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**Keynote**

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FEATURING  
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Gregory Poling: For those in the room, if we could take our seats again we'll move on to our afternoon keynote. I hope everybody is still awake after lunch. It was a riveting panel. I think they all helped us there. Do we have the admiral up? Here we are. Admiral, thank you very much for joining us so early in the morning.

Admiral Stephen "Web" Koehler: Thanks. Happy to be here from Hawaii. I'm really just excited that I'm after lunch, I guess.

Mr. Poling: So our keynote today is going to be by Admiral Steve "Web" Koehler, who's – (laughs) – who's commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet. Admiral Koehler is a graduate of UC Boulder. He's a naval aviator with over 3,900 flight hours in the F-14 Tomcat and F-18 Super Hornet, with 600 carrier landings. He's a former commanding officer of the USS Eisenhower, former commander of Carrier Strike Group 9 and of the U.S. Third Fleet, and former deputy commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, among other positions. And he has very graciously agreed to join us at what I believe is now 7:40 in the morning in Hawaii. So we really, really appreciate it.

Without further ado, let me turn it over to Admiral Koehler for opening remarks. And then I will moderate a Q&A with the audience both here in D.C. and online. Thank you. Admiral.

Adm. Koehler: Great, great. Well, first of all, thanks so much. And honored to join you all here in your afternoon, our morning. And 7:40 is not that early. So truly, no problem. And really, really fired up to be here. You know, I'd just give a shoutout to Greg. I think few people have done more to shine a light on what's been happening in the South China Sea and why it matters so much, and it's so strategic for those who value sovereignty, freedom of navigation, and the rule of law. So, Greg, thanks for working this continued CSIS symposium and we really appreciate your work here.

It's a privilege to share some of my thoughts today from my position as the Pacific Fleet Commander on the challenges and opportunities in the South China Sea. Specifically, I want to address this topic by sharing what I see as two major trends. First, there's a growing recognition that the South China Sea is part of a bigger regional picture. Much of discussion on the South China Sea is on who claims individual features and waters in a static area, lines on the map. And while those lines are, of course, critical for the littoral states – you know, they define sovereignty as well as the energy, and fisheries, and other resources for their EEZ – but if you ask any of the Pacific Fleet's 150,000 sailors, or any mariner for that matter, they will also remind you that the South China Sea is linked closely to the wider region.

It is the maritime thoroughfare along which commerce flows between the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea, the vital Straits of Malacca, passing all of

the ASEAN states to Taiwan, Northeast Asia, and beyond. We can see that China's unlawful claims of control over the entire South China Sea are linked to its broader push towards hegemony in the region. Just as China has increased its deployments and aggressive tactics in the South China Sea, it has intensified its rehearsals for invasion or blockade of Taiwan, just a short distance north in the first island chain.

For the Pacific Fleet, our mission continues to be to deter aggression across the western Pacific, together with our allies and partners, and to prevail in combat if necessary. That mission of deterrence applies region wide, including the South China Sea and Taiwan. A conflict or crisis in either place would threaten the interest of countries across the region and all the countries who rely on economic ties with it. So the South China Sea is not a dispute in isolation but part of a broader dynamic regional challenge. And I think it's useful for us to think of it in that way.

Second, deterrence is largely effective in the South China Sea. In the last several years, China has deployed a growing number of vessels, including Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia with PLA oversight, to harass and coerce Southeast Asia states in their own waters. It has used the artificial island bases it built as a springboard for those actions. The tactics China is using have also grown steadily more aggressive. Water cannons, ship to ship collisions, and lasing. Exactly one year ago today we saw that violence on video in the Second Thomas Shoal. China Coast Guard forces attacked the Philippine Navy resupply crew with axes and knives, and it injured one Philippine sailor.

A year later, however, it's become clear, the pressure that China is putting on is not working well. It has failed to intimidate Southeast Asian claimants and make them surrender their sovereign rights. Despite the pressure, the Philippines has been a leader in persevering and standing up to the challenges of sovereignty. It has maintained its presence at the Second Thomas Shoal and is resupplying its garrison. By shining a light on China's intimidation tactics at sea, it has shown that public exposure can help blunt the effectiveness of coercion.

