islands to “drive global action to combat climate change”<sup>49</sup> and notes: “Of all the 21st-century challenges, none is more pressing for the Pacific Islands region than climate change.”<sup>50</sup>

While reflective of the challenges that the Pacific Islands face, the Biden Administration's emphasis on climate change mitigates other pressing U.S.

interests demanding more immediate attention. The document's last of its identified interests is to ensure that "geopolitical competition does not undermine the sovereignty and security" of the Pacific Islands, the United States, and U.S. allies and partners—an indirect reference to U.S.–China competition.<sup>51</sup>

A stronger strategy would include a more realistic,<sup>52</sup> straightforward acknowledgement of the threats China poses to the region and the economic opportunities the U.S. could support—even if they may not be exactly what the region may prefer to hear.<sup>53</sup> Competition with China is the single-most important driver of U.S. reengagement in the Pacific Islands—and Pacific Islanders are very well aware of this fact.<sup>54</sup> This rationale is no secret, and a stronger strategy would, in effect, "say the quiet part out loud." In relation to the PIF's "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent," a more straightforward acknowledgment of U.S. interests would more accurately contribute to the "open and honest relationships" between the U.S. and the Pacific Islands.<sup>55</sup> This *Special Report* contends such transparency contributes to respecting the Pacific Islands, as sovereign states, by being up front and direct about America's primary interests.

## Competing by Engaging

In service to U.S. national interests and objectives, the U.S. should prioritize geopolitical competition with China for access to the international commons—a term to describe international and shared resource and geographic domains—and sovereign physical territory. This strategy encompasses both U.S.–China competition and U.S. engagement policies, designed exclusively for Pacific Island partnerships.

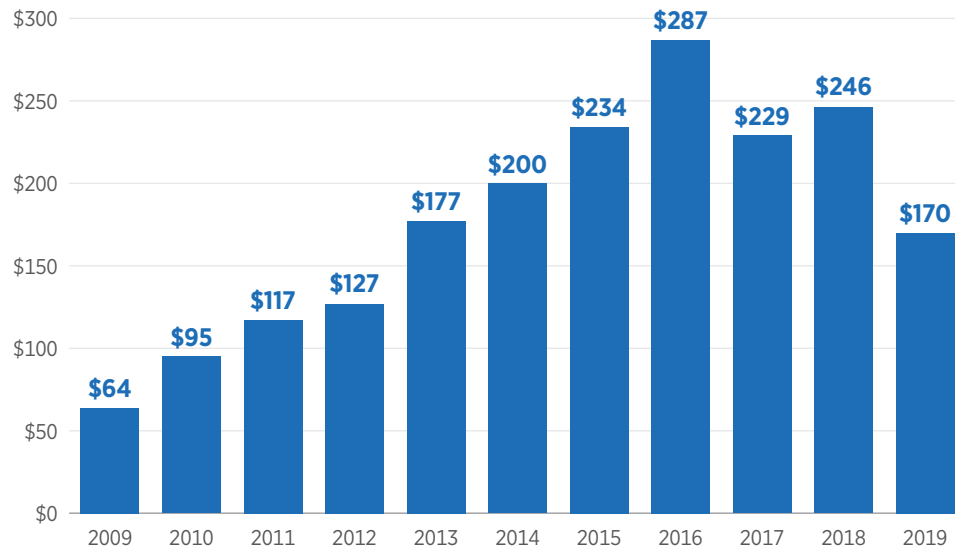
**Addresses America's Primary Threat.** At its heart, U.S.–China competition in the Pacific Islands region is a competition for access to the international commons and sovereign physical territory. America's strong position in the region has helped to keep the Pacific Islands safe and sovereign while ensuring the free flow of international trade. China, by contrast, seeks to break America's defensive architecture in the Pacific, which includes the FAS,<sup>56</sup> and establish regional hegemony.

In the words of one senior Chinese officer: "You take Hawaii east. We'll take Hawaii west."<sup>57</sup> The logic of dividing up the Pacific is sound to Beijing but unacceptable to the United States: If China establishes and enforces hegemony in the Western Pacific, it can restrict American freedom of navigation and the flow of trade while bullying and intimidating its neighbors—many of them U.S. partners and treaty allies.<sup>58</sup>

CHART 1

## China's Aid to Pacific Island Countries, 2009–2019

IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS



**NOTES:** Combined numbers for total spending on grants and loans. Data originally sourced from Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

**SOURCE:** Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific,” Council on Foreign Relations, May 4, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific> (accessed August 30, 2024).

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Nevertheless, China’s influence in the Pacific Islands region is expanding. Since July 2024, China has hosted leaders from Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.<sup>59</sup> In January 2024, Nauru severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and recognized China after Beijing offered Nauru “money far in excess of what Taiwan provides its allies.”<sup>60</sup> After hosting then–Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare in 2023, China and the Solomon Islands signed nine agreements, including a new policy cooperation deal that supports a “comprehensive strategic partnership.”<sup>61</sup> More broadly, since 2020, Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping has, on multiple occasions and often in one-on-one formats, met with heads of state of Fiji, the FSM, Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, among others.<sup>62</sup>

In 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with 17 Pacific Island leaders, which resulted in “52 bilateral cooperation outcomes, covering 15 cooperation areas,” and put forth a position paper outlining “15 principles and initiatives and 24 specific measures” between China and Pacific Island nations.<sup>63</sup> This

followed the leaking of a draft security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands that allowed Chinese “police, armed forces, military personnel and other law enforcement and armed forces” to “[maintain] social order” in the Solomon Islands, if requested by the government.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Wang’s “sweeping trade and security communique” between China and 10 Pacific Island states was rejected due to a lack of the Pacific governments’ consensus.<sup>65</sup> The rejection serves as an example of the Pacific Islands’ strong commitment to collective action, especially regarding security matters.<sup>66</sup>

If China’s actions and advances are left unchecked or unprioritized, however, it will be difficult for the U.S. to advance its national interests with increased threats to American safety and prosperity. Since Wang’s trip, for example, China has “increased [the] resources being pushed towards Pacific studies and Pacific languages” and is “giving a new method of policing [to the Pacific Islands], which is mostly about social control.”<sup>67</sup>

**Emphasizes Engagement.** This strategy considers engagement at bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral levels with the Pacific Islands as the primary means for achieving U.S. regional goals. American intentions and proposals in the region, unlike Chinese security pacts, must be transparent. This approach is intended to respect the “Pacific Way,” which respects Pacific Islands’ sovereignty,<sup>68</sup> and the values that uphold the PIF’s 2050 Strategy, including its emphasis on “open and honest relationships” that are based on “mutual accountability and respect.”<sup>69</sup>

As the framework is operationalized, America’s leaders will need to demonstrate this distinction through their commitments, interactions, and statements, as well as through consultations with Pacific Island states and leaders.<sup>70</sup> Rather than wield power in a pure Machiavellian manner, this strategy advocates for the United States to prioritize engagement and cooperation with the Pacific Islands, treating them as respected peers while acknowledging their core interests, thereby increasing the opportunities to produce agreements that advance U.S. interests.

