



Security Nexus Perspectives

RETHINKING THE APPROACH TO SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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The “tyranny of distance and time” compounded with China’s mature anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) capabilities creates significant challenges to the Joint Force in a conflict with the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).¹ Moreover, Joint Forces are concentrated in northeast Asia and not necessarily well-postured for the current competitive environment or the adversary.² Should conflict with China occur, the PLA could rapidly attack and seize territory before the U.S. and allies could effectively respond, presenting a “fait accompli.”³ More worrisome is that this posture and geography problem set makes deterrence against such aggression increasingly more difficult. New and innovative approaches to the increasingly complex security environment are therefore necessary.

¹ Thomas G. Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), 1, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/implementing-a-strategy-of-maritime-pressure-in-the-western-pacific/publication/1>.

² Nathan Freier, John Schaus, and William Braun, *An Army Transformed: USINDOPACOM Hypercompetition and US Army Theater Design* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2020), xv, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/912>.

³ Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain*, 1.

To help meet the Army's contribution to the Joint Force in the theater, multiple operational concept proposals have emerged over the last five years to overcome these challenges, counter China's A2/AD advantages, and help restore deterrence. These concepts generally favor "greater depth, resilience, agility, and redundancy," spreading Army forces "across the first and second island chains, the South and southwestern Pacific, continental Asia, and the Indian Ocean."⁴ One concept envisions an on-call "land-based network" to receive follow-on forces and provide mission-critical capabilities to the Joint Force.⁵ Another recommends forming "highly survivable precision-strike networks...dispersed along the archipelagos of the Western Pacific" to function as an "inside" force to attack "within China's A2/AD threat envelop, supported by 'outside' air and naval forces able to join the fight from further afield."⁶

However, these proposed operational concepts do not say how the forces, associated equipment, and supporting logistics get into place along the first island chain during or before a conflict. Most call for incorporating allies and partners, with the primary focus of gaining access for U.S. forces. However, they are still unclear on how the U.S. forces and equipment will arrive in time. In addition to access, the U.S. Army should look to allies and partners, particularly in Southeast Asia and Oceania, to provide needed capabilities at key locations because U.S. forces may not be in a position to respond effectively in time when a conflict breaks out.

U.S. alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are strong and in some respects improving, but given the lack of a multilateral structure like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), integration and interoperability are difficult.⁷ Further, the concentration of joint forces in Northeast Asia places those forces far north of the potential flashpoints of Taiwan and the South China Sea, out of position to make use of southern approaches to those locations and unable to disperse across the theater for greater survivability. U.S. Army leadership is attempting to overcome these challenges through various means, including developing the Long Range Hypersonic Weapon system, fielding the First and Third Multi-Domain Task Forces in the Indo-Pacific, and reactivation of the 11th Airborne Division in Alaska. Additionally, the U.S. Army Pacific conducts "Operation Pathways" and "Exercise Forager" annually, which positions "U.S. commanders, soldiers, and equipment on the Asian continent and inside the first and second island chains for extended periods of time."⁸

⁴ Freier, Schaus, and Braun, *An Army Transformed*, 52-53.

⁵ Freier, Schaus, and Braun, *An Army Transformed*, 61-64.

⁶ Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain*, 3.

⁷ Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain*, 41.

⁸ "US Navy and Army Conduct Successful Hypersonics Flight Test Campaign," *Naval Technology*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.naval-technology.com/news/us-navy-army-hypersonics-test/>; Russell K. Shimooka, "Third Multi-Domain Task Force Activated for Indo-Pacific Duty," *Army.mil*, U.S. Army, September 23, 2022, https://www.army.mil/article/260505/third_multi_domain_task_force_activated_for_indo_pacific_duty; Joe Lacdan, "Army Re-activates Historic Airborne Unit, Reaffirms Commitment to Arctic Strategy," *Army.mil*, U.S. Army, June 8, 2022, https://www.army.mil/article/257356/army_re_activates_historic_airborne_unit_reaffirms_commitment_to_arctic_strategy; "Welcome to the 11th Airborne Division, the Arctic Angels," 11th Airborne Division, *Army.mil*, accessed October 28,

