

# DGAP POLICY BRIEF

## Into the Blue Pacific

### Why the EU Should Help Island Nations Address Climate Change and Maritime Insecurity



**Elisabeth I-Mi Suh**  
Research Fellow, Center  
for Security and Defense



**Hanna Gers**  
Student Assistant, Center  
for Security and Defense

The 'Blue Pacific' is a vast region in the South Pacific, encompassing 30 million square kilometers, three million inhabitants and 14 nations. It consists of thousands of islands threatened by climate change – a concern aggravated by geopolitical competition. The EU can help mitigate these challenges through capacity-building for climate adaptation and maritime security and regional consolidation. This overlaps with European strategic interests, including establishing itself as a trusted outside power.

- Events in the Blue Pacific affect peace and stability in the wider region. The island nations are becoming a focus of geopolitical competition, and this in turn has the potential to aggravate tensions in Asian hotspots.
- Climate change is the largest threat to the island nations of the Blue Pacific. The EU should prioritize climate adaptation projects which have the potential to stimulate knowledge transfers from and to Europe.
- Blue Pacific nations have limited capacities for monitoring, policing, and enforcement, which also impacts maritime security in the Pacific. The EU should streamline its capacity-building dialogue for maritime security and non-proliferation.
- Island nations in the Blue Pacific seek regional consolidation as a response to climate change and geopolitical competition. The Pacific Islands Forum provides a focus for the EU to streamline its engagement and strengthen relations between regions.

## A REGION IN TURMOIL

The label 'Blue Pacific' refers to a group of island nations in the South Pacific which encompasses a large maritime area located within the wider triangle between China, Australia, and the United States. Washington and Beijing are vying for influence in the Blue Pacific, and for good reasons: The region is strategically located and owns large deposits of natural resources. Also, there is the perception that its island nations can be influenced for geopolitical purposes.

The United States maintains military bases on Guam, which is a US territory, and on the US state of Hawaii. It has also announced plans to install a further base in the Federated States of Micronesia and an over-the-horizon radar in Palau.<sup>1</sup> It also needs to renew territorial association agreements with three island nations<sup>2</sup> as well as follow up on new arrangements, including the Partners of the Blue Pacific initiative.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of 2022, the United States launched a suite of high-level meetings, new partnerships, and investments plans in direct reaction to Beijing's increasing economic and political footprint in the region.<sup>4</sup> Washington fears that China could gradually build a military presence in the region, and Beijing's security deal with the Solomon Islands in April 2022 fuelled such fears.<sup>5</sup> Vessels for trade, economic and military replenishment are routed through the Blue Pacific, and US vessels would also need to pass through the region if there was a contingency in the Western Pacific, for instance in the Taiwan Strait.

At the same time, large powers are scrambling for the region's resources: The Blue Pacific islands span massive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) which contain extensive stocks of natural resources from fish to nickel, copper, and cobalt.<sup>6</sup> Economic investments also buy political support: Of the six island nations that originally had diplomatic relations with Taiwan, only four remain. The Solomon Islands and Kiribati switched from Taiwan to China in 2019.

## WHAT ABOUT EUROPE?

At least on paper, the EU claims a stake of its own in the Blue Pacific. Brussels has formulated a strategy for the Indo-Pacific that explicitly mentions the importance of France's overseas territories – the seven million square kilometres of French EEZs that lie in the Blue Pacific.<sup>7</sup> The EU and individual European states have diplomatic representations and economic and political interests in the region; EU economic aid and trade relations are important for Pacific Island States (PICs).<sup>8</sup>

The Blue Pacific is also key to the stability of a far broader geography. Instability in this maritime theatre would impact trade routes, supply chains, and thus European economic prosperity. Diverse ripple effects could reach the shores of East Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Military skirmishes in the Blue Pacific could affect French territories in the region and therefore require an EU response.

