

U.S. PACIFIC COMMAND INTERNATIONAL MILITARY LAW AND OPERATIONS CONFERENCE



37th Annual Conference | Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia | Record of Proceedings

"MILOPS is a venue for deterrence and action"

A Note From the Staff Judge Advocate, U.S. PACOM

MILOPS is where combat capability, international law, and global partnerships intersect. MILOPS presents a positive vision of the legal principles we support and defend together. But we must be clear eyed – recognizing our values face continuous pressure from revisionist actors who enforce *rule by law* rather than *rule of law*. But those who oppose our values cannot replicate the organic trust and deep institutional bonds that are made at MILOPS. We are undeniably stronger when we operate and work together, and our combined actions have an exponential effect. Together, we maximize our resolve, unleash our combined combat power, and reinforce whole-of-government deterrence to safeguard our shared legal values, including freedom of navigation, overflight and commerce across our oceans; the peaceful resolution of disputes and the sovereign equality of all nations big and small.

Dustin Wallace
Captain, U.S. Navy
Staff Judge Advocate
U.S. Indo-Pacific Command



Stronger Together
**Ministers of Defense
Philippines and Malaysia**

The active participation of over 300 people from over 30 nations at MILOPS reflects

Three Undeniable Truths:

1. The **unyielding strength** of our existing partnerships, and firm resolve to forge new ones;
2. The **enduring importance** of our shared values.
3. Our **collective commitment** to use this forum to advance freedom, security, and prosperity

ALLIES² = EXPONENTIAL DETERRENCE



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

MILOPS 2026

Across 3-6 August 2026, the United States Pacific Command brought together over 300 military leaders, operators, diplomats, academics and legal and policy advisors representing over 30 nations from across the globe to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to participate in the annual international Military Law and Operations strategic engagement. This year the theme was 'From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific' reflecting the multi-domain environment in which we operate.

Keynote Addresses

Malaysia's Minister of Defence, The Honorable Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin welcomed the participants to Malaysia and gave an address focused on international law, regional neutrality, and the primary role of diplomacy. The Minister advocated that countries with major military capabilities are "custodians of global peace" He reiterated that dispute resolution must always favor peaceful dialogue, mediation, and diplomacy over armed conflict.



"The true purpose of being in the military is to ensure that war and conflict never become necessary." - Minister for Defence of Malaysia,

The Secretary of National Defense for the Republic of the Philippines, The Honorable Gilberto Teodoro Jr. reaffirmed that Philippine defense policies are firmly anchored in international law. He introduced the Philippines' strategy of "transparency," deliberately showing China's aggressive behavior to the world, to build international consensus and expose actions that violate international law. He called for stronger synergies with like-minded nations to build sustainable peace and an open security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. He urged ASEAN to unite with the Philippines in defending the 2016 Arbitral Award on the South China Sea. He stressed that this is not merely a Philippine national interest, but a fight for international principles that secure the shared interests of the entire region.

"No other Asian country is experiencing the same kind of aggression that the Philippines faces today from China, which threatens its maritime domain daily." Secretary for National Defense of the Philippines, Gilberto Teodoro

The Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Dr. Kao Kim Hourn

underscored ASEAN's enduring role in fostering regional stability amid an increasingly complex strategic environment. He remarked that "Competition among states is an enduring feature of international relations. The more pressing task is to manage it responsibly, prevent it from undermining regional peace and stability, and anchor it in dialogue, diplomacy, international law, and practical cooperation". The Secretary General was clear that "dialogue and diplomacy are not the alternative to strategy; they are an essential component of strategy. They create the confidence necessary for cooperation, promote strategic trust, reduce the risks of miscalculation, and preserve channels of communication precisely when they are needed most". He reiterated the importance of forums like MILOPS as a valuable opportunity to exchange perspectives on the evolving security landscape, and reinforced ASEAN's vision of a peaceful, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.



"Peace is not self-perpetuating; it must be continually sustained through trust, engagement, and institutions that keep cooperation possible even when consensus remains elusive" - Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, SG ASEAN



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

MILOPS Day One

The Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral Samuel Paparo reaffirmed the unyielding U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific dedicated to upholding the sovereign rights and prosperity of all Indo-Pacific nations. "We will not let any nation dominate this region or sweep away the hard-fought sovereign rights of independent states. To preserve peace and prosperity, we must safeguard the rule of law as the bedrock of global stability and protector of sovereign rights."

