

**Statement of  
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**U.S. Defense Policy Toward Pacific Island Nations**

*Introduction*

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the privilege of appearing before you to discuss United States defense strategy in the Pacific Islands region. This region is often overlooked and undervalued despite its enormous geography, rich fisheries and unique geopolitical position in the Asia Pacific. Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), American Samoa, and the countries in the Pacific are all crucial U.S. partners and contributors to security in the Pacific Islands region. Additionally, the Pacific Island militaries punch above their weight; for instance, the Tongan Royal Marines served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and will soon to deploy to Afghanistan. The Fiji military maintains their longstanding leadership in International Peacekeeping. In addition, our defense commitment to our long-standing strategic partners, the Freely Associated States, Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of Palau and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, plays an important role in the defense of the homeland.

As a Pacific nation, the United States has national interests throughout the entire Pacific Islands region. Under the current leadership of President Obama, United States engagement with the Asia Pacific has been reinvigorated. My remarks today will focus specifically on United States bilateral and multilateral relations with the island countries in the Western Pacific. As there are significant DoD equities in the Western Pacific, we see a unique and important opportunity to reinforce United States defense engagement in the region.

## *Status of U.S.-Pacific Islands Security Relations*

The Western Pacific is a sparsely populated, physically isolated, and geographically widespread region that comprises 18 island states across six time zones. The region's lack of political and security infrastructure has attracted a growing trend of illicit activities, notably illegal fishing and the trafficking of arms, humans and narcotics.

Many of the island states lack sufficient legal and law enforcement capability to manage their own security issues. Considering the state of regional security and growing transnational crime in the Western Pacific, the Department of Defense has begun to more actively engage in the region to assist our friends build capability and capacity, particularly to promote regional maritime security.

While the United States has been militarily engaged in this region since World War II, things have changed in regional security in the Western Pacific. Australia, Japan and New Zealand remain crucial providers of regional security, but we are seeing increasingly active engagement from other global players, most notably China. As one of the Pacific's traditional power bases, the United States is in the process of refocusing and redefining its role, responsibility and strategy in the Western Pacific in order to maintain political and military leadership in this evolving strategic environment. The Department's long term goals are to incorporate the island states into the Asia-Pacific regional security architecture, promote their integration into the international community, and bolster their security (military and/or police) forces' capability, capacity and readiness to respond to emerging non-traditional security threats at home and abroad. Through the implementation of strategic engagement and security cooperation programs, we work to empower the Pacific Islands countries to take responsibility into their own hands, and defend and secure their own land and sea borders and to contribute to regional and international peacekeeping efforts.

We will also continue to directly engage with the leadership of these islands countries through regular dialogue. The annual Pacific Islands Forum Post-Forum Dialogue as well as the Joint Committee Meetings with the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau afford us a unique opportunity to evaluate and assess U.S. engagement activities in the region on a regular basis.

## *North Pacific*

Based on our Homeland Defense and Defense treaty obligations, the Department of Defense's primary attention has been on the North Pacific Island nations and territories, including Guam, CNMI and the three Compact nations. As reflected in the military build up in Guam and CNMI, strategic interests and equities are shifting more toward the Asia Pacific region. As this region becomes an increasingly valuable base for projecting U.S. military power into the Asia Pacific region, the Department must continuously seek creative means and ways to shape and influence the regional security environment. As the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review states, ". . . [the United States] will continue to ... transform Guam, the westernmost sovereign territory of the United States, into a hub for security activities in the region." Because Guam and CNMI are special U.S. territories and the Compact nations are our treaty partners, we must have a sustained presence in the region and we must pay particular attention to partner capacity building. U.S. Pacific Command will continue to assist the region responding to non-traditional security threats, namely illegal fishing, transnational crime, including the trafficking of drugs, weapons and persons.

Similarly, the Department places high priority on the Freely Associated States with whom we have defense obligations under our respective Compacts: Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau. The Compact agreements assign to the United States full responsibility for defense of these states and the DoD takes its bilateral defense relations seriously. We also value the rights afforded under the Compacts and will continue to defend these nations and exercise our right of strategic denial of third parties to operate in these states. Especially critical to our national security interest is the RMI-based U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA) operated by the U.S. Army Space Missile Defense Command (SMDC).

It is especially important to note that our special defense relationship with the Compact states allows for their citizens to serve in the United States Armed Forces. Indeed, they serve at a higher per capita rate than American citizens and serve in both Afghanistan and Iraq. A number of them have fallen alongside American troops on the battlefield. The Department of Defense recognizes and is indebted for their enormous contributions to United States and global security.

## *South Pacific*

While the Department lacks any special defense relationship with the island states in the South Pacific, we view our engagement with them as necessary and of strategic importance. We collaborate with those countries with militaries, specifically Papua New Guinea and Tonga, as well as those with non-military security forces. Professional military education, funded by International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Financing and Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), supports numerous bilateral and multilateral training to assist our island partner countries to effectively respond to transnational crime and maritime security. The primary focus of our training and assistance programs is on building partner capacity while instilling values of democracy, rule of law and human rights.

The Department also works closely with Tonga to elevate their security forces' capacity. In a strong show of mutual support and friendship, Tonga has actively supported international coalition missions. The Tongan Defence Services, with which Marine Forces Pacific has extremely good relations, recently deployed to Iraq and plans to deploy to Afghanistan later this year. And while there are existing foreign assistance restrictions with respect to Fiji, DoD offers training in certain areas such as law enforcement and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief.

