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It is great to be here this morning. I see many familiar faces in the crowd. A few comments that I'd like to make up front, but I'm most interested in getting to the questions and comments that you all may have, and turn this into a two-way educational experience.

I'm traveling with Lt. Gen. Toolan, my naval partner in the Pacific. He wears two hats. He's the commander of Marine Forces in the Pacific, but he's also the commander of the Fleet Marine Forces in the Pacific, and in that hat he is actually subordinate to me when Marines are embarked. And then of course he takes a leadership role of those Marines when they disembark and they're ashore. So it is great to be traveling with John and his team.

I'd like to offer special thanks to the National Security College here at Australia National University and the Embassy of Japan in Australia for co-hosting this event. I am particularly heartened by the diversity of opinion and perspective represented by those attending this important forum. As I have said many times before, these opportunities for inclusive dialogue help to push us beyond admiring the problem of the day and toward developing more predictive, long-term responses to shared concerns. This conference falls at an important moment both in my tenure as commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and for the broader Indo-Asia-Pacific region that I serve in.

Over the past 10 months I have traveled throughout this region from the West Coast of the United States to Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and most recently, to the large ocean nations of Oceania. All of these sub-regions are vital parts of the vast Indo-Asia-Pacific through which, not only our economies flow, but the global economy as well. Some have described the Indo-Asia-Pacific as the "economic engine" that drives the global economy. Whether your views are as grand as that, I have not found anyone who disagrees with the notion that the regional economy drove the rising tide of prosperity that has lifted so many from poverty. All of our nations – large and small – have major equities in the international rules-based system established in the wake of World War Two that has been foundational as an enabler to this rising tide.

Over the past seventy years, this principled system has fostered a highly interconnected neighborhood in which exclusivity and hierarchy have no place. We are all locals here; there are no outsiders or subordinate states among the Indo-Asia-Pacific nations. We were all given voice after World War Two, regardless of economic stature, heritage, culture, form of government, or military strength.

Some nations do not see it this way and, seeking to right perceived imbalances or wrongs of the past, are abandoning the international rules-based system in the process. As a consequence, portions of the sea are besieged by word or deed to serve unilateral interests alone. Manifest by unprecedented examples of aggressive construction and militarization on disputed land features as well as legal appeals to historic pasts that are inconsistent with international law, there is a palpable sense that an arc of “might makes right” is returning to the region after more than seventy years of security and stability. Attempts to justify these activities at sea are often based on channeling nationalist history outward, the sort of thing that may stoke patriotism at home, but has no place among responsible nations in international waters.

It’s becoming increasingly clear that a contest is underway in the most vulnerable waters of the Indo-Asia-Pacific. As mentioned earlier, on one side is a potential return of might makes right after more than seventy years of stability. On the other is a continuum of the international rules-based system that has served us all so well, with limitless potential to continue to do so. Though larger nations are certainly affected by these new challenges to the freedoms we enjoy and to the rules-based system, in particular, smaller nations that border disputed waters are most vulnerable and increasingly alarmed by these disruptive trends.

Charmless offensives, which have offered dubious reassurances in the past, are clearly no longer charming -- and no longer adequate to buy silence or distract regional countries from aggressive activities occurring just beyond their shores. Regional rhetoric is catching up to this reality. Late last month, the Chairman of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and separately Singapore’s Minister of Foreign Affairs raised the region’s concerns about growing maritime instability at a summit in Laos. The Chairman noted that colleagues from all ten ASEAN nations [and I quote] “remained seriously concerned over [the] recent and ongoing developments,” and as such “land reclamations and escalation of activities in the area.”

Reminding us that maritime disputes involve many more nations than just the direct claimants, Foreign Minister Dr Balakrishnan, said [and I quote again] "Singapore’s not a claimant state. Nevertheless, because we are a small country, we have to firmly adhere with the concept of a rules-based world order. In other words, we cannot have a world where might [makes] right." I also hear clear and direct expressions of this anxiety from every regional leader and geopolitical expert I meet with during my many travels throughout the region.

There are two primary elements driving this anxiety. First is the disproportionate scope, scale and acceleration of the disruptive activities I have mentioned before, especially in contested areas and surrounding waters. Second is a lack of transparency about the intentions of some regional navies, coast guards and para-military forces under their command.

