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Adaptive Regional Sovereignty in the Pacific: Governing Interdependence in Kiribati and Fiji ✣

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Key Words: adaptive regional sovereignty, capacity placement, Pacific regionalism, Kiribati, Fiji, small island states

|ABSTRACT|

Small island states in the Pacific are maintaining sovereignty not by insulating themselves from interdependence, but by actively organizing and governing it. This article proposes a framework of adaptive regional sovereignty, built on the central mechanism of capacity placement. This concept frames sovereignty as a state's strategic choice to allocate core functions across domestic, regional, and transnational contexts. Within the shared Pacific Way regional framework, two distinct pathways are identified. Kiribati exemplifies externalization, placing decisive options transnationally through land acquisition, diaspora networks, and legal advocacy, while engaging regional institutions conditionally. Fiji represents internalization, building domestic legal and financial capacity and then projecting that capacity regionally through hubs, diplomacy, and norm leadership. A paired, process-tracing design compares these divergent pathways, demonstrating how agency and strategic choice shaped each state's portfolio. The analysis reveals that these pathways are interactive but entail tension, as one state's strategy creates direct legal and political burdens on the other. The article refines the dynamics of governing interdependence for the climate era, identifying capacity placement as a sovereign act that transforms structural vulnerability into agenda-setting power. It also clarifies that Pacific regionalism serves as an architecture that multiplies sovereignty rather than undermining it.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

For more than half a century, research on small states has emphasized the strategic value of their rule-bound institutions.[1] Formal equality among members and predictable procedures have offered shelter by disciplining great power behavior, amplifying small state voice, and producing practical benefits that bilateral bargaining rarely delivers.[2] Such insight travels only so far in the Pacific, where it needs a more tailored approach. In particular, atoll island countries are heavily exposed to climate-vulnerable conditions, facing threats that extend beyond classic security problems. Pressure is placed on the basic conditions of state continuity, including food, water, safety, mobility, and community recognition. In this context, sovereignty is achieved less through autonomous survival strategies, but rather through the structuring of interdependent relations. The ability to survive in the face of irreversible risks for these climate-vulnerable states is equipped through legal, fiscal, institutional, and relocation arrangements across domestic, regional, and transnational domains, which this article conceptualizes as adaptive regional sovereignty.

Climate change directly threatens the classic fundamentals of sovereignty on exclusive control of a population over a bounded territory. This concept is less convincing for states on the verge of losing

1) Kenneth W. Abbott and Duncan Snidal, "Why States Act through Formal International Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1998), pp. 3-32; Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer, *Small States in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Godfrey Baldacchino, *The Success of Small States in International Relations: Mice that Roar?* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

2) Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, *Small States at the United Nations: Diverse Perspectives, Shared Opportunities* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2014); Robert O. Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics," *International Organization,* Vol. 23, No. 2 (1969), pp. 291-310.

their physical land to rising sea levels. Here, the study addresses this idea of how sovereignty can adapt to a non-territorial future. It supplements climate-vulnerable contexts by moving away from the traditional territorial logic and toward a functional one that focuses on the state's capacity to provide lifelines for its political community. The intended policy implications are equally significant, as the framework offers a novel lens for understanding how state continuity can be practically organized and legally defended, introducing the term 'capacity placement' for examining the proactive measures that vulnerable states are already deploying to secure their statehood.

In this context, this study aims to synthesize literature that is often treated apart: small-state strategy and complex interdependence in international relations, alongside Pacific regionalism.[3] The synthesis yields a Pacific-specific claim that, as for climate-vulnerable small island states, sovereignty should be analyzed as the capacity to govern interdependence, not to escape it. As a testbed, the study delineates two pathways within the 'Pacific Way,' exemplified by the linked relationship between Kiribati and Fiji. Kiribati exemplifies externalization, placing decisive options in migration, diaspora networks, overseas land acquisition, and legal advocacy. Fiji shows the channel of internalization by building law, finance, and implementation capacity at home and then projecting that capacity regionally through hubs, diplomacy, and norm leadership. The study demonstrates that these are not isolated strategies; rather, they interact dynamically, creating tensions where Kiribati's externalization imposes specific burdens on Fiji's internalized capacity and regional commitments.

The argument is developed around a few key junctures in recent

3) Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence: 4th edition* (Boston: Longman, 2012).

history, including Kiribati's 2014 land purchase from Fiji, and its 2022 Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) exit and re-entry in 2023, as well as Fiji's creation of its domestic relocation architecture, its COP23 presidency, and its regional leadership through the Blackrock Camp and PIF mediation. Methodologically, the article uses historically grounded qualitative process tracing of pivotal choices and their institutional effects using hoop and smoking-gun tests. The aim is not to rank policies or find a superior pathway, but to show how each converts structural vulnerability into a workable sovereignty portfolio within a shared regional architecture.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section II reviews literature on small states, interdependence, and Pacific regionalism to find the necessity of a capacity-centered reading of sovereignty. The next section sets out the analytical framework of adaptive regional sovereignty and specifies scope conditions emphasizing capacity placement. Afterwards, Kiribati and Fiji are compared as two pathways within the same order, detailing externalization and internalization and their interaction with regional institutions. Lastly, it concludes with implications for Pacific governance and for larger applicability of the debates on sovereignty under severe structural challenges in other domains.

Ⅱ. Small States and Regionalism: Synthetic Review on Sovereignty

International relations literature has long noted that small states extract disproportionate gains from rule-bound institutions. Forums that encode equality and procedure allow weaker and marginal actors

to discipline stronger ones, to coordinate expectations, and to make side bargains that would be difficult in strictly bilateral settings.[4] In the 1960s, large numbers of small countries joined the Non-Aligned Movement to have their voices heard on the global arena and to escape being held in the competition between superpowers. The United Nations General Assembly's one country, one vote rule is emblematic for its sovereign equality principle, but the broader impact comes from specialized bodies and treaty regimes that restrain large states' arbitrary use of power by enforcing established legal standards.[5] For small states, such architectures are essential for assuring voice and tangible benefits that material power alone cannot provide.[6]

Constructivist work clarifies how such states present their values and build coalitions. Norm entrepreneurship and the localization of global standards enable small coalitions to reframe problems and to bind larger creditors to commitments that are then monitored through institutional routines.[7] For example, the Alliance of Small Island States illustrates this point in climate politics. As a coalition of 44 small island and low-lying coastal states, the alliance has been highly influential in global climate negotiations by recasting global warming as a matter of survival and by operating within the UN framework. Small island states were able to elevate a more ambitious temperature goal and to move loss and damage to the center of the agenda, forcing major emitters to contend with moral arguments and procedural rules discussed in global talks. What may seem like a moral appeal can in fact be a sophisticated deployment of

4) Abbott and Snidal (1998), pp. 3-32.

