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The Question of Ownership in Pacific Regionalism:

An Assessment to What Extent Major Powers in the Region Dictate its Terms by Self-Proclaiming the Region their Sphere of Influence

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About the author

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Before undertaking an internship at UNU-CRIS, Chiara has already interned at the Anna Lindh Foundation working on social cohesion policy and bringing together civil society organizations from diverse countries. During her internship at the Samoan Embassy, among other things, she provided pivotal logistics planning to the Commonwealth HOG Meeting 2024 and the Samoa Agreement signing event between the European Union and the Organisation of African Caribbean and Pacific States. Furthermore, in her Bachelor thesis, Chiara researched Rebel Diplomacy and Governance as one form of non-traditional diplomacy.

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on Pacific Regionalism. More specifically, I analyzed four major powers (Japan, China, the European Union, and the United States) that perceive the Pacific as their sphere of influence. Thereby, I problematized (negative) influences of major powers' engagement in the Pacific region on Pacific Island Countries' ownership of Pacific Regionalism. By also analyzing Pacific Island Countries themselves, I established their responses to potential compromises to ownership of Pacific Regionalism.

This paper is based on the research I conducted for my master's thesis which was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Science in Political Science: European and International Governance at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

The research is undergirded by a qualitative research design involving scrutinizing high-level political speeches, reports, strategies, plans, leaders' communiqué, leaders' decisions, and declarations applying Discourse-Historical Analysis. I analyzed these texts under the following five concepts: (Ideologically driven) power structures, identity, ownership, decentralization, and empowerment.

The following main findings were made:

- Japan does not negatively influence Pacific Island Countries' ownership of regionalism.
- China and the United States have a considerably negative influence on the ownership of regionalism.
- The European Union's discourse is complex speaking to compromises to ownership under power and identity but not under decentralization and empowerment.

Considering these sub-conclusions for each major power, I found that Pacific Island Countries' ownership of Pacific Regionalism is considerably negatively influenced by major powers' engagement in and with the region. The main policy conclusion of this research project therefore is to sensitize the international community towards a more nuanced engagement in and with the region.

Keywords

Pacific, Pacific Island Countries, Pacific Regionalism, Pacific Islands Forum, Ownership, Sphere of Influence, Engagement, Influence, (Ideologically driven) Power Structures, Identity, Decentralization, Empowerment, Discourse Historical Analysis, Critical Discourse Studies, Major Power

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Introduction

Most people think of 'the Pacific' as a remote place swamped with small islands adhering to traditional cultures. This perception of remoteness and backwardness has been mirrored in international politics. For instance, Western powers perceived Pacific Island Countries (PICs) as incapable of governing themselves and thus colonized them. Later, they used PICs as a nuclear testing ground, thereby, entirely blindsiding their sovereign will (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 1). In the 1960s, PICs fought this domination by creating a regional organization – the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) – to strengthen their voice. Nonetheless, their mindset and vision about themselves in international politics have been influenced by the idea of small island states far remote from the rest of the world. This is also visible in the framing of the region. During colonialism, Western powers termed the region 'Oceania' or 'the Indo-Pacific' although PICs rejected both, claiming that 'Indo' overrides the smaller Pacific region. Instead, they identify themselves as the 'Blue Pacific' or 'Blue Continent' (Fry, 2019, pp. 15-17). Notwithstanding that, in international discourse, the region is commonly understood under Indo-Pacific. Additionally, some argue PICs have become "mere backdrop[s] in the grand strategies of global powers" considering the geopolitical tensions in the region between the United States (US) and China (Morgan, 2021, p. 49).

Meanwhile considering the existential threat that the rise of sea-levels poses to the region, PICs politicians and academics encourage them to reassert their ocean identity to increase their voice in climate change debates. For instance, Kiribati's President Tong (2015) said, "we may be small island states, [but] we are large ocean states, and with a great deal more relevance in international affairs than we realized" (p. 23).

Considering this state of affairs, this research problematizes major powers' involvement in the region with a particular focus on those major powers' actions that negatively influence PICs ownership of Pacific Regionalism or the agenda thereof.

Literature Review

The current state of the art on Pacific Regionalism problematizes these common practical understandings of the Pacific as remote and backward in theory. For instance, the familiar idea of Australia and New Zealand (ANZ) being the 'big brothers' of PICs is mirrored in an academic debate. While some scholars argue that they are proxies of Western powers (Fry, 2019) or are only guided by their national security interests (Chand, 2005), others argue they are the closest allies to PICs (Morgan, 2015).

Furthermore, the current literature on Pacific Regionalism involves a historical dimension displaying how regional matters have developed over time. Inevitably, one debate centers on where to situate the starting point of Pacific Regionalism. While Fry (2019, p. 15) argues Pacific Regionalism already started during 19th-century British colonialism with the Western Pacific High Commission, Hassall (2021, p. 135) places the origins in 1947 with the establishment of the South Pacific Commission – an organization also founded by colonizers. Bryar and Naupa (2017, p. 156) assert that Pacific Regionalism only began post-colonialism with the establishment of the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) (1971).

Lastly, a great bulk of literature centers around a historical perspective of ownership of Pacific Regionalism considering geopolitical developments. To review, the current literature states that Pacific ownership was absent until the (mid-)1950s: The South Pacific Commission (1947) was founded by the six colonizers (ANZ, France, the Netherlands, UK, US), Pacific leaders were denied voting rights, and there was a ban on discussing matters considered political like nuclear testing (Leslie & Wild, 2017, p. 24). With decolonization taking off in the 1960s and 1970s, the literature identifies a shift in ownership in favor of PICs. PIF was established and became a platform for self-determination (Fry, 2019, p. 102). Leaders became increasingly committed to regional diplomacy and joint diplomatic efforts to make their common voice heard in the world (Bryar & Naupa, 2017, p. 156). This, however, became overshadowed by yet another backlash to PICs' ownership in the 1990s and 2000s due to external interventionism along neo-liberal lines which imposed i.a., aid conditionality. This shift is commonly described as the forum moving away from its founding objective of negotiating jointly on global issues (Fry & Tarte, 2015, p. 6). Following rising frustrations with PIFS diplomatic initiatives, PICs became inward-looking focusing on regional integration which led to even more frustration as ANZ dominated the agenda (Fry, 2019, pp. 279-280). This frustration culminated in the 2005 Pacific Plan – a guidance document on Pacific Regionalism – which was perceived as a repackaging of ANZ's regional aid programs (p. 236). Following this disenchanting ownership phase, scholars identify another phase in the ownership debate starting post-2009. This post-2009 paradigm is described as the 'New Pacific Diplomacy' characterized by PICs using their collective agency in

ways reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s (Fry & Tarte, 2015, p. 3). This new commitment to regional collaboration is based on eschewing traditional intergovernmental groupings in favor of non-state actors and on developing a sub-regional framework. The latter is led by Fiji following its suspension from PIF due to a coup d'état (Leslie & Wild, 2017, p. 25).

In sum, there was solely shallow Pacific ownership during colonialism (until the late 1950s) and during the 1990s, yet pronounced agency during the 1970s. While there is agreement on the ownership phases in the past, there is a gap in literature to assess to what extent the reclaiming of ownership post-2009 achieved its goal. The current literature ends by stating that PICs claim control of regional governance post-2009 and want to reassert key underpinnings of the 1970s regionalism. 15 years after the paradigm shift was announced, it is time to take stock of the developments of the last decade. Joining this conversation allows us to rectify the time dimensional gap in literature.

Research Question and Objectives

Taking up this gap in literature, in this research, I problematize the continuous disrespect of PICs sovereignty by major powers by asking:

> *To what extent is Pacific Island Countries' ownership of Pacific Regionalism post-2009 influenced by major powers' engagement in the region perceiving it as their sphere of influence?*

This asks to what extent PICs ownership over Pacific Regionalism generally, as well as over the regional agenda particularly, is influenced. This refinement is indispensable because PICs might have ownership over the regional infrastructure (e.g., institutions, decision-making), yet their agenda is dictated by major powers shifting it for instance towards geopolitics.

2009 as the cut-off point is derived from the gap in literature that was identified previously. Additionally, post-2009 is reasonable as following Fiji's military coup and its subsequent suspension from PIF – the principal regional organization – PICs rethought their approach to regional policy and diplomacy. On the one hand, they increased their commitment to sub-regionalism. On the other hand, PICs aimed to establish themselves as large ocean states and to increase their involvement in IGOs by following 'the Pacific way' – a policy of collective and consensus decision-making aimed at acting as one block (i.e., one vote) towards the outside world to increase the weight of their voice (Fry, 2019, p. 138). Several leaders during that time advocated explicitly for a paradigm shift and the need to manage regional politics themselves. Kiribati's President Tong (2015) for instance said, "I believe the Pacific is entering a new phase – a new paradigm shift, where the Pacific needs to chart its own course" (p. 21).

