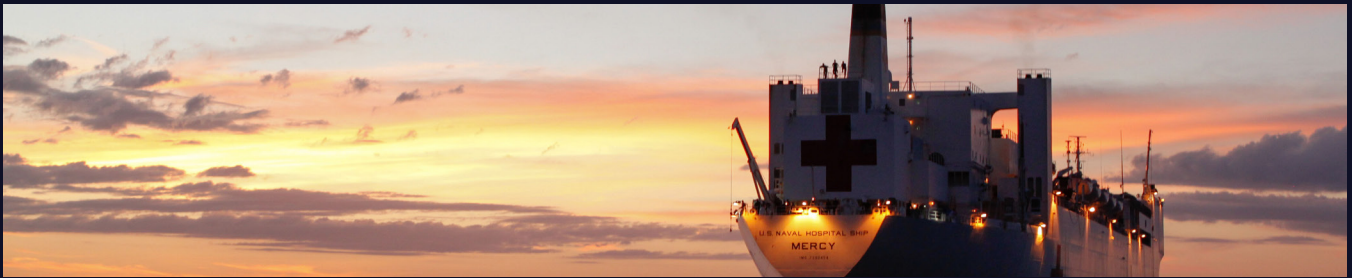


MAY 2026

A REPORT OF THE CSIS AUSTRALIA CHAIR

Security and the Pacific Islands

Insights from Young Pacific Leaders



EDITORS

John Augé, Charles Edel, and Kathryn Paik

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Introduction

By John Augé, Charles Edel, and Kathryn Paik

With historic and commercial ties to the Pacific stretching back to the nation's founding, more than 7,000 miles of Pacific coastline, and over two million Americans calling the Pacific Island home, the United States has long defined itself as a Pacific nation.¹ Yet despite the Pacific's cultural, historic, and geographic significance, its vast geography and remote islands has meant that U.S. engagement with and attention to the region has been uneven. Recent years, however, have seen a marked shift in Washington's attitude toward the Pacific Island region, as it has emerged as a central arena where many of today's most pressing global challenges play out, including geopolitical competition, the race for deep-sea critical minerals, and the fight against climate change—which threatens to overwhelm several Pacific nations through natural disasters and sea-level rise.

Recognizing the Pacific's strategically critical location and wealth of natural resources, China has significantly accelerated its Pacific engagement over the past decade. China's push for influence and presence in a region long taken for granted by western powers has prompted alarm from the United States and like-minded partners including Australia and New Zealand. In response, multiple U.S. administrations have ramped up Pacific engagements and poured greater resources into what is increasingly viewed as a strategically critical region of the world.

Under the first Trump administration, the United States started to turn its attention to the Pacific, including creating a director for the Pacific on the National Security Council and hosting the presidents of the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia at the White House. This focus accelerated under President Biden, and in 2022, the United States launched its first-ever Pacific Partnership Strategy, which stated that the United States has “an interest in ensuring that growing geopolitical competition does not undermine the sovereignty and security of the Pacific Islands, of the United States, or of our allies and partners.”² This was closely followed by leader-level meetings, sweeping Pacific-focused initiatives, and enhanced regional cooperation between the United States and partners including Australia and Japan.

As global powers actively compete to assert their influence across the region, engagement is often framed through a security lens, with China pursuing influence in policing and security agreements, and the United States and its like-minded partners working to reinforce traditional defense ties and bolster regional maritime domain awareness efforts.

While foreign engagement is often welcome in a region with significant economic and security challenges, the inability of development partners to craft initiatives with rather than at the Pacific can backfire.

But of course, external powers alone do not define the region’s strategic landscape, and the security priorities of outside partners do not always align with those of the Pacific. While foreign engagement is often welcome in a region with significant economic and security challenges, the inability of development partners to craft initiatives with rather than at the Pacific can backfire. For example, China’s 2022 “Common Development Vision” was met with significant regional pushback when it was presented to Pacific leaders as a nearly finalized multilateral agreement without prior collective consultation.³

As Pacific nations assert their agency on the global stage, it is more important than ever for the United States and its allies to engage meaningfully with Pacific partners and to listen closely to Pacific voices when addressing the region’s future.

The U.S. Department of State’s Young Pacific Leaders’ (YPL) program has long been a venue for fostering dialogue and enhancing ties between the United States and its Pacific partners. As part of this initiative, in the fall of 2025 the CSIS Australia Chair hosted a YPL Conference on Regional Security in Port Vila, Vanuatu, bringing together emerging leaders from across the region to explore a variety of security challenges including maritime domain awareness, disaster resilience and preparedness, and economic security. Through in-person and virtual panels, small group discussions, site visits, and discussions with senior policymakers and national security officials from around the region, participants exchanged perspectives, identified shared priorities, and developed

practical recommendations to strengthen regional cooperation and engagement with external partners such as the United States.

As part of the dialogue, CSIS asked the participants to develop essays describing a national or regional security issue of their choosing, and suggesting ways that the United States, alongside Australia, New Zealand and other nations, can more effectively partner to tackle some of these formidable challenges. This report is a compilation of those essays, with the aim of bringing this broad range of Pacific perspectives and associated policy recommendations to Washington policymaking circles. These chapters reflect the Pacific Islands' increasingly complex security landscape, addressing issues such as cybersecurity, health security, and maritime threats including illicit drug trafficking and "dark fleets." They also explore humanitarian assistance and disaster resilience, alongside the importance of women's inclusion, youth opportunities, and cultural preservation.

As the following chapters illustrate, the security landscape of the Pacific is increasingly defined by threats that bypass traditional borders, many of which also align with the strategic priorities of Washington. A primary area of mutual concern is the rise of the illicit drug trade and the proliferation of dark fleets. These activities undermine regional stability and economic self-sufficiency, necessitating a sophisticated approach to maritime domain awareness that both the United States and Pacific partners view as essential for protecting national interests. Furthermore, as the region undergoes a rapid digital transformation, cybersecurity has emerged as a frontline defense issue; protecting critical infrastructure from foreign interference and digital crime, a top priority issue for the United States, is now at the forefront of Pacific security concerns.

To address these challenges, the contributors have presented a wide range of unique and actionable recommendations for partners that emphasize regional leadership and local engagement. A central proposal is to scale and strengthen the Forum Fisheries Agency, the Pacific Fusion Centre, and other regional maritime centers to ensure that data collection remains Pacific-led and impactful. To bridge the gap between high-level policy and community-level security, Chapter 11 suggests that Pacific governments collaborate with the U.S. and other partners to introduce border-watch programs that actively engage local officials in monitoring their own territories. Furthermore, to combat digital threats, Chapter 2 recommends that the United States support Pacific-led digital literacy campaigns in schools and community centers to equip youth with the skills to identify disinformation. Pointing out the need to ensure the region retains control over its own strategic narrative and future, several contributors also stressed that development partners must prioritize investing in Pacific-owned and Pacific-led research, information, and data infrastructure. These essays represent a variety of views from the Pacific on the evolving regional security landscape and offer both perspective and recommendations on new avenues of security cooperation between the Pacific Island nations and the United States. But they do more than that. They introduce a number of important emerging voices likely to shape the policy discussion in the coming decades. At a moment when ideas and engagement are in short supply on this issue, these recommendations can provide needed energy into the policy debate in Washington and beyond.

A Voice Among the “Shield and Engine”

Security for Guam’s People

By Kenneth Gofigan Kuper

Standing before a crowd in Guam at the inaugural Guam Defense Forum in September 2025, U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Admiral Samuel Paparo declared, “Guam is the homeland, and we are a Pacific nation. Defending Guam is defending America.” Expanding on the importance of developing comprehensive 360-degree missile defense for the island, Paparo continued, “The Guam Defense System will endure throughout this Pacific century as both a shield for America and an engine for Guam.”¹

In his speech, Paparo echoed the message that earlier Indo-Pacific commanders have emphasized: Guam is strategic and on the front lines. Despite being a target due to its strategic location and large concentration of U.S. military assets, the residents of the island are paradoxically reassured that the U.S. military will always protect and defend Guam against external threats—the “shield.” Furthermore, the people of Guam are told that U.S. military activity will help spur the island’s economy—the “engine.”

This chapter argues that this “shield and engine” framework describing current military plans for Guam obscures important social and political burdens placed on the island’s residents and suggests ways the U.S. federal government can begin to remedy these burdens. Beyond concerns of justice, giving greater consideration to the needs and wants of the people of Guam—who are U.S. citizens—is

necessary for the U.S. military to truly carry out its mission and back up its emphasis on partnership with the local government. To overlook Guam is to overlook part of the homeland.

Background

Located in the Micronesian subregion of the Pacific Islands, Guam is currently an unincorporated territory of the United States; its residents became U.S. citizens in 1950. The Indigenous CHamoru people, however, have inhabited the island for nearly 4,000 years.² A former Spanish colony, the United States assumed control of the island after the Spanish-American War in 1898 and subsequently used the island as a coaling station for the U.S. Navy.³ Today, the island continues to be heavily used by the military, which occupies roughly 27 percent of the island, including Andersen Air Force Base, Naval Base Guam, and Marine Corps Camp Blaz.⁴

Amid escalating geopolitical tensions with China, the United States is further developing Guam—often described as the United States’ “tip of the spear” and as the “forward edge of the Indo-Pacific”—to serve as a key forward-operating base and a logistics and power-projection hub.⁵ The Department of Defense is currently implementing or planning two main military projects in Guam, and approximately 10,000 additional personnel have moved to the island over the past decade.⁶

The first major military buildup in Guam planned in the mid-2000s was the relocation of U.S. Marines from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam, and the establishment of a new live-fire training range and grenade range. Original plans for the buildup included 8,000 Marines and their dependents, but this was scaled down due to local opposition to the size of the project and its significant effects on the island.⁷

The second military project the United States has plans for in Guam is an Enhanced Integrated Air and Missile Defense System (EIAMDS), also known as the “Guam Defense System.”⁸ Critical to the military maintaining its use of Guam is its ability to address the island’s vulnerabilities to potential attack. As noted by the U.S. House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, “Despite its strategic importance, Guam remains highly vulnerable to an increasingly sophisticated network of missiles from the People’s Republic of China.”⁹

To address this vulnerability, EIAMDS integrates missile launchers, radars and sensors, missiles, and command and control systems to be spread across 16 sites, and is being presented to Guam as a tool “to defend the entirety of Guam against rapidly evolving threats of advanced cruise, ballistic, and hypersonic missile attacks from regional adversaries as soon as possible.”¹⁰ The EIAMDS, according to the U.S. Department of Defense, will not only defend Guam but also raise Guam’s deterrent value amid a conflict with China.¹¹ Furthermore, the military has said that the EIAMDS is being implemented overseas to deter a small coercive attack. The fact that EIAMDS includes lower-tier defense could indicate that the United States is preparing for an attack east of the first island chain.

These two large-scale projects—the realignment of U.S. Marines to Guam and the EIAMDS—are the largest military undertakings in Guam since World War II. These projects will have pervasive

and significant political, economic, environmental, and social effects on the island and its people. Robert Underwood, the chairman of the Pacific Center for Island Security, notes this will be a “critical reordering of our lives here in Guam.”¹²

The Challenge

A reordering of the island ultimately means that Guam is asked to bear the burden of U.S. Indo-Pacific deterrence disproportionately. As the author has noted elsewhere, “Former Guam Congressman Ben Blaz once said that the island is ‘equal in war, but not in peace.’”¹³ This observation can be extended further: Guam also bears an outsized burden in war.

Collectively, voicelessness, a lack of transparency, housing effects, a lack of civilian protection, and a lack of political decisionmaking for the island are challenges that must be overcome to truly include Guam in any semblance of the homeland, beyond military plans and fortification. Failing to do this means facing far more friction than necessary. The federal-territorial relationship means that Congress has ultimate and plenary, or absolute, power over the territories. However, this does not mean that Guam is stripped of all agency. The island has used its delegate in Congress, lawsuits using the National Environmental Policy Act process, and other tools to stall projects deemed harmful to the island. Finding a way to resolve these tensions early in the process helps, rather than harms, national security initiatives.

