



**Admiral Samuel “Pappy” Paparo
Commander U.S. Pacific Command**

***37th Annual MILOPs:
“From the Seabed to Space:
Advancing Security, Freedom, and
Prosperity Across the Indo-Pacific”***

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Distinguished guests, Ministers, Chiefs of Defense, and colleagues—it is my distinct honor to speak to you. I want to express my deepest appreciation to our Malaysian hosts, to Minister of Defense Khaled, and to the exceptional assembly of regional leaders gathered in Malaysia.

Centuries before the international community drafted modern treaties in Geneva or New York, Malaysia was already forging the bedrock of regional stability. In the 15th century, during the height of the Melaka Sultanate, Malaysia's leaders recognized that a thriving regional economy required strict, universally understood rules. They commissioned senior sea captains to compile the historic *Maritime Code of Melaka*. This ancient code regulated trade, legally mandated the rescue of persons in distress at sea, established navigational rules to prevent collisions, and explicitly

ordered crews to collectively fight back against piracy with a "strong hand and courageous heart."

It is incredibly fitting that you're all in Kuala Lumpur today. 500 years ago, Malaysia already understood a fundamental truth: regional prosperity requires a safe, secure maritime domain, and freedom of the seas is only possible when we enforce the rule of law together.

To our gracious hosts from the Malaysian Ministry of Defense and across the Malaysian government—thank you for your tireless work to organize and execute this 37th iteration of MILOPS.

This year, we bring together more than 250 military leaders, operators, diplomats, policymakers, and legal scholars representing over 30 nations from across the region.

The United States is a Pacific nation. The Indo-Pacific is the defining strategic theater of the 21st century, and the United States has enduring, vital interests here. This region is, without question, the geopolitical and economic center of gravity for the entire world. In today's environment of global instability and threats, our unyielding commitment to this region—and to each other—has never been stronger or more critical.

This gathering reaffirms that commitment across alliances and partnerships. We remain steadfast in support of our shared national interests: freedom of the seas and commerce, maritime security, peaceful resolutions of disputes, and a profound respect for the sovereignty of all nations. We take comfort in knowing that our shared interests foster trust, strengthens resolve, and projects

our combined combat power and whole-of-government deterrent capabilities.

This week's MILOPS will reinforce a foundational belief that must guide our actions. To preserve peace and prosperity, we must safeguard the rule of law as the bedrock of global stability and protector of sovereign rights. But these values are under continuous pressure. We face revisionist actors who view the sea not as a shared global highway for commerce, but as a domain to dominate and coerce. They use false claims of legitimacy to justify intimidation. That is not the rule of law; that is rule by law. That distinction—between law as a tool of order versus law as a weapon of raw power—is the defining fault line of our time.

(2. Strategic Environment)

The United States is clear-eyed about the complex security environment in this region. Our posture and our intent are well-defined: the United States is deterring China through strength, not confrontation. Let me be unequivocal: we will not let

any nation dominate this region or sweep away the hard-fought sovereign rights of independent states. Each independent state has a voice and has a responsibility for peace. Deterrence is about ensuring that aggression remains an irrational and prohibitively costly choice for any revisionist actor.

The U.S. Joint Force deters by building and maintaining lethal, ready, and forward-postured combat capabilities. But the United States does not stand alone. Our alliances and partnerships represent our strategic center of gravity and our greatest advantage against any would-be adversary.

Hostile actors can build hulls and amass missiles, but they cannot build the organic trust, deep institutional bonds, and combat-capable interoperability represented by the 30-plus nations gathered in Malaysia. 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.

(3. Changing Character of Warfare)

As we deter aggression across all domains from the seabed to space, we must confront a stark reality: while the fundamental *nature* of war remains unchanged—it is, and will always be, a human clash of wills, and a continuation of policy by other means, but the *character* of warfare is dramatically changing.

Three distinct meta trends are driving the changing character of warfare.

First, the Information and Cognitive Frontier. Information technology has made information operations, psychological operations, and cyber operations much more volatile, and a much more salient form of warfare. Governments use it to affect public opinion and behavior. Outside actors use it to affect governments or the public. Before a single hull moves or a single shot fired, nations contest the cognitive space to weaponize the narrative, degrade national will, and sow confusion to undermine legal legitimacy.

