

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“Maritime Security Dialogue
SEVENTH Fleet Update: A Discussion with VADM Karl
Thomas, USN”**

DATE

Friday, October 14, 2022 at 2:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Vice Admiral Karl Thomas

USN, Commander, SEVENTH Fleet

Vice Admiral Peter H. Daly

USN (Ret.), CEO and Publisher, U.S. Naval Institute

CSIS EXPERTS

Seth G. Jones

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Transcript By

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Seth G. Jones: Good afternoon. I'm Seth Jones. I'm the senior vice president and director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On behalf of CSIS and the U.S. Naval Institute, we're proud to bring you the next event of our Maritime Security Dialogue Series. This series is made possible through the generous support and the sponsorship of HII.

The U.S. Pacific Fleet, Seventh Fleet, is the U.S. Navy's largest forward-deployed numbered fleet. For more than 75 years, the Seventh Fleet has maintained a continuous forward presence in the Indo-Pacific, providing security and stability in the region. And we're excited to have Vice Admiral Karl Thomas, commander of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, to the Maritime Security Dialogue Series. And we're particularly delighted to be hosting him at the Jack C. Taylor Conference Center at the U.S. Naval Institute on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Academy.

Vice Admiral Thomas took command in July of last year. He's a native of Northern Virginia and received his commission through the Naval Reserve's Officer Training Corps at RPI in 1986. He was formerly a carrier aviator in the E-2C Hawkeye. He has commanded carrier airborne early warning squadron 117, the USS Mount Whitney, the USS Abraham Lincoln, and the USS Carl Vinson, in addition to a long and distinguished career. And thanks to you very much, Vice Admiral Thomas, for joining us today.

Now I will hand the floor over to Vice Admiral Pete Daly, chief executive officer at publisher of the U.S. Naval Institute, and the lead for this discussion. So over to you, Pete, and thanks for the cooperation.

Vice Admiral
Peter H. Daly
(Ret.)

Thank you, Seth. So we really – we're in our sixth or seventh year of this tremendous partnership between CSIS and the Naval Institute. And we truly appreciate it.

Well, we're very thrilled to have the Seventh Fleet commander here. And there's a lot going on. And there were some early vague asides that maybe you wouldn't be allowed to travel, but glad to see that the chain of command is comfortable enough in its own skin to send you here. This is – there were times in my recollection where maybe that wouldn't have happened. So that's a good sign.

So with the rollout of the National Defense Strategy earlier this year, and of course we didn't really get – we just got a couple unclass pages on that. But then this week we had the National Security Strategy roll out, and we did get a redacted unclassified version of that. And both those documents really double down on the whole idea that China is the pacing threat. And that

really, in a phrase, puts you on the point. And so we're thrilled to have you, and we'll get right into it.

The first question I wanted to ask you, Admiral, was the tempo in the Seventh Fleet's been high in 2022. And for starters, could you describe the type of operations your conducting, the nature of the ops in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, how do they contribute to maritime security, and what behavior and trends you're seeing with the PRC and the Russians?

Vice Admiral Karl
Thomas:

Certainly. And just for those that don't know, it's good to see you, Pete Daly. He was my strike group commander when I was a squadron – CO of the VAW117 Wall Bangers way back when, on the Nimitz strike group. And so it's funny that – he was there the day that I found out that I got the nuclear power program.

And to be sitting in this seat with you today, it's an honor, first, and then to have the privilege to be able to lead the Seventh Fleet is a tremendous honor. And there's a large number of men and women that serve their country every day. I think it's kind of fitting that yesterday was the 247th birthday. And the theme of our birthday was 24/7, a moniker for standing on watch 24/7. And that's really what the Seventh Fleet team does every day to protect not only the United States, but all of our allies and partners in the region.

I think to start off and explain how we approach what is, quite frankly, a very challenging theater, I'll just quickly run down what we're doing today and give you an opportunity to understand the way that we integrate with our allies and partners and describe some of the operations that we're doing. And we've – you know, the national security strategy did come out yesterday. And it's got a very good page in there that talks about integrated deterrence and how we stitch together all of our deterrent actions across not only the DIME – diplomacy, information, military and economic – but via regions and across domains.

And so as I describe the operations that we're conducting, I think you're going to see that play out loudly. So I'll go north to south, just so it's easy to kind of flow down through the Seventh Fleet AOR, which is rather large. We're finishing up Resolute Dragon, which is an exercise up in Hokkaido, Japan, with the 3-MEF. We've got a very tight linkage with our Marine Corps brethren. And they were working with the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force, Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, and we had the Benfold up there conducting a fires exercise in Hokkaido.

At the same time, we have a mine exercise going on in the Sea of Japan with – or the East Sea, if you use South Korean parlance. We're doing a mine

countermeasure exercise there with Great Britain and South Koreans. A little further south, I've got the Tripoli pulling into Okinawa, doing some expeditionary work off of Okinawa as part of Kamandag that was happening up in northern Luzon. I've got Mount Rushmore and the New Orleans who's in Subic Bay, old stomping grounds from when I was a young JO, backloading coming out of that Kamandag exercise.

So, again, a very – and, actually, this year in Kamandag we had Japanese and South Korean ground forces that were participating with the Philippines. And today the Ronald Reagan pulled into Manilla. So a lot of Philippine action. I actually flew here from Cebu, Philippines. Kicked off the Sama Sama-Lumbas exercise, which is a maritime security exercise where we've combined Sama Sama, which is an exercise that we do, with the Lumbas exercise, which is an exercise that Australia does with the Philippines. We've combined it into one large multilateral exercise. And it has Japan, Canada, Great Britain, Australia.

