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TRANSCRIPT: April 26 Teleconference with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink



The audio file for this briefing is available [here](#).

Moderator: Good day from the U.S. Department of State's Asia Pacific Media Hub in Manila. I'm the Hub Director, Zia Syed, and I want to thank you all for joining this briefing. Today, we are pleased to be joined from Washington, D.C. by Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, at the U.S. Department of State.

We'll begin today's call with opening remarks from Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink. We will try to get to as many questions as we can during the time that we have. Finally, as a reminder, today's call is on-the-record. And with that, I will turn it over to Assistant Secretary Kritenbrink.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, thank you, Zia, very much for the introduction, and thank you to all of our friends in the media for joining us, whether it's this evening or this morning, depending on your time zone. Again, I'm Dan Kritenbrink and I'm honored to be with you this evening.

Let me make a few opening remarks and I'll be happy to take your questions.

So, as you know, NSC Indo-Pacific Coordinator Dr. Kurt Campbell and myself, accompanied as well by the Deputy Commander from INDOPACOM Lieutenant General Steve Sklenka and the USAID Acting Senior Deputy Assistant Administrator for Asia Craig Hart, have just returned from a very productive trip to Hawaii, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. This trip followed and built upon Secretary of State Antony Blinken's February trip to the region, where he announced the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and also met with Pacific Island leaders. This trip also follows our Our Ocean Conference in Palau April 13 and 14, which was co-hosted by Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry.

Throughout our trip, we reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific; we sought to demonstrate how our partnerships in the region can deliver prosperity, peace, and security; and we highlighted the enduring bonds between Americans and Pacific Islanders.

In Honolulu, we were hosted by U.S. Navy Admiral John Aquilino, the Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, and there we also met with senior officials from Australia, Japan, and New Zealand. That meeting was part of our regular and extensive consultations with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to coordinate and broaden our efforts in the region.

In Fiji, we had the honor of meeting with Prime Minister Bainimarama and held a strategic dialogue with senior members of his government about a broad spectrum of bilateral and regional issues, including ways for the United States to engage more deeply to support regional institutions. We met with the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) Secretariat to discuss a variety of topics from enhancing U.S. engagement with the PIF to climate change and

environmental resilience. We were then honored to have Prime Minister Bainimarama and other Fijian officials join us aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Munro* to highlight the U.S. partnership with Fiji to protect maritime resources and promote a secure Indo-Pacific.

In our next stop, in Papua New Guinea, we had a productive meeting with the defense secretary and the chief of the armed forces about our expanding security cooperation, followed by an inspirational women leaders' roundtable discussion about the particular challenges that women face when seeking to overcome barriers to political and economic participation. Finally, during our constructive meeting with Prime Minister Marape, we discussed in depth the upcoming opportunities from the joint implementation of the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, and we also talked about a range of other ways to expand our growing partnership with Papua New Guinea. The delegation left Papua New Guinea energized about all of the ways that the U.S. and PNG can, again, continue strengthening our relationship.

In the Solomon Islands, we met with Prime Minister Sogavare and approximately two dozen members of his cabinet and senior staff for a total of approximately 90 minutes. In the meeting, we reiterated our commitment to enhancing our partnership with the Solomon Islands, including expediting the opening of the U.S. embassy there, advancing cooperation on addressing unexploded ordnance, and increasing maritime domain awareness, as well as expanding cooperation on climate change, health, people-to-people ties, and other issues as well.

While there, we also discussed the recently signed security agreement between the Solomon Islands and the People's Republic of China, noting potential regional security implications, including for the United States and our allies and partners. We outlined clear areas of concern with respect to the purpose and scope of the agreement.

We told the Solomon Islands leadership that the United States would respond if steps were taken to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power-projection capabilities, or a military installation in the Solomon Islands. Prime Minister Sogavare reiterated in his public remarks, noting specific assurances that there would be no military base, no long-term presence, and no power-projection capability. The United States emphasized that we would follow developments closely in consultation with regional partners.