Manila strengthened its alliance with the United States, including our Navy. It's modernizing and deploying its maritime fleet to defend its maritime rights. They have deepened their security partnerships with many other nations who also value regional stability and international law, and the need to uphold sovereignty and maritime rights. The Philippines continues to operate with navies of Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and many others, including the U.S. Navy, to conduct maritime cooperative activities in waters of the South China Sea.

Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam have also sustained or expanded their offshore oil and gas work in their EEZs in the South China Sea. This, despite China's deployments and demarches, to stop developing energy in their own waters. In addition, nearly all Southeast Asia littoral states have begun to prioritize improving their own maritime capabilities, whether that's with new vessels, patrol aircraft, sensors, or unmanned systems. The United States is proud to play a role with that effort, along with many of our other allies and partners. So, in Southeast Asia, we have seen a laudable resilience and resolve to defend maritime rights in the face of mounting pressure.

You know, I think the United States has been effective in deterrence as well. The United States, and certainly the United States Navy in particular, is privileged to be a friend, partner, or ally with nearly every nation that borders the South China Sea. Our Navy has sailed in those waters and across the Indo-Pacific since the founding of our republic, building lasting relationships based on shared interests. This year marks the United States Navy's 250th year of service. And we've been in the Pacific almost since the beginning.

For our Department of Defense and for our Navy, the Indo-Pacific is the priority theater. That's reflected in the strength of our Pacific Fleet, with over 200 ships and submarines, 1,300 aircraft, and 150,000 personnel. That's about 60 percent of the United States Navy, and it includes many of our most advanced capabilities. On any given day, around 1/3rd are deployed, another 1/3rd are combat ready. Today, there are two Pacific Fleet carriers strike groups underway in the Pacific, preparing – and more – preparing for deployment.

The USS Nimitz Carrier Strike Group operated in and around the South China Sea for the last few months. The USS George Washington Carrier Strike Group, home ported in Japan, is also underway patrolling the western Pacific. One of our newest amphibious assault ships, the USS Tripoli, is en route to her new home port in Sasebo, Japan. And the USS America Amphibious Readiness Group is in Australia for a major bilateral exercise, Talisman Sabre. On top of that, we have forward-deployed destroyers and littoral combat ships operating from Japan and Singapore, as well as submarines and airborne patrols throughout the region.

Our mission is to deter conflict by continually demonstrating we are ready to prevail in combat if necessary. Throughout the Indo-Pacific, we constantly are improving our capabilities and our combat readiness. We do this by building the quality of our maintenance and our training. We do this by exercising and rehearsing relentlessly. And we do this by persistently operating forward while we field advanced technologies. In addition to the United States actions, I think strong contributions from our allies and partners have had an enormous effect on strengthening deterrence.

One of the clearest signs of this is the busy calendar of maritime and joint combined exercises across the region. I think it's worthwhile to give a few examples. Last September, we joined Super Garuda Shield in Indonesia, alongside 22 nations, including four of them from Southeast Asia, and 5,500 combined force personnel. We help local Indonesian communities with projects such as roads construction. And we do similar community service when we exercise in our other countries.

Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, or CARAT, is a longstanding U.S. exercise with Southeast Asian partners. Now in its 31st year, it continues to grow in scope and scale and it's often held near the South China Sea. Last year, CARAT included the maritime forces of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, as well as the United States Navy. In CARAT, we conduct integrated multi-domain operations, share skills and tactics, all to refine how we operate together. A range of other annual multi-partner exercises bolster deterrence by deepening interoperability and expanding the presence of allied and partner navies.

Pacific Fleet has been part of each one. They include Malabar, with navies of India, Australia, Japan, and the United States. Keen Edge, a high-end joint exercise with Japan and Australia, with a regional scope. Balikatan, the major exercise hosted by the Philippines each spring. It has evolved rapidly in sophistication, scope, and scale as Manila has expanded its security partners, including the countries with whom it now has visiting forces-like agreements, such as Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, alongside the United States. The most recent round in March was the largest ever, with joint forces from a range of regional countries, and Japan joining as a full participant for the first time.

The exercise involved cutting-edge capabilities and a focus on the South China Sea and Luzon Strait. Talisman Sabre, mentioned earlier, is hosted by Australia and, in 2025, will be larger than ever, with 19 nations invited and Papua New Guinea playing partial host for the first time. All of this is a reminder that deterrence is a team sport. We all have a shared interest in making it work. And we all need to do our part. But it can't be achieved alone.

