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## The Cook Islands and Niue: States in Free Association

The Pacific Islands region comprises a variety of polities including fully independent nations, overseas territories, and self-governing states in “Free Association” with other nations. Successive U.S. presidential administrations and some Members of Congress have identified U.S. national security interests in the region, including maintaining free and open waterways; supporting U.S. diplomatic engagement, economic development, and sustainable fisheries; addressing climate change; and maintaining strong economic and security ties. U.S. policymakers also have aimed to address growing influence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) in the region, and potential security threats it may pose.

The United States established diplomatic relations in 2023 with the Cook Islands and Niue, two Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) that share maritime borders with the U.S. Pacific territory of American Samoa. Both are in Free Association with New Zealand, their former colonial power. Free Association provides under agreements with New Zealand in which the two countries manage their own domestic affairs while New Zealand offers a range of support and close relations. Their new U.S. relationships and other developments in the region may prompt Congress to oversee U.S. engagement with the Cook Islands and Niue on issues such as foreign assistance, security, and natural resource partnerships.

### Political Status of “Free Association”

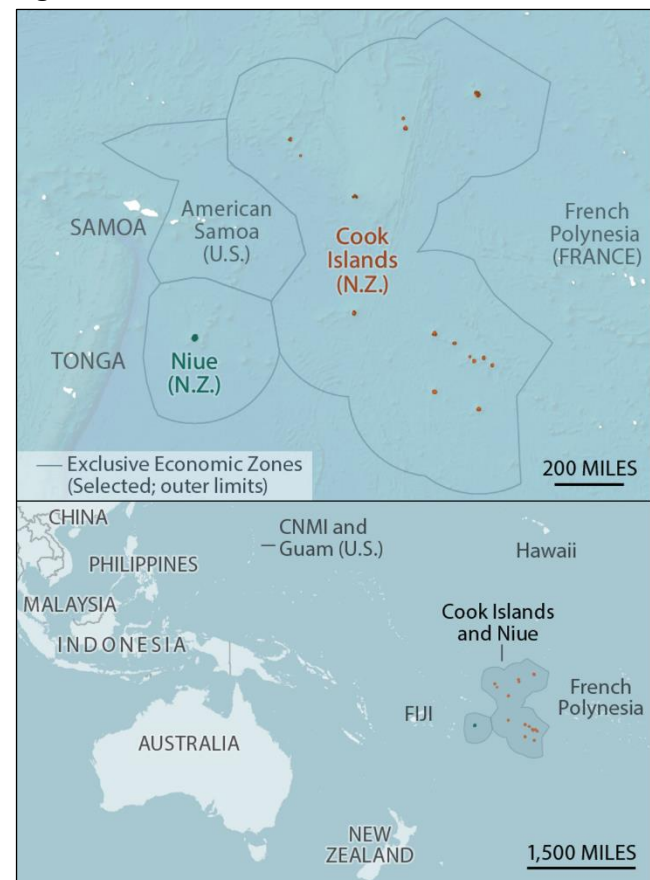
New Zealand assumed colonial administration for the Cook Islands and Niue from the United Kingdom in 1901. During the 1960s, New Zealand considered alternative political futures for the islands as part of a broader global sentiment for self-determination during that period. This culminated in both the Cook Islands and Niue declining options for total independence or full-integration with New Zealand, opting instead for “Free Association.”

Passed in New Zealand’s parliament, the Cook Islands Constitution Act of 1964 and the Niue Constitution Act of 1974 established the basis of self-government and “Free Association.” Through these acts, and subsequent agreements, the Cook Islands and Niue remain part of the Realm of New Zealand and share the same Head of State, King Charles III. New Zealand affords citizenship to people born in the Cook Islands and Niue (offering freedom of movement to and from New Zealand), but the Cook Islands and Niue govern their own domestic affairs. Niue also receives economic and administrative assistance from New Zealand as per the stipulations of Niue’s constitution.

Neither the Cook Islands nor Niue are members of the United Nations, but both are full members of regional and international organizations such as the Pacific Islands

Forum. New Zealand, in practice, provides foreign affairs and defense assistance when requested by their governments, but in the capacity of an “agent” rather than a policy developer. As stated in a 1994 introductory note to the Constitution of the Cook Islands, “the exercise by New Zealand of certain responsibilities for the defence and external affairs of the Cook Islands does not give New Zealand any rights of control.” The Joint Centenary Declaration between the Cook Islands and New Zealand, signed in 2001 and reaffirmed in 2015, sets out the “principles” of the relationship and states that the two countries shall “consult regularly on foreign affairs matters with a view to formulating common policies on important foreign affairs issues.” They also are to “consult regularly on defence and security issues and advise each other of any risks that may affect either or both Signatories.”

