



**PASIFIKA POLICY: AMPLIFYING  
HAWAII'S DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES  
TO NAVIGATE U.S.-PACIFIC  
ENGAGEMENT**

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## Introduction

Covering over 63.8 million square miles and over 30% of the earth's surface, it is no surprise that the Pacific

is one of the most contested regions in the world. Hawaii's diverse cultural makeup offers many unique advantages that can strengthen US alliances in the Pacific. As the state with the largest Pacific Island diaspora community along with its own cultural connections through language, culture, and migration, Hawaii has the potential to be at the forefront of progressive soft power policies. The term, "soft power" was coined by political scientist Joseph Nye and is defined as "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment".<sup>1</sup> Nye associates this concept with intangible 'power resources' such as culture and ideology. In our research, we explore the concept of soft power within an indigenous framework.

In the case of China, political discourse regarding China's engagement with PICs is largely focused on the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative but what is often overlooked is China's investment in soft power resources such as language. To bolster the BRI and strengthen its diplomatic ties within the Pacific region, China is also encouraging more university students to study Pacific Island languages. At Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), widely regarded as one of the top schools in China for aspiring foreign diplomats, students are now offered language classes covering all Pacific Island countries (PICs) with which China has forged diplomatic ties such as Bislama, Fijian, Samoan, Tok Pisin, and Tongan.<sup>2</sup> China also launched the China-Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Center in April of 2022 in Shandong Province of China and the following month stated that "China stands ready to work with PICs to further promote high-level exchanges, cement political mutual trust, expand practical cooperation, and strengthen people-to-people ties so as to build a closer China-Pacific Island Countries community with a shared future".<sup>3</sup>

While some researchers would argue that the Pacific Ocean is caught in a power struggle between China and the United States, we suggest an alternative

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Nye. "Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept".

<sup>2</sup> Denghua Zhang and Setope So'oa'emalelagi. "A New Trend: Pacific Island Language Teaching as Part of the Belt and Road Initiative".

<sup>3</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic Of China in Ireland. "Fact Sheet: Cooperation Between China and Pacific Island Countries".

framing. Although it is important to note China's engagement in the region, we argue that the US should not be motivated by the sole focus of countering China. Instead, US engagement should be guided by culturally-informed frameworks within Oceania and empower people-to-people relationships with our Pacific neighbors and allies. The United States, through Hawaii's leadership and use of human capital in diasporic communities, can create Indigenous-centered policies that stabilize US soft power in the Pacific region while also empowering US citizens in the diaspora through Indigenous language programs and cultural practices. Our recommendation is to build policies in the Pacific based upon culturally-established protocols within Oceania, emphasizing multilingualism in Hawaii's diaspora, and incorporating more Pacific Islanders into foreign policymaking roles.

### Indigenous Frameworks

Even with an abundance of different cultures and languages, there are several oral traditions and values that bind communities together in Oceania; a connection that transcends geopolitical borders which both differentiate and unify.<sup>4</sup> In order to create more effective policy in the Pacific and stabilize the region, the United States must restructure its rules of engagement in the region to more accurately reflect and build upon Pacific Islands culture and connections. The first shift needed in Pacific Island interaction is recognizing the power of the family unit. In Oceania, the family extends beyond that of a Western framework and refers more broadly to the village or clan that one belongs to, regardless of direct blood connections. The family is the central unit and is prioritized above all else. Creating a Pacific policy that acknowledges this pattern in Oceania and in the United States diaspora is the first step to centering Indigenous voices in the region. A common phrase in Tongan is "namu e toto" or "blood smells". While the direct translation may generate more questions than answers, the cultural context of this phrase sheds light on how Pacific Islanders build relationships and the

transcendent nature of these connections. "Namu e toto" embodies the belief that familial ties are so strong that the blood between two individuals can sense an ancestral connection subconsciously; this subliminal connection acknowledged through one's genetic makeup brings individuals together and helps establish a relationship between them before consciously recognizing or being informed of their shared ancestry.

