

Member Day Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Representative Ed Case (HI-01)
Friday, March 26, 2021

Chair Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, members of the Committee:

Aloha from my office in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. Thank you for the opportunity to again testify before the Committee.

In my last Member Day testimony in December 2019, I highlighted the importance of the Pacific Islands region and urged this Committee and Congress to pursue efforts to broaden and deepen our engagement in this critical part of the world.

A few months prior, I had joined several of my colleagues in co-founding the Congressional Pacific Islands Caucus, the first-ever such organization of Members focused on this vast maritime region. We followed with introduction of H.R. 7797, our Boosting Long-term U.S. Engagement in the Pacific Act, otherwise titled the BLUE Pacific Act, to establish a comprehensive, long-term framework for United States foreign policy in the Pacific Islands.

Since then, the challenges and opportunities for our country in the Pacific Islands and the broader Indo-Pacific have grown far more acute and urgent. To continue Congress’ leadership in forging the best path, earlier this month we formally reconstituted the Pacific Islands Caucus, co-chaired on a nonpartisan basis by me, the Dean of this House, Mr. Young, and Representatives Sherman, Bera, Chabot and Wagner of this Committee.

Today, I return to again ask for your full support of our Caucus and its goals, including our improved soon-to-be-reintroduced BLUE Pacific Act. Our initiative focuses on three essential pillars: security, development and shared values. It would expand diplomatic and development presence; increase maritime security cooperation and assistance; deepen and diversify trade; support regional economic and social development in areas like public health and education; invest in climate adaptation and climate-resilient infrastructure; promote shared values like press freedom and gender equality; and strengthen people-to-people relationships and civil society.

In naming this bill, we pay tribute to the concept of the “Blue Pacific” embraced by leaders of the Pacific Islands Forum as a shared identity and platform for collective action. This legislation would integrate our efforts with the work of existing regional institutions and frameworks, including those of our like-minded allies and partners like Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Taiwan and more. Both our Caucus and this legislation have been very well received by our allies and partners throughout the Indo-Pacific.

We believe these initiatives are the responsible response by Congress to the significantly increased level of attention in Washington on the Pacific Islands in just the past few years. Driving much of this surging interest is China’s increasing activity and influence in the region that has triggered alarm among our foreign policy and national security community.

Yet it would be a mistake to characterize U.S. interests in the Pacific Islands as purely a response to changing regional dynamics. The United States is a Pacific nation, and as such, we share interests, values and most of all a common destiny with the peoples and countries of this region.

We have goodwill and networks in the Pacific Islands built by decades of quiet and consistent engagement at all levels of American society, ranging from government to ordinary Americans through programs hosted by the Peace Corps and Hawaii's own East-West Center. Over the past 20 years, the United States has contributed over \$5 billion in assistance for the region. The idea that the U.S. is a recent newcomer to the Pacific could not be more wrong.

Nevertheless, a coordinated strategy of U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands has never been more necessary. COVID-19 has devastated the region's travel and tourism economy even as longstanding development challenges persist. Regionalism, long a hallmark of the Pacific, faces uncertainty and reasonable demands for reform to ensure all Pacific countries and voices are represented. Above all, climate change looms over the future of the region as an existential threat to these island nations, their people and their livelihoods.

Our initiatives are sending a clear message to the Pacific Islands that we stand with them in the face of these challenges, that the United States is a neighbor and partner to all those who share common aspirations for a regional order built on mutual assistance and benefit, free of coercion, and fully respectful of democracy, human rights and the sovereignty of all nations.

I look forward to working with the Committee and its members and staff on increasing and sustaining U.S. engagement in the Pacific Islands.

Thank you for your time and consideration.