The Historical Evolution of Oceania: From Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to Large Ocean States (LOS) in the Indo-Pacific

Dr Nansi Paulraj

Abstract

In recent years, the term 'Large Ocean States'(LOS) has been adopted by many leaders in the Pacific and Indian Oceans to replace the conventional 'Small States' or 'Small Island Developing States' (SIDS) classification. Almost 15 islands states, including ten in the Pacific, three in the Indian Ocean, and two in the Atlantic Ocean, identify as Large Ocean States (LOS). The inhabitants or 'Islanders' of the SIDS assert their sovereignty over a vast portion of the earth's surface, drawing upon their long-standing historical identity, and cultural and economic ties to the ocean. However, 'Outlanders, i.e., larger powers/traditional and emerging players in the Indo-Pacific, view their self-identification through the lens of geostrategic concerns, instead of 'Oceanic Way' regional dynamics. The goal of this study is to challenge and deconstruct the dominant historical narrative in order to foster a new understanding of history in the Indo-Pacific, particularly regarding how Islanders perceive themselves as Large Ocean States. These historical legacies can help elucidate the discrepancies and intricacies that are often associated with the Islanders and Outlanders and the return of Great Power Competition (GPC) in Oceania. Fundamentally, the article is going to analyse two questions: First, what histories can be charted to understand Oceania from a non-coloniser perspective? Second, what insights can these histories provide about how Islanders perceive themselves as LOS?

Keywords: *Islanders, Outlanders, Oceania, SIDS and LOS*

Dr Nansi Paulraj heads the International Relations Department at Loyola College, Chennai

Introduction

The Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans, covers approximately 99 million square kilometres, equivalent to two-thirds of the Earth's total land area. This vast oceanic space, crucial in global history as a realm of exploration, navigation, and trade, has often been viewed through a fragmented lens imposed by colonial powers. However, this article aims to reframe this perspective by examining the concept of Large Ocean States (LOS) and its implications for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the region. Historically, the narrative of this region has been entangled in colonial patterns, overlooking the rich genealogical and oral histories of the Islanders of Oceania. A significant shift in perspective occurred in the 1970s when Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa introduced a ground-breaking approach to Pacific Islands studies, conceptualizing Oceania not as a collection of small islands but as a "sea of islands" (Epeli, 1994) with a rich and diverse history. This view challenged the notion of Oceania as a small, isolated world, instead presenting it as a vast, interconnected realm. Building on this perspective, SIDS have strategically deployed the narrative of Large Ocean States to reshape perceptions and advance their interests.

This narrative serves multiple purposes: challenging vulnerability perceptions, political manoeuvring, enhancing national interests for community benefit, and leveraging geopolitical competition in the region. The article contends that the colonial mindset remains a significant factor in global politics, particularly in understanding territoriality beyond the Westphalian model of nation-states. Islanders assert that their territory is inherently tied to Oceania, formed by seas and waters, rather than conforming to traditional land-based state models. This study explores the structural changes in Oceania's history through the lens of Large Ocean States, examining genealogical perspectives, the impact of imperialism, interactions between Islanders and Outlanders, native resilience and anti-colonial struggles, the process of denuclearization and its implications, international efforts to define Oceania as SIDS, and the emergence of an 'Oceanic Voice' in regional and international forums. By analysing what the concept of Large Ocean States means for SIDS and how it shapes their participation and influence in regional and international contexts, this perspective offers a nuanced understanding of Oceania's past, present, and future, challenging traditional narratives and emphasizing the importance of indigenous viewpoints in shaping the Indo-Pacific discourse.

Genealogical and Imperial History in Oceania

While comparing the genealogical and colonial history, centring on the Islanders will provide a platform to develop the arguments and reflect on the past to consider the descendant identities in the present and their claim as Large Ocean States. The general narrative of Oceania's history often begins with the 16th-century imperial aspirations of Spanish and Portuguese explorers. However, expeditions of discovery in the region began centuries earlier, long before the voyages of Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, Louis-Antoine, Comte de Bougainville, and James Cook.

The early pioneers or discoverers were remarkable navigators who, without charts or compasses, relied on ocean currents, wind patterns, breezes, and constellations to settle in the "Sea of Islands," including Hawaii,

the Solomons, New Caledonia, Palau, Rapa Nui, Vanuatu, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. Oceania was populated through two major waves of migration. The first wave, around 40,000 bp (before present), settled in Papua New Guinea and spoke Papuan dialects. The second wave, approximately 5,000–6,000 bp, originated from Asia and communicated in Austronesian languages. (Jolly, 2007).

