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## *Issue Brief*

# Japan's Engagement with Pacific Island Nations

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## **S***ummary*

Japan's cooperation with the Pacific Islands region faces challenges. The first, most overt, challenge is the rise of China as an alternative aid and trade partner. Another relates to Japan in essence denying or minimising its historical role in the region and taking actions that Pacific Island Countries feel do not comport with its stated goal of respecting their sovereignty.

## Introduction

From 9 to 12 February 2024, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa visited Fiji and Samoa to attend a high-level ministerial meeting of foreign ministers from the Pacific Island Countries and Japan on the sidelines of the Pacific Islands Forum. She held a series of bilateral meetings with counterparts from Fiji, Samoa and the Marshall Islands, while laying the groundwork for the upcoming Pacific Islands Leaders’ Summit 10 (PALM 10).<sup>1</sup>

The PALM meeting is a once-in-three-year event held between the leaders of Japan and Pacific Island countries, and is scheduled to be held in July 2024. Thirty years of high-level dialogue between Japan and the island countries of the Pacific Ocean affords a good vantage point from which to look back on Japan’s history in the region as well as its future prospects in the age of US–China great power competition. It may plausibly be argued that Japan’s engagement in the region, while substantive, has not addressed Pacific Island countries’ core needs, making new thinking in Tokyo necessary.

## History of Japan’s Regional Presence

According to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Pacific Islands were important as sites of migration, colonial rule and resource extraction.<sup>2</sup> Several of the Pacific Islands host significant populations of people descended from Japanese indentured labourers, who were dispatched to work there in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Subsequently, at the turn of the century when Japan became a powerful military player, it was given trusteeship of former German colonies in what are now the countries of Palau, Micronesia, the Marshall Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands under the so-called South Seas Mandate. Newly re-christened the Japanese Mandate for the Governance of the South Seas Islands (*Nihon Inin Tōchi-ryō Nan’yō Guntō*), the islands were governed by a mixture of civil and military officials. Even after Japan lost the Mandate after its withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1935, it continued to hold on to the islands, enforcing a strict blockade preventing foreign ships from entering waters surrounding its territory.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [“The 5th Ministerial Interim Meeting of the Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting \(PALM\)”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> [“Japan’s Support for the Pacific Islands Countries”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant Earnest G. Campbell, USN, [“Japan’s Mandate in the Southwestern Pacific”](#), *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, Vol. 68, No. 6, June 1942. Also see Izumi Kobayashi, [“The South](#)

During the Second World War, several fierce battles were fought in the region between Imperial Japanese forces on the one hand, and the United States armed forces on the other. The battles of Guadalcanal, Saipan and Kwajalein were particularly bloody, and marked key milestones towards the eventual defeat of the Japanese Imperial forces. In 1947, the United Nations revoked Japan’s claims to the islands and placed them under US trusteeship.

After the war, as Japan recovered its economic vitality, its interest in the region turned to resource extraction. In particular, the seas around Pacific Island countries provide Japan with seafood exports. Approximately 40 per cent of the bonito (*katsuo*) and tuna (*maguro*) consumed in Japan is said to be sourced from the region.<sup>4</sup> Both fish varieties are staples of the Japanese diet, with bonito in particular a vital component underwriting the taste and flavour profiles of Japanese food. The region also hosts several key Sea Lanes of Communication (SLoC) connecting Japan to points south and west.

## Japan–Pacific Island Countries Cooperation

Japan’s post-war political engagement with Pacific Island countries can be re-traced to 1987, when then Foreign Minister Tadashi Kuranari, in a speech entitled ‘Working Towards the Pacific Future Community’, outlined what subsequently has come to be known as the Kuranari Doctrine. This doctrine outlines five basic principles governing Japan’s engagement with the Pacific Island Countries. These principles are:

- respect for sovereignty and independence of the Pacific Island nations,
- support for regional cooperation,
- securing political stability,
- expansion of economic cooperation, and
- encouraging people-to-people ties.<sup>5</sup>

The second and fourth of these principles was subsequently operationalised by Japan’s active participation in meetings of the former South Pacific Forum (SPF), known today as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), since 1989.

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[Sea Islands and Japanese Mandatory Rule over Them](#)”, Commentary, The OPRI Center of Island Studies, Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 15 September 2022 for a Japanese perspective.

