U.S.-Japan Cooperation in the Pacific

75 Years After the End of the Pacific War

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The 75th anniversary in 2020 of the Pacific War’s conclusion presents a salient opportunity to evaluate the contemporary relationship of the two leading adversaries of that conflict, the United States and Japan. This complex, bilateral relationship has evolved in myriad ways since 1945. Nowhere is this evolution more evident than in the Pacific Ocean where many Pacific Island Countries (PICs) were sites of ferocious battles from 1941 to 1945. 75 years after the war ended on the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay in September 1945, a realignment of the geopolitical order and a ‘security environment...changing at extremely high speeds’ in the Pacific Ocean has prompted a rapid recalibration of national objectives as well as a re-evaluation of alliances.1 As the Australian Prime Minister ominously phrased it in mid-2020, the Pacific region currently ‘faces multiple challenges and radical uncertainty,’ challenges which are ‘eerily’ similar to those the region faced prior to the Pacific War. As 2020 has continued, regional tensions have only further escalated.2 This

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article will illuminate the considerable impacts these changes are having on the island Pacific region. In particular, it will focus on the ways the United States and Japan are meeting new challenges and circumstances in the region by coalescing their efforts to ensure that the peace signed into existence three-quarters of a century ago prevails. This article also recommends courses of action and identifies opportunities for Japan and the United States to advance their engagement with the Pacific region.

Though the United States and Japan were the main signatories to the Articles of Surrender signed on the USS Missouri, so too were China, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, Australia, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Each of these countries (with the Netherlands replaced by its former colony of Indonesia) continue to play roles, albeit ones greatly altered, in the dynamic situation the United States and Japan are contending within the present-day Pacific. Unlike in 1945, contemporary Pacific strategies are contingent on the fourteen PICs that became independent from 1962 – Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Palau, Kiribati, Fiji, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, the Cook Islands – as well as the island groups still connected in varying ways with former colonial powers, namely the Collectivity of French Polynesia (Fr), New Caledonia (Fr), American Samoa (U.S.), Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI; U.S.), Guam (U.S.), Wallis and Futuna (Fr), and Tokelau (NZ). This complex region, self-identified since 2017 as the ‘Blue Pacific’, presents additional challenges for the United States and Japan as they navigate their way forward in a rapidly altering ocean.³

History casts long shadows over the present relationships of the United States and Japan in the Pacific. Both nations have deep, divergent, and also overlapping legacies in the region. U.S. history with the Pacific dates from the first years of the Republic with late eighteenth-century whaling voyages, followed by naval expeditions such as David Porter’s Essex that claimed the Marquesas Islands in 1813 (naming them the Madison Islands) but Congress, so disinterested in the region at the time, did not ratify the claim. Twenty-five years later, very different levels of interest drove the Wilkes Expedition (1838-1842) in its scientific and strategic objectives: for instance, the connection between the eastern islands of Samoa and the United States can be traced to this moment.⁴ This U.S. government-level

³The Pacific Forum, of which most these nations and territories are members, adopted the Blue Pacific identity in 2017 to ‘drive collective action in support of our vision’ for the Pacific region. 
https://www.forumsec.org/pacific-regionalism/.

⁴The vast array of artifacts collected on this expedition ‘constituted the first treasures of the infant Smithsonian’ in Washington D.C. These treasures, and therefore the connections between the United States and the Pacific Islands, have rarely been displayed. Gillen D’Arcy Wood, ‘The Forgotten American Explorer Who Discovered
engagement was greatly augmented by missionary activity, especially in Hawai‘i from the 1820s, and by Mormonism from the 1840s. These factors have had lasting impacts on binding archipelagos to the United States (like Hawai‘i which became a U.S. territory following its annexation in 1898 and the fiftieth state in 1959) as well as islander populations (for instance, extensive Pacific Islander migrations to Utah began in 1873).\(^5\) Resource harvesting in the Pacific, in this case, guano, led to great westward territorial expansion into the ocean by the United States through the \textit{Guano Islands Act} of 1856. This followed closely after the United States acquired an immense Pacific coastline through the Oregon Treaty (1846), the incorporation of California as a state in 1851, and the purchase of Alaska from Imperial Russia in 1867.

