



***PACIFIC FORUM TURNS 50 AT AN
AUSPICIOUS MOMENT***

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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To mark Pacific Forum's 50th anniversary, long-time staff and contributors will reflect on key moments in the institution's history and what they mean for its future. To help us continue Pacific Forum's work of fostering Indo-Pacific peace and security please consider [supporting us](#).

Pacific Forum marks its 50th anniversary at an auspicious moment. Donald Trump is shedding and shredding old verities about the international order, ignoring or repudiating many of the principles that have guided US foreign, economic, and national security policy for the last 70 years. It isn't clear what will emerge from the tumult—there appears to be a mismatch between the ambitions and the actions of the new administration—but Pacific Forum's experience and insights will be vital tools to help navigate the resulting order.

US foreign policy since the end of World War II was based upon the fact that this country had emerged from that bloody conflict relatively unscathed; it accounted for 50% of global wealth when that war ended. That good fortune allowed the US to shoulder a large, even disproportionate, share of the burden as the world rebuilt from devastation.

As important, though, US policymakers concluded that US engagement was essential to the creation and

perpetuation of a stable, prosperous and peaceful world. International institutions were created and Washington played a leading role in their organization and operation. The US promoted open markets, liberal democracy, and human rights and had those principles enshrined in the institutions and operating systems of the international order. A network of global alliances, in which the US was senior partner, was created and flourished. For sure, there were times when the US did not live up to the ideals that animated these projects, but it was always ready to be measured by and held accountable to them.

In recent years, the consensus in the US about the continuing relevance of those principles has crumbled. The foundational premise of its postwar war policy, its extraordinary wealth and the resulting share of global power, has dissipated. While it's still number one, the US today accounts for just 26.5% of global GDP, nearly half the sum in 1945. Many consider that shrinking share to signal some kind of failure. It is, in fact, testimony to the wisdom that guided US policy—it allowed so many other nations to get rich.

The Trump administration has shown disregard and disdain for those principles and institutions, challenging them at every opportunity. President Trump believes that US allies and partners have exploited US largesse, free-riding on alliance commitments and taking advantage of its belief to free markets, while refusing to open their own. He sees multilateralism as a burden and institutions to constrain US freedom of maneuver.

It is not clear what Trump will accomplish or his ultimate goals: Make America Great Again is an all-inclusive slogan that offers little guidance for US policy. Evidence suggests that the president is winging it when it comes to tactics, confident in his abilities and assessments. While he is ready to listen to many voices, many of them unconventional, he remains the decider-in-chief.

This new world has wreaked havoc on think tanks. Their traditional business model—offering explanations of policy, predictions of policy or analysis that could influence policy—has been eviscerated by a president that prides himself on being

unpredictable. He has turned his back on DC institutions, convinced that they are extensions of the “Deep State” and ready to thwart his designs. Organizations like ours have been forced to rethink their business model.

Despite all the uncertainty Trump has created, one thing seems certain: the world that we knew is being replaced. In this environment, Pacific Forum has a unique position and perspective. We are not part of the Beltway-East Coast consensus. Our analytical starting point is the region that we inhabit and within which we spend our working lives. Being 6,000 miles from Washington gives us a singular vantage point—our day doesn’t start in Washington nor does it end there.

That is a tremendous advantage. While we are a US think tank, one that seeks to promote a safer, more prosperous, and stable world with a leading role for the United States, our conversations are framed by our location. We are embedded within the region we assess. Indo-Pacific concerns are local to us.

For the quarter-century I’ve been associated with Pacific Forum, one of the most important, most rewarding, and most frustrating initiatives has been our next-generation programming. (Frustrating because funding constraints invariably exposed the gap between ambitions for the program and its reality—and we were ambitious!) We have made training the next generation of Indo-Pacific experts and analysts a priority, with in-house and nonresident fellowships, along with the Young Leaders program. While most organizations have their own next-gen programs, I’ve long believed that ours was unique. We sought not just to expose program participants to key issues but sought to more deeply integrate them into our initiatives, to encourage them to pursue original thinking, to speak up and develop the contacts and networks among themselves that are a pillar of the track-two experience.

After 20 years, graduates and alumni of those programs are scattered around the world, teaching in some of the world’s most prestigious universities, working in think tanks and consultancies, and serving in governments and militaries. I am constantly meeting them during my travels and invariably proud

of the way that they used their time with Pacific Forum to advance their careers and promote a peaceful and prosperous world.

I am confident that they have been well prepared to tackle the challenges that they will face in this new world, and that Pacific Forum has been instrumental in helping prepare them.

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