U.S posture and intent are well-defined— the U.S. is deterring China through strength, not confrontation. Deterrence is about ensuring that aggression remains an irrational and prohibitively costly choice for any revisionist actor. Events like MILOPS, send an unmistakable message of our combined capability, shared interests and our commitment to deter aggression across every square centimeter of this theater.



"Each independent state has a voice and has a responsibility for peace."
Commander US PACOM

"The Law as a tool of order versus the Law as a weapon of raw power—is the defining fault line of our time"— Commander US PACOM

The Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, The Honorable Thomas G. DiNanno delivered a warning against geopolitical manipulation, stating that Indo-Pacific nations "will not be fooled by artificial deadlines, artificial islands, artificial legal entitlements, or arms-control arrangements that create only the appearance of security." He asserted that the U.S. is actively "building the strength that makes peace durable." The U.S. is

committed to working alongside regional partners to ensure no single nation can unilaterally close the global commons, dictate rules, or decide the future of the Indo-Pacific.

Chief of Defence Force, Malaysia General Tan Sri Dato' Seri Haji Malek Razak Bin Sulaiman emphasized Malaysia remains committed to a policy of strategic autonomy, choosing to work based on international principles rather than aligning with major global powers, while firmly defending its sovereignty in the South China Sea under UNCLOS. He called on regional partners to strengthen interoperability, information sharing, and practical cooperation to build collective resilience and stability across the Indo-Pacific and urged peaceful, diplomatic resolutions to disputes.



As Day One progressed, the speakers focused on the crucial role of regional partnerships. The Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, The Honorable Michael George DeSombre emphasized that 21st-century Indo-Pacific deterrence relies heavily on daily diplomacy, sustained relationship-building, and robust bilateral partnerships alongside traditional military readiness. He outlined the hierarchical structure of U.S. regional engagements elevating Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships as key vehicles for defense modernization, trade, and securing critical maritime choke points. He advocated for seamless synchronization between nations' diplomatic and defense apparatus to project a unified, unambiguous posture of strength to prevent coercion.

U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN, The Honorable Kevin Kim reaffirmed that the U.S. remains firmly dedicated to ASEAN Centrality to promote regional peace, security, and economic stability. He emphasized the U.S. commitment to strengthening practical, bilateral defense cooperation with regional partners under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) framework. During bilateral side meetings, Ambassador Kim conveyed Washington's deep commitment to continuously improving and upgrading defense relations and practical security cooperation with Malaysia.



U.S. Ambassador to ASEAN The Honorable Kevin Kim in bilateral meeting with Malaysian Minister of Defence Honorable Dato' Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin

From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

The afternoon saw a panel of highly experienced Operational Commanders discuss Cooperation and Interoperability led by **CMDR Jacqueline Swinton** from US PACOM with **Commander of Joint Operations, Vice Admiral Justin Jones**; **Singapore's Chief of Defense, Vice Admiral Aaron Beng**; the **Malaysian Joint Force Commander, Lieutenant General Dato' Tengku Muhammad Fauzi bin Tengku Ibrahim**; and the **Commander of the Philippines' Coast Guard Fleet, Rear Admiral Weniel Azcuna**. The Commanders remarked on the importance of practical integration of regional military forces, joint doctrine sharing, and robust multilateral exercises for building trust, confidence and interoperability. They emphasized the expanding number of Combined Military Exercises, growing nation participation in those exercises and increasing operational support and co-operation on cross-border security issues.

"Co-operation and Interoperability have never been stronger in the Indo-Pacific; we see an exponential growth in regional forces, increasing capability and shared will, all coming together for regional peace, stability and security" - **CMDR Jacqueline Swinton, RAN**



Dr. Collin Koh Swee Lean from the School of International Legal Studies, Singapore closed the day with *How to avoid War in the Indo Pacific*. He expressed the need for countries to expose and legally counter China's "grey-zone" strategy, which relies on domestic regulations to provide artificial legal cover for aggressive physical maneuvers against regional neighbors. He highlighted the crucial role of multilateral maritime activities in demonstrating collective security commitments and to signal that unilateral coercion will carry prohibitive operational costs.

MILOPS DAY TWO

Day Two focused on the South China Sea (SCS). **Mr. Greg Poling, with the Asia Maritime Transparency**



Initiative demonstrated the deteriorated security in the SCS over the last 60 years, where a common goal to preserve the maritime commons has been overtaken by expansionist strategies. Today, China pursues its excessive maritime claims with persistent and ever-increasing maritime operations delivering constant presence of China Coast Guard, Survey, Maritime Militia, and other state-linked vessels, that apply coercive and aggressive activities in order to control contested areas. Asian nations work to improve their maritime domain awareness (MDA) and are utilizing cheaper, more reliable technology, such as AIS receivers, however China simply overwhelms them with scale.

