Securitising Climate Change: Pacific Island States as Norm Entrepreneurs in the UN System

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ABSTRACT

From extreme storms, coastal erosion, to marine ecosystem collapse, Pacific Island states are at the frontline of climate change disruption. Despite their limited material power, Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have emerged as one of the earliest and most influential actors to engage with the climate change issue. In the UN arena, PSIDS have shaped global climate responses by securitising climate change, proposing binding emission targets, and securing consensus on global warming limits.

This article engages with international relations theories on the framework of the United Nations (UN) system, the constructivist theory of norm formation, and the Copenhagen School's theory of securitisation to examine how the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have advanced climate security norms within the UN system and steered global climate responses. Using case studies including the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement, the article argues that the PSIDS' success in exerting disproportionate influence over UN climate agreements should be credited to their skilful leveraging of norm entrepreneurship, and their procedural excellence at forging broad coalitions under their normative authority. The article proposes that the PSIDS campaign illustrates an alternative pathway through which small States can exert meaningful influence in global climate governance, despite the enduring power asymmetries of the international system.

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I. Introduction

Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) are uniquely exposed to climate change. As some of the world's most geographically isolated states with small land area, small population sizes, and constrained resources, they have long been recognised as one of the most vulnerable areas to global warming.[1]

Despite accounting for only 0.02 percent of global emissions, PSIDS face existential threats from global warming and rising sea levels. The low-lying Pacific atoll islands

[1] "Status of Coral Reefs of the World 2020." *UN Environment Programme*, 2021

average just one to two meters of elevation above the sea level, 90 percent of Pacific island populations live within five kilometres of the coast, and half the infrastructure is within 500 metres of the sea.[2] Should the current emission pathway continue, Pacific small islands could face permanent submergence, frequent coastal flooding, extreme storm surges, and the loss of freshwater and land in the coming decades.[3] Even if Pacific small islands could avoid the extreme weather events for now, global warming is already impacting the coastal ecosystem that the island nations rely on. The 2022 IPCC Report confirmed that the highly productive coral reef ecosystems were devastated by rising water temperatures and ocean acidification.[4] The 2024 World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) report recorded unprecedented marine heatwaves in the region, compounded by extreme tropical cyclones in the coastal region.[5]

However, despite their limited material power and acute vulnerability, the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have emerged as disproportionately influential agents in the UN climate diplomacy. They have been one of the earliest actors to reframe climate change as a security issue, advocate for global climate responsibility, drive binding emission targets, and secure consensus on global warming limits. From the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, to the 2015 Paris Agreement, Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) have consistently punched above their weight.

This paper argues that the Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) were able to exert a disproportionate influence on the global climate responses because of their skilful leveraging of norm entrepreneurship and their procedural excellence at forging broad coalitions attracted by their normative authority. Through procedural mastery and strategic diplomacy, PSIDS leaders reframed climate change as an acute security threat, mobilised broad coalitions around this norm, and embedded it within a compelling moral narrative of survival and justice. Using case studies of the pre-1990 framing of the climate security issue, the negotiations leading up to the Kyoto Protocol (1997), and the strategic diplomacy that shaped the Paris Agreement (2015), this article aims to analyse how the PSIDS employed norm entrepreneurship to steer the UN climate response. This study examines how PSIDS advanced the norm of climate security, and how they leveraged the moral authority of their normative consolidation to forge broad coalitions in support of their initiatives.

In Section II, I will examine the theoretical framework of the UN system, dissecting the way in which power is exerted by weak States and non-State diplomatic agents. Building on this framework, Section III will examine constructivist theories to understand the use of norm entrepreneurship in creating rational-legal authority within a specific institutional context. Section IV will focus on the theory of securitisation, as proposed by the Copenhagen School, and delineate the theoretical amplitude of the climate security agenda. Section V will focus on the history of PSIDS' climate security agenda, using selected case studies of UN climate negotiations to delineate how normative power is used to drive climate negotiations in practice.

Building on the theoretical framework of international relations, this paper aims to situate the case study analysis within a nuanced theoretical space. In this paper, the PSIDS grouping is occasionally referred to as the Pacific islands. The UN system recognises PSIDS members as the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands,

[2] *State of the Climate in the South-West Pacific 2023*. WMO Paper No. 1356, 2024.
[3] "Small Islands." *Climate Change 2022 – Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Working Group II Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2023, at 2043-2122.
[4] ibid.
[5] *State of the Climate in the South-West Pacific 2024*. WMO Paper No. 1374, 2025.

Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. In parts of the article, the PSIDS group is discussed within the broader alliances of AOSIS (Alliance of Small Island States), through which the Pacific islands have conducted active collective diplomacy, especially in the negotiations for the Kyoto Protocol.

II. **The Theory and the Practice of Power in the United Nations**

Since norm entrepreneurship is fundamentally shaped by institutional structure, an analysis of PSIDS' climate diplomacy must first begin with an examination of the UN system. In international relations theories, this is predominantly approached through the framework of the liberal international order. In the liberal account, international order is not just an equilibrium condition, nor is it the natural crystallisation of power distribution.[6] On the contrary, international orders are actively constructed by strong States and created in a system of organising principles, authority relations, functional roles, shared expectations, and settled practices.[7] Ikenberry defines the UN system as the institutionalisation of the American-led post-1945 liberal order.[8] In this conception, the UN is the active construct of major States, and was designed to anchor the American-led post-1945 order in a framework of rules and institutions. It functions as a mechanism for collective security, legitimacy, and cooperation. Leading States restrain themselves within the constitutional order to reassure weaker members of the threat of unilateralism.[9] In return, the UN system legitimises the power of leading States in the shared rules and multilateral frameworks. By framing their power within universal and institutional terms, strong States lock in the compliance of weaker States and secure a more cooperative international environment where their leadership is legitimised through institutional means. In this liberal institutionalist view, the United Nations embodies the multilateral face of American and Western leadership in a framework of universal rule-based cooperation, legitimacy, and collective security.[10]

While the UN system remains the active construction of powerful States, weaker States still actively benefit in the shared liberal framework. The UN system provides a means for weaker States to insulate themselves from the arbitrariness of great-power politics. The institutional framework embeds member states in legal-rational norms, predictable procedures, and protects weaker States from the power asymmetries of material power.

