

AN ARMY TRANSFORMED: USINDOPACOM HYPERCOMPETITION AND US ARMY THEATER DESIGN

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This study emerged in an environment marked by increased senior- and working-level anxiety about the American military position in the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) area of responsibility (AOR), as well as a third attempt in two decades to refocus American defense and security strategy on the USINDOPACOM theater. Specifically, the study was initiated by then-Secretary of the Army (SECARMY) Mark Esper and questions he asked of US Army War College (USAWC) leadership and scholars in 2018. Ultimately, USAWC researchers asked and answered a single research question to get at Secretary Esper's concerns: For 2028 and beyond, what is the foundational US Army theater design in the USINDOPACOM AOR that will *best support* the unclassified *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy* (NDS) objectives across the anticipated range of military demands?

Researchers at the USAWC suggest theater design has five elements: *strategy and operational concepts; forces and capabilities; footprint and presence; authorities, permissions, and agreements; and mission command arrangements*. The study also proceeded from the idea that Army theater design is by definition only one component of a broader Joint Force approach to USINDOPACOM's military demands. Over the course of a year-long study effort, the USAWC team responsible for this report arrived at multiple high-impact insights, findings, and recommendations certain to influence how Department of Defense

(DoD), Joint Force, and Army leaders approach USINDOPACOM across all five elements of theater design.

HYPERCOMPETITION, A PACING THREAT, AND A PRIORITY THEATER

This work is a natural next step in an ongoing four-year campaign of study by USAWC scholars on the USINDOPACOM theater. Recent USAWC research on the character of contemporary competition and conflict points to a pair of consistent insights. First, America's once-unassailable military competitive advantage has eroded. Second, this erosion is the product of hubris, distraction, miscalculation, and deliberate rival great-power resistance.

Researchers at the USAWC characterize current strategic circumstances as a high-risk, hypercompetitive environment. They adapted "hypercompetition" – a term first coined in a business context by Dartmouth College's Richard D'Aveni – to contemporary military rivalry. In the context of military rivalry, this and previous USAWC work characterizes hypercompetition as the persistent struggle for transient but exploitable advantage in the face of great-power rivals motivated to achieve the same at US expense.

This work and previous work also suggest the hypercompetitive great-power challenge is particularly acute in the United States' priority

theater: USINDOPACOM. In that theater, the United States faces a pacing, revisionist, near-peer challenge in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC increasingly presents US decision makers with compound challenges—across Joint domains, contested spaces, and instruments of national power—that in sum offer a credible and unfavorable alternative to American Indo-Pacific leadership. The security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region are further complicated by a legacy Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) threat and a hypercompetitive Russian spoiler.

LOST INITIATIVE AND AN IMPERATIVE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

As a foundational insight, this study suggests the People's Republic of China retains the strategic initiative in the USINDOPACOM AOR. Absent effective US action, the PRC is likely to retain and exploit that initiative to decisive effect, severely limiting US freedom of action. The following are significant foundational concerns.

The People's Republic of China is actively transforming its military forces with an eye toward defeating the United States in the event of armed hostilities. The PRC is also creatively employing its military and paramilitary assets to outmaneuver the United States and partners strategically in meaningful gray-zone approaches. The PRC enjoys strategic depth and increasingly operates on internal or heavily protected lines of communication while demonstrating the ability to threaten American interests with a variety of multi-domain capabilities and forces.

Finally, through skillful all-of-government, military, paramilitary, and commercial maneuver, the People's Republic of China is increasingly expanding its broad political-military reach and influence across the Indo-Pacific well beyond the South and East China Seas and western Pacific and deep into the Pacific Islands and Indian Ocean. In the end, the PRC's Go-game approach of crowding out or boxing in the United States and partners persistently generates new strategic and operational dilemmas for the DoD, Joint Force, Army, and partner senior leaders and strategists.

This study concludes that, on the current path and as the decade proceeds, the People's Republic of China will have more military options complementing its hypercompetitive gray-zone approaches, whereas the United States will have fewer. Further—given the same considerations—all US regional partners and interests will be more vulnerable to Chinese coercion and/or overt PRC military aggression.