So what can we expect in this coming year? Well, let me offer a few thoughts. First, I think we can expect China to continue to try and divide and pressure Southeast Asian countries over the South China Sea. This may come in various forms, such as behind the scenes pressure to stay silent when China's ships press unlawful claims in Southeast Asian waters, or harass oil and gas or fisheries in a country's EEZ. It could also mean China offering inducements to buy silence or to look the other way as their coast guard or maritime militia, asserts control. It might mean sweet words such as, let's jointly develop your resources, that are, in reality, an invitation to

arrangements that risk implicit recognition of Beijing's ownership. I think claimant states would be wise to compare notes and stay vigilant to these tactics and preserve unfettered access to their sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the resources in their EEZs.

Second, I think we need to continue to improve our collective ability to deter aggression. It's our constant duty. And we should continue to train and exercise together in meaningful ways. We welcome the trend of Southeast Asian states investing more in capabilities to protect their waters. And we encourage that to continue. The Pacific Fleet will always be ready to operate together with you to strengthen deterrence and show no individual country can be pushed around. As the secretary of defense said at the most recent Shangri-La Dialog a few weeks ago, no one should doubt America's commitment to our Indo-Pacific allies and partners. For the U.S. Pacific Fleet, I can assure you, we will continue every day to build our alliances, partnerships, and expand our operations together in ways that preserve peace through strength.

With that, I look forward to any questions that you have, and our discussion today. Realizing it's by VTC, I really hope we can have a very nice dialog. And thanks so much for giving me the opportunity to address you this morning. And, Greg, I'll turn it over to you.

Mr. Poling:

Admiral, thank you so much for the opening remarks. Let me begin with a couple questions, and then we'll turn it over to our audience both here in the room and online.

The last panel that we had focused on alliance coordination, particularly among U.S., Philippines, Australia, and Japan. But there was plenty of references to things like the maritime cooperation activities with other partners, Canada, New Zealand, maybe future efforts with some of our European partners, or Korea. I wonder if you could say a bit more about the pace of multilateral exercise, how that's different than what we would have seen just a couple of years ago, and what we can expect looking forward – both in the South China Sea and in the theater more generally.

Adm. Koehler:

Yeah. It's a good question, Greg.

What I would tell you – a couple things. One, having been in charge of operations from – starting in 2018 for Indo-Pacific Command, where I drove a lot of the exercises and coordination between countries here from the INDOPACOM perspective, and now coming back six years later now in this job, what I can tell you is that the complexity and the scope and scale of these exercises continue to grow. And I take that from a – in a positive way. We've had a lot of exercises that we worked on for years.

CARAT as an example, Balikatan as an example. And as we look most recently, and the integration both with more countries coming into it and the level of interoperability that we continue to grow, I think what we're seeing is exercises that, instead of just doing them as an opportunity to say, hey, allies and partners are working together, and that being a deterrent effect in itself. Now the operations and the exercises – and I think that's important, and I'll get to that in a minute – have become more directly interoperable, which has a level of deterrence in itself.

And why I say “operations and exercises,” as you alluded to, from an exercise perspective, not to say that it's scripted, but we work through interoperability things together to build that relationship and to – and to build our ability to work together. That, in itself, is a really positive piece, as we've said, that has gotten more complex. To your point specifically on the MCA, those are specific operations that have grown in complexity even in the last year, and are a result of the exercises.

So when you look at the capability and the reason for exercising, ultimately is for a deterrence effect when it matters. And I see that in the maritime cooperation activities that are happening specifically with the Philippines, sometimes with the United States, sometimes not, all together allies and partners across the region, that is actual operations together from a deterrence standpoint. So there's growth from exercises to operations. And I think that's where we've come in the last, certainly, 10 years that I've been involved directly here. I hope that answers your question.

Mr. Poling: It does. Thank you, Admiral Koehler.

Probably one of the most frequently used words at this conference this year, and every year for the last 14 years, has been “gray zone coercion.” We talk a lot about China keeping things below the threshold for kinetic force, and the dilemmas that that presents for deterrence, for the U.S. Navy, and for other armed forces. How do you think about PAC Fleet and the Navy's overall role in deterrence in the South China Sea, and I think increasingly around Taiwan, where we see the PRC focusing on nominally law enforcement and militia harassment, that complicates decision making?