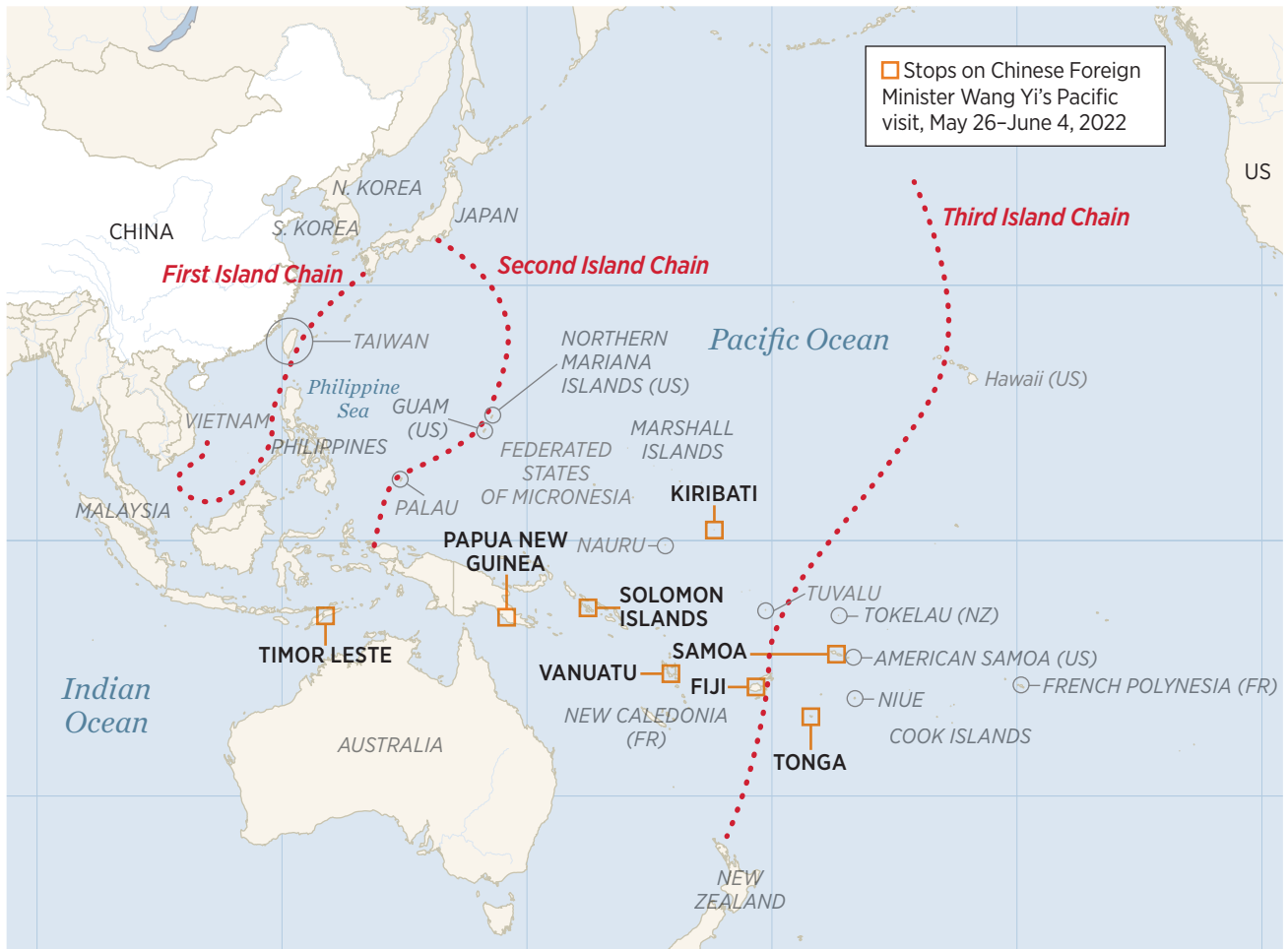
*A Subregional Approach.* While the PIF is the region’s most prominent political forum, having four Pacific subregions, Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Australasia, means that the U.S. should incorporate a subregional approach to its engagements with the Pacific Islands. Incorporating a subregional approach also allows the United States and its allies and partners to provide the most appropriate support to different subregions based on geographical proximity and cultural heritage, among other factors. Indeed, the United States should give the PIF, and other regional organizations, appropriate levels of attention, as the Pacific Islands typically place an emphasis on collective agreements and interests when possible. While



MAP 5


## China's Malign Activities Extend into the Pacific Islands

Chinese malign activities in the Pacific Islands include pressuring countries to downgrade diplomatic relations with Taiwan, weaponizing economic relations for political leverage, and attempting to replace democratic values with an authoritarian Chinese model.



**NOTES:** Nauru ceased diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and recognized China in January 2024. Timor Leste is generally considered as a part of Southeast Asia but has strong ties to the Pacific Islands, including Forum Observer status with the Pacific Islands Forum.

**SOURCE:** New Lines Institute, "A New U.S. Approach to the Pacific Islands Countries," October 13, 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/strategic-competition/a-new-u-s-approach-to-the-pacific-island-countries/> (accessed August 30, 2024).

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acknowledging the logistical hurdles that exist in visiting Pacific Island states, bilateral engagements, both inside and outside the United States, also offer important opportunities to learn about individual states' interests.

More specifically, Micronesia consists mostly of countries and U.S. territories that form the core of U.S. national security interests. This subregion includes CNMI, the FAS, and Guam, as well as Kiribati and Nauru. The subregion also has regional forums that should be incorporated into U.S. engagements, such as the Micronesian Presidential Summit, Micronesian Islands Forum, and U.S. Indo–Pacific Command’s (INDOPACOM) Joint Task Force Micronesia.

Melanesia is becoming a more contested subregion, with security developments within PNG and the Solomon Islands drawing significant U.S. and allied attention.<sup>71</sup> Polynesia includes American Samoa and Hawaii, which are home to American citizens, and possesses regionally important economic sectors, such as fishing. Australia and New Zealand, which are within the Australasian subregion (New Zealand can also be considered as part of Polynesia), are two of America’s primary Pacific allies and partners in both countering Chinese malign behaviors and supporting the Pacific Islands.