The phrase "namu e toto" illustrates how familial relationships in Oceania are incredibly powerful and fundamental to establishing genealogical connections. These family ties in Oceania have direct social implications and expectations. An example of this is in "Tauhi vā: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond" by anthropologist Tevita Ka'ili where he analyzes the process of diaspora and relationship building between Tongans in Tonga and in Maui. Ka'ili argues that tauhi vā, or the nourishing of the space between people, is fundamental to cultivating and retaining long-lasting relationships in Oceania.<sup>5</sup> Initially, this space is created through the conscious acknowledgment of familial connections, but over time is renewed and strengthened through cultural protocol and reciprocity.<sup>6</sup> Ka'ili's research, when applied to the Pacific strategy, would suggest that Tongan identity, and arguably identity in greater Oceania, looks beyond geopolitical boundaries and seeks to create connections with family members to perpetuate culture and empower other members of the family unit. Utilizing these types of Indigenous frameworks and cultural knowledge, which are also deeply retained within the diaspora, can guide US strategy in the Pacific region. Pacific Islanders inside and outside of the United States diaspora look for opportunities to make these connections and are expected to prioritize them over other relationships.<sup>7</sup>

Another framework in which to prioritize an Indigenous framework in policy is in Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor's "Beyond "Migration": Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of

<sup>4</sup> Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands."

<sup>5</sup> Tauhi vā means to nurture or care for the space between two people.

<sup>6</sup> Ka'ili, T. "Tauhi vā: Nurturing Tongan Sociospatial Ties in Maui and Beyond"

<sup>7</sup> Gershon, Ilana. *No Family Is an Island Cultural Expertise Among Samoans in Diaspora.*

Social Space (Va)”.<sup>8</sup> Lilomaiava-Doktor emphasizes the fundamental part of relationship building in Samoan communities is malaga (travel) and va (relationships between people or groups of people); in other words, a core principle in the community is traveling often and connecting with those you share relationships with and have obligations to. Regarding foreign policy in the Pacific, the United States’ first step is to more fully recognize the untapped potential of the Pacific Islander diaspora to operate in this cultural space to stabilize interactions in the third-island chain through intrapersonal connections.

### Indigenizing Foreign Policy<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, the United States is trying to navigate Pacific engagement through Western frameworks and as reactions to Chinese advances in the region, but these strategies are not enough to foster long-term stability and security in the region; we argue that the US response to Oceania policy should be progressive rather than aggressive in order to create the most change. Not only that, but US policy in the Pacific should be reflective of the values of the community they are trying to reach. We title these efforts using Indigenous frameworks, ontologies, and voices, “Pasifika policy”. Pasifika is the Indigenized word for Pacific that was originally used to refer to members of the Polynesian community living in New Zealand where the word was quickly adopted by the Polynesian community in the United States.<sup>10</sup> However, Pasifika has now also adapted to reflect the multicultural communities in the United States expanding to include greater Oceania, to such places as Guam, the Solomon Islands, and more.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, Pacific Islander, or Pasifika, communities across the United States have fought for more recognition and are willing and able to engage with their family members in Oceania.<sup>12</sup> Increasing access

to Oceania and incentivizing involvement in government agencies abroad for Pacific Islanders in diaspora will empower their individual communities and also strengthen political ties to the region as the Indigenous frameworks of Oceania emphasize direct family ties, ancestral connections, and cultural protocols. There have been a number of Pacific Islander scholars in recent years who advocate for the Indigenization of academic methods to better understand and interact with Pacific Islander communities; we are arguing the same for policy-making in the Pacific with the examples seen above with tauhi va, va, and malaga. While we recognize each island country and community has its own cultural values and customs, scholars recognize that there are a number of common themes woven into the fabric of Oceania. Simultaneously, we recognize that identity in diaspora in recent decades has become increasingly more inclusive and reflective of a pan-Pacific or a transnational identity.<sup>13</sup> Centering or “Indigenizing” US policy around these cultural frameworks is the beginning of a more effective and genuine level of engagement in the Pacific that promotes security while also empowering Indigenous people in diaspora and abroad. In conjunction with increased Pacific Islander representation and culturally informed policymaking, an emphasis on Indigenous language learning within the diaspora would prove to be far more advantageous and effective than port building and financial aid through an outsider party such as China or even the United States alone.

Pasifika policy can potentially be the United States’ competitive edge over China when it comes to projecting soft power in the Pacific region. While China has the money to build infrastructure projects, the United States through its diaspora communities has the natural connections through the historical

<sup>8</sup> Lilomaiava-Doktor, S. 2009. Beyond “Migration”: Samoan Population Movement (Malaga) and the Geography of Social Space (Va)

<sup>9</sup> The authors recognize the complexity of the word “Indigenous” and that some Pacific Islanders may feel this does not represent them accurately. For the purpose of this paper, we propose to use this term to denote Pacific Islanders from across Oceania who either live in the Pacific or in diaspora until a term more reflective of their positionality and perspective is available.

