

## A Strategic Vision for the Pacific

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The United States has a long history of enduring relationships with the Pacific islands dating from the early days of Yankee whalers to our alliances in World War II, until today, when we are seeking ways to implement a comprehensive and renewed engagement in the region.

“The United States is a Pacific Power.” This frequent refrain of American officials is usually directed at Asian audiences and intended to convey that the United States’ transpacific relationships are an integral feature of the Asian security and economic landscape. While completely true, the concept of “Pacific Power” implicit in this observation often does not encompass the numerous Pacific island countries (PICs) scattered across the vast ocean between America and Asia. United States’ interests are deeply embedded throughout the Pacific. We have a strong stake in the economic growth and stability of Pacific island countries.

The State of Hawaii, our Pacific territories, and our unique relationship with the Freely Associated States make the United States an integral part of the Pacific. The region is changing, however, and our engagement must change, too, if we are to preserve our place in it. The Pacific’s shifting dynamic is characterized by substantial development in Guam resulting from the relocation of US forces from Okinawa, major investment in resource rich Papua New Guinea, untapped undersea riches, and profound environmental challenges. Increased labor mobility throughout the region, primarily to Australia and New Zealand but also to the United States, provides substantial remittances that underpin the region’s economy. Pacific island countries, however, still remain extremely vulnerable.

Our priorities in the Pacific should be to support and protect democracy and human rights, encourage economic growth and development, foster regional stability, elicit support for US security interests outside the region, and build capacity for environmental protection and resource management. We must also continue to promote US economic interests, such as American investments in the mineral resources, consumer products, tourism and food processing sectors; maintenance of access to Pacific waters by US fishing vessels; and the pursuit of expanded routes for US air carriers.

As US Ambassador in Suva, I am responsible for maintaining diplomatic relations and consular functions with five countries, as well as New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, which together encompass 7.57 million square miles and reflect the diversity of challenges and opportunities found throughout Micronesia, Polynesia, and Melanesia. These countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu) occupy a strategically important place in the Pacific. They are our partners in addressing critical global and regional issues, and it is in the United States’ interest to remain fully engaged

with them. In addition, Embassy Suva is a regional hub post that supports our missions in Port Moresby, Kolonia, Majuro, and Koror on public diplomacy, environmental, labor and security issues with a reach spanning the Pacific.

Kiribati, for example, generally manages its affairs responsibly but has severely limited prospects for economic development. Sitting in the penumbra of the “American Pacific,” it occupies a strategic location stretching across 3,000 miles of ocean. It has emerged as a strategic partner supporting a wide range of US security objectives, including a recent maritime security agreement. Bilateral cooperation is growing, and US assistance to Kiribati is increasing. Kiribati’s expansive Exclusive Economic Zone encompasses valuable tuna fishing grounds and the Phoenix Islands Protected Area, which abuts the United States’ newly proclaimed Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. We will soon sign a memorandum of understanding with Kiribati that will enable our nations to work together to better protect those valuable natural areas, the two largest marine reserves in the world.

Tonga has indicated a desire for closer maritime security ties and has provided valuable support to multinational stability operations close to home and far afield. It participates in the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI), which contributes to stability in that once failed state. Tongan troops have also provided security for Coalition forces at Camp Victory, Iraq, and the Tongan government is considering deployment to Afghanistan. Recent legislative elections showed that Tongans have a strong desire for more representative government, and King George Tupou V has agreed that democratic reforms are needed in the country.

Even while Tonga is making progress toward democracy, Fiji is losing ground. In December 2006, the Fiji military, led by Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, overthrew the country’s lawfully elected government. This was Fiji’s fourth coup in 19 years. The coup has created a prolonged political and economic crisis. Last year, Fiji’s interim government withdrew its pledge to Pacific leaders to hold free and fair elections no later than March 2009. Despite sanctions by development partners, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Commonwealth, every indication is that the interim government will not hold elections before 2014. The media remain heavily censored, and the right to assembly is severely restricted.

The United States responded to the coup in Fiji by imposing a number of sanctions, including a cessation of military and other assistance to the Government of Fiji in accordance with Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act. We also imposed visa sanctions and took other measures directed against the coup leaders and their supporters in close coordination with our allies and partners in the region, in order to underline the urgency to restore democracy and to bolster the efforts of Fiji’s neighbors in the PIF. Moreover, Fiji has been under Section 508 sanctions longer than any other country, which makes our implementation of the sanctions regime vis-à-vis Fiji a template for dealing with small states.