Rectifying this gap is of concern due to the following three reasons where each entails one objective undergirding this research. Firstly, this research aims to sensitize the international community to consider PICs on equal terms in international relations despite their smallness and remoteness. To illustrate, when a major power superimposes climate mitigation policies that work against climate change threats prevalent in its country (e.g., severe weather conditions) on small and remote island countries that are heavily capacity-constrained and faced by distinct climate change threats (e.g., drowning due to sea-level rise), then this neither addresses the threat adequately nor is the island country considered in equal terms. Considering them on equal terms in international relations, however, is conditional on fully respecting their sovereignty. Historical examples like nuclear testing show that this premise was not always given (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 1). Therefore, I, secondly, aim to establish whether 'people on the ground' and their representatives are heeded, to subsequently infer to what extent PICs can speak for themselves as sovereign nations and thus, own the agenda of Pacific Regionalism. Lastly, I attempt to rectify the research gap identified by Schunz, Gstöhl and van Langenhove (2018) on major powers' interactions in a multipolar region and their neighborhood policies. By analyzing the major powers' interactions as well as their engagement with PICs, I will contribute to rectifying this gap. Following that, the broader motive of this research is to pressure the international community to a more nuanced engagement in and with PICs.

Conceptualization

Considering that PICs are understudied, I first present the conceptualization including some background information followed by the theoretical framework.

"The Region" and Pacific Island Countries:

"The Region" refers to the South Pacific which comprises 16 PICs (Cook Islands, Federated State of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu) and Australia and New Zealand (Forum Secretariat, n.d., a) (Figure A1). 13 of the 16 island countries are sovereign countries. Concerning the remaining three, the Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing territories in free association with New Zealand. They maintain independent foreign relations recognized by the United Nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade NZ (MFAT), n.d., a, c). The third one, French Polynesia is a non-self-governing territory and a French overseas territory with a high level of autonomy yet fighting eagerly for full sovereignty (MFAT NZ, n.d., b). All three are full members of PIF.

The region is subdivided into three subregions – Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia (Figure A1).

(Pacific) Regionalism:

The conceptualization of Pacific Regionalism is taken from the Framework for Pacific Regionalism published by the PIF in 2014 and refers to "a common sense of identity and purpose, leading progressively to the sharing of institutions, resources, and markets, with the purpose of complementing national efforts, overcoming common constraints, and enhancing sustainable and inclusive development" (p. 1). Thus, it can involve a variety of political bodies including non-state actors leading to a space where the state competes alongside "a plethora of actors" (Bryar and Naupta, 2017, p. 158).

Ownership:

There is no agreement on the precise meaning of 'ownership', i.a., because it is difficult to observe ownership empirically. Whereas Bendix and Stanley (2008) conceptualize ownership as the "legal right of possession" and having a "lawful claim" (pp. 94-95), Boughton and Mourmouras (2002, p. 3) focus less on the legality dimension and conceptualize ownership as the willingness to take responsibility for policies. Similarly, Weichert et al. (2009, p. 6) state that a measure of ownership is the presence and implementation of initiatives from within the region. For this research, ownership is understood as a combination of all three. Hence, PICs are considered to have ownership when they have a lawful claim – mainly justified by sovereignty – and initiatives are nourished by themselves. Ownership is compromised if either major power infringes on PICs' lawful claim by breaching their sovereignty or when the policy is not nourished by PICs' initiatives.

Major power:

The conceptualization for major powers is taken from the theoretical framework "Between cooperation and competition: major powers in shared neighborhoods" by Schunz et al. (2018) which also provides the theoretical framework of this research. The authors understand major powers as a power that requires firstly, capabilities, secondly, willingness to assume regional leadership, and thirdly, acceptance or contestation of the potential follower (p. 3). Thus, their conceptualization not just focuses on hard power but also on soft power like having the ability to get "others to want what you want" (Schunz et al., 2018, p. 4). If a major power is superior in all three requisites, it becomes (one of the) regional leaders.

In the Pacific, as will be justified in the methodology section, the major powers are Japan, China, the European Union (EU), and the US.

To influence:

Linguistically, to influence means to affect, interfere, or alter something or someone (Morriss, 2002, p. 27). This effect can be positive or negative. Considering the research question, specific attention was paid to the latter. I deliberately opted to not further conceptualize 'positive' and 'negative' as it is just used to indicate the broad direction rather than to narrowly specify how positive or negative the influence is. Moreover, the effect is not issue-specific but can be political, economic, or social.

Importantly, the operation of influencing is indirect and often unseen. It shapes behavior, orders, decisions, and policies based on resources and access to opportunities. Whereas under power the influenced (here PICs) has no choice, the conceptualization of 'to influence' allows 'the influenced' to choose its response thereby exerting influence itself. The outcome is a change in behavior, beliefs, knowledge, opinions, values, or norms (Zaaiman, 2020, p. 11).

Sphere of Influence (SOI):

SOI is a spatial concept referring to superior influence by an external influencing nation over an influenced nation (Ortmann, 2020, p. 314). These means of control are predominantly ideational and economic rather than coercive (Etzioni, 2015, p. 117). Buranelli (2018) introduces a crucial refinement to that by exemplifying SOI as a structure of negotiated hegemony in which norms and rules of coexistence are influenced, debated, and contested between the influencer and the influenced. Thus, he allows for the agency of the weaker (i.e., the influenced) by arguing that it plays an active role in determining the degree of legitimacy and influence of the influencer through its sovereignty (pp. 378-379). Moreover, he understands discourses as rhetorical indicators of accepting or rejecting the negotiated hegemony (i.e., SOI) (p. 386). I will come back to Buranelli's contribution when discussing my findings.

Engagement:

Engagement is understood as a (foreign) policy approach distinct from e.g., isolation (Resnick, 2001, p. 551). I follow Resnick's (2001) conceptualization of engagement as "the attempt to influence the political behavior of a target state through the comprehensive establishment and enhancement of contacts with that state across multiple issue-areas" such as diplomatic, military, and cultural issue areas (p. 559). These contacts are – as the means of control available for the influencer in an SOI also were – non-violent, not involving physical force, but instead are exclusively ideational and economic.

The target state for this research can be another major power or PICs themselves. Thus, 'major powers' engagement' in the research question refers to either a major powers' engagement with PICs or with (an)other major power(s).

Theoretical Framework

This research is undergirded by the theory "Between cooperation and competition: major powers in shared neighborhoods" by Schunz et al. (2018). The scholars provide a conceptual framework to study major powers understood as potential regional leaders in a shared neighborhood perceived by major powers as their SOI. They provide a typology of ideal-typical interactions between major powers based on three factors:

- Nature of interaction
- Principles of interaction
- Approach toward neighborhood (p. 5).

Major powers interactions can vary from conflict to cooperation. Thus, shared neighborhoods can be a stage for power contests or merely serve as a platform for peaceful coexistence. Importantly, major powers' interactions are dynamic. Moreover, their theory helps to predict how and why certain forms of interaction between major powers develop in certain contexts.

To understand why certain major powers were chosen for this research, the author's definition of 'neighborhood' must be considered. They do not understand neighborhoods merely based on geography but apply a broader understanding arguing that relations between states are also influenced by historical legacies. This allows us to consider additional rings of neighbors – not just "neighbors of the neighbors" but also "neighbors of the neighbors' neighbors" (Schunz et al., 2018, p. 4). If a geographical area is perceived as a neighborhood for more than one aspiring regional leader, it is considered a shared, common, or overlapping neighborhood.

	Coexistence	Cooperation	Competition	Conflict
Nature of Interaction	Neutral	Positive (positive-sum game)	Negative (zero-sum game)	Violently negative (negative-sum game)
Principles of interaction	Mutual neglect, ignorance	Good neighbourliness, shared leadership	Dominance	Antagonism, expansionism, proxy wars
Approach toward neighbourhood	Limited or no involvement, buffer zone	region- or alliance-building	Hegemony	region-spoiling, coercion, empire-building
Hybrid forms			**Coopetition**	

Table 1: Ideal-type interactions between major powers in a shared neighbourhood

Note. Reprinted from "Between cooperation and competition: major powers in shared neighbourhoods" by Schunz et al., Contemporary Politics 24(1), p. 5.

The table exemplifies how the nature and principles of interaction as well as the approach toward neighborhood express themselves for each ideal-typical interaction:

- Under coexistence, major powers do not interact or are neutral to each other based on mutual neglect or ignorance. Thus, there is no or only limited interference with the neighborhood.
- They interact more extensively under cooperation yet importantly, to the benefit of both major powers (positive-sum game). They are guided by good neighborliness or even shared leadership and pursue region- or alliance-building.
- This changes under competition and conflict where either one loses and one wins (zero-sum game) (competition), or both lose (negative-sum game) (conflict). The willingness to apply (the threat of) physical force dramatically increases from competition to conflict. Whereas competition still depicts a non-violent conflict arising from a desire by both powers to lead the neighborhood, under conflict, at least one power applies (the threat of) physical force or coercive behavior or both to prevent dominance of the other. Thus, under conflict, the focus shifts from 'control over advantages' to 'control over the other'.
- With the row 'hybrid forms', the scholars add some leeway by allowing for combinations among these ideal types. Coopetition for instance refers to a general pattern of cooperation that coexists with competitive interaction. The scholars further incorporate variation across issue areas and over time (Schunz et al., 2018, p. 5).

