Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

"A Conversation with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield on U.S. Diplomacy in the Pacific Islands"

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FEATURING

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield

Representative of the United States to the United Nations

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John J. Hamre: Well, good morning – or, good afternoon and welcome. (Laughs.) You can see where I've been sleeping all day. No, good afternoon to you all. Welcome. We're delighted to have you here. And it's a – it's a real privilege to welcome Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield. And I will say just a word of introduction, but Charlie Edel is going to do that, really.

I just want to say I'm glad to see all of you here. And when I was talking with Charlie, I thought, you know, having a program on a Monday afternoon that's about Pacific Islands, will we get anybody to come? And I said – he said, yeah. He said, people are interested. And I'm really most impressed that you, Ambassador, are so interested.

Let me just say a word of welcome to Jo-Ann Burdian, who's a real admiral for – the assistant commandant for response policy for the Coast Guard; Carmen Cantor, who's assistant secretary for insular affairs; Margo Deiye – I hope I didn't pronounce that improperly – ambassador from Nauru; Cephas Kayo, who's chargé d'affaires from Papua New Guinea; Collette Morgan, who is assistant – deputy assistant USTR for Southeast Asia; and Brandon Ramsay, who is staff director for the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Thank you. Thank you all for coming.

I just have to share a little story. I was just back talking with Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, and she said something that I think is both true and an insight into her character. She said, you know, when I sit on the floor of the General Assembly, you know, I'm sitting there representing the United States, but every other representative there is my equal. And that's a testament to how she views her mission there, that she views them as equals, not – there's no superiority thing going on here – in her mind, and that's a very refreshing thing. I can't say that that's typical, you know, of American foreign policy elites, but it's welcome. And, you know, it's just a testament to your character.

And I think that comes from 35 really distinguished years in the Foreign Service, becoming ambassador to Liberia, but now you're posted. I don't know how in the world the president talked you into coming out of public life – (laughs) – to go back, but you're now the permanent representative at U.N.. And you know, people don't know this, but that's the only ambassador that gets invited into the NSC. You know, outside of the secretary of state, only the ambassador to the U.N. gets invited into the NSC. And again, it's a testament to her intellect, her character, and the fact that you were willing to come out of private life, again, after 35 years and serve this country. So I want to say thank you.

Let me turn to Dr. Charles Edel, who is going to do the formal introduction, but I didn't want to miss the opportunity to greet you and thank you for coming. (Applause.) Charlie.

Charles Edel: Great. Thanks very much, Dr. Hamre.

And thank you especially, Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, for joining us here today. It's quite an honor to have you here with us at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

I'm Charles Edel, the Australia chair here at CSIS. Given the ambassador's wide range of experience in foreign policy and national security, it hardly comes as a surprise that the president asked her to go to the Cook Islands for the Pacific Islands Forum this past fall to represent the United States there and have presence for the United States in the Pacific. Now, look, I should say that on the one hand there is absolutely nothing new about that. For most of American history, the United States has been deeply engaged in the Pacific. I won't give you too much of a history lesson, but starting in the 1780s American commercial ships were plowing through and across the Pacific. By the time you got to the 19th century we had expanded that commercial presence to include both diplomatic and naval engagement across the Pacific, and it hardly needs saying that America's presence, engagement with the Pacific was felt deeply throughout the 20th century.

But – and there is a "but" here – over the last several decades American focus on and attention to the Pacific has atrophied. You can see signs that this is clearly changing. The Biden administration released its first-ever Pacific Partners Strategy. The White House has hosted leaders from all the Pacific Islands at the White not once but twice in 2022 and 2023. We are in the process of opening new U.S. embassies across the Pacific. We have pushed out the first-ever U.S. ambassador to the Pacific Island Forum. We are seeing an increase in both Coast Guard and Peace Corps presence in the Pacific where they had not been for the previous several decades. And perhaps most significant, Congress has now funded our Compacts of Free Association with Palau, with Marshall Islands, and with the Federated States of Micronesia. However, and this is, I think, the most important point: This is just the start.

And to discuss the importance of U.S. efforts, to walk us through what we should expect to come next, I'm thrilled to welcome Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield here to CSIS. The ambassador is going to come up here and offer some initial comments, after which my colleague Kathryn Paik, senior fellow with the Australia Chair and formerly director of the Pacific and Southeast Asia at the NSC is going to come up here to run her through a conversation, after which point we'll open the conversation up.

