

U.S. Territories' Participation in International Meetings

May United States territories represent themselves in international organizations?

This question is periodically posed by the territories; most recently in the context of whether Guam and American Samoa may participate in the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). Forum members are independent and self-governing states in the Pacific. The United States is not a member and does not participate in the annual Forum meeting but furthers U.S. interests by engaging in the PIF Post-Forum Dialogue, which brings together PIF members and twelve other countries that have a strong interest in the Pacific region. Because the United States is not a member of the PIF and because of the political nature and foreign policy aspects of the PIF, the State Department position is that it is inappropriate for U.S. territories to participate in the PIF independently, in any capacity. In the Post Forum Dialogue, the State Department represents the interests of the whole of the United States, including American Samoa and Guam. In the past, the Department of State has invited a Governor from the U.S. territories in the Pacific to participate in the Post Forum Dialogue as part of the official U.S. delegation when the agenda includes topics of interest and relevance to the territories.

By way of background, the State Department does not agree to territories representing themselves in international foreign policy-making bodies given the constitutional principle that the Federal Government speaks for the United States with one voice overseas. The PIF and other such political institutions differ in scope and purpose from other organizations with a technical or apolitical nature, in which the USG may, on a case-by-case basis approve some form of participation of U.S. territories, subject to those territories not expressing views on foreign affairs or other issues beyond their competence. This is the case, for example, with the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

In addition, a territory cannot represent itself in any international body if the rules of that body do not allow for such participation. U.S. territories would not qualify to be members of the PIF as they are not independent and self-governing Pacific Island countries. In October 2005, the PIF issued a new policy on associate membership and observer status.¹ The policy sets out criteria for associate membership, including “whether the territory exercises a degree of self-

¹ Pacific Islands Forum, “Leaders’ Policy on Associate Membership and Observer Status,” as approved by leaders at the 36th Pacific Islands Forum in Papua New Guinea, October 26-27, 2005.

government such that it determines its own policy on regional issues, and will represent itself and its own interests in regional meetings and groups.” U.S. territories do not meet this threshold.

We do recognize, however, the need for and value of American territories’ contributions to the PIF Post Forum Dialogue. As noted above, we have in the past invited the Governors of territories to participate as part of the official U.S. delegation when the agenda includes topics of interest and relevance to the territories and will continue to do so.