



***SCHOLARSHIPS IN THE PACIFIC
ISLANDS ARE AN URGENT US
NATIONAL SECURITY ISSUE***

BY KIMERY LYNCH

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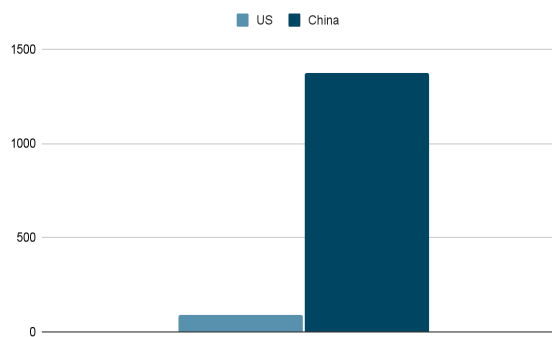
The April 2022 China-Solomon Islands [security agreement](#) has brought the Pacific Islands back into strategic focus for the United States. But far less attention has been dedicated to an area in the Pacific with huge national security implications, and where the United States lags far behind China: scholarships.

As of 2018, China’s government had awarded [1,371 scholarships](#) to students from China’s Pacific partners (Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu). China allocates a total of 20-30 scholarships for each of these countries annually (conservatively, around 160 scholarships each year, pre-COVID). This is China’s largest scholarship program in the Pacific, but there’s also the China-Pacific Island Forum (PIF) [scholarship](#), which has provided around 20 full scholarships annually since 2017 (and 10 annually before then), plus scholarships provided by Chinese companies like [Huawei](#) and [China Harbor Engineering Company](#).

In the United States, a number of programs bring Pacific Islanders to the United States for vocational training: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) [programs](#) offers training to security and civilian officials, the [Pacific Islands Training Initiative](#) focuses on financial management and program performance practices, and there is also the [Pacific Islands Leadership Program](#). However, the only fully funded government scholarship program specifically for Pacific Islanders to study in the United

States is the [US South Pacific Scholarship](#). The USSP has been running since 1995, funding [93 Pacific Island scholars](#) total to study in the United States. This past year, there were only three USSP awardees, compared to approximately 160 yearly scholarships awarded to Pacific Islanders by China pre-COVID.

Total Pacific Islands Scholarships Awarded



The more Pacific Islanders study at Chinese institutions, the more sympathetic they will be to China when voting in an election or making policy decisions, and at least some of those scholars will ascend to positions of leadership in their country.

How could it be otherwise, given that China will have supported their educational and professional development, and they will have spent several years living there and making personal connections? (Granted, not all Chinese scholarships facilitate this, as some separate Pacific Islander students from Chinese students.) This is how China has built an alumni network in the Pacific Islands orders of magnitude larger than the United States, and if trends continue at their current rate, this “sympathy gap” will only grow wider.

Pacific Islanders do not want to study in China more than in the United States. For the 2021 USSP scholarship, over 300 applicants—more than the yearly total of scholarships that China offers—competed for just three slots. Pacific Islanders want educational, training, and development opportunities in the United States, but there aren’t enough pathways. So, many turn to China instead.

More US scholarships for Pacific Islanders would help the United States exert soft power in the region

by, in the words of Joseph Nye, “getting other countries to want what [the United States] wants.” It would also be a way for the United States to invest in the future of the Pacific Islands. If Pacific Islanders can rely on the United States for critical short-term development needs, accepting deals from China will likely be less appealing, especially given the stringent conditions Beijing often attaches to such deals. The need for development assistance, particularly when it comes to climate change, puts many Pacific Island nations in a position where they may have to accept a deal that compromises their sovereignty.

Of course, other US allies in the region, such as [New Zealand](#) and [Australia](#), offer plenty of scholarships for Pacific Islanders to help offset the lack of opportunities in the United States. But China has begun to step up its scholarship and vocational training plans in the Pacific. A recent deal includes [adding over 2,500 scholarships](#) in the next five years. Not only that, barring COVID restrictions, China hopes to start a new [training program](#) for young Pacific Island diplomats this year as part of a capacity-building plan, including seminars on Chinese governance. This should sound alarm bells in the US government. Equally worrying, China has offered scholarships to Pacific Islands military officers too, giving, for instance, a Fijian Naval officer a [four-year scholarship](#) to a Chinese University in 2018.

The United States should increase the number of—and funding for—Pacific Islands scholarship and training programs. Whether that means scaling up existing programs or creating new pathways, doing so is in the United States’ national security interests. It is also a win-win for both the United States and the Pacific Islands. The United States can challenge China’s expansion into the Pacific Islands, and the Pacific Islands can receive more of the education and training necessary to build up their local communities. Although the sweeping trade and security deal China proposed with 10 Pacific Island nations [faltered](#) in May, providing more scholarship and training programs for the Pacific will remove any temptation for such deals in the future.

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