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REGIONAL CHALLENGES

The US Army and the Pacific: Legacies and Challenges

David M. Finkelstein

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ABSTRACT: The Indo-Pacific will loom large in the future of the US Army. The region is increasingly important to myriad US national interests and is a major playing field for great-power competition. As it deepens its Pacific orientation, the Army has a rich institutional and operational legacy to draw upon, as well as encouraging recent initiatives that auger well for its ability to support the Joint Force in this critical part of the world.

The ongoing shift in the global economic center of gravity to Asia, and the region's emergence as a node of technological innovation have profound national security implications for the United States. The theater is now a playing field for major power competition. China, already the world's second-largest economy and building an increasingly credible military, is working to put its stamp on the regional order. Russia would like to make its presence felt once again.

The theater hosts nuclear armed powers, and unresolved geostrategic tensions could potentially erupt into crisis or major power conflict involving our allies, partners, or even ourselves. Additionally, nontraditional security challenges will persist—if not grow—as a result of climate change, water security, pandemics, and demographic pressures, among other issues. The Pacific theater will play a predominant role in the future of the US Army, even as contingencies in other regions demand the Army's attention.

The current and future importance of the Pacific transcends politics. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have attempted to focus on the region with their Rebalance and Free and Open Indo-Pacific policies, amid other requirements. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, echoing his predecessor James Mattis, has reconfirmed on various occasions that the region is the department's priority theater. Consequently the Army needs to continue to deepen its Pacific orientation even as it confronts requirements in other theaters.

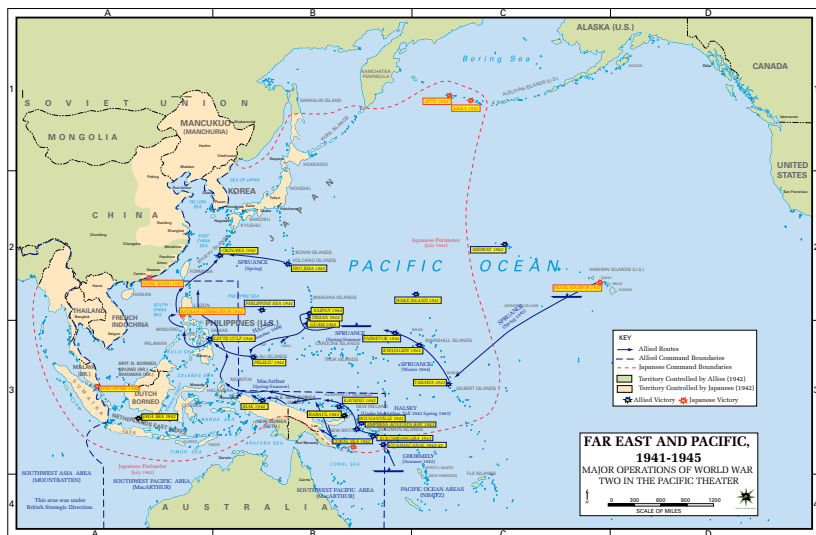
Legacies of the Past

The recent uptick in America's recognition of Asia's importance to our national well-being is just the latest iteration of this assessment along a time line going back to the earliest days of our country as a maritime trading nation. It is worth remembering that to secure its enduring interests in the Pacific, the United States has maintained a permanent military presence in Asia for over 180 years—almost two centuries. This permanent military presence can be traced back to 1835 when the Navy

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first established an East India Squadron, thus creating a naval force dedicated to Asia even before the United States had a Pacific coast.¹

By the early twentieth century, the Army had established a permanent ground force presence in the Pacific, predominantly in the Philippines and Hawaii, but also with lone regiments stationed in places long forgotten by many. For example, the 15th Infantry Regiment (“Can Do”) was stationed in Tianjin, China—formerly Tientsin—from 1912 to 1938, and its interwar alumni included the likes of George C. Marshall, Joseph W. Stilwell, Mathew B. Ridgway, Walton H. Walker, Albert C. Wedemeyer, and many others of note.² The Army presence in the region only became more extensive after the Second World War.



