

# The Geopolitics of Oceania - The Pacific Islands

17 January 2024

## Abstract

The paper analyses the geopolitics of Oceania with the Pacific Island States and the geopolitical role of small states in general. Oceania with its three regions Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia is an area of growing geopolitical competition between the Western States Australia, New Zealand, France, United Kingdom, United States and Japan on one side and China on the other side. The key institution is the Pacific Island Forum PIF with Australia, New Zealand, the French territories French Polynesia and New Caledonia, the 14 oceanic states Fiji, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Niue, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Vanuatu, Nauru, Tonga, Palau, and Tuvalu. American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas have observer status. The main pillars of Western influence in Oceania are: 1. Defense and security, 2. Binding of local currencies to Western currencies, 3. Developmental aid and 4. Association to Western States or a status as dependent territories. Many islands use or are linked to the US Dollar, the Australian Dollar, or the New Zealand Dollar. Most islands do not achieve a 100 million US Dollar national budget, despite development assistance that is primarily provided by Australia, United States, China, France, and Japan. The Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and Palau are in free association with the United States while Niue and the Cook Islands are associated to New Zealand. The Pacific islands states face several challenges regarding natural disasters, poverty, and difficult governance. Large parts of Oceania are threatened by rising sea levels (inundation) that contribute to coastal erosion and salinization of freshwater reserves. The global warming with rising carbon dioxide levels contributes to an acidification of ocean water which leads to coral bleaching and subsequently to reduced fish reserves. Recent geologic studies showed however that many Pacific Islands grow with rising sea levels due to sedimentation. The situation in Oceania shows some similarities to the small island states in the Caribbean Sea.

According to the informal UN Forum of Small States (FOSS) with more than hundred member states, small states are those with populations of less than 10 million people. In international organizations, small states are confronted with asymmetric access to information, capacity constraints, and structural barriers to full participation. On the other hand, due to the widespread one country-one vote principle, they have a higher per capita weight in voting procedures. A special issue is the selling of rights, e.g., licenses for fishing, mining, communication, or transportation. The smaller the state, the more relevant is the income from these activities for the state household. While such activities are lawful and legitimate, there are also practices like vote buying and selling of passports and titles. Large states try to get the vote of smaller states in exchange for money which has influence on UN voting and diplomatic recognition (dollar diplomacy). A related phenomenon is favoritism, i.e., friendly states get more developmental aid or credits.

The geopolitical competition between the West and China is intensified. Chinas approach is to expand influence and to dilute US military power via stretching frontlines. The competition includes a large variety of activities (tourism, media, fishing, investments, foreign aid, deep sea cables) and in reaction to China's advances, the Western states intensify their diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the region.

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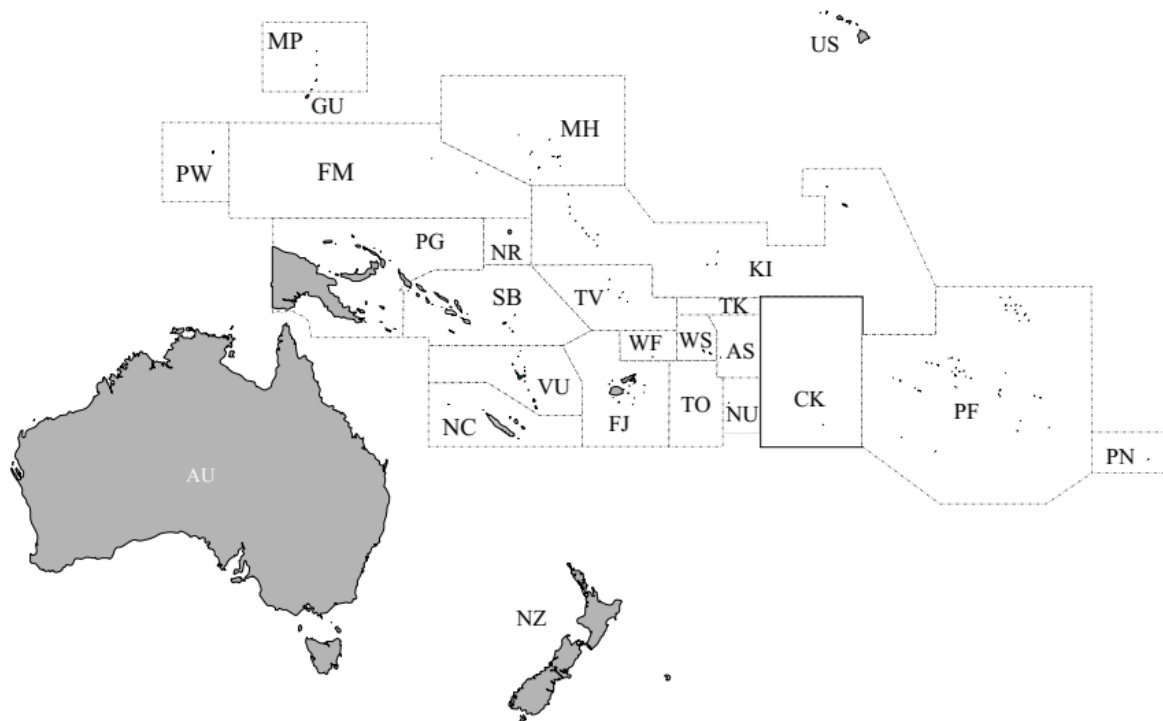
# 1 Overview

## 1.1 The Map of Oceania

Oceania with its Pacific Island States is an area of growing geopolitical competition between the Western States such as Australia and the United States on one side and China on the other side. Oceania consists of the former British colonies Australia and New Zealand, which protect most of the other states together with France and the United States. Australia is still the main military, political and economic regional power.

When the Pacific Island States became independent in the 1970ies, they got defined sea territories as *Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ)* to ensure that they have a coherent territory. Most Pacific Island States are therefore characterized by small land masses and large sea areas. For example, Kiribati has 811 km<sup>2</sup> land mass, but covers 5.2 million km<sup>2</sup> sea surface<sup>1</sup>.

The map shows the status in January 2024, followed by a list with land names, relations to Wester powers (if applicable), land mass and inhabitants.



