



**RECENTERING THE PACIFIC
PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY: HAWAII'S
ROLE IN BRIDGING THE UNITED
STATES AND PACIFIC ISLAND
COUNTRIES**

BY JOHNSON PHAM

Johnson Pham is currently a Staff Assistant for Congressman Ed Case (HI-01) and was previously an intern for the Regional Security Studies Program at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Strategic Studies. He is a First-Generation graduate, having recently earned his BA in International Studies at American University's School of International Service, with a specific focus on U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security.

Introduction

In September 2022, President Joe Biden's Administration launched the Pacific Partnership Strategy (PPS), the United States' first-ever national strategy dedicated to American engagement with all Pacific Island Countries (PICs), at the inaugural U.S.-Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington, D.C.¹

Unlike the strategies of previous administrations, with Presidents Barack Obama's *Pivot to Asia* and Donald Trump's *Pacific Pledge*, the PPS underscores collaborative action between the U.S. and PICs to combat climate change, maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, and ensure the sovereignty and security of PICs. The PPS is broken down into four complementary and overlapping objectives: a strong

U.S.-Pacific Islands partnership; a united Pacific Island region connected with the world; a resilient Pacific prepared for the climate crisis and other 21st-century challenges; and empowered and prosperous Pacific Islanders.²

Although, in recent years, geopolitical rivalry with the People's Republic of China (PRC) has underpinned much of America's Indo-Pacific Strategies and regional partnerships, this paper recognizes the limits of Washington's persistent framing of U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands Region (PIR) in terms of strategic competition with China towards the development of a meaningful U.S.-Pacific Partnership and elevation of Pacific Islander (PI) voices.

I argue that Hawaii plays an important role in implementing the PPS, spearheading Washington's commitment, and strengthening the U.S.-Pacific Islands partnership. Enlisting the support of Hawaii's local institutions and PI diaspora can pave the way for the empowerment of all PIs. Home to numerous institutions dedicated to combatting both traditional and nontraditional security challenges and fostering regional integration, Hawaii is well-positioned and equipped to carry out and maintain the long-term goals of the PPS, while mitigating the "tyranny of distance" between the U.S. and PIR.

US-China Geopolitical Competition

According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "For years, the Pacific Island region suffered from strategic neglect from Washington and others, and Beijing has stepped into that strategic vacuum, moving to increase its influence and project its power across the region."³ China's decades-long engagement in the Pacific Islands (PI) is embodied in various approaches.

¹ Gordon Peake and Camilla Pohle-Anderson, "Six Months In, Where Does the U.S.' Pacific Islands Strategy Stand?" *United States Institute of Peace*, April 23, 2023.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/six-months-where-does-us-pacific-islands-strategy-stand#:~:text=The%20strategy%20lists%20four%20main%20objectives%3A%20%20>

² White House, Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States (Washington, D.C., September 2022),

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wpcontent/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf>.

³ Charles Edel, Christopher Johnstone, and Gregory Poling, "White House Unveils Pacific Islands Strategy at Historic Summit," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/white-house-unveils-pacific-islands-strategy-historic-summit>

Diplomatically, the PRC has normalized high-level visits, encouraged China-PIC exchange via scholarships for PIs, and increased its presence in Pacific regional fora (e.g., Official Dialogue Partner of the Pacific Islands Forum).⁴ The establishment of the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum in 2006, expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and infrastructure projects to 10 PICs, and provision of financial assistance characterize China's economic impact throughout the Pacific region. Reactions towards China's economic presence in the region, however, have been divided. Although, the PRC often promotes PI investments as "win-win" cooperation deals and an alternative to aid from former colonial powers, local concerns say otherwise, citing BRI projects' disregard for environmental and labor standards, lack of return on investment, and entrapment of small-scale economies under China's "debt-trap diplomacy."⁵

