Perspectives of FSM Leaders on China-U.S. Competition and Land Tenure

Grace Constantino DONALDSON*

Abstract:
This study investigates how domestic factors within the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)—specifically the economy, politics, and culture—influence the perspectives of FSM leaders, thereby shaping their views on the China–United States (U.S.) competition over land tenure. Utilizing an analytical framework focused on small-island agency and drawing on semi-structured interviews and historical and contemporary sources, the study advances a two-pronged argument. First, the three domestic factors are the primary drivers of FSM leaders' pragmatic engagement with both China and the U.S., while simultaneously serving as barriers that limit the impact of China–U.S. competition on land tenure. Second, China has an advantage in shaping future land tenure outcomes, attributable to the pragmatic decision-making of FSM leaders and to China's direct engagement with both state and local elites. In contrast, the U.S. encounters institutional barriers to its influence, particularly under the Compact of Free Association (COFA) between the FSM and the U.S.

Keywords: *Sovereignty, land tenure, Federated States of Micronesia, China-U.S. Competition, small-island agency*

1. Introduction

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) is one of the Pacific Island states that has been significantly affected by the hegemonic power struggle throughout history. Scholarly discourse often focuses on two siloes: the legacy of colonial influences on land tenure, and, in a more contemporary context, the role FSM plays in the China-U.S. geopolitical competition. Both emphasize the overwhelming impact of great powers and portray FSM as a passive, strategic pawn in the power struggle among them. This leaves a significant gap as neither discourse explains how domestic perspectives on political, economic, and cultural factors mediate external pressures on land tenure policies. By ignoring small-island agencies, the literature overlooks how local leaders actively navigate great-power rivalry to protect their domestic interests.

This study asks to what extent China-U.S. competition influences FSM leaders' perspectives on land tenure. The analysis shows that the great-power rivalry exerts limited influence on the perspectives

*1 Graduate School of International Relations, Ritsumeikan University
Email: tggdonaldson@gmail.com
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that shape land tenure, which is rooted in cultural identity and state sovereignty. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and analysis of contemporary sources within a constructivist framework, the findings indicate that the combination of a bottom-up hierarchical structure and pragmatic decision-making in FSM, alongside China's multilevel engagement across all sectors of government, may provide China a strategic advantage in shaping future land tenure policies.

2. Literature Review

> *When exploring the idea of a "free and open" Indo-Pacific from the perspective of the region's Small Island Developing States (SIDS), it is essential to recognize the sovereignty of our people and how we have understood our homelands and home oceans while stewarding them for collective enjoyment and sustainability for generations. For us, prosperity is not always defined in economic terms, such as the growth of our national gross domestic product, nor is security always defined in terms of military might and defense, although we do not discount those as important. In a holistic approach to prosperity and security in the Pacific and the Pacific way, we underscore a broader view. The security of our environment and its biodiversity is a priority* (Enlet 2024)[1]

(1) Introduction

This literature review consists of three parts. The first part provides the historical context in which land tenure policy matters to FSM. It does so by tracing the historical impact of colonial powers on land tenure systems, highlighting how external forces have consistently sought to reshape land-use policies to serve their commercial interests, while revealing the resilience of traditional practices. This section reveals a tendency in the literature to overemphasize the impact of great powers on small islands rather than the agency of small islands themselves.

The second part of the review studies the influence of China-U.S. competition on land tenure policy in FSM. This literature review examines their behavior as a manifestation of neocolonialism, representing a new form of colonialism. This reveals that, as discussed in the first part of the literature review, contemporary literature on great-power competition overlooks the importance of small island agencies.

The third part is the conclusion, which discusses how colonial power, even with its administrative authority to legally alter land-use regulations, could not change traditional land tenure rules. The exercise of multi-dimensional sovereignty insulates land tenure, despite the external pressures and influences of both colonial and neocolonial great powers.

Overall, this review argues that while both genres of literature discuss the direct impact of great power competition, the importance of FSM leaders' perspectives shaping domestic land tenure policies is ignored.

(2) Historical Perspectives and Great Power Impacts

History shows that regardless of who is in power, land tenure always matters. Colonial powers modified

1 Joe-Silem Enlet is a former diplomat of FSM and a native son of the State of Chuuk, FSM.

land policies primarily to serve their commercial interests over indigenous social structures. Colonial governments, driven by their own interests and motivations, imposed their values and administrative processes on Micronesians without regard for their well-being (Pelzer 1950). During its occupation of Micronesia from 1899 to 1914, the Germans conducted land surveys and, in doing so, Echterhölter (2021) argues, required the people to define their homesteads in new terms that favored the Germans. The Japanese colonial government continued the Germans' survey work and converted unused land into public land. However, what was perceived as unused land was used for traditional hunting, fishing, and farming. The U.S. colonial power that followed the Japanese attempted to return the land to the original landowners. The process employed to return land, however, failed to account for Micronesian traditions and would create confusion and litigation over land ownership that continues today. Although colonial powers possessed the legal and administrative authority to alter land policies, local populations continued to practice traditional land tenure systems, albeit in secret, demonstrating the resilience of their customs (Hezel 1995). Historical literature fails to acknowledge the importance of leaders' perspectives and small islands in navigating the impositions of great powers on their culture. Today, customary practices and restrictive policies continue to serve as barriers to neocolonial pressures.

(3) Contemporary Great Power Competition and Neocolonialism

China and the U.S. are viewed as exhibiting neocolonial characteristics comparable to historical colonial practices, using economic, political, military, and social integration as means of exerting influence (Das and Albinsson 2023; Nawaz, Ali, and Saddique 2021; Xie 2018). However, this reveals that the small-island agency is also ignored in the contemporary literature on great-power rivalry and neocolonialism. Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister of Ghana and later president, wrote:

> *The essence of neo-colonialism is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. Its economic system and thus its political policy are directed from outside.* (Nkrumah 1965, 4).

