

Micro- state- craft.

Sovereignty as Currency for
Oceania's Island States

Lizzie Yarina

KEYWORDS

Pacific Islands, Oceania, Sovereignty, Statecraft, Microstates
Islas del Pacífico, Oceanía, soberanía, política, micro-estados

Yarina, Lizzie. 2019. "Microstatecraft: Sovereignty as Currency for Oceania's Island States." *informa* 12: 216–231.

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ABSTRACT

The sovereign archipelagos of the Pacific represent the distinctive typology of the 'microstate.' Emerging in the global post-colonial era, they are many of the smallest countries in the world in terms of both population and land area. Still, as independent states, each has earned a seat in the United Nations General Assembly, and other trappings of transnationally recognized sovereignty. This essay explores the *microstatecraft* of Pacific Island nations—distinct transnational negotiations made possible, desirable, or necessary by the unique characteristics of these small island, big ocean states. In particular, *microstatecraft* refers to the opportunities created for these countries by leveraging their very status as states. Rather than a 'development failure,' this subversion of sovereign status can be seen as an astute strategy for self-determination, rejecting the inequities perpetrated by global neoliberalism. How does microstate sovereignty operate differently? This research article explores how Pacific Island micro-states use their sovereignty as a form of currency in the contemporary era, and considers the potentials in this mode of operation.



INTRODUCTION

The Pacific covers one-third of the area of the planet; 14 independent states and an additional 20 remnant colonial territories comprise this expanse of ocean. The Pacific is occupied by a diverse set of island dwellers who have adapted to fluid, archipelagic existences in concert with the powerful sea. However, the Pacific region, or Oceania, is sited in a kind of forgotten cartographic space, split apart by West-centric maps and divided in time by the International Date Line. In this under-looked zone of our planet a new state formation has emerged as an unintentional byproduct of state-building processes primarily designed by and for continental nation-states.

The island states of the Pacific embody a unique territorial typology: the microstate. Defined by the UN as nations with one million people or less, Pacific microstates only recently emerged during the post-colonial era. For the 11 independent small island states of Oceania—excluding the peripheral larger countries Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, as well as offshore territories of larger states—the average population of these countries is less than a quarter of a million people within an average land area of 5,800 square kilometers. These are many of the smallest states in the world by both

population and dry ground. The smallest, Nauru, has only 10,000 people inhabiting a single 10-square kilometer island, much of which is no longer inhabitable as the result of phosphate mining. The combined surface area of these island microstates is similar to that of Rhode Island, as is the sum of their 11 gross domestic products, or GDPs. Still, as independent countries, each maintains a seat in the United Nations General Assembly and all of the other trappings of transnationally recognized sovereignty. This article explores the currency of sovereignty for Pacific microstates, and examines potential risks and opportunities associated with this 'microstatecraft.'

In her book *Extrastatecraft: the Power of Infrastructure Space*, architectural and urban theorist Keller Easterling examines forms of alternative statecraft associated with the era of globalization. The eponymous term describes "the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft."¹ Various infrastructures including codes, zones, and networks provide the spatial softwares² for these extra-state activities. Similarly, the spatial and structural characteristics of Pacific Island nations both explain their emergence as unlikely sovereign states, and their capacities for leveraging their statehood as a form of self-determined development, or even anti-development. Independent archipelagic states are a specific typology of 'infrastructure space': one created not by steel or standards but rather by the forces of geography. The space of islands becomes infrastructural as a product of their relationship to economic, social, and political systems and results in both local and global implications.

The intentions of this paper are twofold. First, the included *microstatecraft* cases demonstrate the collision of free market worldviews with the legal framework of the contemporary state, suggesting broader reconsiderations of how we, as a global society, would like to imagine the roles of nations and markets towards the good of all civilizations. Second, for Pacific Island nations who have historically been at the mercy of colonial powers, and in some cases continue to experience the ramifications of neocolonial activities, this paper advocates for strategic and transparent leveraging of sovereign attributes by island state leaders as a mechanism for counteracting the negative forces of capitalist globalization while maintaining autonomy. This could be through manners suggested by the cases below or via as-yet unexplored ways. Countering framings of island microstates as small and vulnerable, this alternative 'microstatecraft' can push back against geographies of inequality established by continental, West-centric systems of economy and governmentality. 'Irregular' uses of sovereign

status are generally represented as signs of national instability in an international worldview; however, this paper argues that by subverting the colonial and neocolonial developmentalist models imposed upon them, these crafts are ingenious or even essential tactics for nations that wish to maintain their autonomy and may have little else to leverage in the neoliberal global marketplace.

THE MODERN [PACIFIC] NATION STATE

In the past, jurisdictional control was earned through power and expanded through conquest. Nation-states established sovereignty by military force and, in more recent history, commonly maintain authority through the workings of their economy. The modern formation of the nation-state emerged in Western Europe in the era following Renaissance restoration, as feudal society gave way to independent nations. Many cite the Treaty of Westphalia (1648–89), which ended the Thirty-Years War, as the beginning of the era of the nation-state. This document “overturned the medieval system of centralized religious authority and replaced it with a decentralized system of sovereign, territorial states.”³ Therefore, the nation-state model is a territorial mode of governance (state) which rules over a group of people with a shared culture or background (nation). The Western European nations who established this model contributed to its gradual spread across the globe through colonization, conversion, and trade.

A world of nation-states is composed of sovereign actors which “can exercise supreme authority within its own territorial boundary” and are “recognized by the other sovereign states and identified as an equal member of the international society.”⁴ Thus, the nation state must be defined by external forces as well as internal ones. This defining association of modern nation-states as we know it today was first established by the League of Nations (1919), following the first World War, and was followed by its current instantiation, the United Nations (1945). Through this system of association, worldwide models of the nation-state inform all other aspects of modern society: culture, education, science, business, and medicine. The societies composing the nation-state system “are structurally similar in many unexpected dimensions and change in unexpectedly similar ways,” following pre-ordained patterns of development.⁵ These isomorphic tendencies are driven by world economic and political competition. In the context of a globalized world, culture, that aspect

which might distinguish societies, “is of only marginal interest; money and force, power and interests, are the engines of global change.”⁶ External multilateral forces are thus the drivers of nation-state development, not individual (i.e. microstate) actors within the system; statehood is a top-down societal force which self-reproduces through embedded structures and practices.

