

USAPC Washington Report
Interview with Hon. Eni Faleomavaega
November 2007

USAPC: How has Congress' attention to Asia Pacific policy matters changed during the 19 years you have been a member of the House of Representatives?

Faleomavaega: When I entered Congress in 1988, the House leadership would not consider a member's petition to join the Foreign Affairs Committee unless he or she had served at least two terms. That was the custom. But somehow I was able to convince the leadership that the Foreign Affairs Committee needed a member who had an authentically Asian Pacific perspective, which I certainly had as American Samoa's representative in Congress. House leaders accepted my petition, and I have been a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee ever since.

Legislatively, I naturally wanted to focus on Asia Pacific issues. One of the things that surprised me in 1988 was that no one wanted to serve on the subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs. Members wanted to serve on subcommittees where the action was. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, that was primarily the subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East.

It only has been in the last three or four years that Congress has begun to pay more attention to developments in the Asia Pacific region. After all, U.S. trade with the Asia Pacific region far surpasses U.S. trade with Europe or any other part of the world. About two-thirds of the world's population is in the Asia Pacific region. By my last count, six out of the 10 largest armies in the world are in the Asia Pacific region.

Moreover, the region now faces all sorts of challenges. There are threats to regional stability caused by tensions in the Taiwan Strait and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Despite our efforts to sanction this conduct, there continue to be horrific human rights abuses and repressive actions by the ruling junta in Burma.

The South Pacific Islands are contending with extraordinary new demands stemming from the restructuring of U.S. armed forces in the Asia Pacific region. This will entail transferring 9,000 Marines and their families to Guam and possibly even to Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas. And we cannot forget China, which is becoming the third most powerful economy in the world, behind the United States and Japan.

Our national leaders and policymakers should not neglect the enormous changes underway in the Asia Pacific region.

USAPC: There is a good deal of anti-China sentiment in Congress owing to the fears expressed by constituents that they will lose their jobs as a result of the growing U.S.-China economic relationship. What can be done to restore confidence in the American people about their jobs and the strength of the U.S. economy even as our economic relationship with China continues to broaden?

Faleomavaega: Yes, some of my House colleagues will have nothing to do with China. They regard China as a monster, the next Soviet Union with whom we will fight in a global war.

But the growing U.S.-China economic relationship is not the only source of constituents' fears about job safety. They also are concerned about the overall U.S. economic policy, which emphasizes free trade in a global economy.

We should face the fact that China, India, and Japan have emerged as three centers of economic activity that are very global in nature. These three countries reflect what is happening economically in the Asia Pacific region. The United States should be part of this dynamic economic activity. Our national leaders and policymakers in Congress should not put aside the Asia Pacific region as if it is something we can take care of at another time. This is the century of the Pacific.

China certainly serves as a magnet for economic activity with the United States as well as with its Asian neighbors. Recently, U.S. inspectors revealed that Chinese manufacturers used lead paint on toys. There also have been concerns about the safety of China's food exports. China must tackle those administrative challenges if it wants to secure its place as a global economic power. Beijing must develop and enforce product standards that are on a par with ours.

But the fact that 1.3 billion people live in China also means that it is potentially the biggest consumer market in the world. That is why so many countries are flocking to the Chinese market. U.S. business is not alone.

I must ask, however, how did China become the source for 80 percent of the toys sold in America? What happened to U.S. toy manufacturers? Why must we set up shop in China, particularly for industries that always have produced high-quality items? Something is amiss here. We need to seriously re-evaluate our basic economic policies and establish a greater sense of fairness and equity for the American worker.

USAPC: Regarding another China-related matter, on October 2, the House passed a non-binding resolution that urged the Bush Administration to sell F-16 fighter aircraft to Taiwan. The Bush Administration has blocked the sale to protest what it regards as provocative behavior by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian. You also had problems with this resolution. Why?

Faleomavaega: I did not think the resolution really was necessary. It is non-binding. Why then are we embarrassing China publicly with this resolution? Of course, there is a pending contract worth millions of dollars for the sale of F-16s to Taiwan for defensive purposes. Everyone knows that. Why do we have to re-state it? That is like rubbing salt in China's wound.

Taiwan is going through a lot of internal political problems. The current president, Chen Shui-bian, espouses freedom and independence for China. That is totally contrary to the "one-China" policy to which the United States and China adhere.

The other major political party in Taiwan, the Kuomintang (KMT), is open to peaceful negotiations with China perhaps ultimately aimed at unification, but in the meantime wants to simply maintain Taiwan's current autonomous status. I have always said that whatever relationship Taiwan and China want to establish, this should be done by peaceful means.

