KOROR (MARIANAAS BUSINESS JOURNAL)—Palau President Surangel S. Whipps wants an increased U.S. military presence in Palau’s strategic location in a volatile geo-political area. So does the U.S.

It’s no secret that the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command plans an air defense system in Guam and radar systems in Palau, as well as space-based radars.

While the command is seeking funding for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative in the upcoming 2022 fiscal defense budget, efforts to construct more radar in Palau are moving forward.

Discussions began in 2017 with national and state leadership and landowners on surveillance systems, with an eye to also minimizing environmental impact. Radar installations “offer employment opportunities for Palauan citizens to construct and operate the sites and training for Palauan officials to interpret and make use of the collected maritime data,” an August 2017 statement from the Office of the President said.

According to Journal files, in October 2019 the U.S.-funded a first-of-its-kind Coastal Surveillance System which was completed in Kayangel and Angaur states, to assist in the monitoring of maritime traffic within the nation’s waters and exclusive economic
zone. The U.S. Department of Defense, Palau’s Ministry of Justice and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography conducted a ribbon-cutting on Oct. 2, to announce that the CSS had been installed and was operational. The system will be installed in three more sites in Hatohobei and Sonsorol states in the southwest islands.

The U.S. will also install aerial domain awareness systems in Ngaraard and Angaur.

Naval Facilities Engineering and Systems Command Pacific began soliciting for a Tactical Multi-Mission Over the Horizon Radar in mid-May — with a transmitter site on Babeldaob and a receiver on the island of Angaur, according to Journal sources, to “increase maritime awareness in the Asia Pacific region.”

BAE Systems designed the radar, according to a presentation related to the solicitation. NAVFAC Pacific’s scope is to provide infrastructure for the TACMOR radar system. “This project is “precedent setting” for future U.S. projects in Palau, due to its size,” NAVFAC said in the presentation.

The Norwegian People’s Aid will be used for MEC clearance to ensure the area is rid of hidden munitions. The NPA has been in Palau since April 1, 2015 and works there to develop “the knowledge and skill to take care of the types of ammunition left over from World War II.”

While surveillance systems underline the role of Palau in regional security, that is also something the U.S. Pacific Air Force is interested in supporting.

General Kenneth S. Wilsbach, commander of Pacific Air Forces, told the Journal on 10 September last year, “… we do have desires to increase the options there in Palau. It’s a pretty good location to operate out of, although the airfields wouldn’t accommodate much more at this point besides C130-type aircraft.” In order for us to get fighters, or heavy lift or tankers in there, we’d have to do quite a bit more work.”

The Air Force was looking toward that, Wilsbach said.

Last year saw no shortage of U.S. personnel in Palau, according to Journal files.
Task Force Koa Moana 2020 was in Palau to conduct in Peleliu from July to August. The expedition was comprised of 122 U.S. Marines Corps personnel and sailors.

President Surangel S. Whipps told the Journal on 11 May, during a visit to Guam, “They did community projects — things like that. They did some repairs to schools, the hospital. They’ll be coming again this summer; they’re doing some road work, also helping in the schools.”

One hundred fifty personnel from the U.S. Army’s Defender Pacific 20 Exercise arrived in Angaur for five days from 04 September, 2020 for airfield improvement work and to assist the state government in removal of a barge that was a hazard in the area.

“Angaur was kind of overgrown, so it was cleared off; C-130s can land again,” Whipps said. “Peleliu needs the same kind of work. It’s a partnership and Palau welcomes any efforts to improve those runways.

“The [Roman Tmetuchl International] airport in Airai is already crowded. It probably needs more space to park aircraft,” he said. “It’s in the Compact that it’s a joint use area. We want [the U.S.] to use it, because if they use it, it will increase capacity,” Whipps said.

Andersen Air Force Base hosted the Cope North exercise in February, which also saw a C-130 personnel from the 36th Contingency Response Group at Andersen and others visit Angaur.

“Cope North came, and we were out at the airport to meet them,” Whipps said. “It was a Japanese, Australian and U.S. effort to demonstrate the capability and fly over Palau. People were excited to see the planes.”

An ongoing presence in Palau is the Civic Action Team, comprised of Navy Construction Force personnel, or Seabees who are typically on rotation at Camp Katuu in Airai. They are commanded by the U.S. Army.
“They do community projects. It’s important for our people to have the military presence there — they feel comfortable,” Whipps said. “[The Seabees] help out in the community and that’s very much appreciated.”

Aside from any military in the area who wish to visit for R&R, Whipps would welcome resumption of “friendship visits,” he said. “Of course, that’s in coordination with the United States; DoD has to approve, but I’m sure if its allies, they’d be open to it. We’ve had visits from Australians, the French — if they have frigates in the area and Taiwan.”

Whipps was in Guam from 10-12 May to meet with U.S. representatives for Compact meetings at Joint Region Marianas offices. Typically, Joint Consultation meetings on the Compact are held biannually in Hawaii, but did not take place in 2020, due to the pandemic.

Representatives included Brig. Gen. Jennifer Short, deputy director for the Strategic Planning and Policy Directorate of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command; the U.S. Ambassador to Palau John Hennessey-Niland, who accompanied Whipps to Taiwan at the end of March; and Rear Adm. John Menoni, commander of JRM, who is also the senior military official for Palau.

Whipps said topics ranged through “how we can cooperate and look at the region, look at our security threats and how we can help one another ... illegal fishing and more cooperation with the Coast Guard. How we can secure our borders better is really the ultimate goal.”

The Compact of Free Association between Palau and the U.S. began on Oct. 1, 1994, and provides for a review on the 15th, 30th, and 40th anniversaries in 2009, 2024 and 2034. In 2009 the status quo was extended for one year. According to Journal files, after years of delay the economic aspects of the Compact review were confirmed in 2017 as part of the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, but then required Congressional approval. In March 2018, with President Trump’s signature of the Omnibus Act, Palau was guaranteed US$123 million through 2024, as per the 2010 agreement. In September 2018, the then-Secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, which disburses Compact funds through its Office of Insular Affairs,
authorised a transfer of $87.4 million, which included “US$65.3 million for the Palau Compact Trust Fund and US$22.1 million to be used for economic assistance. The remainder of US$34.0 million will be used through 2024 for infrastructure projects and maintenance,” the Office of Insular Affairs said in a Sept. 20, 201 release.

Negotiations between Palau and the U.S. had been ongoing. “That stopped, because both administrations changed,” Whipps said. “I’ve appointed a new negotiator from the Palau side. A lot of the Compact has to do with economic assistance. When we talk about security, I think it’s important that security goes along with economic stability. Security threats also involve economic threats. Palau is going through COVID, which has required us to get US$100 million in loans just to finance our government. … Then we got hit with the typhoon, it’s like a double whammy. I hope that our negotiator will bring those points up,” he said.

Military activity in Palau provides another source of economic activity, Whipps said. “It builds up hotels, it provides work and more stability.”

Palau’s current negotiator for the Compact is Kaleb Udui Jr., also minister of finance in the incoming Palau administration. Udui has had a long presence in the business community as well as government and was a broker for Remax Gold Fern Realty, ran other business interests and was president and CEO of the National Development Bank. He also was the receiver for the Pacific Savings Bank when PSB went belly-up in 2006 and is a past president of the Palau Chamber of Commerce.

The current U.S. Compact negotiators are Karen Stewart, formerly the ambassador to the Marshall Islands and Acting Assistant Secretary Nikolao Pula, who is the longtime director of the Office of Insular Affairs at the U.S. Department of the Interior.…..PACNEWS