To predict when a major power interaction becomes cooperative or competitive, the authors identify three scope conditions. Firstly, in the case of power asymmetry, the less powerful player operates more cautiously thereby, enhancing the chances for a cooperative relationship or coexistence. With increasing power symmetry, there evolves greater potential fertile ground to dominate the other, thus leading to competition. Secondly, the relationship depends on the salience that the powers attribute to the neighborhood. If the neighborhood is politically significant to both, major powers need to invest greatly to manage their (competitive) relations. If both powers attach little importance to the neighborhood, coexistence is more likely. Thirdly, the compatibility between the powers' neighborhood strategies affects their interaction. Highly incompatible strategies lead to antagonism and negative-sum games – hence conflict. A low degree of compatibility leads to competition while increased compatibility constrains competition or combined with cooperation leads to coopetition (Schunz et al., 2018, pp. 9-10).

Extension

The research question problematizes the engagement of a major power with other major powers in the region but more importantly, also with PICs (i.e., the principal power in the shared neighborhood/the target state that is attempted to be influenced through engagement). The theoretical framework specifies ideal-typical interactions only between major powers in a shared neighborhood. However, when scrutinizing the keywords given by Schunz et al. (2018) in the previously introduced table, it becomes evident that these equally apply to major powers' engagement with the principal power (PICs) in the shared neighborhood. Thus, to better serve the angle of this research, I extended their framework to incorporate major powers' engagement with the principal power in the shared neighborhood, namely PICs.
Derived from the theoretical framework, I tested the following hypotheses:

> H1: Major powers' engagement in a shared neighborhood classified under coexistence or cooperation does not influence PICs' ownership of Pacific Regionalism or their agenda or both.
> H2: Major powers' engagement in a shared neighborhood classified under competition or conflict negatively influences PICs' ownership of Pacific Regionalism or their agenda or both.
> H3: PICs' engagement with a major power whose engagement is classified under competition or conflict is more assertive.

Methodology

To address and resolve the project's central complication, the research is undergirded by a qualitative research design. I will now briefly outline what has guided the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this research. For an extensive description of the methodology, justification for the choices made, and limitations thereof, please refer to the original thesis.

Data Collection

It is indispensable to consider the geopolitical conflict between the US and China in the Pacific when researching PICs. China considerably increased its development assistance to PICs and has shattered the security landscape by proposing a delicate Security Deal to PICs besides requesting to establish a military base on Vanuatu's territory. Thereinafter, the US felt threatened in its leadership position in the region leading to substantially amplified power displays by the US (Morgan, 2021, p. 54). Although this context begs to include China and the US as major powers, I encountered data access and availability issues regarding how China frames Pacific Regionalism and its involvement therein. Neither the Chinese official government or Foreign Ministry website, nor a Chinese embassy in the region published a Communiqué or a Pacific Strategy.

Encountering this issue, I reconsidered the research question from 'Who speaks for' to 'Who speaks about' Pacific Regionalism. Considering the recent signing of the renewed EU-OACPS Agreement known as the Samoa Agreement – superseding the Cotonou Agreement – the EU engages extensively in a discourse on Pacific Regionalism. I analyzed the EU in its entirety rather than single EU countries because if I had taken former European colonial powers, the analysis would have been limited as their discourse predominantly speaks to their former colonies. To illustrate, the discourse of France as a former colonizer still having Pacific overseas territories like French Polynesia primarily speaks to those rather than to the South Pacific as a whole. I have still considered the texts that were available for China as I believe, its discourse needs to be analyzed to contextualize the US's discourse. Yet, I will particularly be attentive to internal validity threats for findings on China's discourse. Additionally, since Japan ranks the third biggest aid donor after ANZ, I also analyzed Japan. All four major powers – Japan, China, the EU, US – are PIF Dialogue Partners (PIFS, n.d., b).

To test the hypotheses, I relied on textual and archival data. Specifically, I analyzed high-level political speeches, reports, strategies, plans, leader's communiqué, leaders' decisions, and declarations. Thus, I exclusively relied on primary data. To confine the texts to solely high-level texts was made to symbolically contribute to providing PICs the diplomatic attention they deserve and have long been missing. This is inspired by the US's Pacific Partnership Strategy which aims "to provide the Pacific Islands with the diplomatic attention they deserve" (The White House, 2022, p. 8). A second selection criterion is the timespan, namely, post-2009 until conducting this research. Using post-2009 has been justified earlier, i.a., by the identified gap in literature.

The sampling method for all texts is judgmental or purposive sampling as I selected them based on the previously specified criteria – high-level, post-2009 – and thus, their relevance. Especially for China, I also applied snowball sampling as I found some texts by reference to them in other texts.

I extensively applied triangulation to collect data. Triangulation refers to the method of considering texts from various discursive sites as well as covering extensive data. Using multiple sources of data to study a single research problem allowed me to approach the research problem from different angles which in turn enabled to cross-check findings (corroboration) to enhance validity and to overcome subjectivity.

Given the constraints of science, resources, and time, this textual and archival data is the most useful to answer the research question.

Data Analysis

To analyze the identified texts, I applied Wodak's strand of Discourse-Historical Analysis (DHA). By combining linguistic analysis with historical and sociological theoretical and methodological approaches, Wodak's (2015, p. 1) DHA, as a sub-method of Critical Discourse Studies, emphasizes historical subjects and anchoring by understanding the context as mainly historical (Datondji & Amousou, 2019, pp. 72-73). Additionally, it emphasizes identity construction, unjustified discrimination, and historical discourse formation (Aydın-Düzgit, 2014, p. 136-137). In light of the historical dynamism of ownership of Pacific Regionalism, it is indispensable to contextualize current discourses in this history.

Moreover, by applying triangulation in the data collection phase – to analyze the diachronic change of discourses – DHA integrates historical sources with the social and political background in which discursive events are embedded (Wodak & Boukala, 2014, p. 178). Approaching a research problem from different angles has two advantages. Primarily, it minimizes the risks of being too subjective. Thus, it increases the reliability of the data and data collection process. Additionally, it allows the researcher to cross-check findings by using different data sources ameliorating validity (corroboration) (Wodak, 2015, p. 2).

There is no universally agreed recipe on how to conduct DHA. Instead, there exist several discourse analysis techniques. Of interest for this project were lexical, semantic, grammatical, metaphor and predicate, intertextual, and discursive strategies analysis. An extensive explanation of these analysis techniques can be found in the original master thesis or Tables A1 and 2 in the Annex.

I considered the discourse under the following five concepts. Firstly, (ideologically driven) power structures: This concept is understood as a perspective or worldview composed of mental representations, convictions, opinions, and attitudes shared by members of a social group (Wodak, 2015, p. 4). Secondly, identity is understood as a relational concept that can have two meanings – sameness or otherness (i.e., distinctiveness). The latter occurs when members of one group (non-members) are differentiated from members of a distinct group (Wodak & Triandafyllidou, 2003, p. 210). Thirdly, ownership is understood as a lawful claim – mainly justified by sovereignty – that is nourished by PICs initiatives. Fourthly, decentralization involves the transfer of responsibilities, decision-making, planning, and management functions from the central government to the local level with the aim of responding more to local needs (Collins & Green, 1994, p. 459). Lastly, empowerment involves a multi-dimensional social process with the ultimate aim that people gain control over their lives (Page & Czuba, 1999, para. 11). As an organizational issue, empowerment speaks to the entire community involvement while as a political issue, empowerment is individual recognizing and trying to overcome politically salient inequalities (Østmo, 2007, p. 73).

Following the methodological and theoretical choices made, I approach Pacific Regionalism through a constructivist lens presupposing that actors' perceptions and actions are shaped by norms, discourses, and the broader social reality.
En otras palabras, las medidas nacionalistas crearon un entorno de unidad política necesaria para resistir las posibles represalias políticas y económicas del poderoso vecino del norte.

Analysis

The Pacific Regionalism discourse has been analyzed from three dimensions. Firstly, the analysis of the in-text discourse for each major power and PIC is presented. If applicable, the in-text discourse analyses are followed by broad remarks on longitudinal changes. Secondly, reference will be made to the analysis of each major power and PICs discourse considering the socio-historic context. The linguistic analysis was combined with historical and sociological analyses to understand, embed, and interpret the research findings of the first analysis in the context of ownership dynamism. Lastly, I present an analysis of major power interactions in the neighborhood.

Japan

Two findings concerning Japan's discourse on (ideologically shaped) power structures stood out. Lexically, Japan cherishes the respect of (shared) values, trust, and the cordial and cooperative relationship with PICs (a partnership underpinned by mutual trust and respect"; "we do not impose values" but follow "rulemaking through dialogue that respects the historical and cultural diversity of each country, and equal partnership [...]") (Ninth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting [PALM9], 2021a, p. 1; Jaishankar, 2023). There is, however, one exception where indications of a power relationship are evident. It becomes clear from the analyzed texts, that there is a dependency constellation between Japan and PICs related to assistance which Japan occasionally leverages to construct a dependency narrative ("Taking advantage of Japan's strength") (Kishida, 2023). Particularly, they apply a discursive legitimation strategy (authorization) related to disaster risk reduction ("Disaster risk reduction is a specialty area of Japan", "We will continue to actively support PICs in [...] disaster risk reduction") (MFA of Japan, 2023b; Kihara, 2014). Japan thereby, grants itself legitimacy derived from its own experience to inform and assist in disaster risk reduction. Evidently, this power relationship is not shaped ideologically but can be attributed to Japan's more extensive means, resources, and experience.