Collectively, voicelessness, a lack of transparency, housing effects, a lack of civilian protection, and a lack of political decisionmaking for the island are challenges that must be overcome to truly include Guam in any semblance of the homeland.

Despite Guam’s strategic importance, its residents remain largely voiceless in the U.S. political system and subsequently invisible to the U.S. public. Despite being U.S. citizens, Guam residents have no representation in the Senate or the Electoral College, only nonvoting representation in the House of Representatives, and are under the plenary power of the U.S. Congress.

Environmental impacts also pose challenges. The Record of Decision for the EIAMDS, released in September 2025, identifies significant environmental effects, including the removal of limestone forest across 9 of the 16 sites and the removal of roughly 5,459 individuals of the threatened plant species *Cycas micronesica* at five locations.¹⁴

Housing pressures represent another major concern. The need for housing personnel (military and nonmilitary) will also directly impact an existing housing crisis in Guam. A 2019 report noted that 9,908 housing units were already needed between 2020 and 2025 just to meet civilian demand, and pressures on the housing market from military personnel’s Overseas Housing Allowances will ultimately exacerbate the housing crisis.¹⁵

There is also a lack of preparation for civilian protection in the case of kinetic conflict. The military has said that the missile defense system for the island will provide a deterrent to any attack, but it has no plans for civilian shelters or preparatory measures in the case of deterrence failing. As the author has noted elsewhere, as of now, “It is quite evident that the EIAMDS is truly intended to protect military operations in Guam, with civilian protections taking a backseat.”¹⁶

Lastly, this military reordering of the island is unfolding within a political structure in which Guam remains a territory under congressional plenary power in which it has no voting representation. The CHamoru people have not yet exercised the right to determine Guam’s future political status. Efforts by the local government to advance a sovereign status for the island have been repeatedly rebuffed by the U.S. government, either through active blocking using the legal system or through inaction. Guam’s existence in such a politically anachronistic status does not reflect well on the United States as a beacon of democracy.

Recommendations

Addressing the interconnected problems of military expansion in Guam through the Marine Corps’ relocation and the preparation of Guam for potential kinetic conflict with China requires both immediate and long-term solutions. The stakes are high. If the United States truly wants to help secure a free and open Indo-Pacific with Guam as a real part of the homeland, then it should treat Guam as a partner, not as a colony. This will help reduce friction that produces suboptimal outcomes for the security interests of both Guam and the United States.

SHORT-TERM

Immediate measures should focus on easing the defense burden placed on Guam’s residents and improving the civilian preparedness in the case of deterrence failing. In order to prioritize this objective, the U.S. government should

1. conduct feasibility studies for civilian shelters in Guam and subsequently fund the construction of civilian shelters (while sharing decisionmaking responsibilities with the government of Guam);
2. transition Guam from the Overseas Housing Allowance to the Basic Housing Allowance system, which would allow servicemembers to keep leftover stipends if they find less expensive housing, thereby avoiding skewing the local housing market pricing;
3. release the unclassified version of the Lincoln Laboratory’s report on the EIAMDS for Guam to increase transparency to the people and government of Guam; and
4. work with Guam’s government to plan and fund improvements to critical infrastructure—including underground power lines, water distribution and water quality control systems, and renewable energy sources—to improve resilience in the event of conflict.

LONG-TERM

Long-term solutions require resolving the power hierarchy and the continued colonial status of Guam. This would ultimately shift the way that decisions related to the relationship between Guam

and the U.S. military are made. As it stands, the inequity in Guam's political relationship with the United States and the resulting political friction (such as the lawsuit during the first iteration of the military buildup, which delayed activities for years, or Guam's local leaders commenting negatively on environmental decisions made by the Department of Defense) serve as an obstacle to the sustainability of military projects in Guam. The federal government could simply proceed with projects anyway, but in an era of burden shifting and changing geopolitics, the United States needs as little friction as possible. The long-term solutions provided here are one way of removing this friction.

Modernizing Guam's relationship with the United States (as a state, in free association, or as an independent country) would allow Guam to be either an integral part of or a true ally of the United States, without the current politically anachronistic relationship. Modernization would allow both parties to truly be partners to protect democracy in this part of the world. In this sense, the federal government should not fear a change in political status but rather recognize that a status change can be in the best interests of long-term U.S. national security in the region. Furthermore, a self-determined Guam could work with the United States more fully (either as a fully functioning state or as an ally) to help promote peace and stability in the region. To prioritize these long-term objectives, the U.S. government should

1. appoint a presidential special representative to negotiate Guam's status, and the federal government should provide further funding to the government of Guam's Commission on Decolonization for political status education efforts;
2. support a visiting mission to Guam by the UN Special Committee on Decolonization;
3. ensure that any political status change for Guam (including reunification with the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) is a decision solely made by eligible voters in Guam, and not a unilateral U.S. government decision; and
4. allow for Guam's maximum participation in regional and international organizations to expand its external engagement and help prepare the island for eventual political status change through the U.S. Department of State.

Life in Guam means living at the intersection of the shield and engine. But the question remains, where is Guam's decisionmaking power? Where is Guam's voice? Can Guam be heard amid the noise of the shield and the engine, or is it too far out on the frontlines for the decisionmakers in the back to care? Only time will tell.

The Pacific Youth Bulge

Security Challenges, Development Gaps, and Future Opportunities

By Sharon Marango

The Pacific's growing youth population is entering a decisive five-year window. Rapid investment is needed in employment, skills, and digital resilience. Without it, youth-driven instability—the growing likelihood that youth unemployment, exclusion, and urban marginalization will contribute to political unrest, weaken state capacity, and create an opening for external influence or transnational crime in fragile Pacific contexts—will increasingly undermine U.S. security partnerships, democratic resilience, and strategic competition outcomes in the Indo-Pacific. This is not a long-term development issue, it is an emerging security risk with direct consequences for U.S. interests. The United States still has influence to shape outcomes in a positive direction, but the window is narrowing. Absent timely and sustained engagement, the financial, political, and strategic costs of restoring stability and U.S. influence in the Pacific will rise substantially. Early investment in resilience and youth opportunity should be taken as a preventative measure.

Youth Outcomes Are Security Outcomes

Pacific Island countries face a merging of pressures: rapid youth population growth, weak labor markets, accelerating urbanization, and limited state capacity. The UN Development Program's *Human Development Report 2023/24* documents persistent inequality in access to education,

employment, and basic services among Pacific youth—all conditions that are closely associated with instability and weakened governance.¹ The report highlights the scale of these pressures: Youth unemployment across parts of the Pacific is estimated at approximately 23 percent, significantly higher than global averages.² In some countries, the situation is more severe; for example, recent labor data indicates that up to 50 percent of young people in Kiribati are not in employment, education, or training, underscoring the depth of labor market exclusion in smaller island economies.³

Over the next five-to-ten years, a large cohort of young people will enter labor markets that cannot absorb them. Field-based research across Melanesia demonstrates the structural mismatches between education systems and labor market demand that have already produced high youth unemployment and underemployment across the region.⁴

This demographic pressure is increasingly concentrated in urban areas. Analysis from UN-HABITAT shows that rapid and often unplanned urbanization has outpaced service delivery in Pacific cities, intensifying youth marginalization and social strain.⁵ In cities such as Honiara and Port Moresby, rapid population growth has outpaced housing, employment opportunities, and basic services, contributing to expanding informal settlements and rising youth unemployment.⁶

These trends are no longer hypothetical; they are already shaping the region's security environment.

Youth Instability Weakens U.S. Security Partnerships

U.S. security cooperation depends on stable and capable partner governments. Youth-driven unrest diverts political attention, absorbs limited state capacity, and disrupts coordination on shared priorities such as maritime domain awareness, disaster response, and transnational crime prevention.

Research shows that youth marginalization has historically been a recurring driver of unrest and governance breakdowns. Political economy scholars have linked broader forms of social exclusion and weak governance structures to episodes of instability in Pacific contexts, where limited state presence and contested social relations have shaped patterns of social and political fragility.⁷ In the Solomon Islands, for example, long-standing structural weaknesses and exclusionary political economies have been identified as enduring challenges to stable governance in the post-conflict era, with analyses highlighting how unresolved economic and social stresses can undermine institutional resilience.⁸

When instability becomes entrenched, weakened institutions often create permissive environments for corruption, transnational crime, and illicit economic activity. In such contexts, drug trafficking networks and organized criminal groups can expand their influence, further undermining governance and public trust. This erosion of institutional integrity not only compounds domestic insecurity but also complicates external security partnerships, as corruption and criminal infiltration reduce reliability, transparency, and operational effectiveness. As instability becomes

recurrent rather than episodic, partner governments become less reliable security collaborators and U.S. engagement becomes more costly and less effective.

Strategic Competition Is Being Decided Through Youth Opportunity

Geopolitical competition in the Pacific is increasingly shaped through who provides opportunity to the next generation. External actors are investing heavily in scholarships, vocational training, infrastructure-linked employment, and digital connectivity aimed at Pacific youth. For example, China has significantly expanded scholarship offerings to Pacific Island students through bilateral education agreements and regional initiatives, while also funding school infrastructure, vocational institutes, and digital connectivity projects. Thousands of Pacific students have received Chinese government scholarships over the past decade, alongside expanded Confucius Institute partnerships and technical training programs. By comparison, Australia remains the largest education partner in the region through initiatives such as the Australia Awards program, while the United States provides scholarships and exchange opportunities through programs including the Young Pacific Leaders initiative. However, China's scale, speed of delivery, and infrastructure-linked education investments have increased its visibility and influence in shaping elite networks and future workforce alignments.⁹

These investments shape long-term governance norms, workforce dependencies, and information ecosystems. Pacific-led frameworks, including the Pacific Youth Development Framework 2014-2023, emphasize that youth inclusion and employment pathways are decisive for long-term stability, but gaps in implementation have left space for external actors to shape outcomes.¹⁰ If the United States does not compete in the youth opportunity space, it risks ceding strategic influence by default.

If the United States does not compete in the youth opportunity space, it risks ceding strategic influence by default.

Democratic Resilience Is Eroding

Expanding digital access has increased exposure to disinformation and political manipulation. UN research on Pacific youth shows significant gaps in digital literacy and online resilience, particularly among economically marginalized groups.¹¹ These vulnerabilities increase susceptibility to polarizing narratives and external influence operations that undermine democratic norms and trust in institutions. Once democratic erosion takes hold, restoring institutional legitimacy becomes significantly more difficult and expensive. As democratic norms weaken under sustained disinformation and political manipulation, institutional fragility can translate into broader instability. Polarization, declining public trust, and contested governance outcomes increase the likelihood of political unrest, governance paralysis, and elite capture. In small and highly networked Pacific societies, such instability can spread quickly, undermining reform efforts

and creating openings for external actors to deepen influence through economic leverage or information operations.

Migration Pressures Affect U.S. Domestic Interests

In Compact of Free Association states (the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau), limited youth employment opportunities contribute to migration to U.S. territories and states. While these migration pathways are legal and valuable, unmanaged economic push factors increase pressure on housing, education, and health systems in receiving communities. Addressing youth employment in-country supports regional stability while also advancing U.S. domestic interests.

The Window for Impact Is Narrowing

Pacific governments and regional institutions have clearly acknowledged challenges in youth development across the region. The Pacific Youth Development Framework provides a structured approach to address these issues, but delays in implementation, unmet youth expectations, and governance gaps may undermine its effectiveness. Without timely delivery, public frustration could grow, potentially weakening trust in institutions and creating opportunities for instability. When reform commitments are not matched by visible delivery, public frustration may intensify, increasing the risk of political volatility, weakened state legitimacy, and openings for external actors to expand influence through economic or informational leverage.¹²

Both the development framework and the Pacific Islands Forum's Regional Budget Analysis on Social Sectors consistently call for coordinated investment in skills development, employment, and youth inclusion.¹³

Scale, speed, and strategic alignment with security objectives are still lacking in Pacific regional frameworks. If current trends persist, youth-driven instability will become entrenched rather than episodic, external actors will consolidate long-term influence through youth-focused economic and digital ecosystems, and the cost of restoring stability and U.S. influence will rise substantially.

