

DELEGATE GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLAN

TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD ON S. 2610,
A BILL TO APPROVE AN AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE REPUBLIC OF PALAU

SENATE ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

APRIL 5, 2016

Thank you, Chairman Murkowski and Ranking Member Cantwell, for holding a hearing on S. 2610. Approval of the agreement, entered into by the United States and the Republic of Palau in 2010, to extend the Compact of Free Association between our two nations is long overdue.

Earlier this year, I introduced similar legislation, H.R. 4531, which reflects certain updates that the Republic of Palau believes necessary given the five years that have elapsed since the agreement to extend the Compact was concluded. These differences can certainly be worked out in the course of the legislative process and in full consultation with the Republic of Palau. What is critical is that this Congress at last move forward to approve extension of the Compact and to confirm the commitment of the United States to a faithful ally and strategically important partner in the Western Pacific.

It was President Ronald Reagan who, recognizing the importance of the Western Pacific to U.S. security interests, first negotiated a Compact of Free Association with the people of Palau. President Reagan's prescience of the need to maintain strategic denial to the military of other nations from the land, air, and sea of Palau—an area the size of Texas—is apparent now more than ever. Given the increasingly expansionist policies of China, a close continuing relationship between Palau and the United States is a very real national security interest.

I do not need to remind you that under the Compact of Free Association the U.S. has the authority to operate our armed forces in the area under Palau's jurisdiction and operate military bases on Palau land. The Compact also provides that other states can make use of Palau territory only if the U.S. agrees.

The State Department made this point in testimony to this Committee in 2011—five years ago. It remains true today and worth repeating:

The importance of our special relationship with Palau is most clearly manifested in the U.S. defense posture in the Asia–Pacific region, which forms a north-south arc from Japan and South Korea to Australia. Maintaining U.S. primacy in the Pacific depends on our strong relationship with the Freely Associated States of Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, which along with Hawaii, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa and the smaller U.S. territories comprise an invaluable east-west strategic security zone that spans almost the entire width of the Pacific Ocean.

Additionally, critical security developments in the region require the United States' sustained presence and engagement, particularly given the range of U.S. strategic interests and equities in the Western Pacific. Essential elements of our presence include the Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on U.S. Army Kwajalein Atoll and disaster relief operations throughout the region. This posture will become increasingly important as regional powers become increasingly active and seek to supplant U.S. military leadership and economic interests in the region. Following through on our commitments to Palau, as reflected in the proposed legislation, buttresses our defense posture in the Western Pacific.¹

Yet we in Congress have failed to maintain the commitment that President Reagan established with Palau. Yes, Congress has continued to provide financial assistance to Palau per the terms of the extension agreement, which includes a gradual tapering off of this support over a fifteen year period. But our support has only been on an installment basis, year-by-year, as if we are unsure that the relationship is important. No long-term commitment to our ally has been forthcoming, despite what the U.S. agreed in 2010.

Yet, the Republic of Palau continues to send its citizens to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. Palau votes with the United States in the United Nations 95 percent of the time, ranking only behind Israel in this mark of loyalty. And Palau's keystone geographic position in the defensive "second island chain" in the Western Pacific has not altered.

Our failure to follow through on a negotiated agreement with a key ally not only leaves Palau uncertain about America's commitment. It leaves any nation of the twelve Pacific island states wondering whether to put its faith with America or with others. China, we know, is trying to establish a foothold in the region with aggressive business investment and island-building. Russia is engaged, in Fiji, with transfers of military equipment. Strange as it may seem, even Cuba has established itself, through a medical program, in the Solomon Islands. The people of the Pacific are friendly toward the U.S., but if Congress does not follow through on its commitments to Palau that sends a signal to all to look elsewhere for assistance and friendship.

So, now is time for Congress to affirm the alliance that President Reagan first sealed. Legislation approving the extension of the Compact of Free Association with the Republic of Palau will accomplish that goal. Legislation, such as S. 2610, will help maintain the American presence acquired at great cost in the bloody battles of World War II and will bulwark America's position in the Western Pacific in the years ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony for the Committee's record.

¹ Frankie A. Reed, Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs; Statement before Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington, DC; June 16, 2011.