Ambassador, we know how extraordinarily busy your schedule is, and just really want to thank you not only for taking the time to come to CSIS but making the time to talk about an extremely vital, important part of the world. Ambassador. (Applause.)

Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield: Good afternoon, everyone.

Audience Members: Good afternoon.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: It's really great to be here with you. Let me start by thanking John and Charlie for the warm welcome, and thank you to everyone at CSIS, the whole team, for having me here today.

Last November I had the privilege of leading a high-level interagency delegation to the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in the Cook Islands. I will admit here that I had to look at where the Cook Islands was on the map. I have a huge map in my office; it actually was off the map because it is so far. But I learned that Rarotonga, the largest and most populous of the islands, no building can be taller than a coconut tree, and that's a true fact. I gained a new appreciation of the vastness and the isolation of the Pacific, and the important message it sends when we take the time and make the effort to actually show up.

Most of all, I learned the stories of so many extraordinary Pacific Islanders, leaders and community members who like all of us want to build better lives for their children and benefit from sustainable development in the region who are worried about climate change and how it might wreak havoc on their lives and livelihoods and their children's futures and who have already felt the effects of this existential global challenge.

I'm proud I was able to tell them face to face that the United States is standing with them, we're standing for them, and that we have their backs. My visit was the first of its kind since the U.S. established diplomatic relationships with the Cook Islands and Niue and recognized both as sovereign independent states.

During my time there I was able to reaffirm the United States' plan for empowering communities like the ones I met with and the 2.3 million Pacific Islanders in the region. After all, the United States is a Pacific nation as well. We share a unique, long-standing history with the Pacific Islands. We have robust people-to-people ties that span generations and our economic prosperity and national security are inextricably linked.

At the same time, though, the Biden administration recognizes that we cannot take these vital relationships for granted and so since day one we've worked to strengthen the ties that bind us. That includes the passage of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act, COFA. This agreement will

fully fund $7.1 billion in new assistance over the next two decades helping the COFA nations to provide essential government services like health care, education, infrastructure, and capacity building.

We will continue to make good on our commitment to strengthen our relationships in the Pacific and invest in the people. Of course, COFA is just one aspect of a broader approach. We also developed the first ever U.S. strategy, as you heard, for the Pacific Islands and continue to strengthen our support for the region's priorities outlined in the Pacific Islands Forum 2050 strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.

We're expanding our diplomatic and development presence in the region with new embassies, expanded USAID footprint, and the return of Peace Corps volunteers to a number of islands in the region. In fact, when I took my trip the head of Peace Corps and a USAID representative were part of my delegation.

We're deepening high-level engagements including with President Biden himself. We're bolstering the Pacific regional architecture and deepening our cooperation with the Pacific Island Forum because we know this region is strongest when it is united, and we're working closely with like-minded partners to enhance digital connectivity in the region.

Since the first summit with the PIF leaders the U.S. has announced more than $8 billion in new funding for the Pacific Islands and robust new programs to address climate change, maritime security, gender equity, and more.

Together, these actions reflect the incredible progress we've made together deepening our diplomatic relationships, development partnerships, and security cooperation with the Pacific, and they paint a picture for the future of the U.S.-Pacific relationship.

Over the next year our goal is to continue implementing and delivering on the commitments we've made in the past three years to demonstrate through our words and our actions our enduring partnership with the region and its people and our commitment to elevating the voices of the Pacific as we address shared challenges.

Meeting this moment takes a robust network of partners and I'm proud of the network we've created to that end. Later this month I'll head to East Asia to meet with some of those stakeholders in person where we will discuss, among other things, our shared priorities around nuclear nonproliferation, closing digital divides, and our work in the Security Council, including to support the region.

We also look forward to supporting Pacific Island countries through our preparations and participation at the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States, coming up at the end of May. This will be a once-in-a-decade opportunity to bring together diverse stakeholders to build partnerships and make new commitments. In the meantime, I'm excited to have the opportunity to sit down with all of you, with Kathryn today, and talk about where we've been, where we're going, and how we get there together. I thank you all for your attention and I look forward to our conversation. (Applause.)

Kathryn Paik: Thank you, Ambassador, for your words.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Thank you.

Ms. Paik: As a reminder for our audience, both here and online, you can continue to submit questions via the "submit questions now" button on our event web page. You can find that at CSIS.org, under the Australia Chair on the event page.

