



FOREIGN POLICY

Deterring Aggression in the Pacific *A Conversation with General Kenneth S. Wilsbach*

April 14, 2023

Featuring *Gen. Kenneth S. Wilsbach*

Hosted by FDD CMPP Senior Director *Bradley Bowman*

BOWMAN:

Many in Washington speculate on the nature and urgency of the military threat from China, and the readiness of U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific to deter and defeat aggression by Beijing. But rather than speculating from afar, it is important to hear the candid and informed insights of American military leaders and war fighters closest to the threat who know best what's actually going on. That's why I'm so happy to talk with U.S. Air Force General Kenneth S. Wilsbach. He's the top U.S. Air Force officer in the Indo-Pacific. That means he spends a good portion of his time focusing on the threat from the People's Liberation Army and ensuring the more than 46,000 U.S. Airmen serving in the region have what they need to accomplish the missions they're given.

In addition to these leadership positions, he's also accumulated more than 5,000 hours in the cockpit. In other words, he's someone leaders in Washington might want to listen to as they make important decisions related to China and the U.S. military.

How capable is China's military? What aircraft, munitions, and capabilities do our forces most need in the Indo-Pacific? And how should U.S. forces be arrayed in the region? As the military threat from China grows and Congress considers the Biden Administration's fiscal year 2024 defense budget proposal, General Wilsbach discusses these issues and more with me.

I'm Bradley Bowman, senior director of FDD Center on Military and Political Power, filling in for host Cliff May. And we're so pleased you've decided to join the conversation too, here on *Foreign Policy*.

General Ken Wilsbach, I want to thank you for making time to talk with me. I'm really looking forward to our conversation.

WILSBACH:

Well thanks Brad. I appreciate your time and looking forward to the discussion. I think it should be pretty fun.

BOWMAN:

Exactly. There's a lot of policy meat that I am excited to dig into with you because I think you're focused on such important issues out there. But before we do that I'd really love, as I often do, to give our listeners a chance just to get to know you a bit. So as a place to start, I saw that you



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graduated from the University of Florida, Gainesville. So tell me about the path that led you there.

WILSBACH:

Well, I grew up in a Navy family. My dad was a Navy pilot and I always wanted to fly. And I happened to be in Florida because my dad was stationed in Jacksonville, Florida when I was in high school. And the closest really big university that had ROTC was the University of Florida. And so I applied and got in. And went to ROTC and graduated and went straight to pilot training. And I initially thought I wanted to be an airline pilot. And so my initial plan was go to pilot training, stay for my minimum commitment, which at that time was six years and then I'd get out and go fly for the airlines. And I changed my mind after my first sortie in pilot training where we did aerobatics and I loved the Gs, loved the aerobatics. And at that point, I wanted to be a fighter pilot and I was blessed to get an F-15 out of pilot training and flew that airplane for many, many years.

BOWMAN:

I want to move on if I can to your current position. So as you know, but some of the listeners may not, you currently serve as Commander, Pacific Air Force; Air Component Commander in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. For listeners who may not be familiar with that lingo, frankly, and how DOD organizes itself, what are the responsibilities associated with your current position?

WILSBACH:

You bet. So on the Air Force, so there's really two sides of my job. One is the Air Force side of the house, and then the other side of the house is my joint role. So let me cover the Air Force side of the house right now. My blue hat, if you will. That role is to organize, train and equip all of those forces that are under my command, which are the Air Forces – the U.S. Air Forces that are in Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, Korea, and Japan. And the actual region really is Alaska from just off the coast of California from the Arctic to the Antarctic, all the way to the Indian Ocean. So that's my region of responsibility in-

BOWMAN:

That's a good portion of the globe I think if I'm not mistaken.

WILSBACH:

So we have about 46,000 airmen that work in PACAF in those locations. And of course those are their main bases and we're constantly going to other countries and moving our forces around and training with our allies. And so part of what we do there is train with our allies in exercises so that



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we can increase the interoperability. And in some countries, we're completely interoperable. I mentioned Korea earlier, we're working side by side every single day with the Republic of Korea, principally the air force. Totally interoperable with Japan and Australia. And there's some others too that we work with frequently.

I mentioned to you before we started rolling on the tape that I'll be visiting India this week. We've got some folks going out to an exercise called Aero India later in the month. So we'll be flying with the Indian air force later in this month. And so constantly doing those kind of training opportunities. And so that's on the Air Force side.

