



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory  
Report

**Pivot to the Pacific:  
The Second US-  
Pacific Islands  
Summit**

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The second U.S.-Pacific Islands summit in Washington, D.C., represented the ‘explosive’ reengagement of US foreign policy with the region. From 25 – 26 September 2023 Biden hosted Pacific Island leaders in his capital to reaffirm US commitment to the region. This emphasis on the region comes amidst rising geopolitical tensions with China and growing concerns on the effects of climate change.

### **The US commitment to the region**

This was the second US-Pacific Islands summit, attended by island leaders and representatives from the 18-nation Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Looking back on the long history of American involvement in the region, Biden told the summit: “Like our forebears during World War two, we know that a great deal of the history of our world will be written across the Pacific over the coming years.” Biden affirmed that the US is “committed to ensuring an Indo-Pacific region that is free, open, prosperous, and secure”. The summit saw the Biden administration deploy the extensive financial capacity of the US, setting aside \$810 million in new assistance from last year’s summit and \$7.2 billion in “new funding and programs for the Pacific Island region” that US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, outlined back in May 2023 during talks in Papua New Guinea with the PIF. President Biden announced “a new slate of activities” which would include a request to Congress for “nearly \$200 million” for the region. These new financial packages would cover the cost for new embassies, most notably in Port Villa, Vanuatu, to further the scope of US diplomacy, which has seen embassies open in the Solomon Islands and Tonga all in 2023. Despite these embassies not yet offering consular services, the Biden administration outlined the ‘intention’ to equip these embassies with the capacity to deliver such services.

The Biden administration demonstrated the increasing diplomatic presence of the US in the region by formally recognising Niue and the Cook Islands as independent sovereign states. In his press release, Niuean Premier Dalton Tagaelagi, expressed his country’s gratitude with the recognition, “We are hopeful that this official step in our partnership will provide great opportunities”. The US quest for an expanded diplomatic footprint is accompanied by promises of extending maritime security relationships, deepening economic partnerships, and greenlighting development initiatives, such as a microfinance facility geared at women-owned enterprises.

### **The geopolitical significance of the Pacific Islands**

The summit is preceded by an unprecedented volatile period in the relationship between the US and China. China’s increasing economic and military might and concerns about its intentions with this newfound power have catalysed the US’ hugely upscaled engagements in the Pacific. The geography of the Pacific Island nations makes them valuable partners for the two superpowers seeking hegemony in the region. They are strategically located astride vital maritime shipping routes, whereby in the outbreak of military conflict in the Indo-Pacific, they would make key outposts to support military supply lines. This is a major interest for the US as it operates military bases across the region through its Compacts of Free Association (COFA) relationships, which until recently was heavily dependent on its regional allies, Australia and New Zealand, to lead on development and aid.

Moreover, the territories of the Pacific Islands include vast exclusive economic zones, making them potentially critical partners as states look to the oceans for deep-sea minerals, food and more. China has become increasingly assertive in its geopolitical objectives in the region to the alarm of many Pacific Island states, most notably Palau. In the case of Palau, China has been mapping undersea ridges and assigning them names, and it is soon expected to make claims to these subterranean features. Such developments are a matter of urgency for Palau and the role of the US as a security guarantor for Palau and the rest of the Pacific is increasingly important. The summit further illustrated an alignment of U.S. geostrategic concerns and those of PIF members according to President of Palau, Surangel Whipps.

Nevertheless, this appreciation of the US presence in the region is not shared by all Pacific Island states. Absent from the summit was Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare who later justified his absence on the grounds that he wanted to avoid a 'lecture' and to focus on more pressing issues at home. His absence is significant given that under his watch, the Solomon Islands has built close ties with China, switching to recognise Beijing over Taipei in 2019, and signing a bilateral security cooperation agreement last year in April.

### **The impact of climate change**

The biggest challenge for the Pacific's future is the climate crisis. President Biden used the summit to acknowledge that his administration has heard their warnings about the impact of climate change on the region and that his administration is committed to helping them meet the challenge. The PIF has long been critical of the West for not doing enough to control climate change despite being responsible for much of the problem from their perspective, and for profiting from loans provided to vulnerable nations to mitigate the effects. Biden seemed to head these warnings when he announced that "sea-level rise driven by human-induced climate change should not cause any country to lose its statehood or its membership of the United Nations, its specialized agencies or other international organizations." On this, the US proposed a 10-point plan intended to ameliorate the impacts of climate change, ranging from strengthening disaster preparedness to more climate financing. The request for Congress to approve \$200 million in new assistance for the region announced by Biden, earmarked financing to help the islands prepare for climate and natural hazards as well as improve infrastructure.

The summit can be credited in expanding on the cooperation instituted in the inaugural summit last year, with the US seeming to recognise the significance of the PIF both for climate concerns and geopolitical interests. Although, geopolitical competition promises development chances, its divisive nature will hinder crucial collective action on issues such as climate change, and the functioning of regional institutions will also be hindered as member states are pulled away from consensus.

