

A Closer Look at the US-Marshall Islands Relationship

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Micronesia is a good start word. Particularly the “micro” part. Micronesia is the geographical area of the Pacific, stretching from Kiribati to Palau. On the map, if you see it at all, it is a series of 2,000 micro dots of land totaling just 1,000 square miles. The ocean area meanwhile is nearly three million square miles. Politically, there are five sovereign states and three US territories. At times, one gets the feeling that the countries are too small to get Washington’s attention. It is almost as if you need a microscope to magnify the issues to understand what’s going on. I’ll turn the microscope on just one area, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). Just like life under the microscope, once you zoom in, the activity and diversity is incredible.

The Marshall Islands has played a large role in history and continues to face important issues today. In World War II, there were significant battles in the Marshalls. Medals of Honor were accorded for selfless bravery to five American Marines who fought on Kwajalein, Roi Namur, and Eniwetok. Three of the men threw themselves on live grenades to save their comrades. Marshallese scouts risked and sometimes lost their lives pointing out Japanese positions to the Americans. As Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell said in his testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2010, “Our identity as a Pacific power was, in many ways, forged on the beaches of the Pacific during World War II.”

Assistant Secretary Campbell also referred in his testimony to the United States’ “significant moral, historic, and strategic links with the island nations of the Pacific.” The nuclear testing legacy certainly creates one of these moral links. The Marshall Islands was the unfortunate site of 67 nuclear tests. The largest test, the “Bravo” shot, is marked every March 1 at Remembrance Day, due to the damaging fallout that contaminated several RMI islands. While the United States has paid full and final compensation for the nuclear tests, the Marshall Islands contends that Congress should review the compensation due to “changed circumstances” and evidence about the tests that has come to light since the compensation package was awarded. The United States continues to provide health care for those affected by the tests and the Department of Energy is providing science scholarships for talented Marshallese students so that they can best answer questions about resettling islands like Rongelap, where there was fallout and where remediation steps have been taken.

The Marshall Islands sued the United States and other nuclear powers for breach of the Nonproliferation Treaty, asserting that the United States should do more to denuclearize. The suit was dismissed, with the federal court ruling that the Marshall Islands lacked standing to sue and the case presented a “political question” not appropriate for resolution in US courts. After the ruling, the US Embassy recognized the Marshall Islands’ abiding interest in global security and referred to Under Secretary for Arms Control Rose Gottemoeller’s statement that “the Marshall Islands has played an outsized role in the fight for a safer world.”

Under Secretary Gottemoeller added that “the US commitment to achieving the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons is unassailable.” This goal can only be achieved politically through patient diplomacy. We look forward to our continued work with our friend and ally, the Marshall Islands, as we strive to create the conditions for a nuclear-free world. Nuclear issues are important and will always be a dimension of our relationship with the Marshall Islands, but they do not define the relationship.

Security figures prominently in the relationship today, as the island of Kwajalein hosts the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Range and construction is underway on the Air Force “Space Fence” project to monitor debris and activity in outer space. The United States, by virtue of the Compact of Free Association, provides for the defense of the Marshall Islands and its citizens can live and work in the United States without a visa. Many Marshallese join the United States military. In fact, they join at a higher rate than any US state. And like other Micronesian nations, Marshallese citizens have died in an American uniform overseas. RMI students are also eligible to attend the Coast Guard Academy, a perfect fit for a maritime country. The security relationship between the United States and the Marshall Islands remains rich and deep.

At just one meter above sea level, the Marshall Islands is ground zero for the threat posed by climate change and sea level rise. Fittingly, the RMI has produced a great environmental poet, Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner, who performed at the United Nations and received a rare standing ovation for her poem, “Dear Matafele Peinem,” promising to keep her child, Matafele, from harm from sea level rise. The US Embassy nominated Ms. Jetnil-Kijiner to showcase her talent, underlining our commitment to the region on the issue of sea level rise and climate change, something that Admiral Samuel Locklear, Commander of US Pacific Command, called the greatest threat to the region.

The importance of marine resources in the Marshall Islands is critical to the global economy and tests our ability to manage sustainably one of the world’s great fisheries. On any given day, international tuna boats in the region have millions of dollars worth of high grade tuna onboard. At a local Marshallese store, you can buy sashimi for a dollar or two for a serving that would cost \$40 in a New York restaurant. Additionally, the Marshall Islands is one of the remaining great destinations for divers attracted to both the marine life and World War II ships sunk at Bikini including the Tokagawa, the flagship of the Japanese Navy, and the Saratoga, a great American battleship.

The microscope comes in handy again when looking at the Compact of Free Association. From a distance, the Compact seems too complicated, too legalistic, and too detailed to understand. However, it is really pretty simple. The Compact requires that the United States provides decreasing levels of support for health, education, and infrastructure to the Marshall Islands. This year, the United States will disperse close to \$100 million in Compact funds. By 2023, while the Compact will live on with security and travel arrangements, the sector grants will be reduced to zero. The Marshall Islands has a trust fund to which the United States and Taiwan contribute that will help the Marshall Islands transition to a more independent government financing structure. The United States will continue to lease the US Army base on Kwajalein Atoll, so our ties will remain strong after 2023.

The Marshall Islands sees the world much the way we do. It has one of the highest voting affinities in the world with the United States in the United Nations and it contributes to making the region one of the most stable, democratic, and peaceful in the world. While the Marshall Islands deals with drought, tidal inundations, and energy concerns, it does not have a homegrown insurgency, a history of terrorism, or a history of conflict with neighboring states. As the United States pivots to the Pacific, part of our credibility rests on keeping these Freely Associated States successful and thriving in our globalized economy. Achieving this means continued public diplomacy engagement and support from the many agencies and departments that have historically worked in Micronesia, and helping these countries develop the tourism, fishery, and energy self-sufficiency measures needed to thrive after 2023. This is possible and achievable if sea level rise does not overtake these islands where the average “altitude” above sea level is just one meter. Tourism is especially promising given Majuro is just four or five hours from Honolulu, has incredible marine diversity for divers, and waves that attract some of the top surfers to Ailinglaplap. Claims that Amelia Earhart may have crashed-landed on Mili Atoll add another tantalizing reason for tourists to investigate the Marshalls. In any case, the world community will judge how well the United States treats one of its best friends, indeed a country we helped create, when and if it faces a critical threat to its very existence.

What would be lost to the United States, would not only be a good partner in the United Nations and a few square miles for a world class space and missile defense base, but also a country with a strong maritime tradition, including some of the greatest ocean navigators and boat designers of all time, a unique culture, and the ability to enforce the protection of a great fishery and the world’s largest shark sanctuary. Having served in Russia, one of the largest countries in the world, it’s interesting to see that even the smallest countries play their part, sometimes an outsized part, in world history and development.