On the joint side, my purple hat, I'm the Joint Forces Air Component Commander for Indo-Pacific Command. So Indo-Pacific Command has a number of components. I'm the air component. There's a ground component, a maritime component, and also a space component. So I'm the air component. And so I, in that role, I provide forces as a part of the overall joint, and if there was a coalition, joint and coalition force to provide air power to the INDOPACOM commander to execute his objectives for our nation.

Principally, that is, the objective for us as a free and open Indo-Pacific. And so in that role we execute daily real world missions as well as training. And their joint. I'll tell you, I've been in the Pacific, you saw my bio, I've had a lot of time in the Pacific. Two times in Japan, two times in Alaska, a time in Korea, four times here in Hawaii. So, I've spent more than 20 years of my career in the Pacific. And I can attest to you that never before have we been more joint than we are right now.

BOWMAN:

That's good.

WILSBACH:

So, in the past we would say we were joint, I'm making it a bit crude here because it wasn't really as crude as what I'm about to describe. It wasn't far off. We'd all go to our own planning efforts, and the Army would plan their thing, and the Navy would plan their thing, and the Air Force would plan their thing, Marines would plan their thing, and then we'd go execute them and they'd happen to be about the same time in the same region. And we go, 'See? We're joint.' That's not really joint.



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BOWMAN: Proximity does not equal combined or joint necessarily.

WILSBACH: Right. But nowadays, all planning starts with everybody in the room. So Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Space Force, we start in the room and we start planning and how we can integrate. And it's very easy for me to say that at this very moment, while we're recording this and it'll be true when you air this, that there is a joint operation happening that was planned from the beginning that is executing as we speak. And so that's really powerful. So that is what one of the main things that we've been working on in my joint role with my purple hat on.

BOWMAN: Thank you. That's a great rundown on the various responsibilities you have. It sounds like you have quite the busy inbox and obviously your portfolio makes all things related to China particularly relevant. We'll dig in on that in a minute if we can.

But before we do that, maybe it's the former Senate staffer in me, I always love to hit the 'who cares?' question – or 'why should the listener care?' So I'd love to just hear your... You're not a politician, I don't want to talk policy or politics, anything like that. But just from your perspective, as someone who served our country and has a front row seat, shall we say, in some of the/on the region and some of the challenges there. Why should Americans busy with their own lives here in the United States care about developments in Indo-Pacific?

WILSBACH: Yeah, that's a good question. And I'm finding that members of Congress are increasingly understanding the challenges that the PRC presents. And more and more I think the people of America are seeing this. But I do think that, and I appreciate you asking this question because I think it is important that the average person on the street understands what's happening. Because if all they do is listen to what the PRC says, you might not have too much of an issue. But when you look into what they do compared to what they say, that may cause you some concern. And it certainly does cause me concern.

And I'll recommend two papers that the PRC recently put out. They put out one in August, it's called The Taiwan Question, and then they put out another paper, this was about a month ago called the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper. It's a long very academic title. The Global Security



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Concept, sorry. Global Security Initiative Concept Paper. They're both very interesting papers.

The Taiwan Question paper talks about how they view Taiwan, and they are obsessed with it. They want it back under their control. They want the Chinese Communist Party to control Taiwan. If for no other reason, that should startle Americans for the fact that they could potentially get the semiconductor business under communist control. That would be nearly catastrophic for the global economy. Because all of our good electronics have Taiwan semiconductors in them, because they make the best and the smallest and the fastest semiconductors. And so that should concern you. And there's many other reasons why we care about Taiwan. That democracy is very important to us, and, of course, in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act — we support them in that.

But when you look at the other paper, the Global Security Initiative Concept Paper, and if you just read that and you hear what the CCP says, I mean there's a lot of things that you wouldn't disagree with. If all it was if you just read that paper because it talks about supporting the UN and it talks about respecting other's sovereignty. And the rule of law.

BOWMAN:

It's like Vladimir Putin talks about regularly and his representative at the UN, they 'love territorial, integrity and sovereignty' -- oops, not so much in Ukraine. Yeah.

WILSBACH:

And so that's what they say, now let's look at what they do. So, a few examples: what about the line of control in India where the China went into India's territory on their east and basically just took it over? And of course, they've had troops right along the border for a few years. A lot of friction between India and China over that border. Just more recently, the Philippines had a coast guard vessel trying to resupply one of their islands. And a Chinese coast guard vessel that was more than 1100 kilometers from China was lazing on the Philippines vessel.