The Pacific theater during the Second World War (Map courtesy of the United States Military Academy Department of History [modified])

From an operational perspective over the course of its history in the Pacific, the Army has engaged in nearly every possible type of warfare across the spectrum of operations from “military operations other than war” to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism to total conventional warfare. It is the only theater where a nuclear device has been employed, and it was delivered by an Army asset. Until recently, the Army’s longest fight was in Asia, in Vietnam. All told, the Army has fought more major campaigns abroad in the Pacific than in any other foreign theater of

1. See Robert Erwin Johnson, *Far China Station: The U.S. Navy in Asian Waters, 1800–1898* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1979).

2. See Alfred E. Cornebise, *The United States 15th Infantry Regiment in China, 1912–1938* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2004).

operations, attested to by 62 campaign streamers on the Army flag—32 percent of 192 campaign streamers.³

So to countries that would describe the United States as being an external actor or a latecomer interfering in Asian security affairs or question US willingness to defend American interests and those of our allies and partners, one could simply say, please review the historical record.⁴ But more to the point, today's Army has a firm foundation of continuity of presence and a deep operational legacy to build upon as it looks to the challenges of the present and the needs of the future.

Challenges of the Present

The region that today is referred to by the Department of Defense as the Indo-Pacific is subject to significant strategic tensions, some long-standing, others new. The post–Second World War economic, political, and security order in the region is shifting or under pressure, and various countries—US allies and partners among them—are trying to determine how best to navigate changing strategic terrain in order to secure their interests in the most opportune way.

The most significant development in the region is heightening tensions between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Tensions have been percolating for the past few years, with the relationship characterized by an uneasy admixture of cooperation and competition. Today the competitive dimensions are at the forefront, reflected in the strategic documents of both the US and China defense establishments.⁵

Strategic tensions between the United States and China range across a wide swath of issues—economic, political, technological, and informational. Many of these tensions are playing out globally, not just regionally, and China is no longer just a concern for the United States Indo-Pacific Command. In recent years, the commanders of other combatant commands, such as US Southern Command and US Africa Command, have used their congressional testimonies to voice concerns about Chinese activities in their areas of responsibility. But the Indo-Pacific region is the geostrategic epicenter of where the military dimensions of US-China competition are playing out.

In the Indo-Pacific, long-standing US military dominance is intersecting with China's expanding operational reach and increasing military capabilities, juxtaposed against rising strategic distrust. Because the military forces of the two nations are in close proximity in the region, the risk of miscalculation requires deepening risk reduction and confidence-building measures between the two defense establishments,

3. See John B. Wilson, *Campaign Streamers of the United States Army* (Arlington, VA: Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Institute of Land Warfare, 2019).

4. See James C. McNaughton, *The Army in the Pacific: A Century of Engagement* (Washington, DC: US Army Center for Military History, 2012).

5. See James Mattis, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018); and *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: Information Office, 2019).

and the past few years of US-China military relations reflects such activity. The US Army contributes to these measures through several programs, including an annual disaster management exchange between ground forces rotating between China and the United States.

Fundamentally, the United States is determined to sustain its hitherto uncontested military dominance through forward military presence, advanced capabilities, and alliances and partnerships. China is developing military capabilities to challenge traditional US operational advantages while employing various means to attempt to weaken those military alliances and partnerships. Moreover both nations are using the other as the pacing threat for their respective military modernization programs.

Since late 2015, the Chinese armed forces have been undergoing the most ambitious reform and reorganization in the history of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁶ The objective of this unprecedented military reform effort is to improve the capabilities of the PLA as a joint warfighting force—one that can prevail in information-intensive joint operations in traditional and emerging high-tech domains, principally off China's littoral.

