

CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

The Relevance of The Republic of the Marshall Islands To U.S. Security

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My name is Dean Cheng. I am a Senior Research Fellow at The Heritage Foundation. The views I express in this testimony are my own and should not be construed as representing any official position of The Heritage Foundation.

The Republic of the Marshall Islands, as part of the central Pacific region but also as a close security partner of the United States, occupy a place of increasing importance for U.S. defense planning. This is especially true in light of the islands' longstanding role in helping the United States undertake nuclear deterrence. This role will gain increasing prominence in the coming years, due to the challenges posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Background

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is an independent nation tied to the United States by a Compact of Free Association. It comprises 5 islands and 29 atolls, with a population of some 58,000 people. While only possessing some 70 square miles of dry land, these islands and atolls are spread across 750,000 square miles of central Pacific territory.¹ As such, they straddle waters that link the American west coast with the east Asian littoral.

This strategic position was made clear during the Second World War, when U.S. forces "island hopped" through the Marshall islands, on their way to the Marianas and eventually to Japan. Indeed, the battles for Kwajalein and Eniwetok provided invaluable experience for later battles on Guam, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa.

¹ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Marshall Islands," (July 15, 2018) <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-marshall-islands/>

In the wake of the Second World War, the United States was granted trusteeship over various central Pacific territories, including the Marshall Islands. The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) gained its independence in 1986. Under the original and subsequently amended Compact of Free Association (CFA), RMI citizens can work, live, and study in the United States, as non-immigrants.² There are some 27,000 Marshallese in the United States, as of 2019, a substantial portion of the RMI population.³

In addition, under the terms of the CFA, the United States provides RMI with economic support and aid. The United States provides RMI with some \$70 million annually in various forms. This includes a jointly managed trust fund. US government agencies and offices, such as the Federal Communications Commission and US Postal Service, also provide services to the Marshall Islands. This aid is scheduled to end when the current amended Compact expires in 2023.

In exchange, the United States is granted exclusive and full authority to RMI lands and waterways for security and defense purposes, although RMI is free to conduct its own foreign relations. A key element of both economic and security ties is the leasing of land and lagoon space to the U.S. Army on Kwajalein atoll under the Military Use and Operating Rights Agreement. The missile and space facilities there are the second largest employer in the RMI.⁴

² U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Marshall Islands," (July 15, 2018) <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-marshall-islands/>

³ Susanne Rust, "They Came Here After the U.S. Irradiated Their Islands. Now They Face an Uncertain Future," *Los Angeles Times* (December 31, 2019) <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-31/marshall-islands-uncertain-future-us-marshallese-spokane>

⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Marshall Islands," (July 15, 2018) <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-marshall-islands/>

RMI's Role in American Defense Efforts

Throughout the post-war period, the Marshall Islands have played an important role in America's defense, especially in the nuclear realm.

In the immediate post-war period, the United States conducted an array of nuclear tests in the Marshall islands. The 67 nuclear tests conducted there between 1946 and 1958 included Castle Bravo, the largest American nuclear test involving a 15 megaton device.⁵ It is worth noting that this test was nonetheless dwarfed by four Soviet tests, which ranged from 20-50 megatons.

With the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963, which effectively banned above-ground nuclear tests, the islands have no longer been rocked by nuclear explosions. RMI has continued to play an important role, however, in maintaining America's nuclear deterrent posture. Especially important has been the role of Kwajalein and the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site (RTS).

The RTS provides key support to US defense efforts in several ways. The credibility of the American nuclear deterrent is sustained through a program of regular tests of Minuteman III missiles. As recently as August of 2021, the US fired a Minuteman III with a Hi Fidelity Joint Test Assembly re-entry vehicle onboard towards Kwajalein.⁶ Such tests demonstrate to all observers, including America's adversaries, the

⁵ Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories, "Brief History of Nuclear Testing in the Marshall Islands," (July 28, 2021) <https://marshallislands.llnl.gov/testhistory.php>

⁶ Air Force Global Strike Command Public Affairs, "Minuteman III Test Launch Showcases Readiness of U.S. Nuclear Forces' Safe, Effective Deterrent," (August 11, 2021) <https://www.stratcom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2727368/minuteman-iii-test-launch-showcases-readiness-of-us-nuclear-forces-safe-effecti/>

continuing functionality and reliability of the American nuclear deterrent. This is becoming an ever more pressing issue due to the aging of the Minuteman III, first introduced in the 1960s.