So, Ambassador, thank you so much for talking us through some of the major muscle movements that have been made over the last couple of years under this administration. And, as Dr. Edel said, there's been a really significant ramp up in U.S. engagement in the Pacific. Part of this ramp up has been a plethora of promises from this administration – new embassies, as you said, banking, investment, climate change. Having been out to the Pacific, and heard from the Pacific leaders, and talked to them, where do you think the U.S. should really be prioritizing as we look ahead?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: That's an excellent question. And it's the question that I was asked by the Pacific Islanders when I was there. Because what they said to me is, we're used to you guys showing up once. We're used to you paying a moment of attention to us. But what we need to know is, is this something – is this a commitment? Are we going to see you again? Is it more than just showing up? Are you going to honor all of the commitments that you've made? And I was able to assure them that we were, that our intention was for a long-term relationship. The COFA funding, I think, is the first indication of that, because it's funding for two decades. And that was just passed through Congress. And for our members of Congress and staff who are in the audience, I want to thank you for that. Because that was an extraordinary commitment that actually showed the Pacific Island nations that we're in it for the long term.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely. One of the key tenets of the Pacific Partnership Strategy that you mentioned previously, is to amplify Pacific voices on the international stage, something you are uniquely positioned to see. And, as you know, the Pacific Island nations are very vocal at the United Nations promoting issues that are

very critical to them, such as maintaining maritime boundaries with sea-level rise, or loss and damage due to climate change. Could you give us a little of your thoughts on where those subjects lie in the U.S. system, and how we can best work through the U.N. to help amplify those voices on an international stage?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: You know, it's a high priority for us. And it's a high priority at the highest levels of the U.S. government. The fact that the president has been engaging on Pacific Island issues during his administration I think is a clear representation of how committed we are to amplifying their voices. In New York, I have a very unique perch because I can meet with all of these countries all at once. I've had several meetings with the groupings of Pacific Island countries. I have met with other groupings where we have committed, as a group, to meet with Pacific Island countries.

We have the Quad. That includes Japan, and Australia, and India. And we met recently and agreed that it was important that as a group we also engage, because they're equally engaged on these issues. And I think this is a commitment that will be reflected in all of the work that we do in the future. We've recognized their concerns about their sovereignty as sea levels rise, that they still are – you know, they will still exist as a nation, regardless of what happens to their islands because of climate change. We've made a commitment to the 1.5 Celsius increase. And they have heard us. And they're holding us to that commitment, and we're continuing to maintain our commitments to all of them.

So we have a long way to go, but we've gone a long ways already. And I think that commitment is showing in the efforts that we're making right now.

Ms. Paik: Thank you. One of the concerns that the United States and like-minded partners often express is that Chinese efforts in the Pacific are going against many Pacific Island equities that they may have. And, of course, U.S. interest in the Pacific is not just because of global competition, but that's a factor that the Pacific Islands are very aware of.

I'm curious your thoughts from the U.N. perspective, what you see on the ground there in terms of Chinese and other efforts to countermand the international rules-based order that benefit the Pacific and how you work with Pacific Island and other countries to combat that.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: It's a huge problem that we've encountered specifically in New York. But I think it's a global problem as well, where the Chinese have made a very concerted, forceful effort to kind of rewrite the rules of the road to reflect its own vision of what they see as the future, including putting in – inserting in U.N. documents issues that go against the core values that we have and the core values that many of these countries have.

But what we've been clear on, and I made that statement as well when I was in the Cook Islands, is that we're not trying to force countries to choose between us and China. What we're doing is giving them a choice to make. Many countries will say we're forced into these relationships because we don't have other choices. We're giving them those other choices. And those other choices mean having the U.S. have their backs, having the U.S. standing with them side by side as they address some of the challenges that China is forcing upon them.

Ms. Paik: Thank you.

I'd like to go to some of our audience questions that have come in. And again, people can continue to submit those during the conversation.

Jessica Stone from VOA News asks: Some Pacific Island leaders would say there's a trust deficit when it comes to the United States in terms of attention to the region. How are you using your role at the U.N. to improve relationships between Washington and the Pacific Islands and to prepare U.S. diplomats who are now heading out to the region to understand the priorities of the region?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: You know, that's, again, a question that I was asked by leaders when I met with them. And our commitment is really an ironclad commitment. And we know that there have been times when we were there for a day, there for a meeting, and not – and didn't show up again.