We also decided together with the Solomon Islands to launch a high-level strategic dialogue to enhance communication, address mutual concerns, and drive practical progress. We expect this dialogue will discuss in greater detail security issues of mutual concern, economic and social development, public health, and finance and debt.

In all three of these countries, we sought out a wide range of perspectives, including from opposition politicians, civil society actors, and religious leaders to get the full spectrum of concerns

in each country. We also were deeply moved by our visits to the National War Memorial Grounds in Fiji and our visit to the World War II Guadalcanal American Memorial in the Solomon Islands, where we were able to pay our respects to those who have made the ultimate sacrifice to secure our collective security and prosperity.

The United States will continue to support our Pacific neighbors and contribute to a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific region. Recognizing the ties of shared history and sacrifice, our presence and partnerships in the region allow us to come together quickly to provide aid when called upon.

This trip is just one of many that we expect to make to the region as we deepen our cooperation bilaterally and regionally with the Pacific Islands, in line with the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. Together with our allies and partners, we will build the collective capacity for our region to meet the challenges of the present, adapt for the crises of the future, and seize the opportunities of the 21st century.

Let me end there, and I'll turn it back over to Zia and I very much look forward to answering your questions. Thank you very much.

Moderator: Thank you. We will now begin the question-and-answer portion of today's call.

Our first question will go to Andrew Tillett from the *Australian Financial Review* in Canberra, Australia.

Question: Thank you for doing this briefing. My question is, Daniel, you said that you told the Solomon Islands Government that the U.S. would respond if there was a Chinese military base in the Solomons. Our prime minister, Scott Morrison, here in Australia described it as a red-line issue. Can you elaborate, please, on what the response would look like from the U.S. and Australia and other allies if China did go ahead with some sort of military presence in the Solomons?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, Andrew, thank you very much for your question. Look, I'm not going to speculate and I'm not in a position to talk about what the United States may or may not do in such a situation. But again, our purpose in going to the Solomons was to explain to our friends there our approach to the region and the steps we're taking to step up our engagement across the Pacific Islands, the specific programs and activities that are ongoing in the Solomons and that we expect to expand and accelerate in the months ahead, but also to communicate in a very candid way the concerns that we have about this security agreement that they have concluded with China. And again, we outlined that of course we have respect for the Solomon Islands' sovereignty, but we also wanted to let them know that if steps were taken to establish a de facto permanent military presence, power-projection capabilities, or a military installation, then we would have

significant concerns and we would very naturally respond to those concerns.

So, again, I'm not going to speculate what that may or may not involve, but I think our goal was to be very clear in that regard. And I think as we noted in my remarks a moment ago, and I'm sure you saw the statement that we released from the White House at the end of our trip, Prime Minister Sogavare did reiterate his specific assurances on each of those three concerns: that there would be no military base, no long-term presence, and no power-projection capability, something that he has said publicly. And again, we made clear we will follow those developments closely in consultation with our regional partners, and I'm confident when we hold our strategic dialogue session in September, we will have the opportunity to discuss these issues further, along with the many other issues I've outlined here tonight. Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you. Next if we could go to Ryohei Takagi from *Kyodo News*.

Question: Hi, this is Ryohei Takagi from *Kyodo News*. I have a follow-up question on the security agreement between the Solomon Islands and the PRC. Do you think this would be the first step for PRC to militarize the Pacific Islands like South China Sea? Thank you.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, Ryohei, thank you very much for your question. I think, look, again, in discussing the security agreement that was concluded, we wanted to outline for our friends in the Solomons what our concerns are. And again, Prime Minister Sogavare indicated that in the Solomon Islands' view, the agreement they concluded has solely domestic applications. But we made clear that there are potential regional security implications of the agreement, not just for ourselves, but for allies and partners across the region. And so that is what we wanted to make clear. And I think it's important in this context to keep in mind that we do know that the PRC is seeking to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure that would allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances.

So, we wanted to have that candid conversation with our friends in the Solomons. We outlined our concerns. We have noted their assurances that they've stated to us and to others, and we've indicated that we'll continue to monitor the situation closely and continue to engage with them going forward.