The resulting climate of uncertainty not only threatens freedom of the seas and chips away at the rules-based system, it encourages nations to transfer ever larger shares of national wealth to purchase naval weapons beyond what is needed merely for self-defense. More and more media reports reflect broad concern for rising military budgets, as well as calls for greater transparency and a clear explanation of intentions.

Relatedly, and most troubling, are the undeniable signs of militarization in select parts of the region, unprecedented in terms of scope and scale. The seeds of this militarization were sown by garrisons established decades ago in barely habitable outposts. Now many of their original blockhouses are dwarfed by thousands of acres of reclaimed land with newly constructed barracks, deep-water ports, extended runways, high power radars, surface-to-air missiles and squadrons of naval aircraft.

Recent restrictions on Internet and press freedoms by some nations may very well reflect their true intentions toward all forms of international exchange. Freedom across cyberspace may be less tangible than freedom of navigation for ships at sea, but it is no less consequential in today's interconnected world. Successful imposition of restrictive national laws in international waters would likely require militarization. For these reasons, I remain concerned that the freedom of the seas in some Indo-Asia-Pacific waters is not only at risk by longstanding challenges like piracy, smuggling, and other illicit activities, it is increasingly vulnerable to a state-led resurgence of the principle of "might-makes-right."

I believe there is a clear choice of a best practice to emulate and replicate among the competing visions I have outlined, one that can be illustrated within the vast Indo-Asia-Pacific region. Just after the new year, I visited India and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh I attended the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium where I remarked that if I stood in the Straits of Malacca, looking east into the South China Sea and East China Sea, I saw protracted maritime disputes and a lack of transparency in contested waters. Looking west, into the Indian Ocean, I saw neighboring nations, large and powerful such as India, as well as smaller and more vulnerable, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar/Burma, working together in international fora to resolve similar types of disputes peacefully and promote an inclusive climate of cooperation at sea. By submitting longstanding disputes to international institutions, and agreeing to honor the outcomes, these nations demonstrated the responsible application of a seventy-year old model, forged in war, tested by time, modified by consensus decisions, and adjudicated in accordance with international law.

If I now, here today, re-center my orientation from the Straits of Malacca to the center of the Indian Ocean, I am struck by what I see looking west. There the situation deteriorates rapidly in parts of Eastern Europe, the Levant and the Maghreb. Ongoing turmoil in Syria, Libya and Ukraine reflects the resurgent challenges of international terrorism, failed states and large states invading their much smaller neighbors. These challenges extend to the vital waters of the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea, which enabled the prosperity that region has enjoyed for so long. Here in the Indo-Asia-Pacific we would do well to notice that these seas are now vectors of instability plaguing the region. Put simply, might makes right is taking root in these places in ways that continue to challenge existing regional governance structures and are spreading to the international community, in large part, from the sea.

So I end with a message of hope, concern and reality.

- Hope that the international rules-based system that has served us so well, regionally as well as globally, for the last 70 years, will remain the gold standard for issue resolution. We have only to look as far as the nations that border the Indian Ocean for an example and an affirmation, that nations great and small [can], and are, valued by, what up to now, has been an enduring model of issue resolution and stability.

- Concern that my example of standing in the middle of the Indian Ocean, what I view as a relative sea of tranquility, and looking west into the increasing chaos of the Mediterranean and Black seas, may be analogous to looking through a window at a potential future for the Indo-Asia-Pacific region.

- And last, that the reality is, demonstrated from the days of sail, the great British, French and Spanish armadas, as true today as then, that the canary in the coal mine of regional and global stability and prosperity isn't found in a cave, but on international waters. We all have assumed so long these international seas are the domain of all free men. Perhaps now we too easily dismissed these freedom enablers, these guarantors of stability and prosperity, as simply "freedom of navigation."

In closing on the theme of this conference, "Challenges, Opportunities and Cooperation," I suggest, while we can admire the example set for us by our Indian Oceans friends, we all have an obligation to ensure that the "opportunity" the Indian Ocean example presents to us is leveraged to ensure that all rise to the "challenge" of ensuring this sea of tranquility does not become an oasis, more defined by the chaos that surrounds it, than by the stability within. The key to ensuring the longevity and application of this Indian Ocean model throughout the rest of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region is "cooperation." Cooperation in the form of applying the same international rules-based system of accepted norms, standards, rules and laws that have served so well, so long, well into the future.

Thank you. I look forward the opportunity to expanding my knowledge through your informative questions and comments.