TRANSCRIPT

Event
“Building a Blue Pacific Agenda for the Twenty-First Century”

DATE
Thursday, June 23, 2022 at 3:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING
Kurt Campbell
Deputy Assistant to the President and Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs, National Security Council

Satyendra Prasad
Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations

Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Pa’olelei Luteru
Permanent Representative of Samoa to the United Nations

Gerald M. Zackios
Ambassador of the Republic of the Marshall Islands to the United States of America

Monica P. Medina
Assistant Secretary for Oceans and International Environment and Scientific Affairs, Department of State

CSIS EXPERTS
Charles Edel
Australia Chair and Senior Advisor, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com
We’re on. Good afternoon. I’m Charles Edel. I’m the Australia Chair and senior adviser here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. And I’d like to welcome those of you who are attending in person – this is very exciting for us – but also to all of those of you who are here online today as we discuss “Building a Blue Pacific Agenda for the Twenty-First Century.”

Now, I’d like to welcome not only our general audience, but also the distinguished delegation of Pacific heads of mission who we have here today: Ambassador Arthur Sinodinos, Ambassador Rosemary Banks, and also the terrific turnout that we have from the diplomatic community. I’d also like to extend a special thank you to the embassies of both Australia and New Zealand for partnering with us on today’s event.

Now, here in Washington we’re in the midst of remembering something we should have known all along, the importance of the Pacific. This is true for reasons that are obvious – working together to address climate change, promoting economic development in the region, protecting the Pacific Ocean and its natural environment, and ensuring peace and stability in the region – and that’s also because of external reasons that we’re facing today – the increased geopolitical and geoeconomic competition in the Pacific, and the potential that has to disrupt peace, security, stability, and prosperity.

Now, a key to dealing with both of those is to be a good partner to the Pacific island community. On that front, there’s been a flurry of activity coming out of the White House to strengthen U.S. ties in this critical region, including last month’s launch of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement, and working closely with Pacific Island countries to monitor and respond to and mitigate the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But partnership also means working with and listening to our partners and, hence, the reason for today’s session discussing how we can build a Pacific – a Blue Pacific agenda for the 21st century.

Now, we have a terrific group of distinguished guests here today to discuss what this might mean but also to think with us creatively and ambitiously about what building an enduring partnership in the Pacific might begin to look like.

We’re honored to have Dr. Kurt Campbell from the White House here to kick things off for us with some opening remarks. Dr. Campbell currently serves as deputy assistant to the president and special coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs on the National Security Council. He has had a remarkably distinguished career, serving as assistant secretary of state for East Asia and Pacific affairs, where he is widely regarded as the key architect to the pivot to Asia.
Dr. Campbell previously served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific, director on the National Security Council, deputy special counsel to the president, White House fellow at the Department of Treasury, and an officer in the U.S. Naval Reserves.

He has been recognized for his service by receiving Georgetown University’s Asia Service Award, the State Department’s Honor Award, the Republic of Korea’s Medal for Service, and the Department of Defense medals for distinguished public service and outstanding public service.

And he is also a knight, having been recognized as an honorary Officer of the Order of Australia and as an honorary Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. Dr. Campbell is a friend to CSIS, having formerly served here as senior vice president, director of the International Security Program, and Henry Kissinger Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

It’s a terrific honor to have him here today, and now I’d like to turn the podium over to him to make some opening remarks before we get down to the business of our discussion. (Applause.)

Kurt Campbell:

Thank you, Charles. That was a really gracious and warm introduction. I really appreciate it, and it’s great to be back at CSIS. It’s great to see so many friends in the audience, not only friends and supporters of CSIS but strong supporters of our work together in the Indo-Pacific.

I want to commend Australia, first of all, for making sure that the Australia chair is up and running under such terrific leadership under Charles. It’s an important – it was a missing piece in some of the work that CSIS was doing, and terrific that you’ve launched it with such a tremendous sense of purpose, and I think this initiative – this discussion today really helps us understand the role that Australia and New Zealand and other countries are playing in the Pacific.

I think we all recognize that the challenges that we’re facing in the region are just dramatic. They, really, transcend any effort of any individual country, and I think one of our abiding beliefs and purposes is the idea that we will need to work together as we go forward, and that’s one of the reasons why we’re meeting here today.

I also want to welcome all my ambassador friends, who are going to be participating in the panel, from Fiji, Samoa, and the Marshall Islands, and also my good friend, Monica Medina, who has led the Office of Oceans and is driving force behind the progress that we’re making on the Tuna Treaty and a variety of other innovative initiatives associated with keeping the oceans in the Pacific pristine and healthy.
So just real quickly about me, so I was appointed to this position. It’s a new position in the White House – the Indo-Pacific coordinator. I was there on the first day of the administration. I think the purpose of it is to help to coordinate all the various elements of the U.S. government in a common purpose to recognize the strategic implications of the Indo-Pacific in the 21st century.

I think that challenge is, certainly, clear in many of the big efforts that we’ve undertaken with respect to Asia per se, but it is also very clear in the Pacific where we have so many disparate agencies that have a piece of this critical endeavor in the Pacific. It’s not just the foreign policy bodies. It is also the Department of the Interior. It is elements of the Coast Guard. The idea is to help forge a whole-of-government approach with respect to our efforts to marshal not only existing resources but new resources as we go forward.

I think it would be fair to say we’ve tried to hit the ground running since we arrived in office, tried to make clear about the need for domestic investments in key areas, both bipartisanship generally but also arenas associated with technology, whether that’s 5G or quantum or elements associated with semiconductors. We’ve also worked to try to assemble and work together with a group of nations, like-minded nations, on the common challenges that we’re facing in the Indo-Pacific, and here, I must say I’ve been most gratified at our ability to work closely not just with our traditional partners in the Indo-Pacific, but new partners, and particularly partners in Europe. I’ve worked on diplomacy in Europe for decades. In the past, some of that diplomacy was halting, uncertain on both sides. What we have seen to date is a remarkable transformation of that discussion. We are working together. We see – we compare notes, we combine our efforts, we are focused as never before on common pursuits in the Indo-Pacific.

But with respect to the Pacific per se, I think I would note a number of things just to keep in mind. I agree with Charles; we need to step up our game substantially, but we also believe that we have taken some initial steps. President Biden was the first leader in the United States, sitting president, to address the Pacific Island Forum last year. Secretary Blinken made an important trip to the islands, launched our Indo-Pacific strategy in Fiji. Charles talked about Ambassador Yun. He’s a remarkable negotiator. We have asked Joe to play a critical role to negotiate the next generation of compacts with Palau and others. That’s a central feature of our commitment, our longstanding commitment to essential partners in the Pacific. We’ve welcomed Fiji, the first time ever, as an Indo-Pacific Economic Framework partner, and we’ve tried to also make clear that new and emerging frameworks and institutions like the Quad have relevance for the Indo-Pacific and for the Pacific per se. So when Prime Minister Kishida hosted us in Japan last month, one of our most important initiatives was launching a
major effort on maritime domain awareness, the idea being that new
technologies will allow us to prosecute and engage on issues like illegal
fishing, not just in parts of Southeast Asia or in the Indian Ocean but the vast
reaches of the Pacific as well.

