

# Beyond 'Sinking Islands': Resisting Climate Change in Tuvalu



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# Lecture Outline

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Part 1: Sinking Islands

Part 2: Adaptation

Part 3: Diplomacy

# “Sinking Islands”

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# Sinking Islands: Symbols of the Climate Crisis

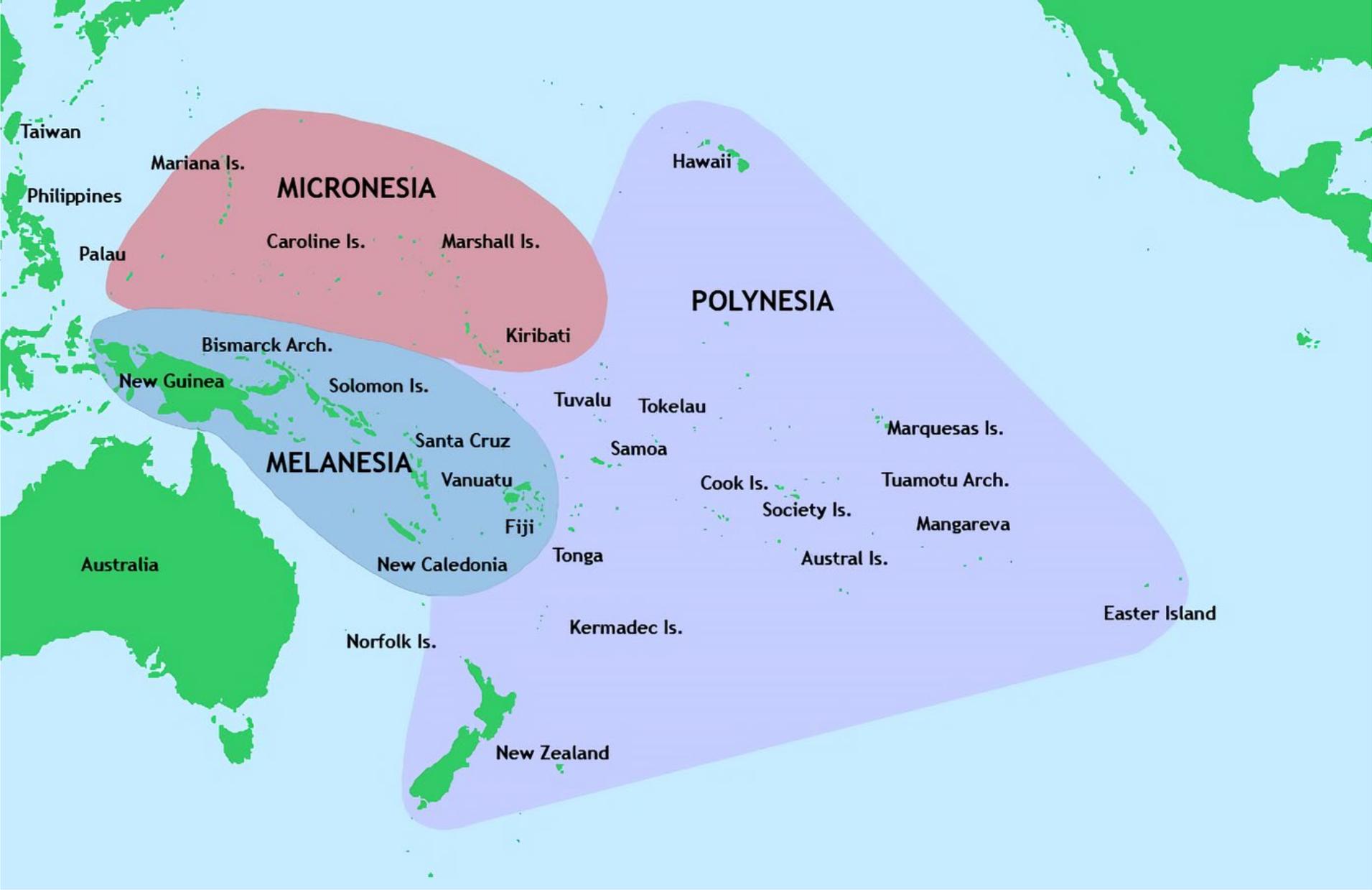
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Climate change is an increasingly important part of the geopolitical identities of island states (Hirsch, 2015).