Under post-colonial late capitalism, national sovereignty has taken on new meaning as unlikely actors began to adopt the Westphalian model. Following World War II, Western nations began the process of decolonization in their Pacific Island colonies. For the century prior, the entire Pacific region had fallen under colonial mandates during the ‘Partition of Oceania,’⁷ although actual involvement of Western actors in their Pacific territories varied based on the quantity and quality of possible extractable resources, or siting in service of military strategies. For many Oceanic cultures, systematic Christianization, beginning in the nineteenth century, was the more powerful Westernizing force. Colonial actors re-mapped the Pacific, creating jurisdictions that grouped together geographically and ethnically distinct groups.⁸ As Pacific Island nations began to establish independence from colonial powers, particularly following the United Nations 1960 *Declaration of Granting of Independence to Colonial Powers and Peoples*, some newly-sovereign national units re-established territories based on historical clan-based networks, such as the British colony of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands split into Polynesian Tuvalu and Micronesian Kiribati, but many of the eccentricities of colonial territorialization remained. For some island nations independence was a struggle, and in several cases remains incomplete: my particular focus is on independent Oceanic states. These states formed parliamentary democracies modeled on their colonizers and enforced by UN metrics.⁹ As a paper written during the decolonizing period notes, traditional practices inhibited movements towards the global nation-state model despite international pressures: “In much of Melanesia, the absence of traditional affiliations extending beyond the boundaries of minute communities—often limited to a single village or a group of contiguous hamlets—has inhibited the development of a sense of national identity.”¹⁰ In these islands, modern statehood often sits in a difficult balance with traditional social norms and organizations.

In spite of these difficulties, the Western nation-state model persisted as the dominant form, no doubt

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| 01. | Easterling, Keller. <i>Extrastatecraft: The power of infrastructure space</i> . Verso Books, 2014. | 04. | Vaughan, “After Westphalia.” | |
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| 02. | Easterling, Keller. “Zone: The spatial softwares of extrastatecraft.” <i>Places Journal</i> (2012). | 06. | Vaughan, “After Westphalia.” | |
| | | 07. | Davidson, James W. “The decolonization of Oceania.” <i>The Journal of Pacific History</i> 6, no. 1 (1971): 133-150. | 09. |
| 03. | Vaughan, Michael. “After Westphalia, whither the nation state, its people and its governmental institutions?” In <i>ISA Asia Pacific Regional Conference</i> (The University of Queensland, 2011). | 08. | Kempf, Wolfgang. “Chapter 10: Climate change, migration, and Christianity in Oceania.” In <i>Climate Change and Human Mobility: Challenges to the Social Sciences</i> , | |
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- edited by Kirsten Hastrup, Karen Fog Olwig (2012): 235. Also see Macdonald, Barry. *Cinderellas of the Empire: Towards a History of Kiribati and Tuvalu* (Australian National University Press, 1982).
 Vaughan, “After Westphalia.” Also see Lawson, Stephanie. *Tradition Versus Democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
 Davidson, “Decolonization,” 133-150.

drawing upon legacy colonial structures and UN mandates. However, alongside Western models of governance, traditional chief systems and traditional laws also were sometimes implemented in parallel. For example, in Tuvalu, the council of elders or *fal-ekaupule* maintains an advisory role in government, and on the rural outer islands a separate disciplinary framework exists for violations of traditional laws. In his comparison of postcolonial adaptation in the Solomon Islands and Fiji, Adrien Rodd illustrates varying ways frictions between indigenous and parliamentary governance systems are accommodated (or not). In the Solomons, the difficulties of a parliamentary structure in the context of a culturally diverse nation led to a newly proposed constitution where, while the parliamentary system is reaffirmed at the federal level, increased cultural autonomy at the community level will be granted. This federated system attempts to accommodate the large socio-cultural gaps between the majority Melanesian population, with its multiple identities and languages, and the state's seven Polynesian Outlier islands. By contrast, in Fiji where earlier coups sought increased indigenous power in response to perceived cultural threats posed by the large Indo-Fijian population (descended from indentured laborers for colonial sugarcane plantations), the current military government and their new constitution seeks racial equality under the law and eliminates traditionally-derived structures such as the Great Council of Chiefs.¹¹

As opposed to other decolonizing sites where multiple groups rivaled for power, the geographical island-ness of some Pacific Island nations contributed to a clearer drawing of new state boundaries, at least as far as the (de)colonizers were concerned. The physical form of islands creates discrete spatial units; instead of fighting over borderlines, the question of where boundaries should be drawn was typically a much broader question of which islands to include (excepting American/Samoa and Papua/New Guinea). In Micronesia and Polynesia, this often led to a conflict-free self-determination process of which aggregates of islands—which often shared traditional clan structures, language, and economies, even if they did not neatly identify as a nation—would translate into the new (nation-) state form. However, for some such as Nauru, Samoa, and Vanuatu, decolonization was a struggle. Greater cultural and language diversity in Melanesia, in part a product of larger island geographies whose volcanic landscapes create internal divisions, has led to ongoing contestations, particularly on the island of Papua.