Although China's hard power in the Pacific is not as extensive, U.S. fears of a growing Chinese military influence in Oceania peaked when Xi Jinping signed a security cooperation agreement with Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare of the Solomon Islands in April 2022.⁶ China's security ambitions were later revealed within Beijing's "China-Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision," which sought to integrate economic with security cooperation and create a competing security architecture grounded by China-PI bilateralism.⁷

In contrast, U.S. engagement with the PICs, over the last decade, has been underwhelming, largely driven by the following goals: the preservation of its security arrangements with the Compact of Free Association (COFA) States, military sphere of influence in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Region (USAPR), and Western-aligned regionalism to counter Chinese influence.⁸ Prior to 2022, America's high-level (but inconsistent) visits to, exclusive "hard-power" maritime security agreements with, and faltering provision of aid towards the PICs have damaged Washington's credibility and trust throughout the region.⁹ U.S. Pacific policies were primarily reactionary, designed to undermine Chinese influence rather than address the priorities of PICs.

The Indo-Pacific Strategies launched by the Trump (2019) and Biden (2022) Administrations received mixed (overwhelmingly negative) reviews from PICs, criticizing America's renewed engagement with the PIR as a reactionary, strategic vehicle to curb Chinese regional influence. Pacific Island leaders have voiced concerns about U.S.-China strategic competition in turning the region into a theater of strategic competition that disrupts and undermines Pacific priorities, particularly regionalism and quest for self-determination.¹⁰ It has been argued that, "the more intense the U.S.-China competition grows, the more difficult it will be for the Pacific leaders to exercise agency, preserve their independence, and avoid committing to one side or the other."¹¹ Fiji's former Ambassador to the U.S., Naivakarurubulavu Solo Mara, stated that Pacific Islanders have the impression that they "have been tacked on at the end" as an

⁴ Zhou Fangyin, "A Reevaluation of China's Engagement in the Pacific Islands," in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, edited by Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, (Canberra, AU: ANU Press, 2021), 234-5.

⁵ Carol Li, "The Belt and Road Initiative in Oceania: Understanding the People's Republic of China's Strategic Interests and Engagement in the Pacific," *Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance*, July 2022: 1-27.

⁶ Judith Cefkin, "U.S. Steps Up Diplomacy in Pacific Amid Solomon Islands-China Pact," *United States Institute of Peace*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/us-steps-diplomacy-pacific-amid-solomon-islands-china-pact>

⁷ Anna Powles and Jose Sousa-Santos, "Strengthening Collective Security Approaches in the Pacific," in *Strategic Competition and Security Cooperation in the Blue Pacific*, ed. Deon Canyon (Honolulu: Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2022), 179-180.

⁸ Patrick Dupont, "The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy and a Revisionist China: Partnering with Small and Middle Powers in the

Pacific Islands Region," *Pacific Forum Issues & Insights* 21, WP2 (Feb 2021): 4.

⁹ Dupont, "The United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy," 3-11.

¹⁰ Terence Wesley-Smith and Gerard Finin, "Washington's Charm-Offensive and the US-Pacific Island Country Summit," *Devpolicy Blog*, November 3, 2022, <https://devpolicy.org/washingtons-charm-offensive-us-pacific-island-country-summit-20221103/>; Marie Jourdain and Charles Lichfield, "Engaging the Pacific Islands is no longer about the why, but about the how," *Atlantic Council*, October 31, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/engaging-the-pacific-islands-is-no-longer-about-the-why-but-about-the-how/>.

¹¹ Terence Wesley-Smith and Graeme Smith, "Introduction: The Return to Great Power Competition," in *The China Alternative: Changing Regional Order in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Graeme Smith and Terence Wesley-Smith, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2012), 17.

“afterthought.”¹² These Strategies fail to align security priorities with that of PICs, where Pacific Islanders view the climate crisis and sustainable livelihoods as their core priorities, not U.S. competition with China.

While China’s growing footprint continues to drive the Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific strategy—demonstrated through the creation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness, Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, and Partners in the Blue Pacific—the launch of the Pacific Partnership Strategy reflected a change in Washington’s routine approach towards the region. By adopting the language of the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, identifying PICs as important partners, and recognizing the existential threat of nontraditional security challenges (i.e., climate change, health insecurity, IUU fishing), the U.S. is in a better position to implement the PPS going forward.