So, look, I don’t think I need to tell this group the importance that we as a
nation see the Pacific. We have a long coastline, we have a state in the Pacific,
and we have territories in the Pacific. We have long-standing historical and
moral ties. My father served in the Pacific during the Second World War. We
need to remind ourselves of that constantly, but that is not enough. This is
not simply about past commitments. This is also about a future that we think
is critical, a future that we embark upon with our Pacific partners. We do not
take these bonds for granted, and we believe, in many respects, the Pacific is
an ocean continent. It’s a blue Pacific continent in which we all have a stake
in its health.

I’d like to lay out just quickly – I know you’re going to be discussing today
what are the best approaches for how to think about a purposeful
engagement in the Pacific. I’d like to say that we have five overarching efforts
underway, and I’d like to just go through those quickly.

First, uphold and increase existing American commitments and new ones in
the Pacific.

Number two, strongly support Pacific regionalism, particularly through
existing institutions like the Pacific Island(s) Forum.

Number three, better coordinate with allies and partners. I think there have
been coordination efforts in the past. We believe that those can be
intensified, that we can learn best practices, that we can cooperate together
in ways to identify gaps where more work needs to be done, more resources
can be applied.

We also believe fundamentally this is about delivering public goods, to meet
Pacific partners where they live, to do what’s necessary, what they care
about, whether it’s illegal fishing or climate change or recovering from
COVID.

And lastly, what we also think is important is protecting sovereignty.
Sovereignty is central in terms of how we see the Pacific overall. Any
initiative that compromises or calls into question that sovereignty I think we
would have concerns with.
So the first element of this approach is the United States must not only fulfill
its existing commitments to the Pacific, but set up our game much further.
What are – what are some of those existing commitments, just so we’re
clear? So we have some unique relationships with the freely associated
states – Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. And we engage these countries through what is called the Compacts of Free Association. Joe Yun’s historic appointment as special presidential envoy by President Biden is an indication that we are devoted to finding and applying the necessary resources to completely overhauling these approaches and bringing them up-to-date with respect to new challenges across the board, and ensure that these relationships continue into the future.

Monica will talk to you later today about the Tuna Treaty. Keeping fisheries healthy and thriving is a critical national interest of the United States. We seek to do it through a number of means. The Tuna Treaty is among the most important. She will also talk to you about some innovative new approaches that we are considering as well. We need to continue to address war legacies, remnants of a time, again, when my father served in the Pacific. They still affect the people of the Pacific today. Hardly a week or a month goes by when some unsuspecting farmer or someone, children playing, stumble across unexploded ordnance on island nations, an often with terrible consequences. We’ve had existing programs to address these issues. We need to do more. And we will do more as we go forward.

I think it is also the case that our efforts in the Pacific require more intensive attention and diplomacy. That means expanding engagement of our senior officials, making sure that government agencies that in the past had not been as active reengage again. We need more diplomatic facilities across the Pacific. The secretary has indicated that we’re taking the initial steps. We will do more. I believe that consequential travel in which key components of the U.S. government deploy not just to the dominant islands but sometimes the islands that receive lesser attention, that will be an important part of our engagement going forward. And I think you will see more Cabinet-level and more senior officials going to the Pacific as we go forward. So, again, direct engagement, recognizing that nothing replaces really diplomatic boots on the ground. And we recognize that in all our endeavors that this is the first element of our national strategy. And I think you’ll see more of this as we go.

So in addition, it’s not just traditional diplomats. Our Peace Corps, our AID officers. We want very much to step up our AID presence in the Pacific. I think we recognize that for our efforts to be effective in the Pacific, we’re going to have to have some hubs of engagement. We believe Fiji will be one of those. We’ll work closely with the government there as we go forward. Second, supporting regionalism in Pacific Island form. Again, I’ve already indicated that we believe that the most important thing that the United States can do in terms of regionalism is supporting the Pacific Island Forum and other associated institutions that are up and running.

It’s important to establish – to support the established institutions, not create new ones at this time. And so the fact that the PIF has taken the
necessary steps in the previous weeks and months to be able to move forward, we commend that, we support that. We want to take the steps to provide directly resources to support the PIF. We believe a strong, dynamic, purposeful, regional organization will serve the best interest of the Pacific people, will help together deal with common challenges. And we intend to work closely with that institution as we go forward.

Pacific regionalism is critical. And I think we believe that in many respects our approach to ASEAN, ASEAN centrality, working with the ASEAN Regional Forum, the secretariat in Jakarta has been a key approach for our efforts in Southeast Asia, and we intend to do the same with respect to the Pacific. So watch this space. More engagement in Suva as we go forward.

Third, we want to deepen our coordination with likeminded partners and allies. I think what we have seen of late is a substantial step up of political and diplomatic engagement, particularly from Australia and New Zealand in recent weeks and months. I want to commend that. We’ve also seen it from our Japanese colleagues and friends. I think what we have seen is that there are a number of countries that have longstanding interests in the Pacific and there are also countries that want to do more with respect to the Pacific. I think what we would like to do in an unofficial and appropriate way is engage with those countries, work with them, create a partnership, so to speak, in which we, together, can identify the key areas that require more resources, that require coordination and engagement.

I do want to just underscore our mantra will be nothing in the Pacific without the Pacific. We are not going to be taking decisions or engagements without the closest possible engagement with Pacific partners. We will do this in the most open, transparent manner. And our focus is, again, going to be on dealing with the issues where the Pacific islanders live, trying to address those key issues from COVID to recovery, enhanced tourism, trade, across the board that we believe will be animating in the 21st century.

We often talk about the challenges, the tyranny of distance with respect to the Pacific, and I think we as a group of countries understand the challenges that are involved. But it is also the case, because they are relatively small populations, even small initiatives can have enormous consequence. And so our determination is to build those programs effectively to build on the good and strong experience of countries like Australia, like New Zealand, like Japan, and others – France, Great Britain, hopefully other countries – that have an interest in working more closely in the Pacific, and basically apply those capabilities in a way that will make a difference on the ground and in the surrounding oceans.

I will also say that one of the things that we’ve seen in a very short period of time is a large number of new countries that are talking about diplomatic
presence and engagement in the Pacific. Those countries extend from South Korea to Germany to Canada, all of whom understand the importance of the Pacific. And they, too, want to step up their game, and we look forward to working with them.

So I think there is a general recognition that this is a region of not only moral responsibility and huge challenges – environmental and the like – but it’s of strategic importance as well. And I think it will be important for us to demonstrate that as we go forward.