Moderator: Thank you. Next if we could go to Motoko Rich from *The New York Times* based in Tokyo.

Question: Yes, hello, Ambassador Kritenbrink. Thanks for taking our call and questions. In terms of trying to project solidarity with your allies in the Indo-Pacific, is there any thought to inviting Japan to join AUKUS? There was some talk in the Japanese media about that.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, Motoko, thank you for your question and thanks for what you do. Look, I certainly don't have anything to say about AUKUS in this context. I think I would just say I would start with the first part of your question. In terms of projecting solidarity with allies and partners in the region, I think, as you have seen, I think the central pillar of our entire strategy and engagement with the Indo-Pacific is revitalizing our ties with allies, partners, and friends. And certainly, our Japanese allies are among our most important partners in the world. It's why at the beginning of our trip, we stopped in Honolulu to consult closely with, again, our allies and partners from Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. And that kind of consultation will go forward, but no, there's no consideration that I'm tracking to expand AUKUS, and I would say, again, that's not directly related I think to the issues that we're addressing here. But again, the first part of your question, there's no doubt that together with our likeminded partners who share our principles, our values, and interests across the region, we intend to continue to step up our engagement there as well.

And Motoko, if I can add as well, just to make very clear - we're not just coordinating with those partners on issues across the region and specifically with the Pacific Islands, but we really valued our opportunity to consult with Fiji Prime Minister Bainimarama and with Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Marape, and I think those kinds of engagements with our other Pacific Island partners are absolutely vital as well. And then again, there's simply no substitute for direct conversation, and that's why we were grateful for the opportunity to meet directly with Prime Minister Sogavare as well.

Moderator: Thank you very much. Next if we could go to Ben Packham from *The Australian* in Canberra, Australia.

Question: Thank you, Ambassador. Ben Packham with *The Australian* newspaper. Could I ask you, are you concerned about the influence of Chinese money in the Solomon Islands over the political process there? And if I may also, when you visited Papua New Guinea, did you ask the prime minister there about progress on the Lombrum Naval Base? It was announced in 2018 at APEC, but not a lot seems to have happened. Would the U.S. like to see greater progress there?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Great, thank you very much for your questions. Let me try to take both of them in turn.

I think what I would say on the first question is I'd make two major points. I think one of the fundamental reasons why the United States, other partners in the region, other friends amongst the Pacific Island states, and candidly speaking, the concerns among other friends inside the Solomon Islands, is those concerns are all related to the complete lack of transparency behind this agreement. What precisely are the motivations behind the agreement? What exactly are China's objectives and the like? I think they're completely unclear because this agreement has not been scrutinized or reviewed or subject to any kind of

consultation or approval process by anyone else. So, I think the lack of transparency is a fundamental concern.

And the other point I would make, and we make this to friends across the region on every trip and we did on this one as well: The United States of America is not in the business of asking countries to choose between the United States and China or anyone else. What we are about is promoting our affirmative agenda and a proactive vision for, again, the shared interests and principles that we believe are vital to all of our friends across the region. That includes, again, transparency; it includes a commitment to peaceful resolution of disputes; a focus on the rule of law; and respecting countries' sovereignty. Any steps taken by countries, whether it would be China or anyone else, that run counter to those interests and principles, I think, would be a fundamental concern to us, and I think have some bearing on what we're dealing with here.

On the PNG, I think what I would say simply is we had a very productive meeting, again, both with the defense secretary, the chief of the armed forces, and with Prime Minister Marape himself. Certainly, we talked about a whole range of ways in which we can expand our partnership, but I think there is a desire on both sides to ensure we take concrete steps to expand our security cooperation as well, and I look forward to advancing those discussions and that joint work in the months ahead.

Moderator: Thank you very much. If we could next go to Gwen Robinson from *Nikkei Asia* in Bangkok, Thailand.

Question: Thanks. Hi, Ambassador Kritenbrink. Nice to hear you again.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Very nice to hear you again as well. I recall we met [*inaudible*].

