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Project for Media and National Security
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DWG: Thank you very much again for finding some time for the Defense Writers Group to speak to us from Hawaii. As you know because of the pandemic all our sessions are on-line right now which in some ways makes it inconvenient and in other ways makes it easier for people like you, Admiral, to speak to us even when you're not in Washington.

Sir, I'm your moderator, David Ensor, of the Project for Media and National Security at George Washington University. You've got on the line here about 30-plus members of the Defense Writers Group and most of them are Pentagon press corps types. I'll launch, if I may, with a general question and then I'm going to be recognizing others to ask you questions, and we're all Q&A, and we're all on the record.

Why don't I just start, sir, by asking you to quickly outline how you see your responsibilities in this command, how you look at the region in which you work, and I guess maybe a little bit on China and how you see it in that context.

Admiral Davidson: Thank you, David. I appreciate that. And I regret, despite our ability to get together in this environment, I regret our inability to actually get together in person. I'll look for an opportunity in the future, the pandemic notwithstanding, that we could all get together. So thanks for that.

Before I get to your question, and quite frankly your three-part question would take me the entire hour to address officially, but I'll make some comments that I think will enable others to

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ask some questions.

But I do want to thank you for this forum and highlight the importance of the free and open journalism that our nation is known for and promoting across the globe as well. I'm really grateful for everything that journalists do not only for their interest in our national security matters but really their contributions in highlighting everything that's going on in the Indo-Pacific, both by the [inaudible] and then by those nations who I think are undermining a free and open Indo-Pacific. [Inaudible] foundation for democracy and it's absolutely critical to our success overall. And one only needs to look to China's pernicious approach most recently about Hong Kong and what they're doing to restrict civil rights and the liberties of the people of Hong Kong. That's an example of what can happen when an unchecked authoritarian government silences a population with censorship and control.

I'll speak here for a few minutes about your question and then I'd certainly welcome any questions you'd like and I'll answer any questions that I like along the way if we can make that bargain.

So on to the Indo-Pacific. In my view, and I've been speaking both internationally and [inaudible] the single most consequential region for America's future, and we'll talk about some of that. And the United States priority theater, you certainly hear that from the Secretary of Defense and the [DoD] apparatus, and I think he articulated it again here earlier today at IISS.

The National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy clearly highlight the Indo-Pacific as a priority theater and I think the demography of the region speaks to that priority quite well. In ten years this region will host two-thirds of the world's population, two-thirds of the global economy.

Our military mission out here is to ensure continued access to

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the global economy in the future, [inaudible] interests of peace and prosperity [inaudible], and then of course to deter any adversarial behavior that would disrupt that [inaudible] attack the United States, attack our allies and partners and as I mentioned, disrupt the global economy.

In my view there are five major security challenges here in the region. First and foremost, I think the greatest strategic challenge to the United States comes from the People's Republic of China. Russia is a factor here in the Indo-Pacific. North Korea is an ongoing challenge. Of course we have the threat of violent extremist organizations in the region. We are still committed to helping our Philippine allies and the challenges they've had really going on two decades now and certainly in the wake of the fight in Marawi in 2017. Of course we have natural and manmade disasters here in the region. People call the Pacific, note the rim of fire around its periphery here including in SOUTHCOM's AOR, in South America. You know, during this season there's not a day that goes by that I don't get some kind of warning about the weather, earthquake, tsunami, the whole shooting match.

Certainly there are other significant security challenges across the Indo-Pacific that speak to the complexity of the region. That includes the impacts from climate change, the level of poverty particularly in Southeast Asia, the rapid population growth in the region and of course everything that comes with disease and [epidemics].

I would say that the values of a free and open Indo-Pacific are even more critical today as we operate under the impacts of COVID-19 and we face increasing challenges to the established rules-based international order in that environment as many nations are forced to divert substantial resources in the form of troops, money certainly, mitigations absolutely to handle the COVID-19 crisis, to help plan for future reference and as the economies throughout the region struggle in this environment, an emboldened Communist Party of China seeks to exploit this

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current global pandemic crisis and they're doing so with more assertive military behavior, maligned diplomatic and information behavior throughout the Indo-Pacific and really their maligned diplomatic and information behaviors happening across the globe.

I'll be happy to go into some specifics here as our discussion continues.

China's pernicious approach to the region includes a whole of party effort to coerce, corrupt and contest the values embraced by the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific. For the very values that like-minded nations across the globe seek to be a part of, to champion and to defend bases like the United States, of course, but also Australia, Japan, New Zealand, India, the UK, France, Canada and the ASEAN nations. All have put forth visions that outline many of the values that are inherent in the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

As an example, I encourage all of you to take a look at the recently released Defense White Papers from both Japan and Australia to understand both the environment that they're struggling with vis-à-vis China predominantly and how their intentions are to handle it going forward.