5) Súilleabháin (2014), p. 3.

6) Keohane and Nye (2012), p. 30.

7) Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 887-917; Amitav Acharya, "How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 239-275.

procedural authority and strategic timing using the alliance shelter.

The logic of alliance shelter explains that alliances and institutional memberships offer diplomatic and financial security, including reputational protection, market and financial access, norm-setting involvement, in addition to military support. As a result, small states participate and maintain their membership in multiple alliances while avoiding capture by any single patron. This multi-pronged strategy is most effective when combined with regional unity, since coordination within a regional forum enhances the bargaining power with external partners and mitigates free riding within a community that shares risks and reputational stakes. Complementing shelter theory, the framework of complex interdependence reframes power as the ability to mobilize networks, create institutions, and link issues across multiple channels.[8] As regionalism evolves, the strategic mobilization of regional networks is increasingly viewed as a sophisticated exercise of power, reflecting a cosmopolitan view that values connectivity over coercion.[9]

While these viewpoints illustrate how small states leverage institutions and norms, they do not adequately account for strategies designed to secure state continuity when the physical territory itself is existentially threatened. The existing literature lacks a meso-level framework that explains how states proactively reorganize and redistribute the core functions of sovereignty when domestic capacity is overwhelmed. This theoretical gap is most evident in the Pacific. Classic accounts of sovereignty as non-interference underspecify how states under ecological pressure preserve life, continuity, and dignity as seen in the small island states' contexts.[10] Even foundational theories, such as the distinction

8) Keohane and Nye (2012), pp. 19-21.

9) Giulio M. Gallarotti, *Essays on Evolutions in the Study of Political Power* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 209-234.

10) Karen T. Litfin, "Sovereignty in World Ecopolitics," *Mershon International Studies Review*,

between a 'system' of states with regular interactions, and a 'society' of states with shared interests, rules, and institutions, rely on an implicit assumption of territorial stability.[11] This underlying premise that sovereignty is fundamentally exercised over a fixed and habitable territory, falters in the Pacific setting. In low-lying atoll polities, climate hazards threaten the very preconditions of settlement and the material base of the state.

In this context, sovereign agencies rest on the ability to assemble legal, financial, and status-conferring instruments necessary for survival, wherever they can be reliably accessed, regardless of physical location. These instruments become the new currencies of sovereignty, where food and water security, safe settlement, lawful mobility and status, access to finance, and recognition through legal doctrine and diplomatic practice become relevant.[12] Therefore, the question is not whether sovereignty erodes under interdependence, but rather whether it can be exercised as the capacity to design and govern interdependence so that these lifelines remain reliable even when climate shocks accumulate. The following sections develop a framework for analyzing such portfolios and then apply it to Kiribati and Fiji, two cases that sit in the same order yet locate their agency in different domains.

Vol. 41, No. 2 (1997), pp. 167-204.

11) Stephen D. Krasner, "Abiding Sovereignty," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2001), pp. 229-251; Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1-5; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 13.

12) Lorenzo Cotula, "Land, Property and Sovereignty in International Law," *Cardozo Journal of International & Comparative Law*, Vol. 25 (2016), pp. 219-260.

Ⅲ. Adaptive Regional Sovereignty in the Pacific: Analytical Framework

1. Capacity placement as a sovereign choice

A framework of adaptive regional sovereignty built on the central mechanism of capacity placement is suggested, as the deliberate organization of the capacities that keep a political community viable across multiple scales. The legal baseline remains the Montevideo criteria of population, territory, government, and external relations, but the Pacific cases show that meeting those criteria, under slow-onset climate stress, hinges on how states design and access lifelines.[13] Thus, sovereignty is not abandoned to regional interdependence, instead it is exercised through the governance of interdependence so that these lifelines remain reliable. This argument advances beyond familiar frames in complex interdependence, shelter theory, multi-level governance, regime complexes, pooled and shared sovereignty, functional sovereignty, and security communities.

The central contribution is the focus on 'capacity placement,' which this study conceptualizes as a specific, state-driven strategy of adaptive regional sovereignty.[14] Where classic sovereignty debates focus on territorial integrity, this approach concerns the effective exercise of core governance functions. It is the agentic strategy of choosing the

13) Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States, *League of Nations Treaty Series*, No. 2802/Vol. 165/19 (December 26, 1933). Article 1 of the Convention defines statehood as (1) a permanent population, (2) a defined territory, (3) an effective government, (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other States. However, this analysis does not contest the Montevideo criteria. It examines how states maintain practical sovereignty, continuity of people, jurisdiction, and international portrayal under slow-onset ecological stress by organizing capacities across domestic, regional, and transnational arenas.

14) George Kyris, "State Recognition and Dynamic Sovereignty," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2022), pp. 287-311.

optimal level across domestic, regional, or transnational for those functions to ensure continuity. This can be distinguished from existing concepts that it engages with. It differs from 'multi-level governance,' which typically describes the dispersal of authority across levels.[15] By contrast, adaptive regional sovereignty emphasizes the centralization of sovereign intent to distribute functions, not authority. It is an agency-driven strategy where the state retains ultimate control over where capacities are located. This is also distinct from 'regime complexes' that analyze overlapping institutional architecture.[16] Instead, capacity placement is state-centric and meso-level, focusing on a state's portfolio design and its strategic use of that architecture, rather than on institutional gravity alone.

This framework is neither 'pooled nor shared' sovereignty. These concepts involve a formal cession of authority, as in the pooled sovereignty of the EU or shared sovereignty model for failing states.[17] Capacity placement, on the other hand, retains ultimate sovereign right while exercising engagement that is both adaptive and conditional. It also differs from 'security communities,' in the sense that while Pacific Way evokes a shared identity that facilitates trust, the capacity placement approach focuses on the instrumental logic of how states leverage this regional framework. It stresses pragmatic cooperation based on shared needs such as humanitarian shelters or pooled funds, rather than assuming integration driven solely by collective identity.[18]

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15) Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "Unraveling the Central State, but How? Types of Multi-level Governance," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 2 (2003), pp. 233–243.

