

Maritime Challenges and Opportunities of the Pacific Island Countries

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*Recognizing the ties of shared history and sacrifice, we
will reinforce our partnership with Pacific Island states.*

~ United States Interim National Security
Strategic Guidance, March 2021

The Indo-Pacific region covers approximately half the Earth's surface. It stretches across two oceans and multiple continents – the Pacific and Indian Oceans, the western coasts of the Americas, all of Australia, and much of Asia. There are few regions in the world as culturally, socially, economically, and geopolitically diverse as the Indo-Pacific. It is home to 36 nations with more than half of the world's population, an estimated 3,000 languages, many of the world's largest militaries, the most populous nation on Earth, the largest democracy, and the largest Muslim-majority nation.¹ Additionally, more than a third of the Indo-Pacific region is comprised of small island nations, which include the smallest republic in the world and the smallest nation in Asia.²

The Pacific Islands states have substantial natural resources. However, they also have diminutive island geography, small populations, and

1 US INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility, accessed December 18, 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>.

2 US INDOPACOM Area of Responsibility, accessed December 18, 2021, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/>.

limited economic diversity which makes them particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and health security challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors have recently led to increased poverty and economic volatility.³ The United States has a significant interest in the Pacific Islands. These interests include the security and protection of US citizens and nationals, US sovereign territory comprising a state, US territories, and those persons and citizens that have aligned with the United States through free association. Moreover, the Pacific Islands have become part of the geopolitical space affected by strategic competition between China and the United States. China sees the Pacific Islands not just for its resources, but as an opportunity to diplomatically isolate Taiwan and to expand its maritime geopolitical dominion. The United States has an opportunity to solidify its positive relationship with the islands, which sit geographically and geopolitically between great powers, for the long term. But this must be done carefully, without overwhelming the small populations or resources of the islands, and with the right tools.

Oceania, or Pacific Islands, region is growing in its strategic importance as part of the greater Indo-Pacific region. The United States must redouble its efforts to support its interests in Oceania and select the right lead US government agency to focus on Oceania. Because of the United States Coast Guard's (USCG) unique maritime mission focus, structure, and posture, it is the right principle, along with many in support, to lead this endeavor. This chapter focuses on the significant maritime challenges and opportunities of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) in Oceania, a unique area of the Indo-Pacific and an emerging geostrategic flashpoint. It begins with a background of Oceania, followed by an overview of substantial maritime challenges facing the PICs, and concludes with discussing opportunities and recommendations for American engagement and how the USCG, in partnership with others, is uniquely positioned to effectually interact with these island nations in support of a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific. The National Defense Strategy of the United States notes that: "A free and open Indo-Pacific region provides prosperity and security for all. We will strengthen our alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific to a networked security architecture capable of deterring aggression,

[pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/](https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/USPACOM-Area-of-Responsibility/).

³ "The World Bank in the Pacific Islands," The World Bank, accessed February 1, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pacificislands/overview#1>.

maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to common domains.”⁴ The USCG is the US agency best equipped to operationalize this assertion.

Background

Oceania is a sprawling and diverse region of the Indo-Pacific with an estimated population of 43 million people with most of its countries being small island nations.⁵ Oceania is generally considered as four geopolitical subregions: Australasia, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The island nations located in Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia are often collectively referred to as the PICs.

Australasia: Comprised of Australia and New Zealand with both countries having extensive knowledge of the region to include decades of experience engaging with the PICs and well-established relationships with the island nations’ policymakers and peoples.

Melanesia: Consists of the Republic of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, the Republic of Vanuatu, and the French territory of New Caledonia.

Micronesia: This subregion comprises the island nations of the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Kiribati, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Republic of Nauru, and Palau. This subregion also includes three US territories: Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and Wake Island.

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are agreements of political association between the United States and three PICs: Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Palau. There are two separate COFA agreements, one between the United States, FSM, and RMI, and one between the United States and Palau. These agreements support the self-determination and economic self-sufficiency of FSM, RMI, and Palau while facilitating U.S. strategic influence in the region.⁶

Polynesia: The eastern most subregion of Oceania containing the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu. Polynesia also encom-

4 Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (2018: US Department of Defense, Washington DC), 9.