Japan's discourse on identity heavily focuses on cherishing a shared identity between Japan and PICs justified by geographical and demographical similarities. For instance, from a discursive strategies analysis by using nomination, Japan puts itself and PICs under the same membership category ("Japan as a member of Pacific citizens") (Odawara, 2016). Grammatically, Japan uses the pronoun 'we' to embrace their common demographical identity ("We are islanders"; "We the people of the Pacific ") (PALM6, 2012b; Suzuki, 2019). Considering that Japan repeats this phrase several times and even finishes with it, shows that Japan wants this fact of collectivity and unity to resonate with the audience. Moreover, it signals the significance this common identity has for Japan and its sincerity and commitment allowing for increased trust. Japan also metaphorically expresses the closeness between Japan and PICs by making a comparison between the distance from Japan to the US and to a PIC to demonstrate that PICs are, in fact, not that remote but in a similar distance to Japan as the US is ("It is some 9,000 kilometers from Tokyo to San Diego [...]. From Tokyo to Nieue [...] it is 8,000") (Abe, 2015). This metaphorically, demonstrates their relative closeness despite PICs often being portrayed as remote ("demonstrative that we are not actually remote from each other") (Abe, 2015). Additionally, Japan embraces PICs' identity and mentions (respect for) the traditions and culture of PICs pointing to an engagement with PICs identity rather than imposing its own ("respect for the traditions and customs of FICs") (PALM6, 2012a). The engagement with and acceptance of PICs identity is most prevalent when Japan introduces its future vision for the region titled 'AOI' (Suzuki, 2019). Since AOI means blue in Japanese, they adhere to PICs identifying themselves as the Blue Continent and even embrace it themselves.

To analyze the discourse on ownership, it was helpful to analyze it based on the two aspects of ownership that were identified in the conceptualization. Concerning the first requirement, Japan, lexically, repeatedly mentions the respect for sovereignty and related state rights ("genuine partnerships rooted in mutual respect [...], "fully accepting and respecting the sovereignty of all nations involved", "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity") (PALM5 Ministerial Interim Meeting, 2024a, p. 1; PALM5, 2009; MFA of Japan, 2023a, p. 3). Moreover, Japan is very vocal about the second requirement, namely a discourse to shape the interactions according to the priorities and needs of PICs as identified by PICs. This is evident lexically in a discourse on respecting each PIC's needs ("taking into account the needs of the PICs") (PALM7, 2015) as well as a discourse on aligning the interactions to guiding documents of Pacific Regionalism ("in line with the Pacific Plan") (PALM6, 2012a). Despite acknowledging on several occasions, the centrality of PICs to the PALM process, Japan's vision of the partnership is one "among equals as fellow island countries" (Aso, 2009). Japan mentions this framing as equal partners explicitly but also implicitly by stating "Japan intends to advance its role as a co-working peer" (Suzuki, 2019). Co-working semantically refers to individuals or groups working

together and sharing facilities or the environment. Peer semantically refers to someone equal i.a., in abilities and qualifications (Merriam-Webster, n.d., a, c). Thus, Japan puts on both an equal footing and advances a spirit of equal partnership.

In sum, Japan, in its discourse, respects both aspects that together constitute ownership – PICs have a lawful claim, and it is nurtured by PICs initiatives. This conclusion is bolstered by periodically used cautious language. Suzuki (2019) in his speech says, "Japan wishes". Toshimitsu (2019) says, "We hope to work together". The verbs 'to wish' and 'to hope' semantically express a desire, an intention to do something, a polite expression of request, or a suggestion (Merriam-Webster, n.d., b, e).

Interestingly, Japan's discourse on decentralization shows a longitudinal change which will later be contextualized. Whereas lexically, efforts to strengthen and invest in sub-regionalism to address common challenges are mentioned at PALM7 and 8, they are no longer emphasized at PALM9 ("effort is necessary to address the national, sub-regional and regional priorities", "Prime Minister Abe took note of the important role of sub-regional efforts in addressing common challenges of respective sub-regions") (PALM7, 2015; PALM8, 2018).

Japan embraces empowerment as an organizational issue because people-to-people and youth exchanges are consistently on the agenda. Furthermore, by mostly mentioning PIFS before Japan, Japan elevates PICs importance generally. A second example of this empowering effect is PM Abe's comparison between the blue and the green ("Let us all champion saving the blue more, embracing the same passion by which we urge people to save the green") (Abe, 2018). "The blue" refers to how PICs identify themselves (i.e., the Blue Continent) and reassert their identity in the international arena since the paradigm shift in 2009. By making a comparison between the Pacific identity (the blue) and the universally known and widely used concept of "saving the green" referring to a discourse on environmental protection and sustainability, Abe (2018) elevates PICs and their identity to the same level as the universally understood discourse.

Having considered Japan's socio-historic context, the picture no longer looks as clear-cut as concluded from the discourse analysis. For instance, although Japan attaches huge strategic importance to the PALM process, PICs have lost interest arguing that "the meetings were long on ritual and short on substance" (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d., para. 6). Moreover, Japan failed to put the points of interest of PICs on the PALM agenda. Thus, although Japan in the discourse analysis invokes PIC ownership on both grounds, they fail to align with PIC initiatives (second requirement) in practice. Although this negatively influenced ownership, this also points to power structures in favor of PICs. Subsequently to the frustration, PICs successfully asserted their power by 'raising their voice' and pushing Japan to take major initiatives to revive interest in the PALM process (ex. track-2 dialogue, roundtables in countries without a Japanese diplomatic mission (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d., para. 7). These decentralization efforts in the lead-up to PALM8 coincide with the in-text discourse analysis finding that sub-regionalism was particularly prevalent at PALM7 and 8.

Further examples where PICs invoke their power are when their decision-making becomes tied to geopolitics. For instance, at PALM8 (2018), Japan explained its 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy'. However, only a few countries declared their support whereas nine countries solely said to continue discussing the topic. It is assumed by Japan that this was "out of deference for China's Belt and Road Initiative" (Sasakawa Peace Foundation, n.d., para. 9). Despite asserting their power, PICs thereby also implicitly invoked their sovereignty by manifesting their sovereign right to decide over the terms of their diplomatic relations.

China

Two findings for China's discourse on (ideologically shaped) power structures stood out: Firstly, China presents its power structures with PICs as ideal, entirely flawless, and without any power structures involved. To illustrate, lexically, China uses extensively the word 'respect' ("China respects the connections that PICs have established with other countries", and "China will continue to provide assistance to Pacific Island Countries with no political strings attached ") (Wang, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (FMPRC), 2022c). Contrastingly, however, China also uses discursive legitimation strategies, particularly authorization ("China has rich experience in the field of information connectivity") (Du, 2015). Thus, similarly to Japan, they legitimize their involvement with their experience. Since this ideal and flawless representation considering common perceptions of China seems untrustworthy, China's discourse on power will be extensively scrutinized considering the socio-historic context.

Plainly from the words used, China does not engage in identity construction or identity politics but "respects the culture and traditions" and argues for "harmony without uniformity" (Wang, 2023). They argue that they "never consider the culture of any country to be superior to those of others" and cherish common fundamental values of humanity (Wang, 2023). This, essentially, silence needs to be embedded in China's approach to identity politics. While the Chinese Communist Party promotes identity politics domestically, they are less vocal about identity politics in the international arena and instead try to make other countries economically dependent on them (Ferchen & Mattlin, 2023, p. 978).

China is very vocal about the first requirement of ownership – a lawful claim justified by sovereignty ("China fully respects the sovereignty and independence of Pacific Island Countries") (Wang, 2023). Moreover, China makes extensive reference to further fundamental state rights such as equality of states ("China believes that all countries, big or small, are equals"), non-interference ("China never bullies others or interferes in the internal affairs of other countries"), mutual respect ("a strategic partnership featuring mutual respect"), self-determination ("support for each other's people in independently choosing a development path"), and independence and territorial integrity ("all parties reaffirmed respect for each other's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity") (Wang, 2023; China-PICs Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 2021). By referring to these in several texts (intertextuality), China reiterates its commitment to them. Concerning the second requirement of ownership, China frames its discourse on respecting PICs' priorities, needs, and wills rather than aligning their engagement according to PICs' priorities and needs as Japan did ("China respects […] [the] development path independently chosen by each island country", "China fully respects the will of Pacific Island countries") (Xi, 2014; Wang, 2023). Contrastingly to these two discourses, China is almost silent on an explicit discourse on ownership. Grammatically, they never use the word 'ownership' as a noun, solely three times as a verb ("enhance their own development capacity", "China is a staunch supporter of open regionalism led and owned by Pacific Island countries", "deciding regional affairs in their own way") (Wang, 2023; Xi, 2014).
China's discourse on decentralization varies widely from Japan's. China barely speaks to sub-regionalism but frames the discourse on decentralization around sub-nationalism ("expand subnational interactions", "encourage closer sub-national exchanges") (China-PICs Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 2021; FMPRC, 2022b).

China is extremely vocal about people-to-people exchanges, scholarship opportunities, and the added value of initiatives for people ("strengthen exchanges and cooperation in fields such as youth, sports, culture", "we have stayed committed to building people-to-people links") (Wang, 2023; Xi, 2014). Contrastingly, grammatically, particularly in the syntax, empowering PICs is absent. China always mentions itself first followed by PICs. This is even apparent in institution names (e.g., China-Pacific Island Countries Foreign Ministers meeting). Hence, although China empowers the people, there is no empowerment at the political level.

