

**Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Ambassador Carmen Cantor Nomination Hearing
April 28, 2022**

Questions from Ranking Member Barrasso

Question 1: Wyoming is the main producer and exporter of American soda ash, a primary component in making glass. The United States main competitor is China, which produces a synthetic soda ash that is less environmentally friendly. A new security pact between China and the Solomon Islands may pose a threat to trade in American soda ash.

In March, the *New York Times* explained that the security pact would give –“*China a base of operations between the United States and Australia that could be used to block shipping traffic across the South Pacific.*”

- a. If confirmed, what would you do in your new role to help ensure the free flow of U.S. exports like American soda ash to the South Pacific, especially as it relates to the waters of the U.S. territories, Freely Associated States, and their neighbors?**

Response: As stated at the hearing, my priorities are all related to partnerships and in my current position I am very aware of the evolving security concerns in this region as it relates to China. If confirmed, I will work to strengthen our historic and economic partnerships, in both the U.S. territories and the Freely Associated States, which are now more important than ever, to counterbalance the overt and covert actions by China in the Indo-Pacific Region. In public and private communications, we must make clear that the United States will continue to preserve and promote free and fair trade in the region, including for U.S.-produced commodities. Taken together, the islands, airspace, and waters of these American partners in the Pacific give the U.S. a strategic presence that compliments American political, social, and economic membership in the Pacific islands region and Oceania that make it clear to China and the world that the U.S. is here to stay and promote American values and interests. Risks involving interference with shipping and other aspects of U.S. freedoms and relationships in the region is reduced by the strength of these partnerships spanning a vast region of the Pacific.

Accordingly, if I am confirmed, I will seek to promote continued trade in the region, free of interference, by working closely with Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations Joseph Yun and the federal team that has been put together to move the Compact of Free Association (COFA) negotiations forward, including the Department of the Interior, State, Defense and other lead agencies. We need to send a signal to the world that this region, including the Freely Associated States, remains very important, and the U.S. is increasing, not diminishing, our commitment to bilateral relationships with our partner governments in the Freely Associated States.

Question 2: During your nomination testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee you stated that – “*We have an opportunity to act as a positive alternative to China’s growing presence in the FSM and the region.*”

- a. If confirmed, how will you use your new position to help facilitate the US being a positive alternative to China’s presence in the region and counter their aggressive actions in both the Freely Associated States and the U.S. territories?**

Response: As I said at my hearing, I agree that China is an increasing threat in the region. That threat is evidenced by the security agreement that the Solomon Islands recently signed with the People’s Republic of China. In my current position as Ambassador, I have been actively engaged in promoting the United States as a

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positive alternative in the region and I believe that there is significant support for that view. The President of the Federated States of Micronesia sent a letter to the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands expressing concerns about that agreement. Since my nomination for this position, I spoke with the governors of the U.S. territories to hear more from their perspectives and discussed China's influence in the region and the need to counter that influence.

While we have been active on this front, I believe that the U.S. needs to do more, be more visible, and signal to the world and to China that this region is not only very important to the U.S., but vital. Our role with the Freely Associated States and U.S. territories is based not only on a historical relationship with the people of these islands, but the values and commitments to freedom and peace that we have come to share. That relationship began with liberation of the islands in which 100,000 Americans and many islanders died and continues today in order to preserve the liberty of the islands. That is not just a U.S. legacy, it is a shared legacy of our peoples. If confirmed, I commit to using my position to support actions and policies to ensure China does not threaten the freedom of our friends or our interests in the region.

One of the ways the U.S. can be a positive alternative to China is by prioritizing and expediting the COFA Negotiations. If confirmed, I commit to do all I can to make sure that COFA Negotiations are completed in a timely way and strengthen those strategic bilateral partnerships.

Overall, I want to support our relationship with the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Historically and in a changing world, these islands are also of immense and increasing strategic importance. I want to be an advocate for our territories, and the hard-working Americans who call those territories home. I want to cultivate partnerships with the U.S. territories and their leaders so we can move the U.S.'s agenda forward. I appreciate the strong interest in these matters by Members of Congress and look forward to continuing engagement, if confirmed.

Question 3: Based on your experience as Ambassador of Micronesia, where do you see the most need in terms of U.S. domestic assistance in the Freely Associated States?

Response: The U.S. has a very special and unique relationship with the three Freely Associated States. We have been friends with the region since the days of World War II and have had a great relationship with them for more than 75 years. Given their geographic isolation as island nations, any government faces challenges to ensure a strong economy and public services, and key issues in my experience include infrastructure, health care, education, and public security. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major challenge to nearly all governments and poses unique issues in the FAS, many of which closed their borders to protect their populations. While there is undoubtedly need for U.S. domestic assistance in the Freely Associated States, those sovereign island nations are best positioned to characterize and prioritize those needs, and to incorporate those needs into Compact renewal discussions. So, if confirmed, I will continue to work with Ambassador Yun on moving COFA Negotiations forward expeditiously.

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Question from Senator Lankford

Question: The last few years have rightly shined a light on the importance of the Pacific region to our national security. **Ambassador Cantor, how do you intend to partner with the Department of Defense to ensure the territories in INDOPACOM are being equipped and fortified to combat China's growing influence and aggression in the region?**

Response: If confirmed, I expect to work closely with all our partner agencies, including the Department of Defense (DOD), when it comes to ensuring security for U.S. interests in the region, including our territories and Freely Associated States (FAS) allies. In my current capacity as Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia, I have worked very closely with the Commander of the Joint Region Marianas in Guam and INDOPACOM leaders in Honolulu. If confirmed, I plan to build on the relationships I already have with these key partners to ensure the territories and the Freely Associated States, segments of DOD's "Pacific Homeland" plan, can fight the People's Republic of China's growing influence in the region.

The office for which I am nominated is charged to carry out the Secretary of the Interior's responsibilities for the U.S. territories and administer and oversee federal assistance under COFA. Those responsibilities require the Department of the Interior to partner with other federal departments and agencies operating in the U.S. territories as our historical partners in the region, more recently with the former U.N. Trust Territory that today partners with the U.S. through strong and close bilateral relations with the Freely Associated States under COFA.

Security matters are an important part of the ongoing COFA negotiations and if confirmed I will work closely with Ambassador Yun to support those negotiations. I believe my experience as Ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia gives me a unique experience and understanding of the domestic and security concerns of the FAS and since my nomination, I have done outreach to the governors of the U.S. territories to hear directly from them, including their security concerns regarding China. I believe the role for which I have been nominated is to serve as an advocate for the U.S. territories that are not always a focus of those in Washington. I appreciate the strong interest in these matters by Members of Congress and look forward to continuing engagement, if confirmed.

The Departments of State and Defense are lead agencies that we work with most closely, among several other agencies that play a vital role in these U.S. and U.S. affiliated islands. DOD works with each of the U.S. territories and the Freely Associated States on addressing the most pressing and defense and security needs. If confirmed, I will do everything that I can to support and work with DOD as they operate in the region.