Researchers at the USAWC suggest that US failure or defeat is not inevitable under these circumstances, but it is possible. Thus, it flags for senior Joint Force and Army leadership an urgent change imperative in the Indo-Pacific region. Lost strategic initiative and the erosion of once-unassailable military advantage already present significant hazards to US regional and global interests. This trend will continue without decisive US action. Reversing this trend is well within reach, but doing so depends almost entirely on DoD, Joint Force, and Army senior leadership making bold transformational choices over the next decade.

PRINCIPAL FINDING: THE JOINT FORCE IS OUT OF POSITION FOR HYPERCOMPETITION

Because the SECARMY chartered this work, the study's detailed findings and recommendations focus predominantly on the US Army. But the Army exists in a broader, Joint, interagency, and geostrategic context. The Indo-Pacific region presents unique strategic and operational challenges based on rivalry and threat, geography, legacy military posture, and alliance relationships. Combined, these factors increasingly demand fundamental transformational change in the way the Joint Force and the Army organize, operate, and employ capabilities in the theater. In the end, a hypercompetitive rival *necessitates* Joint Force and Army *transformation* to a hypercompetitive theater design.

Toward this end, this study identified a single, principal finding: *Physically, conceptually, and in terms of deployed and anticipated capabilities*, the US Joint Force (including the Army) is out of position for hypercompetition with an innovative, aggressive, and transforming PRC. Consistent with the USAWC team's commitment to identify the most Joint Force-relevant Army solutions, the principal finding is first a judgment on the wider Joint context within which the Army operates.

Conceptually, the USAWC team finds no unifying, coherent, hypercompetitive, Joint theater design in force. US military components in the Indo-Pacific region are not yet on a Joint path that transfers greater risk to PRC decision makers while lowering risks for the United States and its regional partners. Physically, US regional posture is concentrated in northeast Asia, predicated on discredited advantage, and positioned for the efficient prosecution of a second Korean War. This posture is not necessarily conducive to effective hypercompetition with an increasingly capable and transforming PRC. Finally, regarding deployed and anticipated capabilities, current and anticipated in-theater Army capabilities are increasingly focused on the delivery of lethal and nonlethal multi-domain

effects and large-scale ground combat operations. Future operational needs will benefit from short-term Army changes biased toward *enabling* the distributed Joint theater first.

PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATION: THE ARMY NEEDS TO ADOPT FOUR TRANSFORMATIONAL ROLES

Based on the 2019–20 research and several previous USAWC study efforts, this work concludes that the Joint Force and a supporting US Army will need more disruptive, agile, and resilient theater designs to be effective in USINDOPACOM hypercompetition. The contours of a transformed Joint design are assumed in this report. Researchers at the USAWC are more specific with respect to the Army. Thus, this study recommends that the Army adopt and adapt to four transformational roles in the USINDOPACOM AOR: the Army as *the grid*, the Army as *the enabler*, the Army as *the multi-domain warfighter*, and the Army as *the capability and capacity generator*.

The grid sees the Army establish a distributed, resilient, and mutually reinforcing theater network of expeditionary base clusters, hubs, and nodes as the foundation for regional Joint operations. The core purpose of the grid is expanding the competitive space; creating options for Joint Force commanders; and, ultimately, enabling effective Joint, multi-domain maneuver.

The enabler calls for Joint-focused Army transformation specific to USINDOPACOM in the areas of mission command, sustainment, protection, movement, and intelligence (and information) to animate the grid. This transformation would require persistent, small-unit, multifunctional Army presence prepared to light up clusters, hubs, and nodes and accept follow-on forces to meet Joint operational demands. Army forces would need to organize tasks based on mission into composite, multifunctional formations that operate in a distributed fashion well below brigade level, and often in ways that challenge even the most liberal interpretations of mission command.

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

Finally, 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 multi-domain capability. Army forces—within a unified, Joint concept for multi-domain competition and conflict—can be a catalyst for fielding a combined, land-based, multi-domain warfighting network that draws on the unique strengths and competencies of US partners.

UNACCEPTABLE RISK ABSENT TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Absent transformational change in Joint and service theater design, US leadership will see the perceived risks associated with defending partners and interests in the Indo-Pacific region rise dramatically, while the People’s Republic of China leadership will perceive a parallel reduction in its own risk. A new, transformative, Joint and service theater design of the type suggested in this report should focus on regaining the strategic initiative, expanding the competitive space, and restoring and maintaining a more favorable military balance in the USINDOPACOM AOR. Both action and inaction present hazards, but this study believes the latter is likely to result in unacceptably high risk to US objectives.

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