## *U.S. Defense Strategy*

Sustained engagement in the region will ensure that the United States will continue to shape and influence regional security in the Pacific Islands. The U.S. Navy (USN) and U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) conduct ship visits and send mobile training teams to the region to provide in-country training on maritime surveillance, law enforcement, disaster relief, disaster management and reconstruction assistance. Our principal goal remains building partner capacity with our partners and allies in the Pacific Island region. The Department will focus on three components: 1) maritime security, 2) humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and 3) training opportunities in the region.

*Maritime Security:* The island nations in the Pacific often lack political and law enforcement capabilities to protect their most valuable resource: fisheries. Defense programs aim to build partner capacity to ensure that the island states develop the necessary skills and capacity to enhance fisheries protection in the region. U.S. Pacific Command, the Department's direct link with the Pacific Island countries, coordinates regional maritime security activities and executes bilateral and

multilateral Defense activities through the USN and USCG. In times of crisis, the USCG supports search and rescue operations at the request of local governments.

The Joint Interagency Task Force-West (JIATF-W) has an active role in coordinating regional counter-narcotics programs. In cooperation with the Australian Federal Police and islands' national police forces, JIATF-W operates Transnational Crime Units to collect and share information and intelligence, support anti-transnational crime activities and conduct maritime surveillance. JIATF-W will continue to collaborate closely with Australia to ensure that local security forces develop the necessary capabilities and capacity to interdict transnational criminal activities within their own maritime borders.

Engagement in the Pacific Islands region continues to focus on developing partner capacity and capability to improve maritime domain awareness through maritime surveillance, information sharing, joint patrolling, and infrastructure development. Currently, the United States has six cooperative maritime U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) shiprider agreements with Pacific Island nations (Palau, FSM, RMI, Kiribati, Cook Islands, and Tonga). These shiprider agreements allow USCG and island law enforcement officers to embark on selected USCG aircraft and vessels to help patrol the waters within U.S. exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and in the 200-mile EEZs of participating Pacific Island states.

While these shiprider programs have been considerably successful, DoD is currently considering ways to expand these agreements to USN and with other Pacific Island states. The Oceania Maritime Security Initiative (OMSI) is a pending Secretary of Defense executive order which will allow us to leverage DoD assets transiting the region to increase maritime domain awareness and support for maritime law enforcement operations. The executive order would expand the six existing cooperative maritime USCG shiprider agreements with Pacific Island nations, pending their approval, to include USN vessels and aircraft. This initiative will allow for a more coordinated and active U.S. role in supporting regional maritime security by building partner law enforcement capability, improving interoperability and ensuring maritime security in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. Broadly speaking, OMSI would enhance U.S. defense presence and engagement in the region.

*Humanitarian Assistance/Disaster Relief:* Perhaps the Department's most successful engagement tool is humanitarian assistance programs. These programs include the removal of explosive ordnance devices from the World War II era; prisoner of war-missing in action operations throughout the Western Pacific;

medical and engineering projects, Pacific Air Force's annual large-scale humanitarian mission Pacific Angel; and Operation Christmas Drop, the longest running organized air drop in the world and one of the largest charity efforts in the Pacific whereby members of our Armed Forces in Guam collect and deliver humanitarian supplies to various communities throughout the Western Pacific. Such programs are evidence that our engagement in the Western Pacific extends well beyond traditional security parameters.

We will continue to build on the success of the U.S. Navy's Pacific Partnership program to operate medical and engineering projects in remote, underserved communities throughout the entire Pacific islands region. In the summer of 2010, U.S. hospital ship MERCY sailed to Palau and dispatched teams to various underserved communities and treated more than 1,000 Palauans. And in August 2008, Pacific Partnership medical personnel treated more than 15,000 locals in the Federated States of Micronesia. In addition, the Civic Action Team based in Palau, comprised of 12 military personnel, will continue to coordinate a range of humanitarian and civic action projects in health, education, and infrastructure.

*Future U.S. Military Training:* As we continue to develop closer relations with the Pacific islands states, the Department will explore opportunities to reinforce our presence in the region. We deeply appreciate and will continue to consider Vanuatu and Palau's offers to host U.S. military training. We envision possible increased bilateral and multilateral training in Guam, CNMI, and the Compact states.

### ***Conclusion***

Despite the challenges of U.S. engagement and the complexities of an evolving security environment, there are still immense opportunities for cooperation. We will continue to work alongside partners such as Australia, France, Japan and New Zealand to coordinate security activities for this region. The United States will protect and defend the U.S. territories of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. In addition, we remain ever committed to the defense and security of the Compact states.

Rising transnational crime, evolving regional security architecture and new U.S. strategic posturing are trends that reinforce the need for American defense engagement in the Western Pacific. As a Pacific nation, the U.S. bears special responsibility to provide sustained and effective defense engagement to ensure peace and stability in the Asia Pacific. It is therefore imperative that the

Department continue to nurture existing relations with the North Pacific while deepening and expanding our defense and security bilateral and multilateral relations with the South Pacific. We need to reassure the island states of sustained U.S. engagement and our shared interest in regional and global stability.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.