Tomorrow, we will have a meeting of what we call the partners of the Blue Pacific. This is designed to support the vision statement of the Pacific Island(s) Forum how outside and existing countries – New Zealand is of the Pacific, Australia is of the Pacific; we can’t really get away with saying we’re of the Pacific, but we kind of are, but certainly we are supporters of the Pacific – how countries can support that common vision, how we can ensure that our efforts are designed to build on the blueprint that they have laid out for how they want to see their region develop over time.

Ultimately, friends, we think for this effort to be effective – both the domestic step up in what we want to do, with respect to allies and partners – is to, basically, deliver public goods. And that means across the board in every arena from climate to COVID to issues associated with illegal fishing – across the board. And so we will try to put in place efforts that will allow us to both share information to make clear that we’re coordinating some of our engagement, but also clear metrics of measurement, of how are we doing, what have we made a difference on, are we following through. I think it’d be fair to say we’ve had substantial consultations with Pacific Island partners to date. Most of what we’ve heard is encouraging and supportive.

But these are nations that have heard promises before and have heard promises from the United States and other countries. They need to see it. They need to see it. But it is a tribute to them that they are giving us a chance, giving us a chance to show that we understand the stakes and we appreciate what’s possible.

And so our intention is to move quickly, both individually as the United States but also work in partnership with other countries as we go forward.

So let me just say that in the last several weeks and months we are involved in a substantial effort to step up our game in the Pacific. We are working with allies and partners. We’re involved in deep consultation. There will be substantial travel.

I do want to just say that this, we believe, is a time of innovation, a time of listening. One of the hardest things for the United States is to be humble and
to recognize that we have a lot to learn. This is one of those circumstances. This is one of these times.

As I was coming up in the elevator with Charles, I made clear that very much want the good offices of CSIS to convene us and others as we think about what have we learned in the past, where can we innovate, what can we do better and differently, and to create and forge these public-private partnerships not only with key people in academia and across various countries but with the business community, international organizations.

For us to be effective, we have to create this fusion of engagement. I do want to thank – I was so thrilled to see Charles in this capacity. We’ve really hit the ground running. I think we’ll have more to report tomorrow on what our goals for the partners of the Blue Pacific are.

I do want to thank – we’ve had a series of consultations with people that you all are about to hear from on your panel. They’ve been very direct with us, and they’re – if I would just summarize in a moment what they’ve told us to date is show us. Show us. And that’s what we intend to do.

So, Charles, I really appreciate this opportunity. We’ve got a very ambitious agenda ahead. I have rarely worked with a group of countries more open, more prepared, and more volunteering of both effort and ingenuity, and that is very hopeful and something that we want to build on.

So thank you for this opportunity. I appreciate it. (Applause.)

Dr. Edel:

All right. You can tell that one of the challenges we have is if we label every seat ambassador it gets a little confusing up here.

What we’re going to do for the rest of our time together is engage in a conversation, really, to hear from some of the principal leaders helping to shape our thinking here in Washington about what this partnership might begin to look like.

To give you a sense of where we’re going for your time here I’m going to introduce everyone who’s here on the panel. We’ll have some opening fairly broad questions, and I’ll toss a couple more their way. And then, please, if you have questions we’ll get to them. We have microphones here.

But those of you who are listening online, too, if you go to the Web page there is a place for you to ask your question. I’ll be really rude. I’m going to take out my phone. It’s not because I’m doing anything other than looking at the questions that you’re asking that I can present to the panelists here. So without further to-do, let me, please, introduce our very distinguished panel.
Ambassador Satyendra Prasad from the Permanent – he has been the Permanent Representative of Fiji to the United Nations since 2018. From 2016 until his last appointment, Ambassador Prasad was the CEO of the Papua New Guinea Governance Facility. Before that, he served as a senior governance advisor at the World Bank, governance advisor at the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development, and commissioner of Fiji’s public service commission. Ambassador Prasad holds a bachelor’s degree from the University of the South Pacific, a master’s degree in sociology from the University of New Brunswick in Canada, and a Ph.D. in the same field from Warwick University in the United Kingdom. It’s a pleasure having you here.

Ambassador Gerald Zackios has been the ambassador for the Republic of the Marshall Islands to the United States since 2016. Prior to his latest appointment, Ambassador Zackios was the regional director for the Pacific Community North Pacific Regional Offices in the Federated States of Micronesia. He also served as vice chairman of the Joint Economic Management and Financial Accountability Committee, and vice chairman of the Trust Fund Committee. Ambassador Zackios completed his bachelor’s in law degree at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby and has a master’s degree in international maritime law from the International Maritime Law Institute in Malta. Welcome and thank you.

Appointed last year, Ambassador Pa’olelei Luteru is the permanent representative of Samoa to the United Nations. Prior to his latest appointment, Ambassador Luteru was ambassador to Belgium and the EU, and was accredited across multiple European countries as well. He was concurrently Samoa’s permanent representative and delegate to the Food and Agricultural Organization and the United Nation’s Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. Ambassador Luteru received a doctorate of philosophy degree in development economics, strategic planning, management, and aid policies from Flinders University in Australia, a master’s of educational administration from the University of New England, and a bachelor’s of science degree in mathematics, economics, and operational research from the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

Assistant Secretary Monica Medina is – was confirmed as assistant secretary for oceans and international environmental and scientific affairs on September 28th, 2021. Previously, Assistant Secretary Medina was an adjunct professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. She was also a senior associate on the Stephenson Ocean Security Project here at CSIS, and co-founder and publisher of Our Daily Planet, an e-newsletter on conservation and the environment. A former principal deputy undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere, she served as general counsel of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and special assistant to the secretary of defense. Assistant Secretary Medina
has a bachelor’s degree from Georgetown University and a J.D. from Columbia Law School.

Thank you all very much for coming here. What I’d like to do is just start with a fairly open-ended question to each of our participants. We’re going to go straight down the line. And I’d like to get your thoughts about the state of Pacific regionalism, recent developments in the PIF, and how the U.S. and other like-minded countries can help reinforce that regionalism. And specifically, where you see the U.S. making its most important contribution.

Ambassador Prasad, would you please start us off?

Ambassador Satyendra Prasad: Thank you. Thank you very much and good afternoon to everyone who’s turned up. And thank you to Mr. Campbell for a fantastic, I think, overview of U.S. perspective on the Pacific. Let me begin with a couple of framing remarks about the blue Pacific. Often thought about in small terms, in smallness and small island states. And he did say a remark about the tyranny of distance. But you could flip that and think about it differently. It is a pretty large part of the planet. American and small Pacific-island states, waters put together we occupy something close to 30 percent of the surface of the planet. And that makes it pretty large.

