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VISIONS & VOICES

Pacific Islands Security In the Era of US-China Competition

By Alex Vu and Nanami Nishimoto



Chuuk Lagoon, Weno, Federated States of Micronesia. Photo courtesy of Marek Okon via [Unsplash](#).

Situated between the United States and China, the Pacific Islands are a crucial ally to establish strategic deterrence against China. The single greatest threat to the Pacific Islands is climate change, which risks both the prosperity of these countries and US national security interests in the region. In line with the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent¹ established by the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat in 2022, the United States should address this national security threat by increasing diplomatic missions and military engagements.

Climate Security in the Pacific Islands Region

Climate change threatens the existence and livelihoods of the Pacific Islands, putting the United States' strategic partnerships at risk if there is a failure to collaborate on mitigating this crisis. Despite contributing less than 0.03 percent² of global greenhouse gas emissions, the Pacific Islands are disproportionately susceptible to the impacts of climate change. According to NASA's Sea Level Change Team,³ Pacific Island states such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Fiji will experience at least 15 centimeters (6 inches) of sea level rise in

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

² Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, "Low Carbon Development Shared the Pacific Island Way," *SPREP*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.sprep.org/news/low-carbon-development-shared-the-pacific-island-way>.

³ NASA Sea Level Change Team, "Overview," *NASA Sea Level Portal*, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://sealevel.nasa.gov/science-team/overview/>.

the next 30 years—regardless of efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.⁴ An August 2024 report published by the United Nations estimates that 90% of Pacific Islanders live within 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) of the coastline and most Pacific Islands have over 50% of their infrastructure within 500 meters (1640.42 feet) of the coast.⁵ In Kiribati, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, 95% of infrastructure is located no more than 10 meters above the mean sea level, making these countries in the western region of the tropical Pacific especially vulnerable to sea level rise. For Pacific Island communities, climate change is not merely a matter of disaster risk reduction or national security; it is an existential threat.

Recognizing the strategic and humanitarian implications of climate change, the United States has recently engaged in efforts to strengthen the US-Pacific Islands partnership amid growing Chinese influence in the region. In 2019, Trump invited the presidents from the Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia to the White House for the first time in history, underscoring the importance of these Western Pacific states to the United States.⁶ The special relationship between the United States and these three Freely Associated States (FAS) is outlined under the Compacts of Free Association (COFA), which grants their citizens certain rights and protections while recognizing their sovereignty.⁷ These agreements were renewed in 2023, providing the three countries with economic assistance for another 20 years until 2043. In addition to hosting two Pacific Islands Forum Summits and opening new embassies, the Biden administration addressed the Pacific Islands' climate resilience and need for disaster preparedness through USAID climate financing projects.⁸ As of March 2025, the second Trump administration has not announced policies on the Pacific Islands, which likely need to be reformed due to the dismantling of USAID.

China's Increased Involvement in the Pacific Islands

China has actively sought to establish and deepen diplomatic ties with Pacific Island nations. In 2019, both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati shifted their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China,⁹ leading to a series of economic and security agreements with China.

Additionally, in May 2022, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi embarked on a tour of Pacific nations, aiming to sign a regional agreement encompassing law enforcement cooperation, cybersecurity, and trade.¹⁰ Although a comprehensive multilateral agreement was not reached, China succeeded in signing multiple bilateral agreements with individual Pacific countries.

China has also become a principal donor and investor in the Pacific Islands, funding infrastructure projects such as roads, clinics, schools, and stadiums. Between 2003 and 2012,¹¹ Chinese enterprises invested over \$700 million in Pacific Island countries, with Papua New Guinea, Samoa, and Fiji being major recipients. In August 2022, the Solomon Islands secured a \$66 million loan from China to have Huawei construct 161 mobile phone towers, highlighting China's growing economic footprint in the region.

China's increasing police involvement in the Pacific Islands has raised concerns among Western nations. In March 2022, China and the Solomon Islands drafted a security pact allowing China to assist local law enforcement agencies, especially in protecting Chinese investments.¹² In response, Australia announced a \$118 million investment to fund and train new recruits for the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force, aiming to reduce the Solomon Islands' reliance on Chinese support.¹³ China has also intensified illegal fishing activities in the area, threatening the local ecosystem and endangering the lives of fishermen.¹⁴

Policy Suggestions for the United States

Given the role of climate change as the main security threat to the Pacific Islands, the United States should maintain and increase efforts in this arena to safeguard US national security interests. Building trust should be the number one priority to any US administration, ensuring that Pacific Islands leaders recognize the United States as a committed and trustworthy partner in the region. The second Trump administration should build upon developments from the first administration and invite the heads of Pacific Island governments to the United States for official visits.

⁴ NASA, "NASA Analysis Shows Irreversible Sea Level Rise for Pacific Islands," *NASA*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.nasa.gov/earth/climate-change/nasa-analysis-shows-irreversible-sea-level-rise-for-pacific-islands/>.

⁵ United Nations, *Surging Seas in a Warming World*, August 26, 2024, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/slr_technical_brief_26_aug_2024.pdf.

⁶ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Interior Secretary Bernhardt Applauds President Trump for Historic Meeting of Presidents," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-secretary-bernhardt-applauds-president-trump-historic-meeting-presidents>.

⁷ U.S. Department of the Interior, "Interior Secretary Bernhardt Applauds President Trump for Historic Meeting of Presidents," *U.S. Department of the Interior*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.doi.gov/pressreleases/interior-secretary-bernhardt-applauds-president-trump-historic-meeting-presidents>.