These are preventable security risks, but only if addressed early.

Practical Steps for U.S. Engagement

To mitigate these risks, U.S. engagement should shift from fragmented youth programming toward a security-informed investment strategy, as outlined below.

1. Treat youth employment as preventive security.

- Scale targeted investment in vocational, technical, and digital-skills programs that directly match projected labor market demands in the Pacific—for example, renewable energy, information and communications technology, and sustainable fisheries sectors.¹⁴
- Partner with local technical institutes and private sector employers to design apprenticeships and internships that guarantee pathways to employment.

- Fund small grants for youth-led startups in priority sectors, creating immediate economic opportunities while fostering innovation.

2. Anchor U.S. action in Pacific-led frameworks.

- Align all youth and security programming with priorities identified in the Pacific Islands Forum action plans and regional strategies.
- Establish a Pacific Engagement Coordination Desk within multiple U.S. embassies to ensure all programs consult with regional bodies before launch.
- Cofinance initiatives alongside regional institutions to enhance legitimacy, reduce duplication, and ensure programs are culturally appropriate and sustainable.¹⁵

3. Compete in the digital space.

- Support Pacific-led digital literacy campaigns in schools and community centers to equip youth with critical skills to identify disinformation and participate safely online.
- Fund local content creation initiatives such as civic technology apps or social media campaigns to reduce reliance on foreign digital platforms and increase youth engagement in local governance.
- Partner with regional telecommunications providers to expand affordable internet access while providing cybersecurity training to both youth and local government staff.¹⁶

4. Integrate youth metrics into security planning.

- Include youth employment rates, education access, and urban inclusion indicators in the annual U.S. Pacific security and development assessment reports.
- Require that all U.S.-funded development programs include monitoring and evaluation frameworks that track these youth-focused metrics, linking outcomes to program continuation or scaling.
- Use these indicators to guide early warning systems for instability, enabling timely, evidence-based adjustments in policy and programming.

Throughout all U.S. engagement, it will be critical to act quickly and through a regional lens, because demographic momentum means that delays will lock in negative outcomes. Early investment is significantly cheaper and more effective than crisis response. Moreover, U.S. presidential decisions to disengage from multilateral or regional initiatives are closely watched in the Pacific. Such moves risk reinforcing perceptions of neglect among young people, who increasingly view global leadership through the lens of inclusion and opportunity. By contrast, sustained presidential commitment to Pacific-led frameworks and youth-focused initiatives sends a powerful signal of reliability, strengthens trust, and counters the narratives that external actors use to sway youth sentiment.

Conclusion: A Strategic Choice for the United States

The Pacific youth bulge is not a future concern—it is a present strategic risk. The United States can still help Pacific nations shape outcomes, but only if youth stability is treated as a core security priority rather than a secondary development issue.

Strategic investment in Pacific youth is not charity. It is risk reduction, influence preservation, and security insurance. The cost of inaction will be higher instability, weaker partnerships, and diminished U.S. strategic position in the Indo-Pacific.

Beyond Borders

Understanding Samoa's Security Landscape through Climate, Migration, and Geopolitical Influence

By Rosaline Parker

Introduction

Samoa, like many Pacific Island nations, faces a complex and evolving security landscape shaped by the interwoven forces of migration, labor mobility, and climate change. These forces do not operate in isolation but rather influence and reinforce one another, generating far-reaching implications for human security, sustainable development, and national sovereignty.¹ This chapter argues that security in Samoa must be understood broadly, extending beyond military or territorial concerns to include social, cultural, economic, and environmental well-being.

Specifically, this chapter examines the scale and scope of these pressures in Samoa, analyzing how migration patterns, labor mobility schemes, and climate-related environmental changes interact to affect the nation's resilience. It also considers how dominant geopolitical narratives and external policy frameworks influence national and regional decisionmaking. Finally, the chapter provides recommendations for Pacific-led policy responses that prioritize human security, strengthen sustainable development, and safeguard Samoa's sovereignty in the face of these interconnected challenges.

Climate Change as a Catalyst for Human Insecurity

Climate change represents an existential security threat to Samoa. Rising sea levels, coastal erosion, saltwater intrusion, and increasingly severe cyclones threaten not only lives and property but also traditional knowledge systems and cultural identity. According to scholars Barnett and Neil, climate impacts in the Pacific are best understood not only as environmental concerns but as threats that undermine economic stability, food security, and social cohesion.²

For example, coastal villages along Samoa's low-lying northern and southern shores have experienced shoreline retreat and repeated flooding, forcing communities to consider relocation and disrupting customary land use and burial grounds.³ Cyclones such as Evan (2012) and Gita (2018) caused widespread damage to crops, fisheries infrastructure, and housing, resulting in prolonged income loss for families reliant on subsistence farming and fishing.⁴

Samoa's vulnerability is intensified by its geographic isolation and dependence on climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and fisheries.⁵ Its remote location limits access to global markets, critical infrastructure, and emergency assistance, making the nation particularly exposed to external shocks. Meanwhile, reliance on agriculture and fisheries ties livelihoods directly to environmental conditions, meaning that extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and shifting ocean ecosystems can rapidly undermine food security, economic stability, and community well-being. This combination of isolation and sectoral dependence amplifies the nation's exposure to climate-related risks, highlighting the urgent need for adaptive strategies that strengthen resilience across social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

Migration as a Security Response and Pressure Point

Migration has long been part of Samoan society, shaped by colonial histories, family networks, and cultural obligations. However, in the face of intensifying climate pressures, migration is increasingly characterized as an adaptive strategy.⁶ Families may relocate internally or internationally to ensure access to education, employment, or safer living conditions. International labor mobility schemes contribute to climate adaptation by building adaptive capacity and facilitating the transfer of knowledge and resources to Pacific Island communities.⁷

Remittances have become a lifeline for the Samoan economy, contributing significantly to GDP, but also creating dependency that can reduce local resilience by discouraging investment in local industries, limiting domestic employment opportunities, and making communities more vulnerable to external economic shocks.⁸

Out-migration also carries cultural consequences. As more Samoans relocate to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States, concerns grow regarding the erosion of gagana Samoa (the Samoan language) and fa'asinomaga (cultural identity and sense of belonging).⁹ Migration therefore functions simultaneously as a coping mechanism and as a source of insecurity, requiring careful governance and community-centered approaches.

Foreign Influence on Samoan Decisionmaking

In examining Pacific security, it is necessary to address the impact of foreign influence on national policymaking. Samoa's political and strategic relationships have historically been shaped by Western development partners, whose narratives often frame Pacific issues through the lenses of geopolitical competition, economic development, and regional stability. These narratives sometimes align with, and sometimes diverge from, Pacific understandings of security that prioritize community well-being, cultural continuity, and environmental stewardship.¹⁰

Western governments frequently employ soft power strategies, including media messaging, strategic aid, and diplomatic engagement, to influence Pacific decisionmaking, though these approaches are not uniform and can vary in intent, effectiveness, and reception.¹¹ Pacific scholar Epeli Hau'ofa challenges externally imposed narratives that portray Pacific nations as small, vulnerable, or dependent, arguing instead that such framings diminish Pacific agency and obscure long-standing systems of resilience, mobility, and relationality. Hau'ofa's concept of "Our Sea of Islands" reframes the Pacific as a space of connection and strength rather than isolation, offering an alternative lens through which security and development can be understood.¹² This perspective underscores the importance of Pacific-led approaches that center local knowledge and values in policy formation.

Western development partnerships have delivered tangible benefits to Samoa, including infrastructure investment, disaster recovery support, labor mobility opportunities, and access to education and health services. However, dominant narratives surrounding these initiatives often present them as unambiguously positive, with limited acknowledgment of structural inequalities, power asymmetries, and long-term social impacts. Climate change funding and development assistance are frequently framed as acts of generosity rather than as responsibilities linked to historical emissions and colonial legacies.¹³ Such framing can unintentionally narrow the policy space available to Pacific nations by reinforcing aid dependency and marginalizing Indigenous knowledge systems and Pacific-led solutions.

At the regional level, Western messaging can shape security priorities by encouraging alignment with external strategic interests. This can sit in tension with Pacific frameworks such as the Boe Declaration, which articulates security in holistic terms encompassing human security, environmental integrity, and cultural resilience.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Pacific states, including Samoa, are not passive recipients of these narratives. Samoan leaders and institutions actively negotiate, adapt, and at times resist external pressures, exercising agency in balancing development needs, diplomatic relationships, and regional solidarity.

For Samoa, the challenge lies in navigating external influences while asserting its own values and aspirations.

For Samoa, the challenge lies in navigating external influences while asserting its own values and aspirations. Messaging, whether intentional or subtle, can shape public discourse and policy agendas, but it does not determine them outright. Strengthening media literacy, transparency, Pacific scholarship, and regional cooperation remains vital to ensuring that decisionmaking reflects Samoan perspectives and supports long-term sovereignty and resilience.

Conclusion

Samoa faces a security landscape shaped by the interlinked pressures of climate change, migration, labor mobility, and foreign influence. Addressing these challenges requires a human-centered, culturally grounded approach that prioritizes environmental stability, social cohesion, and cultural continuity.

To navigate this complex context, development partners must recognize the interconnectedness of these pressures and the ways in which external interventions can either support or undermine local resilience. Samoa should embed Indigenous knowledge in climate adaptation and migration policies, strengthen Pacific-led frameworks such as the Boe Declaration, and critically engage with external partners to safeguard national interests. Labor mobility schemes should be leveraged to support sustainable development, protect migrant rights, and maintain cultural and language continuity within diaspora communities.

For policymakers, the key takeaway is that Western and Samoan/Pacific objectives can be aligned, but only if interventions are informed by the lived realities on the ground, respect local knowledge, and are implemented in partnership rather than in isolation. By enhancing transparency, media literacy, and regional cooperation, Samoa and its partners can collaboratively secure a resilient, culturally strong, and self-determined future that reflects both national priorities and regional security imperatives.¹⁵

Addressing Samoa's Role in the Pacific Illicit Drug Trade

By Romario Pose

Introduction

The Pacific Islands region is experiencing a surge in methamphetamine activity, with Samoa serving as a transit point along drug routes to lucrative markets in New Zealand and Australia.¹ In the past year alone, Samoan authorities have seized approximately 20 kilograms of methamphetamine, indicating its significant presence in the nation.² Similar cases have also emerged in Tonga with growing frequency, and narco-submarines were discovered in the Solomon Islands in October 2025.³ Furthermore, the deportation policies of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have contributed to a growing gang problem in the Pacific Islands, which lack the capacity to address it, further deepening the illicit drug issue in the region.

The drug trade has also created an opening for China, which has embedded security partnerships in the Pacific through drug response programs, at the same time as the United States has pulled back its aid.⁴ Increasing Chinese presence could result in more influence and directly impact U.S. maritime routes.

This chapter will provide an overview of this critical security issue from a Samoan context, examining strengths and gaps in Samoa's response mechanisms, and explain why donor assistance is essential. It argues for targeted investment in community-based enforcement, rehabilitation infrastructure, and reintegration systems to prevent transnational drug networks from becoming established in Samoa and the region.

The Samoan Context

Samoa is a small island nation with a population of approximately 200,000 people.⁵ Similar to other Small Island Developing States, Samoa has limited resources to effectively respond to transnational issues.

Samoa's social framework is uniquely rooted in its village governance structure, called the *matai* (chiefly) system, which creates a foundation of peace, stability, and order. The village matai council is made up of chiefs of extended families, allowing representation for all residents. Villagers may develop their own bylaws, which can be formally registered with the government and bolstered by Samoa's national laws. For example, village bylaws prohibiting drugs can be backed by Samoa's national illicit drug laws, thus giving village councils authority and mobilizing governing bodies at the community level to strengthen local enforcement of illicit drug prohibition. Furthermore, close collaboration between communities and the police is a long-standing feature of Samoa's approach to maintaining public safety.⁶

A strong village position against illicit drugs is likely to be more effective than federal laws in deterring residents from engaging in such activities, given the significant cultural and social weight of local measures and the speed at which they can achieve results. For instance, one village imposed a 10,000 WST fine to anyone found guilty of drug possession, to be paid within one day; failure to do so resulted in banishment.⁷ Another village council successfully took action to stop youth who had been vandalizing property and threatening community members, which the police could not resolve.⁸ Village councils' decisions are immediately felt and, in some ways, have more authority than police orders, given the involvement of community members and emphasis on collective responsibility, with entire families carrying punishments.

