



REVAMPING PARTNERS IN THE BLUE PACIFIC INITIATIVE

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US political divisions threaten more than continued Ukraine funding or a government shutdown: They also put at risk the Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements the US maintains with the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Under these agreements, the US provides financial assistance and in return exercises strategic denial rights, allowing it to block the militaries of other countries from entry into these countries' territories.

The People's Republic of China has already moved to take advantage of the potential void, [approaching](#) Palau with promises to boost its tourism sector by "filling every hotel room" and building more infrastructure. Palau President Surrangel Whipps Jr. has warned Washington that continued failure to renew the funds would "play into the hands of the CCP." It is speculated that Tuvalu [might](#) switch diplomatic ties from Taiwan to Beijing following pro-Taipei Prime Minister Kausea Natano's defeat in the January general elections.

The challenges facing the Pacific Islands, and the US role there, are deeper than COFA, and will persist regardless of renewal. If the US does not provide these funds, however, it will greatly magnify the importance of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP) Initiative, and the need to rethink its role.

Forging a blue continent

June 2024 will make the two-year anniversary of the PBP, launched by the US with [four other member states](#) (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) and three partner countries (South Korea,

France, and Germany). PBP is an open, informal organization bringing together several like-minded nations to establish a constructive, transparent, and efficient developmental framework for the Pacific Islands, reiterating the [long tradition](#) of friendship these partner nations share with the region.

As the name suggests, PBP supports the Pacific Islands Forum's vision of the [Blue Pacific Continent](#), envisaging the Pacific Islands as the world's first "blue continent," i.e. a "[Sea of Islands](#)" united by the and hence infusing them with a new sense of ownership, vigor, and confidence. It demonstrates sensitivity to the needs and interests of the island nations by presenting [six arenas](#) of cooperation ranging from building climate change resilience to people-centered development and cybersecurity.

Most significantly, the PBP eschews the policy of pushing forth a security alliance that might disturb the regional order and cohesion among the Pacific Islands. Pursuing a non-traditional security orientation, it accords the Pacific Islands a "guiding" position in policymaking.

In the two years since its launch, PBP has produced a mixed bag of results.

Achievements

Since its inception, the PBP has [annually contributed](#) more than \$2 billion in developmental assistance. Additionally, PBP member nations and France have promised \$55 million for strengthening disaster resilience through the Pacific Humanitarian Warehousing Program under the [Nadi Bay Declaration](#) and 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy. At least \$22 million has also been committed to building a Pacific-owned research vessel to carry out research on oceans and fisheries. Moreover, PBP has collaborated with Pacific Islands and regional organizations such as the Forum Fisheries Agency to combat IUU Fishing in the region.

The PBP has organized the Pacific Cyber Capacity Building and Coordination Conference (P4C) to not only combat cyber threats and cybercrimes—a key priority under the [Boe Declaration](#) and the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy—but to also pool resources and share best practices to enhance cybersecurity in the region.

The Pacific Islands partner nations' (and not just those affiliated with the PBP) have also stepped up their efforts at the national level. Australia not only [financially supported](#) the Solomon Islands during the

latter's national elections but has also invested in the Coral Sea Cable, which helps bridge the digital divide. The Albanese government has further [announced](#) a special visa category for climate refugees from Tuvalu. India has also [boosted](#) its engagements in the health care, cybersecurity, and green energy sectors.

New Zealand, which had been a close partner of the Pacific Islands, seems to have changed course. Some [speculate](#) that the new government led by Prime Minister Chris Luxon might distance Wellington from the priorities of the region as it seeks to build closer military ties with the Anglosphere, overlooking policies on indigenous rights and climate change. Canada, on the other hand, [accords](#) an important position to the Pacific Islands in its 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, with the goal of developing feminist international assistance programs in line with the PBP. The United Kingdom has similarly [reiterated](#) support for the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy and promised greater cooperation in climate change, cybersecurity, and economic development.

One of the [largest](#) donors to the region, Japan regularly convenes the Pacific Island Leaders' Meetings and has identified [five priority areas](#) in engagement, including COVID response and recovery, sustainable oceans based on the rule of law, climate change and disaster resilience, and human resource development.

