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Climate Diplomacy and Small Island States: Negotiating Security frameworks in response to rising sea levels and climate-induced Displacement

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Abstract: As climate change intensifies, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) stand at the frontlines of rising sea levels, climate-induced displacement, and existential threat. This article explores how SIDS are leveraging climate diplomacy to reclaim agency, reshape international security discourse, and negotiate more inclusive, anticipatory frameworks for climate resilience. It examines the evolution of "climate diplomacy" from a peripheral concern to a core strategy within global governance and security architectures, highlighting how SIDS use moral authority, coalition-building, and legal innovation to assert influence far beyond their geopolitical size. Drawing on empirical sea level data, case studies from Tuvalu, the Maldives, and the Marshall Islands, and critical analysis of institutions like the UN Security Council and NATO, the article shows how SIDS have repositioned themselves from victims to vanguards of global climate justice. It also interrogates the legal vacuum surrounding climate refugees and the diplomatic efforts underway to fill it. Ultimately, the piece argues for a redefinition of security one that includes climate vulnerability as a trigger for preemptive diplomacy and multilateral cooperation. In doing so, it positions SIDS not only as witnesses to planetary crisis, but as architects of a more resilient, inclusive international order.

Keywords: Climate diplomacy; Small Island Developing States (SIDS); climate-induced displacement; sea level rise; human security; climate refugees; international security frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

Small Island Developing States (SIDS), though home to fewer than 1% of the world's population (approximately 65 million people), face disproportionately severe impacts from climate change, including sea-level rise rates now averaging 3–4 mm per year and projected to reach 10–20 mm per year by 2100 under high-emission scenarios (IPCC, 2019; UN-OHRLLS, 2024). These low-lying nations already experience once-in-a-century coastal flooding annually, a frequency set to intensify across the Pacific and Indian Oceans by mid-century (IPCC, 2019). Concurrently, the SIDS population is expected to grow by 16%; from 73.5 million in 2023 to 85.4 million by 2050 thus, exacerbating pressures on limited land and resources (UN DESA, 2024). In this context, SIDS have moved from passive victims of environmental change to proactive agents of "climate diplomacy," leveraging moral authority, coalition-building, and legal innovation to redefine security frameworks and advocate for anticipatory, inclusive governance at venues such as the UN Security Council (Falkner, 2021; Pogge, 2008).

Conceptually, climate diplomacy refers to the integration of climate change considerations into foreign policy and international relations, emphasizing the negotiation of cooperative responses to global climate challenges. Traditionally focused on multilateral treaty-making and emissions targets, climate diplomacy has evolved into a multidimensional domain that encompasses adaptation, climate finance, loss and damage, and climate justice especially as the impacts of climate change intensify and disproportionately affect vulnerable regions, notably Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

The concept gained prominence with the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992, which institutionalized climate change as a subject of global diplomacy. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol and the 2015 Paris Agreement further solidified climate diplomacy's role in coordinating international commitments to emission reductions and sustainable development (UNFCCC, 2023). However, beyond these formal agreements, climate diplomacy now includes a broad range of bilateral and regional initiatives, coalition-building strategies, and normative efforts to redefine security and sovereignty under climate stress.

A defining feature of modern climate diplomacy is its intersectional character. It links environmental degradation with economic development, migration, national security, and human rights (Dellmuth *et al.*, 2022). For instance, climate-induced displacement has emerged as a pressing challenge, prompting calls for a redefinition of refugee law and the development of international protection mechanisms for those fleeing climate-related disasters (McAdam, 2020). In this context, climate diplomacy operates at the nexus of legal

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innovation, humanitarian advocacy, and geopolitical negotiation.

Climate diplomacy has increasingly been framed through the lens of security policy as it is now widely regarded as a "threat multiplier," exacerbating existing socio-political tensions, resource scarcities, and governance challenges, particularly in fragile states (Brown *et al.*, 2023). For instance, the 2021 NATO Brussels Summit recognized climate change as a critical security challenge, and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has held multiple debates on the implications of climate instability for global peace and security (NATO, 2021; United Nations, 2023). Though contentious, these debates highlight the growing relevance of climate considerations within traditional security paradigms.