“Sinking islands” are seen as problematic as they will lead to future “climate refugees” (Farbotko, 2005, 2010; Farbotko and Lazrus 2012)

Questions raised over their future statehood, sovereignty and identity (Odalen, 2014; Yamamoto and Esteban, 2010)

Often island voices are missing from these narratives





# Tuvalu



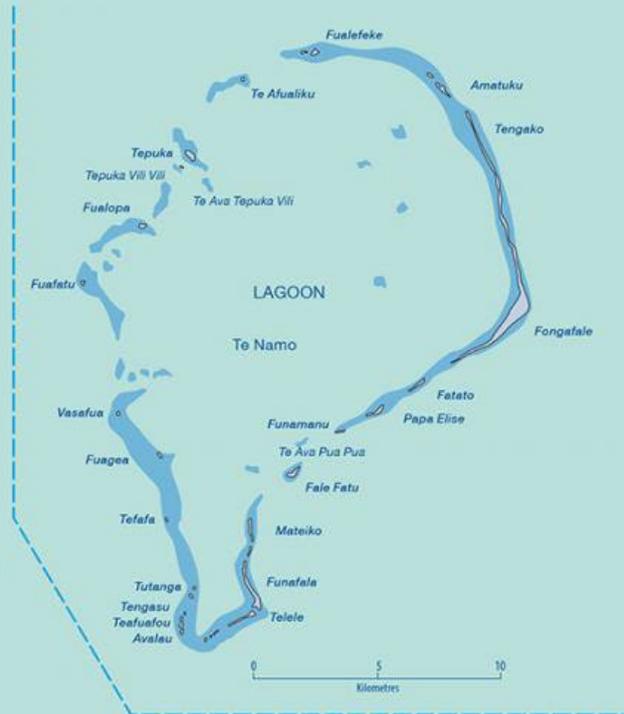
Vaitupu

Nukufetau

FUNAFUTI

Nukulaelae

Niulakita



0 Kilometres 200

# Vertical Geopolitics and Climate Change

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Islands offer a site to think through the intersection of vertical geopolitics, geographies of the ocean and climate change.

Geopolitics often seen as quite “flat”

“How does thinking about volume - height and depth instead of surfaces, three dimensions instead of areas - change how we think about the politics of space?” (Elden 2013)

**“If people in the Atolls sink, the World  
sinks with them”** (UN SG Ant'onio Guterres - Tuvalu Visit, May, 2019)



# Sinking Islands: Are there any other alternative futures?

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'Sinking islands' disconnects cause and effect. Who is responsible?

Shift of responsibility from emitter to island community by emphasising the need for adaptation

Inevitable inundation of island communities closing down alternative futures

Simplistic message of sinking deflects from the complex nature and scale of climate change

# Part 2: Adaptation

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# Climate Change Adaptation

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“Adaptation refers to adjustments in ecological, social or economic systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli and their effects or impacts. It refers to changes in processes, practices, and structures to moderate potential damages or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change” (UNFCCC, 2020)

Research into climate change adaptation often too scarce in its analysis of power and politics in conjunction with socio-economic factors (Mikulewicz, 2018)





# Atoll Adaptation: Land Reclamation

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Land reclamation is the gain of land from the sea, wetlands, or other water bodies (OECD, 2001)

Reimagined as a form of climate adaptation for atoll nations to adjust to rising sea-levels, declining agricultural productivity and environmental degradation (Saddington, 2023)



# The Temporalities of Adaptation: Tuvaluan Coastal Adaptation Project

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# The Temporalities of Adaptation: Tuvaluan Coastal Adaptation Project

