



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

DECEMBER 2020 / JANUARY 2021

2020: SHARPENING OUR COMPETITIVE EDGE

The year's challenges highlighted our strength and tempered our resolve for what's to come.

In 2020, PACAF faced unprecedented challenges due to the worldwide pandemic causing seismic shifts in the global competition environment. Amidst human and economic suffering throughout the Indo-Pacific theater, continuing our mission required unmatched resilience and adaptability to face an uncertain, rapidly evolving threat. In this time of crisis, our competitors opportunistically sought to expand their influence and undermine the multi-lateral institutions we and our allies use to keep the peace in the Indo-Pacific.

Pacific Air Forces commander Gen. Ken Wilsbach stated, "Facing political, economic, and personal uncertainty, including direct health threats to themselves and their families, PACAF Airmen did not flinch; undeterred, the mission went on."

This year, PACAF pushed ahead, increasing the agility of our most powerful and visible icons of global strength as we implemented a [strategic shift](#) from continuous bomber presence to a bomber task force structure. PACAF Airmen executed five elephant walks, including [bilateral and joint efforts](#),

highlighting our ability to generate combat airpower at a moment's notice to ensure regional stability. PACAF continued to assure allies and partners of our nation's steadfastness, participating in [training opportunities](#) and key leadership and international [engagements](#), including the [first ever](#) Airman-to-Airman Talks with Brunei. While our competitors [struggled](#) to maintain relationships in the region, we worked with our allies and partners to build a strong future based on our shared desire for a healthy, safe, and free and open Indo-Pacific.

"It would be a mistake, however, to view the challenges of 2020 as unique, one-time events; rather, we should expect increasing levels of uncertainty and a multi-faceted threat that seeks to erode confidence in US-led institutions to become the norm. The commitment to readiness and presence demonstrated by PACAF Airmen during the challenging times of 2020 will be needed to make us more competitive, more innovative, and more lethal in the years ahead," said Wilsbach. "We must execute the mission with resolve and the knowledge that PACAF Airmen are always competing."



CHINESE OVERREACH IN 2020

While the world contended with the effects of a global pandemic, China tightened its control domestically and encroached upon its peaceful neighbors.



A. HONG KONG

In June, the People's Republic of China (PRC) passed a Hong Kong Security Law giving it broad powers to suppress any type of dissent in the formerly autonomous territory. The demise of the "one country, two systems" construct cast doubt that the PRC would respect liberties if Taiwan were to unify with the mainland.

B. WUHAN

When the COVID-19 pandemic exploded here in early 2020, PRC leaders squandered the opportunity to alert the world to the danger, instead choosing secrecy and misinformation.

C. TAIWAN STRAIT

This narrow 90-mile body of water is the friction point for China's claims of sovereignty over Taiwan. This year, China pushed its limits even farther by sending aircraft over the centerline that has typically separated its forces from Taiwan's.

D. SOUTH CHINA SEA

In April, a Chinese vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat, claiming it was trespassing on China's claims near the Paracel Islands.

E. QINGHAI PROVINCE

In August, the PRC launched a DF-26 missile (capable of ranging Guam) from Qinghai into the South China Sea one day after claiming a US U-2 entered a no-fly zone without permission.

F. XINJIANG/INNER MONGOLIA

Amidst continuing oppression of the Uighur minority in northwestern China, the US passed sanctions against several PRC individuals and entities. Sanctions could incentivize corporations to avoid anything that might associate them with forced labor and internment camps. In August, the PRC announced plans to phase out Mongolian-language teaching in Inner Mongolia.

G. GALWAN VALLEY

In June, Chinese troops wielding spiked clubs attacked and killed 20 Indian troops along the disputed border; the stand-off between the nuclear powers continues.

RELEASING THE PIGEON ON COOPERATION

China was a no-show at a recent event focused on promoting safe military interactions.

After months of careful planning, representatives from Pacific Air Forces and Pacific Fleet were scheduled to meet in December with their PRC counterparts during a three-day virtual engagement—except the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) [never showed up](#).

The Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) was chartered in 1998 with the intent of establishing safe and professional interactions between the two military forces. At the recent MMCA, both sides were scheduled to present examples of safe and unsafe interactions in order to foster a common understanding of how they should interact in international airspace and waters. This year, however, the PLA got hung up on the nature of the agenda, insisting on adding topics that were irrelevant to the MMCA’s charter. While the US offered another, more appropriate bilateral engagement to address these issues, the PLA refused to cooperate further, effectively cancelling the event.

Similarly, in 2019 the PLA attempted to add disputed language to the MMCA’s plenary minutes, setting a precedent for their antagonistic behavior.

