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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity today to discuss how the Department of Defense (DoD) is contributing to peace and security with U.S. partners across the Pacific Islands region.

I am pleased to testify today alongside Assistant Secretary of State Kritenbrink and Assistant Administrator Schiffer, underscoring DoD's commitment to advancing the Administration's whole-of-government approach to this vital region.

Recognizing the Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands

Peace, stability, and prosperity in the Pacific Islands are essential for advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. economy – and indeed, the global economy – relies upon hundreds of billions of dollars in maritime trade that flows through the Pacific, with the Pacific Islands forming a strategically critical geography. Additionally, as the broader Indo-Pacific region's populations and economies continue to grow, the millions of people who live across the Pacific Islands make important cultural and economic contributions in the world's most dynamic region. That is why the United States has committed to strengthening our diplomatic, economic, and security ties with partners across the Pacific Islands, and the Department of Defense is proud to play an important part.

The United States is a Pacific power. Our defense posture in the Pacific Islands countries, ranging in levels of presence from a permanent footprint to rotational forces is critical for U.S. military logistics, sustainment, and power projection. This also includes our posture in Hawaii and the territories of Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. The Department of Defense is supporting U.S. efforts to strengthen our partnerships across the Pacific Islands, including through our defense and security ties with the Freely Associated States (FAS), capitalizing on momentum with Papua New Guinea following the signing of a landmark Defense Cooperation Agreement in 2023, building partner capacity through security cooperation, and conducting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Importantly, we will also continue to work with U.S. allies and partners across the broader Indo-Pacific region as they deepen their connections with the Pacific Islands.

Strengthening U.S. Partnerships Across the Pacific Islands

Our strategic approach to the Pacific Islands region draws strength from our longstanding partnerships, as well as the geographic proximity of Hawaii, Guam, American Samoa, and other U.S. territories. We share common concerns for our security and prosperity. And when it comes to honoring our shared history, our Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, for example, benefits from the strong cooperation of eight Pacific Island countries in their critical mission to provide the fullest possible accounting of missing DoD personnel from World War II.

Across the region, the Department of Defense is supporting the Administration's efforts to deliver on an unprecedented commitment to our relationships with the Pacific Islands.

Renewing the Compacts of Free Association

The Department of Defense was pleased to see Congress recently pass the Administration's *Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2024* with a strong bipartisan majority – and we thank the many Members of this Committee who played a pivotal role in advocating for this legislation until its final passage.

The U.S. Government has provided economic assistance to our partners in the Freely Associated States (FAS) for the last four decades; the vast majority of this assistance has been provided under the Compacts of Free Association (COFAs) and related agreements between the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of Palau (Palau), and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). This assistance supports education, the environment, healthcare, and civilian infrastructure – and it provides a strong economic anchor that complements our defense and security partnership. Last year, the Administration reached agreements with the FAS partners that would extend U.S. economic assistance for an additional 20 years.

Importantly, the Compacts ensure that the United States – and only the United States – can maintain a military presence in the FAS, and they allow FAS citizens to strengthen our All-Volunteer Force through dedicated military service in the U.S. Armed Forces. As part of these agreements, the U.S. military serves as the defense force for FSM, Palau, and RMI, which in return grant the United States assured access for our military operations, as well as sites for critical defense posture in the region. In particular, the Marshall Islands hosts the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Site at Kwajalein Atoll; Palau will soon host the highly anticipated Tactical multi-Mission Over-the-Horizon Radar (TACMOR); and we are exploring opportunities for new cooperation, including with FSM on Yap island. The Compacts also limit the access of third country militaries or their personnel, including would-be adversaries from accessing FAS land, airspace, and territorial seas, securing a key area of the Indo-Pacific region. Crucially, FAS citizens serve in the U.S. Armed Forces at higher proportionate rates than most American states, and we are proud of and grateful for their service.

Failure to extend the economic assistance related to the Compacts would have had serious consequences for the economies of our FAS partners, our strategy in the broader Pacific Islands region, and, ultimately, our national security. However, Republicans and Democrats, diplomats and defense experts, and senior U.S. civilian and military officials all agreed: U.S. partners in the FAS – and broader U.S. defense priorities in the Indo-Pacific region – simply could not wait any longer. That is why passing the *Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2024* marked one of the 118th Congress' most significant achievements to advance U.S. strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region.

Deepening Defense Ties with Papua New Guinea

In 2023, the U.S. defense and security relationship with Papua New Guinea (PNG) broke new ground in historic ways. We entered into a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with PNG that will deepen bilateral security cooperation, strengthen the capacity of the PNG Defence Force, and increase regional stability and security. The agreement will facilitate bilateral and multilateral exercises and engagements in support of regional capacity building priorities and enables the

United States to be more responsive in emergency situations, including through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR). Secretary Austin also had an opportunity to discuss the importance of our new DCA with senior leaders in Port Moresby, where he made history as the first U.S. Secretary of Defense to visit Papua New Guinea.

Building Capacity Through Security Cooperation

The Department of Defense works with countries bilaterally and on a regional basis to build partner capacity in critical areas like maritime domain awareness, maritime security, border security, and advancing women, peace, and security initiatives. DoD allocated more than \$27 million to building partner capacity through Title 10 programming in Fiscal Year 2023. A significant amount of this maritime security-focused assistance can also support regional partner capacity to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, which has serious economic, environmental, and security consequences for Pacific Island partners.