Underwood (2023), a Pacific Islander scholar, contends that everyone acknowledges that neocolonialism exists in various ways, both directly (foreign affairs, influence through assistance programs) and indirectly (trade and economic relations). Furthermore, while Pacific island nations are victims of colonialism, he argues that "*we are victims of our own actions.*"

At the intersection of Nkrumah's definition of neocolonialism and Underwood's view of island agency lies the tension between the narrative of the people's continued victimization and Underwood's view of pragmatic state agency.

China's economic growth expanded its influence in the FSM by promoting economic development and collaboration through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ((Hawksley 2025; Sihaloho, Prabowo, and Pamungkas 2024; Wright 2023). Recognizing the FSM's strategic location, the U.S. institutionalized its influence through the COFA agreement, shaping FSM's economic and political structures and facilitating the integration of FSM's culture into U.S. norms. FSM's constitution, political and economic structures, and education system are all modeled after those in the U.S.

In addition to direct economic support provided through the BRI and the COFA, international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank (WB), promote the development of small economies by supporting infrastructure

projects and offering recommendations for economic recovery (ADB 2015; Kukkonen and Setyowati 2025). IFIs are primarily governed by major shareholders, including the U.S. and Japan, which is a close political ally of the U.S. (Bhasin and Gupta 2018; Petrone 2019). These institutions have been criticized for prioritizing the interests of major powers over those of developing countries, thereby exhibiting neocolonial tendencies in their promotion of infrastructure and economic recovery strategies (Babb and Kentikelenis 2018; Feldner 2018).

Despite external pressures stemming from China-U.S. competition and recommendations from IFIs, FSM leaders continue to prioritize culture and agency. In 2023, the FSM Constitution was amended to permit dual citizenship for the diaspora, thereby strengthening the diaspora's cultural ties to their homeland and enhancing control over land.

To further the discussion of neocolonial behavior by the great powers and state agencies, this paper provides a closer look at the influences of China and the U.S. on state agencies.

1) China's Influence

China's influence is examined through the lenses of South-South cooperation, ideological alignment, economic considerations, and security dynamics (Rudd 2022; Wesley 2020). While scholars and analysts differ regarding China's specific interests, there is consensus about the extent of its influence. China's increased influence in FSM is illustrated in an April 2024 joint statement by China President Xi Jinping and FSM President Wesley W. Simina, in which FSM and China agree to expand the BRI projects, and for FSM to explore cooperation with China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) (Xinhua News Agency 2024).

Zhang (2017) writes that China's diplomacy in the Pacific has been a three-pronged approach: visit diplomacy, economic leverage, and a non-interference policy, in which China insists that all nations, large and small, are equal members of the international community. Much of China's aid to the Pacific comes from infrastructure construction, such as bridges, roads, and buildings. Multiple FSM presidents have been given a full diplomatic welcome, and for over 30 years, have developed stronger international relations (Zheng 2019).

Wallis and Tubilewicz (2024) argue that Chinese influence is not only "material, causal, and unidirectional." Instead, China attempts to reshape the identities and interests of the island nations' elites and publics, aligning their ideas about rules and practices with China's core interests and perspectives. However, there is no evidence that FSM's elites have aligned with China's core interests. Leaders continue to reaffirm FSM's partnership with the U.S. and enduring friendship (Fredrick 2026b; Panuelo 2021). Wesley-Smith (2013) adds that the egalitarian approach to aid with few strings attached, which differs from that of other traditional donors, is pragmatically welcomed by Pacific island nations. He also argues (2021) that China's influence is selective and complex, with political and economic elements overlapping rather than driven by ideological agency. Instead, China promotes South-South cooperation or mutual assistance among developing countries, of which it claims membership.

While China's influence can be observed in economic and South-South cooperation, other analysts insist that China's influence in the Pacific is driven by its security agenda. China has engaged with the Pacific Island countries (PIC) for three decades through the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Antigua and Barbuda 2022). Some contend that China's influence in the Pacific is strategically motivated to politically isolate Taiwan (Englund 2022; Harold, Morris, and Ma 2019). Others assert that China could disrupt U.S. defense strategies should it breach, not only the First Island

Chain, which includes Taiwan, but also the Second Island Chain, which includes FSM (Chang 2020; Paskal 2023a; Yoshihara 2012). The security agreement between China and the Solomon Islands brings to greater focus China's strategic intentions (Liu 2022).

Before leaving office, FSM President David Panuelo claimed that China was engaging in "political warfare," expressing concerns regarding China's influence in FSM and the China-Solomon Islands security agreement (Paskal 2023b). In contrast, the current FSM President, Wesley Simina, while using the same terminology regarding FSM-China relations, views it through the lens of "rooted in the principles of peaceful coexistence" (Fredrick 2024).

The divergent perspectives of two FSM presidents illustrate the on-the-ground national debate about China's influence. The question arises as to whether FSM is more likely to adopt protective or less restrictive land tenure policies, depending on the perspective of the FSM president. However, the impact of China's influence on land tenure must be examined at the state level, as land authority resides with individual states rather than the federal government. The debate also highlights somewhat conflicting voices and pragmatic perspectives that say China is a development partner but cannot be trusted.

2) U.S. Influence

The literature identifies two primary mechanisms, the Peace Corps and the COFA, through which the U.S. seeks to exert influence by implementing programs that promote U.S. political values. The overarching objective is to integrate the FSM's culture with U.S. cultural norms.

The U.S. maintains that the future of the U.S. and the world depends on a free and open economic and democratic environment and the U.S.-led rule of law; defining U.S. influence as "the capacity or power of the U.S. to compel foreign audiences to actively support interests or at least not act against them, particularly in the case of U.S. security." (White House 2022; U.S. Department of State 2010[2]). In 2022, the language included the need to prevent China from changing rules and norms and from becoming the world's most influential country (White House 2022). While FSM and China strengthen their diplomatic relations, the FSM–U.S. relationship also continues to thrive, as illustrated by the recently renegotiated COFA agreement, which offers more benefits to FSM (U.S. Department of State 2024).

