

Maintaining US Credibility in the Pacific Islands

AMBASSADOR JOHN T. HENNESSEY-NILAND

If successful, the September 2022 US–Pacific Island Country Summit meeting between President Joe Biden and 12 Pacific Island leaders can help ensure the administration’s “new” rhetoric about the importance of the region is matched with additional resources. American leadership is on the line here. A United States Institute of Peace report issued prior to the summit points out “intensifying competition with Beijing has led U.S. policy makers to reappraise the strategic importance of the Pacific.”¹

The credibility of US claims of a new commitment to the region—which has seen American attention wax and wane over the years—is going to be tested. The advantages that the United States enjoy in the Indo-Pacific are at risk if this administration’s efforts are regarded as too little too late. Washington has a historic relationship with the Pacific Islands dating to World War II; there are close family ties that continue to this day between the region and Pacific Island communities in the United States. These nations share values and ideals that are held in common with the United States, and the US military presence in the region is welcomed by and large. These bonds have helped overcome the distance from Washington even during lengthy periods of US disinterest.

This region has been the focus of attention previously, with much fanfare (at least in the United States) about American “pivots” to the Pacific, which have petered out over time. Island leaders have heard it all before.² Unless additional resources follow these new announcements, Washington risks seeing these nations turning to other sources of support, such as from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which is focused on expanding China’s presence and influence across the Pacific. What is most concerning is what may follow any PRC aid. Beijing is a vigorous competitor in the region and not averse to ignoring the rules. The United States needs to be present as well as persistent in the Pacific Islands, demonstrating day-by-day Washington’s commitment and capability to be the partner of choice.

Recent US administrations, to their credit, have taken important steps and announced a series of initiatives focused on a free and open Indo-Pacific. In 2020, the administration issued the “Pacific Pledge,” which promised more than USD 100 million in new assistance to the region.³ Earlier this year, the White House

released a new *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, which specifically mentions—for the first time—that climate change threatens to destabilize the region.⁴ And in June, the governments of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States established the Partners in the Blue Pacific—a minilateral (and much needed) effort to coordinate assistance from like-minded nations.⁵ Palau’s new fiber optic cable is a great example of execution.

For its part, the Department of State (DOS) has “stepped up.” Secretary of State Antony Blinken was in Fiji earlier this year and Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman traveled to the region in August, reflecting “the United States’ commitment to engage meaningfully with fellow Pacific nations in the spirit of partnership and friendship.”⁶ The DOS and the White House have also announced—subject to Congressional funding and approval from the host governments—the opening of new US embassies in Kiribati and Tonga and potentially other countries in the region.⁷

However, the DOS needs to do more, including strengthening the small US outposts that dot the region. The motor pools in our larger embassies have more staff than small Pacific posts like Palau. This must change. Some in the region are questioning if the new US embassies will be “full service” posts—will they have an economic or USAID officer with reach-back to US development assistance; a consular officer who can issue visas to facilitate travel to the United States; or a defense attaché to strengthen military support? Will these new posts advance US strategic objectives as well as assist with other pressing concerns in the region? So, it is not just about more money.

What is worse than American neglect is overpromising and underdelivering. Pacific Island leaders know that US interest in their region has as much to do with the global contest with the PRC as with the islands themselves. To be successful, there must be something in every US engagement and deployment in the Indo-Pacific that addresses the myriad other concerns of these nations, such as climate change and capacity building in their communities. That is the basis of a true and lasting partnership. US assistance on COVID is a model for such help.

Possibly the best way to demonstrate US resolve is to agree on funding for the Compacts of Free Association with Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands—the three nations in the Pacific freely associated with the United States.⁸ A positive conclusion to these talks and prompt funding of them would be a powerful signal of America’s long-term commitment to the region and its interest in assisting the people of the Pacific. Should skeptics question the cost, this would be far less expensive than a new US base there or extra ships to patrol the Pacific. 🌐

Ambassador John T. Hennessey-Niland

Ambassador Hennessey-Niland is the former US ambassador to Palau. He is one of the most experienced “Pacific hands” ever to serve in the Department of State. He has worked at the White House at the National Security Council, as a UN War Crimes Investigator in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, and at a number of posts in Europe as well as multiple assignments in the Pacific, including Fiji, Australia, and Hawai’i, where he was the foreign policy advisor to the commander of US Marine Corps Forces Pacific (MARFORPAC). He is currently a professor of practice at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University.

Notes

1. Philip Davidson, David Stilwell, and Robert Underwood, “Why China’s Influence in the Freely Associated States Matters to the United States,” *United States Institute of Peace*, 15 September 2022, <https://www.usip.org/>.

2. Kenneth G. Liberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” Brookings, 21 December 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/>.

3. “U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Islands: 2020 Pacific Pledge” (fact sheet, US Department of State, 1 October 2020), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/>.

4. *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

5. “Establishing the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP): joint statement” (press release, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Government of the United Kingdom, 25 June 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/>.

6. “Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to Visit Samoa, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Australia, and New Zealand” (media note, US Department of State, 3 August 2022), <https://www.state.gov/>.

7. “Vice President Harris Announces Commitments to Strengthen U.S. Partnership with the Pacific Islands” (fact sheet, The White House, 12 July 2022), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

8. Angela Smith, “US Compacts of Free Association Are Key to Deterring a Taiwan Contingency,” *The Diplomat*, 9 August 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/>.

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