<sup>10</sup> Tapasā n.d. “Pacific and Pasifika Terminology” Tapasā. <https://tapasa.tki.org.nz/about/tapasapa/pacific-and-pasifika-terminology/>.

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, Jesi Lujan. *Apmam Tiemp Ti Uli’e Hit (Long Time No See): Chamorro Diaspora and the Transpacific Home*, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Today, Marc Ramirez. “In Pasifika, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Communities Seek Identity and Independence” *USA TODAY*, January 30, 2023

<sup>13</sup> Thomsen, Patrick Saulmatino, Lana Lopesi, and Kevin Lujan Lee. “Contemporary Moana Mobilities: Settler-Colonial Citizenship, Upward Mobility, and Transnational Pacific Identities.” *The Contemporary Pacific* 34, no. 2 (2022): 327–352.

flows of people from Pacific Islander countries to be able to have the human capital to have the ability to implement these kinds of progressive policies. There has been much literature and frameworks on countries such as India, China, and South Korea with significant diaspora populations across the world projecting their soft power to influence these diaspora communities as a form of foreign policy. However, there is a lack of research on the reverse effect of diaspora communities being empowered to take part in foreign policy of their ‘adopted’ country towards countries of ancestry and heritage. As US policymakers and informers become more aware of the potential soft power within Pasifika policy, lasting growth, and resilience will be made in US-Pacific engagement. A fundamental part of Pasifika policy implementation also implies increased government-funded opportunities for cultural learning and language revitalization within the diaspora and greater representation of Pacific Islanders in policymaking spaces. We argue that Hawaii, the state with the largest Pacific Islander diaspora community along with its own cultural connections with Oceania through language, culture, and migration should be at the forefront of this strength in these progressive soft power policies.

### Multilingualism in Hawaii

Hawaii is considered by many to be a very multilingual and multicultural place. It is one of only two states within the U.S. to have another official language besides English, the other being Hawaiian. Over 25% of households in Hawaii speak a language other than English in the home. Hawaii is the ninth for the most number of speakers of languages other than English in the home. Despite the historical complexities surrounding Indigenous language practices, Saft (2019) explains quite clearly that multilingualism in Hawaii is quite widely spread despite the dominance of English, especially as Hawaii is a state and adheres to the same American education system, which gives prominence to English and “impacts the attitudes toward languages as well as

decisions about which language(s) to use.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the U.S. annexation of the islands in the late 19th century and the rise of settlers from the U.S. Continentally, there were policies in place for Hawaii to assimilate into the U.S. and American education system, starting with the restrictions on the use and acquisition of the Hawaiian language in schools along with the segregation of schools in the early 20th century with the implementation of the English standard school system. Many of these policies led to almost a whole generation losing their mother tongue. However, as there became a continued rise in immigration along with tourism becoming the dominant industry in the state’s economy, other languages such as Japanese and Korean have come to more prominence as the number of tourist arrivals and investment increase in these countries and are increasingly taught within the schools and universities in the state.

In the past decade, there have been more initiatives and calls for the importance of language learning in Hawaii public schools. The Hawaii Department of Education (HIDOE) had initiatives such as the World Languages Program and the Multilingualism for Equitable Education Policy. Through the University of Hawaii and the U.S. Flagship Language Program, there has been a wider call for the value of multilingual and multicultural education in relation to Hawaii’s labor market and economy through long-term strategies of the Hawaii Language Roadmap Initiative. Although these initiatives to provide multilingual and multicultural education in Hawaii are strong steps in the right direction, when it comes to foreign policy and forging stronger ties with the Pacific Island region, more can certainly be done on the federal level. Despite this recognition of language revitalization for Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islander languages are not widely taught in Hawaii public schools and are not part of the HIDOE’s World Languages initiative despite over 25% of high school students identifying as Pacific Islander.<sup>15</sup> The first step to implementing Pasifika policy is by integrating

<sup>14</sup> Saft, Scott. *Exploring Multilingual Hawai'i : Language Use and Language Ideologies in a Diverse Society*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> US News, Hawaii Department of Education. “Students at Hawaii Department of Education” 2017.