Conversely, the Communist Party of China promotes a drastically different value system on security, on governance, no trade, on human rights and on intellectual property. Indeed, I say quite frankly frequently, we're in pursuit of a free and open Indo-Pacific, a closed and authoritarian internal order that is the Communist Party of China led organization there does not translate to leadership in such a region. Make no mistake the party is actively seeking to supplant the established rules-based international order, trying to dictate new norms and behaviors on the international community, one that they articulate as a new order with Chinese characteristics and something they do quite publicly and it's happening internally within China's borders as evidenced by everything going on in Xinjiang, for example, but external to China's borders as well

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when it comes to Hong Kong, the Line of Control with India, the South China Sea, et cetera.

The People's Republic of China represents the greatest long-term strategic threat to security not only to the Indo-Pacific but to the entire globe. Indeed, the region as a whole is in a strategic competition with Beijing. I want to make clear, the international order nor the United States seeks to contain China, nor do we seek conflict. We're doing everything we can in the United States and here at Indo-Pacific Command to prevent conflict, but part of that calculus is we've got to be ready to fight and win if we're called upon.

We remain aware that we can certainly lose without fighting in this environment as well. So a deterrent approach is critically important and I'm a key advocate for that. It's important to keep Beijing from achieving its goal of overturning the rules-based international order in the pernicious manner in which they're trying to do it. We must ensure our diplomatic and economic efforts are reinforced by a strong military deterrent and that's foremost in our minds out here in the Indo-Pacific. And those objectives were the driving force behind the comprehensive 1253 report that last year's National Defense Authorization Act required me to submit back in the March time frame. It was delivered to Congress late March and it's titled Regain the Advantage, in which I detailed our strategic initiatives to implement the National Defense Strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

Regain the Advantage is based on four key focus areas to kind of reference increasing our joint force lethality out here in the region, enhancing our force design and our force posture in the region, strengthening our network of allies and partners, and advancing our exercises, our experimentation and our innovation.

If you'd like I'll go into more detail on that later, but I will say that my number one priority and the most important action we can take to rapidly and fully implement the National Defense

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Strategy, the first step is a 360 degree persistent and integrated air defense capability in Guam, what I call the Homeland Defense System Guam.

Of course our Regain the Advantage priorities are all part of a whole of government approach here in the region. We are well aligned across the DoD with state and the interagency in order to ensure sovereignty, access to open markets and adherence to international law, to help provide security and stability in the region and to promote prosperity. As I mentioned before, the United States is not alone in this effort. We remain deeply committed with our allies and partners here in the Indo-Pacific.

Lastly, we look forward to hosting a modified [inaudible] only version of RIMPAC here in the Hawaiian operating areas in August. And then as September dawns we will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II in the Pacific, a profound reminder of the United States' enduring commitment to peace, prosperity and security in the region and all it's [inaudible] in the last 75 years [inaudible].

I think I'll leave it at that and I'll welcome your questions here today. Thank you once again, David, for hosting this. Over to you.

DWG: Thank you, Admiral. We've got a lot of people on the line and probably not enough time, almost certainly not enough time to get to all of them so I'm going to dive straight in. Malorie [Selborn] is on the line I think representing USNI News. Malorie, do you have a question?

DWG: Yes, thank you so much, David, and thank you, Admiral, for doing this.

My question's on the Pacific Defense [Initiative] [inaudible] in your remarks. Congress is sort of coming about with taking some dueling approaches to your report that you delivered to lawmakers. The House seems more focused on partnership and the

Senate seems more focused on capabilities. I'm just wondering if you can talk more about the balance between the two and how you think you in your role can balance both capability and partnership. And also, the administration has expressed some concerns about the ability to keep up with the evolving regional security environment with this initiative and I'm just wondering if you can speak to that as well.

Admiral Davidson: Thank you for the question Malorie. First, the Secretary spoke to IISS this morning and he made plain that he's looking forward to working with the Congress to establish the Pacific Deterrence Initiative to help prioritize our investments. It has a deterrent approach at the heart of it and I think he agreed with that in his comments this morning. And also acknowledge that it's going to require more than just that. It requires an enduring whole of government commitment to the region and acts like the ARIA help with that as well.

To your question specifically about the two, the House and the Senate approach on this, clearly we're going to have to see how this moves through conference, but I would say, and I articulated this when I was talking about what our approach is to the region. Two of the pillars that I'm trying to build our deterrent strategy on, one is strengthening our allies and partners. I would say as well that enhancing the design and posture, how we're located in the region, how we operate in the region, is an element of that. That will help create strategic positional advantages in the region because we enjoy a network of allies and partners and frankly, China does not. So I think that's an important element.