It's a very – the theme you should be picking up is everything we do, we try to do with our allies and partners, and we try to show solidarity, we try to work together to improve our interoperability, to learn from one another. And I just came from Kakadu not too long ago, down in Australia, in Darwin, where we had 20 fleet leaders come together in a roundtable and discuss maritime concerns, not only in our neck of the woods but also down into the Oceania area. So to be able to hear from the leaders of Tonga and Papua New Guinea and the Solomons.

And, you know, just a large effort across the fleet right now to show a united front for the rules-based international order, and to tell those that maybe have different ideas that, you know, we're common in the way we think about the importance of maritime security for that region. And, you know, 70-plus years the Seventh Fleet's been out there ensuring the maritime security for the prosperity for all. And it's worked pretty well. And we want to continue that same thing.

You asked about Russia and China and the activity that we're seeing. You know, I've got the fortune of having been the strike group commander out there. Came back in the Pentagon during a period called COVID, and then came back with Seventh Fleet. And it gives me an opportunity to kind of be able to compare and contrast, and to be able to explain the behavior that I've seen of the PRC in that timeframe.

And I would tell you when I was a strike group commander – I think everybody in this room, in this audience, is smart enough to understand the PRC excessive claims of the Nine-Dash Line and basically the entirety of the

South China Sea. When I was a strike group commander, I pulled the last carrier probably ever into Hong Kong. I got the Ronald Reagan strike group into Hong Kong. And I'm fortunate – you know, I've been there many times in my Navy career and unfortunately it may have been my last time.

But we would have the PRC join us if we're operating in the South China Sea. If we left the Nine-Dash Line they would break off. Today they are a little more persistent. They'll stay with us a little farther. They patrol the Spratlys a little greater than they did back then. They do more coordinated exercises but, you know, they do it often by themselves. And as I articulated earlier, when we do an exercise it's with all of our friends.

Russian activity, clearly we pay attention to the Pacific northern fleet from Russia. And we see them operate out of Vladivostok and out of Peter, and we watch them closely. We see some activity where there might – what I would call coordinated activity between the PRC and Russia, but I wouldn't call it necessarily integrated activity. And not the type of planning that's done by our forces to generate an exercise that's meaningful, and then certainly not as transparently as what we do with our allies and partners.

Vice Adm. Daly: You know, you mentioned – you mentioned the prosperity for all. And that always strikes me that one of the biggest beneficiaries of that was the PRC themselves, the Pax Americana in the Western Pacific.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, there's a great paragraph in the National Security Strategy that kind of compares and contrasts. And it says that very thing, that they're the biggest beneficiaries of the prosperity and the open society that we have. And at the same time, they try to turn it into their own closed benefit, their own authoritarian benefits. So that's an oxymoron.

Vice Adm. Daly: Well, I was going to also ask you – I was going to ask you about partnerships, but I think you really hit that already, and the importance of the partnerships and the rules-based international order. What does the PRC reaction after Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan – was there anything there that surprised you in the nature and types of operations that we observed from the PRC after that?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah. I've been asked that question a fair number of times. And the adjective I usually apply to it is irresponsible. I think that, you know, we have a responsibility through the Taiwan Relations Act to provide defensive capability to Taiwan, and to make sure that we're ready, and we are, to – I mean, our desire would be to have peaceful resolution of cross-strait differences. The PRC says that that's their desire. But when you see them fire ballistic missiles over Taiwan and have them land in the maritime

commons and into shipping lanes, and some of them actually landed in the Japanese economic exclusion zone, that's why I attach that word, irresponsible.

I think that that's not the way that countries that want to be leaders within the world should behave. And especially, you know, our legislatures, if it's in our law that we're going to provide for the defense of Taiwan and help them with their defenses, that's what democracies do. We go, and we communicate, and we see what those individuals need, and then have dialogue. And then to get that reaction I thought was a little bit overreaching.

Vice Adm. Daly: OK. Well, we're several years on from the USS Fitzgerald and the USS McCain collisions. And I wanted to ask you, do you feel like we've achieved the right balance between training, maintenance, and operations out there? Or is there more to do? And we've also made organizational changes, like standing up a surface crew in the Western Pacific there, in Yoko, as you well know. But another area of special interest that feeds into this readiness kind of question is the manning. I mean, that got a lot of attention. And do you think that the fit and fill that you're getting out there for the forward-deployed naval forces in Japan is supporting you?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah. Obviously, we run our forces hard. There's no doubt about it. We have a lot of these operations, these activities, investments to do with our forces. And so we pay an awful lot of attention to it. And clearly the comprehensive review, the SRR, both found several things that were lacking. And I'll tell you – I'll break it out by manned, and trained, and equipped.

So manning. I'm very fortunate in forward-deployed naval forces that our manning levels are higher than what they are in the continental United States. Typically, we're 93-95 percent fit and fill. And we try to man our crews out there to 100 percent. Doesn't mean that we have periods of time where we're – we have a gap, and so we address the manning of every ship, and look at it, and work with the bureau to fill and find the right individuals and the qualified, skilled individuals.

From a training perspective, back before those accidents, a little over five years ago, there was – we would waive certifications if we couldn't get it accomplished. And I'm very proud to say that there's about a zero percent chance of any kind of waiver when it comes to training certification. And Admiral Aquilino has held that line when he was PAC Fleet, and Admiral Paparo has carried that. And it's not even really a consideration for us.

Vice Adm. Daly: So even to the point, tying up a major ship that might be needed for operations, that's a – everybody's on there – on line?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah. The way we approach it is if we think there's a possibility the ship may not be able to make it, we try to find what's our backup plan? What's our tertiary plan? What ship are we going to use? And even to a greater point, we don't bring them into the first island chain if we don't think that they're at the right level of training, because of the activity of the PRC. We take a look at every ship and the mission that they have to do.

