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A CONVERSATION WITH COMMANDER OF US INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND  
ADMIRAL SAMUEL PAPARO

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DISCUSSION

ADMIRAL SAMUEL J. PAPARO: Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

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**KUOK:** Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Lynn Kuok and I'm the Lee Kuan Yew Chair for Southeast Asia Studies here at Brookings Institution. Joining me to my far right is my lovely and wonderful colleague, Michael O'Hanlon, who is director of the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology.

Today, we are truly delighted to welcome the commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Paparo. The admiral has had a distinguished career as a naval aviator, staff officer, and commander. His most recent previous assignment was commander U.S. Pacific Fleet from May 2021 to April this year. He didn't miss a beat, and a month later he assumed his current position. So he's been Indo-Pacific commander now for about half a year. I think it's testament to the importance of the Indo-Pacific command and the work that the commander does that we have a packed room today and we have over 1000 people RSVPd to join us online. I see several ambassadors in the room. We have the ambassadors from the Philippines, Singapore and Malaysia, all countries representing -- all representing countries at the geographic heart of the Indo-Pacific. And I believe Lieutenant General or Lieutenant General Steve Sklenka, who was deputy Indo-Pacific commander, had hoped to join us today, if he hasn't, if he isn't already in the room. He's coming back from a trip to the Indo-Pacific as well, a long work trip to the Indo-Pacific, so there are many people who care about the Indo-Pacific and about its peace and security. The Indo-Pacific command is the largest of the United States' six combatant commands, covering a larger area of the globe surface than any of the other commands. Its responsibilities stretch from the U.S. Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean. That's 36 countries, 14 time zones, and 60% of the world's population. So, to add to the admiral's many distinctions, we can also add the ability to surmount or not suffer from jetlag. I think stakes in the Indo-Pacific are undoubtedly high. The region constitutes nearly two thirds of the world's economy that would be familiar to many in this room. It also houses seven of the largest militaries and five of the world's declared nuclear armed countries. And there are more members of the US armed forces that are based in the Indo-Pacific than in any other region. So according to your website, admiral, 380,000 military and civilian personnel. So it's clear that the Indo-Pacific command plays a critical stabilizing role in today's fraught geopolitical landscape, particularly in light of China's growing power and strategic extroversion, as well as the increasing threat from North Korea. Admiral Paparo's command is responsible for deterring regional conflicts, and if deterrence fails, to fight as well as to win wars. Now, to put it more bluntly, in a way that I think really focuses the mind, in the event of, in the event of overt aggression from a hostile regional power in the region, it is Indo-PACOM and the commander that will be on the front line. So today we hope to cover the risks of war in the region, as well as the United States' preparedness to fight wars. But I also wanted to highlight another important element of the Indo-Pacific commander's role, and that is that of defense diplomacy. And I had the privilege of seeing this in action at the Indo-Pacific Chiefs of Defense Conference in Hawaii in September

earlier this year. Now, this was the very first in-person meeting between the Indo-Pacific commander, as well as the PLA's Southern Theater Commander, General Wu Yanan. And I think it was a really important step towards opening military to military ties between the two countries, which I think for years before that had languished. So congratulations on that, admiral. I noticed that exchanges were respectful and cordial even as they did not shy away from difficult issues. So I think that's truly important in today's world. Now, Admiral Paparo, Mike and I are so delighted that you could join us today. We are very excited to soon be asking you some questions. But I would like to know if you had any opening thoughts to start off this session today.

**PAPARO:** Well. Just briefly, maybe I'll just take us on a survey of the military environment and then that will lead us into some of the policy matters and enable you to visualize it, because I think all the power will be in the questions and the answers. Excuse me. So over the summer I saw the most rehearsal and the most joint exercises from the People's Republic of China that I'd ever seen. And with the widest geography, the jointest operations for air missile maritime power that I'd seen over, over an entire career of being an observer. And this included, on one particular day, 152 vessels at sea, including three-quarters of the amphibious force, 200 combat amphibious shapes in the water. I'd seen 43 amphibious -- 43 brigades, including breaching obstacles, onward movement to military operations in urban terrain. We saw also two demonstrations of military power in response to the Taiwan inauguration on May 20th, and then once again on 10/10, Taiwan National Day as it's so called. So just a, this was the largest rehearsal as we've seen on an upward trajectory of PLA modernization and joint rehearsal as the PLA continues to enhance and improve its military capabilities. We saw also this summer the most long-ranging geographic exercise, cooperative exercise between the PLA and Russia, also air and maritime in the Bering Sea as ranging the largest geography. And this included ships and long-range aviation. And then all will have been aware by now that North Korea tested its largest ballistic missile, having reached an apogee of over 7000km, portending a capability that will have the ability to range the entire continental United States. So, this is the environment. This is the military environment that we find ourselves in in 2024. So just to visualize the operational environment, this is where we find ourselves. And I think that's kind of a nice leaping off point, and here we can get into the larger questions of ambitions and intentions as we begin our discussion.

**O'HANLON:** Fantastic. Let me join my praise for the admiral. Ever since Commander Brendan Stickle was telling me about Admiral Paparo several years ago the legend has only grown. I was in Tokyo for the so-called Mt. Fuji Dialogue this year, and when I told people we were going to host you, everybody wanted to come back across the Pacific. And only I was lucky enough to have the plane ticket. But it's really a treat to

have you here, admiral. We're going to do a little bit of tag team up here on stage with questions before we go to the audience for the last 20 minutes. So I just got really one to ask you now before I hand back to Lynn. But, but what you said about the North Korean launch makes me want to add a second one, if I could. At the moment, and this is a technical question but it's an important one, and I'm not sure what you can say in open session, but do we know much about the North Koreans' ability to bring a reentry vehicle safely back through the atmosphere, and whether they would themselves have any confidence that they could do that? Because it's one thing to range North America, it's something else to be able to bring a warhead and detonate it.

