

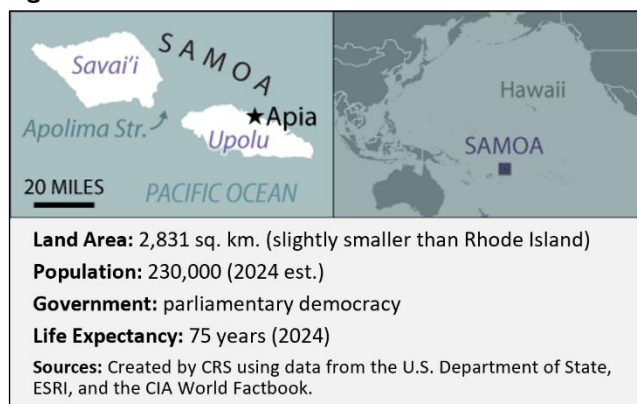
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The Independent State of Samoa: Background and U.S. Relations

The Independent State of Samoa, or Samoa (formerly and colloquially referred to as Western Samoa), is a Pacific Island country (PIC) located in the Polynesian subregion of Oceania. Composed of two major islands (Upolu and Savai'i) with a population of more than 200,000, Samoa shares sociocultural ties with the U.S. territory of American Samoa, which is only about 165 nautical miles away and was acquired by the United States in 1900 by the Cession of Tutuila. As noted by the Department of State, Samoa's adjacency to key shipping routes and telecommunication links that connect the United States to the Indo-Pacific and South America further underscore its strategic value to the United States.

Congressional interest in Samoa is driven by U.S. interests in the Pacific, including maintaining free and open waterways, supporting U.S. diplomatic engagement, developing infrastructure, supporting fisheries, and maintaining strong economic and security ties with the region. Some Members also have shown an interest in countering the People's Republic of China (China, or PRC) in its efforts to geopolitically influence the region.

Figure 1. Samoa



Note: CIA = Central Intelligence Agency.

Political and Social Landscape

Prior to becoming the first PIC to gain independence in 1962, Samoa experienced periods of colonial rule under the German Empire and then a New Zealand-administered trusteeship. Samoa has a social and political culture informed by exposure to Western influence and long-standing traditional customs, particularly the *Fa'a Samoa*, or the Samoan Way, which emphasizes community service, respect, and intricate social obligations to one's family and village.

Samoa is now a parliamentary democracy with a unicameral legislature comprising up to 54 members. It

holds general elections every five years. Prime Minister La'auliemalelietua Leuatea Polataivao Schmidt (La'auli), was elected in an August 2025 snap election as the leader of the Fa'atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi (FAST) Party. La'auli defeated incumbent Prime Minister Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa (2021-2025), under whom La'auli served as a cabinet minister until La'auli's removal from office in January 2025 while facing 10 criminal charges. As party leader, La'auli ejected Fiamē from the FAST. Fiamē and her followers then created the new Samoa Uniting Party, which won three seats in the August election. The FAST currently holds 30 seats (out of a total of 51) in parliament. Leading up to the election, competing party platforms emphasized social welfare and economic development policy plans, infrastructure improvements, and political stability.

Prior to Fiamē's election, Samoan politics were dominated by the Human Rights Protection Party. Former Prime Minister Tuila'epa Sa'ilele Malielegaoi (1998-2021) remains a power broker in parliament.

The Head of State (*O le ao o le Malo*) is a ceremonial role and is elected by the Legislative Assembly. Heads of state customarily have been selected from among the holders of the four paramount chiefly titles, the *tama'aiga*, although this is not a constitutional requirement. Other indigenous political structures are embedded into modern Samoan governance. Until 1991, suffrage was extended only to members of the chiefly *matai* class, and to this day only individuals with *matai* titles may run for parliament or serve on village councils. Eighty percent of Samoa's land is governed under a customary tenure system led by *matai*, some of whom opposed previous efforts by external financial institutions to advocate for land reforms.

Christianity is the predominant religion of Samoa as well as a powerful social and political force. In 2017, parliament amended the constitution, establishing Samoa as a "Christian nation." Some analysts argue that the change may lead to discrimination and strengthen church-affiliated lobbying activities. The State Department reported in 2023 that there was strong societal pressure at the village level to make financial contributions, often totaling more than one-third of a family's income, to church leaders and projects.

U.S.-based nongovernmental organization Freedom House ranks Samoa as "Free," noting its democratic political system, independent judiciary, and general respect for civil liberties. Samoa continues to face challenges such as poverty, vulnerability to natural disasters, and domestic violence against women.

