Statement by Judith B. Cefkin

U.S. Ambassador, Retired

U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation

October 20, 2021

The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Chabot, and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. And I thank you for holding this hearing to shine a light on the strategic importance of the Pacific Island region. From February 2015 to February 2018, I had the tremendous privilege of serving as the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Fiji, the Republic of Kiribati, the Republic of Nauru, the Kingdom of Tonga, and Tuvalu. Additionally, the U.S. Embassy in Suva, Fiji is a platform for support to the broader region, and in my role as Chief of Mission there, I served as the U.S. representative to key regional organizations, including the Pacific Island Forum, and the Pacific Community. My work and extensive travel crisscrossing the Pacific reinforced my conviction that the Pacific Islands are on the front lines of our most compelling security challenges. Now, in my private capacity, I remain committed to bolstering U.S engagement with this vitally important region.

The Pacific Island nations are our friends, our partners, and our neighbors. As you know, the U.S. State of Hawaii is geographically and culturally part of the region, as are the U.S. Territories of American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The U.S. enjoys special bonds with the Freely Associated States of the Federated State of

Micronesia, Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. And U.S. Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) border the EEZs of several Pacific Island countries. The countries of Oceana, who sometimes refer to themselves as "the blue continent," may be small in landmass, but they are vast in ocean space, covering 15 percent of earth's surface.

The U.S. and Pacific Island countries share a rich history. U.S. whaling ships frequented island waters starting in the 1800's. U.S. traders, missionaries, and naval explorers followed. The bonds forged between Americans and Pacific Islanders were tested and further strengthened in the 20th century by our collective sacrifices in the bloody battles of World War II. But, whereas the threat to the region then came from invading armed forces, today the principal threat comes from non-traditional security challenges. If you ask Pacific Islanders to name their top security peril, the overwhelming response you will hear is "climate change."

The region is especially vulnerable to the impacts of global warming, including sea level rise, increasingly violent storms, flooding, drought, and salt water intrusion onto coastlines that reduces already scarce arable land and water supplies. The atoll island countries of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu, which exist on narrow, low-lying slivers of land, face particularly precarious futures. (Also at risk from rising sea levels in the Marshall Islands is the U.S. Army base on Kwajelein atoll.)

I witnessed these impacts repeatedly during my time in the South Pacific. In 2015, Cyclone Pam devastated Vanuatu and parts of the Solomon Islands. Pam's storm surge, combined with strong king tides also caused major damage in Kiribati and Tuvalu. Indeed, half of Tuvalu's population lost property in that storm. In

2016, category-5 Cyclone Winston, the strongest cyclone ever recorded in the southern hemisphere, devastated large swaths of Fiji. Entire villages were raised. Tens of thousands of homes and hundreds of schools were destroyed. And 44 people were killed. This included heart-wrenching stories of children who were literally sucked out of their parents' arms by storm surge. These are just a few of many examples I could cite.

Given this reality, it is hard to overstate the importance the Pacific Islanders attach to implementation of the Paris Agreement. Pacific Island governments, together with other small island states, played an important role in the negotiation of that agreement. Their goals and ours were broadly aligned, but there were some tough issues to reconcile. In fact, resolution of one key sticking point came down to a direct negotiation between then-U.S. Secretary John Kerry and then-Tuvaluan Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga.

Going forward to the Glasgow Climate Summit (COP-26) and beyond, Pacific Islanders will be looking for several things from the U.S., and Congress's role will be critical. A first priority will be to achieve U.S. mitigation targets. The Pacific Island countries are at the bottom of the scale of carbon emitters. Indeed, Tuvalu is the lowest. Yet, as mentioned, they suffer some of the biggest impacts from rising levels of carbon in the atmosphere. So passing legislation that enables us to meet our emission-reduction targets will be important to demonstrating U.S. credibility.

A second priority will be climate finance. To avoid catastrophe, the Pacific Islands are looking to us and other developed countries for robust financial support that will advance their transition to renewable energy, and support climate adaptation. The latter is particularly vital. Experts have stated that every $1 spent to build resilience saves $7 in climate disaster

recovery costs. President Biden's pledge of $11.4 billion per year in climate finance by 2024 was welcome news in the Pacific. Pacific Islanders will now be watching to see whether Congress delivers on this pledge.

A third climate diplomacy priority for the Pacific Islands concerns their desire to adapt international legal frameworks to better address the consequences of climate change. One example is the question of how to handle climate-based migration – a category of migration not recognized under current international refugee protocols. A second worry is the question of how sea-level rise will impact maritime resource entitlements. Island countries are seeking to secure the boundaries of their countries' current territorial waters and exclusive economic zones in perpetuity under the Law of the Sea Convention. These are multilateral, rather than bilateral issues, but U.S. engagement will be important in determining their outcome.

