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GEOSTRATEGIC NET ASSESSMENT

INDOPACOM through 2030

Nathan P. Freier and John H. Schaus

ABSTRACT: INDOPACOM transformation faces two risks: the same kind of strategic distraction that derailed prior efforts to refocus on the Indo-Pacific and competing Joint and service concepts and priorities. Mitigating these risks and restoring a hypercompetitive US position in INDOPACOM relies on US senior leaders' adopting bold change. The Army can lead the way by adopting four transformational roles in INDOPACOM—grid, enabler, multidomain warfighter, and capability and capacity generator.

China's advantages in anti-access/area-denial will require novel US warfighting solutions going forward.¹ A more credible, hypercompetitive United States IndoPacific Command (INDOPACOM) Joint Force will inevitably rely on the deliberate and innovative combination of service strengths. The Army's substantial Joint enabling capability in mission command, protection, sustainment, movement, and intelligence (and information) make it an attractive foundation upon which to build a more agile, distributed, and lethal theater-level Joint Force approach.²

Distraction

For nearly 20 years, the US military focused to a fault on irregular wars with nonstate actors in Afghanistan, Iraq, and more broadly the Global War on Terror. During that time, the Department of Defense prioritized counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and nation building in its strategy, concepts, plans, and readiness. The post-9/11 wars were perhaps the most disruptive for the US Army. The Army shouldered the wars' principal burdens.³ Army forces grew accustomed to predictable mission sets and deployment cycles in familiar regions, and US soldiers became expert irregular warfighters. This all occurred, however, as profound change in the competitive environment emerged on the other side of the world.

As the United States fought insurgents and terrorists, China developed hypercompetitive approaches focused on outflanking US

1. Kathy Gilsinan, "How the U.S. Could Lose a War with China," *Atlantic*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/china-us-war/594793/>.

2. Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), *Operations*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0 (Washington DC: HQDA, 2016), 10, https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/cdg_resources/manuals/adp/ADP_3-0.pdf; and Philip Davidson, "China's Challenge to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (speech, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, October 1, 2019), <https://www.belfercenter.org/>.

3. Brendan W. McGarry and Emily M. Morgenstern, *Overseas Contingency Operations Funding: Background and Status*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Rept. No. 116-R44519 (Washington, DC: CRS, September 6, 2019), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44519.pdf>.

interests and, if necessary, defeating US forces in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, China's hypercompetitive methods have confounded traditional US approaches to competition, deterrence, and warfighting.⁴ As a result, the US military and the Army specifically are out of position conceptually, physically, and with deployed and anticipated capabilities in this highly contested region.

The Transformation Imperative

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS 18) recognizes an imperative for wholesale Joint transformation to meet the challenge of great power rivalry.⁵ United States INDOPACOM is a centerpiece in that anticipated transformation. Among the services, the Army may have the toughest challenge meeting essential transformational objectives.

The Army recently adopted the concept of multidomain operations as its contribution to great power rivalry.⁶ Consistent with its self-image as the nation's war winner, its conception of multidomain operations frequently culminates in large-scale, multidomain ground combat. However, the multidomain and multifunctional demands on the Army in the Indo-Pacific will likely call for a different employment of Army forces. While multidomain ground combat may provide the platform for success in a future European or Middle Eastern war, INDOPACOM's unique geography and threat profile do not bend as easily to Army preferences.

China, China, China!

While the military was away in the Middle East, a fundamental threat to American power emerged in the Indo-Pacific region.⁷ The strategic landscape there changed dramatically from the time of the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review* to NDS 18.⁸ Over that time, US political, economic, and military advantage eroded. China emerged as a hypercompetitive regional juggernaut, and its explosive economic growth—combined with strategic vision—enabled rapid expansion of its diplomatic and economic influence, financial interests, military

4. Nathan Freier et al, "Game On or Game Over: Hypercompetition and Military Advantage," War Room, May 22, 2018, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/articles/the-new-defense-normal-nine-fundamentals-of-hypercompetition/>.

5. James Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense (DoD), 2018), 2–3, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=807329>.

6. US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), *The U.S. Army Concept for Multi-Domain Combined Arms Operations at Echelons Above Brigade 2025–45: Versatile, Agile, and Lethal*, Version 1.0 (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, September 2018), <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/ArmyEABConcept.pdf>.

7. Paul McCleary, "Acting SecDef Shanahan's First Message: 'China, China, China,'" Breaking Defense, January 2, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/01/acting-secdef-shanahans-first-message-china-china-china/>.

8. See Henry Shelton, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, DoD, September 30, 2001), <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>; and Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*.

transformation, and gray-zone activism.⁹ Now all of these factors combine to position China as the most significant rival to American power, influence, and freedom of action since the Cold War.