The reform enterprise is also meant to enhance the reach and expeditionary capabilities of the PLA in order to secure Beijing's growing global economic interests. While much analytic attention is rightly paid to the rise of the PLA Navy, it would be a mistake to discount the ongoing modernization of China's ground forces (PLA Army) and evolving PLA thinking about ground force roles and missions beyond China's shores, including in the joint fight off the Chinese littoral PLA strategists envision as their next most likely conflict.⁷

Against this backdrop of rising US-China strategic tensions, the Pacific remains home to several significant flash points that could escalate into crises or major conflicts, some involving nations with nuclear weapons. Of pressing importance to the US Army is the persistent potential for major ground combat operations on the Korean Peninsula. Next, Beijing continues to reaffirm its right to use force against Taiwan, although it professes a preference for a peaceful resolution of the issue. In the Philippines a counterinsurgency is still underway, with support from the United States.

Tensions persist between nuclear powers India and Pakistan. China and India, also nuclear powers, have yet to resolve their border issues, and these tensions flare-up from time to time with the most violent clash in years taking place between border forces in June 2020. Competing claims of sovereignty in the maritime domain increasingly bedevil the region—between China and Japan in the East China Sea, between China

6. See David M. Finkelstein, "Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform," in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, ed. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019).

7. See People's Liberation Army (PLA) Academy of Military Science Military Strategy Department, *Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, December 2013), 100–101.

and multiple claimants in the South China Sea, between Beijing and Seoul in the Yellow Sea, and between Japan and Russia in the Northern Territories, to name just a few.

In some of these scenarios, the United States may not be merely a concerned observer. For example, in 2018 the US administration publicly reaffirmed Article V of the US-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security covers the Senkaku (Diaoyudao) Islands in the East China Sea, and in 2019 Secretary of State Pompeo stated, “any armed attack on Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea will trigger mutual defense obligations under Article 4 of our Mutual Defense Treaty.”⁸ Also of note, for the past few years Moscow has been increasing its military presence and activities in the Indo-Pacific, and the China-Russia security relationship is taking on new dimensions. Planners must confront this daunting set of issues.

The context of US-China tensions includes second-order effects on alliances and partnerships. For example, quite a few of these countries are now caught in an uncomfortable position, simultaneously looking to China for their economic security and to the United States for their military security. Some of these nations are hedging, and none are keen at the prospect of choosing between the two as problems between Beijing and Washington play out. Consequently, there is a good deal of reassurance to be done on our part.

We constantly need to keep in mind these relationships are critical to a host of strategic-level objectives the United States shares with many countries in the region. For example, our allies and partners represent a network of like-minded nations that can undergird the regional order, set norms and rules, and provide a political-military bulwark against potential challenges to this order. Operationally, allies and partners will remain critical enablers of the access and sustainment our forces must have to overcome what Pacific planners refer to as “the tyranny of distance.” Moreover, training and exercising with allies and partners will build the operational capacity, interoperability, and habits of combined operations that become force multipliers in times of crisis.

Looking Ahead

Despite the persistent pressures put upon the Army to deal with contingencies and missions around the world, the past few years have witnessed a renewed focus on the Pacific. The elevation in 2013 of the commander of the US Army Pacific (USARPAC) to a four-star position was an important move with both operational and political-military implications, including a reorientation of USARPAC’s previous focus on support to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to its role as a

8. Michael R. Pompeo “Remarks with Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin, Jr. at a Press Availability,” (joint US-Philippine press conference, Manila, Philippines, March 1, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/remarks-with-philippine-foreign-secretary-teodoro-locsin-jr/>. See also “President Donald J. Trump’s Summit Meeting with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe,” White House (website), April 18, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-summit-meeting-prime-minister-shinzo-abe/>.

Theater Joint Force Land Component Command.⁹ Moreover, in 2019 USINDOPACOM certified USARPAC as a “4-Star Capable Joint Task Force Headquarters.”¹⁰ Establishing this four-star command position also made sense from an engagement perspective: the Indo-Pacific is a region in which ground force officers still dominate politically and bureaucratically in many countries, despite the maritime flavor of the area of responsibility.

From a doctrinal perspective, the inception and continuing evolution of the multi-domain operations concept is a significant development for the Army, and the Joint Force for that matter. Overseen by the Army Futures Command and being tested first in the Indo-Pacific, multi-domain operations auger well for the Army’s future ability to contribute to Joint Force operations inside an anti-access/area-denial environment—a key warfighting challenge in the Pacific.