The fact that these test shots cover some 4200 miles further enhances the credibility of the American deterrent. Recent Russian ICBM tests from the Plesetsk Kosmodrome to the Kura test range in Kamchatka cover some 3800 miles.⁷ Longer test flights provide more opportunity for measurements of flight characteristics.

Moreover, given the size of the Kwajalein lagoon (which is one of the largest in the world at over 600 square miles), one can target warheads and dummy payloads into it, and thereby prevent their recovery by other actors. In 2016, Chinese sailors seized an American unmanned underwater vehicle (UUV) from international waters.⁸ There should be little doubt that the Chinese, among others, would very much like an opportunity to examine a dummy US nuclear warhead.

The facilities at Kwajalein also support missile defense efforts. The various radars and facilities provide American missile defense planners and engineers with various data to help improve missile interception capability. This is of growing concern, as both Russia and China modernize their own nuclear arsenals.

Nor are missile defenses only relevant to the nuclear side of the deterrence equation. The PRC, for example, has deployed anti-ship ballistic missiles, such as the DF-21 and DF-26. Both of these are clearly intended to neutralize American aircraft carriers and other maritime strategic platforms. Missile defenses would degrade Chinese confidence that they can sink or damage American carriers, which in turn would help deter China from using force against various neighbors, from Japan to Taiwan to the Philippines.

In November 2020, an American SM-3 Block IIA missile successfully intercepted an ICBM-type missile, launched from Kwajalein.⁹ This was the first time that the SM-3, which can be deployed aboard an AEGIS-equipped destroyer or cruiser, had destroyed such a target.¹⁰ This radically improves not only American deterrence, but that of any allied nation that has comparable AEGIS-type systems in their fleet. The SM-3 is already part of the Phased Adaptive Approach for NATO defense against Russian missile threats. It is deployed in the ground-based site in Rumania, and will be deployed to the site currently under construction in Poland. Meanwhile, Japan has chosen to rely on its fleet of AEGIS destroyers to provide missile defense for the Home Islands, against North Korean and Chinese threats. The success of the SM-3 Block IIA test means that this key US ally will be more secure in coming years. The facilities in the

⁷ Joe Saballa, "Russia to Test Launch Advanced intercontinental Ballistic Missile," *Defense Post* (May 5, 2021) <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2021/05/05/russia-to-test-launch-ballistic-missile/>

⁸ Terri Moon Cronk, "Chinese Seize U.S. Navy Underwater Drone in South China Sea," *DOD News* (December 16, 2016) <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1032823/chinese-seize-us-navy-underwater-drone-in-south-china-sea/>

⁹ The Department of Defense, "U.S. Successfully Conducts SM-3 Block IIA Intercept Test Against an Intercontinental Ballistic

Missile Target," (November 17, 2020) <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2417334/us-successfully-conducts-sm-3-block-ia-intercept-test-against-an-intercontinen/>

¹⁰ The War Zone Staff, "The Navy Has Finally Proven It Can Shoot Down an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile," *The Drive* (November 17, 2020) <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/37685/the-navy-has-finally-proven-it-can-shoot-down-an-intercontinental-ballistic-missile>

Marshall Islands have played a key role in improving American and allied security.

Finally, the facilities in the RMI, including on Kwajalein, play a central role in space surveillance. The United States Space Force currently tracks some 26,000 objects in space. Because of the high speed of objects in orbit, even a bolt or a screw can do enormous damage to the International Space Station or an orbiting satellite. The newly built Space Fence on Kwajalein provides the Space Force with the ability to monitor objects as small as a marble.¹¹

This capability is of growing importance as America's competitors and adversaries develop ever more capable space systems, many of which are believed to be anti-satellite systems. The Russians, for example, have deployed sub-satellites from larger satellites, much like submunitions from a dispenser. In 2017, Kosmos-2519 launched Kosmos-2521, a sub-satellite while in orbit. Kosmos-2521 subsequently launched a sub-satellite of its own, Kosmos-2523. Both Kosmos-2519 and Kosmos-2521 maneuvered in orbit.¹² All of these actions are difficult to track, especially while also maintaining situational awareness over 26,000 pieces of other debris. Russia has since launched other satellites that have behaved in a similar fashion, launching their own sub-satellites.¹³ US space surveillance capabilities must maintain watch over all these objects, if America's own satellites are to be preserved.