Decades of extensive Pacific whaling activities brought Americans into contact with a broad cross-section of Pacific peoples. The mistreatment of shipwrecked American whalers was one of the pretexts for the first U.S. government contact with an isolated Japan through the transformative Perry Voyage of 1853.\(^6\) The voyage’s ramifications were manifold, not the least of which triggered the rapid modernization of Japan modeled on Germany. Externally, Japan attempted to emulate British settler colonialism. Japan’s domestic and foreign outreach was fueled by an ambition to match growing U.S. naval power. Japanese territorial expansion, firstly to islands contiguous to its four main islands, commenced in 1855 with Japan claiming the southern Kuril Islands off the coast of Hokkaido.\(^7\) This acquisition of additional island territories (excluding those occupied during WWII) would continue through to 1914 when Japan commanded an immense territory in the Pacific that extended to the eastern edge of the Marshall Islands, just shy of the 180\(^{th}\) meridian.

While Japan was undergoing this extraordinary transformation, the domination of plantation economies mobilized large numbers of workers across the Pacific. Japanese workers dominated Hawaiian labor ranks from the 1860s with over 140,000 remaining there.\(^8\) (Similar forces also created large Pacific-based Chinese communities such as those in present-day Papua New Guinea and Samoa). At the outbreak of the First World War, Japan gained Germany’s Micronesian colonies in 1914, territories that became Japan’s

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\(^6\) For a comprehensive study of United States westward expansion into the Asia Pacific see Michael J. Green, \textit{By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

\(^7\) R. G. Crocombe, \textit{Asia in the Pacific Islands: Replacing the West} (Suva: IPS Publications, 2007), 42.

\(^8\) Crocombe, 43.
Pacific Mandate under the League of Nations from 1920. Japanese migrations to these islands followed, often associated with plantation enterprises. This migration was augmented by extensive contacts with Japanese fishermen and traders, a circulation of Japanese nationals into the Pacific that began before the mandate. Intermarriages between Japanese men and local women birthed hybrid communities in these Pacific islands, like the one concentrated in Chuuk, in FSM where about 20% of the population claim Japanese ancestry, or CNMI and Palau which have lengthy connections to Japan. These couplings forged lasting bonds between Japan and these northern Pacific islands.

World War II and its aftermath have effects that still reverberate throughout the Pacific today. Remote islands became battlegrounds and thousands perished. However, out of the devastation, friendships between disparate peoples were forged that not only endure to this day but have shaped relations and rhetoric for three-quarters of a century. In the aftermath, Japan became a beacon for peace as it embraced the doctrine of non-militarization and the United States became its staunchest ally and guarantor of its security. The Pacific islands in Japan’s mandate were transferred to the United States as U.N. Trust Territories. Yet paternalistic attitudes towards these territories persisted: nuclear testing programs conducted by the United States, Great Britain, and France revealed enduring colonial attitudes. The legacies of these tests, particularly the dome on Runit Island in RMI which was built by the United States to contain nuclear waste, have reemerged as a vexed issue as rising sea levels threaten the integrity of the structure. This is the historical legacy the United States is currently contending within its dealings with the Pacific.

The Cold War drew U.S. and Japanese attention to global trouble spots, leaving the Pacific Islands to what has been termed the ‘benign neglect’ of both powers. Created between 1962 (when Western Samoa, present-day Samoa, became the first self-governing island state) and 1994 (when Palau and Niue became independent from the United States and New Zealand respectively) fourteen island democracies were absorbed into the existing geopolitical order, with each looking to their former colonial powers as they navigated their way through their first years as independent states. These ties to former colonial powers,

9 ‘The official name was the ‘Mandate for the German Possessions in the Pacific Ocean lying North of the Equator’.