Notably, the process of decolonization can be considered incomplete in the Pacific; a number of territories are still under the jurisdiction of their colonial administrators. While the nature of these

relationships varies, some indigenous islanders are still actively seeking independence for their states, particularly Kanaky (New Caledonia, FR), and Guam (US). Islands, particularly the islands of the Pacific with independent indigenous populations, are considered by some—including the UN Special Committee on Decolonization—to be one of the last vestiges of colonial imperialism. Furthermore, many ostensibly 'decolonized' nations can become victims of neocolonialism, where former colonizers continue to exploit island states that are weak in traditional metrics of state power. This is visible in Australia's operation of offshore asylum detention centers in three island sites across the Pacific, and the maintenance of US military bases in the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia. However, as social scientist Godfrey Baldacchino argues, subnational island jurisdictions perhaps more commonly prefer, and even advocate for, the right to remain affiliated with the metropole; for these islands, the microstatecraft of trading-in sovereignty in exchange for trade rights, aid, and protection may be preferable to conventional sovereignty.¹²

The sovereignties of Pacific Island microstates are a by-product of the modern system of transnational governance. Sovereignty was—and is still being—established in Pacific Island nations in a unique context. In a totally distinct geographic and social environment than that from which the Westphalian state was initiated and resulting from a top-down colonization process and decolonization mandate, a new typology of nation-state was formed. This independence was protected, in spite of relative military and economic weakness by a condition of global stability following the Cold War. In the context of late capitalism, economic exploitation is typically favored as a state-growing process over territorial expansion, and with extremely limited economies and resources—in conventional terms—Pacific Island nations have been allowed to persist with limited intervention. Granted autonomy by virtue of their geographic remoteness and distinct physical boundaries, statehood provides these tiny nations unique tools for influence in an international arena—along with a set of possible vulnerabilities associated with the exploitation of their sovereignty by others. While this essay focuses on unique sovereignty of Pacific Island micro-states, the analysis may hold relevance for many of the fifty-two nations that identify as Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

In the past, states needed physical means to defend and secure sovereignty. In a post-Westphalian era, sovereignty has become an innate and inviolable construct, allowing these microstates to continue to exist in spite of their relative weakness on a

11. Rodd, Adrien. "Adapting postcolonial island societies: Fiji and the Solomon Islands in the Pacific." *Island Studies Journal* 11, no. 2 (2016): 505-520.

12. Baldacchino, Godfrey. *Island enclaves: Offshoring strategies, creative governance, and subnational island jurisdictions*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2010.

13. The EEZ was adopted during the Third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (1982). UNCLOS is an international agreement on oceanic rights and regulations.

global scale. Historically sovereignty had to do with maintaining a source of power. When sovereignty exists *without* conventional metrics of power, how can a nation avoid being exploited? And how might micro-states leverage sovereignty in new ways?

THE TRAPPINGS OF SOVEREIGNTY

As Pacific Island states established their sovereignty from colonial powers and formed governments using internationally recognized frameworks, they began to acquire additional benefits associated with recognized statehood. As a transnational legal construction, statehood comes with economic and social self-determination, the ability to issue passports, total sovereignty over native land and the earth below (with some self-imposed limitations presented by United Nations conventions) and certain types of sovereignty over adjacent airspace and oceans. Perhaps one of the most powerful devices granted by reciprocally recognized statehood is access to a seat in the United Nations generally assembly. To join the UN, a state must be approved by both the UN Security council and a two-thirds vote in the UN general assembly. Upon achieving their seat, a United Nations vote provides valuable clout relative to larger states which otherwise command significantly more power. In addition to political bargaining power, nationhood provides visibility on a global stage, allowing nations to call attention to plights in a way that typically would not be possible for ten or twenty thousand people absorbed into a larger national entity—which is perhaps why we hear almost as much media about climate change risks to Bangladesh as to Tuvalu, despite the fact that Bangladesh has millions at risk and Tuvalu only a few thousand.

Over time, evolving United Nations charters and conventions reshape the particular assets of statehood in the modern era. In 1982, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) greatly expanded the territory—and such, the power—of Pacific Island nations through new mandates on national rights over surrounding oceans. UNCLOS stipulates a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) offset of the shoreline of coastal nations.¹³ This allows nations the right to explore for and use marine resources including power production from wind or water, oil reserves, and most importantly for the Pacific, fish stocks. It does not allow any rights to the surface of the sea or above; ships from other nations can pass through an EEZ freely. For Nauru, one of the tiniest nations in the Pacific (and the world) in terms of both population and land area, the EEZ amounts to about 300,000 square kilometers; their territory was expanded by more than 10,000 times by virtue of a collection of signatures on paper.

Statehood is an institution, a legal framework for association created by reciprocal contracts between a collections of self-selecting, autonomous governments. The modern nation-state was created by and for the West, and as discussed above, tends towards isomorphism and attempts to make new member-states in the image of the existing established ‘nation-state’. However, the application of systems intended for geographically large and populous continental states to tiny islands and archipelagos of the Pacific fosters a sort of de-lamination of governance, where statehood as a transnational legal framework sometimes floats in loose association with the atolls and archipelagos of the Pacific.

MICRO SOVEREIGNTY AS CURRENCY

The former section established the unlikely context in which Pacific Island states, most with populations less than that of a small continental town or city, have become actors on an international stage. What does this sovereignty mean when a state has little if any export economy, no military, and few exploitable resources? With limited economic assets—and little capacity to harvest the assets they do have—Pacific Island nations have nimbly found ways to turn sovereignty itself into a form of currency, leveraging different aspects of their nation-state status in order to promote local development and maintain autonomy. Unconventional practices may even be essential to small island state development: “In spite of the mantra of sustainable development, islands fare best economically when they lure revenue from elsewhere, and the performance of their politicians is often appraised by how well they manage to secure such largesse.”¹⁴ Drawing on Easterling’s framings of “extrastatecraft” as alternatives to, and hidden layers of, traditional statecraft,¹⁵ microstatecraft refers to the activities of small island microstates made possible by the virtue of their geographic characteristics. In so defining, these cases in part seek to question framings of Pacific Island microstates as marginal rather understanding the islands, their populations, and their approaches to sovereignty as “fluid, multiple and complex.”¹⁶ Microstatecrafts are savvy approaches to both cope with the risks associated with modernity, but also to find opportunity in the global framework Pacific island nations have been offered.

However, having the status of nationhood without the traditional metrics of force or cash as backing can also be a risk, operating as a kind of negative currency that is vulnerable to exploitation by more powerful peers. Thus, leveraging sovereignty in atypical—or even what might be considered unseemly ways—is not only a possibility, but may be a necessity for these microstates in an effort to stave off outside exploitation. Rather than “desperate

14. Baldacchino, Godfrey. “Small Island States: Vulnerable, Resilient, Doggedly Perseverant or Cleverly Opportunistic?” *Études caribéennes* 27-28 (2014).

15. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*.
16. Teaiwa, Teresia K. “Native thoughts: A Pacific Studies take on cultural studies and diaspora.” In *Indigenous diasporas and dislocations*, pp. 15-

17. 36. Routledge, 2017.
Baldacchino, *Island enclaves*.

measures taken by chronically vulnerable jurisdictions” these activities are perhaps better understood as “expressions of creative governance, a fuller exploitation of political geography for economic or strategic gain,” in the words of Baldacchino.¹⁷ While his work on *Islands and Enclaves* has extensively explored how territorial exceptionalism is leveraged by subnational island jurisdictions and their metropolises, this paper is particularly interested in the opportunities created by sovereignty when not bound to a larger state power. The following cases illustrate the myriad ways in which Pacific Island nations have developed microstatecrafts which (for the most part) make the nation-state framework operate in their favor.

A number of acronym-heavy models have been developed to explain the ‘atypical’ economies of small island states. As early as 1985 Bertram & Watters developed the MIRAB model (Migration, Remittances, Aid, and Bureaucracy) to explain the post-colonial economic functioning of microstates in the “South Pacific.”¹⁸ This model continues to be adapted by academics to explain how small island nations persist without export economies.¹⁹ While migration and remittances are perhaps more tied to the crafts of individuals, aspects of the aid and bureaucracy components of the MIRAB model, as they related to (micro) statecrafts, are incorporated in the cases below. Similarly, Baldacchino’s PROFIT model (People considerations, Resource management, Overseas engagement and ultra-national recognition, Finance, Insurance, and taxation, and Transportation)²⁰ while focused more on small island territories which may not be sovereign, corresponds to several of the microstatecrafts illustrated here.

1. TAX HAVENS

Many independent Pacific Island nations have developed tax laws that attract large sums of foreign cash. Low, or no, tax rates attract outside investors to shelter incomes in these offshore sites, minimizing or eliminating taxes in their home jurisdiction. Offshore Finance Centers (OFCs), colloquially known as tax havens or tax shelters, often provide high levels of information protection as well; in some cases, even preventing clients from prosecution at home for tax evasion or making space for other forms of criminal activity to occur. The primary users of OFCs are transnational corporations and extremely wealthy individuals.²¹ The

minimal tax rates and fees that offshore banks levy can generate huge incomes relative to island economies. While flows of capital are global, taxes are still levied on national jurisdictions, and these sites have been able to leverage this intersection of market globalization and space through local policies.

While tax havens exist globally, they are particularly popular in small nations with weak economies, or in small semi-autonomous territories. Samoa, the Marshall Islands, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu are the largest tax havens in the Pacific, although there are an additional handful of minor players in the region. A recent ranking identified Samoa as the ‘most secretive’ of global tax havens. The Prime minister, Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi, explained their participation in off-shoring finance in this way: “For small economies with narrow revenue bases, Government leaders must always remain vigilant to use every opportunity available to them to raise revenue for development.”²² He argues that microstatecraft is necessary in order to participate in the global economy.

Tax havens have been represented as illicit economies or pseudo-development strategies.²³ However, offshore financial centers are not illegal in and of themselves, rather, they create conditions that allow other actors to partake in semi-legal or illegal tax-sheltering activities (typically relative to home jurisdictions) as the local meets the global. As Palan observes, “tax havens are like the sovereign equivalent of parking lot proprietors: they could not care less about the business of their customers, only that they pay for parking their vehicles there.”²⁴ Following the global financial crisis, G8 and OECD countries have attempted to tighten a crackdown on OFCs, in some cases successfully. However, as economies in the East and Global South with more lenient attitudes on tax evasion increase in power, Pacific Island tax havens may become a more secure strategy for commodifying national sovereignty.

2. FLAGS OF CONVENIENCE

Pacific Island states, led by the Marshall Islands, also sell ‘Flags of Convenience’ as a form of sovereignty-economy. Ocean-going vessels choose where to register their ships based upon which nations have the least taxes and fees, and most favorable laws and regulations. While at sea, they operate based on the laws established by the flag under which they are flying. With a population of only 70,000 people, the

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| 18. | Bertram, G., & Watters, R. F. The MIRAB process: Earlier analyses in context. <i>Pacific Viewpoint</i> , 27 no. 1 (1986): 47-59. | Territories.” Paper presented to the conference <i>Beyond MIRAB: The Political Economy of Small Island States in the 21st Century</i> , Wellington, February 2004. | 23. | more investors.” <i>Pacific Guardian</i> (15 February 2015). |
| 19. | Overton, John, and Warwick E. Murray. “Sovereignty for Sale? Coping with Marginality in the South Pacific--the Example of Niue.” <i>Croatian Geographical Bulletin</i> 76, no. 1 (2014). | 21. | 24. | Baldacchino, “Small Island States.” |
| 20. | Baldacchino, Godfrey, “Engaging the Hinterland Beyond: Two Ideal-Type Strategies of Managing External Relations for Small Island | 22. | 25. | Palan, Ronen. “Tax havens and the commercialization of state sovereignty.” <i>International organization</i> 56, no. 1 (2002): 151-176. |
| | | 26. | 26. | Palan, Ronen. <i>The offshore world: sovereign markets, virtual places, and nomad millionaires</i> . Cornell University Press, 2006. |
| | | 27. | 27. | Van Fossen, Anthony. “Citizenship for sale: passports of convenience from Pacific island tax havens.” |
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Marshall Islands boasts the world's third largest—and fastest growing—ship registry. The registration scheme for both Marshall Islands and Panama flags of convenience is operated by International Registries Inc., in Reston, Virginia.²⁵ These flags of convenience allow Pacific Island nations to trade in a kind of portable national space, trading in a market of temporary citizenship for ocean-going ships.

