



***PACIFIC FORUM AT 50:
OPERATIONALIZING INTEGRATION
AND PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT***

BY JOHN HEMMINGS

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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 see part one in the series click [here](#), and to help us continue Pacific Forum's work of fostering Indo-Pacific peace and security please consider [supporting us](#).

For me, the most memorable work I did at Pacific Forum was organizing the Operationalizing Integration in the Indo-Pacific conference. Yes, of course, I am proud of the work that the team and I put into in that first inaugural conference in January 2024, but as I look back at the event, my overriding impression is one of wonder and awe how much support the effort we gained from outside the organization.

Yes sure, we were the ones facing sleepless nights and long days, etc., but if I am 100% honest, I must admit we were riding on the shoulders of giants—[Ralph Cossa](#), [David Santoro](#), [Bob Girrier](#), [Brad Glosserman](#), and [Jim Kelly](#), and much of the goodwill, support, and positive feeling that the OIIP conference received was because of the work of preceding generations of leadership and staff at Pacific Forum. It was an all-of-think-tank effort and I am deeply proud of the role that our team played in executing the conference and deeply proud of the role that conference had in building understanding between government and defense industry in such trying times.

In a sense, the Pacific Forum was the perfect think tank to help build bridges between US INDOPACOM, Office of the Secretary of Defense Policy, and our defense industrial partners. As a non-governmental organization, Pacific Forum has always been uniquely positioned to offer a neutral “forum” for discussion without leaning too far towards one partner or another. In an age in which our nation [requires a rapid build-up](#) of industrial defense capabilities, it has been clear that government and industry must move out quickly and effect great change. However many obstacles remain: on the one hand, strict export regulations, acquisition bureaucracy, and ever-changing requirements frustrated an industry that had been sheared from its Cold War size to less than a ghost of itself. On the other hand, prioritization of the shareholder, a reluctance to increase industrial capacity prior to contracting, and slow fulfilment of orders frustrated a command that worried ever more about the changing balance of forces across the Taiwan Strait and beyond. With the specter of war in Ukraine, the OIIP conference was intended to bridge the strategic divide between these two stakeholders and give them a place to talk integration and strategy rather than business and acquisition. Working at the Pacific Forum enabled us to appeal to both sides as to our shared sense of urgency of the situation and move forward the goals of integrating systems and putting the right tools in the hands of our warfighters.

It was the excellent reputation of the Pacific Forum that got us our first meetings at INDOPACOM and our first meetings with industry and allowed us to “pitch” the vision of the conference. While I will not discount the immense work and effort that the Pacific Forum team put into supporting OIIP, it was remarkable how quickly things moved from January of 2023 to January 2024. I swiftly realized that the Pacific Forum had an invisible network of friends and allies across the island, around the Beltway, and across the wide Pacific Ocean. It is remarkable to me still how many allies and friends—many of them long-time partners and many as former Young Leaders—took it upon themselves to support the effort, while simultaneously eschewing glory or private gain. Former Young Leaders—like [Eric Sayers](#)—stepped up and helped with contacts and support not only for the good of the Pacific Forum and

the conference but—through that—the good of the country.

My personal experience of working in think tanks has been that one can get a lot done, have a lot of influence—and at times—have more agency than when in government. In addition, I have also found that one can put this in service of country in ways that are deeply impactful and meaningful. While I realize this is not unique to the Pacific Forum, something about its well-established reputation, its 50 years of working with US allies in the region, and its patient efforts at track-2 diplomacy with America's self-identified foes meant that, when we began to work more closely with the defense enterprise under the Pacific Forum banner, many external to the organization immediately believed in its ethos and sincerity. For anyone considering a career at a think tank—or indeed a career at the Pacific Forum—there is much food for thought here. How can we carry out work that is not only meaningful to us personally, but also meaningful for large tracts of humanity, nations across the spectrum of ideological belief? How can we strive to make the world a better place, while at the same time trying to identify security issues relevant to our societies and countries and seeking common solutions that mitigate them? It has been my privilege to work at the Pacific Forum along with some of the smartest people I know and answer these questions in a satisfactory manner.

As the planning cycle for the Honolulu Defense Forum 2026 begins under the able and steady hand of my friend Kim, I take great pride in knowing that the Pacific Forum has yet again punched above its weight and will continue to do so for many more years to come. It has produced positive effects for our government and industry stakeholders that will ultimately benefit our country at a time of great peril. I also take great satisfaction in belonging to the Pacific Forum Ohana, that large and rich family of academics, officials, and wonks that stretch from South Asia to Oceania, from London to Honolulu. And so if you're a Pacific Forum brother or sister of mine, I salute you and ask that you take care of our home and remember its ability to change the world.

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