And on tyranny of distance, on that point I agree wholly with Mr. Campbell. There is a tyranny of distance. And U.S. is – Washington is pretty far away from the center of the world – (laughter) – which I believe is in Kiribati, a country in the center of the Pacific. The only country with all four poles meet in Kiribati waters. And but there is a tyranny of distance. But we don’t have to travel very far to meet U.S. From Fuji we probably travel 2,000 miles to meet U.S. in the North Pacific. In Kiribati, Matthew and Hunter Islands (?), 2,000 miles east in Guam but 1,500 miles in American Samoa. So America is really part of the Blue Pacific. It is a shared story.

So it is pretty large. And to get our minds around how large Blue Pacific is, if you dug a hole in any part of the Pacific you’ll probably still come out in the Pacific. (Laughter.) And so we are talking about a very substantial part of our shared planet.

And we have two – three obligations, I believe.

First is that the prosperity of U.S., the prosperity of good part of the world, and certainly the prosperity of us small island states depends on the peace and stability and good health of this Blue Pacific. Sixty, 70 percent of everything you probably consumed and probably 50 percent of what you are wearing today has traveled the Blue Pacific to reach you, and probably the mobile phone that you are carrying or the shoe that you are wearing has traveled the Blue Pacific to reach you. And so that is how immediate and close the Blue Pacific is, and that is how keeping this as a zone of stability
and peace and secure is important for the prosperity of U.S., prosperity of most of Asia, and certainly for the prosperity of the small islands of the Pacific.

Second is that, why are we so worried about peace and security issues in the small island states? We are very worried about peace and security issues because our planet is off-balance, and the impact of the planet being off-balance is felt most immediately, most directly, and in the most aggravated way on small island states. And I’m talking about climate catastrophes. All the islands of the Pacific experience climate catastrophes more frequently, more intensely, but that’s a story you have also seen in California, in Florida, and elsewhere. The difference is that if you had a catastrophe such as Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu a few years back – and the U.S. is a $20 trillion economy, I believe – a single event would have wiped out close to 16 trillion (dollars) of U.S. economy if you transpose that same devastation on the U.S. economy. And if you picked up example from Solomon Islands of two major cyclones two years ago, these two cyclones – super cyclones – in the same year would have wiped out 9 trillion (dollars) of the U.S.’s 20 trillion (dollar) economy in a single day.

And this is the story that is repeated over and over and over again across the Blue Pacific. And this, we say, is – if we continue on this path, then these are states that will over time be unable to respond, that will unable to – be able to recover. I mean, they will become highly unstable states, those that are. And many of our states in the Pacific, because of associated sea-level rise, stand to lose lots – whole countries in some cases, and in many other countries large parts of their economy.

Even it – and so we choose to work with the world to understand this. And some years back in Paris, those of you who may have been involved in the climate discussions, there was a lot of kerfuffle about whether there should be 2 percent – two degrees Celsius should be the ceiling we should aspire for for global warming, or should it be 1.5 degrees Celsius? The Pacific said it should be 1.5 Celsius. The global consensus was at two degrees Celsius. We said 1.5 (degrees), even that in a spirit of compromise, because even at 1.5 (degrees) between 30 to 80 percent of the existing land economies of the – of the Pacific are wiped out, involving large relocations of people, whole agricultural and food systems no longer viable, and the economic and social decline that sets in with that.

So these are grave challenges. We are so fascinated by America’s leadership in the Pacific. We so welcome America having a deep understanding of the scale of the – of the crisis that the island states are facing. Are facing, and we are saying to America and to all our friends that this is – yes, it is personal to Pacific, it hits us first, but this is also something that is shared by the whole of humanity.
We have stewardship over the Blue Pacific. Every third breath that you all take comes from the Pacific, Blue Pacific. If you took the third breath out because of deoxygenation and the health of the ocean declining, will be one gasp short every day. And we have stewardship. This has been given to us to keep in good care for the rest of humanity. It’s a service that we are providing, as well as a very firm commitment that keep the Blue Pacific open and healthy, and we will also feed a good part of the world. Thank you very much.

Dr. Edel:

Thank you very much, Ambassador.

Ambassador Zackios, I was hoping that you might give us a perspective from Marshall Islands how you think about and conceptualize some of the challenges here.

Ambassador Gerald M. Zackios:

Thank you very much, Charles.

And good afternoon, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen. I have a prepared statement so I will be looking at it this afternoon.

First let me thank CSIS and the embassies of New Zealand and Australia for the invitation to join this important panel together with my esteemed colleagues Ambassador Prasad, Ambassador Luteru, and Assistant Secretary Medina. I wish to thank Coordinator Campbell for his opening remarks today. They touch on much of what I will be talking to and I know that Assistant Secretary Medina will also be touching on some of what I said.

In this connection, I would like to highlight the following points and thoughts for your consideration.

I will start by stating that the Pacific is a dynamic region and our regional institutions and frameworks need to remain responsive. Our region’s strength and in our unique unity and tradition of high-level dialogue, unscripted and honest, informal discussion to resolve and bridge across differences. While the Freely Associated States in Micronesia have a direct and special and unique relationship with the United States, this isn’t at the expense of the need to better focus wider U.S. relationships with the Pacific Island nations, and indeed, both aspects of this issue need to be sharpened. Division, domestically and externally, shouldn’t become a weakness for others to exploit. Island leaders know this. At the same time, we lack a fully effective platform to address intense geopolitical security risks. There are different orientations and views within the Pacific. And if the region is to have an effective voice and maintain it loudly, it must be island-driven, responsive to local community priorities or values, including resource
control and step change in reducing fragility. Resilient and thriving Pacific Island nations will only benefit freedom in the wider Indo-Pacific as a whole.

I also want to directly address our challenges. In all honesty, we aren’t the European Union, and we lack the level of centralized policy integration. While well-intentioned, the outputs of our regional settings might be better understood as a good framing towards advanced common goals. But regional bureaucracy shouldn’t be misunderstood as a replacement or substitute for direct in-country interventions which address key indicators in our overall fragility.

We appreciate very much and value Australia and New Zealand as close partners and they have long served as a vital bridge between the Pacific Islands and the wider circle of allies. But discussions between our partners and Australia and New Zealand about the islands cannot be mistaken for a necessary and direct discussion with the island nations. Time, effort, and resources are needed to understand each one of us individually before really understanding how we work as a region. There aren’t any shortcuts here, I must say.

I want to underscore the importance of direct island-perspective instead of assumptions. Islands have too often been absent, particularly in security discussions, where many of us lack our own full capacity and counterparts. But we do have perspectives on our own security. Islands may share much in common with other partners, but there are naturally different priorities. We are small islands, not superpowers. While we may also have concerns about the balance of power or navigation channels, we might more closely value strengthening our democracy’s values and reducing fragility because financially dependent nations can be driven to desperate measures.

Many Pacific island countries have taken strong votes and stands against Russia’s aggression against Ukraine because we are aware that this type of unchecked aggression has implications in our region and years from now we may be the ones in need of exactly these types of cross-regional coalitions.