Having contextualized China's discourse, two refinements must be made. Firstly, considering that China only has diplomatic relations with 10/18 PIF members as the others have ties with Taiwan (FMPRC, 2022a, para. 4), China's decision to opt for the more expensive national and sub-national efforts becomes reasonable. Secondly, the finding that "China respects the connections that PICs have established with other countries" is simply not true (Wang, 2023). In 2019, Chinese officials successfully pressured the Solomon Islands and Kiribati to switch diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in return for millions in aid (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 12). Furthermore, China has weaponized tourism, even though it is a critical income for most PICs. While from 2011-2015, Chinese tourists to Palau accounted for more than 50% of Palau's annual visitors, this abruptly fell when China banned state-run package tours. This was widely interpreted as pressuring the America-close-Palau to switch diplomatic recognition (para.18). Applying these covert political pressures evidently relates to power structures. Moreover, it relates to ownership because China has successfully changed PICs regional agenda towards discussing diplomatic relations and by applying pressure, also infringed with their sovereign right to freely decide about diplomatic relations.

EU

Concerning (ideologically shaped) power structures, the EU posits a narrative to promote its own values and strategies. This is undeniably evident in a lexical reading ("The EU should increase the impact of its development policy in line with the EU Agenda for Change", "The EU should […] promote EU values" (European Commission (EC) & HRVP, 2012, pp. 2, 6). To legitimatize its approach, the EU, from a discursive strategies analysis, uses an authorization strategy ("As a champion of responsible business conduct", "EU-Pacific partnerships to transfer specific expertise") (EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 6; EC & HRVP, 2012, p. 8). Thus, it legitimizes its actions by referring to its experiences. Furthermore, the EU writes extensively about how much money they spend

to support a project or solve a problem (EC & HRVP, 2012, 2021). There are several potential reasons for this. What is clear, however, is that all this points to more dictation of the terms by the EU and a clear dichotomy between the donor (EU) and recipients (PICs). Lastly, contrastingly to the other major powers, the EU, grammatically, extensively relies on the word 'should' (e.g., "The EU should [...] promote EU values", "The Pacific Community should also benefit from closer ties") (EC & HRVP, 2012, p. 6; EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 13). 'Should' is used to indicate an obligation, duty, expectation, or advisability (Collins, n.d., c). Here, it is on the one hand used to reveal power dynamics: Those who asserted what others should do (here the EU) have authority or influence and can dictate norms, behaviors, strategies, or decision-making outcomes. On the other hand, should is used to invoke expectations or obligations of a group (here PICs) to adhere to certain norms. Thus, from the in-text analysis alone, the EU, so far, is the power that engages the most in (ideologically shaped) power structures.

Throughout the EU texts, there is an explicit discourse evident on a perceived need by the EU to promote EU values in the Pacific speaking to the concept of 'identity'. This is most evident lexically, in "promote EU values in the cooperation with Pacific countries", or in "enhance their ability to promote EU values" (EC, n.d., p. 8; EC & HRVP, 2012, p. 3). Moreover, the EU writes that actions and initiatives should be in line with EU values ("mainstream across all actions the EU's fundamental values", "engaging with Indo-Pacific Partners [...] in line with our values and principles") (EC, n.d., p. 9; EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 17). This discourse is also apparent implicitly. It is stated that "it is essential for the EU [...] to promote the rules-based international order" which is a Western construct (EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 2).

Similar to Japan, the EU lexically foregrounds a discourse on aligning their engagement in the region with Pacific priorities and initiatives and on being responsive to PICs' needs ("responsive to Pacific priorities", "relative to the needs in the Pacific"; "Pacific ways of addressing development challenges"; "a holistic island-based approach to development") (EC & HRVP, 2012, pp. 6-7; EC, n.d., p. 14). Additionally, similar to Japan, the EU lexically uses an explicit ownership discourse. They extensively mention local ownership ("should be locally owned", "this co-operation promotes local ownership"), and political ownership ("government ownership and political will") (EC, 2007, pp. 25, 29; EC, n.d., p. 17).

The EU is the major power most vocal about sub-regional efforts ("establishment of sub-regional recycling hubs", "strengthen partnerships with all relevant actors [...], taking into consideration sub-regional dynamics and specificities") (EC, n.d., p. 12; EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 4). This most likely is due to the EU being a regional organization itself.

Like Japan, the EU praises PICs and their identity syntaxial by predominantly mentioning PICs first ("Pacific-EU cooperation", "Pacific-EU development partnership", "Pacific Islands-EU consensus") (EC & HRVP, 2012, pp. 3, 7; EC, 2007, p. 54). Contrastingly to Japan, the EU invokes not only a whole-community approach to empowerment ("The EU should continue involving civil society, local authorities") but is also vocal about empowering specific underrepresented and disadvantaged groups ("equal participation and leadership of women") (EC & HRVP, 2012, p. 11; EC, n.d., p. 8). Thus, the EU's discourse on empowerment speaks to empowerment as an organizational and political issue. Additionally, in contrast to China, the EU is vocal about empowering the political level ("The EU will encourage greater participation of Indo-Pacific partners") (EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 14). Thus, the EU's discourse on empowerment is the most encompassing.

Several aspects identified in the preceding discourse analysis are reflected in the EU-PIC's socio-historic relations. Historically, EU-PIC agreements focused extensively on promoting Western values and on development assistance given by the EU. To illustrate, the reference to fundamental human rights in Lomé III was opposed by ACP countries as they feared interference by European countries. These trends were nonetheless confirmed with Lomé IV by making aid subject to e.g., respect for human rights reiterates unequal power structures and imposition of values identified in the discourse analysis (disregarding the fact here that human rights should be self-evident) (Ehne, n.d.). Another example is the power politics evident in the ratification of the Samoa Agreement by the EU. Although the previous Cotonou Agreement expired in 2020 and its successor treaty was finalized in 2021, first Hungary and then Poland blocked its approval in the European Council required to reach unanimity by invoking domestic and EU internal issues. Only after two years and several extensions of the Cotonou Agreement did they give their approval (Fox, 2023; Socialists and Democrats, 2023). This undoubtedly negatively influenced the EU's vision that the agreement is one among equals. This historical analysis supports the finding of the in-text discourse analysis of the EU as a normative power proclaiming itself a mission to promote its values and strategies (identity construction) and as an interest-driven actor aiming to advance also its own economic agendas ((ideologically shaped) power structures, ownership).

The social context, however, points to different conclusions. For instance, the whole-community approach identified in the discourse analysis is reflected in e.g., the 'Spotlight Initiative' by the European External Action Service on ending domestic and intimate partner violence or the Commission's call for action grants given to PICs to support Pacific civil society organizations (Hoerder, 2020; Funds for NGOs, n.d.).

US

The US discourse on power is ambivalent. Lexically, they invoke commonality and respect for PICs by mentioning a "shared responsibility [...] for the regional order", a "future that we are building together", "partner with Pacific Islanders" and a "future in which cultural heritage and tradition are respected, honored, and protected") (US Department of Defense (DoD), 2019, p. 6; Blinken, 2023; The White House, 2022, p. 14; The White House, 2022, p. 16). However, the US also invokes a discourse around the need to promote certain initiatives. Contrastingly to the EU, however, these remain ideologically unattached ("advance US security leadership", "promote a networked and more integrated region") (National Security Council (NSC), 2021, p. 4; US DoD, 2019, p. 53).

The US discourse on identity can be positioned between the Japanese and EU discourse. They invoke their common identity in several ways. Firstly, lexically by stating "The US is a Pacific nation"; "the United States is a proud Pacific power" and "We commit to living up to our role as a Pacific power" (US DoD, 2019, p. 1; The White House, 2022, pp. 2, 16). By reiterating (intertextuality) that the US is a Pacific nation, too, they create a more intimate foundation for the relationship. The discourse on a common identity is reinforced grammatically by using the pronoun 'our' ("our countries") (Clinton, 2012). Furthermore, incorporating PICs' identity is evident in mentioning the Blue Pacific repeatedly ("Blue Pacific environment", "Blue economies") (The White House, 2022, pp. 4, 12). Similarly to Japan, they also invoke shared values ("bound by shared interest, and more importantly, shared values") (Clinton, 2012). The US draws on their shared history ("America's historic ties to the Indo-Pacific", "share a long history") to explain their engagement and future commitments to the region ("the history and the future of the Pacific Islands and the US are inextricably linked") (DoD, 2019, pp. 2, 41; The White House, 2022, p. 2). Yet, contrastingly to Japan, the US occasionally engages in a discourse on identity promotion ("highlighting American culture, history") (The White House, 2022, p. 15; Jewell, 2013).

