



***LOOKING AHEAD TO THE PALM10:
THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF
JAPAN-PACIFIC ISLANDS RELATIONS***

BY JAMIE LEE

Jamie Lee (@jamie@pacforum.org) is Resident WSD-Handa Fellow at Pacific Forum. Previously she completed a Regional Security Studies Internship at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) where she pursued an original research project and contributed to multiple publications sponsored by the Center. She recently obtained her M.A. in Political Science from The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

At the April US-Japan summit President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida shared their view on the necessity of continued engagement with more Indo-Pacific countries, specifically mentioning the Pacific Island Countries (PICs). Thus, ongoing dialogue between Japan and PICs could not be more timely as Japan prepares to host the triennial PALM10 summit this July 16-18.

Representatives from all 14 Pacific Island nations will attend, alongside Australia and New Caledonia. This year's summit will also be the first in-person dialogue since PALM9 took place online in 2021 due to COVID-19. Known formally as the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM), the triennial forum is a first-of-its-kind channel for Japan and each PIC to exchange candid views on high-priority issues. Since beginning in 1997, PALM has become Japan's leading forum for strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with the Pacific Islands.

There is ample opportunity for Japan to engage its PALM counterparts and play a part in integrating the PICs in setting the mutually aligned goals of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific. Japan's diplomatic relationship with the PICs started in the late 20th

century through prior Japanese occupation of the Pacific Islands during World War II and the trading of raw materials. Their relations have expanded to be inclusive of non-traditional security concerns including climate change-related projects and Official Development Assistance (ODA). Amid China's rising influence, the Abe administration began exercising closer coordination with the Pacific Islands region under the 2016 Free and Open Indo-Pacific framework.

More recently, Japan was a founding member of the Partners of the Blue Pacific initiative in 2022, also including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The islands may be small, but their surrounding ocean is vast—constituting nearly one-fifth of the earth's surface. From a strategic standpoint, it contains routes for maritime channels and important sea lines of communication (SLOC), the center of maritime enforcement activities.

From trade to bilateral/multilateral diplomacy

Geographically, the Pacific Islands are dispersed and isolated. Consequently, Japan maintains mostly bilateral relations with each. Trade diplomacy remains the focal point of Japan's bilateral relations with the PICs. Concerning natural resources, tree log exports from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and New Zealand alone account for approximately 20% of Japan's total import volume of tree logs. The Pacific is also a critical supply chain route for the flow of food and natural resource exports and imports between both countries. Around 40% of bonito and tuna consumed in Japan is caught exclusively in the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of Pacific Island nations.

Within the Pacific Island region's EEZs lie crucial SLOCs. Of particular significance to the area is the use of emerging technologies, including access to satellites that provide clearer and more accurate images, as well as artificial intelligence and big data platforms dedicated to vessel tracking, prediction, and anomaly detection. Most notably, one of the world's three data fusion centers facilitating the monitoring of maritime operations for the US and its

allies/partners—established under the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness by Quadrilateral Security Dialogue nations—is located in Vanuatu under a key SLOC. This affirms that regional threats to the Pacific Islands are transnational in nature. Moreover, data stored in the fusion center is vulnerable to potential adversary threats and damage from climate change and sea overflow.

An emerging challenge lies ahead concerning Japan and the Pacific Islands region's shared past and sensitivity concerning nuclear testing. The Japanese government's decision to release over 1 million tons of wastewater from the Fukushima Nuclear Plant over 30 years prompted protest, with no island affirming a clear position of agreement with the plan. At an individual country level, most Pacific Island leaders expressed opposition. Vanuatu's Foreign Minister Matai Seremaiah, in a statement last year, said: "[We are] urging polluters not to discharge the treated water in the Pacific Ocean until and unless the treated water is incontrovertibly proven to be safe to do so, and [to] seriously consider other options." Even within Japan public sentiment remains mixed. A recent Kyodo News Agency poll found that 44% of Japanese are unsure whether to support or oppose the release, with 82% saying the government hasn't done enough to explain it. The responses thus far illustrate the need to enforce greater transparency.

Recommendations and strategic implications

Given current and future engagement with the Pacific Islands, there are a few ways Japan can continue building robust partnerships with the Pacific Islands nations. Japan should make good on its promises of increased assistance in the Pacific Islands' energy sector. More specifically, Japan could continue exporting green energy and assist in decreasing reliance on fossil fuels. Assistance in decreasing reliance on fossil fuels through government subsidies could address the root cause of the most central security issue facing the Pacific Islands: climate change. As published in the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Island Continent and formally announced during the 2022 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the need for more options for alternative energy sources and lessened reliance on fossil fuels is more important than ever,

being tied to the Pacific Islands' sovereignty and very survival.

In addition to climate initiatives, facilitating education and training programs, rather than forms of aid that increase dependency, are among measures that could be implemented to promote greater self-sufficiency for all 14 PICs. Continued engagement, especially at multilateral forums and partnerships, presents ways that Japan could continue meeting PICs on their terms and engage according to each PIC's individual needs and concerns. Maintaining transparency and consistency with international standards, set by the IAEA and other international agencies, will prove paramount in the coming months. In anticipation of PALM10, the Japan Foreign Ministry's "New Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (NFOIP) framework stated that climate change-related development assistance will be at the center of discussions.

Thus, the Japanese government should further clarify the specific climate change-related areas they plan to increase investment into, especially concerning green climate and maritime security initiatives. As climate-related issues—IUU fishing, disaster prevention, resilience, and climate change-related projects—remain the most pressing national security concern for the PICs, countering Chinese influence in the region requires providing partner countries with security cooperation that China might otherwise address.

Continuing regional forums like the PALM10 that do not promote a specific security strategy may be in Japan's best strategic interest if it aspires to expand multilateral relationships with the PICs. National and regional interests—in this case, climate change—come with mutual objectives. Thus, multilateral, region-specific forums allow the PICs to accept assistance according to their most prioritized areas of interest without aligning themselves with the US or China.

Another potential avenue for greater regional engagement is Japan's existing partnership with France and the PICs: France has longstanding ties to the region, and Japan and France's 2013 cooperation roadmap in defense and security can provide alternative avenues for collaboration. The PICs could address mutual security concerns without feeling

immediate pressure to align themselves with the US or China. The PICs can address key areas of regional concern, notably climate change, through greater self-sufficiency and lessened pressure to align their interests with the strategic priorities of the greater powers. At the same time, prior US involvement in the region is crucial in the coming years as Japan works to enforce its investments in climate and security initiatives. At a critical juncture in the 21st century where global interdependence and a common interest to preserve democracy and a Free and Open Indo-Pacific region, greater collaboration in the areas of economic relations, security, and climate change initiatives between Japan and the Pacific Island Countries is crucial. Japan should continue exercising more global approaches in its diplomatic outlook, engaging with the PICs beyond government-to-government relationships to closely involve major bilateral and multilateral partner nations, local officials, and NGOs to fortify the autonomy of the PICs and pursue regional and global prosperity, peace, and security.

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