BOWMAN:

And just for the listeners, lazing is when you put a directed energy on a target so that it could potentially be hit by a munition later.



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WILSBACH: That's true. But as you well know, maybe the listeners don't, those lasers aren't like the little laser that you use in a PowerPoint presentation. They can cause physical damage.

BOWMAN: -- blind people.

WILSBACH: So, these are very, very powerful lasers. And so obviously that's unacceptable in international waters. But in this case, these were Philippine waters.

BOWMAN: Yeah, right.

WILSBACH: And then you have -- I know your listeners probably heard about many intercepts that the Chinese Air Force have been doing, mostly in the East and South China Sea, some of which are very dangerous. One that's in particular very dangerous was one of their fighters got in front of an Australian P-8 aircraft, which was a maritime patrol aircraft, and dumped chaff into the engine and across the leading edge of the aircraft. So, chaff are little metal pieces that are used to decoy radars. But when it was released off the aircraft, it hit the front of the aircraft and went down the engine and they were very close. So, one, there was very much danger of a mid-air collision. That's how close they were. I mean, it wasn't miles in front, it was feet in front--

BOWMAN: -- and this was in international airspace, right? And this is just this consistent behavior we see from them where they're making extra-legal, extraterritorial claims to airspace and sea space that they don't own. And then when other countries fly and sail through those areas, they try to intimidate and bully and push them out. Would you agree with that? Is that a fair characterization?

WILSBACH: I think that's right. And it goes to just bad behavior around the world where China just doesn't follow the rule of law and doesn't follow international norms. And they claim all those islands that they built up in the South China Sea, that that was supposed to be international waters and now they're claiming it as Chinese territory.

BOWMAN: And arming those islands to the teeth, right?



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WILSBACH:

Exactly. Exactly.

BOWMAN:

Yeah. Yeah. No, well, that's great. So the one thing I wanted to drill down on is that you mentioned the Taiwan Relations Act. The essence there is that the United States thinks that this conflict or this disagreement should be resolved at the negotiating table, and yet Beijing keeps signaling that they're willing to use military force to do it. And one of the favorite pastimes here in DC far away from the theater of action where you are, is kind of guesstimating when such an attack or aggression could come. And many, including some military leaders, have suggested 2027 as a year to watch.

I'm interested, how do you think about the timeline for potential aggression from Beijing against Taiwan? Is this a next year thing? Is it a next decade thing? Is it a four-year thing? How do you think about the timeline and how can we influence it?

WILSBACH:

Yes, I think that last part of your question is the most important part of the question – how can we influence that? And our objective is to indefinitely deter China from using force with Taiwan. That's our objective. And by the way, that's in their interest. That's in our interest. That's certainly in the interest of Taiwan. It's in the interest of the entire region, maybe even the globe.

So, like I said earlier, China is obsessed with getting Taiwan back. And I wouldn't speculate on the timeline, other than we know what Xi Jinping told his military commanders which was to be ready to take Taiwan by force by 2027. And as I watched the modernization of the Chinese air force and the Chinese navy over the course of the last 20 years, it's unprecedented modernization. They've done that by focusing in their budget on their navy and their air force. But they've also done that by a lot of espionage and stealing from the West to be able to modernize their force. Again, not following international law. They just steal the technology and it shortens their acquisition timeline greatly.

So we're seeing them build to being ready to execute Xi Jinping's guidance to his commanders. So we're seeing that progress. That being said, I don't believe that war is inevitable, and I do believe that we can deter them, and I think that we are deterring them. And perhaps we can maybe talk about



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some later on, maybe think about some of the things that they should be watching in Russia-Ukraine that perhaps would apply to them in a China-Taiwan scenario.

BOWMAN:

Well, let's hit that right now because that was actually on my list. So there's another favorite pastime here in DC is talking about potential lessons for Beijing from what's happened in Ukraine. What lessons do you think Beijing is taking from what they're seeing happen in Ukraine?

WILSBACH:

Yeah, so I don't want to speak for what lessons they are taking because I don't know exactly, but if I was Xi Jinping or if I was a general in the People's Liberation Army, the PLA, here's a few things that I would be paying attention to.

First of all, Russia had a very simple military problem compared to what China would have. Russia had amassed on the border, drive across a land border that didn't have particularly difficult terrain and face what everybody thought would've been an inferior adversary. What China has is the most difficult military operation there is to do, which is an amphibious landing, in conjunction with an air assault, across a hundred miles of open ocean, on an adversary that perhaps is fairly well-defended militarily and has the will to fight, which is like Ukraine. They had a very high will to fight aspect in their country and they were not probably as well-equipped maybe at the time as Taiwan is now.

