



Opening Statement
Hearing on U.S. Interests in the Freely Associated States
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
July 23, 2019

Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order as we meet to review the United States' interests in the Freely Associated States, which include the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, as well as the Republic of Palau.

The United States has a unique relationship with these nations through our Compacts of Free Association, through which we provide for their national defense and their citizens have the right to live, to work, and go to school in the United States without the need for a visa. And in return, the U.S. has access to their lands and waters for strategic purposes, and just as importantly the ability to deny other nations that same access.

To understand our committee's interest and role in the Freely Associated States, we really have to go back to the end of the Second World War when the islands, along with the Northern Marianas, became a Trust Territory of the United Nations, to be administered by the United States.

The administration of the islands was initially led by the U.S. Navy but was turned over to the Department of the Interior back in 1951. That administration ended when the Freely Associated States chose to become sovereign nations, but the Department of Interior continues to be the pipeline for U.S. financial assistance to the nations through the Compacts of Free Association.

I think it is also worth noting that in 1946, the predecessors to this committee – the Committee on Public Lands and the Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions – merged to form the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. So there is a long-standing history and connection between this committee and other U.S.-affiliated islands. I think sometimes people look and say well wait it's the Energy and Natural Resources committee, how do the insular affairs fit in? And so I think it is important to remind us of that history.

Our primary interest today is U.S. financial assistance, which is set to expire in the Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia at the end of fiscal year 2023, and then in Palau at the end of fiscal year 2024; and how that might impact the United States' interests in the region; and whether it would create a leadership void that other nations might seek to fill.

We must also be mindful of the United States' nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands, after conducting 67 nuclear tests between 1946 and 1958 at Bikini and Enewetak, and their impact on those and the surrounding atolls and their inhabitants.

In today's world of bad actors, we don't spend nearly enough time engaging with our friends and hearing out their concerns. The FAS nations are truly our friends and allies. Their citizens are part of our Armed Forces. They vote with the United States on important votes in the United Nations more often than any

other nation except besides Israel. And they live and work in each of our 50 states, making a positive contribution to our nation.

I think we got a good panel this morning, we have a knowledgeable and impactful panel, with witnesses from the Departments of Defense, State, and the Department of the Interior, as well as a witness from the Government Accountability Office, hopefully, you can all help tie these interests together with the discussions we will have.

I look forward to hearing from each of you and thank you all for being here.

Senator Manchin?

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