- 1 See Mar-Vic Cagurangan, "US, FSM reach consensus on a plan to build military base in Micronesia", Pacific Island Times, July 28, 2021: <https://www.pacificislandtimes.com/post/us-fsm-agree-on-a-plan-to-build-military-base-in-micronesia> (accessed February 6, 2023); US Department of Defense, "Contracts for Dec. 28, 2022": <https://www.defense.gov/News/Contracts/Contract/Article/3255710/> (accessed February 6, 2023).
- 2 The Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau are joined with the United States through Compacts of Free Association. These compacts codify arrangements of national defense and financial assistance and are due to expire in 2023 and 2024. Moreover, the United States has announced plans to also establish diplomatic posts in the Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tonga; see White House, Pacific Partnership Strategy of the United States (September 2022), p. 8: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Pacific-Partnership-Strategy.pdf> (accessed October 10, 2022).
- 3 The Partners of the Blue Pacific initiative brings together Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States despite significant policy differences. It presents the third example of intergovernmental coalition-building against China's growing influence in the wider Pacific after the Quadrilateral Dialogue of Australia, India, Japan, the United States and the AUKUS arrangement between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. See: White House, "A new initiative for more effective and efficient cooperation in support of Pacific Island priorities" (June 2022): <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/24/statement-by-australia-japan-new-zealand-the-united-kingdom-and-the-united-states-on-the-establishment-of-the-partners-in-the-blue-pacific-pbp> (accessed January 25, 2023).
- 4 China has completed several infrastructure projects in the region under its Maritime Silk Road Initiative launched in 2013, become a principal donor to the region, and strengthened its bilateral relations; see: Michael J. Green, "China's Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region", CSIS Report, Center for Strategic & International Studies (April 2018), p. 1: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-maritime-silk-road> (accessed November 2, 2022).
- 5 Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific", Council on Foreign Relations (May 2022): <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific> (accessed November 1, 2022).
- 6 While the jurisdiction on deep-sea mining and its environmental consequences remains relatively unclear, several investors and international mining companies are eyeing the mineral resources on the Pacific seabed. For instance the French territory of New Caledonia is believed to house 10 to 30 percent of the global stock of nickel; see: Joshua McDonald, "Pacific Island Nations Consider Deep-sea Mining, Despite Risks", The Diplomat, June 18, 2021: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/pacific-island-nations-consider-deep-sea-mining-despite-risks/> (accessed January 25, 2023).
- 7 EU External Action Service, The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, (September 2021): [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication\\_2021\\_24\\_1\\_en.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf) (accessed October 18, 2022). France, Germany, and the Netherlands had each published national documents to strategize their engagement of the Indo-Pacific prior to the EU's strategy.
- 8 The EU is the sixth largest donor to the Pacific after Australia, Japan, the United States, New Zealand, and China; see: Céline Pajon, "Two Shades of Blue: Europe and the Pacific Islands, Strategic Partners in the Indo-Pacific Era", Briefings de L'Ifri, Institut Français des Relations Internationales (April 2022), p.6: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pajon\\_europe\\_pacific\\_islands\\_2022.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pajon_europe_pacific_islands_2022.pdf) (accessed October 31, 2022).

Moreover, European governments are implicated in the problems facing the PICs. Europe's historic responsibility for colonialism and other acts of exploitation is frequently cited in political wrangles and fuel calls for independence in the French overseas territories. Historical issues also color the sense of climate injustice, given that PICs are disproportionately affected by climate change while contributing less than 0.03 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, there are demands to support and compensate the victims of French nuclear testing activities in the region. Given bilateral post-colonial intricacies, the EU is better suited than individual members to engage the Blue Pacific region.

## PUTTING THE BLUE PACIFIC ON THE MAP

There is also a positive reason for Europe to put the Blue Pacific more firmly on the map: Engagement there means playing to the EU's strengths. The EU has always promoted the notion that nations should be able to exercise consensual political choices over their shared geography. The term 'Blue Pacific'<sup>9</sup> is a sympathetic example that follows the EU's creative interpretation of geopolitics: a local self-description that emphasizes the region's connectivity, common challenges, and collective interests.