The method, scope, and pace of China's approach to countering the United States and the essential character of an American response is most accurately described as hypercompetition.¹⁰ China's growing influence, reach, and raw potential means hypercompetitive military rivalry will be most acute for the United States in the INDOPACOM theater well through the next decade. Hypercompetition, the persistent struggle for transient advantage across highly contested domains and competitive spaces, is a business concept adapted by US Army War College researchers to describe contemporary great power rivalry.¹¹ It presumes fortune favors the bold in an environment where no defense-relevant advantage is permanent. Instead, hypercompetition is acknowledgement that the persistent pursuit and exploitation of new or regained advantage will characterize future great power rivalry and conflict.

US adaptation to hypercompetitive great power rivalry started late and has only recently begun to take root. Most notably over the past three years, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and NDS 18 offered clear guidance that the United States should prioritize great power rivalry in strategy, plans, acquisition, and employment of military capabilities and methods. A byproduct of the two Trump administration strategies is official identification of China as the United States' pacing military threat.¹² Ongoing efforts to refocus the Department of Defense and its Joint military forces on an aggressive hypercompetitive China are as appropriate as they are overdue.

Identifying the Problem

The commander of INDOPACOM succinctly described a key aspect of change in the Indo-Pacific military dynamic during a 2019 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing: "we speak frequently about the erosion of our advantage . . . which is really the case here. China has

9. See Ashley J. Tellis, "Protecting American Primacy in the Indo-Pacific: Testimony: Senate Armed Services Committee, April 25th, 2017," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d., <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/25/protecting-american-primacy-in-indo-pacific-pub-68754>; Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, DIA-02-1706-085 (Washington, DC: DIA, 2019), 2–6, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf; and James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Five Shades of Chinese Gray Zone Strategy," *National Interest*, May 2, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/five-shades-chinese-gray-zone-strategy-20450>.

10. See Freier et al., "Game Over"; and Freier, John Schaus, and William Braun, "Prologue," in *An Army Transformed: INDOPACOM Hypercompetition and U.S. Army Theater Design*, ed. Freier, John Schaus, and William Braun (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army War College Press, forthcoming).

11. Richard A. D'Aveni and Robert Gunther, *Hypercompetition: Managing the Dynamics of Strategic Manuevering* (New York: Free Press, 1994).

12. *Department of Defense Budget Posture: Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 116th Cong. (March 14, 2019) (statement of acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan), https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Shanahan_03-14-19.pdf.

seriously eroded that quantitative advantage—the number of assets that they have—but they’re also eroding that qualitative advantage.”¹³

Aggregate military capability, however, is only one measure of relative advantage or disadvantage. If, consistent with NDS 18, the United States intends to reverse the erosion of military advantage and restore a favorable military balance in an increasingly volatile INDOPACOM theater, it needs to address key vulnerabilities in its current Joint Force theater design across more than aggregate or measurable military assets. A comprehensive view of theater design includes strategy and operational concepts; forces and capabilities; footprint and presence; authorities, permissions, and agreements; and mission command arrangements.

In this more comprehensive view, the United States is dangerously out of position conceptually and physically, and as a result also out of position with regard to deployed forces and capabilities for long-term hypercompetition with China. This reality exacerbates the theater-wide erosion of advantage. It limits military options available to Joint Force commanders. It also simplifies the decision-making calculus of Chinese political and military leadership.

Out of Position Conceptually

NDS 18 and institutional Army strategy both note the importance of developing and experimenting with innovative operating concepts.¹⁴ Though there is some progress, INDOPACOM and its assigned service components are not yet on a common Joint path that transfers greater risk to China and imposes costs while lowering US and partner risks.¹⁵ China, on the other hand, pursues its regional interests at US expense through sweeping military transformation and effective gray-zone campaigning.¹⁶ Absent effective US counteraction—starting with a coherent and unified Joint military approach—China’s aggressive military transformation and its deliberate gray-zone maneuvering will progressively increase US risk and limit realistic future US military options.

13. *Posture of United States Indo-Pacific Command and United States Forces Korea: Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 116th Cong. (February 12, 2019) (statements of Admiral Philip S. Davidson and General Robert B. Abrams), <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/19-02-12-united-states-indo-pacific-command-and-united-states-forces-korea>.

14. Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*, 7; and Mark Esper and Mark A. Milley, *The Army Strategy* (Washington, DC: HQDA, October 25, 2018), 8, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_strategy_2018.pdf.

