# Opinion – Technocolonialism Across the Pacific

https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/17/opinion-technocolonialism-across-the-pacific/

SEOHEE PARK, MAR 17 2025

The Starlink name draws from the novel *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green about two teenagers with cancer who find love and meaningful connection while facing forces beyond their control. Like these characters who refuse their determined fate, Pacific nations face a struggle against external powers. As Starlink satellites multiply in orbit, Pacific Island nations find themselves at the center of a new "Great Game" between competing powers offering technological "gifts" with strings attached or risk being left behind in the digital age. Across the Pacific Ocean, from Niue to Palau, a new form of colonialism, so-called technocolonialism, emerges with infrastructure as its primary vehicle. Undersea cables carrying 99% of the global data traffic and satellite networks like Starlink have become the shipping lanes and trading posts of our digital era. Tech giants and their billionaire owners, not nation-states, increasingly function as the colonial power of the 21st century.

Starlink offers connectivity solutions that Pacific governments find difficult to resist, particularly for communities scattered across remote islands. Nevertheless, beneath this surface utility lies a deeper concern: dependency on technology controlled by foreign tech oligarchs who answer no electorate and recognize no borders. This digital dependency came with hidden costs, for sure. Palau's President Surangel Whipps Jr. stated this predicament clearly, "we have a huge debt we have to repay, so allowing Starlink in uncontrolled would mean a reduction in revenue to pay for those cables." Having committed to building self-owned digital infrastructure through loans from development partners, these nations now watch as Starlink threatens to render these investments financially unsustainable.

The weaponization of essential digital services has become a defining feature of modern power struggles. The devastating January 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano eruption and tsunami revealed this vulnerability. The disaster severed Tonga's only undersea fiber optic cable and made the country digitally isolated from the world. While Starlink immediately provided emergency connectivity, and Australia and New Zealand latter stepped in to support long-term restoration efforts, this disaster exposed the precarious position of nations dependent on single-source connectivity solutions. Similarly, Vanuatu lost communication connectivity in December 2024 due to a strong earthquake.

Such a pattern extends beyond the Pacific. Meta's Free Basics program in Africa offered "free internet" that was actually a walled garden of Meta-approved content. It is criticized as redefining what "the internet" meant for millions of African users. When countries like Egypt in 2015 and India in 2016 recognized this digital enclosure and banned the service, they faced intense backlash and accusations of hindering development, which is the modern equivalent of resisting 'civilizing colonial influence. Even more concerning is how the United Arab Emirates used to ToTok messaging app that presented as a secure communication tool, to conduct mass surveillance of its users. Digital infrastructure is not merely about connectivity but increasingly serving as a vector for political control and intelligence gathering on populations.

Even Europe, despite its economic might and regulatory frameworks like General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has not escaped this so-called digital colonization. The continent's most widely-used communication services, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram provided by Meta, Gmail, YouTube, and Drive provided by Google, and other platforms, are controlled by American tech giants. Europeans conduct their most sensitive personal and professional communications through infrastructure they neither own nor ultimately control. Despite

aggressive regulatory efforts, Europe remains a digital vassal state, with its citizens' data flowing through American-owned channels, creating vulnerabilities that Pacific nations would be wise to recognize as they make their own connectivity decisions.

As Starlink expands across the Pacific, it shifts control over essential communications to private tech companies based far away from their shores. This gradual concentration of digital influence follows familiar historical patterns where commercial entities initially offered valuable services before accumulating broader forms of influence. While promising needed connectivity, these satellite constellations represent a subtle transformation in sovereignty, as island nations' digital pathways increasingly depend on decisions made in foreign boardrooms rather than by local governments. The invisible nature of this influence, flowing through signals rather than physical occupation, makes it both more acceptable and potentially more pervasive than previous forms of external control.

For Pacific Island nations, the choice between Starlink, Chinese-provided infrastructure (mainly by Huawei), or Quad-backed alternatives represents a modern geopolitical dilemma. Tuvalu's Communications Minister Simon Kofe maintains a pragmatic stance regarding Starlink, "We couldn't care less about [Musk's] beliefs and his politics. It's purely his solution." Yet Tuvalu has simultaneously accepted Japan's cybersecurity support while signing the Falepili Union Treaty with Australia that includes provisions about security arrangements alongside climate change assistance. This balancing act between competing powers echoes colonial-era tactics of playing imperial rivals against each other to maintain some degree of independence. The difference today is the invisible nature of digital infrastructure control, which often escapes the scrutiny applied to military bases or resource extractions.

The stakes became clear when X suspended accounts of journalists critical of the platform's owner, Elon Musk (who also owns Starlink), proving how quickly digital services can become tools of personal or political agendas. With Musk's central role in the Trump administration, Pacific nations reliant on Starlink could find themselves vulnerable to American political pressures transmitted through ostensibly private channels.

Some Pacific nations are pioneering approaches to maintain digital sovereignty amid this new wave of technocolonialism. The solution may lie in regulatory frameworks that integrate new technologies without surrendering control, requiring local data storage, ensuring fair contribution to infrastructure costs, and maintaining multiple connectivity options. Fiji has implemented strong national data protection frameworks requiring local data storage, while Vanuatu carefully balances multiple providers including traditional telecom networks alongside satellite services. These strategies minimize dependency on any single tech company or foreign entity. Europe's Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA) represent similar attempts to reclaim some digital sovereignty dominated by American tech firms, offering potential models for Pacific nations. Even Europe has recognized that allowing non-European tech giants unchecked influence leads to a form of digital vassalage.

As the Quad alliance mobilizes resources to counter Chinese digital influence, such as Open Radio Access Networks, and private corporations like Starlink offer their own solutions, Pacific nations have an opportunity to leverage this competition rather than becoming its victims. By maintaining multiple connectivity options, requiring local data storage, investing in cybersecurity training, and carefully evaluating the geopolitical implications of digital infrastructure decisions, these nations can write their own infinity that are small perhaps in geopolitics, but still a universe for their own making. Pacific nations may not control the technological forces reshaping our world, but they can choose how and on what terms they engage with them.

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## About the author:

**Dr. Seohee Park** is a postdoctoral research fellow at Tohoku University (Japan) and teaches international relations at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (Japan). Her research focuses on semiconductors, high-tech industries in Northeast Asia, geoeconomics, and security in the Indo-Pacific.