

MONTGOMERY: I'm retired Rear Admiral Mark Montgomery. I serve as a senior fellow here at FDD and as senior director of our Center on Cyber Tech -- and technology Innovation.

You know, according to the Pentagon's 2022 National Defense Strategy, the multi-domain threat posed by the People's Republic of China is, quote, "the most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge for the department."

Indeed, China has spent the past 25 years working to field modern forces that can establish and exploit asymmetric advantages over the U.S. military, and absent any significant improvements in American and allied investments, Beijing will soon be able to use military force to accomplish its political objectives throughout the Pacific.

We're here today to talk about the Chinese threat, and more importantly what can and must be done in coordination with our allies and partners to maintain and grow U.S. military capabilities and maintain deterrence in the vital Indo-Pacific area of responsibility.

So we're thrilled here today to have the perfect senior leader to discuss these issues with us, the 26th commander of USINDOPACOM, Admiral John Aquilino.

You know, INDOPACOM is the nation's oldest and largest combatant command. It includes more than 380,000 soldiers, sailors, Marines, airmen, Guardians -- I did learn that one -- Coast Guardsmen and Department of Defense civilians, and it's responsible for all U.S. military activities in the Indo-Pacific, covering 36 nations, 14 time zones and more than 50 percent of the world's population.

Admiral Aquilino's a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. He grew up flying F-14 Tomcats, F-18 Hornets and Super Hornets. He commanded VFA-11, the Red Rippers -- I think we're supposed to say "the world-famous Red Rippers" -- and Carrier Air Wing 2. And he served as an adversary instructor pilot. So I think, on the side, he is also perfectly experienced to comment on all the flaws in the new "Top Gun" film. All right.

But his flag assignments included commander of Carrier Strike Group 2 on board the USS George H.W. Bush, director of maritime operations for U.S. Pacific Fleet, deputy chief of naval operations for Operations, and commander of the Fifth Fleet. Most -- just prior to coming to INDOPACOM, he served as the 36th commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

I'm personally grateful to have my good friend "Lung" here with us today; never even knew his first name was John for five years.

We appreciate your 38 years of service, and appreciate that you would take time out of your busy schedule to spend time with us here today.

Today's conversation will be moderated by my good colleague Brad Bowman. Brad serves as senior director of FDD's Center on Military and Political Power, where he focuses on U.S. defense policy and strategy. He's [served as] a longtime Senate staffer, Army officer, helicopter pilot and assistant professor at West Point.

A few quick words about FDD before we get started. FDD's a nonpartisan research institute exclusively focused on national security and foreign policy. In addition to CMPP and the Cyber Center I run, we also house a Center on

Economic and Financial Power. Together, we promote the use of all instruments of American power and produce actionable research and develop policy options to strengthen U.S. national security. We proudly accept no funds from foreign governments.

For more information on our work, we encourage you to visit our website at [FDD.org](https://www.fdd.org) or you can follow us on Twitter at FDD.

Brad, over to you.

BOWMAN: Great. Thank you, Mark, very much for the introduction.

Admiral, welcome to FDD. Really appreciate you making time to talk with us.

AQUILINO: Thanks, Brad. It's certainly a pleasure to be here. It's always beneficial and helpful to see my friend Admiral Montgomery as well.

BOWMAN: Absolutely, absolutely.

Well, I thought we would just jump right in, with your permission.

You know, a lot of folks here in D.C. opine on the nature of the military threat from China. There's a lot of reports published in Washington on that topic. But you are the American combatant commander who understands the threat from the People's Liberation Army, or the PLA, best. So I'm very interested in your current assessment of the threat from the PLA. How is it changing or evolving? And what do you think Americans, who may not be paying attention to this full-time like you are, what do they need to know about it?

AQUILINO: Thanks again, Brad. It's a -- it's an honor to be here.

I think what most people need to understand, and I'm here to tell you, I think many do. They're -- the United States is pretty focused on the challenge that China provides both to the United States and globally.

Militarily, what we are seeing from my seat is the largest military buildup in history since World War II. That buildup encompasses all domains and all capabilities, whether it's naval ships, whether it's fifth-generation aircraft, whether it's missile forces, whether it's cyber capability or capability in space, to include strategic nuclear capability.

So the concern for all Americans should be the pace, scale, and scope that China is growing and what does that mean with regard to intent for a future peaceful globe.