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. It's a really good question. And, you know, gray zone is in itself, to your point, Greg, that's the problem set. And it really needs to be in line with international law and norms. And the ability to stand up to that, when there's, you know, a direct challenge of sovereignty, as we've seen in the gray zone – and we can look at Second Thomas Shoal as an example. Where in the gray zone side there's continued pressure and a challenge of international law that, I think, the Philippines has done a remarkable job in their leadership to stand up to. And I think we should all take light of that and really be able to accentuate that as we go forward.

The U.S. Navy is a part of that. And we've had the opportunity to sail in and around, again, with the Philippines and other countries, in an effort to bolster their – you know, their push at this. I would tell you, when you look at the ability to push back on, you know, claims and international law, a perfect example is freedom of navigation operations, which a lot of times is looked on as a – as a thing in itself. Hey, this is a – we're doing a FONOP, as if that's a – that's a thing. And a military, you know, operation.

There are shipping, certainly, from a military side that's sailing through it. But the point of that specifically, freedom of navigation ops, is challenging, amongst international norms, sovereign claims. And it's sailing where international law allows. And that's important. And we've seen that certainly regularly from the United States Navy. And we sail in and around the South China Sea and other areas that are disputed international law claims. And we've seen opportunity for other nations to sail in and around those areas.

The Taiwan Strait is a perfect example. That is an international strait. And the ability for all nations, and all navies, and commerce to sail through an international strait is very important. And we see an enormous amount of sovereign countries joining – I mean, the United States does it too, but it's not – it's everyone – sailing where international law allows. And I think that's how – from a – from a perspective of the military, in the gray zone, that's how we accentuate and work in that gray zone. And that – you may have a follow-on question to that, but that's how I see it.

Mr. Poling: I think I have a lot of follow-on questions, but I also suspect that the audience does. So I'm going to hold mine for now and turn it over to them. If you're in the room and want to ask a question, wait for the microphone to come to you. And then please identify yourself, and make sure the question is a question, not a speech. Same goes for those online. Type your questions in and please identify yourself. Yes, right here.

Question: Hi. Thank you to Admiral and Gregory. I have a question. I am Cheri Chen.

And I have a question about the ratification of Law of the Sea. Because the United States Navy has played a leading role in defending the freedom of navigation under the United Nations of the Convention of Law of the Sea in the South China Sea. However, the United States itself has not ratified this law, due to a lot of other challenges. So I wonder, how do you address the critiques – especially from Southeast Asian nations and also United States other rivals like China – that question the credibility of the United States leadership on maritime law when it upholds the law and rules that it has not formally ratified? Thank you.

Adm. Koehler: Hey, thanks. Thanks for the question.

First, there's two – there's two ways I want to comment on this. First of all, within the policy side and the ratification, from a military officer side, you know, I'll let the political side work the ratification piece of that. What I would tell you is, from a U.S. policy side that I execute, we regard UNCLOS as customary international law. And it's binding on all nations. And we operate, as a United States Navy, in accordance with UNCLOS. I train all of my ship crews, and the way that I sail in the South China Sea and throughout the world, strictly in accordance with its provisions. And so I'll leave the ratification to other bodies, but I will tell you, from the United States Navy perspective, we operate directly and strictly in accordance with its statutes. And we support protecting the rights under UNCLOS. And we train to it. And that's how – that's how I work with UNCLOS.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Admiral Koehler. Next, John Blaxland.

Question: Admiral, how do you do? John Blaxland from the Australian National University.

We've heard today that the Chinese have a Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia that they're using quite extensively for their operations in the South China Sea. The U.S. Navy, kind of, maybe – it seems like it maybe is the wrong antidote or counterpoint. Is there a greater initiative to bring or engage more U.S. Coast Guard and, I don't know, some other militia in this space as well, in response to China's initiative with the maritime militia and their Chinese Coast Guard? And can you also perhaps comment on INDOPACOM's and PAC Fleet's engagement in the South Pacific? Thanks very much.

Adm. Koehler: Yes, sir. I think I got most of your question. You were going in and out a little bit on the question. One was, if I heard it correctly, was commenting on the maritime militia and Coast Guard, you know, versus a sort of gray Navy here from the United States Navy perspective. I think it was a – it was a comment about that. Let's start with that is that. Is that the first question?