Gaps and Challenges in Responding to the Illicit Drug Challenge

LACK OF APPROPRIATE DRUG REHABILITATION MECHANISMS

Despite strong village enforcement mechanisms, Samoa still has limited resources to effectively respond to the growing transnational drug trade. The introduction of illicit drugs has caused a shift in traditional dynamics within villages and families. The social value of respect has been undermined, and young men in particular are commonly the perpetrators of violence. Drug consumption, accompanied by socioeconomic hardships, perpetuates a cycle of drug use. This is further amplified by the fact that underlying causes of addiction, such as depression or mental disorders, are often stigmatized.⁹ Moreover, social issues are commonly addressed with a faith-based approach in the absence of drug rehabilitation centers, and mental health issues are seldomly discussed in these faith-based institutions. This is largely due to the belief that mental health is caused by demons and thus individuals avoid openly discussing these issues.¹⁰

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE TO MANAGE DEPORTEES

In recent years, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States have increased deportations to Samoa.¹¹ Typically, these deportees have criminal records and bring with them potential ties and connections to gangs and foreign criminal networks and facilitate the drug trade within the region.¹²

However, the existing systems are not sufficient to provide effective monitoring, rehabilitation, and reintegration for returnees, leading to potential re-offences or establishment of foreign gang chapters in Samoa.¹³ Many of these deportees grew up in other nations and therefore have limited knowledge of Samoa, and little or no previous contact with their families in Samoa but have been expelled out of Australia, New Zealand, and the United States without proper rehabilitation. The result has been further fracturing of families and communities and exposure to criminal networks that the state is unequipped to face.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS AND DONOR DEPENDENCE

Samoa, along with other Pacific countries, relies on donor assistance to respond to national security issues due to limited resources. For example, Samoa does not have a military and relies on its police force for protection. Australia continues to be the largest aid provider to the Pacific and has maintained a 37-year relationship with the Samoa maritime police, reflecting a long history of partnership and shared security.¹⁴ At the same time, China has strategically amplified its regional aid strategy to focus on security-related engagement in recent years.¹⁵ An increased Chinese security presence could also extend to a greater presence in government-to-community initiatives, including rehabilitation and reintegration programs, and potentially a military foothold in the Pacific. This would further amplify China's soft power and strategic reach in the region.

Recommendations

1. Enhance community mechanisms and formalize local-federal partnerships.

Existing community systems should be strengthened, with targeted funding for village-led programs and recognition of village matai councils as frontline responders. This recognition can be reflected in program design and funding eligibility, including by allowing matai village councils to directly apply for aid. Moreover, relationships between village matai councils and police, healthcare professionals, and social service providers should be formalized. These local leaders live in the villages and understand their residents and their issues better than external doctors and police. Formalizing such relationships through MOUs would ensure easier referrals and relaying of intelligence on any suspected drug trafficking cases. Village councils may also receive formal training in illicit drug use awareness, including identifying symptoms and response and skills for early intervention and referral. This approach would complement law enforcement by empowering village councils to manage low-level use and reserving the police for major criminal activity and organized trafficking. U.S. and partner nation recognition and engagement would strengthen local ownership and sustainability and provide international credibility to recognizing village matai councils as frontline responders.

2. Provide specialized police equipment.

Police should establish closer partnerships with communities to monitor and report suspected illegal activity. This could be accomplished through the provision of dedicated phones and two-way radios for communication and multipurpose fishing boats suitable for surveillance. Moreover, donor countries should pursue ways to assist continuous

monitoring of Samoa's exclusive economic zone through providing patrol boats and related capabilities.

3. Seek donor support for rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

Donor assistance in providing rehabilitation facilities and reintegration programs in Samoa is also critical. One central rehabilitation facility in the capital, accompanied by nine district rehabilitation centers, attached to each district hospital, would provide the required services country-wide. Furthermore, given the shortage of trained medical personnel in the country, donor assistance would also be required to provide initial staffing of approximately 21 psychiatrists, counselors, and other required staff. A hybrid approach that incorporates virtual counseling could also be utilized. For the continuity and sustainability of the program, scholarship opportunities for psychology, counseling, social work, and nursing are essential. It is crucial to eventually phase in skilled local individuals to foster ownership and allow the district councils to continue these programs for their residents—by Samoa, for Samoa.

4. Secure partner support for deportee integration.

A deportation deal could be arranged between Samoa and Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Under this framework, deportees would be supported through structured reintegration, including pairing returning citizens with respective village councils to assist with cultural reconnection, identity rebuilding, and community accountability.

Conclusion

Samoa is still in the early- to mid-stages of illicit drug use, meaning the United States has an opportunity to stop the transnational drug trade from taking root at the doorstep of major regional partners Australia and New Zealand.

The United States has an opportunity to stop the transnational drug trade from taking root at the doorstep of major regional partners Australia and New Zealand.

The increasing rate of deportees being sent to the Pacific—without rehabilitation or reintegration support—further heightens the risk of gang expansion and criminal network consolidation in the region. This presents an opportunity for the United States to invest in regional stability and crime prevention while advancing its own security interests.

Early U.S. engagement in Samoa would demonstrate a commitment to the Pacific and reinforce shared security interests as an alternative to Chinese influence.

Bridging the Blue

Humanitarian Support in the Pacific

By Logovaka Marilyn Simmons Tapugao

Introduction

The Pacific Islands region is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Eight of its countries are listed among the top fifteen countries at risk worldwide, with narrowed capacities to handle natural disasters.¹ There is a 20 percent probability of a natural disaster occurring in a Pacific Small Island Developing State every year, which is a higher chance than similarly small states face in any other region.² Cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and king tides are not uncommon. Cascading climate effects exacerbate these hazards, transforming what once were seasonal threats into chronic humanitarian challenges. Recovery from disasters is an arduous process, as entire communities face displacement due to saltwater intrusion on atoll islands, leading to water insecurity for whole populations, and disaster recovery cycles shrink as rebuilding becomes more expensive and time consuming. The collapse of critical infrastructure is not a new challenge across Pacific Island countries, but accelerating disaster cycles exacerbate this problem.

The United States has demonstrated renewed interest in engaging with Pacific nations in recent years, driven largely by geopolitical concerns over China's increased interest in this strategic region. The Pacific is home to Hawaii and Guam, home bases for U.S. strategic positioning in the Pacific, and acts as the bridge between Asia and the Americas. It is also home to vast deep-sea critical

minerals—identified by both the United States and China as important to advancing military and technology capabilities.³ Yet, for the United States to be an effective partner to the Pacific, it needs to work through Pacific-led systems, prioritize cultural and human security, and support long-term resilience over short-term visibility.

A Region Defined by Resilience—and Great Risk

Distinct from other global regions, the Pacific consists of small nations united by deep-rooted cultural ties and a shared identity. These countries prioritize collective values and “Pacific regionalism” through the Pacific Islands Forum to maintain a unified front when engaging with international partners.⁴ For Pacific governments, humanitarian assistance is a constant responsibility, one that must be managed alongside everyday challenges, all within the constraints of already stretched national budgets. While natural disasters have always been a challenge, climate change effects such as warming oceans, dry spells, and hotter months now amplify every humanitarian risk. Given the unique circumstances of the Pacific, pre-positioned supplies are distributed to communities most effectively using existing local distribution networks, with support from pockets of funding for preparedness and anticipatory action. According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai eruption caused economic losses of more than 36 percent of Tonga’s GDP—and this figure does not account for additional social and environmental losses.⁵ In Pacific countries with small economies of scale, the road to recovery after a disaster requires long-term support. This means that Pacific countries look to partners who offer genuine and durable collaboration, rooted in Pacific values.

As the United States rethinks its engagement in the region, it is essential that its humanitarian policy aligns with Pacific realities, expectations, and regional frameworks. Funding arrangements that can make the greatest difference on the ground are made with partners who can align to those fundamental expectations and direct their support to those who need assistance the most.

Disasters and the Inequality Divide

Disasters exacerbate inequality, both in resources and capital.

Because the Pacific is home to the most vulnerable and smallest countries surrounded by rising sea levels, disaster response, recovery, and preparedness need to be depoliticized. Partners should work to provide financing that is predictable, timely, and simple to access to enable early action rather than delayed recovery. By combining precise risk modeling with responsive funding and community-centered planning, the Pacific can shift from reactive disaster response to proactive preparedness centered in the communities that are most vulnerable, using available scientific and technological tools to pinpoint the most at-risk areas. The Pacific needs financing that is easily accessible in terms of both processes and decisionmaking.⁶ State-of-the-art modeling can map all communities and provide this critical information.

For over two decades, humanitarian support for natural disasters and risks in the Pacific has been framed by the 1997 Aitutaki Declaration, though present-day support has drawn short of

the evolving nature of disasters and the required support from regional and bilateral partners.⁷ In recent years, two new frameworks have emerged: (1) the 2019 Boe Declaration on Regional Security and its accompanying action plan (under review as of 2025), and (2) the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which has seven thematic areas, including one specifically on climate change and disasters, that forms the basis of policy development and regional collective actions for disaster priorities.⁸

In order to most effectively deliver humanitarian assistance to the region, the United States should aim to work through Pacific frameworks such as the Boe Declaration Action Plan and the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration. These frameworks and strategies are the guide to regional security priorities in the Pacific and require partnerships and financing to implement. Historically, there have been varied degrees of support to the Pacific from the United States, including withdrawal of funding from regional and international organizations that provide support to resilience building in Pacific communities.⁹ To intentionally strengthen partnerships with Pacific countries, fit-for-purpose humanitarian efforts must be crafted in ways that encourage trust building, timeliness, and providing support to the Pacific through its people.

The latter includes a section on human security and humanitarian assistance, which outlines a proposed regional coordination mechanism for disaster preparedness and response and humanitarian assistance involving preapproved partners. It also calls for pre-positioning of approved goods and pooling of resources through country focal points, such as the national disaster management offices. In this framework, rapid response is welcomed through a national request that is coordinated and aligned with local networks to meet the needs on the ground most effectively.

Globally, coordination of disaster efforts is plagued by fragmentation. The recently established Pacific Humanitarian Response Coordination Mechanism (PResCOM) aims to address this challenge in the Pacific by offering an opportunity for the United States to better engage as a humanitarian assistance partner in the region. While U.S. territories such as American Samoa and Pacific Island countries under Compact of Free Association agreements have bilateral arrangements with the United States that include disaster relief, U.S. assistance could be more impactful within a connected framework like PResCOM, ensuring that assistance is received quickly.

In the Pacific, the process is almost as important as the outcome. The adoption of the Koror Declaration and the endorsement of PResCOM at the 2nd Pacific Disaster Risk Management Ministers Meeting in 2025 highlight the importance of coordination.¹⁰ The Pacific does not operate on bilateral humanitarian channels alone; it respects regional arrangements and decisions. The United States often engages bilaterally, but in the Pacific, regional coordination platforms are the entry point. Not aligning with these mechanisms can cause duplication or contradict community-driven priorities. A response that is fast but culturally misaligned can create mistrust or unintended harm. Evacuation decisions must consider Pacific land tenure and traditional governance systems. PResCOM supports coordination among first responders and partners ensuring that efforts within the first 48 hours are contextual. It also permits an opportunity to provide post-disaster reports that consider cultural and indigenous considerations. For example, if a supply warehouse is commissioned with funding from partners to be built in an area that is prone

to flooding, vulnerable people such as the elderly—who are the center of Pacific family priorities—would not be able to easily access critical goods.