Figure 1. The Cook Islands and Niue



Source: Map created by CRS.

### The Cook Islands

The Cook Islands originally were inhabited by the Cook Island Māori (a Polynesian ethnic-group related to the New Zealand Māori ethnic group). The capital of Avarua is

located on the most populated island of Rarotonga. An estimated 26,000 reside in the Cook Islands, while another 90,000 Cook Islanders live in New Zealand.

The Cook Islands had a GDP of \$409 million in 2024, making it one of the region's smallest economies. Tourism accounts for 85% of the economy. National economic objectives include expanding economic inclusion and building climate-adapted public infrastructure. Due to its 2020 graduation to "high income country status" by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Cook Islands is the lowest per capita recipient of development aid in the Pacific.

At times, limits on the Cook Islands' self-governance have led to political friction with New Zealand. For example, when Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown made a state visit to China in February 2025 and signed four bilateral agreements (including a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Action Plan), New Zealand's government expressed "significant concern" that Avarua did not consult about the agreements and their security implications prior to the visit. Relations appear to have stabilized since April 2026 with the two countries signing a Defence and Security Declaration clarifying, amongst other provisions, that the Cook Islands will engage New Zealand in the "first instance for any requests for support in its defence and security."

Among the February 2025 agreements signed between the Cook Islands and China are memorandums of understanding for cooperation on the blue economy (sustainable use of ocean resources for economic growth) and a five-year agreement on deep sea mining exploration of marine minerals within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ; for more information, see CRS In Focus IF12974, *Seabed Mining Interests Across the Pacific Islands*, by Caitlin Keating-Bitonti and Jared G. Tupuola).

## Niue

The government of Niue, with its capital at Alofi, includes a 20-member Legislative Assembly representing a population of less than 2,000 inhabitants, making it the world's second smallest country by population (only Vatican City has fewer inhabitants), though more Niueans live in New Zealand. There are currently no political parties in Niue and the current prime minister is Dalton Tagelagi. Niue is scheduled to hold general elections in May 2026.

Niue is the Pacific's smallest economy, with a GDP of \$39.6 million in 2023. New Zealand is Niue's largest development partner, accounting for 78% of total foreign aid (roughly \$259 million between 2008-2022). Some analysts contend Niue's recent opening of an honorary consulate in Tokyo is an effort to expand its diplomatic presence and strengthen tourism, a primary economic sector. In November 2025, Japan and Niue signed a grant aid deal that has provided Niue with machinery and equipment to address disaster management. Niue is the only PIC to have not signed any new loan financing in the past 15 years.

## Relations with the United States

U.S. diplomatic recognition of the Cook Islands and Niue in 2023 was widely characterized as a signal of U.S. strategic investment in the Pacific. In separate statements, the State Department claimed that the United States would seek to pursue "Pacific Regionalism" with the two countries in regional organizations. U.S. engagement with the Cook Islands and Niue has included Cook Islands representatives at the 2026 Critical Minerals Ministerial and an April 2026 State Department delegation visit to the Cook Islands to scope potential Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) programs. The United States has a Maritime Interdiction Agreement with the Cook Islands, but not with Niue.

## Areas of Congressional Interest

In shaping U.S. bilateral relations with the Cook Islands and Niue, Congress faces several issues:

**Countering PRC Influence.** U.S. engagement with the Cook Islands may be viewed by some observers as an effort to counter PRC influence in the Pacific. The Cook Islands signed four bilateral agreements with China in 2025. China has an embassy in Niue and PRC development projects there have included a road upgrade, vehicle donations to the government of Niue, and telecommunications equipment such as radios given to each household.

**Seabed Mining.** On April 24, 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14285, "Unleashing America's Offshore Critical Minerals and Resources," which provides direction for supporting allies and partners interested in developing seabed minerals in their EEZ, among other actions. In August 2025, the United States and the Cook Islands announced their intention to cooperate to "advance scientific research and the responsible development of seabed mineral resources." An example of such work includes U.S.-led mapping of areas of the Cook Islands EEZ in November 2025. In February 2026, the two countries established a Framework for Engagement and Cooperation to strengthen critical mineral supply chains and deep sea mineral collaboration.

**Fuel Tanks at Sir Robert's Wharf.** The State Department committed to work with Congress to fund the removal of storm-damaged fuel tanks at Sir Robert's Wharf in Niue. Niue views the project as a development priority and has requested support from the United States on the issue before exploring other potential partnerships with the United States. As of 2026, there has been no public update on the status of U.S. support to Niue on this matter. Niue, in partnership with New Zealand, is conducting a feasibility study expected for completion by mid-2026.

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