16) Kal Raustiala and David G. Victor, "The Regime Complex for Plant Genetic Resources," *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 277-309.

17) Stephen D. Krasner, "Sharing Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), pp. 85-120.

18) Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, *Security Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

The framework does, however, refine 'complex interdependence' for the climate era. Where multiple channels are highlighted, adaptive regional sovereignty shows how small states strategically use capacity placement to turn extreme vulnerability into agenda-setting power.[19] It also advances beyond the 'shelter theory,' which posits small states passively seeking protection.[20] Taking this passive interpretation further, this approach highlights agencies in allocating state capacity. For instance, Kiribati's land purchase was a sovereign exercise of choice, not a passive search for a patron. In this framework, the regional order operates as a sovereignty multiplier, a tool that makes each state more capable. The contribution, therefore, is a meso-level framework that treats sovereignty as capacity architecture: governments choose where to locate core functions across scales, so that political community remains viable under intensifying climate risk. As 〈Figure 1〉 illustrates, this lens clarifies variation among small island states subject to same regional rules and shows how shared assets can augment sovereignty without effacing state control.

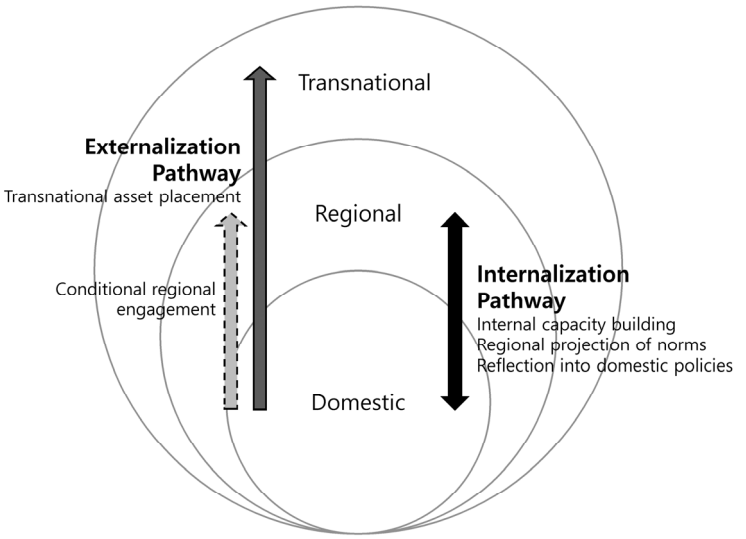
The framework identifies two primary pathways of capacity placement as shown in 〈Figure 1〉. On the one hand, *externalization*, depicted by the vertical solid arrow, refers to a strategy in which the state places decisive options beyond its territory when domestic carrying capacity is tight. As indicated by the accompanying dotted arrow, this pathway involves engaging regional institutions conditionally and advancing legal and normative strategies to secure entitlements. Kiribati's overseas land purchase and advocacy around fixed maritime zones and migration with dignity policy illustrate this approach. On the

19) Keohane and Nye (2012), pp. 103-104.

20) Alyson J.K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer and Baldur Thorhallsson, "Alliance Theory and Alliance 'Shelter': the Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour," *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2016), pp. 9-26.

other hand, *internalization*, represented by the bi-directional solid arrow, refers to a strategy in which the state builds domestic legal and fiscal instruments and routinizes implementation. It then projects that capacity outward regionally through agenda-setting, hub creation, and leadership roles. Fiji exemplifies this pathway, first building domestic instruments like its national climate legislation and a ring-fenced relocation fund, and then projecting that capacity regionally by hosting humanitarian and training hubs and bringing this back to its diplomatic practice.

<Figure 1> Adaptive Regional Sovereignty and Levels of Capacity Placement



Source: Author

The framework is termed adaptive regional sovereignty because the regional architecture is the crucial intervening variable that enables both pathways. While capacity placement occurs across three scales, the regional order provides the shared norms, pooled resources, and collective grounds that make these strategies viable. For internalization strategies the region is the direct audience and the beneficiary of

projected capacity, whereas for externalization strategies, the region remains essential where external assets may be located within other regional member states. Furthermore, transnational legal advocacy is often coordinated through regional bodies, and engagement with the regional order shapes the state's overall leverage. Therefore, the strategic adaptation analyzed here is fundamentally organized through and conditioned by the Pacific regional order.

These types are heuristics rather than boxes as most island governments use both, but with different emphases and different tools of control. Where internalization dominates, the state expects codified law and finance to anchor domestic execution and, in turn, to underwrite credible regional leadership and sovereign hosting of shared facilities. Where externalization dominates, the state expects extraterritorial options to develop alongside norm entrepreneurship and selective, interest-conditioned regional engagement. In both configurations, the regional order matters. Facilities for humanitarian training, pooled insurance, interoperable early warning, collective legal positions on maritime zones, and long-horizon strategies such as the Boe Declaration and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent operate as sovereignty multipliers. They stabilize access to logistics, finance, expertise, and legal certainty that no single small state could provide alone. Thus, the framework presents that Pacific regionalism multiplies small island states' sovereignty, while states differ in how they place and combine capacities inside that enabling architecture.

2. Method and scope

The analysis proceeds based on historically grounded qualitative process-tracing analysis. This method infers causal relationships by examining pivotal junctures and examining evidence within a case using

hoop and smoking-gun tests, to see how and why states pursued divergent strategies.[21] Fiji and Kiribati are selected for a paired-case design. They operate under the same regional architecture yet differ in ecology, population distribution, administrative bandwidth, and fiscal capacity. Still, they are closely related in that each of their strategies eventually affected one another. Thus, the paired design traces capacity placement where endowments vary within a shared regional environment. The objective is theory illustration under controlled contrast, treating the shared Pacific Way as a regional construct of identity, and Pacific Islands Forum as a common institutional environment.

A differentiated condition is the asymmetrical impact of Sino-US competition, which does not affect both states equally.[22] This study treats Sino-US competition not as the primary determinant of pathways, but as a critical contextual factor. The process-tracing assesses how this competition affects leaders when making capacity placement decisions. Similarly, leadership turnover in both countries and external patronage are treated as structural constraints that shape what can be financed and implemented. This analysis shows how leadership agencies operated within these constraints channel each state into its pathway.