**PAPARO:** Not yet. We've not yet seen that capability, but we just see continued testing towards that.

**O'HANLON:** So thank you. My bigger question, broader question really concerns the famous Taiwan issue. And I think the way I'll frame it, you may not want to respond this way, but of course, people all have their favorite date about by when we need to be ready for the most acute moment of threat when China might attack Taiwan. And 2027 tends to be everybody's favorite year because that's when Xi Jinping has told his military he wants them to have a capability to either invade or blockade or what have you. I wonder how you think about the time horizon issue when you're looking at the Taiwan security matter, and whether there is a moment that concerns you more than another? Is it, is the moment of maximum danger sooner or is it later? And is it even useful to think in those terms? Because of course you've got to be ready every day.

**PAPARO:** Yeah, and the closer we get to 2027, the less relevant the date becomes. So, in 2020, 2021 or so, when we first heard it come out in open source, when the date was pushed up from 2035, it seemed, you know, it seemed very alarming, you know, because it was closer up. It was an acceleration by eight years of the of the previous time. But, you know, it's now two years away. And so the closer we get to it, the less relevant it seems to us. And it was always a difference between the, the prospect of a war of necessity, that prior to a date of declaring a readiness to change conditions with force, it might have been a war of necessity, and that is the 2005 PRC anti-secession law. And that's under three conditions: if there was a declaration of independence; if, number two, if the PRC were to see unification or if the PRC were to see a third power intervene on Taiwan's behalf; or number three, if the PRC were to derive that unification was irrevocably beyond its reach via any other means. Those would be, any one of those, a condition under which by its own declared law, it would determine that it must execute a war of necessity. And, and those would be a condition, a casus belli, if you like. Then beyond the point at which it would declare itself ready, it would have an ability to execute a war of choice. You know, it was never a sell-by date. It was never a date

where the PRC had declared, we're going on this date. And I think maybe they're somewhat confused when people conflate it with that. Accordingly, when it was, a long time ago and it was declared in open source, I think it was a, it was a worthy benchmark to say, "seeing this, we had better pay close attention to this." And accordingly, all the time, particularly for a commander that is in the field, in command of forces, who, in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, is charged with the responsibility of being ready. And that is the law that, that directs the Defense Department with being ready. My command, I am responsible for being ready every single day. It, it is, you know, being ready, but as you can see, the closer we get to it, the less relevant that date is and the more we must be ready today, tomorrow, next month, next year and onward.

**O'HANLON:** Thank you. Back to Lynn.

**KUOK:** Thank you. You mentioned the South China Sea earlier, and I was wondering how concerned you are about the risk of escalation there. And I think the way I see it, there are probably two main reasons for concern. One, a U.S.-China clash in the South China Sea, either at sea or in the air, so much like the EP-3 incident in 2001, but now with tensions more fraught between the United States and China, and social media being rife, potentially escalating tensions further. And two, a situation where you might have a U.S. ally in the region, say the Philippines, come head-to-head with China, which then brings in the United States under the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. So how concerned are you about the risk of escalation in either of those two circumstances?

**PAPARO:** So, I like to stay away from the term risk of escalation. You know, I might say it is a risk to mission when there is a risk of unintended escalation. And the way one controls for unintended escalation is by enhancing one's understanding of the strategic environment or of the tactical environment. And so, you know, in popular parlance, everybody imagines a scenario where there are two vessels in close proximity to one another, they're playing chicken on the high seas and there is a collision. That collision results in some bravado, bravado situation, passions are inflamed, and this results in a conflagration with a, you know, with a big war. That does not keep me up at night. Is it, you know, is it -- our units are trained to be safe, to be within the rules, either the Ikkia [phonetic] rules or the International Regulations for the Prevention of the, of Collisions at Sea, and they're trained to be resolute. They're also trained to know the difference between all of them, and when making choices, to choose to be safe. Because we're a dignity culture and not an honor culture, nobody's going to be out there counting coup over playing chicken. You don't play chicken with a \$2