But there's no doubt about it, the capability when it comes to our joint lethality, when it comes to our ability as a warfighting force out here and the JWC, the Joint Warfighting Concept, begins to speak to this. But that's to advance the Joint Force capability set, under the, in Phil Davidson's Indo-Pacific equity, you know, along the lines of dealing with the kind of threat, the challenges that challenge us in all domains.

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From the bottom of the sea up to space. And we're seeing China invest in all those places and that's going to take capability investments from the United States as well.

DWG: Alex [Portovox], I see you're on the line. Do you have a question? If you do, you're next.

DWG: I do. Thanks, Admiral, for doing this.

I guess a simple question based on news of the day, has PACOM seen an increase in cyber attacks or targeting in recent months?

Admiral Davidson: I don't know what you're speaking of when you say news of the day. I will say certainly across the globe and my allies and partners out here as well are seeing increased cyber attacks. And I think it's been well reported across the region what other nations' governments, businesses, think tanks, industry has all been subjected to across the region. It is a growing threat vector.

One of the things that I advocate for in our [inaudible] is for a mission partner environment. This is to help the United States strengthen our allies and partners with a more resilient and common IT partnership environment that would enable us to better protect our information and share information going forward. It's something that, increased cyber attacks is something that we're all going to have to continue to invest in more deeply on the way forward. Thanks.

DWG: Paul Shinkman of U.S. News. Are you on? And if so do you have a question?

DWG: I am. Admiral, I'd like to ask you about your understanding of China's military decision-making. When you look at some recent events in recent weeks like the skirmish along its border with India; its new military deployments in the South China Sea, its crackdown in Hong Kong. To what extent in your mind are they linked? Are we seeing a theater-wide

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campaign by China to secure contested territory? And how concerned should Taiwan be about that?

Admiral Davidson: I didn't quite get all the question. You said, when you were talking about your three examples you said what are we to make of the military's what?

DWG: My question was about China's military decision-making process, and my examples were the skirmish along its contested border with India in the Himalayas, the recent Navy and Air Force deployments to the South China Sea, the, I supposed you could say political crackdown in Hong Kong. My question is to what extent you see these things as linked and with that in mind, how concerned Taiwan should be about that.

Admiral Davidson: It's clear to me in 2020 that China has been advancing their strategy so to speak. Your three examples there are all somewhat military elements of it. Certainly China's aggressive actions and provocations exceed that in fact, right? I mean the skirmish, the standoff with India as you highlighted, but there's been the ramming and sinking of a Vietnamese vessel. There was the pressuring of a Malaysian oil exploration ship, the West Capella, that was operating within Malaysia's own EEZ back in the April time frame. There's continuing harassment of Japanese fishing vessels both in the East China Sea but within the Senkakus as well. There was the targeting of a Philippine Navy ship with a fire control radar from a PRC ship. And then there's been continued and I would say in 2020 increased military operations around Taiwan when it comes to bomber flights, special mission aircraft flights, even some maritime operations around Taiwan as well.

So it's an element of what I observed to be a broader diplomatic and information set of actions to advance strategic aims. I believe that China has kept this in their quiver and meant to roll it out 2020 and they're using the COVID-19 frankly as opportunistically to advance their strategies. I say that

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because they rolled out some diplomatic efforts at the beginning of the year really before COVID became an international issue, the Blue Sea 2020 Initiative. They established those two new administrative districts in the South China Sea around [Hue] Island and Fiery Cross Reef. And then as all of the COVID environment has played out and you've seen the diplomatic back and forth between other nations in the region and China, some of the very pernicious things that China has done, enacting [inaudible] import sanctions on Australia because Australia called for a full investigation of the origins of COVID-19. And then again, the regional tensions you're seeing here.

I think it's part of a broader campaign that's not just military only. I believe it is a campaign inherently, and I believe it comes at the direction of Xi Jinping and the Communist Party of China.

DWG: Dmitry Karsanov of TASS. Are you on the line and do you have a question?

Hearing none, let me go to Gina Harkens of Military.com. Are you on?

DWG: Yes, thank you.

Admiral, you've been talking about several big challenges the U.S. is facing with China. We saw last week that the Trump administration rejected just about all of China's maritime claims in the South China Sea. I'm just wondering how that's going to change what we're seeing in terms of U.S. military action in the region.

Admiral Davidson: Thank you, Gina, for the question. I appreciate that.

I think at the heart of it the policy change is making clear that Beijing's claims in the South China Sea are unlawful and it's frankly a campaign of bullying that must end.