For Small Island Developing States, climate diplomacy is not merely a foreign policy tool but a survival mechanism. As nations facing existential threats from sea level rise, ocean acidification, and climate-induced migration, SIDS have emerged as influential actors in international climate negotiations. Through coalitions such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), these nations have effectively shaped global discourse on loss and damage, financing for adaptation, and equity-based climate action (Betzold & Weiler, 2017). The 2022 UN Climate Change Conference (COP27) marked a historic victory for SIDS with the establishment of the "Loss and Damage Fund," a mechanism long advocated by vulnerable countries to address irreversible climate harms (UNFCCC, 2022).

In addition to state-led diplomacy, non-state actors, including Indigenous communities, youth movements, and civil society organizations, have played an increasing role in shaping the narrative and outcomes of climate diplomacy. Movements like Fridays for Future and advocacy from groups such as Climate Action Network have pushed governments to adopt more ambitious and accountable climate policies, particularly emphasizing intergenerational equity and climate justice (Hadden, 2015; Fisher, 2019).

The institutionalization of climate diplomacy has also progressed at the national level. The European Union and several countries, including Germany, France, and the United States, have embedded climate diplomacy within their foreign affairs ministries. The reappointment of a U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate under the Biden administration exemplifies this trend, signaling renewed commitment to multilateral climate engagement (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

The Role of SIDS in International Climate Negotiations (e.g., AOSIS, UNFCCC).

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have emerged as some of the most compelling and morally authoritative voices in international climate negotiations. Despite their limited geopolitical power and minimal historical contribution to greenhouse gas emissions, SIDS have effectively leveraged multilateral platforms to influence global climate policy, notably through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. Positioned at the frontline of the climate crisis, these states advocate for ambitious mitigation, robust adaptation financing, and recognition of loss and damage as a core element of climate justice.

AOSIS: From Margins to Moral Leadership

Established in 1990, AOSIS is a coalition of 39 small islands and low-lying coastal countries that functions as a negotiation bloc within the UNFCCC and other international forums (AOSIS, 2023). Though diverse in geography and culture, AOSIS members share a common vulnerability to climate impacts, especially sea level rise, saltwater intrusion, extreme weather, and ecosystem collapse.

Over the past three decades, AOSIS has played a pivotal role in shaping the global climate agenda. It was among the first to propose legally binding emission reduction targets during the Kyoto Protocol negotiations in the 1990s. More recently, AOSIS was instrumental in the inclusion of the 1.5°C temperature goal in the Paris Agreement, a scientifically critical threshold for the survival of many island nations (UNFCCC, 2015; Schleussner *et al.*, 2016).

During the 2015 Paris negotiations, the "1.5 to stay alive" campaign led by AOSIS brought global attention to the existential risk faced by SIDS if global temperatures exceed 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Scientific assessments since then have confirmed the dire consequences of surpassing this threshold, including the near-complete loss of coral reef ecosystems and permanent inundation of low-lying atolls (IPCC, 2018).

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SIDS and the UNFCCC: Strategic Coalition-Building

SIDS have adeptly used the UNFCCC as a platform not only for raising awareness but also for forging alliances with other vulnerable groups, such as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). These coalitions enhance their bargaining power in negotiations typically dominated by high-emission countries and major economies.

One of the most significant diplomatic achievements in recent years came at COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, where SIDS, through AOSIS and joint advocacy efforts, led the successful campaign for the creation of a Loss and Damage Fund, a financial mechanism aimed at compensating countries suffering irreversible climate harms (UNFCCC, 2022). This outcome represents a historic acknowledgment of the principle that those least responsible for climate change are bearing the greatest costs.

Navigating Power Asymmetries with Moral Authority

While SIDS lack economic or military leverage, they have wielded normative power in climate diplomacy by framing the climate crisis as a moral and existential challenge. By consistently highlighting the disproportionate burdens faced by their populations, SIDS have shifted the narrative from one of abstract carbon budgets to one of human survival, cultural continuity, and sovereign integrity.

Furthermore, SIDS have been effective in storytelling diplomacy, utilizing personal testimonies, Indigenous knowledge, and evocative imagery to humanize climate data and influence public opinion and policymaker sentiment (George & Craig, 2019). Leaders such as Mia Mottley of Barbados and Enele Sopoaga of Tuvalu have gained global attention for their impassioned speeches and unapologetic calls for climate justice and systemic reform.

Framing the Climate Crisis as Both A Human Security and Geopolitical Issue.