"Gray-zone expansionism happens one tiny little slice at a time."
- **Mr Ray Powell, SeaLight**

Mr. Ray Powell, Director of SeaLight reaffirmed the declining security situation remarking that "China is the Indo-Pacific's most effective modern expansionist power, using gradual "gray-zone" tactics at sea rather than overt conquest". He says "China's actions include political and legal warfare, designed to normalize unlawful behavior, pressure smaller states, and shift blame for escalation onto others". **Ms Jen Parker from the National Security College, Australian National University** highlighted that the Indo-Pacific is a maritime system where competition increasingly centers on access, control, and rules at sea, and where episodic tension can quickly progress to sustained contestation.

General Counsel for the Defense Logistics Agency, Mr. Jose Cora addressed the growing challenge of sustaining military operations in a contested Indo-Pacific. He explained that modern logistics networks optimized for "just in time" efficiency are increasingly vulnerable to kinetic/cyber disruption, while large centralized stockpiles and distribution hubs present attractive targets. Building resilient logistics requires flexible contracting, greater access, basing and over-flight arrangements, and closer integration with allies and partners.



"Contested logistics requires moving beyond vulnerable just in time supply chains toward multiple, resilient, distribution pathways."
- **Mr Jose Cora, General Counsel DLA**



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

Mr. Robert Harris, Legal Counsel U.S. State Department and Professor Jay Batongbacal from the University of the Philippines College of Law executed a deep dive into the 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Tribunal Award given this year was the 10th anniversary of the Award. They emphasized the criticality of the Award today as much as when it was issued. The Award rejected China's expansive maritime claims, clarified the maritime entitlements of South China Sea features, and affirmed the Philippines' sovereign rights and jurisdiction in its Exclusive Economic Zone. China's coercive activities have intensified over the past decade, even as the Philippines has increasingly asserted its lawful maritime rights.



Day Two also brought together senior leaders from the Coast Guards of the U.S., Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines well as a senior leader from the Pacific Islands. **First Admiral Vincent Rajamon (MEA)** (emphasized how regional cooperation must yield concrete, domestic operational value, advocating for strict adherence to UNCLOS and structured, tier-based information sharing. **Admiral Askari (BAKAMLA)** explained of the effectiveness of effective coordination with domestic government agencies to combat complex maritime threats.



Rear Admiral Jay Tarriela (PCG) demonstrated the renowned success of the "Philippines' Transparency Initiative," which documents and publicizes China's illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive (ICAD) activities in the West Philippine Sea. He remarked that "quiet diplomacy" may work for neighbors facing minor incursions, but would amount to surrender for the Philippines' whose maritime borders are being physically encroached upon.

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The panel on *Countering Transnational Crime at Sea* led by **CAPT George Howell, USN** brought together international security

experts and law-enforcement directors who mapped the dangerous convergence of maritime threats—including drug trafficking, fuel smuggling, sanctions evasion, and Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing—which are increasingly being exploited or protected by malign state actors. **First Admiral Sharif Steve McQueen (MMEA)** and **Brigadier General Emmanuel Boiteau (French Armed Forces)** detailed the immense operational hurdle of converting raw maritime surveillance into court-admissible evidence, highlighting recent successes as a result of multi-jurisdictional intelligence-sharing networks. **Mr. Allan Rahari (Forum Fisheries Agency)** explained how distant water fishing fleets are being utilized as instruments of state to test regional response/enforcement. Mr. Rahari noted that while satellite and AI tools have improved, maritime domain awareness and structural enforcement gaps remain, due to the vastness of the sea. **Mr. Charlie Brown (United Against Nuclear Iran)** illuminated the rise of "dark fleets" employing deceptive ship-to-ship transfers and spoofed AIS transponders to evade international sanctions. He highlighted the safety risks these uninsured, substandard vessels pose to coastal communities. No single nation can dismantle these overlapping illicit networks alone, calling for synchronized international legal frameworks, secure confidential financial tracking, and targeted flag-state enforcement to bridge the persistent gap between open-ocean surveillance and successful prosecution.