The ground-based Space Fence radar on Kwajalein is an essential part of the American space surveillance network. It plays a key role in helping the U.S. detect and track potential threats to its satellites, including its missile early warning, strategic communications, and reconnaissance platforms.

Growing Challenges from the PRC

One of the reasons for the growing importance and relevance of the RMI to American security is the heightened challenge posed by the People's Republic of China (PRC). As noted earlier, Kwajalein plays a central role in maintaining American nuclear deterrent capabilities. This is of growing importance as China not only modernizes but expands its own nuclear deterrent forces.

The recent discovery of multiple new fields of ICBM silos in western China suggest that the PRC may be poised to "break out," rapidly fielding over 250 ICBMs.¹⁴ If each of these new ICBMs carries five warheads, as the Chinese DF-41 ICBM is already believed capable of, then the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) is about to add some 1250 new warheads, just on ICBMs. This would not include warheads atop its new submarine-launched ballistic missiles, or any payloads delivered by future Chinese strategic bombers. In essence, Beijing will have reached parity with the United States and Russia in terms of strategic nuclear warheads almost overnight.

¹¹ Sandra Erwin, "Space Fence Surveillance Radar Site Declared Operational," *Space News* (March 28, 2020) <https://spacenews.com/space-fence-surveillance-radar-site-declared-operational/>

¹² Gunter D. Krebs, "Kosmos-2519/Kosmos-2521/Kosmos-2523," *Gunter's Space Page* Retrieved October 17, 2021, https://space.skyrocket.de/doc_sdat/kosmos-2519.htm

¹³ Neel V. Patel, "The U.S. Says Russia Just Tested an 'Anti-Satellite Weapon' in Orbit," *Technology Review* (July 23, 2020)

<https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/07/23/1005568/us-space-command-russia-test-anti-satellite-weapon-orbit-kosmos-2543/>

¹⁴ Shannon Bugos and Julia Masterson, "New Chinese Missile Silo Fields Discovered," *Arms Control Today* (September 2021) <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-09/news/new-chinese-missile-silo-fields-discovered>

Similarly, the PLA is devoting substantial resources to developing hypersonic weapons. Such systems need not carry nuclear warheads to be destructive. The kinetic energy imparted simply by its collision with a target would produce enormous damage. The most recent Chinese test assumed an orbital profile, where the hypersonic vehicle went into low earth orbit (as opposed to a suborbital profile, typical of ICBMs), meaning that future Chinese satellite launches might actually be hypersonic weapons.¹⁵ This makes space surveillance and missile early warning much more difficult—and much more vital to American security. Besides the nuclear and hypersonic aspects, the RMI, and the central Pacific more broadly, is assuming a greater role in American security calculations, as China’s ability to hold the “first island chain” at risk escalates. China’s extended military modernization has included substantial improvements in China’s conventional capabilities. The extensive Chinese flights across the mid-line of the Taiwan straits and into Taiwan’s Air Defense Identification Zone in recent months reflects this growing sophistication and capability across the range of conventional systems. Consequently, China is able to bring a significant array of systems to bear against any forces that might try to cross the line of islands extending from Japan through Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines to Singapore.

American defense planners therefore are increasingly focusing on the need to develop new facilities in the

central Pacific. Studies have been undertaken examining options that would involve building new infrastructure in not only the Republic of the Marshall Islands, but also the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, and the US territory of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, among others. Eighty years ago, US Army and Marine forces liberated these territories as stepping stones on the way to Japan. Today, these same islands, along with Guam, may well become vital footholds to allow American forces to counter Chinese forces breaking through the first island chain.

The Chinese challenge to the security of this area is far more comprehensive than that posed by imperial Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, however. China is exploiting its economy, the second largest in the world, to woo various central Pacific states. Since 2006, China has targeted some \$1.8 billion in aid to various states in the region.¹⁶ Notably, in the process it has persuaded some of Taiwan’s last diplomatic partners (countries that formally recognize Taiwan’s sovereignty), several of which are central Pacific states, to shift their recognition to the PRC.