<https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/hawaii/districts/hawaii-department-of-education-106677#:~:text=The%20student%20body%20at%20the,Hawaiian%20or%20other%20Pacific%20Islander.>

language revitalization into schools and universities while also providing funding to Pacific Islanders from the United States diaspora. The importance of language is best embodied by an 'ōlelo no' eau: “i ka 'ōlelo ke ola, i ka 'ōlelo ka make” meaning “in the language is life, in the language is death”. Pasifika frameworks demonstrate that if we prioritize language revitalization, we allow for diverse perspectives through which we can problem solve, providing Pacific Islanders in diaspora ways to connect with culture while also providing a competitive edge over Chinese influence in the region.

Language acquisition in the diaspora is fundamental to cultivating a source for future policymakers who are rooted in the Pacific and the United States but this is only one step towards incorporating Pasifika policy into current policymaking circles. Another crucial piece to consider is Pacific Islander representation in the policy sector. Pacific Islanders<sup>16</sup> are not as equally represented in politics like other demographics despite large populations of Pacific Islanders in Hawaii and other states bordering the Pacific.<sup>17</sup> Expanding Pacific Islander representation in these political spheres is an important step towards creating a community of policymakers that are reflective of the stakeholders and communities that the US is trying to reach. Additionally, careful consideration must be made to support the integration of these diverse voices while respecting their unique backgrounds and cultural protocols. By increasing Pacific Islander representation in policy making and cultivating a safe space for indigenous concepts and protocols to flourish we can thereby effectively engage with indigenous perspectives and problem-solving approaches.

## Mutually Beneficial Relationship

In recent years, federal agencies such as the U.S. State Department have expended a greater effort to create more educational and cultural platforms for engagement in Pacific Islander diaspora communities by promoting government-funded language programs, increased Pacific Islander scholarships and internship opportunities for students from high school students to PhD candidates, and the creation of University of Hawaii at Manoa's newest Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs (CIPA).<sup>18</sup> But we argue there is more to be done; the Biden Administration's *National Strategy to Advance Equity, Justice and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders* discusses the need for more diversity and representation of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in government.<sup>19</sup> While the brief demonstrates that the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (WHIAANHPI) is more diverse than other branches, the lack of specificity regarding what these NHPI do within the administration and how they feel about the WHIAANHPI plan echoes other research done in Reflective Democracy Campaign's Asian American Pacific Islander Political Leadership report.<sup>20</sup> Language programs, internships, and scholarships for Pacific Islander should do more than give them experience but should help place them in spaces where policy is being made and their voices will guide the conversation. Pasifika policy is not just simply incorporating observable cultural practices and outsider perceptions of the region into policy that is projected onto Pacific Island countries; Pasifika policy is Pacific Islanders from the United States diaspora incorporating their cultural experiences and embodied Pasifika ontologies into a policy that transcends current political temperatures and establishes resilience and consistency in the region. Our recommendation on a university level advocates

<sup>16</sup> Washington Center for Equitable Growth. “How data disaggregation matters for Asian Americans and Pacific Islander” December 2016. <https://equitablegrowth.org/how-data-disaggregation-matters-for-asian-americans-and-pacific-islanders/>

<sup>17</sup> Politico. “Asian Americans are less likely to hold office”. May 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/04/asian-american-pacific-islander-representation-elected-office-485279>

<sup>18</sup> Indo-Pacific Affairs, Center for. “About” *University of Hawaii at Manoa* September 2022 <https://manoa.hawaii.edu/indopacificaffairs/>

<sup>19</sup> White House, The. *National Strategy to Advance Equity, Justice and Opportunity for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders* January 2023. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/WHIAANHPI-2023-Report-to-the-President-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Reflective Democracy Campaign. “Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Political Leadership” May 2021. <https://wholeads.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/reflectivedemocracy-AdvanceAAPIPower-may2021.pdf>

for more funding to be allocated to Pacific Islander and Indigenous student college groups at academic institutions throughout the state like the Pan-Pacific Association at UH Manoa to help provide resources and scholarships for service in the association while simultaneously promoting involvement, cultural practices, language revitalization, pan-Pacific community building and more.