3. CITIZENSHIP FOR SALE

Actual citizenship is another intangible commodity of sovereignty from which Pacific Island nations can extract needed profit with little investment. Many Pacific Island nations have dabbled in passport sales, including the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, and Tonga, with varying degrees of legality relative to their own constitutions. Persons seeking these 'passports of convenience' are generally wealthy elite, and have been predominantly Chinese, seeking multiple national identities in service of tax avoidance, transnational mobility, foreign privileges at home (such as access to international schools for their children), or alternate identities in service of past and future criminal activity.²⁶ The overall market of passport sales in the Pacific has been valued at \$153,450,000. A new national identity will run you anywhere from \$10,000 to \$300,000 USD.²⁷ Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, most legal venues for passport sales have been closed out by pressures from the West; however, it is likely ongoing off-the-books at a smaller scale. Caribbean and Mediterranean passport sales programs, which tend to be more formalized, sponsored by the government or run by foreign professional agencies, have proven more durable and may provide alternative models for structuring passport markets.²⁸

The creation of a market for passports, from an economically (neo) liberal perspective, can be seen as tracking towards a truly free-market world system: a "first step towards more complete deregulation."²⁹ It is ironic, then, that the Western purveyors of neoliberal ideologies are the strongest opponents to the passport market, demonstrating that nationalism remains an important component in the current system of global capitalism. However, free market citizenship can clearly be seen as a by-product of late capitalism, where the market extends into previously unimaginable spheres of our lives. Pacific Island nations have simply been nimble movers in the world system that has been imposed upon them.

4. 'SINKING NATIONS'

In a global collective worldview, the status of nationhood also holds symbolic value. It allows for visibility and identification on a global stage. Pacific Island nations at high risk for inundation due to climate change and sea level rise have leveraged this position to garner media attention, attracting aid and donations, and serve as a broader symbol for global carbon reduction. Tuvalu and Kiribati, nations composed entirely of low-lying coral atolls, have been two of the loudest spoken-nations against climate change and resulting sea level rise. At the recent COP 21 conference in Paris, Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga stated:

For a country like Tuvalu, our survival depends on the decisions we take at this conference. Let me emphasize this point. *Our survival as a nation depends on the decisions we take at this conference.* This is not a simply stepping-stone to a better future. We stand on a cliff edge. Either we stand united and agree to combat climate change or we all stumble and fall and condemn humanity to a tragic future.³⁰

In addition to serving as an exchangeable commodity, here, statehood plays a role in global representations and media as a vulnerable 'sinking' nation that can only be saved by pre-emptive actions on the part of the rest of the world. While certainly vulnerable to climate change, Tuvalu and Kiribati share that vulnerability with thousands of coastal communities around the globe; however, attached to larger states with more complex global identities, the plights of many of these at-risk communities remain less visible. Framing their risk not as the survival of a collection of villages, but the 'survival as a nation' paints a striking picture in a global imaginary.

These 'canary in the coal mine'³¹ representations perform a kind of dual microstatecraft: first, as an attempt to influence global greenhouse gas emissions. Atoll nations in particular have become sharply visible spokes-nations at global climate change negotiations, such as their visible shaping of the COP21 dialogue and Paris Agreement.³² For a broader media-consuming world public, they have helped create the imagery of the climate refugee, a visible reminder of who will suffer, or even drown,

27. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 45, no. 2 (2007): 138-163.
 28. Van Fossen, "Citizenship," 138-163.
 29. Van Fossen, Anthony. "Passport sales: how island microstates use strategic management to organise the new economic citizenship industry." *Island Studies Journal* 13, no. 1 (2018).
 30. Van Fossen, "Citizenship," 138-163.
 31. Sopoaga, E. S. (30th November 2015.) *Keynote Statement Delivered by the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, the Honourable Enele S. Sopoaga*, At the

Leaders Events for Heads of State and Government at the Opening of the COP21. Emphasis added by author.
 32. Farbotko, Carol. "Wishful sinking: disappearing islands, climate refugees and cosmopolitan experimentation." *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 51, no. 1 (2010): 47-60.
 33. Ourbak, Timothée, and Alexandre K. Magnan. "The Paris Agreement and climate change negotiations: Small Islands, big players." *Regional environmental change* 18, no. 8

(2018): 2201-2207.
 33. Betzold, Carola, and Florian Weiler. "Allocation of aid for adaptation to climate change: Do vulnerable countries receive more support?" *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics* 17, no. 1 (2017): 17-36.

without the conscious reduction of carbon footprints by individuals in disparate locations.

Second, the imaginary of the ‘sinking nation’ has played an important role in increasing aid funding for low-lying island nations. In a study of bilateral adaptation aid, Betzold and Weiler found that vulnerable small island states see particularly high levels of adaptation aid per capita,³³ and Robinson and Dornan similarly show that states with SIDs status receive relatively higher levels of aid, all other factors being equal.³⁴ The climate change crisis has made small island nations into poster-child aid beneficiaries, who benefit not only from the projects, but also from an increase in waged positions associated with the bureaucracy, labor, and services supporting these projects. Global and regional aid organizations may even compete for the ability to be involved in adaptation projects in atoll nations. Some have argued that the role of atoll nations as a symbol of climate change or experimental site for adaptation disenfranchises its citizens, or even justifies Tuvalu (and possibly other atoll nations) as “expendable”—after all, the canary must die to serve as an alarm.³⁵ While Farbotko’s illustration of an “eco-colonial gaze” is well justified, it does not negate the nation’s capacity to simultaneously leverage its representation as a ‘disappearing state’ to local advantage.

The sinking nation imagery has also had unexpected side-effects. Listicles, such as “25 Places you should visit before they vanish from the face of the earth”³⁶ have provided boosts to tourism as adventurers seekers aim to explore islands before they are submerged, even though nations like Tuvalu and Kiribati have very little tourism infrastructure. This has the potential for negative impacts as well: Wrighton and Overton have documented how donor-related consultation has placed a considerable burden on small island states with limited institutional infrastructure.³⁷ There is a similar potential for tourism to place a strain on limited resources (food, energy, space, waste); however, if island states are able to prepare there is significant financial value that can be captured from this emergent tourism.