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I think most clearly it highlights that we're going to stand with our allies and partners in Southeast Asia to help uphold their sovereign rights and interests consistent with international law, which I would argue we've been doing throughout,.

The policy changes about maritime claims that fit within the scope of that 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling that was filed by the Philippines against the PRC, and at the heart of it, at the heart of that ruling is to make clear that this is not a U.S.-China issue. This is an international order-China issue. And the U.S. military operations to date and the U.S. military operations in the South China Sea that will continue are meant to assure our allies and partners in the region, help them stand up to China's provocations here, and the litany of military support that we provide, whether it's the direct operations to demonstrate freedom of the seas in there by say the Nimitz and Reagan Strike Groups just in the last few days, or whether it's the information sharing we do when it comes to maritime domain awareness with our allies and partners in the region, it's all meant to help the international order understand that those seas are for all of us. Not the Chinese Communist Party's ambitions for it.

We'll continue those operations and we'll continue to collaborate with our allies and partners in the region with the idea that the freedom of the seas, the critical economic lifeline that is that waterway, both at sea, in the air and importantly under the sea as well when it comes to undersea cables and things like that, that we'll stand with those partners in the region.

Thank you.

DWG: I'm asking because some people are on phones and I can't see if they're on or not, so forgive me if there are some people who aren't that I call upon, but is Eric Schmidt of the New York

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Times with us? Eric, if you are, you can ask a question.

Nope.

Okay, let me go to Michael Gordon of the Wall Street Journal.

DWG: I'm here.

Admiral, I have two questions please.

Can the U.S. adequately defend South Korea at a level below 28,500 troops given that the North Korean threat has not diminished? That's my first question.

And my second question is, you described the Chinese military activities around Taiwan and other places. To what extent has the deployment of U.S. carrier task forces, bomber task forces, battle group, things of that sort, been pre-planned or been an adjustment to the level of activity you've seen on the part of the Chinese?

Admiral Davidson: If I can take your second question first. Certainly our conduct of deployments in the Western Pacific from a strategic point of view have been longstanding and will continue. And I think the Secretary of Defense made quite plain at the IISS engagement this morning, that the Indo-Pacific is the priority theater, and I expect the capabilities and capacities that have been delivered by the United States strategically will continue.

Certainly our operations, if I pull it down to the operational level and things there, as I mentioned before, we're pursuing a deterrent strategy here. And we will do the things required to help deter any maligned behaviors by China and assure our allies and partners in the region. And I'm comforted both in private conversations with my allies and partners and in what I'm seeing in the public sphere, that the United States operations out there are quite welcome, so I appreciate that.

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To your earlier question, the Secretary again made quite plain this morning that we're constantly reviewing postures across the globe. It's been part of his agenda over the course of the last year to do it combatant command by combatant command. And I'll be quite frank, as our nation develops capabilities from F-35 to things that we're developing across the whole of the Joint Force, I look at those capabilities to make sure that we're developing across the whole of the Joint Force. I look at those capabilities to make sure that we're trying to provide the advantages necessary to continue to be able to fight tonight and fight and win when it comes to the DPRK.

So part of that is looking at what the capability sets are there now and making sure that they're the right ones going forward. The administration and the Secretary haven't given me any orders to change any of that posture, but it's part of my obligation to help define what that posture looks like. Thanks.

DWG: Tony Capaccio, are you on the line by any chance? I think not, but I'm just thinking.

Sylvie Lanteaume of Agence France Presse, do you have a question?

DWG: Yes. I would like to know, Admiral, how do you evaluate the risk of a maritime incident with China in the South China sea?

Admiral Davidson: We approach the South China Sea and the operating environment in it like we approach any operating environment wherever it is in the globe. You evaluate what are the conditions in the area and those conditions vary from the political to the strategic down to the operational and tactical. You advance the authorities and the dialogue with your own commanders in a way to help manage and mitigate those risks.

As I said at the outset of this, the United States does not seek

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conflict nor do we seek to contain China. But we are committed to the idea that the South China Sea is a free and open waterway in which all nations have a right to fly, sail and operate whatever they desire, and the economic lifelines of the globe are high dependent on that waterway. So we watch the capability and capacity sets as they develop, we employ the capability and capacity sets that we believe we need to help to mitigate that risk.

DWG: Paul McCleary of Breaking Defense, are you on and do you have a question?

DWG: I am, yes. Thanks for doing this.

Talk about allies for a moment. Japan, it's unclear if they're going to invest in the Aegis Ashore system. Conversely Australia has committed to spending quite a bit of money over the next couple of years on buying new ships and radars and things like that.

What are you looking for from allies as far as partnering with the United States and the kind of capability that they need in the region in the near term?

Admiral Davidson: Thanks for the question.