The US invokes a discourse on how PICs' sovereignty is challenged, particularly by China, rather than respecting it ("pressure and economic coercion by the People's Republic of China", "the region also faces challenges to security and sovereignty including in the maritime domain") (The White House, 2022, pp. 4, 6). In response, the US lexically reiterates its commitment to sovereignty on two grounds. Firstly, they intensify praising the value of sovereignty for all nations ("all nations, large and small, are secure in their sovereignty") (US DoS, 2019, p. 5). Secondly, they reiterate their commitment to sovereignty by counteracting threats to sovereignty ("We will compete vigorously against attempts to limit the autonomy and freedom of choice of Indo-Pacific nations") (DoS, 2019, p. 5). Repeating 'we' in several instances asserts agency and responsibility on the 'we' (i.e., the US). Together this, however, begs the issue that the US reacts to challenges to PICs sovereignty by infringing it themselves. Despite that, the US aligns its engagement with the initiatives and needs of PICs as identified by them and with their principles and documents ("best meet the needs of the Pacific Islands", "these new programs will address the priorities that you have identified"; "to support the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent", "to address Pacific priorities working together with the Pacific according to principles of Pacific Regionalism"; "take the Pacific Islands Forum as its guide") (The White House, 2022, p. 9; Clinton, 2012; Blinken, 2023; The White House, 2022, pp. 5, 7).

The US is the only major power that does not advance a discourse on decentralization. Reflecting on this silence, it could be due to historical factors: The US remains silent on decentralization because they prioritize bilateral partnerships with the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau with which they entertain deep historical ties (The White House, 2022, p. 8). I further elaborate on these historical ties below.

The US's discourse on empowerment is two-fold. Firstly, they advance a people-centric discourse by highlighting the importance of understanding and responding to the needs and aspirations of the people ("that respond to people's needs and expectation", "to support a [...] region that benefits people in the Pacific", "expanding people-to-people ties") (Blinken, 2023; The White House, 2022, pp. 5-6). Certainly, this has an empowering effect. Secondly, similarly to Japan, the US invokes a whole-community discourse ("We will improve the capacity of civil society organizations, journalists, and independent media to serve as advocates

and to inform and amplify citizens' voices and engagement") (empowerment as an organizational issue) (The White House, 2022, p. 12).

Contextualizing US engagement in the region historically partly confirms the discourse analysis findings. During the Second World War, PICs served as refueling and basing sites for a planned US attack on Japan (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 7). Between 1946 and 1962, the US conducted 105 nuclear tests in the Pacific predominantly on today's territory of the Mashall Islands. These have caused irreparable environmental damage destroying at least four islands of the Marshall Islands and making them unable to grow their own food due to the massive amounts of released radiation (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 7). Following independence, the three countries entered into a Compact of Free Association with the US immediately limiting ownership again. Under the agreement, the US provides financial support and social services and in return gets military access, and influence over their foreign affairs and has responsibility for their defense (Searight, Harding & Tran, 2019, p. 13). These specific relations cement the assumption from the discourse analysis on the absent US discourse on decentralization due to (sub-) national historical responsibilities.

Lastly, the repeated phrase "the US is a Pacific nation" is reflected in the social context. The US has cultural ties with the region due to the three Compact countries and because it has several territories in the region, namely American Samoa, Guam, Hawai'i, and Northern Mariana Islands. To illustrate these cultural ties, the East-West Centre (n.d.) located in Hawai'i and funded by the US government was founded in the 1960s to "promote better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the US, Asia, and the Pacific". Moreover, Hawai'i hosts the 13th Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture – the world's largest celebration of Indigenous Pacific Islanders (The White House, 2023). Thus, contrastingly to the historical context, the social context gives support to the US's commitment to the region.

PICs

From several analysis techniques, it is evident that PICs are clearly discontented with the current power structures. Referring for instance to the principal-agent theory, they argue that who entrusts tasks (principal) and who is entrusted with tasks on behalf of the principal (agent) has become upside down. They argue that this leads to donor parties becoming the principal that dictates the priorities and the agenda to PICs who in turn are becoming the agents responsible for implementing initiatives that are not necessarily aligned with their vision ("Who are the principles in, and who are the agents of, regionalism has become confused") (PIFS, 2013, p. 18). Moreover, they clearly see an issue in how major powers interact with the region ("threats to [...] values, changing external influences") (PIFS, 2013, p. 24). PICs' response to these unequal power structures is clear-cut. They invoke their distinct characteristics to claim leadership. Firstly, they reiterate the importance of their leadership in maritime issues as they are guardians of the largest portion of the Pacific Ocean (PIF, 2016, p. 3). Secondly, they use their exposure to climate change to legitimate their claims to climate leadership (PIF, 2013, p. 3). From a discursive strategies analysis, they legitimate their claim to leadership by using a rationalization strategy ("Though the role of Pacific Island states in the causes of climate change is small, the impact on them is great") (PIF, 2009, p. 11). The legitimacy of the claim to take on climate leadership follows from the reason (i.e., the great impact on them).

There is a very explicit identity assertion discourse evident to respond to identity construction by major powers. Semantically, they assert a collective identity for Pacific peoples and position Pacific communities as stewards with a unique responsibility ("Pacific peoples are the custodians of the world's largest, most peaceful and abundant ocean, its many islands and its rich diversity of cultures") (PIF, 2014, p. 1). Lexically, PICs (re-)assert their identity by on the one hand, reiterating their reliance on their culture and traditions ("draw strength from the culture and traditions, language, social values, and religious freedom", "faiths, cultural values, and traditional knowledge are respected, honored and protected") (PIF, 2014, p. 1; PIF, 2022a, pp. 3). On the other hand, they lexically (re-) assert their identity by referring to their deep-seated ocean identity by identifying and framing themselves as the Blue Continent (nomination) in all texts and by reiterating "the region's unique dependency on the Pacific Ocean as the basis for their livelihoods, food security, and economic development". They not only identify themselves as "large oceanic countries" (PIF, 2011; PIF, 2014, p. 1; PIF, 2022a, p. 7) but they also draw strength from and see the ocean as a unifying element ("The ocean brings unity"; "recognizing our ocean as the bridge that links our peoples" (PIF, 2016; PIF, 2015, p. 3). Geographically, the Pacific Ocean is a separating force that compounds connectivity problems. Here, however, the ocean is represented as a symbol of unity suggesting that despite being a geographical barrier, it serves as a unifying and bridging force that connects cultures because they draw strength from the ocean and see it as a shared heritage. Longitudinally, PIC identity

assertion is equally prevalent. Whereas in earlier texts, they primarily referred to themselves as 'Forum Island Countries' derived from the Pacific Islands Forum, in more recent texts, they overwhelmingly refer to themselves as Pacific Island Countries – thus, cherishing their Pacific identity.

PICs stress an explicit discourse on ownership by mentioning challenges to ownership and by stressing what needs to happen to overcome them. Whipps (2021) puts forward a rhetorical question provocatively asking about the purpose of external powers to infringe on PICs ownership ("Today, we are once again being invaded by the most powerful nations on earth by the results of their unbridled emissions, exploiting us for their benefit and our detriment. How long must we suffer under colonization?"). To rectify these challenges, PICs repeatedly use 'need' ("the process needs to be insulated from intervention by stakeholders", "PIFS needs to take ownership") (PIFS, 2013, pp. 35, 80). Semantically, 'need' expresses a requirement or necessity for something that is currently lacking but that must be fulfilled to achieve the desired outcomes (here strengthened ownership) (Dictionary, n.d.). Additionally, PICs are very vocal about protecting sovereignty and safeguarding non-intervention ("region's sovereignty and sovereign rights over its maritime zones and lands", "respecting the principle of non-interference") (PIF, 2022b, p. 29; PIF, 2018a, p. 10). Lastly, lexically, PICs emphasize the need to align engagement with regional priorities and consistent with Pacific approaches ("consistent with the Pacific way", "aligned to the regionalism priorities and should build on the region's effort for the common Blue Pacific identity") (PIF, 2010, p. 4; PIF, 2018b, para.2). Thus, PICs reassert their ownership against external infringement on both grounds.

As mentioned, PICs assign great value to sub-regionalism evident for instance in the frequent use of the word 'sub-regional'. Thereby, they reiterate its importance and their commitment to it. The fact that solely the EU seriously incorporates discourse on sub-regionalism considering PICs' huge significance to it, displays that PICs' ownership over their agenda is influenced by the remaining powers, particularly the US and China as they explicitly (US) and implicitly (China) place security further up on the agenda.

PICs emphasize three related discourses on empowerment. Firstly, like the EU, they foreground a discourse on empowering politically salient groups (empowerment as a political issue) ("participation of women and girls", "women and girls' economic empowerment", "women's leadership") (PIF, 2022b, pp. 22, 24; PIF, 2011). Secondly, PICs prioritize community participation and empowerment discourse (empowerment as an organizational issue). Thirdly, differently from all major powers, PICs by invoking an all-stakeholder approach, use a third discourse for empowerment namely institutional empowerment. Here, they do not focus on empowering the people but on empowering various stakeholders to participate in regionalism and work with PICs. Among those mentioned are Civil Society Organizations, the private sector, philanthropic partners, donors, non-state actors, academia, and faith-based organizations (PIF, 2016, p. 15). This threefold discourse on empowerment exemplifies how PICs aim to regain ownership ("seek the support, commitment, and ownership of all Pacific people") (PIF, 2014, p. 1). Longitudinally, there is, however, a disempowerment evident. Whereas in earlier communiqués topics like regional sports events, social issues, and cultural diplomacy were usual agenda items, since 2017, these topics have been overtaken by security-related agenda items. PICs have clearly discerned that ("Geopolitical competition impacts [...] our member countries. Further there is increasing commercial and state-sponsored interest in our region's ecological and natural resources") (PIF, 2022a, p. 8).
Having contextualized these findings, PIC identity reassertion post-2009 is equally evident – namely by including a reference to its Blue Continent identity in the title of the new regional guidance document (Blue Pacific Strategy). Additionally, some examples point to PICs standing their ground on both aspects of ownership. For instance, rejecting the proposed Security Deal by China on the grounds that it would undermine the 'Pacific Way' or the successful re-negotiations of the South Pacific Tuna Treaty with the US on the grounds that PICs were unsatisfied with the rate of return for PICs that the US proposed (Tarai, 2015, pp. 241-243).

