

Written answers to questions arising from the Committee on Natural Resources Indo-Pacific Task Force oversight hearing on 'How the Compacts of Free Association Support U.S. Interests and Counter the PRC's Influence,' 14 June 2023.

By Cleo Paskal

Questions from Rep. Westerman for Cleo Paskal

1. The U.S. agencies that take part in COFA negotiation and implementation—such as the Department of the Interior, Department of State, and Department of Defense—have a significant impact on U.S. relation with the FAS. The decision to authorize and appropriate funding for the agreement to a certain agency can send signals to the other party on how the U.S. views the relationship, as each agency represents a certain level of American policy. For example, programs administered by the Department of Defense often carry defense connotations. It is vital to be aware of the signals we send to our partners in the region when designating the implementing agency, and how those partners feel about those signals. As such, we must understand how various agencies are perceived by the FAS when framing our future discussions on COFA renewal.

Question: How have FAS perceptions of the U.S. been shaped by the various agencies that have been responsible for managing relations with the FAS governments?

A range of factors go into shaping FAS perceptions of the United States, including the American military's behavior in the post-War period, personal experiences of visits to the United States, the experience of friends and relatives based in the United States, the experience of FAS citizens who served in the United States' military, etc.

That said, direct experience with different agencies can have a deep effect on perceptions of the United States government, and on how those in the FAS involved think Washington views the FAS.

Broadly, apart from the Department of Defense (DoD), there is often the impression that, regardless of the agency, the United States government doesn't prioritize its relationship with the FAS. In some cases, the Department of the Interior is perceived to be, to put it politely, inefficient or ineffective. State hasn't ensured that Ambassadors were in post during much of the critical Compact negotiations window. There have been years of missed agreed payments. Some promised projects have taken years to materialize.

In the case of DoD, some of the otherwise sound relations are affected by the use of contractors who behave poorly, the de facto abandonment of veterans and the lack of community engagement, especially around project that affect daily lives.

Additionally, even in this latest phase when the United States says it is prioritizing the Pacific Islands, State and the NSC seem to be according more importance to the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and countries such as Solomon Islands than to the FAS – countries that

have put their lives in the hands of the United States, and two of which still recognize Taiwan.

The first visit of a sitting President to a Pacific Island Country was to be to Papua New Guinea, had it not been cancelled. And Washington has appointed a permanent Envoy to the PIF but there is no permanent office or officer just dedicated to the FAS – three countries not just in a unique and deep relationship with the United States, but also of critical strategic value to the United States’ Pacific defense architecture.

Also, there is a widespread perception that there is little coordinated strategy across agencies or institutional knowledge, resulting in mixed messages, casual slights, wasted time, and wasted resources.

Some in the FAS would like to see more presence by specific U.S. government agencies/departments. In all three FAS, there are some who would like to tackle corruption, and PRC-linked bribery and organized crime. They are keen for more engagement by the FBI, DEA, Treasury and others who might be able to assist.

Getting to the root of it, others would like U.S. help with stimulating economic growth to benefit their people and ensure PRC economic overtures are less effective. They would like to see Commerce get more involved. Across the board, there is a desire for more help not just with illegal fisheries but with the development of their own fisheries sectors.

However, based on past experience, the widely held assumption is that, once the Compacts renewals are done, the FAS will be forgotten by Washington again (except perhaps by DoD).

Question: How do the FAS perceive the Department of the State versus the Department of the Interior?

In many quarters, sincere and dedicated efforts of DoI staff aside, the perception in the FAS is that the United States government doesn’t consider the Department of the Interior as one of its ‘important’ Departments, and so working through DoI lowers the importance, access and influence of the FAS.

Additionally, the perception is that being handled by DoI is a historical remnant of an earlier time, when they were not sovereign nations. They are no longer ‘Interior’. As such, the general sense is that State is a more appropriate Department, especially given State seems to be taking the lead in the Compact negotiations.

That said, by far the largest American permanent presence in the FAS is DoD. DoD also has the most understanding of the importance of the region, the most invested in the region (literally) and its interest won’t wane once the Compacts are renewed (assuming they are).

Additionally, DoD has the ability to do many of the things the FAS needs (help with illegal fisheries, environmental disasters, infrastructure, sorting out issues with veterans, etc., and DoD

can even assist with education, health care, social services, etc., as it does on bases), and with the large number of FAS citizens serving in the U.S. military, it is a more 'familiar' Department. DoD is also considered one of most 'important' Departments and so well placed to keep awareness of FAS concerns high on the priority list.