I also suggest we have to dispel the myth that climate change is more our priority and somehow not security, as perceived by some to mean Western priorities and values – or values. Our resilience should be our security priority as a crosscutting issue. If we imagine a Pacific future beset by social tension and political conflict at the local, regional, and global levels, and instability within our nations, then climate adaptation and building resilience to rising seas will be almost impossible.

I can also offer a few additional takeaways on the issue of fisheries and oceans, as I’ve said earlier.
First, the international security architecture needs to get an immediate grasp on the full range of fishery policy in the Pacific. That might not sound exciting to some of you or it might sound impossible – impossibly obscure. Unlike many other nations, fisheries has an outsized presence in the Pacific. And even though as island nations we have a direct role in managing our own resources, the industry is dominated by foreign vessels of global superpowers. We are home to between half or one-third of the world’s commercial tuna. And as stocks elsewhere have collapsed, fishing pressure in our region has increased. And in our narrow economies, foreign fishing effort often is closely related to our protection.

Pacific islands have changed the game. We award fishing access to higher bidders and are doing so on our terms, a race to the top and not a race to the bottom. But for some of our closest partners, we fear that your fisheries and security interests may deserve closer communication.

The U.S. Multilateral Fisheries Tuna Treaty gives the unparallel – gives the U.S. unparallel and exclusive maritime access to our entire collective EEZs. No other nation has this. For decades, this fisheries treaty has also served as a pillar of U.S. engagement and aid assistance to the island region. This is welcome. In my view, it holds invaluable security advantages and can be a springboard for a modern and regional approach. We will have some hard work to do, but I suggest that security interests should provide a compelling incentive.

On a related note, increased engagement needed by the U.S. on the ground and in local communities to address World War II legacy, and includes pollution from sunken vessels and others, as have been discussed, and a firm regional commitment is needed at scale to avoid impending ecological disaster. We welcome the renewed effort and technology assistance to improve capacity for illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing. Estimates include that as much as a third of our tuna is stolen from us. But mere surveillance isn’t nearly enough. We have long expressed our own island development aspirations. We want to transition away from passive economic dependence and grow our economies within our national – with our nationals having a direct role in sustainable fishing and processing our own resources. This can certainly reduce our fragility as a region.

I will close by addressing your earlier question. I’ll speak to it a little bit, about present regional events. Regional institutional mechanisms evolved and should remain responsive to emerging challenges and priorities, as I’ve said earlier, of all its members in a fair and equitable manner, including for our smallest and most remote members in Micronesia. We recall the Mekreos Communique concluded in Palau, where the Micronesian president summit leaders firmly believed that the solidarity and integrity of the Pacific Islands Forum is enhanced by equitable representation through subregional
rotation of the secretary-general position, and related key reforms as an expression of Pacific unity.

I am very pleased to see that Micronesian leaders met June 7th in Fiji as part of the Pacific Dialogue Mechanism with the prime minister of Fiji, prime minister of the Cook Islands, and prime minister of Samoa to discuss and agree on a reform package for civil agreement, which is now being considered by the wider Pacific Island forum membership for endorsement by the end of this month. This is a step in the right direction, but we have work to do. So I applaud this – I applaud this momentum.

Finally, I’d like to thank again Coordinator Campbell for the appointment of Special Presidential Envoy Yun, as he has said. As we again revisit these discussions, which had a hiatus of about 15 months, we really look forward to continuing to build and negotiate on the strength of the special and unique partnership between the FAS and the United States. I thank you.

Dr. Edel: Well, thank you, Ambassador Zackios, for such a fulsome statement of how you see the region, and diving down on both the Tuna Treaty but also where we might go on regionalism after some hiccups but now the path seems to be moving forward.

Ambassador Luteru, over to you. Would really like to hear how Samoa is thinking about the region, how it’s thinking of engagement with other partners, how you view recent developments.

Ambassador Fatumanava-o-Upolu III Pa’olelei Luteru: It’s not much really to say after those – my colleagues have spoken. They have covered the geography, the geopolitical. But I do want to perhaps provide some additional comments. The title of this is, of course, “Building a Blue Pacific Agenda.” And I think in doing that, I believe, and Samoa believes, that the partners that will be involved needs to come together. They need to listen to each other. And then decide on the best way forward. And I think for us in the Pacific, the real challenge really is how we can maximize the overlap between the aspiration of Pacific Island countries, as stated in our priorities – the leaders’ priority, and of course the aspiration of our communities. But also, in the context of the U.S., their expectation in terms of this particular relationship.

And I think the relationship is not something new. I think from time, perhaps over the last recent period, our relationship and relations have been under-emphasized. We’re glad to see that the U.S. have committed to elevating its engagement and, you know, support for the region. And I think when you look across the range of challenges that we face, and you ask what are the challenges that my country face, well, the short answer to that is basically those that are faced by the region as a whole. We share those challenges, and
we start with climate change. I think some colleagues have referred to the – 1.5 (degrees) as our red line and, of course, we all agreed with that.

But one of the points that, I think, is extremely important is that the action also that we can do in terms of elevating and making our NDCs more ambitious is also dependent on others. So if you look at the situation where global gas emission at the moment, you know, T-20, I think it is, are responsible for quite a substantial part of that, and I think it’s important that we’ll be frank about this and say that, you know, we need to look to them to provide the leadership because any change in terms of their emission will make a huge impact globally, and the contribution to that 1.5 (degrees).

So it’s extremely important. As part of that equation, we also need to look at adaptation and I think – we hope that the U.S. will see the need to support the COP-27 as, perhaps, an adaptation COP because it’s extremely important in terms of finance.

I think we’re looking, really, at the need of about 7 billion (dollars), 70 billion (dollars) annually for adaptation needs. So that’s, for us, is important. I’m just highlighting a few of these.

Ocean is us in the Pacific. We’re a large ocean state. But the challenge we face also with ocean is something that, I think, we all need to face together. Some of these we can make contribution to but others we can’t because it needs a global approach.

Let’s take a look at pollution, for example. You know, it’s a global problem. What are the response? How do we deal with that? Well, it also involves not only governments but also the private sector. They also have a role to play in this context.

So I think, you know, your reference early on, or is it Mr. Campbell’s reference, to an all of government approach, it’s an important one as well. We need to look at this in an integrated fashion. We can’t just work in silos.

Our concern in terms of ocean also is the sea level rise. I think you – we’ve heard this in the context of our low atoll islands. It’s a real situation at the moment. It’s not an academic discourse for our Pacific Island countries. It’s a reality, and some of these they face every day.

So that, of course, also touch on the issue of biodiversity, which is also something that we need the U.S. to assist with. We’re finalizing the negotiation, hopefully, in August. We need to finish this negotiation. It’s been dragging on.