Ikenberry's construct provides a strong theoretical basis for the study of the UN system. Nevertheless, such broad-stroked theories leave unresolved how power is exercised in practice in the UN system. While the institutional structure of the United Nations remains skewed by the legacy of its great-power origins, most evidently in the Security Council Permanent Five (P5) Members, outcomes in the UN system often correlate poorly with the asymmetries of material power.[11] Certain States appear surprisingly weak in multilateral negotiations despite their material strength, while others exert influences far beyond their material size. What makes one country more influential than the other in multilateral diplomacy? What allows Pacific Small Island Developing States (PSIDS) to punch above their weight in climate diplomacy?

The structural accounts of traditional international relations theories would not suffice to answer these questions. To truly exercise influence in the UN system, State and

[6] Ikenberry, G John. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars, New Edition.* Princeton University Press, 2019.
[7] ibid.
[8] Ikenberry, G John. *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order.* Princeton University Press, 2011.
[9] Ikenberry (n 8) *supra.*
[10] ibid.
[11] Adler-Nissen, Rebecca, and Vincent Pouliot. "Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya." *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2014, pp. 889-911.

non-State agents need to be adept at navigating the legal procedures, institutional rules, and frameworks that crisscross the UN system. Power, then, can be developed not only from material State capacity, but also through rational-legal authority. In this light, it becomes necessary to investigate the constructivist theory, which studies not only where power is formally located, but also how authority, legitimacy, and persuasion are created in the practice of politics. Such constructivist theories do not displace the institutionalist theories of rule-based cooperation nor the structural constructs of the liberal order. Rather, constructivist theories operate at a different analytical scale, investigating how power is generated in rational-legal authority and technical competence that defines institutional interaction. Thus, power in multilateral negotiations rests not in the structural resources of state agents, but in how these resources are locally generated in the UN system of diplomacy itself. Control over technical expertise, information, and skills, then, generates an implicit claim of authority: the ability to decide "how things are done".[12] In this fine-grained level of politics, power manifests in the socially recognised competence or mastery in a certain practice. Being recognised as this authority allows state or non-state agents to wield a context-specific power of influence; that is, a non-coercive power derived not from material strength but technical competency. Once recognised as a source of authority, agents can then decide how this game of social interactions is played out, structure how other players behave, and thereby shape the outcome of the game.[13]

III. **Norm Entrepreneurs in the UN System**

This fine-grained dissection of power broadens the key players of the UN system from great States to any State or non-State agents that know how to play their cards right.

Much of the emergent power is wielded by non-State agents that sit at the negotiation tables, draft its legal proceedings, and define its norms and principles. The ecology of knowledge producers, career diplomats, and legal scholars interacts with the intergovernmental machinery of the UN Member States to create and refine UN decisions at key junctures of its policy processes.[14] They formulate and refine the norms, principles and standards used to influence how issues are perceived, how states understand their interests, and how UN policy recommendations function at local, national, regional, and international levels. It is these agents who wield the rational-legal authority of norm entrepreneurs.

Following Martha Finnemore, we can understand a norm as a three-stage life cycle, beginning with the first stage "norm emergence", the second stage of "norm cascade" in which the norm is broadly accepted, and finally the third stage of "norm internalisation" where it becomes embedded as a taken-for-granted truth.[15] Yet norms do not appear out of thin air. Instead, they are the active construct of agents with strong notions of the appropriate or desirable action in their community. Norms that medical personnel and those wounded in war should be treated as neutral noncombatants are traced to Henry Dunant, a Swiss banker who founded an organisation that would later become the International Committee of the Red Cross.[16] The international campaign for women's suffrage can be traced back to the initial leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the United States and Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst in England.[17] Both cases are consistent with what Ethan Nadelmann

[12] ibid at 893.
[13] Barnett, Michael, and Raymond Duvall. "Power in International Politics." *International Organization*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2005, pp. 39-75.
[14] Carayannis, Tatiana, and Thomas Weiss. *The "Third" United Nations: How a Knowledge Ecology Helps the UN Think*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
[15] Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink. "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change." *International Organization*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1998, pp. 887-917.
[16] ibid at 897.
[17] ibid.

termed "transnational moral entrepreneurs" who engage in "moral proselytism".[18]

Norm entrepreneurs actively identify or "create" issues by naming, interpreting, and dramatizing them.[19] In other words, they construct specific cognitive framings that firmly embed alternative framings to challenge existing norms. Norm entrepreneurs classify the world, creating categories of actors and action, and fix meanings in the social world. They articulate and diffuse new norms, principles, and goals, so that the increasingly technical demands of modern politics can continue in a stable, predictable, and nonviolent way.[20]

However, norm entrepreneurs are not just non-State actors. The ecology of professional knowledge producers and diplomacy enactors can exist both alongside and within State entities. One prominent strategy of modern norm entrepreneurs is to train and recruit like-minded bureaucrats to help or block the promotion of new norms in standing organisations.[21] Peter Haas's study on the Mediterranean cleanup shows that the ecologists' success in promoting their norms was largely contingent on how they persuaded governments to create new agencies to deal with the cleanup and staff those posts with like-minded ecologists.[22] This ecology of non-State professionals is crucial to the agenda of environmental security because their legal-rational authority provides the scientific background and moral weight for PSIDS campaigns.

IV. **Securitisation Theory and the Climate Security Agenda**

The uniqueness of the PSIDS' strategy in the United Nations is its emphasis on the climate security agenda. Analysing this strategy, however, requires a theoretical foundation in security studies. What makes it worthwhile to frame an issue as a matter of security? What quality makes something a security issue? How are security issues different from other pressing agendas, and how has the climate security concept been framed and created?