The climate crisis is no longer viewed solely as an environmental issue, it is increasingly recognized as a human security and geopolitical challenge with wide-ranging implications for international peace, national sovereignty, and global justice. This dual framing that connects the intimate vulnerabilities of communities with the strategic calculations of states has become essential for understanding and responding to climate change in the 21st century.

Climate Change as a Human Security Threat

Human security, as defined by the United Nations Development Programme (1994), emphasizes the protection of individuals and communities from critical and pervasive threats to their rights, safety, and dignity. Climate change directly threatens this concept across multiple dimensions such as food security, health security, water access, shelter, and mobility. For Small Island Developing States (SIDS), rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, increasingly violent storms, and coral bleaching erode the physical foundations of life and culture, while undermining state capacity to provide essential services.

Recent studies confirm that climate-related risks are already displacing tens of millions of people annually. In 2023 alone, climate-related disasters triggered over 28.3 million internal displacements globally, a significant share of which occurred in low-lying island and coastal states (IDMC, 2024). Yet, unlike victims of war or persecution, climate-displaced persons lack formal recognition under the 1951 Refugee Convention, exposing a legal and ethical gap in the current international protection regime (McAdam, 2020).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) emphasizes that failure to address these insecurities will not only harm vulnerable populations but also compound existing development challenges, deepen inequalities, and hinder the realization of human rights. In this context, the climate crisis constitutes a profound threat to human dignity and survival making human security a critical framework for climate governance.

Beyond individual and community vulnerabilities, climate change poses structural risks to international stability and geopolitical order. As resources become scarcer and environmental stress intensifies, there is growing concern about the potential for interstate competition, forced migration, and conflict over water, arable land, and habitable territory (Krampe, 2022).

Nowhere is this more visible than in the Arctic, where melting ice is unlocking new shipping routes and access to untapped oil and gas reserves, intensifying geopolitical competition among major powers such as Russia, the United States, and China (Ebinger & Zambetakis, 2021). Similarly, low-lying states in the Pacific and Indian Oceans

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face potential loss of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) as sea levels rise, prompting questions about maritime sovereignty, legal boundaries, and access to marine resources (Rayfuse, 2020).

The strategic implications of climate-induced displacement are also significant. As people are forced to migrate from increasingly uninhabitable environments, neighboring states may face tensions over border management, integration policies, and resource sharing. These movements are already influencing regional dynamics in South Asia, the Sahel, and the Caribbean (Werz & Conley, 2012).

Moreover, militaries and defense institutions around the world are integrating climate risk into their strategic assessments. The U.S. Department of Defense now labels climate change as a "threat to operational readiness" and a "destabilizing force" in fragile states (U.S. DoD, 2021). The UN Security Council has also debated the security implications of climate impacts, although attempts to formally integrate climate change into its mandate have been met with political resistance (UNSC, 2023).

A Converging Security Paradigm

Framing climate change through both a human security and geopolitical lens reflects a growing convergence in international discourse. For SIDS, this convergence is especially acute. This is real, as their very existence is threatened (human security), while their eroding territorial integrity raises unresolved legal and political questions in the global system (geopolitical security). As such, their advocacy is not merely moral but strategic, aimed at reshaping international norms and pushing for institutional reform in climate law, refugee protection, and multilateral governance.

Recognizing climate change as a security issue in both senses underscores the urgency of transformative diplomacy, international cooperation, and anticipatory policy frameworks that center justice, equity, and resilience. Only by acknowledging the full spectrum of security threats posed by climate change can global actors respond adequately to the scale and complexity of the crisis.

RISING TIDES: THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO SMALL ISLAND STATES

Empirical Data on Sea Level Rise (IPCC, World Bank projections).

Sea level rise is one of the most immediate and existential threats posed by climate change, especially for low-lying Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Driven by thermal expansion of seawater, melting glaciers, and ice sheet loss from Greenland and Antarctica, the pace of sea level rise has accelerated significantly in the 21st century. Multiple authoritative sources, including the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the World Bank, have provided robust projections that underscore the urgency of global mitigation and adaptation efforts.

The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), global mean sea level (GMSL) increased by approximately 20 cm between 1901 and 2018, with the rate of rise accelerating in recent decades. From 2006 to 2018, the rate of GMSL rise was 3.7 mm per year, up from 1.3 mm per year between 1901 and 1971 (IPCC, 2021). Also, NASA satellite data corroborates this trend, indicating that global sea level has risen by about 102 mm since 1993, with clear signs of ongoing acceleration (NASA Sea Level Change Team, 2023).