South Korea has also [scaled](#) up its Pacific policy by providing green ODAs at bilateral, trilateral (with the United States and Japan), and multilateral levels. Germany has similarly [promised](#) to “tangibly step up its engagements,” even though Pacific Islands do not feature prominently in its 2020 Indo-Pacific guidelines.

Challenges

As noted, the gravest of all challenges is the United States' failure to provide funds for the Pacific Islands under COFA. Furthermore, the Solomon Islands, which signed a [security agreement](#) with Beijing in 2022, distanced itself from the statement issued at the 2022 South Korea-Pacific Islands Summit in Fiji. Emphasizing the centrality of Pacific regionalism, Honiara [dissented](#) against the mention of Seoul's Indo-Pacific Strategy in a separate statement. As the recent tragic discovery of up to 50 dead bodies—believed to have been killed in tribal violence—in Papua New Guinea's Enga province [show](#), ethnic tensions remain a major source of social instability. Political volatility in Vanuatu last year similarly

[revealed](#) not only the weakness of democratic institutions in the region but also how the US-China rivalry affects the Pacific Islands, [severely tarnishing](#) regional unity.

Sea level rise caused by climate change shows no signs of abating. Predictions [indicate](#) that Tuvalu might submerge within a century. Many young Tuvaluans are already pessimistic about living conditions and believe the island might become uninhabitable within a decade. Climate change further aggravates food insecurity as [80%](#) of the Pacific Islanders rely on subsistence and semi-subsistence farming, heavily dependent on climatic conditions. Moreover, ocean warming is [likely to deplete](#) the annual fish catch by nearly 40% by the 2050s and the Pacific Islands nations would be the hardest hit.

The way ahead

Given the United States' ongoing failure to approve funds, developmental assistance through the PBP becomes extremely crucial and must be immediately stepped up.

Furthermore, the PBP nations must understand the structural reasons behind the Pacific Islands' tendency to be “lured” by cash from China. As the case of Nauru [shows](#), economic aid from Beijing is considered important not merely to fill the coffers but to resolve pressing economic challenges that many nations in the region face. Relegated to [MIRAB](#) (i.e. dependent on migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy) status for most of their history, the Pacific Islands continue to suffer through economic dependency, further aggravated by climate change. As sea levels rise, food resources deplete, and markets diminish; they see aid promises from China as a short-term, albeit timely solution. PBP nations must be very cautious not to pursue any policy that comes across as compulsion to join sides in great power politics, for Pacific regionalism remains a cherished ideal despite the challenges.

It must also be noted that not all instances of doubts regarding Western credibility in the region have been kick-started by China. Lingering effects of [nuclear testing](#) and a lack of suitable compensation were issues of contention long before China's entry. Furthermore, given long-standing Western ties with the Pacific Islands, China can, at best, aggravate the disenchantment already present.

The PBP nations hence must go beyond mere diplomatic visits and calls for climate change and take

pointed actions to boost capacity in the region—developing better health and education infrastructure, promoting women and youth empowerment as well as promoting media literacy so that nations in the region could truly progress on the path of democratic consolidation. The Pacific Islands’ demand for [more scholarships](#) for its youth and [better visa reciprocal arrangements](#) must also be addressed. This calls for better policy coordination among PBP nations.

Concurrently, ecological cooperation with China becomes beneficial for the region not just to meet the broader developmental goals but also mitigate brewing geopolitical tensions, where the Pacific Islands would be hardest hit. Beijing’s technological progress in [developing](#) unconventional sources of water and [ultra-deep water gas fields](#) can help the Pacific Islands in attaining green development. The PBP must retain its open nature, coordinating with not only members and partners—or even friendly non-member, non-partner countries like India and Canada—but any country willing and able to help the Pacific Islands meet their needs.

Moreover, a diplomatic tilt towards China must not deter the PBP nations to lessen cooperation with the Pacific Islands. They must be ready to work in the same spirit with any government that is democratically elected.

Strategic uncertainty emanating from great power competition has put forth a test of true friendship in the region. It is time for the PBP nations to show up as better allies.

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