Security issues are unique because they elevate the threat from the normal policy space into a prioritised security sphere where extraordinary action is justified and expected.[23] In international relations, security studies have been traditionally understood as a State-centric concept focused on military threats. This tradition, created under the dominance of realist and neorealist theorists, sees the state as the referent object of all security discourse. Threats are defined in military terms, and made against the State's sovereignty and survival. Security, in this framework, equals simply the absence of military threat and the preservation of territorial sovereignty.[24]

The end of the Cold War brought an intellectual shift in the definition of security. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Copenhagen School emerged as a part of the broader IR response to the end of bipolar confrontation.[25] The Copenhagen School, founded by the seminal works of Wæver, Buzan, and de Wilde,[26] conceptualises security as a discursively constructed concept, rather than an objective reality. Their central argument is that issues only become "security" issues when they are successfully framed as existential threats through "speech acts", the process where a securitising agent declares that an issue poses an existential threat requiring extraordinary means. The essence of a speech act is not so much about the objective reality of a threat, but the

[18] Nadelmann, Ethan A. "Global Prohibition Regimes: The Evolution of Norms in International Society." *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1990, pp. 479-526.
[19] Finnemore & Sikkink (n 15) *supra* at 897.
[20] Barnett, Michael, and Martha Finnemore. *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics.* Cornell University Press, 2004.
[21] Finnemore & Sikkink (n 15) *supra*.
[22] Haas, Peter M. *Saving the Mediterranean: The Politics of International Environmental Cooperation.* Columbia University Press, 1990.
[23] Buzan, Barry, et al. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Lynne Rienner, 1998.
[24] Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics.* Addison-Wesley, 1979.
[25] Buzan et al. (n 23) *supra*.
[26] ibid.

performative construction of it.[27] By extension, the scholarship also argued for a multi-sectoral analysis of security, encompassing military, political, societal, economic, and, as the latest addition, environmental terms. Along with the liberal and constructivist critiques of Nye & Lynn-Jones,[28] Mathews,[29] and Crawford,[30] the Copenhagen School sought to broaden and deepen the concept of security from the State-centric, military-focused conception that dominated the Cold War period.

The scholarship is both informed and enabled by a paradigm shift in the structure of international relations. The close calls with nuclear annihilation made the flaws of a State-obsessed security strategy evident. The apparent stability of the American-led post-1990 order rendered actual warfare in the Global North unlikely. Instead, emerging transnational risks, from civic violence, economic vulnerability, to political repression, captured political salience. In this apparent moment of US unipolarity, the UN Secretariat and its knowledge producers sanctified a shift in both the referent object and the sectoral scale of security studies. The 1994 United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report codified this pivotal shift of security paradigms with the introduction of "human security".[31] Ordinary people, not nation-States, became front and centre of the security agenda. With this pivot of referent object came a sectoral broadening of the security analysis. As the scholarship indicates, ordinary people are not only threatened by military threats, but also by multi-sectoral, non-military issues. In response, human security considers a broad range of threats to human development, including protection from non-military threats such as famine, disease, poverty, crime, social conflict, political repression, and environmental hazards.

While the Copenhagen School presents securitisation as an analytically neutral tool, the theory nevertheless raises at least three political and normative concerns.

First, by removing issues from normal democratic politics and into the realm of extraordinary security response, securitising agents risk abusing the process of depoliticization. The successful securitisation of an issue renders it urgent, existential, and its countermeasures beyond debate. Depoliticization, then, shrinks the space of democratic discourse, and allows the executive or technocratic authority to act without democratic checks and balances.[32]

Second, the primacy of performative speech acts encourages actors to instrumentalise security rhetoric to attract attention, authority, and resources.[33] This induces a moral hazard of security framing, where securitising agents are readily incentivised to inflate the threat language to gain material concessions beyond the issue context.

Third, securitisation's logic of existential threats tends to privilege responses in military terms even if the original issue area is not.[34] Despite the sectoral expansion of security issues, the logic of existential threat could readily pull issues towards a militarised framing. Climate change, migration, and global health crises are frequently framed

[27] Wæver, Ole. "Securitization and Desecuritization." *On Security*, edited by Ronnie Lipschutz, Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 46-86.
[28] Nye, Joseph, and Sean Lynn-Jones. "International Security Studies: A Report of a Conference on the State of the Field." *International Security*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1988, pp. 5-27.
[29] Mathews, Jessica Tuchman. "Redefining Security." *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 2, 1989, pp. 162-177.
[30] Crawford, Neta. "Once and Future Security Studies." *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1991, pp. 283-316.
[31] *Human Development Report 1994: New Dimensions of Human Security*. United Nations Development Programme, 1994.
[32] Huysmans, Jef. "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier." *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1998, pp.226-255.
[33] Balzacq, Thierry. "The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context." *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 171-201.
[34] Bigo, Didier. "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease." *Alternatives*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2002, pp. 63-92.

through the lens of national security and defence. Migration securitisation often legitimises border militarisation and detention regimes.[35] Climate change securitisation risks condoning militarised disaster planning or geopolitical resource grabs.

Nevertheless, it is within the Copenhagen School's theoretical construct that one should understand the PSIDS' climate security campaign. PSIDS primed their campaign on framing climate change as an existential threat to island States' environmental viability, socio-economic stability, and physical statehood. Using a deeply moralistic speech act, such as the "1.5 to stay alive" slogan in the Paris talks, PSIDS exemplified the performative aspect of securitisation throughout climate negotiations. Through this discursive campaign, PSIDS directly identified multiple referent objects: the physical survival of the low-lying atoll states, the human security of populations who depended on the fragile ecosystems, and the sovereignty of states whose very existence could be swallowed up by the rising sea.

