



# Trouble in Paradise: Why a Pacific Islands Squabble Matters for Washington

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While official Washington is focused on the early days of the Joe Biden Administration, a dramatic series of events with significant implications for U.S. interests is roiling the politics of the Pacific Islands.

On February 4, Palau withdrew its membership in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the premier regional political organization in the Pacific Islands. On February 7, the Marshall Islands publicly rebuked the PIF, with its Foreign Minister declaring that his government needed to “reassess our relationship with the PIF.”

The cause of this angst is the selection last week of the PIF's new Secretary-General, former Cook Islands Prime Minister Henry Puna, rather than the long-presumed heir apparent, Marshall Islands Ambassador to the United States Gerald Zackios. But rather than simply a case of sour grapes, the grievances voiced by Palau and the Marshall Islands against the PIF stem from legitimate concerns about whether the organization can truly speak for all Pacific Islanders on its current trajectory.

The Pacific Islands are divided into three geographic groupings: Melanesia (comprising Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu); Polynesia (Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu); and Micronesia (Palau, Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Kiribati). The PIF Secretary-Generalship has traditionally rotated among the three groupings, to be better representative of the entire region. The decision to bypass the Micronesian bloc, which has long felt ignored in regional forums in favor of the more populous Melanesian and Polynesian groupings, threatens to drive a dangerous wedge across the Pacific Islands.

The controversy over the PIF is significant for what it says about the future of the Pacific Islands as a regional grouping able to raise their collective voice on international issues, from climate change to illegal fishing to transnational crime. The twelve sovereign Pacific Islands recognized by the United Nations have been powerful global advocates for their interests over the past decade, particularly on environmental issues, and the PIF has served as their principal regional forum. A fractured PIF will likely mean a diluted voice for the Pacific Islands around the world.

The seeming unraveling of the PIF, like so much else in the era of sustained great power competition, ties directly into the rivalry between the United States and its allies and partners on one side and China on the other over influence in the Pacific Islands.

The Micronesian states, particularly the Freely Associated States (FAS) of Palau, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, have formal treaty obligations under the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States, permitting the U.S. unrestricted military access to their territory in exchange for visa-free entry to the United States and generous financial contributions. The FAS are among the most reliable supporters of Washington at the United Nations, and both Palau and the Marshall Islands enjoy diplomatic relations with Taiwan, as do Nauru and Tuvalu.

As China's influence and interest in the Pacific Islands has grown since the mid-2000s, all the Pacific Islands have confronted Beijing in different ways. Some, like Vanuatu and Samoa, have collaborated closely on economic projects and grown politically and diplomatically closer to Beijing at the expense of traditional partners Australia and New Zealand. Others, most notably in the Micronesian grouping, have expressed deep concern about China's coercive economic behavior, debt-trap diplomacy, and heavy-handed interference in internal politics, such as recognition of Taiwan. In recent weeks, the new Palauan President condemned Beijing's “intimidation” and seized Chinese vessels accused of illegally fishing in Palauan waters.

The divide among the Islands over responding to Chinese malign activity will become even more pronounced if the PIF loses both its claim to broad regional representation and its most China-skeptical members. That is why the Biden Administration should act swiftly, in partnership with Australia and New Zealand (both PIF members), to take concerted action aimed at preventing a complete unraveling of the PIF.

First, beyond the current headlines of the Secretary-General election, the PIF must become more inclusive of the concerns of the Micronesian grouping, including in regards to Chinese malign activity. Illegal fishing, often perpetrated by Chinese vessels, has been an ecological and economic disaster for the Pacific countries. Australia and New Zealand can work with their close partners across the PIF membership to encourage a more aggressive approach to issues like illegal fishing that resonate with the Micronesian states. The alternative is the potential collapse of the PIF as a regional mechanism able to seriously advocate for its members.

Second, the United States should urgently reassure the Micronesian grouping, particularly Palau and the Marshall Islands, that it is advocating for PIF reform and views the continued viability of the PIF as essential for the future of the Pacific Islands. At the same time, there can be no doubt that the United States will remain the security guarantor of the North Pacific through the COFAs with the FAS. The Biden Administration can provide undeniable evidence of its commitment to the Micronesian grouping specifically, and the Pacific Islands as a whole, by working with Congress to expeditiously extend and fully fund the COFAs.

Finally, the United States and its allies and partners must continue to speak honestly and forthrightly about China's malign activity in the region. Whether it is illegal fishing, predatory economic practices, or meddling in the internal affairs of the region, Washington, Canberra, and Wellington serve both the people of the Pacific Islands, and their own interests, by speaking candidly about Beijing's activities and articulating a positive vision for a free and open Pacific. Such a vision will long outlast temporary disagreements over the PIF.

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