Collectively, these changes will provide the Joint Force with new and enhanced capabilities to address some of the operational and posture challenges in the Indo-Pacific; however, much of their effectiveness is still contingent on getting the right capabilities into position in the Theater. Different approaches to building partner capacity in the Indo-Pacific could help address this dilemma and the remainder of the challenges. In many of the proposed operational concepts, regional allies and partners are often asked to provide U.S. forces with basing and access, compete with China below the level of armed conflict, and “augment” the U.S. in a military conflict with China.⁹ Often, though, discussion on building partner capacity drifts towards certain high-end capability partners, such as Japan and Australia, and neglects to consider building partner capacity, particularly in Southeast Asia and Oceania, to meet U.S. operational requirements.¹⁰

Some concept proposals look to “bolster the A2/AD capabilities of China’s neighbors by providing them with loans, arms, training, and intelligence,” thereby turning them into “prickly ‘porcupines,’ capable of denying territory to China but not of taking and holding territory themselves.”¹¹ One recent proposal takes this idea further, arguing more specifically for arming Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia with weapons like anti-ship missiles to “reduce China’s ability to focus on Taiwan by maximizing the range and complexity of challenges facing the PLA in other theaters.”¹² These approaches leverage ally and partner geographic advantages to create dilemmas for China; however, they do so in a primarily bilateral manner focused on a country’s specific point of friction with China or most needed security capability. Often, this approach becomes too reliant on a limited capability set rather than linked to a needed U.S. capability in that location.

Instead, the U.S. Army should look at the full suite of operational capability requirements in a conflict with China, beyond anti-ship missiles and including non-kinetic capabilities, and match them to partner requirements, abilities, and political will. The spectrum of land-based capability requirements identified in the various operational concepts includes: strike capabilities, anti-ship, anti-air, electronic warfare, counter-space, cyber, resupply and mobility platforms (including sea and air transport vehicles), communications, ISR, camouflage, concealment, and deception (CCD), as well as logistics stock-piles, to name a few.¹³

2022, <https://11thairbornedivision.army.mil/>; General Charles Flynn, “Land Power Vital to Indo-Pacific,” AUSA.org, Association of the United States Army, April 21, 2022, <https://www.ausa.org/articles/land-power-vital-indo-pacific>.

⁹ Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain*, 40-41.

¹⁰ In *Tightening the Chain*, Mahnken et al. describe ongoing and recommended efforts with the Philippines, which aligns with the views of this paper’s author. However, they do not include some of the more nuanced recommendations articulated later in this paper, nor do they include building partner capacity with other countries in Southeast Asia and Oceania, such as Indonesia, Palau, and others.

¹¹ Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security* 42, No. 2 (Fall 2017):116-117, http://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-pdf/42/2/78/1843874/isec_a_00294.pdf.

¹² Wuthnow, Joel, “Defending Taiwan in an Expanded Competitive Space,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 104 (1st Quarter 202): 92, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-104/jfq-104.pdf>.

¹³ Carol V. Evans, “Providing Stability and Deterrence: The US Army in INDOPACOM,” *Parameters* 51, no. 1 (2021): 32, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss1/5>; Mahnken et al., *Tightening the Chain*, 4-39.

There are several novel ways in which the U.S. Army could build partner capacity to provide these capabilities in position and better meet Joint Force operational requirements in a conflict with China. First, the U.S. could provide a partner with the equipment and training gratis. Not only would this increase interoperability, but it would also ensure that a capability is in position before a conflict begins. In some instances, Title X, Section 333 funding could be used to build partner capacities. However, given the current focused scope of funding activities, DoD may be well-suited to advocate for Congress to expand authorization to include building partner capacities that deter aggressive Chinese behavior in the region that threatens U.S. national security interests.¹⁴ Partner-owned capabilities could cover a spectrum of land force requirements, including air defense, ISR, medical, and even watercraft. Further, properly building in the logistics footprint for these capabilities, such as spare parts, ammo, and local repair, along with appropriately scoped Access and Cross-Service Agreements (ACSAs), could help make forward logistics support available to U.S. forces at the outset of a conflict.¹⁵