When the first ship, Victoria of Spain, arrived in Oceania, contact between Islanders and Europeans was brief and ephemeral. However, the widespread and intensive colonization of Oceania began with the arrival of James Cook and Joseph Banks, following their receipt of a map from Tupaia. Schwartz, remarks that the ship sailed the sea with the help of Tupaia's "*Ingenious Cartographic System*". Tupaia, an Islander renowned as a brilliant cartographer and master navigator, joined the crew of the *Endeavour*, a British Royal Navy research vessel, during James Cook's first voyage of discovery. (1768-1771) (Schwarz, 2019). This highlights the immense knowledge of the Islanders of Oceania, passed down orally through generations. Tupaia's sharing of cartographic expertise paved the way for successive European expeditions into the "Sea of Islands" in the late 18th century, marking the beginning of imperial expansion. European explorers documented and categorized the Islanders' ethnographic typologies.

During their exploration between 1836 and 1837, Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville and Domeny De Rienzi G L categorised Oceania ethnologically and geographically as Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. These labels became a permanent algorithm to define Oceania. The British and French were two prominent colonial powers in Oceania. There was tough competition between these two imperial powers. Later, Russia joined the competition in the island of Melanesia and Hawaii; Germany had a colonial influence in Samoa Island and New Guinea. There were new inroads made by Japan in Micronesia. These colonial attempts had a different array. Some islands had permanent European immigrants and others remained under colonial influence (Flexner, 2014).

The emergence of oceanic sovereignty as a key determinant of power between European states and then across the globe has been in development for over three centuries. However, when one takes a broad view of history, European territorial sovereignty in Africa and Asia has been relatively short-lived in many cases. This highlights the need to view the political rise of Europe as an oceanic event. As new powers emerged in the late 19th century, notably Germany and Japan, their access to oceanic commerce, the formation of new realms, and the arms race (with naval power as a major factor) continued to shape relations between the major powers. In response to Germany's acquisition of colonies, Great Britain established new protectorates to limit German imperial expansion. The competition for oceanic sovereignty was a major factor in the controversies leading to two world wars in the early twentieth century. Despite this, the dominance of the oceans has not disappeared. (Mancke, 1999). The two world wars shaped the political landscape of Oceania, nearly all of Oceania was under the control of external powers, each imposing their own political and economic interests on the diverse island groups.

The wars solidified colonial rule in Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia with territories divided among global powers such as Britain, France, the United States and Australia. While Easter Island was held by Chile in the South Pacific, the Netherlands managed to hold onto West New Guinea while losing authority over the remainder of the Dutch East Indies. In addition to Tonga, Pitcairn, the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands made up Britain's Oceanic Empire. Wallis and Futuna, the French establishments in Oceania, later dubbed French Polynesia, and New Caledonia were all claimed by France. Britain, Australia, and New

Zealand shared administration of Nauru, while the New Hebrides continued to be an Anglo-French condominium.

The territories that make up the United States include former Japanese colonies, as well as older holdings like the Hawaiian Islands, American Samoa, and Guam. These also comprise the Marshall Islands, Caroline Islands, and Northern Marianas, which are managed as UN trust territories. While New Zealand held Western Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau, Australia ruled over Papua New Guinea (PNG), as well as islands in the Torres Strait and Norfolk Island. With the exception of New Zealand, no other island group in Oceania was independent (Aldrich, 2000). The region's colonial status was further entrenched during the Cold war era and the decolonisation process, the global powers especially the US, sought to maintain a strong presence in the Pacific to counter the influence of the Soviet Union.

The Process of Decolonization and Its Impact on Identity in Oceania

A new political map of the world emerged from the massive process of decolonization. However, the immense task of decolonization was not carried out effectively but was instead imposed on the colonized, either through negotiations or conflict (Christopher, 2002). In this process, the colonial powers aimed to decrease the number of tiny, possibly weak states through a variety of strategies. Nevertheless, the end of colonial status did not lead to the establishment of an independent state in most o cases. Therefore, administrative units within the same empire merged during colonial times, whereas entities in other empires merged infrequently. Certain dependents were taken over by stronger neighbours, while others were integrated into the metropolitan powers' governmental framework. As a result of decolonisation, around 96 new states were born/reborn and approximately 32 colonial dependencies were decolonised but did not achieve the status of an independent state and few sovereign states were merged with their neighbouring countries.

