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## US, Cook Islands Discuss Seabed Mining Research

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The United States has launched formal talks with the Cook Islands to support seabed mineral research, a move seen as part of Washington's strategy to reassert its influence in the Pacific amid rising Chinese engagement in the region.

The U.S. State Department announced on Tuesday that discussions with the Cook Islands government have begun to assist with scientific research aimed at informing exploration

and responsible development of deep-sea mineral resources within the island nation's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

Located in the South Pacific, roughly midway between New Zealand and Hawaii, the Cook Islands comprise 15 islands and atolls. Their vast maritime territory contains significant undersea mineral deposits, which have attracted growing international interest as demand increases for materials used in advanced technologies.

“The Government of the United States of America has begun discussions with the Government of the Cook Islands to support the research necessary to inform seabed exploration and responsible development,” the State Department said.

U.S.-linked companies are already involved in marine mineral exploration in the region. The announcement comes amid heightened competition over critical mineral resources and broader concerns about strategic influence in the Pacific.

China has increased its presence in the area through a series of agreements involving infrastructure, fisheries, education, and mineral development with several island nations. These developments have prompted concern from traditional regional partners, including the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand.

Tensions recently escalated between the Cook Islands and New Zealand after the Cook Islands entered into new cooperation agreements with China without consulting Wellington. As a result, New Zealand suspended several million dollars in budgetary aid in June, citing a breach of their long-standing constitutional agreement, which typically requires consultation on foreign policy and defense matters.

Despite the diplomatic strain, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the U.S.-Cook Islands talks and affirmed the right of sovereign nations to manage their natural resources. The Cook Islands have been self-governing since 1965, though they remain in free association with New Zealand, meaning they share certain diplomatic and defense responsibilities.

Seabed mining remains a subject of global debate, with advocates citing its potential to supply minerals critical to high-tech industries and national security, while others raise concerns about its environmental impact.

With increasing geopolitical competition and growing demand for rare minerals, the Cook Islands' seabed has emerged as a strategic asset. The outcome of these talks could have long-term implications for Pacific partnerships and future access to marine resources.