*Allies and Partners.* An important advantage that the United States has over China is its ability to collaborate with its network of regional allies and partners, many of which are PIF Dialogue Partners,<sup>72</sup> on Pacific Island initiatives. The Partners of the Blue Pacific (PBP) initiative, founded along with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom in 2022, serves as a regional mechanism for like-minded partners to “effectively and efficiently” streamline lines of engagement and investments between the Pacific Islands and countries around the world.<sup>73</sup>

More specifically, Australia and New Zealand are heavily engaged in the Pacific Islands, largely due to their geographical proximity and shared cultural ties. Announced during the 2024 PIF Forum Leaders Meeting in Tonga, Australia will provide \$400 million in funding for the Pacific Policing Initiative, a new initiative that will “meet law and order and internal security requirements” with police training centers and a “multi-country police capability” for crisis response.<sup>74</sup> Japan has increased its engagements and financial commitments to the Pacific Islands.<sup>75</sup>

There are also opportunities to collaborate with India, which has been expanding its activities in the Pacific Islands and has notable cultural ties with Fiji,<sup>76</sup> including a visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Papua New Guinea in May 2023.<sup>77</sup> Regional groupings, such as the Quad (a partnership consisting of the Australia, India, Japan, and the United States)<sup>78</sup> and the Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group (Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States), have also stepped up their involvement in the Pacific.<sup>79</sup> Other countries also have interest in more closely engaging the Pacific Islands, including Canada, the Republic of Korea, Southeast Asian states, and the United Kingdom.<sup>80</sup>

MAP 6

## The Four Subregions of Oceania



**NOTES:** Shading is approximate. Multiple definitions and interpretations concerning Oceania's geopolitical configurations exist. New Zealand can also be considered as a part of both Polynesia and Australasia. In September 2023, the United States recognized the Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign states and established diplomatic relations.

**SOURCES:** Thomas Lum, "The Pacific Islands," Congressional Research Service In Focus, January 25, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11208> (accessed August 30, 2024), and Heritage Foundation research.

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Therefore, while the U.S. should continue to nurture its bilateral relationships throughout the Pacific, it should not exclusively engage the Pacific Islands in a bilateral manner. Rather, when interests align with its allies and partners, it should maximize an advantage over China while sharing responsibilities and obligations. Whereas China is forced to practically act exclusively on its own in the region, the U.S. can leverage its partnerships to diversify financial commitments and resources, encourage more countries to be involved with the Pacific Islands, and enhance current relationships with allies and partners.

**Respects Sovereignty.** China's actions demonstrate a lack of respect for Pacific Island states, while the United States—and this strategy—places a strong emphasis on respecting Pacific Islands' sovereignty and interests.

Both countries share similar security interests in the region but deploy very different means in achieving their regional goals.<sup>81</sup> This is true in both practical and ideological terms.

Broadly speaking, the United States and its allies and partners assess China's approach to the Pacific Islands as malign, opportunistic, and extractive.<sup>82</sup> There are numerous examples of China violating the sovereignty of Pacific Island states or, at least, disrespecting sovereign states. To name a few:

- In 2023, former President of the Federated States of Micronesia David Panuelo published a letter detailing explicit examples of Chinese political warfare, including Chinese officials stalking him in Fiji, making “direct threats against [his] personal safety,” and coercing him to accept Chinese-made COVID vaccines.<sup>83</sup>
- In 2022, China invited private FSM citizens to formally represent the FSM in official government meetings with China—without FSM government approval or awareness.<sup>84</sup>
- In 2022, and likely before, Chinese fishing vessels entered FSM's exclusive economic zone, without notifying the government, and were “mapping [FSM's] maritime territory for potential resources, and mapping [FSM's] territory for submarine travel-paths.”<sup>85</sup>
- In 2021, Chinese government money was distributed to 39 out of 50 members of the Solomon Islands' parliament twice,<sup>86</sup> at which time the parliament's opposition leader accused former Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of being “in the service of a foreign power.”<sup>87</sup>

The United States does not perpetuate any of the practices listed above.<sup>88</sup> This strategy supports American-led and democratic values—many of the same values that, unlike China, many Pacific Islanders willingly hold true,<sup>89</sup> which present a reason to Pacific Islanders for why the U.S. would be a preferable partner over China.

*Freedom of Religion.* For example, both the U.S. and Pacific Islands strongly value the freedom of religion. In fact, the Pacific Islands includes one of the world's strongest concentrations of Christians in the world. In 2010, Pew Research Center found that four of the top 10 countries with the highest percentage of Christian populations were Pacific Islands, with nearly every state and territory above 90 percent.<sup>90</sup> PNG Prime Minister

Richard Marape’s warm embrace of Christianity, including his desire to enshrine Christianity in PNG’s constitution, “plays to a distinct U.S. advantage” to use “faith connection to bolster its PNG relationship” and as “a bridge” with the Pacific Islands that China “has no answer to.”<sup>91</sup>

Comparatively, China’s record in respecting religious freedom is abysmal. It has “[altered] religious scriptures and doctrines to conform to [the Chinese Communist Party’s Marxist] interpretation...demolished and forcibly modified Christian churches,” and “forced assimilation of local populations that threatened their religious and cultural identities.”<sup>92</sup>

*Environmental Transparency.* Furthermore, it is worth noting that on climate issues so important to the Pacific Islands, China’s record is also stunningly poor. China is the world’s largest producer of carbon-dioxide emissions, producing nearly one-third of the world’s total carbon-dioxide emissions.<sup>93</sup> In 2023, China “alone accounted for two-thirds of the world’s newly operating coal plants,”<sup>94</sup> as well as 96 percent of new coal power construction and 81 percent of announced projects.<sup>95</sup> In 2022, China was permitting two new coal power plants *per week*.<sup>96</sup> The significance is that while China may attempt to portray itself as a partner on climate change to the Pacific Islands,<sup>97</sup> it is purposefully hiding or misrepresenting its lamentable record while contributing to climate change more than any other single country.