When it comes to Australia, I think their White Paper that came out just [inaudible] I think articulates the capabilities [inaudible].

DWG: I think I found the person and muted them. Try again, sorry.

Admiral Davidson: Okay, thanks.

Australia's White Paper that came out about three weeks ago I think well articulates the capability sets they're pursuing.

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Setting aside Aegis Ashore, which frankly Japan has just taken a step back to revisit the capability set, particularly when it comes to dispensing and when it comes to the interceptors that are associated with it to make sure that they deliver the domestic safeties that they think their population needs. Japan and Australia are deep partners at buying U.S. combat systems capability deeply. That drives a level of interoperability, a level of commonality and doctrinal approach, commonality and tactics that is a huge advantage for the United States, Japan and Australia. Japan alone has been a key and deep partner when it comes to ballistic missile defense. They're working with industry and with the United States on how to get the capability set that they need that addresses that, and I think we'll be hearing a lot more from Japan in the weeks and months ahead.

DWG: So you think Japan might come back into the Aegis program?

Admiral Davidson: Japan is in the Aegis program. They buy Aegis capability and they have them embarked in their ships as does Korea as does Spain. All those nations have been key partners to the United States.

We have to let Japan decide on where they're taking this, but we're going to certainly partner with them to help advance the ballistic missile defense relationship that the two of us have with each other.

DWG: While we're on that, let me recognize [Rialta Day] of GG Press. If you're on the line, do you have a question?

DWG: Yes. Thank you for doing this, Admiral.

Could you please talk about upcoming RIMPAC a little bit? Have you invited Taiwan to join this year's exercise? I think for sure I mean China is not invited, but please talk about RIMPAC.

Admiral Davidson: China is subject to the National Defense Authorization Act of either 2018 or 2019 in which they're

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required to meet several conditions in order to participate and most of those conditions revolve around their approach in the South China Sea and the need to demilitarize what they've built there over time to assure our allies and partners, so I would not expect to see china in RIMPAC in the very near term.

Taiwan is not a participant in RIMPAC either. Thanks for your question.

DWG: Abraham [Mashi] of Washington Examiner. Are you with us and do you have a question?

DWG: Thanks for calling on me.

First off, I wondered if you could talk a little bit about the timing of the dual carrier exercises and the release of the South China Sea policy with tensions rising in the region, or tensions rising with China.

Then also China hasn't delivered economically for the Philippines. Is that helping Philippines to turn back to the United States mil to mil relationships? What's the status of our basing agreement? Are we improving our mil to mil ties with the Philippines? Thank you so much.

Admiral Davidson: Thanks for your question. The United States-Philippines people to people ties are extraordinarily deep and have gone back for a very long time. I would also that our mil to mil ties, particularly in the wake of the seizures in Marawi in 2017 have been almost completely restored.

So on the 1st of June the government of the Philippines notified us that it was suspending its previously announced termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement, if you can tolerate that double negative statement of it which puts us in a better place. And I absolutely welcome the opportunity to continue to work with the Philippines. As I mentioned we have an extraordinarily warm relationship in the people to people sense, and we have a

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longstanding alliance, and we look forward to continued close security and defense cooperation in the Philippines.

I spend a lot of time interacting with my counterpart in the Philippines virtually now, [inaudible], they have a liaison officer here in the headquarters and a counsel general here in Hawaii as well. That helps us advance this. And of course we have a number of special operators and support people that continue to help the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Mindanao to the south, and we'll continue to have a relationship strongly.

To your first question, the United States routinely operates in the South China Sea and we have for centuries. I remind people quite frequently that one of the first treaties that the United States ever signed in the region was in 1833. It was the Treaty of Amity with Thailand. So we've been operating going back in the South China Sea to the founding of the country and we'll continue doing that going forward to help assure our allies and partners in the region, but for our own needs as well, to demonstrate that that waterway is open to commerce and operations of all navies.

DWG: Bob Ackerman of Signal Magazine.

DWG: Thank you. Admiral Davidson, a question. Which do you think has had more of a disruptive effect on the security of the Indo-Pacific region? The pandemic or China's moves with regard to Hong Kong?

Admiral Davidson: Thank you for the question, Bob. If I heard it correctly, you're asking about what has had a greater impact on the region, the COVID or China's movement in Hong Kong. Is that right?

DWG: Yes, in the security of the region.

Admiral Davidson: I would tell you that I think China's

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reneging on its 50 years agreement to maintain Hong Kong's political structure into 2049, the vacating of that has to send a chill across the entire region. It certainly vacates the idea that one country, two systems as a promise from China is, you know, is totally undermined by China's activities. And across the region, whether it's a first island chain nation or it's a close neighbor like Korea or as far away as Australia, I think it has to really send a chill with the idea that a nation with a closed and authoritarian internal order is willing to undermine its own promises to extend that closed and authoritarian order elsewhere, that's got to be particularly alarming for everyone.

