



On his first day in office, the Trump administration engaged with their Australian, Indian, and Japanese counterparts – members of the strategic grouping known as the Quad. Shortly after, the Quad issued a statement reaffirming their “shared commitment to strengthening a Free and Open Indo-Pacific” and opposing “any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion,” a potential reference to countering China’s influence in the region. The promptness of this meeting underscores the Indo-Pacific’s strategic importance to the Trump administration. Moreover, the Quad reflects a deliberate United States (US) effort to contain and counter China, highlighting how American perceptions of security in the Indo-Pacific are inextricably linked to Beijing’s regional ambitions.

Furthermore, within hours of taking office, President Trump submitted the United States’ formal notification of its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This move, while significant, was not unexpected, as it aligned with actions taken during his previous administration. It also accentuated a defining aspect of Trump’s approach to security – one that mainly excluded climate change from its framework.

While Trump's withdrawal will undeniably harm many states in the region that are most vulnerable to climate change – particularly Small Island Developing States (SIDS) – it also presents unique challenges for the US in garnering the support of island nations in regions like the Pacific. The prioritisation of initiatives such as the Quad and other traditional security arrangements may align with US interests in countering China. However, this narrow focus on traditional security, rather than addressing non-traditional threats like climate change, risks creating opportunities for other actors to step in and address the pressing needs of these islands. This dynamic could inadvertently weaken US influence in the region and undermine broader efforts to counter China's growing presence. By sidelining climate action, the US may face increasing difficulty in cultivating the critical support of island states.

If any state has arguably learned the consequences of disregarding its neighbours' concerns, it is Australia. Under the Morrison administration, Australia failed to fully grasp the gravity of the climate crisis for island nations, as reflected in both ill-considered remarks by parliamentary members and the government's reluctance to commit to cleaner energy initiatives. By neglecting the Pacific Islands Forum's (PIF) 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which identified climate change as the single greatest threat to the peoples of the Pacific, Australia faced significant repercussions. This disregard contributed to a shift in regional dynamics, with Pacific Island nations seeking alternative partnerships. A striking example came in 2022 when the Solomon Islands signed a security agreement with China, sparking widespread concern in the Western world.

The US faces a strategic challenge in the Pacific, where island nations have a history of pragmatically leveraging their relationships with major powers to serve their interests. This dynamic is reflected in the “friends to all, enemies to none” foreign policy approach adopted by states like Fiji and the Solomon Islands, emphasising flexibility over strict alignment (see for example, Fiji's recently published White Paper). For instance, the Solomon Islands recently turned to China for potential security assistance, prompting Australia—initially reluctant to increase its support—to step in out of concern that Beijing might gain influence. Similarly, Fiji has also leaned towards China in response to perceived neglect from traditional partners like Australia on critical issues such as climate change. In 2018, then-Prime Minister Bainimarama praised China's leadership in climate advocacy, highlighting its efforts alongside countries like India to draw global attention to the issue. This commendation came as Fiji criticised the lack of meaningful action from Australia and the US on pressing environmental concerns. This pattern underscores the Pacific islands' strategic use of major power rivalries to advance their own agendas.

The above analysis underscores the importance for the United States to tread carefully in its engagement with Pacific Island nations, as neglecting their concerns could drive these states to forge closer ties with powers the US seeks to counter. The Pacific islands, particularly when acting collectively through the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), wield significant influence. Through what is known as “collective diplomacy,” these nations have effectively navigated the international arena to secure outcomes responsive to their needs.

For instance, the PIF’s advocacy for their 2050 Strategy, framing the region as the Blue Pacific Continent, played a pivotal role in shaping the U.S.-Pacific Partnership Declaration to align with Pacific priorities, as highlighted by the Australian Institute for International Affairs. On a global scale, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), representing 20 per cent of United Nations (UN) membership, forms a substantial voting bloc. Maintaining positive relations with these islands is not only strategic but also essential for advancing US interests in the international arena.

The Trump administration must recognise that both outcomes and processes matter. In its efforts to counter China’s influence in the Indo-Pacific, disregarding the concerns and agency of island states could ultimately undermine the very objectives it seeks to achieve.

This piece was compiled by Daniela Marggraff and edited by Maxi Schoeman. The opinions and findings expressed in this Report are those of the author(s) and the NIHSS accepts no liability in this regard.

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