



Pacific maritime security cooperation: views from the Pacific and its partners

# 10. The United States' maritime security cooperation in and with the Pacific Islands

April Herlevi and Genevieve Quirk

The United States (US) has global maritime security interests and pursues specific maritime security cooperation activities in the Pacific Islands region.

This paper describes overarching US views on maritime security and existing mechanisms for cooperation in the Pacific, including both US-led and Pacific-led initiatives. After

summarizing broad global views and specific mechanisms, we assess the compatibility of US goals with Pacific Island priorities and potential challenges to maritime security cooperation.

## US views on maritime security

US views on maritime security are shaped by both global and regional perspectives. The US Navy, US Coast Guard, and US Marine Corps described the global perspective in the joint publication, *Advantage at Sea*, also known as the 'Tri-Services Strategy'.<sup>307</sup> The Tri-Services Strategy recognizes that 'security and prosperity depend[s] on the seas' and also states that US strategy 'focuses on China

and Russia ... prioritiz[ing] competition with China due to its growing economic and military strength'.<sup>308</sup> For the Pacific and Indian Oceans, regional views are captured in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, published in February 2022. The Indo-Pacific Strategy states that the US will 'cooperate to improve maritime security to safeguard fisheries, build maritime-domain awareness, and improve training and advising' with partner Pacific Island countries to create 'a free and open Indo-Pacific that is more connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient'.<sup>309</sup> More specific US policy guidance is contained in the *Pacific Partnership Strategy* released in September 2022.<sup>310</sup> Collectively, these strategic policy documents assert that

the US has global maritime interests and explain existing bilateral and multilateral initiatives that the US is pursuing in the Indo-Pacific and with the Pacific Islands.

## Existing mechanisms for US maritime security cooperation

The Indo-Pacific Strategy recognises that regional maritime security depends on partnerships and reflects policy consistency across US presidential administrations.

## US-led mechanisms

The 2022 *Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States* was designed to rapidly increase US engagement in the Pacific.<sup>311</sup> The Pacific Partnership Strategy has already expanded regional diplomatic presence delivering embassies in Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, re-establishing the USAID regional mission, and appointing the first US envoy to the Pacific.<sup>312</sup> Nonetheless, one recent analysis argues that even this increased ‘diplomatic presence no longer matches strategic needs in the Pacific’ and highlights funding shortfalls in areas critical to maritime security.<sup>313</sup>

In terms of US-led maritime security cooperation, the **Oceania Maritime Security Initiative** (OMSI) is the newest explicit arrangement and has the

potential to be an important coordination mechanism. OMSI is modeled on similar efforts undertaken in Southeast Asia beginning in 2016.<sup>314</sup> The main interagency partner for OMSI in the Pacific Islands is the **US Coast Guard**.

The **Coast Guard’s regional command for the Pacific Area** (PACAREA) encompasses the entire Pacific Ocean inclusive of the Blue Pacific Continent.<sup>315</sup> The US Coast Guard’s regional command is responsible for maritime safety, security, and stewardship in the Pacific. Oceanic fisheries surveillance significantly enhances regional maritime domain awareness (MDA)<sup>316</sup> through the contribution of enforcement capabilities and joint operations. Cooperation with the USCG had previously been undertaken annually through the **Operation Blue Pacific campaigns** which were focused on IUU fishing and transnational maritime crime.<sup>317</sup> The USCG has also recently established the Coast Guard ‘**Marine Environmental Response Regional Activities Center**’ and ‘**Illegal, Unreported, Unregulated (IUU) Fishing Center of Expertise**’ in Hawai‘i aimed at countering maritime crime in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>318</sup>

The new Coast Guard centres should help meet commitments by the US under the latest MOU with the **Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) to continue the *Treaty on Fisheries Between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island States and the Government of the United States of America* 1987 (US Tuna Treaty). The former FFA Director General Pacific Dr Manu Tupou-Roosen recognised this treaty as the ‘cornerstone in our relationship with the United States ... for enhanced collaboration between the Parties in key areas such as combating illegal fishing and tackling climate change’.<sup>319</sup> The US has committed US\$600 million over the next 10 years and US\$10 million

in economic and climate development funds to secure continued access to lucrative tuna in Pacific fishing grounds.<sup>320</sup>

The **Shiprider program**, initiated under the *Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region*, permits US vessels to extend their fisheries surveillance and law enforcement activities to the territorial sea and archipelagic waters of Pacific State Parties.<sup>321</sup> Together with the **Partners in the Blue Pacific** (PBP), the US aims to fund the Pacific’s **Fisheries Science Vessel**, an initiative that responds to regional needs to build capacity as independent actors in maritime surveillance.<sup>322</sup> The US **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration** (NOAA) also supports the **Pacific Islands Region Observer Program** which deploys observers on Pacific fishing vessels and contributes to the enhancement of the existing Early Warning System.<sup>323</sup> USAID’s planned work with the Pacific Community (SPC) will provide US\$3.6 million for disaster preparedness, food security, and emergency management systems.<sup>324</sup> The US government announced \$US8 million for the **Information Services for Resilience Initiative**,<sup>325</sup> and a grant of over \$US1.6 million for Vanuatu to enhance disaster preparedness.<sup>326</sup> Commitments under the Pacific Partnership Strategy have also been made for the **President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience** (PREPARE).<sup>327</sup>