However, simply defining climate security within the regional context would not be enough. Securitisation is a relational process, and the success of a security claim depends on the acceptance of a sufficient audience that endorses and internalises the concept.[36] For the PSIDS, the broad acquiescence of the UN Member States would be necessary to legitimise the move to securitise climate change and transform it into an authoritative reordering of political priorities. This would prove to be the main challenge for PSIDS. By the time the Pacific Islands began their campaign for climate security in the UN arena, the world had only just realised the threat to the natural environment. The scientific consensus on global warming was not reached until the 1970s-80s. The UN first considered the deterioration of the natural environment an issue in the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment.[37] Few States viewed climate change with the same urgency as PSIDS, and many held conflicting interests in greenhouse gas emissions. Winning over such a wide range of State actors, would take more than constructing a rhetoric wholly framed around the Pacific islands themselves.

To an extent, PSIDS would succeed in its mission. In practice, it took strong diplomatic and procedural excellence to form large negotiating blocs, win over sympathetic developed States, and generate moral authority in the international civil society. In the meantime, PSIDS would usher in a process that embeds climate security in a broad array of global issues, from the disruption of ecosystems, the depletion of energy and resources, the instability of national socio-economy, and the threats to human well-being.

Admittedly, the PSIDS' definition of the climate referent object would not be unique. The modern UN arena houses numerous alternative definitions and contesting interpretations of what climate security ought to protect. Some theorists regard the ultimate referent object as the environment itself, while others consider it the risk of losing the achieved levels of civilisation and a forced return to barbarism.[38] In the rapid succession of post-Cold War talks, climate security discourse would borrow the logic of the anti-nuclear movement and its imagery for civilisational success. Implicit in this framing was the suggestion that the true motive for climate security was not environmental preservation, but the protection of "local and planetary biosphere as the essential support system on which all other human enterprises depend".[39] Such a conception would make the moral concern for the planet a mere veneer for

[35] McDonald, Matt. "Securitization and the Construction of Security." *European Journal of International Relations* vol. 14, no. 4, 2008, pp. 563-587.
[36] Buzan et al. (n 23) *supra* at 72.
[37] ibid at 73.
[38] Wæver (n 27) *supra*.
[39] Buzan, Barry. "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century." *International Affairs*, vol. 67, no. 3, 1991, pp. 431-451.

the human enterprise and risk critiques of moral hypocrisy.

The challenge to preserve the moral value of climate security would be compounded by the deliberate ambiguity of its discourse. UN climate security advocates often kept its definitions deliberately obscure to accommodate the divergent interests of endorsing States. While the PSIDS' positions are consistently clear in the survival of the physical islands and their cultural legacy, the reason for European, American, or Chinese support could be a mixture of moral obligation, realist bargaining, or strategic compliance. Therefore, debates on the proper place for the climate security agenda would continue, with some theorists describing environmental security as the "ultimate security",[40] and others as an intellectual distraction.[41]

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the academic advocacy for a climate security agenda largely coincided with, or was guided by, the Pacific diplomats' campaign for climate security in the UN system. When the PSIDS began framing the climate security issue in the late 1980s, they had entered a competitive normative arena with few established frameworks to support their advocacy. Yet, with sustained diplomacy, skilful coalition building, and strong moral appeal, they managed to become one of the key actors in defining and drafting the global climate response.

V. **Case Studies: History of PSIDS in the UN Systems**

The PSIDS' engagement in international climate diplomacy is both extensive and longstanding. They were one of the earliest actors to shape the global climate responses by framing climate change through the security lens, proposing binding emission targets, and securing consensus on global warming limits. As Morgan et al. outline, the evolving influence of PSIDS could be categorised in a "thick history" of distinct phases:[42]

1. Pre-1990. Following growing scientific recognition of global warming, PSIDS began framing climate change as an urgent security crisis in the UN system. The global coalition of island nations, AOSIS, was created to lobby for the climate security agenda.
2. 1991-7. PSIDS steered climate negotiations in the search for a global climate agreement. The group's persistence in building binding protocols eventually paved the way for the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.
3. 1998-2015. The Kyoto Protocol failed to create lasting results in global emission cuts. Recognising stalled talks with major emitters, key Pacific leaders created broad coalitions to secure the 2015 Paris Agreement and codify the 1.5°C global temperature limit.

A. *1985-90*

The scientific consensus on global warming emerged in the mid-1980s, as extensive empirical studies showed that greenhouse gas emissions, caused by the burning of fossil fuels, had serious and irreversible consequences for the planet's climate system. In 1985, a WMO report on greenhouse gases warned that "in the first half of the next century a rise of global mean temperature could occur which is greater than any in man's history".[43] In 1988, a Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere sponsored by the UNEP and the WMO warned that global warming has become "an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment whose ultimate consequences could be second only to a global nuclear war".[44] In the same year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

[40] Myers, Norman. *Ultimate Security: The Environmental Basis of Political Stability*. WW Norton, 1994.
[41] Deudney, Daniel. "The Case Against Linking Environmental Degradation and National Security." *Millennium*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1990, pp. 461-476.
[42] Morgan, Wesley, et al. "Leading from the Frontline: A History of Pacific Climate Diplomacy." *The Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2024, pp. 353-374.
[43] *Report of the International Conference on the Assessment of the Role of Carbon Dioxide and of Other Greenhouse Gases in Climate Variations and Associated Impacts*. WMO, 1985.
[44] *Conference Proceedings: The Changing Atmosphere, Implications for Global Security*. WMO, 1988.

Change (IPCC) was formed to equip policymakers with regular assessments of the scientific information available on climate change.