5 Jason Shvili, “What is Oceania?”, April 12, 2021, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-is-oceania.html>.

6 Erin Thomas, *Compacts of Free Association in FSM, RMI, and Palau: Implications for the 2023-*

passes the French territories of French Polynesia and Wallis and Futuna, and contains the US territory American Samoa and the State of Hawaii, the British territory Pitcairn Islands, the New Zealand territory Tokelau, and the Chilean territory Easter Islands.

The Pacific Islands Forum is an influential political and economic policy organization in Oceania. Founded in 1971, its 18 members, which include the PICs, are: Australia, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.⁷ The PIF is currently fracturing with Nauru, Palau, Kiribati, FSM, and RMI leaving the PIF ostensibly due to the forum's failure to honor a long-standing agreement allowing Micronesia to rotationally head the forum's Secretariat. This fracture in the PIF is an opening exploitable by the PRC that enables it to expand its geopolitical influence.

China and Taiwan are in fierce competition for diplomatic recognition in Oceania. In fact, four of Taiwan's 14 remaining diplomatic allies are the PICs: Nauru, Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu.⁸ China is increasing pressure on these PICs to abandon diplomatic recognition of Taiwan through the use of economic leverage and incentives such as infrastructure grants and public-private loans, predatory financing, and economic and tourism embargoes. China in 2019 persuaded Kiribati and Solomon Islands to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. Furthermore, in 2021, China announced plans to build an airstrip on Kiribati's remote island of Kanton, which lies astride the sea lanes connecting Hawaii with Australia and New Zealand.⁹ The United States is concerned this airstrip could be dual-use and ultimately used by the PRC to directly range US military facilities in Hawaii. Because most PIC economies are underdeveloped, geographically distant from markets, and depend

2024 Renewal Negotiations (March 2019):1.

7 "The Pacific Islands Forum," Pacific Islands Forum, access December 14, 2021, <https://www.forumsec.org/who-we-are-pacific-islands-forum/>.

8 "Countries That Recognize Taiwan," World Population Review, accessed January 4, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/countries-that-recognize-taiwan>.

9 Johnathon Barrett, "Kiribati says China-backed Pacific airstrip project for civilian use," last modified May 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kiribati-says-china-backed-pacific-airstrip-project-civilian-use-2021-05-13/>.

significantly on foreign aid, they are vulnerable to China's use of such economic levers and incentives.

Maritime Challenges

Natural Disasters

The PICs are vulnerable to maritime natural disasters, with five on the 2021 Ruhr University Bochum – Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict's World Risk Index list of the top fifteen nations having the highest risk of experiencing disasters.¹⁰ These PICs and their respective rankings are: Vanuatu (1), Solomon Islands (2), Tonga (3), Papua New Guinea (9), and Fiji (14).¹¹ The PICs' susceptibility to natural disasters is intuitive when considering their geography and topography, which leaves them exposed to the effects of tropical cyclones, tsunamis, and sea level rise. For example, tropical cyclone Gita in 2018 left a trail of destruction from American Samoa to Tonga; destroying Tonga's Parliament building, displacing thousands of residents around the region, and prompting an emergency declaration in American Samoa.¹² Additionally, tropical storm Harold in 2020 barreled into Vanuatu as a Category 5 system, killing 27 people and causing millions of dollars in damage.¹³ In January 2022, the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai underwater volcano near Tonga erupted with the resulting ash and tsunami, leaving Tonga's entire population of 105,000 without reliable access to food and water.¹⁴ Many of the island nations lack substantive and durable emergency management capabilities to adequately prepare for and respond to natural disasters, which compounds their vulnerability to natural disasters and results in the

10 "World Risk Report 2021," Ruhr University Bochum – Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict, 2021, 43-46, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021-world-risk-report.pdf>.

11 "World Risk Report 2021,43-46," Ruhr University Bochum – Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2021-world-risk-report.pdf>.

12 "Review of the 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 Cyclone Seasons," World Meteorological Organization, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://public.wmo.int/en>.

13 "Review of the 2016/2017 and 2017/2018 Cyclone Seasons," World Meteorological Organization, accessed December 15, 2021, <https://public.wmo.int/en>.

14 "Tonga: Volcanic Eruption and Tsunami - Jan 2022," OCHA Service – Relief Web, last modified February 4, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/vo-2022-000005-ton>.

