

Decentralized Deterrence



Reinvigorating the Army's Deterrence Impact in the Face of a Modernized People's Liberation Army

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America's primary adversary in the Indo-Pacific is undeniably the People's Republic of China (PRC). While this adversarial relationship is not destined to result in war, the interests of the two states abut too closely for a potential near-future conflict not to be taken seriously.¹ The primary mission of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) ground forces in the modern age has been to safeguard U.S. national interests through credible deterrence.² Credible deterrence is, in short, maintaining a force posture that renders any gains the PRC would make through military action too costly when weighed against the losses of engaging in conflict with regional U.S. forces. Credible deterrence has been a vital tool in the USINDOPACOM arsenal. Not only has it allowed Washington to avert a potentially devastating conflict with Beijing merely by making the prospect of such an engagement appear too costly to contemplate, but it has also enabled the U.S. Army at large to divert the bulk of its attention to other threats while leaving what amounts to a garrison force to maintain regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.³

In the past, USINDOPACOM's position in the region was virtually unassailable, making it a highly credible deterrent to any aggressive PRC impulses. However, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has rapidly modernized in recent years and has become capable of incapacitating current U.S. positions in the Indo-Pacific with missiles and conventional air power. Accordingly, the USINDOPACOM ground forces' former credible deterrence has dramatically been reduced since the PLA can now challenge the U.S. regional presence and reasonably expect to emerge from a limited-scope conflict without incurring a Pyrrhic victory.⁴ Therefore, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) becomes increasingly expansionist and aggressive, and USINDOPACOM's ground forces steadily lose their credible deterrence impact, the basing posture of U.S. forces in the region must be reexamined.

The Army's forces in USINDOPACOM should adopt a doctrine of decentralized deterrence, wherein ground forces are redispersed throughout the Indo-Pacific as opposed to maintaining the current, centralized posture. In this way, not only will we broaden our network of regional military partners, but we will also



prevent the possibility of a single decapitating strike by the PLA, thus enhancing the Army's credible deterrence and ability to respond to PLA aggression.

The Current Army USINDOPACOM Basing Posture Is Vulnerable

At present, USINDOPACOM maintains its major foreign-based ground forces in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. While these forces have been instrumental in maintaining peace on the Korea Peninsula, the rapid expansion of the PLA's capabilities has caused dramatically diminishing returns in the deterrence effects that the U.S. troops based in these locations exert on the PRC.⁵ In the wake of the Soviet collapse (when the posture we have today was incepted), the PLA simply did not have the capability to effectively strike at current USINDOPACOM positions, while U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) was almost always under threat by a joint PLA/North Korean effort. Furthermore, Beijing clearly understood that swift retribution would be forthcoming if it could not effectively neutralize the bulk of regional American forces, which it simply did not have the capability to do. However, while the Global War on Terrorism has fixed Washington's focus on the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) for

Soldiers of People's Liberation Army stand in formation 1 October 2019 near Tiananmen Square before a military parade marking the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on its National Day in Beijing. (Photo by Jason Lee, Reuters/Alamy Stock Photo)

the past two decades, the PLA has embarked on a robust modernization campaign, particularly in antiaccess capability.⁶

This enhanced capability was dramatically demonstrated in a 2017 study by the RAND Corporation, which projected that the PLA had not only gained the ability to easily neutralize all U.S. positions within the ROK and Japan with ballistic and cruise missiles but could also disrupt operations at bases as far out as Andersen Air Force Base in Guam.⁷ Therefore, it is little surprise that the PRC has become more emboldened in recent years given that the United States' default posture in the Indo-Pacific (a few large, hardened positions) has rendered USINDOPACOM ground forces exceptionally vulnerable to a PLA first strike.⁸ Accordingly, the answer to reinvigorating the Army's Indo-Pacific deterrence lies not in further entrenching its present posture but

rather in expanding its current footprint and decentralizing its consolidated assets.

