

**Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink's  
Opening Statement to SFRC's Hearing  
on "U.S. Strategy in the Pacific Island Region"  
March 14, 2024, 10:30 a.m.**

Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the committee, thank you for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify on U.S. strategy in the strategically important Pacific Islands region. I'm pleased to be joined today by Ely Ratner, Assistant Secretary for Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, and Michael Schiffer, Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Asia at USAID.

The United States is a Pacific nation, and we share longstanding historic and cultural ties with our Pacific Islands neighbors. As Vice President Harris said in 2022, "The history and future of the Pacific Islands and the United States are inextricably linked." U.S. prosperity and security depend on the Pacific region remaining free and open, prosperous, secure, and resilient. The Pacific Islands are important partners on many global issues, from standing together at the UN on human rights and opposing Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine; to contributing to global security through peacekeeping operations; and to tackling the climate crisis as well as combatting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

The Pacific Islands face significant challenges to their security and prosperity including from climate change and economic shocks, making the region more vulnerable to influence from the PRC. As Secretary Blinken has said, the PRC is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. That certainly holds true in the Pacific. Through foreign assistance, elite capture, and robust public messaging campaigns, the PRC has moved aggressively to assert itself in the Pacific Islands. In addition, in recent years, three Pacific Island countries have switched diplomatic ties from Taiwan to the PRC. And in 2022, Solomon Islands signed an unprecedented security agreement with the PRC, the details of which have not been publicly released. Of course, as we have

often said, we are not in the business of forcing countries to choose – neither in the Pacific nor anywhere else. But we do want to ensure that countries in the Pacific have a choice, and the ability to make their own sovereign decisions, free from coercion.

Under the Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and Pacific Partnership Strategy, the United States has expanded its diplomatic and development engagement with the Pacific Islands. President Biden has convened two Summits to engage with Pacific Islands leaders on shared priorities, including climate change, trade and investment, and a free and open Pacific region. Since the first Summit in 2022, we have announced plans to work with Congress to provide over \$8 billion in new funding and programs. We opened embassies in Solomon Islands and Tonga in 2023 and intend to open an embassy in Vanuatu later this year. We also continue to work with the Government of Kiribati on our plan to open an embassy there. We have recognized the Cook Islands and Niue as sovereign and independent states. Peace Corps Volunteers have returned to Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, and are planning to return to Vanuatu later this year and Palau in 2025. We appointed the first-ever U.S. Envoy to the Pacific Islands Forum to enhance cooperation with the region’s leading foreign policy body.

We have also increased our presence and assistance through the U.S. Coast Guard and maritime domain awareness programs. In 2023, we signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement with Papua New Guinea, which will increase our engagement with the region’s most populous country. We are also working with partners to increase internet access in the Pacific Islands, and together with Australia have pledged \$65 million to finance future submarine cable connectivity for Pacific Island countries.

We have announced our intention to request from Congress \$600 million over 10 years, beginning with the FY 2024 request, in support of a new economic assistance agreement related to the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, which is crucial to the region’s economy and has been a cornerstone of our relationship in the region for over three decades.

Our strategy is also multilateral. In 2022, the United States, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom launched the Partners in the Blue Pacific, an informal strategic coordination initiative guided by Pacific priorities. Since its inception, the grouping has expanded to include additional partners and has announced tangible initiatives on disaster resilience, cybersecurity, and ocean and fisheries research.

The United States shares especially close relationships with the Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Our Compacts of Free Association with these countries, and the economic assistance we provide in support of those Compacts, are key to maintaining the stability and prosperity of our closest Pacific Island partners and to safeguarding our shared long-term defense and strategic interests in the region. I want to thank Congress for approving the Compact agreements and authorizing the necessary funding and authorities on a bipartisan basis that will allow us to move steadily ahead in our partnership with these countries.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate the Pacific region's critical importance to the United States and our long-term strategic interests. We look forward to working with Congress to continue our renewed engagement across the Pacific in an era of increased geopolitical competition. Thank you.

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