



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

## DEFENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE

# MISSION REPORT

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*This mission report is presented for information only and does not necessarily represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Ethan Corbin, Director of the Defence and Security Committee.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. A delegation of 19 parliamentarians from 16 countries travelled to Hawaii to visit senior-level military representatives at United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) from 19-21 March 2019. USINDOPACOM is responsible for an area stretching from the Arctic to Antarctica and from the West Coast of the United States to India, an area covering over 100 million square miles. In this arena, the United States military must focus on a range of persistent and varied threats, each with a unique level of complexity.

2. A rising China continues to expand its military footprint across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond to defend China's now global economic interests – China's regional and global behaviour is driving an escalating strategic competition with the United States about the future global order. Russia maintains a capable maritime presence in the region, particularly due to its new class of stealthy submarines. The volatile situation on the Korean peninsula is constantly threatening to disrupt security not only in the region, but far beyond, as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) continues to work to hone its disruptive, long-range missile capabilities. Across the region, there is also a persistent challenge from violent extremist movements, which can cause significant disruption both locally, and beyond depending on the size and scale of their potential activities.

3. Parliamentarians on the visit were able to get a clear-eyed understanding of US interests and priorities in the Pacific (and Arctic), as well as the threats to those interests. They were also able to get a better understanding of the impact a global China will likely have on future Euro-Atlantic security. Asian security challenges continue to grow in complexity – the large and longer-term challenge of growing strategic competition with China is focusing the attention of US policymakers and military leaders; US allies and partners are also increasingly affected by China's new global footprint. In the near-term, the volatility of the North Korean missile challenge remains an evolving threat, which has renewed attention on the appropriate air and missile defence architecture needed in the region.

4. A key takeaway from the visit is the need for a determined effort for Allies to work together to address increasingly global security concerns in order to maintain the current international order. The United States' global efforts are greatly abetted by its allies across the globe as they work together to mitigate a host of increasingly complex threats emanating from both state and non-state actors. Increased exercising, coordinated capability acquisitions, and focused consensus on the drivers of threats and the policies needed to address them will lead to a more effective, highly interoperable Alliance.

## **II. US DEFENCE POLICIES IN THE PACIFIC AND ARCTIC AND NEAR- AND LONG-TERM CHALLENGES**

5. Senior-level officials at USINDOPACOM welcomed the delegation for a round of briefings on the command's mandate, mission, and priorities. Known as United States Pacific Command since its founding in 1947, the command was renamed on 30 May 2018 in recognition of the growing role of the Indian subcontinent. The area of responsibility (AOR) of USINDOPACOM is massive; extending from the US Pacific Coast to the east coast of India and from the Arctic to the Antarctic, it equals more than 100 million square miles or just over half of the surface of the Earth. Several briefers told the delegation that USINDOPACOM's AOR is often internally referenced as 'Hollywood to Bollywood-Polar Bears to Penguins'. Approximately 377,800 military and civilian personnel oversee this massive AOR.

6. The region falling under USINDOPACOM, briefers noted, represents approximately 60% of the world's population, 40% of global GDP, 7 of the world's 10 largest militaries, 5 of 8

nuclear-armed powers, and 3 of the 4 largest missile inventories in the world. As such, it is clear the USINCPACOM AOR is one of significant global importance at all levels. As such, USINDOPACOM's officials told the delegation they break down the region for which they are responsible into five sub-components, in order to execute their mission more effectively.

7. USINDOPACOM briefers noted their principal mission is to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region. The challenges to doing so, they noted, are many. Briefers identified several key priorities and challenges, both near and over-the-horizon, that focused the attention of USINDOPACOM leadership: China as a long-term challenge; North Korea as an immediate threat; violent extremism is seen as a persistent threat; Russia is seen as a transitioning threat to the Indo-Pacific as a whole; the increasing rise of natural and manmade disasters is persistent and deadly throughout the region – the nature of which is changing quickly as a result of climate change; and India-Pakistan tensions are potentially catastrophic as the two nuclear states face-off against one another.

8. More broadly, briefers told the delegation, great power competition is shaping INDOPACOM strategy. As noted below, this means increasing challenges from both China and Russia are just over the horizon. In the region, due to the stretched nature of its assets, Russia is not capable of a significant presence, but it is certainly seen as a capable potential spoiler. China, however, is seen as the real long-term challenge to US influence and interests not only in the region, but globally.

### ***China***

9. A series of briefings addressed the growing challenge from China. Time and again, briefers noted China's concerted efforts to grow its military power to protect its expanding interests. Given China's increasingly global footprint, they noted, this is translating into the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s ability to project combined arms power outside of its borders. Briefers noted China's military capabilities now make the People's Republic of China (PRC) a near peer competitor with the ability to be significantly disruptive across the Asia-Pacific region. China has also made it clear, briefers noted, that today's PRC is a revisionist power, emboldened by its new economic and military power, that is seeking to supplant US influence in the region.

