

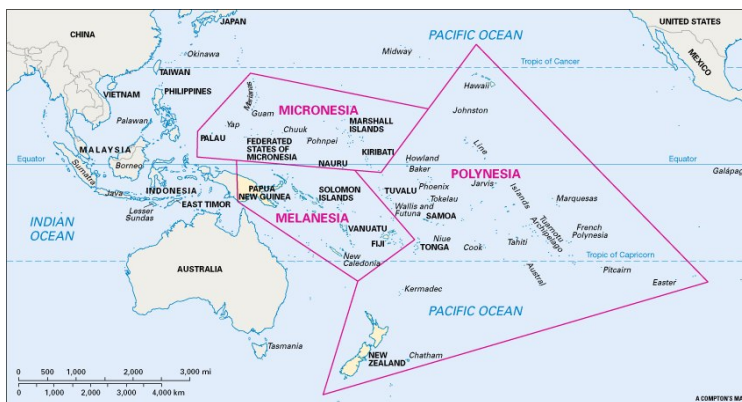
America's "Pacific Principle" in an Indivisible Pacific Islands Region

By Satu Limaye

The United States should, I have argued, pursue the "Pacific Principle. The main features of this principle are power, purpose and commitment to access and engagement across the region in all dimensions from security to public diplomacy." These actions matter more than what the United States calls the region running from our west coast to the eastern coast of Africa.

The Pacific Island countries (PICs) and region (PIR) are crucial for many reasons; and not only because of China's rising activities there. Four Indo-Pacific contests, over the balance of power, order, relations, and narratives, are having particular impacts on the PIR. An emerging feature is the increasing indivisibility of the region; that is, the declining significance of the colonial-era sub-regional delineations of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. These trends provide a basis for framing America's policy approach to the PIR.

The Pacific Islands Region & Four Indo-Pacific Contests



The first Indo-Pacific contest is the balance of power. In the PIR, the balance of combined diplomatic, military, and aid power favor the United States and its allies; most of whom are also resident powers (France, Australia, and New Zealand). Furthermore, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and India, among others, are also increasing their engagement in the PIR. Such a favorable balance provides space for the United States to work closely with PICs on their existential challenge — climate

change. Climate change impacts vary across the vast PIR, but do make the region more indivisible in the sense of a unifying concern with implications for all. The United States and Australia in particular need to "step up" their own commitment to addressing climate change even as they highlight that China should match its rhetoric with more concrete actions.

A second Indo-Pacific contest is the balance of order; of rules, norms and institutions. Pacific Island countries are international order "rule takers" or "rule reliers." One important international asset for the PICs is the United Nations. PICs are also articulating their own rules, norms, and institutions via the Pacific Vision, Blue Pacific, and the Boe and Kainaki II declarations. One can discern increasing regional indivisibility around the issues of climate change, sustainable economic development, and regional identity. The United States should promote PIR resilience, identity, and sovereignty-respecting integration in ways analogous to its support for ASEAN.

A third contest is the Indo-Pacific's "balance of relations." U.S.-China competitive relations get the most attention, but rivalries within the Indo-Pacific, especially between China and Japan and China and India, have also led to more players in the PIR. Senior Pacific Islands leaders have expressed concern about getting this

Satu Limaye, Vice President, East West Center and Director of EWC in Washington, explains that "An emerging feature is the increasing indivisibility of the region; that is, the declining significance of the colonial-era sub-regional delineations of Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. These trends provide a basis for framing America's policy approach to the PIR."

balance right. For example, Dame Meg Taylor, as Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, identified the “increasing plurality of regional actors” as one of two key challenges facing the region—the other was “unmet development needs.” As in Southeast Asia, PICs, by inviting internationalization, can leverage new and more active players to their benefit while seeking to avoid strategic spillovers. The United States should be mindful of PIC sensitivities about pushing an “either-or choice” in the region.

Finally, there is an Indo-Pacific contest over “narratives” (e.g., liberal international order vs “Asia for Asians”). This narrative contestation is less applicable to the PIR. Pacific Islands leaders such as Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Mailelegaoi have used terms such as “Blue Pacific” to provide a “new narrative for Pacific regionalism and how the [Pacific Islands] Forum engages with the world.” Such narratives emphasize a more holistic, indivisible character of the region. The United States should recognize and respect such narratives.

The United States and an Indivisible Pacific Islands Region

The Pacific Islands region’s place in world and in America’s conceptions has had its twists and turns. What is indisputable is that maintaining presence and engagement in the PIR has been part of U.S. policy since the mid-nineteenth century. There continues to be a strong demand in the PIR for a U.S. role. For contemporary U.S. policy, there are several approaches the United States can take, with its allies and partners, in the context of an increasingly indivisible Pacific.

"The United States must take the threat of climate change to the PICs seriously. Climate change is the fundamental reality and existential issue for many PICs."

First, the United States must take the threat of climate change to the PICs seriously. Climate change is the fundamental reality and existential issue for many PICs, particularly the smaller, lower-elevation ones. Dislocations and development stresses will impact U.S. jurisdictions due to emigration and economic burdens. U.S. Congressman Ed Case of Hawaii, co-founder of the Pacific Islands Caucus in the House of Representatives, has highlighted climate change impacts for the state he represents. As the United States prepares to address the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs) with the Freely Associated States (FAS) of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and Palau, this will become even more important.

Second, the spread of U.S.-China competition argues for the United States with its allies and friends to move away from a traditional primary focus on Micronesia to the entire PIR. Australia is likely to continue to concentrate its resources toward Melanesia, and New Zealand towards Polynesia; and there are good arguments for allocating resources in this way. But the factors pushing the PIR toward indivisibility means the United States, its allies, partners, and friends do not have to be everywhere equally, but they do need to be everywhere.

Third, the United States needs to work with allies and partners, including the PICs themselves, to align priority to the PIR and specific issues. The United States and its allies and partners need to be interested in the same things, same places, and calibrate respective policy and resource priorities. In the United States, over the past two or so years, there has been an enormous boom of interest in and attention toward the Pacific Islands. This needs to be sustained rather than turning out to be episodic — as has happened in the past.

Fourth, the United States should align and create efficiencies in programs and mechanisms such as Australia’s Pacific Maritime Security Program (PMSP) and Pacific Patrol Boat program with the U.S. Oceania Maritime Security Initiative. The U.S. announcement of expanded support for infrastructure to enhance climate change resilience and adaption is a welcome first step.

The Pacific Islands region is changing in an increasingly fluid, contested, and uncertain Indo-Pacific. Despite its huge expanse and diversity, factors emanating from within and without the region are creating a holistic and indivisible region. The United States, working with allies and partners, and aligned with PIC realities and priorities, has the opportunity to recalibrate and to adapt policies for a sustainable role in this vital region.

Satu Limaye is Vice President, East West Center and Director of EWC in Washington. He is also a Senior Advisor at the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA). He can be contacted at Limayes@eastwestcenter.org.

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