Under different emissions scenarios, the IPCC projects a sea level rise of 0.29 to 1.1 meters by 2100 (relative to 1995–2014 levels), depending on global mitigation efforts:

- Low-emissions scenario (SSP1-1.9): 0.29–0.54 m rise by 2100.
- High-emissions scenario (SSP5-8.5): 0.63–1.01 m rise by 2100 (IPCC, 2021).

Crucially, sea level rise is irreversible over centuries to millennia due to long response times in ocean and ice systems. Even with immediate emissions reductions, committed sea level rise from past emissions alone could exceed 2 meters over the next 2,000 years (IPCC, 2021). Sea level rise is not uniform across the globe. According to the World Bank's Climate Change Knowledge Portal (2023), Pacific and Indian Ocean SIDS face higher-than-average rates of sea level rise, sometimes up to 1.5 times the global average, due to regional ocean dynamics, land subsidence, and glacial rebound effects.

The World Bank estimates that without effective adaptation:

- 15% of land in countries like the Marshall Islands could be permanently inundated by 2050.
- In Kiribati, entire atolls could become uninhabitable due to chronic flooding and freshwater contamination (World Bank, 2021).

By 2050, up to 216 million people globally could be forced to migrate internally due to climate

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impacts, including sea level rise, unless urgent action is taken (Clement, *et al.*, 2021).

Table 1: Key Sea Level Rise Indicators

Metric	Value
Global sea level rise (1901–2018)	~20 cm
Current rate (2006–2018)	3.7 mm/year
Projected rise by 2100 (low emissions)	0.29–0.54 m
Projected rise by 2100 (high emissions)	0.63–1.01 m
Long-term commitment (>2,000 years)	>2 m (even with mitigation)

From Table 1, the immediate and long-term risks can be deduced as follows: land loss, freshwater contamination, economic disruption, cultural erasure. Accordingly, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are on the frontline of the climate crisis. Their unique geographies, low elevation, narrow resource bases and high dependence on marine ecosystems make them disproportionately vulnerable to a constellation of immediate and long-term risks. These impacts are not isolated; they are cascading, systemic, and deeply interconnected, threatening not only the physical territories of SIDS but also their economic sovereignty, social cohesion, and cultural survival. We shall amplify further on some of the immediate and long-term risks.

Land Loss and Coast

Sea level rise is eroding coastlines, inundating low-lying areas, and threatening the very existence of several island nations. Some atoll countries, such as Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Maldives, sit at an average elevation of just 1–2 meters above sea level, making them extremely sensitive to even minor sea level fluctuations.

The IPCC (2021) projects that by 2100, under a high-emissions scenario, some atolls may become physically uninhabitable due to chronic flooding and storm surges, even if land is not fully submerged.

Marshall Islands and Kiribati are already experiencing permanent coastal loss, with communities forced to relocate inland, a temporary solution that will eventually be exhausted.

This land loss also undermines sovereignty, as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) which define maritime rights are tied to land features that may disappear, potentially stripping these nations of access to fisheries and marine resources that underpin their economies (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2014).

Freshwater Contamination and Scarcity

Many SIDS rely on shallow freshwater lenses or rainwater catchment systems. Rising seas lead to saltwater intrusion, which contaminates aquifers, wells, and other critical freshwater sources.

In Tuvalu and the Maldives, increased salinization of drinking water is already affecting public health, agriculture, and sanitation (UNDP, 2020).

A study in the Republic of the Marshall Islands found that salinity levels in groundwater had surpassed World Health Organization (WHO) limits in several communities, contributing to increased kidney disease and hypertension (Ferguson, *et al.*, 2021).

This freshwater crisis reduces climate resilience and creates feedback loops of vulnerability: without clean water, adaptation strategies such as local food production and disease prevention become much harder to sustain.

Economic Disruption

SIDS economies are highly exposed to climate shocks due to:

- Heavy dependence on tourism and fisheries, both of which are climate-sensitive;
- Limited diversification and high import dependency;
- Infrastructure concentrated in coastal zones vulnerable to sea level rise and cyclones.