And I think the biggest thing when it comes to the accidents in 2015 and '16, the surface force has done a tremendous job in the training pipeline, and in the simulators that they have up at SWOS, and the rigid curriculum, and the fact that not only the JOs, but the department heads, the XO, CO, when they're coming back to command, they have to actually pass a simulator and a check ride. And it has teeth to it. And some folks aren't able to become the department head. And so the rigor that's been put into the program is good. It makes better ship drivers. And certainly, we learned a lot about watch bells.

And I think the – you know, and equipment maintenance for ensuring that we're giving the time they need to get the maintenance done on the ship. But the reality is that the folks like COMNAV Surf Group WESTPAC – Joel Lang just took over that. He was the CO of the Tripoli, and I had a chance to meet him when I went out on the Tripoli. He's a really sharp officer. And he and the SWO boss – he is the SWO boss's forward eyes and ears. And the team really works well together to make sure that we're not cutting any corners, that ships are prepared.

And I feel like we're in a good spot, but never complacent to the point that even in yesterday's three-star, four-star discussion we were talking about get real, get better. We were talking about the Learning Action Board. And one of the things that we're going to do with the Learning Action Board is to go back and revisit the comprehensive review and the SRR, to make sure five years later – or however much time since we implemented these changes – that they still are applicable, that there's not something else that we're missing, and that the things we put in place are still working. So the continuous learning culture, which I think is healthy.

Vice Adm. Daly:

Well, we've just, gosh, in the last month or so, there was a – the annual, you know, maintenance conference. I think it was down in Norfolk. And NAVSEA was there, the regional maintenance guys were there, and they painted a pretty grim picture of the ability to keep up. I mean, it's – really, if you look back almost 20 years, you know, since the height of OIF, you know, the Navy never really got the dedicated reset that, you know, some people felt was

needed. And we've always seemed like we're just five years ago from catching up on maintenance. And so, are you satisfied with the ability to turn ships out there?

I mean, it's one thing to hold the line and say, OK, we've got the balance right between ops, maintenance, and training. But the different entities that are supporting you for this, are they able to do it? There's been some pretty, you know, well-advertised situations out there where ships are waiting a long time. And it strikes me that you're under a lot of pressure to churn them out. So is the forward maintenance establishment getting it done for you out there?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah, I'm actually in a very good position, from our SRF facility out there. The Japanese workers that work in Yokosuka and the ones in Sasebo, they are a different workforce. And it's an ethic, it's a culture. So in that regard, when you put a ship into work and you're doing basic work like tank work or hull work, it's very good. When you get to C5I capability we often have to bring in contractors to get some of that work done. There's no doubt that we are working hard with – our ships are working hard, and they require maintenance.

Some of the – you know, I definitely have my challenges, with a ship that will have something go wrong with it and I'll have to bring it in. I've got the Barry conducting some work on pumps right now that we didn't expect to break, and gas-turned motors break. And so we find ourselves having to adapt. And so what that requires, is it requires that team I talk about – whether it's my DESRON commander, my SRF shipyard commander, or the COMNAV Surf Group WESTPAC, or my staff working together to look downrange and say: OK, this ship really needs this maintenance. What's our alternative? And so it's a dynamic situation. It's a day-to-day situation. But for the planned periods, the SEAHs and the SRAs, we're sticking to those periods.

Vice Adm. Daly:

And do you feel like – it seems to me that there's still a little bit of an air gap there in the C2, because you're obviously numerical fleet commander, numbered fleet commander. You've got the operational chain soup to nuts. But, you know, here you have some entities out there, like tech commander entities, like Surf Group WESTPAC. Do you feel like those dotted lines are working?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

I do. I think that, you know, when we stood up COMNAV Surf Group WESTPAC, the theory was the operational commander had too much responsibility, and they were the ones that were able to cut corners, because we had to make all these operations. And so the answer to that was we

needed to stand up this organization that will be able to be the type commander, to be the honest broker, to ensure that we don't do that. So that was the theory behind COMNAV Surf Group WESTPAC.

What I would tell you is that over our time and our experience of working this organization and working the team out there, it really is a team effort. And it's – no one entity can manage the maintenance effort there. It has to be a team sport and a balance, because there is such a heavy load on our ships. And so, but any one member of the team can say, hey, hold on, time out. We need to take a pause here. And then when it comes down to it, at the end it's my responsibility to make sure that we're deploying safe ships, prepared ships. And I'm not going to cut that corner.

Vice Adm. Daly: I think it's – I think the truth has really revealed itself that to do that is the path to the wrong end. But you mentioned the team. And so you've got this team that's like your home team, the FDNF ships that are there in Japan, the 20-some ships. And then you've got folks that are deploying into your AOR, mostly from the West Coast, and Hawaii, and obviously a little bit of Everett and Bremerton. And so do you find these are two different entities? One is worked up under the standard, you know, east-west coast workup plan. And then you guys have that slightly different workup plan. As far as team goes, do you feel like the assets that you're getting in theater are assimilating quickly and ready? And have you been pleased with their readiness and capabilities to arrive, you know, ready to work?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah. I think, you know, Strike Group 15 is the entity that's responsible for working up the strike groups on the West Coast. And they've done a really nice job. I get a chance to brief with the strike group that's working up, and they provide me – you know, they have a very good curriculum that talks through different theaters and different levels of preparedness. And they brief me. And that gives me a chance to talk with a strike group before they ever come out. Right now we've got the Nimitz Strike Group doing their Comp TU exercise.

And so we do a very good job of folding the two teams together. I think that the way we get to the end-state and in FDNF, because we are operating at a higher op tempo and tend to be out there in contact routinely, our bathtub never quite – gets quite as deep, and the readiness level stays up. They get an opportunity to do LVC training and to really expand their maneuver in the distributed maritime ops on the West Coast. And so they, through COMPTUEX and red forces, they peak maybe a little bit higher, and then as they come out their readiness might fall.

