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Statement of Testimony

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“Peace Through Strength: The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands to U.S.-led Global Security” oversight field hearing of the House Committee on Natural Resources

Honorable Chairman and members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, it is a pleasure to be before you today to discuss the strategic importance of the Pacific Islands to the global security efforts led by the United States. We all know that the Pacific Islands occupy a very large strategic area. Strategic issues like food security, fishing rights, international trade, strategic communication lines, and the free flow of ideas should set the Pacific Islands and their people at the forefront of the discussion of global security.

As Governor of the U.S. Territory of American Samoa, I speak today with particular pride about the strategic importance and opportunities of the islands I call home. While every Pacific Island and the people of those islands should be considered strategically important in the push for global security, today I seek to demonstrate American Samoa’s importance to the global security efforts. I hope that I can impress upon you how American Samoa is uniquely positioned to strategically enhance these efforts and how the U.S. can support us in doing so.

As we all know, a wholistic strategy for global security requires engagement on many fronts. From defense and security initiatives to economic development to cultural engagement, the opportunities to bolster global security through American Samoa are nearly limitless. As America’s only South Pacific territory, we are uniquely positioned in geography, culture, and regional interactivity to become a hub for growing strategic engagement.

With the appropriate and sufficient allocation of resources, American Samoa can become the go-to regional partner of our Pacific Island neighbors for healthcare, economic development, education, and jobs. For instance, as I am sure you all know, American Samoa is blessed to have one of the world’s largest and deepest natural harbors. The opportunities that stem from this harbor alone makes our Territory strategically important for global security. With adequate development it can become a place of regional engagement benefitting everyone in the region and helping stave off outside influence. An increased U.S. Coast Guard presence would be a perfect fit in our harbor to, among other things, monitor and deter illegal fishing activities. In doing so, the U.S. demonstrates its commitment to sustainable economic development of not just American Samoa

but our regional partners and allies alike. When we enhance food security and protect mutual resources that sustain ourselves and our neighbors, global security is strengthened.

Additionally, development of a more robust industry-leading shipyard within this strategic natural resource would not only support Coast Guard needs but also allow American Samoa to provide our Pacific Island neighbors with a place where they could obtain much needed shipyard services. Again, being able to exploit such a resource for the benefit of everyone in the region leads to stronger global security. There is no need to turn to others who may not have our best interest at heart if these resources are available from those who do. Consider how much more effective American Samoa could be in the global security push if we were also provided with resources needed do this through healthcare, education, and economic development.

These are just a few of the numerous ways that American Samoa can play a vital role in helping secure global security. Sometimes, just being a good neighbor is enough to stave off negative foreign influences. We are not naïve enough to think that this is all it takes, but these are the types of building block initiatives that bolster the strategically necessary relationships between the U.S. and our brothers and sisters in the Pacific Island nations. They are so critically important in the effort for global security. These are the very real, practical needs that when we help meet them, we shore up holes in our global security efforts at the ground level.

Please understand that the people of American Samoa share blood, culture, heritage, and history with so many of the people in these other Pacific Island nations. Many scholars point to Samoa as the mother of Polynesia. We know the history of how Samoan missionaries have spread Christianity across the Pacific. We know the history of the Samoans that traveled extensively around the Pacific, including those sent to Micronesia. American Samoa has a historical connection to all regions of the Pacific and these are the ties – the relationships – that bring American Samoa closer to all of the island nations of the Pacific. It allows our leaders to connect and understand each other on a level that only exists when there is a shared and mutual respect of a common culture.

We also know of the involvement of the U.S. throughout history in the Pacific. Engagement through the Peace Corps brought the U.S. closer to the Pacific region. It was one of the best strategies implemented by the U.S. Because of this engagement in the 1960's and 70's, most if not all leaders of the Pacific today were taught and trained by the Peace Corps. This engendered good will towards the U.S. that has lasted for decades.

But we also know of the absence of the U.S. in the Pacific in recent decades. This is what has led to the void that allowed foreign nations like China to find and develop opportunities to further their national interest through engagement with our Pacific neighbors. Make no mistake, when the U.S. neglects the Pacific, China and other foreign powers will move in and offer the support to our Pacific nation neighbors.

With this in mind, please note that American Samoa has the highest U.S. military enlistment rate and highest casualty rate per capita of any state or Territory. We are a very patriotic community that revels in its relationship with the United States. There is no independence movement, and protests against the U.S. are non-existent. We are here today imploring you, the leaders of the U.S., to help us become the South Pacific hub from which U.S. engagement reaches out to our brothers,

sisters, friends, and allies in these most strategically important Pacific Island nations. It is how we continue to win the hearts and minds of the people and the strategic support of their leaders.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome further discussions about how American Samoa can play a key role in supporting the U.S.-led global security efforts among these strategically important Pacific Island nations.