From data available at the World Bank (2023): SIDS lose an average of 1.5–9% of their GDP annually to climate-related disasters. In Dominica, Hurricane Maria (2017) caused damages amounting to 226% of GDP — a single event that erased decades of development gains. Climate change also threatens blue economies, as warming waters and coral bleaching reduce fish stocks and marine biodiversity, further imperiling food security and export revenues.

Cultural Erasure and Sovereign Identity

Perhaps the most profound long-term consequence is the potential loss of cultural heritage, identity, and national continuity. SIDS are not merely physical territories, but complex cultural ecosystems grounded in traditional knowledge,

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language, spiritual relationships to land and ocean, and intergenerational memory.

Displacement from ancestral lands due to rising seas threatens intangible heritage: oral histories, sacred sites, and customary land practices.

For nations like Kiribati, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands, existential migration raises the unprecedented question of "nations without territory" (McNamara & Farbotko, 2017). What becomes of a country when its land is gone but its people remain?

In response, some Pacific leaders have begun digitizing cultural archives and exploring legal recognition of “climate diaspora nations”, ensuring that even in exile, sovereignty and identity can endure in some form (Farbotko, *et al.*, 2020).

Case studies: Maldives, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands.

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are not only sites of vulnerability but also of innovation, resilience, and diplomatic activism. The Maldives, Tuvalu, and the Marshall Islands offer distinct but interconnected examples of how SIDS are navigating the threats posed by climate change, particularly sea level rise and displacement while leveraging climate diplomacy to assert their agency on the world stage.

Maldives: Climate Leadership and Adaptation through Engineering

In the case of the Maldives, comprising 1,192 coral islands and with an average elevation of 1.5 meters above sea level, the area is highly exposed to sea level rise. Over 80% of its land area is known to be less than 1 meter above sea level (IPCC, 2021), and it could become uninhabitable by 2100 without strong adaptation measures.

Adaptation and Diplomacy:

- The Maldives was the first country to hold a cabinet meeting underwater (2009), symbolizing its vulnerability and calling for urgent global action.
- It has invested in artificial islands like Hulhumalé, raised by 2 meters above sea level, intended to house over 200,000 people in anticipation of future displacement (UNDP, 2021).
- The country has actively participated in the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), pushing for ambitious emissions cuts and adaptation funding in international forums.
- According to the World Bank, despite these innovations, high debt burdens, tourism dependency, and corruption vulnerabilities challenge long-term resilience (World Bank, 2023).

Tuvalu: Existential Threats and Sovereignty Preservation

Tuvalu, generally denoted as a Polynesian archipelago has about 11,000 inhabitants, and is one of the world's lowest-lying countries, with a maximum elevation of just 4.5 meters. Recurrent flooding, land erosion, and saltwater intrusion have made large swaths of the islands marginally habitable.

Cultural Sovereignty and Legal Innovation:

- In 2022, Tuvalu announced plans to digitally replicate its territory and government in the metaverse, preserving cultural sovereignty even if the physical nation is lost (The Guardian, 2022).
- The country has advocated for recognition of “climate-induced statelessness”, challenging traditional notions of statehood under international law (Burkett, 2011).
- Migration Diplomacy:
- Tuvalu has secured bilateral migration pathways with New Zealand under the Pacific Access Category visa, though the government insists relocation must be voluntary, not forced (Mortreux & Barnett, 2009).

Marshall Islands: Advocacy, Loss and Damage, and Nuclear Legacy

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is home to 58,000 people across 29 atolls and 5 islands. It faces a double burden: climate change and the lingering impacts of nuclear testing by the United States during the 20th century.

Global Advocacy:

- The RMI has played a pivotal role in climate diplomacy, notably in shaping the “High Ambition Coalition” during the Paris Agreement negotiations (Canterbury, 2016).
- It continues to champion the Loss and Damage agenda, calling for compensation mechanisms from historically high-emitting nations.

Displacement and Infrastructure Risks:

- According to the World Bank, over 40% of the population in Majuro, the capital is vulnerable to regular inundation by 2050 under current sea level rise trajectories (World Bank, 2021).
- Despite receiving international funding for climate resilience, implementation is hindered

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by governance challenges and limited human capacity (ADB, 2022).

