Secretary of Defense Speech

U.S. Pacific Command Change of Command

As Delivered by Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, May 27, 2015

Well, with so many military careers, Sam – like so with – like with so many military careers, excuse me, Sam Locklear’s began with enlistment papers. Some of you may not know this, but because Sam was committed to serving his country when he was still 17 years old, he needed his parents to sign that permission.

And more than four decades later, we’re very grateful that they did, because in those years of service, Sam has helped make the United States and the world safer, and at Pacific Command, he inspired and then led a rebalance to a region vital to our future.

So ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, elected leaders: good morning, and aloha!

Today, we celebrate the careers of some of our Navy’s finest admirals – Sam Locklear, his successor Harry Harris, and our new PACFLEET Commander Scott Swift. All well known to me.

We came together at Pearl Harbor, 70 years after the end of World War II, to mark this, the change of command at PACOM, our oldest and largest combatant command. PACOM’s leaders – and all who serve under them – are charged with protecting the nation while assuring the peace that’s been the hallmark of the Pacific region for many, many years. Sam has done so, and I’m sure Harry will do the same.

As we honor Sam today, I’d like to thank his parents – his father Sam and his mother Margaret – who helped launch this remarkable career. They couldn’t be here today, but I know Sam is incredibly proud of his dad, whom he describes as a “Renaissance Man,” and his loving mom, whom he claims is the best cook the South has ever seen. I’d also like to thank Sam’s two daughters Jil and Jenny for the love, support, and encouragement they’ve provided him throughout his career.

And I want to make sure we all recognize – we all recognize Sam’s wonderful wife Pam. Pam, thank you for your service and sacrifices as well. Managing 29 moves over the years isn’t easy. But we thank you for every one of them, and everything else you’ve done to support Sam. I know you’re looking forward to spending more time with him, and staying put for a while.

Now, I’ve said this many times, but it bears repeating – America’s future rests with the Asia-Pacific. And Sam leveraged all of America’s unrivaled strengths, and the tremendous U.S. forces PACOM brings to bear in this region – over 350,000 military and civilian personnel, nearly 2,000 aircraft, and 180 naval vessels – to meet the commitments President Obama made when he announced the rebalance.

Sam has also been a diplomat. He’s charmed everyone, as he likes to say, from Hollywood to Bollywood with his good sense and his – again, as he calls it – “South Carolina English.” He’s been the de facto ambassador to Asia for me and for two of my predecessors, nurturing long-time alliances and partnerships, while developing – helping our nation develop new friendships.

As a strategist, Sam helped transform U.S. military posture and planning. He enhanced American presence in the Asia-Pacific. He organized hundreds of exercises that increased readiness, cooperation, and contingency planning. He helped improve our counterterrorism efforts and our ability to respond to attacks at home. And he spearheaded our work on cybersecurity, ensuring that our forces are prepared for tomorrow.

Finally, as a leader, Sam recognized the importance of people – both the region’s and his own – our own. He organized humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, including Operation Damayan after Typhoon Haiyan struck Southeast Asia a short time ago. And he took great care of his most precious asset – his people, our people – the men and women of PACOM who work to protect us every day.

Sam has left a tremendous legacy – in making the rebalance a reality, and as a diplomat, strategist, and leader. But along the way, he also taught so many of us, including me, about America’s enduring interests and commitments in the Asia-Pacific. Sam’s advised a generation of government and military leaders – Secretaries of Defense, National Security Advisors, Joint Chiefs – and we’re going to remember those lessons and build on his legacy as we enter the next phase of our rebalance.

As we do so, we want to improve on what he describes as the, quote, “patchwork quilt” that makes up this region’s security architecture. That’s why, when I speak at the Shangri-La Dialogue on Saturday, I’ll call for the region to strengthen its security institutions and relationships to ensure we can maintain lasting peace and stability in a region that is undergoing significant change.

But as Sam knows so well, this region’s security is rooted in something deeper and more fundamental, which is a commitment to shared values and principles – like a commitment to the rule of law, to resolving disputes through diplomacy rather than coercion, and to maintaining freedom of navigation and overflight.

The United States, the Department of Defense, and PACOM have always stood up for those principles, and we always will, because they’ve assured the Asia-Pacific’s peace and prosperity, for decades, was widely shared and widely supported.

That’s why I want to be clear about our position on the South China Sea.

First, we want a peaceful resolution of all disputes, and an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by any claimant. We also oppose any further militarization of disputed features.

Second – and there should be no mistake, should be no mistake about this – the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows, as we do all around the world.

Finally, with its actions in the South China Sea, China is out of step with both international norms that underscore the Asia-Pacific’s security architecture, and the regional consensus in favor of a non-coercive approach to this and other long-standing disputes.

China’s actions are bringing countries in the region together in new ways.  And they’re increasing demand for American engagement in the Asia-Pacific, and we’re going to meet it. We will remain the principal security power in the Asia-Pacific for decades to come.

Thank you, Sam, for all you’ve done to help us live up to that commitment. In doing so, you’ve helped the ‘big-P’ Pacific stay ‘small-p’ pacific. You’ve been a source of tremendous insight and advice for me. And you’ve laid the groundwork to ensure stability for decades to come. On behalf of our nation and all the men and women of DoD, Sam, I thank you. Pam, I thank you.

Now, we’re fortunate we didn’t have to look too far for Sam’s replacement – we found someone just down the road.

Admiral Harry Harris is the son of a Navy Chief Petty Officer who served on the U.S.S. Lexington, which left Pearl Harbor just a few days before that fateful Sunday morning in December 1941. And throughout Harry’s career, he’s dedicated to make himself – to making certain that we’re never surprised again.

At PACFLEET, he helped bring our most advanced capabilities to the Asia-Pacific and shift 60 percent of our naval assets to the region. He also stressed and maintained the readiness that’s at a premium in this dynamic region. For all those reasons and many more, Harry’s the PACOM commander we need for the next phase of the rebalance.

Harry, thank you for accepting this new mission, and Bruni, we thank you for your unwavering support. We’re all very grateful to both of you for your continued commitment and service to our country.

I’d also like to recognize Admiral Swift. Now Scott, I know your call-sign is “Notso.” We all know that. But you’re plenty swift. Known you for a long time, and I look forward to your leadership on maritime security in the years to come. And Trish, we thank you for your continued commitment as well.

Finally, we soberly remember, here at Pearl Harbor, how quickly and how unexpectedly peace can disappear. An old friend of mine likes to say that security is like oxygen. When you have enough of it, you pay no attention to it. But when you don’t have enough, you can think of nothing else.

In a region that has enjoyed decades of stability and prosperity, it’s only human nature for some to take security for granted. But we cannot, and will not, make that mistake.

Sam Locklear never did. And I am certain that neither Harry Harris nor Scott Swift will do so either, as they help us move into the next phase of our rebalance to the region, help lead the men and women who make up the finest fighting force the world has ever known, and help protect the peace and prosperity of the Pacific for years to come.

Thank you. And now, I’d like to invite Sam and Pam onstage here for a moment.