BOWMAN: That's great. Now, it seems to me that the more they build up their military, the more aggressive they're behaving in a lot of places, including the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

You mentioned the largest military buildup since World War II and the largest in the history of the People's Republic of China, I would add. You know, we're witnessing the largest invasion in Europe since World War II and that makes me think of, you know, you're focused full time on the Indo-Pacific but I suspect you see the headlines about Ukraine.

When you look at Ukraine and what's happening there and the unprovoked invasion there, what are the core lessons you draw for the Indo-Pacific? What lessons do you draw for your area of responsibility from Ukraine?

AQUILINO: Thanks, Brad.

I want to first highlight the tremendous work by my partner, General Wolters, and all the NATO nations, as well as the incredible effort by the Ukrainians. I am completely impressed by what they intend -- what they continue to do to defend their nation.

As it applies to Indo-Pacific lessons learned, I think globally what we see is that the world is certainly unwilling to accept a single person's actions, illegitimate, unprovoked, to change the world order, the status quo, the international rules-based order through an unprovoked, illicit invasion. That is not in the benefit of all nations on the Earth, and we should all be concerned about that action.

Now, from where I sit, the most concerning aspect of it is that the People's Republic of China has declared a no-limits policy in support of Russia. And what that means to both the Indo-Pacific and the globe, if those two nations were to truly demonstrate and deliver a no-limits policy -- I think what that means is that we're currently in a extremely dangerous time and place in the history of humanity, if that were to come true.

BOWMAN: No, for sure. And as you would know better than me, we've observed combined China-Russia military exercises and a the joint patrol last year, Russian and Chinese patrol around Japan, and their -- and we've seen, as you said, Beijing echoing some of the false talking points of Russia after the invasion of Ukraine in February.

You know, when a lot of people see headlines about Taiwan and the South China Sea, they -- the first thing they may -- they may not think of Guam, right? But I -- I think it's important for folks to understand the importance of Guam to American military posture and deterrence in the region, so I'm eager to ask you this.

How important, from your perspective as the combatant commander there, are the military bases on Guam to deterrence -- by that, we would mean prevent -- as you know well but some of the viewers may not -- you're preventing something from happening in the first place because the aggressor thinks they can't accomplish their objectives or the costs would be too high -- how important is Guam to American deterrence and likely contingencies in the region?

AQUILINO: Yeah, thanks for that.

Guam's extremely important but let me go beyond a little bit -- start beyond Guam and talk about the United States force posture west of the International Date Line, right?

So, all those posture places are important. Our partners in Japan, the bases in places we operate from on the Japan mainland, are critically important. Our support and our effort and our basing in the Republic of Korea is extremely important. The places we operate with our allies and partners across the region is important to deliver deterrence.

Guam is absolutely a strategic location. We will need to operate from Guam, we will need to both fight for and from Guam. And it will provide a variety of capabilities and support functions, should we end up in some crisis situation. So it's extremely important.

And I didn't leave this for last, but 125,000 United States citizens -- it's the homeland.

BOWMAN: Who would expect to be defended...

(CROSSTALK)

AQUILINO: And you would treat it obviously as important as it is.

BOWMAN: That's great.

I'm glad you zoomed out first there, because that's been an area of research here at FDD about the -- regarding the value of defending forward, the value of forward posture. And you know from your decades of service to our country that, you know, when we station forward -- forces forward, that helps with deterrence, it helps with training, and it helps, ultimately over the long run, reduce some of the burden on us as our partners become more capable. And so I -- I'm glad you made that broader point.

Coming back to Guam, the -- you know, you've talked about its importance to -- you know, we've got to protect the American citizens there, you've talked about its importance for contingency plans in -- in the region. Yet our research tells us that there's a growing Chinese missile threat to Guam. And so I'd love to hear your thoughts on the nature of that growing Chinese missile threat to Guam and any sort of timelines that you can share in an unclassified conversation here.

AQUILINO: Yeah, the -- as we started the conversation with -- right, the increase in capability and the military buildup, the PLA Rocket Forces clearly developing continuous advanced capabilities, longer range -- Guam has a 360 degree threat. So our ability to defend it and to be able to operate from there is absolutely critical.

I won't have any timelines. I can see a continuous improvement and a continuous threat, and what that leads me to do is to move with a sense of urgency in order to provide the capabilities that both defend and we can project power from Guam.

