

## **Member Day Testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee**

Congressman Ed Case (HI-01)

December 12, 2019

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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, distinguished members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of this Committee's and our Congress' full focus on the Pacific Islands, a critical region for my Hawai'i and our country.

The Pacific Islands and their exclusive economic zones encompass a vast area of the Pacific Ocean larger than the land areas of Russia and China combined. Their challenges, opportunities and our own engagements range across an equally wide spectrum, from defense to development, governance, the environment and culture. We have a shared history dating back hundreds of years, and too many of our own have shed blood and still lie buried or lost throughout these lands and waters.

The President's 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy rightly identify China as a central challenge and the Indo-Pacific as the region where the geopolitical competition between our countries and "between free and repressive visions of world order" is taking place.

Earlier this year, DoD issued its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report that emphasized revitalized engagement in the Pacific Islands. In this we are behind the curve, as not only China but our partner countries including Australia, New Zealand and Japan have substantially ramped up their engagement over the past decade.

These Pacific Islands are critical to the U.S. not only because of our shared interests, values and history but also because our country is part of them. Together, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Marianas and, of course, Hawai'i provide vital links to the region, especially since Hawai'i hosts the headquarters of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, its component commands

and institutions that promote our interests in the Pacific Islands, such as the East-West Center and the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies.

Given the importance of this region to our national security, I am proud to have co-founded this year the first-ever Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus with my friends, the Dean of this House Mr. Young and the chairman and ranking member of this Committee's Subcommittee for Asia, the Pacific and Nonproliferation, Mr. Sherman and Mr. Yoho. I am here today to testify in support of a sound, cohesive and long-term U.S. strategy of full engagement in the region across all areas.

This critical geopolitical competition in the Pacific Islands demands this whole-of-government strategy, which enhances and balances our military edge with increased development assistance and diplomatic and cultural engagement based on our shared values and history. Specifically, Congress should enact legislation building on the progress made by ARIA and the BUILD Act from last Congress to provide the right tools and authorize the necessary funding to compete against potential adversaries and maintain trust among our allies and partners in our leadership.

This renewed effort is critical to our success. A few months ago, I met with fellows of the East-West Center's Pacific Islands Leadership Program to discuss their perceptions of the U.S. and its role in the region. These young professionals and future leaders of their Pacific island homes expressed to me their concern that the U.S. had neglected their part of the world. To them, the connective tissue that had long bound our nations and peoples together was weakened by our perceived absence and strained by the rapidly changing regional dynamics.

To address this challenge, I hope to work with my Caucus and this Committee on new and renewed initiatives in three areas: diplomacy, development and democracy.

In diplomacy, this includes bolstering our presence in the Pacific Islands and participating more regularly and at more senior levels in existing regional organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Community, and more.

The development challenges in the Pacific Islands present additional opportunities for U.S. engagement, especially in health care, fisheries and marine resource management, climate change and U.S. trade and private-sector investment. Of particular importance is facilitating the circumstances for our Peace Corps to reenter these Pacific Island countries.

Lastly, we must support democracy, good governance and the rule of law in the Pacific Islands just as we do around the world. By doing so, we empower citizens and civil society to combat corruption and hold governments accountable in upholding their interests and sovereignty. The East-West Center in particular has done exceptional work in capacity building for Pacific Islands journalists, civil society and other leaders.

In conclusion, given the accelerating importance of the Pacific Islands to our national interests, I hope members of this Committee will consider joining our Pacific Islands Caucus and work with us to send a strong signal of our commitment to our allies and partners. I look forward to working with the Committee and its members and staff on achieving our goals in a region that will truly determine our place in a rapidly changing world for generations.

Thank you for your time and interest.