By the late 1980s, growing scientific and political concern had alarmed the PSIDS. In 1987, tidal waves caused massive flooding in Malé, the capital of the Maldives, prompting global coverage and a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution to assist the Maldives in strengthening coastal defences.[45] A 1988 technical report prepared for the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme warned that "global warming threatens the physical and cultural survival of several Pacific societies".[46] In the 1988 South Pacific Forum, PSIDS leaders expressed "concern about climatic changes in the South Pacific" and the threat of "serious social and economic disruption in countries of the region".[47] Kiribati President Ieremia Tabai told reporters of the conference, "if what the scientists are saying is true, within 50–60 years there are countries like my country which will no longer be there".[48]

The Pacific islands convened a series of multilateral meetings to discuss the existential risks climate change posed for small island nations. At the South Pacific Forum in July 1989, leaders "expressed concern about the possible effects on island countries of rising sea levels" and agreed to "take decisive action to draw world attention to the way the environmental problem affected the South Pacific".[49] In November the same year, the Small Sates Conference on Sea Level Rise in Malé focused the discussion on "the need for a common strategy on sea level rise and on how to protect the SIDS [small island States] from the effects of global warming".[50] The ensuing Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise called for the establishment of a UN convention on climate change and for negotiations to start as soon as possible.[51]

In 1990, the first IPCC assessment report was released at the Second World Climate Conference in Geneva. The report confirmed that global warming was driven by anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and predicted global sea levels to rise by 20cm by 2030.[52] This would mean that low-lying Pacific islands that "lie almost entirely within three metres of sea level, such as the Maldives, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Tokelau and other archipelagos and island nations in the Pacific ... could lose much of their beaches and arable lands".[53] In response to the IPCC report, a UNGA resolution was passed in December 1989 to formally launch negotiations for a UN climate convention.[54]

Alarmed by the urgency of the threat, the PSIDS began framing global warming as an urgent crisis that required immediate action, especially from the developed states. In the 1990 World Climate Conference, Tuvalu's Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu stated that the Pacific islands were "extremely vulnerable to the environmental hazards and dangers of the greenhouse effect and sea level rise. These are problems which we have done the least to create but now threaten the very heart of our

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[45] UNGA Res. 42/202, 1987.
[46] Hulm, Peter, et al. *A Climate of Crisis: Global Warming and the Island South Pacific*. Association of South Pacific Environmental Institutions, 1989.
[47] "Annex 5: Forum Communiqué." *Nineteenth South Pacific Forum, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, 20–21 September 1988: Agreed Record*, South Pacific Forum, SPEC(88)Rep, at 57.
[48] Scott, David. "Shoring Up Regional Interests in South Pacific." *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 Sept. 1988.
[49] "Annex 6: Forum Communiqué." *Twentieth South Pacific Forum, Tarawa, Kiribati, 10–11 July 1989: Agreed Record*, South Pacific Forum, SPFS(89)Rep, at 55–56.
[50] Ronneberg, Espen. "Small Islands and the Big Issue: Climate Change and the Role of the Alliance of Small Island States." *The Oxford Handbook of International Climate Change Law*, edited by Kevin Gray et al., Oxford University Press, 2016.
[51] "Malé Declaration on Global Warming and Sea Level Rise." *Commonwealth Law Bulletin*, vol. 16, 1990.
[52] *IPCC First Assessment Report: Policymaker Summary of Working Group I: Scientific Assessment of Climate Change*. WMO, 1990, pp. 63-64.
[53] *see* Ashe, John, et al. "The Role of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the Negotiation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)." *Natural Resources Forum*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1999, p. 210.
[54] UNGA Res. 45/212, 21 Dec. 1990, UN Doc A/RES/45/212.

existence".[55] Broad coalitions with global small island States were pursued. At the Second World Climate Conference in Geneva, 1990, the PSIDS joined forces with their counterparts in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean to establish the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). AOSIS was created with the mission to continue the initiative laid forth in the 1989 Malé Declaration and to represent the shared global demand of small island developing states (SIDS) in UN negotiations.[56] Through AOSIS, Pacific Island states would later propose a binding cut of emissions by 20 percent on all developed countries and set the precedent of legally binding emission cut protocols.

In constructivist terms, 1985-90 is best characterised as the stage of norm emergence. In this period, the PSIDS acted as key norm entrepreneurs in reframing climate change as an existential threat to territorial survival and sovereignty. They were among the first UN actors to emphasise the asymmetric distribution of climate risks, which disproportionately falls on the smaller, developing States in the Global South. The early articulations of their entrepreneurship, most notably the 1989 Malé Declaration, constituted some of the earliest normative innovations in a discursive landscape that had yet to recognise climate change as a global responsibility.

In time, the growing momentum of their norms would help justify the creation of the UNFCCC negotiating process and logic of differentiated responsibilities for developing and developed States. While the PSIDS had yet to consolidate true engagement in the Security Council or begin their push for binding emission cuts, they had succeeded in establishing themselves as the moral authorities in the emerging climate regime.

B. *1991-97*

In the early 1990s, UN negotiations became increasingly divided by a North-South faultline. Developing countries argued that developed States, which had burned fossil fuels for centuries, had the obligation to cut emissions first.[57] Within the Global North, fissures emerged between European States, which were more conciliatory to clear emissions targets, and the United States, which initially opposed any binding targets.[58] During this period, the PSIDS remained vocal for ambitious climate action. The existential threat posed by global warming helped the PSIDS to be seen as the 'international conscience' on the issue, allowing them to exert considerable moral pressure in UN climate negotiations.[59]

In the lead-up to the 1992 Earth Summit, negotiations culminated in the creation of a UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), through which Pacific islands joined the unified front of the AOSIS coalition. In the 1992 Summit in Rio, AOSIS advocated to impose emission limits on developed countries, and proposed a global compensation fund to pay for the loss and damage of climate change.[60] Under strong American opposition, the targets failed to obtain official UN ratification, and the convention signed in Rio only made an ambiguous reference to emissions reduction and made no mention of compensation for loss and damage. However, the advocacy did force the UNFCCC to establish a shared objective to prevent "dangerous anthropogenic interferences with the climate system" and recognised the unique position of small island developing states, who were given specific seats on various UN bodies established during the convention.[61] In the 1992 South Pacific Forum, convening island leaders described the convention as "an important first step" that