15. Phillip S. Davidson, “Transforming the Joint Force: A Warfighting Concept for Great Power Competition,” (speech, WEST 2020, San Diego, California, March 3, 2020), <https://www.pacom.mil/Media/Speeches-Testimony/Article/2101115/transforming-the-joint-force-a-warfighting-concept-for-great-power-competition/>.

16. See Michael J. Green et al., *Asia-Pacific Rebalance 2025: Capabilities, Presence, and Partnerships: An Independent Review of U.S. Defense Strategy in the Asia-Pacific* (Lanham, MD: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2016), 15–19, http://csis.org/files/publication/160119_Green_AsiaPacificRebalance2025_Web_0.pdf; and Kathleen H. Hicks and Joseph P. Frederici, “Campaigning through China’s Gray Zone Tactics,” in *The Struggle for Power: U.S.-China Relations in the 21st Century*, ed. Leah Bitounis and Jonathon Price (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2020), 96–104, https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2020/01/TheStruggleForPower.pdf?_ga=2.184197153.682513604.1579885138-406713349.1579619482.

At present there are two Joint warfighting concepts under development by separate US headquarters or staffs and at least six independent service-specific operational concepts in various stages of development. Army multidomain operations is among them. While all these efforts are potentially value-added, the effect of multiple uncoordinated and, at times, competing concept development efforts threatens Joint unity of effort. Further, without strong senior-leader oversight, new Joint concepts are vulnerable to suboptimal compromise favoring service interests over emerging Joint operational requirements.

Out of Position Physically

The regional posture of the United States is concentrated in northeast Asia, predicated on discredited assumptions of military advantage and positioned for the efficient prosecution of a second Korean war. It is not a forward posture conducive to effective hypercompetition or—in extremis—transition to conflict with a hostile China. Substantial advances in the number and quality of China’s precision-guided munitions—delivered from land, air, and sea—by themselves may nullify the deterrent effect of an American military heavily concentrated on large bases in Japan, Korea, Guam, and the Hawaiian Islands.

Likewise in the event of increased tensions or conflict, China enjoys strategic depth, internal or heavily protected lines of communication, and the ability to employ and maneuver critical assets with the benefit of relative sanctuary. But US and partner forces positioned in theater are within reach of China’s substantial precision weapons inventory and would be in immediate danger. Furthermore, US and allied surge and sustainment forces pushed from the United States and other regions would be under persistent threat as they attempted to reinforce forward-deployed forces.¹⁷ En route to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific theater, US and allied forces would have to navigate long, vulnerable lines of communication at the end of which entry into and maneuver within the theater would be heavily contested.

Out of Position in Capabilities

US Joint Forces currently lack the capability for the kind of large-scale, widely distributed “all-domain” operations essential to give China pause in escalating regional tensions or to defeat the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in armed hostilities.¹⁸ In particular, power projection and access, Joint command and control (including secure data and communications), sustainment, protection, and intratheater movement and maneuver are challenged by the tyrannies of antiquated posture, distance, and an increasingly capable PLA.

For the Army specifically, delivery of lethal and nonlethal multidomain effects and ground combat are favored at the expense of

17. See Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*.

18. See Davidson, “Transforming the Joint Force”; and Ernest Nisperos, “Joint All Domain Effects Convergence: Evolving C2 Teams,” *Over the Horizon*, March 10, 2020, <https://othjournal.com/2020/03/10/joint-all-domain-effects-convergence-evolving-c2-teams/>.

Joint-enabling capabilities essential to an agile and distributed theater Joint Force.¹⁹ According to one observer, the US military is figuring out how to “shoot” without solving how it “moves” and “communicates.”²⁰ Our research suggests adding *protect* and *sustain* to the deficits in movement and communication as well.

From Strategy to Hypercompetition

The operational demand for more distributed Joint operations within the INDOPACOM area of operations will expose the folly of a suboptimized Joint approach, uncoordinated service concepts, and persistent neglect of the enabling functions upon which successful Joint operations rely. Continued disadvantages in concepts, physical posture, and capabilities will increasingly constrain or deny the ability of US Joint Forces to hypercompete, especially when confronted with escalation from China.

A new hypercompetitive theater approach that is biased for action is the most appropriate way ahead. This approach implies transforming theater design across Joint functions and service components while actively hypercompeting for and exploiting transient advantages. US Joint Forces should pursue longer-lead, high-risk, high-reward technological advancements. They cannot, however, necessarily rely on them for decisive effect over the near- to midterm. Across the Joint Force, the earliest wins will likely emerge not from breakthrough technological change but from innovative and novel operational concepts, task organization, mission tailoring, and physical posture.