The important work of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Joint Interagency Task Force West (JIATF West), as well as the U.S. Coast Guard, also helps strengthen maritime domain awareness in the Pacific Islands. In Fiji, for example, JIATF West has supported the local government's Maritime Surveillance and Rescue Coordination Center with computer equipment and updated software for maritime surveillance activities. Meanwhile, across the region, maritime law enforcement (or "shiprider") agreements with over one dozen partners in the Pacific Islands allow the Coast Guard to help patrol local exclusive economic zones with counterparts. Together, these efforts help the United States maintain a robust presence, deepen defense and security ties with partners, and help uphold the rule of law in the region.

The Department's security cooperation efforts extend beyond the maritime sphere. The DoD State Partnership Program plays an important role in the Pacific Islands, enabling the establishment of enduring people-to-people ties while building partner capacity and improving interoperability. The Nevada National Guard is partnered with Tonga, Fiji, and Samoa, and the Wisconsin National Guard is partnered with Papua New Guinea. We are excited to expand the Guam/Hawaii partnership with the Philippines to the Republic of Palau this year. Another of our most enduring programs is our Civic Action Team in Palau – a tri-military service initiative that supports the community through construction projects, medical civic actions, and community relations.

Conducting Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

The Department also continues to strengthen U.S. ties across the Pacific Islands through supporting humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities, in close partnership with our counterparts at the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In January, the nineteenth iteration of our Pacific Partnership mission concluded after four months of strengthening disaster response preparedness and providing critical medical support across the Pacific Islands region. In August 2023, USAID requested the unique capabilities of the Department in response to a request of the Government of Papua New Guinea to support humanitarian assistance following volcanic eruptions at Mount Bagana. The Department was able to provide heavy lift rotary wing and tiltrotor support to USAID through the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, moving personnel and supplies in and out of the affected area. In 2022, the

USS SAMPSON supported a multinational humanitarian assistance effort alongside France, Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Japan, and others, following a volcanic eruption in Tonga. These operations demonstrate U.S. commitment and strengthen relationships in moments when our partners need us most.

In addition to responding in times of need, we are also working to build our partners' own resilience to respond to such events, including by prioritizing HA/DR-focused exercises to build interoperability and share best practices. By joining with allies and partners in efforts to enhance resilience, we will both strengthen defense relationships and reduce requests for U.S. forces to respond to instability and humanitarian emergencies.

Connecting the Pacific Islands with the Broader Indo-Pacific Region

As the United States deepens our longstanding relationships with the Pacific Islands, the Department is encouraged by how likeminded allies and partners across the broader Indo-Pacific region are also taking important steps to further strengthen ties with the Pacific Island countries. These efforts exemplify how, across the Indo-Pacific region, the United States can work with our allies and partners as they advance a shared vision for peace and stability.

In recent years, for example, the Department has launched the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) alongside the Indo-Pacific Quad partners Australia, India, and Japan. The IPMDA initiative uses cutting-edge technology, including space-based commercial platforms, to deliver a sharper common maritime operating picture throughout the Indo-Pacific region. With radio frequency data, Pacific Island countries are gaining the ability to address potential violations of fisheries regulations in their waters by detecting vessels that have turned off their transponders. In a region as vast as the Pacific Ocean, where IUU fishing and trafficking remain persistent challenges, the IPMDA initiative will equip the Pacific Islands to protect fish stocks, ensure sustainability, and strengthen the livelihoods of local communities. We are also working on countering IUU fishing and strengthening maritime domain awareness through Partners in the Blue Pacific alongside Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom.

Additionally, the United States and key Indo-Pacific allies and partners are delivering targeted economic and security assistance to strengthen resilience across the Pacific Islands. In 2020, for example, the United States joined with Australia and Japan to support a crucial undersea cable project for Palau that will promote connectivity and protect against interference. Australia has pledged to deliver patrol boats and related infrastructure upgrades to our FAS partners under Australia's Pacific Maritime Security Program. Meanwhile, Japan has also helped donate equipment to the FAS, and assisted with the construction of Palau's Maritime Coordination Center. When our countries work together in these ways to expand our capabilities and connections with each other, we are advancing our shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

The United States and our partners, however, are not the only countries that recognize the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands. According to the *2022 National Security Strategy*, the PRC "is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it." That

assessment remains true when it comes to the PRC's approach to the Pacific Islands, where the PRC seeks to erode longstanding U.S. partnerships in the region. In recent years, the PRC has drawn from a range of diplomatic and economic tools to advance its foreign policy goals. This includes through infrastructure projects that lack transparency, pressure against sovereign nations that maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan instead of the PRC, and support of distant water fleets engaged in harmful practices like IUU fishing throughout the region.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, the achievements in the Pacific Islands region that I have just described would not have been possible without bipartisan attention and robust resources from Congress. At the same time, we also know that continuing to deliver meaningful results will require even greater urgency in the years ahead.

The Administration's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* concludes by stating that the region's future "depends on the choices we make now." The Department of Defense remains committed to working alongside our partners across the executive branch, as well as every Member of Congress, in support of strong U.S. partnerships across the Pacific Islands and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Thank you for your time and attention, and I look forward to your questions.