The other thing that I think surprised Russia, and it should be a lesson that China takes, was how quickly the world came together to support Ukraine. Because they were aghast at the choice that Russia made to invade and they wanted to support freedom. And initially, the economic sanctions came in, the economic support all the way now to many, many countries providing humanitarian support, lethal aid even, economic support, et cetera. And so China should pay attention to that because not only does the U.S. have stakes in Taiwan, the world has stakes in Taiwan, the region has stakes in Taiwan. And so I think China certainly should worry about how the world would come together and create barriers and friction for China if they were to choose violence.

One other area that should be important to note is: look how poorly the Russian military has done in Ukraine. It's been a disaster for them from the



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standpoint of executing. Part of it is they are probably overconfident in what they could do. But one thing that I've learned in authoritarian systems is there's not free flow of information up and down the chain of commands. If I have a problem, I tell my boss and I tell him I'm working on it. Sometimes I ask my boss to help me and I expect the same thing for my subordinates. If they've got problems, don't hide it, tell me about it because I want to know because maybe I can help.

BOWMAN: Yeah, it's not clear Vladimir Putin had that free flow of information when he made these decisions last February 24th, right?

WILSBACH: I doubt it. But that's pretty typical of authoritarian regimes where the boss doesn't get told true information because when they do, the subordinates get in trouble.

BOWMAN: Yeah. Do you worry that Xi could make a bad decision based on poor information?

WILSBACH: I worry about that, but they should worry about it, too, because I suspect there's some Chinese colonels and generals that aren't being completely open with their readiness and their capabilities up the chain. And so, if I was Xi or some of their very senior commanders, I would worry about that, and it would cause me to pause — and it should cause them to pause.

BOWMAN: I hope one of the lessons, just from my part as someone on the outside here now with deference to your expertise, but I would hope that Beijing is observing the agility, determination and, frankly, ferocity of the Ukrainian people to defend their homes against an unprovoked invasion. And I hope they're wondering whether 24, 25 million free people in Taiwan would be equally ferocious and seeing what's happened in Hong Kong and not wanting something similar or worse to happen to them.

So, I hope they're thinking about that. I also note that I do worry, and you don't have to respond to this unless you want to, that Xi would look at Putin's saber-rattling and then say, "Oh, interesting. The Americans didn't deploy forces, they didn't do a no-fly zone," both steps that I think would've been a mistake for us. But then they could say, "Oh, interesting, we could conduct aggression, rattle our nuclear saber and then maybe the Americans would back down." And meanwhile they're conducting, as you



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would know better than me, a massive expansion and modernization of their nuclear arsenal. So, I do wonder about that. You don't need to respond unless you want to on that.

WILSBACH:

No, I agree with you. I can't say it any better than you did, but I agree with you. I think that they should consider those things.

BOWMAN:

Yeah. Yeah. Very good. So let's dig in. You mentioned the People's Liberation Army, and this is really where I wanted to go next. With your permission, I just want to dig into some details on that. So the 2022 National Defense Strategy calls China: "the pacing challenge for the Department of Defense." Do you agree and why is that?

WILSBACH:

I definitely agree and the reason that I agree is because of the modernization that they've been executing over the last few decades present challenges that are unlike any other challenge we might have. They've surpassed Russia's military capabilities in many, many ways. And really there's not many other countries that really can keep up with the PLA, all branches of their service, because they have dedicated so much of their budget to modernizing their force. And they seem to be on a path to use that in some way, whether it's actual employment or intimidation by such force.

So because we have so many interests in the Indo-Pacific and economic ties and friendship and allies and partners in the region, and they could perhaps be threatened by the PRC's objectives, which from my study, the PRC wants to be the only superpower. They don't believe anybody else could be the superpower. And they expect everyone to kowtow to them and show respect and deference. And when they talk about peace and security, which sounds really good in English, what they mean is 'we can be peaceful and we can all be secure if you all will do it the Chinese way'.

BOWMAN:

Right. I suspect the Japanese, the Vietnamese, the Filipinos probably aren't interested in kowtowing these days. I don't know, I could be wrong.

WILSBACH:

We would have to ask them.

