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# Implementing the Strategy to Deter China Hinges on Landpower

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## Introduction

The 2022 *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* “directs the Department [of Defense] to act urgently to sustain and strengthen U.S. deterrence, with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge for the Department.”<sup>1</sup> However, slashes to Army endstrength, topline additions favoring other services and a flattening budget for the nation’s land force suggest that the importance of landpower in the Indo-Pacific remains undervalued and misunderstood. Unlike in Europe or in the Middle East, communicating the value of the Army in the Indo-Pacific—the priority theater—faces headwinds from skeptical majorities, both from inside and outside of DoD, who are unaware of the role that land forces perform in a theater long considered, according to one prominent historian, “a special preserve of the navy.”<sup>2</sup> However, joint and combined military operations in the Indo-Pacific, including large-scale protracted conflicts across air, land and sea, have in fact relied on the Army’s foundational capabilities for well over a century.

Without question, deterring the PRC requires more advanced naval and air assets than we currently have, plus a modernized nuclear arsenal and cutting-edge space and cyber capabilities. But implementing the 2022 *NDS*, or operationalizing its strategy, fundamentally depends on methods that, first, fuse the efforts of the U.S. military services, which all characteristically shy away from jointness; and, second, bind the loose mix of allies and partners in the region, all of whom demonstrate varying levels of commitment. Combatant commanders provide the operational direction and command and control (C2), but they depend on the services (represented by service component commands like U.S. Army Pacific) to practically integrate their means through ways that achieve unity of effort. The Army has performed and continues to perform this vital role as a practical integrator to achieve unity of effort among joint and multinational forces, which underscores how implementing the *NDS* in the Indo-Pacific—as unlikely as it may sound—hinges on landpower.

## Overcoming Obstacles

Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth has labeled the Army as the “linchpin service” and the “backbone of joint operations” to emphasize the Army’s various combat and support roles in the region.<sup>3</sup> But unlike other theaters, the Army faces two persistent challenges when communicating its universal value in the Indo-Pacific as a practical integrator of joint and multilateral assets and efforts to deter the PRC.

First, solutions to military problems in the region tend to discount the role of landpower by predominantly focusing on naval and air capabilities.<sup>4</sup> However, the Indo-Pacific area of

More advanced military capabilities, particularly in the air and maritime domains, are essential to deterring the People’s Republic of China, but implementing or operationalizing the *National Defense Strategy* in the Indo-Pacific fundamentally requires landpower to practically integrate joint and combined military operations.

U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 17th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division and the 2nd Infantry Division Combat Aviation Brigade conduct an air insertion of three M777 Howitzers during Exercise Warrior Shield at Rodriguez Live Fire Complex, South Korea, 19 March 2023. Warrior Shield is a combined training event with the Republic of Korea Army, highlighting the combined aspects of military operations (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sergeant Effie Mahugh).



responsibility is the biggest and most complex operating environment on Earth, including not only the world’s largest maritime expanse but also the bulk of the Asian continent, the Australian continent and 300,000 square miles of Pacific Island landmasses.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the world’s largest armies are found in Asia, including the Indian Army, the People’s Liberation Army Army (PLAA) and the Korean People’s Army Ground Force.

Building more ships and planes is an important aspect of strengthening deterrence, but the 2022 *NDS* implies that implementing a unified approach to deter the PRC requires more than advanced hardware. Rather, accomplishing the objectives set out in the *NDS* relies primarily on methods that synchronize, coordinate and integrate the various operations, activities and investments—driven by the joint force commander’s vision—to achieve unity of effort. Unity of effort produces the synergy required to materialize that vision by: interweaving the strengths of all available means; boosting interoperability among joint and coalition (or combined) forces; and achieving positional advantage for joint forces operating in all domains through forward posture. Reinforcing jointness, therefore, is essential to deterrence.