*Freedom to Recognize Taiwan.* China’s actions reflect a great power with intentions to coerce smaller states into supporting the interests and values of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).<sup>98</sup> For a recent example, in August 2024 during the 53rd PIF Leaders Forum, China’s Pacific Ambassador Qian Bo protested the leaders’ communique that “reaffirmed the 1992 Leaders decision on relations with Taiwan/Republic of China” by stating the line’s inclusion “must be a mistake” and “there must be a correction on the text.”<sup>99</sup> Cook Islands’ Prime Minister and former PIF Secretariat Mark Brown told Qian that the PIF would “remove it” and “talk to [him] about it later.”<sup>100</sup> The line was ultimately removed in the communique’s final form. As demonstrated, if China can successfully mold Pacific relationships and international institutions to match its own interests and values, Pacific Islanders may risk losing some protections and freedoms they have enjoyed for decades.<sup>101</sup>

*Freedom of Expression.* In the Pacific, views on China are diverse. Regional capitals are aware of the growing leverage the U.S.–China competition has provided them; if the United States pushes too far or does not fairly consider their interests, it risks pushing them to opportunistically cooperate with China.<sup>102</sup> As former Secretary General of the PIF Henry Puna noted, “geopolitics is (also) an opportunity for us to leverage gain for our own benefits and our own priorities in our region.”<sup>103</sup>

Dame Meg Taylor, another former Secretary General of the PIF, rejects “the terms of the dilemma in which the Pacific is given a choice between a ‘China alternative’ and our traditional partners.”<sup>104</sup> Taylor places a particular emphasis on “access” to Chinese “markets, technology, financing, [and] infrastructure” because it provides an “opportunity to rectify” Pacific Islands’ limitations in “fully [engaging] in a globalised world.”<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, Taylor states that it is the “prerogative” of PIF members to “*leverage this situation for their national benefit*” while emphasizing that competition “also provides an unprecedented opportunity to position our region for the future and secure the wellbeing of the Blue Pacific.”<sup>106</sup>

Other leaders hold different perspectives toward China. Former President Panuelo, in a letter made available in 2023, warned that “FSM is an unwilling target of PRC-sponsored Political Warfare and Grey Zone activity.” The letter provides in-depth details on Chinese corrupt practices that directly violate FSM’s sovereignty and even discusses the feasibility of switching diplomatic relations from China to Taiwan.<sup>107</sup> Former President Panuelo’s shift is notable, as he “did not enter office in May 2019 with opposition to the [PRC]” and “saw the PRC as a friend.”<sup>108</sup> Palauan President Surangel Whipps, Jr. has asked for U.S. assistance to deter Chinese “unwanted activities” of conducting surveys in Palau’s exclusive economic zone, which he declares is “a violation of international rules-based order.”<sup>109</sup>

Ultimately, even if Pacific Islanders believe that the U.S. is engaging in the region *purely* to counter China, then this strategy contends that the U.S. is the net-preferable partner that is more willing to incorporate Pacific Island interests in its strategic thinking and both shares and defends many of their values. This is because China, at best, has the same intentions but without the respect for sovereignty and shared values and, at worst, intends to disrupt collective actions by Pacific states, restrict freedoms of Pacific Islanders, and infringe on Pacific Island sovereignty.

## Respecting National Interests

Some may argue that this strategy’s prioritization of U.S.–China competition, which results in a comparative reduction on the current emphasis on climate change, could be poorly received by the Pacific Islands, potentially damaging America’s reputation and mitigating the strategy’s overall effectiveness.<sup>110</sup> Nevertheless, the pragmatic approach advocated in this paper is the best way to support the interests of both the American and Pacific peoples.

Transparency about America's national security interests is preferable to concealing them because it best respects the Pacific Islands as sovereign states. While Pacific Islanders may not appreciate America's fixation on China and great power competition,<sup>111</sup> this focus is the single-most significant domestic driving force behind increased U.S. attention. It is the manner, whether one likes it or not, by which U.S. officials can justify the increased U.S. attention and resources needed in the Pacific Islands.

Legislative proposals, especially those requiring funding, may face significant difficulties in passing either chamber of Congress unless tied to China-related priorities. For example, a bipartisan letter, with 26 Senators' signatures, framed the renewal of \$7.1 billion worth of provisions of the COFA agreements as a "national security" effort to counter China's "active efforts to undermine Pacific Island nations' confidence in the United States" and "ensure [the United States], rather than a hostile nation to U.S. interests, [maintains] strategic control of the Pacific Ocean between Hawaii and the Philippines."<sup>112</sup> Clearly, to sustain *bipartisan* interest in allocating resources to the Pacific Islands, the U.S. government must focus on competition with China.

Importantly, this respect of national interests must be mutual. In practice, this means the U.S. must be prepared to partake in discussions on climate change as an element of engagement for America to be taken seriously in the region.<sup>113</sup> The Pacific Islands collectively consider climate change a matter of national security.<sup>114</sup> For example, the Pacific Island Forum's 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security supports an "expanded concept of security," with climate change representing "the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific."<sup>115</sup> In another example, in 2023, the PIF declared that "the statehood and sovereignty of Members of the [PIF] will continue" even if a country is submerged underwater.<sup>116</sup>

For Pacific Islanders, and especially small island states that are only a handful—literally, a handful—of meters above sea level, any realized or potential effects of climate change are legitimate threats.<sup>117</sup> Discussions about climate change also serve as a means for jobs, reliable energy, resilient infrastructure, and cultural preservation.<sup>118</sup> Many Pacific Island leaders have also emphasized their prioritization of climate change over geopolitical competition.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, independent of U.S. policymakers' attitudes to the risks, or lack thereof, that climate change poses, it will prove difficult for the United States to present itself as the Pacific Islands' preferred partner of choice if it ignores needs of the region.

In practice, the U.S. should be clear about its primary drivers of engagement, but that does not mean China must dominate all forms of engagement.<sup>120</sup> Rather, the U.S. must pursue a balance between its national

security concerns and opportunities to address other shared interests and concerns in the region. For their part, Pacific Islanders should recognize U.S. interests in the region extend beyond climate change and adopt both terminology and initiatives more focused on practical infrastructure and investments that help them to address “environmental resilience.”<sup>121</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

To implement an American strategy for the Pacific Islands, the U.S. will need to execute policies, initiatives, and engagements across multiple domains. To advance America’s vital national interests, the U.S. should:

- **Require an Annual Assessment to Congress on How Ongoing Pacific Islands Initiatives Are Directly Advancing America’s Vital National Interests.** This annual assessment, guided by U.S. national interests and regional objectives, will determine which initiatives should be continued and funded or possibly modified, while eliminating unnecessary initiatives. The assessment is an efficient tool to list all ongoing efforts in one place, provide transparency on ongoing initiatives, and encourage innovation of new ideas based on which projects are working and which may not be.

The assessment, produced as a written report, should be led by the Department of State due to the numerous functional overlaps from initiatives, with contributions from the Department of Defense (DOD) and National Security Council (NSC), in both unclassified and classified manners. The Global Fragility Act’s reporting requirements can serve as a useful model.<sup>122</sup> In addition, and with limited redundancies, the NSC should produce a classified internal assessment to ensure that executive departments and agencies are meeting an administration’s objectives for the Pacific Islands region.