The global decolonisation movement of the mid 20th century saw varying degrees of success across different regions. In the first wave of process in 1940's, the independence transpired in Asia, Africa, and Middle East, while the island countries were still under the clutches of colonisation until the 1970's. This was also observed by an Islander, Rati Sir Kamisese Mara in 1970 at the UN General Assembly, UN'S Decolonization Committee "tended to be dogmatic and doctrinaire and would have every territory independent immediately" (Lawson, 2010). This perspective echoed in various writings on Oceania's independence phase, often noting that the region experienced "no political upheaval or collective nationalism", and as Davidson remarked, "the decolonisation was unusually peaceful and orderly" (Davidson, 1971). However, it is important to recognise that the claim for sovereignty and self-determination in Oceania had been expressed long before formal independence, beginning with indigenous movements like the *Mau* Movement in Samoa and *Maori* Movement in New Zealand (Campbell, 2005). These early efforts were followed by broader anti-colonial movements across the region. As David Robie's book *Blood on Their Banner: Nationalist Struggles in the South Pacific* highlights, it invokes the sovereignty of the political nation and not just the sectional interests of one island, one tribe, one clan or one culture (Firth, 1991).

An intriguing conflict known as the Coconut War took place between the island of Espiritu Santo and Papua New Guinean soldiers in Vanuatu. Vanuatu is a Y-shaped archipelago that was jointly governed by France and

Britain. When colonial authorities announced their intention to leave by 1980, the former Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Anglican clergyman Rev. Walter Lini, led the country's 172,000 citizens and its 83 Melanesian islands toward independence. However, Jimmy Stevens, a planter, seized control of Espiritu Santo with the help of 600 bowmen. Stevens aimed to detach the island from the soon-to-be-established nation of Vanuatu, which translates to "our eternal land."

Although the process was one of decolonization, the security protector involved was still a colonial power. Father Lini relied on colonial forces to end the rebellion and sought support from Britain, which, albeit reluctantly, sent 200 Royal Marines, contrary to France's wishes. The newly independent government also supported independence movements in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, opposed nuclear testing in the Pacific, and called for a reduction in US naval activity. Additionally, it expressed support for Libya's liberation and faced geopolitical pressure when it issued fishing permits to China and Taiwan (Kaufman, 2023).

It is important to note two key factors: first, the timeframe of decolonisation, and second, that the decision to leave or remain rested with the colonial powers, regardless of the will of the Islanders. Hence the process of decolonisation in Oceania was gradual and varied significantly across the region. The most intense period of decolonisation began in the 1970s, when many islands gained political independence and the islanders began rebuilding their traditional identities. While some territories successfully transitioned to full independence, others opted for forms of self-governance or remained under the control of colonial powers. The Western Samoa (1962), Nauru (1968), Papua New Guinea (1975), the Solomon Islands (1978), Tuvalu (1978), Kiribati (1979), and Vanuatu (1980) were moved to full independence. The Niue and Cook Island decided to become self-governing in free association with New Zealand. The New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Wallis, and Futuna were not decolonised and remained as French dependencies. While Tokelau administered by New Zealand and American Samoa became US administered territories. (MacDonald, 1986). The historiographical gap, despite movements embracing nationalist and anti-hegemonic causes, framed these efforts not as a pursuit of self-determination to assert indigenous identity, but rather as a futile attempt to remain under colonial rule. David Chappell described this as a "dependency with dignity" (Chappell, 2000). As a result of this decolonization pattern, an intricate structure emerged, marked by a complex relationship between the colonial past and the post-colonial present. Most importantly, it highlighted the economic vulnerability and dependencies of Oceania. During the process of decolonisation, the islands of Oceania became critical nodes in the global security architecture, with military bases, nuclear testing sites, and strategic alliances shaping the political dynamics of the region.