BOWMAN:

Yeah, we'd have to ask them. And again, you don't have to respond if you don't want to, but I like to do little interjections every now and then. It



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seems to me they not only want to displace us as the global, of course they want to push us out of the region, they wanted to displace us globally as the preeminent power, establishing a disproportionate influence over rules-making and then really remaking the international order in their authoritarian image. And it seems to me if they're able to do that, if folks don't like what they're seeing in Xinjiang, if you don't like what you're seeing in Hong Kong, if you don't like what you're seeing in the South China Sea, expect a Beijing-dominated world order to look a heck of a lot more like that. That's how I see it.

WILSBACH:

Exactly. Exactly right. And our friends in Taiwan are really concerned because they saw what happened in Hong Kong. As you mentioned, if everybody remembers, China said, "Okay, you can have democratic principles in place in Hong Kong." And then almost at the first opportunity they made those democratic principles illegal and replaced the leadership with Communist Party leadership. And the people in Taiwan are very concerned about that, because they are very fervent about their right to vote and their ability to choose their own destiny. And we support that.

BOWMAN:

The Pentagon's report on the PLA, the People's Liberation Army published last November, said that, "People's Liberation Army Air Force and People's Liberation Army Navy Aviation" – very awkward names for them – "together constitute the largest aviation force in the region and the third largest in the world." And went on to say that, "the People's Liberation Army Air Force is rapidly catching up to Western air forces and continues to modernize."

What is your assessment? You have deep air force expertise. What is your assessment of China's air force?

WILSBACH:

Well, I think they have modernized quite a bit and it might be unprecedented. And while we were very engaged in the Middle East, they were not engaged anywhere, but they took that time to really modernize their navy and really modernize their air force. And when people say they're rapidly catching up, there was an enormous gap between the capability of Western air force and principally the United States Air Force and the PLAAF, the People's Liberation Army Air Force, huge delta between capabilities.



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Of course, they've been slowly closing that gap. There's still a gap. We still have superiority. Our technology is still better than theirs. What a lot of people forget is the skill and the way we train. We have figured out how to train air crew, and I'm not sure that they have, and their system has some roadblocks in it. We so value the warrior spirit and to give people innovative ways to execute their mission. We don't micromanage our warriors. We give them an objective, we tell them a time, and then we cut them loose to figure out the way to do it.

BOWMAN:

Do you see them emulating our red flags and the things that give us that training and operational excellence? I know in the army domain, which I've focused on elsewhere, we have seen them emulating the National Training Center joint readiness training center model. Do you see them emulating red flag-type exercises?

WILSBACH:

I'm not sure if it's red flag, but we certainly see them emulating. Very much the Chinese model is 'copy what works', and they realize what we have works, and so they do copy. Like I said earlier, they've been stealing technology. Well, they've been stealing training techniques as well. We see them. I don't know if they have a red flag, something that's that advanced, but we certainly see them graduating from very simple tactics to much larger tactics and techniques and procedures. We do see that, but I still think we have a qualitative edge.

BOWMAN:

Got it. Let me jump ahead. We'll call that the headache session. Maybe we'll take a little aspirin here. I got a headache. We'll move to what the good guys and gals are doing to address some of these issues. I hear you saying that as the Chinese military is becoming more powerful, Beijing is wielding it more aggressively, whether that's on the border with India, or in the South China Sea, or in the Taiwan Strait. Yet, you commented earlier about how we're sun-setting, we're pulling out the F-15's from Kadena Air Base in Japan. One, do you agree with the value of forward air positioned air power and what are we doing to backfill those F-15's that we're pulling out of Kadena?

WILSBACH:

Yes, definitely think there's a great value in presence for a few reasons. One, because we have forces there that can respond immediately if we have to. The other value of having forces forward is the daily interaction that we have with our allies and partners. In this case, it's with Japan. We



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have an immensely close relationship with Japan, and we're very encouraged with some of the changes that are going on inside of Japan, with respect to their military and boosting their military budget. Some purchases that they're making to upgrade not only their air force, but all of their forces. We're very encouraged by that. The plan for future forces in Japan has not been announced. In the meantime, we obviously have aircraft that are at Kadena from other places around the Air Force that are filling the F-15's as they come back to the states.

BOWMAN:

Got it. My understanding: those are rotational deployments, perhaps, according to public reports, maybe F-22's from Alaska or F-16's from elsewhere. Admiral Aquilino, the Commander of Indo-Pacific Command, told me during a public event at FDD on June 24th, 2022, that, "It would be certainly desirable" to have fifth generation aircraft permanently stationed west of the International Date Line. He said those fifth generation aircraft are, "critically important of the ability to deliver deterrents." First of all, are there any F-22s or F-35A fifth generation aircraft that are permanently stationed in East Asia, or at least somewhere west of the International Date Line?