Major powers' engagement

Here, I will analyze more targeted major powers' interactions as well as summarize the findings from the preceding analyses.

Japan and the EU are the least vocal powers concerning major powers' interaction in the region. The EU for instance only emphasizes multilateral cooperation with "willing and ambitious Indo-Pacific partners" and Japan stresses "rulemaking through dialogue" (EC & HRVP, 2021, p. 17; Kishida, 2023). Nevertheless, these keywords already show that both powers have a cooperative approach to major powers' interactions.

The US is the most vocal and explicit power concerning geopolitics and major power interactions. They recognize that geopolitical competition possibly undermines sovereignty ("We also have an interest in ensuring that growing geopolitical competition does not undermine the sovereignty and security of the Pacific Islands") and explicitly make China responsible for growing geopolitical tensions ("In Particular China, [...], seeks to reorder the region", "pressure and economic coercion by the People's Republic of China, which risks undermining the peace, prosperity, and security of the region, and by extension, of the United States") (The White House, 2022, pp. 4-5; US DoD, 2019, p. 1). The US is also plain in its response namely by reiterating "global US leadership" as they believe that the "Indo-Pacific security continues to rest on US military presence and [...] alliances and close partnerships" (The White House, 2022, p. 10; US DoD, 2019, p. 44). Contrastingly, with other major powers, the US frames its interactions cooperatively ("long history of cooperation") (US DoS, 2019, p. 22).

While China is less vocal than the US concerning major powers' interactions, China's actions most profoundly address major powers' interactions. Examples are the Palau instance mentioned earlier and China's attempt to work for a "new type of international relations to safeguard the interests of developing countries" (FMPRC, 2022c).

Discussion of findings and evaluation

To embed the findings in the theory, I will run the powers through the three dimensions of the typology – nature of interaction, principles of interaction, and approach toward neighborhood. This allows us to bring the findings from the two analyses into discussion and evaluate the findings to subsequently answer the hypotheses and the research question.

Japan's engagement can be summarized as cultural- and equality-oriented. Firstly, they extensively mentioned cherishing shared values and principles and emphasized their historical, geographical, and demographical similarities with PICs. Moreover, they considerably invoked respect for PICs, their identity, and their own approaches. This was particularly evident in the power and identity analysis. Secondly, their approach is equality-oriented as, particularly under ownership, they portrayed it as self-evident to be equal partners. Although some indices of power assertion were evident in the historical analysis, these are minuscule compared to the extensive focus on commonality and equality.

The nature and principles of Japan's interaction with other major powers confirm coexistence. Japan is neutral towards other major powers' engagement and generally neglects or ignores them in their discourse. For instance, they have never commented on geopolitical tensions in the region. With PICs, Japan prioritizes cooperative engagement. They clearly advance positive-sum games through equal partnership and mutuality discourse and favor good neighborliness through advancing mutual trust, respect, and dialogue. Moreover, neither in their nature and principles of interaction nor in their approach toward neighborhood were negative influences on PIC ownership visible. Thus, the analysis of Japan supports hypothesis I.

China's analysis is limited by the number of texts available and, more importantly, by their non-transparency concerning their engagement in the international arena. The contrasting findings in the discourse analysis and the socio-historic analysis illustrate this mismatch. Whereas based on the discourse analysis, China's engagement can be summarized as following a mutual coexistence approach (neutral in their nature of interaction, and as principles, they generally ignore other major powers), this must be adjusted towards dominance (competition), and spreading antagonism (conflict) following the socio-historic analysis. China deliberately attempted to undermine the Pacific Way by proposing a sovereignty-sensitive Security Deal ("China, Pacific islands fail to reach consensus on security pact", 2022, para. 5). This emphasized unequal power structures with PICs as the Security Deal had the potential to undermine the Pacific consensus decision-making. It also touches on power structures in China's interactions with major powers as it was the most profound expression by China to change the region's power structures (i.e., strengthen its leadership at the expense of other powers) and make the Pacific Chinese and clearly illustrated a zero-sum game (Competition). Hence, China's engagement is better summarized as a covert power politics approach, specifically targeting security.

Overtly, China portrays its engagement with major powers as coexistence. They are neutral in their nature of interaction, and as principles, they generally ignore other major powers. This, however, is far from the reality as embedding China's discourse

in context shows that Chinese principles of interaction should be classified under dominance (competition) and spreading antagonism (conflict) as China favors a zero-sum game (e.g., the Security Deal would have strengthened its leadership at the expense of other powers). Similarly, in their relations with PICs, they contend to follow cordial relations and basic good neighborliness (cooperation) as they mutually respect state rights. Yet their actions demonstrate that they do not shy away from using competitive assertions and starting non-violent conflictual situations to gain power and influence (competition) illustrated by China applying pressure to achieve changes in diplomatic recognition or since with the failed Security Deal China would have had great security leverage over PICs (dominance). Moreover, by deliberately strengthening sub-nationalism, China spreads antagonism in the region as it possibly leads to a profound challenge to the Pacific Way policy. Throughout the analysis, I found several instances in which China's (covert) engagement in the region compromised PICs ownership, classifying China under competition supports hypothesis II.

The EU's engagement is the most complex one. On the one hand, the EU is a normative power as it considerably engages in identity promotion. On the other hand, the EU is the most progressive power in empowerment and decentralization. They not only invoke a whole-community approach but also empower specific groups as well as the political level. Therefore, I summarize the EU's approach as issue-specific. On the one hand, they are an encroaching soft power as they apply soft power by leveraging their cultural and ideological power. Since they do not just inspire (i.e., attract) but promote their values and strategies, it is encroaching. On the other hand, the EU was the most diligent power under decentralization and the most encompassing under empowerment. Hence, it is issue-specific. Therefore, the EU's engagement in the region confirms the hybrid form of 'coopetition'. Their nature of interaction is cooperative aiming for positive-sum games as the EU clearly portrayed in its discourse how both sides win from cooperation. Socio-politically, the EU's engagement with PICs falls under cooperation, too. By empowering the people, the political level, and advancing sub-regionalism, the EU's engagement with PICs favors good neighborliness and contributes to region-building. Their interactions with major powers' also fall under cooperation as they strengthen alliance-building and multilateral cooperation. Ideological- and identity-wise however, the EU's principles of interaction speak to competition. They use principles of domination to promote their values and strategies cumulating an approach toward the neighborhood of hegemonic identity promotion.

In sum, the EU's engagement with PICs ideological- and identity-wise is classified under competition whereas its political engagement and its engagement with major powers are cooperative. Answering the hypothesis based on the EU analysis is difficult as the EU is classified between cooperation and competition. However, when only considering the ideology and identity discourse, the EU was classified under competition and clearly compromised PICs ownership supporting hypothesis II.

In their engagement with PICs, the US ideological- and identity-wise extensively focused on their shared history and identity. This was also reflected in the social context. Yet, the US is the only country recurrently mentioning geopolitics. Thus, concerning their engagement with other major powers, the US is extremely responsive to their involvement in the region. Therefore, I summarize the US as a realpolitik actor following a realist approach. To illustrate, to reiterate their might during the Cold War, the US did not shy away from abusing PICs' strategic position exemplified by the nuclear tests (Dionne & Sparling, 2022, para. 1). Nowadays, because their leadership in the region vanished, the US aims to regain its leadership by counteracting Chinese increased influence. Thus, the US clearly prioritizes its own state interest particularly, its security interest (realist approach), and makes pragmatic decisions given the circumstances rather than following ideological lines (realpolitik). Therefore, the US's engagement reflects a cooperative engagement with PICs, which, however, the US is willing to leverage. This coexists with competitive interactions and power politics when interacting with major powers.

The US's nature of interaction with PICs is very dynamic. On the one hand, they strengthen positive-sum games (ex. the Compacts) (cooperation). Yet there are also zero-sum games evident (ex. nuclear testing) (competition). They cooperate with PICs to achieve good neighborliness based on their similarities. However, they try to dominate other major powers. Thus, despite their aim to live up to their commitments as a Pacific nation, their pragmatic considerations, e.g., security concerns and geopolitical realities, often overtake their engagement with PICs. Prioritizing security interests clearly supports summarizing the US approach into a realist approach. In sum, the US's nature and principles of interaction with PICs are cooperative but with other major powers competitive. Their approach toward neighborhood is competitive towards major powers and PICs. Since the US falls overwhelmingly under competition and considering that they were silent on an explicit ownership discourse and willing to infringe PICs sovereignty when addressing challenges to it, the US analysis supports hypothesis II.

