

The US Pacific Island Country Summit at the White House, 28-29 September 2022



Washington's charm offensive and the US-Pacific Island Country Summit

By Terence Wesley-Smith and Gerard Finin
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At the [US-Pacific Island Country Summit](#), held 28-29 September, President Biden wooed Pacific Island leaders with red carpet treatment, a positive vision for the future, and promises to address regional priorities. Although China is not mentioned in the resulting [Declaration on US-Pacific Partnership](#) – and only once in the [Pacific Partnership Strategy](#) which was also launched at the event – escalating China-US competition was clearly the strategic elephant in the room. Whether Washington's efforts will succeed in curbing Beijing's ambitions in Oceania, particularly its supposed pursuit of a naval facility, remains to be seen. Island leaders were pleased to have their concerns taken seriously, but they are aware that little of what the US brought to the table is new, and that much of the heralded US\$810 million in expanded funding is for programs unlikely to eventuate soon.

The summit represents a milestone in the broader outreach campaign initiated by the Trump administration and accelerated under the direction of Biden's National Security Council. The administration's [Indo-Pacific Strategy](#) promotes a positive regional vision based on democratic values and networks of "like-minded" allies, as well as bolstering the ability "to deter aggression and counter coercion" by military means. New US-led alliances, such as the Quad and the AUKUS trilateral security pact, reflect shared interest in containing China and blunting its ability to challenge the US-dominated international system. The tacit aim of the Pacific Partnership Strategy is to bind the strategically important islands of Oceania to the US by offering to address their needs.

The White House summit was an important part of this charm offensive. The leaders were gratified that the agenda closely reflected their expressed priorities. They also appreciated the parade of top-level participants, a who's-who in Biden's cabinet and congressional leadership. The island leaders were particularly impressed by Biden's style as he personally welcomed delegates, led an impromptu tour of the Oval Office, and distributed his trademark [aviator sunglasses as gifts](#).

That the summit yielded a joint declaration was a victory for the Biden administration, especially since Beijing failed to win regional approval for its proposed [Common Development Vision](#) in May 2022. The Pacific leaders could claim that the document mirrored their own [2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent](#) launched in July. They successfully made changes to the draft prior to the summit, adding more about climate change, and overcoming Washington's opposition to mentioning US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. They were also able to remove references to China, as well as a provision that bilateral security agreements be approved by others in the region. These changes allowed all participating countries to endorse the declaration, [including Solomon Islands](#) which had earlier indicated serious reservations.

Long on generalities and short on specifics, the 11-point declaration signals Washington's support for a very broad range of Pacific Island concerns, including tackling the climate crisis, and strengthening regionalism. The [accompanying fact sheet](#) does little to indicate how these aspirations are to be achieved. Although described as a roadmap, it is more like an inventory of dozens of unrelated programs from across the vast federal bureaucracy. It is not clear how all these activities are to be coordinated, or even how the claimed US\$810 million in expanded US support was calculated. What is clear is that funding for many of these programs - including for the renegotiated US Treaty on Fisheries which accounts for the bulk of the total - must be requested from Congress. This is a perilous process, especially when the upcoming midterm elections will likely alter political dynamics in Washington.

Most concerning is the prospect that Washington's increased engagement will undermine Pacific priorities, particularly the [quest for self-determination](#) long central to regional initiatives. Many of the proposed activities are to be conducted by US or international agencies rather than Pacific ones: a [key example](#) is US support for climate adaptation through the Green Climate Fund rather than through the region's own Pacific Resilience Facility. Furthermore, despite the declaration's strong support for regionalism, some US initiatives - such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific consortium of donor countries - [undercut regional architecture](#) carefully constructed by Pacific leaders to manage their interactions with external powers.

The US-Pacific Partnership is important to Pacific leaders because of its promised deliverables. For Washington it provides an opportunity to influence decision-making by participating in regional activities. A [prime example is the South Pacific Tuna Treaty](#), first created in 1987 to enable US flagged vessels to access a tuna-rich fishery spanning multiple Pacific Island jurisdictions as well as the high seas. Although the US Pacific tuna fleet has

now dwindled to a handful of boats, the Biden administration has pledged to boost the State Department's annual subsidy under the treaty's economic assistance component from US\$21 million today to US\$60 million a year for ten years beginning in 2024. The [renegotiated treaty](#) has become less about access to tuna (although US fishing interests are pushing hard for its renewal) and more about a convenient mechanism to channel budgetary support to the 15 island country members of the Forum Fisheries Agency - and strengthen US influence in the region. The panoply of smaller US programs in fields such as agriculture and aviation are valued because they too provide seats at numerous decision-making tables across Oceania.

The Washington summit and the resulting partnership agreement represent attempts to attract rather than coerce Pacific Island countries as US-China rivalry intensifies. Indeed, the agreement specifically affirms "the ability of nations to make sovereign decisions in the best interests of their people". The real test of this commitment may come when China revives efforts to negotiate its own regional agreement, which it is likely to do, or other island countries decide to follow [the example of Solomon Islands](#) and sign bilateral security deals with Beijing.

Meanwhile, Pacific leaders will be closely monitoring outcomes - particularly progress on the climate change stipulations in the agreement, already [regarded by some as wholly inadequate](#). If the US fails to come through on these aspects of the partnership agreement it may take more than aviator sunglasses to keep island leaders on side.

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