Climate-Induced Displacement: Legal and Policy Gaps

Lack of legal recognition for climate refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention: Despite mounting evidence that climate change is displacing populations, "climate refugees" lack formal legal recognition under international refugee law. The 1951 Refugee Convention, the cornerstone of international refugee protection was not designed to address environmental or climate-related displacement, leaving millions vulnerable to legal ambiguity and exclusion.

The 1951 Refugee Convention: A Historical Limitation

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as someone who: "...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country."

This definition excludes those displaced by climate-induced phenomena such as sea level rise, extreme weather, or ecosystem collapse unless their situation can be indirectly linked to one of the five protected grounds, which is rare and often unprovable.

For example, a family displaced by rising seas in Tuvalu or Kiribati would not qualify as refugees under this convention, as there is no persecuting agent and no political or religious motive.

In 2020, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled in Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand that climate change can, in theory, trigger non-refoulement obligations, but the threshold remains exceptionally high (UNHRC, 2020).

Consequences of Legal Invisibility

This legal gap has profound humanitarian and geopolitical consequences, including:

- Displaced persons from SIDS face uncertain futures without legal pathways to asylum, resettlement, or compensation.
- States are under no legal obligation to admit or support climate-displaced populations unless bilateral agreements exist.
- Without recognition, climate migrants often fall into grey zones, treated as economic migrants and subjected to deportation or denial of entry (McAdam, 2012).

Consequently, as sea levels rise and extreme weather intensifies, the number of people displaced by climate-related events could exceed 200 million by 2050 (IOM, 2022). This underscores the urgency of legal reform.

Emerging Norms and Policy Responses.

Although the 1951 framework has not been amended, soft law instruments and regional approaches have begun to address these gaps, some of which includes:

- The Global Compact on Migration (2018) acknowledges climate as a driver of migration and calls for "planned relocation" mechanisms. However, it is non-binding.
- Pacific Island nations have spearheaded efforts to define climate mobility as a human rights issue, advocating for a new legal category of "climate refugee" or climate-displaced person.
- New Zealand's "Climate Refugee Visa" proposal (currently paused) was a pioneering attempt to institutionalize protection for citizens of SIDS at risk of becoming uninhabitable.

It should be noted that without legally binding commitments, these efforts remain fragmented and insufficient.

The Call for Legal Reform

Experts and advocates have called for comprehensive legal reform to address climate-induced displacement. Two principal approaches have been proposed: (a) broadening the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to encompass those uprooted by environmental change, and (b) negotiating a distinct international instrument dedicated to environmental migration and the attendant obligations of states. As sovereign territories confront the prospect of physical disappearance, climate displacement transcends a mere humanitarian concern to become an issue of international legal responsibility, justice, and equity.

Regional institutions have moved more swiftly than global fora to devise context-specific responses. In particular, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) have harnessed regional frameworks—such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) and the Cartagena Declaration—to pioneer adaptive legal and policy measures that reflect their shared vulnerabilities.

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Pacific Islands Forum (PIF): Diplomacy and Regional Solidarity

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), comprising eighteen member states including Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia, has elevated climate change to the forefront of its security agenda. In 2018, the PIF Secretariat adopted the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which characterizes climate change as "the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific" (PIF Secretariat, 2018). Through unified representation at United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations, PIF members have pressed for more ambitious mitigation, adaptation, and loss-and-damage commitments (UNFCCC, 2023). Moreover, the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (2017–2030) integrates disaster risk reduction with climate adaptation, thereby providing a coherent policy architecture for member states (PIF Secretariat, 2017).

Implications

By crafting planned relocation guidelines and fostering intergovernmental cooperation, the PIF has sought to safeguard state sovereignty even as some territories face inundation. Nevertheless, the translation of regional commitments into on-the-ground action has been uneven, hindered by capacity shortfalls and financial constraints within member states (PIF Secretariat, 2018).

Cartagena Declaration: Expanded Protection in Latin America

Experts have highlighted the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984) as a paradigmatic regional instrument whose protective ambit may be extended to those displaced by climate-related phenomena. Although originally formulated in response to political upheavals in Central America, its innovative refugee definition and subsequent soft-law influence render it a valuable template for addressing environmental displacement.

Expanded Definition

The Cartagena Declaration articulates a refugee concept that transcends the 1951 Convention's narrow focus on political persecution by encompassing individuals who flee their homes owing to "generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order" (Cartagena Declaration, 1984, para. 3). Though the Declaration is non-binding, its principles have been codified into the domestic legislation of more than twelve Latin American states, thereby operating as influential soft law (Hathaway, & Foster, 2014).