PICs often requiring significant foreign humanitarian and disaster-relief assistance.

Climate Change

The Pacific Island Forum's Boe Declaration Action Plan of 2018 asserted that climate change is the single greatest threat to its members' livelihood, security, and well-being.¹⁵ However, compared to the PICs, climate change and its effects may not necessarily be as significant a threat or align with the priorities of other larger nations and great powers in the region. For example, the PICs' geography, topography, and limited emergency response capabilities will likely cause them to bear the brunt of climate change effects and therefore view this issue as more of an existential threat when compared to Australia, New Zealand, the PRC, or the United States, for whom climate change is viewed as an impending threat and will be insulated from its most acute consequences due to greater land mass and larger and more diverse economic base.

The Thwaites Glacier illustrates how the PICs are susceptible to the effects of climate change, specifically sea level rising. This glacier is part of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet and is the largest glacier on Earth with dimensions approximately equal to the subcontinent of India.¹⁶ The Thwaites Glacier has an annual net loss of an estimated 50 tons of ice and since 2000, experienced a net loss of more than 1,000 billion tons of ice with the loss doubling over the last 30 years.¹⁷ If this glacier melts completely, which at its current rate would take an estimated 100 years, it will raise sea levels approximately 10 feet.¹⁸ This sea level rise would inundate most of the PICs.

In addition to climate change, the Boe Declaration's other strategic focus areas include Human Security and Humanitarian Assistance and

15 "Boe Declaration Action Plan," Pacific Islands Forum, accessed November 12, 2021, <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/BOE-document-Action-Plan.pdf>.

16 "Thwaites Glacier," The International Thwaites Glacier Collaboration, accessed December 28, 2021, <https://thwaitesglacier.org/index.php/about/facts>.

17 "Thwaites Glacier," The International Thwaites Glacier Collaboration, accessed December 28, 2021, <https://thwaitesglacier.org/index.php/about/facts>.

18 "Thwaites Glacier," The International Thwaites Glacier Collaboration, accessed December 28, 2021, <https://thwaitesglacier.org/index.php/about/facts>.

Environmental and Resource Security. Although independent issues, these areas can also be causatively linked to climate change.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing (IUU-F)

IUU-F erodes both regional and national security, undermines maritime rules-based order, jeopardizes food security and availability, is harmful to the environment, and destroys legitimate economies. Recognizing the effect climate change can have on fish stocks and food security, coupled with the PICs' dependency on fisheries for most of their dietary requirement, the Boe Declaration's Action Plan includes strengthening efforts to protect fisheries by combating IUU-F through enhanced monitoring and surveillance capabilities. However, most PICs currently lack the capability to fully patrol their EEZs and enforce their fisheries, making each especially vulnerable to IUU-F.

Transnational Crime and Human Trafficking

Transnational crime networks are more likely to operate in the PICs because of these nations' low levels of development, poverty, and instability. The illicit drug industry is the most significant crime threat in the region.¹⁹ In addition, the PICs are used as transit points for trafficking of people to other target nations to include the PICs themselves, where they are exploited primarily by the sex and construction industries.²⁰ There are several PICs listed as Tier two countries in the US Department of State's 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report. Per the US Department of State, Tier 2 governments do not fully meet the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 minimum standards but are making significant efforts to bring themselves into compliance with those standards.²¹

Opportunities

During the Pacific Campaign of the Second World War, the PICs were a high priority for the United States due to their strategic location. However, except for American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the COFAs, the United States has paid

19 Roderick Broadhurst, Mark Lauchs, Sally Lohrisch, "Transnational and Organized Crime in Oceania," SRN Electronic Journal (2000): 8.

20 Roderick Broadhurst, Mark Lauchs, Sally Lohrisch, "Transnational and Organized Crime in Oceania," SRN Electronic Journal (2000): 11.