WILSBACH:

Not permanently. Like I said, I won't want to get into future things that haven't been announced, but stay tuned.

BOWMAN:

Okay. Very good. Yeah, I respect that. You're wearing the stars right now. I'm not. But from my humble perch, it seems like, based on what you just said about the value of forward posture and having our best aircraft forward positioned, might make sense, but I will stay tuned. Put me on your interested shortlist.

WILSBACH:

Yeah, for sure. One other thing, you're talking about U.S. Air Force, but we obviously have F-35B's from the Marines that are in Iwakuni, Japan, and then our partners, Japan, have F-35s, as well as Korea has F-35s. There are fifth generation aircraft west of the Date Line. And then I talk a lot about our forces that are in Alaska, which we have more than 100 fifth gen in Alaska, and Alaska's only nine hours flying time from that part of the world. We can rapidly get fifth gen into the region by self-deploying. That is something that we can get fifth gen west of the Date Line very easily.



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BOWMAN:

No, that's an important point and I'm tracking what you're saying about the Marine Corps, and allies, having some advanced capabilities in the region. I would just add that the goal here is to create dilemmas that are difficult for adversaries to solve so that they don't try it in the first place. It seems to me if we can make that dilemma more difficult for them to solve with additional forward position forces, that might be helpful. Then just the assumptions that maybe in 1990-91, we could deploy whatever we want unchallenged. Again, with deference to you, it feels like we're in a different anti-access air denial space now in this contingency than maybe ever before.

WILSBACH:

No doubt.

BOWMAN:

Yeah, for sure. If folks are going to adopt this idea of having more forward positioned forces for the reasons we just discussed, obviously we need to defend them from what is clearly a growing missile threat to our bases, and also a drone threat. I would note the same Pentagon report on China from last year said the PLA Rocket Force launched approximately 135 ballistic missiles for testing training — more than the rest of the world combined, not including ballistic missile employment. How concerned are you about the threat to our air bases — particularly in the first island chain?

WILSBACH:

Yes, so they certainly proliferated this capability and they've got a lot of weapons. Some of them are fairly long range and they're all very accurate. There's a number of ways that you can perhaps combat this potential threat. One of them is a strategy that we've implemented about five or six years ago called Agile Combat Employment. You mentioned 1991. Back in those days, we load up hundreds of aircraft on a few airfields, and because they were sanctuaries, you didn't have to worry about them getting struck. Those times have changed. Now, you do.

BOWMAN:

They're long gone, right?

WILSBACH:

Yeah. What we have developed is this concept called Agile Combat Employment, or ACE, and it is a dispersal of your forces. Instead of putting hundreds of aircraft on one airfield we take those aircraft and we spread them across many airfields. And they're all linked by a command and control network so that you have a series of hubs and spokes. And you can get aircraft in the air. And even if one of them gets struck while the aircraft



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are in the air, they can go land at a different base get some fuel and some weapons and then take off again.

It's the ability to complicate any adversary's targeting problem. Then while you're doing that, you have defenses at the bases where you can potentially shoot down the ballistic missiles and the cruise missiles coming in. Then, if you do get hit, we have rapid runway repair. A lot of people don't know about our rapid runway repair capability, but literally you can pour concrete, in 45 minutes you can walk on it, in three hours, you can land a C-17 on it which is a gigantic hardware.

BOWMAN: That's a big deal.

WILSBACH: It's a very rapid capability. That's our answer to the ballistic missile and cruise missile threat.

BOWMAN: When you consider the main operating bases, or the main air bases, and what I'll call these 'lily pads' that you might be jumping to once shooting starts under the Agile Combat Employment doctrine or strategy, that's a lot of requirements for air and missile defense to protect both the main operating base and the jump-to sites, which would imply obviously you'd want to have maybe some air missile defense capabilities pre-positioned. Some I think you'd want to be mobile, so they can move around with the air forces. Maybe a sensitive question, you can answer if you want to: are you getting the support you need from the U.S. Army on air and missile defense in terms of protecting your air bases?

WILSBACH: Yes, and I'll qualify that with: I wish we had started the effort five or ten years earlier, but I am getting the support. In fact, headquarters Air Force and headquarters Army have stood up a task force in the Pentagon to study this and some of the capabilities that you talked about, which the Army has started awhile ago with some much more agile base defense capability than what you can get out of a Patriot or THAAD, which they're a great weapon system, but they're not agile.

