

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 21, 2024

Dear Speaker Johnson,

We write to urge the inclusion of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2023 in the next available legislative vehicle. This bipartisan legislation was reported and unanimously recommended for House approval by the Committee on Natural Resources as H.J. Res. 96 on November 8, 2023, and now awaits passage by the House and Senate.

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) include non-expiring provisions securing vital defense rights in strategically critical areas of the Pacific increasingly contested by the People's Republic of China (PRC). Under the COFA, the three Freely Associated States (FAS) of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) grant the United States basing rights, operational control, and the right to deny access by third nation militaries to each nation's exclusive economic zone. The U.S. is also responsible for these nations' national defense. These security and defense rights give the U.S. control of an area of ocean in the Western Pacific as large as the continental United States.

In return, the United States provides direct grant assistance payments and certain federal services without requirement of reimbursement. The COFA Amendments Act of 2023 would update and extend for 20 years COFA provisions that provide economic assistance and federal programs to the FAS.

The COFA are the cornerstone of U.S. presence in the Pacific Islands and have been recognized as strategically critical by numerous national security documents, including the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy. The PRC currently is waging political warfare to expand its influence and disrupt friendly relations throughout the region, making our deep and enduring partnerships with these nations more critical than ever. Senior officials from the Department of State and the Department of Defense repeatedly emphasized in Congressional hearings how crucial these relationships are to U.S. presence and operations in the Indo-Pacific.

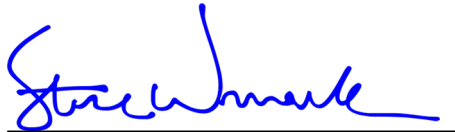
The economic assistance provisions of the Compacts for RMI and FSM expired last fiscal year, and Palau is funded at a reduced level until the end of this fiscal year. After negotiations under two administrations, all three nations signed agreements to renew the Compacts for 20 additional years, starting from FY 2024. It is now incumbent on Congress to complete the approval process for the negotiated agreements through the passage of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2023.

Failing to ratify these agreements negotiated in good faith would be the most self-destructive gift the United States could give to the PRC in the Pacific, damaging U.S. credibility and deterrent capability in the FAS and the larger community of Pacific Island nations. Indeed, the delay in approval of the COFA stands in contrast to PRC success in establishing diplomatic relations with Solomon Islands in 2019 and more recently the Republic of Nauru.

Pacific Island nations understandably view these agreements as litmus tests for United States partnership. They are watching to see if we will follow through on our commitments, and should we fail, the PRC will further exploit that vacuum with further intervention and disruption rather than open and lawful competition. As a result, a broad coalition has openly urged Congress to pass these agreements into law: this includes the Heritage Foundation, the Select Committee for Strategic Competition with the Chinese Communist Party, and the Administration.

Each day that we do not pass this legislation into law is an opportunity missed, and an opening for our enemies to sow doubt about our viability as a partner and our strength as an ally. With so much at stake in the Indo-Pacific, we urge you to include this legislation in any available vehicle.

Sincerely,



Steve Womack
Member of Congress



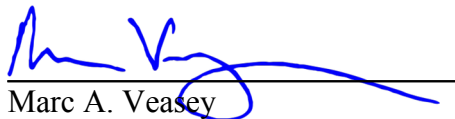
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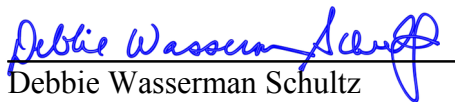
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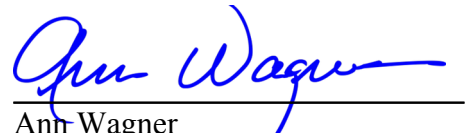
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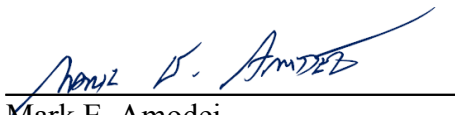
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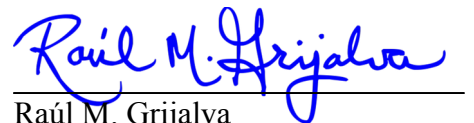
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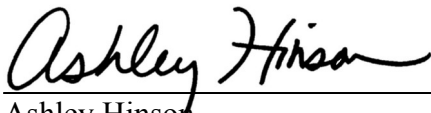
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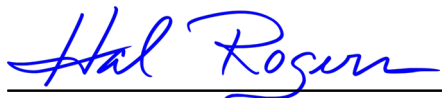
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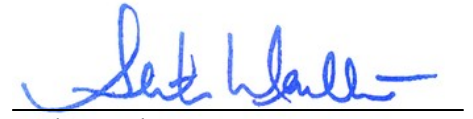
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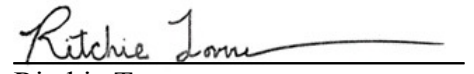
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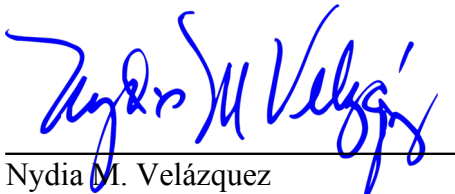
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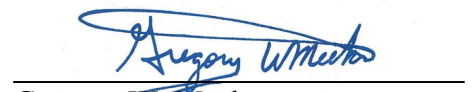
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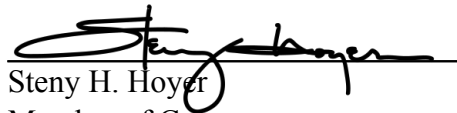
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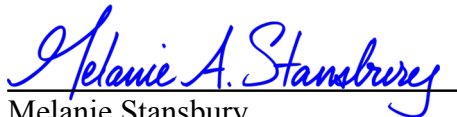
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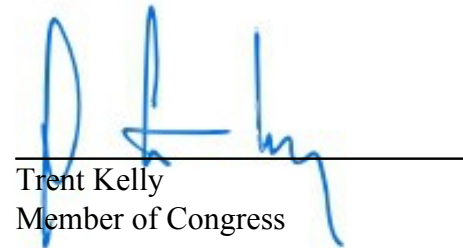
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