billion warship over some transitory point of honor on the high seas. And if there were to be a collision, the command -- our command and control are in such a state that our units are in such a place that they'll maneuver to a position of advantage, a position of where, where we'll be in a safe position, and cooler heads can prevail. And I have that confidence in that, you know, and allow, allow cooler heads to prevail. This is notwithstanding the Hainan Island lesson. And I'd like to think that the lessons of Hainan Island have been internalized, where if we were to have a collision at sea, you know, a ship would not go sailing into Yulin for help. You know, I'd like to think that we've learned that lesson. So that doesn't really keep me up at night very much. And, and so it's my job, our job as commanders to promote that understanding within our units. And then, when we don't have perfect understanding of the other's intentions, to default to a safe condition, you know, because momentary games of chicken are just not worth it. We're not in a shooting war and nobody wins in a game of chicken. And I've seen this on the high seas, where a unit cut in front of one of my units rapidly, and with deft seamanship, our unit maneuvered well and a collision was avoided. And I have that confidence in our unit's ability, in our unit's ability to do so. Now, granted, you know, there is some chance of collision, but in such a case, I'd be confident in our ability to control that, that situation. That doesn't mean that there's zero chance of it. But you know, I view that, I view a very, very low probability of such a situation in some conflagration. I think this is the stuff of fiction, I truly do. Now, on the matter of our treaty obligations to our, to our ally, the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and our mutual obligations to one another are salient. And specifically, a armed attack on a state vessel are, are salient. And there are tensions in the, for the Philippines in their sovereign rights to the exclusive economic zones with regard to the excessive and unlawful claims of the PRC in the so-called nine-dash line. And those tensions peak and ebb over time. And we have seen this over the 25-year-old case of BRP Sierra Madre. And we have seen the PRC and the Republic of the Philippines come to a diplomatic arrangement on this recently. But this is no reason to be complacent about this agreement, because subsequent to this, we saw another flare up on Sabina Shoal, only 55 miles from Palawan Island. And so we must maintain a watchful eye on this. We together must continue to cultivate our, our defense ties. We're on a mutual campaign to, for enhanced cooperation as the Philippines conducts its comprehensive archipelagic defense concept, which is a long-term campaign to, for the Philippines to enhance their own capability to defend their sovereign rights in their archipelago and in their exclusive economic zone. And the Philippines are not alone within the ASEAN countries in this encroachment.

**KUOK:** You highlighted, I mean, you talked about the need for cooler heads in the context of the U.S.-China encounters at sea and air. The fact of the matter is that much of the tension in that respect has been a result

of fundamentally different views in terms of the rights of coastal states, in the rights of user states to coastal -  
- in terms of what they can do or can't do within the territorial seas of coastal states as well as beyond that.  
What do you think are the prospects of a U.S.-China maritime dialogue in terms of reaching some sort of agreement on the rights of user states in the territorial sea and beyond? Because I think much of it has been, you know, whether or not a coastal state has the right to insist on prior authorization before a warship can pass through their territorial waters, as well as China fundamentally disagreeing with the United States and other naval powers' rights to exercise, to conduct military activities, including surveillance activities beyond the territorial seas within the exclusive economic zone.

**PAPARO:** Thank you, Lynn. I mean, in fact, there are a number of, of vehicles for this, and we just concluded our mutual maritime cooperative agreement talks just weeks ago. And, and similarly, ASEAN, within ASEAN itself, there's work on a code of conduct within the ten-nation ASEAN this year. And Malaysia is the chair of this year, and so there's that as well. And then within the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, of which the United States is a member as a function of, of Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas being in the Western Pacific, there's the code for unplanned encounters at sea. And these are all vehicles by which we can come to agreements for this conduct at sea. And, but without cooperation with one another, without compliance with one another, they're not worth the paper they're printed on. And so time and time again, the other party violates these agreements, and then they, and when they suit their purposes, they cite it. They frequently doctor imagery from it and show it in my face as if they were violations. And, and so we continue to go through the dialogue of it. We continue to urge cooperation. It is to our mutual benefit to do so, and we continue to view the future, hopefully striving for the day when we can, when we can all cooperate lawfully on these conventions through these vehicles.

**KUOK:** I suppose as the cooperation between the United States and China, which is so sorely needed at the moment, but also cooperation between the US and its allies and partners, which the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States describes as a strategic necessity. I'd like to ask you about the state of military cooperation between the United States and one of your allies, the Philippines, in the region, in particular, the status of the, I guess, the current operational readiness of the four additional Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites with the Philippines, which was concluded in 2023. So the agreement giving you, giving the United States access to four additional sites, can you tell us a little bit about where we are in terms of operational readiness of those four sites?

**PAPARO:** Yeah.

**KUOK:** Because those are critical, of course, three facing Taiwan, one facing the South China Sea.

**PAPARO:** Well, presently they're oriented for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. And they've, and they've been quite critical lately in typhoon relief in the wake of -- it's been three typhoons that have struck the Philippines recently. And with the most recently, Pepito that's just struck hours ago, days ago, November 17th to really to superb, superb preparation on the part of the Republic of Philippines with evacuation, they've averted tremendous loss of life and disaster, we've averted disaster or Philippines averted disaster. Right now, those EDCA sites, as they're called, are strictly oriented against humanitarian supplies. So food, water, and medical sites or medical supplies are what's oriented on there. And that is that is the limit of the orientation of those sites presently.

**KUOK:** And is there a reason why it hasn't been developed further at the moment?

**PAPARO:** The sites will be developed, because it is a mutual partnership and because the United States' ultimate value in this are the principles of sovereignty, the sites will be developed at the sovereign wishes of the Philippine government. So I think, you know, based on Philippines' desire, based on the tensions in the region, based on the development of the Philippines' own military, based on the formation of the alliance, I think there's opening to continued development of the sites. But this is the state of play as, as they are right now.

**KUOK:** So we've covered some regional security flashpoints, regional flashpoints. We've covered alliances and partnerships. I just wanted to touch on one topic before I hand it -- one further topic before I hand it off to my colleague Mike. And that's the question of, you know, defense preparedness. The Pentagon, in particular, the secretary of defense, Austin, has described the Indo-Pacific as its priority theater. But of course, you know, what's been in the media a lot recently has been the conflict in Europe, as well as the conflict raging in the Middle East. To what extent do these conflicts impact, impact defense preparedness in the Indo-Pacific?

**PAPARO:** Up to this year, where most of the employment of weapons were really artillery pieces and short-range weapons, I had said not at all. But now with some of the Patriots that have employed, some of the air-



to-air missiles that have been employed, it's now eating into stocks. You know, and to say otherwise would be dishonest.

