

The Honorable Lourdes A. Leon Guerrero, Governor of Guam
Government of Guam
August 24, 2023

“Peace Through Strength: The Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands to U.S.-led Global Security”

Chairman Westerman, Ranking Member Grijalva, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources, *hafa adai!* Welcome to Guam.

Mr. Chairman, by air travel, you are approximately 7,447 miles away from your home state of Arkansas and a similar distance from the nation’s capitol in Washington, D.C. Like each of your colleagues, the circumstances that bring you here are an equal blend of history, present circumstance, and a future still waiting to be written. History tells us that from 1521 to the present day, Guam has been, and continues to be, a linchpin of every Pacific Power.

The reasons for this are simple. On the axis that crosses 5,000 miles of the Pacific between Hawai’i and Asia, Guam is the only island with a protected harbor and sufficient land for major airports. Guam is also the largest landfall for communications, shipping, and military installations on the nearly 3,000-mile north axis from Japan to Papua New Guinea and Australia.

This geography means that Guam has access by air and sea to China and Southeast Asia to the west, Hawai’i and North America to the east, and Japan to the north.

For these reasons, Guam has played a unique and pivotal role in nearly every major American conflict in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As a result of American engagement in the Marianas and the larger Pacific region, the United States won an unparalleled period of peace, economic trade, and shared prosperity in the Pacific. Yet, as time passed and other priorities drew America’s watchful eye away from Pacific Island Countries, China emerged.

Offering massive infrastructure packages, awarding what some have called predatory debt, and dispensing travel and training to certain Pacific Island Countries (PICs) personnel—China, in the present day, has shown a commitment to its goals. But what are they?

Its first goal is to increase its popularity in the Pacific region and gain support for pro-Chinese policies at the United Nations. China’s second goal: its proposed China-

Pacific Island Countries Common Development Vision and the China-Pacific Island Countries Five Year Action Plan on Common Development (2022-2026).

Put simply, because Guam can project power throughout the Indo-Pacific region, China is working to project equal power onto Guam and its sister islands. This has brought with it specific consequences for the People of Guam. Yes, Guam has always been considered the tip of the American Spear in the Pacific. Some have said that the deployment of missile defense systems throughout Guam now makes it a first strike community in the eyes of China.

Mr. Chairman, I know it's hard for some Americans to understand why any of this matters to their way of life. After all, Guam and the Pacific Islands are thousands of miles away.

This is the best way I've heard it explained. Nearly 95% of America's potential customers live outside U.S. borders. 29% of U.S. exports of goods are sent to Asia, and this region represents over two trillion dollars in trade in goods with the United States in 2022. That trade, the lives and livelihoods that depend on it. The supply chain, the food on supermarket shelves, or chips in our computers and mobile phones—all if it relies on a secure Pacific.

Knowing that, who should write the rules of U.S. trade with the Indo-Pacific? If we choose not to, China surely will. This is why I support the bipartisan effort to increase U.S. engagement throughout the region and invest in the security of Guam and other vital U.S. territories. It is why I join other island leaders in seeking economic and infrastructure support for the Pacific's developing democracies.

And it is why I ask the members of this Committee to adopt policies and create programs that partner with PICs allowing them to engage American innovation and entrepreneurship in solving the problems we face.

From talking and listening to many Pacific Island leaders over the years, it is clear that we want to grow our own economies and create job and business opportunities that can help turn the corner on why so many of our people have left our islands.

To combat the impacts of climate change and illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing we need technology, we need financial expertise, we need trained workers, and new businesses if we are to secure the hard to access funds for climate change infrastructure and ocean resource monitoring. The U.S. Congress could develop or strengthen an existing incentive pathway for American businesses to help Pacific

governments create and implement the mitigation and adaptation projects that will allow islanders to return and flourish at home. Furthermore, we must continue to build regional resilience in health security, climate adaptation and mitigation efforts, and energy security.

Finally, I respectfully ask that Congress recognize that American values are constantly on display throughout the Pacific. How it treats one Pacific island is seen and felt by all Pacific islands.

By ensuring fair treatment of COFA citizens and investing in Guam's infrastructure, the U.S. demonstrates its commitment to collaboration. Initiatives like a Guam-only visa program, COFA cost reimbursement, and debt forgiveness showcase America as a reliable partner capable of cooperation and competition. In short the Compact renewal must be reflective of a whole of government approach and the U.S. Congress' commitment to recognize the importance of our Pacific islands.

In closing, I thank Chairman Westerman and this Committee for the opportunity to address this crucial issue. Let us work together to preserve peace, win prosperity, and expand opportunity in the Indo-Pacific region.