The Army’s pilot multi-domain task force, hosted by I Corps, participated in the Navy-led combined exercise Rim of the Pacific in 2018. During the exercise the multi-domain task force engaged in land-based precision fires to sink a ship at sea successfully. Keeping with the combined nature of the Rim of the Pacific exercise, this multi-domain task force exercise included participation from Japan’s Ground Self Defense Force, a significant optic.¹¹ Moving forward, work on doctrine and other facets of Army modernization must keep a Pacific orientation at the forefront.

Another positive development in the engagement space is the promulgation of Pacific Pathways 2.0. In this iteration of the program, US Army units training with partner-nation forces in the region will stay deployed much longer than the few weeks previously the norm. Under the new scheme, some units will stay in the region for up to six months.¹² Doing so will enhance the habits of cooperation between the Army and its host-nation partners, deepen relationships, signal resolve, and provide deployed US soldiers enhanced grounding in the cultural, political, and operational realities of the region.

Going forward, these types of sustained engagement initiatives with allies and partners will be critical. It is clear the Army and other Joint Force engagers need to work very hard to reassure US allies and partners

9. See Vincent K. Brooks and Charlie H. Kim, “US Army Pacific Makes Major Moves to Face Regional Challenges,” AUSA, March 17, 2014, <https://www.ousa.org/articles/us-army-pacific-makes-major-moves-face-regional-challenges>.

10. LTC C. J. Phillips, email message to author, February 18, 2020.

11. See Todd South, “Army to Build at least Two Multi Domain Task Forces,” *Army Times*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/08/07/army-to-build-at-least-two-new-multi-domain-task-forces/>; Devon L. Suits, “What Soldiers Need to Know About Multi-domain Ops, Modernization,” US Army, (website) April 22, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/220663/what_soldiers_need_to_know_about_multi_domain_ops_modernization; and Rachael Jeffcoat, “Army Conducts 1st RIMPAC Joint Live-Fire Sinking Exercise as Multi-Domain Task Force,” US Army, (website) July 23, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/208852/army_conducts_1st_rimpac_joint_live_fire_sinking_exercise_as_multi_domain_task_force.

12. Sean Kimmons, “Pacific Pathways 2.0 to Bolster Presence in the Theater,” US Army, (website) June 7, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/222783/pacific_pathways_20_to_bolster_presence_in_the_theater.

of our intentions, capabilities, and political will. We need to continue to prove we are good partners, that we understand what others need to get out of our defense relationships, and that we do not take allies and partners for granted. This is especially the case under the shadow of a rising China and, frankly, in response to concerns by some countries in the region about certain US policies and rhetoric.

Cultivating human talent has always been a strong suit for the Army. As part of its Pacific orientation, the Army must continue to invest in and expand the pool of human talent and expertise demanded by this culturally, politically, geographically, and operationally diverse region. The US Army Foreign Area Officer program, Functional Area 48 is the envy of the other services. As is the case with demand for Army strategists (Functional Area 59), combatant commanders, the Joint Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and others focused on the Pacific want their share of these individuals. Do we have the right mix of Indo-Pacific foreign area officers? Is the pipeline healthy? Are we pushing them down to operational units focused on the region in addition to the Joint billets they fill? How can the Reserves, Army National Guard, and Army civilians contribute to the talent pool Army commanders operating in the region will demand?

Perhaps the greatest challenges moving forward will be those beyond the control of the Army, namely fiscal constraints and real-world contingencies. Despite the fact DoD leaders continue to declare the Indo-Pacific the priority theater, Pacific forces will continue to compete for attention and resources. Reality dictates the theater will likely never get all the focus, forces, and resources desired. Consequently, the Army's Pacific orientation will need to be a long game—adjusting doctrinal concepts, enhancing operational capabilities, deepening partnerships, cultivating human talent, and preparing the force to operate in the region even as it operates globally. We have done this before; there is no reason to believe we will not be able to do it again.