Relevance to Climate Displacement

Scholars contend that the Declaration's reference to "other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order" can be interpreted to include climate-induced disasters such as sea-level rise, extreme storms, and protracted drought (Cantor, 2015). This interpretive potential was underscored during the Cartagena+30 Process and the adoption of the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action in 2014, both of which reaffirmed regional commitments to comprehensive protection frameworks that could be extended to persons displaced by environmental hazards (UNHCR, 2015).

Limitations and Opportunities

While the Cartagena Declaration did not expressly envisage climate migrants, its normative breadth establishes a precedent for legal evolution. Latin American states, by virtue of their experience in incorporating Cartagena's standards into national law, are well-positioned to pioneer formal recognition of climate-displaced persons. Such regional leadership could serve as an exemplar for other geopolitical blocs seeking to adapt refugee protection regimes to the realities of environmental migration.

Table 2. Comparative Strength of Regional Mechanisms.

Framework	Scope	Legal Status	Climate Relevance	Innovation
Pacific Islands Forum	Pacific SIDS	Intergovernmental	High	High
Cartagena Declaration	Latin America	Soft Law	Moderate–Emerging	Medium
Kampala Convention (Africa)*	African Union	Binding Treaty	Explicit mention of natural disasters	High

Experts have observed that the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention, 2009) represents the sole binding regional instrument to expressly encompass

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climate-related displacement within its protection mandate (African Union, 2009; UNHCR, 2024).

Sovereignty Dilemmas: The Fate of a State That Disappears

Rising sea levels pose an existential challenge to the principle of territorial sovereignty, long regarded as inseparable from statehood under the Montevideo Convention (1933). According to Article 1 of that Convention, a state must possess (a) a permanent population, (b) a defined territory, (c) government, and (d) the capacity to enter into relations with other states (Montevideo Convention, 1933). If inundation eradicates a state's territorial base, international lawyers question whether it can continue to satisfy these criteria and thus maintain legal personality in world affairs (Burgess, 2018; Crawford, 2019).

The Emergence of "Deterritorialized" States

In response, several Small Island Developing States have begun to decouple sovereignty from physical geography. Tuvalu has announced plans to become a "digital nation," migrating its governmental records, land registries, and cultural heritage into a metaverse platform in order to preserve legal continuity beyond physical submergence (Government of Tuvalu, 2022). Likewise, Kiribati and the Maldives are negotiating land-purchase agreements abroad to establish extraterritorial sovereign enclaves or diaspora-based governance structures (Barnett & Matthew, 2019). Such innovations, termed "deterritorialized nation-states", thus, push the boundaries of international law, though their legal standing remains untested (Burkett, 2011)

Maritime Zones and EEZs: Do They Disappear Too?

Experts emphasize that the potential submergence of coastal and island states raises urgent questions under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) regarding maritime entitlements and statehood (Rayfuse, 2013; UNDOS, 2022).

First, loss of territory jeopardizes a State's baseline, hence its 200-nautical-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—unless customary law or new agreements adopt a "fixed baseline" to preserve maritime boundaries despite sea-level rise (Rayfuse, 2013; UNDOS, 2022). The forfeiture of an EEZ portends not only economic collapse but also diminished political leverage in resource and security forums.

Second, should inundation nullify a State's defined territory, its United Nations membership and voting rights in multilateral institutions could be contested, and its access to development finance imperiled. In response, "diaspora governance" models, akin to governments-in-exile—are being considered to maintain legal personality and self-determination absent a physical homeland (Burkett, 2011; Crawford, 2019). Nonetheless, no binding protocols currently exist to safeguard state continuity post-submergence, revealing a critical lacuna in international climate governance.

Third, these developments provoke profound ethical and normative questions: Can international law evolve to recognize non-territorial states on equal footing? Who guarantees that displaced populations retain agency rather than mere protection? And what obligations do historic greenhouse-gas emitters bear to ensure that sovereignty and identity are not sacrificed alongside submerged territory? These issues strike at the core of global justice and call for the decolonization of climate diplomacy, centering the voices of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in crafting equitable legal frameworks (Barnett, & Matthew, 2019; Burkett, 2011).

