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VISIONS & VOICES

Abandonment of Soft Power, Neglect of Climate Change, and the Shifting Geopolitical Landscape of the Pacific

By Gabriel Otis



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The start of President Donald Trump's second term has been turbulent. In just a few months, the United States' position in the Pacific has sadly been weakened, widening the arena for strategic competition that inevitably puts peace and security in jeopardy. Needless to explain, due to their location, Pacific Island nations are adversely affected by these types of geopolitical dynamics. In a world that is hyper focused towards conflicts in Europe, the Blue Pacific's unique leadership and regionalism has been overlooked and, frankly, taken for granted.

U.S. President Joe Biden made strides in increasing U.S. engagement and interest in the Pacific through a tripling of aid to \$600 million, the signing of the U.S.-Pacific Partnership (while contentious, showed a good-faith effort to engage), the establishment of three U.S. missions in the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, and a front and center focus on the risks and mitigation of climate change.¹ Many of these initiatives showed an understanding, and willingness to be part of the "the Pacific Way."²

¹ Rory Medcalf, "Looking Back at the Biden Administration's Pacific Strategy," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/looking-back-biden-administration-s-pacific-strategy>.

² Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, August 5, 2022, <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>.

In sharp contrast, the current administration's abandonment of soft power combined with the neglect of the most pressing security concern the Blue Pacific Continent faces, climate change, are two blunders that members of the Pacific family will not forget, and China will not ignore. However, President Trump has a tested track record of being a good Pacific partner during his first term. By restoring soft power, acknowledging and acting on climate change, and pursuing a consensus-based, inclusive approach to engaging in the region, the U.S. can once again be a member of the Pacific family.

Abandonment of Soft Power

Collective action, working together, and promoting joint aspirations and priorities are at the heart of regionalism in the Blue Pacific. To ensure harmony, peace, and security, soft power is a must. Through a range of cultural and educational exchanges, and most importantly, foreign assistance and aid, the U.S. has historically forged strong partnerships. This contribution to Pacific regionalism and leadership was in its purest form, respecting collective action while simultaneously showing willingness to "address the increasingly complex geopolitical environment and to respond to emerging issues."³ Soft power enables this aspiration to materialize.

The cuts to and dismantling of USAID have already been felt in the regions of the world that need U.S. support the most.⁴ To be brief, USAID in the Blue Pacific Continent is a beacon of American soft power that enables its partners to tackle the most difficult challenges within their borders. These challenges include fighting deadly diseases, addressing critical infrastructure through economic development projects, and curbing the impacts of the climate crisis.

The U.S. is the 5th largest aid provider to the Blue Pacific Continent and thankfully Compact of Free Association (COFA) states, Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, will largely be unaffected by this dangerous policy decision due to the special relationship they share with this U.S. According to the Lowy Institute, 80%, or US \$249 million annually, of U.S. Pacific aid goes to COFA states.⁵ Prior to the freeze, it is estimated that there were over 100 projects, directly employing close to 600 people.⁶ However, the organizations funded by USAID employ far more.

While the horizon is unpredictable, the precedent that this sets, anxiety that it causes in communities across the Blue Pacific

Continent, and the image it paints of a retreating U.S. have rippling effects.

It would be unwise for the Trump Administration to have a one-track mind on its relationship with Pacific partners. To be clear, the security threat that China poses is pressing, which is why a retreat of soft power is even more dangerous. Soft power is crucial in walking the tight rope of respecting partner's national sovereignty while encouraging united action for the collective good of the region.

Neglect of Climate Change

Since the signing of the *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* in 2018, it has been the collective understanding that climate change is the single greatest threat to the security of the Blue Pacific Continent.⁷ Neglecting climate change is neglecting the peace and security of the region. The effects of climate change are vast and dangerous, including rising sea levels, natural disasters, and internal displacement.

In the first few months of the new administration, we have witnessed a retreat from international climate agreements such as the Paris Agreement and executive orders targeting progress that has been made on climate commitments. Both moves have signaled to the Pacific that the U.S. has vastly different interpretations of security challenges. In the Pacific, words and rhetoric matter. That is why characterizing climate change as a "hoax" is harmful to the peace, security, and trust of the Pacific.

Regardless of politics or opinion, climate change is scientifically an existential threat to the security of the Pacific. To contribute to the peace and security of the region and contribute to the leadership of the region, one must respect and not doubt this fact.

Consequences

The one actor that sees this disengagement as opportunity is China. Security pacts are already forming between China and key Pacific partners including the Solomon Islands and the Cook Islands.⁸ Combined with the widening gap in foreign assistance from the U.S. and neglect of the key existential security concern of the region, China is in a prime position to deepen ties with Pacific Island countries by providing additional economic support which from the Pacific's perspective would ensure the safety, security, and prosperity of the region. In a Pacific Island Forum (PIF) meeting in

³ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat. *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent*. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, August 5, 2022. <https://forumsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022-1.pdf>.

⁴ Euan Graham, "Aid on Ice: How Trump's Freeze Hurts the Pacific and Southeast Asia," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 2019, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/aid-ice-how-trump-s-freeze-hurts-pacific-southeast-asia>.

⁵ Lowy Institute, *Pacific Aid Map*, 2025, <https://pacificaidmap.loyyinstitute.org/map/?donors=united-states>.

⁶ Hawai'i Public Radio, "Pacific News Minute: Dismantling of USAID," *Hawai'i Public Radio*, February 19, 2025, <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/pacific-news-minute/2025-02-19/pacific-news-minute-dismantling-of-usaid>.

⁷ Pacific Islands Forum. *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*. Nauru: Pacific Islands Forum, September 5, 2018. <https://www.forumsec.org/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>.

⁸ Voice of America, "China, Cook Islands Sign Strategic Partnership Pact," *Voice of America News*, 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-cook-islands-sign-strategic-partnership-pact/7976033.html>.

March 2025, the secretary general of PIF stated that "member countries must work together and identify other alternatives for cooperation," in response to the United States' freeze on development assistance around the world.⁹

The U.S. disengagement is placing strain on traditional partners in the region to partially fill the gap from lack of USAID funds. For example, Australia has added an additional \$135 million for development spending in its latest budget.¹⁰ While this is better than China filling the gap, Australia is already the largest aid provider by far in the region and arguably is already doing its part. The U.S. needs to do its part, as well.

The abandonment of soft power and neglect of climate change are two aspects of the Trump Administration which are directly counter to the values and drivers of leadership and regionalism in the Pacific that ensures the peace and security.

What's Next

The first Trump Administration has a proven track record of being a reliable Pacific partner. However, the current U.S. policy direction is being weakened by a neglect of both soft power and the refusal of acknowledging the severe impact of climate change. Three actions

must happen to reposition the U.S. as a leader in the Pacific and a valued member of this diverse regional architecture. First, soft power must be put back at the center of engagement with the region. Second, climate change must not only be acknowledged as the single greatest security threat but respected and acted upon by the U.S. Finally, the same commitments given to Compacts of Free Association Agreements (COFA) should be expanded further to truly represent inclusive leadership, which is at the center of the *2050 Strategy for the Pacific Blue Continent*.

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⁹ Radio New Zealand, "Pacific's Top Diplomat Urges New Cooperation Amid US Aid Freeze," *RNZ International*, 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/545325/pacific-s-top-diplomat-urges-new-cooperation-amid-us-aid-freeze>.

¹⁰ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Federal Budget: Foreign Aid Spending," *ABC News*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-26/federal-budget-foreign-aid-spending/105095584>.