Pacific governments frequently report that external partners, despite good intentions, create administrative pressure through overlapping assessments, visibility demands, and parallel coordination systems. Apart from PResCOM, the Pacific Island Forum is restructuring its partnerships and its Forum Dialogue Partners group, which the United States and China are both part of. The partnership mechanism, discussed at the 54th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting, allows for Pacific partners to work more closely with countries by aligning response arrangements without reinventing the wheel, acting in good faith to help Pacific countries build resilience by reducing vulnerability instead of focusing on strategic influence.¹¹

Humanitarian assistance in the Pacific should be measured by how well partners ease national workloads, not by how much visibility they achieve. In this context, adaptability is more important than scale. For humanitarian support and coordination, this means ensuring that Pacific mechanisms are framed and implemented by Pacific leaders through regional agencies and national structures.

All Good Things in the Pacific Are Done Together

Humanitarian assistance in the Pacific is seen not simply as a response system, but as an expression of sovereignty, culture, and collective resilience.

Humanitarian assistance in the Pacific is seen not simply as a response system, but as an expression of sovereignty, culture, and collective resilience. The Pacific is home to underwater resources and sea lanes that represent key security levers for U.S. interests, making stronger partnerships with Pacific leaders highly valuable. In this region where climate change intensifies every hazard, the United States has an opportunity to help build a safer, stronger Pacific by being ready to assist where it is most needed and respecting that the beauty of the region is in its people, who will stand together in the face of adversity.

Kiribati Is Coming Online. But Is It Secure?

By Aana Temaia

While digital connectivity marks major progress in small island states, it does come with challenges. Internet access provides a critical connection to the outside world, connecting islands both nationally and internationally, but it also poses significant security issues domestically. For Kiribati, a nation made up of 32 atoll islands and the phosphate island of Banaba, which are scattered across all four hemispheres of the Pacific, the benefits of connectivity also come with many challenges. As technology use increases rapidly, the government of Kiribati should take extra precautions to protect its citizens from technology-related offenses such as libel, misuse of computer systems, proliferation of child pornography, and abuse.

The Challenges of Connectivity

Access to the internet, and particularly social media, has exposed the people of Kiribati (known as the i-Kiribati) to various online risks, including scams and cyberbullying. As social media has increased in popularity, many i-Kiribati have fallen into traps of online scammers through these platforms, thanks to a lack of public awareness about the risks. New social media users are often unfamiliar with common scams; the most popular are romance scams, in which victims send funds to a perpetrator posing online as a romantic interest.¹ Other popular scams include investment scams, in which victims are tricked into investing in an attractive but fraudulent business plan,

and migration scams, which take advantage of the people's desire to escape the impacts of climate change in Kiribati.²

Other cybercrimes facing i-Kiribati and the Kiribati government include cyberbullying and the misuse of artificial intelligence to assist cyberbullying by generating and creating inappropriate videos of individuals, including government leaders. In September 2022, a group of unknown users created a Facebook page called “Narerewa.” In early 2024, the page began anonymously posting defamatory allegations against the government and its officials, screenshots of private messages, and adult pictures. The page operated for months and targeted several victims. After a number of complaints were filed with the police, the government began investigating the issue and even sought a court order to demand Meta to disclose the identities of the users operating the page. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful due to the lack of a mutual legal assistance treaty between the United States and Kiribati, an issue that the government is taking steps to remediate for the future.

The nation's attorney general has been working closely with the International Criminal Police Organization division of the Kiribati police service to investigate the identity of the users behind the Narerewa page. While the page has been deleted, similar pages with similar names have since been created on the platform.

The current law that regulates cyber activities in Kiribati is the Cybercrime Act of 2021.³ The act established a cybercrime unit within the Kiribati police service and criminalized computer-related offenses such as “unauthorized access, interception and data interference, the misuse of computer systems and computer programs, computer-related forgery, and fraud.” The act covers all areas of cybercrime applicable to the Kiribati context; however, the provisions are general, allowing space for cyberbullying offenders to escape direct punishment. The act does not explicitly define what constitutes cyberbullying, nor does the penal code, which complicates the prosecution of the offense. All cases relating to cyberbullying are charged as either libel or defamation under the penal code, while the Cybercrime Act is silent on the subject, allowing countless cyberbullying practices to proliferate. The act imposed reasonable penalties for computer-related offenses but did not address cyberbullying; hence, the issue has not been reduced in practice, given the limited instruments and resources available for prosecution.

Alongside the implementation of the criminal statutes for some cybercrimes, the Kiribati government also promotes reliable, safe internet use through its Ministry of Information, Communication and Transport (MICT), which works to promote these services to all islands, including the geographically isolated outer islands. Moreover, the ministry aims to “promote social and economic sustainable development” and a “responsive and accountable government” through the “expansion, diversification, and effective application” of these services.⁴

Recommendations to Combat Cybercrime

Despite all of these measures, internet scams and cyberbullying continue to negatively impact Kiribati. This is largely due to lenient penalties and a lack of resources. Offenders are not afraid of potential consequences, as most cyberbullying cases are not treated seriously, and therefore offenders are

penalized with minimal sentences. Most cases are classified as misdemeanors, and judgments are generally suspended in accordance with Section 44 of the Kiribati Penal Code, which states that any sentence under two years' imprisonment shall be dismissed upon the court's approval.⁵

The MICT, together with the police and the Office of the Attorney General, works to resolve the rising issue of technology-facilitated offenses. The government is currently working on passing a new act, which will regulate cyber issues and areas that are not covered by the current act.

As [Kiribati] switches to digital systems and platforms, however, it is critical that the government take extra measures to protect its people from cyberattacks and cyberbullying.

Kiribati, as a developing country, is still in the process of adapting to a digital world. Its government bodies, state-owned enterprises, and authorities are slowly moving from manual paperwork to computerized systems, making work more convenient and accessible. As the nation switches to digital systems and platforms, however, it is critical that the government take extra measures to protect its people from cyberattacks and cyberbullying. The most effective solution at hand would be to amend the Cybercrime Act of 2021 to criminalize cyberbullying and other types of cyberattacks, in particular gender-based offenses, which are now prevalent on Facebook. At present, several technology-facilitated offenses are not fully reflected in national law, which is more focused on data and systems protection. Amending the current law will make prosecution easier and more effective at minimizing these offenses.

Lastly, Kiribati should enter into mutual legal assistance treaties with countries that require more than diplomatic relations for information sharing and other forms of mutual assistance, to help combat cybercrimes and other forms of cyberattacks. For developing countries with limited resources such as Kiribati, it should be a priority to seek help in these areas, as these issues can develop rapidly. Establishing working relationships with cybersecurity counterparts from different parts of the world will minimize the increasing impacts of cyber threats.

The rapid advance of digital technology has connected remote islands with the world unlike ever before. However, as this technology develops across the region, the Kiribati government must take extra precautions to strengthen cybersecurity protections for its people.

Ocean of Peace, Currents of War

Pacific Facilitation of Sino-U.S. Stability

By Raihaamana Tevahitua

A Promise and a Gamble

In his second inaugural address, President Donald Trump presented his vision for his second term: “We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end—and perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into.”¹

Nevertheless, thus far in 2026, President Trump has militarily ousted Venezuela’s leader and started a war with Iran. Simultaneously, the United States and China are engaged in increasingly intense strategic competition that brings the Indo-Pacific closer to major conflict. Together, China and the United States account for 43 percent of global wealth and control the global flow of goods, data, and money.² Therefore, even short of all-out war, the deterioration of this bilateral relationship negatively affects the world, including the Pacific region.

As the risk of conflict increases, the need for a method to reduce tensions is ever more acute. This imperative is felt most keenly in the Pacific Islands, a region that suffered enormous consequences the last time great powers fought across the Pacific, during World War II. Despite their land size, these Pacific nations possess some leverage over both the United States and China, as both larger nations desire preferential access to the Pacific region. For this reason, there is an opportunity for

the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) to facilitate dialogue between these competitors. Indeed, Oceanic diplomacy prioritizes interpersonal relations over intergovernmental relations.³ Ultimately, human decisionmaking underpins all international relations.⁴

It is in this context that this paper makes a bold proposal: In order to manage strategic differences between China and the United States and create the preconditions for détente, Pacific leaders should leverage their strategic importance to both powers and propose a Pacific-hosted bilateral exercise to foster mutual understanding and promote empathy between mid-level officials in both systems.

Situational Awareness

When China was identified as a “revisionist power” in its military appropriation of the South China Sea and began to demonstrate increased interest in expanding influence across the Pacific Islands, the United States and other partners began pursuing strategies to deny China military access in the Pacific, resulting in rising tensions.⁵

As the two superpowers distance themselves from one another, they are intensifying their interactions with the Pacific Islands through a strategic lens.⁶ As such, both countries have increased engagement and development assistance throughout the region in recent years, as well as efforts to establish security arrangements to benefit China or the United States at the expense of the other.

Faced with pressure to choose sides and seeing increasing military and security activities throughout the region, the Pacific Islands are eager to assert their agency to reduce the risk of conflict.⁷ This desire can be seen in regional documents and statements: The PIF’s ongoing Review of Regional Architecture will enable Pacific leaders to grant rights to partners based on their alignment with regional priorities, and the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration is a reminder that peace for islanders is linked to human security.⁸ However, security for larger countries such as China and the United States is ensured by deterrence.⁹ It is because of this outlook that the Pacific has been the target point of recent long-range intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests.

Drifting Toward the Abyss

As the potential for conflict hangs over the Pacific, the shift toward a paradigm of great power competition seems increasingly difficult to reverse.

At the heart of this strategic rivalry are mutually exclusive interests regarding national governance, technological innovation, and military projection, compelling both the United States and China to shape the international order in their favor. A deeper factual understanding of each other’s interests will not necessarily enable cooperation.¹⁰ On the contrary, every global issue seemingly lends itself to the two powers attempting to demonstrate the superiority of their own model, from Olympic medal counts to effectively managing the pandemic.

Furthermore, there has been a decline in interaction between pro-engagement coalitions in China and the United States, contributing to the intensification of competition. For instance, the number of flights per week between the two countries decreased from 340 to 90 between 2019 and 2025, and Mexico became the United States' top goods supplier over China in 2023.¹¹ Exacerbating this trend is the fact that some officials on both sides exploit political animosity between the two states to garner popular support.¹²

As the potential for conflict edges closer, it poses an inescapable disaster for both great powers and the rest of the international community. For smaller nations like those in the Pacific, it is an existential imperative to ensure that this bilateral relationship operates within an accepted framework of rules. Following tensions over Taiwan, the United States and China agreed at the 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to resume high-level military communications, but more is needed to prevent these pressures from spilling over.

Rediscovering the Relationship

In the face of decoupling and misalignment, policymakers should seek ways to foster interpersonal connections and raise awareness about the implications of war.¹³ Only empathy and, above all, the instinct for survival, can overcome the default toward conflict.

The Cuban Missile Crisis during the Cold War illustrates this starkly. Recognizing mutual vulnerability led to the development of communication mechanisms and rules for coexistence.¹⁴

How, then, can such cooperation be achieved? One approach is to simulate a threatening situation; for example, in the Kowari survival exercise in the Australian outback, U.S. and Chinese officers had to depend on each other for water, food, and shelter.¹⁵ The goal of undergoing and overcoming common challenges was to enhance mutual trust among individuals and, potentially, their organizations, which are normally diametrically opposed.

Given their strategic importance to both China and the United States, the Pacific Islands are well placed to promote [cooperation] between mid-level government officials from both great powers.

Given their strategic importance to both China and the United States, the Pacific Islands are well placed to promote a similar exercise, potentially between mid-level government officials from both great powers. This engagement could center around an exercise involving shared adversity accompanied by candid conversations.¹⁶ These exercises could start with participants jointly working through a neutral scenario such as response to a natural disaster, with the aim of eventually incorporating conflict scenarios with undefined adversaries. In particular, Chinese participants could role-play U.S. victims of a wargame scenario and vice versa. Open-hearted dialogue, or

talanoa, could then facilitate expression of respective feelings. In the spirit of Oceanic diplomacy, this activity would allow participants to build relationships before addressing any contentious issues.¹⁷ Fundamentally, such an exercise would aim to generate deterrence through recognizing the humanity of the potential adversary and foregrounding the costs of conflict.