And so we end up being at about in the same spot, and we have opportunities routinely to bring our two strike groups together, or to bring our amphibians and our strike groups together, and to be truthful. You know, the way I view it, in its very simple term, is shoot, move, and communicate in distributed maritime ops. And then the fires aspect of find, fix, track, target, engage, and assess. And those are the muscle movements that we need to be

able to totally interoperable on. And we practice that every time that the forces are out there.

Vice Adm. Daly: You know, you just mentioned distributed maritime ops. You know, there's been a lot of talk about that. And I was wondering if you – it's difficult even for me to fully comprehend what the change is. I mean, part of it I could see with the – you know, the disaggregated/aggregated concepts that we've applied in the past. You know, there was a time when we did away with the picture of the strike group because everybody who looked at the picture thought we all operated that way, all together. And clearly we haven't. So if we have been doing the disaggregated for some time, what's the new change? What's the delta with DMO? Just maybe a couple examples.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah. So I would say that the picture's always important. Got to have the picture to let you know that you've done the exercise. (Laughter.) But you're right. We're not going to aggregate. We're not going to be in that tight a formation. But really, what distributed maritime ops is about is being able to bring fires from multiple axes at a point and time of our choosing, and mass them to create the effect that we want. And so we'll often – you know, part of this is with our Marine Corps brethren. I'm a huge fan of the commandant's force design.

And we've gotten to the point now where we've taken my CTF-76 and the 3rd MEF, and we've combined. We've actually integrated the two staffs. And my good friend, Chip Bierman, who's – General Bierman, 3 MEF, he and I conduct staff talks and rock drills. And that inside force and being able to integrate what they can bring to the table with what the Japanese ground self-defense force can bring, what the Japanese maritime self-defense force can bring, what my naval forces can bring, what the Air Force can bring.

And so it at the time and place and the integrated manner, using different sensing techniques which I won't go into in great depth, but to be able to sense, to find, to hold targeting capability, and then to deliver the weapons from various axes. That's, in a nutshell, distributed maritime ops. Being distributed means that you're less vulnerable because you aren't aggregated.

Vice Adm. Daly: You talked about the integration of the staffs at the lower level. And that's a great example, I think, of what's new is old and what's old is new, because if you look at how Nimitz ran the Pacific war, he was very big on that

integrated staff option. Not the GHQ, kind of the Army model, but the early lower-level integration coordination model. And so I think it's going to be very interesting to see how that works out. It seems to me like it's very logically done between at least the Navy and the Marines.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, we've never been tighter in my career than we are right now.

Vice Adm. Daly: Yeah. Well, it's great to see. And General Berger's thinking on this is, I think, really changing things.

You mentioned earlier, Admiral, the – you know, Captain Joel Lang who commanded Tripoli and did that, you know, what some people called the lightning carrier test. But he, you know, zorched across the Pacific, picked up all those F-35Bs in Iwakuni. I think it was, like, some 20 F-35 –

Vice Adm. Thomas: It was 14 in Iwakuni and it was 20 off of San Diego.

Vice Adm. Daly: And so how did that – I know that they've gone back to the configuration now. You know, the standard ARC, with 31st MEU configuration, but for the time period of that experiment – that, you know, 2-3 months out there – how did that go? And are there any insights you could share from that? And did that – when you saw that, and the operations with it, the standard carrier group, how did that work?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah. So it's a neat capability. You know, Joel likes to call it the assault carrier instead of the lightning carrier, which I think is – and the reason he does that is he says it's just got such – you know, one day you can have F-35Bs on the flight deck. The next day you can have MV-22s, and you can be putting Marines at the shore. And so it just is a very versatile instrument. And the fact that you have 14 fifth gen fighters on board is an incredibly capable sensor.

And so we're still in the experimentation phase. We wanted to at least try to find out how would you integrate an assault carrier with a full-size carrier? What missions might it be able to do? And what we found is that when we operated it this last summer, one, I embarked my staff so that we could check out of the C2 capability of an LHA, and to see what options we had there. But then we also – you know, we had two of our aircraft carriers, with the Tripoli, conducting the Valiant Shield exercise.

Vice Adm. Daly: Right. And I think you embarked for that on Tripoli?

Vice Adm. Thomas: I did, I embarked for a small portion with my staff on Tripoli. And so what we found is we distributed out three large decks for a period of time. And I will note that LHA with 14 F-35Bs is much more capable than either of the PRC's current carriers, both from a sortie creation perspective as well as just a sheer capability. There is no comparison between a J-15 and an F-35B. But there's mission sets that I think that it will be designed for. I think that there's regions that it could operate in a better capacity.

And then I think that because of the vertical takeoff nature of the F-35s, you can find yourself putting F-35s in AEBOs, and maybe you bring them back out to the ship for some maintenance, then you move them elsewhere. Maybe you lash them up with the carrier and use the command and control or the electronic countermeasure capability of the E-2s and the Growlers. So we're still in experiment phase. But the capability that, you know, we've seen Queen Elizabeth come across, and had the 35Bs on her flight deck. We know with Japan has launched an F-35B off of Izumo. So it also allows our allies and partners to see the capability you can bring with F-35Bs on the flat top.

Vice Adm. Daly: Thank you. So Proceedings has been running a number of articles under the moniker of a maritime counterinsurgency project. And we started that in July. And kind of the premise is that it's not sufficient just to prepare for the high-end fight. You got to prepare for the high-end fight, but also we need to be able to counter the PLA Navy, the China Coast Guard, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia, even down to the state-owned fishing fleet, when they're violating international norms and you mentioned rules-based international order earlier, and exerting Chinese claims in other nations' EEZs.

And so you mentioned also General Berger, that he was at – he did one of these maritime security dialogues about a year and a half ago. And he mentioned – he said, if deterrence is working, then why did we watch the Chinese build the runway that they said that they wouldn't build, build the revetments, the reinforced hangars, and the radars, and install the missiles on these islands in the South China Sea. What was it – what was the shortcoming of deterrence? And you started off by saying, hey, NSS, integrated deterrence. That's a key component of both the NSS and the National Defense Strategy.

