



**TRUMP OR HARRIS: THE US MUST
BACK THE PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP
ACT**

BY MOSES SAKAI

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The following is the seventh in a series on the challenges facing the next US presidential administration in managing the most crucial Indo-Pacific relationships. See part one in the series [here](#), see part two [here](#), part three [here](#), part four [here](#), part five [here](#), and part six [here](#).

In their first ever presidential debate in early September since their parties' official nomination as candidates for the 2024 US presidential election, the Democrat Kamala Harris and Republican Donald Trump clearly [outlined](#) their foreign policy priorities. Among the key issues to be tackled in their foreign policies included wars in Europe and the Middle East, artificial intelligence and critical technologies, China and climate change. While Donald Trump will most likely continue with his "[America First](#)" policy if elected, the question remains whether Kamala Harris, the incumbent vice president will continue with Biden's foreign policy efforts, particularly in the Pacific.

Biden's reengagement efforts in the Pacific since 2022

China is already at the top of both candidates' foreign policy priorities, regardless who wins in the presidential election in November. China's rising superpower status globally and in the Indo-Pacific have [challenged](#) the establishment of the US as the

global hegemon since 1945. While US has maintained its regional presence militarily in the Indo-Pacific, broadly through joint exercises with like-minded partners and allies at the multilateral and bilateral levels, US engagement in the Pacific has been [missing](#) since the end of World War II.

The Biden administration's reengagement efforts in the Pacific came as a result of China's growing influence through economic and security initiatives in the Pacific over the past decade. While Beijing has heavily [invested](#) in the Pacific through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in infrastructure developments, its [bilateral security agreement](#) with the Solomon Islands in April 2022 has caused Washington to step up its efforts in the Pacific. Various [US-led initiatives](#) were established. For the first time in post-World War II, the White House twice hosted the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) leaders in September of 2022 and 2023. The two US PICs leaders' summits resulted in the first ever [US Pacific Partnership Strategy](#) (USPPS) aimed at [enhancing](#) US engagement with the PICs in accordance with Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF) priorities envisaged in the [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#).

The USPPS outlines key initiatives undertaken by the Biden administration since 2022. While there remains much to do to strengthen the US Pacific engagement, a few of the initiatives achieved under the Biden administration were establishment of new US embassies in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga, and Kiribati and USAID mission and office in Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG) including the expansion of the Peace Corps. The Biden administration has also [renewed](#) another 20-year Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement with the Freely Associated States (FAS) of Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau, and Federated State of Micronesia on the [sidelines](#) of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in September of this year. The [Partners in the Blue Pacific](#) (PBP), a US-led initiative established in June 2022 with US allies and partners including Australia and New Zealand as members of the PIF to bolster Pacific regionalism and [support](#) climate change efforts in the region as PICs

are not part of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) for prosperity except Fiji.

While [reaffirming](#) the first US PICs summit at the US Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Dialogue in PNG's capital Port Moresby in May 2023, the Secretary of State Antony Blinken also [signed](#) the [US-PNG Defense Cooperation Agreement](#) (DCA). The DCA is probably one of the key milestone achievements of the Biden administration in the Pacific on security front as it allows the US military to access major PNG airports and seaports. While the DCA between the US and PNG (which is an expansion of 1989 Status of Forces Agreement between the two countries) aimed to improve capacity within the PNG Defense Force, it was also a strategic move by US to [counter China's 2022 security pact](#) with PNG's closest neighbor, Solomon Islands. The DCA came into force in August 2023. However, in June 2023, as part of the DCA, four US F-35 lightning II fighter jets did an [unscheduled](#) stop over for a refuel at PNG's Jackson's International Airport for the first time in post-WWII. Given PNG's [strategic significance](#) in the Indo-Pacific and geographically larger country in the Pacific, the unscheduled stop over of the F-35s is perhaps a signal by US to reinstate its status as the Pacific power and the region being its traditional backyard for influence in security cooperation.

Challenges for the new administration

The new administration's priority in the Pacific, regardless of Democratic or Republican leadership of the White House, after the election is to elevate the partnership with the Pacific to a more comprehensive strategic level. The reengagement efforts by the Biden administration in the Pacific was just the beginning. The US has already [pledged](#) more than \$800 million in the two summits to support PIF's regional priorities in the long-term but real efforts and commitments on the ground is required.

Harris will most likely continue with Biden's re-established efforts in the Pacific. In her remarks at the first US-Pacific summit in 2022, Harris candidly [described](#) the significance of the historical bond in which US has with the Pacific and even announced to triple funding for economic development and climate

resilient initiatives in the region. Climate change remains by far the Pacific's top priority, although geopolitics remains a [concern](#) among the PIF leaders. While Trump's re-election would most likely halt US climate initiatives in the Pacific and globally due to his [rhetoric against climate change](#) and withdrawal (again) through an executive order from the 2015 Paris Climate Accord—including President Biden's IPEF—his administration would continue other initiatives to support the region's key development priorities as US remains one of the PIF's key development partners.

According to [Biden-Harris administration](#), US is a proud Pacific power and a proud Pacific nation. The current administration has already set the precedent. The new administration's effort is to reinforce the US-Pacific engagement regardless. This can be done through the [Pacific Partnership Act](#) (PPA). Although PPA is a [US Congressional initiative](#), it is the [outcome](#) of the Biden's USPPS as a measure to increase US engagement and assess factors that could cause risks to US's national interests in the Pacific. The PPA has already [received](#) bi-partisan support of the US Congress through the House of Representatives. However, bipartisan Congressional support is required at the House of Representatives and Senate before PPA will come into full force. Once passed by the House and Senate, the PPA will allow the president and the Secretary of State to develop periodically a strategy and its implementation mechanism in consultation with key stakeholders in the US and the Pacific in terms of the White House engagement in the Pacific as required by the Congress. The new administration's effort perhaps is to ensure that the PPA is fully passed before the third US-PIF leaders' summit in 2025.

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