Denuclearization Struggles and Sovereignty Issues in Oceania

The Second World War, often described as a Just War, brought an end to Nazism, but it also unveiled the complex and numerous causes of global conflict. As Walzer poignantly observed, the war culminated in the "fall of man at Hiroshima" (Walzer, 1971) symbolizing the terrifying new era of nuclear warfare. Simultaneously, the devastating use of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki galvanised global efforts toward denuclearisation, particularly in regions like Oceania that became the testing ground for nuclear powers. The Islanders in particular, emerged as a powerful voice against nuclear testing, intertwining their struggle for independence with the demand for a nuclear-free region. These movements collectively aim to restore indigenous rights, protect cultural heritage and promote peace and security in the Islands. This gave

rise to movements for native rights to their indigenous land and cultural practises as well as pan-oceanic movements for Decolonisation and Denuclearisation.

The Oceanic Islands have long been a site of nuclear testing by colonial powers, leading to widespread environmental degradation and health crises among the indigenous populations. These activities sparked significant resistance movements, as indigenous communities rallied to protect their islands and assert their rights against outlanders' exploitation. Nuclear testing in Oceania for almost three decades led to protest movements by the indigenous communities. As the impacts of nuclear testing became increasingly evident, the voices of the Islanders grew stronger at international forums. These communities united and formed regional alliances and movements, giving rise to a powerful Oceanic voice that resonated globally, advocating for the protection of their future generations.

One important group, the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP), was the first regional organization to hold the Regional Nuclear Free Pacific Conference in 1975. This conference grew out of the Against French Testing in Moruroa (ATOM) group, which was founded in Fiji in 1970. They adopted a People's Charter for a Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific declaring, "We, the people of the Pacific have been victimised too long by foreign powers. The Western imperialistic and colonial powers invaded our defenceless region, they took over our lands and subjugated our people to their whims. This form of alien colonial, political and military domination unfortunately persists as an evil cancer in some of our native territories such as Tahiti- Polynesia, Kanaky, Australia and Aotearoa. Our environment continues to be despoiled by foreign powers developing nuclear weapons for a strategy of warfare that has no winners, no liberators and imperils the survival of all humankind" (disarmsecure.org, 2023). The conference was held once in three years in the neighbouring islands such as Caroline Islands in 1978, Hawaii in 1980, and Vanuatu in 1983. It also created wider awareness among the indigenous communities of Great Island, East Timor, Aotearoa, Polynesia, Melanesia, and West Papua (Keown, 2018).

These conferences highlighted the devastating impact of nuclear testing in Oceania, emphasising the critical need for a thorough reassessment of nuclear policies and their profound human consequences. It also addressed the suffering endured by these communities, particularly the impact on women and the disturbing phenomenon of 'jellyfish babies' who were boneless and shapeless (Macdonald, 1988), stressing the severe and lasting harm inflicted by such tests. In response to the suffering of their neighbours, particularly the victims of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands (The Compact of Free Association agreement between United States of America and the three island countries Belau, Marshal Islands and Federated States of Micronesia were protected and governed as a trust territory since 1945), the women of Belau became the torch-bearers and took up the responsibility of protecting the wellbeing of the Belau community even before Belau became Palau.

Under the leadership of Indigenous woman Ms. Gabriella from Belau, civil society was mobilized at the grassroots level, with every woman becoming involved in raising awareness about the nuclear tests and their impacts. Each plebiscite for an anti-nuclear clause in the constitution saw the women of Belau canvassing door to door, tirelessly working to educate and rally support for protecting their community from the devastating effects of nuclear testing. Gabriella even traveled to the United Nations to present their case, advocating for Palau's right to self-determine its constitution and include the anti-nuclear clause. Gabriela Ngirmang and Mirair of Koror, both anti-nuclear activists, fought for nearly 15 years, from 1979 to 1994, to implement the world's first nuclear-free clause in a constitution, banning nuclear activities in Palau (Ishtar, 2022). In 1979,

the Pacific islands of Belau and Vanuatu declared themselves nuclear-free. The Solomon Islands followed suit in 1983, and the South Pacific as a whole became a Nuclear Free Zone in 1985. (Keown, 2018).

