



STATE OF THE GAME

BUILDING PACAF'S COMPETITIVE MINDSET

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2021

PACS 21: IT'S GOOD TO HAVE FRIENDS

Allies and partners from around the world pursue stability in the Indo-Pacific

In August, air chiefs and senior enlisted personnel from 15 countries came together at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam for the 2021 Pacific Air Chiefs Symposium. This gathering highlighted one of the few constants in the Pacific region — a focus on durable and lasting cooperation in pursuit of regional stability.

Many air chiefs expressed deep interest in the U.S. Air Force's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept, showed a desire to allow access into their countries for ACE, and offered proactive participation in the development of ACE in exercises. The air chiefs also discussed air domain awareness and the desire to create a combined common operating picture which could underpin regional cooperation efforts and empower the enforcement of their own air sovereignty.

September was a month of notable progression in expanding formal security partnerships within the Indo-Pacific. In addition to a series of high-profile military senior leader engagements around the theater, the U.S. and its partners secured tangible milestones including the first phase of the cooperative maritime [exercise MALABAR 21](#) among the Quad nations of the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia and the announcement of the new Australia, United Kingdom, United States (AUKUS) agreement opening up additional military technical cooperation between the allies.



“We need to accelerate change or lose. Alongside our allies and partners, we will respond to the changing situation and ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.”

**Gen Kenneth Wilsbach,
PACAF Commander**

THE QUAD AND WHY IT MATTERS

Multilateral relationships make all the difference in anchoring regional stability

In an increasingly complex and threatening global environment, the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, popularly referred to as the Quad, have renewed their commitment to partnering to ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific. As four of the region's largest democracies, the increasingly rapid alignment of these countries in employing all instruments of national power (diplomatic, information, military, and economic) to secure peace and prosperity will play a pivotal role in the future of the region. In September, the leaders of these four countries [met](#) to discuss topics of vital interest to the prosperity of the Indo-Pacific including COVID-19, climate change, emerging technologies, and cultivating next generation talent.

As part of this drive for broad alignment, the countries have increased information sharing, particularly in the areas of air domain awareness and cybersecurity, to counter an environment in which regional actors routinely conduct incursions into their neighbors' [air](#) and [cyber spaces](#). As global scientific leaders with vital interests in the space domain, the four Indo-Pacific nations have also agreed to share satellite data to gain better understanding and security in the region.

While not a primary focus, military interoperability advanced with the United States increasing operations and exercises with its traditional allies of Australia and Japan and expanding a burgeoning relationship with India. Exercise MALABAR included all Quad countries in 2020 and 2021, highlighting a growing desire for alignment of the four militaries. The recent AUKUS [deal](#) between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States regarding technology sharing, to include nuclear submarines, strengthens the Quad by not only bringing two members together, but also showcasing the commitment of a European NATO partner to the security of the region. Furthermore, India and Australia's [recent agreements](#), along with Indian and U.S. commitment to expand defense cooperation, prove bilateral engagements can strengthen the four-country dynamic as a whole.



U.S., Indian, and Japanese ships sail in the Bay of Bengal during MALABAR 21.

Economically, the Quad represents four of the largest and most dynamic markets in the world, with a [combined GDP](#) of \$34T. Hence, one of the Quad's greatest opportunities in the coming years is to harness the advanced and established economies within the limitless possibilities of India's extensive resources and markets. The potential for the Quad as a driver for balanced and sustainable regional economic development has already been exemplified through Japan's robust investments in Southeast Asia, dwarfing Chinese investment \$259B to \$157B as of 2019. Though the Quad displays great current and potential strength in its collective instruments of power, its greatest advantage may be its ability to foster and preserve a free and open Indo-Pacific supported by democratic values and governed by institutions.

Why It Matters: The Quad continues to [coalesce](#) as like-minded states willing to exercise their collective instruments of power to prevent the development of an exclusionary regional order. Although the Quad does not target any particular country, it seems evident that China views an alignment of powerful, advanced democratic states as a threat to its policies, and an implicit rebuke to an authoritarian state that exercises power ruthlessly and unilaterally in pursuit of its own goals. PACAF will continue to participate in exercises and engagements with Quad nations in the coming years, increasing our ability to compete with malign influence in the region.

MEANWHILE, IN CHINA...

Despite talk of “common prosperity” for all, the PRC continues to prefer like-minded repressive regimes

In the face of U.S. diplomatic and military momentum, the PRC has doubled down on its preference for repressive regimes. Beijing telegraphed its malign intent well before the collapse of the Afghan government from Taliban aggression, with Foreign Minister Wang Yi choosing to extend a friendly [invitation](#) to Taliban leadership to meet with him in the city of Tianjin in late July. During their meetings, the PRC made it clear their primary concern was ensuring the Taliban didn't offer any refuge to militant groups opposing PRC repression of ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang region that borders Afghanistan.

For their part, Taliban leadership appeared more than willing to stop any struggle for an Islamic emirate at the PRC border or show concern for repression of an Islamic minority (Uighurs) in return for PRC aid and investment under the Belt and Road Initiative. The fact this meeting came just two days after U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy R. Sherman [met](#) with Wang makes it abundantly clear the PRC chose sides ahead of the endgame in Afghanistan.

In addition to its eager embrace of the Taliban, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) found other repressive partners with whom to deepen their ties. China and Russia held a [bilateral](#) military exercise in western China in early August. While press reports

trumpeted new levels of integration between the Eurasian powers, some analysts [questioned](#) the level of operational interoperability and instead characterized the exercise as primarily a geopolitical messaging opportunity.

Regardless of the tactical results, the CCP is trying to send the message that they are aligned with a former enemy best known for aggressive attacks against its neighbors. Both countries appear comfortable supporting each other publicly, particularly if it can divert international pressure away as they conduct gray zone activities and repress their internal populations. The widely derided elections in Russia at the end of September probably failed to produce the boost in legitimacy Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin was looking for, but in the end are probably a more truthful representative than the re-coronation Xi Jinping is planning for at the 20th Party Congress next October.

Why It Matters: The PRC continues barking that democracies' security arrangements convey a “Cold War mindset,” but fairly elected leaders around the world recognize the threat from nuclear-armed autocratic revisionist powers without respect for international law. The U.S. and its allies stand in direct contrast and for global peace.



Opening ceremony of ZAPAD/INTERACTION-2021 in Qingtongxia, northwest China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, August 9, 2021.



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

**STRATEGIC
COMPETITION TEAM**