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*So the priorities, what the focus of the project is, depends on our climate change priorities... And I think the building of sea walls and the protecting of islands was key. Why? Because we needed space to think. To give us more time. So we have to build the islands (Interview, Lono, 29/08/2019).*

*In terms of not only buying time - we do not want to leave. We cannot say we do not want to leave and then we do nothing. We do not want to leave our home and at the same time the government of Tuvalu is trying to explore the alternatives that are available out there. So in terms of extending the reclaimed land, it is vital for the protection of the land (Interview, Maatia, 06/12/2018)*

# Buying space and time?

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# Artificial Islands: Limits to Adaptation

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According to the IPCC, “technical limits to hard protection are expected to be reached under high emission scenarios (RCP8.5) beyond 2100 (high confidence)” for atolls (IPCC 2019; p. 4-6).

*...is all about a matter of survival for us, people in the Pacific and low-lying atolls. I know coming from a country...knowing very well that we have very limited resources, technology and capacity. We are all limited especially in terms of human resources and capacity. We are, barely left with very minimal options...It is all about survival (Interview, Maatia, 06/12/2018)*

# Falesuiti Ecological Island



## Rendering of Ecological Island

In this rendering, the existing facilities are allocated in same scale so that everyone easily understands the size of the island. The island is large enough to accommodate 5,000 people and establish various capital facilities.

Solar energy absorber system in Nevada desert

Port of Apia. Large enough to build a port facilities.



## Falesuiti Ecological Island

NGO Tuvalu Overview 2014/04/01

The villages of Vaitupu island are allocated. About 800 people live there.

Reservoir to store rainwater. Freshwater fishes such as tilapia can be bred.

2000 m runway with apron and building site

Mangrove forest

Resort hotels same as those in Honolulu.

NGO Tuvalu Overview

Images © 2008 DisruptiveLabs

# Geopolitics of Artificial Islands

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Drawing on Johnson-Hanks' (2002) vital conjuncture, Smith (2012) argues that a vital territorial conjuncture describes “a point at which the territorial future is understood to be at risk”.

Understandings of atoll nations as “sinking islands” has created a moment in which the future of Tuvalu is fluid, uncertain and up for grabs.

Thus, atoll state are embracing performative forms of adaptation as a form of voluntary immobility (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019).

# Fantasy islands?

Large-scale adaptation projects, such as the construction of artificial islands, are deemed too risky by international funding bodies and donors.

Consequently, small island state politicians have struggled to gain international support for such a large-scale project through traditional routes

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## Tuvalu: Pacific nation turns down Chinese islands and backs Taiwan

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GETTY IMAGES

Tuvalu is battling rising sea levels



# Islands of hope

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Jackson and della Dora (2009; p. 2087) argue that “performative icon for future geographical imaginaries, the artificial island is rapidly becoming both a symbol... of globalising iconicity, and thus worthy of attention for geographers.”

Artificial islands provide a promise of islanders retaining control of their oceanic space through a reproduction of statehood with the Tuvaluan government retaining sovereignty over a population situated within a clearly a defined (artificial) territory.

Ambiguities and uncertainties around climate change and potential migration are resolved

# Part 3: Diplomacy

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# Diplomacy

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Political activity, sovereign states attempt to achieve foreign policy without utilising force, propaganda or international law

Critical geopolitics has deconstructed foreign policy narratives, the role of elites – less attentive to practices, sites and actors of diplomacy (McConnell, 2019)

Climate diplomacy encompasses a range of state and non-state actors across multiple spaces, engaging with a range of issues including efforts to increase, or restrict, global ambition on mitigation; securing new forms of bilateral and multilateral funding for adaptation and mitigation; ensuring protection for those who are displaced; creating precedents for litigation; and more broadly raising the profile of climate change (Light, 2017).