In the North Pacific, the United States renewed the **Compacts of Free Association** (COFA) with the freely associated states (Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)), which extends economic assistance to the COFA states and maintains security guarantees from the US for these countries.<sup>328</sup> In Melanesia, the US has signed a comprehensive **Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Papua New Guinea** that includes access to Lae Seaport, Lombrum Naval Base, and Port Moresby Seaport.<sup>329</sup>

## Pacific-lead maritime security cooperation with US involvement

The US is a founding member of the **Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific** (CROP) institutions—the **Pacific**





## Community (SPC) and Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).

Within the CROP, the US maintains the **Pacific Islands Development Program** (PIDP) located in Hawai'i.<sup>330</sup> The PIDP has been an important diplomatic mechanism, previously hosting the **Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders** with Pacific Island Heads of State. In 2022, these meetings were upgraded as the **US-Pacific Island Country Summit**,<sup>331</sup> now a biennial event hosted by the White House.<sup>332</sup> These various efforts are aligned with the US *Pacific Partnership Strategy* as well as the thematic priorities of the Pacific Island Forum's (PIF's) 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

The US also participates in multilateral fora such as the **South Pacific Defence Ministers' Meeting**, the **US Indo-Pacific Command's Indo-Pacific Environmental Security Forum**, the **Western Pacific Naval Symposium**, and the **Joint Heads of Pacific Security** meeting.

## Potential compatibility challenges

Maritime security cooperation between the US and Pacific Island countries faces at least four main challenges. First, US financial support has not yet matched the policy rhetoric. The *Pacific Partnership Strategy* depends on a significant expansion of US presence in the Pacific. This includes establishing new embassies and increasing the 'diplomatic and development footprint'<sup>333</sup> of USAID and the Peace Corps. In the short timeframe since the 2022 *Pacific Partnership Strategy* was announced, the logistics to enable this expansion are still underway. To illustrate, following an announcement that the US will double the USAID footprint<sup>334</sup> efforts are still ongoing to 'secure larger office space in Fiji and Papua New Guinea to accommodate a growing staff presence'.<sup>335</sup> Coordination could be a challenge given that multiple US agencies, like NASA, NOAA, and the Peace Corps already have relationships with regional institutions and new programs are being layered upon this existing set of partnerships.<sup>336</sup> The White House's recent announcement of programs, still contingent on congressional approval, promised US\$20 million toward the PIF's **Pacific Resilience Facility**; \$4.5 million to USAID for advancing a democratic and resilient Blue Pacific Continent;

and \$500,000 to strengthen regional institutional capacity.<sup>337</sup> Congressional funding of these programs will be an initial test of successful US commitment and will need to be monitored.

The US Coast Guard is an effective partner in the Pacific but may need additional resources to maintain operations in the region. As noted in the 2022 USCG Strategy, 'increasing demand for the Coast Guard's unique authorities, partnerships, and capabilities will stretch our organizational capacity'.<sup>338</sup> Given the important role of the USCG in maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Islands region, competing priorities for the USCG could diminish its capacity to maintain combatting IUU fishing programs or other activities described above.

Second, while the US recognises the centrality of the PIF, US actions have not yet matched that rhetoric in terms of climate change and the region's broader conception of security under the 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security*. The *Boe Declaration* addresses a range of issues, including human and environmental security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster resilience, with each dependent on reducing climate emissions. Despite this, the US continues to rank among the highest emitters on global climate change performance.<sup>339</sup> The US also actively obstructed and diminished ambitions for the UN *Framework Convention on Climate Change* loss and damage fund, championed by Pacific states.<sup>340</sup> Given this history, fulfilling even the modest financial commitment to this global fund would represent a significant gesture toward mending relations.<sup>341</sup>

The third potential challenge for maritime security cooperation between the Pacific Island countries and the US is the lack of US ratification of UNCLOS, which hampers the US's ability to manage the global maritime commons and hurts US credibility. According to the Congressional Research Service, 'U.S. law largely comports' with the provisions in UNCLOS and other elements of customary international law, but the lack of ratification creates a barrier for coordination through this international convention.<sup>342</sup>

Fourth, upcoming US government changes in 2025 could mean the new presidential administration will not

support Pacific partnership programs or the incoming Congress may not fund key initiatives. While there has been relative consistency across presidential administrations regarding the Pacific Islands region, Congress may alter funding priorities for any of the existing mechanisms described above.

## Initial assessments

In 2024, the PIF adopted a new and assertive stance by proposing to categorise **Forum Dialogue Partners** under specific criteria for tier one or two diplomatic partnerships.<sup>343</sup> If the US is serious about the centrality of the PIF, aligning implied funding with delivery is vital.<sup>344</sup> As discussed in the introductory paper, the 2050 *Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* does not explicitly state the term 'maritime security.' Rather, the 2050 Strategy focused on stewardship of the oceans. In contrast, while there are many mechanisms for coordination, the main US maritime strategy documents make clear that competing with China in peacetime and preparing for conflict are key elements of US policy. Given this reality, some Pacific Island countries may view the US as treating them instrumentally in service of strategic competition with China. While environmental stewardship, climate change, and combatting IUU fishing are important components of maritime security cooperation in the Pacific Ocean, it is not clear how those goals would align should a maritime conflict occur in Asia. Thus, as we evaluate maritime security cooperation opportunities for 2025 and beyond, assessment of funding mechanisms and their longevity will need to be key elements of future analysis.