The three pillars of our policy toward Fiji consist of implementing Section 508 sanctions; protecting and promoting US interests; and doing no harm to the people of Fiji. Our sanctions are targeted only against the military regime. The United States continues to provide assistance to the people of Fiji, particularly regarding disaster preparedness and relief. Nor do our sanctions preclude assistance in support of credible steps leading to Fiji's return to democracy. This would include supporting election reform efforts, as well as programs geared toward strengthening civil society, a free press, and an independent judiciary. We continue to maintain full diplomatic relations with Suva and look forward to closer relations when Fiji once again resumes its leadership role in the Pacific by restoring democracy to its people.

Fiji's coup is not just a problem for that country. The political impasse in Suva is an impediment to expanded regional cooperation, greater harmonization of Pacific programs, and broader US engagement. Suva is the headquarters of the Pacific Islands Forum, the leading multilateral political/policymaking organization in the region. In addition to the Forum, several important multilateral technical organizations are based in Fiji, including the University of the South Pacific, which serves as the main tertiary educational institution for 11 Pacific island countries. Fiji hosts numerous diplomatic missions with regional responsibilities, the regional or branch offices of international organizations, regional intergovernmental bodies, and major nongovernmental organizations. It is also the regional transportation center, which with its diplomatic role makes Fiji the informal capital of the Pacific and the nexus of our larger regional engagement.

Pacific island nations face many of the same "global issues" threats and challenges that confront the United States and other countries, but in the case of the Pacific islands, the repercussions can be more acute and the margin for error much smaller. These states' national capacity to respond to the challenges of fighting HIV/AIDS, preventing and managing diabetes, stemming the flow of illicit drugs, combating human trafficking, and preventing illegal fishing, for example, are weak to nonexistent. Nauru's once bountiful phosphate mines are nearly depleted. Its per capita income has plummeted from among the world's highest to near subsistence levels. Environmental degradation poses an especially critical challenge for Pacific island countries. Many include low-lying atolls that are increasingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Tuvalu and Kiribati have expressed concern that any rise in sea level associated with climate change could completely engulf them and require the relocation of their entire populations. Although such concerns may be premature, they reflect the seriousness with which this threat is regarded.

Resource management is also a challenge. Overfishing threatens marine resources and hits hard in the Pacific, because these island states depend on fish stocks not only for their sustenance but as a major source of government revenue. We are already working with Pacific countries to better manage fisheries, strengthen tsunami and other disaster warning and response capabilities, strengthen surveillance of infectious diseases, save coral reefs, adapt to a changing climate, and reduce the impact of invasive species. Our successful Pacific shipriders maritime law enforcement program, first established in the Freely Associated States and the Cook Islands, is now being offered throughout the region. Kiribati and Tonga also have penned agreements with the United States, expanding the

authority of the US Coast Guard to protect fisheries and increase maritime law enforcement in cooperation with our Pacific partners.

Acute lack of governmental capacity is an impediment to development throughout the region and limits the ability of Pacific island countries to meet their international obligations and respond effectively to either the challenges that confront them or the demands of their citizens. These small states rely heavily on a constellation of regional intergovernmental organizations to supplement their very limited human and financial resources. The United States is a member of some of these organizations and has long-standing relationships with others. Strengthening our coordination with Pacific regional institutions is one of the most constructive and cost-effective steps we could take to ramp up our regional engagement and have a positive impact on the security and prosperity of the Pacific islands.

We also look to strengthen capacity in the private sector to ensure the Pacific region's full participation in the recovery from the global economic downturn. We are committed to transparency and inclusiveness as central principles for expanded trade. Just as regional and nongovernmental organizations require the confidence of their stakeholders to function well, the private sector relies on networks of confidence among businesses that customer and client needs will be met. This Mission is committed to providing efficient and productive service to help improve commercial ties among the countries of this region and the United States.

We see prospects for mutually beneficial trade opportunities and civil aviation, reflecting our long-term trade links, despite global economic uncertainty. Continental Micronesia will begin flights to Nadi that would link Fiji to Guam and Honolulu, opening opportunities for increased business, tourism, and labor travel. Key exporting sectors of the US economy, such as pharmaceuticals and aircraft, have grown this year. America's large and efficient poultry industry and other products have the potential to reach greater numbers of regional consumers.

The United States looks forward to enabling, sharing in, and spreading equitably among our Pacific partners the benefits of an economic recovery to come. Doing more business with the United States will provide the region's consumers with more choices and lower costs, create employment, and contribute to economic prosperity. With transparent, free, and fair frameworks, we can make trade a powerful contributor to the revival of the US and Pacific economies.

Labor issues have a critical impact on the Pacific island countries. The health of most of their economies is largely dependent upon the volume of remittances from their overseas workers, while their physical plant and key infrastructure degrade rapidly for lack of skilled maintenance. Youthful demographics and extremely high levels of unemployment characterize many of the islands at the same time we are seeking to meet the enormous demand for both skilled and unskilled labor required to support the relocation of Marines from Okinawa to Guam. Labor mobility is a potential life-line to societies threatened by rising sea levels. A new regional labor officer has arrived in Embassy Suva

to take on these challenges by promoting technical and vocational education and training opportunities, supporting labor rights, and strengthening the elements of civil society.

