

CHARTING A NEW COURSE FOR THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

STRATEGIC PATHWAYS FOR U.S.–MICRONESIA ENGAGEMENT

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Edited by April A. Herlevi

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Beyond Presence: What Can the United States Do Better in the Pacific?

April A. Herlevi

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The United States is at risk of overpromising and underdelivering in the Pacific Islands. To succeed in building a “strong U.S.-Pacific Islands partnership” empowered by Pacific Islanders, the United States will need to do more than maintain its presence.¹ In the last year alone, the flurry of activity and U.S. policy announcements has been frenetic.² While the United States’ desire to re-engage is clear, the prospects for effective implementation are far less so. This introductory essay provides a framework for thinking about the Pacific Islands for audiences based in the United States and discusses two sets of concepts that should help guide U.S. policy. The first is the “three C’s”—climate, credibility, and commitment—and is intended to help U.S. policymakers keep Pacific Island concerns centered. The second set of concepts, which will be expounded on in the conclusion, is the “three A’s”—acknowledge, appreciate, and actively coordinate. Both sets of concepts provide ideas for how U.S. engagement should proceed in the region.

The main problem, as expressed by U.S. policy, is the role of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Oceania. China’s decades-long engagement in the Pacific Islands has culminated in events that have garnered the attention and concern of the United States and its allies. One of the most salient of these events has been the security agreement between the PRC and Solomon Islands in 2022.³ Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos describe how the announcement of this agreement “raised alarm in Canberra, Washington, and Wellington, eliciting swift visits by U.S. Indo Pacific Coordinator, Dr. Kurt Campbell, to Solomon Islands in April, a discreet visit by a New Zealand foreign affairs official also to the Solomon Islands, and Australian Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong, four days after the Australian elections, to Fiji in May.”⁴ However, other events in 2022, such as China’s proposal to create the China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision, have heightened concerns among Pacific Island leaders and external partners.⁵ For example, the president of the Federated States of Micronesia David Panuelo argued that any “predetermined joint communique” should not be accepted by Pacific leaders, noting that the impact of “Chinese control over our communications infrastructure, our ocean territory and the resources within them, and our security space, aside from the impacts on our sovereignty, is that it increases the chance of China getting into conflict with Australia, Japan, the United States, and New Zealand.”⁶

¹ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., September 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

² On June 25, 2022, the Partners in the Blue Pacific coordination mechanism was announced. See “Joint Statement on the Announcement of the Partners in the Blue Pacific Initiative,” Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), June 25, 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/news/media-release/joint-statement-announcement-partners-blue-pacific-initiative>. The partner countries met on September 22 on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, with U.S. secretary of state Antony Blinken hosting twelve Pacific Island countries as well as a variety of external partners to discuss this new initiative. See “Joint Statement on Partners in the Blue Pacific Foreign Ministers Meeting,” U.S. Department of State, September 22, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-foreign-ministers-meeting>. Earlier in September, the White House hosted the first-ever U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit. See “Statement by Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre on the First U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit,” White House, September 2, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/02/statement-by-press-secretary-karine-jean-pierre-on-the-first-u-s-pacific-island-country-summit>. The summit culminated with the release of the U.S. Pacific Partnership Strategy and a joint declaration. See White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*; and White House, “Declaration on U.S.-Pacific Partnership,” September 29, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/declaration-on-u-s-pacific-partnership>.

³ “PM Sogavare: Not a Secret Deal but a Sovereign Issue,” Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Solomon Islands), April 1, 2022, <https://solomons.gov.sb/pm-sogavare-not-a-secret-deal-but-a-sovereign-issue>; and “Wang Yi on China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), June 3, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220603_10698478.html.

⁴ 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), 173.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PRC), “China’s Position Paper on Mutual Respect and Common Development with Pacific Island Countries,” May 30, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220531_10694923.html.

⁶ Kirsty Needham, “China Seeks Pacific Islands Policing, Security Cooperation—Document,” Reuters, May 25, 2022, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/world/832887/china-seeks-pacific-islands-policing-security-cooperation-document/story>.

For Pacific Island leaders, the concern is not so much about who is “winning” in the Pacific but about how strategic competition is disrupting regional unity.

The purpose of this introduction is to raise awareness of Pacific Island realities for U.S. policymakers unfamiliar with the region, highlight critical concerns for those devising policy related to the Pacific Islands, and frame the contributions to this report. It draws heavily on the Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research in May 2022 in Tamuning, Guam, with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency Strategic Trends Research Initiative and with partnership with the University of Guam. That event featured 25 officials, regional experts, practitioners, and scholars representing a diverse set of countries, territories, and freely associated states from Micronesia and beyond. Central questions posed to dialogue participants included what security concerns exist among governments and citizens in Micronesia, whether those concerns align with U.S. national security interests, and how Micronesian governments are dealing with the consequences of strategic competition. Many of the discussions in that dialogue highlighted unique Micronesian perspectives. However, some viewpoints were reflective of larger debates among Pacific Island countries in Melanesia and Polynesia.

Micronesian representatives and regional experts raised a myriad of issues during the dialogue, including climate change, food security, health, land rights, territorial integrity, drug and human trafficking, illegal fishing, cybersecurity, and political stability. Climate change is the most salient security concern, and there is clear recognition that, over the long term, rising sea levels and other climate change impacts will affect many other issues. Despite strong consensus on the risks associated with climate change, which are mirrored across the Pacific Islands and in critical documents from regional organizations, views on other issues are not monolithic.⁷ For the United States to respond to these varied concerns in a more proactive manner, the U.S. government will need to harness expertise, resources, and authority from across agencies and prioritize how it implements those programs. In particular, one of the central themes that emerged from this dialogue was the lack of trust in the United States and the concern that U.S. policy is too reactive.

The Three C’s: Climate, Credibility, and Commitment

Like representatives from the broader Pacific, representatives attending the Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue from throughout Micronesia emphasized the importance of efforts to address climate change and described how climate change is linked to food security, economic development, health outcomes, political instability, and the sustainability of the islands themselves and thus their sovereign territory. For Pacific Island leaders, the clear consensus that climate change is the most salient security concern has been articulated in numerous announcements, including the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, the Boe Declaration Action Plan, and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, as well as in speeches and articles by representatives of the Pacific Islands Forum.⁸ Policy documents from the United States have begun to reflect the language of the

⁷ “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2022, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022.pdf>; “Boe Declaration Action Plan,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2019, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/BOE-document-Action-Plan.pdf>; and “Boe Declaration on Regional Security,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security>.

⁸ See, for example, “The Framework for Pacific Regionalism,” Pacific Islands Forum, 2014, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Framework-for-Pacific-Regionalism.pdf>.

Pacific region. For example, the Pacific Partnership Strategy calls for the sustainable development of the “Blue Pacific environment.”⁹ However, using the Blue Pacific rhetoric without also following through on the requisite actions carries risks, as empty promises that do not fully embody the needs for climate change action will likely be seen as pandering rather than genuine progress.

Credibility means many things, but in the Pacific there are two crucial concepts for establishing credibility: presence and trust. The former is much easier to realize than the latter. In Micronesia, the United States is both literally and figuratively present, with U.S. territories in the North Pacific—Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands—and through Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements with the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. U.S. presence in the territories is somewhat more permanent than those arrangements with COFA states, but both require consent for the relationship to work effectively. For the COFA states, consent is tied to specific timelines and thus is always based on the individual choices of those nations. In short, countries have choices. Two of the COFA agreements, with the Federated States of Micronesia and the Marshall Islands, will expire in 2023 if not renewed, although progress seems to have been made through recent memoranda of understanding.¹⁰ Long-term presence across Micronesia will require a credible commitment, additional resources, and consistent actions to ensure partnership.

Trust is more complicated than presence and will take more effort from the United States to rebuild. International relations scholars note that cooperation among countries requires a certain degree of trust, but studies of trust have generally focused on Cold War interactions between major powers.¹¹ Far less scholarship exists on how trust operates in heavily unbalanced relationships, which would more accurately reflect relations between the United States and individual Pacific Island countries.¹² Moreover, we must also understand how trust operates in multilateral settings, which informs analysis of relations between the United States and regional organizations, such as the Pacific Islands Forum. Thus, the United States will need to consider trust in the context of interpersonal relationships, which are critical in Pacific communities. It is important to recognize that trust is not an emotion but rather “a cognitive assessment.”¹³ In international relations theory based on iterative games, individual countries can make assessments about another country’s trustworthiness. Trust in the context of credibility may be defined as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another’s person’s actions.”¹⁴ Pacific Island governments that talk about trust with external partners have noted that climate change goals, regional unity, and the sovereignty of the “Pacific way” are becoming vulnerable to actions made by external powers in the name of strategic competition.

⁹ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States*, 4.

¹⁰ “The United States of America and the Republic of the Marshall Islands Sign Memorandum of Understanding,” U.S. Department of State, January 12, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-of-america-and-the-republic-of-the-marshall-islands-sign-memorandum-of-understanding>.

¹¹ Andrew Kydd argues that trust and mistrust are critical causal mechanisms in international relations and help explain when countries will reciprocate or exploit cooperation. Theoretically, this was an important and necessary advancement in international relations thinking, but the empirical analysis that has grown out of that insight has primarily been focused on the Cold War and interactions between major powers. See Andrew Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Andrew Kydd, “Trust, Reassurance, and Cooperation,” *International Organization* 54, no. 2 (2000): 325–57.

¹² For one excellent exception that focuses explicitly on unbalanced relationships as a structural factor in how two states interact, see Brantly Womack, *China and Vietnam: The Politics of Asymmetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³ Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021), 191.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Specific to climate change vulnerabilities, Dame Meg Taylor, who was formerly secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum, and Soli Middleby note this dilemma and argue that “Western nations have been unable to take the necessary action on mitigation domestically,” nor have countries such as the United States supported the region’s Pacific Resilience Facility.¹⁵ Clear actions at home and effective policies abroad are necessary to express a comprehensive commitment to climate change. Words are not enough, and words without action may generate the potential for an enduring credibility problem. The United States may be better served by underpromising and overdelivering rather than creating expectations that could be left unfulfilled. Rhetoric without the requisite action will fail.

Commitment is more than simply credibility or presence. It is the long-term plan for engagement that articulates how and why actions are taken and includes building personal, organizational, and other ties with the region. Credibility needs to be established to show good faith, but it is only one component in a series of steps that must be taken and reinforced. This will not be easy for the United States, which continues to have global commitments. Pacific Island leaders are looking to the United States to live up to its climate change and other commitments. However, those same leaders also recognize that the climate change crisis is such an existential threat to the livelihoods and security of Pacific people that relying on only one partner or limiting external partners is foolhardy.