The label 'Blue Pacific' stands for community among rich diversity. It describes a huge realm of 30 million square kilometers<sup>10</sup>, thousands of small islands, three million inhabitants in 14 nations with distinct cultures, multiple languages, and policy approaches – all connected by the ocean. The region, moreover, already has a common institution, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), which has identified cooperation as the only way to deal with the ravages of climate change

and geopolitical competition. All island nations in the Blue Pacific face one overriding issue of global proportions: climate change. It is the ocean that links and sustains them, and it is the ocean that represents a collective, existential threat to them. Their low-lying atolls are disproportionately affected.<sup>11</sup> Warming waters and natural disasters threaten ecosystems, biodiversity, livelihoods, food and water security as well as economic well-being and health in the Blue Pacific;<sup>12</sup> and often impact women disproportionately.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, climate change and its effects represent the most important security threat and threat multiplier to Blue Pacific nations.<sup>14</sup>

A second major concern that affects the entire Blue Pacific, not least because it prevents its nations from tackling the first, is geopolitical competition. Particularly Australia and the United States court PICs with economic and political arrangements to buy influence and support against China, which responds in kind. As Blue Pacific nations fear to become – as during the 20th century – subject to coercion and exploitation in the context of strategic rivalries, the Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations in New York expressed the local consensus that “in the geopolitical contest between the United States and China, climate change is winning.”<sup>15</sup>

The priority given by the region to mitigating climate change and geopolitical rivalry overlaps with European interests in the Blue Pacific. But the EU has yet to capitalize on its capacity-building efforts.

## CLIMATE SECURITY

Blue Pacific leaders declared a “Climate Emergency” in July 2022<sup>16</sup> and called for support for the region's efforts in adaptation, mitigation, and disaster risk

9 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent (2022): <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PIFS-2050-Strategy-Blue-Pacific-Continent-WEB-5Aug2022.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2022).

10 Their combined Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) span 30 million square kilometers.

11 Roger McLean, Paul Kench, “Destruction or persistence of coral atoll islands in the face of 20th and 21st century sea-level rise?”, Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change (July 2015), p. 459.

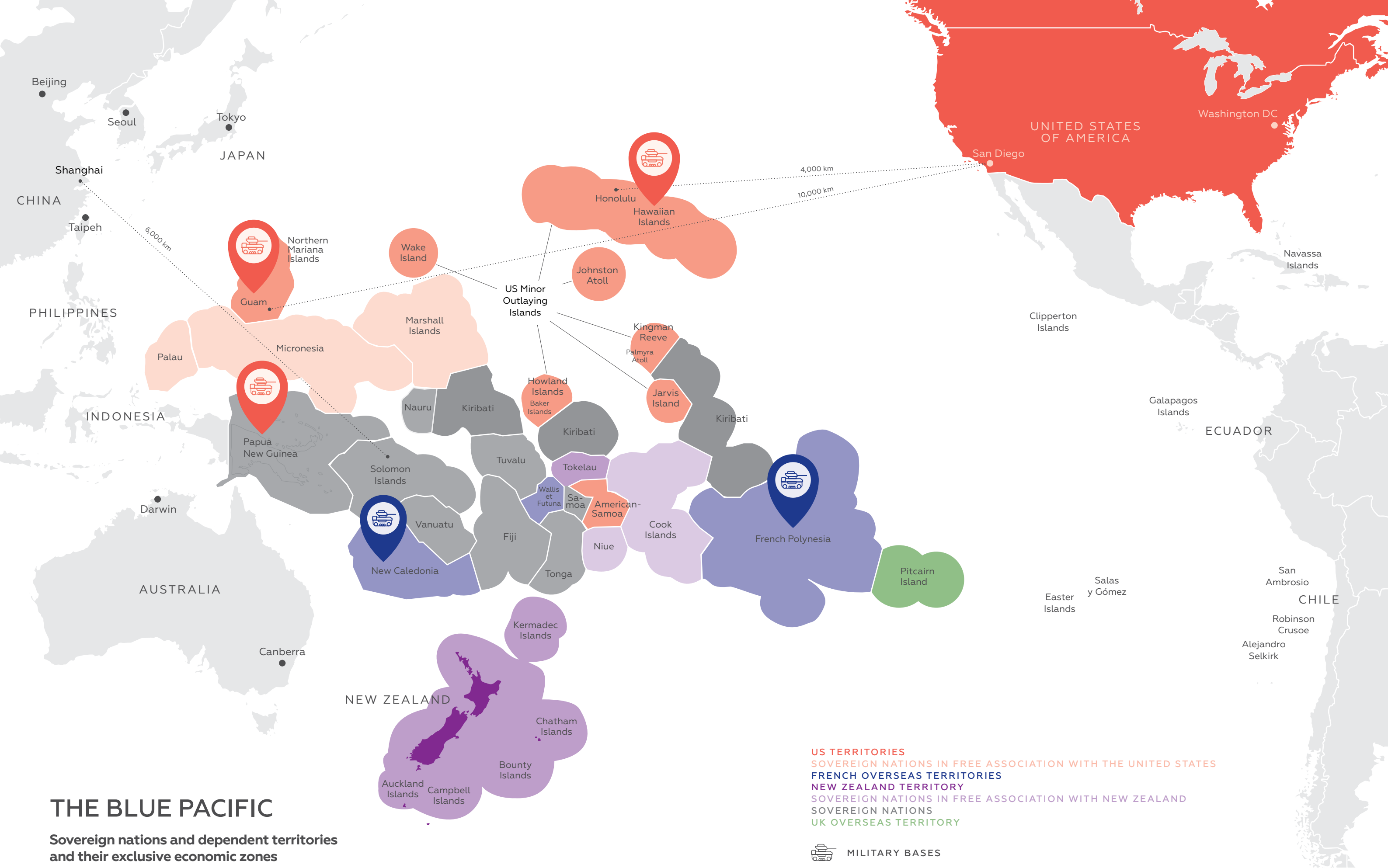
12 The Blue Pacific accounts for a third of global tuna catch, a resource under threat; see: Pacific Community, Pacific Island Countries and Territories adapting to Climate Change in Tuna Fisheries (June 2019): <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2019/06/pacific-island-countries-and-territories-adapting-to-climate-change-in-tuna> (accessed October 13, 2022).