[55] *see* Barnett, Jon, and John Campbell. *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific*. Earthscan, 2010, at 87.
[56] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra*.
[57] ibid at 360.
[58] Bodansky, Daniel. "The History of the Global Climate Change Regime." *International Relations and Global Climate Change*, edited by Urs Luterbacher and Detlef F Sprinz, MIT Press, 2001.
[59] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra* at 360.
[60] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra* at 361.
[61] The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1771 UNTS 107.

would pave the way for tougher negotiations on the climate security protocol.[62]

In September 1994, AOSIS submitted a draft protocol under the UNFCCC framework, calling for a binding commitment for all developed countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 20% below 1990 levels by 2005.[63] First drafted by the Pacific island nation Nauru, the proposal was submitted by Trinidad and Tobago, then the chair of AOSIS, and introduced to the UN session by Samoa's ambassador to the UN, Tuiloma Neroni Slade.[64] The meticulous coordination of the Pacific island alliance helped the AOSIS protocol become an important reference point in ensuing climate negotiations. The ambitions of the target were justified as a historical responsibility: since it is the developed countries that are historically responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions, they should also bear the most immediate responsibility in cutting them.[65]

While this proposal did not pass in its original form, its framing of climate security and the introduction of binding targets were subsumed in later UN climate negotiations.[66] In the First Conference of the Parties to UNFCCC (COP 1) in April 1995, the AOSIS protocol was brought to the floor and won the support of most developing countries, with China and India adopting the AOSIS text as the basis for a negotiating proposal.[67] While the AOSIS protocol failed to gain formal adoption at COP 1, it succeeded in catalysing the adoption of the Berlin Mandate, a political compromise inheriting the protocol's framing of global climate security, and advancing its call for stronger commitment from the developed states. The mandate established the Ad Hoc Group on the Berlin Mandate (AGBM) to draft a legally binding protocol that would establish stronger, quantified, legally binding commitments for developed countries to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2000, and hit further reduction targets by 2005, 2010, and 2020.[68] In the 1995 COP 1, Report Decision 1/CP.1 Section III.5, the Berlin Mandate directly referenced the AOSIS protocol, affirming that "the protocol proposal of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), which contains specific reduction targets ... should be included for consideration in the process".[69]

The precedents set by the Berlin Mandate would eventually lead to the 1997 signing of the Kyoto Protocol. In the negotiations leading up to Kyoto, AOSIS consistently presented itself as a cohesive, moralistic developing-country coalition pressing for legally binding, clear, and quantifiable emission-reduction commitments from the developed countries. Their framing of climate action as a matter of moral and political urgency had anchored their moralistic authority in the negotiations, allowing Pacific Island states to form flexible coalitions with the European Union and the Group of 77 and China (G77 / China).[70]

During the Kyoto negotiations, sharp faultlines over emissions reduction responsibilities materialised between the Annex I Parties, the 37 individual industrialised countries and economies in transition and the European Union, and the non-Annex I Parties, the developing countries asserting that they have no legally binding reduction targets. Between these faultlines, PSIDS delegations formed strategic alliances to borrow the power of major developing states and conciliatory developed nations. The dual moral authority AOSIS members

[62] South Pacific Forum (n 49) *supra*.
[63] *Draft Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on the Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions*. Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), 1994.
[64] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra* at 361.
[65] ibid at 361.
[66] Klöck, Carola, et al. "AOSIS in the UNFCCC Negotiations: From Unity to Fragmentation?" *Climate Policy*, vol. 12, 2012, pp. 591-613.
[67] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra* at 361.
[68] *Press Backgrounder: A Brief History of the Climate Change Convention*. UNFCCC, 1997.
[69] *Report of the Conference of the Parties on Its First Session, Held at Berlin from 28 March to 7 April 1995. Decision 1/CP.1: The Berlin Mandate.* UNFCCC, 7 Apr. 1995.
[70] Betzold, Carola. "Borrowing Power to Influence the World: Small States in Multilateral Negotiations." *International Negotiation*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2010, pp. 131-148.

command as a small developing state and a global warming victim allows delegations to retain alliances while acting as a "vanguard subgroup" in the G77 / China bloc.[71] The wider G77 / China bloc consisted of low-income developing States that sought to emphasise development over immediate climate mitigation. While AOSIS members consistently pushed the G77 / China bloc towards stronger language in mitigation and climate ambition, they were cautious not to openly challenge major developing states such as China or India. Instead, Pacific island delegations adopted a flexible coalition strategy, speaking through the G77 / China platform to pressure climate commitment from the Global North, and acting as the independent AOSIS to not contradict the developmental ambitions of major Global South powers.

AOSIS's other significant ally in the Kyoto negotiations was the European Union, which supported binding targets for developed countries and held a notably conciliatory position compared to the United States and Japan. In this coalition borrowing, the EU complemented the AOSIS bloc's moral credibility with practical political, economic, and diplomatic leverage to push less-ambitious major emitters like the US. While this alliance remained informal, the technical proficiency of the AOSIS delegation allowed the island States to insert their proposals into negotiations led by other penholders. Their strategy proved successful, as the Kyoto Protocol set binding targets to reduce Annex I Parties' emissions by an average of 5% below 1990 levels while imposing no mitigation commitments on non-Annex I Parties.

During the 1991-97 period, climate security entered the stage of early norm cascading. While PSIDS remained norm entrepreneurs on promoting binding emission reductions and asymmetric burden sharing, the general acquiescence of climate responsibility had already spread to a heterogeneous grouping. In this cascading landscape, PSIDS increasingly assumed the role of norm sponsors to support ideas already accepted within the G77 / China coalition and the emerging United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. During the Kyoto negotiations, these sponsored norms include, most notably, the principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR), the expectations for financial and technology transfer obligations of the Global North, and the absence of binding mitigation commitments for developing countries.