Our recommendation from implementation of Pacific-minded policymaking on a large scale is through already established, Hawaii-based research organizations such as the East-West Center, PAAC, and CIPA. These organizations will partner with programs like the Presidential Management Fund to create partnerships with consulates and embassies in Hawaii and across the Pacific for potential internship opportunities. Internships should then be given the option to be converted into long term positions or extensions. Service in high needs areas, like the Pacific and US territories, should frame this promotion of soft power development in the region as reconnecting with culture and family in “home” countries to connect with Indigenous communities. Pacific Islanders who live in diaspora are often eager to reconnect to the fonua, land and this framework as connecting with home and family is directly tied to the Indigenous ontologies mentioned earlier in this paper. While some programs like this are already in place, like Resilient Pacific Island Leadership Program, a downfall to some of these current programs is that they do not promote participation from Pacific Islanders in the United States diaspora as much as they do to the Pacific. President Suzanne Vares-Lum of the East-West Center, in their five year Foundational Strategy states that the East-West Center plans to “increase Pacific Islands participation in all programs, with a balanced representation from Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia (including Native Hawaiians)”.<sup>21</sup> Prior to President Vares-Lum, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders who resided in American territories were not seen as target groups. These programs, when more actively inclusive to Pacific Islanders in diaspora and the greater Pacific as defined by Pacific Islanders, can create a future

generational pipeline to the Foreign Service, where they can fill jobs in the U.S. Embassies abroad within Oceania. Certain career jobs at U.S. diplomatic missions can be reframed through an Indigenous lens as members of the diaspora can travel back to their countries funded by the United States government., connect with family, practice language, and make U.S. wages; which embody the frameworks discussed above by Ka’ili, Lilomaiava-Doktor, and Gershon. Indigenizing foreign policy, empowering Indigenous people to work through western systems to eventually create more self-sustainable, self-reliant governments. The United States is not looking to recreate an imperial age in the Pacific, we are interested in establishing beneficial trade relationships with partner countries to create a more stable Pacific Region.

World language programs that include Austronesian languages, and eventually language immersion programs, should be offered in areas with high concentrations of Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders regardless of geographical area. These programs should be partially funded through the United States’ State Department as a proactive approach to foreign policy in the Pacific region to develop interactive and engaging language curriculum that teaches language and simultaneously exposes young students to problem solving for challenges in the region. In addition to this, the US State Department should take on the responsibility to provide adequate compensation for teachers who specialize in these language groups to give them an incentive to teach in these high need areas. More Asian and Pacific Island languages such as Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, Bislama, Tok Pisin, etc. should be considered as ‘critical languages’ to qualify for grants and opportunities such as the Critical Language Scholarship from the U.S. State Department to provide opportunities for students for immersive language learning in these nations. Hawaii, as a place of multilingual practice and a large Pacific Islander diaspora community, could itself become a hub for international education and language acquisition for the Pacific region. This can be centered around the involvement of a large public institution such as the

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<sup>21</sup> East-West Center, The. *East-West Center Foundational Strategy 2023-2027*. August 2022.

<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/east-west-center-foundational-strategy-2023-2027>

University of Hawaii at Manoa in creating an intensive language institute specifically geared toward Asian and Pacific Island languages, similar to that of the Wisconsin Intensive Summer Language Institute (WISLI), which teaches is funded by a consortium of institutions. WISLI is host to seven summer language institutes that offer intensive summer courses in over 30 less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), mostly languages from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Languages can be taught not only as a way of feeling rooted and making connections to one's own culture and heritage, but there is the benefit of human capital and creating these stronger ties and bonds with Oceania as a way of indigenizing U.S. foreign policy toward this region.

## Conclusion

Pasifika policy is a radical approach to policy making in Oceania. We recommend a four pillar approach:

1. Use Indigenous terminology to engage with the region
2. Increase of government-funded language revitalization of Austronesian languages in Hawaii
3. Targeted engagement in policy making opportunities for Pacific Islanders in Hawaii's diaspora
4. Connecting eligible Pacific Islanders from Hawaii to established professional development programs to work in embassies and consulates in high needs areas.

We must focus on increasing Pacific Islander representation in foreign policy roles while simultaneously promoting growth and resilience in Pacific Island countries.<sup>22</sup> It is important to ensure that policymaking, such as this recommendation suggests, should dually support the well-being and development of the Pacific Islands and the people who live there while also strengthening relationships and engagement with the US. The development of

Language Programs for diaspora communities in Hawaii, and the mainland US must also provide a pathway that supports and strengthens the engagement of Pacific diaspora with their home islands. By empowering our diasporic communities in Hawai'i and centering indigenous epistemology and frameworks in foreign policy in the Pacific, the US can effectively strengthen people-to-people connections and build long-lasting relationships with our Pacific neighbors.

*Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.*

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<sup>22</sup> White House, The. "FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States" February 11, 2022.

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