21 "2021 Trafficking in Persons Report," US Department of State, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

relatively modest attention to these island nations when compared to other regions of the world. This is despite PIC proximity to important sea and air routes linking the United States with the rest of the Indo-Pacific, routes that account for a significant portion of our foreign trade. In fact, until recently, the United States viewed the southern PICs as primarily the responsibility of its allies whose countries are either located in Oceania or have territories in the region.²²

Reflecting on China's militarization of land features in the South China Sea, and recent security agreements, such as the one with Solomon Islands, the emergence of PRC engagements in Oceania are of particular concern to US policymakers. In 2021, the PRC was the third-largest aid donor to Oceania, behind Australia and New Zealand with its involvement factoring into its policymakers' strategic thinking in at least two ways: as a means of furthering the One China principle and as part of an effort to challenge the United States for primacy in the Pacific region.²³

With the emergence of the PRC's growing engagements and investments in the PICs, the United States recently took several important steps to underscore the importance of Oceania to its national security interests. Specifically, it pressed for action on further funding for the COFAs, created a new Director for Oceania position on the National Security Council staff, announced more than \$300 million in additional spending for the region in 2019 and 2020, emphasized steps to address climate change, and is providing COVID-19 vaccines.²⁴

USCG's missions which include protecting marine resources, safeguarding the environment, ensuring port security, the search and rescue of persons at sea, emergency management and response to natural disasters, are especially relatable to the PICs because they are activities and skills with which the PICs are typically involved. Moreover, the USCG's small footprint relative to larger US agencies, emphasis on human-to-human interactions and partnerships, and ability to work well within the interagency enterprise underscores its ideal fit for effective and substantive small island

22 Oceania and the United States, Dorrance.

23 Jennifer D.P. Moroney and Alan Tidwell, *America's Strategy In Oceania, Time For A Better Approach*, July 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/americas-strategy-in-oceania-time-for-a-better-approach/>.

24 Jennifer D.P. Moroney and Alan Tidwell, *America's Strategy In Oceania, Time For A Better Approach*, July 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/americas-strategy-in-oceania-time-for-a-better-approach/>.

nation engagements. In other words, the USCG is ideally suited to meet PICs requirement for small, frequent engagements, not large-scale more infrequent activities, which in many ways is the Department of Defense model.

The USCG is a recognized leader in emergency management within the maritime domain with demonstrated proficiency in managing incidents and crises, whether as the lead federal agency or in a supporting role. Recent examples include the USCG being the first federal agency on-scene in less than 24 hours supporting Joint Task Force Haiti, rescuing people, and providing humanitarian assistance following the devastating 7.2 magnitude earthquake that ravaged Haiti in August 2021.²⁵ And when Hurricane Ida made landfall that same month in 2021 as the second-most damaging and intense hurricane to hit Louisiana, the USCG had an integral role in the interagency response efforts leading, coordinating, supporting, and executing search and rescue, pollution response, and ports and waterways preparation and restoration missions, among many other actions.²⁶

Furthermore, the US National Incident Management System-Incident Command System (NIMS-ICS) is a comprehensive, systematic, standardized approach to emergency and incident management that guides departments and agencies at all levels of government, NGOs, and the private sector. Maritime contingency response operations continue to be a hallmark of Coast Guard expertise, with their proficiency and agility operating within the NIMS-ICS arena as the backbone of its members' ability to be an effective part of any coordinated response under the National Response Framework. With increased funding and personnel, the USCG could expand its NIMS-ICS exportable training capabilities to include the PICs, supporting their ability to become more proficient and resilient emergency managers during the preparation, response, and recovery phases of natural disasters.

Many PICs, including the US island territories, lack the capability and capacity to fully police their sovereign waters, making them vulnerable to IUU-F and other illicit activities. The USCG recognizes a global approach

25 "Coast Guard, partner agencies continue to support Haiti," Coast Guard News, August 25, 2021, <https://coastguardnews.com/coast-guard-partner-agencies-continue-to-support-haiti-3/2021/08/25/>.

26 "Coast Guard continue to support Hurricane Ida recovery efforts," Coast Guard News, September 26, 2021, <https://coastguardnews.com/coast-guard-continues-to-support-hurricane-ida-recovery-efforts-5/2021/09/26/>.

is needed to effectively combat IUU-F and is currently a leader in an assemblage of international counter-IUU-F and illicit trafficking operations and partnerships in Oceania, which include:

Pacific Quadrilateral Defense Coordinating Group (Pacific QUAD)

The USCG serves as the US Indo-Pacific Command representative to the Pacific QUAD, a collaborative effort with Australia, France, and New Zealand aimed at coordinating and strengthening maritime security in the South Pacific. Pacific QUAD efforts to combat overfishing include joint patrols to ensure compliance with international fisheries agreements.