Mr. Poling: He also asked for any thoughts on increasing role for the U.S. Coast Guard or navy cooperation with the USCG to meet that challenge.

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. OK. Well, first of all, couple comments would be I completely agree with you, in the sense that the Chinese navy, the PLAN, utilizing additional shipping in maritime militia and in Coast Guard, especially here in the South China Sea – I mean the numbers of maritime militia that are, you know, postured in and around the Spratlys and constantly are there is, without a doubt, a show of force by them, and bolstered then by their gray shipping. And so it's a very difficult challenge as we look to it.

I think that their coast guard operates, you know, under the guise of an international law look in the coast guard realm. I'm not necessarily sure that it's always in line with how other coast guards operate, as we've seen some very aggressive actions by both PLA – or, by the militia and the coast guard. We do have our Coast Guard in and around the Pacific operating regularly, whether it's in the South China Sea, up and around the Taiwan Strait, or in the South Pacific. From an overarching numbers perspective, the Coast Guard doesn't have as many ships as, certainly, the United States Navy has. But we have a really strong partnership with them, and they have spent an enormous effort ensuring they're postured in the Pacific.

And, you know, in fact, currently there's a large exercise with Japan Coast Guard and the U.S. Coast Guard happening today. And so I think that capability is there. And it's a constant challenge for all of us regionally with a number of ships, both Navy, PLAN, coast guard, Chinese Coast Guard, and militia – you know, they have a regional look in and around the first island chain with an enormous sized flotilla, in that regard. And so our ability to counter that and work with that is spread between the Navy and the Coast Guard. I think that answered your question.

And there was a second one, I think, concerning the South Pacific, or the western Pacific that you broke up on.

Mr. Poling: I think the question was just if you wanted to say anything about the operations of PAC Fleet in the South Pacific.

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. I would, actually. Really strong opportunity. Here, again, we have a – as you know, my – a Pacific Fleet perspective, my area that I'm responsible for is from the coast of California to the west coast of India, and pole to pole. So South Pacific is part of that. And we work to sail both in Pacific partnership, which is a – which is an opportunity we do every year in and around this time for both shipping and engagements in the South Pacific. We work that both unilaterally and in concert with our Australian and New Zealand friends in the South Pacific. And it's very helpful. And it's an opportunity to be postured there and continue to work against the Chinese influence down there, which I think we all know is fairly large.

I laud my New Zealand and Australian partners, for spending an enormous amount of time working both, you know, militarily, diplomatically, and economically in and around the South Pacific as a buffer towards the continued movement of China down there. And we will continue to operate there. I think there's – certainly not specifically in the South Pacific – but in that overarching area with Talisman Sabre and our operations here in the next few months, I think we'll have some good opportunity to continue to be

in and around there. Thanks for the question. Really important work down in that part of the world.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Admiral. Let's take one from our online audience, then we'll come back to those in the room. So we have a question from journalist Christopher Woody.

He asked: What implications does access to Cambodia's Ream Naval Base have for China's military operations in the South China Sea and the surrounding region?

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. You've certainly seen the opportunity there. It provides a(n) additional basing perspective, operationally, for the PLA, from a sustainment perspective, conceivably from a repair perspective, and from a volume perspective in and around the South China Sea. You know, on the positive is that, at least, I think, certainly more than symbolically, Cambodia said Ream is open for other shipping to come in. Japan was very quickly in and around, and pulled into port to Ream. I think you've heard the secretary of defense comment that he is interested in sending a ship quickly to Ream, and he looks forward to visiting Ream.

I think that's an opportunity to counter it. But certainly, operationally, specific work out of that area is another vector and another base, you know, further south in the South China Sea, which gives them opportunity and access further – you know, further south from Hainan and all of the other areas that China has worked on. You know, they've – Fiery Cross Reef and Mischief Reef has been some work that they've built out. And we've seen that, you know, go awry, from an opportunity for that to be, you know, a humanitarian, we'll build up these islands at the expense of the environment. And now we've seen that grow very specifically into, you know, military outposts.

They're claimed by China, and so sovereignly they think that those are theirs. When you have another base in another sovereign country and conflict arises, there would be difficult opportunity to counter that, realizing that every country is – gets a vote. And, you know, countering that from another country would be difficult.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. OK. The next one from the audience. We'll go to the back, and then here to the front.

Question: Yeah. Hi. My name is Richard.

