



Adm. Samuel J. Paparo, Commander of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
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Good morning all and Aloha. Thanks very much. Thanks for the warm introduction, Dustin. It is my distinct honor, along with my co-hosts, Governor Green and President Whipps, to welcome you. For the Governor and Attorney General Lopez, you are superior ambassadors for our state. Thank you so much for your support. President Whipps, we're so grateful for your thoughtful and salient remarks as our keynote speaker, setting the tone. You travel from Palau specifically for MILOPS, a head of state, the first head of state to address MILOPS. And it is no easy task to get to Hawaii from Palau. I know you depart shortly and participate in Pacific Island Forum leaders meeting in Solomon Islands, where you will and do, always act with principled leadership through a giant mind and through an even more giant heart. We're so grateful to you. You're steadfast, your principled leadership, coupled with your resolute commitment to the rule of law, not rule by law, but the rule of law.

If you're in the room, you believe in the rule of law. It inspires each and every one of us. President Whipps -- your message this morning perfectly set the tone for our conference, for concrete actions to advance our common interest of securing a free and open Indo-Pacific.

To all of our outstanding group of moderators, of panelists and speakers, thanks for bringing your expertise here to MILOPS. Your energy, your commitment to providing a frank and candid discussion about the significant challenges we face, and there are so many. I want to thank our team here for putting this event together. MILOPS is one of my favorites. I don't miss MILOPS each time, and it's just tireless dedication from our Director of Strategy and Plans, our Director of Public Affairs, our Director of Protocol, as well as our legal teams. Legal Eagle number one, Captain Dustin Wallace, somebody whom I admire a great deal. You can see this in our body language. And then to our favorite lawyer on the staff, Commander Jacqui Swinton. I don't care to serve in an INDOPACOM that doesn't have Jacqui Swinton in it. And when I say our favorite lawyer, my daughter is a lawyer. So high praise. Greg, feel absolutely free, Greg Wilcock, to call upon our Australian leaders that INDOPACOM needs Jacqui Swinton here. Thank you very much. And also, to Miss Judy Roe, thank you so very much for your leadership.

To our allies, our partners and our friends across the region, representing 30 nations, 220 participants, thank you for being here. I know many of you traveled many thousands of miles across vast oceans and time zones to join us here at the gathering place, our beautiful island here of Oahu, in Honolulu. That commitment, it speaks volumes for your commitment, thank you so much. And to stand here and to witness the scope and scale and the level of enthusiasm for this event, it humbles us and it inspires us. So, thank you.

This 36th MILOPs is the largest we've ever done. It includes a broad spectrum of government and military leaders, operators, legal professionals and academic scholars coming together for one objective: advancing freedom, security and prosperity to all. And let's start with this too, the Indo-Pacific is the priority theater for the United States of America. In a world of finite resources and rising global



instability, our commitment to this region and our commitment to you is stronger than it has ever been. And there's this tendency to say the 21st Century is the Indo-Pacific century. I don't know, the 20th century felt pretty Indo-Pacific, also, having served in this theater during this time. It's just so absolutely important. We're so committed to it, and I think MILOPS reflects this commitment. MILOPS reflects our resolve to preserve peace through strength. It reflects our belief that the law is not a constraint, no, it's a shared value that is a force multiplier for military commanders such as me. It reflects our conviction that human dignity and its expression at the state level, sovereign rights, transparency and principled cooperation are not optional values, they are fundamental pillars of security and fundamentally underpin the social contract and the community of nations. This year's theme, advancing Indo-Pacific security through legal vigilance - and it was a term President Whipps used often - legal diplomacy. It's not rhetorical, it's operational. And legal diplomacy, it's not rhetorical, it's operational. That's why the conference is called MILOPS.

It is my sad duty to report that we are not in an era of peace. We are in an era of contested peace. It's a peace we must win every single day. Aggression from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran is accelerating. They are revanchist, revisionist and expansionist states. They seek to displace the international system that's brought unparalleled peace and prosperity since the Second World War and replace it with an authoritarian framework, in their own image. This peace that we've lived for all these years has lifted 60% of the world out of poverty since the end of the Second World War and lifts 160,000 people out of poverty each and every day, and it is under threat. We see pressure mounting in our own region, with the Indo-Pacific at a critical inflection point. We see it in a steady tempo of gray zone operations, maritime coercion, cyber attacks, disinformation, illegal, unregulated, unreported fishing and legal warfare in our own backyard. President Whipps explicated that with such specificity, so that it is real, it's tangible, we can see it, and we see it in China's shifting strategy from 'bide our time and hide our capabilities' to be 'ready and dare to fight.'

We see it in China's regular acts of coercion and aggression against the Philippines and in the Philippines exclusive economic zone despite ironclad international law and blatant disregard to the unanimous and binding U.N. Arbitral Tribunal decision of 2016. We see in China's claim to a maritime law that no one else agrees to and no one else recognizes, and we see it in China's pervasive use of legal warfare as a tool for coercion and a pretext for aggression.

China's misuse of the law is not theoretical. It's real, it's tangible, it's upon us, and if you are in earshot of my voice right now, it's affecting us, and more importantly it's affecting our families and our children. As part of its three-warfares strategy, China's legal warfare is calculated and strategic with the goal of isolating, of intimidating and of delegitimizing.