The United States and Japan shifted gears as a result of the USSR’s encroachment in what had been the ‘exclusive domain’ of western powers and Japan, an effort aided by the collapse of the Soviet Union shortly thereafter.\footnote{‘U.S., Soviets vie in S. Pacific: “Fishing Expeditions” by Moscow Cause Concern’, \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 29 June, 1987, \url{https://www.latimes.com/archives/l-a-xpm-1987-06-29-mn-203-story.html}.} In 1985, the United States established
the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL) that has met triennially and in 1987, the United States ratified a fisheries treaty with sixteen Pacific Island parties. The U.S. Secretary of State described this treaty in 2017 as ‘a cornerstone of our relations with the Pacific Island region for approximately three decades.’ Japan also launched a diplomatic offensive. Foreign Minister Kuranari’s 1987 policy speech delivered in Suva (the first visit by someone of that office to the Pacific islands) became known as the Kuranari Doctrine and pledged to double aid to the region, elevating Japan’s presence as a regional actor. Both the United States and Japan became founding dialogue partners of the South Pacific Islands Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum) in 1989. Japan founded the Pacific Islands Economic Center in Tokyo in 1996. A year later, it launched the Triennial Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM) that has held eight regional summits since, the latest of which was held in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture in 2018.

The significant shifts in Pacific Island geopolitics are clearly evident by tracking the rhetoric and commitments from Japan in PALM meetings from 1997 to 2018. From 2006, the fervent engagement of China across the Pacific, as well as the ongoing impact of the War on Terrorism, signaled a multiplicity of challenging circumstances that the United States and Japan had to navigate. This situation has only become increasingly acute since. In 2018, U.S. and Japanese grand strategies became more interwoven and were articulated as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) which were premised on alliances with like-minded nations, especially with the democracies of India, Australia, and New Zealand.

It should be stressed that the Japanese and U.S. shift to an Indo-Pacific grand strategy has not been embraced by PICs. As Samoan Prime Minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, expressed the Pacific position that ‘the ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy’ [that] is being advocated and pursued leaves us with much uncertainty. For the Pacific, there is a real risk of privileging ‘Indo’ over the ‘Pacific’.” He added that ‘there has been a reluctance to engage in open discussions on the issue and to share information to assist us in decision making.’ This wariness about recent U.S. and Japanese reframing of the Pacific

20 Tarte, 13.
21 All publications from PALM meetings can be accessed at https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/palm/index.html.
Ocean (as well as by key allies like Australia) was underscored by the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum, Dame Meg Taylor, who stated that:

“Very little has been written and published from a Pacific Islands perspective and [they have] rarely featured in the discussions except from a perspective of vulnerability to China’s influence and therefore as a part of the Indo-Pacific that needs to be ‘secured’ by and for external partners.”25

She stated that the two key questions for the ‘Forum Family’ are “How does the Pacific maintain and strengthen its own strategic autonomy?” and “How do we ensure our regional priorities are neither undermined through the breaking of our Pacific solidarity, nor appropriated by the narratives of others not of our region?”26 The disconnect between the United States and Japanese regional outlook and that of the ‘Blue Pacific’ nations is a matter still needing resolution.

In the meantime, region-wide support in the ‘Blue Pacific’ has been tilting toward China (and away from the United States, Japan, and their allies). Through Belt and Road funding, China has secured diplomatic recognition from most PICs, leaving only four nations (Palau, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Tuvalu) that recognize Taiwan. The defection of Kiribati and the Solomon Islands to China’s diplomatic ledger in September 2019 led to immediate and alarming developments. In October 2019, it came to light that China was attempting to lease the entire island of Tulagi in the Solomons.27 In June 2020, the pro-China president of Kiribati, Taneti Maamau, who shocked even his own party by suddenly switching allegiance to China, was re-elected. These events have been described as a ‘watershed moment in China’s expansion across the Pacific towards the Americas.’28

Christmas Island in Kiribati has, with Chinese money, been earmarked for tourism and expanded tuna fisheries necessitating drastically upgraded port facilities. It is expected the port will be capable of accommodating the Chinese navy, like the Beijing-funded port in Vanuatu that triggered alarm bells in 2018 because of its proximity to Australia.29 Such a port on Christmas Island could put Chinese naval assets within 1,300 miles of Honolulu.