10. China is expanding its economic interests well beyond the Asia-Pacific region with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is pushing out well beyond China's borders across the Asian sub-continent and central Asia and into Africa and beyond as a means of connecting these areas to China via infrastructural developments and technology sharing – it is also causing states cooperating with China to often find themselves in significant debt due to the size and scope of the projects they agree to undertake with Chinese state-backed industry players. Briefers noted this 'debt-driven diplomacy' is having a wide-reaching impact and has the potential for China to use its debt leverage to seek further state concessions to the PRC, such as the use of their territory for military installations.

11. Briefers discussed the impact of China's debt-driven diplomacy across Oceania. Many small nations in the region accepted Chinese money for development projects but are now in considerable debt as a result and, therefore, beholden to the Chinese. Chinese debt holdings across Oceania could be eventually converted into leased or acquired territorial presence for Chinese military assets. China is also attempting the same manoeuvres into Southeast Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, Central Asia, and across Africa.

12. Briefers also noted that China's political, economic, and military efforts were an effort to impose *fait accompli* scenarios across the region, which will change the balance of power against the United States. If successful, China would be able to line-up power and capabilities significantly in its favour against the United States and its allies and partners in the region and, therefore, not have to face a challenging military conflict against the United States, but rather just impose a new reality which the United States would simply have to face.

13. China's military development and distribution of military assets inside of the PRC and now into the South China Sea from 1999 to 2019 is seen as a game changer. There has been a dramatic shift in both the range and capabilities of the Chinese armed forces. Briefers noted that it is estimated that by 2025 the PLA will surge capabilities along the Chinese coast and beyond to push its A2/AD capabilities much further out into the Pacific.

### ***Russia***

14. Russia's Pacific posture is challenged by both internal and external factors. Russia's declining population is particularly impacting its eastern territories – large areas are losing significant population, which is adversely affecting Russia's economy in the east. In a feedback loop, the declining economy is forcing populations to seek opportunities in other regions. Cheap Chinese immigrant labour is also creating significant local economic challenges. Moscow is concerned about the tip in the balance of Russian versus Chinese populations in some regions and the political and social challenges that spring from such demographic and economic changes.

15. Militarily, Russia maintains a significant number of forces in the Pacific across air, land, and sea services. The most significant – and potentially disruptive – is the Russian naval presence, headquartered in Vladivostok. Briefers noted that while Russia's surface fleet presence is not really a significant concern, Russia's subsurface capabilities are a different story. Russian submarines, particularly the new Dolgorukiy ballistic missile submarine, are very quiet and have an excellent missile delivery system. The central question for Allies when considering Russia's role in the complex security environment of the Pacific, it was noted, is Moscow's ability to sustain its presence, as Russia has quite an extended military posture already with its focus on the Euro-Atlantic arena, its operations in Syria, etc.

### ***North Korea***

16. Briefers across several facilities and bases visited noted the potential volatility of the North Korean threat. While North Korea may not have significant maritime forces, it maintains very large armed forces on the Korean Peninsula and a significant number of short-to-medium range missiles pointed at the Republic of Korea, particularly at Seoul, which is very close to the border with North Korea. In addition, briefers also spoke of the rapidly evolving long-range ballistic missile threat, which has been upsetting the security environment well beyond the Korean peninsula into the Pacific. If North Korea is able to find the means to perfect its launch vehicles and the accuracy of its delivery systems, then it can pose a real threat to the United States. The challenge remains how to assure a key US ally in South Korea, maintain security on the Korean peninsula and the adjacent seas, and thwart North Korea's efforts to develop an accurate long-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) nuclear deterrent capacity.

### ***USINDOPACOM Mission and Strategy***

17. The central question preoccupying the minds of planners responsible for the USINDOPACOM AOR, briefers noted, is how to maintain a rules-based international order. The key to doing so, briefers said, is by continued, strong engagement with allies. To engage with its regional allies, the United States maintains the hub and spoke approach of bilateral engagements, rather than the multilateral defence structure with which it engages its NATO Allies in the Euro-Atlantic arena. Briefers noted a focused US effort to assure their regional allies, while simultaneously deterring potential adversaries.

18. To deter against potential adversary efforts to disrupt USINDOPACOM's central mission to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific region, briefers noted the combatant command is taking several steps to strengthen the US position. First, the United States is enhancing the posture of its armed forces in the region (to include increased joint-force lethality). Second, USINDOPACOM is working diligently to increase the strength of its allies in the region by expanding the breadth and depth of its allied and partner cooperation efforts. A major way of achieving this, it was noted, is via increased exercising and common equipment procurement. Third, the combatant command would work to continue to be a leader in experimentation and innovation.

19. To better understand US strategy and efforts, in addition to briefings on US naval presence and efforts, the delegation also received briefings from US Marine Forces Pacific and US Air Force Pacific, as well as on the Pacific Missile Range Facility, where briefers discussed US integrated air and missile defence efforts in the region. US armed forces in the Pacific focus on maintaining readiness, promoting resiliency, and power projection. The maintenance of the significant US forward deployed presence in the Asia-Pacific region is key to maintaining the current degree of regional peace and stability. As briefers stressed time and again, however, given the size and scope of US responsibilities in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as around the world from Europe to the Middle East to South America, strong and mutually beneficial alliances are the essential means of maintaining peace and security based on the international order that has benefitted the United States and its Allies and partners over the decades since the end of the Second World War.