



The Enduring Nuclear Legacy in the Marshall Islands: Recent Developments

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This In Brief examines the recent renewal of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) between the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), which was the site of the largest nuclear explosion in the United States (US) test series conducted from 1946 to 1958. Called BRAVO, the explosion at Bikini Atoll on 1 March 1954 spread radioactive fallout over Bikini and atolls to the east, leaving a legacy of contamination and injury that persists to this day. In a demonstration attended by the Pacific Islands Forum Secretary General Henry Puna, hundreds of people marched in Majuro, RMI, on 1 March 2024, marking 70 years since BRAVO became a defining event in the country's post-war history.

In the Pacific Islands as a whole, the nuclear issue was always inseparable from the question of independence and decolonisation. The tests and their consequences — and, indeed, later efforts at compensation — lasted from 1946 to 1996, and they happened because of the colonial status of the testing grounds and the dominance of the metropolitan testing power, whether it was the US, the United Kingdom or France. See, for example, the recently republished Petition to the United Nations Trusteeship Council from the Marshallese People, 20 April 1954 (MacLellan 2023), an appeal from a colonised nation to be freed from the military experiments of their governing authority. Under Germany from 1885, Japan from 1914, and the US from 1944, the Marshallese had known colonial subjection since the 19th century, only to experience a new, nuclear version of it.

COFAs and island sovereignty

The RMI is one of three Micronesian states 'freely associated' with the US. The other two are the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Palau. Recently, these three states signed new COFAs that will govern their relationship with the US over the next 20 years; compacts briefly summarised as aid and access in return for US strategic monopoly. Citizens of freely associated states, although they are not US citizens, have the unique right to enter and work in the continental or island US without a visa.

From the American point of view, this arrangement (circumscribed independence accompanied by important bilateral strategic agreements) is a key element in its strategic dominance of the north Pacific. US congressional staff explained to Republican

members of the House Committee on Natural Resources in a 14 June 2023 [memo](#) that the freely associated states represent a vital safeguard against China in the Pacific:

Under Title III of the COFAs, the US secures unprecedented and unmatched security and defense rights based in these nations, in exchange for vital US economic assistance and defense guarantees. These rights allow the US to establish military facilities in the FAS in accordance with the COFA terms and to exercise the right of strategic denial. The right of strategic denial allows the US to deny any foreign military, including the PRC, access to an FAS territory. This right is secured in a separate agreement that survives termination of the COFA and does not terminate except by mutual consent of the parties.

The original compacts, adopted by the RMI and the FSM in 1986 and Palau in 1994, demonstrate the unique US approach to decolonisation in a strategically important area: that is, they conferred an alleged 'sovereignty' on these three countries and delivered development assistance while ensuring via subsidiary agreements that they and their maritime zones remain under the control of US military forces in perpetuity. The compacts, then and now, guarantee US military hegemony across an area of ocean greater than the land area of the US itself and bring the Pacific Ocean from California to Guam into a region of American security supremacy.

Negotiating the new compacts

Appearing before Congress in 2023, the FSM and Palau representatives struck a cooperative note with the US. The Marshallese delegation to Congress in Washington DC, on the other hand, devoted most of its presentation to the ongoing consequences of the US nuclear tests conducted in the RMI (Bikini and Enewetak atolls) between 1946 and 1958.

The RMI wanted compensation that compared with what was given to the victims of nuclear testing in Nevada under the US Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. The RMI foreign minister Jack Ading [reminded](#) senators of the sheer extent of nuclear experimentation by the US in his country:

The nuclear detonations in the Marshall

Islands had an explosive yield equivalent to roughly 1.7 Hiroshima-sized bombs per day over the entire 12 years of testing. In terms of radioactive iodine alone, 6.3 billion curies of iodine-131 were released during the US nuclear testing program — 42 times greater than in all of the atmospheric testing in Nevada, 150 times greater than released by the Chernobyl breach, and 8500 times greater than released from Atomic Energy Commission operations at Hanford, Washington.

The consequences were correspondingly injurious to those exposed to radiation through fallout or from the island environment: children with thyroid tumours; mothers giving birth to deformed children (a phenomenon being re-experienced by grandchildren); a general increase in cases of cancer; and the prospect of more to come.

In particular, the RMI government wanted something done about Runit Dome, the concrete structure built on an island in the Enewetak Atoll that is, or is in danger of, leaking radioactive waste, including plutonium, into the surrounding sea. That is where, in the process of an incomplete clean-up of the contaminated atoll in the 1970s, the contractors amassed 76,000 cubic metres of radioactively contaminated soil and rubble, covering it with a concrete cap. Sent to examine the dome a few years ago, the US Department of Energy reported that it represented no immediate threat but was in future danger from rising sea levels and storm surges. Department of Energy [studies continue](#). Runit represents the potentially disastrous collision of nuclear waste with climate change.

Bilateral deals with the US

Palau and the FSM signed the COFA agreements in May 2023. The RMI held out for a better offer on their key issue, the US nuclear legacy. As a congressional report pointed out in November 2023, ‘Compensation for past nuclear testing was a sticking point in the US-RMI Compact negotiations’ (Congressional Research Service 2023). The RMI claimed about US\$3 billion in damages. In the end, the RMI received a US\$2.3 billion package over the coming 20 years — not as damages but as development assistance — and a renewal of the trust fund ‘that the RMI government declares will be used to address the needs of those affected by the nuclear testing program’ (ibid.). Under the agreement finally reached in October 2023, the Four Atoll Health Care Program remains. The ‘four atolls’ are the so-called

‘radiation atolls’ of Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap and Utrik, all of whose people experienced radioactive fallout in the test program, and for whom there are special provisions for health care (ibid.).

Limits to independence and the enduring nuclear legacy

As the Marshallese discovered in negotiating with the Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations, Joseph Yun, the independence of the freely associated states has its limits, and the negotiations were obviously stacked in favour of the US. Even the first order of business for the RMI’s recently re-elected second-time [President Hilda Heine](#) — declaring a state of emergency and alleviating the food shortage on the island of Kili — had origins in the country’s nuclear history, as the Kili population is mostly Bikinians who were forced to leave their homeland because of radioactive contamination.

The bill to pay for the new compacts was supposed to pass the US Congress in October 2023 but was delayed by party-political disagreements. Eventually, Congress approved the expenditure for Micronesia in March 2024 as part of a giant US\$460 billion spending package designed to keep the US government operating (Razdan 9/3/2024).

The nuclear legacy and its connection with the compact will not be forgotten. The first of March, Remembrance Day (formerly known as Nuclear Victims’ Day), will continue to be observed as a public holiday in the RMI as the day the Americans exploded their largest nuclear weapon.

Author note

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