

Subject: RE: US officials: Funding for Pacific allies 'must be done'

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By Alex Willemyns for Radio Free Asia

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Officials from the White House and the US departments of State and Defense say Congress must find the funds.

A deal by Congress to find funding for promised aid to three Micronesian allies of the United States "simply must be done" in order to stop Beijing from growing its influence in the strategically located countries, a senior White House official said Thursday.

Efforts to counter Chinese influence in longtime American allies Palau, Micronesia and Marshall Islands have been frustrated by the inability of Congress to fund economic assistance packages pledged to countries, which hold "compacts of free association" with the United States.

The deals, often simply referred to as COFA, give the U.S. military access to their vast maritime territory in the Pacific in exchange for funds and the right for citizens to work and live in America.

A new 20-year COFA deal worth \$7 billion in total was signed in October but Congress has not yet found the funds. Notably, the money was not included in a massive aid bill in the Senate this week.

Leaders of the nations last week wrote a joint letter to U.S. President Joe Biden warning that "competitive political actors" may be exploiting the delays in funding due to the "uncertainty among our peoples."

Speaking at an event at the United States Institute of Peace, Mira Rapp-Hooper, the senior director for East Asia and Oceania on Biden's National Security Council, said getting the funds flowing to Palau, Micronesia and Marshall Islands "really matters" for U.S. strategy.

"Getting COFA funded is really second-to-none in terms of our strategic tasks we have to take on this year, and it just simply must be done," Rapp-Hooper said, calling the funds "a reinvestment" in America's "deep and continuing historical ties" to the three countries.

Contested access to the region

Rapp-Hooper's comments at [the event](#) - which marked two years since the release of Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy - were echoed by two colleagues from the Departments of State and Defense.

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Mira Rapp-Hooper, the senior director for East Asia and Oceania on Biden's National Security Council, speaks at an event at the United States Institute of Peace, Feb. 15, 2024. (United States Institute of Peace)

"Securing COFA funding is one of the most important things that the administration can do this year in terms of our Indo-Pacific strategy," said Ely Ratner, the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, emphasizing the strategic centrality of Micronesia.

The territory covered by the three archipelagic countries stretches over a vast swathe of the Pacific Ocean from just west of Hawaii to the Philippines. The area is wider than the continental United States.

"This is really strategic territory in terms of having a short access in the region," Ratner said. "It's also the fact that citizens in the COFA territories are participating in the U.S. military at very high rates."

"Look, this is something that matters," he said. "This is an opportunity for Congress and the administration to work together this year."
"We just have to get it done," he added.

Camille Dawson, deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, said that she agreed "100%" with the comments.

Congressional efforts

Sen. Mazie Hirono, a Democrat from Hawaii, last week unsuccessfully attempted to make an amendment to the Senate's aid bill to include the promised funding for the COFA states, saying in a speech on the Senate floor that it was a mistake to leave the money out.

"At a time of rising tensions in the Pacific, these compacts are a critical component of our ability to operate in the Pacific, especially as we work to counter China's growing influence in this region," Hirono said.

The chairs of four Senate committees - foreign relations, armed services, energy and natural resources - had all expressed support for finding the funds, she noted, but it was still left out of the bill.

"They understand how critical these agreements are to our posture and readiness in the Pacific and, frankly, the harmful message it would send if we do not get these Compacts agreed to," she said.

Edited by Malcolm Foster.

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