Second, the U.S. could explore combined units with some partners in specific capabilities. The Army already demonstrated this ability at the division-level with the 2nd Infantry Division/ROK-U.S. Combined Division in Korea after the unit held its first live-fire exercise in August 2022.¹⁶ Granted, it was several years from unit stand-up to live fire, and the partnership with Korea is likely one of the most integrated. However, it is also not implausible for similar constructs to be built at a smaller scale or lower echelon to provide specific functions, such as air defense, ISR, and mobility. Although the Indo-Pacific does not have a NATO-equivalent structure, battalion task force-sized multilateral units, similar to the enhanced Forward Presence Battle Groups (eFPs) deployed in Eastern Europe, may also provide a framework for establishing needed capabilities in key positions.¹⁷

Some form of combined or multilateral framework unit may also provide a convenient workaround for all sides in instances where outright basing of forces is not feasible. In certain cases, partner nations may be willing to provide limited but necessary supporting roles such as security, mobility, logistics, or life support for more advanced or provocative capabilities after they arrive in a contingency. This would aid in reducing the overall movement and logistic support requirements for a deployed capability.

¹⁴ Foreign Security Forces: Authority to Build Capacity, US Code 10 (2016), § 333; Currently § 333 states, "The Secretary of Defense is authorized to conduct or support a program or programs to provide training and equipment to the national security forces of one or more foreign countries to build the capacity of such forces to conduct one or more of the following: (1) Counterterrorism operations. (2) Counter-weapons of mass destruction operations. (3) Counter-illicit drug trafficking operations. (4) Counter-transnational organized crime operations. (5) Maritime and border security operations. (6) Military intelligence operations. (7) Operations or activities that contribute to an international coalition operation that is determined by the Secretary to be in the national interest of the United States."

¹⁵ "Acquisition and Cross-Service Agreements," Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition & Sustainment, Director, International Cooperation, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/ic/acsa.html>.

¹⁶ Josh Smith, "U.S., S. Korean Troops Practice War with Eye on N. Korea and 'Near-Peer' Enemies," Reuters, August 30, 2022, 11:58 HST, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/us-south-korea-stage-largest-combined-military-drills-years-2022-08-31/>.

¹⁷ Baxter Hodge, "Enhancing Forward-Presence Combat Readiness," *Land Power Magazine*, Spring 2021, 28-31.

Third, the U.S. Army and partner nations could jointly build ammunition supply points (ASPs), providing storage for both partner nations' ammunition and U.S. forward-positioned ammunition for contingencies. During annual exercises, such as Operations Pathways, U.S. Army forces could practice drawing and replenishing ammunition supplies from these ASPs. These combined ASPs would complicate PLA targeting in a conflict scenario by dispersing U.S. ammunition stocks across the region while increasing political costs to PLA targeting. This approach could also be applied to other logistical storage facility requirements for fuel, medical, spare parts, and other material.

Fourth, the U.S. Army could explore the establishment of pre-standing agreements for U.S. forces to fall in on and assume the operation of partner-owned equipment. This may provide a necessary workaround in instances where partners desire capability but may not desire to be directly involved in a specific conflict.

An immediate concern with any of the above approaches is whether or not the partner nation would provide access or support in a time of conflict with China. This is a valid concern but may be overstated. First, the mere act of building this level of interoperability and cooperation with partners would likely incline them to be more supportive in a time of conflict. Second, it may not necessarily matter. In the same way that the U.S. may not be certain of partner support in a conflict, the PLA and Chinese leadership cannot rule it out, and as such, will need to plan accordingly, be it in expending efforts in the grey zone to block U.S. advances or by taking direct action during a time of conflict.

Overcoming current geographic, posture, and A2/AD challenges in the Indo-Pacific requires new and unique thinking. Leveraging long-standing alliances and partnerships in the region and emerging partnerships can help overcome some of these challenges and provide additional dilemmas for PLA planning, elevating the cost of aggression. By using a more comprehensive and nuanced approach, the U.S. can elevate the cost of Chinese aggression and create more dilemmas for the PLA. This will help the U.S. to restore deterrence while ensuring necessary operational capabilities are in position during a time of need.



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