So I regularly meet with my Pacific Island counterparts in New York. I go to them. I don't always ask them to come to me. I mentioned, when we were speaking before, that with one country I went – made an appointment and went to that country's mission, and they told me they had never had a visit by a U.S. permanent representative in the history of their time in the United Nations.

And I don't just call on them when I need them. I call on them regularly and show them the respect that they deserve as a sovereign country. And I think that has gone an extraordinarily long way in showing our commitment and developing the relationships in the engagements that we have.

You know, when you're the U.S. PR, your schedule is just out of control. You don't have a – you don't always have control over your schedule. But one thing I've controlled in my schedule is to say that every country is equal and that I will have courtesy calls with every single country. There are 193.

I will tell you in three years I've only gotten through about 157. And many have changed, so there are some countries I'm seeing over and over again in

these one-on-one courtesy calls. But my goal is to hit every one of them. And I think at this point I may have gotten all of the Pacific Island countries either one on one or in groupings.

Ms. Paik: That's fantastic. I'm curious your thoughts on – you know, another tenet of the Indo-Pacific strategy of this administration is the partnership with partners and allies, as we do everything globally. And, obviously, we have wonderful partners in the Pacific. But we also have strong partners and allies that are trying to also work with the Pacific – Japan, Australia, New Zealand, both of whom are members of the Pacific Island Forum themselves. What are your thoughts on how we are working with our partners and allies currently in the Pacific, how we might do better, how we might collaborate in a better way?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Yeah, this is something, again, that came up during my visit. And I did meet with partners when I was there. I met with the New Zealand now speaker. I met with an Australian counterpart. I met with Indonesia. So there were a number of countries – larger countries from the region that we have the opportunity to talk about how we can work together. We're working, for example, with Australia. I think it's $65 billion – Theresa, correct me if I'm wrong – million? (Laughs.) Billion sounds better. (Laughter.) Sixty-five million dollars to address digital issues. We're working with countries on youth programs and education programs, because we know we can't do it alone.

And the countries in the region know the region even better than we know the region. I'm not going to say I know the Cook Islands better than New Zealand, when I was told by the New Zealand minister when he was there that there are more Cook Islanders living in New Zealand than there are living on the island. And every Cook Islander is a New Zealand citizen as well. So they clearly know these countries well. And I think we have to take advantage of the – you know, what they bring to the table, the tools that they bring to the table, so that we can work together on our common interests.

And then I'd just add one thing that I came away from my visit with. And that is people want to be heard. They don't want to just be talked to and spoken to. They want us to hear what their priorities are, what they're dealing with, and with issues of climate change, how they're dealing with youth programs. And we have – we announced a program to support the Pacific Island youth leadership as well. How they're dealing with gender issues. How they're dealing with the private sector, and how we can engage with the private sector to help them to address some of – some of their needs. So they wanted to be heard. And I did a lot of listening while I was there. I did less talking and more listening.

Ms. Paik: Sounds like the right approach many times for U.S. diplomats.

I'd like to go to Judith Cefkin, former U.S. ambassador to Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga, and Tuvalu, who asks: The success of U.S. partnership with the Pacific Island countries will depend largely on the U.S. ability to help address the region's top security threat, climate change, through climate finance and other forms of assistance. Yet, follow-through will depend on Congress appropriating the necessary funds. Do you see a path forward? And I'll add a little bit onto this. More broadly, in your role as ambassador to the U.N., is there a role for the U.N. maybe in making climate finance more accessible on a global level?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Well, first on the question related to our engagements with Congress. The fact that we got the COFA through I think sends a very strong message. And we continue to engage with Congress on other programs that we want to fund in the Pacific Islands. And I think they understand and appreciate the importance of us engaging with Pacific Island nations.

At the U.N., that's an easy one. We have the SDGs. We have the Summit of the Future. We're dealing with a whole host of issues that are very specific to the priorities of Pacific Island countries. And working with those countries at the U.N. to address those issues I think are key to us. Looking at how we deal with oceans, and the importance of addressing all of the SDGs – whether it's education, gender equity, dealing with infrastructure issues – all of these are issues that we address on a regular basis at the U.N.

And I will mention that we were very, very pleased last week that we got the resolution on AI through the U.N. through a consensus vote. Well, no vote – it was through consensus that we got this resolution through and the important thing in that resolution for many developing countries was breaking and bridging the digital divide and that is something that Pacific Island countries will definitely benefit from.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely. As you mentioned, there's such a tyranny of distance out there between them and that connectivity is so essential whether we're talking health or security or just being able to connect with the rest of the world.