To evaluate the evidence, the analysis employs hoop and smoking-gun tests to establish standards for causal inference. A hoop test identifies necessary but insufficient evidence, where failing the test eliminates the assumption. A smoking-gun test identifies sufficient but not necessary

21) David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2011), pp. 823-830.

22) Sue Windybank, "Why China First Wooed then Jilted Kiribati," *The Centre for Independent Studies,* January 29, 2007, https://www.cis.org.au/commentary/opinion/why-china-first-wooed-then-jilted-kiribati/ (Accessed October 1, 2025).

evidence, where passing the test strongly confirms the assumption and substantially weakens rival explanations. For Kiribati's externalization strategy, the hoop test is the existence of high-level policies linking state continuity to external assets. Without the migration with dignity policy and the strategic justifications for the Natoavatu Estate purchase, the hypothesis of a deliberate external hedge would fail. The smoking-gun test is the 2022 decision to exit and then re-enter the Pacific Islands Forum on negotiated terms the very next year. This unconventional choice of sovereign act is sufficient to confirm the conditional regionalism mechanism.

For Fiji's internalization strategy, the hoop test is the codification of domestic legal and financial architecture. An intentional strategy of internalization would be eliminated if Fiji had failed to produce foundational policies like its Climate Change Act of 2021 and passage of the Bill the same year, Planned Relocation Guidelines, and the formation of the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund. The smoking-gun test is the translation of this domestic capacity into assertive regional and global leadership. The COP23 presidency and the initiative to create the regional Blackrock Camp is evidence confirming the 'internalize then outward-projection pathway.' Had Fiji only strengthened internally, the theory would be weaker, and therefore this outward projection is the smoking gun.

Scope conditions are explicit, in that the argument applies to small island polities where climate hazards are structural and cumulative. Two contrasts shape feasible choices, where the first is ecology and space, as low-lying atolls with thin freshwater lenses and dispersed settlements face a different frontier from higher islands with domestic refuge and more diversified economies. The second is administrative bandwidth, given that states with deeper fiscal and bureaucratic capacity can codify and enforce complex policies at home and are better positioned to host

shared assets. Within the same adaptive regional order, these contrasts help explain why Kiribati and Fiji compose their sovereignty portfolios differently. The next section applies the framework to show how externalization in Kiribati and internalization in Fiji emerged from shared constraints yet evolved along distinct pathways inside the Pacific Way.

Ⅳ. Two Pathways within the Pacific Way: Kiribati and Fiji

Kiribati and Fiji's policy choices have directly affected each other's estimations of sovereignty while yet being part of the same regional organization. Kiribati's purchase of land on Vanua Levu made it possible to build a community on Fijian land, which raised questions regarding the norms of hospitality. At the same time, Fiji's official plans to move and help with regional logistics opened more options for neighboring countries. Thus, the pair provide a controlled contrast: Kiribati exemplifies externalization, and Fiji shows internalization with regionalism.

1. The Pacific Way as a common enabling architecture

The Pacific has been reorganizing itself around this challenge. The 'new Pacific diplomacy,' as documented, describes a shift that re-centers Pacific priorities, diversifies participation beyond governments where useful, and recalibrates agenda control.[23] The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), founded in 1971, remains the region's principal political venue

23) Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2015).

and emblem of what leaders call the 'Pacific Way,' a region-wide diplomatic style that emphasizes dialogue, respect, and unity in intraregional diversity.[24] The approach has enabled flexible cooperation even as national interests diverged over time after independence. For example, when Fiji was suspended from the PIF after a 2006 coup, it spearheaded the creation of the Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) in 2013 as a new inclusive platform with governments, civil society, and business partnered together to advance sustainable development.[25] Even after Fiji returned to the PIF in 2014, it did not end the PIDF. Instead, the regional structure was modified to accommodate more than one forum.

If an institution ceases to serve a member's needs, the response has been to reform it, create a complementary body, or in rare cases temporarily withdraw and later re-engage once issues are addressed. This kind of flexibility is part of a broader trend of adaptive regionalism. After gaining independence, Pacific states protect their sovereignty, but they work together because they are small, spread out, and share certain vulnerabilities. Instead of entrusting their sovereignty to any supranational authority, they form pragmatic coalitions and institutions to amplify their voice and achieve tangible results.[26] Over decades, such Pacific regionalism has increasingly prioritized climate and security issues. The 2018 Boe Declaration on Regional Security deems climate

24) Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2022); William Waqavakatoga, "How the 'Pacific Way' of Diplomacy Shored up the PIF," *East Asia Forum*, March 7, 2023, https://eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/07/how-the-pacific-way-of-diplomacy-shored-up-the-pif/ (Accessed September 20, 2025).

25) Matthew Dornan, "Pacific Islands Development Forum Launch in Fiji," *The Devpolicy Blog*, August 13, 2013, https://devpolicy.org/pacific-islands-development-forum-launch-in- fiji-20130813/ (Accessed September 20, 2025).

26) Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, *What does it look like for Australia to Support Pacific Regionalism* (Canberra: Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defence Dialogue, 2024).

change to be 'the single greatest threat' to Pacific peoples' livelihoods and well-being.[27] Building on this, the Pacific leaders have agreed to the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent signed in 2022, which serves as a long-term blueprint for a resilient and inclusive region. These strategies place climate action at the center of collective efforts and set out a shared vision of "a resilient Pacific region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity, so that all Pacific people can lead free, healthy and productive lives."[28]

To translate these high-level commitments into action, regional capacities have been strengthened. For instance, a state-of-the-art humanitarian and disaster response hub was established at Blackrock Camp in Nadi, Fiji, which is a facility that provides training grounds, a large-scale relief warehouse, logistics headquarters, and other shared resources that no single small state could easily maintain alone.[29] The Pacific Catastrophe Risk Insurance Company is another example of how risk pooling has grown. It started as a World Bank pilot project in 2013 and has since become a separate entity owned by Pacific nations to provide sovereign disaster insurance.[30] In the legal realm, Pacific states have even moved collectively to safeguard their rights. In 2021, PIF members issued the Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones, affirming that once a country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is set under UNCLOS, it will remain fixed notwithstanding climate change-related sea-level rise.[31]

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27) Pacific Islands Forum, *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum, 2018).

28) Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (2022), p. 6.

29) Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Australia - Fiji Engagement," https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/fiji/australia-fiji-engagement (Accessed October 12, 2025).

