

# Our Enduring Advantage

## How Working with Our Allies and Partners Is the Best Way to Compete

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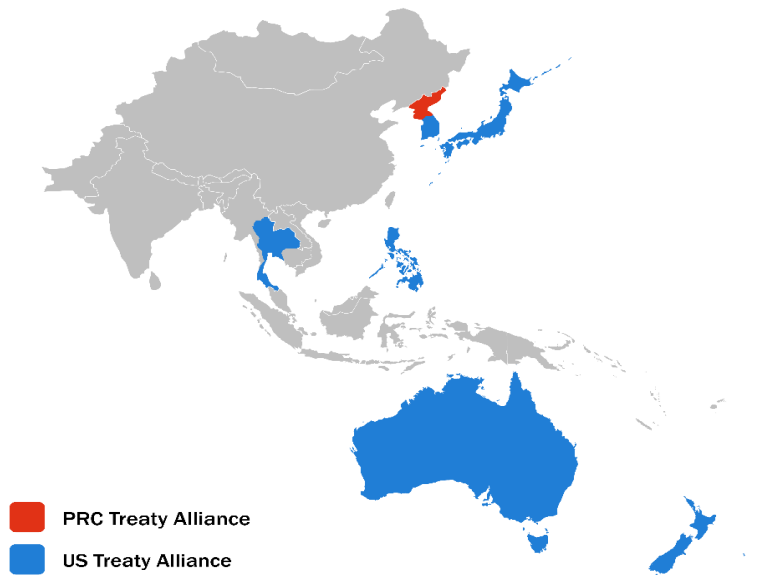
We are all comfortable with the idea of framing success in a debate, a game, or a conflict around the goal of winning. However, what if you were asked to shift your paradigm that the idea is not to win but to continue playing with the goal of always making ourselves better to have advantage over our competitors? In great-power competition, there is no defined finish line, time limit for play, or mercy rule to end the game for participants lagging unrecoverably behind. This continuity and open-endedness stand in stark contrast to how we view our role as those charged with wielding our nation’s military powers to achieve our goals. Rather than viewing employment of military force as an aberration leading back to a condition of “peace,” instead we must think of ourselves in a long-term effort employing all instruments of national power in pursuit of our national objectives.<sup>1</sup>

As the air component in the Indo-Pacific region, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) executes operations supporting national strategic guidance directing strategic competition with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). We can best compete in this region by making engagement, interoperability, and common goals with our allies and partners the center of gravity around which all our efforts revolve.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* outlines two primary objectives: (1) to restore America’s competitive edge by blocking global rivals Russia and the PRC from challenging the United States and our allies, and (2) to keep those rivals from throwing the current international order out of balance<sup>2</sup>. These two revanchist and revisionist powers compete with US influence in the Indo-Pacific; while Russia has enduring historical interests in the Far East, our region lies at the heart of the PRC’s strategy to match and eventually surpass the United States as the leading power in the world. This fact is increasingly accepted across the United States government, with our response coalescing around a policy of deliberate, enduring competition against a Chinese government seeking to displace the United States as world leader. For our nation, and specifically Airmen

serving in the Indo-Pacific theater, the PRC is the pacing threat to those in the region who actively contribute to regional and global security. As stated in the Biden administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, "[China] is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."<sup>3</sup>

The PACAF Strategy operationalizes guidance on great-power competition from the President, Secretary of Defense, and theater commander through three lines of effort: (1) strengthening alliances and partnerships, (2) improving interoperability and lethality, and (3) developing operational concepts for great-power competition. The key asymmetric competitive advantage the US military enjoys over the armed forces of our adversaries, particularly the PRC, are the war-fighting capabilities, positional advantages, and moral authority our constellation of like-minded allies and partners provide. This article will examine each of the lines of effort Indo-Pacific Airmen are directed to execute, focusing on the impact of allies and partners and contrasting PACAF's approach with the malign and corrosive influence of the Chinese government.