⁸ The White House, "Following Through on the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership 53rd Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders Meeting in Nuku'alofa, Tonga August 26-30, 2024," August 27, 2024, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/08/27/fact-sheet-following-through-on-the-u-s-pacific-islands-partnership-53rd-pacific-islands-forum-pif-leaders-meeting-in-nukualofa-tonga-august-26-30-2024/>.

⁹ Al Jazeera, "China, Solomon Islands Establish Diplomatic Relations," *Al Jazeera*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/21/china-solomon-islands-establish-diplomatic-relations>.

Nick Perry, "China's Foreign Minister Starts Pacific Tour in the Solomons," *Associated Press*, May 26, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/asia-pacific-wang-yi-penny-wong-beijing-china-6e380f9942ca0de5c7189fb16f4c274b>.

¹¹ Denghua Zhang, "China's Influence as a Pacific Donor," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, September 4, 2020, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-influence-pacific-donor>.

¹² Patricia M. Kim, "Does the China-Solomon Islands Security Pact Portend a More Interventionist Beijing?" *Brookings Institution*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/does-the-china-solomon-islands-security-pact-portend-a-more-interventionist-beijing/>.

¹³ Associated Press, "Australia Announces \$118 Million Deal to Enhance Policing in Solomon Islands," *AP News*, December 20, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/australia-solomon-islands-police-china-bfde14238c78a99fe9559011f77af8ed>.

¹⁴ Needham, Kirsty, and Lucy Craymer. "US Coast Guard Says Boardings of Chinese Fishing Vessels in South Pacific Legal." *Reuters*, April 10, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-coast-guard-says-boardings-chinese-fishing-vessels-south-pacific-legal-2024-04-10/>.

Additionally, the United States must increase diplomatic engagement in the Pacific Islands. Reports from the Lowy Institute¹⁵ show that the United States is trailing behind China in the number of diplomatic outposts and diplomats, thus limiting the US' ability to effectively engage with the Pacific Islands. In 2023, the United States reopened its embassy in the Solomon Islands after a bilateral security pact was signed between China and the Solomon Islands in early 2022.¹⁶ The United States should consider opening new diplomatic establishments in underserved islands such as Kiribati.¹⁷

To ensure the Pacific Islands' security, the United States should increase investments toward infrastructure, education, and healthcare. In March 2025, \$9 million in funding for the Pacific Resilience Facility was reinstated,¹⁸ highlighting continued support for climate security in the Pacific Islands. The US should coordinate with allies such as Australia and New Zealand, particularly given Australia's role as the Pacific Islands' largest donor.¹⁹

Aside from international aid, military cooperation through the Pacific Partnership Missions²⁰ or the installation of TACMOR facility²¹ could also bring vital infrastructure, healthcare, and disaster relief assets into the islands. The United States Coast Guard plays an especially important role in increasing US presence in the region, safeguarding the populations against natural disasters and deterring China's expansive and illegal gray-zone activities in the region. Agreements such as the Shiprider Agreements²² should be

increased to coincide with the Coast Guard presence in these waters.

To protect both regional stability and US interests, the United States must deepen climate-focused engagement, expand diplomatic ties, and build trust with Pacific leaders. The Pacific Islands, located primarily between the second and third island chains,²³ hold significant geostrategic value in deterring future conflict with China. A committed, cooperative approach will ensure the Pacific remains resilient and aligned with shared values.

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¹⁵ Lowy Institute, "Key Findings," *2024 Global Diplomacy Index*, accessed March 28, 2025, https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/key_findings.

¹⁶ Rod McGuirk, "Solomon Islands Leader Rules Out China Base in His Country," *Associated Press*, October 6, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/china-australia-canberra-solomon-islands-government-and-politics-0ac755c18daa8e6fb81579d2216dfc63>.

¹⁷ Lice Movono, "US Funding for Pacific Resilience Facility Survives Aid Cuts," *ABC Pacific*, March 17, 2025, <https://www.abc.net.au/pacific/programs/pacificbeat/pifsaidcut/105064870>.

¹⁸ Newsdesk, "US Reinstates \$9 Million for Pacific Climate Fund amid Wider Aid Cuts," *Talanoa o Tonga*, March 20, 2025, <https://talanoaotonga.to/us-reinstates-9-million-for-pacific-climate-fund-amid-wider-aid-cuts/>.

¹⁹ Harry Pearl, "Tonga, Micronesia Get Largest Increases in Australia's Pacific Aid Budget," *Radio Free Asia*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.rfa.org/english/pacific/2025/03/27/australia-foreign-aid/>.

²⁰ Gavin Arnoldhendershot, "20th Pacific Partnership Mission Prepares to Enhance Disaster Response Capabilities, Strengthen Ties in Indo-Pacific," *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, July 25, 2024, <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/3852070/20th-pacific-partnership-mission-prepares-to-enhance-disaster-response-capabili/>.

²¹ Tom Abke, "Palau-U.S. Defense Projects Boost Air Domain Awareness, Operational Flexibility," *Indo-Pacific Defense FORUM*, August 7, 2024, <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/08/palau-u-s-defense-projects-boost-air-domain-awareness-operational-flexibility/>.

²² Ray Joseph, "Strengthening Pacific Security: US Shiprider Agreements," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/02/strengthening-pacific-security-us-shiprider-agreements/>.

²³ Andrew Harding, "The Pacific Pivot: An American Strategy for the Pacific Islands," *The Heritage Foundation*, October 1, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/china/report/the-pacific-pivot-american-strategy-the-pacific-islands>.