**KUOK:** Eating into whose stocks?

**PAPARO:** Into the stocks of the United States of America.

**KUOK:** -- and --

**PAPARO:** -- the high-end capability of the United States of America. And if there are x inventory of the United States of America, which is fungible across all theaters in the United States of America, that can be applied equally across any contingency across America, none are reserved for any particular theater, but any can move with alacrity to any theater. Inherently, it imposes costs on the readiness of America to respond in the Indo-Pacific region, which is the most stressing theater for the quantity and quality of munitions because the PRC is the most capable potential adversary in the world.

**KUOK:** So should Taiwan be concerned, for instance? I mean, there was talk about how support for Ukraine was diverting weapons from Taiwan. Is this a concern to you?

**PAPARO:** When you say concerned, you know, should it keep them up at night? Or, you know, we should replenish those stocks and then some. I was already dissatisfied with the magazine depth. I'm a little more dissatisfied with the magazine depth. You know, it's a time for straight talk.

**KUOK:** Thank you. Mike, please.

**O'HANLON:** And thank you for talking again about Taiwan. I want to dive a little deeper on that. But first, going off the South China Sea discussion that you and Lynn just had. Admiral, I don't know if there is a way to interpret Chinese motives, but I'd be curious if you have a theory of the case about why China has become in the last decade so pushy in the South China Sea. And we hear this debate in think tanks and all across the government in the country and some people think it is sort of a harbinger of greater Chinese imperial ambition that will only grow as their capabilities grow, and other people focus in more on the fact that for them it's historic and also it's sort of their submarine bastion, if you will, where they want to operate

with their ballistic missile submarines and would prefer that other people not be watching them while they do so. I wonder if you have a theory of the case about what, what the Chinese primary motive might be in the South China Sea?

**PAPARO:** Well, I think yes, yes and yes. And, you know, as the man said, Thucydides, fear, honor and interest. And so it may be submarine bastions for the nuclear deterrent. It may be, on the surface, a sense of insecurity along its south. It may be mineral wealth all throughout the South China Sea, because they do, in fact, get excited about development in Reed Bank, Laconia Shoals, and Natuna, near Natuna Island. And in the vicinity of Vanguard Bank, they chase fisherfolk and greatly fish fishing fields, chasing poor fishermen out of those fields. And in fact, eight of the ten greatest violators of IUU fishing are PRC state-owned enterprise. And that's the interest part. And from an honor perspective, I think this sense of nine-dash line is how they stoke passion over the matter among, you know, among the Chinese in order to, you know, in order to build support for the nine-dash line. So fear, honor, interest is all a part, but primarily it's the security interests for submarine bastions, for security on the sea itself and its interests on the mineral wealth and the fishing fields. But unfortunately, I'm sorry, but international law, the, the UNCLOS applies and they are international waters, like the Gulf of Mexico is, like this you know, like any other waters are and your neighbors have, have rights to those waters. And your comprehensive national power does not mean you can bully your neighbors, and our partnerships together should be a control for that.

**O'HANLON:** That's a very nice use of Thucydides. Thank you. That's going to stick with me. I wanted to now do a little bit of a deeper dive on Taiwan, and I think the way I would frame this next question would be to ask which type of scenario worries you more: an invasion scenario or a blockade or some kind of a gray area, you know, coercive use of force up to and including perhaps a blockade? And the reason I ask is because, of course, the invasion scenario is the one that, if somehow they can pull it off, game over, right? And or at least you could, you could try to incite a resistance, the Taiwanese could resist. But if the Chinese can pull off the invasion quickly, we're in bad shape. On the other hand, the, the blockade or the gray area is more consistent with all the activity we've been seeing them do in recent years. It's more consistent with what Henry Kissinger used to emphasize to me, which was that, you know, the Chinese like to mess with people's minds and use coercion more than they like to invade, if they can figure out a way. And also, frankly, at a defense analysis level, I worry more about the blockade scenario because it seems to me a counter-blockade operation is very hard to do over a sustained period of time. So I wonder how you think of these

two. Obviously, you've got to think about both types of scenarios, but do you have one or the other that you feel we need to prioritize more going forward?

**PAPARO:** You know, I think being Western and our strategic game is chess. Chess is a 1 or 0. You know, pieces have set moves, regicide is the goal and total victory is the goal. We tend to think in those terms. And we tend to think, well, we're in competition or we have a full invasion. And if we have those two things solved, why we've got everything in between solved. So, and we're not thinking in space and time. So what would happen if there was a temporal blockade, the international community responded, if there was, you know, there was a weakening for a time, a bit of negotiation, a, you know, a, a capitulation of, of one form or another. And this was a breathing matter that was, that was, you know, overall a failure. And I will tell you that the object here, the policy of the United States of America, has not changed. The policy of the United States of America is the three communiques, the Taiwan Relations Act and the six assurances, you know, we might, we might remind ourselves of that. And so that is that the status quo does not change with the use of force. Sometimes we get so focused on Taiwan that we believe that Taiwan is the object. And I appreciate that for, for the Taiwanese, it's Taiwan's right of self-determination. That is the object and that is the policy of the United States. The three communiques is: 1) one China, 2) we'll have, we'll have economic and we will have cultural relationships. The Taiwan Relations Act is that, or the Taiwan Relations Act is the part that relates to me, is that we will give defensive or we will provide defensive articles and support and defensive services to Taiwan. The third communique is that we will reduce that defensive support in proportion to the demilitarization of the Taiwan Straits. You can also appreciate what is implicit in that is the inverse. And then the six assurances inherent is, is that we won't reduce that in relation to the, to relate to our relationship with the PRC, and we won't force Taiwan to negotiate with the PRC ourselves is kind of a big idea for the six assurances, too. We sometimes get so wrapped up in the Taiwan question that we forget the policy of the United States of America and frequent - and for that reason too, we get into a misunderstanding loop with the PRC who don't believe we don't believe the policy of the United States, but the policy has not changed. And when we get really wrapped up in all of this, we forget that it makes liars out of us. If the policy makers change the policy, then that's that. But as it regards me, my job is the Taiwan Relations Act 1979. Be ready. So my job is to be so I want to just take a non-sequitur from all of this. It's a sequitur, non sequitur. And talk about the requirement to be ready for competition for all of these contingencies. Between that and a full invasion. Kissinger's brilliant 2012 book, "On China" begins with a metaphor of chess or wei qi. And the fact is, you know, it's not an either or. You got to be able to play both. So we have to have contingency plans for the full invasion. Got to have contingency - you have to have plans for competition. You have to have