"While Malaysia and Indonesia are dealing with a neighbor occasionally stepping on their lawns, the Philippines is dealing with a neighbor that has forcibly moved its fence halfway across their yard" - Mr Ray Powell, Director SeaLight



MILOPS Day Three

The Honorable Earl Matthews, General Counsel for U.S. Department of War began Day Three with his remarks on *Legal Support across Full Spectrum Operations*. He outlined the U.S. Department of War's framework for military legal readiness and emphasized how modern legal operations are not merely administrative or reactive, but are active, strategic components of operational planning, that span the entirety of the competition spectrum.



Ms. Sylvain Vite, Senior Legal Advisor with the International Committee of the Red Cross remarked at the relevance of the 1949 Geneva Conventions today amid rising inter-state tensions, new technologies, and modern maritime operations. He emphasized that the key challenge is not rewriting the law, but ensuring states take practical steps in advance to comply with detailed obligations under IHL. Across issues like detention at sea, cyber operations, and AI-enabled warfare, he remarked that legal relevance endures, but preparedness, interpretation, and meaningful human judgment are essential for compliance.



Professor Kathryn Friedman from the Ted Stevens Centre for Arctic Security Studies moderated *The Future Security of the Polar Regions*. The Panel discussed how the Arctic and Antarctica regions are increasingly relevant to Indo-Pacific strategy, international law, and geopolitical competition. The strategic parallels between South-east Asia and the polar regions were compared, particularly the ways adversaries may use legal ambiguity, coercion, and gray-zone tactics to pursue national objectives. Professor Anne-Marie Brady, University of Canterbury, New Zealand argued that China sees the Arctic and Antarctica as integral to its long-term global



"No nation can deal with China as it is now on their own.....Alliances matter. Partnerships matter. Relationships matter. And the rule of law matters."
- Prof Kathryn Friedman, Ted Stevens Centre

strategy, with interests in military access, resources, scientific presence, logistics, and influence over evolving legal and governance frameworks.

Lieutenant General Derek Macaulay, Canada's Senior Military Representative to the Indo-Pacific offered that sovereignty depends on sustained presence, investment, domain awareness, and deep cooperation with allies, Indigenous communities, and whole-of-government institutions.



Ms Anthena Tong from the University Tokyo and Pacific Forum presented on *Information Operations, Digital Authoritarianism and the Rule of Law* demonstrating how China integrates information operations, legal coercion, and physical infrastructure pressure via a coordinated strategic approach. She explained how AI has industrialized influence operations through bots, microtargeting, narrative testing, and content flooding, making it harder for humans to verify facts and maintain trust in institutions. Using Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines as examples, she showed how China exploits local divisions, launders propaganda through seemingly domestic voices, and uses lawfare to

invert perceptions of aggressor and victim. Dr. Joanna Siekiera, from the University College of Professional Education, Poland, presented on Cognitive Warfare. She spoke on an adversary's goal to degrade decision-making capacity, exploit psychological and cultural biases, and erode trust in democratic institutions and the rule of law. "Cognitive warfare is not just about changing what people think (as in traditional propaganda), but systematically disrupting how they think, including creating "legal noise" to cause confusion, hesitation, and second-guessing".



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.



CDR Tim Boyle led the panel of Major General David J. Bligh (Navy); Major General Bobby Christine (Army); and Major General Christopher Tolar (Marines) on the JAG Role in Multi Domain Deterrence

The U.S. TJAG Panel presented on the preparation of legal advisors for increasingly contested, joint, multinational, and multi-domain environments, including efforts to improve talent management, operational law training, education, and readiness. A central theme was that legal professionals must be embedded with operational forces, understand the Commander's mission, and be interoperable with allies and partners, especially in the Indo-Pacific, where legal coordination, shared understanding, and preexisting



relationships are essential to deterrence and operational success.

Ms. Apoorba Banerjee, (ASEAN Strategy Lead for **Osborne Engineering**) presented on Supply Chain Resilience and Cross-Border Strategies. She argued that the paradigm for global supply chains must shift from efficiency to readiness in the face of increasing global uncertainty. The old model, built on single-sourcing and minimal inventory, is too fragile for an environment shaped by geopolitics, conflict, and climate stress. True resilience is not merely stockpiling but an actively engineered system design involving supplier diversity, multi-tier visibility, and strategic buffers.