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and the U.S. Pacific Command: a lynchpin in establishing the Third Island chain in China’s great power strategy.\(^3\)

The highly unusual circumstances of 2020 brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have been utilized by China to make a series of provocative maneuvers such as harsh crackdowns in Hong Kong, military actions in the South and East China Seas, multiple cyberattacks originating in China against foreign governments voicing opposition to Beijing, punitive trade actions, provocations on their Indian border, and upping the ante in the island Pacific as noted above. This has put Japan, the United States, and their allies on high alert.\(^3\) In response to China’s acts, the United States deployed three aircraft carriers to the Pacific in June 2020. This move met with a ‘show of arms’ between China and the United States and escalated rhetoric.\(^2\)

The Australian prime minister’s allusion in July 2020 to the 1930s and the build up to the Pacific War in his *Defence Strategic Update*, is partially applicable to the current situation. China’s ‘string of pearls’ strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative can be seen as reincarnations of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere that Japan enacted by 1942 (albeit effected by enticements and economic leverage rather than military force), and they are considerable dimensions of the challenges facing the United States and Japan in the Pacific. Military co-operation between the United States and Japan, exemplified by twenty-three U.S. military bases in Japan, has been amplified in recent years due to China’s actions. This has included a redefining of Japan’s Self-Defense Force (SDF) parameters, allowing Japan to ‘take on larger security roles alongside its American ally’.\(^3\) Japan has participated in the U.S. Pacific Partnership Program for some time, a naval program that reaches out to partners in the Indo-Pacific to ‘enhance regional interoperability and disaster response capabilities, increase stability and security in the region, and foster new and enduring friendships’.\(^4\) Military capacity building in the island Pacific has also been conducted by Japan and the United States, with emphasis on Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon

\(^3\) ‘China Could be in Reach of Hawaii After Kiribati Elects Pro-Beijing President’, *Foreign Policy*, 19 June, 2020, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/kiribati-election-china-taiwan/#](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/kiribati-election-china-taiwan/#).


Islands, and the COFA states.\textsuperscript{35} In 2018, the United States announced a partnership with Papua New Guinea and Australia to upgrade the Lombrum Naval Base on Manus Island, giving the three nations a naval presence there. Yet in June 2020, reports circulated that Papua New Guinea is reviewing the agreement, possibly jeopardizing the plan to China’s advantage.\textsuperscript{36}

Meeting the challenges raised by the infusion of funds deriving from China’s Belt and Road Initiative in the islands has also been a Japanese and U.S. priority with both nations pledging increased financial commitments from 2018.\textsuperscript{37} In 2019, in what has been dubbed their ‘Indo-Pacific Road’, this initiative was expanded to involve Australia.\textsuperscript{38} Under this plan, government-backed lenders will embark on numerous infrastructure projects like Papua New Guinea’s liquefied natural gas project. Overall, the joint financing venture plans to lend over $1 billion across the Indo-Pacific region.\textsuperscript{39} This is in addition to other funding that will be distributed in various ways across the region. In one collective initiative, Papua New Guinea will get a rural electrification project aiming to reach ‘70% electrification by 2030’ and expand broadband connectivity: this project will be jointly funded by Japan, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{40}

Japan and the United States are also attuned to the overtly stated priorities of the island Pacific to address climate change mitigation and resilience projects, ocean health, and the protection of vitally important fish resources.\textsuperscript{41} It is estimated that nearly one-quarter of the Pacific Ocean fish catch goes unreported per year; this poaching represents

\textsuperscript{36} ‘PNG to review deal with Australia for naval base on Manus’, \textit{Radio NZ}, 12 June, 2020, \url{https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/418860/png-to-review-deal-with-australia-for-naval-base-on-manus}.
an immense drain on Pacific Island economies. In order to stem these losses, the United States spearheaded a shiprider program with Australia, New Zealand, and France working with 11 Pacific island nations to patrol their EEZs. Japan has been unwaveringly committed to supporting projects addressing climate change and environmental protection since the 1990s. To this end, Japan has partnered with Samoa to fund the Pacific Climate Change Center in Apia that will be a regional center for climate change information, research, and innovation. In contrast to Japan (and also China), since 2017 the United States has sent mixed signals on climate change and as a result, its commitment to this highest priority concern of PICs has been questioned. The United States needs to urgently address their ambiguity on this critical issue for the region.

