



## ***A TRUMP ADMINISTRATION PLAYBOOK FOR THE PACIFIC***

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As secretary of state, Marco Rubio has established a clear framework for US foreign policy: Every initiative must strengthen America, secure its future, and enhance its prosperity. In the Pacific Islands, Washington faces a strategic puzzle: What instruments can the US deploy that both align with the Trump administration's priorities and address the region's specific circumstances and aspirations?

By examining four fields of statecraft—diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic—a playbook that speaks to both Trump's vision and regional interests is uncovered. While many point to the [unpredictability](#) of the Trump administration's foreign policy, clear patterns now appear: China stands as the paramount global threat to US interests; the use of [hard power](#)

takes precedence over soft; [cost-cutting](#) is at the forefront; and allies should share more of the [burden](#).

Diplomatically, the Trump administration has focused on recalibrating trade relationships to address deficits and foster friendlier environments for American businesses. This approach has led to a clear shift: economic and financial agencies such as the Department of Commerce are taking center stage. However, these agencies' ability to effectively negotiate and work with other countries is intrinsically tied to the functions of US diplomatic assets.

Despite growing [interest](#) from Pacific nations in strengthening ties with the US, the US has failed to build a robust diplomatic presence in the region. This is an obvious blind spot in a region where personal relationships hold substantial power. [Sending](#) Commerce Department officials to key Pacific nations could both facilitate trade and ensure America's influence remains strong.

Additionally, the president and Congress need to expedite the nomination and confirmation of US ambassadors to the Pacific Islands. The US embassy in Honiara [re-opened](#) in January 2023, yet the ambassador position remains [vacant](#). In the Solomon Islands, a country where China has a diplomatic footprint at least [three](#) times the size of the US, this was an easy gap to fill but one where the US fell short.

As with the first Trump administration, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad") is a key fixture in the US' Indo-Pacific Strategy. Bolstering partnership with Australia, India, and Japan, the US can simultaneously expand its Pacific engagement while meeting the administration's burden sharing priority. The Quad announced a range of [initiatives](#) in 2023 aimed at addressing regional issues of mutual concern, including climate change, maritime security, and economic development. The US needs a diplomatic presence that matches the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands.

Beyond diplomacy, intelligence-sharing plays a critical role in safeguarding US security interests. The

Freely Associated States (FAS)—including the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia—are on the front lines of countering China’s [malign influence](#). The United States could offer enhanced support from its intelligence agencies to identify illegal behavior from the PRC and support local law enforcement.

Preventing malign Chinese influence through information sharing also aligns with Pacific priorities. For instance, US surveillance of weather activity and trends can boost disaster preparedness and resiliency through investments in early warning systems, infrastructure adaptation, and technical assistance. The US could also work with partners to enhance regional maritime domain awareness. With illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing cutting into Pacific [food supplies and economies](#), it is a vital security concern that the United States can help tackle.

The US has active [shiprider agreements](#) with 12 Pacific Island countries that boost local capacity by hosting local law enforcement on US Coast Guard vessels to patrol their EEZs. Combatting [IUU fishing](#), [human trafficking](#), and [drug smuggling](#), shiprider programs combat transnational security issues in the Pacific Islands with potential spillover implications for the United States. However, due to the vastness of the Pacific and lack of capacity, these programs are limited. Cost-effective methods of combatting this are as simple as reallocating assets or prepositioning cutters in the Pacific Islands.

The United States may have the systems in place to work closely with the Freely Associated States, but not across the Blue Pacific. Australia and New Zealand can help fill in these gaps. The Director General of New Zealand’s Security Intelligence Survey recently [emphasized](#) deepened intelligence cooperation across the region. The US should also arrange secondments for its own intelligence analysts to the Australia funded [Pacific Fusion Center](#), which hosts analytical thinking in the region.

On the military front, the US has a long-standing role as a security provider in the Pacific Islands. Through

the Compacts of Free Association, the United States maintains [exclusive and extensive](#) defense rights and responsibilities for the FAS. Recently, security arrangements with [Papua New Guinea](#) and [Fiji](#) have strengthened the United States’ footprint in the region, acting as a strategic counter to China’s growing presence, while supporting Pacific needs through development and enhanced disaster relief collaboration.

However, the US is not the only security player on the allied side of the ledger. Australia and New Zealand are both increasingly stepping up their roles in the Pacific Islands. Recently Australia has renewed discussions with [Papua New Guinea](#) and [Vanuatu](#) on security agreements. To avoid overlap and ensure a complementary approach, the US will need to coordinate closely with these partners—especially as Australia has secured major security agreements with [Tuvalu](#) and [Nauru](#).

US engagement with the PICs can’t be discussed without looking to the elephant in the room—how the [freeze](#) of foreign aid and dismantlement of [USAID](#) has not only damaged the US’ credibility as a partner after years of rebuilding, but it has also given China perfect opportunity to increase its influence. While foreign aid is not the only economic angle to consider, it is one of the most important forms of engagement.

Fortunately, disaster relief and some unexploded ordnance programs were restarted in the FAS and Papua New Guinea. Additionally, once foreign aid is turned back on, programs in the Indo-Pacific seem comparatively less likely to be subjected to the chopping block. Nevertheless, the foreign aid freeze has left policy makers wondering how the US can economically engage with the PICs in a more explicitly mutually beneficial way.

This isn’t just about charity—it’s about investing in mutual benefits. By prioritizing areas like economic development, environmental resilience, and small-scale infrastructure, the US can deepen relationships with Pacific Islands while meeting its own strategic interests. The US can easily cooperate with allies and

partners on these types of foreign aid and development finance projects as they either already have a stake or are looking to become more involved.

The United States' engagement with the Pacific Islands represents a crucial opportunity to align its foreign policy goals with the region's priorities, while addressing broader strategic concerns. Despite challenges such as the freeze on foreign aid, there are several avenues through which the US can strengthen its presence and influence in the Pacific. By leveraging diplomatic channels, enhancing intelligence sharing, deepening law enforcement and coast guard cooperation, and fostering economic partnerships, the US can safeguard its security interests and counter Chinese expansion. A pragmatic, cost-effective strategy that balances US interests with the aspirations of the Pacific Islands will be essential in shaping a resilient and prosperous future for both sides.

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