13 UN Women Fiji (2014), Climate Change, Disasters and Gender-Based Violence in the Pacific. Fiji: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women: <https://www.unclearn.org/wp-content/uploads/library/unwomen701.pdf> (accessed November 9, 2022).

14 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Boe Declaration on Regional Security (September 2018): <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security> (accessed January 25, 2023).

15 Center for Strategic and International Studies, Building a Blue Pacific Agenda for the Twenty-First Century, June 23, 2022: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-blue-pacific-agenda-twenty-first-century> (accessed January 25, 2023).

16 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Pacific Foreign Ministers declare a climate emergency, set priorities at FFMM 2022, (July 10, 2022): <https://www.forumsec.org/2022/07/09/pacific-foreign-ministers-declare-a-climate-emergency-set-priorities-at-ffmm-2022> (accessed November 2, 2022).



## Major Frameworks, Partnerships and Diplomatic Visits 2013–2023

# 2013

China launches “Maritime Silk Road Initiative”

# 2016

Japan announces “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”

# 2017

Australia announces “Pacific Step-Up”

# 2018

New Zealand announces “Pacific Reset”

reduction.<sup>17</sup> Such support should include a change of perspective, with the PICs seen not as mere victims, but as sources of knowledge and places to do research.<sup>18</sup> In fact, the Blue Pacific has been described as an innovation hub and has put forward several innovative adaptation projects.<sup>19</sup> However, the region in many cases lacks the financial, technical, and human capacities needed for implementation.

To address some of these shortfalls, the EU launched the EU-Pacific Green-Blue Alliance in November 2021.<sup>20</sup> This partnership includes a financial package of €197 million for the years 2021–2027. It also provides funds for other major climate adaptation projects.<sup>21</sup> Technical assistance and close cooperation with local communities, such as through roundtable discussions and joint research projects, help to reduce barriers and facilitate the inclusion of women and Pacific indigenous knowledge. By securing local ownership and bringing in diverse constituencies, the sustainability of climate security projects is increased. Such an approach improves the chances for innovation which can also feed European climate security efforts elsewhere.

Yet, the EU is not as effective in its efforts to support climate adaptation as it would like to believe. Its bureaucratic structures mean that access to funding and the implementation of projects are often difficult.<sup>22</sup>

## MARITIME SECURITY

As stated in its Indo-Pacific strategy, the EU is committed to improving maritime security in the region. This includes strengthening capacities against drug and human trafficking, wildlife crime, illicit goods, and financial flows linked to terrorism. The EU also seeks to consolidate information-sharing mechanisms.<sup>23</sup> But while the information aspect is vital, Pacific island countries particularly struggle with technological tools (software), technical equipment (hardware), and trained personnel for data management, monitoring, and enforcement.