### Map of Oceania

**Source/Author:** Carte de l'Océanie, avec le code des pays et territoires

Date 26 November 2016

Original map: Fonadier. Derived map: SenseiAC No changes made here.

Page URL: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oceania\\_grey\\_map\\_with\\_country\\_codes.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Oceania_grey_map_with_country_codes.svg)

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**For abbreviations see country list below.**

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<sup>1</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2017

## Country List

Country	km <sup>2</sup>	Inhabitants	
<b>Australia</b>	7,686,850	21,050,000	AU
Protected by Australia, no own army*			
Nauru (former Pleasant Island)	21	10,600	NR
<b>New Zealand (NZ)</b> , in Maori: Aotearoa	268,680	4,108,037	NZ
Cook Islands (NZ)**	237	14,974 <sup>2</sup>	CK
Tokelau (NZ)	10	1,431	TK
Niue (NZ)** former Savage Island	260	1,190	NU
Protected by New Zealand, no own army			
Samoa also known as West Samoa	2,944	218,764	WS
<b>United States territories****</b>			
Northern Mariana Islands (USA)	477	77,311	MP
Guam (USA)	549	160,796	GU
American Samoa (USA)	199	44,000 <sup>3</sup>	AS
US Pacific Remote Island Area PRIA (USA), Wake island and Midway island southwest of Hawaii			
Protected by US military, no own army			
Federated States of Micronesia FSM***	702	105,216	FM
Republic of Marshall Islands RMI***	181	72,191	MH
Palau***	458	21,265	PW
Kiribati (former Gilbert Islands)*	811	105,711	KI
<b>French Overseas Territories</b>			
New Caledonia (France)	19,060	207,858	NC
Wallis and Futuna (France) <sup>4</sup>	274	11,558	WF
French Polynesia (France)	4,167	257,847	PF
<b>British Territories</b>			
Pitcairn Islands (UK) <sup>5</sup>	47	46	PN
Papua New Guinea	462,840	9,949,437 <sup>6</sup>	PG
Fiji	18,270	924,610	FJ
Tonga	748	106,017	TO
Tuvalu (former Ellice Islands)	26	10,869	TU
Solomon Islands	28,450	707,851	SB
Vanuatu (former New Hebrides)	12,200	308,385 <sup>7</sup>	VU
<b>International Seabed Authority ISA</b>			
Clarion-Clipperton Zone (northeast of Kiribati, between Kiribati, Hawaii, and Mexico) <sup>8</sup> managed by the UN International Seabed Authority ISA	Multinational Zone for mining of seabed polymetallic nodules, currently by China, Japan, Russia, Korea, Belgium, Singapore, United Kingdom, a consortium (Bulgaria, Cuba, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Russia), Germany, Singapore, Cook Islands, Nauru, Tonga and Kiribati		

Source: land mass and population data from Lum/Vaughn 2017, UNFPA 2021 and Wilkins 2023 if not otherwise mentioned

If a state is mentioned in brackets, e.g. USA, then the region is a territory of this state, e.g. a US territory

\* Kiribati is also protected by Australia.

\*\* Associated States with New Zealand. Tokelau did not want to change its status to an associated state.

\*\*\* Free Association to United States<sup>9</sup>. In the early 1980s, the Marshall Islands and Micronesia chose free association with the United States. In 1986, the United States and Palau signed a 50-year Compact of Free Association.

\*\*\*\* Military bases on Guam, Kwajalein Atoll (Marshall Islands) and Wake island. Wake island and Midway island are unincorporated US territories and no states. Moreover, US governs five small islands between Marshall islands and Hawaii called the US Pacific Remote Island Area PRIA (Johnston Atoll, Howland island, Baker island, Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll, Jarvis island), Tilghman 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Resident Population, UNFPA 2021

<sup>3</sup> Tilghman 2023

<sup>4</sup> EOM 2019

<sup>5</sup> UPEI 2007

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins 2023

<sup>7</sup> Haagen 2021

<sup>8</sup> Thelitz/Kelen 2023

<sup>9</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2017

Timor Leste (14,918 km<sup>2</sup>, 1.3 million inhabitants, independent since 2002) is a Southern Pacific State located between Indonesia and Australia, but west of Papua and not in Oceania. The European Union handles Timor Leste as *Pacific Island Country PIC* together with the Oceanic Islands<sup>10</sup>. Timor Leste is not part of the *Pacific Island Forum PIF*.

Between the Marshall Islands and Hawaii, there is a large United States territory called **Pacific Remote Island Area PRIA** which together with Wake and Midway islands fills the gap between Oceania and the United States. Despite its strategic importance, it is usually not shown on Oceania or Pacific maps.

South of PRIA and northeast of Kiribati, between Kiribati, Hawaii and Mexico, there is the **Clarion-Clipperton Zone** which is managed by the *International Seabed Authority ISA* of the United Nations. The ISA supervises the deep seabed mining of polymetallic nodules. Nation states have the right to apply for a sector. To prevent overexploitation, there are reserved areas which cannot be used for mining<sup>11</sup>.

## 1.2 Brief History

Australia formed with New Guinea a continent named Sahul which was not far away from a Sunda land mass reaching down to Borneo. Despite the enormous distances, Oceania has a common history. An 'Austronesian' agrarian culture spread from the Chinese coast and Taiwan over thousands of years stepwise over Oceania<sup>12</sup> and then populations differentiated further after settlement into the three regions Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji), Polynesia (Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu) and Micronesia (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau) and there to local cultures and populations<sup>13</sup>. The expansion finally reached over the whole Pacific Ocean to the Easter Islands (Rapa Nui), Hawaii and also to Madagascar.

After the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453, European powers started sea expeditions around the globe. Magellan reached various Polynesian islands in 1522, then the Dutchman Tasman in 17<sup>th</sup> century, then James Cook in 18<sup>th</sup> century. Background of these expeditions was also the theory of a Southern continent 'terra incognita', which should serve as a physical 'counterweight' to the Northern landmasses. In 1788, the settlement of Australia was started in Sydney, first with prisoners, afterwards also with normal immigration. Christianization took place which dominates the Pacific region.

There was a 'colonization race' between France and England. New Zealand was conquered from the native Māori in 19<sup>th</sup> century after a long fight while the region around Tahiti was stepwise brought under control by France.

As a result of the American-Spanish war in 1898, the USA expanded their Pacific territories and controlled everything north of Kiribati (British) and east from the Marshall Islands as well as Guam and the Philippines. Later, the United States took over territories from Germany and Japan after the two world wars.

In the cold war, the Bikini and Eniwetok atolls of the Marshall Islands served as test place for nuclear and hydrogen bombs of the USA from 1946 to 1958, while France tested its bombs on the Mururoa atoll near Tahiti. The United States and the Marshall Islands had political and legal discussions to compensate the inhabitants. The United Kingdom had a nuclear test area at the Christmas islands, meanwhile known as Kiritimati. This territory was handed over to Kiribati in 1983.

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<sup>10</sup> EU 2023

<sup>11</sup> Thelitz/Kelen 2023

<sup>12</sup> EOM 2019

<sup>13</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2022, Lum 2023

Like United Kingdom, France had an active settlement policy, so that Australia and New Zealand are now mainly populated by the descendants of the English colonists, while in the French New Caledonia and Polynesia relatively large French minorities exist. There was a significant immigration from India to Fiji in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also in modern times Chinese and Philippine people migrated to the Northern Mariana Islands.

Important decolonization steps were the independence of 1968 Nauru, 1970 Fiji and Tonga (as protectorate its monarchy was permanently maintained), 1978 Salomon Islands, Tuvalu (split from Kiribati by voting), 1979 Kiribati, 1980 Vanuatu, 1986 Micronesia, 1990 Marshall Islands, 1994 Palau. Only Pitcairn with only 46 inhabitants, the descendants of the mutiny on the Bounty, remained British. 1975 Papua New Guinea became independent, which still gets significant Australian development assistance.

Australia and New Zealand made an 'internal decolonization', in which Australia terminated the suppression of the Aborigines and recognized them as original inhabitants (until the seventies Australia was legally an 'empty' *terra nullis* before colonization). New Zealand gave back land to the native Māori and established Māori as the second official language.

New Zealand got its external territories from United Kingdom and a kind of Mini-Commonwealth was established, with the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau planned as independent states in association with New Zealand, but Tokelau wanted to stay with New Zealand.

### 1.3 Institutions

In 1971, the *South Pacific Forum* was founded, which at its 30<sup>th</sup> meeting 1999 was transformed into the intergovernmental *Pacific Island Forum PIF* that includes Australia, New Zealand, the French territories French Polynesia and New Caledonia and the 14 oceanic states Fiji, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Niue, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Vanuatu, Nauru, Tonga, Palau and Tuvalu. American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas have observer status. Main topics are climate change, regional security, and fisheries<sup>14</sup>. There was a temporary suspension of the Fiji Islands after a military coup with tensions between the Melanesian majority of indigenous Fijians (*i-Taukei*) and the Indo-Fijian minority, but this was resolved and Fiji joined again<sup>15</sup>. In 2022, Kiribati left the PIF after disputes about the recognition of China (instead of Taiwan)<sup>16</sup>.

Since 1999, the annual meetings are continued on a ministerial level in permanence as *Post Office Forum Dialogue (PFD)*. There is the *Pacific Island forum Secretariat (PIFS)* headed by the *Secretary-General, the Chairman of the Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP)*. All states except Palau and Marshall Islands signed the *Pacific Island Countries Trade Agreement (PICTA)* with the intention to establish a free trade area. In 2014, the PIF released a common *Framework for Pacific Regionalism*<sup>17</sup>.

There is a Melanesian interest group, the *Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG)*, founded in 1986, that includes the following Melanesian countries and organizations: Fiji, the *Kanak Socialist Liberation Front (FLNKS) of New Caledonia*, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2017

<sup>15</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2017

<sup>16</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2022

<sup>17</sup> PIF 2014

<sup>18</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2017

## 1.4 Pillars of Western Influence

There are four main pillars of Western influence in Oceania: 1. Defense and security, 2. Binding of local currencies to Western currencies, 3. Developmental aid and 4. Association to Western States or a status as dependent territory.

### 1.4.1 Defense and Security

It is difficult to impossible for the Pacific States to defend the scattered small islands so that the Western states are responsible for the defense in many cases. The United States military has ties with Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Tonga, the only Pacific Island states with regular armed forces<sup>19</sup>. Only the Solomon Islands have signed a security agreement with China in 2022<sup>20</sup> which in turn led to stronger engagement of the United States that opened an embassy while Australia supported the Pacific Games in 2023.

At the 31<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Pacific Island Forum the *Biketawa Declaration* was signed, where the first time also peacekeeping measures and stabilization missions were agreed. Under the leadership of Australia, the *Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI)* took place and where 2,200 security forces were stationed for some years after local unrest. In the first decade of this century, Australia also intervened in Nauru (economic crisis) and Tonga (local unrest in 2006<sup>21</sup>).

The Pacific Island Countries agreed on an expanded concept of security in the *2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security*, which states that climate change remains the single greatest threat to the Pacific<sup>22</sup>.

### 1.4.2 Binding of Local Currencies

Many Oceanian currencies are bound to Western currencies which gives stability, but also limits the economic freedom of action:

- The US-Dollar is used as currency in American Samoa, Guam, Palau and the Associated States (Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Northern Marianas)
- The Australian Dollar AUD is used as currency in Australia, Tuvalu and Nauru, the Kiribati Dollar is fixed 1:1 to the AUD
- The New Zealand Dollar NZD is used as only currency in New Zealand, Tokelau, and Pitcairn; the Cook-Dollar and Niue-Dollar are fixed 1:1 to the NZD
- Tonga's Pa'anga is not convertible and fixed to a bucket of AUD, NZD, US-Dollar, and Japanese Yen
- The French territories New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna and French Polynesia use the Change Franc Pacifique (CFP franc) with the fixed rate 1 € = 119.3317 XPF, 100 XPF = 0.838 €.

### 1.4.3 Developmental Aid

Most islands do not achieve a 100 million US Dollar national budget, despite development assistance. Between 2006 and 2014, Australia gave approximately \$7.7 billion in foreign aid, followed by the United States (\$1.9 billion), China (\$1.8 billion), New Zealand (\$1.3 billion), Japan (\$1.2 billion), and France (\$1.0 billion)<sup>23</sup>.

The European Union promotes 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states (*Cotonou agreements*), of these, 48 are African, 16 Caribbean and 15 Pacific states (Cook islands, Fiji,

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<sup>19</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2022

<sup>20</sup> Chanlett-Avery et al. 2023

<sup>21</sup> Firth 2018

<sup>22</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2022

<sup>23</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2017

Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon islands, Timor Leste, Tuvalu, Vanuatu). For the ACP states, the European Union is still the most important trade partner. The measures of the European Union concentrate on three issues: governance, regionalism and sustainable management of natural resources. In December 2020, the EU and the new *Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS)* that formally replaces the ACP Group of States, reached a political deal on the text for a new Partnership Agreement that will succeed the Cotonou Agreement<sup>24</sup>.

#### 1.4.4 Association with Western States

The United States have a treaty with some island states, the *Compacts of Free Association*. This includes the Federated States of Micronesia FSM, the Republic of the Marshall Islands RMI and Palau.

The United States is obligated to defend the *Freely Associated States (FAS)* against attack or threat of attack. The United States can veto against policies that affect the defense (“defense veto”), and block involvement of third countries (“right of strategic denial”).<sup>25</sup> The compact of 2003 provides continued US financial and program assistance to the RMI and FSM and payments for US military use of Kwajalein Atoll with approximately \$3.5 billion over a twenty-year period<sup>26</sup> and was refreshed in 2023. The Northern Marianas chose commonwealth status while Guam became a United States territory in 1950<sup>27</sup>.

The Cook Islands and Niue are in free association with New Zealand, while Tokelau refused this status and remained a dependent territory.

The Free Association provides influence for the Western states and gives security and stability to the associated territories. The citizens of these associated states can migrate to and work in the United States and New Zealand (and Australia), respectively. As a side effect, this led to a massive emigration from the associated states. It is estimated that about 4 times more Cook Islanders live in New Zealand than in the Cook Islands<sup>28</sup>. An estimated 80 000 Cook Islanders live outside the Cooks, which has a population of 11,700, and around 20 000 Niueans live outside their home island, compared with just 1,611 living on Niue in 2018<sup>29</sup>. More than 94,000 FAS citizens live in the United States, including children born in the United States and hold dual citizenship<sup>30</sup>. Similar observations were made for the French territory Wallis and Futuna<sup>31</sup>.

## 2 Political Challenges

### 2.1 Introduction

The islands of a state are often spread over a wide area, so the outer islands are often difficult to access. Often, there is limited connection by air or ships, which makes trade difficult and results in relatively large administrative bodies<sup>32</sup>. Kiribati has e.g. approx. 5.2 million km<sup>2</sup> water surface but only 811 km<sup>2</sup> land surface. In Kiribati, there is an internal migration from the periphery to the main islands ongoing. The water surface is the *Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)* of the respective island state. The Pacific islands states face several large challenges regarding

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<sup>24</sup> EU 2023

<sup>25</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2017

<sup>26</sup> Lum 2004

<sup>27</sup> Lum 2023

<sup>28</sup> UNFPA 2021

<sup>29</sup> Firth 2018

<sup>30</sup> Lum 2023

<sup>31</sup> EOM 2019

<sup>32</sup> EOM 2019



susceptibility for natural disasters, poverty, and difficult governance. Natural disasters in 2019-2022 included earthquakes, volcanic activity, tropical cyclones, floods, and landslides<sup>33</sup>.

The agriculture is impacted by harsh physical environment, poor soil quality and small land areas<sup>34</sup>. There is an increasing trend to tensions, disputes, and violence over land in Pacific urban areas as landlessness becomes more common<sup>35</sup>.

Due to their small total population of less than 15 million, about which two thirds live in Papua New Guinea, Oceania is often internationally neglected.

The proportion of Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand) on world trade is small. Agriculture, fish, textile, and tourism are important economic factors. Over half of the world's tuna is fished in the region<sup>36</sup>.

Tonga has a long-standing monarchy (but with a democratic constitution<sup>37</sup>) and the Pacific States are democracies. In contrast to the left-right scheme of Western democratic parties, kin, traditional chiefly and provincial relations are more relevant<sup>38</sup>. Micronesia, Papua New Guinea (which consists of hundreds of different tribes and languages), Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have a weak national identity<sup>39</sup>.

Countries such as Niue, the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Tokelau have high emigration rates, while countries like Tuvalu, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Kiribati have a high growth rate due to a high birth rate but little international migration. The Cook Islands and Kiribati suffer from inner migration from the periphery to the main islands, also Tuvalu's Funafuti atoll is densely populated.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, overseas remittances from emigrated workers are a relevant income source of islands states with high emigration rates<sup>41</sup>.

## 2.2 Climate

Large parts of Oceania are threatened by rising sea levels (inundation) and many island states are concerned that in approximately 50 years large parts could be under water, since many islands are only 2-3 meters over the water, partially even less. Until 2100, sea levels may rise by up to 200 centimeters, with average annual temperatures rising by 1.4–3.7°C<sup>42</sup>. Rising sea levels contribute to coastal erosion<sup>43</sup> and salinization of freshwater reserves<sup>44</sup>.

The global warming with rising carbon dioxide levels contributes to an acidification of ocean water which leads to coral bleaching<sup>45</sup> and subsequently to reduced fish reserves<sup>46</sup>.

Even the evacuation of whole States of (Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu) is already in discussion. Papua New Guinea discussed to evacuate the Carteret islands since 2009, but the evacuation did not take place then<sup>47</sup>. Australia has signed with Tuvalu an evacuation agreement which allows 280 citizens of Tuvalu to migrate to Australia each year, and if necessary, the entire

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<sup>33</sup> Wilkins 2023

<sup>34</sup> Tuvalu 2019

<sup>35</sup> Firth 2018

<sup>36</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2022

<sup>37</sup> Firth 2018

<sup>38</sup> UNFPA 2021

<sup>39</sup> Lum 2023

<sup>40</sup> UNFPA 2021

<sup>41</sup> UN 2017

<sup>42</sup> Wilkens 2023

<sup>43</sup> Campbell/Warrick 2014

<sup>44</sup> Haagen 2021

<sup>45</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2017

<sup>46</sup> Haagen 2021

<sup>47</sup> Campbell/Warrick 2014

population of Tuvalu would be allowed to come to Australia<sup>48</sup>. As precautionary measure, Tuvalu has changed its constitution in a way that Tuvalu still exists and can claim its sea territory even if the whole country is underwater. However, the *UN Sea Convention UNCLOS* clearly states that claims for sea territories can only be made for structures that are *permanently over the water*<sup>49</sup>.

The Pacific Islands Countries which supported a first UN resolution on climate change (see Section 3.1) were among the first countries to ratify the *2015 Paris Climate Agreement*<sup>50</sup>. However, climate change progressed faster than expected since 2015. States already struggle with the energy transformation and the climate goals.<sup>51</sup> The *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)* noted for example that despite progress, adaptation gaps exist, and will continue to grow at current rates of implementation<sup>52</sup>. The *World Meteorological Organization (WMO)* expects that global warming will reach the 1.5°C level already between 2023 and 2027 with 66% likelihood and not in 2050<sup>53</sup>.

The prognosis that the Pacific islands will sink assumes that reef islands are static, but new research shows a geological dynamic<sup>54</sup>. Rising sea levels lead to an increased accumulation of sediments<sup>55</sup>. The sedimentation effect leads to a vertical growth of islands despite rising sea levels<sup>56</sup>. Moreover, there is also a win of land space. The sedimentation mitigates the coastal erosion from rising sea levels<sup>57</sup>. Satellite data from 1971 to 2014 showed that despite rising sea levels, the space of 8 of 9 atolls of Tuvalu was growing and also of 75% of 101 analyzed Pacific islands<sup>58</sup>.

Even if it is now less likely that the Pacific islands will sink in a rising ocean which is good news for the inhabitants, the studies show that this will co-incide with a damaged environment<sup>59</sup> with dead sediments instead of healthy corals.

### 2.3 Independence Movements

Currently, there are three independence movements in Bougainville (from Papua New Guinea), New Caledonia (from France) and Chuuk (from the Federated States of Micronesia).

Between 1988 and 1997, an independence movement from Bougainville fought against Papua New Guinea. In 2001, a peace agreement was signed<sup>60</sup>. An Autonomous Bougainville Government was formally established in 2005. In 2019, 98% of the Bougainvilleans voted in favor of independence<sup>61</sup>. However, the exact roadmap to independence is still under discussion and takes longer than expected<sup>62</sup>. Bougainville's president Toorama visited Washington to seek for United States support to gain independence by 2027<sup>63</sup>. However, United States are hesitant as Papua New Guinea has favored United States over China in security matters and they are

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<sup>48</sup> Zoll 2023

<sup>49</sup> Zoll 2023. Vanuatu is the first country of the world that has completely forbidden the use of plastic, Haagen 2021

<sup>50</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2022

<sup>51</sup> IEA 2022, IRENA 2022

<sup>52</sup> IPCC 2023

<sup>53</sup> WMO 2023

<sup>54</sup> Masselink et al. 2020

<sup>55</sup> East et al. 2018

<sup>56</sup> Masselink et al. 2020

<sup>57</sup> Tuck et al. 2021

<sup>58</sup> Lingenhöhl 2018

<sup>59</sup> See also Howes et al. 2018

<sup>60</sup> Firth 2018

<sup>61</sup> Yinusa/Lum 2023

<sup>62</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2022

<sup>63</sup> Pohle 2023

uncertain whether an independent Bougainville will stay on the side of the United States in the long run.

In February 2004 in Paris, a new autonomy statute for French Polynesia was released. France is now only responsible for foreign policy, law, defense, internal security and monetary system. An independence movement of indigenous Kanak, the *Kanak Socialist Liberation Front (FLNKS)* of New Caledonia is fighting against the French rule. In New Caledonia (Kanaky) an independence referendum was agreed. However, a majority has repeatedly voted against an independence from France, the last time in 2021<sup>64</sup>. For France, New Caledonia with its huge sea territory and its nickel resources is still attractive and the majority of inhabitants of New Caledonia is still concerned about the economic prospects of an independent state.

The Federated States of Micronesia FSM consist of four islands with an own traditional identity. Chuuk is the largest state of FSM and dissatisfied with the distribution of money between the four members. This resulted in the wish to become independent. An independent State of Chuuk would own a substantial sea territory, but is also strategically important as the Chuuk lagoon is one of largest and deepest in the Pacific and is a potentially important strategic naval asset<sup>65</sup>. However, United States were able to stop the secession so far, because they made clear that the advantages of Free association that the Federated States of Micronesia got would not be given to an independent Chuuk as well.

#### 2.4 Parallels to the Caribbean Islands

Many challenges of the above-described challenges are not specific for the Pacific Islands, but shared with other small island states. The Caribbean islands shown in the table below have similar issues: this region is also composed of mostly small independent island states and territories which still belong the colonial powers. Besides Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic with approximately 11 million inhabitants each and Jamaica with 2.8 million, all other territories have less than 500,000 people<sup>66</sup>.

Like in the Pacific area, they experience frequent damages by tropical storms and also due to their small economy, it is difficult to maintain the infrastructure. Poverty is widespread on the small islands; and developmental aid plays an important role for the region. Several islands have formed the *Organization of Eastern Caribbean States* in 1981 with a common currency, the East Caribbean Dollar, for cooperation and support (1 US\$ = 2.70 EC\$).

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<sup>64</sup> Lum/Vaughn 2022

<sup>65</sup> Grossman 2023

<sup>66</sup> Numbers from Wikipedia entry Caribbean States, last access 09 Jan 2024

**Table Caribbean Islands**

Independent States	Dependent or overseas territories	
Antigua and Barbuda*	<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>France</b>
Bahamas	Anguilla**	Guadeloupe**
Barbados	British Virgin Islands**	Martinique**
Cuba	Cayman Islands	Saint Barthelemy
Dominican Republic	Montserrat**	Saint Martin
Dominica*	Turks and Caicos	<b>United States</b>
Grenada*	<b>The Netherlands</b>	Navassa island
Haiti	Aruba	United States Virgin Islands
Jamaica	Bonaire	
Saint Kitts and Nevis*	Curacao	
Saint Lucia*	Saba	
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*	Sint Maarten	
Trinidad and Tobago	Sint Eustatius	

\*Member states of East Caribbean Organization \*\*Associated Members

### 3 The Geopolitics of Small States

#### 3.1 Introduction

According to the informal UN *Forum of Small States (FOSS)* with more than hundred member states, small states are those with populations of less than 10 million people. In 2014, 13 UN member states had less than 100,000 inhabitants, while 15 member states had between 100,000 and 500,000 people<sup>67</sup>. As shown above, many of the small states are in Oceania and the Caribbean region, but also Europe has small states such as Malta, Liechtenstein, Andorra, Vatican City<sup>68</sup>, San Marino and Monaco.

Even if a global organization is formally equal and fair, the dominance of large nations is normal, because only large states have sufficient diplomatic, economic and legal capacities to utilize global organizations, while they cannot be used by small states in the same way due to their limited resources. Ó Súilleabháin (2014) identified three key challenges: asymmetric access to information, capacity constraints, and structural barriers to full participation.

Realistically, it cannot be expected from small island states that they permanently provide hundreds of diplomats, lawyers and experts to international organizations. In contrast, many small states struggle to maintain state functions and are dependent from developmental aid and international support, for example island states in Oceania or the Caribbean Sea which suffer from frequent tropical storms. In 2014, the Caribbean Island of Jamaica had a diplomatic staff of 8 individuals in 2014 at the UN, will China had nearly 80 and the United States mission more than 150<sup>69</sup>.

Organizations like *Islands First* provide internships e.g. for students that can represent with a formal ‘Advisor’ status the states on behalf of the ambassador at the UN General Assembly, e.g. for Tuvalu and Nauru<sup>70</sup>.

As a result, large states are often the rule makers while smaller states are rule takers and the rules are modified by real power. However, in the United Nations and in other organizations, all nations are equal (sovereign equality), i.e. ‘one country, one vote’ which gives small states

<sup>67</sup> Ó Súilleabháin 2014

<sup>68</sup> Note that many Catholic States still recognize the Order of the Maltese Knights (Order of Malta) as sovereign subject, the territory consists of a palace in Rome.

<sup>69</sup> Ó Súilleabháin 2014

<sup>70</sup> Moll 2011

an overproportioned weight in voting procedures as a small state has the same vote as India or China<sup>71</sup> (which makes them to potential targets of vote buying, see Section 3.2.3).

If small states coordinate their activities, they can start their own political initiatives. In 2009, the *Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS)* drafted a resolution calling for the security implications of climate change to be acknowledged and addressed. Their resolution was supported by more than 100 states and was adopted by the UN General Assembly<sup>72</sup>.

### 3.2 Selling of Rights

A special issue is the selling of rights, e.g., licenses for fishing, mining, communication, or transportation. The smaller the state, the more relevant is the income from these activities for the state household. While such activities are lawful and legitimate, there are also practices like vote buying and selling of passport and titles. Even diplomatic recognition may have its price, see Section 3.2.3.

Some islands found additional ways, e.g., many people transfer their money to as a discrete storage to the Caribbean territories Virgin Islands and Cayman Islands.

#### 3.2.1 Tuvalu - a Case Study

A successful state is the island of Tuvalu. The Gross National Income (GNI) was 4960 US Dollar per capita in 2011, which with approximately 11,000 inhabitants results in a total of approximately 55 million US dollar<sup>73</sup>.

- A main income source are fishing rights which resulted in 19 million dollar in 2019.
- In addition, it owns the country code top level domain tv, i.e. internet addresses ending with .tv. As this is highly attractive for television (TV) stations as internet address, Tuvalu made already 1/12 of its gross national income in 2019 with selling the rights for domain use, in 2023 this increased to 10 million dollar per year<sup>74</sup>.

These activities represent a significant proportion of Tuvalu's income and result in relatively good living standards<sup>75</sup>.

#### 3.2.2 Mining

Resources make states or regions always attractive for political actors and investors, e.g., the French territory New Caledonia has significant nickel resources<sup>76</sup>. Sometimes, this could cause problems as well, e.g. in the civil war of Bougainville a huge mine was in the center of conflict before the independence referendum.

The Pacific island state of Nauru had huge phosphate resources which were exploited over decades, leaving a destroyed environment and landscape behind.

But now, Nauru and further Pacific islands (Cook islands, Tonga and Kiribati) have cooperations with private mining companies to exploit polymetallic nodules in the ISA territory, the Clarion-Clipperton Zone<sup>77</sup>. Private companies can only access the territory if they cooperate with a state. The regulations say that the licensing state keeps the liability for the activities in their ISA territory, but it will be challenging for small island states without technical knowledge to do the oversight.

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<sup>71</sup> Ó Súilleabháin 2014

<sup>72</sup> Ó Súilleabháin 2014

<sup>73</sup> UNFPA 2011

<sup>74</sup> Washington Post 2019, Medium 2023

<sup>75</sup> Washington Post 2019

<sup>76</sup> Belkin 2021

<sup>77</sup> Thelitz/Kelen 2023

Another new income source for Nauru is the hosting of 1,500 asylum seekers from the Middle East, Africa and Asia on behalf of Australia<sup>78</sup>. To prevent visits of foreigners, Nauru increased its visa fees to 8000 Australian Dollar<sup>79</sup>.

### 3.2.3 Vote Buying

Another phenomenon is vote buying between states, i.e., state X gives money to state Y, and state Y votes then for state X's suggestions. Typically, large states try to get the vote of smaller states in exchange for money. While giving money to individuals to achieve a certain political behavior is a type of corruption and bribery, and therefore illegal, things are much more complicated if this happens between states.

In politics, *quid pro quo* strategies and bargaining are standard elements of international activities. If state Y supports state X, it can in turn expect support from state X as well, e.g., votes, political or financial support, i.e., governments trade money for political influence<sup>80</sup>.

A study from the *Harvard University* showed some examples for the Pacific Island States<sup>81</sup>:

- In 2002, Nauru cut diplomatic ties with Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) in 2002, after it allegedly received \$130 million from China (People's Republic of China), but then re-established the relation three years later after a better offer. Kiribati and the Marshall Islands have recognized Taiwan and revoked this more than once. This is also called the China-Taiwan "dollar diplomacy," where both sides compete with each other through offers of foreign aid<sup>82</sup>.
- In 2006, elections for non-permanent UN Security Council members took place and Japan promised \$410 million in new aid to the small Pacific Island islands resulting in full support for Japan.
- In 2008, Iran paid \$200,000 to the Solomon Islands in exchange for voting against Israel in the UN General Assembly.
- In 2009, Russia offered Nauru \$50 million in exchange for diplomatic recognition of the separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In 2024, Nauru recognized the People's Republic of China again and the Taiwan stopped the diplomatic relations. Taiwan complained that Nauru came with a request for a high sum of money which Taiwan could not pay, but the People's Republic of China could<sup>83</sup>.