Attacks on the health of the waters that bind us – the mighty Pacific – pose a further existential threat to the region. The degradation of the marine environment caused by ocean warming and acidification, marine pollution, and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, jeopardizes global commerce and food security. This gives the U.S. a major stake in helping the Pacific Islands sustainably manage their marine resources. An important tool in this effort is the U.S. Shiprider program, whereby Pacific Island enforcement officials can use visiting U.S. Coast Guard and Navy vessels as platforms to crack down on IUU fishing in their EEZs. But such visits are infrequent. Allocating resources to expand this effort would be highly advantageous.

On the topic of fisheries, it is also important to mention the South Pacific Tuna Treaty, which for over

30 years has given U.S. fishing vessels access to the EEZs of 16 Pacific Island countries. This arrangement is an important source of revenue for those nations, supports jobs in the U.S., and ensures a supply of tuna in our lunchboxes and on our dinner tables. The treaty has been viewed as a model for international fisheries cooperation.

While climate change and marine degradation present the most serious longer-term threats to the Oceana region, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the value of increasing U.S. health and economic cooperation with the region. Faced with the lethality of the virus and their limited medical infrastructures, most Pacific Island countries opted for total lockdown of their borders. This has had a devastating economic impact, especially for countries such as Fiji and Vanuatu that are highly dependent on tourism revenues.

Turning to traditional security engagement, military cooperation has been and remains a very import dimension of U.S.-Pacific relations. Appropriately, much of that cooperation has focused on building Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief capacity and bolstering Maritime Domain Awareness. Another area of our security assistance focus has been support for peacekeeping deployments, particularly in the case of Fiji, which is a substantial contributor to global Peacekeeping Operations.

During my tenure as Ambassador, Tonga was the one country in the region that had a State Partnership Program. This partnership executed by the Nevada National Guard was highly beneficial. We advocated for expansion of this program, and I was pleased to learn that the Nevada Guard has now added a partnership with Fiji and that the Wisconsin National Guard has begun a partnership with Papua New Guinea.

This brings me to the discussion of our evolving U.S. strategy towards the Indo-Pacific, and specifically the focus on competition with China. There is no doubt but that sustained U.S. military presence in the Pacific has been the guarantor of a free, open, secure, and prosperous region. It is also clear that that the manner in which China has substantially expanded its presence and influence in the region raises important questions about China's ultimate intentions. But in deciding how we navigate this competition, I would emphasize two points.

One: Increased U.S.-China tensions makes the Pacific Island countries (even the three that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, rather than with the PRC) very nervous. They absolutely do not want to be put in the middle of a new geo-strategic competition. In talking to Pacific leaders about the China challenge, I would hear the parable that "when the elephants fight, the grass gets trampled." This underscores the importance of articulating an affirmative agenda regarding Oceana that responds to our Island partners' concerns.

Two: Any increase in the allocation of U.S. military resources to the region, must be matched by a corresponding increase in the allocation of U.S. soft power resources there.

I believe that the embrace of China by a number of Island nations is motivated in large part by their need for economic assistance, particularly in the area of infrastructure development. An increase in USAID programming, ratcheting up the capacity the U.S. Government's new Development Finance Corporation, and forging partnerships with other donors to undertake joint infrastructure projects, offers a promising way forward. On the latter point, the joint U.S-Australia-Japan-New Zealand undertaking to expand the electric

grid in Papua New Guinea, and the U.S.-Australia-Japan collaboration to install a new submarine cable for Palau are encouraging models.

Strong people-to-people ties animate our friendship with Pacific nations. One of the biggest assets we have had in this regard in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, and Vanuatu, is the Peace Corps. During my service as Ambassador, when I mentioned Peace Corps to local interlocutors (ranging from senior leaders to the grassroots), the inevitable reaction was a broad smile. As I told the volunteers I met, they were "the good news part of my job." With its very low operating costs, Peace Corps is great bang for the buck. Countries that formerly had Peace Corps programs but no longer do, and countries that have never had programs, desperately want Peace Corps. Post-COVID, when Peace Corps is able to return volunteers to the field, I hope they will consider father expanding Peace Corps' regional presence.

Equally valuable are U.S. educational exchanges and study tours, such as the Fulbright scholarship and International Visitor Program. But, I fear these opportunities, as currently funded, are a drop in the bucket. China is reportedly providing some 100 training grants per year to Pacific Islanders, whereas we currently provide only a handful. Surely, we can do better.

Finally, I will close by emphasizing the importance of according Pacific leaders the respect conveyed by senior-level engagement. Having served 35 years in government, I understand that this is really tough. Our principals' time is severely constrained. But this is another area, where China has eclipsed us. Given this reality, it was encouraging to see President Biden's recent participation in a virtual Pacific Island Forum leaders' meeting. I hope this presages

more high-level engagement by the Administration. And when conditions permit a safe return to international travel, I hope members of this Committee will consider adding the Pacific Islands to your travel schedule.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to offer this testimony. I am now happy to take your questions.