30) Resilience Risk Pools, "A Recognition of Responsible Planning," https://resiliencerisk pools.com/?page_id=56#:~:text=PCRIC%20traces%20its%20origins%20to,to%20conti nue%20the%20insurance%20program (Accessed September 20, 2025).

In short, Pacific regionalism primarily is about consolidating power while maintaining autonomy. It involves collaboration across Pacific member countries to achieve more effective outcomes and impacts at both national and community levels. This flexibility illustrates an ongoing dilemma for Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS), where sovereignty is preserved as an inviolable legacy of decolonization, while small economies, fragmented geographies, and transboundary threats need collaboration.[32]

2. Kiribati's pathway of externalized sovereignty

1) Land, migration, and legal norms

Kiribati's recent history reveals a pattern of sovereignty externalization, in which the government seeks to protect itself beyond its own borders. This pathway was not structurally pre-determined; it was the result of controversial yet strategic choices to place capacity outside its borders. The migration with dignity doctrine and the 2014 purchase of the Natoavatu Estate on Vanua Levu were pioneered by the administration of President Anote Tong.[33] The existence of these explicit, high-level policies confirms the deliberate intent to link state continuity to external assets, satisfying the necessary hoop test for an intentional externalization strategy. This strategy was a non-obvious political act of agency, reframing displacement as a planned, dignified process rather than a failure of the state.[34]

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31) Pacific Islands Forum, *Declaration on Preserving Maritime Zones in the Face of Climate Change-related Sea-level Rise* (Suva: Pacific Islands Forum, 2021).

32) Ryan Mitra and Sanskriti Sanghi, "The Small Island States in the Indo-Pacific: Sovereignty Lost?" *Asia Pacific Law Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2023), pp. 428-450.

33) Elfriede Hermann and Wolfgang Kempf, "Climate Change and the Imagining of Migration: Emerging Discourses on Kiribati's Land Purchase in Fiji," *The Contemporary Pacific,* Vol. 29, No. 2 (2017), pp. 231–263.

In particular, regarding the acquisition of the Natoavatu Estate, the Tong administration finalized the purchase of approximately six thousand acres of Fijian land. Public justification focused on food security and agricultural diversification, as the estate was covered mainly in forest. Nevertheless, the transaction also served as a visible hedge against a scenario in which atolls become uninhabitable. The act normalized the proposition that continuity of the political community can be protected by assets outside the home archipelago. It reframed what constitutes appropriate sovereign stewardship under slow-onset threats.[35] Debate followed on whether private ownership of foreign land could anchor resettlement, what consent and status would be required from the host state, and how citizenship, identity, and local authority would be preserved if communities were to relocate.[36] The purchase widened the range of acceptable policy moves and lowered the political cost of pursuing further external options. In the long run, it contributed to debates on the status and rights of populations displaced by climate change, emphasizing that relocation need not entail loss of dignity or identity. These moves turned its inherent vulnerability into agenda-setting power.

Moreover, Kiribati's leadership articulated migration with dignity as a guiding doctrine. Rather than wait for citizens to become desperate

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34) *The Guardian*, "Besieged by the Rising Tides of Climate Change, Kiribati Buys Land in Fiji," July 1, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/jul/01/kiribati-climate-change-fiji-vanua-levu (Accessed September 20, 2025).

35) "We would hope not to put everyone on this one piece of land, but if it became absolutely necessary, yes, we could do it," Tong said at the time. This bold move essentially acquiring foreign territory as a climate contingency, redefined what sovereignty meant for an atoll state. It signaled that Kiribati was willing to extend its sovereign reach extraterritorially to protect its people's future. Dornan (2013).

36) *ABC News*, "Kiribati to Buy Fiji land Amid Rising Sea Levels," February 6, 2013, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-02-06/an-kiribati-buys-fiji-land-for-food-security/4503472?utm_campaign=abc_news_web&utm_content=link&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_source=abc_news_web (Accessed October 12, 2025).

climate refugees, the government sought to prepare and proactively migrate people on their own terms. It invested in education and training programs to qualify for jobs primarily in Australia and New Zealand as a condition for migration.[37] Instead of defining mobility as failure, the policy encouraged skills acquisition that qualifies citizens for lawful employment abroad in maritime industries, nursing, and seasonal agriculture, widely welcomed in neighboring countries.[38] The idea was to create a skilled diaspora that could send remittances home bolstering the economy and eventually, if needed, help relocate entire families. Remittances thereby became an explicit part of national capacity-based leverage, and the diaspora network functions as a reservoir of skills and advocacy.[39] Training and recognition of qualifications were pursued to make these pathways predictable. The approach treated human mobility as adaptive capacity and as a long-term safeguard for continuity of the community.

Global norm entrepreneurship is another manifestation of Kiribati's externalization. It became an outspoken advocate for rights of climate migrants and for legal changes to address statehood in the face of sea-level rise. Specific protections for displaced people are provided under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, those who have been displaced by climate change are not recognized as refugees under the current articles.[40] Thus it used its moral voice to push

37) Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Kiribati Skills for Employment Program: Investment Design Document* (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015).

38) Government of Kiribati, *Kiribati Joint Implementation Plan (KJIP) for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management 2014-2023* (Tarawa: Government of Kiribati, 2014); Government of Kiribati, *Kiribati Joint Implementation Plan for Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management 2019-2028* (Tarawa: Government of Kiribati, 2019).

39) World Bank, "Remittance Inflows to GDP for Kiribati," *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis*, May 7, 2025, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/DDOI11KIA156NWDB (Accessed September 28, 2025).

40) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "The 1951 Refugee Convention and

the international community on loss and damage compensation and the recognition of climate displacement as a human rights issue, portraying itself and alike states as a canary in the coalmine of climate change.[41] Kiribati also advanced legal strategies in regional and international forums to defend entitlements as shorelines shift. It joined the region-wide effort to fix maritime boundaries of its EEZ notwithstanding climate change related sea-level rise, an effort designed to secure rights over fisheries and seabed resources and to avoid a second dispossession if coastlines recede. These actions helped Kiribati's influence reach beyond its boundaries through diplomacy and conventions, using interdependence as a resource for its survival.