- **Require Executive Branch Departments and Agencies with Vested Jurisdiction and Interests in the Pacific Islands to Establish or Appoint a Principal Responsible for Pacific Island–Related Affairs.** For example, the current National Security Council has a designated Director for the Pacific Islands and New Zealand portfolios, and the Department of State currently designates a Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for relations with Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands. Ensuring other key departments and agencies, such as



the Departments of Commerce<sup>123</sup> and Transportation,<sup>124</sup> have an identifiable senior principal on Pacific Island affairs, rather than assigning the portfolio to a China or Asia generalist, will streamline U.S. engagement efforts and responses to challenges or crises that may arise for the now 14 Pacific Island states the U.S. recognizes. These principals would also possess an understanding of Chinese “political warfare” methods that allow U.S. federal entities to better identify linkages between Chinese actions, across multiple domains, that are systematically designed to undermine U.S. influence and presence.<sup>125</sup>

- **Establish an Ambassador at Large or Special Envoy for the Pacific Islands.** Designating a particular Ambassador or Envoy who is fully and consistently engaged with the region would centralize America’s engagement efforts and directly report to the White House or State Department. The Ambassador or Envoy would be a senior, experienced, and respected individual that coordinates U.S. efforts throughout the region, thereby demonstrating long-term commitment to the region and generating accountability for U.S. proposals—both for Americans and Pacific Islanders.<sup>126</sup>

Establishing the position would likely be welcomed in the Pacific. For example, President Whipps, Jr., requested that the U.S. government establish a presidential envoy for COFA negotiations “who could ensure attention from top decisionmakers across the Executive branch.”<sup>127</sup> Ultimately, Ambassador Joseph Yun’s appointment as U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations proved critical for getting the COFA agreements finalized, with President Whipps, Jr., deeming Yun “irreplaceable.”<sup>128</sup>

- **Align Discretionary Foreign Assistance Spending with Indo–Pacific Priorities.** The Indo–Pacific consistently receives less than 10 percent of total U.S. foreign assistance each year.<sup>129</sup> To successfully implement all components within this strategy, Congress will need to allocate necessary financial resources. Examples of past discretionary foreign assistance that could have been better aligned with Indo–Pacific and regional objectives—and potentially more beneficial to U.S. interests—is assistance to the Palestinian people (\$500 million allocated between April 2021 and March 2022);<sup>130</sup> Afghanistan (\$1.1 billion allocated between August 2021 and September 2022);<sup>131</sup> and Venezuela (\$415 million allocated between fiscal years 2022 and 2023).<sup>132</sup>

- **Develop and Support Educational Opportunities and Programs that Can Help Educate and Train Both U.S. and Pacific Island Professionals.** The U.S. suffers from a talent gap of students and young professionals with knowledge of the Pacific Islands. The Fulbright Program offers grants to graduate students of South Pacific Island states to study in the United States and vice versa. As of now, the Fulbright Program offers three Open Study/Research Awards for U.S. students to study in the “South Pacific Island Nations”<sup>133</sup> and four English Teaching Assistant Awards in PNG, each as a 10-month program.<sup>134</sup>

To maximize U.S. interests and expand people-to-people exchanges, the Fulbright Program should reallocate additional awards to the South Pacific. The Peace Corps, which has recently returned to Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, should also provide support through educational volunteering.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, universities and public policy institutions such as think tanks should consider establishing scholarships or fellowships for Pacific Islanders to produce academic scholarship and develop people-to-people relationships within the United States.

- **Improve Messaging to Both Pacific and Domestic Audiences.** Many U.S. initiatives are unknown to Pacific Island citizens or to American and allied policymakers. China has a documented record of messaging its accomplishments directly to Pacific Islanders, often through the construction of physical structures with Chinese references on them. Ceding discourse power to China allows it to both tell China’s story and censor America’s story. The U.S. should add additional social media posts detailing victories, including on the ground photos and other U.S. support, in conjunction with public factsheets that are released by government entities, such as the State Department and DOD. These efforts should remind readers that America’s borders and citizenry extend into the Western Pacific through American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam.

To secure a safe, free, and open Indo–Pacific led by like-minded allies and partners, the U.S. should:

- **Consider Altering or Waiving Security Requirements, on a Case-By-Case Basis, for Potential New U.S. Embassy Constructions in the Pacific Islands.** The Secure Embassy Construction and

Counterterrorism Act of 1999 and the Omnibus Diplomatic Security and Antiterrorism Act of 1986 mandate important security requirements that protect U.S. diplomatic personnel and minimize security risks.<sup>136</sup> An unintended consequence, however, is that the requirements make it difficult to construct a U.S. embassy in some Pacific Islands that do not offer a site that could meet all necessary requirements. The Secretary of State, in consultation with the Diplomatic Security Service and other relevant offices, should consider waiving requirements when alternatives are deemed safe and necessary, such as perimeter distance and site selection criteria,<sup>137</sup> that prevent the U.S. from maintaining a physical, constant presence in the Pacific Islands. Separately, Congress should consider legislative amendments that would provide tiers of security requirements for countries that meet defined thresholds which would otherwise prohibit embassy construction. Kiribati, Nauru, and Niue are specific examples.

- **Invest in the Pacific Quad to Enforce Maritime Laws and Counter Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing.**

The Pacific Quad (Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States) should coordinate efforts, in conjunction with Pacific Islanders, on expanding capacity and forces to support common interests, such as countering illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing and training programs that support local enforcement and surveillance capabilities. For example, Operation Nasse, a three-month operation conducted by the Pacific Quad, investigated IUU fishing activity in and around Australia, the Cook Islands, Fiji, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, and Tonga.<sup>138</sup> The U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) contributed over 58 hours of flight time, sighted and analyzed 37 vessels, reported four potential Conservation and Management Measures violations, and provided 240 hours of analyst-to-analyst collaboration and training.<sup>139</sup>

- **Explore How the Primary Quad Grouping Can Be a Proactive Contributor to Pacific Island Regional Security and Initiatives.**

The primary Quad currently supports many environmental, technology, health, and infrastructure initiatives with the Pacific Islands.<sup>140</sup> To build on its current efforts, the Quad should produce an executable campaign plan, both for individual and collaborate initiatives, that supports common goals and maximizes respective strengths. For example, in coordination with Pacific Islands, the Quad could play a stronger role in supporting the expansion of maritime domain

awareness, enforcement of maritime laws with USCG support,<sup>141</sup> and physical infrastructure development.<sup>142</sup> A particular line of effort, with notable Japanese support, would be supporting MDA throughout the Pacific Islands that expands law enforcement capacities.<sup>143</sup>