Japan, the United States, and their democratic allies also continue to vigorously defend democratic political systems and good governance practices in the Pacific. In addition to a long pattern of funding to support these purposes, the United States and Japan (again, with Australia and New Zealand) edged China out of funding the Bougainville independence vote that was held in late 2019. 98% of votes favored independence from Papua New Guinea for the resource-rich island. The referendum was a key component of the peace negotiated at the end of the ten-year secessionist war between Bougainville rebels and the central Papua New Guinea government. China has been a conspicuous presence in support of Bougainville independence and the reopening of controversial mining operations. The non-binding referendum result will now be negotiated between the Papua New Guinea government and the Autonomous Bougainville

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44 Address by H. E. Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting (PALM8), 19 May, 2019, Iwaki, Fukushima, Japan. https://www.mofa.go.jp.


48 ‘Does China have a master plan for the future of Bougainville?’, 60 Minutes Australia, 18 November, 2019. https://youtu.be/sZAr8QARc8s.
Government; both the United States and Japan have opportunities to ensure an amicable outcome, particularly by offering sources of financial support for Bougainville.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis in abeyance for the island Pacific. As of July 24, 2020, there were seven deaths attributable to the virus (2 in the CNMI and 5 in Guam) and 481 cases across the region concentrated in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Guam, CNMI, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea, with the rest of the Pacific reporting zero cases due to the prompt closures of their borders.49 Both the United States and Japan are engaged in preparedness for the pressures on the weak health care systems in the islands.50 The border closures and the crippling of tourism industries that account for an immense slice of the national economies of numerous PICs, combined with a sharp reduction of remittances (another mainstay of PIC economies) due to multiple pandemic impacts on ex-patriot Pacific communities especially those residing in the United States, will cause a great deal of financial pressure.51 The United States and Japan will need to be very attentive and responsive to this looming situation in the coming months.

By contrast, Pasifika communities residing in the United States have been hard hit by the pandemic. A disproportionate number of islander households have at least one essential worker (in Arkansas it is estimated 82% of households, largely from the Marshall Islands, have an essential worker). Coupled with these frontline jobs, underlying health vulnerabilities have led to a staggeringly disproportionate impact on communities. In Arkansas, even though Pacific Islanders are 1% of the state’s population, they have accounted for 50% of the all deaths in NW Arkansas by mid-June.52 In Los Angeles, Pasifika communities ‘suffer the highest infection rate of any racial or ethnic group’ by a large margin.53 The United States government in concert with local jurisdictions, must act with urgency to ameliorate this situation. Addressing these domestic concerns should be


seen as integral to their foreign policy approaches to the islands, given how profoundly integrated the home and ex-patriot PICs communities are.

Building coalitions and strengthening existing relationships will be instrumental for the United States and Japan going forward. Japan signed an agreement with Australia in July 2020 ‘committing the two countries’ space agencies to develop greater co-operation in space, science, research, and education.’ Also, the leaders of both countries have committed to working together to deliver health services to the Pacific region to combat COVID-19.54 In the same month, Australia’s Defence Strategic Update refocuses Australia on its more immediate strategic neighborhood and extends the highly integrated security relationship in the Pacific.55 Working with New Zealand, Great Britain, and France on multiple levels will also be of the utmost importance for achieving U.S. and Japanese objectives in concert with PICs. It is also imperative the United States and Japan partner with PICs to find innovative ways to strengthen the coalition of democracies seeking to preserve the ‘peace, harmony, security, social inclusion, and prosperity so that all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives.’56

Recommendations

The United States and Japan have many opportunities to expand and deepen their alliance through working with nations in the island Pacific at this critical juncture in history. Both nations should promptly do more to expand their regional presence according to local need. Launching dedicated taskforces with expertise from multiple sectors would do much to ensure an effective and timely response.