So do you see this integrated deterrence as answering what many perceived as a gap in the gray zone, the fact that others can take advantage of us because they know we're going to follow the rules, any thoughts on that? I mean, something's got to change.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, no, I agree. And I think as you look back – you mentioned the South China Sea island buildup. And I think that that speaks volumes to – you

know, Chairman Xi told the president at the time that they wouldn't do that, and they clearly did. So that's – I think we, as a nation, wanted to believe that the PRC, because of their global economy and getting brought into the fold of the way that the Western economies worked, that that would it, it clearly didn't, to the gray zone. You know, clearly they have, as an authoritarian regime, the ability to use state-owned fishing, to use PAFMM

militia. And it's an area that we see them doing, and so integrated deterrence, I think, is the answer.

I think, you know, we have a lot of opportunities to share information with our allies and partners. And we do share information with them. Clearly their coast guards, the Japanese Coast Guard is very capable and very large. And it's an area that they very aggressively work on. The Philippine Coast Guard not as large. We have our Coast Guard come out and work with their coast guards. And I think that's been very beneficial too. The U.S. Coast Guard has really stepped up and brought their cutters over there. And we just had the Midgett leave. And so that is an aspect of it, is the training and the working with like capabilities.

But when it comes to exposing the malign behavior, the false claims, you have to do that in the information space. You have to do that through diplomatic channels. You have to do that through military. I don't actually have that much interaction with them. They tend to swarm into areas that are either close in to some of those features, but we don't really have that many interactions, out in the broader South China Sea or East China Sea. But if in the integrated deterrence scheme, where you're looking across domains, you're looking across instruments of power, regions. Clearly illegal fishing down in the Oceania region is a huge thing for those countries.

And so it has to be a multinational, multidomain effort to expose those behavior. And the international community has to be willing to step up and work on it together. It's a little bit of what we've seen in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, that when you violate sovereignty, when you don't follow rules-based international order, the international community will step up. The challenge with the PRC is they stay right below that level, and they just incrementally work it. And so it's very important that we don't accept. And that's why we do freedom of navigation operations.

If we didn't do them and we just accepted the claims, the claims that are beyond what the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea allows, the claims that have been determined not legal in the international tribunal – if we don't do

those freedom of navigation ops, if we don't have our like-minded nations – and fortunately we've seen Australia and Canada sail through the Taiwan Straits routinely. Routinely might be a strong word, but we've seen them sail through there. And we do it regularly. If you don't – if you don't push back, if you don't, you know, take a stand, then they'll just continue to move the ball down the field. And, you know, enough's enough.

Vice Adm. Daly: With the tension that's inherent in this, you know, there's the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, CUES. Kind of I always think of it as, like, the

INCSEA of the Western Pacific, the agreements that we had in the Cold War with the Russian navy to deescalate when things got tough. Is that being used out there?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

It is. You know, all of my ships, all my air crew, have the CUES at their disposal. They will use it. CUES is a product of one of the WPNS symposiums that was – that happened – I think it was 2014. We have one of those coming up in Tokyo, when the nations come together and try to come up with these measures to be able to provide for maritime security. And so we have it. And we use it. It will tell you that the PRC usually, if they don't respond, I know they understand what we're saying.

And I also tell all my ship commanders and squadron commanders: If you need to get your intentions across, use plain voice if necessary. But in general, not a lot of dialogue with it, but certainly many nations have signed up for it. And the bottom line is it's out there to remove ambiguity and to try to let the other guy know what your intentions are, so that we can decompress a situation.

Vice Adm. Daly:

Thanks. I just want to take a second here. I'm going to ask one or two more questions and then open it up to audience questions. We have mics up front. The only thing we require is that you have a question and identify yourselves when you ask a question. And we also have people watching online who will be able to submit questions and we'll pass those on to the admiral. So we'll be doing that in just a moment.

But, you know, we haven't talked about the Koreans so much, and North Koreans. And, you know, the Navy has been making some pretty strong noises lately that, like, hey, MBMD, you know, we're going to do some of it, but if it can be done from land, maybe that's somebody else's responsibility. And of course, the Navy's under immense pressure from a budget standpoint. You're on point. The Navy isn't an inherently maritime region out there, with this Chinese threat. So we've got the North Koreans firing missiles over Japan at certain points in the last few weeks.

Where do you see the maritime ballistic missile defense thing balancing out? Do you think we're going to do less from sea, more from sea? It seems to me that it's got to be a huge part of one of your mandates, which is to reassure our Japanese allies.

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah. So very fortunate to have several ships that have ballistic missile capability. Clearly, there's ballistic missile capability to protect our allies and partners. We just did a trilateral ballistic missile defense exercise following the most recent shots from Korea, to let them know that we're lockstep and unified in our defense of our – of those allies, South Korea and Japan. I certainly have ships that have the capability to defend the landmass. I would

tell you that all my ships are multi-mission ships, and there's capability, like a THAAD battery, that could defense against a geographic location.

I think that there's – certainly Japan itself is looking at its own ballistic missile defenses. But I'll also tell you, the PRC has ballistic missiles, DF-21s and -26s and YJ-20s that they can launch out of their Renhais and their Luyang IIIs. So having the ballistic missile defense is not only to protect our allies and partners; it's to protect ourselves. And our ships are extremely capable. And so having that ballistic missile defense capability is something that I would want on every one of my crewed ships, just from a multi-domain capability. But certainly, in competition and the spectrum of conflict where we live right now and competition, it is a very good reassurance to both Japan and South Korea.