Helping to build up such capacities would also align with the EU's long-standing goal of stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Capacities for non-proliferation and sanctions enforcement overlap with capacities needed for maritime security on the practical level; both sets of capacities evolve around information gathering, monitoring, and enforcement. North Korea's illicit activities show the practical importance of such efforts: Pyongyang is well-known to sail under false flags and off the radar in order to circumvent arms embargos and sanctions. And North Korea exploits the lack of capacities among PICs for its false flag operations.<sup>24</sup>

As part of its longer-standing non-proliferation strategy, the EU already has set up an annual

17 Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2050 Strategy.

18 See Pajon, A Green-Blue Alliance in Motion, p. 2.

19 Elizabeth McLeod et al., “Lessons From the Pacific Islands – Adapting to Climate Change by Supporting Social and Ecological Resilience”, *Frontiers Marine Sciences* (June 2019), p. 1.

20 See Céline Pajon, “A Green-Blue Alliance in Motion. Pacific Island Countries and Europe Fighting Climate Change”, *Briefings de L’Ifri, Institut Français des Relations Internationales* (October 2022), p. 4: <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/briefings-de-lifri/green-blue-alliance-motion-pacific-island-countries-and-europe> (accessed October 31, 2022).

21 Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), *Pacific Ecosystem-Based Adaptation to Climate Change* +, <https://www.sprep.org/project/pacific-ecosystem-based-adaptation-climate-change> (accessed November 30, 2022).

22 Pajon, A Green-Blue Alliance in Motion, p. 5.

23 European External Action Service, EU Joint Communication, p. 13–14; the Pacific Fusion Center represents such a regional information-sharing mechanism. It was established in 2021 and is funded by the Australian government.

24 United Nations Security Council, Report by the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009), S/2022/132, March 1, 2022.

## 2019

Solomon Islands and Kiribati switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China

## 2021

United Kingdom announces “Indo-Pacific Tilt”

United States and Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) announce building of a military base in FSM

The EU publishes Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

## 2022

Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets PIC leaders in Fiji (first visit by a Secretary of State in 37 years)

Security Deal between China and the Solomon Islands

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi pays official visit to 8 PICs

Australia, New Zealand, UK, US, Japan launch “Partners in the Blue Pacific” (BPB) Initiative

Pacific Islands Forum launches “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent”

Pacific Island Country Summit in Washington

United States National Strategy for the Pacific Islands

## Outlook

2023: Compacts between United States and FSM and Marshall Islands expire

2024: Compact between United States and Palau expires

2026: United States over-the-horizon radar station expected to be completed in Palau

Source: Authors’ own compilation

dialogue on capacity-building for non-proliferation and sanctions enforcement in the Indo-Pacific. Brussels could become more effective by merging its efforts for maritime security with those for non-proliferation and upgrading its dialogue with the Pacific Islands Forum. Such capacity-building would serve to meet Brussels’ interests and address vulnerabilities in the Blue Pacific as well as some island nations’ interest in security cooperation. The Solomon Islands’ security pact with “China, that included arrangements for training local security forces, exemplifies” such local demands.<sup>25</sup>

## FOSTER REGIONAL COOPERATION

Faced with climate change and an array of political challenges, Blue Pacific nations seek regional

consolidation. For the EU, it is part of its DNA to seek to strengthen regional organizations. Upgrading EU-PIF relations would be a natural next step for both sides.

The EU has traditionally followed a dual approach of engaging PICs both multilaterally<sup>26</sup> and bilaterally. Yet, the PIF is developing into the key regional organization for matters of security and issues common to all the island nations.<sup>27</sup> The EU already cooperates with the PIF as a dialogue partner, and it can use its status as a regional body to participate in ministerial and working-level meetings. Moreover, an EU-PIF partnership framework would institutionalize region-to-region relations, which would boost regional consolidation and facilitate the EU’s capacity-building activities in the Blue Pacific.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See Solomon Islands Government, Solomon Islands-China Security Cooperation signed (April 20, 2022): <https://solomons.gov.sb/solomon-islands-china-security-cooperation-signed/> (accessed January 25, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> The Cotonou Agreement provides the framework for the partnership between the EU and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States (ACP). The extended agreement will expire in June 2023; the Post-Cotonou Agreement will enter into force subsequently.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Powles, Joanne Wallis, “An expanded, empowered Pacific Islands Forum could lock in Pacific security”, RNZ, July 19, 2022: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/471230/an-expanded-empowered-pacific-islands-forum-could-lock-in-pacific-security> (accessed January 25, 2023).