Both countries would benefit from more closely aligning their approach and agendas around the clearly stated concerns, priorities, and outlook of Blue Pacific nations who have expressed unease with the United States and Japanese Indo-Pacific strategic posture.57 The disconnect between Japanese, U.S., and Blue Pacific outlooks can be mitigated by increasing dialogue, consultation, and the continuing development of robust

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partnerships with a coalition of like-minded democracies of PICs, New Zealand, Australia, France, and a regionally reengaged Great Britain.

2020 has generated unprecedented tests that demand urgent action, presenting the United States and Japan with opportunities to act on their rhetoric and be a strong and helpful presence in the region as it contends with multiple acute, existential challenges stemming from climate change to COVID-19.

In 2019, the Pacific Forum declared climate change as ‘the single greatest threat to our Blue Pacific region.’ Both the United States and Japan would be well advised to continue to strengthen their commitments to environmental issues, ocean health, and do more to protect fisheries from poaching. Both countries also need to continue to reduce emissions that contribute to warming oceans, the degradation of reefs, extreme weather, and rising sea levels. The United States should send a clear message, supported by deep commitments to climate change action domestically and in the Pacific region, and do more to support regional climate resilience projects and provide more natural disaster relief. The United States has to continue to urgently address the Runit Island nuclear waste site and work closely with the RMI on this critical issue going forward.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis on multiple fronts that PICs are currently contending with or preparing for. Building a COVID-19 aid coalition with allies, international agencies, and NGOs with expertise in the Pacific islands would do much to build trust in the region. Working with the Pacific Forum’s COVID-19 Humanitarian Pathway Protocols continues to be the most effective means to achieve this. This may also be a vital opportunity to cooperate with China which has been prominently distributing COVID-19 supplied across the region; an effort greatly assisted by Chinese philanthropist Jack Ma. Domestically, the United States must urgently address the dire impacts of COVID-19 on resident Pasifika communities. The well-being of the significant Pasifika communities residing in the United States should be seen as integral to foreign policy approaches to the islands, particularly as the United States renegotiates its Compacts of Free Association with FSM, RMI, and Palau. Japan and the United States must strongly encourage their philanthropic sectors, particularly foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, to become more actively engaged in the Pacific region and with Pasifika communities in the United States.

The economic impacts of COVID-19 present multiple challenges but also vital opportunities for the United States and Japan. Both nations and their partners must monitor and ameliorate an anticipated sharp decline in income and therefore remittances

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that will drastically impact households in both resident and home countries.\textsuperscript{60} One way of assisting with this situation would be for Japan to expand its working holiday program to PIC nationals. The United States, with its long heritage of accepting Pacific Islanders as workers, could further expand this accessibility by allowing nationals beyond the COFA states to work in the United States. Pacific Islanders working in the United States should be assisted with entering capacity building professions like health, technology, science, and education. This expansion of regional and labor mobility between the Pacific, the United States, and Japan should be accompanied by educational opportunities. Government-sponsored educational, professional, and cultural exchanges should be increased by both nations. Both should also encourage universities and grant-giving organizations to institute or expand earmarked scholarships for Pacific Island students.

The sudden suspension of tourism throughout the Pacific due to COVID-19 will have acute and far-reaching impacts on the economies in the region. Revenues will be greatly reduced across the region and the United States and Japan need to address impending economic stresses that will likely exacerbate existing trends. The alliance should expand its role in offering alternatives to China’s Belt and Road and help ameliorate debt burdens across the Pacific region. Tokyo and Washington could play a leading role in refinancing Chinese loans on more favorable terms. Such actions could relieve indebtedness to China and limit China’s strategic and political leverage with PICs.

The United States and Japan should be leaders in the Pacific with implementing the G20s Debt Service Suspension Initiative and provide debt relief to eligible countries requesting such support. Both nations should act as resources for PIC governments providing advice and budget support when requested. Investment in high-quality infrastructure projects together, and with partner countries, in schemes like the Papua New Guinea Electrification Partnership is a model that should be replicated. Narrowing distances and the disadvantages of isolation in the Pacific through the much-needed upgrading of communication technologies is also a key area where the United States and Japan must continue to lead, as they (along with Australia) are doing with the extension of the trans-Pacific cable line to Palau.\textsuperscript{61} Working with New Zealand, Great Britain, and France on multiple levels will help achieve the alliance’s strategic objectives in concert with PICs.