China has also developed extensive trade ties with many of these countries. It is the second largest trading partner for the RMI.¹⁷ Even some Chinese economic interactions nest potential dangers within, however.

One key resource for both the Chinese and the Marshallese is fish. For the Marshallese, fish is a key

¹⁵ Demetri Sevastopulo, “China Tests New Space Capability with Hypersonic Missile,” *Financial Times* (October 17, 2021) <https://www.ft.com/content/ba0a3cde-719b-4040-93cb-a486e1f843fb>

¹⁶ Meaghan Tobin, “Why Taiwan, U.S., and China Are Watching Marshall Islands Vote Count,” *South China Morning Post* (November 26, 2019) <https://www.scmp.com/week->

[asia/explained/article/3039299/why-taiwan-washington-and-beijing-are-watching-marshall-islands](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf)

¹⁷ Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker, and Han May Chan, *China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States*, (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2018), p. 7, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf>

part of their diet; it is also a potential export item. China's 17,000 fishing boat fleet, however, is on a global mission to bring free maritime protein back to China. They often are outsize, and employ massive nets to effectively strip mine rich fishing grounds.¹⁸ Indeed, the U.S. Coast Guard has concluded that Chinese fishing activities are often "illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU)," and now poses a greater danger to international maritime law than narcotics or piracy.¹⁹

This behavior is reflected in Chinese intrusions into various central Pacific states' exclusive economic zones, marked in 2019 by a Chinese frozen fish carrier which ran aground in the RMI. The Chinese boat was not licensed to be in those waters.²⁰ The possibility that Chinese fishing vessels may also be part of the PLA's maritime militia, meanwhile, cannot be discounted.

Policy Considerations

For the United States, it is vital that it retain the confidence and support of the people of the Republic of the Marshall Islands, as well as the other central Pacific states more generally. To this end, it is essential that the United States conclude a successor agreement to the amended Compact of Free Association ("Compact II"), which expires in 2023. As the Compacts provide the legal basis for the special security and defense relations between the U.S. and the RMIs, the creation of a successor agreement is

vital to ensure continued privileged US access to the island's strategic advantages.

The American relationship with the RMI cannot simply stand on its own, however. It should be embedded into a broader strategic vision for the central Pacific, a region that is larger than the United States itself. To this end, the Congress should consider shifting the administration of aid and funding from the Department of the Interior to the Department of State, so that there can be a better integrated, regional strategy for the entire region.

The aid that has been provided over the past several decades has not generated substantial growth in regional economies. Indeed, the RMI remains one of the poorest nations in the world. The Congress should also consider creating incentives, to promote private investment and trade in the RMI and other central and South Pacific states. Given their location on the equator, these states have a number of potential avenues for economic growth, including tourism and fishing, as well as space tracking and potentially even space launch. (The commercial space launch provider Sea Launch operated its maritime launch ship from equatorial waters in the Pacific.) With the growth in commercial space activities, there is a real opportunity for states such as the RMI to establish themselves on the ground floor.

In the intensifying competition between the United States and other great powers, Washington cannot afford a policy of "benign neglect" towards the Republic of the Marshall Islands and its neighbors.

¹⁸ Joseph Hammond, Chinese Fishing Fleet Poses Threat to Pacific Island Economies," *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum* (June 21, 2021) <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2021/06/chinese-fishing-fleet-poses-threat-to-pacific-island-economies/>

¹⁹ Drake Long, "China Named in Ambitious New Anti-Illegal Fishing Strategy for the U.S. Coast Guard," *Radio Free Asia* (September 18, 2020)

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/usa-fishing-09182020165833.html>

²⁰ Jan van der Made, "Tiny Pacific Islands Become Battleground in Superpower Spat," *RFI* (July 1, 2019) <https://www.rfi.fr/en/asia-pacific/20190107-marshall-island-china-us-pacific-battleground-superpowerssiz>

This is particularly true also of Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia, with which the US also has soon expiring Compact agreements. In the overall scheme of things, the \$200 million per year the US pays to secure these three strategic partnerships is

a an extremely good bargain. It must undertake a deliberate policy to strengthen ties with these small states with their outsize territorial expanse and strategic location.

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