The Three A’s: Acknowledge, Appreciate, and Actively Coordinate

To preview the report and the policy options discussed in the conclusion, a second set of concepts worth considering is the “three A’s”: acknowledge, appreciate, and actively coordinate. On the surface, each of these concepts is simple, but simplicity does not imply effortlessness. U.S. policymakers have a myriad of global concerns, and slowing down enough to acknowledge and appreciate regional concerns will require empathy and respect for local viewpoints. Active coordination should occur once common ground is established and will almost surely be more time-consuming than some may anticipate. Acknowledgment means having conversations that show nuanced understanding of individual countries’ interests while simultaneously understanding the importance of regional unity. Appreciating the concerns of Pacific Island country leaders is not simply agreeing with them or using their rhetoric. Reading key documents from the Pacific Islands Forum, such as the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy, is necessary for foreign officials, but using the language of the Blue Pacific without fully appreciating the seriousness of these concerns will come across as insincere.

Acknowledgment and appreciation are both trust-based, long-term goals for the relationship and will not be achieved immediately. Patience will be necessary for U.S. policymakers. Active coordination is knowing when to act and, even more importantly, when not to act due to the enormous difference in capacity between host nations and the United States. U.S. officials should take extra care to ensure that Pacific voices are not drowned out by the volume, size, or stature of U.S. programs. The Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative holds great promise, but appropriate implementation will be a challenge.

¹⁵ Meg Taylor DBE and Soli Middleby, “More of the Same Is Not the Answer to Building Influence in the Pacific,” 9DASHLINE, October 3, 2022, <https://www.9dashline.com/article/more-of-the-same-is-not-the-answer-to-building-influence-in-the-pacific>.

The first two essays of the report outline key issues from a Micronesian perspective. First, Kenneth Gofigan Kuper at the University of Guam describes “the turbulent waters of a violent geography” and the unique risks for U.S. territories in Micronesia. In particular, he addresses how strategic competition between the United States and China exacerbates risks of conflict for Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands because these territories are on the front line of U.S. military presence in the Pacific. In describing this reality, Kuper makes important contributions to international relations scholarship about political status, identity, and representation. For Pacific Islanders, the existential risks are present now, not in some distant future. Next, Alan Tidwell, director of the Center for Australia, New Zealand, and Pacific Studies at Georgetown University, describes how the “twin transnational threats” of climate change and Covid-19 have already had significant impacts in Micronesia and have the potential to create longer-term societal cleavages that could decrease health and food security in the region.

The third essay of this report shifts from identifying the challenges to thinking about lessons for the future and designing policies that are mutually beneficial. Henrietta McNeill, at the Australian National University, and Joanne Wallis, at the University of Adelaide, discuss engagement in Micronesia by considering lessons learned from key regional partners Australia and New Zealand. By examining both the successes and failures of Australia’s and New Zealand’s recent policies in the broader Pacific, the United States can benefit from their experiences. In particular, McNeill and Wallis encourage the United States to be present in Micronesia, listen, coordinate, focus on the people, and be consistent. All these recommendations sound simple, but require time, attention, and commitment.

In Micronesia and the broader Pacific Islands, there are many challenges. Despite those challenges, there are also many opportunities. The United States has the potential to alter climate change trajectories, build effective relationships with countries and territories in the region, and bolster regional unity. However, doing so will not be easy. The United States has global commitments and is often pulled in a multitude of directions, which in the past has led to benign neglect of the Pacific Islands region. Long-term commitment and proactive, tailored, and coordinated policies will be necessary for the U.S. government to produce mutually beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities, and the broader region. Tailored, long-term commitments will require focus and attention and a clear recognition of the importance of Pacific Island countries. Now is the time for the many promises that the United States made in 2022 to be implemented and become reality.

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Security in Micronesia: Navigating a Violent Geography

Kenneth Gofigan Kuper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the security landscape in the subregion of Oceania known as Micronesia, assesses the equally existential human security threats from climate change and traditional geopolitical security threats, and provides guidance for U.S. policymakers to better understand islander perspectives on the future of regional security.

MAIN ARGUMENT

In an age of escalating great-power tensions, Micronesia has emerged as a strategically located geopolitical hotspot. The islands simultaneously face existential threats from climate change and rising geopolitical security tensions. Prioritizing one of these threats over the other is not feasible and will lead to a blind spot for regional policymakers. Furthermore, there are structural factors that inhibit just and equitable engagement between the U.S. and Micronesia, including the hierarchical political order that exists in the region. Only by understanding the region's role in a potential future conflict can policymakers in the U.S. and the region develop more mutually beneficial policies.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The convergence of climate change, intensifying human security issues, and traditional geopolitical security concerns will define the future of Micronesia. Any U.S. policy toward the region that ignores this convergence is doomed to be incomplete at best or a failure at worst.
- The U.S. has political relationships in Micronesia that are hierarchical and colonial. Moving forward, the U.S. needs to address and resolve these issues if it wants to more fully engage with the Pacific Islands.
- U.S. miscalculation in any conflict with China will affect Micronesia existentially. Policymakers in the region need to consider this risk when engaging with the U.S. or China.
- The U.S. needs to continuously engage the islands and their inhabitants when deliberating on policy issues that will affect Micronesia.

The islands of Micronesia lie in the turbulent waters of a violent geography. Like a volcano, it does not continuously erupt, but the potential for destruction is ever-present. Propelling the dangerous current of these waters is the intersection of traditional geopolitical security concerns and other existential security issues such as climate change, infrastructure resilience, food security, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Properly addressing and strategically prioritizing these potentially competing concerns will define the Micronesian security landscape.¹

While the need to simultaneously address geopolitical and more nontraditional security concerns is not unique to Micronesia, the future of the region will be contoured by the continued exacerbation of this convergence. Furthermore, closer attention must be paid to how shifting geopolitical tectonic plates in the region will affect core island security concerns (including nontraditional security). Failure to adequately see this convergence may lead to a blind spot in the future of security for Micronesia. This essay provides a survey of this violent geography, followed by a case study of Guam and a concluding discussion of policy implications.

Threats Facing Micronesia

Nontraditional Security

To understand the convergence of traditional and nontraditional security issues, it is important to note the main antagonists. The first driver is climate change. Micronesia is already feeling the effects of climate change, and anxiety is growing over the threat posed to the region. It is not an exaggeration to say that climate change remains a primary security threat and existential threat to the region. Micronesian states such as the Republic of the Marshall Islands are inundated with king tides that salinize their soil, resulting in food insecurity.² To mitigate this situation, they are considering alternatives such as raising land and developing land on the sea. Furthermore, island states are fighting for their survival and the protection of their territorial integrity. One of the most illustrative examples is the fight to preserve baselines for exclusive economic zones. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), maritime entitlements can change as coastal baselines change. The security issue at stake is the vulnerability of normal baselines as sea levels rise, thus leading to Pacific states preparing for a dim future by advocating for “fixed baselines.”³ This will have severe economic consequences for Micronesia, and more so for Pacific states that must tackle the question of state sovereignty when considering the loss of a physical base. Micronesian states are in the unfortunate position of having to entertain a scenario where their territory is no longer inhabitable.⁴

The existential threats confronting these states reinforce the necessity of addressing climate change to understand the region’s more localized vision of security. Failing to properly address climate change will increase the distance in the relationship between the United States and Micronesia. A divergence of security priorities displays bad faith on behalf of larger powers like the

¹ In this piece, I limit my analysis to the U.S.-affiliated parts of Micronesia and do not include Nauru and Kiribati.

² David Krzesni and Laura Brewington, “What Do Climate Impacts, Health, and Migration Reveal about Vulnerability and Adaptation in the Marshall Islands?” *Climate Action* 1, no. 22 (2022).

³ Pacific Islands Forum, “Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-Related Sea-Level Rise,” August 6, 2021, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Declaration-on-Preserving-Maritime.pdf>.

⁴ Claudia Tam, “Does an Island Lose Its Statehood If It Sinks?” *Earth.Org.*, March 25, 2021, <https://earth.org/will-an-island-lose-its-statehood-if-it-sinks>.

United States. The Pacific Elders' Voice group correctly notes that "growing military tension in the Pacific region created by both China and the United States and its allies, including Australia, does little to address the real threat to the region caused by climate change."⁵ Palauan president Surangel Whipps Jr. went so far at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference as to tell larger powers that they might as well bomb the islands instead of having them witness the sludge of a slow death.⁶

Despite shared values and strong partnerships, it is erroneous to say that the United States and the Freely Associated States (FAS) are in the same boat and face the same threats. The projected future of the United States has already arrived in Micronesia, as the two sides are working on two different timelines of direct impact. Many in the United States acknowledge the harsh realities of climate change (while some also reject its anthropogenic origin). However, unless these realities are directly experienced, they can still feel like a dystopian future rather than a present threat. For Micronesia, however, this dystopia has, in many ways, already arrived. Leaders in the FAS are having to create adaptation plans for sea-level rise not as a hypothetical backup plan but as something to be implemented in the next decade.⁷

Thus, the United States and Micronesia do not appear to share the same sense of urgency in reversing climate change. This incongruity needs to be considered with the actual solutions presented for any active and sustained U.S. engagement with Micronesia. With the continuing intensification and cumulative effects of climate change, Micronesia has a clear strategic interest in partnering or working primarily with states that can best help the region mitigate, adapt, and survive global climate change. It is not an exaggeration to say that U.S. policy toward Micronesia is misguided if it does not adequately address this issue.

Unfortunately, what is needed goes beyond the commitments made in the U.S. Pacific Partnership Strategy.⁸ Assisting Micronesia with climate change cannot suddenly be seen as a priority amid intensifying geopolitical tensions. Pacific states cannot rely on the United States to be a full and engaged partner on climate change if the U.S. commitment changes with each successive presidential administration. Another example of a blind spot in commitments to the Pacific is differing views on nuclear weapons. The Pacific has been at the forefront of fighting for a nuclear-free world, yet the United States is antagonistic to multilateral treaties that aim to achieve this objective. Some may argue that engaging with the Pacific needs to be done on the basis of mutual interest. However, temporary national interest and existential threat are qualitatively distinct, and Micronesia needs a partner whose commitment will not shift with the geopolitical tides. The Pacific Partnership Strategy is a start but should not be the final word on U.S. involvement with the Pacific.

Traditional Geopolitical Security

As Micronesia faces nontraditional existential threats, leaders in the region must also pay close attention to traditional geopolitical security. When asked about geopolitical threats, President David Panuelo of the Federated States of Micronesia remarked in October 2021, "Our sense is

⁵ Kate Lyons, "Climate Crisis—Not China—Is Biggest Threat to Pacific, Say Former Leaders," *Guardian*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/29/climate-crisis-not-china-is-biggest-threat-to-pacific-say-former-leaders>.

⁶ "Whipps: 'You Might as Well Bomb Us,'" *Pacific Island Times*, November 7, 2021, <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/whipps-you-might-as-well-bomb-us>.

