

ISSUE BRIEF

Engaging the Pacific Islands Is No Longer About the Why, but About the How

OCTOBER 2022 MARIE JOURDAIN AND CHARLES LICHFIELD

The South Pacific is the hottest new destination for high-level Western delegations. They aren't coming to take in the scenery, idyllic though it may be.

In April 2022, the Solomon Islands and China signed a secret security agreement that raised great concerns within the region and as far as Europe and the United States. One of the clauses in a leaked draft¹ allowed Chinese ships to carry out logistical stopovers while authorizing Chinese armed forces to be deployed to “protect the safety of Chinese personnel and major projects.” A Chinese naval base close to Guam was rapidly becoming plausible.

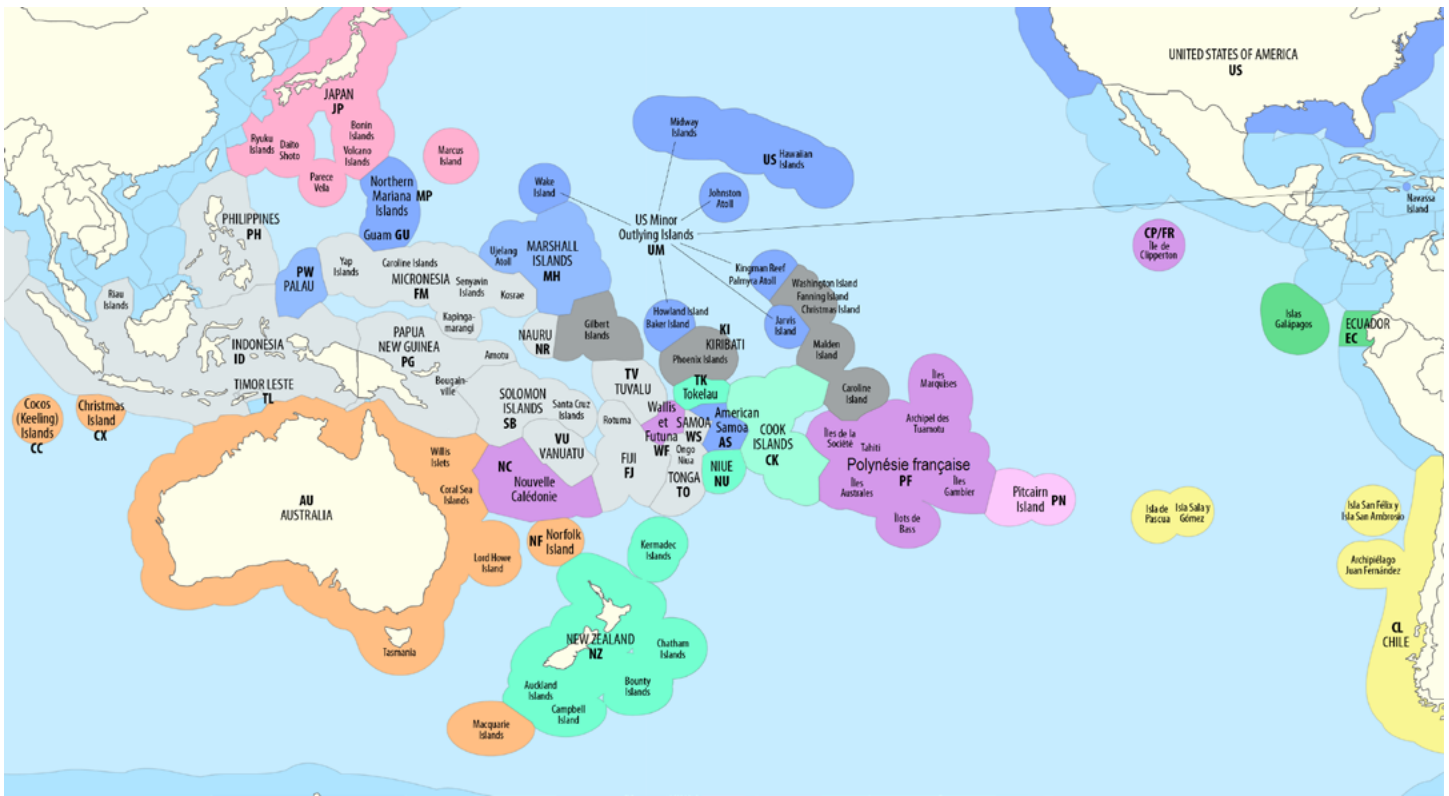
Under great pressure, Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare had to clarify his intents in July, stating that the Solomon Islands will not allow any military base on its territory and that Australia remained the “partner of choice.” But in late August 2022, a US Coast Guard ship and a United Kingdom Royal Navy ship (conducting patrols to prevent illegal fishing) were denied a routine port call to refuel on the Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Sogavare denied it was a move against the United States and announced a moratorium on all foreign navy vessels—except for Australia's, New Zealand's, and Fiji's military vessels—until they update their approval processes.