Raúl Prebisch's Model and its Relevance to Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Oceania

The Raúl Prebisch Model, emerging during a period of significant economic disparity between the North and South, underscored the disparities between developed and developing nations. Prebisch's advocacy for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), brought to the forefront at the UNCTAD conference in 1964, was closely intertwined with the broader decolonisation movement. As former colonies gained independence, they sought to challenge the unequal economic structures imposed by their former colonisers. The NIEO represented a push for a more equitable global economic system that recognised the rights and needs of newly decolonized states, including Small Island Developing States (SIDS), to participate fairly in international trade and development. The main objective of NIEO was to end the economic inequality among nations. In the framework of NIEO, three groups of states were identified: Least Developed Countries (LDC's), Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDC's), and Developing Island Countries (DIC). In 1972, at the third UNCTAD conference, the international organisation and academic scholar identified unique disadvantages of island nations based on their geographical and physical barriers. This issue received significant attention, and repeated efforts were made within international organizations and communities to understand the characteristics of DICs. These characteristics were identified as "smallness, remoteness, transport and communication constraints, great distances from market centers, lack of natural resources, heavy reliance on a few commodities for foreign exchange earnings, shortage of administrative personnel, and heavy financial burdens." However, these factors did not align with Prebisch's Center-Periphery model, and the economic vulnerability of DICs extended beyond the scope of Prebisch's Periphery structure.

In between, there was an acronym change. DIC became Island Developing Countries (IDC's) and then Small Island Developing States (SIDS). There was a turning point in the history of Oceania, when speculation about ozone depletion became a 'scientific certainty' (Doolittle, 1989). Oceania received worldwide attention and their matters were discussed more earnestly. A series of environmental conventions were held and treaties were adopted such as the Vienna Convention in 1985, Montreal Protocol of 1987, followed by the Rio Conference in 1992. Since the emergence of island states' discourse in international forums, the vulnerability of island nations—especially smaller ones—to natural disasters has been recognized as a geographical disadvantage that poses a significant obstacle to their development. However, the susceptibility of small island states to the adverse consequences of environmental change has come to be recognised as their most distinctive characteristic, to the point where it has significantly altered the structure of the island state groupings. These conventions recognized a shared commonality between developed and developing countries, while acknowledging their differentiated responsibilities in the context of sustainable development (Grote, 2010).

The specific concerns of SIDS were addressed in the United Nation's agenda. Article 56 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) recognizes full sovereignty over the 12 nautical-mile territorial sea. It also grants coastal states Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending up to 200 nautical miles from their coastlines, giving them sovereign rights to explore, exploit, conserve, and manage the natural resources within these zones. As a result, small islands scattered across vast ocean areas significantly expand a nation's

maritime territory. Therefore, the global legal maritime regime grants a small number of states a large portion of the world's oceans (Chan, 2018). Climate change presents multiple threats, with one of the most pressing and urgent being the rise in sea levels, which requires serious and immediate attention.

Though states worldwide are increasingly concerned about rising sea levels, some states are more concerned about its implications than others. It is undeniable that Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are at the forefront of the threats posed by sea level rise and are particularly vulnerable to its effects. The far-reaching implications of climate change-induced sea level rise have prompted some island states to take immediate action, asserting their sovereignty as Oceanic nations.

In 1989, the newly independent government of Maldives convened the 'Small States Conference on Sea-Level Rise,' with participation from around fourteen small island states. The conference highlighted the serious threat to the survival of many island nations. This drew the attention of the international community, leading the UN General Assembly to pass a resolution urging the immediate consideration of the vulnerability of small island countries. SIDS are a group of about forty low-lying islands that are especially susceptible to sea level rise; the majority of these islands are G-77 members. Because of the threat that climate change poses to their survival, SIDS Parties often take a unified position in negotiations. During the Kyoto Protocol discussions, they were the first to propose a draft text calling for a 20% reduction in carbon dioxide emissions from 1990 levels by 2005 (United Nations Climate Change, 2023). In 1990, an ad hoc political lobby through the New York Diplomatic Mission was formed called Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

The AOSIS became an important mediator of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Earth Summit recognised SIDS and in Agenda 21, stipulated in Chapter 17 positing that "States commit themselves to addressing the problems of sustainable development of small island developing states". It also stressed that it is necessary "to adopt and implement plans and programmes to support the sustainable development and utilization of their marine and coastal resources, including meeting essential human needs, maintaining biodiversity and improving the quality of life for island people; To adopt measures which will enable small island developing States to cope effectively, creatively and sustainably with environmental change and to mitigate impacts and reduce the threats posed to marine and coastal resources" (United Nations Conference Small Island Developing States, 2023). The Barbados Conference took steps to translate Agenda 21 into practical measures for sustainable development in SIDS, but it lacked a clear action plan. While AOSIS acted as a mediator, visible improvements were not observed in the small island states.

