



***HOW THE PACIFIC ISLANDS SHOULD
RESPOND TO THE TRUMP
ADMINISTRATION***

BY REP. ED CASE

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Anyone who followed President Trump's first term and his statements on the road to a second cannot be completely surprised at his foreign policy adjustments in the first months of this term. Still, the confusion and rapidity of this administration's redirection have not only sown doubt around the world. They also raise the question of whether this represents a fundamental long-term change in America's generational commitment to a leading world role, to our allies and partners, and to the geopolitical challenges of our generation, or a short-term adjustment motivated (or purposely amplified) by legitimate American voter concerns at the costs and sharing of that commitment.

To cut to the chase, I believe it is the latter. The question is how best to adapt to this rhythm in the long term as opposed to overreact now into far worse scenarios.

Let's first be clear about what's going on. The Trump administration, fed by concerns of some parts of American society, is engaged in a purge of perceived excesses in American foreign policy and spending, driven by a sense that the US economy and government are leaving too many of our own behind. We can debate the underlying argument; I agree the US economy and government are leaving too many of our own behind, but not because we engage fully in the world. The reality is that this sentiment is driving the Trump administration's actions.

Let's also acknowledge the real-world consequences of this abrupt shift. Whole programs that assist international partners with their most intractable challenges, in health, economic development and more, are falling victim to the attempted dismantling of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and related agencies and NGOs. The purge of any program related to climate change dismisses the real-world, often existential challenges, especially of the island and seacoast nations. Projects years in the making—such as a Conventional Weapons Destruction program in Papua New Guinea, the Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership in Fiji and across the region, and a potable water system in Samoa—have been abruptly cancelled, leading to tangible setbacks in the region.

But although these details matter, each of them with their own story, what is and should be most concerning is the erosion of trust and partnership built up over generations between the US and countries that share our values and goals for a peaceful, prosperous and democratic world. This is assuredly the case in the broad Indo-Pacific and the Pacific Islands themselves. It would be easy to interpret this as an attack on the US-Pacific Islands relationship itself, and our geopolitical challenges, especially the People's Republic of China, are very busy to that effect with this sudden gift that keeps giving. But it's more accurate to view these first months as its own overreaction to inflamed and well-manipulated American domestic political concerns, however misplaced and misinformed, which will right over time out of mutual adjustment and necessity, security and otherwise.

For context, as a founding Pacific Islands Forum Dialogue Partner and otherwise, the United States has for decades been committed to advancing Pacific priorities through united and cohesive political leadership. The specific nature of that commitment has varied under different American administrations, from Hillary Clinton being the first Secretary of State to participate in the Pacific Islands Forum Post-Forum dialogue and President Obama addressing the 2016 Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders, to diplomatic focus on the region growing under the first Trump administration, establishing a Pacific Islands

directorship in the National Security Council and inviting the presidents of the Freely Associated States to the White House to advance negotiations on the renewal of the Compacts of Free Association, to President Biden hosting the first US-Pacific Islands Summit, creating the first Pacific Partnership Strategy and appointing the first US Envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum in 2022.

Although its overall direction has been forward, US foreign policy has always fluctuated in response to changing domestic and international political realities. The current administration's initial approach to foreign aid and its relationship with the Pacific Islands, while disheartening, is simply the latest chapter in this broader narrative, one which I believe will prove an aberration.

This readjustment will occur for various reasons. First, the fever in American politics will break and mainstream American sentiments will reassert as geopolitical realities set in. Second, the challenges faced by the Pacific Islands will not go away on their own and will compel a broader coalition to address. Third, the alternative world presented by the PRC will prove unsustainable and unacceptable to most nations and will compel another resent for mutual defense purposes.

As we all weather this cycle, there are three aspects that remain critically important. First, there are many individuals in the administration, Congress and the broader community who continue to advocate for the US-Pacific Islands relationship. Their efforts to maintain the region's importance on the national agenda must be supported.

Second, like-minded countries with strong or developing relationships with the Pacific Islands—like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Germany, just to name a few—must take up as much of the slack as possible.

Third, the Trump administration needs to hear from the Pacific Islands in a way that resonates with the concerns of the administration and those in American society for whom it professes to speak. US assistance cannot be viewed as enabling an avoidance of

responsibilities that should be borne by individual countries (think, the argument that Europe is not contributing sufficiently to its own defense and expand that thread into other areas). The challenge of the PRC is real and the vacuum cannot be left lest it be filled. US engagement abroad is mutually beneficial, including by ensuring the security and economic prosperity of the people of the US.

The Trump administration's initial attempted withdrawal from generational commitments to the world including the Pacific Islands is a huge miscalculation driven by misguided domestic political priorities. It is not nor need it be a permanent retrenchment from alliances and partnerships and an entire approach to international citizenship that most Americans continue to understand and support. These are very challenging times and weathering them will be difficult. But there are clear options and avenues to emerge mutually better and stronger than before.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.