You mentioned the U.S. being a Pacific country, which we definitely are. I think I've heard numbers of 2 million U.S. citizens actually live in the Pacific, whether it's in territories or Hawaii. Greg Brown from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute – ASPI – asks an interesting one here. Leaders in American Samoa and Guam have expressed desires to join the Pacific Island Forum, similar to participation of the New Zealand realm countries and the various French territories.

What is the administration's position on these American desires, PIF inclusivity via all the Pacific Islanders more generally, and the possibility of the U.S. as a Pacific country joining the PIF?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Well, I think right now, of course, we are a partner with the PIF. That being said, that all of the territories are partners with the PIF. They are engaging on a regular basis.

I stopped in Hawaii on the way to the forum and heard from the governor that he was very actively engaged, and I would encourage Samoa and other U.S. territories to be actively engaged and be part of what we are doing as the United States on dealing with Pacific Island countries.

I think that there is a commitment for all of these territories plus Hawaii and others to be directly engaged with what is happening in the Pacific Islands because they also have the same challenges and they should know that we are absolutely working to ensure that their concerns are being brought to the table as well.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely. Do you think there's ways that we as a nation could use our territories and the leaders in the Pacific better to engage with the Pacific or should we always be doing this from D.C.?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: No. No. No. I think absolutely they should be part of it. That was why I stopped in Hawaii to ensure that they were part of it. They have their own connections, their own relationships, their own voices.

So I absolutely support them having their own voices. They're part of us, so it's not just us going out there representing them but it's us joining with them to ensure that their issues are on the table as well. And, yes, it probably makes more sense when you send a delegation to have a Cabinet official do it and I think the Pacific Island nations appreciate it that a member of President Biden's Cabinet was there.

But in no way does my presence diminish the important voices that the Pacific Island territories of the U.S. and Hawaii would have in addressing these issues.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely.

Cleo Paskal asks a very similar question, wondering if you're engaging at all with the congressmen and women from our territories such as from American Samoa and Guam on some of these issues who may have broader expertise on the Pacific region.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: I have had engagements with them and in fact a group of them came to New York before I went off on the visit and I met with them. When I returned I met with some individual Congress members to share what I learned on that visit.

But also it's my belief that we have to always engage with members of Congress so on a regular basis I'm on the Hill. I answer their calls, I answer their letters, and I actually proactively engage with members from that region as well as in other regions of the world.

Ms. Paik: Admirable.

Based on what you're hearing from Pacific leaders and what you heard last year at the leaders summit – obviously, we've been ramping up the engagement, lots going on, as you said. Where are we still falling short, the U.S.? And where should we be doubling down our efforts?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: I think we have to double down our efforts in just having high-level – my visit can't be a one-off, so we've had other members go and we need to ensure that we have other Cabinet members go on a regular basis. As I said, it's distant and it's isolated. You have to make an effort to do it, and so encouraging other members of Cabinet to make that effort, to get out there to ensure that they see us on a regular basis. That's one area where we have to double down.

The second is – again, you mentioned Congress. It's engaging with Congress to ensure that we get the funding that we need. We have a request in now for funding for the Pacific Islands young leaders program. I want to see that funding come to fruition. I work with the Young African – it's called YALI, the Young African Leaders Initiative, and I saw the importance of that initiative in terms of bringing the voices of young people forward. And I want to see that happen in the Pacific Islands as well, that we can actually promote and mentor and encourage young voices to address the issues of today, as well as the issues of the future.

Third, on Peace Corps. As I mentioned, I traveled with the Peace Corps, the head of Peace Corps out there and there are a number of countries who have asked for Peace Corps to return, and having that happen is going to require funding for Peace Corps. I am a great fan of Peace Corps. I was never a Peace Corps volunteer. It's the biggest regret of my life that I was not a Peace Corps volunteer, but I think it's one of the greatest programs we have because they are on the front lines of American diplomacy in terms of getting young people out into communities to meet with communities and really developing those long-term relationships because they live in communities, so getting the funding to get Peace Corps.

And then, fourth, our diplomatic presence. We've opened two new diplomatic entities in Cook Islands and Niue. We need to get our diplomats out there and we need to look at where there are other places where we can have more diplomatic relations. We have to build those embassies so that they see that we're serious about that and get our presence.