Shifting from Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to Large Ocean States (LOS)

Although independence could appear to be a break from the colonial past, the continuities persisted, shaping subsequent events in Oceania. The Oceanic identity often emerged in response to external encroachments, typically on specific issues, rather than through a cohesive, autonomous identity. Shared characteristics such as smallness, remoteness, limited economic resources and varied colonial experiences have continued to influence post-colonial relationships within and beyond Oceania.

The complete autonomy gained through decolonization placed these nations into an international system as SIDS. According to the classification by Outlanders, the islanders were left to survive with financial aid from

various sources due to their economic vulnerability and the impacts of climate change. Despite being rich in phosphate, nickel, and numerous other resources, the political instability and dependency of Oceanic nations led them to be classified as having a MIRAB economy—one that relies heavily on Migration, Remittance, Aid, and Bureaucracy. This classification has contributed to their status as "dependent" and "unsustainable" (Bertam, 1999).

In fact, Wesley Smith, critiques the concept of self-determination as a "legitimising myth" and a "trap" for those seeking to escape oppression and dispossession. According to Smith, the notion that societies should be allowed to choose their own political paths has been used to provide moral authority to procedures driven by other practical considerations (Smith, 2007). This critique is particularly relevant for Oceania, where the pursuit of national sovereignty by leaders like Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara of Fiji, Michael Somare of Papua New Guinea, Walter Lini of Vanuatu, Amata Kabua of Marshall Islands, Ieremai Tabai of Kiribati, and Hammer deRoburt of Nauru and others was often thwarted by political instability and external pressures (Fraenkel, 2013). A closer look reveals political imbalances among the islanders, such as those seen in the 1998 and 2021 Noumea Accords, where New Caledonia chose to remain a special collective of France, boycotted independence, and opted to remain under France's dependency.

The Cold War and post-Cold War era further polarized the region and influenced domestic politics across former colonies. Regional integration in Oceania was delayed and largely shaped by former colonial powers. Initiatives such as the Canberra Pact of 1944, which aimed to outline a common understanding on regional issues (Olseen, 1944), and the subsequent formation of the South Seas Commission (SSC), demonstrated the influence of metropolitan powers on regionalization efforts. Olseen observes that the pact is "to enunciate, for the benefit of all whom it may concern, a common understanding of the two governments on local and international issues and on questions affecting the future of the South- West and South Pacific areas" (Olseen, 1944). While the pact was welcomed by metropolitan powers like the UK and Canada, it did receive wider criticism in the US and Australia. This was followed by the South Seas Commission (SSC) comprising Australia, France, Netherlands, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the US with the main objective of the agreement being "to encourage and strengthen international co-operation in promoting the economic and social welfare and development of the peoples of the non-self- governing territories in the South Pacific region administered by them" (Fry, 2008). It is clear that the pact is cynical, yet it is always tied to the socio-economic welfare of the islanders, even though it did provide a platform for them.

The SSC, later renamed The Pacific Community in 1997, focused on promoting economic and social welfare but faced criticism for its colonial undertones. In the 1970s, Melanesian states formed the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), a political forum that expanded in 2016 to include New Caledonia and French Polynesia, despite their non-independence status. The MSG, along with other regional associations like the Pacific Island Producers Association (PIPA), helped amplify the voices of islanders at international forums. The inclusion of Indonesia as an associate member in 2015 and the support for West Papuan independence during the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 further highlighted the evolving political dynamics in Oceania (Lawson, 2017). As these regional entities continue to expand and include diverse members, they underscore the dynamic and evolving political environment in Oceania, where the voices of island nations are becoming increasingly influential on the world stage.

In his 1993 lecture at the University of Hawaii and the East-West Centre in Honolulu, Hau'ofa expressed a powerful sentiment: "Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is

humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom…" Hau'ofa urged Oceania to embrace its expansive, self-determined identity, free from hegemonic constraints. (Epeli, 1994). Sarina Theys' 2019 study also highlights that many island leaders now identify as Large Ocean States, reflecting a growing recognition of their maritime strength. U.S. Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro's statement reinforces this view, emphasizing the crucial role of large ocean nations in managing their waters. (Theys, 2022).