The Efficacy of Decentralized Deterrence Is Empirically Proven

Although the current Army USINDOPACOM posture is highly vulnerable to being neutralized by PLA first strike weaponry and serves a highly compelling argument for decentralization, empirical evidence also strongly argues that USINDOPACOM's credible deterrence effect would be enhanced through a decentralized basing posture. In 2020, RAND conducted a subsequent study examining the deterrence that forward-deployed U.S. forces were able to exert. The authors found that the most effective forward-deployed deterrent to foreign aggression are ground forces, whereas air and naval forces showed "little if any evidence" of exerting a deterrent impact.⁹ Further, the study also stated that among these ground forces, "heavy" elements (e.g., armored, artillery, or mechanized units) on steady-state deployments exerted the highest deterrent effect, and this deterrence is even further enhanced when these elements can be surged to regional flashpoints in so-called "crisis deployments."¹⁰

The implications that this RAND data has for the Army's role in the modern USINDOPACOM posture are staggering. In fact, it was abundantly clear during Congress's 2019 hearing on the challenges facing USINDOPACOM that both the uniformed and civilian sides believe USINDOPACOM requires a higher investment in naval assets and USFK/Japan forces are sufficient ground-based deterrents.¹¹ The

PLA is presently up to the task of completely hamstringing USINDOPACOM's Army component (and is actively investing in countering regional U.S. naval and air assets). Statistical analysis of the 2020 RAND data shows that naval assets simply do not exert the same deterrent effect that a

permanent forward-deployed ground presence does.¹² Bearing in mind that sequestration demands evidence-based solutions, it makes far more strategic sense to decentralize the assets that are empirically proven to effectively deter, rather than pouring precious funds into naval assets that are unlikely to meaningfully shift the balance of power.

While admittedly, any permanent ground presence in the Indo-Pacific will be within PLA striking range, basing such forces within more allied and partner nations to increase decentralization will greatly enhance both the deterrence credibility and retaliatory response capability of USINDOPACOM's ground forces. Not only would the first strike calculus of the PRC be enormously complicated by a wider geographic dispersal of U.S. "trip wire" forces throughout the region (elements that would trigger a larger conflict if they were transgressed), but basing such forces in partner nations would force the PRC to contend with bringing a third party on the side of the United States into any potential Sino-American conflict. At present, the PLA would merely have to launch ballistic missiles and conventional air power at the highly centralized USFK and Japanese positions to effectively neutralize USINDOPACOM's ground force presence in the region. However, under the proposed doctrine of decentralized deterrence, these forces would be dispersed throughout the region and could be coalesced to mount an effective counterattack following the PRC's initial thrust.

This Strategy Is Diplomatically Viable

Turning from the understanding that a decentralized ground presence in the Indo-Pacific is desirable and would enhance USINDOPACOM's mission of securing U.S. national interests against an increasingly expansionist PRC, the question now is whether such a strategy is feasible. The 2017 RAND study predicted that Chinese expansionism in the South and East China Seas would be positively correlated with many regional nations' willingness to cooperate with the United States on security matters.¹³ Given that the CCP, as stated in its 2019 white paper (a document outlining its defense policy for the coming years), essentially claims sovereignty over the entirety of the South China Sea and all outlying islands—a claim that

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is not only disputed by multiple Indo-Pacific nations but is also in violation of international law—Chinese territorial assertiveness in the region is unquestionably on a meteoric rise.¹⁴ Therefore, the time may be right to approach our regional partners in Asia regarding enhanced security cooperation.

Though in the past, many Indo-Pacific states wished to remain neutral in the Sino-American power struggle, in recent years, the increasingly expansionist attitude of the PRC has forced a number of these nations into a position where they must soon choose a side.¹⁵ Further, as Randall Schriver, the assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, noted during a 2019 House Armed Services Committee hearing, the PRC has progressively eroded the trust of many of its regional neighbors either through dubious trade practices or outright aggression.¹⁶ The United States has multiple nations that it could approach that may be eager to reap the deterrent benefits of hosting a modest USINDOPACOM ground presence. The South China Sea issue alone has caused the Philippines and Vietnam to entreat the United States to take a more active role in securing the region against the “Chinese threat.”¹⁷ As Adm. Philip Davidson noted during a 2019 talk at the Aspen Institute’s Security Forum, Thailand remains one of our oldest and most active military partners in region.¹⁸ Even Malaysia, though traditionally a staunchly neutral party for fear of becoming fixed in Beijing’s crosshairs, could perhaps be swayed if the Malaysians were to see significant U.S. ground force dispersal throughout the region. Despite Malaysian neutrality, the PRC has recently stepped up its transgressions on Kuala Lumpur’s airspace in the region, sending a clear message that China cares little for diplomatic niceties should its ability to assert claims of sovereignty be impeded.¹⁹