**Figure 1. Alliances.** The PRC's relationship with their sole treaty ally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, has atrophied, and military interoperability is not actively maintained the way it is within US alliances. The United States has defense alliances with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, as well as partnerships with many nations throughout the region.

## **Readiness through Strong Alliances and Partnerships**

Our readiness to respond in any crisis is the foundation of our force; the geographic and political realities of the Indo-Pacific theater mean that for PACAF, readiness must be built on a foundation of strong relationships with allies and partners. Our first line of effort is to strengthen our network of alliances and partnerships. Personal engagement, practical cooperation, and demonstration of our shared values and goals set the stage for the complex combined air operations required to respond whenever and wherever a crisis strikes.

As the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, the potential impact to readiness was obvious. Through various exercises and engagements, PACAF supported efforts to provide COVID-19 relief to the region. In April 2020, PACAF Airmen, in coordination with other government agencies, airlifted more than 31,000 pounds of effective personal protective equipment and medical supplies to Guam and Saipan; even more impressively, they achieved this feat with only 72 hours' notice. In December 2020, the Department of Defense's longest-running humanitarian airlift, Operation Christmas Drop, provided an opportunity for the United States and Japan to demonstrate decades of bilateral training and readiness. In its 69th year, despite the pandemic, the operation resulted in the delivery of nearly 30 tons of toys, food, clothing, and supplies to the citizens of the Republic of Palau.

Where face-to-face meetings were not possible, PACAF worked at the staff level to expand and fortify our relations with allies and partners through a seamless transition to virtual platforms. In 2020, PACAF conducted Airman-to-Airman talks with Thailand, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and, for the first time, Brunei. These talks provided an avenue to develop interoperability, foster military-to-military relations, and improve bilateral cooperation.

In contrast, while PACAF has provided aid and relief since early spring of 2020, the PRC behaved disingenuously from the very beginning of the pandemic. As COVID-19 spread from Wuhan to the rest of the world, PRC leaders squandered the opportunity to alert the world to the danger, instead choosing secrecy and disinformation. This dangerous level of self-centered behavior has continued as the PRC exported defective personal protective equipment, refused to be transparent with international health organizations, and limited the participation of experts. Additionally, the PRC's pandemic assistance in the region is based on transactional considerations rather than sincere goodwill, as countries like Cambodia received swift assistance while independent actors like Singapore and Vietnam waited months. In May 2020, PACAF hosted a virtual senior leader conference to discuss COVID-19 and its implications on engagement and exercises; this event included a leader from Taiwan, which has performed incredibly im-

pressively in responding to the virus. The PRC responded to the event by demarcating the United States and other countries for the inclusion of Taiwan. We believe that when a crisis hits, you cannot deflect and you must be ready to act with all the best tools available.

Unfortunately, the PRC and its People's Liberation Army (PLA) do not prioritize bilateral cooperation with their neighbors, or with us. After months of planning, representatives from PACAF and Pacific Fleet were scheduled to meet with their PRC counterparts at a three-day virtual engagement in December—except the PLA cancelled due to a minor dispute over the agenda. While the United States will continue to seek constructive forums for engagement with the PRC, this failure to participate in the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) demonstrates an abandonment of bilateral cooperation and the rules-based international order.

### **Interoperability and Lethality**

PACAF's second line of effort, improving interoperability and lethality, is how we translate the alliances and partnerships into airpower to deter military adventurism in competition and, if necessary, prevail in conflict. The most visible and imposing icon of US Air Force (USAF) power projection in the theater is the flights by our Bomber Task Force. In the past year, PACAF successfully transitioned from a continuous bomber presence construct focused on rotational bomber deployments on Guam to employ a more agile and responsive concept, focused on interoperability with our allies and partners. This showcased our ability to generate deliberate airpower from multiple sites throughout the theater and from the North American mainland. This revolution in bomber employment would have been infinitely more difficult without the unmatched levels of interoperability we established with our allies. This enabled new locations, such as Japan, to facilitate basing, maintenance, refueling, and fighter integration to make our missions a success.