Shiprider Agreements

The USCG partners with the PICs through bilateral Shiprider Agreements that allow partner nations to enforce their own domestic laws by having their law enforcement officials aboard a USCG vessel. Furthermore, most Shiprider Agreements also authorize a PIC law enforcement official to embark on a US Navy vessel with a USCG law enforcement detachment in order to observe, board, and search vessels suspected of violating that PIC's maritime laws or regulations, which include transnational crime organizations, human trafficking, and other illicit activities.

Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI)

A Department of Defense program leveraging military assets transiting Oceania to strengthen maritime security, raise maritime domain awareness, and support regional stability and partnerships in Oceania by enabling USCG law enforcement personnel to conduct maritime law enforcement operations from US Navy assets in coordination with the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

USCG International Port Security (IPS) Program

In partnership with our maritime trading partners, the IPS Program seeks to reduce risk to US maritime interests, including US ports and ships, and to facilitate secure maritime trade globally. Through reciprocal port visits, the discussion and sharing of port security best practices and the development of mutual interests in securing ships transiting to the United

States and elsewhere, the PICs and other states can enhance the security of the global maritime transport system.²⁷

USCG and Defense Institute of International Legal Studies (DIILS)

The USCG, in partnership with DIILS, has been working to bolster the PICs' legal capacity to prosecute IUU-F and trafficking cases.

In July 2021, the USCG retitled its Guam unit to "Coast Guard Forces Micronesia/Sector Guam" to reflect its expanding presence in the Western Pacific. This includes the addition of three new Fast Response Cutters (FRCs) possessing advanced capabilities in endurance, communications, and surveillance systems to replace the aging 110-foot patrol boats previously homeported in Guam. These FRCs bring new expeditionary capabilities to Oceania to conduct maritime security missions such as fisheries patrols, enhance maritime domain awareness, and enforcement efforts with partners in the Western Pacific that have limited offshore surveillance and enforcement capacity.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The Pacific Islands region, largely forgotten by the United States during the Cold War and post-Cold War era, has again become a geopolitically contested region and part of the great power competition between the PRC and the United States. The United States has the opportunity and desire to sustain and enhance its interests in the region and can best do so through a whole-of-society approach to the opportunities noted in this chapter.

The United States should reaffirm its commitment to the COFA states to maintain strategic influence in the region while supporting the self-determination and economic self-sufficiency of our COFA partners.

The United States should maintain its positive relationship with all of the PICs even through the current tumultuous redefining of multilateral relationships as the Pacific Islands Forum faces an uncertain future. Though the PICs are diverse and disparate, sustaining a positive

27 "IPS Program FAQ," United States Coast Guard Atlantic Area, accessed February 1, 2022, <https://www.atlanticarea.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Area-Units/Activities-Europe/Maritime-Security/IPS-Program-FAQ/>.

relationship with the region as a whole will prevent it from being dismantled piecemeal.

The United States should assist the Pacific Islands states with their most pressing challenges, many of which involve maritime security to include climate change, IUU-F, and transnational crime and human trafficking. Beyond monetary support and even more important than investment, the United States should renew its efforts to establish a lasting and reliable presence focusing on enduring relationships. Part of this effort can be through partnerships such as those through the Maritime Security Initiative. An extremely important Department of Defense tool is the resilient capacity, shared understanding, and networked relationships built through time by the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and other similar institutions.

The great asymmetric advantage that the United States has is its alliances and partnerships. The United States should redouble its efforts to approach the Pacific Islands collectively and proactively with its treaty allies, partners, and other like-minded states. Australia and New Zealand are central to the effort, but Japan, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and European Union are also key to the effort and have demonstrated an interest in the region.

Issues the PICs consider of top importance include climate change that can affect resource and food security, predacious taking of resources through IUU-F, illicit traffickers, and natural disaster response. These are issues and missions the USCG regularly engages with, many times in concert with PICs and other like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific region. With the goal of a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific, the Coast Guard's operations, activities, and investments in the region are helping ensure unrestricted, lawful access to the region's maritime commons. Ultimately, the United States' focus on this region will be central to multiple similar efforts to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific.