

## 8 Small states in the Pacific

### Sovereignty, vulnerability, and regionalism

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Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs) are a valuable area for small-state analysis as they exhibit layers of diversity with respect to sovereignty, development, dependency, political activity, and regional interaction that can contribute to our understanding of the role and influence of small states in international politics. This chapter introduces the small states of the Pacific to readers unfamiliar with the region's history, economy, and development and is divided into three sections. It first focuses on what constitutes a 'small state' in the Pacific Islands context, an important matter given international assumptions about state sovereignty and the diverse political arrangements in the Pacific. We explore factors linked to the geography, land and sea areas, and populations of Pacific Islands polities, as well as the ongoing process of decolonisation, noting that this does not always result in independence. We also set aside the traditional 'independent/dependent' distinction of state sovereignty in favour of a more nuanced explanation that allows for a range of activities in international relations for both independent and dependent PICTs. Second, we explore how the ongoing decolonisation of the Pacific has led to small states with limited resource bases using their sovereignty in various ways to guard against vulnerability. Third, we examine how regional organisation has presented opportunities for small states to meet some common challenges, including food systems and food security, in an era of global integration in trade and development, as well as urbanisation and climate change. We argue throughout this chapter that PICTs use their sovereignty, both individually and collectively, to influence larger global agendas, and that such actions create opportunities for both independent and dependent PICTs to engage in subregional, regional, and international actions to advance their specific 'national' interests.

#### **Small-state sovereignty in the Pacific**

The Pacific Ocean region of 'Oceania' includes Australia, New Zealand, and a variety of independent states and dependent territories known collectively as the Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs). Due to their land mass, size and type of economy,<sup>1</sup> population, and level of engagement in world affairs, both Australia and New Zealand can be understood as 'middle powers' (Hawksley, 2009) and are not considered 'small states'. We also exclude from small-state analysis

Papua New Guinea (PNG), which is both larger and more populous than New Zealand (Hawksley & Ward, 2019), and which among other Pacific Islands states is considered something of a giant, with a population almost ten times that of the next most populous PICT, Fiji, and an economy valued at over US\$24.6 billion in 2020, over five times that of Fiji (\$4.49 billion) (Countryeconomy.com, 2022).<sup>2</sup>

This discussion of small states in the Pacific thus focuses on the smaller remaining PICTs of Oceania, within which there are three artificially created and imposed (Georgeou et al., 2022), yet useful, subregional groupings: Melanesia ('black islands') in the southwest Pacific; Micronesia ('small islands') in the North and Central Pacific; and Polynesia ('many islands') in the Southeast Pacific (see Figure 8.1).

The combined land area of all 22 PICTs is 551,483 square kilometres, an area roughly equal to that of France; however, PNG (460,842 km<sup>2</sup>) makes up 83.5% of this area. The smallest Melanesian state (Vanuatu) is still a relative regional giant, with a larger land area than all the Polynesian and Micronesian PICTs combined (Georgeou et al., 2022). Table 8.1 shows the enormous disparity in land area between Pacific states, with many having less than 1,000 square kilometres of territory.

While small in land area, the size of the Pacific states' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) magnifies their importance. The total EEZ of all the PICTs is

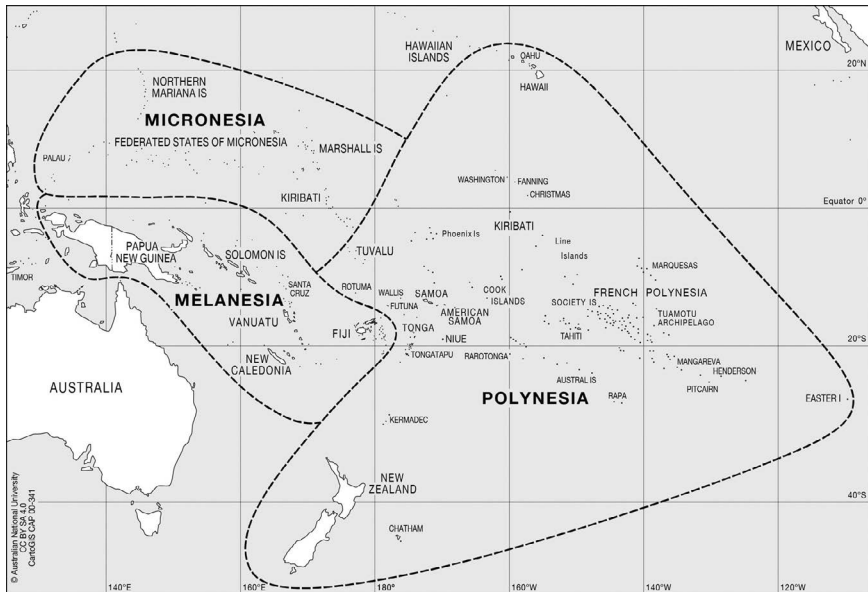


Figure 8.1 Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia

Source: CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University © The Australian National University (2021) CC BY SA 4.0.

<https://asiapacific-archive.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/micronesia-melanesia-polynesia> (accessed March 2023)

Table 8.1 Data on select PICTs (Pacific Islands Countries and Territories)

<i>PICT</i>	<i>Population (in 2021)</i>	<i>2020 GDP/Per Capita (in US\$)</i>	<i>Land Area (in km<sup>2</sup>)</i>	<i>EEZ Area (in km<sup>2</sup>)</i>
Papua New Guinea (PNG)	8,934,475	2,854	462,840	2,402,290
Fiji	898,402	6,152	18,333	1,282,980
Solomon Islands	728,041	2,295	28,230	1,553,440
New Caledonia	273,015	37,448	18,576	1,422,540
Vanuatu	301,295	3,223	12,281	663,251
Samoa	199,853	4,284	2,934	127,950
Kiribati	120,740	1,636	811	3,441,810
Federated States of Micronesia	105,754	3,830	701	2,996,420
Tonga	99,532	5,081	749	659,558
Marshall Islands	54,516	4,337	181	1,990,530
Palau	17,957	15,673	444	603,978
Cook Islands	15,342	24,913	237	1,830,000
Tuvalu	10,679	4,223	26	749,790
Nauru	11,832	11,666	21	308,480
Niue	1,549	18,757	259	450,000
Tokelau	1,506	6,882	12	319,031

Source: Created by authors using SPC (2021).

[www.spc.int/our-members/](http://www.spc.int/our-members/)

30,273,426 square kilometres, some three times the land area of Canada and almost twice the land area of the world's largest state, Russia. Under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the EEZ regime gives Pacific small states access to revenue from fishing rights and other possible future income streams (such as undersea mining); however, their low-lying environments also make Pacific islands states uniquely vulnerable. Again excluding PNG from the PICTs, around 90% of the remaining Pacific Islands population live within 10 kilometres of the ocean (Andrew et al., 2019), so there is clear vulnerability for small Pacific states from rising sea levels, higher temperatures, shifts in rainfall patterns, and changes in the frequency and intensity of extreme climate events (CSIRO, 2021; RCCAP, 2021) such as cyclones (e.g., 2015's Cyclone *Pam* in Vanuatu). Frequent earthquakes and tsunamis add to the complexity of that vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> Another common feature of small states in the Pacific is that they have small populations. Apart from Papua New Guinea, all other PICTs have populations of under one million, with the largest populations being in Melanesia. While the demographic dominance of Melanesian states and their settlement patterns make the PICTs on average rural (77% rural in mid-2018), there is heavy-to-extreme localised urbanisation in both Micronesia (75.5%) and Polynesia (49.3%) (Georjeou et al., 2022).

As with other parts of the world, the colonial background and decolonisation experiences of Pacific states have led to a wide array of political systems—unicameral and bicameral, presidential and parliamentary. National ideology and political parties, however, normally count for little in the PICTs (Fraenkel, 2013), so the phrase ‘all politics is local’ applies across the Pacific. Elections are usually characterised by fiercely fought contests between local independents, with parties as vehicles to access national power and ministries so that elected members can return wealth to their communities.

### **Decolonisation, self-determination, sovereignty, and independence of the region**

The Pacific region progressively came under the control of foreign powers during the last half of the nineteenth century with France claiming New Caledonia in 1853. The first independent Pacific state was Samoa in 1962, and the last to date have been Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Palau (both 1994) (Hawksley & Ward, 2019). While it might be tempting to define small states as ‘independent states’, the situation in the Pacific with respect to statehood is not always clear, and some interrelated terms require explanation: decolonisation, self-determination, sovereignty, and independence.

Broadly speaking, *decolonisation* is the same movement that delivered independent statehood to colonial peoples across the world after the Second World War. In the Pacific, however, decolonisation is an ongoing process with several movements for *self-determination*—understood as communities making decisions about self-government that can range from greater self-rule or autonomy to complete *independence* (though separate statehood). Movements for self-determination can occur in populations controlled by states both outside the Pacific and within PICTs.<sup>4</sup> We understand *sovereignty* to mean the claims made by states concerning their competence in domestic governance and in exerting their control over their territory. Such claims constitute the minimum expectation of state behaviour in the international community. The processes of mutual recognition and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations are a confirmation that the claimant state is regarded as independent by others. While UN membership can certainly help in a state’s quest for international legal recognition (see, e.g., Krasner, 1999; Philpott, 2001), in the Pacific neither Cook Islands nor Niue, both of which are independent, are members of the United Nations.

