



**THE US INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY:  
DON'T OVERLOOK THE PACIFIC  
ISLANDS REGION**

BY PATRICK DUPONT

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*This article summarizes the key recommendations found in his [broader study](#) of *The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and a Revisionist China: Partnering with Small and Middle Powers in the Pacific Islands Region*.*

If the past is precedent, as the Biden administration puts the finishing touches on its own Indo-Pacific strategy, one area will be largely overlooked: the Pacific Islands Region (PIR). The region has, in the past, been viewed as a [tranquil backwater](#) with little need for attention. Traditionally, the attention Washington did give the region was exclusively focused on Micronesia—a vast region containing both the Freely Associated States (FAS) and US territories such as Guam. The remainder of the PIR was often left in the hands of close US partners such as Australia and New Zealand. Washington's strategic neglect of the PIR needs to end. While the United States has focused its attention elsewhere, China has established itself as a strong economic partner with a [growing diplomatic network](#). If the Biden administration is serious about addressing China's growing challenge to US interests across the world, it should not disregard a region where a little bit of attention, coupled with cooperation with like-minded partners, can go a long way.

My [recent study](#) on *The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and a Revisionist China: Partnering with Small and Middle Powers in the Pacific Islands*

*Region* provides an analysis of both US and Chinese influence in the PIR along with the important and growing role of regional friends and allies like Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Japan, India, and others. It argues that the PIR is just as crucial to maintaining a “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) as is the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, or the Indian Ocean. Any continuation of the Indo-Pacific Strategy must not neglect the PIR. The Biden administration must focus on denying the use of the PIR to “unfriendly powers” for military purposes, as well as denying the ability of external powers to interdict vital sea lines of communication from the continental United States to Asia.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, Washington must—as part of its broader Indo-Pacific Strategy—embrace the increasing multipolarity of the region and look past the traditional division of labor between just Australia, New Zealand, and itself. The Biden administration must partner with like-minded nations of all sizes such as Australia, France, India, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and Taiwan to reinforce broadly held international values conducive to a FOIP. To do this, the Biden administration should:

- **Go beyond its focus on the FAS and ensure its diplomatic engagement with the entire PIR is more consistent.** An emphasis on the FAS, whilst warranted, has come at the detriment of Washington's relationships in Melanesia and Polynesia. Raising the US delegation lead to the PIR to Secretary of State level or higher would demonstrate a positive step towards consistency.
- **Better acknowledge the strategic importance of the PIR.** The 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report did little to acknowledge the strategic importance of the PIR within its conceptualisation of a FOIP. Washington's approaches thus far have given many in the PIR the [impression](#) that they are an “afterthought” or simply being “tacked onto the end” of the strategy.
- **Harness its key strengths: soft power and military relationships.** The United States'

key strengths in the PIR are rooted in its strong historical, cultural, and linguistic connections to the region, as well as its military relationships. Washington can enhance these strengths through establishing:

- **Labor mobility schemes.** Washington should consider expanding its existing arrangements with the FAS—which allows FAS citizens to work in the United States under special visa arrangements—to other PIR states. A similar model, called the Pacific Labor Mobility Scheme, has been [employed](#) successfully in Australia.
- **Military training, education, and joint-exercises.** The United States should expand the number of joint exercises and training opportunities for PIR militaries. Furthermore, Washington should seek to expand its joint exercises and training opportunities to PIR states with security forces, but no standing militaries, such as Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.
- **Habitual military-to-island relationships.** The United States should expand the US National Guard’s State Partnership Program in the PIR. With relationships already established between the Nevada National Guard and Tonga and Fiji, this should be expanded to include partnerships in Papua New Guinea (PNG), the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.
- **Expanding the US Defence Attaché network.** The United States currently only has one [USDAO](#) for the entire PIR, located in Suva, Fiji. The number of USDAOs in the PIR should be expanded, with a particular focus on PNG and Tonga. An alternative option may be supporting PIR states with militaries to establish Defence Attachés in Washington.
- **Expanding VOA presence into the PIR.** The lack of VOA broadcasting in the PIR presents an opportunity for Washington to double-down on its strengths in the information domain. This should be a joint venture with PIR countries to develop local language broadcasting on Pacific-focused issues.
- **Expand its diplomatic footprint.** The United States’ six embassies in the PIR—three of which are within the FAS—give an unfortunate impression of the low level of strategic weight Washington places on the region. Washington must expand its diplomatic footprint, especially in Melanesia and Polynesia.
- **Focus heavily on targeted engagement with rising regional powers such as PNG and Fiji.** PNG and Fiji have distinguished themselves as emerging activist regional powers in the PIR. Both nations have the highest GDP and populations, and field the region’s two largest militaries. Although PNG and Fiji have certainly explored more independent foreign policies and international activism in recent decades—making them somewhat harder to influence—this also makes them effective vectors of influence in the PIR.
- **Avoid a “False Dichotomy” Trap in the PIR.** The PIR has made it [clear](#) that the region does not want engagement to be framed within the context of competition with China. Although strategic competition may serve as one rationale for engagement, it should not drive engagement. Rather than focusing on countering China in the PIR, the focus should be on encouraging, facilitating, and cooperating with like-minded partners to engage with the PIR—this serves to reinforce international values, naturally counterbalancing China’s undue influence. Encouraging multi-polarity will help avoid creating a “false dichotomy” in the PIR, whereby PIR countries are seen to be choosing between just the United States or China.

- **Revisit the division of labor in the PIR.** The United States can no longer afford to rely on its informal “division of labour” with Australia and New Zealand in the PIR. As a self-declared “Pacific nation,” the US must take up greater responsibility in its own neighbourhood if its “revitalised engagement” is to go beyond maintaining its defence and security arrangements in the FAS. The passing of the BLUE Pacific Act should be a priority for the Biden Administration’s approach to the PIR.
- **Engage like-minded partners.** Encouraging several like-minded—not necessarily strategically aligned—partners to pursue a concerted FOIP strategy will make it more difficult for Pacific Island leaders to play the “China Card” by diluting any perceived China-US strategic dichotomy in the region and crowding Beijing’s engagement. Ultimately, PIR states are sovereign states with their own respective agency; however, harnessing like-minded small and middle powers will help in filling gaps that Washington cannot commit to.
- **Ensure good governance and engaging Taiwan.** Unlike many of the aforementioned like-minded powers, Taiwan has been actively courting the PIR for decades in its “checkbook diplomacy” with China. Although much of this activity has subsided, Washington should continue to seek out joint or even multilateral cooperation activities with Taipei in the PIR to ensure good governance principles are being upheld.
- **Better incorporate emerging small and middle external powers into the existing regional architecture.** Many of the aforementioned external powers are already increasing their engagement with the PIR under their own regional strategies. Washington must work with like-minded partners to ensure these strategies are not being engaged in competition with each other, but rather, in unison. Existing groupings such

as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, the Quadrilateral Defense Coordination Group, and FRANZ provide a strong basis for such coordination.

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