Why It Matters: While the US will continue to seek constructive and cooperative forums of engagement with the PRC, the PRC’s failure to participate in the MMCA demonstrates further abandonment of the rules-based international order.

**“Release the Pigeon”
is a Mandarin
Chinese phrase to
describe a person’s
failure to keep an
appointment or
promise.**



LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENTS GO VIRTUAL

While the PLA is releasing pigeons, PACAF is building partnerships.

In December, Pacific Air Forces commander Gen. Ken Wilsbach [hosted](#) a quarterly virtual conference with leaders from 22 air forces throughout the Indo-Pacific and the world.

While key leadership engagements are typically in-person, moving to a virtual format has been nearly seamless. “Despite the challenges associated with the global COVID-19 pandemic, we continue to work at successfully strengthening our alliances and building partners,” said Wilsbach. “Our advantage in this region is having meaningful relationships and continued dialogue with our allies and partners that allows us to work together toward a free and open Indo-Pacific.”



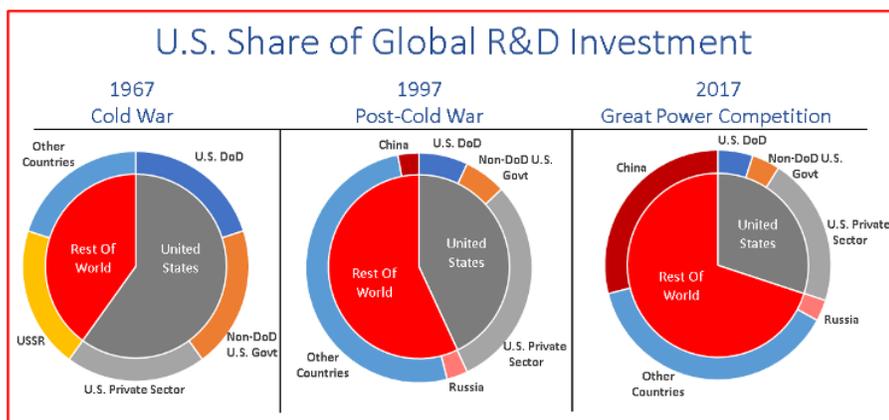
Gen. Ken Wilsbach, Pacific Air Forces commander, hosts 22 senior leaders from the Indo-Pacific theater during a quarterly Pacific Air Chiefs (PAC) Video Teleconference (VTC) from Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, Dec. 9, 2020. The PAC VTCs reaffirm PACAF’s commitment to multilateral allies and partners by providing regular, continuing opportunities for senior military leader dialogue. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Nick Wilson)

ECONOMIC OUTLOOK: US-CHINA COMPETITION

Provided by the Air Force's Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis

Great power competition between PACAF and the PLAAF is not conducted in a vacuum. Understanding our countries' interactions across the diplomatic, informational, and economic domains is critical because it will likely be these factors, rather than military ones, that will be the primary drivers for competition—or conflict—in the future.

China is at an important juncture in its efforts to transform from being a large but lagging technology imitator to a strong and cutting-edge science, technology, and innovation leader. President Xi Jinping views efforts to implement an innovation strategy through the lens of a zero-sum technological competition for national and military dominance. To demonstrate his country's commitment to transforming its technology sector, Xi has placed top priority on upgrading the Chinese national innovation ecosystem, both in the civilian and military domains.



Why It Matters: If the PRC closes the gap of current US technological superiority, it likely will increase the probability of friction in other strategic domains that could push Beijing and/or Washington to resort to military confrontation.

[Learn more](#) from the Office of Commercial and Economic Analysis.

2021 AND BEYOND: A CALL TO COMPETE

While 2021 brings changes in national and Indo-Pacific leadership, the PRC will remain our prime great power competitor. We must incorporate the hard-learned lessons of resiliency and adaptability from 2020 into our competitive culture to meet our nation's needs.

Regardless of changes in political leadership in the US and the PRC, strategic competition between our nations will be the defining feature of the global geopolitical environment for decades to come. This is not a fad or a passing fancy within the Beltway; it will define the careers of all those in uniform now and for the next generation.

As before, PACAF will continue to cooperate with China 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 the international community has set for how we conduct ourselves overseas. PACAF will continue to fly in international airspace, consistent with international rules and norms, and do its part to support a free and open Indo-Pacific by working with our allies and partners to uphold the rules-based international order.

As the Chief of Staff of the Air Force [stated](#), "Uncontested US Air Force dominance is not assured." This is a massive paradigm shift, and we must be relentless in our efforts to accelerate change and adapt. We must all hone our edge by developing a deeper understanding of the role we play individually, as a service, and as a nation in great power competition.



A monthly review of competition thoughts and activities from PACAF's

STRATEGIC
COMPETITION TEAM