We see sovereignty in the Pacific Islands very much in the “basket theory” tradition (Philpott, 2001, p. 313) where state sovereignty involves different attributes. Following Krasner (1999, pp. 9–25) “domestic sovereignty” involves legal authority over the territory and population; “interdependence sovereignty” is the capacity of a state to police its borders to prevent entry or exit of people or goods; “Westphalian sovereignty” is the notion of non-intervention by other states in a state’s internal affairs; and “international legal sovereignty” is recognition by other states of a state’s claim to be a state. For the PICTs, this ‘basket’ of sovereignty approaches is arguably a more useful typology than the monolithic ‘chunk’ theory,

where sovereignty exists or does not exist by virtue of being a state. In the PICTs, sovereignty arguably involves the traditional attributes of statehood—territory, permanent population, recognised government, international recognition—but in many PICTs, levels of centralised state control are often weak and the presence of the state minimal, so they exist as legal entities without much capacity for enforcement. In the less than fully independent PICTs, the compliance costs and complexities of living up to international expectations of statehood mean independence is only one possible result of a process of decolonisation.

A process of self-determination may allow a population to decide that full independence is not the most appropriate option, and for small island territories, the costs of independence may outweigh the apparent benefits. Indeed, in 2017, Prinsen and Blaise (2017) argued that as no non-self-governing island had acquired political independence since 1983, this ‘Islandian sovereignty’ might be more pragmatic than nationalistic. Until 2019, this observation held for the Pacific as Tokelau (population 1,506) had twice rejected offers of independence from New Zealand (in 2006 and 2007). The principle has also held so far for New Caledonia, where under the 1998 Nouméa Accord there have been three votes on independence from France, in 2018, 2020, and 2021. The first two of these New Caledonian votes saw an increase in the independence (the ‘Oui’) vote (from 43% to 47%), however in the final December 12, 2021, referendum there was an overwhelming (96.49%) vote in favour of staying with France. This result is explained by the indigenous Kanak boycott of the vote, a protest at France’s actions in holding the poll without sufficient consultation, specifically not allowing the vote to be delayed until after the traditional 12-month mourning period for those who had died from COVID-19 (Manuel & Seselja, 2021). With less than half of eligible voters casting votes, the third referendum has been described as a “hollow victory” for France (Robie, 2021).

The ‘Islandian sovereignty’ trend has, however, been upset by the November 2019 vote on the island of Bougainville (population 300,000), which decisively (by 97.7%) opted for full independence, rejecting an offer of even greater autonomy within PNG (Lyons, 2019). Bougainville was the location of an armed conflict from 1988 to 2001 that arose due to mining at the Panguna copper, gold, and silver mine, inequitable profit-sharing between the province and the PNG state, and environmental pollution of villages downstream from the mine (Wolfers, 2014a). Following the conflict, the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) was created as part of a peace process, and the ABG has numerous powers relating to independent action in foreign affairs, some held in conjunction with PNG and others alone (Wolfers, 2014a). Bougainvilleans await ratification of their vote by the PNG parliament to ensure full secession and independent statehood. As with many small states, there are questions around economic viability—discussion on how to raise revenue for an independent Bougainville has led to debate on the merits of reopening the Panguna mine, the source of the original conflict—to gain much-needed revenue.

Then there are also PICT populations that live in dependent territories. Guam, American Samoa, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)

are all largely self-governing US-dependent territories. American Samoa is an ‘unincorporated territory’ of the United States; Guam is an ‘organised unincorporated territory’ of the United States Commonwealth; and Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)—which contains islands that continue to be important for US geopolitical defence in Kwajelin and Johnston Atoll—is an unincorporated territory of the United States and part of the US Commonwealth.

Both France and Britain continue to maintain island territories in the Pacific. The main French Pacific territories<sup>5</sup> —New Caledonia (population 273,015), French Polynesia (population 278,909 population), and Wallis and Futuna (population 11,441) (SPC, 2021)—are represented in the French Parliament in Paris, enjoy different levels of autonomy within France, and also exhibit some attributes of independence in foreign policy. New Caledonia has the highest level of autonomy of all the French overseas territories, and its unique ‘*sui generis*’ classification within the French state means the New Caledonian territorial congress has powers over most matters of local governance, as well as some input into decision-making over its own foreign policy. Under Article 3.2.1 of the 1998 Nouméa Accord, New Caledonia is permitted by France to exercise some autonomy in foreign policy when this applies to regional matters in the Pacific (UN, 1998). Britain has the overseas Territory of Pitcairn Island (population 50), which has a governor (the British High Commissioner to New Zealand based in Wellington) and a legal adviser, neither of whom require the consent of the Pitcairn Islands Council to make laws (Pitcairn Constitution Order, 2010).

Since 2004, French Polynesia has been a French overseas collectivity and has the status of a ‘*pays d’outre-mer*’ (‘overseas country’), which is unique in the French state. It has a president and an assembly with a high level of autonomy (DFAT, 2022a) and, like New Caledonia, joined the region’s major political association, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), as a full member in 2016. Both are members of other regional organisations, such as the Pacific Community (SPC). Wallis and Futuna is one of five ‘*collectivités d’outre-mer*’ (‘overseas collectivities’) in the French state and is less politically independent than the larger French Pacific territories. It has a territorial assembly along with a French High Administrator, yet in 2018, Wallis and Futuna became an Associate Member of the PIF (DFAT, 2022b). All three territories are members of the South Pacific Regional Environmental Program (SPREP, 2022).

Finally, independent states may opt to retain linkages with other powers, even former colonial rulers. The concept of ‘free association’ whereby a fully sovereign independent state enters into a voluntary compact of free association with another power demonstrates this complexity. Cook Islands and Niue became independent from New Zealand in 1968 and 1974 respectively, and both then chose to remain in free association with New Zealand, which delivers services in health, education, and defence. While neither Cook Islands nor Niue is a UN member, both have widespread diplomatic recognition throughout East Asia and the Pacific, as well as in Latin America. According to the UN Secretariat-General (UN, 1994, p. 10), because Cook Islands had already joined international organisations without restriction—the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1984, the Food and Agriculture

Organisation (FAO) in 1985, the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 1985, and the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) in 1986—it was recognised in 1992 as having “full treaty making capacity”, a recognition of its independent state status. Niue joined UNESCO in 1993 and the WHO in 1994 and was similarly recognised by the UN Secretariat in 1994 (UN, 1994, p. 10). In 2011, Japan—which had long withheld recognition of Cook Islands and Niue on the basis of their free association with New Zealand—established full diplomatic relations with Cook Islands and, in 2015, with Niue. While Tokelau remains a dependent territory of New Zealand, and thus part of the New Zealand ‘realm’, it has held Associate Member status at the PIF since 2014.

### **Pacific small-state vulnerability and global engagement**

Notions of security in the Pacific are also changing from outside concerns of geopolitical control or even domestic state control and stability (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2015) towards a human-security model that considers a range of factors including access to education, disability inclusion, food security, combatting gender-based violence, and support for climate action. The combination of limited land, small economies, small and often growing populations, and low-value exports also means a high level of vulnerability in terms of economic security.

Whether territories were independent or not, by the 1970s and 1980s, several trends were generally observable across the PICTs: rising populations, increased urbanisation, limited employment (except in the government sector), migration, remittances, and rising debt, all of which added to vulnerability. Urbanisation is perhaps of greatest concern in Micronesia and Polynesia rather than in Melanesia where states have more land area. More recently, climate change has created tensions for food security as low-lying PICTs are generally reliant on coastal fisheries, and marine resources shape livelihoods, food cultures, and economies (Islam & Kieu, 2021, p. 102). Connections to the global economy can also display vulnerabilities, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic when shipping services were reduced. The first six months of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was spreading across the globe and states were locking down, saw widespread declines in both imports and exports in the Pacific: Fiji’s exports were down 20.5% and its imports 24.8%; Samoa’s exports fell 18% and its imports 20.9%; Tonga’s exports fell 28.3% and its imports 24.8%; and Tuvalu’s exports declined by a massive 71%, however, its imports were unchanged (Pacific Community, 2020). As Harlan Koff and Thomas Kolnberger argue in the introduction to this volume, the lack of access of Pacific small island developing states to transnational economic networks acts as a constraint on sustainable economic development.

Declining balance-of-payments figures can mean increased reliance on aid or remittances, and while some Pacific states have very small resident populations, there is a significant Pasifika diaspora across the world, especially in New Zealand (Anae, 2014) that makes for transnational linkages in culture, migration, labour, and remittances. This combination of factors gave rise to the notion of Pacific states as “Migration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy” (MIRAB) economies,

even though, as Crocombe (2001, p. 396) has observed, some 90% of Pacific Islanders lived in economies where these were not dominant factors. None the less, the MIRAB perception shaped notions of ‘wasteful’ government spending in the Pacific, and fuelled concerns over governance and corruption which contributed to major regional aid donors like Australia imagining that the way to reduce aid reliance was to integrate more closely with global market mechanisms that would purchase Pacific agricultural exports, create wealth, and reduce poverty (Hawksley, 2009, p. 18). This trend has continued in the twenty-first century. Australia continues to promote the idea of reducing poverty through economic development and engagement with the agricultural export economy as a means of wealth generation. Arguably, this aid focus is to the detriment of market gardening for domestic consumption, which in Melanesia at least may assist domestic income creation and improve gender equity and food security (Georgeou & Hawksley, 2017; Georgeou et al., 2019, 2022).

The effects of global neoliberal trade agendas have been felt in the Pacific with global economic integration leading to labour migration, resource extraction, decreased traditional state security, and decreased human security (Firth, 2007). One of the main issues with PICTs is that trade was heavily weighted towards former or current governing powers (e.g., France and New Caledonia); there is, however, increased interest from China in the region. Over the past two decades, China has become a most valuable trade partner for most PICTs, a fact that helps to explain the switch of diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the People’s Republic in 2019 by both Solomon Islands and Kiribati (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2019). China has sought to expand its Belt and Road Initiative into the Pacific, and across the Pacific region China has been offering concessional loans to PICTs, although there does not appear to be sufficient evidence that this is a monolithic policy position rather than the result of internal rivalry within the Chinese aid bureaucracy (O’Keefe, 2020). Pacific leaders are, however, cautious about taking on debt, either from China or from Australia (Rajah et al., 2019).

In an attempt to sell their commodities, Pacific states joined the Africa Caribbean Pacific (ACP) organisation and through the Cotonou Agreement have sought markets in Europe for their goods, principally palm and palm-kernel oils, coffee, tea, sugar, and tropical fruit. In 2009, the European Union, Fiji, and PNG signed an Economic Partnership agreement, and the European Commission (EC) webpage notes 14 Pacific members in the APC (EC, 2022). Apart from PNG, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) bypasses the Pacific Islands; however, Australia has been pushing Pacific states to become more engaged in global trade through the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus treaty, which entered into force in October 2020 after Cook Islands joined and after over a decade of negotiations (DFAT, 2022c). PACER Plus is seen as advantageous for Australia and New Zealand as it reduces tariffs and controls over investment in Pacific states, but it does not appear to address Pacific states’ concerns, especially over climate change and compliance costs (APH, 2021). It is perhaps no surprise that the larger Pacific economies PNG and Fiji have not signed on.



### **Geostrategic importance**

While marginal in terms of population and economics, the geostrategic importance of the Pacific region is bound up with the Western strategic denial of the Pacific to China, with Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States attempting to keep China out.<sup>6</sup> In terms of diplomatic footprint, Australia is the best represented with extensive official diplomatic posts in the Pacific, including Consulates General in New Caledonia and French Polynesia. China has, however, added to its longer-term relationships in the Pacific to now include Niue (2007), Kiribati (2019), and Solomon Islands (2019), the latter two only recently prised from the Taiwanese diplomatic orbit (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2019; MOFA PRC, 2021). Such switches form part of a much longer-term global diplomatic game involving Chinese attempts to extinguish recognition of Taiwan that date back well over a decade (Hawksley, 2009).

China's links with Fiji (the headquarters of the Pacific Islands Forum) are of particular concern to Australia and New Zealand, both of which imposed supposedly 'smart sanctions' on Fiji in 2007 to convince the Fijian military regime to return power to the democratically elected government. These sanctions backfired in a spectacular manner as China strengthened its relations with Fiji (O'Keefe, 2021). In 2018, Australian media was reporting that China was seeking to establish a military base in Vanuatu, which is a member of the non-aligned movement (O'Keefe, 2020), and while these reports were false, in 2007 China did build a new headquarters for the subregional Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in Port Vila, Vanuatu (Hegarty, 2015).

Increased Chinese engagement in the Pacific has presented an opportunity for some Pacific states and has caused diplomatic panic in Australia. In 2018, Australia managed to get Solomon Islands to cancel a deal with Chinese telecommunications company Huawei to build a fibre-optic link from Australia to Honiara but only after Australia agreed to pay the cost of installing an undersea telecommunications cable from Brisbane to Solomon Islands (Agence France Press, 2018). A year later Solomon Islands switched its diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China amidst reports of MPs each being offered between SBD\$2 million to \$5 million (US\$246,000–US\$615,000) to vote in favour of recognising Beijing (Cavanaugh, 2019).<sup>7</sup> For Solomon Islands the switch made sense as China had been its largest trading partner since 2007 (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2019). In September 2020, Solomon Islands named Huawei—a company banned by the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia from their domestic markets due to concerns over possible spying (Bowler, 2020)—as preferred partner in the construction of around 200 communications towers for its new mobile phone system (Kekea, 2020). In March 2022, the Australian government—which had spent over AUD\$2.8 billion between 2003 and 2017 on the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (SBS, 2017)—was caught unawares and embarrassed when Solomon Islands and China drafted an agreement allowing Chinese police, troops, and naval vessels access to Solomon Islands as part of an attempt by Solomon Islands to expand its development relationships (Sora, 2022).

Historically, Australia has been the largest aid donor to the Pacific, with New Zealand, Japan, the United States, and the European Union also contributing; however, in the past 15 years China's aid contribution to the Pacific has increased. In 2015, China's aid spending (US\$274 million) exceeded that of New Zealand (US\$204 million) for the first time. In 2017, China pledged US\$4.8 billion to the Pacific, far more than Australia's US\$1 billion; however, by 2021 little of this had been spent (Lowy, 2021).<sup>8</sup> As the case of Solomon Islands demonstrates, Pacific states are able to exercise their sovereign powers to act independently in the geopolitical tussle over the Pacific region. Small states can leverage donors and former allies to secure their own national interests, which are not necessarily the same as the interests of outside donors. Once independence is obtained, the concept of state sovereignty supposedly implies non-interference, so in theory Pacific states should be able to take decisions concerning their political and economic futures, free from external influences.

There are, however, limits to this sovereign action. Some Pacific states have engaged in entrepreneurial activities to raise state funds, some of which have been quickly quashed by outside powers concerned about the possibility of criminal activity. Under Nauru's colonial rulers, phosphate was mined extensively on the island by the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, leading to long-term environmental damage. An independent Nauru had few other resources, so it continued mining, creating a national provident fund with the phosphate royalties. Poor investment decisions and real estate purchases resulted in substantial decreases in the value of Nauru's investments, and other revenue-raising options were then entertained. In the late 1990s, Nauru developed an offshore banking industry and before long had some 400 offshore banks registered. In 1998, Nauru was estimated to be laundering around US\$70 billion/UK£49 billion Russian organised-crime money, over 700 times the state's annual GDP. Nauru received US\$35,000 per registered bank (Henley, 2001), plus transaction fees, but as Nauru at the time had no anti-money laundering legislation, it soon found itself on the Group of Eight's (G8) Financial Action Taskforce (FATF) list of Non-Compliant Countries and Territories (NCCT) and subject to financial sanctions. Improved compliance with international banking regulations meant Nauru's offshore banking industry had to be abandoned, but it was then 'de-listed' by the FATF in 2005 and restored to the international banking community in 2006 (FATF, 2007). Nauru has also provided space to Australia to create detention camps to hold asylum seekers (Hawksley, 2009) for an initial fee of US\$20 million per year (Hawksley & Georgeou, 2013, 2014).

Another revenue-raising scheme has involved a flexible use of state sovereignty. In early 2022, Palau announced its 'e-residency card' which allows individuals across the world to register companies and trade cryptocurrency in Palau but not to visit or claim physical residency. Fees are low at US\$240 per e-registration (available both as a physical document and now as a Non-Fungible Token 'NFT'), with a US\$100 annual renewal fee. By early March 2022, the programme had netted Palau just US\$71,000. While there was concern about the possible abuse of the scheme, there was also confidence it could quickly expand to raise more revenue (Kesolei, 2022).

Like Nauru, Tuvalu also has a small population and no obvious resources apart from fishing rights, but when internet domain names were decided in the early 1990s it was allocated ‘.tv’—a handy suffix (top-level domain) for broadcasting companies and now for online entertainment streaming services. Tuvalu rents its ‘.tv’ domain name to US media company Verisign for US\$5 million per year, which is around 8.5% of its domestic revenue (Lee, 2019) and after 2021 intended to renegotiate on the back of the success of gaming and streaming platform Twitch. tv. Vanuatu has a more direct method of revenue-raising. Wealthy people in search of a new passport can simply become a citizen of Vanuatu, which sells citizenship for US\$150,000 to boost revenue (Trainor & Nunis, 2019). Thus, state sovereignty allows for some creative thinking in the policy space to avoid vulnerability.

### **Small-state regionalism and international association**

Despite their small size, Pacific states exhibit political and diplomatic behaviours that can affect specific global agendas concerning the environment and can leverage aid donors to achieve specific objectives.

Pacific states have small economies, limited employment, limited income, little disposable income, and high transport and labour costs that discourage both inter-island trade and even domestic markets (Hutchens, 2011, p. 302), resulting in economies only partly integrated into the global economy. One response to perceived underdevelopment has been to act collectively to an extent through a wide range of regional and subregional associations. Regionalism takes a variety of forms in the Pacific Islands, with Crocombe (2001, pp. 591–626) identifying numerous reasons for association: religious, colonial, intercolonial, metropolitan/islands, Oceania, Islands, culture area, common interest, small island states, Pacific Basin, marine resources, Asia-Pacific, transport, higher education, and voluntary. Despite the hundreds of Pacific regional organisations, regionalism has not moved towards the level of centralisation that is characteristic of the European Union (Wolfers, 2014b). Rather, Pacific regionalism is perhaps even less integrated than the small states of the Caribbean, where there have been past attempts at a Caribbean Federation (1958–61). Like the modern-day Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and its (as yet unrealised) CARICOM economic driver of a Caribbean Single Market Economy (CSME) (Hawksley, 2004, pp. 253–4), the PICTs have so far avoided such arrangements.

The first post-war regional organisation in the Pacific, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), was created by colonial powers in 1947, but from 1965, the SPC has admitted independent Pacific states. In 1983, all countries and territories in the SPC were deemed equal members, and the organisation was renamed the ‘Pacific Community’ in 1997, retaining the ‘SPC’ acronym. Based in Nouméa, New Caledonia, it has the widest Pacific Islands membership of all regional organisations and includes all 22 PICTs, plus Australia, New Zealand, France, the United States, and the United Kingdom, which rejoined the SPC in December 2021 after quitting 17 years earlier (Radio NZ, 2021). Cooperation in the Pacific community is technical, focusing on science, knowledge, and innovation (SPC, 2022), so the SPC is non-political.

The main political regional organisation in the Pacific is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which commenced life in 1971 as the South Pacific Forum (SPF) as a body for newly decolonised independent states to have dialogue with major regional powers Australia and New Zealand. In 2000, the South Pacific Forum changed its name to the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), and in 2016, it dropped its rules about members being fully independent, and expanded, granting full membership to the French Pacific territories of New Caledonia and French Polynesia.

One example of effective cooperation through the PIF is the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), an organisation that dates from 1979 and which is supported financially by Australia, New Zealand, and Japan (FFA, 2022). The FFA involves 17 PIF members or associate members and acts as a coordinating mechanism to manage the lucrative and highly migratory tuna and other fish stocks that travel across the South Pacific Ocean, especially through the EEZs of small Pacific states that are their feeding grounds (Jollands & Fisher, 2017). The FFA implements licencing agreements over the combined FFA EEZ and allocates the sale of fishing quotas to distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) such as Russia, China, Taiwan, and South Korea while attempting to ensure the viability of fish stocks for Pacific Islands food security. Based in Honiara, Solomon Islands, the FFA focuses on fisheries management, development, operations, and corporate services and has helped to progress regional cooperation between states on sustainable resource management (Azmi & Hanich, 2021).

Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia also engage in subregionalism to advance specific interests. One of the more important subregional associations is the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), with a membership of PNG, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji, and the New Caledonian independence movement FLNKS (Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste or 'Kanak Socialist National Liberation Front'). MSG has a free-trade agreement that dates from 1993, and it often discusses the issue of the fellow-Melanesian people of West Papua, especially their occupation by Indonesia (Georgeou & Hawksley, 2014). The Polynesian Leaders Group (PLG), which includes Hawaii, Rapa Nui, New Zealand, and American Samoa, allows leaders to discuss issues of mutual concern, such as climate change, transport, health, information technology, and human rights (Samoa News, 2021). Founded in 2010, the PLG has a secretariat but as yet no permanent home. Micronesian organisations include the Micronesian Presidents' Summit (from 2001) and the Micronesian Chief Executive Summit (from 2003) (Gallen, 2015).

Globally, Pacific Islands states, acting through the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) group, were some of the most vocal proponents of a climate-change mitigation agreement at COP21, the United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris in 2015 (Islam & Kieu, 2021, p. 99). Fiji has been very active recently in the SIDS group at the United Nations, which intersects with regional organisations such as CARICOM, the PIF, and the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) to push for the adoption of the SAMOA pathway (2014), which supports the UN Sustainable Development Goals towards a just transition with climate mitigation, protection of biodiversity, and improved health and social outcomes through partnerships for development (UN, 2022).

## Climate change and security

Climate change is one policy area that demonstrates Pacific Islands' engagement with, and shaping of, international norms. The COP26 meeting in Glasgow in late 2021 was attended by leaders of three Pacific states (Palau, Fiji, and Tuvalu), who were part of some 200 organisations that signed a new Climate Charter aimed at addressing the climate crisis. Differences and tensions between Pacific states do exist around climate change, especially around not being able to 'speak with one voice' (Denton, 2017; Islam & Kieu, 2020); however, climate activism by Pacific states is not a new concern. Back in 2001, Tuvalu attempted to secure agreement from Australia for the possible transfer of its entire population as climate refugees, an entreaty that was quickly rejected (Hawksley, 2009, p. 129). The issue of climate change is critical and existential for Pacific states as several PICTs, including Fiji, are already experiencing the displacement of populations and the loss of agricultural land (Georgeou et al., 2022). Both Fiji and Vanuatu have developed models to deal with communities affected by global warming. In November 2020, Fiji moved seven households of the Narikoso community on the island of Ono to a new village on higher ground, constructed with EU funding. Fiji has identified over 800 other communities at risk and to meet the potential costs created the Climate Relocation and Displaced Peoples Trust fund in 2019. Vanuatu in contrast has been advancing a so far less popular model of having the largest polluters pay reparations for climate damage (Moore, 2022). The example of climate change in the Pacific and the policy responses of small states appears to confirm the trend identified by Harlan Koff and Thomas Kolnberger in the introduction to this volume that the traditional concerns of Small-State Studies need to be re-orientated to address the changing notions of security and agency.