DWG: Jason Sherman, Inside Defense. Are you on?

DWG: I am, thank you.

Admiral, I have a couple of questions about the 1253 report you sent to Congress. I'd like to ask you to say a couple more words about the Homeland Defense System Guam that you mentioned and also the proposal for Pacific Multidomain Training and Experimentation Capability.

On the Homeland Defense System Guam, can you say a bit about the challenges associated with defending Guam that are prompting you to rank that as your number one unfunded priority? And what exactly do you have in mind? An Aegis Ashore, is that what you're looking at?

And on the training facility, can you describe what that is you're hoping to put together and say where, how that project is shaping up in the FY22 budget bill? Thank you.

Admiral Davidson: Thanks, Jason. At the heart of it we probably have to have a longer conversation particularly about your second question.

But to the first point, the backbone of Homeland Defense System Guam would be the baseline 10 Aegis Ashore system. The reason

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I'm a key advocate for that is first, it is technology that is available to us now and could be delivered by 2026 when I believe that the threat will require us to have a much more robust capability than the combination of THAAD which is deployed there now in an Aegis ship in response can provide.

At the heart of it, THAAD and an Aegis ship is meant to defend against a pretty small wedge of the clock, if you would, against a North Korean rogue missile shot against Guam. When you look at the way the threat capability, the threat capacity is manifesting from China in the future, whether it's ballistic missiles from the land, or whether it's ballistic or cruise missiles from air and maritime platforms, you're going to need a complete clock. A 360 degree coverage in order to help defend Guam. Further, Aegis Ashore, the C5I that comes with it, enables you to bring in other capability like PAC-3, other shorter range defenses as well, interact with that much like baseline 10 on a ship enables you to link and engage with other capability sets. That's going to be required going forward. And it comes quickest. That's why Homeland Defense System Guam is at the top of my list.

DWG: When would you need to break ground in order to have that in place by 2026?

Admiral Davidson: The funding, to me, has to get delivered in '21.

DWG: Thanks.

Admiral Davidson: So when it comes to -- begin in '21. You know, it's a FYDP, not a [inaudible].

To your question about exercise and experimentation, we have this extraordinary network, and this is why we need to have a longer conversation with a map in front of us, but we have this extraordinary network of ranges out here. Right? You've got the PRMF on Kauai, you've got the Pohakuloa Training Range on

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the big island, you've got the J-Park in Alaska, you've got the ranges both that are existing and are envisioned at Guam and are envisioned for the Northern Mariana Islands there on Saipan and Tinian. And then you've got the burgeoning capability that comes from our presence and relationship with Australia in Darwin. You've got some Japanese inherent capability and you've got really good structure in Southern California, in Nevada as well. All of that capability, that's been the backbone of ballistic missile defense development, it's been the backbone of offensive long range strategic fires in the United States, the nuclear ICBM, I forgot to mention Kwajalein. The J-Park and what we're doing in Nevada both at the Navy and Air Force ranges there have helped us develop the idea of 5th generation -- not the idea, but tactics behind 5th generation fighters and help us advance integrated air and missile defense.

So if you have a networked capability set and you're thinking about how the Joint Force is going to operate moving forward, particularly the profound defenses that come in, the longer and longer ballistic missile defense fires, longer and longer 5th generation fighter capability, potentially 21st bomber capability. Talk about long range precision fires, offensive fires from the sea, from the air, from the land. You need a wider network of ranges and by the way, that network of ranges has got to be able to simulate a higher capacity and capability of potential opposing forces to you. And then allow you to space the geography and the networks to exercise and all that going forward.

I relate it back to the discussion of AirLand Battle developed by the Army and the Air Force in the last '70s and early '80s. We went and vetted the National Training Center in order to advance that concept and doctrine going forward. We need to do the same thing under the Indo-Pacific warfighting concept and certainly as the nation develops a Joint War Fighting concept and the doctrine that will spin out of that, we need a National Training Center that is based on that network of ranges to fully enable us to train the Joint Force and deter our adversaries.

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DWG: Thank you. And the funding, what's the progress for that?

Admiral Davidson: I didn't hear the question.

DWG: The prognosis for FY22 funding for that project.

Admiral Davidson: It's something I'm engaging on now. I would like to see it be part of FY22 discussions and I continue to have this discussion within the department.

DWG: Jeff Schogol of Task and Purpose and after that will be Aaron Mehta of Defense News.

DWG: Thank you so much, Admiral. I appreciate you doing this.