# Climate Change Diplomacy

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“conferences, of both notionally scientific and political kinds, have long loomed large in the politics of climate...geographers, along with political scientists, have recently shown growing interest as a particular site of social and political action (Mahony and Hulme, 2018, p.404)

Most attention focuses on the annual Conference of the Parties (or COP) where countries come together to negotiate

COPS you may have heard of: Kyoto, Paris, Glasgow... this year in Dubai

# Climate Change Diplomacy beyond COP

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UN

Regional Organisations (EU, PIF, ASEAN)

Bilateral



# Performative Adaptation

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“Conferences are key sites for the visible performance of expertise and power” (Craggs and Mahony, 2014, p.415)

Completion of the Queen Elizabeth Park and the hosting of the Pacific Island Forum was used to demonstrate the ability Tuvalu to adapt to climate change and engage in diplomacy (Saddington, 2023)

*So, it is about action and taking action. So we build, we reclaim this. Holding the forum on reclaimed land is a statement. You know? We can't wait. We had to do something. It is important we carry this message to our partners, if you are willing to help. You can help us with the infrastructure development (Interview, Lono, 29/08/2019).*



# Feminist Geopolitics and New Diplomacy Studies

Emotions crucial to geographies of performance, emotional geopolitics (Jones and Clark, 2019; Pain, 2009)

Emotional diplomacy constitutes a “coordinated state-level behaviour that explicitly and officially projects the image of a particular emotional response towards other states” 243 (Hall, 2015, pp.2).

Body, emotions and performance largely absent from climate diplomacy scholarship bar a few exceptions (Farbotko and McGregor, 2020)

*The Child, The Westerner, The Minister*



# The Child

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Designated sites choreographed produce particular politics (McConnell, 2009)

Global intimate (Pratt and Rosner, 2006) body location collapsing and constructed scale of global and geopolitical as intimately lived

Children's bodies are emotive and as Smith (2013, pp. 582) argues "young bodies are understood to be proxies for the future and vectors for the unravelling of territory".



# The Westerner

Visual always played a key role in diplomacy (Constantinou, 1996)

Shimazu (2014, pp. 242) “world statesmen as key diplomatic actors are often perceived by audiences to be personifications of the states they represent; hence, the giving of a strong stage performance becomes even more critical to creating a positive national image in international politics”.



I'm in Tuvalu, on the extreme frontlines of the global climate emergency.

Rising seas threaten to drown this island nation — a sign of what's in store for us all.

We need urgent [#ClimateAction](#) to stop Tuvalu from sinking and the world from sinking with it.



2:40 AM · May 17, 2019 · Twitter for iPhone

1K Retweets 2.3K Likes

297

960

2.3K



# “Riskscapes”

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Boundary of land and sea, imagined space creation of “riskscapes” (Yarina and Takemoto, 2017)

Neumann (2019, pp. 465-66) contends that “diplomatic work is more than work with words. It also involves the visual work of manipulating cultural visual codes — in the receiving state, in the sender state, and, ultimately, globally. The more presentable the diplomat, the higher the visibility, and the higher the visibility, the larger the room to manoeuvre regarding other work”.



# The Minister

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Addresses previous concerns around the UN Secretary General

Digital and Public Diplomacy

Amplifying the voices, and agency, of Pacific Islanders

Jones and Clark (2019, pp. 1264) contend that “diplomats are articulators and practitioners who bring the state into being through their performances”



# Australia offers climate refuge to Tuvalu citizens

🕒 10 hours ago



Climate



EPA

Anthony Albanese and Kausea Natano announced the pact at the Pacific Islands Forum

# Conclusions

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Space and time are key to understanding climate change adaptation

Low-lying islands can shed a light on the relationship between adaptation, diplomacy and resistance

Islands-Bodies-Future(s)

Questions of agency and the opening up of multiple potential geopolitical futures

# Further reading

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**Saddington, L.**, 2023. The chronopolitics of climate change adaptation: land reclamation in Tuvalu. *Territory Politics Governance*, v. ahead-of-print, p.1-20. [doi:10.1080/21622671.2023.2216732](https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2216732).

**Saddington, L.** and Hills, T., 2023. Geopolitics and humiliation: The 'sinking islands' of Tuvalu. *Political Geography*, v. 105, p.102938-. [doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102938](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102938).

Note these are academic articles – but with the lecture they should be accessible!