The Pacific Island Panel moderated by **Dame Meg Taylor (PNG) Pacific Island Voice**), brought together regional leaders from "Big Ocean States". **The Honorable Jennifer S. Olegeriil (Minister of Justice, Palau)** and **The Honorable Leonito Bacalando Jr. (Secretary of Justice & Attorney General, FSM)** emphasized that for Pacific peoples, security is not strictly a military concept; it is an integrated, existential struggle against the immediate, devastating impacts of climate-induced sea-level rise (which they treat as a direct threat to sovereign borders), transnational drug networks turning transit routes into domestic consumer markets, and the social integration challenges of deportees. **Mr. Douveri Henao (Geopolitical Analyst, PNG)** highlighted how PNG's large, agrarian youth population is leveraging affordable high-speed internet (via Starlink) and AI-driven micro-credentials to leapfrog traditional development barriers. The panel defended their sovereign right to choose their partners, with Palau and Micronesia highlighting their deep, legally binding defense relationships with the U.S. via the Compacts of Free Association (COFA). They firmly asserted that these treaties do not dictate their broader diplomacy or prevent them from trading with other nations, concluding that the Pacific's preferred future is one modeled on ASEAN-style regional solidarity, consensus, and the "Pacific Way" of dialogue—where outside powers are welcome to engage, but only on the Pacific's own self-determined terms.

"Cross-border resilience must be planned before disruption begins. Resilience is not a warehouse... It is an operating system."
Ms Apoorba Banerjee



Pacific's "Big Ocean States" Panel recontextualized their nations not as small, vulnerable, or dependent territories, but as vast, sovereign custodians of the Blue Pacific continent.



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

MILOPS DAY 4

The final day opened with **Professor Masahiro Kurosaki** from **Tohoku University School of Law** examining how emerging technology is challenging traditional LOAC classifications, such as autonomous vessels and the definition of “warship” and that Legal advisors must look beyond labels and Manuals to the underlying treaty law, state practice, and operational functions.

Major Stephen M. Gorman, Chief of Space Law, U.S. Space Command, addressed the evolution of international space law as military, commercial, and civilian reliance on space rapidly expands. The 1967 Outer Space Treaty remains the foundational legal framework, but it was negotiated in an era that could not anticipate thousands of satellites, proliferated commercial constellations,

renewed lunar activity, or today’s dependence on space for communications, navigation, financial systems, intelligence, and military operations. Space is now both an essential enabler across every operational domain and a warfighting domain that will be increasingly contested. As technology and commercial activity advance faster than governments can develop new agreements, lawyers must apply established legal principles to increasingly complex questions involving dual-use satellites, commercial support to military operations, targeting, jamming, and activities below the threshold of armed conflict. Where new treaties are difficult to achieve, agreements such as the Artemis Accords and multinational cooperation can develop shared expectations for responsible behavior in space.



Professor Dale Stephens, University of Adelaide, presented on the development of the **Wayfarer Manual on International Law Applicable to Peacetime Air and Sea Navigation**. Unlike Manuals focused on LOAC, the *Wayfarer Manual* addresses Indo-Pacific maritime and air operations and activities outside of armed conflict.

The project seeks to clarify areas of legal uncertainty through rules and accompanying commentary grounded principally in treaties, customary international law, and, critically, state practice.

“These manuals have no authority in themselves. It’s a matter for states to determine what they accept and what they don’t accept. State practice is the “secret ingredient” - Prof Dale Stephens



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.



The last Panel brought together **Senior Regional Legal Advisors from across the Indo-Pacific** from Australia, Canada, Fiji, France, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, Republic of Korea and United Kingdom to **discuss Contemporary Legal Challenges and Opportunities**. Despite differences in force size, geography, and national authorities, the Panel identified similar demands arising from strategic competition below the threshold of armed conflict, foreign interference, cyber and information operations, emerging technology, maritime security, transnational crime, and preparation for high-end conflict. Several panelists emphasized that legal services cannot develop deep expertise in every emerging field and must prioritize resources, build operationally fluent legal advisors, and leverage relationships with Allies and Partners.