Ironically, Camp H.M. Smith, headquarters to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command—the senior joint headquarters in the region—is named after Lieutenant General “Howlin’ Mad” Smith, a Marine whom both historians and his contemporaries labeled as one of the most polarizing figures of the Pacific War. Sharon Tosi Lacey explains in *Pacific Blitzkrieg* that, despite praise for Smith as the “father of amphibious warfare,” his antipathy toward the Army nearly derailed Admiral Nimitz’s Central Pacific Campaign and later fractured Army and Marine Corps relations well into Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> To be fair, the Army had its share of parochial figures, including Lieutenant General Robert Richardson, Nimitz’s commander of Army forces, whom John McManus describes as Smith’s “partisan alter ego in the Army.”<sup>7</sup> Service parochialism is hardly new, and its accompanying “great service competition” is far less extreme today, but narrow service biases, whenever present and to whatever degree, indisputably undermine unity of effort.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore important to be cognizant of biases; everyone has them. Following that, it is even more important to overcome service biases by prioritizing jointness above parochial interests.

The Pacific War proved that military operations over the region’s extreme distances and exacting terrain are inherently interwoven among all services, across all domains and in each warfighting area. “In fact, the overall success of the Central Pacific Campaign,” Lacey writes, “rested on army and marine units being nearly interchangeable in combat.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, as the contemporary joint force collectively works to overcome these perennial obstacles, it is important to note that, moreso than any other theater, campaigning in the Indo-Pacific requires the highest levels of inter-service cooperation and joint integration. The same is true for warfighting concepts, but independent service concepts sometimes drift from the

realities of inter-service support requirements. For example, Claire Chennault, leader of the “Flying Tigers,” framed airpower as an insulated means to victory, but he did so without regard to the practicalities for land forces to seize, secure and supply airfields over long distances and in contested areas.<sup>10</sup>

Second, pivoting the Army toward Asia and the Pacific has previously been a challenge for DoD. Russell Weigley states in *The American Way of War*, for example, that well after Pearl Harbor, “the Navy . . . continually urged upon the more Europe-minded Army the necessity to halt Japan in the Pacific.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite its proclivities to focus on Europe, the Army has in fact earned more campaign streamers on Asia-Pacific battlefields than in all other wars, contingencies and expeditionary operations outside the North American continent combined.<sup>12</sup> The Army possesses a storied history in the region, but its past role as the practical integrator of joint and combined military operations and activities is only now coming back into focus.

John McManus explains in *Fire and Fortitude*, his first book in a landmark trilogy that chronicles the Army during the Pacific War, that Soldiers there not only comprised the third largest force ever fielded in U.S. history, but also “did the vast majority of the planning, the supplying, the transporting, the engineering, the fighting, and the dying.”<sup>13</sup> McManus notes these facts not to diminish the sacrifices and achievements of the other services in the region, but rather to underscore how the Army’s invaluable contributions to winning the most horrific war in human history—in the largest theater of that war—are neither well understood nor renowned. Neither the Navy, the Air Force (Army Air Corps at the time), the Marine Corps, nor the Army alone produced victory. Credit belongs to the collective efforts of all services, working together with allies and indigenous populations, to form one of the most powerful and effective combined and joint military forces in history. Most important, they were led by those who understood that unity of effort among all of these components was fundamental to winning.

The Army’s legacy of the Pacific War ultimately demonstrates how landpower interwove and enabled a U.S.-led combined and joint coalition to fight a large-scale protracted conflict against a peer adversary, over extended distances, from distributed locations and across all domains—including some of the roughest and most exacting terrain on earth. The same role for landpower applies today, but cognitive dissonance continues to cloud the link between the Army’s historic achievements and how they apply to the contemporary security situation regarding the PRC. Overcoming this dissonance is critical because, contrary to World War II, national strategic guidance now prioritizes the Indo-Pacific over Europe.<sup>14</sup>

Russia remains an “acute threat” while it continues to prosecute an unjust war against Ukraine, but, according to the *NDS*, the PRC is far more threatening to U.S. national interests than Russia.<sup>15</sup> This is first due to the fact that the geostrategic weight of the world has shifted to Asia—including the vast share of global wealth, most leading economies and a growing majority of the world’s population. Secondly, it is because the PRC’s rapidly expanding military instrument of national power, paired with a demonstrated aggressiveness to employ that capability to pursue political outcomes, is and will likely remain unmatched through mid-century.

