



U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Nathan Shelton, an avionics backshop technician from the 18th Component Maintenance Squadron, guards his fire team's retreat during a break contact battle drill 22 August 2019 at the Jungle Warfare Training Center, Camp Gonsalves, Japan. Shelton and other Team Kadena airmen from the 18th Wing were invited by U.S. Army Green Berets from 1st Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), to broaden their deployment readiness capability in a joint environment. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Peter Reft, U.S. Air Force)

Support the Fight!



The U.S. Army, the Joint Force, and the Indo-Pacific

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Joint campaigns may require land operations as part of unified action since land forces often control areas or assets that influence and enable operations in the other domains. For this reason, land operations are vital during almost all operations, even in places where maritime or air forces dominate.

—Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army*

As the Department of Defense continues its long-heralded pivot toward China, the Army, with the primary responsibility of “conduct[ing] prompt and sustained land combat,” seems out of step.¹ While the Army has pursued such initiatives as security force assistance brigade (SFAB) rotations to the Indo-Pacific, celebrated the use of High Mobility Artillery Rocket System artillery batteries to engage naval targets, and begun experimentation with innovative multi-domain task forces (MDTF), it has struggled to not only justify the impact of such capabilities but also merge these actions into a comprehensive Pacific strategy for integration with the joint force.² To fully explain existing and emerging Army capabilities, the Army should articulate its contributions in the Pacific under three distinct missions: set the joint force, sustain the joint force, and provide Army support to partner nations.

The Army’s ability to set and sustain the theater is essential to allowing the joint force to seize the initiative while restricting an enemy force’s options. Setting the theater for the joint force includes the establishment of access and infrastructure to support joint force operations. The Army possesses unique capabilities ... [including] intelligence support; communications, port and airfield opening; logistics; ground-based air defense; and reception, staging, onward movement, and integration.

—ADP 1, *The Army*³

Set the Joint Force

In the Pacific, increased Army fires capability via missile batteries and air defense systems could attrit both the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the Army Air Force (PLAAF) while protecting the joint force from Chinese strike assets. Equipped with long-range antiship fires, Army missile batteries—the

nuclei of MDTFs—can create high-risk, no-go zones for Chinese naval forces, canalizing them into known engagement areas for additional joint force strike team prosecution. Such Army strike forces, positioned near the handful of chokepoints that control access in and out of the first and second island chains (chains of islands that form concentric boundaries that roughly parallel the Chinese coast), would be an effective use of Army sea denial capabilities while freeing up more specialized and mobile Marine littoral regiments to operate forward inside the Chinese antiaccess/area denial defensive perimeter.⁴ Such a sea denial presence, even at a distance from a primary area of operations, would also interdict extended Chinese sea lines of communication without the need for significant attached Navy support.⁵ When analyzed defensively, the availability of an Army sea denial capability becomes increasingly attractive as the PLAN continues its efforts to create an offensive naval strike capability outside the first island chain.⁶ Army MDTFs would help prevent such moves while providing a protected staging ground for joint force teams organizing to penetrate the Chinese defensive perimeter. Additionally, when equipped with surface-to-surface missile capability provided via current Army tactical missile systems or in-development long-range precision fires, Army missile batteries offer the ability to conduct artillery raids on Chinese bases to destroy Chinese defensive and offensive strike capabilities, further preparing the battlefield for future joint force exploitation.

As demonstrated during Rim of the Pacific 2018, Army attack aviation also maintains the ability to prosecute naval targets.⁷

While targeting Chinese naval task forces would likely prove too difficult, Army aviation could easily target weaker Chinese naval auxiliaries in the Chinese maritime militia and coast guard, likely conducting an array of missions to include intelligence and reconnaissance operations, counterreconnaissance, antisubmarine warfare

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(ASW), and minelaying.⁸ Such a use of Army aviation, further bolstered by Army investments in next-generation helicopter designs and long-range munitions, would have the additional benefit of allowing U.S. Air Force and Navy concentration against the more formidable PLAN.⁹ Army aviation could make contributions under the sea as well, bolstering struggling U.S. Navy ASW capabilities against an increasingly formidable Chinese underwater threat. While it would be a stretch to suggest U.S. Army aviators undergo ASW training like their Navy and possible Marine counterparts, it is not a stretch to imagine Army aircraft serving as additional delivery devices for a variety of drones and sensors designed to help build underwater awareness for the joint force.¹⁰