Vice Adm. Daly: You just touched on the Ukraine briefly, but is there anything that you see in the Ukraine-Russia conflict that informs or gives you an insight about your theater? I know there are tremendous differences, but there may be a few things that – and maybe you already touched on one, which is will. To have the will, you know, to do the right thing. But any comment on that, you know, from – you must be watching it very closely for implications in the Western Pacific.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, I think the first thing I would hope that the PRC would be watching is that when you try to, you know, use force to go across borders, that it causes the international community to respond as a team. And I think there's 50-plus nations that are – that the secretary of defense is working with right now to provide support to Ukraine. Clearly, it's a different geography, when you – if you try to draw parallels between Ukraine and Taiwan. But I think we've learned quite a bit in the world of asymmetric weaponry. I think that when you look at an ability to hide and operate in Ukraine, or, you know, with foxholes or with camouflage, clearly, that doesn't exist, because you're trying to cross 80-plus miles of water.

I think that we haven't seen an amphibious landing for a very long time for a reason. When you're working against precision munitions, it's a different animal. And so, you know, I would say the will of the Ukrainian people, and the leadership of Ukraine is another thing that I think all of us are watching and are very impressed with. President Zelensky and the way that he's led his country, I think, that as you look at that – the importance of those people and their determination to defend their nation, that's something that you could take away and apply. And then I think that you look at the challenges that Russia has had in this fight, to be able to not only sustain themselves but to – you know, it certainly didn't play out the way that they thought.

And I think that the decision, with all that we know now, eight months later, if President Putin had that decision to make again I doubt that he'd make

that decision. So I would hope that Chairman Xi is looking at that, and maybe taking some lessons learned. And I think the biggest lesson, I would hope, is that you look at the will of the people of the United States, the will of the free world, the will of likeminded nations to come together to support that nation when they were illegally invaded. And that's the biggest lesson I would hope that anyone would take out of it.

Vice Adm. Daly: Thank you. Microphones are open. I'm going to take a question from the audience – a question from the audience now that's online.

And this question is from Yosuke Aoki from the Japan Ministry of Defense. He says: The U.S. Navy is modernizing its naval forces under DMO. Do you think that promotion of this concept would change the way the Seventh Fleet and the Japanese maritime defense force operates? We've already talked about DMO, but how do you see DMO and JMSDF?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, I'll tell you that I have the best relationship with my counterpart at the JMSDF, Vice Admiral Yuasa. He and I were – when I was a strike group commander, he was fleet escort force. We both went away for a little bit then came back. And he's CINC SDF fleet now and I'm Seventh Fleet. So we weekly meetings where we get together in our commanders update briefs. We conduct wargames with our counterparts in Japan. That's another thing – I used a little bit of the then and now description earlier.

But what I didn't say – that was in a PRC lens. What I didn't say is how far Japan has come in their thinking, whether it be in the joint world – you know, the Japanese ground self-defense force and 3 MEF, and our Japanese maritime self-defense force and the U.S. Navy are working together every day out there to share information, to conduct fires using all these different sensors. And so – and we're bringing in the Japanese air self-defense force as well. And our bomber task force from the U.S. conducts flights in that area, and we integrate with them as well.

So from a DMO perspective, it's a topic of discussion that we have with Japan. They obviously have a little different geography that they have to worry about. Their nation is within the weapons engagement zone, and they have to defend their territory. So when we look at that and when we plan, we look through a

little different prism with them, but with the same intent and with the same ironclad resolve to defend our very close ally.

Vice Adm. Daly: Thanks.

Mallory Shelborne.

Q: Hi, Admiral. Mallory Shelborne. I'm with USNI News.

It appears that we've been seeing near monthly transits through the Taiwan Strait. But it also appears that we've seen fewer freedom of navigations operations this year, compared to 2021 and 2020. What are we to make of that, and how else are you doing presence operations in the region?

Vice Adm. Thomas:

I wouldn't make too much of it. So we do Taiwan Strait transits on a fairly regular basis, but not so regular that we're predictable. And we do the same thing with freedom of navigation program. That's a State Department-run program. A lot of people don't recognize that, but we get our direction and we work – Department of Defense works with the Department of State on which freedom of navigations ops we're going to do. And they're not all oriented towards the PRC. They're oriented towards any excessive claims by any country. So sometimes you may not see us doing one overtly in the South China Sea, because maybe we're doing one in some other part of the world.

And so, you know, we balance the operations that we do both in the South China Sea, as well as in the Philippine Sea, as well as the freedom of navigation or Taiwan Strait, or maybe one of our allies and partners is doing one of those things that – you know, we try to assess the situation, to assess our deterrence capability. And we pull all of those operations and all of the areas that we're sailing into this assessment. And we throttle up and throttle down based on what we're – what we're seeing.

Q: Are some of them just not getting announced? Is it possible? Throughout the world, not just in your region?

Vice Adm. Thomas: No, the FONOP program is a global program. Anywhere that somebody has an excessive claim against a baseline, or they require us to notify them

before we enter waters, we will challenge that claim. Because if you don't challenge it, then it becomes just de facto the way it is. And that's the whole point of the program.

Vice Adm. Daly: That's a really point, because I think people – because of the recent history – associate it with the PRC and the Taiwan Strait. But, I mean, I can remember doing FONOPs with – against Canadian claims. And it's very "South Park," but the bottom line is – (laughter) – the bottom line is that people do tend to link those and it's just global.

Mallory, did you get your answer?

Q: Yeah, thank you.

Vice Adm. Daly: Thank you. I've got a question over here.

Q: Sir, Silas Son. I work for Planet Federal, a commercial satellite imagery provider, and also a retired Navy intel officer. Thank you for being with us today.

