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Fireside Chat with Admiral John C. Aquilino

[Admiral John C. Aquilino](#), Commander, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

Moderator: [Courtney Kube](#), NBC News Correspondent, NBC News

Courtney Kube

Hello. All right, let's try this again. He's still the commander of us Indo Pacific Command. Still a Naval Academy graduate. He flew F 14 and F18. He's a graduate of Top Gun. I know, right? He's, he was became the commander of US Pacific fleet in May of 2018. And he's been Commander of PAYCOM since April 30 of 2021. So I'm happy to welcome him.

John C. Aquilino

Well, thank you very much. Great to see you.

Courtney Kube

And I also just, I know this isn't necessarily in his background, but I just want to run you through this is a smart audience. But I just want to run you guys through some of the stats about PAYCOM to give you a sense of how huge his job is. More than half the world's population lives in the Indo Pacific Command. Two thirds of the entire global economy flows through the region. There's over 35 countries, seven of the world's 10 largest armies in Indo PAYCOM five of the world's declared nuclear nations, and some pretty sophisticated navies so he's got a pretty big job. A lot of news and I'm going to start with the news out of your region today. A US soldier is in North Korean custody tonight for crossing the demarcation line the DMZ willfully according to US officials, who is he and what happened?

John C. Aquilino

First, let me say thanks to the Aspen leadership for having me tonight. It is it's truly an honor. And also would like to welcome all of the local community that's here tonight. I know this is a special event and I'm honored to be here. The story hasn't really built much more than what's been reported. So he's private from the US Army. And again, it was willingly and it was unauthorized. In a run across the militarized zone in the Joint Security Area was picked up by the North Koreans. We've had no contact. We're still doing our investigation to find out exactly what happened.

Courtney Kube

is that the UN Command that's investigating that?

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John C. Aquilino

It is US Forces Korea board station under General Paul LaCamera that is doing all the work right now.

Courtney Kube

When you say there hasn't been contact you haven't had contact with these the US soldier but has there been communication between the US and the North Koreans in some capacity over this?

John C. Aquilino

Not that I'm tracking Yet.

Courtney Kube

What there's reports that he had some sort of a disciplinary action incident. He was supposed to leave the country and took off out of the airport. Somebody's supposed to be watching him to make sure he got on a plane to leave Korea? Was there's some sort of a breakdown in security here?

John C. Aquilino

Yeah, I don't think we know enough quite yet to find that out. But I think those facts will come out in the next few days as we dig into it.

Courtney Kube

Is there any indication that this young man was a sympathizer for North Korea and that's why he took off?

John C. Aquilino

Again we're gonna we're gonna look into that I've got no reports on that

Courtney Kube

Also today for the first time since about the 1980s the us sent a nuclear armed ballistic missile submarine submarine the USS Kentucky is capable of launching a ballistic missile this very uncommon, was announced a couple months ago that this was likely to happen but why send it there now?

John C. Aquilino

When you say why should that there now as military officers, we do a lot of planning if somebody thinks we said today hey, go pop that thing up and send it to North Korea to the South Korean port of Busan that's just not what happened. That said It's critical for United States to demonstrate all forms of our national power to support our alliances. We have a mutual defense treaty alliance with

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both Japan and Korea and that means the entire force United States Armed Force is ready to support those alliances. So demonstrating our willingness and our capabilities to our allies is reassuring. Last week, we flew a B 52 Bomber over the Korean peninsula with South Korean fighters attached as escorts along with US fighters. Prior to arriving there, the Japanese joined up with the bomber. So we reassure our allies and partners often and this was just one of those demonstrations.

Courtney Kube

Do you expect that North Korea will respond they fired off some sort of a missile today is that that was in response to this visit?

John C. Aquilino

two missiles today. We could make some assessment that their unhappiness with that visit could have been the cause for this event. That said they've been shooting missiles so frequently that I can't figure out what the justification is. Other than their intent is to destabilize the region and threaten the allies and partners that we have in the theater. I guess what I would say is the strategy is just not winning for them. What I mean by that is the alliances and partnerships in the regions are getting tighter. Just last week, General Milley came out to Hawaii with Gerald LeCamera, and we hosted a trilateral event with our Korean counterpart and our Japanese counterparts. So the uniformed members of Japan Korea and the United States are working together more frequently and more easily. The leadership in both of our countries, not too long ago President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida got together and I thank them both for their willingness to take political risk to ensure that they can defend their nations. That trilateral relationship is important. It doesn't come without some long historical issues between the two. But the leadership in Japan and Korea right now. Very very impressive for what they're doing to defend their nations.