Many people are not aware that Taiwan currently enjoys more than \$100 billion in trade per year with China. To me, that suggests that despite all of the occasionally hostile rhetoric one hears from either side of the Taiwan Strait, China and Taiwan cannot be that angry with each other! Millions of Taiwanese have traveled to mainland China, and Beijing, too, is promoting cross-Strait tourism.

The people of Taiwan generally enjoy a good standard of living. I do not know one Taiwanese who is starving. Taiwan is one of the top 11 countries in the world in terms of economic standing-- even though the United States and many other nations do not recognize it as a sovereign state.

So how does one define Taiwan's situation? It is not independent. It is not sovereign. But Taiwan certainly is very blessed by healthy trading relations with many nations in Asia and elsewhere, and by the fact that 23 nations still deal with it on an official basis. However, it would be a contradiction to expect that Taiwan would ever enjoy equal standing with China in the United Nations. Basically, that is what Chen Shui-bian is advocating.

We must remember that in 1949 Chiang Kai-shek, the former president of Taiwan and leader of the KMT, lost the civil war to the Communist Party, then led by Mao Zedong. Quite frankly, I do not think Chiang was any different from Mao even though he was not a communist. He enjoyed U.S. support only because the United States was fighting communism.

But Chiang ruled Taiwan with an iron fist. Although he never professed to be a communist, Chiang's leadership style was not much different from that of a communist ruler. So these are some of the political, historical, and cultural issues that make the Asia Pacific so interesting and dynamic.

USAPC: Do you think the United States is sufficiently engaged in Asia Pacific organizations?

Faleomavaega: President Bush's abbreviated attendance at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum this past September was a big slight to the other regional leaders. You may recall that President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice left before the conference ended. That was an affront to the many regional leaders who had taken the time to attend the entire conference. I realize that all countries have priorities and emergency matters that must be addressed. But President Bush's actions were uncalled for.

USAPC: Would you go so far as to say that the U.S. is abrogating regional leadership, particularly in the South Pacific, which is of special interest to you?

Faleomavaega: Absolutely. U.S. policy toward the South Pacific focuses almost exclusively on Australia and New Zealand. When the prime minister of Australia or New Zealand visits Washington, he is wined and dined at the White House. But when four prime ministers and four heads of states of Pacific Island nations come to Washington – as they did in May 2007 for the Pacific Islands Conference of Leaders (PICL) – President Bush did not even grant them a courtesy call. Instead, they met Secretary Rice. To me, that is not right.

The leaders of France, Japan, and China have graciously hosted the leaders of the South Pacific nations. President Bush's behavior suggests that they are not important enough; the nations of the South Pacific are not sufficiently important to U.S. interests.

To help rectify Washington's negligence, this past July, I introduced the "Pacific Island Economic and Educational Development Act of 2007." It would authorize funding needed to provide technical and other assistance to these countries through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), provide Fulbright Scholarships for Pacific Island students, and promote other educational exchanges by increasing scholarship programs at institutions like the East-West Center in Hawaii. The bill passed the House in early September and is pending Senate consideration.

USAPC: What else could the United States do that would build confidence in the Asia Pacific region and demonstrate to these nations that it wants and intends to play a leadership role?

Faleomavaega: The nations of the Asia Pacific are not the only ones that have lost confidence in the United States. The Iraq War has shaken the confidence of the entire international community in the United States as a global leader.

The Iraq War is probably the greatest blunder of U.S. foreign policy in the last 100 years in terms of the money we have spent and the lives we have lost. Three terms best define the mess we have created in Iraq: arrogance, ignorance, and lost credibility.

Concerning our arrogance, the United States told the world we did not need its help, we would handle the war ourselves. Now, however, we are practically begging the world to help us clean up the mess we created.

With respect to ignorance, I do not think our national policymakers had any idea what they would encounter when they went after former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. I supported the resolution authorizing the war with Iraq because Members of Congress were informed by the highest U.S. government officials, including the President, that Saddam possessed nuclear weapons. We were told that Saddam effectively had his finger on the trigger, he planned to target Israel, and he would sell the nuclear weapons to terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda.

Based on these intelligence reports, I felt we were in imminent danger. After spending some \$300-400 million to look for these supposed Iraqi nuclear weapons, we have since discovered that we had faulty intelligence and faulty information. This created a misinformed and misguided policy toward Iraq.

