

Undergraduate Research Assistantship Report 2026

As assistant to Dr. Ryan Centner, I have had the pleasure of developing his project, “Development challenges in US territories and freely associated states”. The project compares three US Pacific territories – Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and American Samoa – with the three freely associated states – Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, exploring what their unique relationships with the US mean in relation to sovereignty, citizenship, political representation, infrastructure, and development prospects.

For my contribution to the project, I took on two parallel case studies - one territory, American Samoa, and one freely associated state, Palau. For each, I examined six core dimensions: the status of US citizenship, sovereignty, governing documents, US defence and security, the application of US federal law, and political representation. I also investigated current development plans and infrastructure projects underway in both locations.

Methods

During my research I worked across the disciplines of history, economics, urban planning, politics, and law. I conducted a systematic review of academic literature across Pacific studies publications and international law journals. I undertook close reading of government documents, including the American Samoa Constitution, the COFA with Palau, the US insular cases, and recent court cases challenging the lack of birthright citizenship for American Samoans. I analysed government planning documents and budget proposals, including a detailed dissection of the PAAS 2030 Vision Pago Pago airport redevelopment plan to assess the credibility and current status of proposed developments. I monitored current affairs through newspaper sources to track live developments, including US-China tensions in the Pacific, deep-sea mining restriction rollback, and military infrastructure updates. These methods helped to enhance my source reliability assessment skills, particularly when researching Pacific geopolitics and tensions between China and the US, where misinformation is frequently circulating. Additionally, I located contact details for planning officials from the Port Administration of American Samoa for the purpose of interviews to be conducted by Dr. Centner with planning officials.

Summary of Findings

American Samoa

Unlike in CNMI and Guam, American Samoans are not US citizens, largely due to domestic resistance to incorporation in order to protect Fa’a Samoa (the Samoan way of living) - its people, culture, and land rights. The majority of American Samoan land is managed on customary tenure, which can be leased to non-American Samoan applicants for a maximum of 55 years. The inability to easily mortgage or sell communal land creates structural restrictions to foreign investment required for development.

The territory faces considerable structural challenges: a declining population, limited economic diversification, and a high dependence on US financial support. The cannery industry, which historically anchored the local economy, has declined, with a USD 106 million cannery project being cancelled in 2018. Recent developments under the Trump administration, including the reopening of previously protected marine areas to deep-sea mining, have introduced new tensions between with the fishing industry and wider economic and urban development.

An additional development project is the proposed USD 250 million expansion of Pago Pago International Airport (PPG), which plans to double terminal capacity, add new gates and jetways, and develop surrounding commercial infrastructure, including hotels and a 20MW solar farm. However, through analysis of government planning documents, I found that funding for this project appears unconfirmed: the official government website still seems to be seeking federal sponsorship, with construction nominally planned for October 2026. Two structural barriers further undermine the plan's viability - US cabotage law, which restricts PPG to US-registered carriers and gives Hawaiian Airlines a regional monopoly, and the diminishing need for Pacific stopovers due to increasing aircraft range. Furthermore, Guam appears to be a more favourable strategic location for US investment in Pacific transportation infrastructure, disincentivising development.

Palau

Under its COFA with the US, Palau retains formal sovereignty while delegating full responsibility for defence and security to the United States. In return, Palau receives extensive annual grant funding directed at infrastructure, maritime surveillance, energy, healthcare, education, and government operations, contributing significantly to its development. As an independent state, Palau receives developmental aid from a range of countries, including the US, Japan, Australia, and Taiwan, with the US accounting for less than one-fifth. The 2024 COFA review committed USD 889 million over twenty years — though some of this funding has since been frozen under the Trump administration.

Palau is also a significant site of US-China geopolitical rivalry. It is one of only three Pacific nations to maintain formally recognise Taiwan despite Chinese opposition, a position it has held despite significant economic pressure from the loss of Chinese tourism. Chinese businesses have been accused of stalling development by hoarding land leases without initiating construction, limiting the economic benefit to local communities. In recent years, American military infrastructure in Palau has expanded, with the construction of a long-range radar system nearing completion and the multi-million dollar modernisation of Malakal Port in 2023.

Summary

To summarise, Palau seems to be a more favourable strategic development area for US military efforts in the Pacific in recent years. American Samoa remains constrained by structural factors and a less favourable regional positioning for military development or aircraft infrastructure. While the remaining cases must be comparatively examined in order to determine any correlation between development and relationship with the US, my research suggests that there is notable a difference in the level and rate of urban development in Palau compared to American Samoa.

Wider context and policy implications

This research contributes to an emerging body of scholarship on urban development in the Pacific, a field that is widely understudied, and which has pressing implications as cuts to USAID and drastic policy changes under the Trump administration impact development programmes across the Pacific. As the US expands into the Pacific, the question of whether strategic attention translates to development that genuinely benefits island communities remains open and urgent.

Furthermore, questions of American Samoan citizenship and the legacy of the Insular Cases remain contested. American Samoans living in the continental US have faced legal challenges

in accessing government employment and law enforcement roles — practical manifestations of their ambiguous citizenship status. The foundational legal framework governing US territories requires revision and thoughtful application to American Samoa, as the only Pacific territory that remains unincorporated.