Admittedly, the outcomes of the Kyoto Protocol were largely determined by the G77 / China coalition and intra-OECD bargaining. Nevertheless, the PSIDS' interventions locked in a strong securitising frame that conditioned how climate change was interpreted in the negotiations and widened the political space for more stringent mitigations. While sponsoring the norms promoted by the G77 / China bloc, the PSIDS also acted as the hardline vanguard of climate action that advocates a moral imperative for deeper emission cuts. Their persistent security framing challenged the predominantly technocratic emissions-trading language favoured by many Annex I states. In this sense, the PSIDS' distinct normative influence helped entrench a moralised sense of responsibility for the Global North, which ultimately informed the normative foundations of the Kyoto Protocol.

C. *1998-2015*

Global climate action proved to be disappointing in the decade that followed the Kyoto Protocol. The United States, then the world's largest emitter, withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001. By the early 2000s, a growing recognition emerged that significant climate impact was likely and imminent. UN climate talks are increasingly focused on climate adaptation and financing for developing nations to deal with the consequences of climate change. At the same time, Pacific diplomats continued lobbying the UN to consider climate change as a primary security threat with limited success. In 2004, the Tuvalu Ambassador called for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to include climate

[71] ibid at 141.

change in the reformed UNSC agenda. During the first UNSC debate on climate change in 2007, Papua New Guinea's ambassador argued that climate change was "no less threatening to small islands" than "guns and bombs … to large nations".[72] These securitisation efforts were met with strong opposition from permanent Security Council members, including China, Russia, and the United States, who argued that climate concerns were inconsistent with the UNSC's responsibilities.[73]

The UNSC opposition opened a new battleground for codifying the climate security agenda. By 2009, Pacific island ambassadors successfully sponsored the first UNGA resolution on climate change and security, titled *Climate Change and Its Possible Security Implications*. The UNGA was chaired by Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, a Nicaraguan diplomat and long-time advocate for decisive climate action. The 2009 UNGA resolution "invites the relevant organs of the United Nations", including the Security Council, "to intensify their efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications".[74] The resolution was adopted unanimously, with more than 100 countries as co-sponsors by the time it was passed.[75]

Despite the success in the UN normative space, by the early 2000s, PSIDS had realised the vast inadequacies of the existing climate agreement. The Kyoto Protocol failed to credibly constrain global greenhouse emissions, especially as developing countries and the United States were not required to cut emissions. This reflected poorly on the emission reality then. By 2007, China had become the world's largest emitter, and the United States was in favour of creating a new deal including emission cuts from major developing States.[76] The global climate response became increasingly shaped by the balance of American and Chinese interests. Following the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit (COP 15), American diplomats pressed UN climate negotiations to move away from binding targets and shift to a flexible regime that would allow countries to set nationally determined commitments.[77] This shift received reluctant support from China, and the bilateral cooperation set the tone for a new global climate treaty.

With stalled global climate action, PSIDS began to press for a legally binding agreement that would limit global warming to 1.5°C. At the 2008 COP14 climate talks, AOSIS argued that any new climate agreement must limit global warming to 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average to ensure the security of small island States. In the 2009 Copenhagen COP 15, both AOSIS and the Southern Pacific island nation of Tuvalu proposed a legal text for a new Copenhagen Protocol that would limit global warming to 1.5°C and require global emissions reduction of 85%, compared to 1990 levels, by 2050.[78] This proposal failed to win over the developed States or the major developing countries such as China and India.[79] However, commitment to obtain a 1.5°C limit pushed PSIDS to form new coalitions across the traditional South-North divide, the most notable of which would be the High Ambition Coalition (HAC), led by the Marshall Islands, which would help seal the 2015 Paris Agreement.[80]

HAC began as a quiet alliance. In 1994, Marshall Islands Foreign Minister Tony de Brum began quietly convening with a core group of foreign ministers from developed and developing States to discuss a common

[72] "Security Council Holds First-Ever Debate on Impact of Climate Change on Peace, Security, Hearing over 50 Speakers." United Nations Security Council Press Release SC/9000, 17 Apr. 2007.
[73] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra*.
[74] UNGA Res. 63/281, 3 Jun. 2009, A/RES/63/281.
[75] Morgan et al. (n 42) *supra* at 364.
[76] ibid.
[77] ibid at 366.
[78] Bascombe, Michael. "AOSIS Release: Islands Propose 'Survival' to COP15." *Climate Pasifika*, 11 Dec. 2009.
[79] Komai, Makereta. "AOSIS Shakes, Goliath Stirs: US, China Hands Off on '1.5 to Stay Alive' Call at COP15." *Climate Pasifika*, 11 Dec. 2009.
[80] Manoa, Fulori. "The New Pacific Diplomacy at the United Nations: The Rise of the PSIDS." *Pacific Diplomacy*, edited by Greg Fry and Sandra Tarte, ANU Press, 2016, pp. 89-98.

position on ambitious global climate goals.[81] Meetings were often conducted in secret, and sensitive communications were handwritten to avoid being leaked to the wider assembly.[82] During the Paris talks, Marshall Islands negotiator Dean Bialek recalled that new members had to approach de Brum in person: "[t]o all those who wanted to be part of us, this was personal. No emails, you had to come to our delegation office, shake hands and look at us in the eye".[83] In the 2015 Paris negotiations, this secret alliance was finally announced publicly.

Throughout the Paris negotiations, HAC remained an informal but broad alliance aligned on ambitious provisions of climate response. It steadily attracted partners from Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, including France, Germany, Chile, Jamaica, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Within the Coalition, Marshalls Minister de Brum found a valuable ally in the EU Climate Commissioner Michel Canete, his European counterpart, committed to advancing the continent's response to the climate emergency. Eventually, the Coalition succeeded in winning over two heavyweight actors: the United States and Brazil. The membership of Brazil was especially crucial, as it had already been in the coalition of BASIC, a negotiating pact with South Africa, India, and China.[84] Tough negotiation points had surrounded India and China's reluctance to comply with stricter transparency measures and climate plan reviews every five years.[85] Brazil's partnership proved to be a pivotal point. Minister de Brum and Commissioner Canete had met with São Paulo's experienced Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira frequently throughout the year, and were both impressed by Brazil's commitment to a national, absolute emissions reduction target. "It was a game changer", Commissioner Canete commented to reporters, "as they [Brazil] were part of BASIC, seen as hardline".[86]

The Brazilian negotiator's decision to break with the BASIC allies provided the Coalition with the momentum to keep pushing for a tougher deal. The final Agreement, committed to keeping global warming "to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels".[87] The inclusion of the 1.5°C pathway was a key success for Pacific islands: the warming limit, lower than the commonly accepted 2°C threshold agreed at the Copenhagen talks, would be one safer for small island States.

