

United States-Australia Indo-Pacific Conversation Series #3

Partnering with the Pacific: Engaging with Pacific Islands

featuring Victoria Keener, Sandra Kraushaar, and Karen Knudsen

— Key Findings —

Introduction

Pacific Forum, in cooperation with the United States Studies Centre, and with generous support from the U.S. Embassy in Canberra, organized the inaugural session of the U.S.–Australia Indo-Pacific Conversation Series. This virtual event took place on April 7, 2021 (Hawaii) through the Zoom platform, under the theme “Partnering with the Pacific: Engaging with Pacific Islands”. The session was headlined by Dr. Victoria Keener (Research Fellow and Co-lead Principal Investigator of Pacific RISA, East-West Center) and Ms. Sandra Kraushaar (Director, Pacific Islands at The Asia Foundation), and moderated by Ms. Karen Knudsen (former Director of External Affairs at the East-West Center in Honolulu). The following are the key findings from the session.

The Indo-Pacific Strategic Landscape

The Pacific Islands Region (PIR) encompasses 36% of the total surface of the earth and it consists of up to 26 polities, which includes a mixture of sovereign states, semi-independent territories, and freely associated states. The large ocean area surrounding Pacific Island Countries (PICs) economically isolates them from global markets, and most island states have relatively small populations with a legacy of colonialism and resource extraction. Being situated between the United States and China, this huge geographic entity, comprising the various polities, land masses, maritime boundaries, and resources, has become a proxy for geostrategic maneuver.

Mindful of the region's competitive environment, the Biden administration intends to revitalize U.S. alliances in the PIR. The U.S. has a strong presence in the PIR, and it engages Pacific Island Countries in a broad array of economic, diplomatic, and climate science initiatives. It also has military facilities on Guam, the Marshall

Islands, and Wake Island. As outlined in the “Pacific Step-Up” plan of 2016, Australia continues to express its commitment to engage PICs through investment and joint agendas. The issues addressed by joint agendas range from defense to trade and diplomacy. China is also active in engaging PICs, and perceptions of Beijing vary between states. Beijing is particularly active in providing infrastructure projects to PICs; however, it often supplies its own contractors and materials for these installations, leaving Pacific Islanders with minimal training and education in how to construct or maintain such structures in the future. Japan has a long-standing, yet quiet, economic, diplomatic, and developmental presence across the PIR. It is very involved in climate science, entrepreneurial and income-generating activities, and offering educational opportunities for students from Pacific Island Countries. It is important to understand these initiatives outside the altruism of a development lens, rather as tools of soft diplomacy in a globally competitive world.

Women’s Health and Security

Gender-based violence continues to constitute a shadow epidemic in the PIR. Violence against women and girls, gender inequality, and sexual and reproductive health issues persist in PICs. The economic, political, moral, business, and human rights case for gender equality is a work in progress in many countries, and there has been some improvement in education, health, and women’s participation in formal employment and national policymaking, however resources for many women’s health and security budgets remain limited.

Addressing Climate Change

Climate change poses the greatest security threat to the PIR, affecting not only the environment, but the communities that live and depend on its resources for food security and livelihoods. Rising sea levels and warming temperatures contribute to coastal erosion, increasing storm intensity, declining ocean resources, and prolonged droughts, ultimately forcing climate-induced migration. Pacific Island Countries have undertaken extensive climate planning and advocacy. The Boe Declaration for Regional Security, the establishment of the United Nations Local2030 Islands Hub, and the Kainaki II Declaration for Urgent Climate Action Now are examples of such initiatives. Some Pacific Island Countries have also looked to engineering projects, such as floating islands, to provide different solutions to populations living on land that is rapidly changing or disappearing.

Climate boundary organizations are especially valuable mechanisms for bridging local knowledge, scientific expertise and policy on climate change. Boundary organizations form a crucial interface between researchers, community members, and policymakers. They assist in shaping knowledge in order to meaningfully engage

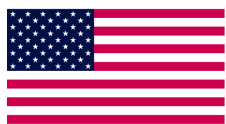
affected communities and determine the most efficient and effective allocation of resources. Examples of the work of climate boundary organizations, like Pacific RISA, include investigating climate services for the Marshall Islands health sector, and assessing the capacity of freshwater reserves to support expanding human populations around U.S. defense installations on Guam. Such organizations will become critical for the PIR in the future as the effects of climate change become increasingly acute.

Opportunities for Meaningful Collaboration

Despite the multiplicity of actors engaged in initiatives throughout the PIR, there remains a need for a joined agenda with elements of security, development, trade, and diplomacy. Climate disaster responses are an especially useful opportunity for collaboration, allowing allies to coordinate efforts with each other, Pacific Island governments, international donors, aid groups, and federal agencies. A free and open Indo-Pacific should allow all states to pursue a prosperous and sovereign future, which is why meaningful engagement with Pacific Island Countries starts with listening to their needs, not simply viewing them through the prism of great power competition.

This document was prepared by Tom Connolly, Non-resident Vasey Fellow, Pacific Forum. For more information, please contact Ariel Stenek (ariel@pacforum.org), Director, Young Leaders Program, Pacific Forum. These preliminary findings provide a general summary of the discussion. This is not a consensus document. The views expressed are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants. The speakers have approved this summation of their presentation.

The United States-Australia Indo-Pacific Conversation Series is held with support from the **US Embassy in Canberra** and in collaboration with the **United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney**.



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