Question: Yes, that's right. So, as we discussed in Bangkok, the Biden administration has put more focus on ASEAN again, and it seems like ASEAN's initiative, for example, on Myanmar has really not gone very far at all. I was wondering what your view is of ASEAN in terms of the issues we're discussing here. The South Pacific, it's their backyard - Indonesia launched a South Pacific initiative a few years ago. That has all gone quiet. Do you feel that ASEAN should perhaps take more of a role, and if so, what kind?

And if I could just add on that also, I know you're talking about the South Pacific, but could I just ask after the passage of the BURMA Act, whether you see any progress on Myanmar and U.S. aims there?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: All right, Gwen, thank you very much. Let me just write that down if I can.

So, on the first general question on ASEAN's role in the region, ASEAN's role in the South Pacific, I would say, first of all, I would reiterate our strong commitment to ASEAN centrality and our

belief that really all of the challenges and all of the opportunities in the region I think need to be addressed and solved with ASEAN at the center. And I think just one additional and most recent tangible manifestation of that belief is the fact that President Biden has announced that he will host the leaders of ASEAN in Washington, DC, on May 12 and 13 for a U.S.-ASEAN special summit. The President and all of us very much look forward to that discussion, and I think it would be natural in the course of that discussion for us to talk about issues in the South Pacific as well. And whether it's friends in ASEAN or others, we'll welcome any likeminded partner who share our principles, again, regarding sovereignty, international law, peace and stability across the region.

On your series of questions about Burma and ASEAN's role in that - look, Gwen, this is truly a tragedy what's taking place in Burma since the coup. We've worked very closely with our friends in ASEAN and partners around the world to continue to put pressure on the junta to deny it sources of funding and to continue to take a range of measures, including sanctions and other robust steps, to put pressure on the junta to compel it to return to the path of democracy.

I think in that regard, ASEAN will continue to play a leading role, the leading role. We continue to strongly support the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus. But these are very difficult, meddlesome issues that are not going to be resolved easily or quickly. But again, I'll come back to where I started. There's no doubt that any solution, any better path for the people of Burma has to include ASEAN at the center. Thanks very much.

Moderator: Thank you. If we could go next to Maddison Connaughton from *Agence France-Presse*, from AFP, in Australia.

Question: Hi, thanks so much for doing this briefing. I just have a question again on the Solomon Islands-China security deal, which seems to come as something of a surprise, at least here in Australia. And as you said, it may have regional security implications. Are you concerned China may be discussing or close to striking similar security deals with other nations in the Pacific?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, thank you, Maddison, for your question. Here's what I would say. We've made clear, broadly speaking, including in our Indo-Pacific Strategy, why the Indo-Pacific is so central to American security and prosperity. Secondly, we've made clear what our primary interests are, and values are, as I've outlined here today. And that is why, in the case of the Solomon Islands and the security agreement with China, which, again, has been concluded in a completely non-transparent way - that's why that's caused I think so much concern on the part of the United States, other partners around the region, partners among other Pacific Island nations, and again, amongst the people of the Solomon Islands themselves.

I'm not here to speculate on what may or may [not] happen in the future, but I think you can rest assured that those principles

will remain consistent going forward, and we'll continue to apply them across the region and apply them to any future challenges that may arise as well.

Moderator: Thank you. Next if we could go to Ravi Buddhavarapu from *CNBC* in Singapore. Ravi, please go ahead.

Question: Hi, thank you. So, I would just like to broaden the discussion a little bit to the larger Indo-Pacific Strategy. During his recent visit to India, Boris Johnson, the British prime minister, announced that the UK would grant an open general license to India to transfer fighter jet technology. It is thought to be part of the efforts to wean Delhi's dependence away from Russia. Does the U.S. have anything in the pipeline of a similar nature?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, Ravi, thanks very much for your question. Let me say a couple of things, prefaced by the fact that among the many responsibilities I have in my job, I do not have direct responsibility for our important partnership with our friends in India. But I think the importance of that partnership is self-evident. Certainly, it's very clear to me in the Quad in which India has played such a central role. But I think, Ravi, it's probably safer for me to leave a more detailed answer to your question to my colleagues who deal with our, again, vitally important partnership with India every day.