The key to building interoperability with our allies and partners is their participation in our service-level and joint exercises. In 2020, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, PACAF still executed 24 exercises, building capacity by executing unilateral, joint, and combined operations even under pandemic conditions. Indeed, the ability to continue to conduct exercises even under restrictive conditions illustrates a great strength of airpower, fostering military ties with established and developing partners via distributive means. We never know where the next crisis will develop, and interoperable procedures cannot be developed overnight; the PACAF exercise program represents a critical enabler for our abil-

ity to credibly respond to conflict, gray-zone confrontations, and natural or man-made disasters—no matter where they strike.

In December, F-15Cs and a KC-135 from the 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base, Japan, as well as aircraft from the Republic of Korea Air Force and Japanese Air Self-Defense Force, responded to a diverse formation of PRC and Russian combat aircraft flying near their respective airspaces. Korea and Japan effectively handled the response, with PACAF providing backup support. This mission was only possible because the United States and allies train regularly, share information, and trust each other.

In contrast to PACAF's dedication to cultivating relationships with dozens of partners in the interest of maintaining peace and stability throughout the region, in the past year, the PRC elected to provoke crises with multiple neighbors. The most brutally egregious of these transgressions occurred in June 2020 when Chinese troops wielding spiked clubs attacked and killed 20 Indian troops in the Galwan Valley along a disputed border referred to as the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This was the first fatal confrontation between the two nuclear powers since 1975 and rapidly led to further deterioration of all aspects of their relationship. The PRC's aggressive acts of territorial encroachment needlessly threatened countries' response to humanitarian disaster. Less violent PRC activities also took place in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and Nepal.

While the PRC puts its peaceful neighbors on the defensive, the United States stands ready to partner with all nations that seek to maintain the rules-based international order. The PACAF–Indian Air Force relationship was on an upward trajectory prior to last year's LAC crisis, and the relationship accelerated due to our timely and relevant support. This rapid increase in support of a fellow democracy quickly yielded concrete progress in our direct communication capabilities, intensified collaboration on common airlift platforms, energized operationalization of our logistics agreements, and increased the scope and pace of intelligence sharing. Years of engagement and exercises with India made it possible for us to support India's response to Chinese aggression in a constructive and de-escalatory manner at an operationally relevant speed and reaffirmed our shared commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific.

## **Operational Concepts**

The fights of today and tomorrow will be unprecedented in speed, scope, and complexity. Even with allies and partners with whom we enjoy outstanding interoperability, if deterrence fails and we are called upon to defend our national interests, legacy tactics and operational concepts will be insufficient. Through our third line of effort, by developing novel operational concepts, we will reaffirm our

status as an innovative, agile, dynamic, and lethal force, but without the partnerships developed in competition and crisis, these concepts will not be viable in conflict.

To meet the challenges of today's dynamic environment, PACAF continues to develop, refine, and exercise its cornerstone operational concept: agile combat employment (ACE). ACE enables PACAF to prosecute a modern, high-end campaign as the theater air component utilizing agility, posture, protection, and joint all-domain command and control. It is a proactive and reactive operational scheme of maneuver executed within expected threat timelines to increase survivability while still generating effective combat power. PACAF Airmen successfully implemented the concept in 2017, and we continue to expand the ACE enterprise across multiple platforms, joint operations, and with our allies and partners. Indeed, the entire concept requires a transition from centralized bases, often on US soil, to regional base clusters dispersed throughout the theater. The agility demonstrated by the ACE concept stands in stark contrast to our competitors from the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), who despite aspirations to coordinate complex and agile operations, have only demonstrated an archaic ability to operate in rigid and scripted environments.