Twenty twenty-two has already been marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Chinese revision of the de facto sea border between China and Taiwan. In this context, the Pacific Islands are acknowledged as truly strategic. Their votes at the United Nations (UN) are precious: All 13 voted to condemn Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. Not all had sided with Kyiv following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Four of the islands still recognize Taiwan, though Kiribati and the Solomon Islands ended their official diplomatic ties with Taiwan in 2019. Their geographic position is also strategic if a conflict were to break out in the Taiwan Strait.

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¹ Anna Powles (@AnnaPowles), “The Draft Security Cooperation Agreement between China and Solomon Islands Has Been Linked on Social Media and Raises a Lot of Questions (and Concerns),” Twitter, March 24, 2022, <https://twitter.com/annapowles/status/1506845794728837120>.



Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ's) for countries in the Pacific area. EEZ's indicative only—2018. Source: Maximilian Dörrbecker/Wikimedia.

The traditional limitations for engagement to overcome

However, engagement from the West (the United States and like-minded countries) in the South Pacific is traditionally limited by three features hampering its effectiveness. First, the South Pacific islands see themselves as large oceanic countries rather than small island countries. As such, they intend “to work together as one”² as stated in the “2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.”³ Yet, the Western countries usually fail to adopt a comprehensive approach toward the region. The United States tends to focus on Micronesia, home to three US territories. France is absorbed by Polynesia, which is home to some French territories, and New Zealand

focuses on Melanesia, which harbors islands like Fiji and Vanuatu to its direct north.

The second limitation stems from a lack of sustained effort. Following the end of the Cold War, during which the United States was embedded in the region, it came to neglect the South Pacific, as illustrated by the closing of the US embassy in the Solomon Islands in 1993 (now to reopen). US officials acknowledged⁴ a “continued uncertainty in the region about the United States’ willingness and ability to sustain a robust forward presence” as early as 2016. France, while lacking a specific strategy, engages semi-regularly with the region. France’s engagement is illustrated through the France-Oceania Summits, but especially whenever there is a specific need. The success of the 2015 United Nations

² “The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,” Council Pacific Affairs, June 21, 2021, <https://www.councilpacificaffairs.org/ressources/the-2050-strategy-for-the-blue-pacific-continent/>.

³ “The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent,” Pacific Islands Forum, July 2022, <https://www.forumsec.org/2050strategy/>.

⁴ “US Policy in the Pacific: The Struggle to Maintain Influence,” *Hearing before the US Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, 114th Congress*, 2016, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg20532/html/CHRG-114hhrg20532.htm>.



Tuvalu's Foreign Minister Simon Kofe gives a COP26 statement while standing in the ocean in this handout picture taken in Funafuti, Tuvalu, November 8, 2021. Picture taken November 8, 2021. Ministry of Justice, Communication and Foreign Affairs Tuvalu Government/ Handout via REUTERS.

Climate Change Conference was the result of intensive consultations with the Pacific Islands, marking a real partnership. Unfortunately, France failed to build on this momentum (the high-level engagement was more a one-shot effort).⁵ In the meantime, the United Kingdom announced its “Pacific Uplift” in 2019 but did not mention the South Pacific even once in its Integrated Review.⁶

The third limiting factor is that the region is never a political priority. The South Pacific is geographically far from Europe (except for France through its overseas

countries and territories), while the United States tends to invest more heavily in other subregions of the Indo-Pacific. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recognized in 2012⁷ that “the Pacific half of Asia Pacific doesn’t always get as much attention as it should,” and there is little evidence that this has changed since then. For instance, the Joe Biden administration first focused on the revival of the Quad⁸ and put the emphasis in its Indo-Pacific strategy⁹ on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as a privileged multilateral partner (mentioned eighteen times while the Pacific Islands Forum was mentioned only once),

5 Noumea, “High-Level Dialogue on Climate Change,” Pacific Community, November 16, 2014, <https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2014/11/high-level-dialogue-on-climate-change>.

6 Cabinet Office, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development, and Foreign Policy, Report to the United Kingdom Parliament, HM Government, March 2021*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/975077/Global_Britain_in_a_Competitive_Age_the_Integrated_Review_of_Security__Defence__Development_and_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

7 Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks at the Pacific Islands Forum Post-Forum Dialogue,” US Department of State, August 31, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/08/197266.htm>.

