



**THE US INDO-PACIFIC COMMAND
MAKES ITS INDO-PACIFIC MARK,
WITH CHINA IN MIND**

BY DAVID SCOTT

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Vice-President Mike Pence's speeches at the Hudson Institute "[The Administration's policy toward China](#)" (Oct. 14), his piece in the *Washington Post* "[US seeks collaboration not control in the Indo-Pacific](#)" (Nov. 10), and his speeches at the [East Asia Summit](#) (Nov. 15) and the [APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting](#) (Nov. 16) had a recurring theme - a free and open Indo-Pacific is being threatened by China. This political message was matched by equally blunt comments during November by Adm. Philip Davidson the chief of the US Indo-Pacific Command, in charge since May when the command was renamed from US Pacific Command. Davidson's two speeches in November represent the first developed public expositions of the Indo-Pacific Command's view on the Indo-Pacific and China.

On Nov. 16, Davidson delivered a hard-hitting speech at the Halifax Security Forum titled "[Indo-Pacific Security Challenges](#)." The US Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) policy was carefully laid out by Davidson. Threats from jihadist destabilization and Russia were noted; but the "even greater challenge to the long-term stability of the region" was identified as China. His analysis criticized China's Maritime Silk Road initiative ("debt-trap diplomacy" and "predatory economics"), its maritime activity ("coercion" "intimidation" "militarization") in the East and South China Seas, and its rejection of international law ("excessive territorial claims" that the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague "does not accept"). He also warned that "the PRC is pressuring ASEAN states into granting China de facto veto authority over

who ASEAN states can sail, fly, train, and operate with in the South China Sea." Chinese promises were unconvincing: "despite President Xi's 2015 promise not to militarize these features, the PLA secretly deployed" anti-ship missiles, electronic jammers, and surface to air missiles (SAMs) to the various artificial features build up by China; "so what was a 'Great Wall of Sand' just three years ago is now a 'Great Wall of SAMs' in the South China Sea," enabling Chinese "control over international waters and airspace" as well as seabeds and their information cable lines.

Davidson then gave the "Keynote Address" at the biannual US Army Pacific (USARPAC) Commanders Conference, held on Nov. 28 around the theme of "Competing in the Pacific." He [reiterated](#) his criticisms of China, and went on to point out that China needed restraining; but that "we can not do this alone. Our allies and partners are imperative for success."

Davidson gave a lengthy exposition titled "[China Power](#)" on Nov. 29 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). This echoed his Halifax Security Forum speech, again emphasizing the general significance of the Indo-Pacific, the nature of the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy, and his reiteration of identical word-for-word criticisms of China.

Faced with China's Indo-Pacific challenge, Davidson's remedy was two-fold in his "[China Power](#)" speech. First, US maritime power was emphasized: "preserving a free and open Indo-Pacific is a core interest of the United States, underwritten by the credibility of the combat power within US Indo-Pacific Command." A forward military posture matches Davidson's [comments](#) to the Senate Armed Forces Committee on April 17 on the "importance of developing and fielding a force posture" that is "capable of countering Chinese malign influence in the region," and "that effectively deters Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific." This is precisely why during 2018 there were a rising number of US freedom of navigation deployments into the South China Sea, and also into the Taiwan Strait.

Second, maritime partnerships were flagged by Davidson in his "[China Power](#)" speech: "we are seeing a general convergence around the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific across the region", where Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and India have also "all put forth similar concepts or visions" of the Indo-Pacific. Davidson also welcomed how "in the last three

months you're seeing a larger number of nations operating in the South China Sea." Bilaterally "Japan and the United States exercise together within the nine-dashed-line" as did Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and France unilaterally – all to "assert the rights to operate in international sea space." With local weaker states buckling under Chinese pressure the US admiral called for stronger nations to stand together, for "when strong nations stand up – and stand together – for a free and open Indo-Pacific, we send a signal that it's okay to resist," and "that signal will be heard by those nations absorbing the full weight of Chinese malign influence."

Davidson's rhetoric in November reflected the increasing tempo of INDOPACOM China-related activities. The *USS Antietam* conducted exercises with the Thai Navy before joining the *USS Curtis Wilbur* for a Taiwan Strait transit on Oct. 22. The Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group and the John C. Stennis Carrier Strike Group conducted anti-submarine exercises in the Philippine Sea during mid-November. The *Ticonderoga*-class guided-missile cruiser *Chancellorsville* conducted freedom of navigation operations off the Paracels in the South China Sea on Nov. 26, quickly followed by the *USS Stockdale* and the *USNS Pecos* conducting another Taiwan Strait transit on Nov. 28.

INDOPACOM's search for collective responses to a rising China goes on. B-52 bombers returned to Guam on Dec. 9 after participating in *Lightning Focus* exercises at Darwin with Australia. Gen. Charles Brown, chief of the Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) conducted discussions with Indonesian defense officials on Dec. 13 [concerning](#) "challenges present in the Indo-Pacific" from China, and the importance of "maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific." Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer's discussions in New Delhi from Dec. 21-23 involved general [emphasis](#) on "Indo-Pacific" security and specific recommendation of the trilateral *Malabar* exercises held by the US, Indian, and Japanese navies.

INDOPACOM continues to particularly seek out India, which is seen as a growing counterweight to China. On Dec. 7 the Indian defense minister visited INDOPACOM headquarters, complete with Davidson's [comment](#) about them being "partners on defense and security and this exemplifies our mutual cooperation to assure a Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The 7th Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Phil Sawyer arrived in India on Dec. 12 to co-chair the Executive Steering Group (ESG) on bilateral naval cooperation, [asserting](#) that "we share an enduring commitment to

providing security across a free and open Indo-Pacific." *Cope India* exercises between the US and Indian air forces were conducted from Dec. 3-14. PACAF chief Gen. Brown, arriving in India for defense discussions with Indian officials from December 14-17, [welcomed](#) both the *Cope India* exercise and his discussions as giving the US "the opportunity to work alongside nations that support a free and open Indo-Pacific." On Dec. 22, the amphibious transport dock *USS Anchorage*, arrived at Visakhapatnam India's Eastern Command headquarters; accompanied by [comments](#) from Rear Adm. Brad Cooper, that the US navy would be operating "alongside their Indian team mates, providing security across a free and open Indo-Pacific."

To conclude, the US Indo-Pacific Command leaves 2018 and enters 2019 with; (1) increasing forward projection up to the "first island chain" off the Chinese coast and South China Sea, including (2) continuous bomber presence at Guam from where patrols over the South China Sea were a regular 2018 feature; (3) talk of greater military cooperation with Taiwan amid (4) increasing defense cooperation with other China-concerned states. The strategic implication for the region is a visible US forward position, which is comforting for allies and partners, a little uncomfortable for some more neutral states wanting to avoid taking sides, and certainly disquieting for China. USINDOPACOM's focus for 2019 has been given a steer by President Trump's signing of the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (ARIA) on Dec. 31. The Act emphasizes Chinese threats to US security in the Indo-Pacific, and specifically mandates the government, and in turn USINDOPACOM, to work with "allies and partners to conduct joint maritime training and freedom of navigation operations in the Indo-Pacific region, including the East China Sea and the South China Sea, in support of a rules-based international system."

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