BOWMAN: That's great. No, our -- just -- and you would have better information but our -- you know, our research suggests that -- that the -- that Beijing is sprinting to field ballistic -- advanced ballistic and cruise missiles to threaten much of our posture in the region, including Guam. And as you just suggested, it seems to me we need to sprint faster than they are to protect our interests and Americans there.

In terms of American air and missile defense on Guam, what do you see as the current primary deficiencies that need to be addressed to better protect ourselves there?

AQUILINO: Well, first, I'm extremely encouraged and thankful for the secretary because, as you've looked at the '23 budget, the delivery of a capability has been identified by the department. And I thank both Deputy Secretary Hicks and Secretary Austin for the support.

So the key is to take the tremendous effort and the budget and then move forward to deliver that capability against all those threats, whether they be maneuvering or whether they be ballistic, whether they be cruise missile. We have to be able to deliver that capability to protect the forces and the people against all those threats.

BOWMAN: That's great.

What do you see as the -- to the degree that you're able to talk about it -- what do you see as the basic requirements or lay down for an initial operational capability for improved missile defense on Guam?

And I understand you're reluctant to talk about timeline, but it seems like there -- there's an initial capability we might be able to have to kind of address the immediate threats, and then over time, we might be able to improve and expand that.

And more generally, do you have any concerns that we have to be careful not to make the perfect the enemy of good and add things to it that may delay our -- the deployment timeline for our air and missile defense? Any thoughts on IOC, what that looks like, what FOC looks like?

AQUILINO: Yeah, again, from the combatant commander position, I've articulated the requirements that I believe. I believe that a near-term capability is desired. I also believe in a phased approach and continuous improvement to be able to take on all threats that either might come to fruition and certainly the threats that we see now.

I'm encouraged that the department is working towards that architecture and the delivery of a capability as soon as possible.

BOWMAN: Yeah, OK. How -- you mentioned command and control earlier. How concerned are you about maintaining command and control for forces west of the Date Line? And how might we mitigate the risks associated with you doing that? I mean, we -- it's such a vast area of responsibility. I would imagine that's a tremendous challenge.

AQUILINO: Yeah, half the globe.

That said, we've proven over many years that the United States can operate as a joint force, synchronized, integrated in all domains across vast distances.

That's the exact problem I have in the Pacific. We are continuing to work on ways to ensure that our C2 is resilient. We expect to be attacked in that domain and we have to put in place the structure and the formations that allow us to command and control no matter where we are, whether it's inside the First Island Chain, outside the First Island Chain, all the way back to any headquarters.

So this view of being able to deliver a picture across a node of nodes is the approach we're taking, and I'm confident we can do that.

BOWMAN: Depending what the solution -- either the initial solution or the -- a -- kind of the long-term solution in Guam -- depending what that looks like, do you see that that air and missile defense solution is helping with some of your command and control challenges? And could it eventually help provide some offensive capability to -- that might be useful from a deterrence perspective?

AQUILINO: Yeah, it's critical that we weave in -- again, wherever we have capability, wherever we are operating, we have to be able to weave it in, we have to ensure that everyone sees the same picture, and we have to be -- we have to ensure that it's real time. And the delivery of that capability is a true focus area for us and the support from the department's really helpful.

Admiral John C. Aquilino

Moderated by Bradley Bowman

Introductory remarks by RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery

BOWMAN: One question I always like to ask, with, you know, full deference and respect to the budget request and the many things in it that will be helpful to you and help you and the Americans that you lead accomplish your mission, if you were given -- you know, pick a number, \$5 billion in in a fund, right? Yeah, just pulled that number out of the sky -- \$5 billion above and beyond yjr budget request, where would you spend it to best address your requirements?

AQUILINO: I always love a hypothetical...

(CROSSTALK)

BOWMAN: ... but I couldn't resist.

AQUILINO: So I think what I would articulate is, you know, as a part of the NDAA, INDOPACOM was tasked to provide an assessment and an understanding of capabilities that we view as critical. I would point to that report and I would highlight the critical capabilities of being able to operate in contested space, the persistent battle space awareness, real time, that I articulated, and then the ability to close the kill chain with the correct weapons from any location.

I think funds in the near term focused on those areas would provide immediate increased advantage for the United States and deliver the integrated deterrence that the secretary of defense has tasked us with.

BOWMAN: That's great.