Hawaii in the Pacific

Although the PPS signifies a vital approach towards U.S. increased engagement with and presence in the PIR, it overlooks Hawaii’s potential and importance in forging stronger U.S.-PI partnership. Throughout the Strategy, Hawaii is only mentioned twice: in 1) the *Introduction* when proclaiming the U.S. as a Pacific nation; and 2) *Section 4* highlighting the Honolulu-based East-West Center (EWC) and Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) as potential hubs for Pacific Island educational exchanges.¹³

Hawaii’s relationship with the PICs is characterized by decades of cross-cultural exchange, inter-island migration and Pasifika interconnectivity, economic cooperation, and diplomatic outreach. According to

the EWC’s “The Pacific Islands Matter for America/America Matters for The Pacific Islands” Report, Hawaii inhabits about 400,000 Pacific Islanders—roughly 26% of the total Pacific Islander population in the U.S.¹⁴ Economically, Hawaii and US-Affiliated Pacific Islands are America’s key trading partners with Indo-Pacific and Pacific Island Countries, “conducting over 50% of their international trade with Asian or Pacific trade partners.”¹⁵

As a Pacific entity itself, the Hawaiian archipelago also faces similar nontraditional security—especially climate change—and economic challenges confronting vulnerable PICs. The State of Hawaii has developed creative solutions and necessary institutions to lead the charge against existential threats and ensure regional security, particularly through its facilitation of people-to-people exchanges between the U.S. and PICs.

Military-to-military exchanges between the U.S. and Pacific Islands have long been facilitated by Hawaii-based DOD institutions, including APCSS, the Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DMHA), and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). APCSS conducts regional workshops and offers training to security and civilian officials, encouraging strategic communication among regional future leaders and decisionmakers of Indo-Pacific security.¹⁶ CFE-DMHA, similarly, extends training to foreign military personnel, government officials, and civilian personnel focused on effectively commanding and controlling resources in the wake of natural or man-made disasters in participants’ respective countries.¹⁷ USINDOPACOM enhances regional security by broadening military exercises and shiprider agreements, deploying defense attachés, and

¹² John Grady, “Pacific Island Nations Want More U.S. Engagement,” USNI News, May 15, 2019, <https://news.usni.org/2019/05/15/pacific-island-nations-want-more-u-s-engagement>.

¹³ White House, *Pacific Partnership Strategy*.

¹⁴ “The Pacific Islands Matter for America Matters for the Pacific Islands,” (Honolulu, HI: East-West Center, March 2022), 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶ Mark Esper, “Defense Secretary Addresses Free and Open Indo-Pacific at APCSS,” U.S. Department of Defense (Washington, D.C.: 2020),

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2328124/defense-secretary-addresses-free-and-open-indo-pacific-at-apcss-courtesy-transc/>.

¹⁷ Phil Davidson, “The United States’ Enhanced & Enduring Commitment to the Pacific Islands Region,” *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command* (Honolulu, HI: 2020),

<https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/2421973/the-united-states-enhanced-enduring-commitment-to-the-pacific-islands-region/>

expanding the National Guard State Partnership Program throughout the Pacific.¹⁸

At the forefront of climate resilience, CFE-DMHA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) have provided avenues for regional training against natural disasters, and collaborative research among ocean and climate scientists and environmental stewards, respectively. Through the Pacific Regional Integrated Sciences and Assessments (RISA) program, NOAA has spearheaded projects focused on supporting climate change adaptation in the PIR, resulting in the collective advancement of collective scientific and technical capacity, availability of climate services, sub-regional and in-country training and core capacity-building.¹⁹