The Peace Corps was a volunteer program that was first implemented in FSM in 1966 and continued until 2018 (Peace Corps 2024). The volunteers were typically young, college-educated, and idealistic Americans who formed alliances within developing countries (Drezner 2000). Many of the young Americans who stayed beyond their tenure later became involved in proposing and drafting legislation for the Congress of Micronesia (COM) (Severance 2016).

The second mechanism of influence is through COFA. Under COFA, signed in 1986,[3] the U.S. promises to assist FSM towards economic self-sufficiency while recognizing its status as a sovereign nation. It also addresses U.S. strategic and security objectives. It includes the option for the U.S. to "foreclose access to or use of the Federated States of Micronesia by military personnel or for the military purposes of any third country" (Compact of Free Association n.d.). However, COFA's influence extends beyond the funds it obligates. It strengthens influence through soft power[4] means. It allows any FSM citizen to reside in any U.S. territory or state without the visa requirements that typically apply to

2 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/pdcommission/reports/2010report/chapter6/index.htm>

3 COFA was signed in 1986, and subsequently amended in 2003, and 2024 (FSM Legal Information System)

4 Soft power, as defined by Joseph Nye, is the ability of a country to influence another or shape outcomes without use of coercive methods, such as threats or money, thereby increasing goodwill and relations (Nye 2009, 5).

foreigners.

As a result, the number of FSM citizens who migrated and reside in the U.S. is approximately one-third of the citizens living in FSM (FSM Statistics 2021). The 2023 renegotiated COFA ensures that the U.S. and FSM will maintain their association (Lum 2023), thereby sustaining U.S. presence in FSM. In summary, the influence of the U.S. on FSM is on all three fronts—political structure, culture, and economics.

3) Connecting the Constitution, Traditions, Land Tenure, and Sovereignty

FSM's multi-dimensional sovereignty, embedded in the country's constitution, acknowledges the formal and functional roles of traditional leaders, which creates a bottom-up hierarchical system that protects its land from external pressures. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of protecting the people's traditions, designating this protection as a "compelling social purpose" (FSM Constitution n.d.). This commitment to tradition led to the devolution of power to the states, granting them authority over all matters related to tradition and culture. The first president of FSM, Tosiwo Nakayama, was quoted as describing his newly established government as "*an arm of the states…we have no control over the states because we are a loose federation and the states are more powerful than the national government*" (Hanlon 2014, Kindle location 4299 of 7567). Consequently, it is the states, not the national government, that hold authority over land tenure policies. This is further codified in the FSM Constitution, which expressly restricts federal powers to banking and commerce, postal service, international relations and international trade (FSM Constitution n.d.).

The global community recognizes FSM as a sovereign nation; however, actual power lies with the four states. This devolution of power establishes a form of state sovereignty that prioritizes local governance over federal oversight in matters of culture and land. This state sovereignty is codified in Article V, Section 2 of the FSM Constitution, which protects the state powers by statute. If challenged as a violation of Article Four, the Declaration of Rights, "*Micronesia's traditions shall be considered a compelling social purpose warranting such government action*" (FSM Constitution n.d.). It was designed to empower the individual states, which are culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse, to preserve their unique cultures and identities. This section of the Constitution, corroborated by interview participants' statements regarding land protection, constrains the impact of China-U.S. geopolitical rivalry on domestic political, economic, and cultural determinants of land tenure policies within the states.

The concept of sovereignty is more complex than the traditional Westphalian notion of an independent state (Hannum 1998/1999; Overton et al. 2019). According to Secretary-General Kofi Annan of the United Nations (1999), sovereignty encompasses two primary dimensions: state sovereignty and individual sovereignty. He defines state sovereignty as the principle that governments serve their people, rather than the reverse. This form of sovereignty defines national interests, common goals, and shared values. Annan further contends that a third dimension exists, the rights of states within a nation. Mamudu and Studlar (2009) propose the concept of shared sovereignty, wherein states voluntarily transfer aspects of their sovereignty to intergovernmental organizations or supranational entities to address challenges that cannot be managed independently. Glanville (2013) posits that sovereignty is the right to wage just war against tyranny and to protect the oppressed. Jean-Marie Tjibaou, leader of the Kanak independence movement in New Caledonia, asserted that "*Sovereignty is the right to choose partners*" (Baker 2021), emphasizing that the essence of independence lies in interdependence. Tjibaou is quoted as saying, "*The balance of power is such that if we didn't have international support, the colonial power could wipe us*

out here" (Baker 2021).

It could be said that the FSM states exercise sovereignty in all the forms described by Annan (the devolution of power), Glanville (the use of their legal autonomy to protect their interests against foreign pressures), and Mamudu and Studlar (four island states uniting as one country, thus sharing sovereignty, to deal with issues that are global in nature, such as climate change). While the U.S. is bound by institutional restrictions, Tjibaou's "right to choose" definition may also give China an opening to gain an advantage in influencing future land tenure policies. It speaks directly to the states' right to seek interdependence for economic survival. By redefining sovereignty through a multi-dimensional framework, it is possible to separate federal-level engagement with the great powers from local states' interests in protecting their interests.

(4) Conclusion

Successive colonial powers used their administrative authority to change land-use rules, but traditional land-tenure resistance persisted. Contemporary literature on China-U.S. competition and international institutions demonstrates that major powers exert neocolonial influence through economic and development assistance, as well as political and social pressures. Despite historical legal mandates and ongoing external pressures, traditional land tenure practices in FSM have persisted and remain embedded within the cultural and legal frameworks that safeguard land from foreign control. For instance, Chuuk, the poorest state, and Yap, considered the most traditional, have exhibited divergent responses to economic pressure. This variation indicates that state-level agencies exert greater influence than the potential benefits or pressures resulting from China-U.S. competition.

