



***PACIFIC FORUM AT 50: HOW THE
PANDEMIC UPDATED OUR
DEFINITION OF SECURITY***

BY ROB YORK

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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](#), for part two [here](#), and to help us continue Pacific Forum's work of fostering Indo-Pacific peace and security please consider [supporting us](#).

When asked how long I have worked with Pacific Forum, I always say "January 2020."

Then, depending on the atmosphere, I might slip in, "Of course, nothing important happened after that."

In truth, working with Pacific Forum provides opportunities to travel the world and meet officials making impactful decisions, not to mention other well-regarded thought leaders in the fields of security, diplomacy, and defense. Pacific Forum, thanks to the efforts of those who came before me—such as Adm. [Lloyd Vasey](#), [James Kelly](#), and [Ralph Cossa](#)—and the ongoing work of staff like [David Santoro](#), has a stellar reputation in most such circles, making it a high honor to work for them. In all honesty, between January and March 2020 I frequently questioned whether my worthiness for the position, and whether I would rise to their level.

The importance of such questions diminished considerably by early March 2020, when it became

clear that the world faced a once-in-a-century pandemic which would change the nature of diplomacy and policy, and for many of us even the nature of work itself. Instead of traveling the world to meet policymakers, diplomats, and experts, we were considering Zoom subscription options and learning to synch them to our Outlook calendars. Dialogues, including track 1.5s, that once took place in foreign capitals turned virtual, which admittedly saves time on visa fees but does not foster the best circumstances for networking.

However, Pacific Forum adapted. Already scheduled programs shifted online and were executed smoothly, with the Forum as always delivering a set of recommendations for policymakers and officials to consider. [New programs](#) launched and took place entirely online, reaching audiences in multiple time zones; something that hadn't been possible via in-person conferences and dialogues. And our continent-spanning fellowships and Young Leaders programs added new engagements that allowed our fellows in Hawaii to interact with those in East Asia, South Asia, and Europe in real time.

More importantly, the definition of "security," upon which Pacific Forum's foundations lie, evolved into something more comprehensive than military balances and defusing hostilities between rivals, or between bickering partners. Health security became a new theme to consider, and with the rise of technology-aided remote work so did the security of supply chains. When still-high demand for semiconductors came under threat from droughts and extreme storm patterns so too did environmental security. And as rumors of COVID-19's origins spread, along with speculations of draconian government overreach in response, so did information security.

But traditional security's importance had not diminished, as the deadly clash between India and China at Galwan Valley that May demonstrated.

Society gradually adjusted to the conditions, and thanks to modern medicine we would not need to live in fear of infection, for ourselves or our loved ones, for good. And now in 2025, 50 years since Pacific

Forum's founding, we may offer our most diverse array of programs ever. This is true both in terms of where they take place—[India and the Indian Ocean](#) have emerged as a major focus area for us, to complement our older East and Southeast Asia programs—but also in the range of subjects covered. Pacific Forum now features economic security, [critical technology](#), and programs designed to counter more-subtle malign influence campaigns to go along with its established focus areas of nuclear security and extended deterrence.



Pacific Forum Director for Regional Affairs Rob York speaks to a group of career educators at the East-West Center's "Infusing Korean Studies in American Undergraduate Higher Education" program in July 2024.

What will be the most important security topics between Pacific Forum's golden and diamond anniversaries? Based on what we know now:

- **Changes to nuclear security**—The United States and its partners still officially uphold the conventions of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, and for good reason: No one desires a new scramble toward nuclear armaments, especially in areas of already-high tension. But the international community has failed to stop North Korea from building out a nuclear program or slow China's expanding arsenal. Given these changes, and Americans' growing distaste for foreign commitments, will we see partner countries (especially South Korea) seek exceptions? Would carving out exceptions

ultimately bolster the NPT or effectively end it?

- **Economic security**—Proponents of free trade were once convinced that the regular flow of goods would gradually liberalize and democratize the world. As it became apparent that adversarial great powers would resist such reforms (even at the expense of economic growth) and domestic concerns over de-industrialization grew, they have gradually lost the high ground to protectionists and central planners. Yet, the data on [free trade](#) still largely suggests that it is beneficial to exporter and importer alike. Mercantilism accomplishes political goals but rarely enriches countries over time (with some [notable exceptions](#)). But do alternatives need to be made when one country becomes too dependent on a large adversarial power's exports? And furthermore, shouldn't we get more economists and IR specialists in the same room to hash out the parameters for when free trade is an unmitigated good, and where exceptions need to be made?
- **Where influence ends and malign influence begins**—Whether it's called cognitive warfare, political warfare, malign influence or simply "disinformation," the capacity of great powers to coerce their neighbors without firing a shot has grown. "Media literacy" and "critical thinking" are not mere buzzwords among intelligentsia—in strategically valuable countries only beginning to grow accustomed to new forms of communication they are distinct vulnerabilities. At what point do we consider our allies' and partners' media literacy a security threat, and how do we address it without facing credible accusations of seeking to influence our partners' domestic affairs?
- **Conventional deterrence**—The relevance of the original deterrence has not diminished with the evolution of technology. Indeed, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and with China "rehearsing" for a Taiwan invasion, revelations that the US Department

of Defense is prioritizing [conflict deterrence](#) are welcome. Only time will tell if they are enough.

Throughout these challenges, Pacific Forum will continue to grow and adapt, just as it did during COVID-19. We may not all be strategic thinkers on the level of Adm. Vasey, but [our team](#) and our network of [contributors](#) is diverse in its specializations and committed to a peaceful Indo-Pacific. We thank our generous donors for their support, and invite others to [join them](#).

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