Contemporary voices, such as those of Chamorro scholar Craig Santos Perez, underscore the interconnectedness and resilience of Oceanic cultures. He believes that "We are part of a world of shifting islands, cultures, languages, and ecosystems". Indigenous and imposed peoples have inhabited Oceania for thousands of years and developed complex societies based on interconnectedness, harmony, balance, sustainability, and respect. They are known by a variety of names that are native and acquired: Hawaiian; Samoan; Chamorro; Tongan; Fijian; Marshallese, I Kiribati, and others (Perez, 2016). This shows their association with oceans and the manner in which it is handed down across generations. The above political and social affirmation asserts that these nations are no longer Small Island Developing States (SIDS), but are instead self-determined and evolving as Large Ocean States. International actors should reconsider their status and embrace the "Oceanic Way." Perez highlights the complexity of societies that have existed for thousands of years, built on principles of balance, sustainability, and respect (Perez, 2016). This perspective challenges the outdated SIDS classification, advocating instead for recognition of Oceanic nations as self-determined and evolving Large Ocean States.

Conclusion

The classification and perception of Oceania have evolved significantly over time, shaped by the complex interplay of colonial history, geopolitical interests, and the island nations' efforts for self-determination. The shift in terminology—from the externally imposed 'nesian' categories (Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia) to more recent self-identifications—highlights the ongoing struggle for recognition and autonomy on the global stage. In the post-World War II era, as great powers shaped the new world order, Oceanic nations were initially categorized under various development-focused acronyms such as DIC (Developing Island Countries), IDC (Island Developing Countries), and finally SIDS (Small Island Developing States). These classifications, while acknowledging the unique challenges faced by island nations, often reinforced perceptions of dependency and vulnerability.

The decolonization period of the 1980s brought new complexities to Oceania's identity. This era was highly politicized, with external powers attempting to reshape regional dynamics by linking Oceania with the concept of the 'Pacific Rim' and incorporating it into the broader 'Asia Pacific' region. This geopolitical framing often overshadowed the distinct cultural and historical identities of Oceanic peoples. Furthermore, the strategic importance of Oceania led to its transformation into a sphere of influence contested by great powers. The region became a ground for missile and nuclear testing, highlighting the disparity between global strategic

interests and the wellbeing of local populations. This period underscored the vulnerability of small island states to external pressures and environmental threats.

A significant shift in self-identification began in 2001 when Ambassador Vinci N. Clodumar of Nauru introduced the concept of 'Big Ocean States' to the United Nations. This term marked a pivotal moment in how Oceanic nations viewed themselves and presented their identity to the world. It emphasized the vast maritime territories under their stewardship, rather than their limited land area, reframing their perceived significance in global affairs. Since then, the frequency of self-identification as 'Big Ocean States' or ‘Large Ocean States’ has increased, signalling a growing assertion of agency and importance on the international stage. This shift in terminology reflects a broader movement towards 'island regionalism,' with indigenous Oceanic peoples (Islanders) taking the lead in shaping their own narrative and regional dynamics.

Despite their small land masses, these nations are increasingly influencing the Indo-Pacific agenda. Their renewed international activism as ‘Large Ocean States’ is gaining traction, challenging traditional notions of size and power in global politics. This evolving identity emphasizes their role as custodians of vast oceanic resources and key players in addressing global challenges such as climate change, maritime security, and biodiversity conservation. However, the transition from conceptual reframing to tangible action remains a critical challenge. While the new influence of small-island states as ‘Large Ocean States’ represents a form of renewed international activism, it must translate into concrete outcomes. This includes greater recognition of their sovereign rights, increased support for climate change adaptation and mitigation, and more meaningful inclusion in regional and global decision-making processes.

As the International Court of Justice prepares to rule on states’ climate-related obligations, the evolving identity of Oceanic nations as ‘Large Ocean States’ takes on added significance. This ruling could potentially reinforce their calls for climate justice and support their efforts to safeguard their oceanic domains. It may also provide a legal framework that acknowledges the unique position and contributions of these nations in addressing global environmental challenges. In conclusion, the journey of Oceanic states from colonial-era classifications to self-identified ‘Large Ocean States’ reflects an intense shift in how these nations perceive themselves and are perceived by the international community. As they continue to assert their identity and expand their influence, the challenge lies in translating this conceptual evolution into tangible improvements in their global standing, environmental security, and sustainable development prospects.

Works Cited

Aldrich, R. (2000). The Decolonisation of the Pacific Islands. *Itinerario*, 173-191.

Bertam, G. (1999). The MIRAB Model Twelve Years On. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 105-138.

