

Pacific Perspectives on the US Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Mr. Joe-Silem Enlet

Today, I will bring a view from the Pacific Ocean and her people, which centers the Ocean, the Blue Pacific, and the Pacific Way. This view embraces the teachings of our respected Pacific scholar, Epeli Hau'ofa, who guided us in understanding that our identity is inextricably bound to the ocean.

The Pacific and its ocean people's heritage need to be featured more prominently in the US Indo-Pacific strategy. Pacific island states are large, gigantic if you will! If you consider the area where these states have sovereign rights, their exclusive economic zones (EEZs), then 5 of the 20 largest states in the world would be Pacific Island states. Three of those are in the North Pacific. Considering its EEZ, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is equivalent to the size of the entire US mainland. Obviously, this assertion challenges the "land dominates sea" maxim in international discourse. However, a saying from our traditional navigators, "The seas are highways of life, they do not separate us, they connect us," better encapsulates the strategic value of our ocean territory. This point is also echoed in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which holds that freedom of navigation is important to bring stability and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific.

For coastal states, freedom of navigation must be tempered by our security and must ensure that our rights are not neglected. We face threats from malign actors who have entered our EEZs under the guise of freedom of navigation only to violate the sovereign rights of our states. Of course, the principle of freedom of navigation is taken from customary international law and codified in the monumental 1982 Convention on the Law of The Sea, which, hopefully, our partners will one day ratify.

When exploring the idea of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific from the perspective of the region's Small Island Developing States (SIDS), it is essential to recognize the sovereignty of our people and how we have understood our homelands and home-oceans while stewarding them for collective enjoyment and sustainability for generations. For us, prosperity is not always defined in economic terms, such as the growth of our national gross domestic product, nor is security always defined in terms of military might and defense, although we do not discount those as important.

In a holistic approach to prosperity and security in the Pacific and the Pacific way, we underscore a broader view. The security of our environment and its biodiversity is a priority. Pacific nations have identified climate change and its impacts as the greatest threat to our existence. To bring it back to the ocean theme, the ocean is our single largest natural resource, a resource we depend upon for our survival. In many Pacific countries, the fisheries sector is our livelihood and the basis of the economy. Recent [climate modeling studies](#) show that climate change in the Pacific drives pelagic fish stocks further east and away from our EEZs. This trend threatens to disrupt the more than \$30 billion of commerce generated by the fishery industries of the Western and Central Pacific Oceans. Similarly, [ocean acidification](#), exacerbated by anthropogenic (human-made) carbon emissions, threatens livelihoods in the Pacific as it contributes to [health problems in fish](#), [the degradation of the coral reef](#), and [productivity losses in mariculture](#). Acidification also reduces the ocean's ability to act as the world's largest carbon sink and the largest producer of the oxygen we breathe.

Mr. Joe-Silem Enlet, former Consul General for the Federated States of Micronesia and current PhD Student at the University of Rhode Island, explains that "[t]he Pacific and its ocean people's heritage need to be featured more prominently in the US Indo-Pacific strategy."

As referenced in the US Indo-Pacific strategy, we strongly support the idea of a partnership between the United States and the People's Republic of China to combat the anthropogenic causes of climate change, which has led to this disruption of natural resources. The fact that Pacific people bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change while contributing the least to it ought to stir a sense of urgency and infuriation. In these terms, it is an undeniable injustice!

Pacific Island states require increased capacity to effectively manage their vast ocean territories, not only for conservation but also for sustainable utilization. This includes combating the pervasive and destructive impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which [siphons tens of billions of dollars from legitimate industry and is a significant driver of overfishing](#). Our partners must prioritize technological capacity building as enhancing monitoring and surveillance is critical. Moreover, investment in human resources is also paramount, as promoting indigenous expertise over dependency on external support is a more effective and sustainable countermeasure to IUU fishing.

"The fact that Pacific people bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change while contributing the least to it ought to stir a sense of urgency and infuriation. In these terms, it is an undeniable injustice!"

We also expect that the United States will support and implement the recent WTO agreement prohibiting harmful subsidies in fisheries. The International Maritime Organization has also established an effort to decarbonize the shipping industry by 2050. Again, these efforts are ways that the United States can continue to support and join ocean-based strategies for a healthier ocean.

Rising sea levels not only physically harm and displace our communities but also have dire international legal ramifications, including the shifting of maritime boundaries. This poses a significant threat to SIDS, potentially reducing their EEZs and limiting access to vital resources like tuna. Despite these challenges, FSM and other SIDS have taken proactive measures to maintain current maritime boundaries, such as freezing baselines with exact coordinates. However, the threat of disappearing islands raises questions about our existence as sovereign states and our right to self-determination.

The US Indo-Pacific Strategy affirms that the [Compacts of Free Association](#) are “the bedrock of the US role in the Pacific.” As a citizen of the FSM, I join with my compatriots in Micronesia and other Freely Associated States (FAS) in ensuring this pronouncement develops beyond words and into action. That means the expeditious renewal of the compact renegotiations on adequate and fair terms. It also means a focus on strengthening island infrastructure as well as human development and human capacity. For decades, the United States has enjoyed full military access to the air, land, and sea of FAS countries, as enshrined in our compact relationships. Given the strategic importance of this area, which others have dubbed the “corridor of freedom,” I think it is incumbent on the United States to live up to its end of the bargain and invest more deeply in relationships with FAS. Ultimately, it will benefit the stability of the Pacific and the world. For FAS countries, our hospitals, roads, and other infrastructure are still severely inadequate even though compact relations have spanned almost 40 years. The decades-long neglect of developing island states has created a void of vulnerability. This void has primed the region for political warfare and other opportunistic and often malicious activities.

In truth, we must admit that we are working from behind. I caution partners not to engage the Pacific with the language of “competition” but with the language of “relationships,” where we respect each other’s sovereignty, but all in the context of family and collective prosperity. Because strong Pacific states mean a strong Pacific, and you cannot really go anywhere without the Pacific.

Mr. Joe-Silem Enlet, former Consul General for the Federated States of Micronesia and current PhD Student at the University of Rhode Island, can be contacted at joe_enlet@uri.edu.

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Lance D. Jackson

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.