What you talked about, being able to move them around quickly without ships, or multiple C-17 loads, to get them around is something that I'm interested in. I believe in my heart that the solution is going to be a directed energy type of weapon that can easily handle a straight ballistic



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missile, a maneuvering reentry vehicle, a hypersonic weapon, or maybe even a stealthy cruise missile. The directed energy would be able to handle all of those threats just because the weapon is flying at the speed of light.

BOWMAN:

Right. The direct energy could give you some additional capacity, in addition to kinetic and that makes sense. We're talking about moving things around. As you know, I see the map behind you on the wall there. The distances in Indo-Pacific are vast. As you know better than me, that obviously makes logistics and air mobility vital. I think I know the answer to this question, but I would be negligent not to ask it: do you have the capacity you need to move personnel and material around, and are there any particular areas of focus or need to make all this work in terms of air mobility?

WILSBACH:

We do. In fact, the partnership between Pacific Air Forces and Air Mobility Command perhaps has never been greater, I'm very close with General Minihan. In fact, we have such a presence by Air Mobility Command personnel in our headquarters, doing planning. He has folks from my headquarters in his headquarters doing planning and we have a very close relationship. He is dedicated to supporting us, and I greatly appreciate that. One other aspect of the logistics that sometimes people don't think about is this notion of pre-positioning, and in the 22 budget, the 23 budget, we expect 24 and beyond to have several hundreds of millions maybe even more of money to purchase items that we are pre-positioning.

We've already started this purchase and deploying some of this equipment, but it relieves you of some of the risk of logistics under attack if you have stuff at the islands you intend to fly from already. Things like food and water, and fuel and weapons, and things like that that will already be there. When you disperse, you don't have to resupply straight away that you can operate there for a period of time. We're already starting to purchase those and deploy them.

BOWMAN:

That makes total sense to me in light of some of the things we've talked about earlier about moving things around, and getting access, even in the first place into the region once shooting starts. That makes a lot of sense to me. The Department of Defense and the Air Force, as you know, a few weeks ago submitted its fiscal year 2024 defense budget request. Are there



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any elements in that request that are particularly important to you as PACAF Commander?

WILSBACH:

I mentioned one of them already, and that is the dollars for pre-positioning. There's some other things that are funded inside of that and some of it is construction. There's a number of places where we want to operate where the runway's not quite long enough, the taxiways aren't quite as robust, maybe they don't have the fuel and weapons storage. And so we're getting a few hundred million dollars for that, and so you'll see us doing construction projects to lengthen runways and improve airfields so that when we get there we can operate in a way that we want to operate.

And then, some significant modernization for the Air Force things like the E-7 aircraft, which is, my number-one modernization priority is the E-7 and the reason is because the E-3 is very stressed. It's an old aircraft and they're very difficult to maintain, so we're challenged to get those airborne on any given day. The E-7 will be a brand new aircraft but then once they get airborne the sensors on the E-7 are significantly better than the E-3. It will allow us to find targets that we cannot find with the E-3, and so it just gives us better domain awareness and capability to employ against those targets so the E-7 will be coming in the near future.

The F-15EX is another purchase that I'm looking for that will help us with air superiority and also perhaps targeting ships which gets after that notion that you talked about, anti-access area denial, and then additional F-35's as well as upgrades to many weapons that will help retain that capability gap that we talked about earlier in the podcast. But a lot of those modernizations are helping us retain the ability to achieve air superiority and when the Air Force provides air superiority not only for itself but the joint force we all can achieve our objectives much easier. If we don't have air superiority, kind of like what happened to Russia in Ukraine, everybody fails.

BOWMAN:

Right. No, there's so much great content there. I'm glad you hit on everything. I'm eyeing the clock, I know we're about to run out of time, but your comment about runways, right? I mean speaking to my former colleagues in the Senate, that may not be in the home state or home district, but here you have a war fighter saying that these investments and runways are critical. I hear you saying the E-7 is number one. My colleague



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Admiral Mark Montgomery and I have published several times on the E-3, E-7 issue. We've published with some of our Air Force fellows. I'm glad to hear that our analysis aligns with you because that's exactly what we've argued.