2) Conditional regionalism and diplomatic leverage

In July 2022, Kiribati announced its withdrawal from the PIF, a great surprise to member countries. The reason for its exit was Kiribati's perception that PIF had failed to resolve the issues facing the Micronesian states it is part of, namely a dispute over the Forum's leadership rotation. The year before, members of the Micronesian Presidents' Summit, signatories of the Mekreos Communiqué, had threatened to quit after their nominee for Secretary-General was passed over.[42] A compromise known as the Suva Agreement was negotiated in June 2022 to placate them, promising reforms, including a Micronesian

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1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees," https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention (Accessed September 28, 2025).

41) Pacific Peoples' Partnership, "A Canary in the Coal Mine: Disappearing Islands and Climate Change," March 8, 2020, https://archive.pacificpeoplespartnership.org/a-canary-in-the-coal-mine-disappearing-islands-and-climate-change/ (Accessed September 28, 2025).

42) Graeme Dobell, "Micronesia's Exit from the Pacific Islands Forum," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, February 7, 2022, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/micronesias-exit-from-the-pacific-islands-forum/ (Accessed September 28, 2025).

country as the next Secretary-General and a host for the new sub-regional office.

This decision to exit the PIF was not an isolated incident, but rather reflects a national pattern of bold, non-obvious sovereign choices that persists across different administrations. For example, while the Tong administration made its own move by switching diplomatic recognition from China to Taiwan in 2003, the succeeding Maamau administration demonstrated a similar willingness to use its capacity placement, by switching back to Beijing in 2019.[43] These moves, combined with the 2022 PIF exit, were sovereign choices made in a context where Kiribati's vast EEZ, a vital tuna fishery in one of the world's largest EEZs, made it a key strategic and economic partner for China.[44] When the Forum's outcomes were not only disappointing, but when important meeting dates clashed with Kiribati's national holidays, it declared it would leave. Despite speculation that the withdrawal was affected by China's pressure, President Taneti Maamau stated it was a "sovereign decision, … and that it was not meant as an offense to fellow Pacific countries."[45]

The action was unique; a small island state had never before left the region's main institutional framework. This strong stance seemed to harm regional unity, but it showed that Kiribati was willing to prioritize its own interests over agreements with its neighbors if it believed they were unfair. This high-stakes, costly, and unique sovereign act serves

43) Chien-Huei Wu, *Switching Diplomatic Recognition between Taiwan and China* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), p. 51, 138.

44) Bud Fujii-Takamoto, "Strategic Competition in the Pacific: A Case for Kiribati," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 7 (2022), pp. 100-120.

45) *Island Times*, "Kiribati Leaves Pacific Islands Forum, Said Not Consulted on Suva Agreement," July 12, 2022, https://islandtimes.org/kiribati-leaves-pacific-islands-forum-said-not-consulted-on-suva-agreement/ (Accessed September 28, 2025); *The Diplomat*, "Was China Behind Kiribati's Withdrawal from the Pacific Islands Forum?" July 19, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/was-china-behind-kiribatis-withdrawal-from-the-pacific-islands-forum/ (Accessed September 28, 2025).

as the smoking-gun test for conditional regionalism. It provides sufficient evidence that Kiribati prioritizes sovereign flexibility over regional consensus when its core interests, such as sub-regional equity, are challenged.

However, this separation was short, which has an even bigger implication. After Fiji's government changed at the end of 2022, high-level diplomacy became more important to fix the rift. Sitiveni Rabuka, the newly appointed Prime Minister of Fiji, prioritized reconciliation with Kiribati and sought direct conversation as early as January 2023. Soon after the dialogue, Kiribati officially showed its intention to rejoin the Forum, which settled the disagreement. The resolution entails reiterating the amendments to the Suva Agreement to ensure Micronesia's complete level of inclusion. In early 2023, Kiribati reentered the PIF, with President Maamau affirming that his country's concerns had been resolved. This withdrawal and return process underscores Kiribati's conditional regionalism, which means that the country only works with regional counterparts in the area on its own terms. It demonstrated unwillingness to simply comply with stronger members and simultaneously displayed its understanding of the importance of regional collaboration in the long term by returning shortly after the diplomatic gesture by Fiji.[46)]

Crucially, this externalization strategy diversified Kiribati's sovereignty portfolio, reducing its dependence on the PIF as the sole mechanism for securing interests. By cultivating external assets, diaspora networks, and independent geopolitical leverage, Kiribati's leadership lowered the perceived opportunity cost of temporary disengagement from the regional alliance. This strategic diversification provided the leverage

46) *Reuters*, "Kiribati to Return to Pacific Islands Regional Group, Ending Rift," January 30, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kiribati-return-pacific-islands-regional-group-ending-rift-2023-01-30/ (Accessed September 20, 2025).

necessary to execute exit and demand reforms on its own terms. Kiribati now possesses a greater degree of influence in negotiations with its array of externalization moves. However, this pathway creates significant new risks. By centering its strategy on external goodwill and selective regional collaboration, Kiribati has become reliant on external help and finds itself in a dangerous legal predicament. For example, owning land in Fiji does not automatically grant Kiribati inhabitants the right to live there without Fiji's agreement. These peculiar, high-risk activities are deemed essential for Kiribati to continue with dignity as it navigates an existential crisis.

3. Fiji's pathway of internalized sovereignty

1) Domestic architecture and global norms

Fiji's strategy diverges from Kiribati's by focusing on solidifying domestic capacity, enhancing internal institutions, while promoting regional integration. This pathway was enabled by Fiji's relatively larger influence. It represents a deliberate strategic choice to construct and project domestic capacity as a tool of statecraft, particularly in its post-2006 coup effort to regain regional leadership. The agency is visible in the specific, sequenced legal construction of its internal architecture. To regain its status in the region after restoring parliamentary democracy in 2014, the Bainimarama government implemented significant adjustments to the state's laws and policies. In 2021, Fiji was among the first countries to enact a comprehensive Climate Change Act.[47] This legislation established a target of net-zero emissions by 2050 and, more importantly, created a formal mechanism for communities impacted

47) Government of Fiji, *Climate Change Bill 2021* (Suva: Government of Fiji, 2021); Government of Fiji, *Climate Change Act 2021* (Suva: Government of Fiji, 2021).

by climate change to relocate within its own territory. This Act was built upon the Planned Relocation Guidelines of 2018 and the Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund of 2019.[48)]