Moderator: Thank you. We will try to get to as many questions as we can in the next 10 minutes or so. If we could next go to Rhiannon Hoyle from *The Wall Street Journal* in Adelaide, Australia.

Question: Thank you very much and thank you for the time. I just was curious, you mentioned before there'd be a response to any more lasting military presence in the Solomons, but will there be any response to this security agreement in and of itself? You mentioned the establishment of an improved high-level dialogue. Is that the response at this time, actually just bolstering diplomatic efforts in the Solomons and broader Pacific?

And a second one, if you don't mind, just to follow up from an earlier point you made about the lack of transparency being a key concern to that particular agreement. Can you just respond to [what] Sogavare said that this is about the Solomons being friends to all and it needed to diversify security partners in order to ensure it can meet all of the challenges it's facing for the future? Can you just respond to his point there as to whether or not you agree with that or take any objection to the Solomons' need to bring on more partners? Thanks.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Thanks very much, and let me try to take those in turn and make sure I can read my notes from your questions.

On the issue, again, of concerns regarding a potential lasting military presence and what our response will be, again, I think

what I would underscore here is this: We made clear in what I would say was a very constructive and candid meeting with Prime Minister Sogavare - we made clear that we respect the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands. At the same time, we also tried to make clear that there are potential implications to the decisions that the Solomon Islands makes, and those implications could impact the security interests of the United States and our partners, and we wanted to be crystal-clear about what that may mean.

When you ask what our response is, I would put it in the context of our larger relationship with the Solomon Islands. Again, we had a more than 90-minute meeting with Prime Minister Sogavare. We talked about our stepped-up engagement across the region, across the Pacific Islands, and the specific program that we're advancing in the Solomon Islands, and then we made very clear what our concerns would be, should there be outcomes in the security realm that I've already outlined. Prime Minister Sogavare provided assurances that there would be no such outcomes, and we again reiterated that we would continue to follow developments closely.

So, what is our response? I would again just reiterate that our relationship with the Solomon Islands is bigger than this security agreement, but I think I've already been clear what our message on the Solomon Islands has been.

Regarding the lack of transparency, I do think that this is a fundamental concern that we have with certain Chinese activities I think across the region, and specifically in the Pacific Islands. We welcome the contributions- whether it's from China or other countries to regional development, so long as these activities adhere to high standards, including in areas, again, such as transparency, rule of law, sustainable financing, respect for the autonomy and sovereignty of partners in the region. But I think there are reasons to be concerned in that regard based on a range of problematic behaviors that we've seen from the PRC across the region, and that has everything to do from advancing unlawful maritime claims to militarizing disputed features to engaging in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

So, again, I'll just underscore we have respect for the Solomon Islands' sovereignty. The Solomon Islands will make its own decisions. But we have tried to be clear how those decisions may implicate American national interests.

Moderator: Thank you very much. We'll try to get to just a few more here before we have to wrap up. Next if we could go to Kate Lyons from *The Guardian Australia* in Sydney.

Question: Hi. Thank you so much for your time. Our prime minister, Scott Morrison, has said he shares the same red lines that the U.S. has on the issue of a potential military base, a permanent presence of China in Solomon Islands. Given you're not specifying what the U.S. response would be if a base is established, are you uncomfortable with the connotations of "red lines" that is being discussed, and can you rule out that the U.S.

would take military action against Solomon Islands if China established a base there?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, Kate, thanks very much for your question. I think I don't have a lot to add beyond what I've already stated. Again, we've tried to be very clear with our friends in the Solomon Islands and I've tried to be very clear with friends on this call tonight that we reiterated our respect for the sovereignty of the Solomon Islands, but we also outlined the potential regional security implications of this security agreement that it has signed with the People's Republic of China. We've outlined the specific concerns that we have regarding the potential for a permanent military presence or power-projection capabilities or a military installation, and we've indicated that should those events come to pass, that the United States would respond accordingly. And I think it's best if I leave it at that and not speculate on what that may or may not mean.