Just real quickly, so there's a lot to like, from my perspective, in the Air Force's budget request, but I did notice that there was almost a \$3.5 billion unfunded priority list. And from my view, China's the number-one threat we confront. INDOPACOM is the most important area of responsibility. And yet, there's a \$3.5 billion unfunded priority list. And these aren't exactly more golf courses or bigger houses for generals. It seems to me these are real, hardcore, war-fighting capabilities. Is there anything on the unfunded priority list that would be particularly useful to you as you're trying to deter aggression?

WILSBACH: All of it.

BOWMAN: Did I hear you say all of it? Okay.

WILSBACH: All of it. All of its particularly interesting to me because we're going to deter China through strength, and the more dilemmas that we can present to the PRC, the better, because we want them waking up every day saying, "Today is not the day."

BOWMAN: Right. Like we talked about earlier.

WILSBACH: And all of those things in that unfunded priority list will help us to do that.

BOWMAN: Yeah. No, very good. And again me talking, not you General, but just to my former colleagues in the House and Senate: if we say China's the number-one threat and if we say INDOPACOM is the top combatant command that we need to be focusing on — if you have that command saying, "Here's things that we need to deter aggression," it seems to me the burden of proof should be on anyone saying that those should not be authorized and appropriated. That's just my little interjection there.

Quickly moving on, you talked about sinking ships. Would you agree that a primary purpose for the U.S. Air Force Indo-Pacific Command should be the ability to sink ships? Is that a core task in your mind for you guys?



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WILSBACH:

Yes. And it may not be obvious if you're not steeped in how we do air superiority but it's an air superiority thing for me and it's because those ships that we're talking about will present a surface-to-air threat. It's that anti-access area denial, so the ships cruise around with surface-to-air missiles, and they project a weapons engagement zone. That means that if you fly into that weapons engagement zone, they're going to shoot you down and it takes away your ability to maneuver in the air. And when we can't maneuver in the air, then our ground forces are put at risk and our maritime forces are put at risk so we want to take away their ability to project that anti-access area denial.

Then the next part of that is they're going to take Taiwan by an amphibious landing. And if the ship can't make it to the shore, then the amphibious landing can't happen. And if the amphibious landing can't happen, they can't take Taiwan by force. And so those are two good reasons why we should be able to sink ships.

BOWMAN:

And I'm proud to say we don't take any funding from any defense companies, so I'm asking this for all the right reasons: it seems to me long-range anti-ship missiles would be a key munition for you to have to support that mission?

WILSBACH:

Agreed. And that's a part of that budget we were talking about.

BOWMAN:

Yeah, absolutely — in the max quantities available, hopefully. Alright. Very good. Well, let's move to conclude. So this is the softball I like to ask at the end here: is there anything that I didn't ask you that you'd like to talk about? Or anything in particular that you want Americans to know about the men and women you lead?

WILSBACH:

Well, thanks. I think, one, my compliments to you as the podcast leader because I think it was really comprehensive and appreciate the questions that you asked. But what I'll tell you, the thing that I want to end on is the men and women that serve in the Pacific, principally the ones that are in the Air Force, since I'm their commander: they love America. They love serving in this region. They're working really hard and we certainly do appreciate all the support we get from the citizens of our country.



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And just don't forget about us out here. Sometimes we're doing some hard work in some tough locations, and I know you've probably been out to some of these places in the Pacific — and it's a long way from home. You can't just jump in your car and drive home. Every place where our airmen are serving is a very long plane ride home. The shortest is about three hours from Alaska. The rest of them are a lot farther than that. And with the way airline prices have skyrocketed, and — especially our young airmen — it becomes cost-prohibitive to go home.

So, don't forget about our airmen serving, especially in the Far East where it's tough to get home and some of them are there without their families for an entire year. And so don't forget their great service, because I never do. I never take for granted how amazing they are and how full of service they are — and dedication and love for their country.

BOWMAN:

What a great way to end this. And I will tell you, from our humble foxhole here at FDD in our Center on Military and Political Power, we are not forgetting about you guys, and we spend a good portion of our time wanting to ensure that you have the means to accomplish the missions you're given. That's kind of our animating spirit here. And this conversation with you has given us some wonderful information to kind of move forward with. And they are a long way from home but as you know better than anyone, what happens there will affect us here at home. And that's why we want you to have everything you need.

And Ken, I just want to say, sincerely, thank you to you and your family for your decades of distinguished and continued service to our country. I want to thank, as you just said, the men and women you lead who defend our country and keep us safe.

And to our audience, I want to thank you for joining us here on *Foreign Policy*.

WILSBACH:

Thanks, Brad. It's been a pleasure being with you today.

BOWMAN:

Thank you again.