My question for admiral is we see the rapid growth of a Chinese navy in last few years. And in last two years alone, China launched nine nuclear submarines. And also, China building two aircraft carriers simultaneously in

two different shipyard, and also countless destroyers and frigates. And my question is how the Pacific Fleet plan to counter China's growing threat? And we know the China's fleet size already doubled compared to 2016. Maybe within next – within 10 years China fleet will be doubled again. So how – the what's the strategy behind the Indo-Pacific Command to counter China growing threat of the Navy force?

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. It's a very good question, Richard. Thank you.

You know, you've seen the PLAN grow an enormous amount, right, to your point. And I don't have to recapitalize it. I mean, they continue to build ships at an enormous rate. I think you see specifically in and around our policy the need and desire to continue to work our shipbuilding piece. The majority of the United States Navy resides in the Pacific fleet. And that's a counter to that specifically. There is a capability piece, where I feel the United States Navy is very much more and strongly capable, and able to deter right now, due to combat capability.

We also have a strategic advantage that the PRC does not have. And that would be our allies and partners. And we, as mentioned in my remarks, work consistently and very relentlessly in the interoperability side with our – with our like-minded teammates. And so we've seen very specifically, you know, Philippines, Japan, Australia, all of those countries have the same concerns with the growth of the PLAN. And working together as a counter to that, I think, both capability and interoperability amongst very high-level and like-minded nations militarily, and the ability for them to coalesce together, is our strategic strength against that. And I think we will continue to see military build out and counter with United States actions. But I look forward to continuing to work together with our – with our allies and partners in the region.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. All right. Next.

Question: Thank you. Thank you, Admiral.

My question is maybe the almost the same, but I may ask in a very provocative manner. And I'm Liu Xiaobo, the retired PLA Navy captain.

So I have reached the same question to the Admiral Harry Harris 10 years ago, when the PLA Navy joined the RIMPAC 2014. So what's your view about the PLA Navy and expansion, especially the recent two aircraft carrier operated in the western Pacific? Do you think the relationship between the U.S. and the Pacific Fleet and with the PLA Navy would be the potential hostile, or something relation like that? What kind of relation –

Adm. Koehler: Sir, I missed some – yeah, I missed the final piece, that you said it would be a – would be the relationship between the PLA Navy and Pacific Fleet will be a potential – and then I missed what you said.

Question: Advisor or hostile, yeah.

Mr. Poling: Whether it will become more hostile, given the growth of the PLA Navy.

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. So thank you for the – for the question. So I would say, you know, indicative of professional militaries, and the opportunity to ensure that we do not have any sort of, you know, unwanted, unbeknownst escalation, there's a – there's a requirement to continue to respect everybody's ability to operate and respect everybody's opportunity for a dialog. We've seen over these past year or so the opportunity to have dialog with the PLAN. I had the opportunity to meet Admiral Hu a little over a year ago, who is their head of Navy. And we've seen in the last year Admiral Paparo as INDOPACOM, as well as, you know, political leadership have continued to discuss that.

And so I do think that the PRC continues to push outwardly, from a – from an overarching regional Navy to a broader push outside of the first and into the second island chain. You know, as I mention to a lot of people, they have a – they are building a global-sized Navy, and currently have a regional province that they work on. I think it's their desire to push that out and to have the opportunity to operate in other parts of the globe. We see that they continue to send a group to the Middle East, and have done so for the last decade. And, as you mentioned, operating currently in the Philippine Sea is a change from where they normally have.

And so the continued work of the Pacific Fleet will be continuing to operate and be where they are as well. You know, we have a – we have certainly a global navy. And it is not difficult for us to operate, certainly, anywhere we want, and where international law allows. And so I think we'll continue to do that. I think there's a continued counter that we're going to need to provide. Without a doubt, I believe that the PLAN continues to rehearse their ability to exert influence on Taiwan. And currently, you know, as certainly been stated, believe that there's a need for unification of Taiwan. And so I think they're using their navy, you know, as an effort to do that.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Admiral. Let's go to another one from our online audience, David Brunstrom, who's with Reuters.

David asked: How important to U.S. South China Sea strategy and deterrence of China is Australia's acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines under AUKUS?

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. I would tell you that currently, just from an AUKUS perspective, the department is currently reviewing all of the AUKUS pieces. I think Australia has desire to have a strong submarine force. And I'll hold my comments specifically on AUKUS as the department reviews that.