5. SPACES OF EXCEPTION

The currency of sovereignty can also be exploited or inverted, becoming a kind of negative currency. In the same way that semi-autonomous offshore territories of powerful nations can be exploited as military/detention sites, tax havens, and exclusive economic zones, weak or desperate independent

states also risk exploitation through similar mechanisms. Powerful nations can use offshore, ex-situ sites as zones for operations that would not be admissible or in their own sovereign territories. In the past, this was achieved through colonialism and explicit force, as with the testing of nuclear bombs across various atolls during the Cold War, most famously the lagoon bomb site at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, 1946-1958.³⁸ While today these nations have established sovereignty, a Compact of Free Association between the US and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau allows the US to maintain autonomous military bases on island soils in exchange for military protections and favorable migration policies. The Compact has also allowed the US to effectively forgo clean-up for the more than 50 nuclear bombs they detonated in the Marshall Islands.³⁹ Despite their seats in the UN, the power structure created by the Compact has led a number of scholars to consider these three nations as “effectively non-sovereign.”⁴⁰

Nauru provides an even more dramatic example. During the colonial era, the single raised coral island of Nauru was exploited as a site of phosphate extraction by foreign, primarily Australian, administering authorities. As a result of strip-mining activities, more than 80% of the surface of the island-state has been heavily degraded and made uninhabitable. When the phosphate ran out in recent decades, Nauru’s economy effectively collapsed, leading some to suggest that it had become a “failed state.”⁴¹ In 2001, as part of their “Pacific Solution” to a (perceived) influx of African and Middle Eastern refugees, Australia entered into a deal with Nauru to operate one of three off-shore asylum sites as part of a strategy to disincentive refugees from seeking access to Australian soil by boat. With a struggling economy originating from Australian exploitative mining practices, Nauru acquiesced to the arrangement. The Nauru Regional Processing Center, operated from 2001-2007 and 2012-present has been the site of numerous human rights violations against refugees. Violent and exploitative actions are made possible by a “space of exception,”⁴² where the camps exist on Nauruan sovereign soils but are operated under Australian authority. In this way, Australia, and the private contractors who operate the camp, are able to exercise full control over the camps and exploit prisoners in ways that would be unconstitutional on their own ground. A similar model is applied by the U.S. in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.⁴³ In these cases, sovereignty is a negative currency

34. Robinson, Stacy-Ann, and Matthew Dornan. “International financing for climate change adaptation in small island developing states.” *Regional environmental change* 17, no. 4 (2017): 1103-1115.

35. Farbotko, “Wishful sinking,” 47-60.

36. Schmalbruch, Sarah. *The Independent* (2017). <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/travel-25-places-you-should-visit-before-they-disappear-forever-a7699556.html>

37. Wrighton, Nicki, and John Overton. “Coping with participation in small island states: the case of aid in Tuvalu.” *Development in Practice* 22, no. 2 (2012): 244-255.

38. Davis, Jeffrey Sasha. “Representing place: “Deserted isles” and the reproduction of Bikini Atoll.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 3 (2005): 607-625.

39. Gerrard, Michael B. “America’s

forgotten nuclear waste dump in the Pacific.” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2015): 87-97.

40. Baldacchino, *Island enclaves*.

41. Connell, John. “Nauru: The first failed Pacific state?” *The Round Table* 95, no. 383 (2006): 47-63.

42. Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

43. Reid-Henry, Simon. “Exceptional sovereignty? Guantánamo Bay and

for Pacific Island states; an asset to be exploited by foreign powers, a pawn to larger global power struggles or capital accumulation. A more strategic leveraging of other forms of sovereignty-currency might help island nations to avoid this sort of exceptional exploitation.

6. AID FOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

It has been established above that an essential metric for achieving the status of nation is being recognized by other nations as such. Thus, another powerful tool of Pacific Island microstates is the ability, through this reciprocity mechanism, to help validate prospective nation-states that might actually be much more powerful and wealthy than their Pacific Island boosters. Stringer puts it succinctly: “With their sovereignty, these states can benefit themselves economically using their diplomatic power to negotiate the terms of their international relationships.”⁴⁴ This model appears most visibly in the Pacific in the struggle for international recognition between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. At the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Nationalist government of China retreated to the island of Taiwan as the communists took power. The Peoples Republic of China (PRC) regards Taiwan as a rebel region and has contributed to its displacement as a national power; Taiwan lost its seat in the UN in 1971. In efforts to regain its nation-state status, Taiwan sought out recognition from other sovereign nation-states, typically in return for reciprocal aid or trade. Presently, Taiwan is recognized by twenty-two nations (Australian Government DFAT), including five Pacific Island nations: Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, and Tuvalu.

At the same time that Taiwan has offered aid and other rewards in exchange for recognition, The PRC has attempted to sway nations to recognize One China through similar means.⁴⁵ Many Pacific Island nations have manipulated this diplomatic love triangle to their own advantage, swapping recognition as the opposing party sweetens the deal. For example, Taiwan loaned Palau \$20 million for the construction of their new capital city⁴⁶ and donated the imposing three-story government center in Tuvalu, the nation’s largest and most modern building by significant measure. Strategic policies on China/Taiwan have allowed Pacific Island nations to extract multiple benefits from both governments; Kiribati, Nauru, Vanuatu, and Tonga have all switched allegiances in efforts to maximize

their diplomatic advantage. For example, in 2002 Nauru, initially an ally of Taiwan, recognized ‘One China’ in exchange for \$150 million in aid and debt relief. In 2005, Nauru switched back to recognizing Taiwan; although no visible funding was received in exchange, Wikileaks recently revealed Taiwan was paying cash directly to Nauruan members of parliament. While some used this cash to benefit their districts more broadly, others simply pocketed the sum. The MP’s were being paid only around \$5,000 per month; a huge sum for impoverished Nauru, but a cheap price to buy national sovereignty on the part of Taiwan.⁴⁷ More recently, Nauru also recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia (breakaway regions of Georgia) in exchange for—ostensibly unrelated—generous aid donations.

In these cases, sovereignty is an asset in its ability to beget sovereignty for other prospective nation-states. While these are diplomatic relations that can be leveraged for the benefit of the entire recognizing nations, the Nauru case also suggests that there is a risk of corruption in these non-traditional models associated with microstatecraft.