Beyond the security landscape, Hawaii has hosted and contributed significantly to the educational/professional exchange between Americans and Pacific Islanders. Educational scholarships offered by the University of Hawaii (UH)—notably through the Indo-Pacific Affairs Internship Program, Foreign Language and Area Studies and EWC Graduate Degree Fellowships, and U.S. South Pacific Scholarship (USSP)—have attracted Pacific Islanders to Hawaii. Since 1995, the USSP has funded 93 Pacific Island scholars total to study in the U.S.²⁰

Established in 1960, the East-West Center (EWC)’s purpose was to promote better relations and mutual understanding of the peoples of the U.S. and Asia-Pacific. According to the EWC 2022 Annual Report, the Center hosted 142 participants from Oceania, 8% of total program participants.²¹ Initiatives—such as the Resilient Pacific Island Leadership and Asia-Pacific Journalism Programs, Pacific Drought Knowledge Exchange, and Pacific Islands Tourism Professional Fellows Program—convened U.S. and PIC leaders and provided platforms for knowledge

exchange, collaborative research and trust-building, and leadership development and cultural literacy among young professionals.²² East-West Center President, Suzanne Vares-Lum, strongly expressed EWC’s role as “a bridge to allies, a hub of expertise, and a platform for Pacific voices.”²³

Policy Recommendations

Hawaii’s people-centered activities and geographic proximity stress the State’s important partnership with the PICs and obligation in leading U.S. long-term engagement, mutual trust-building, and efforts of the Pacific Partnership Strategy. Washington must continue supporting Hawaii’s diplomatic conduct by reinforcing the capacity of the State’s regional institutions.

To further strengthen the U.S.’ people-to-people ties with and empower the climate and economic resilience of all Pacific Islanders, I also recommend the following strategies and actions the Biden Administration should consider and weave into the PPS.

Expand Funding for Educational Opportunities and Professional Exchanges in Hawaii

- a. Strengthen Capacity and Recruitment of PI Leaders Participation for East-West Center Initiatives via Increased Funding.

As U.S. Representative Ed Case expressed, “[F]unding for the East-West Center and other institutions and efforts focused on the Indo-Pacific sends a powerful message to our critical Pacific Islands partners and allies that our country values our relationships, will invest further in them, and will

¹⁸ Davidson, “The United States’ Enhanced”.

¹⁹ Marra, John, Courtney Couch, and Laura Brewington. “Pacific Islands Climate Storybook.” (Honolulu, HI: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2021), 1.

²⁰ Kimery Lynch, “Scholarships in the Pacific Islands are an urgent US national security issue,” Pacific Forum, June 9, 2022,

<https://pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PacNet32.2022.06.09-1.pdf>

²¹ East-West Center, “East-West Center Annual Report 2022,” (Honolulu, HI: Jan. 2023), 4.

²² East-West Center, “East-West Center Foundational Strategy,” (Honolulu, HI: Aug. 2022), 8.

²³ Suzanne Vares-Lum, “The East-West Center’s Regional Role in 2022,” *East-West Center*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news/web-article/the-east-west-center-s-regional-role-in-2022>.

continue as an active and engaged partner in pursuit of our shared values.”²⁴

Despite receiving \$22 million through U.S. Congress’ Fiscal Year 2023 Appropriations Bill, the Administration must continue to work closely with the EWC to increase the capacity for exchanges with and prioritize recruitment of PI scholars and leaders.²⁵ Increasing funding for exchange programs (such as the Asia-Pacific Leadership Program and Journalism Fellowship, Pacific Islands Tourism Professional Fellows Program, and Changing Faces Women’s Leadership Seminar) will reinvigorate and sustain the longevity of people-to-people exchange between the U.S. and PICs.

- b. Increase Federal Funding for USSP Opportunities to Study at the University of Hawaii.

In contrast to the underwhelming number of USSP grantees, as of 2018, China has awarded 1,371 government scholarships to Pacific Island recipients.²⁶ Lynch constitutes China’s scholarship push as “an urgent national security issue” for the U.S., arguing that “the more Pacific Islanders study at Chinese institutions, the more sympathetic [scholars] will be to China when voting in election or making policy.”²⁷

Underscored within the “Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership,” the Administration has responded in kind by pledging \$5M, pending Congressional approval, for the establishment of the *Resilience and Adaptation Fellowship Program for Rising Leaders*—in partnership with the University of the South Pacific, UH, and University of California Santa Barbara.²⁸ While this may sound appealing, the PPS should allot funding towards existing programs (USSP) to continuously facilitate and finance educational opportunities for PI scholars.