contingency plans for one by one by one by one. And you have to be ready for the policymakers to either tell you to go or to not go, because in the United States of America, policy is king.

**O'HANLON:** And picking up on policy, one place where we saw remarkable agreement between the Trump administration and the Biden administration, and there aren't necessarily a lot of topics where you can say that, would be on the national defense strategies that each administration put forth, first under Jim Mattis in 2018 and then -- please -- and then Lloyd Austin in 2022. And they really both shifted emphasis to great power competition and the Biden emphasis even a little more explicitly on China, but really much more agreement than disagreement. In fact, we once had our new colleague, Colin Kahl here on stage when he was still in government as the undersecretary for policy, basically acknowledging that the Biden team had built on the Trump NDS. So I think it's therefore a nonpolitical question for me to pose to you, which is how are we doing in the implementation of these two national defense strategies from your point of view? In other words, there are a lot of things that I know you need an Indo-Pacific command, more secure communications, more magazines of munitions, satellites that can survive Chinese attack or jamming, logistics support for an extended series of operations. There are a lot of things that are implied in these national defense strategies, some of which I know we've been trying to address, but others of which I sense we haven't gotten halfway or even maybe a quarter of the way yet. I wondered if you could comment on that. How are we doing in the implementation of these last two national defense strategies?

**PAPARO:** Yeah. Well, I mean, I will make a comment about, about -- I agree with the seamlessness of the philosophy over the last eight years of essentially the policy and the strategy for the Indo-Pacific and, and that continuity is good. And, and how we're doing is, you pay me to be unsatisfied with how we're doing. You know, you pay me to be a proper Augustinian, restless, you know, and wanting to get better. And so we are. And, you know, as we think about what is, what for the 21st century is timeless and what is timeful, and what's changing. And so, yeah, there's an overall math to what do I know, the fidelity of what I know and how quickly I can see, understand, decide and act over the fidelity of sensors from the seabed to the heaven and the resilience of that network of sensors, divided by my adversary's ability to see, understand, decide and act. And my ability to affect that, whether it is deception, whether it's momentarily dazzling that or whether it's destroying my enemy's ability to see that and the resilience and the preservation and defense of my sensors. And then, and then it's the appropriate targeting, the fires effects and targeting. You know, fires: if I have to destroy something; effects, if I can get away with not destroying it; and targeting, what I do it with, you'd like to do it with as low a human cost as you possibly can. That is, dangerous things, if you could do it with a

machine, you're going to do it with a machine. And in today's world, with greater A.I. tools, with greater autonomous, with the proliferation of unmanned capabilities, the more unmanned capabilities you can use, the better. But because we see political behavior from our adversaries, because of the morality of that, you can never abdicate these decisions to a machine. And so navigating that, but also navigating the economics of attritable systems should end with an H or a T, hundreds or thousands of dollars. And reusable systems can end with a different number. We shouldn't confuse that when we're making these choices. You know, there's a, there are knees in that curve as we're making these choices. And we should also respect the laws of physics, and that is the Pacific is contested space over about, you know, 8000 miles of ocean by about 8000 miles of ocean, and so a pocket drone that can stay airborne for an hour ain't going to do it. So, you know, understanding what's timeless, understanding what's timeful, and, and knowing the difference among all those systems is the coin of the realm. Understanding an engineering level -- the engineering-level understanding of your adversaries' kill web from the seabed to the heavens, how to find its brittleness, how to affect it, how to do so serially. One or the other in a system is, is important. And then know when you can use smaller systems, know when you must muster large energy systems. Knowing what's timeless, knowing what's timeful, applying economies of scale, engineering. That is the key.

**O'HANLON:** Thank you. Let me focus in on those shorter-range systems, though, for one specific concern. And let me invoke a couple of other scholars and, and officers. Dave Ochmanek at RAND has long advocated that we have ways to shoot at Chinese ships in the Taiwan Strait without depending on big runways or big aircraft carriers to be, you know, required for the takeoff of the aircraft. So he wants to have, you know, unmanned systems that can loiter in large numbers and be maybe based on Okinawa, but not have to use the Kadena airfields there, could perhaps survive and move around their forests. David Petraeus recently wrote an op ed in the Wall Street Journal after a trip to Ukraine where he cited you wanting to think about how we need to be able to turn the Taiwan Strait and its airspace into a hellscape for China if it ever thinks about the idea of trying an invasion. Do we need to do better at using smaller unmanned systems and buying them fast to be able to address that acute threat? Or are we making headway with Deputy Secretary Kath Hick's replicator initiative? Is that the kind of thing that you think she's going to help achieve by some time in the coming months?