Moderator: Thank you. Like I said, we'll try to get to just a couple more here. If we could go to Phelim Kine from *Politico*.

Question: Thank you so much for holding this, sir. Could you tell us, how did the Solomon Islands interlocutors respond when you asked for the details of the actual agreement? Obviously you say there's no transparency. Did you in fact ask to see, or for publication or publicization of the agreement? And if they didn't agree to it, what are their reasons for keeping it secret? Thank you.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Phelim, thank you very much for your question. Here's what I would say. I think that having consulted widely with a range of friends across the region and in the Solomon Islands itself, I think it's clear that only a handful of people in a very small circle have seen this agreement, and the prime minister himself has been quoted publicly as saying he would only share the details with China's permission, which I think is a source of concern as well. We've tried to outline, though, in a candid and transparent way here the explicit concerns that we outlined for friends in the Solomon Islands, and then we've outlined explicitly the assurances that the prime minister provided. And again, we welcome those comments, but I think it's also very important to underscore that we indicated we'll continue to track new developments very closely.

Moderator: Thank you very much. Next if we could go to Demetri Sevastopulo from the *Financial Times* in Washington.

Question: Hi, thank you. I'm just curious, some foreign policy experts say that the U.S. in a sense opened the door to China on the security deal with the Solomon Islands because it didn't have an embassy since 1993 and may not have paid enough attention to the Solomons in terms of economic and diplomatic engagement. In that context, I'm curious- in the Solomon Islands, Fiji, or PNG, was there any discussion about those countries getting involved in

some way in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework that the Biden administration is going to unveil shortly?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Demetri, thanks very much for your question. I think I would respond in a couple of different ways. First, the United States has been and remains actively engaged across the entire Indo-Pacific region, across the Pacific Islands, and certainly within the Solomon Islands itself, and so I would certainly reject any assertion that we haven't been active there for some time, and I can rattle off a whole range of activities from the 150,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines we've provided to the Solomons in the past six months, the Millennium Challenge Corporation threshold program that we have inked which is a four-year, \$20 million program. I can talk about the U.S. Geological Survey and USAID and their programs to help monitor the Savo Volcano. Certainly, we can talk about our past provision of unexploded ordnance clearance assistance and how we'll continue to expand that, and the many other things that we're doing.

So, we're certainly engaged, and of course I should mention the five-year, \$25 million SCALE program as well. So again, that's just one small snapshot of some of the things that we've been doing in the Solomons, and I think you're aware of our broader engagement across the region, highlighted most recently by Secretary Blinken's stop in Fiji in February.

But, Demetri, on the specific question of IPEF, no, I'm not tracking currently any discussion about including our friends in the Pacific Islands potentially in IPEF at this time. But certainly as we engage with our friends in the Pacific Islands, it's clear that our economic ties are an important component. I know our friends in the Pacific Islands both in February and on this trip have expressed a desire to work closely with us on a range of issues, not just in terms of economics and trade, but assistance to combat climate change, certainly a range of programs to continue to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and the like. But not currently any talk about IPEF. Thanks, Demetri.

Moderator: Thank you. If we could go to Kym Bergmann, a reporter for *Asia Pacific Defence* in Canberra, Australia.

Question: Thank you very much, Ambassador. This is very valuable, and I'd encourage you to continue briefing regional journalists

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Thank you, Kym. My pleasure.

Question: My interest is in the dynamic with Taiwan. It appears that a key event in all of this was the Solomon Islands switching diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to Beijing. Would you encourage those few remaining countries that still recognize Taiwan to maintain the status quo, or is that immaterial to circumstances?