Courtney Kube

North Korea has launched an unprecedented number of missiles in the last year or so 2022 2023. I mean, I know it's hard to say what their motivation is but like, but what do you think they're Kim Jong Un's endgame is with all these launches.

John C. Aquilino

I think his endgame is to remain in power,

Courtney Kube

And what about the one recently, ICBM solid fuel? I know that you guys don't like to talk about why that's so concerning. But and I'm sure our audience already knows this because like I said, You guys are pretty smart, but when you have a solid fuel rocket, there's less warning to others that it's that it's potentially going to be launched off because they can take it out to a launch pad, they can stand

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up and they can fire it. You don't have a day or two of gassing the thing up before you fire it. So the fact that they now have demonstrated solid fuel ICBM, is that a game changer and is there going to be some sort of a US response in some way to that.

John C. Aquilino

So I don't think it's a game changer. KGU is clearly working to advance his missile delivery capabilities. He's been doing it now consistently for the past almost two years. That is a goal that allows him to present a position of strength that he believes will enable the Kim regime to remain in place. That said, we continue to build our readiness with the forces on the Korean peninsula to meet our responsibilities under the Alliance. Forces at USFK are ready to respond. We continue to work with the other allies and partners in the region, because the capability of that missile now just doesn't threaten South Korea or Japan or the United States. It threatens all nations in the region. And that should be concerning for all.

Courtney Kube

Can North Korea hit the continental US with a nuclear armed ballistic missile today?

John C. Aquilino

The capability that they've delivered and demonstrated the other day we assess could reach the United States. The mating and all the nuclear capability is still being reviewed.

Courtney Kube

So the the miniaturizing the warhead, it's not clear if they've achieved that capability yet. The IAEA also said several months ago that they appear to have reopened this nuclear testing site. There's been a lot of talks they might test a nuke over the last few months, but they haven't. Do you think are they actually going to test a nuke? And what does that mean for the region in the world if they do?

John C. Aquilino

Boy, if I could figure out what he was going to do. Like I always tell him I wouldn't be here I'd be in Vegas. But bottom line is he's he's made it capable such that if he chose he could test another nuclear weapon. Game Changing? I don't think so. He's already tested seven. What does it mean to the world is that his nuclear capabilities that research and development continues oh, by the way, at the expense of the people of North Korea, because he's investing a lot of money to build those weapons of mass destruction. And again, it's taken food off the tables of those in North Korea. And, you know, that needs to be highlighted but will he do another nuclear test? I think I know he could. We'll see if he does.

Courtney Kube

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Another alliance that you've talked about is the one between China and Russia. They've signed this recent No Limits partnership. What exactly is this partnership and have you seen any practical changes in your area since they've entered into it?

John C. Aquilino

Yeah. I don't know what this partnership is I'll use their words it's a no limits relationship. And we've seen a lot of things that lead us to believe that it's truly real, despite their long historical and cultural differences. Let me start by just the sheer support from the CCP for the war, the illegal illegitimate war that the Russians are waging on Ukraine. That should be condemned. And the PRC has not done that. Additionally, they are amplifying the propaganda that NATO that Russians are using. Their explanation is that NATO expansion was the cause of the invasion. That is just complete falsehood. So the PRC are supportive of the Russians. That's in that information space and as it applies to Ukraine. As it goes into Pacific, they have amplified and increase their amount of joint training joint exercises and joint demonstrations. Just a month ago, bombers from both Russia and China, Russian bombers landed in China, and then they flew a joint mission into the Philippine Sea towards Guam. Today, a Russian and Chinese maritime Task Force is doing a combined patrol. We'll see where that ends up, whether it's off the Aleutian Islands, whether it's in the Philippine Sea, whether it goes to Guam, whether it goes to Hawaii or whether it goes off the west coast of the United States. So their exercises have increased their operations have increased. I only see the cooperation getting stronger. And boy, that's concerning. That's a dangerous world.

Courtney Kube

Is there any indication China's providing Russia with lethal aid that they're using in Ukraine?

John C. Aquilino

I don't have any evidence of that at this point. We do think they are certainly supporting them. Whether it be with intelligence, or other means.

Courtney Kube

What's the current US military assessment for when China may invade Taiwan? We're among friends here, right? Everyone's?