My question has to do with artificial intelligence, technology innovation. I read with interest, and I've been following the sail drone use out at Task Force 59 out of CENTCOM. Seems like they have really kind of doubled down on that sort of technology, disaggregated sensors, AI. It seems like something that would be useful for you out at the Western Pacific. And I wanted to see if you had anything to say on what you think of those programs.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah, my good friend Brad Cooper sat next to me yesterday at the three-star, four-star. And we're always kind of bantering back and forth about this. But without a doubt, he is learning. And with the unmanned taskforce, we are in this very rapid evolution of understanding how to sense and make sense. And I keep saying, man, you keep learning. And when you get it perfected, I'm going to take it. (Laughter.) But no, I do think there's value. And, you know, clearly he – I am the good recipient of – the beneficiary of not having to send my carrier strike groups through my fleet anymore and onto CENTCOM.

And so I'm keeping them in Seventh Fleet, which is exactly where I want to – where I want to keep them. That, unfortunately for him, has left him with a little less capacity than he's had in the past. And so this ability to use the sail drones and to work with quite wealthy countries out there and get them involved in this effort, and build the maritime domain awareness has worked quite well. I can see applications in many areas. I can't be everywhere all the time. So I do think there's value. I would love to see the price points come down a little bit and to be a truly – get our unmanned sensors to be disposable, we're not quite at that point.

But we did take his capability and we did an exercise down in Sydney, where we worked at the Sydney harbor with Australians, that they could see the capability. So we're bringing it, but we're still in that learning and growing phase. And I'm quite, frankly, happy right now to let him, you know, bring all the resources there and really work the AI piece of it, because I think that's the secret sauce, is what he likes to say. And so once we get that figured out, I think that we'll see it expand across the remainder of the Navy.

Vice Adm. Daly: So let's go from sail drones to Triton UAV. I got a question here from the audience on Triton UAV from Rich Burgess at Sea Power. He's wanting to know, is how are you finding that asset, its utility in theater?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah, so we've obviously been operating with Triton in theater for quite some time. We're getting close to where we're getting to the IOC level of Triton. You know, we're going to use Triton as a replacement for some of our surveillance aircraft. And so the biggest benefit it brings, clearly it's got some – it has tremendous endurance. And so we've operated it out of Guam routinely.

We've started working to operate it out of various places in Japan and trying to not only make sure – you know, make sure we can have numerous places to take off and land, I think in competition it has great benefit because of its legs. We're going to work to build up an orbit. It'll be – we'll have to learn our way through some of the capability that an EP-3 might bring back. It'll be a different way of processing the information than we do with our EP-3. And so we're working as a Navy to figure out how we seamlessly make that transition. But, you know, any sensor is goodness in my fleet. It's a huge AOR, and to have something that has that kind of legs, and that persistence really helps.

Vice Adm. Daly:

That's great. I've got a question from Admiral Kevin – Vice Admiral Kevin Green, USN retired. He said, do we need to develop additional regional capabilities and operating locations in your AOR?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

So additional regional contingency operating locations? So we do have programs, and I have a taskforce, Task Force 75, that operates out of Guam. It's my Seabees and my EOD team. And every day they're operating in various countries. And when I get their slide and their footprint, and I see all the different nations that they have teams in, whether they're doing an EOD exercise with another nation, whether they're doing diving and salvaging to

improve a nation's capability in that regard, or whether the Seabees are constructing a schoolhouse or constructing a warehouse, we are building places.

I won't say bases in places, but we're building capability and things that we might need in a contingency. And there's a very, you know, Indo-Pacific Command has a plan for where we put forces, and what activities we do, and what investments we make. And so we are actively in the process of doing that.

Q:

Hi, sir. Jennifer Hlad from Defense One.

I just wanted to see if you can talk a little bit about, as North Korea has increased some of their missile launches recently, as Admiral Daly mentioned, is that requiring more of Seventh Fleet's attention and

resources? And how is that maybe affecting some of the resources you might normally have elsewhere?

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah. Clearly, they are on a little campaign right now of launching ballistic missiles and short-range ones. And it certainly has all of our attention. U.S. Forces Korea, as well as mine, and PAC Fleet's. And it's a concern. You know, when we – when they launch the missiles, we pulled together a short-notice ballistic missile defense exercise with Japan and South Korea. And that was something that we're very united on. The Reagan had been in the Sea of Japan. They had done an exercise called MCSOFEX, which was a counter special operating forces exercise with South Korea.

And so I think that what you saw was after many years of not operating in the Sea of Japan, and visiting South Korea for a couple reasons – one, COVID. Another, the prior administration had a different way of doing business than the current South Korean administration. And so us being in that area I think probably precipitated a little bit of his tantrum, whatever you want to call it. But as far as taking away resources, we always have resources available for us. It's a concern, but not one that I'm going to prioritize over my bigger concern in the area.

Q: Sure. Thank you, sir.

Vice Adm. Daly: Question over here.

Q: Good afternoon. I'm Veronica Cartier and my concentration is Indo-Pacific region.

I would like to get your perspective for the coming planning of a strategic INDOPACOM towards Indonesia. I learned that – you know, that U.S.-Philippine joint exercise, Sama Sama, perhaps is not quite suitable for Indonesia. As you may learn, that China has been very stronger than ever spread all over Indonesia. Especially in the island of Sumatra, where in the south where is location of the Strait of Malacca. Where China has been concentrating on that region, it means China now have control of the Strait of Malacca. Also, the access to Indian and Pacific Oceans, and Indonesian Seas.

Vice Adm. Daly: So, Veronica –

Q: So what is your perspective to have previously American base above the Java Island. It was several years ago. And I think that is my opinion of strategic to control China's spread and, you know, all over. So the American base, bases to be back in the – along Indonesian island. And I'd like to get your perspective on –

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah, Veronica, thanks for that question. So I did have a chance to go to Jakarta not too long ago. I get out and get a chance to visit my counterparts and had a great visit with the admirals down in Jakarta. And when I was there, my good friend Admiral Hammond from Australia was there at the exact same time. And so we engaged with the leadership of Indonesia and we talked about the concerns that they have. We have an exercise called SEACAT that we do out of Singapore that talks about this very important crossroad of Indonesia, and the activity that we're seeing down in that area. And so we have LCS ships that are in Singapore and operate out of Singapore.