- c. Elevate Pacific Forum’s Presence and Research Fellowships.

As one of the world’s leading Asia-Pacific policy research institutes, Honolulu-based think tank, Pacific Forum, has long elevated Asian and Pacific Islander perspectives, enhance cross-cultural connectivity, executed research projects, and engaged in policy discussions with global leaders and publics shaping Indo-Pacific security.

President Emeritus Ralph Cossa advocated that amplifying Pacific Forum’s research fellowships and NextGen programs, particularly the Young Leaders Program, via federal funding will extend Hawaii’s public diplomacy reach in the PIR, presenting more research opportunities and professional exchanges for PI scholars.²⁹

- d. Establish Leadership Development Internships/Exchange Program for PI Local Government Leaders in Partnership with the Hawaii State Legislature.

Local politicians of Hawaii’s State Legislature should develop programs that promote leadership exchanges and professional opportunities for young Pacific leaders to learn more about American and local governance and democratic participation in Hawaii.

While the Administration’s *Roadmap* seeks to establish the U.S.-Pacific Institute for Rising Leaders Fellowship in Washington, D.C., Pacific Island leaders can best learn about American democracy, political stability, and community-led security (particularly climate) initiatives in Hawaii, a culturally, politically, and environmentally similar location to that of PICs.

²⁴ “EWC Receives \$22 Million in 2023 Congressional Appropriations Bill,” East-West Center, January 6, 2023, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news/announcement/ewc-receives-22-million-2023-congressional-appropriations-bill>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lynch, “Scholarships in the Pacific.”

²⁷ White House, “Fact Sheet: Roadmap for a 21st-Century U.S.-Pacific Island Partnership,” (Washington, D.C., 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/29/fact-sheet-roadmap-for-a-21st-century-u-s-pacific-island-partnership/>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ralph Cossa, interview with Johnson Pham, June 5, 2023.

Integrate Hawaii's Presence into and Support for Regional Climate Security Architecture and Sustainability Efforts

- e. Initiate USINDOPACOM and CFE-DMHA Collaboration with Key Regional Climate Actors.

USINDOPACOM and CFE-DMHA's Community for Indo-Pacific Climate Security should collaborate with agencies within the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP)—such as the Pacific Resilience Partnership (PRP) Task Force, Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environmental Programme (SPREP)—at the forefront of climate insecurity to jointly promote information and technological sharing, conduct exercises and trainings, and seek avenues for climate security cooperation.³⁰

- f. Extend US Geological Services (USGS) Pacific-Islands Climate Adaptation Science Center (PI-CASC) Beyond the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Region (USAPR).

The PI-CASC, a collaborative partnership between the USGS and UH Manoa-led university consortium, seeks to provide regionally relevant scientific information and resources to support community-led sustainability and climate adaptation efforts of Hawaii and the USAPR.

The Administration should expand the PI-CASC to include and support the climate security initiatives of all PICs. In conjunction with Pacific Community's Pacific Islands Ocean Decade Collaborative Centre, the PI-CASC can create more opportunities for regional dialogue, knowledge sharing, and professional research partnerships throughout the Pacific.

- g. Include PICs in Hawaii Green Growth (HGG)'s Local2030 Hub Initiatives.

Grounded in indigenous knowledge, local movements, and a strong public-private partnership, the HGG aims to identify green growth economic priorities and develop Hawaii's long-term sustainable economy—aligned with the UN 2030 Agenda—through community resilience, transition to a net-zero economy, and regenerative tourism.

HGG Initiative should expand and integrate PI local leaders into its Local2030 Hub network, where they can partake in cross-sector, peer-to-peer conversations, exchange best practices for sustainable economic development, and collaborate on green solutions applicable to all Pacific Islands.