Air Commodore Chris Taylor (Australia) and Brigadier James Kennedy Good (New Zealand) stressed that military lawyers can no longer simply be "compliance officers" in the rear; they must be embedded as "operational enablers" directly alongside frontline Commanders to quickly navigate ambiguous, grey-zone provocations and complex multinational interoperability issues (such as the AUKUS agreement). **Colonel Saturnino Diaron Jr. (Philippines) and Colonel Kajoon Song (South Korea)** shared distinct frontline challenges, explaining how they actively utilize the law as an asymmetric weapon to transparently document and counter adversary aggressions—from Chinese maritime swarming in the West Philippine Sea to North Korea's multi-domain provocations (including GPS spoofing and trash balloons). Across the board—from the vast arctic patrols of **Canada described by Major General Robin Holman** to managing the extensive Pacific EEZ by **France's Commander Alban Merlin-Aubert**—the JAGs concluded that their most significant future hurdles are keeping pace with "black box" technologies (AI, autonomous systems, cyber warfare) and combating "lawfare", demanding unprecedented legal collaboration and rigorous, unified adherence. A recurring theme was that **legal interoperability is itself an operational capability**. Exercises, exchanges, information sharing, comparative legal analysis, and sustained relationships allow partners with different legal systems and authorities to operate together effectively and strengthen collective capacity. This cooperation is particularly important in responding to lawfare. Discussing multinational transits of the Taiwan Strait, panelists emphasized that states must both exercise rights recognized under international law and clearly communicate the legal basis for doing so. Air Commodore Taylor summarized the relationship between state practice and legal narrative as **"what we do" and "what we say about why we're doing it."** Partners must continue exercising lawful freedoms rather than allowing competing legal narratives or persistent objections to narrow internationally recognized rights.

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Legal interoperability is Operational Capability:

Exercises, exchanges, information sharing, and sustained relationships allow partners to overcome differences in legal systems and authorities

Thank you to the Senior Regional JAGs on the Panel for sharing their expertise and advice:

Air Commodore Chris Taylor, Director General Military Legal Service; Major General Robin Holman, Judge Advocate General, Canadian Armed Forces; Colonel Kitone 'Tui' Tunaosara, Director Legal, Royal Fijian Military Forces; Commander Alban Merlin-Aubert, Head of Law Enforcement at Sea, French Armed Forces; Brigadier General James Kennedy-Good, Head Legal Services, New Zealand Armed Forces; Colonel Saturnino S. Diaron Jr., Chief, International Law & Special Projects, Armed Forces Philippines; Colonel Kajoon Song, Judge Advocate, Republic of Korea Air Force; Air Commodore Kevin Sanders, Deputy Director Legal Service, Royal Air Force, United Kingdom

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- MILOPS 2026 KEY TAKEAWAYS -

The following represent key take-aways that were repeated throughout discussions and had significant support from the audience (in no particular order):

1. **The Primacy of International Law (especially UNCLOS):** a stable Indo-Pacific order must be rooted in international law, with UNCLOS as the cornerstone. This includes respecting sovereignty, sovereign rights, freedom of navigation and overflight, and rejecting excessive maritime claims. The final, binding and unanimous 2016 South China Sea Arbitral Award was repeatedly cited as a critical, legally binding affirmation of these principles.
2. **"Gray-Zone" Tactics are the New Frontline:** "Gray zone activities" (or "illegal, coercive, aggressive and deceptive– ICAD- activities") are the primary method used by revisionist actors to alter the status quo through intimidation, coercion and the use of coast guard vessels and maritime militias to pressure states and blur the lines between peace and conflict.
3. **Partnerships and Alliances are Critical:** From the opening remarks to the closing statements, it is clear no single nation can address the region's security challenges alone. The strength of the region lies in building and sustaining robust partnerships, alliances, and personal relationships.
4. **The Law is an Operational Tool, Not a Constraint:** Legal advisors should accept the challenge to move beyond a reactive, compliance-focused role. This means actively using legal frameworks to enable military operations, expose unlawful behavior, build international consensus, and gain a strategic advantage.
5. **Transparency as a Counter-Coercion Strategy:** The Philippines' strategy of actively documenting and publicizing China's aggressive actions in the West Philippine Sea was highlighted as a powerful new tool. This "transparency strategy" is designed to counter gray-zone tactics by exposing the truth, building international consensus, imposing reputational costs on the aggressor, and rallying support for compliance with UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal Award.
6. **ASEAN Centrality:** ASEAN has a central role in the region's stability and security; it has a responsibility to ensure the region remains a "zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality" and to deter conflict.
7. **The Growing Challenge of Technology:** Emerging issues for practitioners include addressing the destabilizing threat of AI-driven autonomous weapons and deepfakes, the "black box" legal challenges of advising on new technologies, the weaponization of information through digital authoritarianism, and the evolution of the space and polar regions as contested domains.
8. **Resilience Over Efficiency:** In the context of both logistics and supply chains, speakers argued for a paradigm shift away from "just-in-time" efficiency, which creates vulnerabilities. The new emphasis must be on building resilient, redundant, and diversified systems—whether for military supply lines or global trade—to withstand disruption in a contested environment.
9. **An Integrated, All-Domain Approach to Security:** Modern security challenges are interconnected. Competition is not just about warships but involves the entire maritime ecosystem, information operations, legal warfare ("lawfare"), economic pressure, and even the strategic use of fishing fleets and civilian vessels. Effective deterrence requires Cooperation, Coordination and an integrated, whole-of-government response that synchronizes diplomatic, military, and economic efforts.