Hindsight being 20/20, do you think it was a mistake to approve the Theodore Roosevelt's visit to Danang in March?

Admiral Davidson: Thanks for the question, Jeff.

The Secretary commented on the visit to Vietnam from 5 to 9 March this morning in his speech at IISS, talking about what an important event it was. It was only the second visit to Vietnam in the wake of the Vietnam War. Thanks for the question.

DWG: Aaron Mehta, Defense News?

DWG: Thanks. And thank you, Admiral.

Earlier today at his speech Secretary Esper said that since the COVID outbreak's started he's seen a lot more interest in multinational partnerships in the Pacific. That's something the U.S. has pursued for a while, but there's been mixed results. I'm wondering if you can just kind of confirm that you're seeing more of this in the wake of COVID, what that might mean from your perspective for security chances, and what do you think the chances are of this continuing long term?

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Admiral Davidson: Thanks for the question.

One of the things I was highly encouraged by is there was a meeting of what was called like minded partners in Sidney in early February and if I recall correctly it was the Five Eyes -- Australia and New Zealand, Japan, France, the UK, the United States. I can't recall right here in the heat of the moment whether Canada was there or not. But it was a discussion about the kind of not only -- it was a discussion of the kind of economic development needs that were existing in both the Pacific island chain and in Southeast Asia.

I think the Five Eyes plus Japan, France, India, certainly, and certainly ASEAN are welcome in such a conversation. The administration has made plain that ASEAN is central to our approach when we talk about the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific. That is a key multinational forum which we continue to engage on. Not all nations are going to agree on every nuance of every policy that may come out but I believe in the last two years that there is a desire for and a deeper collaboration and conversation that's going on about the needs in the region and the way going forward is to continue to build on that structure.

DWG: Thanks. Dan Lamothe of the Washington Post. If you're on, you'd be next with a question, and the Courtney Kube of NBC.

DWG: Thank you for your time.

To start with, if I could follow, respectfully, Admiral, it seems like you sort of ducked my colleague Jeff Schogol's question there, the question was whether or not you thought it was a mistake, not what the Secretary said this morning.

Secondly, I wanted to ask about that investigation. One thing you highlighted was poor communication as a sort of central piece of what went wrong within 7th Fleet and higher. Do you think it was appropriate for culpability to end with Captain

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Crosier and Rear Admiral Baker? And if so, why not go higher into 7th Fleet and Pacific Fleet? Are you comfortable with what happened there? Thank you.

Admiral Davidson: Thanks for the question, Dan.

Listen, I'm not going to comment further on the CNO's investigation. He's passed that investigation on now to Admiral [Akalido]. He's got a set of accountability actions that the CNO asked him to look at and Admiral [Akalido]'s got that in hand. In my position I can't offer anything else on this without undue influencing the process. I'll leave it at that. Thank you.

DWG: Courtney, do you have a question?

Admiral Davidson: I do. Thanks, David.

Two follow-ons. To Michael Gordon's earlier question, I just want to be clear, Admiral, that you're saying that you're confident that decreasing the U.S. footprint in South Korea will not have any kind of a security impact, and do you see that North Korea could respond in some way if the U.S. draws down forces there?

And then just one more time on the Vietnam visit. I think [inaudible]. The question is, in hindsight, was that the right decision to make when it's very plausible that more than a thousand sailors contracted COVID or ended up getting COVID because of that port visit? Do you still believe that that was the right decision to make?

Admiral Davidson: To your first question about Korea, thanks for that. I'm not commenting on that assessment here in this public forum.

The Secretary's made plain that he's reviewing posture around the globe. They have not ordered any change out here in the

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Indo-Pacific. And certainly as I made mention, the capabilities that need to be preserved there for our warfighting needs, our ability to fight tonight, are going to be my priority and that will be my approach in that conversation going forward.

To your second question, I understand what you're asking. The decision to go to Vietnam at the time and place that that was made, from 5 to 9 March, was done with the complete collaboration of U.S. Pacific Fleet, 7th Fleet, indeed the Carrier Strike Group, and certainly our Embassy in Vietnam. And the mitigations that were placed on that port visit were taken at the advice of medical experts including the CDC, our CDC rep in Vietnam and across the Navy medical apparatus going forward. And lastly, the decision to go, which was made in full collaboration and understanding of what the CDC had established around the world, it was completely aligned with Department of State standards for travel and was taken with mitigations to help mitigate the threat of COVID. Thanks.

DWG: Brian Bender, Politico. Are you on and do you have a question?

Todd South, Military Times. Are you on, Todd?

DWG: Thank you.

