

Questions for the Record
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
House Committee on Natural Resources

Rep. Westerman

1. The U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific is currently focused on forward deployed forces in Japan, South Korea, and Guam, with Hawaii serving as the locus of the Indo-Pacific military effort through its headquartering of both U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and U.S. Pacific Fleet. Guam is currently undergoing a long-anticipated transition of forces from Okinawa, Japan, primarily Marine Corps assets, which will both strengthen Guam's role in U.S. forward-deployed defense while hopefully alleviating some of the pressures Okinawa has faced by hosting large numbers of U.S. forces. American Samoa currently lacks any notable U.S. military presence, but should be strongly considered for a permanent U.S. Coast Guard facility and the basing of USCG cutters to project power across the South Pacific. Additional Navy and Coast Guard assets positioned in CNMI and resources devoted to strengthening alternative airfield infrastructure in the Minor Outlying Islands (e.g. Wake, Midway, etc.) would provide additional options for the U.S. in the ongoing competition with the CCP. Finally, as the Compacts of Free Association are hopefully renewed, there are opportunities to strengthen rotational U.S. military deployments in Palau and FSM, in addition to the permanent presence at Kwajalein in RMI. Palau, in particular, can serve as an important alternative site for critical infrastructure given its proximity to both Guam and Okinawa.
2. While there is certainly political risk that PRC/CCP influence operations will succeed in creating pockets of support within the FAS (FSM, Palau, RMI) over the next two decades, I am less concerned by a complete realignment toward the PRC in any of the three polities. Pacific Island states seek to hedge against both Great Power competitors to the extent possible, and a complete realignment given the historical and economic connections with the U.S. would present significant practical difficulties. However, to combat CCP influence and the emergence of pockets of support in the FAS that seek to promote PRC/CCP interests, it is critical for the U.S. to place its long-term relationship with the FAS on a more permanent footing through renewed COFAs while also taking concrete steps to push back against PRC/CCP influence operations that undermine island sovereignty.

Rep. Case

1. While not an expert in "Compact Impact" issues, I recognize the immense importance of ensuring that host communities are not exposed to undue costs associated with Compact migration. Such costs undermine political support for the Compacts, with serious adverse national security impacts. I have long encouraged the national security community to take seriously the threat posed by "Compact Impact", if unaddressed, to undermine the political will needed to sustain healthy, long-term relationships with the FAS.

2. It is my understanding that, collectively and as a percentage of population, citizens of the FAS serve in the U.S. military at a higher rate than any U.S. state. That is a tremendous credit to the citizens of Palau, FSM, and RMI, and something that U.S. leaders should never cease to emphasize in interactions with their FAS counterparts. Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated repeatedly since the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, the Department of Veterans Affairs lacks infrastructure in the FAS to address the types of injuries sustained in recent conflicts. Many FAS veterans lack the resources to travel to the closest available VA facilities. I encourage Congress to examine additional funding for FAS veterans to travel to VA facilities where their needs can be met, as well as establishment of satellite facilities in the FAS to treat some conditions (mental health being an area of significant attention). The obligations owed to our FAS veterans is significant, and the relationships forged through military service are a major strategic advantage to the U.S. in the region.
3. The Department of Defense is the largest strategic beneficiary of the COFAs through their access to the FAS and right of denial to other strategic competitors. DoD, given its budget and the benefits gained from the FAS, should be the largest budgetary contributor to the COFAs. Interior should continue to manage COFA assistance and State has a key role in managing the relationships with sovereign states, but DoD must take a large proportion of the financial obligation given the strategic benefits.
4. Congress can help the recent Pacific Islands strategy by ensuring steady funding for key initiatives, like reopening U.S. embassies in the Pacific and bringing the Peace Corps back to the region. Pacific states are justifiably skeptical of U.S. commitment to the region, given American distraction over the last thirty years, and Congress should provide the resources to help alleviate that skepticism. Swift approval of the COFAs would also strengthen perceptions of American staying power.
5. The U.S. can utilize a whole-of-government approach to assist the Pacific Islands meet the challenges they face, whether IUU fishing or environmental threats. Bringing the entire USG, from the EPA to the Fish and Wildlife Service to the DEA to the USDA, to engage to address challenges Pacific Island states actually face (soil erosion, rising sea levels, etc.) will help implement the strategy put forth. Congress can provide critical oversight to ensure the USG is working holistically to execute and implement this strategy.