7. COALITIONS AND ALLIANCES

It has already been established that sovereign nations successfully admitted into the United Nations gain the added benefit of a voting seat in the United Nations General Assembly. While this vote and voice is valuable in and of itself, it becomes a true force of microstatecraft when UN member nations align their positions and votes in the UN towards shared interests and agendas. For Pacific Island nations, the most significant alliance is the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), founded in 1971 as the South Pacific Forum. This intergovernmental organization is an official observer of the UN, and its member nations occupy sixteen of the 193 seats in the General Assembly, yet only represent .5% of the global population. Michael Powles remarks on how significant these voting blocs can be:

Numbers count at the UN. The General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, with their various committees and subsidiary bodies, are nothing if not democratic, to the occasional ill-conceived chagrin of the UN’s larger members, some of whom remain uncomfortable with the ‘one state one vote’ rule which underpins the universality of the United Nations.⁴⁸

44. Stringer, Kevin D. “Pacific island microstates: pawns or players in Pacific rim diplomacy?” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 17, no. 3 (2006): 547-577.

45. Stringer, “Pacific island microstates,” 547-577.

46. Vltchek, Andre. “Wooing the islands: China and Taiwan high stakes bid for Pacific Island support.” *Asia-Pacific*

Journal-Japan Focus 6, no. 4 (2008). Dorling, Philip. “Nauru Officials ‘Friendly Payoffs,’” *Sydney Morning Herald* (2011). <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nauru-officials-friendly-payoffs-20110828-ljgnu.html>

48. Powles, Michael. “Making Waves in the Big Lagoon: The Influence of Pacific Island Forum Countries in the United Nations.” *Revue Juridique Polynésienne* 2 (2002): 59-76.

49. Chasek, Pamela S. “Margins of

power: Coalition building and coalition maintenance of the South Pacific island states and the alliance of small island states.” *Review of European Community & International Environmental Law* 14, no. 2 (2005): 125-137.

These votes can then be pooled towards shared Pacific Island objectives, particularly sustainable development and climate mitigation and adaptation agendas. Some past successes of the forum within the UN framework include establishing a provision for holding a global conference on the interests of small island developing states during the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment; re-inscribing New Caledonia on the UN list of non-self-governing territories; and shaping the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Seas in terms that were favorable to interests of Pacific Island nations.⁴⁹ For climate-change related issues, PIF defers to AOSIS, or the Alliance of Small Island States. With 42 UN seats, AOSIS exerts an even stronger pull; the alliance was established in 1990 with the specific agenda of exerting increased influence during the UN Convention on Climate Change (UNCCC) in the interest of small island states particularly vulnerable to climate change and sea level rise.⁵⁰ Together they have initiated the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. Initially launched in 1994 and signed by 125 nations, it establishes regional and local action programs to improve climate change adaptation through UN organization. At COP 21, a coalition between AOSIS and the Least Developed Countries (LDC) group helped establish ambitious goals within the Paris Agreement, including the 1.5°C maximum target for global warming.

8. ISLAND JURISDICTIONS

The rejection of sovereignty can also be a tool of microstatecraft. Island jurisdictions, often remnants of the colonial era, in recent decades strive to retain their dependency statuses, in spite of attempts by their metropole benefactors to shed their offshore territories. Overton and Murray note that “small states may in practice ‘sell’ their sovereignty—or aspects of it—in order to secure greater benefits from large metropolitan powers”; for example, Niue’s 1974 referendum decision to become a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand appears to have created more opportunities for the island-nation rather than remaining a territory or becoming an independent state.⁵¹ In addition to the support, aid, and negotiating power New Zealand provides, residents of Niue benefit from the power of a New Zealand passport, allowing free movement in both New Zealand and Australia. In contrast, citizens of independent Pacific Island states, except those in free association with the US, may find themselves trapped by impotent passports. This condition of “upside down decolonization”—actively embraced

by the residents of territories including Tokelau, Niue, the Cook Islands, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands who have all voted to remain as territories in recent decades—perpetuates the colonial relationship, to the chagrin of the UN Special Committee on Decolonization.⁵²

However, rather than trading-in their sovereignty entirely, subnational island jurisdictions enjoy varying degrees of autonomy. As enclaves of their metropole state, they are still able to employ a number of microstatecraft tactics. Keller Easterling, in her toolkit of the infrastructure spaces of extrastatecraft, describes the ‘zone’ (the Export Processing Zone and its progeny) as trading “state bureaucracy for even more complex layers of extra state governance, market manipulation, and regulation.” Islands and colonial remnants are popular sites for zones, some of which “merge the island resort with the offshore financial center.”⁵³ Zone users and occupants enjoy a number of incentives, including relaxed environmental laws, access to cheap labor and land, and even “quasi-diplomatic immunities.” In this condition of “sovereign bifurcation”⁵⁴ subnational island jurisdictions can deploy microstatecraft just as zones operationalize extrastatecraft while still benefitting from affiliation with and legitimization by a larger state.

Yet, this tradeoff is inherently made on unequal terms, and island jurisdictions can also suffer as a result of their non-integrated status. This was most recently (and violently) illustrated by the US response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, where mainland-centric regulations including the Jones Act, inability to declare bankruptcy, and FEMA eligibility guidelines, (as well as cultural, social, and language barriers) have slowed the disaster response and occluded many from receiving much-needed assistance. Disruptions of stability by climate change may call tradeoffs associated with other subnational relationships into question as well.

9. ETCETERA...

The clever leveraging of sovereignty-related assets does not end with the above list. Pacific Island nations have branded their tropical identities for the sale of local products; they have sold off their internet domain names (notably Tuvalu’s catchy ‘.tv’ moniker) for large sums; they have sold space for strategic military bases and telecommunications infrastructure; they leverage their UN-mandated exclusive economic zones to sell fishing licenses to larger nations with better fishing fleets (tuna fishing

50. Chasek, “Margins of power,” 125-137.
 51. Overton and Murray, “Sovereignty.”
 52. Baldacchino, Godfrey. ““Upside Down Decolonization” in Subnational Island Jurisdictions: Questioning the “Post” in Postcolonialism.” *Space and Culture* 13, no. 2 (2010): 188-202.
 53. Easterling, “Zone.”
 54. Palan, *Offshore World*.