<sup>28</sup> The EU has previously provided support to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for economic integration and other policy fields of regional consolidation; see: Giulia Tercovich, Assessing EU Leadership in Inter-Regional Relations. The Case of the Institutionalisation of ASEAN Disaster Management, New York 2022.



## Countries and Territories in the Blue Pacific

Country/ Territory	Status	Population	Land Area (km²)	Exclusive Economic Zone (km²)	Membership	Recognition Taiwan/PRC
<b>United States Territories</b>						
American Samoa (AS)	Unincorporated and unorganized territory	46,366	200	404,391	SPC, SPREP	
Guam (GU)	Unincorporated and organized territory	168,801	540	221,504	SPC, SPREP	
Northern Mariana Islands (MP)	Commonwealth in political union with and under the sovereignty of the United States	56,608	464	749,268	SPC, SPREP	
<b>French Overseas Territories</b>						
French Polynesia (PF)	Overseas country and collectivity	299,356	4,167	4,767,240	SPC, PIF, SPREP	
New Caledonia	Sui Generis collectivity	273,015	18,576	1,422,540	SPC, PIF, SPREP	
Wallis and Futuna (WF)	Overseas collectivity	11,441	142	258,269	SPC, SPREP	
<b>New Zealand Territory</b>						
Tokelau (TK)	Dependent Territory	1,506	12	319,031	SPC, SPREP	
<b>British Overseas Territory</b>						
Pitcairn Islands (PN)	Overseas Territory	50	47	836,108	SPC	
<b>Sovereign Nations</b>						
Cook Islands (CK)	Independent, in free association with New Zealand	17,459	237	1,830,000	SPC, PIF, SPREP	China
Fiji (FJ)	Independent	926,276	18,276	1,282,980	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China
Kiribati (KI)	Independent	119,940	811	3,441,810	SPC, UN, SPREP	Switched to China in 2019
Marshall Islands (MH)	Independent, in free association with the United States	54,590	181	1,990,530	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	Taiwan
Micronesia (FM)	Independent, in free association with the United States	104,468	701	2,996,420	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China
Nauru (NR)	Independent	11,690	21	308,480	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	Taiwan
Niue (NU)	Self-governing, in free association with New Zealand	1,562	261	450,000	SPC, PIF, SPREP	China
Palau (PW)	Self-governing, in free association with the United States	17,930	444	603,978	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	Taiwan
Papua New Guinea (PG)	Independent	8,934,475	462,840	2,402,290	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China
Samoa (WS)	Independent	198,646	2,934	127,950	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China
Solomon Islands (SB)	Independent	712,071	28,230	1,553,440	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	Switched to China in 2019
Tonga (TO)	Independent	99,780	749	659,558	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China
Tuvalu (TV)	Independent	10,580	26	749,790	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	Taiwan
Vanuatu (VU)	Independent	294,688	12,281	633,251	SPC, UN, PIF, SPREP	China

Source: Authors' own compilation based on CIA, The World Factbook, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries> (accessed January 30, 2023); Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, Forum Members, <https://www.forumsec.org/who-we-are-pacific-islands-forum> (accessed January 30, 2023).

Legende für die Abkürzungen: SPC = Pacific Community, PIF = Pacific Islands Forum, SPREP = The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, UN = United Nations



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Rauchstraße 17/18  
10787 Berlin  
Tel. +49 30 254231-0  
info@dgap.org  
www.dgap.org  
@dgapev

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*DGAP receives funding from the German Federal Foreign Office based on a resolution of the German Bundestag.*

**Publisher**

Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 2198-5936

**Editing** Bettina Vestring

**Layout** Lara Bühner

**Design Concept** WeDo

**Author picture(s)** © DGAP



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This paper is part of the DGAP Project Risk Reduction  
and Arms Control in the Asia-Pacific Region

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program/risk-reduction-and-arms-control-asia-pacific-region](https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/security-and-defense-program/risk-reduction-and-arms-control-asia-pacific-region)