<sup>4</sup> [“Japan’s Support for the Pacific Islands Countries”](#), no. 2.

<sup>5</sup> [“太平洋島嶼国における開発課題” \(“Development Issues in the Pacific Island Countries”\)](#), 東南アジア第六・大洋州課 (South-East Asia Division, Sixth Department, Pacific Islands Section), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), 2 September 2019, p. 15.

In 1997, Japan extended its own institutional framework onto the Pacific Islands region with the inauguration of the first PALM summit. It also set up a dedicated organisation, the Pacific Islands Centre (PIC) in Tokyo, to serve as a hub of coordination between the two sides. Since then, Japan has been investing significant amounts of aid into the region, with over US\$ 249.96 million worth of cumulative aid disbursed in 2022.<sup>6</sup>

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has also been playing a key role in the region, with emphasis on developing primary infrastructure, assisting in sustainable development and promoting people-to-people cooperation. Sectors such as healthcare, infrastructure, disaster prevention and human resources development have been important focus areas.<sup>7</sup> With the addition of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific agenda into PALM’s basic doctrine, recent years have also seen the rise of maritime security as a growing sector for cooperation.

## **Intrinsic and Extrinsic Challenges to Cooperation**

However, Japan’s cooperation with the Pacific Islands region faces challenges. The first, most overt, challenge is the rise of China as an alternative aid and trade partner. As China’s economic wherewithal has risen since the early years of the 1990s, its footprint has increased correspondingly. China entered the region with the setting up of the China–Pacific Island Countries Economic Development Forum in 2006, which promised over US\$ 375 million in aid and trade to the region. Ten of the 14 Pacific Island Countries now have memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with China, and China is the largest trading partner for most of the region. This has inevitably created economic strains on these countries, as several are now deeply in debt to Beijing and dependent on trade with it to survive. Tonga and Vanuatu are particularly vulnerable in this regard, with their debts reaching unsustainable levels.<sup>8</sup>

China’s influence has extended to the security domain as well. It successfully caused the Solomon Islands and Kiribati to end their diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in 2019, followed by Nauru in January 2024, leaving only the Marshall Islands, Palau and Tuvalu as Taiwan’s ‘diplomatic allies’ at present.<sup>9</sup> In March 2022, China also

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<sup>6</sup> “[開発協力白書 2023版](#)” (“**White Paper on Development Cooperation 2023 Edition**”), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 12 March 2024, p. 123.

<sup>7</sup> “[Japan’s Support for the Pacific Islands Countries](#)”, no. 2, pp. 3–4; “[太平洋島嶼国における開発課題](#)” (“**Development Issues in the Pacific Island Countries**”), no. 5, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Celine Pajon, “[Japan and the Pacific Islands Countries: Longstanding Strategic Interests, Recent Strategic Engagement](#)”, *Asie.visions* 134, IFRI, March 2023, pp. 23–26.

<sup>9</sup> “[Diplomatic Allies](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Taiwan.

signed a security cooperation agreement with the Solomon Islands which commentators noted gave it the potential capability to dock warships there. In 2023, the Solomon Islands signed a pact with Beijing that allows the latter to train, equip and support local police forces.<sup>10</sup>

The rapidity of the developments alarmed many throughout the region, and Japan has not been an exception. From 2019 onwards, Japan began to shift the content of its diplomacy towards Pacific Island Countries. It shifted emphasis of its aid diplomacy towards quality rather than quantity, expanding the PALM process to include French-held territories in New Caledonia and French Polynesia and included an explicitly strategic dimension. It also signed a multilateral agreement on law enforcement training in 2023, competing directly with Chinese efforts to spread its model of policing to the region.<sup>11</sup>

Another challenge, however, is more difficult to tackle, as it emanates from inside Japan itself, especially within the minds of those manning its policy establishment. This relates to Japan in essence denying or minimising its historical role in the region and taking actions that Pacific Island Countries feel do not comport with its stated goal of respecting their sovereignty. The most relevant examples of these have been those regarding demining and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), as well as nuclear waste disposal.

