



***CAN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS REMAIN
“FRIENDS TO ALL” AMID US-CHINA
COMPETITION?***

BY MOSES SAKAI

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Most Pacific Island countries [claim](#) the foreign policy of “friends to all and enemies to none” amid the mounting geopolitical disputes between the United States and China. But what does this foreign policy mean? This foreign policy [seeks](#) to identify short- and long-term national interests on an ad hoc basis with bilateral partners, including superpowers like the United States and China.

Many developing states [profess](#) this foreign policy to ensure they remain neutral during this period of intense rivalry. Among the key issues discussed during their 52nd meeting in Rarotongo, Cook Islands from Nov. 6-10, 2023, Great Power competition in the region was a [concern raised](#) by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) leaders including Australia and New Zealand, with the region increasingly being used as a geopolitical playground for hard power projection. On geopolitics, the host of the PIF meeting, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, [stated](#) that the Pacific region was seen as the focus of “heightened geostrategic interest” but will not shift attention away from the key issue of climate change, especially with the PIF’s 21 dialogue partners—including the United States and China.

China has its footprint in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—an infrastructure program largely funded by China’s Exim Bank in the form of

loans to countries in the Pacific and developing countries in other regions of the world. However, recent studies [indicate](#) that the populations of a few countries in the Pacific already disapprove of the BRI due to debt risks. China’s official development finances in the Pacific region have significantly [decreased](#) since 2016, according to the 2023 Pacific Aid Map launched by the Lowy Institute, but China [maintains](#) support in a few, such as the Solomon Islands and Kiribati. In 2019, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati shifted their diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing. China in 2022 solidified its diplomatic relationship with Solomon Islands to a more comprehensive strategic standard by [signing a security pact](#) to improve Solomon Islands’ policing. This [controversial](#) pact triggered increased PIF engagement from the United States and her traditional allies, like Australia.

Of course, Washington has long been regarded as a “Pacific power.” Now, for the first time since the end of WWII, the United States, under the Biden administration, has hosted PIF leaders at the White House in [2022](#) and [2023](#), pledging over half a billion dollars to address climate change, among other key issues in the region (Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manaseh Sogavare was [absent](#) during the second meeting). At the PIF meeting this year, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [said](#) she wanted to “listen to better understand how the US can continue to support the region’s priorities.”

US support has immensely increased in the region this year, both economically and strategically. For instance, in May 2023, the United States signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest country in the region. The DCA allows unlimited access by US military personnel to six of PNG’s major ports, including sea, air, and land. And in collaboration with Australia, Washington has already [announced](#) funding for a new undersea internet cable initiative for Pacific Island countries, largely implemented by US tech giant Google.

Such economic and strategic support to the region is to ensure “a free and open rules-based order” in the Pacific and is the aim of President Biden

administration's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, as the region stretching from the Indian to the Pacific Ocean is considered a bedrock of global peace.

However, even with closer defense⁴ cooperation between the United States and PNG, island country's view of the Great Power Competition should still be thought of as neutral. Furthermore, while both the United States and China are making moves to meet the Pacific region's key development priorities, as envisioned in the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#), they have also aroused the concern of region's political leaders regarding great power competition. Speaking at the Pacific Islands Forum leaders' summit in Fiji in 2022, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister James Marape [stated](#) that the foreign policy of

friends to all and enemies to none remains despite the current geopolitics in the region where the bigger forces are at play. We have no intention of making enemies and our Pacific ways must pacify all forces and interests in our region.

To ensure order and stability within the region and simultaneously address key emerging issues like maritime security, nuclear testing, cyber security and climate change requires commitment and regional cooperation from all PIF leaders. PIF states are among the world's most aid-dependent countries and their 21 dialogue partners, including the United States and China, are seen as PIF development partners, multilaterally and bilaterally. At the PIF summit this year, Fiji's Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka [proposed](#) declaring the Pacific region a "zone of peace" due to current geopolitics. While Rabuka's proposal was accepted by Forum Leaders and a [declaration](#) will be made in Tonga in 2024 at the PIF's 53rd meeting, it must be similar to [Biketawa Declaration](#) and [Boe Declaration](#), the two Declarations that fully recognized Forum Members' sovereignties and their values such as peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity underpinning the Framework for Pacific Regionalism. Being friends to all and enemies to none under the Framework for Pacific Regionalism and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent signifies peace, stability, and order.

As PIF states are small island developing states, they will still need external assistance from development partners—including the United States and China—to achieve their development goals, even if Great Power Competition subsidizes. In the meantime, while big powers may have their own interests in the region, regional interest should be the key for PIF countries when engaging with their development partners, including the United States and China. To maintain that foreign policy at the regional level necessitates solidarity from all forum members both at the present and in the future to ensure they remain neutral and to avoid any conflict within the region.

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