Madame Chair and Ranking Member Lowey:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of funding for the East-West Center in the Fiscal Year 2012 budget for the Department of State. The Center was established by an act of Congress 50 years ago. Although located in Hawaii, the Center has a national and international impact. I support funding of at least $21 million for the East-West Center so it can sustain its core functions, which support key U.S. foreign policy and national security interests in the Asia Pacific region.

Before delving into the implications of the President’s $10.8 million budget request, I would like to highlight the Center’s value. The East-West Center is not a foreign aid program, but pure public diplomacy aimed at projecting American interests and values in Asia and the Pacific through joint study, training, and research. It performs the unique function of bringing Americans and their counterparts from Asia and the Pacific together to address issues of common concern, such as security, trade, governance, human rights, environment, energy security, health, and demography. Participants are drawn from key public opinion groups in Asia, including young lawmakers, journalists, scholars, and teachers, whose views carry weight among their fellow countrymen, particularly with younger citizens.

East-West Center programs require American and Asians to travel and work together for an extended period while they tackle cutting-edge issues. This has been found to have a far greater and more lasting effect than working in isolation. I understand that Congressman Kevin Yoder, a new member of the Committee, was a participant in an East-West Center program, and he continues to speak highly of his experience. As I told my House colleagues during debate on H.R. 1, if the U.S. had created a similar center for the Middle East, bringing young Israelis, Egyptians, and other Middle Easterners together with Americans for cooperative exchange and research at a location on American soil, our world might be a little different today in a positive way.
But the Center’s activities has an impact at the U.S. grassroots and help the average American to better understand a region that will be increasingly important to us in the years ahead. The East-West Center’s teachers’ programs, which focus on developing Asia-related curricula at high schools, junior colleges, community colleges, historically minority colleges, and small colleges, have introduced many young Americans to the Asia-Pacific region. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Center’s local programs are helping to upgrade the U.S. educational infrastructure for the Pacific Century – which is exactly the kind of objective that President Obama had advocated as a priority for federal programs under the current administration.

I’d like to highlight another aspect of the Center’s work, which is its sponsorship of the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders (PICL). The State of Hawaii is the only state that is a member of PICL because of our strategic location among the Pacific Island nations. I attended a PICL conference in Fiji when I was Hawaii’s Lieutenant Governor and what was clear was how the Pacific Islanders viewed Hawaii’s participation as a reflection of our country’s interest in them and this part of the world. As Secretary of State Clinton noted in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 2, China has a major diplomatic offensive underway in the Pacific Islands, one that will only grow larger in the absence of the Center’s involvement in the region.

I’d like to turn your attention to the Center’s budget for FY 2012. The reason why Congress established the Center as an independent entity outside of government is two-fold. First, because of its size and lean organizational structure, it can operate far more flexibly and far more economically as compared with a large government bureaucracy. Equally important, it can reach groups and address sensitive topics that would be challenging for the State Department. Examples include bringing together Chinese and Taiwanese government officials or conducting exchanges involving American and Asian Muslim journalists.

Second, the Center’s status enables it to leverage taxpayer dollars to attract significant amounts of non-appropriated money. Madame Chair, over the years, the Center has evolved into a true public-private partnership. I understand that some 40 percent of its $35 million annual budget comes from sources other than its Congressional appropriation. Thus, any reduction in the appropriated level would dramatically undermine the Center’s ability to leverage federal funds to obtain private monies.

Giving this a more human face, this means that by reducing the Center’s appropriation from the levels Congress has appropriated in recent years to the OMB request – which would amount to a decrease of more than 50 percent in one year –the Center would have no choice but to eliminate 120 of its 190 positions. Needless to say, such a dramatic reduction in staff would be a devastating blow to the Center’s ability to conduct its public diplomacy activities.

(more)
The President’s FY 2012 budget request recommends $10.8 million for the East-West Center. In previous administrations as well as the current one, the President’s budget request for the Center has been artificially low – for a tactical reason. OMB and the State Department fully expect that Congress will plus this figure up to enable it to implement programs and activities that complement and add critical value to State Department’s efforts in Asia. For the past five fiscal years, the OMB figure generally has hovered in the $10 million to $12 million range, which if these figures had been allowed to stand, would have rendered the Center incapable of performing its public diplomacy mission. Fortunately, Congress, in its wisdom, has approved appropriations for the Center ranging from $19.240 million in FY2005 to $21 million in FY2009 and $23 million in FY2010. And neither the State Department nor OMB has objected to the “plus up” because they fully anticipated it.

Funding the Center at the $10.8 million level would have an immediate and potentially devastating impact on this country’s foreign policy and national security interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, a more than 50 percent cut in the East-West Center’s funding would render it incapable of providing meaningful help to the State Department in hosting the summit in Hawaii this November of the heads of government of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). This group of nations includes such Pacific powerhouses as China, Japan, Korea, Russia, and Australia. The Center has been a key partner with the State Department and with state and local officials and the business community in providing staff and facilities for the APEC meeting and building national awareness about the trade and foreign policy implications of APEC. Without the Center’s help, the United States risks falling short as an APEC host in the eyes of these nations as signaling an apparent disinterest for the region.

In addition, steep cuts to the Center’s current budget will mean that it no longer could serve as the organizing U.S. committee for the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, an official “second track” to APEC. The Center assumed this role years ago at the request of the State Department.

To conclude, Madame Chair, I am keenly aware of the fiscal challenges we face. For this reason, I urge the Subcommittee to support funding for the East-West Center at $21 million – precisely because it provides the United States with a focused and economical means of furthering our nation’s foreign policy and security interests in this dynamic part of the world.

Thank you.