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THE U.S. ARMY IN THE PACIFIC IN THE 1990s

by

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Over the years, the United States has focused its attention on Europe and European affairs for many reasons, including strong economic and cultural ties. When not focused on Europe, Washington has been preoccupied with Middle East problems which tend to manifest themselves around Israeli/Arab disputes. Worldwide, and particularly U.S., dependence on Middle East oil has complicated diplomacy in this part of the world.

In August 1990, Iraqi military forces occupied Kuwait, an act which sparked Operation Desert Shield/Storm. In support of the operation, which was conducted under United Nations sponsorship and led by the United States, more than 500,000 U.S. and coalition forces deployed to the crisis area. In a well-coordinated, combined air, sea and ground campaign, Iraqi forces were defeated and forced to withdraw from Kuwait.

While not as spectacular, significant events have also been taking place in the Asia/Pacific area of the world. Reactions in the Pacific to happenings in Europe, the Soviet Union and the Middle East clearly demonstrate the international flavor and involvement of the Pacific/Asia countries with the rest of the world. The fall of communism in Europe and the Soviet Union has caused the communist states of North Korea, Vietnam and China to tighten internal political control and, at the same time, begin to look more toward each other for support. These developments are important to U.S. interests in this region of the world. To ignore them would be sheer folly.

The countries of the Pacific western rim have enjoyed continued economic development. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong have shown the rest of the world how to operate the capitalist/market place economic system. These five countries will soon be joined by Malaysia and Thailand as new industrialized countries.

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United States trade with Pacific/Asia countries has exceeded trade with Europe since the early 1980s (by \$21 billion in 1989). U.S.-manufactured exports to Japan (\$27 billion in 1989) were higher than U.S. exports to Germany and France combined. In 1990, the total GNP of Pacific/Asia countries exceeded the GNP of the European countries. While trade issues, especially between the U.S. and Japan as well as South Korea, are numerous and sometimes become prickly problems, the size of our trade effort with our Pacific friends continues to grow. U.S. economist Bernard Golden, a professor at the University of New Hampshire, argues that in every respect — market size, market growth, technology content of exports and consumption of U.S. goods — Asia is the best bet for U.S. exporters.

Our security situation in the Pacific has always been more complex and multipolar than in Europe. Five of our seven worldwide defense treaties are with countries in the Pacific/Asia area. U.S. military presence in Asia — meaning military personnel on the ground — has been a stabilizing factor, and countries in that part of the world want U.S. forces to remain. U.S. military presence in the Pacific provides our diplomats with significant leverage as they deal with major political issues.

Although the Pacific/Asia area has been generally stable, there are specific areas of tension and conflict. Fighting continues in Afghanistan and Cambodia, communal strife grows in India and border disputes between India and Pakistan threaten to escalate. The Korean peninsula is a good example of an area containing large numbers of military forces which could quickly erupt into a hot war. Though the United States military presence on the ground over the last 40 years-plus has guaranteed the peace, North Korea is still a major military threat to Seoul.

Recent events in Moscow and Soviet military force reductions in the Pacific/Asia region may lead to a more modest Soviet military threat. However, the Soviets are modernizing their remaining Far East forces; the inability at this time to chart how the Soviet Union will evolve underscores the need for U.S. military forces to remain deployed in the Pacific/Asia region.

At a recent National Defense University workshop on Asia-Pacific Strategy Development, it was concluded that "U.S. forward deployed military forces have generally been regarded as force for stability and the U.S. remains the least disliked major power in the region. Other major regional powers, especially Japan, China, India and perhaps even an eventually resurgent Soviet Union, could fill the void by too precipitous or deep cut in U.S. force presence."

Given the aforementioned, it seems reasonable that the United States should maintain a military presence in the Pacific and on the western Pacific rim. However, some wonder if a U.S. Army presence is necessary. It is now popular to speak about the Pacific/Asia area as a maritime and airpower theater. What this means is difficult to establish. It is true that there are, indeed, vast amounts of water and air in the theater, but there is also a lot of land. It is interesting to note that:

- Seven of the 10 largest armies in the world are in Pacific/Asia.
- Since 1900, the U.S. has been involved on the ground in five major conflicts in Pacific/Asia and party to many more armed activities on the ground, such as Afghanistan and Cambodia.
- In many countries in the Pacific/Asia area, the army is the major armed force and has the greatest influence in the government.

— The Second World War began and ended for the United States in the Pacific/Asia area, and the U.S. Army has deployed sizable forces in the area for over 45 years.

So, although the region is advertised as a maritime/airpower theater, armies have played and will continue to play a significant role there. Today, for example, the U.S. Army has about 50,000 soldiers in the Pacific/Asia region. There are about 30,000, including the 2d Infantry Division, in Korea; the remainder of the troops are split between Hawaii (25th Division) and Alaska (6th Division).

Future Army structure in the area is being shaped by two elements. The first is a Secretary of Defense report to Congress entitled *The U.S. Report on Future Asia Defense* (Spring 1990). This comprehensive report, also known as the Nunn/Warner Report, outlines force reductions in three phases extending to the next century. Phase I (already in the implementation stage) reduces 15,000 troops in the Pacific, including 5,000 soldiers in Korea. Phases II and III actions are left vague. The report states that any further reductions *depend upon* stability in the region — read the Korean peninsula. This is a very important condition. Granted, there have been significant and high level discussions between North and South Korea. However, at this point in time the North Korean military threat to the South is real and has not diminished. While there have been improvements in South Korea's military capabilities, U.S. forces, including the combat elements of the U.S. Army, are necessary to deter North Korean aggression and, if deterrence fails, defeat aggression by North Korea.

The second element driving the Army's future role in the Pacific is the declining U.S. defense budget. The Department of the Army has forecast that by 1995 two Army divisions will remain in the Pacific — the 2d Division in some form in Korea and a light division in Hawaii. The challenge is to maintain this position in the face of mounting congressional pressure to further reduce both the defense budget and the number of U.S. forces stationed overseas. It is easily demonstrated that it is much cheaper to station forces in Japan and Korea than in the United States. What now seems important to Congress is not the cost, but who receives the direct benefit of having Army forces stationed in their areas. Some in Congress want only U.S. citizens to receive these benefits, regardless of national security interests or realities.

The Army must remain in the Pacific area. They should remain in Korea even if the North Korean threat does actually dissipate or there is unification. The Army in Korea should be configured not only to add stability on the peninsula, but also to be available as a regional contingency force. The Philippine government has decided not to renew U.S. treaty rights in that country; the United States will have three years to vacate the strategically-located Subic Bay naval complex. (The Mount Pinatubo volcano has already rendered moot the question of U.S. presence at Clark Air Base). An argument can be made that the Marines will be asked to leave Okinawa. Okinawans dislike the military and object to the use of precious land for military purposes. Further, their benefactors in Tokyo may tire of underwriting Marine Corps presence. Korea by default could end up as our only bastion for ground forces on the western Pacific rim. The Army in the Pacific requires a modest portion of the Army's resources and provides a high return on the investment. Finally, the U.S. Army on the ground and forward deployed demonstrates U.S. resolve to protect its national interests and support its allies and friends in the region.

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