As the Pacific is not fully integrated into the global economy some PICTs have a higher level of self-reliance in terms of food security; however, recent work on the impact of COVID-19 on Pacific Islands' food systems has shown that the pandemic reduced agricultural production, food, and incomes, at the same time as it improved household production of root vegetables and fruits. Yet, even though traditional food systems were reinvigorated, overall dietary diversity declined (Iese et al., 2021). Other threats to food security include the historical effects of urbanisation, population growth, export-crop plantations, global market volatility, remoteness from global supply chains, resource extraction, land degradation, and declining land productivity, erosion of crop genetic diversity, coastal and coral degradation, and declining productivity of fisheries due to distant water nations' overfishing, a growing dependence on imported foods, and changing consumption patterns, as well as breakdowns in traditional social safety nets (Connell, 2014; Georgeou et al., 2019; Islam & Kieu, 2021).

Pacific exports include agricultural products, timber, fish, and minerals, but the islands are being mined out, the forests depleted, and oceans overfished. The strains being placed on the land/water/development nexus have been recognised in an ambitious regional response through the PIF, the *Blue Pacific Continent 2050*, which has been under development since 2017 (addressed more fully elsewhere

in this volume). Based on a traditional Pacific consensus model, it is claimed that “the 2050 Strategy sets out our long-term approach to working together as a region, and as countries and territories, communities, and people of the Pacific” (PIFS, 2022, p. 3) to manage change. The strategy employs a ‘Drivers of Change’ model to examine events and decisions that may disrupt the future. With a focus on social development, the strategy is based on evidence of trends such as climate change, or emerging issues, such as new technologies. The strategy is owned and developed by the PIF members and involves wide consultation with “all stakeholders, including CROP [Council of Regional Organisations in the Pacific] and other regional agencies; the private sector; civil society; media; academia; community, cultural and faith-based organisations; development partners; and other equally valuable constituencies” (PIFS, 2022, p. 3). So far there is little in terms of concrete action to show for the discussion around the Blue Pacific Continent; however, there is a growing awareness that shared problems such as climate change, overfishing, and urbanisation might drive future collective subregional, regional, and international action by small Pacific states to protect their futures.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have argued that rather than being shaped by geopolitics, PICTs are advancing their own agendas in regional and international discussions. The leading role PICTs are playing in the ongoing climate discussions indicates that small land areas and populations are no barrier to active engagement and involvement in world politics. Rather, PICTs demonstrate an influence in international affairs that belies their physical or economic size. They are also able to leverage an evolving geostrategic contest in the Pacific to shake up traditional aid-donor relations and extract greater development benefit for themselves.

Problems such as economic fragility, balance of payments, debt, climate change, and food security cannot, however, be easily remedied. Small states in the Pacific will remain vulnerable to internationally imposed agendas such as free trade and development and to climate-change mitigation, even as they seek to influence the direction of these discussions. While small, Pacific states exhibit a wide and fascinating range of political arrangements concerning their levels of independence, autonomy, or self-government and demonstrate that sovereignty in the Pacific Islands is adaptable, fluid, and more variable than is often understood in international politics.

### **Notes**

- 1 In 2020, Australia’s economy was valued at US\$1,359 billion and that of New Zealand at US\$209 billion (countryeconomy.com 2022).
- 2 Statistics in the Pacific Islands are often guestimates, even for those sources claiming to be exact. We have attempted to use the most accurate guestimates available.
- 3 The December 2021 undersea volcano eruption created a tsunami for Tonga, and a 2007 earthquake created a tsunami for Gizo in Solomon Islands.
- 4 Due to space restrictions, movements for self-determination or independence on other Pacific Islands, such as Okinawa (Japan), Rapa Nui (Chile), and Norfolk Island (Australia, see Gonschor, 2017), are not considered in this chapter. There have also been occasional

- calls from Malaita Province for independence from Solomon Islands, most recently at the time of writing (mid-2022).
- 5 Clipperton Island (1,080 km south-west of Mexico) is an uninhabited French overseas territory and French state private property. It was granted to France after a legal dispute with Mexico was settled in 1931.
  - 6 This strategic denial is based on cooperation between Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, with Britain and France assisting, and dates back to the Radford-Collins agreement between Australia and the United States in 1951 (see Hawksley, 2009). In November 2021, a deal for Australia to purchase AUD\$90 billion worth of French diesel-powered submarines was cancelled by the Australian government, cooling relations between the two states.
  - 7 The local currency in Solomon Islands is the Solomon Island Dollar (SBD). At the time of writing (mid-2022), US\$1 bought around SBD\$8.2.
  - 8 For further updates see: <https://pacificaidmap.lowyinstitute.org/dashboard> comparing China and NZ/AUS in specific years.

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