8 The White House, “Quad Leaders Joint Statement: ‘The Spirit of the Quad,’” March 12, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/12/quad-leaders-joint-statement-the-spirit-of-the-quad/>.

9 The White House, “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.



US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken attend the US-Pacific Island Country Summit at the State Department in Washington, US September 29, 2022. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst.

while the first high-level visits in the region were not in the South Pacific (Secretary Antony Blinken and Secretary Lloyd J. Austin's first visits in the Indo-Pacific were to Japan and South Korea as well as India for Austin).

Renewed engagement

Yet, in light of the Pacific Islands' increasing strategic relevance, there is now strong momentum for renewed, co-built, and lasting engagement of Western countries with the Pacific Islands. Under the Biden administration, high-level visits to the region have come to multiply. Joe Biden held an unprecedented US-Pacific Island Country Summit late September (only Kiribati was missing) while unveiling the first-ever Pacific Partnership Strategy. The latter plans to straighten the partnership (delivering on

commitments and increased American presence) and to support the regional architecture (with an envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum for instance), among other objectives. This effort of consultation is also directed to like-minded partners as the United States launched the Partners for the Blue Pacific initiative¹⁰ this June along with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (France and the European Union [EU] being so far in an observing capacity) for "a more effective and efficient cooperation in support of Pacific Island priorities." Since then, Germany and Canada expressed their intent to join the initiative

Like-minded countries are also displaying their determination to enhance cooperation with the region. Australia announced its "Pacific Step-Up"¹¹ in 2016, New Zealand announced its "Pacific Reset"¹² in 2018, and the

¹⁰ The White House, "Statement by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States on the Establishment of the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP)," June 24, 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>.

¹¹ "Pacific Step-Up: Stepping Up Australia's Engagement with Our Pacific Family," Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d., <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific>, accessed September 15, 2022.

¹² "The Pacific Reset: The First Year," New Zealand Cabinet External Relations and Security Committee, n.d., <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/OIA/R-R-The-Pacific-reset-The-First-Year.PDF>, accessed September 15, 2022.

United Kingdom is increasing its diplomatic presence and official visits. In addition, the EU published its first-ever Indo-Pacific Strategy¹³ in 2021; the EU Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific¹⁴ took place in February 2022; and the EU-Pacific Green-Blue Alliance,¹⁵ part of the EU's Global Gateway, was launched in 2021.

Without a coherent approach, the renewed engagement could fall flat. Western countries must develop a co-built, transparent, and efficient policy with the Pacific Islands.

Areas of focus for cooperation

The Pacific Islands are primarily concerned about climate change. Rising sea levels are an existential threat.¹⁶ Natural disasters are more frequent and require robust contingency plans, meaning the reliance on external naval forces and coast guards is only likely to increase: The FRANZ mechanism,¹⁷ which coordinates humanitarian assistance in the South Pacific following a disaster, has proven to be critical. It was activated in response to the eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano in January 2022.

Maritime security has become a thornier issue. The issue to monitor illegal fishing, trafficking, and foreign incursions with limited is not new, as the South Pacific is home to large exclusive economic zones (EEZs). National coast guards also lack the capacity to enforce rules against China's fishing fleet of over fifteen thousand-plus vessels. France announced during the last Oceania-France Summit the creation of a new network of coast guards for the South Pacific, but tracking what has followed from the announcement is a hard task.

Connectivity and transport infrastructure need to be made more resilient. The South Pacific countries rely on a handful of major shipping routes¹⁸ operated by multipurpose vessels. Goods are then transferred to and from smaller islands through a patchwork of interisland and domestic routes. Port installations tend to be inadequate for efficient hub-and-spoke models to emerge.

In 2017, the percentage of individuals using the internet was unusually low at 39 percent.¹⁹ The most striking factor behind this is the low rate of fixed broadband subscriptions, at 1.64 per one hundred people. Mobile cellular subscriptions are higher at seventy-eight per one hundred people, but these cannot prop up the development of a digital services economy or make the islands attractive to the "digital nomads" who have brought new income to larger island economies in the Indo Pacific, from Indonesia to the Maldives.

Economic recovery offers some relatively quick fixes, despite the disparate levels of national income. French Polynesia and Nauru have reached about US\$20,000 per capita whereas Kiribati and the Solomon Islands are around \$1,500. These figures are supported by overseas development aid (ODA); personal remittances from overseas; and large tourism sectors, representing over 50 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in some cases.²⁰ This latter dependency left many islands heavily exposed during the Covid-19 crisis.