### “Linchpin Service”

Other branches of the U.S. military explain how they deter the PRC by showcasing their capabilities; this is because the need for platforms like a *Virginia* class attack submarine or

The Army has long provided foundational capabilities that underpin unity of effort among all military services—which is a cornerstone of conventional deterrence—but it faces persistent challenges when describing its value in the Indo-Pacific because the region is considered predominantly an air and maritime theater.

an F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is rather straightforward. The Army, however, faces challenges in following a similar approach, given a well-established and widely held view inside and outside of DoD of the Indo-Pacific as “a predominantly air and maritime theater.”<sup>16</sup> For example, the Navy and the Air Force’s urgent calls for more ships and planes require minimal justification, given the increasing threat to the global commons from the PRC’s rapidly expanding air force and fleet, which is now numerically the largest navy in the world.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, explaining the need for a rapidly deployable infantry division headquarters from Alaska or an advanced capability such as Tactical Intelligence Targeting Access Node (TITAN) is not as immediately intuitive; it is markedly more complicated to explain Army requirements and contributions in a theater named after two oceans.

Meanwhile, the prestigious reputation of the Marine Corps in the Indo-Pacific has been cemented into popular memory by events like the defense of Wake Island and the flag raising on Iwo Jima. This legacy, as valiant and hard-earned as it is, unfortunately amplifies a misconception that landpower in the Indo-Pacific is solely comprised of expeditionary land-based Marine forces. Commandant of the Marine Corps General David Berger writes, “Marines acting as stand-in forces will be positioned forward, shoulder-to-shoulder with our allies and partners, leveraging all-domain tools as the eyes and ears of the fleet and joint force.”<sup>18</sup> To be fair, Soldiers operate alongside Marines in forward areas, including long-standing conventional footprints comprised of tens of thousands of Soldiers in Korea and Japan. Whereas Marines predominantly support fleet operations, Soldiers provide the joint force with the bulk of foundational capabilities across all warfighting areas, such as maneuver, fires, C2, intelligence, protection and sustainment, all to deter adversary aggression and reinforce pivotal alliances in East Asia and the Western Pacific.

One aspect that distinguishes the Army and the Marine Corps’ roles and contributions in the Indo-Pacific is the Army’s unique off-axis approaches, such as those conducted by Oceania Engagement Teams, who routinely support bilateral civil-military projects in the littorals. Another example is the Security Force Assistance Brigade that persistently operates in over a dozen countries in Asia and throughout the Western Pacific, building allied and partner military capacity and providing security force assistance.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers partners with Southeast Asian countries to improve water flow along the Mekong River, the sub-region’s arterial waterway. The point is that the Army is persistently operating in various capacities, at various scales, throughout the entire Indo-Pacific, by leveraging the span and depth of its foundational capabilities to achieve outcomes ranging from conventional deterrence to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

Moreover, somewhat similar land-based capabilities are often viewed interchangeably, such as the Marine Littoral Regiment (MLR) and the Army’s Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF). The MLR “is designed as a naval formation, including capabilities to enable maneuver and operations in the maritime domain.”<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the MDTF is “inherently joint” and offers a much greater payload of assets, enabling operations across *all* domains “that synchronize long-range precision effects—such as electronic warfare, space, cyber and information—with long-range precision fires.”<sup>21</sup> The MLR supports the fleet while the MDTF supports the joint force. They are complementary, but not the same—this is an important distinction.

Despite differences between the Army and the Marine Corps, the principle of jointness among land forces—and among all services, for that matter—remains paramount because of natural inter-service dependencies. For example, Soldiers often deliver common user logistics to Marines or, at times, Marines perform reconnaissance in support of Army forces. However, the Marine Corps is not the Army, nor does the Army perform many of the specialized missions of the Marine Corps. Each service performs valuable roles, but it is important to note that all services look to the Army to provide the bulk of inter-service support—a

*A U.S. Army Soldier assigned to U.S. Army Landing Craft Utility Calaboza guides a Marine Corps Joint Light Tactical Vehicle into position during exercise Winter Workhorse 23 at Naha Military Port, Okinawa, Japan, 4 December 2022. Winter Workhorse is an annual exercise that provides training in carrying out mission-essential tasks in forward-deployed, austere environments (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Corporal Madison Santamaria).*



fact that is often overlooked when considering the preponderance of water covering the region's map. Yet the inter-dependencies illuminate the reality that only the Army can provide land combat and support forces at the required scale and with the depth of capabilities to allow a joint and combined coalition to deter or, if required, to defeat a peer adversary like the PRC, especially in a protracted conflict.