But in our assessment of the 17 sort of main areas of divergence, we need the support of the U.S. in terms of five of those at the moment and these are
the sort of things that, I think, it's important. We're talking about ecosystems, of biodiversity. Extremely important. Also, not only for the Pacific but for everyone. So that's the ocean.

In terms of – you spoke about economic development. That's central to us, but, perhaps, in the context of COVID – post-COVID recovery, and I think the U.S. is a(n) economic superpower in this. I think we need to work together in terms of ideas and how we, a small island state, can recover from this.

And one of the ways that I firmly believe that the U.S. can help us on that, and you asked for this, is to support the multidimensional vulnerability index, which is something that is being driven at the moment by the United Nations.

You asked the question, well, what does that – how does that fit into the economic recovery? Well, it does a lot of – it's huge, to be honest, because the MVI is a tool, or at least from our perspective, in the Pacific. It is a tool for accessing concessional financing. It's one of the tool(s). But it's an important one because it embraces a new component, which is vulnerability. And you know, the Pacific states in particular, we're very vulnerable not only in terms of environmental factors, economic factors, but also social. So the inclusion of these vulnerability indices, so to speak, is important. And we are not saying that we should replace the current GNI. I think it's important. I think we supplement that in terms of determination, not only for allocation of grants from our partner countries but in terms of concessional financing and loan from international financial institution(s). So that is something concretely that the U.S. could help the small island developing states with.

And within the context of the Tuna Treaty – and I'm sure that Monica will speak to that – perhaps there is a need to see how we can expand it – and I think that is already under consideration – into perhaps a wider trade agreement, because I think it's something that will be very helpful in terms of all the Pacific island countries.

Peace and security, I think my colleagues have spoken to those and I won't – but our emphasis in terms of that broad category is not about cross-border conflict in terms of fighting and – we are a peaceful region. Our concern really emanates from the impact of climate change and what it can do.

Cybersecurity is a real issue for us, and this is where we need also capacity building to ensure that, you know, we are not affected adversely because of lack of capacity.

And finally, I just want to say something about regionalism. I think it's an idea that emanates from the application of the principles of subsidiarity and complementarity. And I think our Pacific Island(s) Forum Secretariat, as the premier political organization of the region, is very central to this in terms of
implementation. But also, equally important, all our implementation regional organization that deals with the environment. For example, SPC, the South Pacific Commission Secretariat. We also have, you know, the University of the South Pacific in terms of education. So those are also equally important in terms of ensuring that we are effective in the context of our approach, because I think at the end we need to take that holistic, integrated approach. I don’t think that we will be successful if we operate in silos.

So I think I’ll leave it there. I may have spoken a little bit longer than necessary. (Laughs.) Thank you.

Dr. Edel: No, it’s very much – very much appreciated. (Applause.) And thank you so far for laying out not only the set of priorities, but a concrete set of initiatives that I think we could pursue.

But now, Assistant Secretary Medina, that you’ve been teed up multiple times, over to you for the official response.

Monica P. Medina: Thank you so much. And, Charlie, it’s such an honor to be here, and I want to thank CSIS for – and the embassies of Australia and New Zealand for hosting this important discussion today.

And I just want to say how humbled I am to be on this panel with such a distinguished group of speakers who have so much experience with diplomacy and also who are such fabulous representatives of their countries. And I’m lucky to have visited some of them, so I feel as if I know them at least a little bit.

And I think as many of you know, you know, I think – when I think of the U.S., particularly as the person who thinks about oceans and our ocean projection in foreign policy and diplomacy, it’s hard not to think of us as a Pacific nation and an island nation because our 50th state, Hawaii, as well as the territories of Guam and American Samoa and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, are neighbors and really part – integral part of this region that’s represented here today.

And so while, yes, I’m here to talk tuna – (laughter) – I am also hoping that we can expand this discussion. And it’s what I’ve been saying since I took this job, that I thought tuna has always been sort of the heart of the compact that we share with these nations but it really is – shouldn’t be the centerpiece of it any longer. It should be an important part, a key part, but we need to expand the cooperation that we have among these 14 nations. And the U.S. is privileged to have a special relationship with all 14 of them. This gives us an opportunity to actually meet the moment we are in today and to think about the environment, nature, biodiversity, climate change, the blue economy, the things you’ve heard these wonderful spokespeople talk about today. These are some of the richest places on the Earth in terms of biodiversity, and their
stewardship is important as a legacy not only to them and to their region but to all of us on the planet. So I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility and kinship with them.

These big ocean nations are such an important part of the air we breathe, as they've said; the food that we eat; and our future. They are and want to be part of the climate solution, not just countries that are seen as having significant climate challenges. So I see this as an incredibly important and wonderful moment, actually, to deepen our relationship, to broaden it beyond tuna – although we’ll always, I think, have tuna. (Laughter.) So, hopefully, that’s the goal, right, to always have tuna. (Laughs.)

So let me just start by saying we do share so much more than an ocean. Our societies were built on shared democratic values and a vision for a peaceful and secure Pacific. And we also understand from listening to them that these islands are not all the same. They have much in common, but they are individual nations with their own challenges and strengths. And we do share, though, this important, vital mission, which is to take on this climate crisis, and to give our children and our grandchildren the future they deserve, and to give Pacific island children and grandchildren the future they deserve. And that’s what motivates me.

We've all seen that the islands are in many ways in the bullseye of the climate change crisis and its impact on the ocean, and some islands or significant portions of them are disappearing as a result of sea-level rise, and saltwater is intruding into freshwater resources, and the region is grappling with more frequent and intense storms every year. And the tuna industry itself, upon which these islands have been dependent for many years – and for all the islands in the tropics, the amount of fish caught from coastal fisheries could decrease by half by the end of the century because of climate change. And climate-sensitive diseases, such as those borne by mosquitoes, influence the health of the people on these islands, and those are also on the rise. So the islands are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and yet they are not responsible for the climate crisis.

So the U.S. does very much hear their calls and the calls upon all of the world and the major polluters to curb climate change. And that is why we hosted – we co-hosted a major conference in Palau in April to help shore up global commitments, and we did. We were able to gather 16 billion in commitments to conserve and protect the ocean and to address the ocean-climate nexus. That was a huge undertaking, and it was one that we were really proud to be a part of in the region, and it gave us an opportunity to have a chance to talk to these islands together and individually. And that was a tremendous thing, and it really did kick off the conversation we’re in now and it changed the trajectory of our negotiation in the Tuna Treaty itself.
And I – you know, I want to say that Secretary Antony Blinken, my boss, has visited the region. He was in Fiji in February and we announced plans to open an embassy in the Solomon Islands. And when Tonga experienced the impacts of the recent volcano eruption and tsunami, the American government was there to help. With respect to COVID, we’ve been there to help, to provide vaccines and other life-saving equipment and treatment. That’s another thing that falls within my bureau. And I know how important it is to these regions that are isolated to get that equipment, those vaccines, so that they can withstand the COVID crisis – at least, the health side of it. We know the economic impacts are steep, and difficult, and are still being experienced. And we know we have much, much, much more work to do.

