

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**STATEMENT OF
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CHAIRMAN**

**before the
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND THE
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT**

“Renewed Engagement: U.S. Policy toward Pacific Island Nations”

September 29, 2010

On September 29, one year ago today, American Samoa was hit by the most powerful earthquake of 2009 which struck below the ocean about 140 miles southwest of Pago Pago, American Samoa, and 125 miles south of Samoa.

The earthquake, which registered 8.3 on the Richter scale, set off a massive tsunami that crashed into American Samoa, Samoa and Tonga, sweeping cars and people out to sea as survivors fled to high ground. In American Samoa, many children running for home unknowingly ran in the direction of the tsunami.

The neighboring islands of Samoa and Tonga were also deeply affected and, as we pause to remember the lives lost and the families impacted, I want to once more publicly thank President Obama for his leadership during this tragedy.

I also want to thank U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her unwavering support. At my request and the request of Congresswoman Laura Richardson, Secretary Clinton authorized the immediate airlift of 92,000 pounds of emergency supplies collected by Samoan and non-Samoan communities in the Los Angeles, California area as well as by our Samoan and Tongan communities in Salt Lake City and St. George, Utah.

The Obama Administration continues to stand with us and, on behalf of all Samoans, I thank the Administration for its swift response.

Based on its statements and actions, the Obama Administration clearly recognizes the rising importance of Asia and the Pacific and has adjusted U.S. policies to reflect emerging realities – including enhanced engagement with the Pacific Island nations integral to the region.

Despite their geographic importance, steadfast friendship with the United States and consistent partnership with us in the United Nations, for too long we effectively outsourced our

policymaking toward the Pacific Islands to Australia and New Zealand. Unfortunately, the sometimes imperious attitudes and actions of our friends in Canberra and Wellington toward the Pacific Islands have fostered a degree of resentment and distrust that has limited their influence as well as their ability to represent U.S. views and interests. In Australia's case, its role may now be further constrained by the recent election of a fragile, single-seat majority, coalition government.

By deferring to the foreign ministries of Canberra and Wellington, we left a vacuum in the Pacific that China has been only too eager to fill. And while China can and should be a force for prosperity, stability and security in the Pacific Islands region and around the globe, Beijing's rapid rise presents a unique set of challenges. It is very much in the interest of the United States to develop a coherent, robust and sustained regional policy toward the Pacific Islands, one that recognizes and, ideally, complements China's rise. It was thus reassuring to hear Secretary Clinton last year, in her first appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, pledge to establish "a more comprehensive approach, American approach" to Pacific Island nations.

In the 17 months since then, the Administration has made tangible progress in meeting that pledge. The Secretary of State just held her second annual meeting with Pacific Island leaders two days ago in New York and I understand it went well. Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and Assistant Secretary of Defense Chip Gregson also led a high-level U.S. delegation to the August Pacific Island Leaders Post-Forum Dialogue in Vanuatu. As of this week, we have a resident Ambassador to Palau for the first time, and at long last, an agreement on the Compact. USAID is reopening offices in Fiji and Papua New Guinea after a 15-year absence, and the Defense Department is continuing its Pacific Partnership program to provide humanitarian and other assistance.

These are all important steps, and the Administration deserves credit for seeing to it that Secretary Clinton's pledge has already borne fruit. But if we seek to play a role in the Pacific commensurate with our interests, we have far more to do. After so many years of U.S. neglect, Pacific Island nations need and deserve further tangible evidence that the United States is committed to enhancing its engagement with the region for the long term.

Toward that end, I believe that we should institutionalize the Secretary of State's annual New York meeting with Pacific Island leaders. And when the Secretary makes her visit to the Pacific later this year – postponed due to the earthquake in Haiti – I hope she will visit at least two Pacific Island states in addition to Australia and New Zealand. My invitation to her to stop in American Samoa still stands. Such a visit would support efforts to strengthen U.S.-Pacific Island relations as well as American Samoa's position as a regional leader. It would also give the Secretary a chance to thank the thousands of Samoan men and women who serve in the U.S. armed forces and who put their lives on the line every day in the most dangerous parts of the world.

I believe that the United States should also institutionalize its participation in the Pacific Islands Forum by creating an Ambassador-level position for the PIF, just as we now have for ASEAN. U.S. participation in the PIF should also include Congress, and I will do my utmost to ensure that my colleagues make the effort to attend.

Meanwhile, we should move quickly to ensure that the President's planned participation in the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders next year in Hawaii takes place. The significance of America's first Pacific President attending that Conference cannot be overstated.

We should also enlarge the International Visitor Leadership Program and other exchanges for Pacific Islanders so they can interact more often with their American counterparts. We should increase the presence of Peace Corps volunteers in the region, offer more Fulbright scholarships to Pacific Islanders and increase funding for the U.S.-South Pacific Scholarship Program run under the auspices of the East West Center.

USAID's return to the region offers a chance to assist crucial country-level and regional projects, including those directed at the extraordinary, and potentially existential, challenges that climate change poses to Pacific Island nations. The Administration should seek to leverage its programs on global warming by complementing ongoing efforts of existing regional organizations such as the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community as well as new programs being developed at the East-West Center with funding from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Washington should also help strengthen the region's economy through the promotion of bilateral trade and investment, including encouraging the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations negotiations (PACER Plus) to provide maximum economic benefits for Pacific Island nations. And as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) moves forward, I hope that the United States and other countries involved would consider developing links between TPP and PACER Plus. In addition, the Administration should actively encourage the Millennium Challenge Corporation, International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to enhance their programs in the region. For all these organizations, it is critical to remember that a small amount of assistance goes a very long way in the Pacific islands.

On the difficult issue of Fiji, my own view, based on four trips there since the constitutional crisis last year and extended discussions with all sides, is that U.S. engagement is absolutely essential. The country's problems are multidimensional, resulting from the Fiji's unique colonial history, complex ethnic mix, and chiefly, provincial, religious and family rivalries. Clearly, the Australian and New Zealand policies of sanctioning and isolating Fiji have failed. Indeed, one result is that the interim Prime Minister appears to have become ever more reliant on a small group of advisors, some of whom, at a minimum, are not well informed.

I understand that during her meeting with Pacific Island leaders on Monday, Secretary Clinton spoke to Fiji's Foreign Minister about developing a bilateral dialogue. I encourage both sides to move forward expeditiously on such a dialogue. I would also encourage the exploration of new multilateral discussions with Fiji, perhaps through the Melanesian Spearhead Group or another venue in which Pacific Island nations take the lead.

In engaging Fiji, we should recognize that the interim Prime Minister has not altered the plans he outlined in his Strategic Framework for Change to draft a constitution reflecting the country's culture and history, to enact electoral reforms that will establish equal suffrage and to hold free, fair and democratic elections by 2014. In fact, he has reaffirmed that position over the

past year in public statements at international venues such as the World Bank.

I think we should take the interim Prime Minister at his word when he says he wants to end Fiji's coup culture once and for all, and we should offer Suva resources to facilitate the reform of its electoral process, redraft its constitution, ensure successful elections and build strong institutions capable of sustaining democracy and stability.

Again, I do sincerely thank the Administration for moving our policies in the Pacific in the right direction and for providing essential assistance to American Samoa and Samoa after the tsunami. The witnesses here today have helped lay the foundation for progress in U.S. relations with the region. Now is the time to use that foundation to develop a sustained, robust and comprehensive American approach to the Pacific Islands.