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

MULTINATIONAL COUNTER-LAWFARE COORDINATION GROUP 2026

The U.S. Pacific Command Counter-Lawfare Center facilitated the Second Annual Multinational Counter-Lawfare Coordination Group. More than 50 participants from over 11 nations participated, including from military, academia, think tanks, interagency organizations, and the broader international legal community. The group reflected a shared recognition of the importance of the legal environment to regional security. States and other actors can use—or misuse—law, legal processes, institutions, and legal narratives to advance strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. Effective responses, therefore benefit from shared legal vigilance, sustained dialogue, and practical collaboration among countries and institutions committed to the rule of law. Multinational teams worked through hypothetical lawfare threats and developed coordinated responses drawing on military, diplomatic, legal, economic, informational, academic, and civil-society tools. Scenarios included false legal narratives in the information environment, exploitation of emerging-domain rules, economic coercion, and excessive maritime claims and declaratory measures. A central lesson was that effective counter-lawfare rarely depends on a single legal action. Participants identified complementary responses including diplomatic demarches; public release of legal positions; media engagement; transparency and documentation; coordinated action in multilateral forums; exercise of navigational rights and freedoms; maritime domain awareness and information sharing; lawful maritime and law-enforcement activity; litigation and amicus participation; economic measures; and partner capacity building. Participants also emphasized the importance of defining the desired objective before selecting a response. Legal vigilance should identify not only what an actor is doing, but why it is doing it, what legal or informational effect it seeks, and where opportunities exist for coordinated action. This favors proactive efforts to build legal resilience and consensus before contested narratives or practices become established.



U.S. PACIFIC COMMAND COUNTER-LAWFARE CENTER

SECOND ANNUAL MULTINATIONAL

COUNTER-LAWFARE COORDINATION GROUP

Summary of Discussions and Way Ahead



50+
PARTICIPANTS



PURPOSE AND PARTICIPATION

Following MILOPS 2026, the U.S. Pacific Command Counter-Lawfare Center facilitated the Second Annual Multinational Counter-Lawfare Coordination Group in Kuala Lumpur.

More than 50 military and civilian participants from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, and other partners participated, alongside representatives from academia, think tanks, interagency organizations, and the broader international legal community.



The group reflected a shared recognition of the importance of the legal environment to regional security. States and other actors can use—or misuse—law, legal processes, institutions, and legal narratives to advance strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. Effective responses benefit from shared legal vigilance, sustained dialogue, and practical collaboration among countries and institutions committed to the rule of law.



COORDINATION GROUP OBJECTIVES



Promote shared legal vigilance and understanding of the legal environment, including emerging concerns and the lawfare tactics participants assess as most consequential.



Identify practical opportunities for multinational counter-lawfare collaboration to expose and oppose misuse of law, strengthen collective resilience, and uphold the rule of law.



11+
COUNTRIES REPRESENTED



KEY DISCUSSION THEMES



MARITIME AND JURISDICTIONAL MEASURES

Excessive maritime claims; nature reserves and other regulatory zones; declaratory measures; and domestic customs or regulatory mechanisms used to assert or expand jurisdiction.



EMERGING DOMAINS AND TECHNOLOGY

Exploitation of gaps or uncertainty in developing legal regimes governing artificial intelligence, data, and space, including attempts to shape emerging norms for strategic advantage.



INSTITUTIONAL AND INFORMATIONAL LAWFARE

Use of courts, institutions, academia, and public messaging to legitimize contested positions; extraterritorial application of domestic laws; and the cumulative effect of repeated legal narratives.



ECONOMIC AND REGULATORY COERCION

Sanctions or other economic measures, supply-chain vulnerabilities, dark-fleet practices, ship-to-ship transfers, and evasion of domestic or international regulatory requirements.



2
COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVES



PRACTICAL COUNTER-LAWFARE EXERCISE



Multinational teams worked through hypothetical lawfare threats and developed coordinated responses across military, diplomatic, legal, economic, informational, academic, and civil-society tools.