So let me just take a couple minute to talk about the things we’ve already started, the things we’ve put in place. As a first step, President Biden and our whole-of-government approach is committed to working with congress to fully fund something called the President’s Emergency Plan for Adaptation and Resilience, or PREPARE, at $3 billion annually to support developing countries and vulnerable communities, including these in the Pacific, to adapt to climate change and to manage its impacts. And we know that we have to engage Pacific Island leaders to collaborate on the development of adequate climate resilience strategies and plans and assistance.

I always want to talk quickly about a little thing that we launched at COP 26 called the Islands 2030 Network, which is an organization that’s intended to galvanize these leaders in islands to talk with each other and to help us to help them to understand what they need in terms of climate change support. And I want to sort of mention some of the other things we’re working on to bring as part of a package of climate resilience and adaptation efforts, including climate-proofing ocean resources through marine spatial planning, which may sound like a weird term to most people. But it’s really making sure that we economically use the ocean areas of these big ocean countries to their greatest benefit, and to make sure they’re conserved for the long run, and coastal habitats as well.

We also want to support climate- resilient fisheries management and sustainable aquaculture. And I think we haven’t talked about that much, but that means really giving much more attention to the regional fishery management organizations that are the managers of the fisheries in this region but don’t have as much support as they probably need. And we need to pay more attention to how they’re doing their job, how well they’re doing their job. We also need to increase access to and use of climate forecasting tools, information that will provide early warning systems to help with adaptation planning. And these are the sorts of capabilities that will not only help us help them, but it will help them help us improve our climate models.
We need that data. These ocean readings and ocean data that we can help gather in their countries make our climate models for our own climate forecasts and for forecasts all around the world, better. We also need to—and many people have mentioned this today—to strengthen maritime security to counter illegal, unregulated—or, unreported and unregulated fishing, IUU fishing, which robs Pacific Islands of nearly 600 million (dollars) annually.

And I want to take a minute here to tip my hat again to CSIS for the Stephenson Ocean Security Project, and all the work they’ve done to bring maritime domain awareness and these security issues around illegal fishing to the forefront of this debate today. You laid the groundwork—sorry, bad pun—but you laid the groundwork here for much of the conversation that is front and center in this region today. And it’s a testament to what CSIS can contribute, and organizations like this one, can contribute to the conversation.

We also need to strengthen their freshwater supply and wastewater and waste management. I hate to lift this up, but I’ve spent a lot of time recently on plastic waste. And it’s a particular problem for the Pacific Island nations, some of which have tried to ban it but can’t because they can’t live without it. They can’t not accept the products. Everything comes to them wrapped in plastic on ships, right? And then there’s nothing to do with it. They’re nodding. And it’s a problem we have to take on. It’s one we are working on globally.

We also need to strengthen our infectious disease forecasting with climate forecasting tools like the ones we would use for natural phenomenon. We can also use them to look at mosquito-borne illnesses and other public health stressors. And of course, we need to scale renewable energy generation, and electrification, and surface transportation—all kinds of infrastructure—and bring clean, renewable energy to these islands so that they can develop. I mean, we’re connected to them now through the internet. We have wonderful Zoom meetings. They can create businesses there too that would be connected to the rest of the world via these superhighways of cables under the sea.

And so lastly, I think, with all this potential we in the U.S. and the countries that work in the region really want to help leverage the funding that they need for investment in their resources, in conservation, in stewardship, and in their blue economies, in sustainable use of their resources. And I believe that there is interest in the philanthropic community to join with us in government to leverage the funding that we have, to help them expand and grow their economies in a sustainable way, and to conserve these important resources for future generations.
So I hope you can hear the excitement in my voice when I talk about these issues. I look forward to the chance to work with these island nations and the others, and the Tuna Treaty, and the other nations throughout the region to build the capacity of this part of the world, because it’s connected to the U.S., but also because it’s just such an important and vital part of our planet. And I’m just so glad to be able to be here and to talk about these issues, and to be working on them on behalf of the U.S. government. So thank you again, Charlie.

Dr. Edel: Thank you. Look, this has been a fantastic scoping of what I think amounts to an ambitious, broad, and a desired agenda for the region. It’s the start of a conversation, clearly not the end of one. There are a lot of directions we can go. I’m conscious of the time. I’d like to turn it over to the audience to see what questions they might have for our distinguished panelists. There’s a microphone right there. So if you make your way to it, you can queue up. But you’re the first taker, so you get it. If you wouldn’t mind identifying yourself, and then we’ll direct it up here.

Demetri Sevastopulo: Hi. Good afternoon. I’m Demetri Sevastopulo with Financial Times. And can I just say that all this talk about tuna has made me really hungry. (Laughter.) My question to the ambassadors is, you know, Monica, you mentioned a bullseye. But in some ways, you’ve become the bullseye of a new rivalry between the U.S. and China, among the Pacific Island nations. Can you talk a little bit about how – not your governments – but how the people in each of your countries view the rivalry between the U.S. and China? And then specifically, could you just name one specific thing you would like the U.S. to do in addition to climate that would show what Dr. Campbell was talking about, that the U.S. is back, and the promises are not empty promises, and this time they’ll be more durable? Thank you.

Dr. Edel: OK. So just to repeat, because we’re going to go straight down the line here because we have a broad question, how people in your nations are responding to the rivalry. And one concrete you’d like to see, outside of climate, that can demonstrate the United States is back and involved in the region – if I paraphrased this question correctly. Ambassador.

Amb. Prasad: So, on the geopolitical side, I think our response is clear and simple. In the geopolitical contest between U.S. and China, climate change is winning. And the longer this draws out needlessly, climate change will continue to win. So that’s how we frame our security perspective. I think there’s no ambiguity about that. On one thing that U.S. would do more or better, if that’s one way of paraphrasing that, I think we have seen the start of helpful and ambitious and broad discussions between the U.S. and the Pacific Islands. These discussions have been going on for a couple of years. We’re at the start, at
the cusp, I think, of many, many things that are – likely, that are already happening, that are likely to happen.

One thing, rather than an ask, I would think that Pacific peoples and their governments would welcome an enduring partnership with the U.S. That it is there for the long term, that there is no stop and start to a highly stepped up and broader relationship between the U.S. and the Pacific. And that there's great predictability across the areas that we are engaging with deeply – all of the vectors that, at least, our colleagues spoke about, one climate change, on development. These are all multigenerational type of areas – oceans – that we need to work on. And there are no three-year projects for dealing with these. There are no five-year projects for dealing with this. And meanwhile, time spent on anything to do with oceans and climate, you're probably talking a 15-year transition. And so there must be great predictability about the relationship. And I'd respond in that way.