Accordingly, many of our regional partners maintain complex dual ties to both the United States and the PRC. China, in becoming ever more aggressive in pressing its expansion in the Indo-Pacific, has created a climate in which many East Asian nations have become far more amicable to cooperating with Washington on security issues. Therefore, the disbursement of USINDOPACOM ground forces to multiple partner nations throughout the region, while untenable a decade ago, may now be not only diplomatically feasible but also in fact welcome.

This Strategy Is Unlikely to Provoke Sino-American Conflict

Detractors of an expanded USINDOPACOM basing effort have correctly noted that even the academic discussion of doing so has provoked bellicose responses from the PRC. An article in this very publication advocating for a permanent troop presence in Taiwan elicited a response from Chinese state-run media that vowed that an Army presence in the country may trigger a “reunification-by-force operation.”²⁰ While these stirring words clearly had the intended effect of giving Western readers pause, lending undue credence to the saber-rattling coming out of Beijing is inadvisable as this sort of rhetoric is at best a calculated strategy and at worst the product of a civil-military divide within the PRC.²¹

Although it is tempting to read a headline from a PRC official and automatically presume that the words have the approval of the state as a whole, within the PRC there exists a significant civil-military divide. While the literature remains split as to why this divide exists, it is undeniable that in the realm of foreign policy statements, Central Military Commission (akin to the U.S. Department of Defense) officials often act counter, and in a far more aggressive manner, to their civilian CCP counterparts.²² This civil-military gap is even tacitly acknowledged in the white paper, wherein the State Council Information Office devotes several subsections to delineating what steps China is taking to ensure that the CCP has a tighter grip on the conduct and “political integrity” of its armed forces.²³

Even if we were to take all the statements coming from every official organ of the PRC at face value, this would necessarily mean that the statements in the white paper provide us with at least as much insight into how the PRC would react to an expanded USINDOPACOM basing effort as the statements of lone officials. Accordingly, statements such as “the military strategic guideline for a new era adheres to the principles of defense, self-defense, and post-strike response” and “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked” should be more than dispositive evidence that an expanded ground force presence in the Indo-Pacific would not provoke an armed response from Beijing.²⁴

In any case, this discussion is all a moot point as the State Council Information Office devotes an entire paragraph to stridently condemning the United States’



deployment of missile defense assets in the ROK as having “undermined the regional strategic balance and the strategic security interests of (Indo-Pacific) countries,” despite these being assets with no offensive capability whatsoever.²⁵ Thus, it is clear that no matter what action the United States takes in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing will protest should it have an impact on China’s ability to act with *carte blanche* in the region. Accordingly, while “fire and fury” statements issuing forth from Central Military Commission officials certainly should not be discounted, they cannot be used in isolation to prognosticate a Chinese response, nor should Washington allow them to dictate how we base USINDOPACOM forces.

Implementation Could Begin Rapidly

The final question to consider regarding the proposed doctrine is whether such a strategy could be implemented by USINDOPACOM within a reasonable time frame. With USCENTCOM’s Middle East mission rapidly ending, sequestration and drawdowns are soon to hit the Department of Defense. Given this pending period of force and budgetary reduction, one may question if the resources exist to engage in a dramatic reshuffling of the Army’s Indo-Pacific basing posture.