Consistent with NDS 18, a transformed INDOPACOM theater design should prioritize change to regain the strategic initiative. With initiative, the Joint Force can expand the competitive space to complicate rival decision-making and restore and maintain the favorable military balance.²¹ A favorable military balance does not connote restoration of permanent military advantage. Rather it implies the persistent ability to generate and exploit opportunity faster and with greater impact than can the pacing rival China.

Initiative, nurtured by deliberate choices in the application of resources and effort, allows the Joint Force to identify and exploit hypercompetitive opportunities as they emerge. This initiative starts in the persistent campaigning that should inevitably occur in the gray space short of armed conflict. As the Department of Defense works to develop and consolidate around a new Joint warfighting concept, an essential component of persistent campaigning is refocusing and repurposing Joint and service-level priorities to maximize operational and theater-strategic impact. We suggest the Army is central to such a change.

19. See Esper and Milley, *Army Strategy*, 1, 2, 6–8.

20. Telephone conversation with a senior military officer responsible for service concept development in January 2020.

21. Mattis, *National Defense Strategy*, 4.

Joint Transformation

Real Joint transformation in INDOPACOM can come when one service embraces the job of enabling Joint multi- or all-domain operations. This transformation is the Army's greatest value proposition in the INDOPACOM theater over the next decade as it relates to the US-China rivalry. Toward this end, the Army can contribute most effectively to a transformed Joint theater design by adopting four transformational roles:

- the Army as the *grid*
- the Army as the *enabler*
- the Army as the *multidomain warfighter*
- the Army as the *capability and capacity generator*²²

The Army as the grid sees an Army-led establishment of a distributed, resilient, and mutually reinforcing theater network of expeditionary clusters, hubs, and nodes as the foundation for Joint multidomain operations. The core purpose of the grid is to expand the competitive space, creating options for Joint Force commanders, ultimately, enabling effective Joint multidomain maneuver.

The Army as the enabler calls for a Joint-focused Army transformation specific to INDOPACOM in mission command, sustainment, protection, movement, and intelligence (and information) to animate the grid. This transformation requires a persistent small-unit, multifunctional Army presence prepared to activate clusters, hubs, and nodes to meet Joint operational demands. It further requires mission-tailored Army forces to task organize and operate in distributed fashion well below the brigade level.

The Army as the multidomain warfighter sees the Army-led fielding of a land-based, multidomain warfighting capability with theater-wide presence and reach in concert with sister services and foreign partners. Army and sister service multidomain capabilities and concepts should be inspired by and integrated into a unified Joint multidomain theater concept.

The Army as the capability and capacity generator leverages a significant asymmetric US advantage—a strong network of regional allies and partners—to enhance traditional ground-force competencies and expand complementary multidomain capability. In this regard, Army forces—within a unified Joint concept—can be a catalyst for fielding a combined land-based, multidomain warfighting network that draws on the unique strengths and competencies of US partners.

The Army is currently focused on its roles of multidomain warfighter and capability and capacity generator in INDOPACOM.²³ The roles of

22. Freier et al., *An Army Transformed*.

23. Ryan McCarthy, "The Army's Strategy in the Indo-Pacific," (remarks, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, January 10, 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/fp_20200110_army_indopacific_transcript.pdf.

grid and enabler will be more difficult to adopt and socialize—though they are likely most important for the Army and the Joint Force in long-term hypercompetition with China. Only the Army can underwrite effective Joint Force operations theater-wide operating at the scale needed across the expanse of the Indo-Pacific region in the functions of mission command, protection, sustainment, movement, and intelligence (and information).

Conclusion

Thriving in hypercompetition first requires the United States to recognize and commit to engaging in it. A hypercompetitive US approach to INDOPACOM requires agile, disruptive, and mutually reinforcing Joint and Service theater designs. This point is not lost on China, but it remains conspicuously underdeveloped in US strategic calculations.

The Army is currently well positioned to take the first steps in inspiring essential Joint transformation by creating a flexible, scalable, and dynamic theater design biased first for distributed Joint theater enabling. This bias also implies commitment to establishing the physical grid essential to the enabling function. The grid and enabling functions combined will require innovative reconfiguration and employment of Army mission command, protection, sustainment, movement, and intelligence (and information) capabilities. As it becomes a reality, transformed Army theater design should help signal enduring US commitment to the region, expand options available to Joint Force commanders, and help them complicate rival planning and decision-making.

Success cannot be the result of good fortune or providence in INDOPACOM.²⁴ Rather it must rely on transformational change in Joint and combined warfighting and the service concepts supporting them. The window of opportunity to make bold transformational change will not be open long and will be difficult to negotiate.

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24. Michael J. Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).