In addition to holding strategic leverage over both China and the United States to urge both powers to participate in this type of engagement, the Pacific possesses other unique characteristics that make it a prime location for such an ambitious endeavor.¹⁸ As the Pacific Islands maintain an inclusive space for all contributors to their development, they provide a more neutral platform than Switzerland and Alaska, both of which are clearly rooted in the West.¹⁹ Holding these discussions in the arena where confrontation could likely occur also makes these risks more tangible for participants. Lastly, the physical location of the Pacific—in particular the home of the PIF in Fiji—predisposes mutual concessions. Unlike Singapore, the Pacific Islands offer a retreat from public scrutiny, and, since they are roughly equidistant from both poles, they symbolize parity.

Given the ongoing and unpredictable nature of great power competition, U.S. and Chinese delegations should meet annually. As the champion of the Ocean of Peace Declaration, Fiji could host this event, bringing together mid-level officials from both countries under the auspices of the PIF.²⁰

Finally, this preparatory phase could lead to a functional phase, whereby meetings could be supplemented by discussions around pragmatic objectives for bilateral cooperation. Guest delegations would contribute the necessary expertise for practical negotiations and establish a discussion agenda with the best chance of being adopted by all parties.

Human-First Approach

Before engaging in political or technical negotiations, it is essential to first prepare mindsets and promote mutual understanding.²¹ This can be done through a simulation of the perils at stake, and through shared experiences of challenges. This proposal aims to do exactly that, using the Pacific's Oceanic diplomacy to build relationships, foster mutual empathy, and, hopefully, reduce the overall risk of catastrophic conflict.

Charting a Meaningful Course to a “Pacific Ocean of Peace”

Integrating the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

By Merita Tuari’i

Introduction

Growing geopolitical tensions in the strategically significant Pacific Islands region risk enveloping the Pacific in a broader global conflict. The Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration offers a renewed opportunity for Pacific Island countries and their development partners to actively address the region’s growing remilitarization.¹ Yet the declaration falls short of ensuring lasting peace for the region, as it reinforces a masculinist security paradigm that may deepen insecurity for the people of the Pacific through increasing targeting risk, economic insecurity, gender-based violence, conflict escalation risk, and human rights violations. To achieve sustainable peace in the Pacific, a coordinated, gender-responsive, and demilitarized approach, along with genuine partnership between development partners and Pacific Island countries, is required to transform the declaration into a truly enduring foundation for a Pacific “ocean of peace.”

Calling for Peace in the Pacific

In 2023, Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka made a bold proposal calling on nations to halt military buildup in the Pacific Ocean and declare the region a “zone of peace.”² His call came amid renewed geopolitical tension in the Pacific region—including an expansion of U.S. military

equipment and presence in the northwestern Pacific, and an increase in the number of security agreements between Pacific Island countries and their traditional and nontraditional partners—and conflict in Ukraine and the Middle East.³ Rabuka suggested a regional declaration could help regulate the behavior of major powers.

This concept was introduced to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) at the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands in November 2023. Since then, it has gained the full endorsement of PIF leaders and is now known as the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration. However, in contrast to Rabuka’s original proposal opposing military buildup, the declaration functions more as a security framework, omitting demilitarization as a core principle for achieving regional peace and allowing for the continued securitization of Pacific Island countries in a way that is aligned to larger powers’ interests.⁴

No Peace Without Women

Analysts have noted that the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration offers a timely opportunity to embed the United Nations’ Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda within the Pacific region’s evolving security.⁵

While the final, accepted version of the declaration acknowledges the importance of including women in peace initiatives, it stops short of making the WPS agenda a central pillar of regional peace.⁶ The declaration references key human rights and international security instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1985 South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty. However, it notably omits core instruments on gender equality, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Pacific Platform for Action, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the progenitor to the WPS agenda, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

By omitting these core documents, the declaration fails to recognize the importance of social justice and inclusion to addressing deeper causes of long-term insecurity in the region, including the work that has already been achieved under these instruments for a more gender-equal Pacific.

Women on the Margins

By omitting demilitarization and key gender equality instruments, the declaration’s acknowledgment of the need to include “women and girls in all of their diversities” in peacebuilding becomes a token “gender add-on.”⁷ Demilitarization is a structural foundation for security and long-lasting peace—inseparable from gender justice and gender equality, as emphasized in the WPS agenda.⁸ Without it, the declaration becomes less a significant instrument toward an “ocean of peace,” and more a framework that perpetuates the dangers of militarized peace and security in the Pacific, including targeting risk (i.e., the increased risk of becoming a target for military strike or conflict); economic insecurity, including unfulfilled promises of economic prosperity and investment in communities hosting military installations; increased gender-based violence,

particularly around military installations; conflict escalation; and erosion of human rights through speech censorship, corruption, concentration of political power, and limits on trade unions.⁹

Lack of Information and Trust

These challenges are reinforced by the absence of coordinated research and data on the gendered impacts of militarization, conflict, climate change, and inequality in the region.¹⁰ This information gap enables ad hoc and ideologically driven decisionmaking, weakening evidence-based policy and leading to misinformed actions.¹¹

In addition, limited transparency around security arrangements and the exclusionary nature of regional security processes erodes the public trust required for lasting peace in the region.¹² In one recent example, the former prime minister of Vanuatu, Ishmael Kalsakau, signed a security agreement with Australia in 2023 without internal political or national consultation, causing public outcry.¹³ And in 2025, the U.S. military's use of Guam as a decoy in Operation Midnight Hammer—its strikes on Iranian nuclear sites—faced pushback by Guam's leaders, who called out the nation's lack of consent, noting that the action “sends the wrong message—to our allies, that Guam is expendable; to our adversaries, that we are divided; and to our own people, that we are invisible. Guam deserves better.”¹⁴

Lack of Support for Civil and Political WPS Action

Indigenous, grassroots-led reconciliation and security initiatives in the Pacific have been successful in addressing root causes of conflict, and Track 2 activities led by regional organizations have created spaces for frank conversations about peace and security for the region.¹⁵ However, these essential programs require sustained funding; short-term support or ad hoc agreements cannot resolve deep-rooted issues. For example, women's support and peace advocacy groups Kup Women for Peace and Voice for Change in the Papua New Guinea Highlands are cash-starved, and members often have to support women using their personal resources, even taking victims of violence into their own homes, risking their own and their families' safety.¹⁶

At the regional political level, progress on the WPS agenda has been limited.¹⁷ Although a Pacific Working Group and a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security were established and endorsed, the plan was never funded, evaluated, or renewed, and a new iteration has yet to appear on the PIF agenda.¹⁸

Policy Recommendations

The strategically important Pacific Islands region is a crucial component of U.S. security. The Pacific was once referred to as the “American Lake,” and countries within that “lake” are as important to the strategic security goals of the United States as the North and South American spheres.¹⁹

Pacific Island countries cannot meaningfully integrate women, peace, and security into their vision of an “ocean of peace” in isolation. Without the economic, political, and technical support of

key development partners, such as the United States, efforts to secure lasting peace in the region remain shallow.

Pacific Island countries cannot meaningfully integrate women, peace, and security into their vision of an “ocean of peace” in isolation.

Pacific Island country leadership must take the lead in continuing engagement and support on a Pacific regional WPS strategy. To ensure wider security for the whole of the Pacific, around the Pacific Rim and across the Pacific Islands region, development partners should consider the following recommendations:

1. **Work toward demilitarization of the Pacific while removing barriers to women-led security solutions and ensuring that decisionmaking legitimately values women’s input.** Together, these actions will reduce targeting risks for all and distinguish the Pacific and its partners from authoritarian, patriarchal governments and regimes that threaten collective well-being.
2. **Invest in Pacific-owned and Pacific-led research, information, and data infrastructure,** and platforms that can be used to monitor the Pacific WPS Agenda, such as the Pacific Academy of Sciences and the recently established Pacific Research Hub.
3. **Enhance transparency in security decisionmaking through reconciliatory processes** that recognize the harms of colonial legacies. This will build the trust needed to address global security issues, such as climate change and transnational crime, in partnership with Pacific Island countries.
4. **Collaborate with the PIF to elevate the Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace Declaration into a binding treaty,** creating a genuine opportunity to meaningfully integrate the WPS agenda and sustain lasting peace.

Conclusion

The critical role of women in leading security approaches is still widely underestimated worldwide. Despite ongoing rollbacks in women’s rights and participation in decisionmaking, there remains an opportunity to advance a renewed vision of a safe, secure, and equitable Pacific region, especially through the WPS agenda. By partnering meaningfully with Pacific Island countries to pursue demilitarization, integrate the WPS agenda, invest in research, and enhance transparency and trust, development partners can help build a peace-filled Pacific grounded in human security, international cooperation, and rules-based norms for the well-being of all.

Health Security in Niue

A Socio-Technical Approach

By Kulakimata Vaha

Introduction

Health security in the Pacific operates without a safety net, resulting in substandard health outcomes across a range of metrics. Conventional frameworks assume proximity to specialists, redundant supply chains, and economies of scale—conditions absent in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). A single equipment failure, workforce departure, or shipping delay can jeopardize essential healthcare. This chapter argues for a socio-technical approach that recognizes the interdependencies between healthcare systems, technological infrastructure, human capacity, and supply networks—interdependencies that become critical vulnerabilities in isolation.

Niue, a South Pacific island of approximately 1,700 people located 2,400 kilometers from New Zealand, exemplifies these challenges. Its single hospital contains eight ward beds, two emergency beds, and six overflow beds, and the island is served by only four doctors—approximately one physician per 425 residents—far below World Health Organization (WHO) benchmarks for workforce density.¹ The government of Niue’s 2025-2029 national security strategy identifies health security and food security as core national security threats, priorities echoed in regional frameworks, including the *Pacific Islands-WHO Multi-Country Cooperation Strategy* (MCCS) 2024-2029.² Drawing on firsthand experience with Niue’s pharmaceutical and biomedical systems, this analysis

demonstrates how these interdependencies create overlapping vulnerabilities and presents recommendations aligned with WHO and regional frameworks.

The Challenge Landscape

During Covid-19, when Niue Foou Hospital's only floor-mounted X-ray machine failed, border restrictions required a two-week isolation period for the replacement technician, followed by two weeks of installation. This month-long gap—even with temporary equipment—meant reduced diagnostic capacity and limited functionality—patients with complex imaging needs faced medical evacuations to New Zealand, costing over \$50,000 per patient.³ The incident illustrates how a single point of failure can cascade into system-wide disruption.

Niue's vulnerabilities span geography, workforce, supply chains, and technology—each reinforcing the others.

Geographic Isolation: Niue's remoteness provides natural disease barriers but heightens emergency risks. Medical evacuations depend on weather and aircraft availability; during cyclone season, evacuation may be impossible for days. The *Niue National Security Strategy* highlights that Niue's wharf and airport—lifelines for medical supplies and evacuations—are vulnerable to single points of failure.⁴ Climate change, identified by the Pacific Regional and National Security Conference as the Pacific's "single greatest security threat," compounds these risks as adaptation windows quickly close.⁵ With no overflow capacity or nearby referral systems, delays are measured in weeks, not hours.

Workforce Limitations: With fewer than 2,000 citizens, Niue cannot sustain medical specialists, biomedical engineers, or IT professionals. The WHO reports that Niue's health workforce is aging, shrinking, and heavily dependent on foreign-trained personnel.⁶ When trained technicians leave—often for higher salaries abroad—local expertise in equipment maintenance disappears. Recruitment and training can take 6 to 12 months. The *Niue National Digital Strategy 2024-2030* emphasizes digital literacy, local talent development, and leveraging the digital diaspora to mitigate these gaps.⁷

Supply Chain Vulnerabilities: Niue imports all pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and equipment from New Zealand. A single shipping disruption can delay essential medicines for four to six weeks. The MCCS identifies supply chain fragility as a regional vulnerability, particularly for SIDS dependent on external procurement. Covid-19 further exposed these weaknesses, as global competition for personal protective equipment and diagnostics disadvantaged small island nations.