Finally, SIDS have leveraged their moral authority in global climate negotiations—most notably through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)—to enshrine the 1.5 °C target in the Paris Agreement and to secure the Loss and Damage Fund at COP27–28 (UNFCCC, 2015; UNFCCC, 2023). By framing climate change as a matter of human rights, intergenerational justice, and common but differentiated responsibilities, SIDS have redefined security discourse and exercised soft power well beyond their material capacities.

Table 3. Key Achievements of SIDS in Climate Forums

Forum/Event	Contribution by SIDS	Outcome
Rio Earth Summit (1992)	Highlighted SIDS' special vulnerabilities	Agenda 21 recognizes the needs of SIDS
Kyoto Protocol (1997)	Advocated for binding commitments	Limited success, but elevated AOSIS profile
Paris Agreement (2015)	Championed 1.5°C limit and Loss and Damage provisions	Target adopted; language on L&D included

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COP27/COP28 (2022–2023)	Pushed for operationalizing the L&D Fund	Fund established with initial pledges

These wins were not about power, but persistence, narrative framing, and coalition diplomacy.

Climate Change - A Threat Multiplier?

Climate change now functions as a "threat multiplier intensifying preexisting risks of conflict, displacement, food insecurity, and governance fragility (U.S. Department of Defense, 2021; Theisen, Holtermann, & Buhaug, 2011). In response, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and other climate-vulnerable countries have advanced a climate-inclusive security doctrine that would embed climate risk within peacekeeping mandates, establish regional climate-security hubs, and appoint UN-level climate-security envoys to coordinate anticipatory action (Barnett, & Adger, 2007; UNGA, 2023).

Diplomacy has likewise shifted from reactive crisis management toward preemptive adaptation. SIDS such as Fiji, Barbados, and the Maldives have leveraged nature-based solutions; coral restoration, mangrove protection, and regional frameworks (CARICOM, PIF) to secure anticipatory finance and technology partnerships (Mottley, 2022; UNFCCC, 2015). Initiatives like the Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) illustrate how multilateral cooperation can deliver real-time data for anticipatory planning, from seasonal crop adjustments to planned relocations (WMO, 2022). Bilateral pacts, exemplified by Tuvalu–Australia's Falepili Union (2023) and New Zealand's Pacific Access Category visa, reimagine migration as dignified, planned mobility rather than emergency relief (Falepili Union, 2023; New Zealand Immigration, 2024).

These developments underscore a broader normative shift from traditional state-centric security to human, environmental, and existential security. Proposed mechanisms, climate mobility compacts, legal recognition of deterritorialized governance, and scaled-up Loss and Damage financing, that seek to enshrine equity and self-determination for displaced populations (Biermann & Boas, 2010; UNFCCC, 2023). Such reforms aim to decolonize climate diplomacy by centering the agency of SIDS in shaping the legal and institutional architectures that will govern a warming world.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the story of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) cannot be reduced to one of passive victimhood, of eroding coastlines, dwindling freshwater, and involuntary displacement. Rather, SIDS exemplify resilience, resistance, and strategic agency. Confronted with an existential crisis, they have harnessed international diplomacy, through moral leadership, coalition-building, and anticipatory governance to redefine the parameters of global security (Barnett & Adger, 2007; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2023). By insisting that climate change constitutes a security imperative, SIDS have compelled institutions from the United Nations Security Council to NATO to broaden their understanding of peace and conflict in the twenty-first century (UNGA, 2023).

Through innovative diplomatic instruments, migration compacts, legal advocacy campaigns, and narrative-driven soft-power initiatives, these states have converted climate vulnerability into political momentum (Falepili Union, 2023; Biermann & Boas, 2010). Their demands for justice, solidarity, and survival resonate well beyond their diminishing shorelines. No longer mere petitioners for external assistance, SIDS have assumed the role of architects of a fairer international order, one in which the rights to remain, adapt, or relocate are exercised by choice rather than imposed by crisis (Mottley, 2022; UNFCCC, 2015).

As rising seas redraw maps and disperse populations, SIDS reclaim not only land but the very notion of sovereign collective agency in a turbulent world (Burkett, 2011). Their struggle transcends territorial preservation; it is a struggle for dignity, recognition, and the authority to shape their own futures. In doing so, SIDS demonstrate that climate diplomacy is about far more than emissions targets or funding mechanisms, it is fundamentally about who survives, who decides, and who leads (Crawford, 2019).

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