### **The Practical Integrator**

The methods, or the ways, that landpower drives *NDS* implementation on behalf of the combatant commander create a useful framework for communicating the Army's underlying value in the Indo-Pacific. Three of the Army's signature initiatives in the region best illustrate how landpower underpins efforts to implement the strategy's three pillars of "integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages."<sup>22</sup>

The first initiative is the **Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC)**, the Army's newest regional combat training center, which has campuses in Hawaii and Alaska and has an exportable package that can be deployed to other host nations, such as Indonesia or Australia.<sup>23</sup> Now in its third year, JPMRC involves complex, high-end collective training in live, virtual and constructive environments in both tropical and arctic climates. Month-long training rotations offer ideal laboratories not only for integrating joint and multinational training at scale, but also for experimenting and testing new technologies with real units in an active theater of operations. JPMRC is likewise materializing the combatant commander's longstanding initiative—the Pacific Multinational Training and Experimentation Capability—that links training ranges across the Western Pacific, from South Korea to Australia.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, JPMRC offers rare but invaluable opportunities to integrate joint concepts like Joint All Domain Command and Control and service concepts like the Navy's Distributed Maritime Operations and the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Advanced Basing Operations. For instance, the Air Force rehearsed its Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concept for the first time during a JPMRC rotation, which reinforced basic principles of air-ground integration—creating the necessary fusion between ACE and the Army's Multi-Domain Operations. This was groundbreaking in many ways: analogous to eight decades ago, expeditionary air operations in the Indo-Pacific inherently rely on Army capabilities, like intra-theater logistics, to supply fuel, ammunition and land-based air and missile defense to protect airfields and aircraft.

Military forces from all branches gain interoperability at JPMRC by working alongside regional allies and partners while experiencing realistic scenarios in the conditions where

they are most likely to operate. The November 2022 rotation in Hawaii paired a brigade combat team and a full lineup of Army enablers, including an MDTF and Army watercraft, in a littoral combat scenario. The rotation also included Navy and Coast Guard surface vessels, Air Force fifth-generation fighters and medium- and heavy-lift aircraft, an MLR, special forces teams and three multinational infantry companies (from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines).<sup>25</sup> This is *integrating* deterrence.

The Army's second signature effort in the Indo-Pacific is **Operation Pathways** (formerly Pacific Pathways), which links both the Army and the joint force's well-established (but previously independent) bilateral and multilateral exercises. Outside concentrations of permanent basing in Northeast Asia, Operation Pathways is the predominant way that the joint force strengthens interoperability with allies and partners, builds joint readiness and denies key terrain to the PRC by projecting combat-credible forces west of the International Date Line—in places like the Philippines, India, Japan, Thailand and Australia—for extended periods of time. Threading these connections creates the unity of effort that is necessary to operationalize and achieve the joint force commander's broader mission and purpose and thus implement the central objectives of *NDS*.

Army exercises within Operation Pathways create opportunities to position high payloads of combined and joint forces in strategic locations at critical times. For example, Garuda Shield was previously an Army bilateral exercise with the Indonesian Army, which occurred annually near the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits—strategic maritime chokepoints. In August 2022, joint leaders launched “Super Garuda Shield” by incorporating all of the services, upward of 4,000 troops, with participation by 14 nations.<sup>26</sup> This display of unity and collective commitment starkly contrasted with the PRC's aggressive actions following House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, the timing of which straddled the exercise.