And so I think that the entire region, and in that Kakadu exercise I talked about we had Indonesian representation there as well. And so, you know, I think there's no lack of concern about where the PRC is trying to influence and expand, and the resources that they're trying to gain, and the places they're trying to gain access to. So I think many nations share in your same concern. And in the dialogue that I have and the staff talks that I have with these nations, we talk about that. Indonesia wasn't part of Sama Sama, but Indonesia and Malaysia and the Philippines have a very tight relationship to patrol the Sulu Sea and work together in that area. So Indonesia is a great partner, a great friend, and we work closely with them on many of these exercises.

Q: One last thing. Is, do you think for Indonesian President Widodo Joko is cooperating with the U.S. requests for more open of American involvement in the Navy in Indonesia?

Vice Adm.
Thomas: Yeah. I think that Indonesia is a great partner, and I look forward to working with them.

Q: All right. Thank you very much.

Vice Adm.
Thomas: Thank you.

Vice Adm. Daly: Over here, Sam LaGrone. I think we'll just have time for these two last questions here.

Q: All right. I'll make it quick. Afternoon, Admiral.

A lot of the conversation around the Chinese capabilities are sensitive, classified, depending on what avenue you're looking at that. How much can you talk about the threat and the counter to the threat down on the deck plates? What are you telling your sailors? You know, they're on these ships doing these operations in the South China Sea. How do you articulate the threat? And how do you let them know what the stakes are? Thank you.

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah. I think that we're – you know, we talk a lot about how China is the pacing threat. And they certainly have capability. But we talk about the importance of our mission. And we're going to sail, we're going to operate, and we're going to fly anywhere international law allows. And so when I'm on ships and I'm talking to the sailors I articulate the importance of their mission, first. I articulate the importance of being ready. I articulate the fact that you have a responsibility as the leaders of the navies that are out there to work with our allies, our partners, our teammates together, and to every day you're operating train like it could happen, because that's our job.

That's what they pay me to do, that's what they pay my sailors and my Navy to do. And that is to be ready, to defend if necessary, and we are. And so I've – I try to get out as much as I can to be able to explain just exactly the behavior that we see and to tell my sailors the role that they play. It's not just a U.S. role. It's, you know, the role they play as ambassadors as they visit these countries, the role they play when they communicate with their teammates on other ships to make sure that they can not only share the way they do their techniques, and their tactics, and their procedures, but to ensure that we're operating as one team, because it's going to take the entire free work coming together to enforce the rules-based international order. And there's a lot at stake. And I think that the average sailor that's out in the Seventh Fleet understands that, that there's a tremendous amount at stake.

Vice Adm. Daly: Thanks. Over here for our final question.

Q: Good afternoon, Admiral. I'm Lieutenant Commander Ross Hammerer.

Recently this year we announced that we're going to send two more destroyers to Rota to be forward deployed there. You mentioned earlier as well Force Design 2030 and the work that you do with 3 MEF. Do you see or do you feel that one ARG forward deployed to your fleet is enough? Or do you see that there's an increased need in order to support Force Design 2030 with more amphibious ships forward deployed to Seventh Fleet? Thanks, sir.

Vice Adm.
Thomas:

Yeah, thanks for the question. I think that presence matters, first and foremost. So the more ships that we have forward, the more opportunities we have to use them. I think that our goal right now is about having a constant 1-0 presence of the ARG. That would be the level that would be good for competition. Clearly, we can surge more if we need. We have the America ARG that is forward deployed. So she's out and available half the year. And what we try to do is deploy an ARG to cover down for the remainder of the year from the West Coast. And if we can maintain that, that gives us that constant presence that is a good deterrence baseline. And then clearly, we have forces that can surge if we see the need to as we assess what's happening in the theater.

We have a balance of having Marines on amphibious ships, because they are our crisis response force. If something happens, we can immediately get them there and quell something. And then we all owe the force design effort and being thin and being able to be nimble, and to sense, and to be able to provide fires on off-axis. And that capability is extremely important if we were to get into a high-end fight.

And so being able to work across that spectrum and being able to train to it, as long as we have a – at least one amphibious readiness group out there that can either work the shore, like they're doing right now, from Kakadu up to Resolute Dragon, or to be on the ships and work with my maritime ships, it's the ability to be able to flex, and to be able to maneuver and adjust. And that's the versatility that you have in the U.S. Navy. That's the versatility you have in the naval team. And it's on display every day out in Seventh Fleet.

Vice Adm. Daly: One safe round, one minute, on the Coast Guard forward with the national security cutters. Peter Ange and others have asked this question, their contribution and, with the nature of ops, do you want more of that?

Vice Adm. Thomas: Absolutely. I think what we mentioned, with the gray zone, you can't have enough Coast Guard forward. And they've been great partners. And they've been pushing as much forward as they can. I think it's a capacity issue. And –

Vice Adm. Daly: Right. But the right tool for your job.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Exactly.

Vice Adm. Daly: Well, I just can't thank you enough for making time. We know your time is precious. It's really exciting to get you here in person with our audience and online. And on behalf of CSIS, and the Naval Institute, Admiral, we just want to thank you for giving us this time. And also want to thank our sponsor, HII, without whom we wouldn't be able to continue this wonderful Maritime Security Dialogue Series. We thank you. And let's give the admiral a big hand. (Applause.) OK. I think we're out. I think this was wonderful and really appreciate your time, again. And hope you can take a few minutes and just look around the Naval Institute for 10 minutes.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Vice Adm. Daly: That would be great. Thank you. Thanks, again.

Vice Adm. Thomas: Yeah.

(END)