A key partner for the United States is the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), headquartered in Noumea, New Caledonia, but with a large office in Suva that houses over a third of its staff. We collaborate with the SPC in such areas as maritime and port security, the fight against pandemic influenza and other public health concerns, natural resource management, food security and climate change. The full participation of US Pacific territories and the Freely Associated States in SPC provides an additional avenue for further US regional engagement. US domestic agencies should be encouraged to look for ways to make greater use of SPC as well as the Samoa-based South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and other regional bodies to implement their mandates, while linking their activities in US-affiliated jurisdictions to broader regional efforts that address common environment, health, and economic development challenges.

In addition to expanding our utilization of, and support for, Pacific regional organizations, we should explore other avenues toward greater engagement. Reestablishing US Agency for International Development (USAID) programming in the Pacific is critical. The Pacific affords an opportunity for USAID to play a role as the overall coordinator of US government assistance in the region. In addition to multiple US government agencies, other donor countries, multilateral organizations, NGOs and private sector partners can be engaged to develop a comprehensive approach to development assistance. USAID officers covering regional issues would work closely with the Regional Environmental Office to provide oversight for grant programs undertaken by implementing partners and designed to help the PICs with climate change adaptation.

Revisiting Millennium Challenge Corporation eligibility for small but otherwise well-qualified island states would make a powerful contribution toward enhancing cooperation and improving America's standing in the region. As we consider increasing the Peace Corps worldwide, it is worth remembering that the Pacific offers a number of safe and receptive locations eager to absorb new volunteers. Finally, the Honolulu-based Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies and the East-West Center are both essential partners in our regional engagement.

All of these initiatives are underpinned by our growing and increasingly important public diplomacy efforts. The departure of Public Affairs offices from our Pacific island embassies in the mid-1990s set back our efforts to educate and cultivate vital relationships. For more than ten years, the future leaders of Pacific nations have lacked a full range of scholarship opportunities to study in the United States. Over the last two years, we have greatly expanded our international exchange programs, providing more opportunities for Pacific islanders to visit the United States to study issues of common concern. Citizens from the Pacific are receiving Humphrey Fellowships to work and study at institutions and corporations, and Fulbright Scholarships to earn US master's degrees. My staff has brought musicians, artists, and speakers to the islands to share American culture. We are reaching out to younger audiences with revised Web sites and a new Facebook page, and we are training journalists to promote a freer and more professional media.

The future holds many public diplomacy opportunities, including the “ribbon cutting” of our New Embassy Compound (NEC) in 2010 that will highlight Embassy Suva’s role as a regional hub post. At that time, we will host a week of intensive outreach activities to underline our expanding commitment to the Pacific. But we must do more. We need to reengage PICs through additional public diplomacy programs that promote mutual understanding and address capacity building in critical areas such as transnational crime, corruption, rule of law and the environment.

We are not alone out here. In addition to the United States, many nations have significant interests in the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand have strong cultural, political, historical, and security ties to the region. The United States works closely with these two friends in coordinating policies and programs throughout the Pacific to achieve common objectives.

France has Pacific territories and remains engaged in the region, as does the European Union, which is a major donor. Japan, too, has a substantial presence and two large parallel aid programs. Historically, we have been less engaged in coordinating with these important partners. We should redouble our efforts to do better.

China is rapidly expanding ties throughout the Pacific, apparently in its pursuit of resources, commercial opportunities, and favorable alliances. Beijing has set aside a \$600 million low-interest loan fund for Pacific island countries. It is increasingly important that Beijing show accountability and transparency in its assistance programs to ensure that these efforts support good governance and the rule of law. The recent truce over competition for diplomatic recognition between Beijing and Taipei has strengthened the ability of Pacific island countries to address these issues. It also affords us a new opportunity to work with China to develop a cooperative approach to development assistance.

Pacific island countries remain the United States’ staunchest allies at the United Nations. However, they require our commitment in order to remain strong. Expanded security assistance, economic aid and technical cooperation are required to safeguard our interests in the Pacific and to achieve our development and environmental protection goals. Additional US assistance to the region does not have to be large. Moderate funding that prioritizes the challenges of water, sanitation and energy, and utilizes Pacific multilateral bodies would have a positive impact out of proportion to the low cost and would help safeguard US global and regional interests.

I see my responsibilities as working with countries that are connected by an ocean rather than separated by water. This has immense implications for US national security, including defense of the homeland and regional prosperity. The United States cannot afford to neglect Pacific island countries. For their sake, and our own, we must work together to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.