**Recentering the Pacific Partnership Strategy:**

**Hawaii’s Role in Bridging the United States and Pacific Island Countries**

**INTRODUCTION**

In September 2022, President Joe Biden’s Administration launched the Pacific Partnership Strategy (PPS), the United States’ first-ever national strategy dedicated to American engagement with all Pacific Island Countries (PICs), at the inaugural U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, D.C.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Unlike the strategies of previous administrations, with Presidents Barack Obama’s *Pivot to Asia* and Donald Trump’s *Pacific Pledge*, the PPS underscores collaborative action between the U.S. and PICs to combat climate change, maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, and ensure the sovereignty and security of PICs. The PPS is broken down into four complementary and overlapping objectives: a strong U.S.-Pacific Islands partnership; a united Pacific Island region connected with the world; a resilient Pacific prepared for the climate crisis and other 21st-century challenges; and empowered and prosperous Pacific Islanders.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Although, in recent years, geopolitical rivalry with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has underpinned much of America’s Indo-Pacific Strategies and regional partnerships, this paper recognizes the limits of Washington’s persistent framing of U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands Region (PIR) in terms of strategic competition with China towards the development of a meaningful U.S.-Pacific Partnership and elevation of Pacific Islander (PI) voices.

I argue that Hawaii plays an important role in implementing the PPS, spearheading Washington’s commitment, and strengthening the U.S.-Pacific Islands partnership. Enlisting the support of Hawaii’s local institutions and PI diaspora can pave the way for the empowerment of all PIs. Home to numerous institutions dedicated to combatting both traditional and nontraditional security challenges and fostering regional integration, Hawaii is well-positioned and equipped to carry out and maintain the long-term goals of the PPS, while mitigating the “tyranny of distance” between the U.S. and PIR.

**US-CHINA GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION**

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “For years, the Pacific Island region suffered from strategic neglect from Washington and others, and Beijing has stepped into that strategic vacuum, moving to increase its influence and project its power across the region.”[[3]](#footnote-3) China’s decades-long engagement in the Pacific Islands (PI) is embodied in various approaches.

Diplomatically, the PRC has normalized high-level visits, encouraged China-PIC exchange via scholarships for PIs, and increased its presence in Pacific regional fora (e.g., Official Dialogue Partner of the Pacific Islands Forum).[[4]](#footnote-4) The establishment of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006, expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and infrastructure projects to 10 PICs, and provision of financial assistance characterize China’s economic impact throughout the Pacific region. Reactions towards China’s economic presence in the region, however, have been divided. Although, the PRC often promotes PI investments as “win-win” cooperation deals and an alternative to aid from former colonial powers, local concerns say otherwise, citing BRI projects’ disregard for environmental and labor standards, lack of return on investment, and entrapment of small-scale economies under China’s “debt-trap diplomacy.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Although China’s hard power in the Pacific is not as extensive, U.S. fears of a growing Chinese military influence in Oceania peaked when Xi Jinping signed a security cooperation agreement with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of the Solomon Islands in April 2022.[[6]](#footnote-6) China’s security ambitions were later revealed within Beijing’s “China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision,” which sought to integrate economic with security cooperation and create a competing security architecture grounded by China-PI bilateralism.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In contrast, U.S. engagement with the PICs, over the last decade, has been underwhelming, largely driven by the following goals: the preservation of its security arrangements with the Compact of Free Association (COFA) States, military sphere of influence in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Region (USAPR), and Western-aligned regionalism to counter Chinese influence.[[8]](#footnote-8) Prior to 2022, America’s high-level (but inconsistent) visits to, exclusive “hard-power” maritime security agreements with, and faltering provision of aid towards the PICs have damaged Washington’s credibility and trust throughout the region.[[9]](#footnote-9) U.S. Pacific policies were primarily reactionary, designed to undermine Chinese influence rather than address the priorities of PICs.

The Indo-Pacific Strategies launched by the Trump (2019) and Biden (2022) Administrations received mixed (overwhelmingly negative) reviews from PICs, criticizing America’s renewed engagement with the PIR as a reactionary, strategic vehicle to curb Chinese regional influence. Pacific Island leaders have voiced concerns about U.S.-China strategic competition in turning the region into a theater of strategic competition that disrupts and undermines Pacific priorities, particularly regionalism and quest for self-determination.[[10]](#footnote-10) It has been argued that, “the more intense the U.S.-China competition grows, the more difficult it will be for the Pacific leaders to exercise agency, preserve their independence, and avoid committing to one side or the other.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Fiji’s former Ambassador to the U.S., Naivakarurubulavu Solo Mara, stated that Pacific Islanders have the impression that they “have been tacked on at the end” as an “afterthought.”[[12]](#footnote-12) These Strategies fail to align security priorities with that of PICs, where Pacific Islanders view the climate crisis and sustainable livelihoods as their core priorities, not U.S. competition with China.

While China’s growing footprint continues to drive the Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy—demonstrated through the creation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, and Partners in the Blue Pacific—the launch of the Pacific Partnership Strategy reflected a change in Washington’s routine approach towards the region. By adopting the language of the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, identifying PICs as important partners, and recognizing the existential threat of nontraditional security challenges (i.e., climate change, health insecurity, IUU fishing), the U.S. is in a better position to implement the PPS going forward.

1. Gordon Peake and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, “Six Months In, Where Does the U.S.’ Pacific Islands Strategy Stand?” *United States Institute of Peace,* April 23, 2023. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/six-months-where-does-us-pacific-islands-strategystand#:~:text=The%20strategy%20lists%20four%20main%20objectives%3A%20%>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. White House, Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States (Washington, D.C., September 2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Charles Edel, Christopher Johnstone, and Gregory Poling, “White House Unveils Pacific Islands Strategy at Historic Summit,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies,* September 30, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/white-house-unveils-pacific-islands-strategy-historic-summit> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zhou Fangyin, “A Reevaluation of China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, (Canberra, AU: ANU Press, 2021), 234-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carol Li, “The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania: Understanding the People’s Republic of China’s Strategic Interests and Engagement in the Pacific,” *Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance,* July 2022: 1-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Judith Cefkin, “U.S. Steps Up Diplomacy in Pacific Amid Solomon Islands-China Pact,” *United States Institute of Peace,* May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/us-steps-diplomacy-pacific-amid-solomon-islands-china-pact> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos, “Strengthening Collective Security Approaches in the Pacific,” in Strategic Competition and Security Cooperation in the Blue Pacific, ed. Deon Canyon (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2022), 179-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patrick Dupont, “The United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy and a Revisionist China: Partnering with Small and Middle Powers in the Pacific Islands Region,” Pacific Forum Issues & Insights 21, WP2 (Feb 2021): 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dupont, “The United States’ Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Terence Wesley-Smith and Gerard Finin, “Washington’s Charm-Offensive and the US-Pacific Island Country Summit,” Devpolicy Blog, November 3, 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/washingtons-charm-offensive-us-pacific-island-country-summit-20221103/>; Marie Jourdain and Charles Lichfield, “Engaging the Pacific Islands is no longer about the why, but about the how,” *Atlantic Council,* October 31, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/engaging-the-pacific-islands-is-no-longer-about-the-why-but-about-the-how/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, “Introduction: The Return to Great Power Competition,” in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands,* ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. John Grady, “Pacific Island Nations Want More U.S. Engagement,” USNI News, May 15, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2019/05/15/pacific-island-nations-want-more-u-s-engagement>. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)