John C. Aquilino

Well, let me start by talking about the things that the PRC specifically President Xi Jinping has said, that shapes how we think about this. First, he has given the challenge to the Chinese military to be prepared, if required to take Taiwan by force by 2027. Alright. Those are his words, not ours. Now, my job is to prevent that conflict and we do that and work each and every day in order to prevent conflict. That said, if we think he's set his site to be ready by 2027, I have the mission today. We need to be ready today. And we need to get our forces in place. We need to get the right

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capabilities. We need to have the right partnerships. And all of those things provide a strong deterrence to ultimately prevent the conflict, which is the goal. That said if deterrence fails, our job is to fight and win. And I am I am confident I'm extremely proud that the strongest military on Earth is in the United States. And a lot of it's in the Pacific.

Courtney Kube

Are you are you confident that if they if China were to invade Taiwan today, that you have everything that you need to be able to defend them?

John C. Aquilino

So nobody has everything they need. You show me that person. That said there are a number of items that I've asked for specifically as part of the budget process. The deputy secretary and the Secretary of Defense have clearly supportive they are aligned to a strategy based budget focused on the China challenge. And I'm thankful for that. That said with what we have today, I'm confident that they would fail.

Courtney Kube

What do you think could prompt President Xi to invade?

John C. Aquilino

Once again, if I could tell you that? You know, there's a lot of things certainly there's some red lines that have been identified specifically by the Chinese if there were a declaration of independence by Taiwan, that would be a serious concern. That said, let me just start by saying the United States policy as it applies to Taiwan has not changed. We work in accordance with the Taiwan Relations Act. The six assurances and the three communicates that is the shapes the United States policy. We don't support independence on Taiwan, but we do support the peaceful resolution of the differences of people on both sides of the strait. And that's without coercion or action, no unilateral change to the status quo. And that's what we believe is the right place.

Courtney Kube

You said in some congressional testimony in April that the biggest challenge facing the US is the speed of urgency at which we're working because the US has been at war in the Middle East for 20 years. And we need to understand how fast it's coming in. We need to go faster. Are you concerned that the time to deter China is running out?

John C. Aquilino

I would like there to be as I stated an increased set of urgent sense of urgency to deliver the capabilities that have asked for to do them in a time and a speed that's relevant. As I said President

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Xi said he wants to be ready by 2027. So we certainly ought to be ready before that if we're doing our jobs. We have been in a world where we have believed that Russia was going to, peace was going to break out with Russia and there was no chance of a war in Europe. We had been living in a world where we believed that the PLA was going to integrate into the world international rules based order in a way that was responsible. That's not the world we live in. So to be prepared and ready to live in that world, we ought to put all of our capabilities in place, our posture initiatives in place, our alliances and partnerships in place, and we ought to do that fast.

Courtney Kube

Do you think that the the deterrence, frankly not working with Russia may help your case to get to provide you with your I mean, you have like three and a half million dollars in unfunded priorities, many of which I imagine are focused on China capabilities for China. Do you think the fact that Ukraine and Russia did invade despite the efforts to deterrence might help your case and being able to prepare faster?

John C. Aquilino

I think, you know, I said watch my counterpart to the general Walters testimony, and he got accused of not being able to deter President Putin. I think his mission was derived and task to ensure that NATO Alliance was strong, and that NATO was not invaded. So you could argue whether deterrence failed or not. But General Walters did some great work followed up by General Kouvola I'm not concerned that deterrence is failing in the Pacific. That said, we want to continue to position ourselves for a position of strength. We want our allies and partners to work and operate with us. We want to have all of those partners articulate the importance of the rules based international order there is a place for China in this world. China's not going away. That said they need to integrate into the into the rules based order in a way that's beneficial for all and not specifically at the benefit of the PRC. I'll give you this example the Global Security Initiative is China's term, although vague and without facts for what the new rules based order should look like. That is that you are hearing them lay the groundwork for what the rules should look like. Well the deeds that I see look like this. A Chinese spy balloon flies directly over the continental United States. If that's what the Global Security Initiative looks like, under Chinese rules, I'm pretty sure that's unacceptable to all nations. It's certainly unacceptable to the United States. And there are more examples of say do mismatch that we see but we should be concerned about the way the PRC talks about the new rules based order. The second example that I have to bring up as the international tribunal that was filed by the Philippines in 2016. against the Chinese claim with all of the area inside the nine dash line, and specifically on Second Thomas Shoal. Right, the International Court determined China had no valid claim. Yet they continue to threaten the Philippines. They have discounted the international ruling based on no facts other than they don't like the decision. So with the international rules based order on the Global Security Initiative, just means as long as the PRC likes the outcome, that's the rules. We ought to all be concerned about that

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Courtney Kube

since you brought up the Chinese spy balloon what is this the spy balloon situation in your area? I mean, do you still see them often is China flying these all the time and they're just not going over the continental US? And are you shooting any of the others of them down?