Technology Constraints: The implementation of mSupply—an electronic inventory system—in 2022 improved pharmaceutical management, and the 2020 Manatua submarine cable enabled telehealth consultations. However, bandwidth limitations, cybersecurity risks, and the absence of local IT professionals constrain digital health expansion. The government's *National ICT Policy 2023-2030* stresses the need for modern and resilient infrastructure, data governance, and cybersecurity.⁸ The MCCS similarly highlights digital health, integrated information

systems, and telemedicine as essential components of universal health coverage (UHC) and emergency preparedness.

These four dimensions—geography, workforce, supply chains, and technology—form an interlocking system where weakness in one area amplifies weaknesses in all. Effective solutions should consider these individual challenges not in isolation, but rather as a system of interconnected vulnerabilities. The following recommendations are sequenced to build foundational capacity before advancing to more complex interventions.

Strategic Recommendations

Priority 1 (Immediate): Adopt appropriate technology standards. Inappropriate or unmaintainable technology is a major pathway to system failure. Equipment should meet four criteria: (1) regional maintenance support available within 72 hours or via remote guidance, (2) environmental robustness to humidity, power fluctuations, and limited climate control, (3) minimal training requirements for existing staff, and (4) sustainable life-cycle costs aligned with constrained budgets. The Pacific Community’s National Equipment Management Policy and Medical Equipment Donation Policy reinforce these principles, emphasizing life-cycle planning, risk assessment, and rejection of unsupported equipment.⁹ This aligns with the WHO’s UHC objective of ensuring safe, quality service delivery.

Priority 2 (Medium Term): Formalize regional technical networks. As the 2025 Pacific Regional and National Security Conference affirmed, regional security structures must be “owned and driven by the Pacific, and not externally imposed.”¹⁰ Formalizing regional biomedical and digital health networks would enable shared procurement, inter-island equipment loans, regional troubleshooting support, telemedicine expansion, and technician knowledge exchange. These networks multiply capacity and reduce reliance on single individuals.

Priority 3 (Medium Term): Develop cross-functional technical expertise. Niue needs “T-shaped” professionals with deep expertise in one area and working knowledge across related domains. Rotational training with New Zealand institutions and Pacific Community centers can build specialized skills while maintaining local employment ties, reducing the brain drain that costs SIDS a disproportionate share of trained health workers annually, as documented by the WHO MCCS.

Priority 4 (Ongoing): Implement phased digital health systems. Niue’s digital strategies provide a foundation for phased digital health implementation: expanding inventory management, strengthening telemedicine, implementing electronic health records, and adding equipment monitoring. Digital health, integrated information systems, and telemedicine are essential for UHC and emergency resilience. Analog backups remain critical to avoid new vulnerabilities.

Priority 5 (Long Term): Integrate health security planning. The *Niue National Security Strategy* frames security as “whole: the whole person, whole community, whole country, and whole region.”¹¹ Health security planning must integrate with energy systems, telecommunications,

transportation, disaster risk reduction, and economic development. Pacific security must be multisectoral, prevention-focused, and grounded in Pacific values, requiring climate-resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and multisectoral coordination.

Niue’s vulnerabilities span geography, workforce, supply chains, and technology—each reinforcing the others.

Conclusion

Niue’s health security challenges reflect broader regional vulnerabilities identified by the WHO: fragile systems, workforce shortages, high noncommunicable disease burdens, and exposure to climate-related shocks. Effective investment should prioritize foundational resilience—appropriate technology, regional networks, cross-trained personnel, and phased digital systems—before advanced applications. Aligning national action with the WHO’s MCCA priorities and regional security principles articulated at the Pacific Regional and National Security Conference will strengthen Niue’s capacity to deliver equitable, resilient, and sustainable health services in the face of ongoing and emerging threats.

Strengthening Vanuatu's Open Shipping Registry

By Lenisha Vari

In June 2025, reports surfaced that an EU-sanctioned Russian trading tanker, *Torex*, was reflagged to Vanuatu following its de-registration by Barbados. The Vanuatu-flagged tanker was heading to Russia's Baltic ports. This incident highlighted the challenge that open registries pose for small states such as Vanuatu, which must weigh the benefits the registry brings with the very real risks associated with dark fleets.

With major powers including Australia and China continuing to compete for influence within the Pacific Islands region, Pacific nations are finding themselves increasingly needing to focus resources and capabilities toward their own security needs. For small island nations such as Vanuatu, one solution is to look to donor countries, such as China, which provide support through infrastructure loans and equipment donation in the form of drones, motorbikes, and even patrol boats. However, there are risks associated with such aid, including the possibility of creating space for Chinese influence in Vanuatu's security sector.

Another pathway Vanuatu is currently pursuing is raising revenue through its open shipping registry, which allows parties in other countries to register their fleets and ships under the Vanuatu flag without needing to be residents of Vanuatu. Although an open registry can result in financial gains and potential tax benefits, it also presents challenges, including vessels using the system to evade sanctions and partake in illegal trade. This chapter will examine the implications of dark

fleets within Vanuatu's shipping registry and provide policy recommendations to help the island nation limit risks and safeguard its reputation.

Vanuatu's Open Ship Registry and the Risk of Dark Fleets

Dark fleets, or shadow fleets, are ships that are engaged in illegal operations to avoid sanctions, insurance costs, or compliance with safety or environmental regulations, or engage in other illegal activities.¹ Dark fleets are usually linked to open shipping registries (also referred to as “flags of convenience”), which allow for vessels to be registered in a different country than the one where the ship's owner resides or holds citizenship. There are many risks to operating an open registry, chief among them collecting revenue and monitoring compliance—particularly for ships that are evading sanctions or conducting other illegal activity.

Vanuatu is one of several Pacific countries that operate open shipping registries.² The registry is managed and operated by Vanuatu Logistics and Administrative Services Limited (VLAS), which is based in the United States.³ Vanuatu's open shipping registry has proven quite lucrative, generating approximately \$2.4 million in revenue each year, 50 percent of which goes to the government.⁴

However, Vanuatu's shipping registry and the company that runs it have been in the spotlight following revelations that dark fleets have been registered under the Vanuatu flag, casting a shadow on the nation's maritime sector.⁵ The fleets, which have been linked to China and Russia, operate in an attempt to bypass EU and UK sanctions and enable trade between Russia and the Asian market, among others. With limited resources and capabilities to monitor and patrol wide areas of water, Vanuatu will need to decide whether the revenue generated is worth having an open registry—and if so, what it can do to combat the rise in dark fleets registered under Vanuatu's flags.

Vanuatu's shipping registry was established by a June 2022 amendment to its Maritime Act. The amendment allowed for a fully open maritime registry whereby banks and financial lenders can mortgage vessels and allow ship owners to register online.⁶ The registry currently has a total of 419 vessels, 186 (44 percent) of which have received a minor, serious, or severe compliance warning from domestic or international maritime authorities. Ten vessels on the list have been sanctioned, all of which are tankers.⁷

After the news emerged in mid-2025 that Torex had been reflagged to Vanuatu, additional reporting revealed that several other sanctioned Russian tankers—Yodan, Lieto, and Nautilus—had also been flagged to Vanuatu.⁸ These types of vessels are intentionally avoiding detection and do not comply with flag state obligations under Article 94 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which requires all states to ensure that ships flying that country's flag comply with safety at sea.⁹

Given the condition of some of the ships, the repercussions of having them on Vanuatu's registry could include not only financial consequences (e.g., fines and noncompliance penalties) but could also cause environmental (e.g., oil spills and vessels running aground) and health and safety issues

(e.g., for officers and seafarers onboard). Because its shipping registry is located outside of the country, the Vanuatu government has little control over the registration and monitoring of vessels flying its flags—a point illustrated in 2023 allegations from Vanuatu’s minister of education and training, who accused VLAS of establishing an illicit parallel shipping registry.¹⁰

Recommendations to Strengthen Vanuatu’s Open Registry

To ensure that it can address the challenges of having an open registry, Vanuatu, with support from the United States as a development partner, should take the following steps:

1. First, the recently established Ministry of Fisheries, Oceans, and Maritime Affairs should work to build its capacity to operate independently and strengthen key areas, including technical skills for port controls, surveillance, and monitoring to better monitor its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).¹¹ The United States already has a ship rider agreement with Vanuatu (a comprehensive framework for cooperation between the U.S. government and the government of Vanuatu to combat illicit transnational maritime activities), which should be further utilized to assist the new ministry and other government agencies in monitoring Vanuatu-registered vessels outside of Vanuatu’s EEZ, with the help of the U.S. Coast Guard.
2. Second, the United States and Vanuatu should set up a data-sharing agreement between the Vanuatu Fisheries Ministry and Vanuatu Maritime Safety Authority (VMSA) on one side and the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control on the other. This would allow the United States and Vanuatu to share warnings about vessels attempting to use their flag for illicit activities and enable both authorities to deal with noncompliant vessels.
3. Third, the United States can work with the VMSA to provide policy advice on how to better enforce or update Section 11, Chapter 131, of the Vanuatu Maritime Act, which formally adopts non-statutory general maritime law of the United States for all vessels registered under the VMSA Act. Updating these frameworks will assist Vanuatu in better handling the rise in dark fleets and the risks they bring to Vanuatu’s reputation.
4. Lastly, the United States can work with Vanuatu, through the VMSA, to ensure it adheres to the sanctions policies it adopted last October 2025. The policies included U.S. sanctions related to Venezuela and the zero-tolerance policy regarding Iran.

While the shipping registry provides much-needed revenue, allowing dark fleets to operate under the Vanuatu flag creates risks that far outweigh the financial rewards.

Vanuatu faces the same challenge as much of the Pacific region—having to balance economic survival with national security. While the shipping registry provides much-needed revenue, allowing dark fleets to operate under the Vanuatu flag creates risks that far outweigh the financial

rewards. By strengthening oversight and working closely with partners including the United States, Vanuatu can clean up its registry and protect its global reputation. Taking these steps will ensure that Vanuatu generates the income it needs without compromising its integrity, its security, or the overall security of the region.

Transnational Organized Crime in the Pacific

Implications for U.S. and Regional Security

By Denson Varirokese

The evolving threat of transnational organized crime (TNOC) in the Pacific should be of concern for the U.S. government. The Pacific region, often perceived as peaceful and distant, has become a dynamic battleground for sophisticated TNOC activities that directly impact the United States' homeland security, economic interests, geopolitical standing, and commitment to the international rules-based order.

This chapter will provide background information on TNOC, including the specific types reported in the Pacific region, and outline how it negatively affects the U.S. government and the broader international community. It will also highlight some of the key drivers and enablers of TNOC and provide recommendations for mitigating the issue in the Pacific region.

The Pacific Islands' Vulnerability to TNOC

Pacific Island countries and territories have become an increasingly important transit hub, area of operations, and destination point for organized crime syndicates. Geographically, the Pacific region is situated in a strategic location that stretches across the vast ocean between Asia and the Americas. While once considered a barrier to engagement, the region's isolation now provides opportunities for groups to operate in less-patrolled waters, facilitating large-scale illicit shipments.

Additionally, the region's porous borders, heavy reliance on foreign development funding, lack of economic diversity, and outdated legislation contribute to the region's vulnerability.¹

The other enabler of TNOC in the Pacific is corruption. Corruption in the Pacific is pervasive, infiltrating state institutions and exploiting weak rule of law, particularly in sectors including natural resources, public administration, and offshore banking.² It is also important to note that foreign criminal actors—including drug cartels from the Americas, violent outlaw motorcycle gangs from Australia and New Zealand, well-networked criminal deportees, and highly entrepreneurial Asian criminal networks—are increasingly active in the Pacific region.³ These groups often operate by masking criminal activities as legitimate businesses.