**PAPARO:** Yes. I mean, with the -- yes, I mean, certainly these systems are ideal in enclosed spaces. If you can get it, if you can deploy it, then when you're finished with doing this, you're going to have to sustain those

forces in Okinawa over, over wide-ranging space. To do so, you're going to need air and maritime superiority. How am I going to do that?

**O'HANLON:** Gets back to the 8000 mile by 8000 mile problem that you mentioned. You're going to have to worry about that whole space.

**PAPARO:** That's right. Everybody is stuck in this, everybody is stuck in this paradigm of either or. See, in Ukraine, there is a band, you know, there is a line of fire that's supported by 32 countries, of air superiority and secure lines of communication. And on the other side, it's supported by a rebuilt war machine, and 12 zones, 12 time zones of air superiority and lines of communication. And there are, there is a war of attrition in the middle where we're learning a lot about EW and we're changing the game. And there's a lot to be learned in there. But if you think that's all of it, and we can quit on everything else in the Pacific, you know, how are we going to sustain everything else if we completely give up on air and maritime superiority in the Pacific? Oh, let's just quit on everything, we got some drones. All right. Well, the PRC has got 2100 fighters. They've got three aircraft carriers. They have a battle force of 200 destroyers. Well, Roger, we've got a couple of drones. No problem. Yeah, we got the Ukraine thing licked, you know? You know, I mean, I agree with General Petraeus that this is, that for enclosed spaces for executing sea denial, this can be a very key capability. But air and maritime superiority are going to be important over wide expanses. And that means energy and energy density. And here the coin of the realm is dazzle, deceive, destroy an enemy's capability to see and sense the battle space. Maneuver in periods where an enemy can't see, bring long range fires on an enemy, gain that capability to maneuver and sustain across seven joint functions. And one of those joint functions is sustainment. Some of those people on Okinawa, I mean, you know, I don't think a victory garden is going to do it for those folks over the course of the war. I mean, I'm being too cute by half on this.

**O'HANLON:** No, you're being powerful. I appreciate very much the imagery and the argument. Why don't we go to the audience? We've got about 20 minutes left. I'm going to handle a few from my seat and then toggle back to Lynn for one last one. Let's go to Dmitri. First on the fourth row, please.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Thank you, admiral, Dmitri from the Financial Times. I want to bring you back to 2027 and ask you, what is your assessment of whether the PLA is on track to meet Xi Jinping's goal? And how do you think the corruption scandals and the defense ministers and rocket forces commanders being ousted? What impact is it having on the PLA's ability to meet that target?

**PAPARO:** I respect the PLA's capabilities, from, to conduct air and maritime operations in the Western Pacific. I'm still confident in the allies' capability to do what I've said that we've done, but they've made admirable progress. I think the cross-strait invasion would be exceedingly difficult, given some of our advantages. I think anything else is highly, highly predictable across unpredictable terrain, across mountain ranges, and stabilizing a population. On a blockade, I think the international opinion is very unpredictable given the, given the high leverage that such a thing would have on economies. And if this problem were to be internationalized, you know, I think that there are political dimensions of that. And, and, you know, I would be confident of our ability to break a sea blockade. And, and so we're working on that a little bit. And so I'll leave it at that. On the next matter, it, it can't help the confidence in the PLA on that matter. But I won't dismiss the capability of the force, because you pay me to game and to assume the best force in the PLA that they can be. So I will not whistle, you know, past the graveyard on the, on the PLA on these corruption scandals. So it gives me no great comfort that there are these corruption scandals in the, in the PLA.

**O'HANLON:** Let's go to Tony in the back, please. Swing over here.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Hey, Tony Capaccio, Bloomberg. Next August, there are supposed to be thousands of replicators in your area. Fully sustainable and fully tested, according to the Pentagon. What are some of your caveats to that vision, and how important is it to get buy in from the Philippines, Japan and South Korea to pre-position some of these thousands?

**PAPARO:** My caveats are I'm not saying a word about that. Not a word. Good to see you, Tony. Good man.

**O'HANLON:** Let's go over here and the gentleman in the in the white shirt.

**PAPARO:** Thank you. You know, I love you like a brother, but I don't want to talk about that.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Admiral Paparo. Thank you. And the two of you did a very good conversation.

**KUOK:** Can you please identify yourself and your affiliation?

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** I'm Tang, from Sino-US Innovative Times. Thank you. My question to Admiral Paparo, if you were to support policies promoting diversity, inclusion and the similar efforts in the military, that the newly picked secretary of defense and the Trump 2.0, also known as a reformer of Pentagon control, criticizes, says, "woke!" Then your perspective may differ significantly. Well, Mr. Hegseth believes this policies distract from the military core interests. You might view them as essential to the modern military functionality and the cohesion. These could suggest potential conflict between you and the Mr. Hegseth reached potentially --

**O'HANLON:** Wrap it up. Well, if you could wrap it up, please, quickly. Okay. We understand the question.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Yeah. Yeah. A question. How do you like that?

**O'HANLON:** Okay. Thank you.

**PAPARO:** Thank you.

**KUOK:** We could do a few questions.

**PAPARO:** What is going on.

**O'HANLON:** Well, he was asking he really wanted to understand a question that I don't think it's really appropriate for us to want to dwell on with you today, which is to try to foresee what might happen in the Trump administration with some of the rumors about, you know, challenging the culture of the military.