John C. Aquilino

We have not seen one since the event. And I have not shot any down.

Courtney Kube

not yet. but you got like a year left in the job. So you still have time.

John C. Aquilino

I'm just trying to get through tomorrow.

Courtney Kube

The interview is not over yet. So. So another thing that we hear a lot about with China is their hypersonic capabilities. Are you concerned that China's capabilities at delivering hypersonic missiles to the US? Are they more advanced than what the US has in hypersonics?

John C. Aquilino

Let me start by saying what we're seeing is a military buildup second, to none, at the speed and rate at which it's being delivered. And it's not just hypersonic missiles, it's all capabilities, its capabilities in the maritime environment in the Ergo domain, in space hypersonics and missile capability is one part. So am I concerned about the buildup and the capabilities that are delivering? Absolutely. That said that the United States continues to deliver capabilities that can ensure that we defend the homeland and protect our forces. And we'll continue to do that. So will they continue to develop? Absolutely, to include their nuclear capability. Largest buildup that we've seen, the fastest buildup in history.

Courtney Kube

Their August 2021 Hypersonic test showed some real advanced capabilities. You're asked about it and testimony earlier this year. Are you confident that the US has the US has the missile defense systems that they need that they could actually knock one of those things down?

John C. Aquilino

I'm confident that the United States industry innovation, we are developing those capabilities to ensure that we can do that

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Courtney Kube

Are you developing and fast enough?

John C. Aquilino

Hence my point on urgency.

Courtney Kube

Do you have any contact with your Chinese counterparts?

John C. Aquilino

I do not. Now we invite them and I have asked to speak to my Chinese counterpart parts because there's more than one that the alignment is different. So the Eastern theater commander and the southern theater commander for two years now I've had a request to speak with each of them. My asks have gone either unanswered. Or refused. We have invited the Chinese chairman to come to our annual chiefs of defense conference. We're going to have that in Fiji next month. We have invited we have not heard. We do it virtually three other times two to three times per year. So in the two years, we've had one showing of the Chinese representation via teleconference. That's been the extent of my contact since I've been in this position.

Courtney Kube

The former STRATCOM commander, Admiral Richard called China's nuclear breakout breathtaking. They have three new ICBM fields. Are they modernizing faster than the US and is there anything that the US can do to discourage that or is there any impact the US can have on their modernization?

John C. Aquilino

So it's critical that the US continues their modern, our modernization of our strategic capabilities, and very, pretty costly, but required it is the bottom line defense of this nation through strategic nuclear deterrence. That said, the Chinese are going very quickly. I don't I'd have to go back and look and see how they equate it on a scale. Doesn't matter to me. What matters is that we modernize our force and we're ready to be able to respond if need be. I think we have well, I know we have asked the Chinese to participate in some nuclear Limitation Talks, as well as with the Russians. They have not accepted that invitation either quite yet.

Courtney Kube

Has the US military conducted any war games with Taiwan?

John C. Aquilino

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All of our actions in accordance with Taiwan are aligned with the Taiwan Relations Act. Just leave it there.

Courtney Kube

Doesn't the NDAA require them require as of 2023 require that there be some war games?

John C. Aquilino

I gotta go back and look at the language.

Courtney Kube

It's a lot. It's really long.

John C. Aquilino

We will always follow the law and meet the requirements.

Courtney Kube

Has are you concerned that us support for Ukraine's billions of dollars in weapons and equipment that the US has been sending? There that that's depleting munitions, specifically, but weapons that could go to Taiwan to help with this readiness ississue?

John C. Aquilino

Yeah not at this point Courtney. The United States is a global power. And I'd argue that after Ukraine invasion invasion of Ukraine, we actually might be the only global power so we can walk and chew gum at the same time. It's critically important that we support Ukraine. Strategically, it's critically important, and at this point, there's been nothing pulled out of my theater. That limit me to do my job.