Chinese and U.S. initiatives, such as the BRI, the U.S. Peace Corps, and COFA, as well as the IFI's recommendations, expose FSM citizens to views of land as a commodity and to alternative economic systems. These initiatives primarily influence federal-level policies, which lack legal authority over state land tenure.

Furthermore, the divergent rhetoric of FSM presidents—characterizing China as engaged in political warfare versus an advocate of peaceful coexistence—remains confined to the federal-level discourse and does not extend to state-level governance.

Ultimately, the loose federation of states possesses legal authority that supersedes federal mandates. Through the exercise of multi-dimensional sovereignty, the states further insulate land tenure from external influences arising from China-U.S. competition.

3. Methodology

(1) Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study offers a systematic method for assessing the extent to which China-U.S. competition influences leaders' perspectives on domestic political, economic and cultural factors, which in turn shape land tenure. This section presents the rationale for the study. Two core components pertinent to land tenure policy were examined in this research: First, this study dissects the perspectives of FSM leaders on domestic factors and determines which of the three factors have been most impacted by the China-U.S. competition. Second, the study examines FSM leaders' perspectives on China-U.S. competition and its influence on their views of the domestic factors mentioned above. By

examining how China and the U.S. influence, it is possible to draw a conclusion about the effectiveness of the great powers' influence. See Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Analytical Framework

This framework goes beyond the conventional realist understanding of the impact of the China-U.S. rivalry on small island states. Realism views political power as driven by competition and self-interest and in which rational actors seek survival and security. Morgenthau (1949, 14) defined political power as a psychological relationship between two states—one influencing the other. Influence can take the form of orders, threats, persuasion, or a combination of these. Additionally, the pursuit of material assets, such as control over a sea lane or acquisition of territory, inherently involves exerting influence over another state. Mearsheimer (2014, 21–24) writes that great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power and will seek opportunities to achieve global hegemony. Mearsheimer further asserts that states gain power at others' expense. The China-U.S. relationship, characterized by a rising power (China) challenging an established power (U.S.), illustrates a realist dynamic. The FSM-China-U.S. relationship can then be analyzed through a realist lens, with both China and the U.S. seeking to influence FSM to shift the balance of power in their respective favor.

This framework is informed by a constructivist approach to international relations, which emphasizes the importance of *ideas and perspectives* as key determinants of policymaking, rather than material factors as realists claim. For example, Onuf (2013, 3–4) asserts that constructivism views humans as social beings who construct realities that shape social behavior. Additionally, rules mediate the relationship between society and individuals by prescribing appropriate actions. Wendt (1999, 372) maintains that human-generated ideas enable states to relate to one another and define their identities, thereby establishing a connection between ideas and identities. Peterson (1993) posits that conceptions of the self emerge from the interaction between psychological and sociocultural variables. Furthermore, individuals possess multiple identities (e.g., teacher, student, parent) that shape perspectives and behavior.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, perspectives are ways of viewing phenomena that are shaped by experience and personality. In this study, perspective is operationalized as the shared meaning embedded in the identity-related interpretation of land. In contrast to the realist perspectives, which view land as a material asset to be acquired or used for advantage, the constructivist perspective explains how leaders' perspectives shape pragmatic decision-making to protect their land while navigating geostrategic rivalry.

While the China-U.S. geostrategic rivalry is a realist pursuit of the great-power agenda, it has not dictated domestic land tenure policies. Rather, the response to the realist agenda is marked by pragmatic agency, a constructivist lens. Rubinstein and Mulalap (2014) provide a common Yapese saying that captures the method of the island state's agency: "There is wisdom in the basket," which refers to the slow process of preparing a betel nut from the basket before it is finally chewed. This serves as a metaphor for achieving social consensus through deliberate thought.

The COFA agreement provides many benefits to the government, but the bureaucratic nature of COFA may compel states to accept China's infrastructure support pragmatically, without ceding land. For example, China revitalized an existing World War II-era airport in Yap to meet the state's economic and social needs. Amid the China-U.S. geostrategic competition, states are observing neighboring island nations such as Palau, which have modified their land tenure regimes to attract foreign investment, and FSM states are evaluating how this might inform the strengthening of their own land tenure systems (Bohane 2016).

The research question concerns the perspective of FSM leaders that shape land tenure policies, not the FSM-China-U.S. relationship itself. Therefore, the empirical analysis, rooted in constructivist principles and using a semi-structured interview method, is most appropriate for examining how leaders' perspectives on domestic factors influence land tenure policies.

(2) Methods

1) Content Analysis Approach

This study utilizes a semi-structured, open-ended interview approach with 13 individuals from FSM, conducted either in person or via Zoom. A qualitative design enables the capture of the contextual and experiential dimensions of perception. The methodology incorporates thematic analysis, which offers a structured yet adaptable framework for examining the perspectives of diverse participants across the four FSM states. This approach allows themes to emerge organically from the interview data, rather than imposing predetermined categories. Inductive coding is subsequently applied to systematically classify statements into recurring themes and to analyze the content provided by interview participants.

2) Selection Criteria for Interview Participants

Interview participants were selected based on their affiliation with one of the following groups: current or former elected officials; high-ranking elected and non-elected government officials at the national and state levels; chiefs, historians, journalists, and entrepreneurs. In-person interviews were conducted on Pohnpei and Guam between January and December 2023. Due to budgetary constraints, travel to the other three states was not feasible. Participants who reside in Yap, Chuuk, or Kosrae were interviewed via Zoom.