Finally, our credibility has suffered. Our handling of the Iraq War has greatly undermined U.S. credibility around the world. Take the Abu Graib torture and prisoner abuse scandal, for example. We preach to the world that torture is undemocratic and morally wrong, but in light of Abu Graib, this message sounds hollow. Some countries that we have criticized for abusing human rights rebut, "Don't talk to us about torture. Don't talk to us about democracy."

How do we restore U.S. credibility in the world? That will be pretty tough. The only way we can become a beacon of democracy is to re-group and set a much better example.

USAPC: U.S. efforts to promote democracy have been tested further by the brutal actions of Burma's ruling junta. I understand you will be taking a congressional delegation to Burma in the near future. What do you hope to accomplish?

Faleomavaega: Yes, in the near future I hope to visit the Burmese military leaders as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of Burma's democratic opposition party. Rather than simply reading media reports and relying on experts, I want to see for myself what the situation is on the ground. When issues arise, I then would have a much better sense of what constitutes a sound policy response because I had been there. I also hope to visit Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam so I can develop a better feel for the countries whose relations with the United States come under the purview of my subcommittee.

I am very concerned about developments in Burma. Many Americans do not realize how dire the situation is. There are more than one million Burmese living in Thailand, and many are in crowded refugee camps housing more than 150,000 people. And in addition to the flood of refugees from Burma, there are significant numbers of Laotian and Cambodian refugees.

My question is: What is the U.S. government doing to help all of these refugees in Asia? What should our responsibility rightfully be? Equally important, how do we deal with repressive leaders effectively? The Burmese junta pays the army well enough so they can retain control of the country.

USAPC: On October 19, President Bush imposed a broader set of economic and financial sanctions against Burma's ruling military elite. What more should be done to break the junta's repressive rule and allow the democratic opposition to assume power as the Burmese people themselves wanted in 1990?

Faleomavaega: Sometimes sanctions work; sometimes they do not. As long as Burma can trade and conduct financial transactions with and through other countries, I do not believe that U.S. sanctions will have much impact. The Burmese ruling junta likely will continue to enjoy good relations with China and India because they both are vying for access to Burma's considerable oil and natural gas resources. China and India's trade and economic relations with Burma therefore will continue to undercut U.S. sanctions.

USAPC: You have said that the United States is hypocritical in how it applies its sanction policy. Specifically, Washington has imposed sanctions on Thailand and Fiji, whose governments were overthrown by military coups, but not on Pakistan because we need its support in the war on terror. Will you introduce legislation to change U.S. sanctions policy?

Faleomavaega: I am definitely pursuing this area of concern and have used Pakistan as the basis for my work. U.S. law calls for sanctions to be imposed on any government that is overthrown via military coup until that government restores democracy to the country.

Eight years following Musharraf's overthrow of the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, however, he still has not called elections or restored democracy to Pakistan. And on November 3, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency, under which he has jailed opposition leaders, clamped down on the media, and forced out several Supreme Court judges. Yet, [at press time] the United States has not imposed sanctions. This is because there is a clause in U.S. sanction's law that allows the President to waive sanctions for national security reasons.

However, Washington did impose sanctions against Fiji following the military overthrow of the government in December 2006. Basically, the sanctions brought to a halt \$2.5 million in primarily military-related assistance, precluded new economic assistance programs under the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, including the Millennium Challenge Account, and denied visas to coup and interim government leaders.

We imposed these sanctions despite the fact that Fiji has been a close ally in the South Pacific. State Department officials who testified before my subcommittee in August even noted that Fiji was quick to condemn the attacks of 9/11 and has been a strong supporter of U.S. efforts to build an international coalition against global terrorism. Nevertheless, our sanctions law required that sort of response.

USAPC: The 2008 election year is right around the corner. What would be your advice to the next president, be he or she a Republican or Democrat, about U.S. policy toward Asia?

Faleomavaega: It is very important for the United States to engage with the nations of the Asia Pacific owing to the massiveness of our own standing internationally. In particular, I have always believed we should pursue broader economic and political relations with China. Educational and cultural exchanges also are important. As I said earlier, some of Members of Congress are very apprehensive about China's rise. But to me, the engagement process is very important.

In that regard, I think APEC has done an excellent job serving as a forum in which the United States and the other 20 member economies can interact on an annual basis. The fact that APEC policy objectives are voluntary and non-binding encourages the nations of the Asia Pacific to participate. And this forum provides the heads of government, including the U.S. president, opportunities for both bilateral and multilateral discussions. It is important that APEC facilitates dialogue, and we should support this organization if we want to continue to be a meaningful player in the Asia Pacific region.