- h. Facilitate Dialogue between Hawaii and PI Tourism Industry Leaders.

Collective initiatives to advance regional economic development and sustainability can be advanced through dialogues between leaders of the Hawaii Tourism Authority and Pacific Tourism Organization. Best practices in sustainable tourism, natural resource and destination management, and visitor-local community building should be shared to uplift the peoples and development of all small-scale, tourism economies of all PICs, including Hawaii.

Establish a Hawaii-based Peace Corps Training Program

As Peace Corps volunteers return to the Pacific Islands (Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu), the Administration should establish a Peace Corps Training (PCTP) based in Hawaii to further support the PPS' goal in fostering greater people-to-people connectivity.³¹ In collaboration with UH Manoa's Matsunaga Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution and Center for Indo-Pacific Affairs, the Peace Corps should create a Pacific regional training program that 1) emphasizes cultural sensitivity and competence to best engage with PI and indigenous communities; 2) prioritizes specialized Oceania languages training;

³⁰ Lillian Dang, "An Emerging Climate Security Framework in the Pacific Islands: Opportunities for U.S. Climate Security Engagement," in *Climate Change in the Pacific Islands: Needs and Priorities for U.S. Engagement*, ed. Michelle Ibanez (Honolulu, HI: Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance, 2023): 16-17.

³¹ U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Dialogue in Papua New Guinea," (Washington, D.C.: 2023), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-pacific-islands-forum-leaders-dialogue-in-papua-new-guinea/>

and 3) orients training programs around combatting specific development challenges facing PICs (e.g., sustainable agriculture, environmental conservation, health and food security). Furthermore, a PCTP in Hawaii would equip future volunteers with practical skills and expertise to serve the needs of PI communities, offer opportunities for pre-integration with PI host communities through interactions with Hawaii's PI diaspora, and gain first-hand living experience in the Pacific.

If established, the PCTP should launch outreach efforts throughout Hawaii to actively target and recruit local talent among Hawaii, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander populations. With cultural knowledge and experience interacting with PI diaspora, enlisting Hawaii's residents would significantly expand the supply of volunteers suitable for Oceania, thereby entrenching people-centered diplomacy between the two regions.

Conclusion

Establishing the Pacific Partnership Strategy is a strong start to America's reengagement with PICs; however, this should not be the final word on U.S. commitment to the Pacific. The current reality of a polarized America—demonstrated by Congress' constant stagnation and uncertainty of U.S. administrations—can threaten U.S. long-term engagement with the region, jeopardizing its presence and credibility when promises are not delivered. The U.S. needs to make better use of its existing institutions and advantages in the Pacific—i.e., Hawaii's educational and professional institutions, shared vision towards security, and large Pacific Islander diaspora.

Alan Tidwell, Director of Georgetown University's Center for Australian, New Zealand, and Pacific Studies Department, has strongly expressed Washington's need for Americans from Hawaii and the USAPR to "fill the expertise gap" and "help inform the government about Pacific Islands points of view" and strategic priorities.³² Efforts to empower and foster collaboration between Hawaii-based

institutions and Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific agencies, deepen people-to-people connections via cultural/educational fellowships and professional exchanges, and accentuate Hawaii's long-standing relationship with and contribution to U.S.-PIC relations should be explored and expanded in the Strategy.

As the only U.S. state located in the Pacific Ocean, Hawaii's geographic proximity, economic centrality, cultural relevance, and diplomatic prowess have, and can continuously, contributed to the United States' presence, delivery of soft power initiatives, and bilateral relationship with the PICs. Fostering opportunities for PIs through Hawaii will not only enable PIs to build their own capacity, but also reinforce America's commitment to elevating the prosperity, well-being, and autonomy of Pacific Islander Countries and peoples.

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

³² Alan Tidwell, "Next Steps for American Engagement with the Pacific Islands," Lowy Institute, Aug. 20, 2022,

<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/next-steps-american-engagement-pacific-islands>.