Table 1. Selection of Interview Participants

Position/(Sector)	*Age, State*	*Rationale for selection*
Elected officials (Federal, State)	60s, Chuuk (2)	Represents federal and state-level offices, although from the same state
Appointed Diplomats (Federal)	40s, 60s, Kosrae (1), Chuuk (1)	Represents non-elected officials appointed by different presidents
Chief (Local or village)	60s, Chuuk (1)	Traditional, community leader
Journalists (Non-sector)	50s, 60s, Pohnpei (1), Yap (1)	Provides historical and current community perspectives that are "non-political"
Land management officers (Federal, State)	50s, Pohnpei (2)	Understand the historical, political, cultural, economic, and community perspectives on land from both the federal and state levels
Entrepreneur (State)	40s, Pohnpei (1)	Provide insight into the value of land from an economic perspective

Department Heads (State)	40s – 50s, Pohnpei (2)	Appointments by the current president, but one was also appointed by a previous president of a different island
Historian (Non-sector)	60s, Chuuk (1)	Provides historical insight into current perspectives

As of 2023, FSM's population was 75,817. Chuuk and Pohnpei account for approximately 45 percent and 34 percent of the population, respectively, while Yap and Kosrae represent 14 percent and 7 percent (FSM 2023 Population and Housing Census). Among the thirteen interviewed participants, five were from Chuuk, six from Pohnpei, and one each from Yap and Kosrae. The distribution of interviewees closely reflects the population proportions of each state. However, in qualitative research, the substance and the consistency of emerging themes are more important than the quantity of participants from each state or sector.

3) Structure of the Interview Method

The semi-structured interview method was selected because it provides a structured framework while allowing exploration of additional, unanticipated factors. Interviews offer an advantage over focus groups by preventing the influence of others' opinions. On small islands, participants often know each other, making focus groups unreliable due to unknown relationships. Thus, this method was excluded.

Finally, the semi-structured method was selected because it allows the researcher to gather the unique perspectives of interview participants, which is not often possible with other data collection methods, such as surveys.

4) Interview Questions

Four fundamental questions were posed to each of the participants:

1) How does China or the U.S. influence policies in FSM?
2) How does China or the U.S. influence land tenure policies in FSM?
3) What is your perspective on the China-U.S. competition?
4) Why did the FSM vote for dual citizenship, after almost three decades of debate?

The first two interview questions were designed to elicit participants' perspectives on the influence of China and the U.S. on land issues. The third question aimed to assess respondents' preferences for either China or the U.S., with responses potentially indicating which country exerts greater influence on land tenure policies. The fourth question addressed dual citizenship due to its potential impact on eligibility for land ownership and inheritance. After decades of debate and repeated inclusion in proposed constitutional amendments, dual citizenship for individuals with FSM ancestry was approved by all four states in 2023.

Although the law applies to citizens of FSM, the ability of new citizens to own land continues to depend on their ancestry, as state-specific land ownership laws remain in effect. For instance, an individual of Chuuk ancestry cannot own land in Pohnpei.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one and ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.

5) Data Collection and Analysis

Snowball sampling was employed as the selection method for data collection. Initial attempts to contact

and confirm participants through letters, email, and telephone were unsuccessful. The most effective approach involved leveraging personal contacts in Guam, who facilitated introductions to potential participants. Following each interview, participants were asked to refer others who might be willing to participate. Additionally, Facebook was utilized to establish direct connections. Facebook contacts and others living outside of Pohnpei were interviewed online via Zoom.

Nevertheless, snowball sampling presents inherent limitations. A primary concern is the potential for a lack of diversity of perspectives among friends and colleagues. Secondly, there is an inherent loss of control that impacts the reliability and validity of the results (Ting, Memon, Thurasamy, and Cheah 2025). Therefore, it was necessary to selectively interview only those participants who met certain criteria. To ensure the rigor of this qualitative study, it was necessary to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data. Critics of qualitative research often argue that data analysis is too subjective and, therefore, call into question its trustworthiness. Below are the descriptions of the steps taken to ensure validity and reliability.

a) Validity

To ensure the validity of the data, this study triangulated the data against primary documents (COFA, FSM and state Constitutions, Court rulings) and against IFIs and ADB (2023) reports.

Audio recordings using iPhone and Zoom were transcribed using two AI software programs, iTranscribe and Transcribe. The transcripts were then uploaded to Atlas.Ti software for qualitative analysis of interview data. Atlas.Ti was used to code the data.

b) Reliability

1. Participants were selected from the political, economic, cultural, and community sectors.
2. All participants occupied leadership or elite positions within their respective sectors.
3. Government officials served as representatives of either state or federal government entities.
4. A chief served as the representative for the community sector.
5. Journalists were long-term residents of FSM and reported from Pohnpei and Yap.
6. A historian who taught students from every state of FSM was included.
7. One-on-one, in-person interviews were conducted at sites selected by participants. This approach facilitated open discussion and minimized influence from broader community perspectives.
8. At the outset of each interview, participants were assured of confidentiality and informed of their right to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw from the interview at any time.
9. Permission was obtained to record interviews using both iPhone and Zoom.
10. Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, iTranscribe and Transcribe, were used to convert audio recordings into Word files.
11. To minimize subjectivity, these transcriptions were merged and uploaded to the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.Ti.

c) Coding Steps

Thematic analysis of interviews was conducted through coding. The following coding process was implemented:

1. Each relevant paragraph or sentence of the raw data was coded into two main general themes: China and the U.S. From these general themes, they were further analyzed to determine the

following:

2. Whether China exerted influence or did not exert influence
3. Whether the U.S. exerted influence or did not exert influence
4. After determining whether China or the U.S. exerted influence, instances were categorized as influencing the state government or the federal government.
5. Once the level of influence was identified, comments were further analyzed to determine whether it was political, economic, or cultural.
6. Some comments were assigned to multiple codes or subcodes. Because this analysis was thematic and qualitative rather than quantitative, overlapping categorizations reflected the nuanced nature of certain statements.