55. Baldacchino, “Small Island States.” Also see Prasad, Naren. “Escaping regulation, escaping convention: development strategies in small economies.” *World Economics* 5 no. 1 (2004): 58. And Stringer, “Pacific island microstates,” 547-577.
 56. Palan, “Tax Havens,” 151-176.
 57. Hau’Ofa, Epeli. “Our sea of islands.” *A new Oceania: Rediscovering our*

sea of islands (1993): 2-16.
 58. Teaiwa, “Native thoughts.”
 59. Palan, “Tax Havens,” 151-176.
 60. Baldacchino, *Island Enclaves*. Also see Overton and Murray, “Sovereignty,” 17.
 61. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*, 213.
 62. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*.



in the Pacific is a \$4 billion dollar industry), and they have even earned income from space, by claiming and monetizing orbital satellite slots.⁵⁵ The strategies vary across nations, and this paper recognizes that the economies, cultures, degrees of development, and even geographies of Pacific island nations are quite diverse. However, they share the microstate typology that affords relatively small and poor states a distinct form of influence on an international stage. This operationalization of sovereignty perhaps even helps to reject the imaginary of Pacific Island microstates as small and marginalized spaces: by leveraging their unique geo-political characteristics via microstatecraft, they have come to play a significant role in the workings of the neoliberal world—it has been estimated that half of the world’s money passes through offshore tax havens.⁵⁶ Understanding and operating within a condition of flux is essential to the inhabitation of an Oceanic world; as Tongan/Fijian Scholar Epeli Hau’Ofa has prominently argued, the occupants of the region traditionally saw their realm not only as “tiny islands” but rather a broader universe of navigable oceans, underworld deities, and heavenly constellations as guides to the world below.⁵⁷ Rather than inhabiting flows of water, contemporary microstatecraft conceives Pacific island microstates as adept navigators of the flows of global capital. While perhaps not powerful enough to control the movement of oceans or the global financial superstructure, the residents of Oceania have adapted to both mediums, finding ways to make the powerful flows propel their (-)crafts.

MICROSTATECRAFT FUTURES

Microstatecrafts illustrate Teresia Teaiwa’s claim that Pacific Islanders have “with surprising frequency

outwitted—if not outstripped—their competitors in the race which has been modernity.”⁵⁸ This collection of cases suggests a new potential understanding of sovereignty in the era of late capitalism. When everything is commodified, sovereignty too embodies attributes that can be bought and sold by states who have few conventional products to offer in the global marketplace. The complex political maneuvers undertaken by Pacific Island micro-states, discussed above, serve to illustrate the delicate nature of contemporary geopolitical structures in the context of global capitalism; statehood systems designed to ensure global stability become exploitable commodities. Palan observes that tax havens demonstrate “the manner by which the modern state system not only accommodates globalization but also produces in subtle ways the infrastructure of globalization”⁵⁹; microstatecraft is a fundamental component of existing world systems. While this paper has focused on microstatecraft cases from Oceania, this holds true for many other island states, from the tax havens in the Caribbean to the passport sales of the Mediterranean.

Pacific Island nations have been able to bargain with statehood in new ways in recent decades, however there is also possible risk for microstates where non-state actors, corporations, or other entities without the best interests of associated citizens, begin to operate straw man nations towards more nefarious ends. Corrupt local leaders can sell state attributes towards personal gains without minding dangerous fallout for their countries. And many of these microstatecrafts, from tax havens to flags of convenience, have been frowned upon by larger nations. Some have argued that island states may be in fact better off as semi-autonomous jurisdictions of larger nations who

can provide protections and support systems.⁶⁰ Yet, many Oceanic states have chosen to become and stay independent in recent decades, suggesting that for at least some island states, sovereignty is valued over the assurances that a metropole can provide. Microstatecraft is a form of survival for small island, big ocean states where forces ranging from capitalism to climate change to neo-imperialism are constant threats, but it might be seen as itself a form of activism towards the right of oceanic states to operate autonomously and make their own rules within these larger systems. In her study of extrastatecraft, Easterling suggests that activism might benefit from activities outside and beyond the norm:

Just as many of the most powerful regimes in the world find it expedient to operate with proxies and doubles in infrastructure space, the most familiar forms of activism might similarly benefit from using undisclosed partners or *unorthodox* auxiliaries, if only to soften up the ground and offer a better chance of success.⁶¹

In Easterling's framing, alternative strategies for activism are made necessary by the pervasiveness and potency of global capitalism. Similarly, microstatecrafts, beyond traditional forms of statecraft, can be seen as tools to combat the powerful and often ex-colonial states whose activities—greenhouse gas production, international regulations, capitalist expansion—limit the capacity of small island states and peoples to thrive, or even exist. For Pacific Island nations who have historically been at the mercy of colonial powers, and in some cases continue to experience the ramifications of neocolonial activities, the use of microstatecrafts advocates that the right to exist independently and participate in global systems need not be a function of territorial, economic, or militaristic scales. Deploying such tactics as offshore banking, passport sales, and UN voting coalitions allow island nations to re-define what sovereignty means in their own terms, leveling the playing field in a West-centric world. Sovereign archipelagoes and their inhabitants can use microstatecrafts as tools to advocate for their own well-being in a world system which currently, through climate destruction, globalization, and capitalist expansion, seems set to destroy them.

Island microstates are “active forms,”⁶² their geographic components corresponding to series of regulations, flows, and virtual networks. While the post-colonial nation-state framework has subdivided the Pacific into discrete geographic units, the region's fluid history suggests the potency of projects which exceed state boundaries, engaging in larger flows. As a region, many interests are shared in the Pacific: adapting to climate change, improving the mobility of citizens, retaining cultural practices in a globalizing world, and economic development. The work of PIF/AOSIS suggests that perhaps the most powerful currency of sovereignty in island microstates is the formation of coalitions toward shared agendas. In an age where disasters and displace-

ment associated with changing climates reigns as a primary concern for Pacific Island nations, strengthening relationships such as AOSIS and PIF may be essential tactics towards securing ongoing self-determination through affiliation. Perhaps even a new Pacific Union is in order, one which re-introduces the islander mobilities disrupted by the Westphalian state and modern passport. Subverting frameworks designed by and for the benefit of Western powers, Pacific Island micro-states can expand upon the currencies of sovereignty, using microstatecraft to expand Oceanic agency on a global stage.

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