Second, the Commoditization of small, cheap, unmanned systems, has expanded access to capabilities once reserved for major powers. Proliferated unmanned systems have made cheap kill at scale possible and probable.

This commoditization of cheap kill compresses our decision timelines from days and hours down to minutes and seconds, testing the limits of human cognition and traditional command structures – and challenges the pace of your legal advice to commanders.

Third, the Commoditization of space, information technology, and penetrating weapons, has made precision strike a more salient and cheap form of affecting outcomes. Forces can now see and strike critical nodes, including leadership, from across the theater at lower cost and at greater speeds. Geography no longer offers sanctuary. The capability to hold critical infrastructure, commercial shipping lanes, and

forward-deployed forces at risk is becoming a baseline commodity across the global stage.

(4. The Convergence: One Megatrend)

All three of these, information operations, unmanned cheap kill, and precision strike, converge to the **megatrend** of the absolute dominance of information and decision superiority.

This is defined as the ability to observe, orient, decide, act, assess, learn and adjust faster than the adversary. It leads to a greater omniscience, ubiquity of data, compute, and application. When we talk about application, we're talking about artificial intelligence, machine learning compute, and most importantly, the single most important factor in this changing character warfare is human adoption of these tools. Whoever employs these tools best will be able to prevail in the 21st century.

As we integrate automated systems, AI infrastructure, and machine-learning algorithms to accelerate our decision-cycle, we must remain true to our legal, moral, and ethical principles.

Our operational ethos for modern warfare is unyielding: *We will not risk a human life to do a dangerous task if a machine can do the job. We will let machines do what machines are good at—processing data, calculating trajectories, and sensing the environment. But we will never abdicate the human responsibility to take a life.* Human judgment and human accountability must remain a fundamental tenet for all commanders.

(5. A Call to Arms for the Legal Profession)

This brings me to the core of why you are here at MILOPS. If the mega trend of modern conflict demands decision superiority at the speed of relevance, then **law is not a secondary consideration—law is the strategic terrain itself.**

In this compressed, high-tech operational environment, some mistakenly view the law as a constraint, a set of regulatory brakes that impede a commander's ability to act. They are wrong. Driven by the changing character of war, our legal teams have transformed the law from a perceived constraint into a powerful

warfighting enabler across every domain, from the seabed to space.

Success on the battlefields of today and tomorrow hinges on a commander's ability to rapidly make the best possible decisions under immense pressure. Because of the vital role you play in that process—and because of your distinct ability to think logically, objectively, and critically based on incomplete or ambiguous information: you are a weapon system.

To prevail, commanders require decisive legal advantage at the speed of relevance. Therefore, I want to explicitly challenge the legal professionals gathered today.

First, I challenge you to provide all-domain legal advice at the speed of decision-making—ensure your legal advice paces your commander's decision cycle. When an algorithm flashes a targeting solution or a gray-zone crisis manifests in seconds, your integration with operations must be seamless. The legal professional must understand the technology, the data streams,

and the network parameters intimately enough to ensure that our tools maintain first-mover advantage while strictly preserving second-mover legitimacy.

Second, provide your respective commander your clear-eyed, candid advice—speak hard truths. A commander does not benefit from a lawyer who simply says "yes" or defaults to the risk-averse option. Commanders require your unvarnished, independent judgment, especially when operational friction is high, and options are fraught with risk. Use your superb logical thinking skills to identify problems and present options to your commander – and do it at the speed of today's decision cycle.

Third, I challenge you to join our Multinational Counter-Lawfare Coordination Group, which is focused on exposing and opposing any misuse of the law. When revisionist actors weaponize lawfare to falsely justify aggression or normalize coercion, we must collectively call it out, document it, and expose it to the global community.

(6. Conclusion)

Ladies and gentlemen, peace requires constant action to maintain. We must win the peace every single day through combat readiness, multinational cooperation, transparency, and unyielding legal strength.

In this decisive decade, the difference between stability and catastrophic conflict may depend on the concrete actions, relationships, and the trust that you forge in Malaysia this week.

As leaders, operators, and legal professionals—use this 37th MILOPS as an operational workshop for action. Sharpen the legal tools required to ensure that our shared values endure.

Thank you for your dedication, thank you for your service to your nation, and thank you for your commitment to our shared security. God bless you and God speed.