4. Empirical Analysis

(1) Introduction

This section examines FSM leaders' perspectives on domestic factors—specifically the economy, politics, and culture—and assesses how these elements inform their views on the China-U.S. competition over land tenure. To do so, interviewees' comments were analyzed in relation to two sub-themes identified from the interview data for each factor. The economic factor is analyzed through the sub-themes of 1) pragmatic agency and 2) the secondary role of the economy. The political factor encompasses the sub-themes of 3) bottom-up hierarchy and 4) state sovereignty. The cultural factor is explored through the sub-themes of 5) connection between land and identity, and 6) the importance of cultural identity. In addition, their views on the China-U.S. competition over land tenure are also analyzed in relation to two sub-themes: 7) limited geopolitical influence on land tenure and 8) the differing strategies of influence employed by China and the U.S. The empirical analysis demonstrates that economic security, political considerations such as state sovereignty, and cultural factors, including the protection of identity and land, are primary influences on FSM leaders' perspectives on the impact of the China-U.S. competition on land tenure. These factors shape a pragmatic approach to engagement with great powers.

(2) Perspective on Domestic Economic, Political, and Cultural Factors

Analysis of the interviews indicates that political, economic, and cultural factors are closely interconnected. Discussions of one factor frequently overlapped with those of others. Although this analysis seeks to distinguish these factors, the interviews reveal a clear pattern: economic factors often serve as the primary incentive for policy change, as observed in Yap. However, the political structure, characterized by a bottom-up hierarchy, limits the federal government's ability to negotiate land for economic purposes. Cultural norms ultimately serve as the final gatekeepers, preventing changes that would circumvent political and economic barriers. Therefore, any shifts in land tenure must navigate these three interrelated structures.

1) Perspective on the economy

While the economic factor was significant, it remains secondary to the roles of culture and state sovereignty. Nevertheless, economic considerations underpin pragmatic decision-making and will be addressed in a subsequent part of this section. A former high-level federally elected official observed

that even substantial economic incentives offered by major powers are rejected if they threaten land. For example, a proposed 10,000-room hotel project in Yap by a Chinese developer was ultimately scrapped because it would "*destroy the culture*" and "*transform the place*." This outcome was considered unacceptable. This same official stated,

> *...this ample money that we can receive from grants, but we just don't, we're not serious about land issue. Back to land, everything back to land. So, we're not serious about this* (referring to land reform as recommended by IFIs).

This quotation illustrates that cultural concerns take precedence over economic considerations. Another participant noted that development is not always beneficial to FSM and expressed concerns about potential cultural changes.

When asked why, despite FSM's lower-income designation (World Bank n.d.), there is no evidence of homelessness or starvation, an entrepreneur explained that land provides for the people. According to his perspective, no one is homeless because families support those without homes or land, and it is considered shameful for a family to allow a relative to remain homeless. Another participant stated:

> *You come to my village. Many of you don't even have 50¢ a day. Right? But you never see starvation. You never see homelessness. We own the land. There is nobody starving. There is nobody being homeless, and yet we do not have a dollar to live on a day. Because we own the land, we own the sea.*

Therefore, land holds economic value and can mitigate the effects of poverty. Western indicators such as financial wealth, development, or unemployment rates may be less relevant in a society that prioritizes familial care. Land functions as an economic safety net, particularly for islanders who face barriers to migration, even when opportunities exist to relocate to wealthier nations such as the U.S.

However, the economy is central to pragmatic decisions, whether economic or policy-related. Pragmatism will be further discussed in a separate part of this section. A powerful statement reflecting pragmatism in their economic decisions is: "*COFA doesn't pay the rent*." China is perceived as addressing immediate needs and providing tangible, very visible infrastructure, which reinforces its image as a development partner offering direct assistance to the people. In contrast, although the U.S. also provides economic support, it is viewed as indirect. The bureaucratic processes associated with U.S. funding contribute to the perception that the U.S. primarily supports the government rather than delivering direct assistance to the population.

2) Perspective on Political Factor

Two themes, the bottom-up hierarchy of the legal framework and state sovereignty, emerged as critical factors in safeguarding land from foreign influence and maintaining control over its narrative. The bottom-up hierarchy framework refers to the significant authority that states hold, particularly over land and culture, which constrains the federal government's powers. State sovereignty, in this context, refers to the state's ability to negotiate directly with foreign agents on matters outside the federal government's purview. The FSM Constitution limits the federal government's powers to banking and commerce, postal service, international relations and international trade (FSM Constitution n.d.). One participant clearly described the two themes: "*the FSM Congress does not determine the future of the country. It's in the*

state."

Expanding on these two themes, a key factor unilaterally expressed by the participants is the state governance of land and land use, linked to both bottom-up hierarchy and state sovereignty. Conversations surrounding sovereignty emphasize its general importance to the nation. Moreover, there is a pronounced sentiment that states must retain governance over their land. A former state governor underscored the central role of the traditional chiefs, whose customary authority over cultural and land matters far outweighs their lack of formal position. Chiefs can influence or nullify federal negotiated land deals, even those within the federal government's authority. To quote the same elected official mentioned above: "*nothing happens at the national level without the villages approving it*."

A further illustration of state authority is evident when state leaders reject land-use rights previously negotiated by the federal government, even though such rights fall within the federal government's authority to negotiate with international entities. Thus, when the issue concerns land use, any federal agreement requires informal final approval from the chiefs, who operate at the local level.