And then, finally, I haven't spoken about Ambassador Reed, who is our special envoy to the Pacific Island Forum; she's amazing and we have to give her the resources so that her presence can be felt. And she's going to be on the front lines, really on the front lines of our diplomacy, and I think that sends a very strong signal of how important the relationships are with the Pacific Island countries, so again, giving her the resources that she needs to ensure that her presence is seen and respected.

Ms. Paik: I have certainly heard the same on Peace Corps. In fact, it's not uncommon to talk to a Pacific Island leader who they themselves were taught by a Peace Corps volunteer or had a family member taught by a Peace Corps volunteer.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: And what they said to me is Peace Corps volunteers never leave. So they go away, they go on to new lives, but they forget their Peace Corps families and they always come back; they always connect to their Peace Corps families. So again, getting the Peace Corps program ramped up and more robust will be, I think, a key part of answering the call of the Pacific Island countries.

Ms. Paik: Those people-to-people ties on the ground, although I'm not sure you should have any regrets. (Laughs.)

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: I do regret it. I always used to say, for you young people in the room, Peace Corps was always my plan B and I am lucky enough in my life that all my plan A's worked out. I wish Peace Corps had been my plan A so that I could have had that experience to add to the many things that I've done.

Ms. Paik: Aryan from the East-West Center asks if you could go into a little more detail about the Quad engagements that you mentioned. Could you comment on what exactly the Quad intends to do in the Pacific and what commitments you'd like to see from India in particular?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Look, we are – we're an informal group. We develop a lot of informal groups in New York, where we come together to talk about common issues of interest and how we can bring our unified voices together on particular issues; and this Quad group – as I mentioned, Australia, India and Japan.

And so one of the things we've discussed is how we can address, as a group, some of the issues that have – are the priorities that have been raised by Pacific Island countries. How can we bring our unified voices to supporting their efforts?

And, first and foremost, what we plan to do is start out with meeting with them as a group, which we have never done before, and hearing what their priorities are. So it's not about us going in, telling them what we're going to do. It's about us going in as a group, hearing what they need us to do. And that is now being planned for the coming weeks and months.

Ms. Paik: Fantastic.

I have a question from Callie Cho, Cook Islands Whale Research. And this may get a little into the technical nature of the question, but just appreciate whatever you can provide from your perspective at the U.N. She's curious how the U.S. is planning to advocate for sustainable management of marine resources globally and around the Pacific Island nations, such as with regard to deep-sea mining, commercial fishing, and tourism. And these are all, of course, issues of intense concern for the Pacific Islanders, who depend so much on their maritime resources.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Again, that was a subject that was raised. I met with the Cook Island prime minister, who showed me these little nodules that are – and, again, more technical than I've been; I think it's iron ore, but I'm not sure – and how important it is to be able to mine this resource without doing damage, ecological damage, to the sea. And they want, for example, companies, responsible American companies, or other companies who can come in, who will take into account their concerns about how this is managed. And they talk to me about how they can engage with those companies.

In the U.N., I think the important role there is to give them the technical – the technology resources to address their concerns so that when they are negotiating, for example, with companies or with other countries, they can negotiate from a position of knowledge and strength, and they don't go into these negotiations without having the foreknowledge to negotiate the best deals for their own countries.

Also raised with me was the issue of maritime fishing and the use of their fishing lanes by countries and particular concerns with China coming in and really taking fishing resources without their permission, and how we could address, for example, helping them to build up their coast guard. So I also had a member of the Coast Guard from the region on my delegation as well, who was able to engage with them on marine protection and how to protect their coast. These are also things that, again, the U.N. can bring to them in their discussions.

So this was a whole lot. And I will tell you, as I said, this was my first time engaging with Pacific Island countries. I came away from those discussions with a deep sense of a desire on their part for our active engagement and for

us to stay engaged with them. And that's the message I brought back to the president and to other members of the Cabinet, that this is a long-term relationship that we have and it's not a one-off. So hopefully, as – certainly from my standpoint it's not a one-off. And hopefully, over the course of the next couple of decades, with COFA, they will see that it's not a one-off.

Ms. Paik: Well, many of our measures that we're taking, such as COFA or opening new embassies, are much more in the realm of institutionalizing that engagement, right?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Yes.

Ms. Paik: And I think that's been a real focus, as long as we can follow through with some of them.

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Yes.