At the signing of the Agreement, Marshall Islands negotiator Bialek recalled "strong resistance to the language on a long-term goal", and a number of developing countries "wanted to strip out aspects of the agreement particularly on the ambition side".[88] Eventually, the rough edges were smoothed out, and the Coalition won over even the hardliners of climate talks—Canada and Australia, which had until then been major blockers of UN negotiations. Once inaugurated, the Paris Agreement codified a functioning, adaptive, global climate response after three decades of scientific consensus on the issue. The agreement still allowed nations to pledge new, adaptive emission reduction targets every five years, so that the international society might work together to decarbonise the global economy by 2050.

By the post-Kyoto and Paris era, the PSIDS' campaign for climate security increasingly operated within a maturing normative space with limited space for the invention of new ethical categories. Consequently, PSIDS diplomats were engaged primarily with sponsoring and amplifying existing norms and pushing them towards more ambitious goals. These sponsored norms include the vision of a

[81] ibid.
[82] Goodell, Jeff. "Will the Paris Climate Deal Save the World?" *Rolling Stone*, 13 Jan. 2016.
[83] King, Ed. "Foie Gras, Oysters and a Climate Deal: How the Paris Pact Was Won." *Climate Home News*, 14 Dec. 2015.
[84] ibid.
[85] ibid.
[86] ibid.
[87] The Paris Agreement of 12 Dec. 2015, 3156 UNTS 79.
[88] King (n 83) *supra*.

net-zero global emission endpoint, and the formal recognition of climate change as a legitimate object of security governance. These norms had predominantly originated in activist, scientific, or selected political circles, but were not yet institutionalised within the UN framework. In the Paris negotiations, the PSIDS' sustained coalition building helped move these norms from diffuse advocacy into formal institutional campaigns, and ultimately embedded them into the legal architecture of the Paris Agreement.

Nevertheless, PSIDS remained the principal norm entrepreneurs for the 1.5°C threshold when most negotiating states favoured the 2°C benchmark. By framing 1.5°C as the survival threshold for small island states, PSIDS secured an unlikely cross-bloc support owed in large to their diplomatic leadership in the High Ambition Coalition. Thus, by 1998-2015, even as PSIDS had largely assumed the role of norm sponsors to facilitate norm cascade and legal internalisation, they nonetheless preserved their hardline ambition to lock in deeper climate commitments in a maturing climate response regime.

VI. **Conclusion**

This article has examined how Pacific Small Island Developing States served as norm entrepreneurs and shaped the global climate response. Tracing from the emergence of the global warming consensus in the 1980s to the codification of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the article investigated the nuanced ways in which the PSIDS steered UN action with a combination of normative authority and diplomatic mastery.

Considering their limited material power, the PSIDS' success in manoeuvring the UN system to ratify ambitious climate agreements is nothing short of an impressive feat. Following the 2015 Paris Agreement, countries have taken concrete action to consolidate the new climate regime. However, the tenacity of the Paris Pact continues to be tested under the global hegemons' reluctance to sacrifice development goals. The future of the UN climate regime remains unclear under the power asymmetries of the international system.

While the Pacific islands continue to face the worsening impacts of climate change, their persistence has embedded the norm of climate security within the UN system, and the language of climate security has been internalised even in the Security Council. In 2021, US Special Envoy for Climate John Kerry told the UN Security Council that failing to address the threats of climate change "is almost tantamount to a mutual suicide pact".[89] In the same year, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was then serving as the chair of the UNSC, asserted that "it is absolutely clear that climate change is a threat to our collective security and the security of our nations".[90]

Identifying and framing climate change as an existential threat to island States and as a security matter to the international society gave Pacific leaders the role of norm entrepreneurs early in climate discussions. As one of the first movers to push for the climate security concept, key Pacific actors came to be recognised as the moral authority and technical leadership in climate negotiations. The inaugural role of the Marshall Islands in securing the Paris Agreement evidences that. Beyond setting the space of normative discourse, the procedural excellence and strategic diplomacy of the Pacific negotiators exemplifies constructivist theories on emergent power and influence.

Despite the current roadblocks to the Paris Agreement, the PSIDS' campaign in climate diplomacy presents an alternative pathway for small, vulnerable states in the UN system. Regional challenges such as food security or climate-induced migration may be well-positioned to adopt similar strategies. Conflict-driven food insecurity could be readily securitised and elevated into an

[89] Sengupta, Somini. "Biden's Climate Envoy, at U.N., Likens Global Inaction to a 'Suicide Pact'." *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2021.

[90] Goering, Laurie. "Small Island States, Britain Warn U.N. of Climate Threats to Security." *Reuters*, 24 Feb. 2021.

international security and humanitarian issue. The current legal and normative vacuum around climate-induced migration could be tackled by strong issue-framing that integrates the protection of climate-displaced population within the existing refugee framework. In practice, broad coalition-building and procedural excellence would be necessary to define international obligations, support mechanisms, and lock in the Member States' acquiescence. While small States would still face an uphill battle in advancing these agendas, the Pacific islands' experience provides a valuable example that small States can drive global action even when it is beyond the agenda of the major powers.

In conclusion, this article has analysed the way in which small States can leverage UN institutional frameworks, using international relations theories in both the liberal and constructivist traditions. Despite the enduring power asymmetries that define the international system, the success of the PSIDS in achieving climate talks breakthroughs should serve as encouragement that weak, small States can exert meaningful influence in the global climate response.