Specific Types of TNOC in the Pacific

One of the most persistent types of TNOC in the Pacific is drug trafficking. Pacific Island countries serve as crucial transit points for illicit narcotics—particularly methamphetamine, cocaine, and fentanyl—originating in the Americas and Southeast Asia, with destinations including lucrative markets in Australia and New Zealand, and even Europe and United States. According to a 2022 Lowy Institute report, illicit drug trade in Australia alone is estimated to be A\$11.3 billion annually.⁴ In one example, in 2018, Solomon Islands authorities with the support of Australian Federal Police discovered 500 kg of cocaine on a private yacht destined for Australia. The vessel originated in South America.⁵

Trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants is another issue in the Pacific region. Pacific Island countries are identified as source, transit, and destination points for human trafficking, mainly for sexual exploitation and forced labor, particularly in the fishing, hospitality, domestic, and agricultural industries.⁶ Child sexual exploitation is also a concern, often linked to urban or tourist areas and facilitated by family members.⁷ Some Pacific countries serve as points of origin for trafficking flows to Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia, as well as destinations for migrants smuggled from Asia. In 2023, for example, two boats were caught smuggling Chinese nationals into Guam, according to the United States Attorney's Office for the Districts of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands.⁸

Environmental crime, money laundering, and cybersecurity-related crimes are also interrelated with TNOC operations in the Pacific Islands region. For example, fishing, mining, logging, and other extractive industries have been linked to TNOC in several Pacific Island countries in recent years, according to the 2025 *Pacific Island Security Outlook Report*.⁹

How Pacific TNOC Threatens U.S. National Security

The evolution of this threat lies not just in its increasing scale, but in its diversification, technological sophistication, and the increasingly complex ways it intersects with geopolitical competition.

In terms of U.S. national security, it is important to highlight that Pacific drug trafficking is destined for lucrative markets in Australia and New Zealand as well as the U.S. homeland, contributing to the opioid crisis and drug-related crime within both the Pacific and the United States, straining law

enforcement resources and devastating communities. As the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy laid out, countering narco-terrorists, cartels, and other transnational organizations that threaten the homeland is a core national interest for the United States.¹⁰

The recent introduction of narco-submarines has added further urgency to this problem: In 2025, several abandoned narco-submarines were found in Solomon Islands territorial waters by Pacific Islands law enforcement authorities.¹¹

Beyond drugs, the rise of cyber-enabled scams and human trafficking represents a particularly insidious and evolving threat. Scam compounds in Southeast Asia rely on the recruitment of forced labor and operational links in the Pacific, and these sophisticated financial scams directly target and defraud American citizens.¹² These scam operations are estimated to cost U.S. victims billions of dollars annually. Furthermore, these illicit cyber infrastructures, controlled by TNOC groups, pose a latent risk: They could be repurposed or co-opted by state actors for broader cyberattacks against U.S. critical infrastructure, intellectual property, or government systems, thus blurring the lines between criminal and national security threats. The exploitation of vulnerable individuals through human trafficking for these scams also directly contradicts fundamental U.S. human rights values.

Economically, the spread of TNOC in the Pacific undermines global financial stability and directly impacts U.S. prosperity. Pacific Island nations, many with limited regulatory capacities and nascent financial sectors (including offshore services and casinos), are increasingly exploited by TNOC operators for money laundering. Illicit financial flows distort local economies, foster corruption, and make it challenging for the United States and its allies to track and seize criminal proceeds that often transit through the global financial system, including U.S. dollar transactions. This erodes the integrity of the international financial architecture and creates fertile ground for further illicit activity, impacting legitimate U.S. investment and trade opportunities in the region.

From a geopolitical and strategic perspective, TNOC poses a significant challenge to U.S. influence and the regional stability of the Pacific Islands.

From a geopolitical and strategic perspective, TNOC poses a significant challenge to U.S. influence and the regional stability of the Pacific Islands. TNOC thrives in environments with weak governance, rampant corruption, and under-resourced law enforcement. Criminal operators perpetuate systemic corruption through activities such as drug trafficking, illegal logging, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, thereby eroding public trust in judicial institutions and destabilizing fragile island governments—and countering U.S. efforts to ramp up engagement in a region that is increasingly important for U.S. national security interests.

Recommendations

The challenges and threats posed by TNOC have direct implications for the United States and Pacific nations. Therefore, this paper recommends that the governments of the Pacific Islands and the United States take serious actions to combat TNOC activities in the Pacific region, as outlined below.

1. Pacific governments should work with the U.S. government and other partners to introduce border-watch programs that engage local officials, community leaders, and civil society groups in awareness training and encourage them to monitor and report suspicious activities related to TNOC and other border-related crimes. Establishing these programs would enhance trust with local communities and facilitate the reporting and monitoring of drug and other TNOC activities.
2. The United States and other development partners should work with Pacific governments to reform and modernize border agencies and law enforcement entities in the Pacific region by providing technical experts to coach local officers and advise on restructuring to effectively tackle challenges posed by TNOC and other emerging threats.
3. Pacific governments should engage the U.S. government and other development partners to provide support for improving the use of technology and digital systems to counter TNOC in the Pacific region, including strengthening border management systems at international ports of entry and enhancing artificial intelligence frameworks and cybersecurity systems.
4. Pacific border agencies should partner with the U.S. government to develop implementation plans for existing MOUs between the United States and Pacific Island countries. For example, a U.S. multilateral fisheries treaty established in 1987, which includes the 17 member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, provides a great opportunity for the United States to work with the Pacific region to maximize fishing revenues and monitor IUU fishing in the region.¹³
5. Regional and international partners should work to strengthen cooperation through the development of MOUs and bilateral and multilateral partnership arrangements that would help Pacific nations increase workforce capacity and proficiency. For example, existing secondment programs for law enforcement officers at Pacific Fusion Centre in Port Vila, Vanuatu, need to be expanded to cater to the growing demand for analyst training and long-term instruction opportunities for regional officers.¹⁴ Also, law enforcement agencies of the region need to further develop twinning, or institutional arrangement programs that support information and intelligence sharing for officers, dealing with TNOC.
6. Pacific governments should strengthen legislative and enforcement efforts to combat TNOC by introducing new laws and by incorporating TNOC into regional and national law enforcement training. For example, the Dangerous Drug Cap 98 of Solomon Islands should be amended to address the changing drug issues in the country and the region.¹⁵

Conclusion

The evolving threat of TNOC in the Pacific is far from a localized issue. It has a direct impact on U.S. security through drug flows and cyber scams, a corrosive effect on global economic stability, and profound implications for geopolitical competition and the international rules-based order. A comprehensive, adaptive strategy that integrates diplomatic, intelligence, law enforcement, and capacity-building efforts with regional partners is essential to effectively counter this multifaceted and escalating challenge.

Closing the Maritime Domain Awareness Gap in the Pacific

By Benjamin Wheeler

Introduction

Due to the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, current analytical capacity is insufficient to fully understand what is happening across its maritime domain; surveillance assets and analytical institutions are simply not adequately developed to keep pace with evolving threats. This gap has direct implications for regional security, resilient supply chains, and the ability to counter illicit activity. Maritime domain awareness (MDA), therefore, becomes not just a technical function, but also a strategic necessity—one that underpins stability, economic development, safety, and the protection of the marine environment.¹

The Pacific region stretches across roughly one-third of the earth's surface.² Yet the islands that make up the region have relatively small landmasses and populations. Tuvalu, for example, has an area of 10 square miles, roughly half the size of Manhattan.³ It is a significant challenge for Pacific Island nations to control their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), which collectively amount to approximately 10 percent of the world's ocean surface.⁴ Resources are already stretched thin even as transnational organized crime (TNOC); illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and major military powers converge on this vast oceanic space.⁵ Effective MDA requires a coherent shared picture of maritime activity; however, the geographic scale of the Pacific overwhelms

the capacity of existing resources and institutions, making it difficult to sustain such a common operating picture.

There is, therefore, a real need for allies to support Pacific Island countries in enhancing their situational awareness capabilities. Closing the awareness gap will require access to commercial MDA software, increased human and technical capacity built with a Pacific focus, and strengthened regional fusion centers that can operate at scale.

Challenges

The primary MDA challenge facing Pacific Island countries is the difficulty of maintaining comprehensive surveillance across extremely large EEZs. There is a persistent mismatch between the scale of the maritime space and the capacity of national and regional institutions. This reality limits the region's ability to detect, track, and respond to security threats such as TNOC, IUU fishing, and smuggling.⁶

National maritime assets are limited. Patrol boats, maritime patrol aircraft, coast watch systems, and radar installations are scarce, and external partners donate many key assets.⁷ These resources cannot cover entire EEZs, and levels of capability differ significantly among countries. As a result, surveillance coverage is intermittent and data gaps routinely emerge, producing incomplete maritime pictures and reducing the effectiveness of enforcement and deterrence.⁸

Embracing emerging technologies can significantly improve situational awareness, but only if systems are usable, interoperable, and locally maintainable.

While physical presence at sea remains important, technology is now central to delivering MDA at scale. Embracing emerging technologies can significantly improve situational awareness, but only if systems are usable, interoperable, and locally maintainable. There is limited sustainable benefit to the region from donated platforms or software when these are not accompanied by clear, long-term capacity development.⁹

At present, there is no consistently available and shared common operating picture that fuses accessible technologies into a timely decision-ready tool for Pacific Island countries. When larger partners share information with Pacific counterparts, challenges arise in absorbing and operationalizing the material. There is often limited capacity to receive and manage classified intelligence and to integrate multiple data streams into a single view.¹⁰ The Pacific Fusion Centre (PFC), located in Port Villa, Vanuatu, gathers open-source information and provides analysis, but in its current mandate and configuration, it cannot on its own provide all the higher-end capabilities required to fully address TNOC and IUU threats.¹¹

Policy Recommendations

1. **Expand Pacific access to commercial MDA software within an agreed interoperability framework.** Commercially available software is now able to use advanced data science, behavioral analytics, and multiple information sources (i.e., automatic identification system, synthetic aperture radar, radio frequency data, and satellite imagery) to produce a secure and intuitive common operating picture for the maritime domain.¹² The core value of this software lies in transforming complex datasets into clear, actionable displays for users with varying levels of analytical expertise.

Partners should support wider access to such systems for Pacific Island countries to help protect data sovereignty while aligning with existing national and regional systems. Where the platform does not fully meet Pacific needs, it should be adapted in close consultation with Pacific stakeholders.

A Pacific-led governance board could be established to provide oversight of how the system is used, ensuring that it enhances, rather than competes with, existing platforms. This approach aligns with Pacific priorities of maintaining sovereignty, ensuring technology is fit for purpose, and supporting both larger and smaller countries equitably.

2. **Build long-term human and technical capacity through Pacific-led training pathways.** Pacific societies often operate on relationship-based models in which enduring personal connections are central to institutional effectiveness.¹³ Short project cycles, high staff turnover, and heavy reliance on foreign technical personnel undermine the long-term delivery of advanced MDA systems. To address this, partners should collaborate to invest in sustained, Pacific-led human-capital development that produces a cadre of regional MDA specialists.¹⁴

Existing institutions, such as the PFC, the University of the South Pacific, the Pacific Community, and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) provide natural foundations for this effort. Pacific-to-Pacific training models should be prioritized, with experienced regional practitioners training the next cohort of professionals.¹⁵

3. **Scale and strengthen the FFA, PFC, and other regional maritime centers.** Scaling and strengthening the FFA and PFC will enhance the region's ability to generate high-quality analysis and make informed decisions. The PFC already adds value by assessing illicit maritime activity, supporting national authorities, and improving situational awareness across large ocean areas.¹⁶ The FFA, meanwhile, enhances MDA by integrating fisheries intelligence, coordinating joint surveillance operations, and harmonizing compliance frameworks among member states.¹⁷

Pacific governments and external partners should work together to secure stable, long-term funding aligned with the PFC's strategic goals. This should include support for additional national or subregional fusion centers. These centers could be located in Fiji and Papua New Guinea to extend the network and reduce reliance on a single node.¹⁸

All such institutions should remain governed by Pacific nations, with balanced representation from Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. This helps ensure equitable prioritization, mitigates donor-driven agendas, and reinforces regional ownership. Strengthening these centers under Pacific leadership will improve the region's ability to convert data into actionable intelligence and support national and regional security objectives.

Conclusion

Strengthening MDA in the Pacific is ultimately a question of aligning scale, capacity, and governance. Expanding access to commercial MDA software, investing in long-term Pacific-led human and technical capacity, and scaling regional fusion centers can collectively close the situational awareness gap. If pursued under Pacific leadership and with genuine partnership from allied countries, these measures will help ensure that the Pacific's maritime domain is monitored, understood, and safeguarded in line with regional priorities.

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