⁷ Government of the Federated States of Micronesia, *Federated States of Micronesia Climate Change and Disaster Risk Finance Assessment* (Palikir, February 2019), https://fsm-data.sprep.org/system/files/Federated-States-of-Micronesia-Climate-Change-and-Disaster-Risk-Finance-Assessment_FW.pdf.

⁸ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C., September 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

that much of the geopolitical competition appears to be speculation.”⁹ This, however, does not seem to be a realistic appraisal of the current empirical situation. The speculation is dangerously materializing with each passing day. Even if Micronesia and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had good relations (with the Federated States of Micronesia being the only FAS to have diplomatic ties with Beijing), this does not mean that the United States and China would essentially treat Micronesia as a neutral zone. Many countries in Oceania have ties with the PRC (e.g., Solomon Islands, Kiribati, and Papua New Guinea), but none are as strategically located for the United States military as Micronesia. Thus, the risk calculus and subsequent national security equation are not similar. The geography and resulting variation in political status across the region (unincorporated territory and freely associated states) mean that Micronesia is qualitatively different from the rest of Oceania. It is easier for other countries in Oceania to avoid bearing the brunt of geopolitical competition. This is not the case for the FAS countries, which have explicit agreements allowing U.S. military access and facilities. President Whipps expressed anxiety about this situation: “One of the concerns I have is [that] we are a peaceful nation. But now with all the U.S. military activity in Palau, they put a bullseye on Palau.”¹⁰

Micronesia may one day be the grass on which the proverbial elephants fight. Furthermore, even if the elephants do not fight on Micronesian grass, the field will be forever changed in preparation for a fight. That which happens to prepare for conflict can, like conflict itself, also be destructive. Thus, a primary security concern for Micronesia needs to be maintaining actual peace in the region. This provides both a challenge and an opportunity. Micronesian leaders need to use their diplomatic prowess to secure climate justice, which is directly related to their survival, as well as to help ensure that the region does not become a hotbed for great-power politics. When push comes to shove during a conflict with China or another aggressor, the United States will fall back on Micronesia. One only needs to look at the provisions of the respective Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements or the separate Military Use and Operating Rights Agreement that the United States negotiated with these countries to understand their military importance. The world must remember that Micronesia was the exception to the general U.S. pledge after World War II not to obtain direct physical control over foreign territory. The United States aimed to develop a closed sphere of influence in Micronesia after the war, even offering the entire region to become a U.S. territory.

Outlook

Forecasting the future suggests that these two existential threats—climate change and traditional geopolitical concerns—are squeezing Micronesia. This calls for strategic Micronesian statecraft and diplomacy. The states of Micronesia must continue to put national and regional interests first. Even if the three FAS countries have COFAs, which arguably have led to the development of asymmetrical relationships between these states and the United States, they still have significant control over their foreign affairs. Acknowledging this reality, the FAS must continue to recognize when and where discrepancies in interests lie. The region is submerged in rhetoric from the United States on “historical ties,” “democratic values,” and “special relationships.” There is definite truth

⁹ Johnny Blades, “Ten Questions: Micronesia’s President David Panuelo Fronts Up,” Radio New Zealand, October 21, 2021, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/453893/ten-questions-micronesia-s-president-david-panuelo-fronts-up>.

¹⁰ Kelvin Anthony, “Palau’s President Fronts Up on PIF Rift, Covid-19 and Climate Change,” Radio New Zealand, March 29, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/464160/palau-s-president-fronts-up-on-pif-rift-covid-19-and-climate-change>.

to the rhetoric. However, strategic Micronesian diplomacy entails cutting through the rhetoric and looking straight at the ingredients of the U.S.-FAS relationships.

For its part, the United States must acknowledge that relationships with the FAS are not acts of “welfare” or “charity.” COFAs are strategic agreements that the United States benefits from via strategic denial and subsequent friendly geopolitical posturing. The policymaking process and negotiations with the FAS related to the economic provisions of a compact need to be framed accordingly. The author has sat in rooms with senior U.S. policy officials accusing Micronesian leaders of being irrationally uncooperative. In the minds of these officials, Micronesian leaders should be happy with what they get. This is a negotiation and policy framework destined to fail. To put it differently, what message does it send to the rest of the Pacific if the United States takes its closest “partners” in the region for granted and treats them as mere charity cases? All of this needs to be taken into account as Micronesia continues to face the dual threat of climate change and traditional geopolitical security concerns.

The Case of Guam

Guam, which is a heavily militarized, unincorporated territory of the United States, provides a case study of the challenges in reconciling regional and U.S. interests in Micronesia. The island has been called the “tip of the spear” and “America’s unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Pacific.”¹¹ It serves as the center of the second island chain and as a critical hub of U.S. power projection and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, hosting large military installations such as Andersen Air Force Base, Naval Base Guam, and a new Marine Corps base, Camp Blaz.¹² In total, around 27% of Guam’s land is currently occupied by these installations.¹³ The island’s strategic location means that it can provide logistical support to U.S. operations in the first island chain but is outside the range of China’s short-range missiles. In the present reality of strategic competition between China and the United States, Guam is touted as the “forward edge of the Indo-Pacific.”¹⁴ This has spurred policy debates on how to best defend the island, with a 360-degree missile defense architecture being presented as a solution. The U.S. Missile Defense Agency has already made scouting visits to Guam for possible host locations, suggest that the island is being prepared for “its part” in a conflict between the United States and China.¹⁵

A recent RAND report on ground-based intermediate-range missiles argues for the strategic importance of Micronesia because of the potential for ally hosting. Per the report, it is unlikely that allies in the region such as Australia and South Korea would be willing to host these systems, and one of the four alternatives considered is to place them in Guam and the FAS.¹⁶ The argument

¹¹ Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, “Guam: The Sharpening of the Spear’s Tip,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, July 20, 2022, <https://fpif.org/guam-the-sharpening-of-the-spears-tip>; and Van Jackson, “Trapped By Empire,” *Dissent*, February 8, 2023, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/trapped-by-empire.

¹² “Marine Corps Activates Camp Blaz in Guam,” *Pacific News Center*, October 1, 2020, <https://www.pncguam.com/marine-corps-activates-camp-blaz-in-guam>.

¹³ Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, “Understanding the Political Anatomy of the ‘Forward Edge’: The Case of Guam,” *East-West Center*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/understanding-the-political-anatomy-the-forward-edge-the-case-guam>.

¹⁴ Bill Birtles and Mitchell Woolnough, “Guam, America’s Forgotten Speck of an Island in the Pacific, Is the New Front Line against China,” *ABC News (Australia)*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-09-18/guam-is-the-new-front-line-against-china/101407620>.

¹⁵ Kuper, “Guam.”

¹⁶ Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Ground-Based Intermediate-Range Missiles in the Indo-Pacific: Assessing the Positions of U.S. Allies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2022).

is that the islands' special political relationships with the United States mitigate the risk of having their governments refuse to host the missile systems.

The FAS countries have COFAs and other subsidiary agreements that allow U.S. military access to their land and waters, but Guam is perhaps the most likely alternative. As a U.S. territory, Guam is under the plenary power of the U.S. Congress. The island has no voting representation in the House of Representatives, no representation in the Senate, and no votes in the Electoral College. It thus essentially has no political power to make final decisions regarding U.S. military presence or activity. The people of Guam have not yet had the opportunity to freely choose the nature of their relationship with the United States.

Self-determination and subsequent decolonization, however, are arguably not only political issues but security issues that need to be addressed. When Guam thinks about major conflict scenarios in the future, its people are not empowered to define their own security landscape. One analyst has noted that the United States is “quite lucky” to have a territory in the second island chain.¹⁷ This misses the mark, however, as luck was not the factor by which the United States acquired Guam as a territory. The island was colonized by Spain in the seventeenth century, ceded by Spain to the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War, conquered by Japan, and then reoccupied by the United States during World War II. War, bloodshed, imperialism, and geopolitics, rather than luck, have led to Guam's current status as a U.S. territory. Most Americans, however, have historical amnesia or simply disregard their country's involvement in Micronesia. For most, the region (Guam included) is barely a footnote.¹⁸

Today, Guam once again finds itself caught in the middle of a geopolitical struggle between external powers. Guam should at least have a voice when it comes to determining its position in a conflict. Decolonization would be an option for achieving this just outcome. By “decolonization,” I mean straightforward political decolonization in line with the UN charter and various resolutions (e.g., Resolutions 1514 and 1541) of the UN General Assembly.¹⁹ Per these resolutions, Guam's political status as a non-self-governing territory means that it has not yet reached a full measure of self-government. To remedy this situation, those eligible in the island should have the ability to choose their political destiny, including whether to become integrated with the United States, enter into free association with an independent state, or become an independent state itself.

Decolonization does not mean completely severing ties with the United States. Rather, U.S. policymakers should consider Guam's decolonization as a modernization of the relationship that will help quell criticisms of American colonialism in the region. Without exaggeration, decolonizing Guam has significant ramifications for the island's security. Through the process, as noted above, Guam could remain a U.S. territory, become a freely associated state, or become an independent nation. This of course would have implications for the role of the U.S. military in Guam, the island's engagement in international organizations, the funding available to it for technical projects, and the political system that defines its government. Thus, a change in the political status of the island would have significant ramifications for its security.

The United States and Guam have a long and entangled history. Yet, regardless of the outcome of decolonization, they will likely continue to have strong security ties. In fact, the process could

¹⁷ Rebecca Heinrichs, ed., “Defending Guam,” Hudson Institute, July 5, 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/defending-guam>.

¹⁸ Michael Lujan Bevacqua, “My Island Is One Big American Footnote,” in *Indigenous Literatures from Micronesia*, ed. Evelyn Flores and Emelihter Kihleng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

¹⁹ The text of UN Resolution 1541 is available at [https://undocs.org/A/RES/1541\(XV\)](https://undocs.org/A/RES/1541(XV)).

even enhance the relationship by eliminating the anathema of unincorporated territory status. The island's political status determines how it can engage with the world and navigate its geography. Given this reality, the native inhabitants of the island should be able to choose their political destiny. Moreover, it is blatantly contrary to American democratic ideals for the United States to keep Guam as a territory without allowing the island's colonized people to decide their own political status.

Conclusion

The lessons drawn from this overview of the security environment in Micronesia are threefold. The first is the connection between the United States' perception of Micronesia as a reliable option for achieving U.S. military goals and the tapestry of political identities across the region. One cannot understand the relations between the United States and Micronesia without understanding the differing political status of the unincorporated territory of Guam, the Freely Associated States, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

The second lesson is that the convergence of climate change, intensifying human security issues, and traditional geopolitical security concerns will define the future of Micronesia. Any U.S. policy toward the region that ignores this convergence is doomed to be either incomplete at best or, at its worst, a failure.

The third lesson is that the risks of miscalculation are high for the people of the region. The Guam-based think tank Pacific Center for Island Security observes the following: "Miscalculation may be a temporary roadblock in the strategic minds of some. For us, miscalculation could be terminal."²⁰ Just as the effects of climate change disproportionately affect the islands, the islands will also disproportionately bear the consequences of miscalculation. This truth was laid bare at a U.S. think tank event regarding the best ways to defend Guam. The expert panelists acknowledged that Guam, on some level, may not actually be defensible, and thus they recommended that the United States balance investment in Guam with investment in other bases in the region.²¹ Losing Guam or the FAS in the event of a conflict with China would inevitably be a huge loss for the United States, requiring a change in tactics and strategy. For the islands, though, lives, societies, cultures, ancestral lands, and languages would be lost.

The stakes are thus not the same for the United States and China, on the one hand, and the Micronesian islands, on the other. The people of Micronesia need to ensure that they engage with states, organizations, and other actors that can help reduce miscalculations of geopolitical tension. The islands lie at the intersection of climate change and intensifying geopolitical heat, but there is no law that the islands must forever float at this intersection. Micronesians did not put themselves in this position. The leaders and people of Micronesia should come together to best figure out how to steer their collective future in such a violent geography. The only thing certain is that the future of Micronesia is brightest when those who create the maps are those who call the region home. A Micronesian cartography will birth a more peaceful geography. As the old CHamoru proverb goes, "Isaonia i tumungo' ya ha sedi kinu ayu i mismo umasaogui," or "Greater is the fault on those who allow the injustice upon themselves."

²⁰ "About Us: Key Concerns," Pacific Center for Island Security, <https://pacificcenterforislandsecurity.com/colibri-wp/about-us/#key-concerns>.

²¹ Heinrichs, "Defending Guam."

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The Twin Transnational Threats of Climate Change and Covid-19 in Micronesia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the relationship between the twin transnational threats of climate change and Covid-19 in the Micronesian subregion and the consequent impact on healthcare.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The low-lying countries of the Micronesian subregion, such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau, are profoundly vulnerable to climate change. The eruption of Covid-19 placed further pressure on these heavily aid-dependent countries. The combined impacts of these threats will amplify these countries' vulnerability and test their adaptability. In particular, the health sector will be buffeted by both acute and chronic challenges. Not only will climate change and Covid-19 have first-order effects, but their second-order effects may also erode social cohesion, increasing the negative impacts of social conflict.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Micronesian governments must continue their work on both healthcare and climate adaptation. This should include protecting or relocating critical healthcare infrastructure, such as hospitals, to protect against storm surges and flooding.
- Donor governments may want to deepen engagement in projects that have dual climate and health benefits, such as including a climate-related narrative in all health monitoring data collection.
- Strengthening both first-order replies in the health sector and second-order social resilience will be a necessary step in years to come.

Covid-19 and climate change are twin transnational threats that will have significant impacts in Micronesia. More immediately, they will affect health security and food security. By extension, the twin threats also have the potential to affect social capital and social stability. In a worse-case scenario, they may even create cleavages along which social conflict could emerge. The U.S. Navy's "Climate Action 2030" report notes that researchers are exploring the complex interactions between health and climate. The plan also foreshadows building "climate resilience in areas of the world that are most susceptible to climate-induced conflicts, humanitarian disasters, or acute climate impacts such as water and food insecurity or migration pressures."¹ This essay offers some thoughts on the challenges that lie ahead and considers potential options for the U.S. Department of Defense to promote greater resilience among its Micronesian partners.

Like transnational threats such as organized crime, terrorism, or nuclear proliferation, both climate change and Covid-19 have proved to be particularly resistant to containment. During the 20th and 21st centuries, humans altered the chemical composition of the atmosphere by introducing high levels of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, but there is no record of humans successfully lowering the levels of these gases. Similarly, the spread of Covid-19 has proved resistant to containment efforts. Unlike other transnational threats, however, climate change and Covid-19 interact with the natural world, further complicating remediation.

Both climate change and Covid-19 have affected health outcomes and food security in Micronesia, albeit along somewhat different pathways. Collectively, the Micronesian islands share some characteristics that make these threats particularly challenging. The five island countries are far away from large landmasses and markets. As a consequence, they have high transportation costs, limited ability to benefit from shared infrastructure, and difficulty in creating economies of scale.² Not only are these small island states far away from landmasses and markets, but they are also far from one another. The Federated States of Micronesia, for example, consists of 607 islands with a total land area of 702 square kilometers (km²) and roughly 3 million km² of exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Kosrae in the east is 2,776 km from Yap in the west. Similar descriptions are shared by the other Micronesian countries, with the exception of Nauru, which is just 21 km². The islands, made up for the most part of coral islands, atolls, and the summits of underseas volcanos, sit low in the water, mostly ranging between two and ten meters above sea level.

Just as geography has played a role in Micronesia's history, so too geography will shape the ways in which Covid-19 and climate change play out in the subregion. Complicating matters is the inescapable fact that both Covid-19 and climate change will dramatically affect the islands and that their combined impacts will place enormous pressure on island resilience.

This essay is divided into four parts focusing on (1) the status of the health sector across the region, (2) the varied ways in which climate change will influence the health sector, (3) the obvious impacts of Covid-19 on the health sector, and (4) a discussion of more speculative impacts and the longer-term implications, along with possible steps that the U.S. Department of Defense can take to improve the resilience of Micronesian states against the twin threats of climate change and Covid-19.

¹ U.S. Department of the Navy, "Climate Action 2030," May 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Portals/1/Documents/Department%20of%20the%20Navy%20Climate%20Action%202030.pdf?ver=ScwuxX5mGr9jXT1ewRvlg%3d%3d>.

² Chris Becker, "Small Island States in the Pacific: The Tyranny of Distance?" International Monetary Fund, Working Paper, September 2012, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WP/Issues/2016/12/31/Small-Island-States-in-the-Pacific-the-Tyranny-of-Distance-26253>.

The Limited Healthcare Capacity in Micronesia

The delivery of healthcare in Micronesian countries relies on resources that are often meager in supply and mostly geographically dispersed. The World Health Organization (WHO) offers a snapshot of the region's health infrastructure:

- Kiribati has four hospitals, 30 health centers, and 75 clinics.³
- The Marshall Islands have two hospitals (one each in Majuro and Ebeye) and 56 health centers in the outer atolls and islands.⁴
- Micronesian states provide medical and public health services through a hospital, community health centers, and dispensaries. Each state system is autonomous. There are six private health clinics in the country and one private hospital.⁵
- Nauru, with a population of 12,500, has one primary healthcare location known as Nauru Hospital.⁶
- Palau, with a population of 18,000, has one primary hospital known as Belau National Hospital, four community centers known as super dispensaries, and four additional satellite dispensaries.⁷

The supply of healthcare workers presents another challenge. In 2018 the distribution of nurses and midwives (per 1,000 people) was 2.0 in Micronesia, 3.3 in the Marshall Islands, 3.8 in Kiribati, 7.3 in Palau, and 7.9 in Nauru.⁸ Distance also presents a significant barrier in accessing healthcare, with the exception of Nauru. In Kiribati, for example, half the population lives in South Tarawa, and the other half lives on the more distant outer islands.

Climate Change and the Health Sector

The climate change threat to low-lying Pacific Island countries has been known for some time. Climate change has not only resulted in rising sea levels but brought on greater storm surges, greater storm intensity, drought, heatwaves, and warming oceans. A common insight is that rising sea levels threaten existing food stability and the availability of potable water supplies. Research undertaken in 2007 on two Micronesia coral atoll islands illustrated the differing impacts of rising sea levels on homes.⁹ Researchers found that while both the Lukunoch and Oneop islands experienced profound losses after the same high sea event flooded the two island atolls, the nature of the losses varied. Only around half of the households on Lukunoch lost a portion of their carbohydrate sources, whereas on Oneop nearly all the homes lost a portion of their carbohydrate sources.¹⁰

³ WHO, "Country Cooperation Strategy: Kiribati," May 2018, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/609168/retrieve>.

⁴ WHO, "Country Cooperation Strategy: Marshall Islands" May 2018, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/609552/retrieve>.

⁵ WHO, "Country Cooperation Strategy 2018–2022: Federated States of Micronesia—WHO," 2017, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1096362/retrieve>.

⁶ WHO, "Country Cooperation Strategy 2018–2022: Nauru—WHO," 2017, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1096364/retrieve>.

⁷ WHO, "Country Cooperation Strategy 2018–2022: Palau—WHO," 2017, <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1096372/retrieve>.

⁸ World Bank, "Nurses and Midwives (per 1,000 People)—Micronesia, Fed. Sts.," World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.MED.NUMW.P3?contextual=region&end=2018&locations=FM&start=2018&view=bar>.

⁹ Mark E. Keim, "Sea-Level-Rise Disaster in Micronesia: Sentinel Event for Climate Change?" *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness* 4, no. 1 (2010): 81–87.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Water insecurity threatens the region as well. The atoll countries of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Nauru are particularly exposed due to their dependence on rainwater and limited freshwater aquifers. Inundation from seawater thus presents a significant challenge. Drought also threatens the region. As one example, the U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Juniper* delivered “over 4,000 gallons of safe drinking water, 200 buckets with lids, 600 10-liter water containers, and two 10,000-liter water bladders” to Kiribati in July 2022.¹¹ Recent droughts serve as a reminder of the logistical challenges inherent in supplying far-flung islands with adequate potable water.

Another threat to island food security is the warming oceans. Modeling suggests that several species of tuna will shift eastward, out of Pacific Island EEZs, and into the high seas.¹² Of the five Pacific Island countries most affected, four are in the Micronesian subregion (only Kiribati escapes the top five, coming in at eighth). Tuna is among the most profitable fish found in Pacific EEZs.¹³ In 2016 the Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency members caught around 1.5 million metric tonnes valued at \$2.5 billion.¹⁴ How warming waters will affect the availability of other fish species is an open question.

A second effect from climate change comes in the form of health impacts. Research undertaken in 2015 by the WHO illustrated that there are different health impacts from climate change.¹⁵ Among the health impacts are insect-borne and airborne diseases that are propagated in warmer climates. For instance, dengue fever is forecast to increase among Micronesian states. The WHO health impact assessment also found that climate change would spur an increase in waterborne diseases, respiratory illnesses, and zoonotic infections. In addition, a warming region will reduce the number of hours that individuals can work during the day. Climate change in the Pacific is forecast to increase the intensity of storm activity, reducing the number of working days available and inflicting a physical and mental toll on inhabitants. The Micronesian subregion is already home to one of the world’s highest suicide rates. Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, and Nauru figured in the top-twenty suicide rates in 2019.¹⁶ The two Micronesian U.S. territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands also have high suicide rates.

The effects of food and health insecurity will combine to erode the resilience of the Micronesian people. Resilience, in this context, is defined broadly as the capacity to bend but not break. Food and health insecurity, if unaddressed, will test Micronesia’s breaking point.

Covid-19 and the Health Sector

A second area on which to focus is Covid-19. The pandemic is not over. We know from lived experiences that Covid-19 will change and that new variants will emerge. Those variants may be

¹¹ David Graham, “Coast Guard Cutter Juniper Conducts Potable Water and Supply Offload at Kiritimati Island, Kiribati,” Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, July 20, 2022, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/425448/coast-guard-cutter-juniper-conducts-potable-water-and-supply-offload-kiritimati-island-kiribati>.

¹² Katherine Seto et al., “Climate Change Is Causing Tuna to Migrate, Which Could Spell Catastrophe for the Small Islands That Depend on Them,” *Conversation*, August 4, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/climate-change-is-causing-tuna-to-migrate-which-could-spell-catastrophe-for-the-small-islands-that-depend-on-them-164000>.

¹³ Raiana McKinney et al., “Netting Billions 2020: A Global Tuna Valuation,” Pew Charitable Trusts, Report, October 2020, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/reports/2020/10/netting-billions-2020-a-global-tuna-valuation>.

¹⁴ Meg Taylor et al., “Tuna Fisheries Are Vital to Our Blue Continent,” Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, <https://www.ffa.int/node/2109>.

¹⁵ Lachlan McIver et al., “Health Impacts of Climate Change in Pacific Island Countries: A Regional Assessment of Vulnerabilities and Adaptation Priorities,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 124, no. 11 (2016): 1707–14.

¹⁶ Hannah Ritchie, Max Roser, and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Suicide,” *Our World in Data*, June 15, 2015, <https://ourworldindata.org/suicide>.

less effectively covered by existing vaccines and treatments. The Omicron variant, for example, rendered mRNA vaccines less effective against symptomatic infection. Recently, it has been reported that some monoclonal antibody treatments for Covid-19 are less effective against recent variants.¹⁷ Small island states have resumed international global travel, and as a consequence have had to deal with Covid-19 within their borders. Covid-19 places tremendous pressure on the health sector of these small states, as well as the social structure more broadly. The social impacts of Covid-19 will have global consequences but will also play out regionally. Understanding how the forces emerge in the Pacific will be essential to forestall or limit their negative impact.

The island countries, generally speaking, were able to withstand some of the most intense effects of Covid-19 because of their isolation prior to the distribution of vaccines. Palau, for example, avoided adverse health outcomes by closing its borders for an extended period. The United States donated vaccine doses, and the uptake has been very successful.¹⁸ When Kiribati reopened to travel, however, the story was very different. Repatriation flights resulted in the introduction of Covid-19 and high rates of infection. On January 14, 2022, for example, a plane landed in Kiribati, bringing in several cases of Covid-19, which then spread rapidly.¹⁹ Doctors Without Borders has launched a major effort in Kiribati to stabilize the healthcare system that was ravaged by more than three thousand Covid-19 cases.²⁰

Of particular concern, Covid-19 has intersected with Pacific Islands' type 2 diabetes liability. Of the top fifteen countries and territories with type 2 diabetes around the globe, ten are in the Pacific Islands. Not surprisingly, Covid-19 deaths are highly correlated with type 2 diabetes, making the rapid spread of the virus particularly troublesome.

The longer-term threat from Covid-19 is equally worrisome for the Pacific Island countries. Data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs clearly shows the longer-term negative impact of Covid-19 on cardiovascular health.²¹ But increased heart problems are not the only areas of concern. Other studies have shown that Covid-19 can also have long-term neurological impacts.²² Covid-19 may also be oncogenic, adding to the list of long-term healthcare challenges. Research suggests that Covid-19, especially long Covid, may increase the risks of cancerous tumors.²³ Other long-term effects of Covid-19 are still unknown. The cumulative effect of these long-term challenges will place additional pressure on a healthcare system that is already strained by limited funding, access to healthcare professionals, and distance from other hospitals and supplies.

¹⁷ Erin Prater, "The Tools Are Getting Picked Off: An Ever-Mutating Mix of Covid Variants Means Fewer and Less Effective Treatments This Fall," *Fortune*, October 14, 2022, <https://fortune.com/well/2022/09/24/new-covid-omicron-variants-subvariants-evade-monoclonal-antibodies-bebtelovimab-recombinants-convergent-evolution-sars-immune-evasion>.

¹⁸ Leigh Hartman, "U.S. Ships Covid-19 Vaccines to Pacific Island Nations," *ShareAmerica*, February 6, 2021, <https://share.america.gov/us-covid-19-vaccines-pacific-island-nations>.

¹⁹ Amy Gunia, "A Covid-Free Pacific Nation Opened Its Border a Crack. The Virus Came Rushing In," *Time*, February 2, 2022, <https://time.com/6143260/covid-19-pacific-islands-kiribati>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Yan Xie et al., "Long-Term Cardiovascular Outcomes of Covid-19," *Nature Medicine* 28, no. 3 (2022): 583–90.

²² Jacqueline E. Shanley et al., "Longitudinal Evaluation of Neurologic–Post Acute Sequelae SARS-CoV-2 Infection Symptoms," *Annals of Clinical and Translational Neurology* 9, no. 7 (2022): 995–1010.

²³ Alberto Gómez-Carballa, Federico Martínón-Torres, and Antonio Salas, "Is SARS-COV-2 an Oncogenic Virus?" *Journal of Infection* 85, no. 5 (2022): 573–607.

Additional Impacts and Implications

Covid-19 will only amplify the challenges to the health sector from climate change that were identified in the 2015 WHO study. As a result, it is imperative that Micronesian states begin planning today for managing the twin transnational threats of climate change and Covid-19. In 2020 the Green Climate Fund allocated \$10 million to reduce water-, vector- and food-borne disease risks in the Federated States of Micronesia by improving healthcare system resilience. However, the second- and third-order effects of both Covid-19 and climate change remain unaddressed. Second-order effects arising from health sector challenges include limited support in rehabilitation and recuperation. The third-order effects, such as the resulting inability to adequately provide childcare and food security, can erode family resilience.

Especially significant is the potential for these twin threats to disturb the social fabric of Micronesian states and expand the potential for social conflict. Cleavages and social conflict, for example, resulting from inequitable access to food, water, or healthcare could emerge and spawn grievances. Cleavages born of those grievances may then morph into social conflict. The sentiment of injustice and the breaking of social units into contending blocks could lay the groundwork for further escalation, as well as exploitation.

The best step for addressing such a cascade of woe is prevention. The U.S. Department of Defense could use its resources to promote health and food security. The USNS *Mercy*, a thousand-bed hospital ship, already operates in the Pacific. Yet the challenges facing the Pacific may require more than what the *Mercy* can offer. Thus, further consideration should be given to how the U.S. Department of Defense can deploy medical support units in the Pacific, whether to deliver medical services, to support civilian-based medical services, or to build infrastructure to be used by civilian medical organizations. One essential role U.S. forces can play is to assist with inter-island medical transport and evacuation. Another important task that could be undertaken by the U.S. Department of Defense is ongoing health monitoring. Frequent surveys of islander health status will allow the United States to flex appropriate resources into regions when needed.

Other preventive measures that could be taken concern the ongoing challenge of climate-induced humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. In particular, greater consideration should be given to the development of appropriately sized and scoped transport capability. The aforementioned transportation of water supplies aboard a U.S. Coast Guard cutter is a case in point. Although the U.S. Coast Guard was providing important relief during a crisis, this vessel may not have been fit for purpose; instead, a tanker that can transport large volumes of potable water may be necessary.

As for measures to address the broader issue of food security, current U.S. efforts on illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing are appropriate. Protecting ocean resources is a vital step in ensuring that people in the Micronesian subregion have secure sources of food. Further consideration should be given to how the U.S. Department of Defense can help protect island resources. Identifying good locations for seawalls that prevent ocean inundation of potable water resources is essential. Civic action teams, like those from Palau, could be replicated across the subregion as well. One such team, originating in Palau in 1970, counts among its ranks engineers from the U.S. Army, Navy and Air Force on six-month deployments supporting local community projects. Units deploying island by island can build small-scale, but effective, infrastructure to protect food and water resources.

Of course, prevention does not always work. In such cases, the U.S. Department should consider how it will help support island governments' responses to social conflict. In these

situations, support should be given to quickly identify the sources of disquiet, address the situation as best as possible (ensuring adequate supply of food and water, for example), and support local peacebuilding activities to restore relationships in the community. This requires deeper ongoing relationships than fly-in-fly-out interactions. Trust between islanders and those from outside comes on the back of strong people-to-people engagement and ongoing interactions. With those robust relationships, potential tensions might be speedily addressed. By quickly acting to reduce tensions, the United States and its partners can reduce the likelihood that external actors are able to exploit emerging social cleavages.

Conclusion

In sum, the twin transnational threats of climate change and Covid-19 will test the resilience of the inhabitants of the Micronesian subregion. The U.S. Department of Defense has the interests and resources to help forestall the worst effects of these threats. Prevention is the soundest way forward, and the U.S. Department of Defense has some excellent resources to engage in prevention. By addressing the twin threats of climate change and Covid-19, the United States aligns itself with the Pacific Island Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, particularly in the context of delivering on the wellbeing of the Pacific people. If, however, prevention fails, these measures still offer the U.S. Department of Defense solid resources to work with Micronesian states to limit the negative impacts of climate change and Covid-19, at least in the short term.

Of course, if either climate change or Covid-19 become too unwieldy, then there is probably very little the United States can do. In the worst-case scenario of uncontrolled and catastrophic climate change, the best option would be to create a physical escape route, along with an international climate refugee status, to protect the people of the Pacific. The prospect of this dire outcome makes an emphasis on preventive measures all the more urgent.

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U.S. Engagement in Micronesia: Lessons from Australia and New Zealand

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines Australia's and New Zealand's engagement with the Pacific Island countries and offers lessons for the U.S.'s future engagement in the region.

MAIN ARGUMENT

As the U.S. looks to revitalize its engagement in the Pacific Islands region through the U.S.-Pacific Partnership, and enhance its relationship with the Micronesian subregion in Compact of Free Association negotiations, it can learn from Australia and New Zealand, the partners that have long played the most active role in the Pacific. The successes and failures of Australia's and New Zealand's increased Pacific engagement suggest five lessons for the U.S.'s relationships in Micronesia: (1) be present in the region, particularly through diplomatic representation; (2) listen to Pacific Island states, particularly their concerns about the growing militarization of the region; (3) coordinate both between U.S. agencies and with partners to avoid duplicating efforts and overwhelming Pacific absorptive capacity; (4) recognize the importance of people-to-people connections, with opportunities to engage the Pacific diaspora and improve avenues for Pacific migration; and (5) be consistent in commitment and policy approach.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- When engaging in dialogue with Pacific Island states, the U.S. should invite representatives from U.S. territories in the Pacific to participate in order to deepen regional relationships through Indigenous and diasporic ties.
- To increase its engagement with the Pacific Islands, the U.S. must be present (when invited) at regional forums, listen to the concerns of Pacific Island states, develop relationships, and act with integrity.
- The U.S. should remember that the region is diverse. Each state has its own history, priorities, politics, and interests, and what works in one state might not work in another.
- Due to Pacific Island states often having small and poorly resourced public sectors, engagement must be coordinated across U.S. agencies to minimize duplication.
- When establishing capacity-building programs, the U.S. should assess existing programs and coordinate with both providers and recipients. Any new initiatives should address the specific needs and interests of the recipient rather than adopt a one-size-fits-all approach.
- The U.S. should consider how domestic policies, such as immigration pauses for seasonal work visas, may contradict its foreign policy of engaging more closely with the region.

Like the United States, Australia and New Zealand have sought to revamp their relations with Pacific Island countries. Since 2018, Australia has implemented the Pacific Step-up policy, under which it has made substantial investments in infrastructure, increased labor mobility opportunities, developed several security-related initiatives, and implemented programs aimed at deepening people-to-people connections (including through education, sport, and churches). Similarly, in 2018, New Zealand announced its Pacific Reset to position itself as a Pacific nation and deepen its regional involvement. This policy was underpinned by five principles: understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective ambition, and sustainability. To build on the Pacific Reset, in 2021 New Zealand announced a Pacific Resilience framework grounded in the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) and that reflects deep connections between New Zealand and Polynesia.¹

With the United States looking to revitalize its engagement with the Pacific Islands through the U.S.-Pacific Partnership and in the Micronesian subregion through Compacts of Free Association (COFA) agreements, what can it learn from Australia and New Zealand, two U.S. partners that have long played the most active role in the Pacific Islands? This essay examines the successes and failures of Australia's and New Zealand's increased Pacific Island engagement and identifies five lessons for the United States' relationships in Micronesia: (1) be present in the region, (2) listen to the concerns most important to the region, (3) improve coordination, (4) recognize the importance of people-to-people connections, and (5) adopt a consistent policy.

Be Present in the Region

The Pacific Islands region is diverse—each state, territory, and island has its own culture and history that affects how it conducts its international relations. The broad-brush “Indo-Pacific” terminology adopted by the United States and its partners, including Australia, can overlook the diverse needs and interests of Pacific Island countries.² The United States should be conscious of the particularities within and between the three subregions that constitute the Pacific Islands—Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—and invest in ongoing and trusted relationships that reflect differences in characteristics, interests, challenges, and priorities.

Recent developments in Solomon Islands illustrate the importance of such trust building. In April 2022, when Solomon Islands entered into a security agreement with China, the consequences of the United States' lengthy diplomatic absence from the region became clear. An embassy was opened in February 2023 in response; however, the United States did not have a diplomatic presence in Solomon Islands for three decades, and when there was suddenly a need to engage, it did not have strong relationships to leverage. Recognizing the importance of investing in trusted relationships, Australia has established a diplomatic presence in every Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) member, consolidating its position as the state with the most extensive diplomatic network in the region. New Zealand has also increased diplomatic postings, including four globally to promote Pacific policy. New Zealand has a growing number of diplomats of Pasifika descent who speak Pacific languages and instill New Zealand's Pacific identity into its foreign

¹ Anna Powles, “From Reset to Resilience: Unpacking Mahuta's Pacific Vision,” Incline, November 15, 2021, <https://www.incline.org.nz/home/from-reset-to-resilience-unpacking-mahutas-pacific-vision>.

² Joanne Wallis et al., “Security Cooperation in the Pacific Islands: Architecture, Complex, Community, or Something Else?” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcac005>.

policy. Close people-to-people and diplomatic links enable trust and thereby facilitate deeper security conversations.

In addition, prior to the pandemic, both Australia and New Zealand increased their tempo of ministerial visits. These visits included the first by a New Zealand prime minister to Tokelau in fifteen years, accompanied by a minister of Tokelauan descent. High-level visits foster diplomatic relationships and build the people-to-people, social, and cultural connections necessary for deep and long-lasting relationships. Such visits have resumed with border reopenings. At the time of writing, Penny Wong had visited twelve Pacific Island countries since she became Australian foreign minister in May 2022. New Zealand's foreign minister, Nanaia Mahuta, has also undertaken visits in a way that "respects the Pacific."³ Both Australian prime minister Anthony Albanese and then New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern attended the PIF leaders' meeting in Fiji in July 2022.

After years of neglect, the United States has increased its high-level visits and meetings with Pacific Island countries. For example, President Donald Trump met with the COFA states in 2019. The Biden administration has intensified this approach, with diplomatic visits to Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea; a virtual address by Vice President Kamala Harris at the 2022 PIF leaders' meeting; high-level attendance at the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders; bilateral meetings on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly; and a meeting between President Joe Biden and leaders of fourteen Pacific Island states in September 2022. But beyond high-profile, high-level meetings, U.S. diplomats and officials need to engage in continuous and committed diplomacy in the region in order to build trust. This will mitigate the perception that the United States only takes an interest in Pacific Island countries when it has geopolitical concerns.

There are also opportunities for the United States to engage with the region through multilateral regional forums. For instance, the United States is seen as a trusted partner in the Pacific Transnational Crime Network. Engaging with other agencies, such as the Oceania Customs Organisation through the existing memberships of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), could assist in building relationships. However, caution should be exercised here: imposing a U.S. presence where it is unwanted could undermine good intentions. For example, Guam's application to join the PIF may ultimately be unsuccessful due to concerns that the United States will use Guam's membership to impose its views on the forum.

The United States could also invite Guam, CNMI, American Samoa, and Hawaii to play a role in U.S. diplomacy. Inviting representatives of U.S. territories to participate in high-level engagements with Pacific Island countries may be a way to deepen regional relationships, particularly as these entities already have solid relationships within regional organizations. This strategy was employed when the governor of Guam was included as part of the U.S. delegation in the U.S.-Pacific talks in September 2022.

Listen to the Concerns Most Important to the Region

Beyond showing up, the United States needs to listen to Micronesian and, more broadly, Pacific Island perspectives. Indeed, analysts have observed that there is "frustration in the Pacific when Australia and other metropolitan states are perceived not to appreciate the need for slowness:

³ Russell Palmer, "Mahuta Planning on Visits That 'Respect the Pacific,'" RNZ, June 7 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/468662/mahuta-planning-on-visits-that-respect-the-pacific>.

taking time to listen, build people-to-people relationships, and reach consensus.”⁴ The style of listening is also important, and Pacific leaders “demand that relationships within the Pacific family be conducted on an equal, open and respectful basis.”⁵

The United States and Australia have not always listened to Pacific Island states. This was evident when Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States announced their AUKUS trilateral security partnership in 2021, a key aspect of which is that the United States and the United Kingdom will assist Australia in developing nuclear-powered submarines.⁶ None of the AUKUS partners discussed the plan with Pacific Island states prior to the public announcement, which was a significant diplomatic oversight because nuclear technology is a highly sensitive topic for these countries. After the announcement of the AUKUS partnership, regional leaders expressed concerns that Australia, by acquiring access to nuclear technology, would potentially breach its commitment to the 1986 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty. The treaty is vitally important to Pacific Island states that continue to struggle with the legacy of U.S. nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands, UK testing in Kiribati, and French testing in French Polynesia. Indeed, Kiribati president Taneti Maamau raised this legacy when AUKUS was announced: “Our people were victims of nuclear testing...we still have trauma...with that in mind, with anything to do with nuclear, we thought it would be a courtesy to raise it, to discuss it with your neighbors.”⁷

Pacific Island leaders have also spoken out against the militarization of the region.⁸ The large U.S. military presence in Micronesia is an example of how the region has been made “the tip of the American military’s spear.”⁹ After listening to these concerns, Australia and New Zealand have reshaped their military presence to largely focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) and maritime domain awareness. In particular, they have emphasized protecting the fisheries and other marine resources within Pacific Island countries’ exclusive economic zones (EEZs). Reattributing military assets is one way of doing this: Australia has announced that it will dedicate a navy vessel for HADR in the Pacific, and New Zealand has focused its military deployments and engagements on HADR. Australia has also continued to roll out its Pacific Maritime Security Program, under which it provides patrol boats, training, and sustainment to Pacific Island countries to assist them in policing their EEZs. Following this lead, the United States has been exploring similar opportunities, including a renewed focus on shiprider agreements, which indicates a new willingness to listen to regional priorities.

Improve Coordination

The example of the United States increasing its role in HADR and maritime domain awareness highlights the challenge of coordination within partner states, between partners states, and

⁴ Maima Koro et al., “Tā, Vā, and Lā: Reimagining the Geopolitics of the Pacific Islands” (forthcoming, 2023).

⁵ Greg Fry, “AUKUS Undermines Australia’s ‘Pacific Family,’” Australian National University, Devpolicy Blog, November 4, 2021, <https://devpolicy.org/aukus-undermines-australias-pacific-family-20211104>.

⁶ “Joint Leaders Statement on AUKUS,” White House, September 15, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/15/joint-leaders-statement-on-aukus>.

⁷ Stan Grant, “Kiribati President Says AUKUS Nuclear Submarine Deal Puts Pacific at Risk,” ABC News (Australia), September 27, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-28/kiribati-president-criticises-australia-defence-submarine-deal/100495894>.

⁸ Meg Taylor, “Griffith Asia Lecture 2019” (lecture delivered at Griffith University, Brisbane, November 11, 2019), <https://www.forumsec.org/2019/11/12/griffith-asia-lecture-2019-delivered-by-the-secretary-general-of-the-pacific-islands-forum-dame-meg-taylor>.

⁹ Kenneth Gofigan Kuper, “Living at the Tip of the Spear: Guam and Restraint,” Responsible Statecraft, July 20, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/07/20/living-at-the-tip-of-the-spear-guam-and-restraint>.

between partners and Pacific Island countries. Coordination can be challenging because partner states generally have large bureaucracies, particularly the United States, that are inflexible, duplicate tasks while failing to address others, have incongruent funding and policy priorities, and are difficult for Pacific Island countries to work with and influence. Since the 2018 Pacific Step-up, Australia has sought to address these challenges by creating the interagency Office of the Pacific to coordinate government engagement with Pacific Island countries. The office features staff from various agencies that play a role in designing and implementing Australia's Pacific policy and is located in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. New Zealand also has sought to improve coordination. For example, agencies involved in Pacific security outreach meet regularly to coordinate, and law-enforcement officials often travel together to Pacific Island countries for capacity-building activities. This makes their engagement less burdensome, as it means that Pacific Island officials need to attend only one training program with New Zealand officials rather than multiple ones with officials from different agencies. Consolidating partner activities is important in the Pacific, where government agencies are often small and poorly resourced and therefore cannot afford to frequently remove personnel from their roles to attend duplicative training and meetings.