Japan Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF) paratroopers line up to load onto a C-130J Super Hercules assigned to the 374th Air-lift Wing during exercise Airborne 21 at Yokota Air Base, Japan, 9 March 2021. More than five hundred JGSDF paratroopers performed a static-line jump at the Combined Arms Training Center drop zone, Camp Fuji, Japan, making it the largest U.S.-Japan personnel drop in the history of the two countries’ alliance. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Gabrielle Spalding, U.S. Air Force)

To begin, Congress has already earmarked funds to increase USINDOPACOM’s fleet assets. While it is beyond the scope of this work to delve into interservice budgetary disputes, it does bear repeating that given USINDOPACOM’s primary mission of exerting credible deterrence, these funds would be far better spent on permanent ground forces that are proven to have a greater deterrent impact than naval assets.²⁶ However, this proposal will take current INDOPACOM budgetary levels as they are and presume that no interservice funding shifts will be forthcoming.

The findings of the 2020 RAND study were not that the forward-deployed ground forces needed to be stationed at levels sufficient to undertake an extended campaign on their own, but rather that these forces simply needed to be sufficient to demonstrate a significant U.S.

commitment to the region.²⁷ Accordingly, preexisting base infrastructure of the prospective host nation could jointly house American forces with modest alterations to accommodate the heavier assets. Because this strategy requires, at most, one or two brigade-strength forces to be centralized in any one area in the region, it is highly unlikely any significant long-term investment would need to be made into host nation infrastructure to accommodate these redeployed elements.²⁸ Accordingly, the cost USINDOPACOM would incur in implementing the decentralized deterrence doctrine would be negligible at most.

When taking into consideration where the Army might draw preexisting personnel for the implementation of this doctrine, two options are immediately viable. First, with USCENTCOM's Afghanistan mission largely at its end, the Army could elect to partition some of its division's heavy brigades for either rotational or permanent forward deployment to the Indo-Pacific. This would not require an increase in recruitment and could be entirely accomplished merely by reassigning needed elements from USCENTCOM to USINDOPACOM.

Alternatively, should bringing USCENTCOM elements under the USINDOPACOM umbrella so soon after withdrawing from the Middle East prove

untenable, portions of USFK could be redeployed. Given that USFK serves much the same function as the other trip wire forces (and in any case is not expected to fend off a DRPK invasion on its own), dispersing it throughout the Indo-Pacific would be unlikely to reduce its current credible deterrence impact. Further, the DRPK first-strike casualty projections for USFK are staggering. Dispersing USFK assets out of North Korean conventional weapons range would enhance force survivability and its ability to effectively counterattack following a DRPK first strike. Thus, a wider regional deployment of USFK ground forces would not only be implementable without personnel increases but would also expand the deterrence impact beyond the Korean peninsula.

Chinese modernization and ambition have wildly outpaced USINDOPACOM regional posture since its modern inception. As a result of the PLA's dramatic modernization campaign, the Army's credible deterrence impact has been significantly reduced. As the Indo-Pacific rapidly becomes the focus of U.S. strategic competition, many arguments will be forwarded as to the best way to strengthen USINDOPACOM's posture in the face of the modern PLA. The proposed doctrine of decentralized deterrence presents an empirically proven, diplomatically viable, and rapidly implementable solution. ■

Notes

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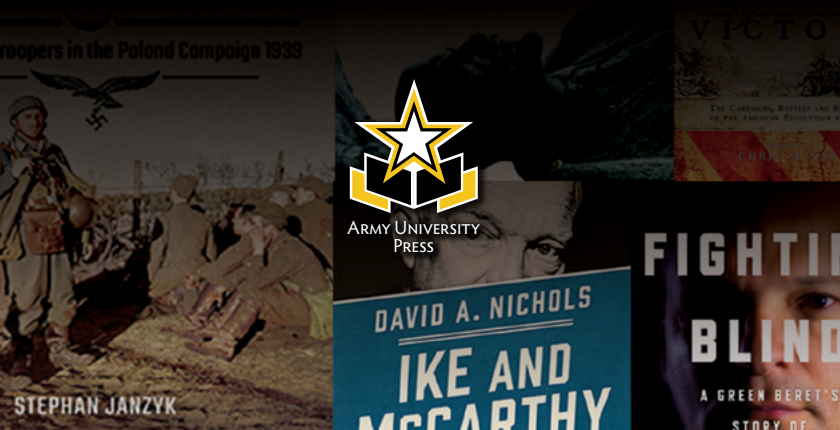


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28. Ibid., 14–16, 20–25, 163–65.