- **Expand Regional Cooperation with India.** India has taken a strong interest in the Pacific Islands, building on the Forum for India–Pacific Islands Cooperation that began in 2014. Prime Minister Modi recently attended a summit in 2023 in PNG.<sup>144</sup> New Delhi’s “Act East Policy” can serve as a component for stronger U.S.–India collaboration in the Pacific Islands,<sup>145</sup> thereby encouraging additional investments into the region and achieving shared goals. Expanding cooperation also benefits the broader U.S.–India partnership, which continues to grow as one of America’s most important comprehensive partnerships to balance Chinese advances.<sup>146</sup>
- **Support Taiwanese Engagement in the Pacific Islands.** Palau, the RMI, and Tuvalu are among the few remaining countries to offer diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. With historical ties between Taiwan and the Pacific Islands dating back centuries—long before China became interested in Taiwan—the U.S. should support Taiwanese initiatives in the Pacific Islands to encourage Taiwan’s participation in diplomatic forums and demonstrate the benefits of working closely with Taiwan.
- **Close a Visa Loophole Actively Exploited by Chinese Nationals in CNMI.** CNMI is the only U.S. territory where Chinese nationals can legally enter on visa-free visits for up to 14 days. Chinese nationals have been documented illegally entering Guam from the CNMI. The U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands has prosecuted Chinese nationals for transporting illegal aliens,<sup>147</sup> illegal drug trafficking,<sup>148</sup> and selling U.S. driver’s licenses.<sup>149</sup> The Department of Homeland Security has the authority to close this loophole but has failed to do so.<sup>150</sup>

To maintain leadership, in close coordination with allies and partners, in regional security affairs, the U.S. should:

- **Fund INDOPACOM’s Unfunded Priorities List.** For fiscal year 2025, INDOPACOM requested \$11 billion in funded priorities, with \$430 million requested for Guam missile defense systems.<sup>151</sup> Of the

identified 44 areas, INDOPACOM requested “\$3 billion for [military construction], \$2.7 billion for procurement, \$2 billion for research, development, test and evaluation, \$1.2 billion for operations and maintenance and \$1.6 billion for classified programs.”<sup>152</sup> With China’s military increasingly modernizing and enhancing capabilities, supporting INDOPACOM’s requests will support U.S. deterrence, sustain America’s military leadership, and ensure the U.S. can win wars.<sup>153</sup>

- **Expand the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) for Non-Traditional Security Cooperation.** The PDI is designed to “focus resources on key military capabilities to deter China,” with “[enhanced] budgetary transparency and oversight,” and “reassure U.S. allies and partners” that the “American people are committed to defending U.S. interests in the Indo–Pacific.”<sup>154</sup> To better support the PDI’s goal of shoring up posture and logistical weak points,<sup>155</sup> Congress and the Department of Defense should increase PDI resource allocation to upgrading harbor facilities throughout the Pacific, such as those in PNG, and airfields.<sup>156</sup> This would be in line with INDOPACOM’s Investment Plan for Implementing the National Defense Strategy for fiscal years (FYs) 2022–2026. The plan proposes \$982 million for dispersal, training, and prepositioning facilities in Oceania and the Pacific Islands, and \$185 million for construction of the Tactical Multi-Mission Over-the-Horizon Radar system in Palu.<sup>157</sup>
- **Fund and Support the U.S. Coast Guard to Conduct Operations in the Pacific Islands.** The U.S. Coast Guard’s role in advancing U.S. interests and contributing to a safer Pacific is underrated. The USCG, for example, has proven essential in enforcing Pacific Island sovereignty<sup>158</sup> and seizing drugs across transnational drug transit routes,<sup>159</sup> as many Pacific Islands do not have standing militaries.<sup>160</sup> Within the USCG’s FY 2025 unfunded priorities list, around \$255 million relate to supporting operations and personnel in the Indo–Pacific.<sup>161</sup> With additional resources, the USCG can support its increased demands in the region, expand capacity to enforce maritime laws against IUU fishing, and support additional ship rider agreements with Pacific Island states. A particular emphasis should be placed on maintenance, sustainment, and personnel to ensure new USCG assets allocated to the region can maximize usage and effectiveness.

- **Explore How the FAS Could Factor into Indo–Pacific Military Contingencies.** It is likely that “[i]n case of a military contingency in the Indo–Pacific, such as a Chinese attack on Taiwan or a conflict on the Korean peninsula, the U.S. would require easy access and transit through the central Pacific, where the FAS serve as important staging grounds or, in a dire situation, a fallback location.”<sup>162</sup> With the FAS’s location in the central Pacific and military assets, the DOD should continue to conduct wargames, tabletop exercises, and other scenario exercises to better explore how the FAS could support U.S. military goals. Local security specialists should also participate, which could help advance the establishments of national security councils in all three FAS states.<sup>163</sup>
- **Consider Reestablishing A Permanent Presence of Civic Action Teams (CATs) Throughout the FAS.** In the 20th century, the CAT program was formed from battalions and specialized in “construction projects and support facilities for use by both military personnels and civilians.”<sup>164</sup> CATs have been engaged in the FAS since 1969, but since 2003, only one CAT program, in Palau, remains.<sup>165</sup> The U.S. Army’s CAT program in Palau focuses on “community construction projects, medical civic actions, community relations, WWII monument maintenance, emergency response, disaster relief and senior military official support.”<sup>166</sup>

The Secretary of Defense should reestablish a permanent presence of CATs through both the FSM and the RMI to support community-based and infrastructure projects.<sup>167</sup> The presence of the CAT team in Palau has supported higher wages,<sup>168</sup> improvements for local schools and churches, and mentorship programs that teach Palauans mechanics and professional skills.<sup>169</sup> In an interview with the U.S. Army, Palau’s former Chief of Staff Secilil Eldebechel said that “the Palauan people are very much appreciative for the fact that we have had this partnership for long.”<sup>170</sup>

- **Explore the Feasibility of New COFA Agreements or Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) in the Region, Including the Possibility of a “Grand Compact.”** The Compacts provide excellent security and economic benefits for both the U.S. and the FAS. Other Pacific Islands may be interested in pursuing similar arrangements, as shown by the recent Australia–Tuvalu Falepili Union, which is

a bilateral treaty providing Tuvalu a special visa arrangement and developmental assistance in exchange for favorable security provisions and access for Australia.<sup>171</sup> Kiribati's geography and possession of an airfield and ports makes it a potential state for a future Compact or DCA,<sup>172</sup> though challenges remain.<sup>173</sup> Australia and New Zealand may also be well suited to pursue compact-like agreements with their own comparative advantages, such as their proximity to the Pacific Islands.

