



USA

Bill to Fund US Government Includes Money to Counter China in Pacific

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FILE - Secretary of State Antony Blinken, center right, meets with, from left, Marshall Islands Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Jack Ading, Palau President Surangel Whipps, Jr., and Micronesia President Wesley Simina, Sept. 26, 2023, at the State Department in Washington.

WASHINGTON — U.S. congressional negotiators released a bill Sunday that would fund key parts of the government through the rest of the fiscal year, which began in October 2023.

Among provisions in the appropriations package are critical funds to counter China in the Pacific as part of an agreement signed last year called the Compacts of Free Association, or COFA.

Under the compacts, Micronesia, Palau and the Marshall Islands will receive \$7 billion in economic aid over 20 years. In exchange, Washington will provide for their defense and can deny China access to their territorial waters, a maritime area larger than the continental United States.

The United States has had similar agreements in effect with Micronesia and the Marshalls since 1986 and with Palau since 1994. Citizens from these nations are allowed to travel, live and work in the United States as nonimmigrants.

Congresswoman Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen, who represents the U.S. territory of American Samoa, told VOA on Sunday that House Speaker Mike Johnson reached her early Saturday morning to deliver the news.

Radewagen said she then called the presidents of the three Pacific allies to share the details.

“The COFA agreements send a clear message of U.S. commitment to the Pacific region and take a much-needed international strong stand for the ideals of democracy and freedom,” she told VOA in an email.

Senator Mazie Hirono, a Hawaii Democrat who has long supported the full funding of the agreement, issued a statement Sunday night.

“As we work to counter China’s growing influence in the Pacific, these agreements are extremely important for our national security and that of our allies, and also for the tens of thousands of COFA citizens who live, work and pay taxes in the U.S.,” she said.

The move comes after 26 senators, including Senators Joe Manchin, a Democrat, and John Barrasso, a Republican, urged Senate leadership to include the language that had previously been dropped from a Senate security spending bill on Feb. 12.

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“Failure to act on COFA opens the door to more corrupting influence and funding by the PRC in the region,” wrote the senators, using an acronym for the People’s Republic of China.

Pacific Island leaders remain cautious.

President Hilda Heine of the Marshall Islands spoke to a Remembrance Day for victims and survivors of nuclear testing on March 1, the 70th anniversary of the U.S. nuclear test on Bikini Atoll.

“Our nation has been a steadfast ally of the United States, but that should not be taken for granted,” she told the audience, according to the news site Islands Business.

Palau President Surangel Whipps, Jr. told VOA:

"We are heartened that the leaders of both houses of Congress and the White House have reached a consensus on the legislation slated for action this week. We thank our friends in both parties for their continued support and partnership."

U.S. lawmakers face another threat of a partial shutdown if they fail to act by midnight Friday.

House Speaker Johnson has said he will bring the compromise bill to the floor for a full house vote on Wednesday.