Dr. Edel: Ambassador Zackios.

Amb. Zackios: Thank you. Thank you for your question. I'll try. The Marshall Islands has a very strong and vibrant relationship with the Republic of China, Taiwan. So to the question, I think the – I touched a little on it in the context of fisheries. But I think my colleague Ambassador Prasad also talked on the issue of climate. And I said, and I hope I did not say or convey the message that climate is not a priority to Marshall Islands. Climate is a priority to the Marshall Islands. We are a founding member of The High Ambition Coalition. But at the same time, I think climate change cannot operate in a vacuum. And therefore, security plays an important role as part of our climate challenges. So if – I'll stop here on your question. I thank you.

Dr. Edel: Ambassador Luteru.

Amb. Luteru: Perhaps I'll answer the second question first. One thing is, of course, make your presence felt in the region. In terms of representation, I think that's important. As some colleagues were saying early on, you cannot compete in the region if you're not in the region. So I think that that would be a good start. I think there are obviously a lot of other areas that the U.S. can help us with. I mentioned some of these in terms of global issues. Also at the multilateral level within the U.N. And I think that these sort of support are based really on our shared values and principles that we all share. So it's not something new, but I think it's extremely important that we stand up for those principles and be accountable. Extremely important.

The first question is a bit of a longer question. But, you know, things also – from the outside, they look worse than they are from the inside. And you also got to remember that when you are dealing with key decisions taken by politicians, and they have a responsibility in certain areas. They have to
provide certain services, whether it’s infrastructure or whatever. And if the choice is that you ask a particular country and they are not able to help you, you then have a choice to say, no, we’re not going to provide that service to the people. Or you go to another country that perhaps is not a traditional partner. And you say to them: Can you help us?

But let me say that in the context of our Pacific countries, we’re fully aware of what we’re dealing with. You know, let me assure that. At least in my country, I think we’re very much aware. Let’s assure, you know, partners that, as I say, from the outside it may look, you know, like we don’t know what we’re doing but, please, you know, trust us. We do know. Thank you very much.

Dr. Edel: I think we have time for one more question.

Patrick Cronin: Charles, thank you. I’m Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair at the Hudson Institute.

I think each one of you know exactly what you’re doing, and I think your challenge is connecting to a larger, more influential community in the United States and internationally. Not only is the geopolitical issue critical, as Demetri just asked, but the development issue is even more dire. And this is a chance to connect these two communities in a way that we haven’t been able to do because the tyranny of distance, because of our neglect, because of a lot of reasons.

But as Kurt Campbell suggested, a little can go a long way. And I guess I want to know, in addition to what the U.S. needs to do, what can other countries in the region, beyond, obviously, the sponsors here of Australia, New Zealand, who know this well. But what can our other partners and allies in the region and around the world do to help make that little make a huge difference in the near term? Thank you.

Dr. Edel: Just to put a fine point on this final question, I will say that consistently in conversations with friends from the European community there is a new and growing interest in the Pacific and a search for what to do. So if you have suggestions – (laughs) – now, we’ve got some of them in the audience here, but I think ears are open to how to be helpful and constructive partners. Again, actually, I’m going to start with you this time and we’re going to go straight down the line.

Amb. Luteru: Well, let me take the cue from you in terms of other potential partner. Let’s talk about the EU.

We’ve just concluded – when I say “we,” I’m talking about African, Caribbean, and Pacific states; you’re talking about 79 developing countries. Thirty-seven
of those are SIDS, small island developing states. And we've just concluded an agreement for the next 20, 25 years. One of the new initiative that we have agreed to under this new agreement, which will be called the Samoa Agreement, is that in each of the three regions – you have Africa, Caribbean, Pacific – we now have what we call protocols, specific protocols. And these protocol operationalize the principles that are contained in the main text of the agreement. And I think that this is an expression that, you know, the issues in Africa, it's not going to be – the emphasis is going to be different in the Pacific, as well as in the Caribbean.

And when we talk about peace and security, Africa concentrate, really, on cross-border conflict, for example; whereas the Caribbean and the Pacific, when we talk about security issue, it's about climate change and cybersecurity. So, you know, the way that was structured is to recognize the difference – slight difference. There are, of course, areas of commonalities, but I think it's also important to recognize that.

And I think, you know, very strong program in the Pacific, you know, range of issue, including trade, although we recognize that under WTO we've still got to maintain that as the premier sort of trade organization. So we didn't want to sort of go too far into it. We still have what we call economic partnership agreement under the old – sorry, the Tuna agreement.

So, yes, you know, we’re looking at other partners. But you know, in the Pacific, the European Union and we like to see the U.S., as well, as one of our major, key partners moving forward. Thank you.

Dr. Edel: Ambassador Zackios?

Amb. Zackios: Thank you. Thank you very much and thank you for the question.

We welcome – and as you may be aware, tomorrow we’ll be meeting a number of likeminded partners, and I think it’s a very good start, where we will meet the countries of France, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. So it’s an important milestone for us to start addressing what you have said but in a way that is coordinated, strategic, and addresses our issues.

One thing that I would ask of partners that are here is commitments – commitments to a very important issue for us, climate change. Countries need to make their contributions so we in the Pacific can address the existential threat that climate change poses upon us. Thank you.

Dr. Edel: Ambassador Prasad?

Amb. Prasad: Thank you for that question. For Europe and our other partners, my suggestion to anybody, you look anywhere, Pacific is ready to work with you,
whichever sector. Probably one area in which we can focus a lot of energy and attention would be in helping us build, helping us to help you – helping us build highly sustainable blue economies, and that allows our blue economies to also be of service to the rest of the world.

What do I mean by that? Kiribati, a country at the heart of the Pacific, has locked up some 500,000 square miles of the Blue Pacific for their no-take zone. There’s no tuna in that area. About a third of its tuna income is lost as a consequence of that, you know, highly marine protected area. And that’s a great service to the world. It’s the equivalent – moral equivalent maybe asking Saudi Arabia to shut off about a third of its oil well. And it does it alone. It’s there ready somebody for a partnership – as is Palau, as is Cook Islands, as is any country. It’s help us and we will help you. And so the Pacific is ready to work with all our partners.

Dr. Edel:

Ambassador Prasad, Ambassador Zackios, Ambassador Luteru and Assistant Secretary Medina, this has been really useful, because this is – we should have had our jackets off and our sleeves rolled up, because actually we were developing the agenda that we’re going to see pushing forward. But as I stressed, I think for many reasons we know that the Pacific has gained a lot of attention all of a sudden. The question for all of us in the room is what are we going to do with the attention now that we have focus? And I think this has been a terrific start of this, but I do stress this is the start of a sustained, and ongoing, and durable conversation.

So if you would please join me in thanking our guests here today for this terrific panel. (Applause.)