**PAPARO:** I'll just, I'll just offer is it -- military, we have a 250-year tradition of subordination to civilian leadership and compliance with the wishes of civilian leadership. And so, when the next secretary is put in place, we'll obey the next, the next secretary, in accordance with the traditions and the Constitution. Thank you.

**O'HANLON:** Thank you. Gentlemen, over here in the fourth row.



**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Thank you, admiral. Donghui Yu with China Review News Agency of Hong Kong. A couple of days ago when President Biden met with President Xi in Lima, they emphasized the importance of a stable US-China relations in, in this transition period. From your standing point, what would you do to ensure a stable relations in the next two months? And do you believe the U.S.-China mil-to-mil relations will be sustainable in the next four years? And talk a little bit more about your relationship with your counterpart in China. I know you're having a dialogue recently. Thank you.

**PAPARO:** Thank you. Well, first, we're status quo power, and our operations reflect that commitment to the status quo. And that is just, our exercises, our line, our lines of effort reflect that, reflect that stability. And so first, our behaviors reflect that stability, and the stability of Secretary, of Secretary Austin, who's in the Indo-Pacific right now. I expect, you know, a seamless handoff from the secretary to the next secretary and or an acting secretary. And each time, I don't foresee any instability across those, across those lines. On the matter of mil-to-mil, General Wu Yanan and I, we had a very cordial, very productive conversation, first by video teleconference. And then he visited on, on what's called the Big Island, Hawaii Island. And we had several informal discussions in social arenas. And then we had a substantive 1.5-hour discussions where we respectfully aired our differences. They were very focused at the operational level, and that is on matters of maneuver, disagreeing on matters of, of the employment of lasers, the employment of sonar, the employment of maneuver, those employment of behaviors. Each of us told the other where we thought that there was areas where we thought it was dangerous, dangerous to people, dangerous to maneuver. And I offered the hope that we could have continued dialogue. My opinion, I think my opinion is that it's very positive. I don't want it any more than anybody else. I don't believe I want it more than the PRC. I don't intend to have to make any concessions to have mil to mil. I won't make any concessions to have mil to mil. They are mutually beneficial to both parties. The other party should want it equally as I do. Frequently when we have encounters at sea, the other party says avoid misunderstanding, and there's no chance of misunderstanding. I know precisely what's going on, but you know, I think that they're fruitful. I think my conversation with Yanan, who met my wife at the conference, who very generously gave my 12-year-old son a bookmark and we presented gifts to one another very cordially. And I think there's, there's a basis for continued respectful dialogue. And I found him to be a very decent man. I will tell you also that he received a lot of withering criticism on matters of policy over which he has no control. And on some of these matters, I actually came to his defense because he has no control over these matters of policy. We are perfect instruments of our government's policy designed to execute them. And, and I thought he handled those with great aplomb. I credit and respect him for that.

**O'HANLON:** Lynn, I'll throw it back to you for any final questions from the audience and the online questions you wanted to bring.

**KUOK:** Thank you, Mike. For the next question, I would like to call on Singapore's ambassador to the United States, Ambassador Lui Tuck Yew.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Admiral, thank you for sharing with us. You mentioned your engagement with Wu Yanan, Southern Theater Command, on several occasions for several times already. He's a new commander, probably three months in the job. The person that we really need to engage is Lin Xiangyang, Eastern Theater Command, who has been there for two and a half years because he looks after Taiwan and East Asia. You don't hear of that engagement over the last few years. Is there a sense that China would rather have the US engage with the Southern Theater but not the Eastern Theater?

**PAPARO:** Yes.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** One, yes. Okay. The second is you talk about geography of the theater. And I think it does put the US at some disadvantage. Kadena is 450 miles away, Guam is too far to affect --

**PAPARO:** Say that again.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Kadena. Kadena Base is about 450 miles from Taipei. Guam is too far away to affect the air battle. My conclusion is that Taiwan cannot be defended by Taiwan alone. And Taiwan can only be defended from Taiwan. Do you agree with that? And what more do you think you would want to see done to make sure that Taiwan is more properly equipped and ready to defend itself?

**KUOK:** I should also add that the Singapore ambassador to the United States was previously Singapore's ambassador to China as well as Japan.

**PAPARO:** I appreciate that. Your statement that Taiwan can only be defended by Taiwan. I just -- from, from Taiwan -- I believe Taiwan can be defended from air, land and sea. Your pessimism -- including undersea. I have got a number of plans which have been tested in classified environments that have proven success in

doing so. We don't hear about this in open source, but so I don't share your pessimism about that necessarily. I'm of course, wary and skeptical of myself and am in a constant state of introspection about that. But, and I do believe that Taiwan must have the greatest stake in its own defense as it pursues its own course of self-determination. You know, as it, as it's on its own course, noting that there's no change in U.S. policy on, on Taiwan. But, and so, and while Kadena is some miles from Taiwan, other islands are in closer proximity that are part of Japan that, which can be deployed to. And there are sea spaces to which we have access and there are airspaces to which we have access to. And there are answers to the PLA Rocket Force, and there are answers to the PLA Air Force, and there are answers to the PLA Navy. And so, and that's our job. And would that the questions that those answers are answers to are never posed, because deterrence is our highest duty.

**KUOK:** Thank you. Perhaps one last question from the room. The gentlemen in the second row. And then I'll turn to the online questions.

**AUDIENCE QUESTION:** Thank you. John Harper with Defense Scoop. I was wondering, are you planning to base large numbers of these or sorry, deploy large numbers of these replicator systems on US ships and aircraft so you don't have to worry about basing them on allied territory and dealing with some of the potentially political complications of that?