Courtney Kube

When you say walk and chew gum is that a military way of saying that you can fight two conflicts at the same time? Like if China were to invade today, the US could support in some way?

John C. Aquilino

I think it's the it's the way to say that as a global power, we can meet our global responsibilities.

Courtney Kube

One thing that that's surprising to me about the the Taiwan vs. And Ukraine, all these weapons, as Taiwan has like a 19 There's like \$19 billion in weapons that are backlogged that have been earmarked to go to Taiwan that are just sitting and haven't been sent, and at this point, a lot of them may not get there before 2027. So how is it possible that with all these weapons, and specifically munitions and Long Range Systems and air defenses, that Taiwan needs. How is it

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possible when the US is sending so many of those to Ukraine? It's not having any impact on Taiwan? It just doesn't make sense.

John C. Aquilino

Yeah, there's some different capabilities. Out of that 19 billion, large chunk of that is F sixteens that they have purchased so again, at this point, like I said, I haven't seen any impact. The capabilities in some cases are different for the for the pacific problem set and the overland problem set that's happening right now. But you bring up a good point about the you keep making my sense of urgency argument, and I've had much conversation with industry on how they could speed up. You know, just in time, defense support is not where we need to be anymore. So we got to build up the defense industrial base in a way where we can meet our requirements.

Courtney Kube

So we only have a few minutes left and I think this is going to be your favorite part of the interview. Because I feel like you're a four star you have this prominent job. You got like 300,000 50,000 80,000 people under your command. But I bet a lot of people don't know a lot about you. So let's change that right now. First off, your callsign is lung it's on your nametag there. Why?

John C. Aquilino

Aquilino turns into Aqualung. I wish I had a better story.

Courtney Kube

I know you shouldn't. Just for the record, you should make up a better story than that for the next time. Like something cool about saving someone by sticking a straw in their lung and there's something I don't even know if that's the thing. Do you are Top Gun pilot. What do you think of Top Gun Maverick? Do you do you roll your eyes at the Hollywood ization. I'm making a word left and right up here. By the way of the Top Gun. Or is it cool?

John C. Aquilino

Oh it's cool. So certainly there's some Hollywood portions of that but there's a whole bunch of part of that movie that's that's real and I don't know if it comes out but then I'll just give you a couple points. First, every one of those airplane scenes was an airplane flying with a US Navy fighter pilot in the front seat so that flying is all real. The dedication of those kids. I call them kids now because I'm old as dirt. But for those kids to get out there and do the mission, the dedication it takes the hours that it takes to perfect your craft and be effective. You know that's the flying part of the scenes if you were to look at the scenes on a US aircraft carrier. Those kids are killing themselves every day. Think about being in the Middle East and on the Gulf and work on a 12 to 16 hour shift on 140 degree flight deck launching airplanes for 12 hours. I'm proud every day to be able to work with those kids and I'm in awe. When I was younger I didn't get it right I feel like an old nostalgic dad. I

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watched his kids work and you know I got almost 1300 arrested landings and every one of them took about 30 of those kids mostly under the age of 25 to do everything they do perfectly for me to not die.

Courtney Kube

I wouldn't call you old but since you brought it up the Do do you think you'll go anywhere after PAYCOM? Do you think there's another Navy job for you or what do you think?

John C. Aquilino

Let me just go back to what I said. I hope to have this job tomorrow. And we'll see I got enough on my plate Courtney. I got the greatest team on the planet out in PAYCOM. I have a great amount of partners throughout the regions. Almost all the chiefs of defense that are out there I call friends. I got a lot of work to do before I worry about what's next.

Courtney Kube

Was there ever a point in your career where you thought I just messed up I'm gonna get fired?

John C. Aquilino

I wish there was only one we'll wait till after I retire to have that conversation.

Courtney Kube

And And just one more. Since you're the head of PAYCOM. Do you think that paycom should stay in navy billet? Or do you think it's possible that that could go to another service?

John C. Aquilino

Well, I think when the Secretary takes a look at whoever he's going to fill it, there's a ton of qualified officers. An amazing amount of talent that I've been able to work with over the past. How am I going on almost 40 years. So I'm confident that whatever the secretary decides to fill behind me, will be qualified and really amazing officer. It's a joint force that said there's a lot of water out there.

Courtney Kube

On a note Can I call you Lung?

John C. Aquilino

Only my friends do so yes.

Courtney Kube

Thank you. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you for making the trip here.

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