

Island Areas Glossary

Purpose

The U.S. territories and freely associated states (T/FAS) come with their own unique terminology. This resource serves as a quick reference to get new readers up to speed or give old hands a refresher.

All entries are alphabetical. If you're looking for something specific, use Control+F to open a search box in your browser window.

Compacts of Free Association

Public laws that establish the special relationship between the United States and the sovereign nations of the **Republic of Palau**, **Federated States of Micronesia (FSM)**, and **Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI)**. Under these laws, the U.S. government agreed to provide economic and technical assistance, ensure U.S. military defense support, and allow unrestricted travel to and from the U.S. states and territories for FAS citizens. In exchange, FAS grant the U.S. government exclusive and unlimited use of their land, air, and waterways for strategic purposes. Some of the economic assistance is set to continue through 2043, while defense and migration provisions continue in perpetuity.

Freely Associated State

One of the three independent island nations that have ratified Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the United States. The three FAS are former U.S. territories that became independent nations in the 1980s and 1990s, and which maintain a special relationship with the United States through COFA. COFA reflect FAS's importance for U.S. geopolitical and military interests in East Asia.

In many ways, FAS operate like any foreign country: Each nation elects a president and maintains a national legislature as well as additional local political structures. The nations have their own constitutions and their own federal agencies (e.g., Ministries of Health). These nations are represented in multilateral forums like the World Health Assembly (unlike territories, which are represented by the U.S. delegation). However, COFA establish certain privileges that differentiate FAS from other countries.

FAS citizens are not U.S. citizens, but they:

- Are eligible for some U.S. federal programs (e.g., certain HHS grants).
- Can serve in the U.S. military.
- Do not need a visa to live, work, or travel in the U.S.

FAS:

- FSM
- RMI
- Palau

FSM and **RMI** entered into a joint COFA with the United States in 1986; Palau entered into its own COFA in 1994.

Note: Other countries may also have freely associated states; when referring to those, use lowercase.

Island Areas or Island Jurisdictions

Colloquial terms used to reference the U.S. T/FAS.

Territories in the Atlantic:

- Puerto Rico
- U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI)

T/FAS in the Pacific:

- American Samoa
- Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)
- FSM
- Guam
- RMI
- Palau

Territory, Territories

The CDC Office of Island Affairs [defines](#) territories as “sub-national administrative divisions overseen by the U.S. government.” The Department of the Interior further [specifies](#) that territories are an “area in which the United States Congress has determined that only selected parts of the United States Constitution apply.” Individuals born in U.S. territories are either U.S. nationals or U.S. citizens, and in these jurisdictions the territorial and U.S. flags often fly side by side.

While this term may include uninhabited islands, ASTHO uses it to refer to the following jurisdictions:

- American Samoa
- CNMI
- Guam
- Puerto Rico
- USVI

Note: *In strictly legal terms, only three of the aforementioned jurisdictions, American Samoa, Guam, and USVI, are “unincorporated territories.” The other two are “commonwealths,” which are afforded a slightly higher degree of internal political autonomy than territories.*

For more detailed information on each of these jurisdictions, visit their [profile pages](#).

U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands

A term often used to collectively refer to the Pacific jurisdictions affiliated with the United States, including both territories and freely associated states.

Territories:

- American Samoa
- CNMI
- Guam

Freely Associated States:

- FSM
- RMI
- Palau