This codified, intentional, and well-resourced domestic framework is evidence of internalization. The establishment of this comprehensive architecture satisfies the hoop test for internalization, confirming the intentionality of building codified domestic capacity to manage climate stress on a regional scale. These instruments collectively establish protocols for Fiji to adapt internally to climate change, determining which coastal settlements require evacuation, securing funding for their resettlement, and protecting the rights of impacted communities. By the time these laws were enacted, Fiji had already initiated actual relocations.[49)]

In 2014, the village of Vunidogoloa became the first to be evacuated to higher ground owing to increasing sea levels with government assistance. Fiji demonstrated its ability to withstand and adapt to climate change within its borders rather than seeking land abroad.[50)] Fiji has also implemented financial instruments, such as issuing the first developing country sovereign green bond in 2017. In addition to its own endeavors, Fiji adopted an ambitious international stance to alter norms. In 2016, it was the first country to ratify the Paris Agreement, and the following year, it became the first small island state to lead a UN Climate

48) Anita Foerster, Anaseini Waqatabu, Adarshani Vikash, Maria-Goreti Muavesi, Frances Disiga, Margaretha Wewerinke-Singh and Madison Wynen, *A Next Generation of Climate Laws in Fiji and the Pacific: Exploring the Role and Value of the Climate Change Act 2021 Fiji* (Melbourne: Monash University, 2024); Government of Fiji, *Planned Relocation Guidelines: A Framework to Undertake Climate Change Related Relocation* (Suva: Government of Fiji, 2018); Government of Fiji, *Act 21: Climate Relocation of Communities Trust Fund Act* (Suva: Government of Fiji, 2019).

49) International Labour Organization, "Fiji: A Village Forced to Move by Rising Seas," September 13, 2013, https://www.ilo.org/resource/article/fiji-village-forced-move-rising-seas (Accessed October 3, 2025).

50) Clothilde Tronquet, "From Vunidogoloa to Kenani: An Insight into Successful Relocation," *The State of Environmental Migration*, Vol. 2015 (2015), pp. 121-142.

Conference at COP23. During its presidency, Fiji presented the Pacific tradition of Talanoa as a new discourse for climate discussions, strengthening its position as a norm entrepreneur and highlighting how the internal legitimacy of its policies could have an outward impact projection.[51]

2) Projecting regional leadership

Fiji has linked its own national security and that of its neighbors, announcing it would provide permanent sanctuary to the residents of Kiribati and Tuvalu if those countries become uninhabitable. This offer alters the discourse over Kiribati's land acquisition and instead positions Fiji as the leading nation ready to assist its smaller allies, reinforcing the notion of a shared Blue Pacific. Fiji also consistently sought to enhance regional institutions. After its exclusion from PIF until 2014, Fiji experienced the consequences of isolation and upon rejoining became an advocate for unification. A central example of this is its role in the PIF dispute. Following Kiribati's withdrawal, Fiji's Bainimarama administration deliberately kept the possibility of reentry available, while his successor Sitiveni Rabuka aggressively pursued reconciliation, leading to Kiribati's successful reinstatement in 2023.[52] While Fiji's advocacy for regional integration is partially self-serving, it is simultaneously rooted in ideational principles. This is evident in Fijian authorities'

51) United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "We Need Talanoa for Climate Ambition - COP 23 President," February 5, 2018, https://unfccc.int/news/we-need-talanoa-for-climate-ambition-cop-23-president (Accessed October 3, 2025); United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "2018 Talanoa Dialogue Platform (COP23)," https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement/2018-talanoa-dialogue-platform (Accessed October 3, 2025).

52) *Radio Free Asia*, "Kiribati Says it Will Rejoin Pacific Islands Diplomatic Grouping," January 30, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/pacific/kiribati-pif-01302023211518.html (Accessed October 9, 2025).

references to the 'Blue Pacific Continent identity,' which position the islands as a singular society that must unite to project effective regional leadership.

Contributions to providing regional public goods have been substantial as well. A prime example is the Blackrock Camp, which Fiji has strategically used to navigate great power competition.[53] It was redeveloped with over 100 million dollars in Australian funding, a decision made by Canberra explicitly to counter a rival offer from Chin a.[54] It is telling that Fiji calls the Blackrock Camp a 'firmly sovereign Fijian facility' while in the same breath highlighting that it serves the region's needs. The integration of warehousing and training inside a sovereign facility enhances the capacity of neighbors who cannot sustain such assets alone. Moreover, Fiji consistently deploys military personnel for regional peacekeeping and hosts the Forum Secretariat in Suva, making it a core of the region's network.

This successful translation of domestic capacity and global credibility into assertive regional leadership satisfies the smoking-gun test. It confirms the 'internalize then outward-projection pathway,' demonstrating that domestic consolidation was explicitly leveraged for regional influence. Sovereignty, in Fiji's view, is not diminished by sharing responsibilities but in fact is enhanced when trust is gained from neighbors.[55] This pathway, however, is not without its own challenges. Implementing relocations is expensive and risky in terms of social

53) *Radio New Zealand*, "Pacific Ministers Endorse Fiji Military's Blackrock Camp as Disaster Relief Depot," September 19, 2022, https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/475021/pacific-ministers-endorse-fiji-camp-as-disaster-relief-depot (Accessed September 20, 2025).

54) *Pacific News Service*, "Blackrock, a Huge Responsibility: Fiji Defense Minister," March 16, 2022, https://pina.com.fj/2022/03/16/blackrock-a-huge-responsibility-fiji-defence-minister/ (Accessed October 1, 2025).

55) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Fiji, *Fiji's Foreign Policy White Paper* (Suva: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Fiji, 2024).

integration. Fiji also assumes the burden of upholding regional order, as evidenced by its involvement in the Kiribati crisis. Given the escalating competition among major Pacific states and from great powers, this strains Fiji's diplomatic resources. Ultimately, Fiji is also tackling climate challenges on multiple fronts: domestically through legislation, regionally through collaboration, and internationally through advocacy.

4. Comparison and implications

The paired cases of Kiribati and Fiji demonstrate how one regional order accommodates divergent sovereignty portfolios that remain mutually interdependent and complementary. Kiribati diversifies existential risk by locating decisive, long-horizon options beyond national territory, cultivating diaspora capacity, and advancing legal strategies that preserve entitlements. Through such an externalization pathway, it engages regional institutions on terms that foreground subregional balance. Fiji, by contrast, focuses on codifying and financing action at home, then leverages that capacity into regional public goods and intraregional leadership, stabilizing the neighborhood on which it also depends. From this comparison, implications can be summarized as in 〈Table 1〉.