Given that Australia and the United States are both engaged in—or proposing—more training activities in the region, they should first assess what capacity-building programs are already in place and then work to coordinate their initiatives. They should also, after listening to their Pacific Island counterparts, ensure that any new training initiatives specifically address the needs and interests of recipient agencies or states rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, New Zealand and Australia both have policing and border security capacity-building programs that the United States could partner with by providing advisers and specific training, instead of creating a new parallel training program that will potentially duplicate or overlap with what is already in place.

Recognize the Importance of People-to-People Connections

What the United States hears when it tries to listen to its Pacific Island counterparts will depend on what it is told, which will in turn depend on how much it is trusted. As will already be clear, relationships are critical to trust, and people-to-people connections are critical to relationships. To facilitate relationship-building in the Pacific, the United States could learn from New Zealand's attempts to engage with its Pacific Island diaspora. New Zealand has many similarities to the United States in its constitutional relationships with Pacific Island states, such as the non-self-governing territory of Tokelau (near the disputed U.S. territory of Swain's Island), and the Cook Islands and Niue, both of which are in free association with New Zealand. These relationships are a key feature of New Zealand's foreign policy, which emphasizes Pacific Island identity through people-to-people links. Alongside the constitutional relationships that provide citizenship, New Zealand has a host of migration settings that enable the flow of Pacific Islanders for work, study, and family reasons. Over decades, this has led to a large diaspora and population of Pacific descent, totaling over 8% of New Zealand's population.¹⁰ Importantly, New Zealand's long-standing Recognised Seasonal Employers program supports Pacific Islanders through jobs in horticulture, agriculture, fisheries, and construction.

¹⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (New Zealand), "Pasifika New Zealand," <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/en/trade/free-trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements-in-force/pacer-plus/pasifika-new-zealand>.

Australia has also implemented labor mobility programs that provide opportunities for both seasonal and long-term circular migration from Pacific Island countries. Labor mobility is vital to the region, as it offers a safety valve for Pacific Island states with large unemployed and underemployed young populations. However, labor mobility schemes need to be well-managed to protect against exploitation and modern slavery, as well as to mitigate the impact for Pacific Island countries when skilled workers leave.¹¹

In New Zealand, demographic changes are having tangible effects on domestic politics and diplomacy. The Pasifika population is reshaping the political landscape. Ministers of Pacific Island descent make up 10% of New Zealand's Cabinet, and New Zealand's deputy prime minister Carmel Sepuloni is of Samoan and Tongan heritage.¹² Pacific Island leaders have highlighted the Pasifika identity as a distinct advantage to New Zealand's foreign policy: "Without a doubt, New Zealand has comparative advantage among development partners working in the Pacific as a consequence of history and its Pasifika New Zealand resident population. What better way to 'reset' than use this advantage to deliver to the Pacific?"¹³

Further, both New Zealand and Australia have recently recognized the importance of developing links between their Indigenous populations and Pacific Islanders, and indeed this has been called for in the region.¹⁴ New Zealand has incorporated Māori worldviews and practices into its foreign policy, emphasizing Indigenous ties.¹⁵ Likewise, Australia has developed the Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda.¹⁶

There are opportunities for the United States to foster similar relationships. The 2020 Census found that 1.6 million people living in the United States identified as "Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander"—with 619,885 identifying as Native Hawaiian, 211,876 identifying as Samoan, and 156,083 identifying as CHamoru.¹⁷ A focus on Native Hawaiian, CHamoru, and Native American ties would likely be welcomed in Pacific Island diplomacy and international relations.

While there are opportunities for Pacific Islanders to migrate through COFA, churches, and seasonal work, the United States could increase migration pathways to foster relationships with Micronesian states such as Nauru and Kiribati. However, it needs to acknowledge the impacts of labor mobility and visa schemes. H-2A and H-2B visas are contingent on Pacific Island states being "compliant" with U.S. interests. During the pandemic, when states closed their borders, Samoa and Tonga refused to accept the return of their citizens who had been deported. Deemed "non-compliant," Samoa and Tonga were blacklisted by the United States in 2021, and their nationals were unable to access seasonal work visas.¹⁸ This decision reflected a disregard for these states' inability to accept deportees while also needing economic opportunities at a time of crisis.

¹¹ "Samoa Reviews Overseas Employer Schemes," Radio New Zealand, October 11, 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/476449/samoa-reviews-overseas-employer-schemes>.

¹² "Ministerial List to Take Effect on 1 February 2023," New Zealand Government, January 2023, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Ministerial%20List%20as%20announced%20on%2031%20January%202023.pdf>.

¹³ "Views on NZ 'Changing': DPM," *Cook Islands News*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.cookislandsnews.com/local/views-on-nz-changing-dpm>.

¹⁴ Tess Newton Cain, James Cox, and Gier Henning Presterudstuen, *Pacific Perspectives on the World: Listening to Australia's Island Neighbours in Order to Build Strong, Respectful and Sustainable Relationships* (Penrith: Whitlam Institute, 2020).

¹⁵ Nanaia Mahuta, "Inaugural Foreign Policy Speech to Diplomatic Corps" (speech, Waitangi, February 4, 2021), <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/inaugural-foreign-policy-speech-diplomatic-corps>.

¹⁶ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Indigenous Diplomacy Agenda* (Canberra, May 2021), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/indigenous-diplomacy-agenda.pdf>.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2022," April 18, 2022, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2022/asian-american-pacific-islander.html>.

¹⁸ Henrietta McNeill, "Deviant States,' Deportation and Border Disruption," University of Oxford, Faculty of Law, November 3, 2022, <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/blog-post/2022/11/deviant-states-deportation-and-border-disruption>.

New Zealand and Australia, on the other hand, both paused deportations during the border closure period.¹⁹ This contrast with U.S. policy highlights how labor mobility opportunities should mirror overall foreign policy outcomes of economic growth, ongoing relationships, and people-to-people connections.

Adopt a Consistent Policy

While Australia's Pacific Step-up is intended to improve the country's relationships with the Pacific Islands, the policy was undermined by the previous Australian government's inconsistent policymaking toward the region. The most obvious inconsistency—and the one that most harmed Australia's relations in the region—was the failure to take serious action to address climate change. Indeed, at times the previous government acted as a spoiler on regional climate efforts, particularly within the PIF. This was despite PIF countries making it clear, including in the 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, that climate change is an existential threat to the region. This inconsistency in Australia's approach—on the one hand, professing to want to improve its relationships with its "Pacific family," while, on the other hand, refusing to address the major security challenge Pacific Island countries face—raised questions about the sincerity of Australia's commitment to the region.²⁰ While this inconsistency has been partly resolved by a change of government in May 2022 delivering a corresponding change in Australia's climate policy in favor of taking more concrete action, questions remain about whether the new government's commitments will be sufficiently ambitious to satisfy Pacific Island countries.

This example demonstrates the importance of consistency in U.S. Pacific policy. Positive initiatives to improve relationships in the region will be undercut if the United States simultaneously adopts policies that go against the interests of Pacific Island countries. While the Biden administration's approach to climate action has been welcomed, other aspects of U.S. policy—such as the delayed disposal of unexploded ordinance and the continued promotion of militarization as a solution to geostrategic challenges—may erode confidence in its consistency.

Conclusion

While Australia's and New Zealand's recent attempts to enhance their engagement and relationships with Pacific Island countries have not been unqualified successes, neither have they been abject failures. This essay has highlighted five lessons from their experiences for U.S. policymaking: (1) be present in the region, (2) listen to the concerns most important to the region, (3) improve coordination, (4) recognize the importance of people-to-people connections, and (5) adopt a consistent policy. Each state and territory has different needs and interests, and what works in one state may not work in another. Increased engagement should be tailored to the interests of each specific Pacific Island country.

¹⁹ Henrietta McNeill, "Dealing with the 'Crimigrant Other' in the Face of a Global Public Health Threat: A Snapshot of Deportation during Covid-19 in Australia and New Zealand," *Social Sciences* 10, no. 8 (2021): 278.

²⁰ Joanne Wallis, "Contradictions in Australia's Pacific Islands Discourse," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 75, no. 5 (2021): 487–506.

Conclusion: Strategic Pathways for U.S.-Micronesia Engagement

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For the United States, the Pacific Islands are a critical geostrategic region within the Indo-Pacific. The subregion of Micronesia is at the heart of U.S. interests in this region given the military, diplomatic, economic, and people-to-people ties that have been sustained across these island states. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) nations—the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands—and the U.S. territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands have allowed the United States to solidify its military power in the western Pacific. Despite this history, there are clear disconnects between the United States and Pacific Islands in Micronesia that must be addressed in order to preserve U.S. commitments, strengthen partnerships in the region, and effectively respond to urgent security challenges. Specifically, it is increasingly important for the United States to acknowledge these islands not just as strategic assets but as strategic partners.

The essays in this report have outlined a series of issues across the Micronesian security landscape on which the United States can increase its engagement, ranging from health and food security to challenges in the maritime domain, such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. As described by Alan Tidwell, the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing impacts from climate change have had a profound effect on the stability of numerous Micronesian states due to their lack of capacity and resilience in the health sector. This has wide-reaching implications for these countries and territories as pandemics and other biological threats will naturally and unforeseeably occur in the future, compounded by climate change as an evolving issue exacerbating numerous Pacific concerns. At the Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue convened by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR), which has informed the contributions in this special report, climate change and its consequences rose to the forefront as the primary security concern in the region.

Strategic Competition, Climate Change, and Regional Stability

Micronesia has become a primary focal point for U.S.-China competition as China's economic and diplomatic ambitions have expanded in the region, rivaling U.S. influence. Beijing views Micronesia and the broader Pacific Islands as a market for trade and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and as potential diplomatic and security partners. The BRI's extension into the Pacific has been endorsed by all ten Pacific Island countries that have formal diplomatic relations with China.¹ Although BRI projects have aided in the development of local economies, they may also make some countries and communities vulnerable to resource exploitation. For instance, Kiribati's fishing industry produces more tuna than any other country in the world and serves as a hub for Chinese fishing fleets.² China's strategic access and overfishing in Kiribati's waters has contributed to the decline of global fishing stocks and highlights concerns about IUU fishing. Kiribati's switch in its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China also emphasizes Beijing's ongoing attempts to politically isolate Taiwan. Three of the twelve UN member states globally that still maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan are in Micronesia: Nauru, Palau, and the Marshall Islands.

¹ These countries currently include the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, and Niue.