Economic pressures exacerbated by COVID-19 will also impact a number of significant land transactions occurring throughout the Pacific region that may put major landholdings under Chinese ownership. The United States and Japan could play a role in

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\item \textsuperscript{60} ‘Remittances on the Rise in the Pacific’, \url{http://www.pfip.org/newsroom/in-the-news/2016-2/remittances-rise-pacific/}.
\item \textsuperscript{61} ‘Joint Statement on Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations, 28 July, 2020; \url{https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2020/}.
\end{itemize}
providing alternatives to the relinquishment of considerable Pacific Island territory to Chinese interests. Involving conservation organizations to purchase lands or developing other forms of revenue raising will provide a critical intervention to help circumvent another wave of indigenous dispossession.

The United States and Japan must continue, along with their partner countries, to vigorously counter Chinese activities in the Pacific to preserve local autonomy and further shared interests, values, and deep historical ties. They should both continue to be prominent defenders of the sovereignty of PICs, as well as press freedoms and freedoms of speech, as these rights are challenged in a number of PICs. There may be a role for the United States House Democracy Committee to play. Japan could expand its Pacific Leaders’ Educational Assistance for Development of State, launched in 2015, to foster upcoming leaders beyond those of the nine PICs currently eligible.62 Japan and the United States could also offer to help deescalate tensions in West Papua. This is an ongoing issue that continues to vex regional relations due to claims of human rights violations. The United States and Japan should also play a more active role in financing and assisting the negotiations between Papua New Guinea and Bougainville following the recent vote for independence.

The United States could play a significant role in addressing the area of disability rights, a priority issue for the Pacific Islands Forum given that nearly 15% of the Pacific Islands population (1.7 million) live with disabilities. The United States is a world leader in this area and as Japan adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, it could also impart valuable knowledge and expertise given its recent experiences.63

Another vital opportunity for the United States and Japan to work together in the Pacific Islands is through projects that target ‘women’s security and meaningful economic and political participation’ and ‘women’s economic empowerment’.64 By joining Australia in its support of the Pacific Women Organization, the United States and Japan would be readily networked into a complex structure currently spanning twelve PIC governments, international agencies, and numerous NGOs, private sector organizations, regional and multilateral organizations, and universities. Both the United States and Japan could pursue micro-financing of women’s business enterprises and the creation of markets for such commodities as textiles, outside of home countries and therefore not dependent on tourism.

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Such action is urgent given the economic impacts of the pandemic on households throughout the region. This focus on women’s security and economic empowerment should also include women’s health, particularly the services needed to mitigate cervical cancer through HPV vaccines and treat the high rates of cervical cancer in the region, another Pacific Islands Forum priority issue.

Both the United States and Japan have an opportunity to emphasize their Pacific heritages. Such action would undergird an effort to learn about the Pacific Islands’ history and culture, rebalancing the dearth of knowledge about this part of the world. Establishing dedicated learning centers in the United States and Japan to exchange knowledge about the Pacific region is an essential dimension of this. Japan could also continue to emphasize its particular connection to a part of the Pacific (particularly Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji) made through the game of rugby.65

The deep and complex linkages between PICs, the United States, and Japan, forged through kinship, religious, cultural, business, and historical links are a vital resource that both nations must leverage as they advance their Pacific relationships in these very uncertain times. It has been 75 years since the conclusion of the Pacific War, and now, more than ever, it is imperative that the United States and Japan honor the past by ensuring the hard-fought peace in the Pacific withstands the test of time. By coalescing their efforts, these friends and allies will meet the challenges and rapidly changing circumstances in today’s Pacific.

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65 A substantial number of men of Pacific heritage comprised the Japan team that hosted the Rugby World Cup tournament in 2019. [https://www.rugbyworldcup.com/teams/japan](https://www.rugbyworldcup.com/teams/japan).