**PAPARO:** Probably, yeah. That's all you get.

**KUOK:** Short and sweet. So we're so grateful for the people in the room, but also for our online audience. So I did want to leave some time for that. We've asked them to submit their questions. And I think the first question that I'll go to brings us back to the issue of the importance of allies and partners in the region. And we had a question from John [last name inaudible] who's program manager at DOD inspector general. And he asks what the future of military coordination or collaboration with India might look in the next 3 to 5 years.

**PAPARO:** We have a growing partnership with India. One of the greatest focus areas is in the, in the space of undersea domain awareness. That's the greatest area of common interest, particularly as in regard to the Indian Ocean as a line of communication. Other security cooperation areas are growing areas. We see this security partnership growing year by year. India cherishes its history in the nonaligned movement. So those who aspire to an alliance with India, I think, don't hold your breath. And we're not holding our breath either.

And so, but that doesn't, I don't think that that at all tempers our ambition for deeper partnership and deeper friendship with India. India has got a competition with the PRC also, and there have been flashpoints of tension at sea and along its border. And those are opportunities for our cooperation as well. And India has other partnerships which, at points, place, place our security cooperation in tension, notably Russia. And there can be tensions that we must overcome. I believe that those partnerships will likely fade over time as the partnership between the United States and India grows. But we cannot be complacent about it. But we have many, many mutual interests. And we've got to, we have to, both of us have to keep our foot on the accelerator.

**KUOK:** I think that leads us very nicely into the next question, which is, I guess, you know, just as the United States has allies and partners in the region, the United States' adversaries also have partners. And so the next question comes from [name inaudible] from ROK Transcom. And the question is, what are the implications of North Korea's growing alliance with Russia for security in the Indo-Pacific, and how should the United States respond?

**PAPARO:** They're dangerous and transactional. And so North Korea has contributed missiles in the form of KN-24 that have been directly used against Ukraine. They have contributed artillery shells that have been directly used against Ukraine. Now, they have directly contributed soldiers in five digits that are being directly used against Ukraine. I would expect coming back will be submarine technology and propulsion technology that are coming back. I think KJU is reforming the North Korean state in a new image. We've seen him eschew unification. We've seen him declare South Korea as impure and an other -- an other, not Korean. And we should not ignore this sea change. We see that this can't be a good development for the PRC because as North Korea proliferates, the PRC has declared that they seek the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And we respect that declaration from the People's Republic of China, and we appreciate that. So it is a dangerous situation. It adds complexity to an already dangerous situation. It is transactional. It's symbiotic. Each state is giving the other something that the other needs that makes the other's situation more dangerous and imparts more risk on the allies and continues to bear watching.

**KUOK:** And let me close with one final question from Captain Hector Casanova. And I suppose much of the attention of INDOPACOM is on the, is in the military realm. And much of United States focus is, you know, military tools, economic tools, etc. But the question is how do you see soft power playing a role in US interests? And I think, you know, we mentioned earlier about how INDOPACOM exercised important defense

diplomacy, but what broader comments could you make about U.S. soft power and how that may be more effectively deployed in an increasingly contentious landscape?

**PAPARO:** I really appreciate this INDOPACOM even sounds hard coming off.

**KUOK:** Let me try to say it softer.

**PAPARO:** I so cherish soft power and, and we even see this where sometimes we see the services trying to divest soft power capabilities. But I, we cherish and we so need it. And in some cases, in some places, via elite capture and PRC soft power, is that, like the deployments of Peace Ark, the hospital ship, and, and humanitarian assistance disaster relief on the part of the PRC, they can sometimes act faster than we do. But in the South Pacific and then in other places where we've employed soft power, it's had tremendous benefits. And in fact, in this November, we will commemorate 20 years since the Aceh Tsunami. I was in theater for the Aceh Tsunami 20 years ago, and Abraham Lincoln was repurposed to soft power. Back-to-back years in Pacific Partnership, we deployed USNS Mercy and the impact of bringing surgeries and dentistry into places in the South Pacific where it's not. We have Seabees now, as I utter these words, that are building schools and these missions with littoral combat ships going to places that aren't, that have, where they have not been before. These are spaces where destroyers, aircraft carriers and Virginia class submarines have very little applicability. But LSTs, LCSs, or I should say LSDs, where these soft power missions we've executed humanitarian assistance, disaster relief missions in Papua New Guinea. And we reap enormous benefits to these that frequently have at the second order, will have applicability for hard power, and then have applicability for denying that political and diplomatic space and maintaining open communications with allies in the South Pacific or with maintaining open spaces in the Indian Ocean. And, and we cherish it. We need it. It complements our diplomatic positions. And, and I value it every bit as much as I do the dynamic demonstration of combat power. We have the Center for Excellence for, for disaster, for disaster management. And so, you know, I can't, I can't talk about that enough. And hospital ships and you know, frequently we reverse engineer to achieve that effect with others. So very important to us and software -- soft power becomes hard power in conflict and, and so it has tremendous applicability.

**KUOK:** Thank you. My takeaway from that soft power is instrumental as part of the toolkit that the United States has. And nothing says soft power like good dentistry and a good smile. Thank you. I'd like my colleague Mike to have the last word.

**O'HANLON:** So as we wrap, just let me thank you, admiral. What an amazing tour de force. And you could all give us 60 seconds or so to make our way off stage. But most importantly, please join me in thanking Admiral Samuel Paparo.