² Pita Ligaiula, "Study of Kiribati Economy Finds It Is Over-reliant on Tuna Fishery," Pacific Islands News Association, August 22, 2022, https://pina.com.fj/2022/08/22/study-of-kiribati-economy-finds-it-is-over-reliant-on-tuna-fishery/?doing_wp_cron=1676561602.3623011112213134765625.

Kenneth Gofigan Kuper notes that intensifying U.S.-China competition has brought about a destabilizing shift to Micronesia's geopolitical and security environment. Micronesia hosts the bulk of U.S. military forces among the three Pacific Islands subregions, with Guam, in particular, serving as the most essential and strategic location for U.S. military operations. While the U.S. military is committed to fighting for and from Guam, its presence also makes the island a potential target for China and other adversarial countries, such as North Korea.³ In the event that the United States becomes militarily involved in a cross-strait conflict for the defense of Taiwan, China is likely to attack key U.S. bases in the Indo-Pacific. Guam will be prioritized for such an offense, especially as thousands of U.S. Marines are set to be relocated there from Okinawa, despite local concerns.⁴ China has even developed a conventionally armed ballistic missile, further heightening the security situation for Guam. The geopolitical ramifications of U.S.-China competition are also affecting how Pacific nations interact with one another, including within the Pacific Islands Forum, the region's main multilateral organization. Kiribati's withdrawal from the forum in 2022 is largely seen as a result of deepening relations with China and sentiments that the regional body has continuously disregarded Micronesian interests. The Biden administration has made efforts to reach out to the Pacific Islands Forum amid these tensions, but there must be sustained engagement to strengthen Pacific regionalism.

The U.S. approach to Pacific regionalism must also recognize that the Pacific Islands within Micronesia are fundamentally different and have varying relationships with the United States, based on their political and territorial status. For instance, the Covenant, which governs U.S. relations with the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, is not the same as the arrangements that govern Guam.⁵ Each of the COFA agreements has provisions specific to the particular countries and timelines for renegotiation that differ, though the Biden administration has made notable strides by signing memoranda of understanding with the three COFA states and hopes to renew the three compacts soon.⁶

Although diverse issues continue to plague Micronesia and the Pacific Islands more broadly, climate change remains the single most important security challenge uniting all countries and territories in the region. Since many of the islands are small low-lying atolls, including in the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, and Nauru, they are severely affected by rising sea levels and are at risk of being submerged. Climate change already constitutes an existential threat, as the possibility of submersion has become a reality for some of the Pacific Island countries.⁷

In the Pacific Islands region, climate change intersects with a variety of security concerns. Tidwell points to direct correlations between climate change and food security in these countries and territories that rely heavily on their waters for nourishment. The geographic and water temperature shifts will affect fishing stocks as tuna and other species of fish migrate. In addition

³ Phill Leon Guerrero, "Admiral: Ability to Defend Guam 'Absolutely Critical,'" *Guam Daily Post*, July 1, 2022, https://www.postguam.com/news/local/admiral-ability-to-defend-guam-absolutely-critical/article_8cfffbee-f859-11ec-a07e-bb300b7054f6.html.

⁴ Maricar Cinco, "2024 Transfer of Okinawa-Based Marines to Guam on Course: U.S. Marines," *Kyodo News*, December 9, 2022, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2022/12/d96faa52e79-2024-transfer-of-okinawa-based-marines-to-guam-on-course-us-marines.html>.

⁵ For further discussion of the Covenant, see Howard P. Willens and Deanne C. Siemer, *An Honorable Accord: The Covenant between the Northern Mariana Islands and the United States* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002). For an in-depth discussion of self-governance in Guam, see Office of the Governor of Guam, Commission on Decolonization, *Giha Mo'na: A Self-Determination Study for Guahan* (Mangilao: University of Guam Press, 2021).

⁶ Matthew Lee, "U.S. Nears New Cooperation Deals with Pacific Island Nations," *Associated Press*, January 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-china-marshall-islands-palau-cadbe13c8cf26dd8b117bca686e06bba>.

⁷ "Disappearing Islands: Inevitable Climate Change Phenomenon," *American Bazaar*, July 29, 2022, <https://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2022/07/29/disappearing-islands-inevitable-climate-change-phenomenon-450417>.

to hurting local food supplies, this negatively affects local economies that depend on fisheries as a source of revenue to maintain schools, hospitals, and other critical services.⁸ As rising sea levels create increasingly uninhabitable geographies, the economic and labor-related consequences of climate change will also intensify. The United States has recommitted to action on the climate crisis, but the existential threat to Pacific security and livelihoods means that measures to reduce the impact of climate change and mitigate further increases in global temperatures cannot wait.

Lessons Learned for the United States

The approaches of U.S. allies to engagement in the Pacific Islands can provide examples for the United States when it comes to bolstering cooperation in Micronesia. In their essay, Henrietta McNeill and Joanne Wallis describe how Australia and New Zealand have learned from past mistakes and are rebuilding relationships, including with Micronesian states, through their respective Pacific Step-up and Pacific Reset policies. Both countries have come to recognize the importance of actively engaging with and listening to the Pacific Island countries and have incorporated those values into their Pacific strategies.

In particular, Australia and New Zealand have strengthened their militaries' focus on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), capabilities that are tremendously needed within Micronesia and across the Pacific. The U.S. Coast Guard already maintains strong relationships with Pacific nations, such as the Federated States of Micronesia, on maritime law enforcement to address IUU fishing and also conducts operations on joint search and rescue exercises. There is, however, much potential for the U.S. military—specifically its naval forces—to divert more of its attention and capabilities toward joint HADR activities with Australia and New Zealand. Although HADR has been identified as a shared goal among the three nations, and each has engaged in individual disaster response operations, these countries have yet to realize the full potential of combined HADR.⁹ Given that the United States has greater leverage in the security framework of Micronesia than Australia and New Zealand, it should exercise that advantage to increase its HADR efforts to support the safety of its Micronesian partners and enhance strategic trilateral coordination.

At the same time, there are lessons to be learned from China and its level of engagement in Micronesia. Beijing has asserted its economic and diplomatic influence over the region and other developing nations with the growth of its national power in the 21st century. China has demonstrated that it can effectively compete in the areas of trade and economic investment, presenting a strategic challenge to the United States. According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China's total trade volume with Pacific Island diplomatic partners was \$5.3 billion in 2021, and its investments in those states amounted to \$2.72 billion by the latter half of 2022.¹⁰ In comparison, the most recent data from the U.S. Trade Representative shows that the United

⁸ Katherine Seto et al., "Climate Change Is Causing Tuna to Migrate: It Could Spell Catastrophe for the Small Islands That Depend on Them," *American Bazaar*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2022/07/29/disappearing-islands-inevitable-climate-change-phenomenon-450417>.

⁹ Dylan Nicholson, "ANZUS Hospital Ships for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief," *Defence Connect*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5861-anzus-hospital-ships-for-hadr>.

¹⁰ Sanjeshni Kumar, "Pacific Island Nations Eye More Opportunities: Pacific Trade Invest China," *Pacific Islands News Association*, November 23, 2022, <https://pina.com.fj/2022/11/23/pacific-island-nations-eye-more-opportunities-pacific-trade-invest-china>.

States' total volume of trade with the Pacific Islands was only \$968 million in 2020.¹¹ It is evident that Beijing's strategic approach to economic development in the Pacific Islands has largely been successful, in part because few other countries rival it in terms of investment scale. As Pacific scholars Dame Meg Taylor and Soli Middleby have noted, "while Chinese-built infrastructure is criticized for being sub-standard, it remains the only real option."¹²

However, Beijing's strategic approaches to security in the region have not been as effective, as it has attempted to advance proposals to partners with little consultation and the expectation that they will accept. For instance, China worked to push forward a collective security agreement in the region in 2022,¹³ but that arrangement was rejected by its ten diplomatic partners in the Pacific. Several of the partners cited concerns regarding the expansion of Chinese influence into security matters.¹⁴ This episode highlights regional fears of U.S.-China competition overtaking regional priorities and the imperative to keep Pacific Island interests in mind.

On that front, maintaining and encouraging regional unity should be a focus of the United States in this period of higher engagement with Micronesia. Bolstering Pacific regionalism amid internal tensions within the Pacific Islands Forum will not be easy, but it is crucial for the United States to remain present, open, and proactive in its diplomacy. To that end, a reactionary approach to China's engagement in the Pacific Islands is not sustainable for U.S. relationships with regional countries. The United States must instead actively and consistently engage with its partners and understand their perception of key security challenges. Furthermore, the United States should fulfill its climate change commitments in Micronesia and the broader Pacific to enhance its diplomatic standing and build trust. This will require follow-through on cooperative initiatives such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific and the newly created Pacific Partnership Strategy, as well as on climate resilience efforts.

In conclusion, NBR's Pacific Islands Strategic Dialogue found that U.S. efforts to encourage mutually beneficial ties in Micronesia and leverage them to bolster regional security must rest on the "three A's": acknowledge, appreciate, and actively coordinate. *Acknowledging* means recognizing that Pacific Island countries and territories, including those in Micronesia, are not monolithic. Should U.S. officials and representatives lump these disparate jurisdictions and cultures together as one homogenous entity, important nuances will be missed. *Appreciating* the concerns of Pacific Island leaders is not simply a matter of agreeing with them or using their rhetoric. U.S. officials must make a concerted effort to understand the seriousness of the concerns raised in key documents from the Pacific Islands Forum, such as the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, otherwise their engagement will come across as insincere. Last, *actively coordinating* requires U.S. government agencies, some of which are larger than the populations of some Pacific Islands nations, to ensure that programs and policies do not overwhelm local officials and Pacific voices.¹⁵

¹¹ U.S. Trade Representative, "Pacific Islands," <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/pacific-islands-0>.

¹² Meg Taylor and Soli Middleby, "More of the Same Is Not the Answer to Building Influence in the Pacific," *Island Times*, October, 7, 2022, <https://islandtimes.org/58511-2>.

¹³ Wang Yi, "China-Solomon Islands Bilateral Security Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, June 3, 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202206/t20220603_10698478.html.

¹⁴ "10 Pacific Island Countries Reject China's Regional Security Pact," NDTV, May 30, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/10-pacific-countries-reject-chinas-regional-security-pact-3022158>.

¹⁵ For example, the U.S. Department of the Interior, which is responsible for managing the aspects of the relationships with the U.S. territories and COFA states, has over 70,000 people. The population of the Marshall Islands is just over 60,000 people.

Building and maintaining trust requires presence, resource commitments, and a long-term agenda. The permanent representative of Samoa to the United Nations put it succinctly to the United States recently in a quote that should guide any strategy in the Pacific Island countries going forward: “Make your presence felt in the region in terms of representation. You cannot compete if you are not in the region.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Pa’olelei Luteru in “Building a Blue Pacific Agenda for the 21st Century,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 23, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/events/building-blue-pacific-agenda-twenty-first-century>.



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