Campbell, I. (2005). Resistance and Colonial Government: A Comparative Study of Samoa. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 45-69.

Chan, N. (2018). "Large Ocean States": Sovereignty, Small Islands, and Marine Protected Areas in Global Oceans Governance. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, 537-555.

Chappell, D. A. (2000). The Forgotten Mau: anti - navy protest in American Samoa, 1920-1935. *Pacific Historical Review*, 217-60.

Christopher, A. (2002). Decolonisation without Independence. *Geo Journal*, 213-224.

Davidson, J. (1971). The Decolonization of Oceania. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 133-150.
disarmsecure.org. (2023, October 27). Retrieved from Disarmament and Security Centre: https://www.disarmsecure.org/nuclear-free-aotearoa-nz-resources/nuclear-free-and-independent-pacific-movement

Doolittle, D. M. (1989). Understanding Ozone Depletion: The Meandering Road to the Montreal Protocol and Beyond. *Ecology Law Quarterly*, 407-441, Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/24112936.
Epeli, H. (1994). Our Sea of Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 148-161.

Firth, S. (1991). Review of the book: Blood on Their Banner: Nationalist Struggle in the South Pacific by David Robie. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 448-449.

Flexner, J. L. (2014). Historical Archaeology, Contact and Colonialism in Oceania. *Journal of Archaeological Research*, 43-87.

Fraenkel, J. (2013). Post - Colonial Political Institutions in the South Pacific Islands: A Survey. In D. H. Tryon, *Politics, Development and Security in Oceania* (pp. 29-49). Canberra: ANU Press.

Fry, T. (2008). The South Seas Conference, 1947. *Australian International Affairs*, 6-10.

Grote, J. (2010). The Changing Tides of Small Island States Discourse - A Historical Overview of the Appearance of Small Island States in the International Arena. *Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 164-191.

Ishtar, Z. d. (2022, December 2022). *Celebrating the life of Gabriela Ngirmang.* Retrieved from greenleft.org.au: https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/celebrating-life-gabriela-ngirmang-palau

Jolly, M. (2007). Imagining Oceania: Indigenous and Foreign Representations of a Sea of Islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 508-545.

Kaufman, M. T. (2023, February 13). *web.archive.org*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com: https://web.archive.org/web/20230118174828/https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/23/world/walter-lini-57-clergyman-who-led-nation-of-vanuatu.html

Keown, M. (2018). Waves of Destruction: Nuclear Imperialism and Anti - Nuclear Protest in the Indigenous Literatures of the Pacific. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 585-600.

Lawson, S. (2010). 'The Pacific Way' as Postcolonial Discourse: Towards a Reassessment. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 297-314.

Lawson, S. (2017). Regionalism and Colonialism in Contemporary Oceania. *The Round Table*, 143-153.
MacDonald, B. (1986). Decolonization and beyond: The Framework for Post - Colonial Relationships in Oceania. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 115-126.

Macdonald, B. (1988). Book Review of "Day of Two Suns: US Nuclear Testing and the Pacific Islanders by Jane Dibblin". *New Zealand International Review*, 22-23.

Mancke, E. (1999). Early Modern Expansion and the Politicization of Oceanic Space. *Geographical Review*, 225-236.

Olseen, E. (1944). The Australia - New Zealand Agreement. *The Australian Quarterly*, 10-22.
Perez, C. S. (2016). New Pacific Islanders Poetry. *Poetry*, 373 -377.

Schwarz, L. E. (2019). The Making of Tupaia's Map: A Story of the Extent and Mastery of Polynesian Navigation, Competing Systems of Wayfinding on James Cook's Endeavour, and the Invention of an Ingenious Cartographic System. *The Journal of Pacific History*, 1-95.

Smith, T. Wesley. (2007). The Limits of Self Determination in Oceania. *Social and Economic Studies - The Caribbean and Pacific in a New World Order*, 182-208.

Theys, Sarina. (2022). Small States Reconsidered. *Microstates and Small Island states in International Affair*, 81-96.

United Nations Climate Change. (2023, January 24). Retrieved from unfccc.int: https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/parties/party-groupings

United Nations Conference Small Island Developing States. (2023, January 22). Retrieved from un.org: https://www.un.org/en/conferences/small islands#:~:text=The%20Agenda%2021%20programme%20adopted,of%20small%20island%20developing%20States.

Walzer, M. (1971). World War II: Why Was This War Different? *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 3-21.