Ms. Paik: Similar to the last question, another question from Eileen Natuzzi from Georgetown asks about health, and health infrastructure. And, you know, this is something I've heard many times as well in the Pacific, is that the lack of health infrastructure and the lack of health security is really a national security issue for these countries. And it crosscuts climate change, it crosscuts food security, and so many other issues. Is there anything at the U.N. level – or are there any discussions at the U.N. on ways to help bolster the health infrastructure and the health security of these countries?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: You know, I think COVID, the pandemic, really highlighted and amplified the lack of capacity in so many countries to deal with health issues. And what we know is that this pandemic won't be our last. But this pandemic really I think – it encouraged and urged the world to come together to figure out how to support countries like those countries in the Pacific Islands, where there's not a very strong health care system. And part of our engagement, part of COFA, is to address the health infrastructure issues, and to help these countries prepare for the next pandemic.

So WHO has been actively engaged with these countries, as well as other countries around the world, to ensure that they do have the wherewithal to withstand the impact of a pandemic. So it's not just the health impact that they experienced. The economic impact was immense. The impact on their education system, immense. Their economies are still trying to come out of this. So we all have a lot of work to do. And it can't – again, it's not going to be done by the United States alone. It's going to take our partners in the region. And this is what the U.N. is for. So we have to work together in the U.N. as well, to address these issues.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely. And for these – many of these countries, COVID as a health issue actually was less of a problem than the –

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Yeah, than the economic –

Ms. Paik: – the economic issue, with tourism being such a major part of their economies.

Another question from Carlo Capua at Sister Cities International – and I'm not sure you've – you're that familiar with Sister Cities, Ambassador. But this is a new initiative that was started to connect cities in the U.S. with cities across the Pacific Islands. But more generally, he asks: How have you seen these people – these types of people-to-people partnerships between countries impact global peace and security?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: You know, it's people-to-people relationships that really make a difference. We, diplomats, can do everything in our toolkit, but ultimately it is about people. And these city peer relationships, I think, are truly important. I saw the city-to-city relationships in Africa and what that meant to countries in Africa and cities in the – in the United States, how it developed those people-to-people relationships. And I think it's important that we see those relationships develop in the Pacific Islands. I was not aware of this particular program, but I'm delighted to hear that we do have the city-to-city relationships.

Ms. Paik: And it's just getting going. I'm only aware because I – (laughs) – I was in when we got it started. I think we have time for one more.

Alan Tidwell from Georgetown University also asks: What can the U.S. do, via the U.N., to advocate for change in development funding? And noting that, again, back to the idea of accessing finance – which is such a critical problem for so many of the Pacific Island countries. And they often voice that the bureaucracy of multilateral banks or other international financing is just complicated for smaller countries to deal with. So what can the U.S. do to support greater access to development funds, both through UNDP or through the various multilateral development banks?

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Well, certainly in New York, through UNDP, UNICEF, other agencies, we're on those boards. We're on the board of UNDP. We're on the board of UNICEF. We really – and World Food Programme. So we do have a say in how those organizations address issues that developing countries bring to the table. And our voice is clearly a voice that is very powerful because we, in almost all cases, are the largest donors to these organizations – certainly to the humanitarian ones, but I think even at UNDP. So we can speak for and

promote the interests of developing countries in a way that I think is important. And that's something that I know that we do on a regular basis, and that's certainly the case with the international financial institutes as well.

We do think there is room for and time for the reform of the IFIs. It's not going to happen in New York; it's going to happen through the Bretton Woods process and how we address what we do with those institutions in the future. And it also means addressing the impact that China has through its own financing, which has, in the past and I think even I can say certainly even now, has put these countries into a debt trap. And we have to figure out how to help them get out of that debt trap, but also how to address more just reliable funding and easy-to-access funding.

I think one country I spoke to, they were like, we don't have the people to fill out all these forms and to answer all the questions that come in from the IFIs, so we can't take advantage of some of this development funding because we don't have the people resources to do it. So we can help on that – from that standpoint as well, you know, helping to build the capacity that they have on the ground, to add to that capacity by giving them the people resources to help them access this funding in a more equitable way.

Ms. Paik: Absolutely. Just the capacity building –

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Yeah.

Ms. Paik: – can be so intently important.

Well, thank you, Ambassador, for this extremely rich conversation today, and thank you for joining us – I know you have a very busy schedule – (laughs) – for fitting us in. If I could ask everyone to join me in a round of applause. (Applause.)

Amb. Thomas-Greenfield: Thank you. (Applause.)

(END.)