Operation Pathways affords rehearsals at every echelon—strategic, operational and tactical—by deploying joint forces at scale and distance, by operating forward with operational headquarters and enablers across all warfighting areas and by training tactical formations across all domains: air, land, sea, space and cyber. This is *campaigning*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Army is building **joint interior lines** in Asia and the Western Pacific that provide the U.S. military with the positional *advantage* to project and mass combat power along multiple lines of approach from distributed locations. Interior lines provide the joint force with the operational endurance and reach necessary to conduct “operational pulses” that counter the PRC's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) arsenal—an arsenal, notably, that is primarily designed to defeat air and maritime forces and is secondarily designed to degrade space and cyber.<sup>27</sup> The PRC's A2/AD arsenal is not, however, designed to find, fix or finish distributed, networked, meshed, reloadable, lethal or non-lethal ground forces. Consequently, the Army presents new dilemmas that complicate the PRC's decision calculus and thereby deny a *fait accompli*.

Soldiers are gaining footholds in forward areas where the United States requires enduring presence but where the military lacks permanent basing. For example, the Army's longstanding engagement in the Philippines has done much to set conditions for DoD to expand sites covered by the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. Army forces will further solidify the joint force's ability to operate alongside Filipino military counterparts from the new and existing strategic locations by developing infrastructure, expanding forward stocks and improving accessibility. Similar opportunities exist under the AUKUS

Three signature Army efforts in the Indo-Pacific—the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center, Operation Pathways and joint interior lines—best illustrate how the Army is allowing DoD to implement the three pillars of the 2022 *National Defense Strategy*: integrated deterrence, campaigning and actions that build enduring advantage.

(Australia, United Kingdom and United States) agreement in Australia, a strategically vital location that was the central sustainment hub for large-scale joint and coalition military operations during the Pacific War.<sup>28</sup>

The security environment in the Indo-Pacific is transforming daily. The speed of military operations has accelerated, and warfare has entered new domains, highlighting the dawn of new transformative technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning (AI/ML). The geography—and the geometry of the geography—however, has not changed. Thus, the physics to project military power through C2, protection, collection and sustainment are principally the same.

Interior lines are fundamental to warfighting. They strengthen the joint force’s ability to campaign, to respond in crisis and, if necessary, to prosecute combat operations that deny the PRC’s objectives by: expanding forward sustainment stocks; constructing military facilities; hardening existing infrastructure; opening ports and airfields; layering in terrestrial collection sites; growing logistics transport capacity; installing the AI/ML-enabled mission partner networks; testing distributed C2 systems; building satellite terminals; layering in multi-tier protection assets; positioning land-based long range fires; et al. Interior lines boost the powerful but temporal effects of routine plays, such as freedom of navigation operations and bomber task force flyovers, and they pair with modern strategic deterrent capabilities, such as nuclear and cyber weapons. Creating interior lines thus comprises many of the actions that build an enduring advantage.

## Conclusion

The United States manages a complex framework of bilateral and multilateral security relationships against several threats in the Indo-Pacific, the PRC chief among them. The 2022 *NDS* emphasizes that “the PRC is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order, and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do so.”<sup>29</sup> The absence of a regional collective security alliance such as NATO, coupled with the overall complexity of the theater, leaves it unclear how a U.S.-led joint coalition will achieve unity of effort to practically implement the *NDS* in the priority theater.

However, the Army’s storied history in Asia and the Pacific is coming back into focus, revealing how the Army long ago began a legacy as the “linchpin service” and the “backbone of joint operations.” To materialize what Bridge Colby labels in *The Strategy of Denial* as “an integrated denial defense-cum-binding strategy,” DoD requires unity of effort to gain staying power by converging the strengths of all available means in all domains.<sup>30</sup> Based on the urgency to implement the *NDS*, now is the time to leverage the Army—landpower—in the priority theater to allow the joint force, together with our allies and partners, to deter one of the most serious threats that the U.S. military, the region and our nation has ever faced.



*General Charles Flynn assumed duties as the Commanding General of U.S. Army Pacific in June 2021; he previously served as the Army Deputy Chief of Staff G-3/5/7 for Operations, Plans, and Training. General Flynn has extensive experience in the Indo-Pacific region, including assignments as the Deputy Commanding General, U.S. Army Pacific, and Commanding General, 25th Infantry Division.*

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## Notes

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