Now -- and for viewers, you know, Congress mandated that your command provide a report, a Pacific Deterrence Initiative Report, that really goes right at the question I asked. And as you've said, they're -- your command, it provided this report and it lays out in quite detail -- in quite specific detail about what you need to do your mission. And I -- I think it's -- I'm glad you highlighted that.

I want to zoom in a little bit on some of the services and what is most helpful to you in your area in terms of what the services can provide. So specifically, what sort of lay down would you like to see from the U.S. Air Force -- forward station -- you mentioned Japan earlier -- what kind of lay down would you like to see from the Air Force in Japan and Guam, in your ideal world?

AQUILINO: Thanks.

Let me start by saying, you know, I have the best component commanders in the Indo-Pacific, who truly understand the region and what's needed to deliver the integrated deterrence we discussed before.

So to do this, it will take the entire joint force. We can have conversations about specific services but the fact that that team comes together for me every day to synchronize their operations, to include space and cyberspace, to deliver a robust posture and set of operations, has been really impressive to watch from my component commanders.

From the Air Force perspective, forward stationed, persistent deep-penetrating capability is what I've asked for. Additionally, the ability to be expeditionary and move around the theater in places that matter when needed, that's what I've asked. And General Wilsbach has been tremendous.

BOWMAN: That's great.

Is it reasonable to expect permanently -- in your view, a permanently stationed Air Force fifth generation aircraft west of the Date Line? Do you think that's a reasonable...

AQUILINO: Yeah, I think -- well, for your awareness, they're already there...

BOWMAN: Yeah, on temporary deployments, but permanently stationed as well?

AQUILINO: I would envision that that capability is certainly -- well, it's certainly desirable, but we would like to get to that. That ability to, like I said, operate in contested space, fifth generation capabilities, whether they be F-22, F-35, are critically important to the ability to deliver deterrence.

BOWMAN: That's great.

From my perspective, for what it's worth, you know, we talked about -- you mentioned anti-access/area denial threats. If when a conflict starts, our assets aren't there, you know, there might be challenges getting them there. So it seems to me there might be some value in having some of those forces already there, once the conflict starts.

What is your -- I'm interested in your assessment of the Air Force's doctrine or concept of agile concept -- agile combat employment. And for viewers, this is, you know, this idea that our -- you know, in a conflict, our bases will probably -- may be targeted by the adversary, and so it's the need to be agile, move around and be unpredictable.

Interested to hear in -- how you think that is going, how is the implementation of this agile combat employment concept going in the Indo-Pacific?

AQUILINO: Yeah, General Wilsbach again is doing a really good job operationalizing the ACE concept in the Pacific. He's executed a few events now, continues to pull lessons learned, and continues to refine on what it means to deliver that capability in the Indo-Pacific.

So we look forward to continuing to utilize it. The concept makes the force more survivable. You combine that with some defenses and now we have a -- a airborne capability that can deliver dilemmas from anywhere.

BOWMAN: Yeah, exactly.

I was privileged to do a podcast a while back with the commander of U.S. Army Pacific Command, and really enjoyed talking with him. And I'm interested to hear your thoughts -- what are the primary things that you need as a combatant commander from the Army -- from the U.S. Army in the region?

AQUILINO: Yeah, General Flynn, as well, is doing tremendous effort operationalizing the multi-domain task force structure. While he's working toward the delivery of those added capabilities, his ability to move around the theater, again, to provide land-based capabilities against either land targets, at sea targets, both in space and cyberspace, those capabilities with the rest of the joint force. Now, there's -- there are problems that are coming from everywhere in the Indo-Pacific, and that's our approach, so...

BOWMAN: So that's interesting. You're talking about offensive strike capabilities from the Army in the Pacific, so long-range precision fires. And then any thoughts on the Army's role in air and missile defense?

AQUILINO: Certainly, they will have a role in air and missile defense.

BOWMAN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

AQUILINO: As you know, THAAD is already on Guam, and as we work to build out what that architecture looks like, as we integrate with our Japanese partners, again, the Army has a critical role in the integrated air and missile defense mission set. We also left out the logistics support, right?

BOWMAN: Right, exactly.

AQUILINO: So the theater logistics commander.

BOWMAN: Right.

AQUILINO: And again, General Flynn has put a lot of effort into ensuring that not only are -- is the -- are the forces deployed, but they are sustained.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: And I can't thank him enough for all of his hard work.

BOWMAN: That's great.