Mr. Poling: I suspected you might, Admiral. Thank you. (Laughs.) All right. Let's come back to our in-person audience. Yes, we have a question over here.

Question: Thank you, Admiral. My name is Mark. Just a quick question.

When you speak of deterrence, how can we incorporate Taiwan into, outside of the framework that we exist right now? Thank you.

Adm. Koehler: I think your question was how can we incorporate Taiwan into the deterrence piece? Is that – is that what you mentioned?

Mr. Poling: That's right, yes.

Adm. Koehler: Yeah. I think if you look specifically across, politically, the work with Taiwan and the – and the discussions with the United States, is the way to do that. You know, our posture, from a military standpoint, is in line with all of the policy side. You know, the Taiwan Relations Act, the three communiques, and the assurances which enable the defense of Taiwan. And I think staying true to that is – from a military perspective – is the way to continue to do that.

Mr. Poling: All right. We have a late question here, and then I'll grill you with mine.

Question: Hi, Admiral. Thank you for your service.

Families been at sea. My grandfather was in the great war off a destroyer in New York, and my father was in the Coast Guard out of Boston. As for myself, I had a version of sea water, so I basically studied the fleets at the Fletcher School, maritime studies and King's College, war studies. Early in my career, I liaised with ONI. And I saw so much, you know, intelligence coming in. How do you, on an almost daily basis, go through all the threat assessments from around the world? And what are your priorities?

Adm. Koehler: Well, first of all, thanks for you and your family for all of your service. I truly appreciate that. You know, what you kind of brought up is the overarching volume, writ large, for Pacific Fleet. Honored and humbled to be here and have the opportunity to serve with 60 percent of the naval force, and then all of the challenges that that brings. One of which is ensuring that we maintain the posture amidst all the challenges that the world brings on a day-to-day basis. You know, how do I do that? There's a strong apparatus here with my intelligence side and operation side. And we work through that daily. And, you know, I think my job specifically, as the commander, is to rise above the

tactical side and look where I need to be, both posture-wise and response-wise, to affect it.

I would say that there is something that comes to mind specifically that I'd like to highlight. One would be, is that I have two major – well, I have a bunch of lines of effort – but two major lines of effort, the top two that that I use at Pacific Fleet. One is to build and maintain combat readiness. And that's with the overarching fleet, to ensure that ship and aircraft and submarine capability is built and maintained, the crews are trained, and we have the ability to ensure in time of need that it's ready to go. The second line of effort is to employ that combat capability in an effort to deter, which is my ultimate duty.

The problem set that happens between – you know, daily in my life, is the teeter totter of when I employ I'm using this combat readiness and I want to employ to ensure I continue to deter and have this capability. At the same time, that then is using up the combat readiness. Deterrence allows me to build it, using it allows me to deter. And so I need to do both. And I balance those things every day, as you mentioned, with all of the challenges that the world brings. So as an effort to say, how do I do it, I look at those two things very clearly. And that's how I work the balance. Thank you for the question.

Mr. Poling:

Thank you, Admiral Koehler. OK. If I could ask another, from my compendium here. You've said a couple times during your remarks that you are responsible for roughly 60 percent of the U.S. Navy in the Indo-Pacific. And that has been the stated goal, I think, going back to then-Secretary Panetta now, a decade ago. And it's always been difficult to maintain that level of resourcing, given that the U.S. operates globally, unlike China which operates regionally. We just now had, according to reporting, to cancel a planned carrier visit to Da Nang because of the crisis in the Middle East. So could you speak to, you know, INDOPACOM and PAC Fleet's attention, trying to maintain the focus on the pacing threat of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific, while the world doesn't wait – doesn't necessarily say that only, you know, 40 percent of the world's crises will take place outside of INDOPACOM's AOR?

Adm. Koehler:

Yeah, Greg. It's a – it's a really good question. So, to exactly your point, right, the world always gets a vote. And competitors get a vote. And so as we work to balance all of these things, it gets back a little bit to combat readiness and combat employment, right, which I mentioned. Those two balances that I am constantly working on, in an effort to, my perspective, deter the region that I'm responsible for, realizing that forces may and are needed other places. And how do – how do I work that amidst all the challenges.