A distant, though potential, option is the hypothetical proposal of a "Grand Compact for the Pacific," in which Australia, New Zealand, and the United States provide security, economic, immigration, and environmental benefits to Pacific Island states in exchange for defense rights and access.<sup>174</sup> Any compact proposal, whether for the entire region or for select interested states, must be mutually beneficial, focused on mutual interests, and based on respect and national sovereignty.<sup>175</sup>

To contribute to bilateral relationships and regional institutions that support national sovereignty and economic development, the U.S. should:

- **Plan for the U.S. President to Visit a Pacific Islands State and for More Frequent High-Level Visits by Senior Administration Officials.** Ideally, the President would visit a FAS country, given their unique relationship with America and the fact the U.S. is obligated to defend them if attacked. Surprisingly, no sitting U.S. President has ever visited a Pacific Island state—a disappointing fact that China has exploited. The U.S. must be physically present in the region.<sup>176</sup> Executive branch delegations with a senior Cabinet official, ideally including the Secretary of State, should follow suit and regularly incorporate Pacific Islands trips in their budgets and schedules, including trips to participate in regional forums, such as the PIF, in person. Two positive steps are Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell<sup>177</sup> and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield leading U.S. delegations to the PIF Leaders Meeting in August 2024 and November 2023, respectively.<sup>178</sup>
- **Propose and Complete Infrastructure Projects That Advance American Vital National Interests and Regional Objectives.** Despite the difficulties and structural challenges that exist for the U.S. to construct physical infrastructure, as well as how the U.S.

cannot outspend China in sheer dollar terms, America, along with its PBP members, should focus on select high-quality and high-impact projects that most directly impact the lives of Pacific Islanders. Physical infrastructure projects, especially those with relevance for U.S. military equities, should focus on airfields, ports, fuel storage, transmission, distribution, and seawalls, while soft infrastructure projects should focus on cybersecurity, telecommunications, and digital connectivity. For example, a grant from the U.S. Trade and Development Agency will modernize Palau's telecommunications network, which includes the Quad-endorsed deployment of the Open Radio Access Network.<sup>179</sup> Primary U.S. actors include the Development Finance Corporation, U.S. Agency for International Development, and public-private partnerships.

The U.S. can also leverage its positions in financial institutions, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, and Export-Import Bank to support projects that advance U.S. interests. Regulatory reforms should be considered that make it easier for U.S. actors to work with Pacific Islands, which include a mix of small island developing countries and middle-income countries with state-run enterprises.

- **Support Environmental Resilience and Management Efforts.** Prioritizing U.S. efforts on environmental support for the Pacific Islands demonstrates its sincerity and long-term commitment to the region. The United States and its partners should support research and development efforts on desalination and seawall storm surge control. As natural disasters and sea levels pose threats to the Pacific Islands, permanent efforts to develop environmental resilience and adaptation will contribute to a safer Pacific. Educational programs on resource management could be performed in conjunction.<sup>180</sup> Partnerships, such as with the U.S. National Park Service's Pacific Islands Invasive Plant Management Team,<sup>181</sup> can also support efforts to eliminate invasive species and strengthen local agriculture that could, ultimately, reduce high food import costs.<sup>182</sup>
- **Encourage Private Investment and Public-Private Partnerships into the Pacific Islands That Support National Economic and Local Business Development.** Although challenges exist,<sup>183</sup> an influx of capital into the Pacific Islands would go far in both improving



prosperity for Pacific Islanders and fostering long-term, fruitful partnerships between Pacific Islanders and Americans, along with allied and partnered business communities. Opportunities exist for innovative proposals. For example, the Republic of Korea–Pacific Islands Forum Cooperation Fund resulted in an initial grant of \$60,000 to six Pacific micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises, in support of an e-commerce grant facility, and the commitments to increasing trade flows from the Pacific Islands to South Korea and expanding business networks.<sup>184</sup>

Tourism is also a notable industry. The more Pacific Island nations can attract tourists around the world, the less reliant they will be on China—a vulnerability China has weaponized.<sup>185</sup> Investments could include sustainable support for small businesses to access grants or low-interest loans and produce authentic tourism products that are advertised to international airlines.<sup>186</sup> Tourism opportunities can also encourage airline industries to form new flight routes to the region, which would improve access to the region.<sup>187</sup>

- **Support U.S. States in Strengthening Relations with the Pacific Islands.** While a lot can be done at the federal level, U.S. states have an excellent opportunity to engage the Pacific Islands. For example, Honolulu, Hawaii, and Avarua, the capital of the Cook Islands, became sister cities through the “7 for 70” initiative led by the NSC, State Department, and Sister Cities International.<sup>188</sup> The U.S. intends to have at least seven sister-city agreements with Pacific Islands by 2026.<sup>189</sup>

To support private investments and activity, state-based business council groups should consider partnerships with Pacific Islands that could offer goods and services to U.S. state markets. Additionally, the DOD’s State Partnership Program (SPP) is managed by the National Guard Bureau and supports state national guards to provide trainings, disaster relief, leadership development, cyber defenses, and communication services to foreign nations.<sup>190</sup> As of August 2024, only five Pacific Island states had SPP partnerships: Fiji, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Tonga.<sup>191</sup> The SPP program should be expanded to other interested Pacific Island states.

- **Support Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and Religious Missionary Organizations That Can Contribute to Broader U.S.**

**Interests and Objectives.** Multiple U.S.-based NGOs and nonprofit institutions have strong expertise on the Pacific Islands region and are actively supporting projects that advance U.S. national interests and regional objectives. Organizations, such as the International Republican Institute,<sup>192</sup> the East–West Center,<sup>193</sup> and religious missionary groups have documented successes in engaging the region.<sup>194</sup> The more active such groups are in the region, backed by necessary financial support, the more avenues of cooperation, investments, and people-to-people exchanges exist that offer alternatives to federal programs.

- **Enhance Sports Exchanges and Diplomacy.** The U.S. Naval Academy rugby team’s recent travel to Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga for exhibition matches showcased the unifying power sports can bring to peoples from many nations.<sup>195</sup> America’s Armed Forces, universities, and major sports leagues should consider exchanges across a wide variety of sports, such as already-popular rugby and soccer, while sharing popular U.S. sports such as football and basketball. The State Department’s Sports Diplomacy programs should add additional Pacific Islands programs and dates, as well as expand opportunities for Pacific Islanders to participate in U.S.-based sports programs.<sup>196</sup> Doing so enhances cultural and people-to-people ties that improves U.S. reputation at a lower financial cost than other security or economic initiatives.
- **Increase Medical Services, Exchanges, and Training.** The visiting of Military Sealift Command hospital ship *UNNS Mercy* to the Solomon Islands allowed U.S. health care professionals to perform surgical care and clinical care while providing medical and community trainings.<sup>197</sup> Complications can occur, however, once U.S. medical personnel and equipment depart and patients have limited access to follow-up care.<sup>198</sup> Natural disasters, such as cyclones and floods, threaten the safety of health systems and structures, like hospitals, that further restricts the quantity and quality of available services at a given time.<sup>199</sup> The United States, in coordination with host nations, should increase the frequency and duration of medical visits to support host nation self-sufficiency.

