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INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES

U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations
Member Day Testimony

May 17, 2022

Chairwoman Lee, Ranking Member Rogers, and distinguished members of this Subcommittee:

Mahalo, or thank you, for the opportunity to testify today in support of a Fiscal Year 2023 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that fully invests in U.S. engagement throughout the Indo-Pacific, but especially the Pacific Islands.

The Pacific Islands region spans the vast expanse of ocean from Easter Island and Hawai‘i to the shores New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia and Asia. The nations spread throughout these waters control a combined exclusive economic zone larger than the entire continental United States. We share centuries, if not millennia, of values, culture and history with the Pacific Islands. In World War II, our nation lost countless of our own on these islands and the surrounding seas. We have been a full partner in the present and future of the Pacific in the three generations hence. In this Indo-Pacific century, our relationships throughout the Pacific are paramount.

The priorities of these nations are familiar because their fate is tied to our own in many ways. Climate change is an existential threat for the Pacific Islands, as rising sea levels have already begun to subsume their communities. Their economies have been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they are increasingly forced to the frontlines of the geopolitical challenge of China.

Successive administrations and Congresses have emphasized the urgent need to shift our foreign policy focus westwards. But now is indeed the time to fund a coordinated U.S. government strategy for engagement in the Pacific Islands. The President’s recently released Indo-Pacific Strategy speaks to the region’s importance and commits to bolstering U.S. diplomatic engagement and cooperating with Pacific Island nations on mutual priorities.

We must assure that this strategy is fully authorized, funded and implemented. There are many inter-related components, to include as just a few: the full return of the Peace Corps; bolstering

efforts to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; supporting trainings and scholarships for Pacific Islanders to study in the United States, especially through proven institutions such as the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i; increasing our attaché, consular and embassy presence; and providing support for climate resilience projects, civil society, and trade development.

Each initiative that we fully authorize, fund and implement sends a clear message to the Pacific Islands that we stand with them in the face of mutual challenges, and that the United States is a neighbor and partner to all those who share common aspirations for a regional order free of coercion and fully respectful of democracy, human rights and the sovereignty of all nations.

In 2019, I co-founded the bipartisan Pacific Islands Caucus to increase awareness of the importance of the Pacific Islands within the Congress. We have worked to ensure that the Pacific Islands are not overlooked in our approach to the Indo-Pacific, and we have produced legislation like the BLUE Pacific Act to ensure we include the region in our strategy for Indo-Pacific engagement. The United States Innovation and Competition Act and the America COMPETES Act contain provisions from the BLUE Pacific Act which, if funded, would be transformative for our approach to the region.

The Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 provides many of the authorizations needed to fund the Indo-Pacific and Pacific Islands related provisions of United States Innovation and Competition Act and the America COMPETES Act. However, this is only possible with specific carveouts for the Pacific Islands in the educational and cultural exchange, international disaster assistance, development assistance and global health programming accounts. Without funding to support strategic engagement in the Indo-Pacific, it becomes too easy for administrative inertia to stall our best intentions.

I urge you to craft a Fiscal Year 2023 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bill that supports a comprehensive, whole of government approach to U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands. We have made progress through renewed diplomatic and other efforts to engage Pacific leaders, including Secretary Blinken's and Congress' own travels to the region. However, without funding to support specific initiatives, visits alone and promises made will ring hollow.

Now is the time to ensure that our foreign policy budget reflects the importance of our ties to the Pacific Islands and our support for a secure and stable Indo-Pacific, committed to an order based on mutual respect, cooperation and freedom. Mahalo for listening, and I look forward to working with you on our Committee and otherwise to fully realize our goals.