The first implication is that capacity placement matters more than generic effort. In Kiribati, the decisive options are transnationally located, whereas in Fiji, core functions are domestically located and then projected regionally. Next, both strategies are only feasible because the Pacific architecture supplies the sovereign multipliers, in the form of shared legal doctrines and pooled finance that lower action costs and reduce uncertainty. Risk profiles differ as Kiribati's externalized approach hinges on partner consent and the evolution of unsettled international law on statehood and cross-border movement. On the

contrary, Fiji's internalized approach is capital-intensive and socially demanding, and it tacitly commits Fiji to underwriting elements of regional cohesion.

<Table 1> Comparative Sovereignty Portfolios of Kiribati and Fiji

Dimension	Kiribati (Externalized Capacity Placement)	Fiji (Internalized Capacity Placement)
Strategic Core	• options located beyond national territory • conditional regionalism to secure interests	• core functions located internally • capacity projected regionally as public goods
Key Mechanisms	• overseas land purchase • skills training and migration • diaspora as a national asset • strategic use of withdrawal and re-entry	• codified domestic architecture (laws, funds) • internal relocations • global norm leadership • sovereign hosting of training hubs
Feedback Effects	• legitimizes external options • attracts partner resources • consolidates dignified migration narrative	• lowers implementation costs • credibility attracts finance and partnerships • reputation compounds
Potential Risk	• reliance on host-state consent • precarious international legal status • risk of cultural dispersion	• high fiscal and social costs • land-tenure friction • burden of regional leadership

Source: Compiled by the author

Finally, and most critically, these two pathways are not just divergent, in fact, they create tension. Kiribati's externalization strategy places a direct sovereign burden on Fiji, as the Natoavatu Estate is not just an asset for Kiribati. It is a potential future domestic and legal challenge for Fiji, testing the limits of its own relocation and land-tenure systems. Conversely, Fiji's internalization as a regional leader creates an implicit obligation to manage impacts created by its neighbor's strategies. Fiji's high-level diplomatic effort to bring Kiribati back into the PIF in 2023 illustrates this tension, where Fiji's internalization-based leadership is 'taxed' by the need to diplomatically contain the regional disruptions

caused by other members' externalization strategy based on conditionality.

In short, the Pacific order functions as a cooperative framework that augments national agency without displacing it. The contrast affirms the central claim: Pacific small island states preserve sovereignty by governing interdependence, either by extending autonomy beyond the waterline or by deepening it at home and offering it as a regional public good. These comparative pathways, mechanisms, and risks are what signify the adaptive regional sovereignty of these small island states.

V. Conclusion

As this study finds, Pacific small island states are preserving sovereignty by strategically governing interdependence. The paired cases suggest two viable pathways within the same regional order, where Kiribati externalizes decisive options while engaging regional institutions conditionally and Fiji internalizes core functions and then projects that capacity regionally. Crucially, the analysis highlights the dynamic friction between these strategies. Externalization can impose direct legal and social burdens on regional partners, while internalization entails an obligation to manage regional cohesion as seen in the diplomatic costs Fiji incurred to maintain cohesion during the PIF dispute.

These findings hold several meanings. First, for climate-vulnerable small states, sovereignty is best understood functionally, as the placement of capacities that sustain a political community across scales, rather than purely as authority over fixed territory. Second, the theory of complex interdependence requires a climate-era adjustment where capacity architecture itself functions as power when legal frameworks, finance, and logistics are assembled effectively. Third, Pacific

regionalism clearly operates as a sovereignty multiplier, providing doctrines, shared facilities, and coordinated legal positions that no member could secure alone. Taken together, the findings confirm that durable sovereignty in the climate era is achieved not through the insulation of authority, but through the constant, strategic placement of capacity to govern interdependence within an adaptive regional order.

The logic of this framework extends far beyond the Pacific, offering a generalizable tool for analyzing how states govern interdependencies under structural challenges in other domains. This logic can apply to diverse settings: in global finance, where offshore centers externalize regulatory functions; in digital governance, where data localization mandates for security; in public health, where pooled regional laboratories are shared; and in the strategic management of diasporas as externalized national assets. In all these cases, sovereignty is exercised not by escaping interdependence, but by strategically distributing core functions across scales to ensure a political community's survival.

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[국문초록]

태평양 소도서국의 적응적 지역 주권: 키리바시와 피지의 상호의존 거버넌스

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태평양 소도서국은 지역적 상호의존성을 단순히 수용하는 데 그치지 않고, 이를 능동적으로 조직하고 통치함으로써 주권을 유지한다. 본 논문은 이러한 역학을 분석하기 위해 역량배치(capacity placement)라는 핵심 기제에 기반한 중간수준의 분석틀, 즉 '적응적 지역 주권(adaptive regional sovereignty)'을 탐색한다. 이 개념은 주권을 국내, 지역, 초국가적 맥락에 걸쳐 핵심 기능을 전략적으로 배치하는 국가의 선택을 일컫는다. 태평양 방식(Pacific Way)으로 상징되는 공동의 지역 규범 틀 속에서, 본 연구는 키리바시와 피지의 상이한 역량배치 경로를 비교한다. 키리바시는 해외토지 매입, 디아스포라 네트워크, 법적 옹호를 통해 역량을 외부화하며 지역 제도에 조건부로 참여한다. 반면 피지는 국내에서 역량을 먼저 구축한 뒤, 이를 허브 역할, 외교, 규범 리더십을 통해 역내로 투사하고 이를 외교정책에 다시 반영하는 내부화 경로를 취한다. 두 경로는 상호작용하는 동시에 긴장관계를 내포하며, 한 국가의 전략이 다른 국가에 직접적인 법적, 정치적 부담을 야기하는 양상도 드러난다. 과정추적 비교분석을 통해 두 국가의 주권 포트폴리오가 어떻게 형성되었는지 규명한 본 연구는 역량배치가 소도서국의 구조적 취약성을 의제설정 권력으로 전환하는 주권적 실천임을 보이며, 기후변화 시대의 상호의존 통치 역학을 정교화한다. 또한 태평양 지역주의가 주권을 약화시키기보다 오히려 증폭시키는 지역 메커니즘임을 밝힌다.

주제어: 적응적 지역 주권, 역량배치, 태평양 지역주의, 키리바시, 피지, 소도서국

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