Scenarios included false legal narratives, exploitation of emerging-domain rules, economic coercion, and excessive maritime claims and declaratory measures.



Central lesson: Effective counter-lawfare rarely depends on a single legal action. Success comes from complementary responses and interagency, whole-of-society coordination.



Define the desired objective before selecting a response. Legal vigilance should identify what an actor is doing, why, and what legal or informational effect it seeks—seizing opportunities for coordinated action early.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONTINUED COLLABORATION



1 | COUNTER-LAWFARE COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Establish a mechanism for participating nations and organizations to maintain dialogue between meetings, exchange unclassified legal analyses, identify trends, and rapidly share perspectives on issues of common concern.



2 | ENDURING COORDINATION GROUP

Develop the annual group into a more persistent multinational forum, potentially supported by a rotating secretariat and periodic virtual or in-person meetings. A distributed model allows partners to shape agendas, introduce regional concerns, and lead collaborative initiatives.

Additional opportunities include:

- Collaborative legal analysis & information sharing
- Capacity building & practitioner exchanges
- Engagement with academia & think tanks
- Coordinated public messaging
- Multilateral engagement
- Broader partnerships across government and civil society



WAY AHEAD

The Coordination Group demonstrated that legal strength comes through collaboration. Participants need not share identical legal positions or national interests on every issue. The value of the network lies in identifying areas of common concern, exchanging perspectives, improving collective understanding, and developing practical opportunities for mutually reinforcing action.



The Counter-Lawfare Center will continue working with participating nations and organizations to develop the proposed collaboration platform and explore options for institutionalizing the Coordination Group. Our objective is an enduring network capable of identifying emerging legal challenges early, sharing expertise, and coordinating appropriate responses to uphold the rule of law.



SHARED LEGAL VIGILANCE • PRACTICAL COLLABORATION • RULE OF LAW



From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

U.S. PACOM would like to **thank all the participants** for their contributions including presentations, questions, the frank and fearless discussions and the many bilateral and multilateral meetings which took place on the sidelines. **A special thank you to the Malaysia** for co-hosting this strategic engagement and providing the incredible support of senior leadership from the Ministry of Defence, Malaysian Armed Forces and the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency.

Closing Remarks

MILOPS provides opportunity not only to reinforce existing partnerships but to build new relationships that must now be sustained beyond the conference. “Build relationships now; You can’t surge trust in a conflict.” MILOPS brings together shared values and a shared commitment to the rule of law, freedom of navigation, overflight and commerce, and the sovereignty and equality of states. The law should be used as a means to safeguard rights, not as a means to isolate, intimidate, and coerce. China was invited to participate in MILOPS 2026 but did not attend. US PACOM will continue to seek respectful, professional engagement and dialogue with the People’s Liberation Army.



MILOPS 2026: OFFICIAL PHOTO ACCESS

Thank you for attending the 37th Annual MILOPS Conference and download high-resolution event photos



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OPEN FREE ACCESS

To access the MILOPS 2026 Welcome packet, Presentations, Biographies, Photos and more, please see “MILOPS 2026” or <https://www.pacom.mil/Contact/Directories/J0/J06-Staff-Judge-Advocate/MILOPS-2026/>

The full montage of photos can be found at the QR link.

MILOPS 2026

FROM THE SEABED TO SPACE:
ADVANCING SECURITY, FREEDOM AND PROSPERITY FOR ALL ACROSS THE INDO-PACIFIC

U.S. Pacific Command's annual International Military Law and Operations strategic engagement supports candid dialogue, enhanced partnerships and strengthened cooperation for shared objectives including the Rule of Law, the peaceful resolution of disputes, freedom of navigation and overflight and advancing the security, freedom and prosperity of all nations.

3-6 AUGUST, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

30+ NATIONS
37TH ANNUAL
55 GUEST SPEAKERS & EXPERT PANELS

VISIT MILOPS 2026

ALLIES² = EXPONENTIAL DETERRENCE

MILOPS empowers nations to address common challenges and to determine how we can better work together to deter and respond to coercion, aggression and legal warfare in the region. We are stronger together. By strengthening legal interoperability, expanding combined exercises, and enhancing information sharing, we are building a resilient, integrated security architecture capable of defeating aggression and maintaining regional stability.

Transparency is the ultimate tool for Accountability

Alliances and partnerships are a vital deterrent to conflict

We are stronger together

From the Seabed to Space: Advancing Security, Freedom, and Prosperity for All Across the Indo-Pacific.