You know, speaking of the Army as -- but as well as the Air Force, we've focused a bit of our research here on the State Partnership Program, and I know from my eight or nine years of working in the U.S. Senate, I didn't know a lot about the State Partnership Program as an active duty military officer, and I went to the U.S. Senate, I became very familiar with it, you know, the New Hampshire National Guard and the Indiana National Guard, and I really came to become an admirer of the program for the long-term relationships and capabilities that that program helps build.

Interested in hearing your thoughts on how we might expand or strengthen the State Partnership Program in the region to best support the National Defense Strategy.

AQUILINO: Yeah, I've spoken specifically with General Hokanson about the benefits that the National Guard provide. The State Partnership Program links us through people-to-people ties through all the nations in the Indo-Pacific.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: They bring expertise from both their civilian positions and their military roles. You know, that continues to expand our relationships with our allies and partners. And again, allies and partners in the region are a critical advantage that any competitors in the region do not have.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: So anything that can contribute to that is extremely (inaudible), and he's really done a lot of work in helping us out.

BOWMAN: Yeah.

We mentioned Ukraine earlier, and I was privileged to do a -- an event awhile back with the chief of the National Guard Bureau, he talked about the California National Guard [State Partnership Program with] Ukraine and the many, many training iterations that they conducted over the years and how those were helpful. And obviously, the primary reason for success in Ukraine is the bravery of the Ukrainian people defending their homes against this invasion, but it just reminded me that these training -- this training that we could do before the invasion will pay real dividends in terms of deterrence or success on the battlefield once it comes. And I would suspect that we'd see the same thing in the Pacific. Excellent.

So you know, Mark, at the beginning as introduction, mentioned you -- your biography and the fact that you were an F-14/F-18 pilot, and that you graduated from the Top Gun school and commanded a number of fighter squadrons, and were an adversary instructor pilot. So based on that, I can't resist the temptation: Have you seen "Top Gun" yet? And what do you think?

AQUILINO: Of course.

BOWMAN: OK, OK, OK.

AQUILINO: I've seen it. I thought it was a tremendous film. I thought it was really entertaining. I have a lot of friends who actually participated in the technical advice and then a variety of partners who actually did the flying in the movie. I'm really impressed. Again, I thought it was a great film, and I really enjoyed it.

BOWMAN: Yeah, OK.

AQUILINO: It brought me back a little bit.

BOWMAN: OK, there you are. I bet -- yeah, some memories there, I would imagine. That's very cool.

So I've asked you a lot of -- we've covered a lot of ground. We've moved quickly. I want to make sure I give you an opportunity to add -- address anything else that I should have asked or that you'd like to cover before we conclude.

AQUILINO: Yeah, thanks.

First of all, thanks again for having me today. It's great to be with the team here, and I appreciate the opportunity.

You know, the key here as we look at this pretty dangerous national security environment is I don't think we can operate under a business-as-usual mindset.

BOWMAN: Yeah, yeah.

AQUILINO: Whether that's the Department of Defense, the services...

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: ... combatant commanders, industry, I think we have to understand, you know, the concern of, you know, what does the future look like based on the security environment and the objectives of some of our competitors?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: And I don't think that future is something that any of us would be happy with, right?

BOWMAN: Yeah.

AQUILINO: We work and operate and fight every day for the freedoms that we have. The ability to deliver a free and open Indo-Pacific is what we spend our time on. And I can tell you, my team is the best team, the greatest set of China and threat experts in the region, and we spend every day trying to (inaudible).

Again, I thank all the servicemembers in the Indo-Pacific for their dedication and sacrifice.

BOWMAN: Well, thank you for that.

No, it's -- it seems to me, just tying things once again to Ukraine, that the horrible situation there just is a potent reminder that investments in deterrence are much cheaper than dealing with the consequences of war, and that we need to make sure that you, as the combatant commander, have everything you need to fulfill the mission that you're given by Washington.

And so that's why I'm so honored and pleased to talk with you, and I want to thank you, Admiral, both for your decades of service to our country, and for the important leadership role that you're playing to protect Americans and our allies in the region and to secure our interests. So I thank you sincerely for what you've done and continue to do for our country.

And thanks to everyone for tuning in and viewing this. And for more information on FDD and our Center on Military and Political Power, we encourage you to visit FDD.org. Thank you.

AQUILINO: Thanks, Brad.

BOWMAN: Thank you, sir.