Admiral, I just have a question regarding basically first island chain defense and positioning of troops. If you can just speak to where the troops, specifically in Okinawa, for instance, and the moves, ongoing, decades-long work to move them, how that will affect things moving forward. In particular, concerns you may have about not having someone in that chain versus having folks outside the chain within the Guam area. Hopefully that made sense. Thanks.

Admiral Davidson: Are you asking about the DPRI? Is that it?

DWG: Yes. I'm sorry. Thank you.

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Admiral Davidson: The United States posture in the Western Pacific is critically important. A component of that is certainly our presence of principally Marine and Air Forces in Okinawa going forward.

There's been a program of long standing called the DPRI, the Defense Policy Review Initiative with Japan that was I think established first in 2003 and then refined in 2012. I continue to support the requirements there. The United States needs a posture within the first and second island chains in order to be responsive to our allies' security, in order to help defend our U.S. territories in the region. Guam, the Northern Marianas are the westernmost, and help our defense [inaudible] with our allies over the [inaudible] states as well of Lau, Federated States of Micronesia, as well as the Republic of the Marshall Islands. So having that presence forward is critically important to me.

DWG: Thank you. Getting close to the end here. Rick Burgess of Sea Power Magazine, do you have a question?

DWG: Yes, thank you.

During the recent excursion of Nimitz and Reagan Strike Groups into the South China Sea, is there anything you can tell us about the Chinese reaction, whether they sent out aircraft or [inaudible] ships or something like that? Thank you.

Admiral Davidson: The PRC certainly has a presence in the maritime and air domains in the South China Sea as well. I thought Admiral [Kirk] made it quite plain, we see them and they see us. I would tell you that the vast, vast, vast majority of interactions between the two forces are safe and professional. Thanks.

DWG: Thank you.

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DWG: Rich Abbott of Defense Daily, are you on and do you have a question?

Okay. I see Nick Schifrin. Nick, you usually have a question. Do you have one this time?

DWG: I'm sure you mean that in the best of ways, David.

Admiral, thanks so much. I want to go back to Taiwan and a quick follow-up on COVID.

I'm intrigued by the idea that you had of these activities that you listed that China has pursued or are already in their quiver I think is what you said before COVID. I'm just wondering why you think that was already there, it was already part of their plan and they're just using COVID as an opportunity.

And then I'm fascinated by the Hong Kong answer vis-à-vis COVID, and I'm just wondering, asking bluntly, you know, people saw what happened in Hong Kong and people in Taiwan are worried they are next. Are you worried that the Chinese could target Taiwan much sooner than perhaps we believed already? Thanks.

Admiral Davidson: Thanks for the question.

I've been on the record saying that I think the greatest long term strategic challenge to the United States is China. China both in the diplomatic sense and what they say in their public rhetoric have made it quite plain that they believe Asia is not part of [inaudible], they believe Asia is for China and they're starting to advance that idea at a quicker rate. That was the point of what I was saying about their declarations here in the South China Sea, what they've done in Hong Kong.

When you look at their 100 year plan going out to 2049, that's their ambition. I think they're using COVID to just take advantage of the timing and opportunity that presents itself and in a somewhat defensive manner. By that I mean kind of

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personally defensive, trying to squeeze others from examining closely China's handling of the pandemic.

You're going to have to help me on the second part of the question.

DWG: Taiwan, the fears that people we're talking to are, you know, Taiwan's next after Hong Kong.

Admiral Davidson: Every democratic nation in the region is watching what's happening in Hong Kong and worried about their own situation. Proximity plays I think a reason in everybody's calculus across the first island chain.

DWG: That sounds like a yes, sir. It is, you are concerned that it could be next. Right?

Admiral Davidson: Again, it is not a unique position that the United States has about the threat that China presents here. I think all nations [inaudible].

DWG: Please stop talking or put mute on, thank you. Go ahead, Admiral. Sorry.

Admiral Davidson: All nations interested in a free and open Indo-Pacific and the principles that support that vision dislike what China's doing in Hong Kong.

Thanks.

DWG: Admiral, thank you very much for finding time for what I think has been a really interesting conversation. Clearly since we last had a chance to speak to you or someone with your responsibilities, a lot has happened and China is front and center in the great concern.

I hope we can do this again sometime, perhaps face to face. That would be nice if the pandemic permits it. So please keep

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us in mind, and if and when you come to Washington, maybe next year, we might be able to meet again.

In the meantime, thank you so much for doing this.

Admiral Davidson: Thank you, David. Appreciate it a lot. I look forward to doing it in person. Thanks.

DWG: Thank you so much.

And folks, let me just tell journalists you will receive an invitation in the next day or two to a session on July 30th with the leadership of DARPA, the Defense Applied Research Projects Agency.

With that, thank you very much. Bye for now.

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