Economy

The World Bank classifies Samoa as an upper-middle-income country with a national gross domestic product (GDP) of \$1.07 billion in 2024 (GDP per capita was \$4,894 in 2024) and a growth rate of 9.4%. In 2024, the State Department reported that Samoa's economy was dominated by the services sector, primarily tourism, which accounted for roughly half of the Samoan national GDP and employed 65% of the formal workforce. Agriculture and fisheries are other important sectors, accounting for 90% of Samoa's total exports. Financial support from external partners is another pillar of Samoa's economy. The Asian Development Bank has committed over \$600 million in public sector loans, grants, and assistance through the end of 2024.

Financial remittances from Samoans working overseas provide a significant influx of capital into the Samoan economy. In 2022, remittances were almost 35% of GDP. Of the remittances tracked, roughly 80% of the recipients in FY2023-FY2024 were households. The preponderance of financial remittances comes from members of the Samoan diaspora in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States.

According to the U.S. Embassy in Samoa, the United States is Samoa's largest export market, accounting for nearly 50% of total exports. In 2024, the United States had a trade surplus of \$48.9 million with Samoa.

Relations with the United States

The United States has an embassy in Samoa's capital, Apia, but historically the U.S. Ambassador to Samoa also has been accredited to New Zealand and managed bilateral relations from Wellington. President Donald Trump has nominated Jared Novelly as Ambassador to New Zealand, Samoa, the Cook Islands, and Niue.

U.S. engagement with Samoa has centered on foreign assistance to Samoa. Previous U.S. programming from the Department of Defense and the dismantled United States Agency for International Development supported maritime security, educational opportunities, economic and infrastructure development, women's empowerment, health care, and disaster risk mitigation. The Peace Corps has sent volunteers to Samoa since 1967.

Samoa has no military, but the United States and Samoa have a mutual law enforcement agreement that allows Samoan law enforcement officials to board U.S. naval and Coast Guard vessels to enforce maritime security laws. In 2024, an addendum was signed to further expand maritime law enforcement cooperation. The Nevada National Guard has a State Partnership Program with Samoa that has supported police, fire, and disaster management services.

Samoa's relationship with the U.S. territory of American Samoa is unique, with both polities sharing familial, linguistic, and cultural bonds. The governments of Samoa and American Samoa hold an annual *Atoa o Samoa* Executive Meeting to discuss cross-Samoa relations and opportunities for collaboration.

The U.S. Samoan diaspora was recorded at nearly 265,000 in 2022, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, making Samoans the second-largest Pacific Islander ethnic group in the United States after Native Hawaiians (Kanaka Maoli).

Foreign Policy

Among the Pacific Islands, Samoa is considered a regional leader and has been heralded by external partners as a "role model" not just for its postcolonial economic and social development but also for what some scholars characterizes as an "assertive" foreign policy that emphasizes Samoan sovereignty in diplomatic relations. Samoa helped found the Pacific Islands Forum, in which it advocates for Pacific regionalism and addressing transnational issues like climate change through consensus-based solutions.

Following independence, New Zealand and Samoa signed the 1962 Treaty of Friendship, requiring New Zealand to consider requests of assistance from Samoa. Australia is Samoa's largest development donor, and the two countries signed a 2023 Bilateral Partnership Agreement that commits them to cooperation on a broad range of issues, including climate resilience, security, and economic growth. Security cooperation includes a bilateral policing partnership and equipment donations through Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program. Samoa also participates in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, allowing Samoan workers to gain skills and income working for Australian businesses.

Diplomatic relations between Samoa and the PRC entered their 50th year in 2025. That relationship was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022. China has an embassy in Samoa and vice versa. Relations focus on security, bilateral cooperation and development assistance, tourism, educational and cultural exchanges, and trade and investment. China and PRC entities are Samoa's largest foreign creditor, accounting for 35% of external debt. Some analysts forecast a decrease in China's total debt holdings over time as the government curbs new China-financed infrastructure projects.

Former Prime Minister Fiaame visited Beijing in 2024 and committed to partnering with China on a range of issues, including disaster prevention and mitigation, climate change, maritime economics, and people-to-people exchanges. However, Fiaame pushed back on some PRC investments, including canceling a \$100 million Belt and Road Initiative-funded port refurbishment project when she came into office in 2021, claiming that it was unnecessary and expensive. In 2024, Samoa accepted a \$33 million Police Academy built by China.

Congressional Interest

Samoa's strategic location in the Pacific and history of close relations with the United States, especially the U.S. territory of American Samoa, will likely continue to drive congressional interest in the U.S.-Samoa partnership. Rising investments by China, including in Samoa, may challenge U.S. interests in the bilateral U.S.-Samoa relationship. Congress may seek to expand its oversight of U.S. federal agency engagements with Samoa to ensure that programming aligns with congressional geopolitical priorities.

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