3) Perspective on the Cultural Factor

Empirical data highlights the significance of culture, prioritizing cultural over economic value in relation to land. A participant articulated this very sentiment by asking, "*How can I call myself 'Pohnpeian' if I do not have land?*" Another expressed that without land, there is no future for the FSM, underscoring the political dimension of sovereignty. When asked why culture is so strong, one participant replies, "*that's our survival*." A participant stated that the land tenure system continues to rely on "*traditional tributes to chiefs*" and clan affiliation, both of which remain robust. These statements suggest that the traditional social structures remain primary drivers of land tenure, not foreign policy. It further implies that the traditional leaders — the chiefs — have greater influence on land tenure policies than either the federal and state governments or China and the U.S.

Sovereignty is commonly defined as a country's authority to govern itself and remain free from external control. However, sovereignty encompasses more than political autonomy and international status; it also carries important cultural implications. Comments emphasizing the lack of national identity also highlight the significance of state identities, distinct from both the broader nation and other states. One participant observed that individuals in Micronesia typically identify first with their island community, stating, for example, "*I am Yapese*" or "I am Chuukese" before identifying as "Micronesian." Another participant stated, "*... so the governor is my landlord. He's a great man. I love him dearly, but he really is Pohnpei first*."

However, cultural factors cannot be separated from the political factor — state sovereignty, citing land governance as a state right, not federal. Participants, in whatever position they held, whether at the federal or state level, of any age, noted the importance of land to the states, linking state sovereignty, culture, and identity to it.

Furthermore, the state constitutions, particularly regarding land issues, vary from island to island. For example, Yap, considered the most traditional, allows 100-year leases, whereas Kosrae, the least traditional state, restricts land titles to individuals who are both FSM citizens and of Kosrae descent, by blood or adoption (FSM Legal Information System n.d.).

Despite the increased presence of both global powers, one participant noted that no constitutional amendments have been proposed to modify land tenure rules. The legal framework serves as a safeguard; one participant stated that he believed the law allowed leased land to be returned to its owners if development failed to materialize within a specified period, highlighting the tension between Chinese

influence and legal safeguards. Even in the face of bribery, traditional values persist — one participant noted that while some unscrupulous individuals accept the "*red envelopes*" when land is involved, they "later regret it," suggesting a strong social or legal backlash.

China's multilayered engagement strategy with local elites illustrates a case of subsequent regret. Initially, local elites, motivated by anticipated economic benefits, cooperated with Chinese developers. However, community pressure later prompted these elites to reverse their decisions. After Yap authorities approved long-term leases, contracts with Chinese investors increased. ETG, a Chinese-owned developer, proposed a 10,000-room resort, but public opposition led to the project being reduced to 1,500 rooms. This resistance stemmed primarily from concerns regarding the potential impacts on the Yapese lifestyle and culture (Bohane 2016; Rubinstein and Mulalap 2014).

(3) Perspective on the Impact of the China-U.S. Competition on Land Tenure

Two themes that emerged, reflecting their perspectives on the China-U.S. competition, are the differences in China-U.S. engagement with state and federal governments. The findings of this study indicate that interview participants universally recognized the China-U.S. competition as beneficial to FSM's economy, while noting its limited influence on land tenure policies.

The hierarchical structure established by the FSM Constitution limits the impact of external pressures on land matters. Multiple interviewees emphasized this constitutional barrier to external influences on land tenure. One quotation that best summarizes the bottom-up hierarchy was:

> *The president of the FSM does not determine the future of the country. No…. The national government is just a spokesperson for the nation, but the power to determine the future of the country rests within the state. And then if you look at it, it's not the state legislature. It's not the executive branch or the legislative branch. But if you really look at it, it's in the villages.*

China and the U.S. are viewed as having different styles of engagement and influence. China is characterized as engaging directly across all levels of government – federal, state and local elites. Conversely, the U.S. is viewed as engaging directly with the federal government and only indirectly with the states. One participant summed up the difference between China and the U.S. in their engagement with the states and federal governments:

> *But you know, they (Chinese) wanted to lease the land for their own ostensible tourism purposes. But it was, you know, it was never a U.S. – China situation at that level. The U.S. just cannot, will not get involved in local matters like that. It's not within their purview.*

China engages through highly visible infrastructure projects such as school gyms, bridges, and government offices. Additionally, when state governments request resources, such as computers, funding for an event, or vehicles, Chinese representatives respond promptly. Two participants mentioned anecdotally that "*red envelopes*" containing cash are commonly used incentives.

In contrast, U.S. influence is generally characterized as indirect, primarily focused on the federal level through high-level diplomacy and technical assistance. One participant described U.S. influence as consisting of "*wishes*." Another participant reported that an American diplomat explained that they would not be permitted to engage in the "*red envelope*" practice because it is illegal. In contrast, another

participant was advised by another government official that accepting "*red envelopes*" is acceptable because there is no specific prohibition in the law.

The second theme that emerged is that geopolitical influence on land is limited. A participant summed up the thoughts expressed by others, "*you know, that's how land is passed from family member to family member. So, in terms of your subject for the FSM, the U.S. and China have little to no influence on land grant issues*."

The data indicates friction with the U.S. rooted in differing cultural values. For instance, one viewpoint is that the U.S. presence in FSM is primarily "*self-serving*," and that the COFA places FSM "*between a rock and a hard place*," complicating decisions about cultural and economic priorities. Another participant noted that, absent U.S. influence during the drafting of the Constitution, the FSM Constitution would have been "*simpler*," implying it would have more closely reflected FSM's cultural practices rather than U.S. legal frameworks. These statements suggest a perceived erosion of cultural identity due to the U.S. presence. Notably, no participants made comparable remarks regarding China's lack of cultural understanding. Additionally, the recognition of differing perspectives between FSM and the U.S., while not explicitly negative, underscores distinctions that may have future implications for FSM-U.S. relations.