Also, there is a phenomenon called **favoritism** (i.e., better treatment of friendly states)<sup>84</sup>. A vote in the UN General Assembly for a suggestion of the United States may result in certain cases in better treatment by the *International Monetary Fund IMF*. Also, the *World Bank* was asked by United States to help friendly governments when these were facing elections. Non-permanent members of the UN Security Council enjoy an increase of foreign aid during their membership.

While such practices could be considered as problematic, also due to the lack of transparency, there is still no generally applicable norm of international law that prohibits states from selling their votes in international institutions or bars other states from buying them<sup>85</sup>. In other words: it may be considered as immoral, but it is not illegal.

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<sup>78</sup> UNFPA 2021

<sup>79</sup> Zoll 2024

<sup>80</sup> Vreeland 2019

<sup>81</sup> Lockwood 2013

<sup>82</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2017

<sup>83</sup> Zoll 2024

<sup>84</sup> Vreeland 2019

<sup>85</sup> Lockwood 2013



### 3.2.4 Passports and Titles

An investigative reporter from Denmark bought the role and title of Liberian ambassador in the Central African Republic for 135,000 Euro via a specialized broker. As a bonus, he received an honorary PhD degree from the *University of Monrovia*. Alternatively, he was offered to become a Trade Attaché (commercial representative) of Vanuatu which may indicate an involvement of this Pacific state in such activities<sup>86</sup>. Diplomatic status provides privileges like immunity and uncontrolled luggage which could theoretically open opportunities for smuggling<sup>87</sup>.

However, this activity was definitely not in line with the *1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations* which strictly binds diplomatic privileges to certain roles and duties including notification, approval and accreditation procedures with the right for rejection for the host country (further regulations are the *1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations* and the *Headquarters Agreements* entered into with international organizations)<sup>88</sup>. The *1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations* states that the ambassador should be a citizen of the sending state (Art. 8) and clearly states that the diplomatic role must not be used for personal profit (Art. 42) and prohibits the misuse of embassies for purposes not covered by law of nations (Art 41).

In practice, there are very tight procedures in place for diplomatic staff; a good example is the diplomatic protocol of Belgium which is very systematically organized in a step-by-step manner similar to industrial Standard Operating Procedures<sup>89</sup>.

Another critical issue is the selling of citizenships against investments, the so-called *Golden Passports*. A second citizenship can have advantages, e.g. if someone is a citizen from a country that is sanctioned by others or is subject to tight visa restrictions. Here, the second citizenship can facilitate free travel. Another thing is that a citizen with two passports from country A and B can easily evade to country B if there are troubles in country A. While Pacific islands are not involved here, Caribbean islands are active here. For investments between 100,000 to 150,000 dollar, the investor can earn the citizenship of Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis or St. Lucia<sup>90</sup>.

## 4 Competition between the West and China

Chinas approach is to expand influence, in particular via economic measures (silk road and developmental aid, strategic investments in Oceania, Africa and Latin America) and to dilute US military power via stretching frontlines. The *First Island chain* includes southern Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines<sup>91</sup>. Military posts in the Micronesian subregion, including bases on Guam and Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, constitute the second island chain in the Pacific. China tries to push back US forces from the First Island chain to the more distant Second Island chain and to establish strategic locations around India as String of Pearls<sup>92</sup>. A retreat of United States from any Pacific position would prolong the front lines by thousands of kilometers which would significantly aggravate the already existing stretch of US forces. Guam is now of major strategic importance as this is a key element of the second island chain and the regional US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) plans to expand the Guam forces and to build a Missile defense by the *US Missile Defense Agency MDA*<sup>93</sup>. The plan is to have a full

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<sup>86</sup> Wadewitz 2012

<sup>87</sup> Wadewitz 2012

<sup>88</sup> Belgium 2021 Official Protocol Guide Immunities and Privileges

<sup>89</sup> Belgium 2021 Official Protocol Guide Immunities and Privileges

<sup>90</sup> Towey 2022. The European Union considers this a bad practice and urged Cyprus to stop its passport program.

<sup>91</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2017

<sup>92</sup> CRS 2023

<sup>93</sup> Feickert 2017, Tilghman 2023

defense against simultaneous raids of maritime, ballistic, maneuvering, and hypersonic threats<sup>94</sup>.

Guam's importance is also based on doubts of the US military that Japan and South Korea would provide full cooperation and support for offensive U.S. military operations in the event of a conflict over Taiwan<sup>95</sup>. Palau may also get a military base, also Micronesia<sup>96</sup>.

China's concept of 'circle of friends' differs from the alliance and coalition building concept of the United States and the Western allies, such as the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD)*, the trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (*AUKUS*), the *Chip4 Alliance* between US, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan and the *Indo-Pacific strategy*<sup>97</sup>.

Since 2013, when Xi Jinping became President, China has focused on enlarging its 'circle of friends' who understand and support China with a priority on neighboring and major states and on developing a network of partnerships. In 2013, the *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, formerly known as *One Belt, One Road (OBOR)* initiative (or as *New Silk Road* as reference to the historic silk road as most important Asian trade route), was set up and China engaged in meetings and various *Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs)* were signed with the states along the trade routes which reaches from China to Africa and Europe, but also to the Oceanic region where China is increasingly active with diplomacy and economic initiatives.

Important strategic goals are to remove Taiwan's regional influence, to break through the second island chain and to get access to the regional resources and economies<sup>98</sup>. From May to June 2022, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited eight Pacific islands nations and suggested trade and security agreements to 10 states, but the states were hesitant to sign such far-reaching agreements<sup>99</sup>.