This evaluation of the major powers' interaction analysis supports the scope conditions that Schunz et al. (2018, pp. 6-9) formulated to predict when a major power interaction becomes more cooperative or competitive. Concerning the first scope condition (power (a)symmetry), Japan and the EU are clearly the less powerful players in this research. They both encourage cooperative interactions with other powers or coexistence. Power is more symmetric between China and the US, and I identified their respective interactions with major powers as competitive. For the second condition (salience of the neighborhood), the neighborhood is of strategic importance for China and the US as they both see it as a strategic location to have access to essential maritime routes and resources. The theory expected competitive relations, and this is supported by their interactions. Concerning the last scope conditions (compatibility of neighborhood strategies), the US's and China's neighborhood strategies are incompatible as the US wants to re-establish itself as the regional hegemon and China aims to weaken the US's leadership role. Having concluded competitive interactions between the two, this also supports the theoretical assumption that a low degree of compatibility leads to competition.

I summarize PICs' responses to major powers' engagement to follow an assertive approach. This is evident throughout all discourses and the socio-historic analysis. PICs want to take on climate leadership and change the current power structures, reassert their identity by grounding policies in their cultures and traditions, reclaim ownership by reiterating the need to align policies to their needs and condemning infringements to sovereignty, raise the importance of decentralization without undermining the Pacific Way, and lastly, invoke an all-stakeholder approach speaking to empowerment.

Analyzing PICs' perceptions of ownership was not immediately needed to answer the research question. I nevertheless considered it indispensable to analyze how PICs themselves perceive the issue of ownership in their region to analyze how they react to major powers' influences. Their analysis as well as hypothesis III therefore served as the mirror to the major powers analysis and hypothesis I and II. Derived from the theory, I hypothesized that if a major power engages competitively in the region, PICs' response will be more assertive to lessen compromises to ownership. However, what I found is that PIC engagement is assertive no matter whether the major power engages cooperatively or competitively. The only nomination strategy PICs use to differentiate is being "invaded by the most powerful nations on earth" (Whipps, 2021). However, it remains unclear whether with "most powerful nations" they only refer to the global powers – US and China – or also to great powers – the EU and Japan. Furthermore, PICs express a general discontent with the current power structures and an aim to combat dominance (i.e., external influences) and hegemony (i.e., neo-imperial structures). Thus, I did not find support for hypothesis III.

Despite not having found support for hypothesis III, I find it indispensable to have included PIC discourse in the analysis. By introducing the agency of the influenced in the analysis, I could conceptually overcome, as Buranelli (2018) has recommended, portraying the influenced (PICs) as a victim and instead understanding it to have agency and interests. This is most evident when PICs contested compromises to ownership and asserted their identity.

In sum, I found support for H1 and overwhelming support for H2 but did not find support for H3.

To answer the research question, it was helpful to look again at the conceptualization of ownership. It consisted of two components – a lawful claim (mainly expressed and justified by sovereignty) that is nourished by PICs initiatives – that only together constitute ownership. Thus, if one of them is scratched, ownership is compromised.

To answer the research question, I first draw sub-conclusions for each major power separately:

- Japan adhered to both components in its engagement with PICs and other major powers.
- China infringed on PIC's lawful claim for its engagement with major powers, changed the agenda, and was silent on whether it adhered to PIC initiatives.
- The EU infringed with PICs' lawful claim in its engagement with PICs yet aligned their engagement with PICs' initiatives and nurtured cooperative interactions with major powers.
- The US (is willing to) infringe(d) PIC's lawful claim for its interactions with major powers, thereby shaping PIC agenda yet adhering to align with PIC initiatives.

Considering these sub-conclusions together, the research question must be answered by PICs ownership of Pacific Regionalism post-2009 being considerably negatively influenced by major powers' engagement in the region.

For an evaluation of academic, political, and ethical implications, limitations of this research, and future research suggestions please consult the original master thesis.

Conclusion

Answering the question 'To what extent is Pacific Island Countries' ownership of Pacific Regionalism post-2009 influenced by major powers' engagement in the region perceiving it as their sphere of influence' by concluding that major powers' engagement considerably negatively influenced PICs ownership, this research has successfully contributed to overcoming the identified time dimensional gap in literature. Typifying major powers' engagement in the region contributed to the three objectives. The US's analysis, for instance, speaking to objective II, showed that people on the ground and their representatives are not heeded thus, PICs do not (fully) own the agenda. The EU's analysis speaks more to the objective I because they do not consider PICs in equal terms power- and identity-wise. Overall, analyzing the interactions of four major powers has contributed to rectifying the gap identified by Schunz et al. (2018) on major powers' interactions under multipolarity (objective III).

The constructivist lens allows to portray the impacts of discourses on actors' perceptions and interpretations – meaning the impacts of the discourses used by major powers on PICs perceptions and interpretations – which following constructivism are understood as socially constructed. For instance, because PICs have long been imagined as remote, small, and backward island states, their mindset and vision of themselves are influenced by this perception. Having disclosed the largely insensitive engagement of major powers in and with the region, this research project adds a novel and meaningful conclusion to the literature on Pacific Regionalism and is yet another call on Western politicians to stop thinking that they need to intervene somewhere 'to save the people.' Precisely, this research portrayed this by displaying the fine-grained yet crucial difference between 'promote' and 'inspire'. Hence, as was identified as the motive of this study, this research should pressure the international community to adopt a more nuanced engagement in and with PICs.

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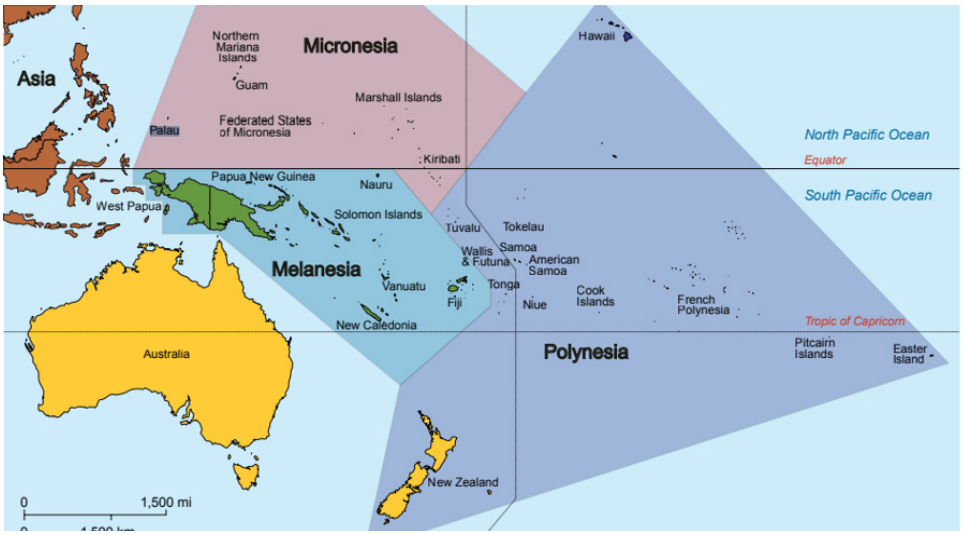
Annex



Note: Reprinted from Strengthening the U.S.-Pacific Islands Partnership (p. 3) [Report] by A. Searight, B. Harding, K. M. Tran (2019), Center for Strategic and International Studies

Figure A1: South Pacific sub-regions

Strategy	Objectives	Devices
Referential or nomination	Discursive construction of social actors, objects/phenomena/events, and processes/ actions	• Membership categorization devices, deictics, anthroponyms, etc. • Tropes such as metaphors, metonymies, and synecdoches (pars pro toto, totum pro parte) • Verbs and nouns used to denote processes and actions
Predication	Discursive qualifications of social actors, objects, phenomena/events/processes, and actions (more or less positively or negatively)	• Stereotypical, evaluative attributions of negative or positive traits (E.g., in the form of adjectives, appositions, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, conjunctional clauses, infinitive clauses, and participial clauses or groups) • Explicit predicates or predicative nouns/ adjectives/pronouns • Collocations • Explicit comparisons, similes, metaphors, and other rhetorical figures (including metonymies, hyperboles, litotes, euphemisms) • Allusions, evocations, and presuppositions/implicatures • Other
Argumentation	Justification and questioning of claims of truth and normative rightness	• Topi (formal or more content-related) • Fallacies

Perspectivization, framing, or discourse representation	Positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance	• Deictics • Direct, indirect or free indirect speech • Quotation marks, discourse markers/ particles • Metaphors • Animating prosody • Other
Intensification, mitigation	Modifying (intensifying or mitigating) the illocutionary force and thus the epistemic or deontic status of utterances	• Diminutives or augmentatives • (modal) particles, tag questions, subjunctive, hesitations, vague expressions, etc. • Hyperboles, litotes • Indirect speech acts (e.g., question instead of assertion) • Verbs of saying, feeling, thinking • other

Table A1: Discursive Strategies

Note: Reprinted from The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction (1st ed., p. 8), by K. Tracy, C. Ilie, & T. Sandel, 2015, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Legitimisation Strategy	Explanation
Rationalisation	Legitimacy of the claim follows from the reason
Authorisation	Legitimacy follows from experience or convention
Moral Evaluation	Legitimacy follows from valyes; explicit evaluation
Plausibilisation	Legitimacy is suggested implicitly by narration or illustration an iconic event
Representation	Legitimacy follows from portrayal

Table A2: Discursive Legitimisation Strategies

Note: Reprinted from EU foreign policy through the lens of Discourse Analysis: Making Sense of Diversity (p. 156), by C. Carta & J-F. Morin, 2014.

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