One participant commented on both competition and the economy, repeating the powerful statement mentioned above, "*COFA doesn't pay the rent.*" China is perceived as filling economic gaps that COFA does not address. Several interview participants identified China as a significant development partner despite expressing concerns about its trustworthiness; one participant stated, "*China is a development partner, but cannot be trusted*." While the U.S. is recognized as an important partner, no participant explicitly referred to it as a development partner. However, despite comments that China is an economic partner, there remains a lack of trust in China. This lack of trust may undermine China's future advantage over the U.S. in shaping land tenure policies.

(4) Pragmatism

Empirical analysis demonstrates that pragmatism — defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the adoption of a practical approach to social and political issues rather than an ideological stance — is fundamental to economic decision-making in FSM. This study finds that competing interests — culture and economy — are the root of their pragmatic decisions.

Concerns have been raised that FSM may become a site of strategic competition between China and the United States. Nevertheless, some stakeholders perceive this geopolitical rivalry as beneficial for FSM. The country exhibits openness to both the Compact of Free Association (COFA) and the BRI. One state elected official stated, "*Oh, he (Panuelo) was saying that they were trying to give out monies. Yes. And let me just say, during my time, the Chinese, they were able to give us a vessel, a trip vessel that can service the entire state*."

Pragmatism is also evident in statements such as "*COFA has placed FSM between a rock and a hard place*" and "*the U.S. interest is self-serving*."

One participant noted that the U.S. and FSM maintain differing perspectives. Despite this, FSM remains dependent on COFA funding, and citizens continue to migrate to the United States. Although there are longstanding political, economic, and social ties, some statements indicate that COFA imposes costs on FSM's national identity. As one remark stated, "*If not for the U.S., the FSM Constitution would be simpler*," suggesting that the FSM Constitution is not an indigenous document, but a compromise to

retain sovereignty and continue the U.S. support.

The same state elected official, decoupling foreign aid from political alignment, stated, "*Are we going to say change the compact (COFA) because we got the vessel? No. The Chinese built the capital in June, just years ago… It's built by China. Are we going to change the direction of the country? I say no.*"

At the state level, Yap mirrors this pragmatic behavior. For instance, Yap allows both the U.S. and China to renovate World War II-era airports, albeit on separate islands within Yap. Governor Francis Itimai of Yap was quoted as emphasizing that the airport "*strengthens our unity as one people across Yap State and the Federated States of Micronesia*" (Fredrick 2026a).

There is a broad consensus that FSM leaders prioritize protecting land ownership while remaining receptive to one-time financial incentives or infrastructure projects. According to one participant, isolated incidents of corruption may occur; however, these do not signify a systemic shift in land policy. Instead, leaders strategically leverage external economic opportunities without compromising established land tenure systems.

The 2023 constitutional amendment approving dual citizenship exemplifies a pragmatic approach that reconciles cultural beliefs with economic considerations, rather than adhering strictly to ideological positions. After more than two decades of debate, first introduced in the 2001 and 2011 ConCon (McClure 2018), dual citizenship legislation was reintroduced and ratified by the electorate of all four states in 2023. The primary justifications were to enable the diaspora to own land and maintain their connection to FSM, as well as enable upward mobility for the thousands of FSM citizens who are serving in the U.S. military or other branches of the U.S. government.[5]

Ultimately, the pragmatic behavior suggests that the sovereignty of the states or of the FSM is not an exclusive alliance but a strategic agency for meeting their economic needs, without relinquishing their land.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the extent to which China-U.S. competition shapes FSM leaders' perspectives on land tenure policies. It finds that China-U.S. competition exerts limited influence on the leaders' perspectives. Additionally, three empirical findings emerged from this study. First, the bottom-up hierarchy, which allocates authority over land and cultural decisions to individual states, limits the extent to which China-U.S. competition influences leaders' perspectives and, consequently, land tenure. Secondly, the U.S. faces institutional constraints and rigid oversight through the COFA framework, while China engages more directly and flexibly with state and local elites. Third, the economy is central to pragmatic decisions, but the importance of culture supersedes that of the economy.

Several interview participants identified both China and the U.S. as important partners. Notably, China was categorized as a development partner, but not the U.S. However, this recognition of China's developmental role was frequently tempered by apprehensions regarding its trustworthiness.

The combination of pragmatic decision-making and China's integrated engagement with leadership across all levels may currently provide China a strategic advantage in influencing future land tenure policies. However, a persistent lack of trust among FSM leaders may serve as a critical qualification that could, in due course, undermine China's advantage over the U.S. in shaping future land tenure policies.

5 The U.S. government restricts non-U.S. citizens from certain government service, including the U.S. military, and has included the removal of these non-U.S. citizens from military service. This creates economic instability for the thousands of FSM citizens currently serving in the U.S. military (Straut-Eppsteiner 2024).

Furthermore, empirical analysis indicates that FSM leaders' perspectives on the U.S.-China competition and land tenure are driven primarily by three factors: economic security, state sovereignty, and the preservation of cultural identity and traditional land. Consequently, these factors drive a pragmatic strategy for engaging with major powers.

Ultimately, FSM's culturally rooted internal systems act as filters or barriers to influence, potentially disrupting strategic security or hegemonic objectives. The 2023 FSM Constitutional amendment extended FSM citizenship to its diaspora. This pragmatic legislation advances economic mobility for the diaspora, strengthens state sovereignty, and imposes additional restrictions on foreign land ownership. However, further research is necessary to assess whether new FSM citizens, the diaspora, view land primarily as a vital component of cultural identity warranting protection from foreign acquisition, or as capital for economic development and personal gain. If the latter perspective prevails, it may further enhance China's relative influence over future land tenure outcomes.

This study contributes to the understanding of small-island agency by 1) emphasizing the significance of state-level sovereignties within micro-federations such as the FSM and 2) advancing the analysis of the China-U.S. competition in the Pacific. A key policy implication for both China and the U.S. is the need to recognize the impact of small-island actors at the federal, state, and local levels.

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