And I would just say that it's a – it's a day-to-day challenge, and one that is part of being a military officer, is to work through the best ways to get after all of the challenges that we have. Some of them are to provide forces to

other places, and then to balance that with the use of resources that I have here, realizing that I have to continue to deter. I think we have a pretty strong look, and a comment out of the secretary, and a desire to ensure that that the priority focus is here. And I feel that way. I'm strongly supported by INDOPACOM.

But I do have other resource challenges that I need to provide, and then work with my teammates here to build out that capability here to provide response and deterrence options. I work directly with allies and partners who have a vested interest to work with us in that regard. And we see that across the entire region, again, from the coast of California to the west coast of India, just today. So I appreciate the question. It's a constant bit of work, and one that I think we're – I think we're doing pretty well at.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. If there's no others, I'll take the last question, then we'll let you get on with your morning. Our focus nominally today is the South China Sea, although the conversation is really theaterwide. But the South China Sea is a long way from Hawaii, and it's a long way from Japan and Guam. Could you speak to the role that you envision for other partners, I think, particularly maybe the Philippines, with the redevelopment of Subic, to enhance sustainment, maintenance, and other capabilities for PAC Fleet, given this vast AOR over which you have responsibility?

Adm. Koehler: Yeah, Greg. Another great question. You know, one of the things when I – when I get somebody who comes to visit me from Washington, you know, and they fly their 11 hours to get to Oahu. And they say, wow, the Pacific is really big. And my comment to them is, yeah, welcome to it. You're a third of the way across to – you know, to the South China Sea. So thank you for the 11-hour flight. To the point, from the coast of California to the west coast of India, if you wanted to sail there – so I send a ship to the edge of my area of responsibility, it's 26 days.

And so when you talk about the ability to get to the first island chain, which is nominally about 13 days, from a shipping perspective, the required and the need to then have posture forward – and we do, right? From an overarching military capability, certainly in Northeast Asia, from a basing perspective for the Navy, very strong. There's constant work as we build out, you know, places, I would say – you've heard it, places not bases – there's opportunity in and around the Pacific, and the ability to have things forward is really important.

I think most recently, under President Marcos' leadership, there's been an opportunity here to continue to work with the Philippines and have, in this case, opportunity, whether it be in Subic or other places in and around the Philippines, to have some capability there, which will aid and assist any sort of needed requirements, should crises arise. I think it's – I think it's very

important. The time-distance problem that the Indo-Pacific generates is – you know, it requires a level of posture, meaning things, agreements, and opportunity, forward. It doesn't necessarily always mean bases. I think people think that "posture" means that you have to have a base forward. And that's not necessarily the case, as we certainly see.

And so, specifically as it looks to Subic Bay, or the Philippines, or Palawan, or Northern Luzon, all of those are strategic opportunities. And there's been a strong push and look out of certainly the OSD and Office of Secretary of Defense, as an opportunity to do that. And we're going to continue to work with our Philippine allies to see how we can build that out. Certainly, from my perspective, any opportunity to have things forward is helpful and beneficial, from all regards in military operations.

Mr. Poling: Thank you, Admiral. That's it for me. We have a couple minutes left. Perhaps you'd like to give us a closing benediction, and then we'll let you get on with your day.

Adm. Koehler: (Laughs.) Well, first of all, what I would tell you is what an opportunity to be able to discuss with you at least what's on my mind and the challenges. All of us live in a very, very interesting time here. And I appreciate, you know, organizations like this, that have the opportunity to bring an enormous amount of very smart people in a single room to work and discuss and understand the challenges that we all face. Ultimately, I think the issues that we need to work on are based in international law.

And if we – if we hold onto the values that I think all of our like-minded partners here have, and international law is a basis, then we have an opportunity to continue to operate here, certainly in the Pacific, in a level of competition, in a level of capability, that enables everyone to prosper. And that's a little bit, you know, idealistic, but it's one that I think is very important to ensure, you know, viability, economic, you know, growth, and rights for all nations. And that's what we're based on here in Pacific Fleet. And certainly, I think noble cause to continue to work on.

I really appreciate the opportunity to address you all today. And I look forward to doing it again sometime.

Mr. Poling: Thank you. Let me ask those in the room, at least, to join me in thanking Admiral Koehler for his time. (Applause.) Thank you so much, Admiral. And everybody, we will be back in 10 minutes for the last session of the day. Thank you.

(END)