Dependency on ODA, remittances, and tourism will not disappear in any realistic scenario. Other than connectivity, taking better advantage of resources in the ground and in the sea in every island's EEZ would help grow the share of exports to GDP and thus introduce more balance into the islands' economies.

13 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, European Commission, September 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf.

14 "Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific," European Union External Action, February 20, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ministerial-forum-cooperation-indo-pacific_en.

15 "EU-Pacific Green-Blue Alliance," European Union External Action, October 6, 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-pacific_green-blue_alliance.pdf.

16 The Pacific Elders Voice, "Pacific Elders' Statement on Pacific Security," *Planet Politics*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.planetpolitics.org/ppi-blog/pacific-elders-statement-on-pacific-security>.

17 "The FRANZ Agreement," New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 20, 2014, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/NZDRP-docs/Franz-Arrangement-Brochure.pdf>.

18 Kim Sewon, "Proposal for Improving Maritime Connectivity in the Pacific Region," Korea Maritime Institute, December 18, 2020, <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/event-documents/7.%20Proposal%20for%20Improving%20Maritime%20Connectivity%20in%20the%20Pacific%20Region.pdf>.

19 World Bank, "Pacific Island Small States Data," 2017, <https://data.worldbank.org/region/pacific-island-small-states>, accessed September 15, 2022.

20 "Pacific Islands Monitor," Asia and Pacific Department, International Monetary Fund, October 2021, <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Countries/ResRep/pis-region/small-states-monitor/pacific-islands-monitor-issue-15-October-2021.ashx>.



Delegates attend the Indo-Pacific Ministerial Cooperation Forum as part of the French Presidency of the EU Council in Paris, France, February 22, 2022. Christophe Archambault/Pool via REUTERS.

The steps to be taken

Western partners are best placed to deliver on the Pacific Islands' top concern: climate change. The United States and the EU have committed to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. While the war in Ukraine will distract them from this commitment in the immediate future, they are in a better position than most—from a technical and political standpoint—to honor these goals.

Climate change alone has caused the Pacific Islands' ODA needs to grow over the past decade, yet commitments have not kept up. Until 2019, the region received \$2.4 billion in official financing flows on average each year, of which about 81 percent was in the form of grant assistance, 15 percent loans, and the remainder other flows. Rising living standards in the bigger economies of the region have made it more difficult to cast a wide net, as the larger islands (which also need to make larger investments) find themselves above thresholds and ruled out from certain grants. Over 55 percent of ODA therefore

still comes from neighbors Australia and New Zealand. China has begun to play a role but mainly through loans, not grants. Thirty-nine percent of concessionary loans to the region come from China, which accounts for only 6 percent of overall aid.

Investment is currently being delivered by a mix of raising taxes on domestic economic activities and ODA. Private foreign direct investment is not insignificant at 3.5 percent of overall GDP in 2020 but nowhere near enough to meet the islands' needs. This makes ODA key.

Increasing ODA in resilience projects is an excellent opportunity to concentrate Western efforts and generate recognition.

While it is hard to track "resilience" across sectors, there is an interesting trend to point out. Some crucial ODA sectors to make the islands more resilient already see Western partners overrepresented.²¹ Japan accounts for

21 "Pacific Aid Map," Lowly Institute, n.d., <https://pacificaidmap.lowlyinstitute.org/>, accessed September 15, 2022.

an impressive 45 percent of all ODA contributions on energy. The EU is already punching above its average spend on renewable energy generation projects at about 10 percent of total ODA in 2019—before even taking member state aid into account. The two are similarly overrepresented in water and sanitation projects. But, crucially, these sectors account for small portions of the overall aid budget—4 percent and 2 percent, respectively.

Any collective Western strategy must prioritize working with development agencies to soften the arbitrary living-standard thresholds. Individual countries and agencies should build on their thematic expertise and work with the Pacific Islands Forum to determine where this is most needed. Chinese participation should not be shunned. The loans that China has provided have been at generous concessionary rates. But governments need to have a multitude of options to avoid being leveraged by Beijing.