The demining issue can be traced to the Second World War. As the pitched battles of the Pacific theatre were being fought, both the Imperial Japanese Army and the US Army expended massive quantities of ordnance to achieve military objectives, a sizeable quantity of which remained either unused or misfired. Japanese assessments put the amount of unexploded ordnance at approximately one million units, which implies that there is a significant risk of civilians coming across one and falling victim to it. Yet, while the US Army had effected EOD missions during its trusteeship period after the Second World War, Japan had never taken responsibility for its share in causing this tragedy. It was only in January 2024 that the Japanese Self-Defence Forces returned to Guadalcanal to assist local police forces in demining and EOD, after approximately 80 years.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> [“China Signs Pact with Solomon Islands to Boost Cooperation on ‘Law Enforcement and Security Matters’](#)”, Associated Press, 11 July 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Celine Pajon, [“Japan and the Pacific Islands Countries: Longstanding Strategic Interests, Recent Strategic Engagement”](#), no. 8, p. 27. See also Yurika Ishii, [“Japan-Pacific Islands Countries Cooperation on Maritime Law Enforcement”](#), Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore, 14 August 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Nen Satomi and Toshiya Obu, [“Tokyo Helps Guadalcanal Police Deal with WWII Ordnance”](#), *The Asahi Shimbun*, 23 February 2024.

Even then, the task has only begun: the seas around the Micronesia region, which saw heavy naval fighting during the Pacific campaign, are crowded with the rotting hulks of several fighting ships. These have been leaching chemicals into the seas around them due to them having been sunk while carrying explosive munitions. These require urgent solutions as well, as they affect not only the marine environment but also the lives of people on land.

A second, not entirely unrelated, legacy of history has to do with the tragic fact that several of these islands’ inhabitants have been affected by the US’ use of their land as test sites for nuclear weapons. This has led many island nations in the region to be extremely sensitive to nuclear waste and radiation-related issues. They have thus come to view Tokyo’s decisions relating to nuclear waste disposal or storage as contrary to their interests.

While the issue of the discharge of treated wastewater from the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactor has garnered much news attention, it must be remembered that from the region’s perspective, this is not the first time Tokyo has attempted to carry out its interests without adequate consultation. In 1980, Tokyo under Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone had planned to dump low-level nuclear waste from its nuclear reactors in the Marianas Trench. When the plan came to light, a commentator notes,

“[t]he Japanese government was taken by surprise at the storm of protest [in the Pacific Islands region] as they did not recognise that there were political actors in the ocean to whom they should have paid consideration.”<sup>13</sup>

In this light, it is no wonder that many in the region are seeing the Fukushima wastewater issue as a repeat of this same callous attitude.

## Conclusion

If there is something to be learned from the history of the complexity of Japan–Pacific Island Countries relations, it is that Japanese diplomacy has often struggled with a failure of imagination. Its initial outreach in the 1980s and 1990s was successful only to the extent that it was operating in a relatively clear field without any close competitors, where a strong economic base was its greatest asset. However, as the

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<sup>13</sup> Izumi Kobayashi, “[Japan’s Diplomacy towards Member Countries of Pacific Islands Forum: Significance of Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting \(PALM\)](#)”, *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2018, pp. 91–92.

century turned, it became difficult for Japan to envisage the gap between the kind of role its friends in the region want it to play, and the kind of role it envisages for itself.

Certain positive steps have been taken in recent times which point to a possible reorientation. The above-mentioned cooperation between the JSDF and police forces in Guadalcanal is a solid start, as it implicitly marks Japan’s acknowledgement of its destructive role in the Second World War. Human resource development programmes such as scholarships for students to study in Japan, as well as the donation to the National University of Samoa for the upgradation of its facilities announced by Kamikawa upon her visit are a symbol that Japan is committed to ensuring young Pacific Islanders are not left behind in educational terms. JICA’s activities in disaster prevention and health and sanitation are having a salutary effect on the region’s well-being. Kamikawa’s promise to regional countries of furnishing them with scientific evidence of the safety of the Fukushima wastewater is also a sign that Japan understands the impact its decisions have had on its perception in the region.

However, Japan’s engagement is still piecemeal and tends to confuse symptoms for causes. This is a luxury it can no longer afford, as the rise of China marks the entry of a strong superpower competitor in the region. Its own actions in the Fukushima case indicate an inadequate consideration of the viewpoints of the Pacific Island Countries on an issue of mutual concern. Unless Tokyo alters its perspective, its aspirations to play a larger role would remain unfulfilled.

## About the Author



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