

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 26, 2022

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden:

We write today about a critical topic for our security and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific—the status of renegotiations for our Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with the Republics of the Marshall Islands and Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia. We respectfully request that you swiftly appoint a lead envoy with the authority to conduct whole of government negotiations and extend our associations with these three sovereign nations that were once parts of a territory administered by the United States.

Our government has a uniquely close relationship with these island nations. The talks to extend our unique free associations with these nations stalled last year because Departments of State and Interior representatives lacked the authority to represent some of the dozen other Departments and agencies with programs at issue. Proposals raised under the last administration would have reduced assistance at a time when they are more critical strategically than at any time since World War II.

The three freely associated states (FAS) span an expanse of the Pacific as large as the 48 contiguous States, from Hawaii to the Philippines and Indonesia, including shipping lanes coveted by the People's Republic of China. Their young men and women volunteer in the U.S. armed forces at a level that generally exceeds that of States. The Department of Defense is installing crucial military facilities in Palau, and the Marshall Islands already hosts what the Joint Chiefs of Staff say is “the world’s premier range and test site for intercontinental ballistic missiles and space operations support,” including the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Site. These Freely Associated States enable our country to deny other nations access to their vast waters and airspace, which are imperatives for preserving our Nation’s position in the Pacific and, therefore, our national security.

Essential assistance to the Marshall Islands and Micronesia expires in 2023 and to Palau in 2024. China is already aggressively trying to shift the allegiance of these nations through ‘carrot and stick’ measures described by our Indo-Pacific Commander in 2019 as “the pernicious use of Beijing’s economic leverage.” As a report to the Secretary of Defense advised, a failure to provide sufficient support now “would be a self-inflicted wound that could come at the expense of the foreign policy and defense interests of the United States.”

The Compact of Free Association with Palau explicitly calls for reconsideration of the relationship by 2024. The compacts with the Marshall Islands and Micronesia implicitly raise the same questions. The islands strongly identify with the United States, with which they have been associated for 77 years, but they also face stark realities due to their geography and history that we cannot ignore:

- COFA states deliberately chose free association with continued U.S. military rights as it came in conjunction with extending domestic programs and other aid.
- The same factor that makes the islands strategically vital, their relatively remote and far-flung locations, makes economic self-reliance extremely challenging.
- Although the peoples of the islands are predisposed towards the United States, they cannot exercise fundamental elements of their national sovereignty critical to economic and military security if we fail to meet their basic needs.

Successful talks will require a negotiator who can represent all of the federal departments and agencies of jurisdiction and who will address proposals of the FAS.

Allies and partners are the cornerstone of our asymmetric advantage. We should continue all federal programs in the islands and ensure that the FAS has funding for services and development in the amounts equivalent to present levels or, as warranted, higher than that for as long as we enjoy the exceptional strategic powers they enable us to exercise. Additionally, we must resolve unsettled issues from our government testing nuclear bombs and storing radioactive waste in the Marshall Islands while the United States administered those islands as a trustee.

We stand ready to work with your administration in support of extending our COFA agreements as needed. Thank you for your consideration in this strategically important matter.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



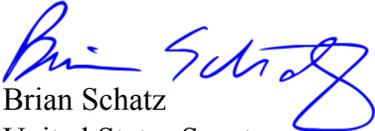
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United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



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