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Well, thank you, Kym, for your question. Look, what I would say is, broadly speaking, I think you're well aware of U.S. policy on Taiwan. I think we've

continued to highlight for partners and friends around the world that there are many benefits associated with ties with Taipei and cooperation with our friends in Taiwan. I think you've noted that Taiwan continues to be a strong partner for many of our Pacific Island friends, including those in the Marshalls, Palau, Nauru, and Tuvalu. So look, we'll continue to advocate for our friends in the region to seek deeper ties with Taiwan. Taiwan in our view obviously is a leading democracy and a critical economic and security partner, and I think there are many, many benefits from cooperating with our friends in Taipei.

And I think the United States has been clear about that, and we'll continue to be that way going forward. And again, I would reiterate - I believe I noted earlier the United States is not in the business of asking countries to choose between the United States and China, but what we are very clear about is we want all countries to have choices and have a say over their own sovereignty and the ability to make their own decisions without coercion. And I think those are considerations that all partners around the world and in the Indo-Pacific region and amongst the Pacific Islands, they ought to keep those considerations in mind I think as they consider the issues you've raised here tonight.

Moderator: Thank you. We'll do the last question -- to Damien Cave from *The New York Times* in Sydney.

Question: Thanks for doing this. A lot of this has been really great and answered a bunch of my questions already, but one thing I do wonder about in terms of the Solomons is what has been learned from this experience by the United States. Other questioners have noted that in the region, there's a perception that the United States simply hasn't been as engaged as it could be, and if China is in fact seeking connections across the region that are deeper than they have been in the past. What's been learned from the Solomons and what is the United States going to do differently as this continues to come up?

Ambassador Krittenbrink: Well, Damien, thanks very much for your question. I would answer your question in this way. I think each and every day, all of my colleagues here in the U.S. Government take steps to outline in a clear way, again, the tangible benefits to cooperating with the United States. We outline our affirmative, proactive agenda for the region, and I think, perhaps most importantly, we again outline the principles and the values that we hold near and dear. But I think if you look at the range of engagement on the part of the United States across the Indo-Pacific and in the Pacific Islands, it encompasses everything from robust security cooperation to economic and trade ties, people-to-people ties, and really vitally important work on a range of global challenges as well -- from COVID to climate change and illegal fishing and development assistance.

So, look, all of those issues will continue to be important going forward. I think there can be no mistaking the strength and the depth of our commitment to the region under the Biden-Harris administration. I think, as you know, the first two world leaders hosted in the White House by President Biden were from the Indo-

Pacific. The first trip overseas by the Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense in this administration were to partners in the Indo-Pacific. The President has engaged with Pacific Island leaders as has the Secretary of State. Both the President and the Secretary have engaged intensively with leaders in ASEAN as well, and again, the Secretary has taken many other travels to the region as well.

I think our commitment to the region is strong and enduring, and I think the broad range of activities that I've outlined here tonight again demonstrate the tangible benefits of cooperating with the United States, and we'll continue to focus on that going forward.

I guess the last point that I would make, Damien: In all of my travels across the region, whether it's together with our senior officials, on my own trips, or this last one, there's an incredibly strong demand signal in the region for greater U.S. engagement. There's a great deal of gratitude and excitement over the activities that we're currently carrying out, and I think, again, there's a strong demand signal to do even more, and we intend to respond to that, continue to respond to those demand signals in robust ways because we believe doing so is in the interest of the United States and the American people, and it's in the shared interests of our many partners and the peoples across the region.

Moderator: Thank you very much. That concludes today's call. I want to thank Daniel Kritenbrink, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, at the U.S. Department of State. And I also would like to thank all of you for participating in this briefing, and I apologize if we were not able to get to your question today, as there were many in the question-and-answer queue today.

Please stay on the line for information regarding access to an audio recording of the call. Also, please be aware that a transcript of the call will be posted to our social media platforms and sent out to all of you within a day. If you have any questions about today's call, you may contact the Asia Pacific Media Hub at AsiaPacMedia@state.gov . Thank you.

Ambassador Kritenbrink: Thank you, Zia. Thanks, everyone. Great talking to you tonight. Look forward to the next opportunity.

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