Measures include:

- Beijing has opened diplomatic missions in all eight of the Pacific Island countries with which it has diplomatic relations. Also, it shows much official attention to the leaders of Oceanian states. Meanwhile, the West realized that the states felt neglected and pays now more attention. In 2022, the US government presented the *Pacific Partnership Strategy* and planned to open embassies in Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, and Tonga, and to send a special US Envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF)<sup>100</sup>. The US has opened an embassy on the Solomon Islands in 2023 and the UK already opened new High Commissions in Vanuatu, Tonga, and Samoa in 2019<sup>101</sup>
- Papua New Guinea: China offered in 2019 to take over the complete state debts which would make it financially dependent from China. Papua New Guinea did not sign this agreement, but turned to US and Australia for support<sup>102</sup>.
- In Vanuatu, China has built a large wharf which allows stops of large tourist ships, but also a military ship from China visited this<sup>103</sup>. This caused dual-use concerns of

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<sup>94</sup> Tilghman 2023

<sup>95</sup> Tilghman 2023

<sup>96</sup> Lum 2023

<sup>97</sup> Ekman 2022

<sup>98</sup> Grossman 2023

<sup>99</sup> Jones 2023

<sup>100</sup> White House 2022

<sup>101</sup> Belkin 2021

<sup>102</sup> Jones 2023

<sup>103</sup> Zoll 2018



Chinese wharf projects<sup>104</sup>, but also for an airstrip in Kiribati<sup>105</sup> where China helps to extend an airstrip to more than 6,000 feet on the island of Canton<sup>106</sup>

- Commonwealth of Northern Marianas (CNMI)<sup>107</sup>: massive engagement in casinos on Saipan Island with Chinese immigration and infrastructure investment resulting in increased public support for China
- Federated States of Micronesia (FSM): ‘visit diplomacy’ with regular high-level visits and invitations, scholarships for students, infrastructure investments, financial aid, resulting in increasing support for China<sup>108</sup>
- Palau: tourism offensive with massive hotel construction campaign led to a rapidly growing importance of Chinas economic activities<sup>109</sup>. Since the early 2000s, large loans from Chinese banks have created debt dependency in the Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, and Vanuatu<sup>110</sup>; Tonga is apparently not able to pay the back the credits.
- China is meanwhile the second largest aid donor in the Pacific after Australia. Also, an *Oceania Silk Road Network* is underway.
- The US observed massive numbers of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing incidents by Chinese fishermen in Oceania<sup>111</sup>
- Activities are accompanied by multi-platform communication strategies with free sending of Chinese Government’s international television in English throughout the Pacific and by *China Radio International (CRI)*.

In summary, China’s Oceania strategy includes more political measures such as assertive diplomacy, media campaigns and economic activities<sup>112</sup>.

A new area of strategic competition is the telecommunication via deep-sea cables. The United States, Australia, and Japan financed undersea telecommunications cables for Kiribati, Micronesia, Nauru, and Palau in 2020 and 2021. In 2019, Australia financed an undersea telecommunications cable connecting Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to prevent the involvement of China’s company *Huawei* into the project<sup>113</sup>.

## 5 Summary

The paper analyzed the geopolitics of Oceania with the Pacific Island States and the geopolitical role of small states in general. Oceania with its three sub-regions Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia is an area of growing geopolitical competition between the Western States Australia, New Zealand, France, United Kingdom, United States and Japan on one side and China on the other side. The key institution is the Pacific Iceland Forum PIF with Australia, New Zealand, the French territories French Polynesia and New Caledonia, the 14 oceanic states Fiji, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Marshall Islands, Niue, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Samoa, Vanuatu, Nauru, Tonga, Palau, and Tuvalu. American Samoa, Guam, and the Northern Marianas have observer status. The main pillars of Western influence in Oceania are: 1. Defense and security, 2. Binding of local currencies to Western currencies, 3. Developmental aid and 4. Association to Western States or a status as dependent territories. Many islands use or are linked to the US Dollar, the Australian Dollar, or the New

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<sup>104</sup> Jones 2023

<sup>105</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2022

<sup>106</sup> Jones 2023

<sup>107</sup> Babbage 2019

<sup>108</sup> Jones 2023

<sup>109</sup> Zoll 2018

<sup>110</sup> Babbage 2019

<sup>111</sup> Grossman 2023

<sup>112</sup> See also Babbage 2019

<sup>113</sup> Lam/Vaughn 2022

Zealand Dollar. Most islands do not achieve a 100 million US Dollar national budget, despite development assistance that is primarily provided by Australia, United States, China, France, and Japan. The Federated States of Micronesia FSM, the Republic of the Marshall Islands RMI and Palau are in free association with the United States while Niue and the Cook Islands are associated to New Zealand.

Currently, there are three independence movements in Bougainville (from Papua New Guinea), New Caledonia (from France) and Chuuk (from the Federated States of Micronesia), but with little progress.

The Pacific islands states face several challenges regarding natural disasters, poverty, and difficult governance. Large parts of Oceania are threatened by rising sea levels (inundation) that contribute to coastal erosion and salinization of freshwater reserves. The global warming with rising carbon dioxide levels contributes to an acidification of ocean water which leads to coral bleaching and subsequently to reduced fish reserves. Recent geologic studies showed however that many Pacific Islands grow with rising sea levels due to sedimentation. The situation in Oceania shows some similarities to the small island states in the Caribbean Sea.

According to the informal *UN Forum of Small States (FOSS)* with more than hundred member states, small states are those with populations of less than 10 million people. In international organizations, small states are confronted asymmetric access to information, capacity constraints, and structural barriers to full participation. On the other hand, due to the widespread one country-one vote principle, they have a higher per capita weight in voting procedures.

A special issue is the selling of rights, e.g., licenses for fishing, mining, communication, or transportation. The smaller the state, the more relevant is the income from these activities for the state household. While such activities are lawful and legitimate, there are also practices like vote buying and selling of passports and titles. Large states try to get the vote of smaller states in exchange for money which has influence on UN voting and diplomatic recognition (dollar diplomacy). A related phenomenon is favoritism, i.e., friendly states get more developmental aid or credits.

The geopolitical competition between the West and China is intensified. Chinas approach is to expand influence and to dilute US military power via stretching frontlines. The competition includes a large variety of activities (tourism, media, fishing, investments, foreign aid, deep sea cables) and in reaction to China's advances, the Western states intensify their diplomatic, economic, and military engagement in the region.

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