Rigidity is not an option. We must be strategically predictable but operationally unpredictable. PACAF continues to follow the *NDS* direction to "flexibly use ready forces to proactively shape the strategic environment while maintaining readiness to respond to contingencies and ensure long-term warfighting readiness."<sup>4</sup> Our dynamic force employment concept and expeditionary expertise enable us to project power across the globe at the time and place of our choosing. This capability allows us to provide our allies and partners with the consistent support that they expect and deserve as fellow advocates for a free and open Indo-Pacific and is an ability not shared by regional competitors with revisionist goals. Without the capacity to build meaningful trust-based relationships that treat other nations as true partners, the PLAAF will never have the ability to conduct agile, distributed global power projection in the same manner as the USAF.

By comparison, much of our strength comes from our Airmen's development and the trust we put in them to make decisions. This past year and with minimal guidance, PACAF commanders at bases throughout the theater planned and executed joint, bilateral "Elephant Walks,"<sup>5</sup> demonstrating the ability to rapidly generate airpower. This decentralized execution showcased a level of agility unattainable by our authoritarian competitors. Empowering Airmen at the lowest level is essential to developing a competitive force. In the USAF and in the air forces of our closest allies, we value our enlisted force's leadership, innovation, and experience; conversely, the PRC's airmen are viewed by their service primarily as



necessary for menial tasks but not as leaders or experts, regardless of their time in service. Our and our allies' investments in human capital are yet another asymmetric advantage; the PRC's lack of investment in the personnel comprising its force has stymied its ability to use modernizing military hardware to its fullest advantage and has sustained a qualitative deficiency in performance between the PLAAF and our partners.



**Figure 2. Elephant Walk.** In June 2020, the 35th Fighter Wing and the Japanese 3rd Air Wing executed a joint, bilateral “Elephant Walk” at Misawa Air Base, Japan. With minimal guidance, commanders were able to execute this under their own authority, validating our doctrine of centralized control and decentralized execution. Accomplished on short notice and under COVID-19 operating conditions, it demonstrated agility and our ability to quickly generate airpower with our ally.

## **Our Enduring Advantage**

We will continue trying to cooperate with the PRC within the bounds of national policy, despite Beijing's antagonistic behavior. PACAF is committed to cooperating with the PRC in appropriate ways in the coming years, including the MMCA, pandemic response, and natural disaster relief. These activities demonstrate our commitment to being good neighbors and playing by the rules of conduct set by the international community.

Short of armed conflict, PACAF is maximizing our long-term advantages to reinforce the rules-based international order, ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific,

prevent regional hegemony, and deter PRC aggression in the region. We will continue to exercise readiness, improve our interoperability, and develop more effective operating concepts alongside our many allies and partners. While we believe in the criticality of a coalition, the PRC has but one ally; this is our enduring advantage in competition.

While national and regional leadership shifts, strategic competition between the United States and the PRC will remain the defining feature of the global geopolitical environment for decades to come. It will define the careers of all those in uniform now and for the next generation. Indo-Pacific Airmen should expect increasing levels of uncertainty and a multifaceted threat that seeks to erode confidence in the rules-based international order to become the norm. We will rise up against this challenge, shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and partners, with a competitive long-term mind-set focused on building a safe, healthy, and prosperous future for all nations in the Indo-Pacific. ✪

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Major Zhang is a member of Pacific Air Force’s Strategic Competition Team. Maj Zhang received his commission from the United States Air Force Academy in 2009. He is a C-5M Instructor Pilot and a USINDOPACOM Foreign Affairs Officer with more than 1,800 flight hours in the C-5M, C-5B/C, C-130H, T-44, and T-6. He has operated and deployed in support of Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, Inherent Resolve, and Resolute Support.



## Notes

1. Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game* (London: Penguin Business, 2019).
2. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018), <https://dod.defense.gov/>.
3. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.
4. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*.
5. An *elephant walk* is a US Air Force term for the taxiing of aircraft in close formation before takeoff.