Additionally, export-led economic growth in the Pacific Islands should be one of the goals for ODA alongside climate change resilience. Policymakers should also check what rules and constraints needlessly imposed on the islands' economies. Even as the Biden administration claims that market-access trade deals are outdated, it has itself promised by 2023 to update the South Pacific Tuna Treaty—which grants US vessels access to the EEZs of the islands we are focusing on, as well as Australia and New Zealand. This is a positive step, not least because the treaty contains transparent remuneration for the Pacific Islands and mechanisms to prevent overfishing. But this begs the question of why the Pacific Islands' precious raw materials can't be granted easier access into the US market. The political risks of doing this are next to zero as the small size of Pacific Island economies poses no threat to jobs in the United States. The EU has all the architecture in place for a subtle approach, which takes the special status of French overseas territories into account. French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis and Futuna are not part of the EU Customs Union and enjoy partial membership of the Single Market. This combination is designed to allow them to trade more freely with their neighbors. However, negotiations on the post-Cotonou framework for non-reciprocal trade preferences offer

an opportunity for the EU to improve all Pacific Islands' access to European markets, particularly in agriculture and raw materials.

Concrete assistance should not simply come through ODA. Pushing for World Trade Organization/UN bodies to reform would allow the Pacific Islands to secure appropriate redress for illegal fishing. While ODA can help purchase a fleet of new ships for the navies of the Pacific Islands, the vast surfaces in question mean this will never be sufficient. Instead, ODA should include the transfer of equipment and nimble technologies to the islands so they can monitor illegal fishing themselves as much as possible.

Western navies and coast guards should also remain open to providing direct support on terms that reassure the islands. For instance, the United States and Tonga have reached a bilateral deal allowing Tongan officials to board US Coast Guard ships when they are patrolling the island's waters. Were such a deal possible on a multilateral basis, it would assuage concerns over the region becoming a theater for great power tensions. The decision to extend CRIMARIO²² (Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean) to the Pacific is promising.

Western countries have a genuine interest in the Pacific Islands. However, it is unrealistic to expect that the South Pacific will take precedence over other key regions, especially from the European perspective. Finding the right design to ensure continuous mobilization at home will avoid irregular or unfulfilled commitments. Increased diplomatic presence is a welcome step, in addition to the launch of initiatives such as the Partners in the Blue Pacific (PBP).

At the European level, the EU's Indo-Pacific envoy could establish a deputy focused exclusively on the South Pacific. The EU could also open a new delegation in Micronesia; the one located in Fiji has the most significant coverage of all EU delegations in the world. The EU could also set up a Track 1.5 dialogue with the Pacific Islands, complementing existing initiatives such as the roadmap for engagement with civil society in the Pacific,²³ which was adopted in June 2022. The high-level consultations on the Indo-Pacific between the United States and

22 CRIMARIO is an EU initiative to enhance maritime domain awareness set up first in the Western Indian Ocean.

23 "The European Union Delegation for the Pacific Discusses Its New Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in the Pacific (2021-2027) with Civil Society Representatives," Delegation of the European Union to the Pacific, June 6, 2022, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/fiji/european-union-delegation-pacific-discusses-its-new-roadmap-engagement-civil_en?s=139.

the EU²⁴ could also cover the South Pacific to ensure increased coordination.

Western strategy

The Pacific Islands reject the notion that their region will be a theater of strategic competition and refuse to side with the West or China. As such, while strategic competition is key to mobilizing American and like-minded partners, it should not drive the strategy.²⁵

Primarily, this is because it implies that the West would react to Beijing's actions instead of taking the initiative.²⁶ The West should not react to Chinese actions in the region, but identify mutually beneficial areas to proactively work with the region on. In that regard, the PBP initiative has identified the right areas: climate change, connectivity and transportation, maritime security, health, prosperity, and education.

But the initiative would be wise to employ the sort of flexibility and joined-up thinking these two authors are calling for. Well-founded projects should not be held back by a lack of ODA funding, simply caused by arbitrary living-standard thresholds. The PBP should also be flexible enough to welcome the participation of non-Western partners in the region, such as India or Indonesia, precisely because this would mitigate any perception that the West aims to cement the Pacific Islands into a Western political bloc.

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24 Office of the Spokesperson, "EU-U.S.: Joint Press Release by the EEAS and Department of State on the High-Level Consultations on the Indo-Pacific," Media Note, US Department of State, December 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/eu-u-s-joint-press-release-by-the-eeas-and-department-of-state-on-the-high-level-consultations-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

25 Ali Wyne, *America's Great-Power Opportunity: Revitalizing U.S. Foreign Policy to Meet the Challenges of Strategic Competition* (Polity, 2022).

26 Amanda H A Watson, "Undersea Internet Cables Connect Pacific Islands to the World. But Geopolitical Tension Is Tugging at the Wires," *The Conversation*, September 19, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/undersea-internet-cables-connect-pacific-islands-to-the-world-but-geopolitical-tension-is-tugging-at-the-wires-167968>.

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