Combined with public opinion warfare and psychological warfare, China uses legal warfare to cloak its coercion and aggression under false pretexts and false legitimacy threatening the peace and security we work so hard together to protect and defend. And that's why, as President Whipps said, legal vigilance and legal diplomacy are not sidebars to deterrence, they are a centerpiece of deterrence.

Nested within the INDOPACOM command plan, as Dustin discussed, we view legal vigilance and legal diplomacy as critical enablers to deter aggression, and if deterrence fails, to prevail in conflict. And you, my dear friends, whom I admire so much, represent the center of gravity for legal vigilance and diplomacy. And so, what do we mean by that when we say so? Vigilance means watching the law the



way a sentry watches a perimeter, always alert, always on notice, always applying critical thinking, always parsing every word, every phrase, to look for leakage. It means exposing legal warfare, countering false narratives and making our legal position known and timely. It means publishing analysis that affirms sovereignty, the expression of human dignity at the state level, freedom of navigation and lawful behavior before misinformation has a chance to metastasize. As they say, a lie travels around the world before the truth can put its pants on.

Legal diplomacy means building bridges between legal professionals across militaries and ministries, as we're doing right now, we're building bridges among ourselves. It means operating with candor, consistency and respect. It means forging shared understanding, not because we always agree, but because we always respect each other. We respect our opinions. We are stronger when our disagreements are aired with transparency and with mutual respect. Where we can find legal consensus, it means coming together with one loud, strong voice to safeguard international rules and norms, while enthusiastically promoting our shared values. In combination, legal vigilance and legal diplomacy enable deterrence because they increase the cost of coercion, they expose malign actions, and they reduce the space for misunderstanding, highlighting our unity and our strength when we're working together.

My mission, the mission of the going on 400,000 service members and civilians of United States Indo-Pacific Command is to work side by side with you, our treasured allies and partners to deter conflict and to safeguard our shared values. Preserving our shared values is not the work of any one nation, it's the obligation of us all. It's a team effort that demands actions from us all. Executing Indo-Pacific Command's mission requires the best possible legal support, and we have that in you. Not just from our team at INDOPACOM, but also providing the best possible legal support to your respective commanders and leaders across the Indo-Pacific, and that's why we're here. We're here for timely and effective legal advice, legal vigilance and legal diplomacy, requiring the intellectual rigor, the creative spirit and the unyielding commitment to the rule of law that you scholars and practitioners of the law alone can bring.

To all our legal advisors, regarding both military and policy making, your role is critical. This is how you put your shoulder into the mission. And MILOPS is not a collection of observers, it represents a coalition of actors, of action-oriented people, steadfast in your resolve for peace, security and stability. We're over 200 strong this week, representing more than 30 nations. That's not a coincidence. It's a signal, a signal that we're unified, we're serious, we're ready. Aggressors who claim to stand for the law while violating its every principle cannot divide or deceive us regarding action.

And let's hold ourselves accountable. You told us last year that we need to act. So, we did. You asked for multilateral action. We launched a multilateral counter-lawfare coordination group. So, we don't face this challenge alone, it's open to participation from all countries. You asked for timely action, we now publish our legal vigilance update weekly to ensure that we move at the speed of relevance and faster than the lies travel. You ask for transparency regarding China, we extended an invitation to China to attend MILOPS. Their invitation remains open, as does their seat at the table and we welcome China. These are not symbolic moves, they're deliberate acts in our legal strategy. I commend each and every one of you, because many of these actions were not authored at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. They were authored because of you, your voices, your work, your intellect and your resolve.



Deterrence remain our highest duty. Deterrence is about the adversary's knowledge of our capability and will. It's about making sure our adversaries know that aggression will fail, and the cost will be too high. In deterrence, it is exponential when it is exercised together. It's a shared responsibility among all of us. Two allies don't yield 2x deterrence, it yields 4x. Three allies yield 9x. It's not theory, it is reflected in the intelligence record. So, when we train together, when we publish together, when we operate together in the legal domain, we strengthen deterrence. That's why MILOPS matters. They say that the military is "ultima ratio regum." I know lawyers like to speak in dead languages, and that is that the military is the last argument of kings. But the legal argument is the first, most effective and most essential argument of kings, and that's why MILOPS matters, because when legal advisors are integrated into operations, we're stronger, we're more resilient, we're more principled, we're more credible, and accordingly, we're more lethal.

China has made the law a weapon. We must make the law a shield, a shield and a signal. They declared laws unilaterally and then apply them retroactively. They pressure nations to concede sovereign rights that nations lawfully possess. They use false claims of legitimacy to justify coercion. This is not the rule of law, this is the rule by law, and that distinction between law as a tool of order versus a tool of power is the fault line of our time.

So let me please close with this. My fervent hope is that you'll engage one another this week on complex issues regarding the South China Sea, artificial intelligence, cyber law, maritime security, space governance, unlawful fishing, and many more topics and that you'll contribute to our dialogue. As you engage with one another and identify concrete actions to advance peace and security, remember, peace is only durable when it's built on transparency, shared understanding and legal strength. Peace is not passive. It must be protected -- we must protect it. Peace must be won every single day, and it requires us to act together. This is why we must invest in strengthening our relationships and advancing our legal interoperability. This is why we forge partnerships and bonds across militaries and across ministries. And this is why we believe law is not a part of the terrain, law is the strategic terrain.

Thank you for what you've done. Thank you for what you will do this week, because in this decisive decade, the difference between peace and conflict may very well depend on what we decide to do with our laws, our voices and our partnerships. Mahalo, I look forward to any question on any topic.

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