



Rock Islands, Republic of Palau, Photo: DOI Theilemann

## What are the different designations for U.S. Territories, Commonwealths, and Freely Associated States?

The U.S. affiliated Pacific Islands includes the three U.S. territories -- Guam, American Samoa and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), and three independent nations -- the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), the Republic of Palau (RoP) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) (States of Kosrae, Pohnpei, Chuuk and Yap). These three independent nations, along with what is now CNMI, comprised the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) which was created after WWII and administered by the United States. The CNMI chose to affiliate with the U.S. in a commonwealth status, becoming the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in 1978. The other islands in the TTPI divided themselves into three nations, achieving independence as RMI and FSM in the mid-1980s and as RoP in 1994 and as such, are home to some of the world's youngest democracies. These independent nations are politically linked to the United States through unique treaties referred to as Compacts of Free Association (COFA), which allow their citizens visa-free access to the United States to live, work and study. These three nations are also referred to as Freely Associated States (FAS).

These **Pacific Islands comprise some of the most geographically isolated populations** among all U.S. States, territories and tribes. Roughly **600,000 people live in the six Pacific Island jurisdictions**. Pacific Island populations **reside on hundreds of islands and atolls** (ring-shaped volcanic remnants with a central lagoon) **spread over millions of square miles of ocean**. These territories, commonwealth and freely associated countries are **home to diverse indigenous cultures, many of whom have been displaced by war and disasters, and who speak more than two dozen languages**. Flying from the furthest reaches of these Pacific Islands to the East Coast of the United States takes 22 hours of flight time. **These Pacific Island jurisdictions, with over 104 inhabited islands and low-lying atolls, cover a geographic expanse greater than that of the continental United States.**

Individuals from the region, including citizens of RMI, FSM, and Palau, also **serve in disproportionate numbers in the U.S. armed services, both active duty and in the National Guard (Guam and CNMI) and the Army reserve (American Samoa)**. These Pacific Islands experience some of the highest per capita deaths rates during the last 15 years in the Middle Eastern conflicts. Veterans returning to their home islands in the USAPI, face unique challenges in accessing comprehensive health services of the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA)



**By: Subroto Banerji**  
**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**  
Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health (OASH)  
Region IX – San Francisco  
415.437.8114  
[subroto.banerji@hhs.gov](mailto:subroto.banerji@hhs.gov)