More permanent “high-yield, low-cost initiatives” could include financial and personnel support for expanded human capacities throughout clinics and medical specialty care centers for more advanced

referrals.<sup>200</sup> One particular line of effort should focus on noncommunicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes, which “represent the single largest cause of premature mortality in the Pacific Islands.”<sup>201</sup> Universities and U.S. medical organizations should also consider partnerships in the Pacific Islands for educational purposes and community engagement.

- **Monitor the Economic Feasibility and Regional Perspectives Toward Deep-Seabed Mining Activity.** Deep-sea mining represents a policy matter that can prove divisive within the region,<sup>202</sup> thereby requiring the United States, even if has yet to reach a policy position, to closely track political developments both among PIF members and outside actors, like China. Separately, and to not miss the opportunity to shape international conversations on deep-sea mining, the United States—independent of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea—will need to assess if deep-sea mining activities by the Pacific Islands and within the region, should they progress, could support U.S. national interests and regional objectives.<sup>203</sup>

To minimize Chinese influence and activities that corrupt political institutions and threaten the democratic rights, freedoms, and well-being of Pacific Island people, the U.S. should:

- **Communicate, Through Government Social Media Channels and Policy Publications, Chinese Malign Behavior and Intentions in the Pacific Islands.** Shining light, through public means, on Chinese malign behaviors can be effective in educating Pacific Islanders of the risks that working with China entails. For example, in a February 2024 letter to the U.S. Senate, RMI President Hilda Heine warned that China wanted to “develop one of [its] atoll municipalities” on the condition that “it were granted autonomy from [the] national government,” reflecting a broader Chinese willingness to challenge and disrespect RMI’s sovereignty.<sup>204</sup>

In another example, Chinese nationals have proliferated illicit drug trades, including fentanyl, through Fiji, which result in drugs entering the United States and Australia, among other states.<sup>205</sup> One successful example of using tools to communicate Chinese malign behavior is Stanford University’s SeaLight, a maritime transparency initiative that exposes illegal Chinese actions in the South China Sea.<sup>206</sup> As

intelligence, education, and social media campaigns on TikTok<sup>207</sup> and Huawei<sup>208</sup> have made China's malign behavior more publicly available and visible, countries may be less willing to cooperate with China.

- **Remain Vigilant About Chinese Proposals That Could Compromise Pacific Island Security and U.S. Interests and, if Possible, Block Them.** China's history of promising security and policing agreements in the Pacific Islands is well-documented. In addition to China's willingness to compromise Pacific states, the agreements can also risk U.S. and allied security interests. The State Department, its regional embassies, and the intelligence community should be vigilant about Chinese diplomatic efforts and prepare convincing cases for why problematic Chinese proposals should be rejected. To support trust-building initiatives and convince leaders to reconsider against Chinese proposals, the U.S. would support a stronger ground presence that demonstrates a genuine care and respect for Pacific Island sovereignty and well-being through select intelligence briefings and people-to-people relationship building.
- **Support Journalism Fellowships and Local Journalism Capacity in Pacific Islands.** The United States, in collaboration with Pacific Islands, could consider the merits of supporting additional journalism fellowships and programs, as well as encourage federally funded programs, such as Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, to dedicate more resources to the Pacific Islands. Local journalism can uplift Pacific voices, allowing Pacific Islands to share their stories, perspectives, and concerns to an international audience that is growing more familiar with the region.

Supporting local journalists can also hold China accountable and shine light on its corrupt and infiltrative actions throughout the Pacific Islands while ensuring they become less susceptible to Chinese corruption, unlike the *Solomon Star* newspaper.<sup>209</sup> The University of the South Pacific has long supported Pacific journalism, most recently with its 2024 Pacific Media Conference.<sup>210</sup> The East–West Center and Report for the World recently selected six Pacific Island journalists for its Financial Investigative Reporting and Mentorship Initiative.<sup>211</sup> American universities should also consider collaborative programs and student exchanges.

## Conclusion

As a Pacific state with Pacific borders and an escalating rivalry with China, the United States must continue to partner with the Pacific Islands in new, innovative ways. This national strategy for the Pacific Islands will lead the way forward for American engagement in the region. The approach recommended in the *Special Report* is clear-eyed about putting American interests and objectives in the Pacific Islands first while prioritizing engagement with the Pacific Islands in areas of common interest.

In addition, this paper illustrates why China poses such a significant threat to both U.S. and regional interests, including how China seeks to usurp the values many Pacific Islanders hold true and replace them with its own authoritarian vision for the region. If successfully executed, this national strategy will advance a more secure, prosperous, and free region for both Americans and Pacific Islanders alike.

## Endnotes

1. This *Special Report* was reviewed by and received feedback from more than one dozen scholars, both within and outside the United States, with a variety of—and even differing—perspectives and experiences.
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4. Charles Edel and Kathryn Paik, “U.S. Leadership in the Pacific Is at Risk,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 5, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-leadership-pacific-risk> (accessed August 22, 2024).
5. To illustrate, convincing Members of Congress and executive agencies to allocate attention and assistance to East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East has been easier than generating consideration and aid to the Pacific Islands. Of course, the United States has security and economic interests in these regions. Some elements of these interests were and are tied to the legacy of the Cold War, wherein the U.S. and former Soviet Union actively competed for influence and access across continents. These regions, as well as Latin America, were and still are considered “competitive” between great powers for access and influence. Comparatively, U.S. strategists did not consider the Pacific Islands to be a decisive theater, thereby reducing (though certainly not eliminating) their comparative importance to U.S. strategic thinking and resource allocation. For example, following the Soviet Union and Kiribati signing a commercial fishing agreement in 1985, the United States and regional partners ratified the South Pacific Tuna Treaty in 1988. See “Soviet Fishing Pact Stirs South Pacific Fears,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/10/world/soviet-fishing-pact-stirs-south-pacific-fears.html> (accessed August 7, 2024). Additionally, the Compacts of Free Association were also initiated during the 1980s.
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11. U.S. Code 48, Ch. 18, § 311(b)(1) (emphasis added).
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36. U.S. Department of State, *Report to Congress on Voting Practices of U.N. Members for 2022*, March 31, 2023, p. 6, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Report-Voting-Practices-of-UN-Members-2022.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2024).
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38. Pacific Islands Forum, “Partnerships,” <https://forumsec.org/partnerships> (accessed August 22, 2024).

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44. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.
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