In an operational environment marked by extensive use of land, air, and sea launched missiles as well as drone and conventional air attacks, layered air defense capabilities will be in high demand. In addition to Army air defense protecting MDTFs and the potential for temporary task organization to other high-value joint force elements, Army air defenders could also assist in providing theater ballistic missile defense capability.¹¹ Army air defense could also provide offensive effects, creating high-risk areas for the PLAAF. Pushing forward a protective envelope, even one that can be overwhelmed or defeated, would reduce PLAAF flight radii, thus decreasing the range of air launched weaponry without the retasking of additional PLAAF or PLAN assets for a protective suppression of enemy air defense mission. Regardless, Army air defense presence would complicate enemy operations and force additional Chinese resource investment into additional enabling operations to retain indirect strike capabilities. Whether against land, sea, or air targets, increased Army fires ability would provide the joint force with multiple engagement options to set conditions for further joint operations while simultaneously increasing the array of threats the People's Liberation Army (PLA) must defend itself against.

While Army fires complexes would set conditions for joint force freedom of maneuver by restricting enemy options and destroying enemy assets, Army combat support elements possess the ability to enable such maneuver through use of intelligence, cyber, communications, and engineer units. Such combat support elements could be attached to support various

Army MDTFs, and detached elements could also find significant use in fulfilling joint force requirements and needs.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's Operation Spring Shield in northern Syria, and the 2020 conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region have provided strong examples of a network that combines sensors and other intelligence assets to a network of shooters—drones, strike aircraft, and artillery—to prosecute targets. Following the logic that the first step in either the joint force or PLA kill chain is the sensor—drone, militia fishing vessel, Marine littoral regiment, etc.—there exists the demand of the friendly sensor to detect, classify, and report the enemy presence while also remaining undetected. The joint force must be prepared to process vast amounts of information on Chinese activities and generate it into actionable intelligence while managing the increasing blur between traditionally separate cyber and intelligence activities.¹² Overlapping the predicted rapid growth of the Internet of Things, a network of devices globally connected to the internet, to the operating environment of the first island chain reveals another problem. The conflict between the United States and China in the Pacific will take place among some of the most densely populated and traveled waterways of the world, giving any person with a cell phone or similar device, including those in neutral populations, a frontline view of the conflict and the ability to share such a view globally and near instantaneously.¹³ Strategic combined cyber and intelligence threats exist as well, ranging from the vast quantities of Chinese security equipment in use around the globe, including in partner nations like Germany, to the increasing ability to use simple internet-connected devices such as fitness trackers to inadvertently reveal secure facilities and personnel movements.¹⁴ When merged with information collected from past Chinese personnel file hacks, the likelihood of a Chinese ability to gain critical intelligence on U.S. military deployments even before departure from the continental United States is alarmingly high.¹⁵

For problems of such scale, the U.S. Army intelligence and cyber communities must be prepared to support the joint force. While the individual branches would be able to focus on tactical intelligence and cyber support, the Army could take lead on developing joint intelligence centers capable of processing vast amounts



of information into actionable intelligence for forward units, echeloning and enhancing information gathering and processing capabilities. It is not enough that American sensors simply exist; they must be correctly oriented by successful intelligence operations toward potential targets or areas of interest. To protect U.S. forces from the moment of activation inside the continental United States, such intelligence centers must also work on conducting deception and counterintelligence operations on a scale not seen since the Second World War. While it remains to be seen whether simply overloading hostile intelligence sources with false signals or attempting to run completely silent and go unnoticed is the best policy, something must be done, and at scale to prevent successful Chinese intelligence gathering operations during joint force mobilization. Fighting for electromagnetic signature control cannot wait to begin inside the Chinese defensive perimeter. For attacks against civilian targets such as port facilities and critical infrastructure for supporting military operations, both U.S. Cyber Command and civilian

Two AH-64 Apache helicopters operate with the guided-missile destroyer USS *Paul Hamilton* 27 March 2020 during a joint naval and air integration operation in the Persian Gulf. Army attack aviation maintains the ability to prosecute naval targets. (Photo by Mass Communication Spc. 3rd Class Matthew F. Jackson, U.S. Navy)

cyber agencies would likely need assistance in combating formidable Chinese incursions and draw upon these joint intelligence centers as well. It is also worth considering that other malicious actors may take advantage of the confusion generated by Chinese cyber activities and launch further attacks of their own on vulnerable American targets.

The Army can also assist in providing the crucial sensor to shooter link with robust communications systems. That is not to say that a Marine sensor node must go through an Army communications node to reach either a Marine shooter or other joint force strike asset, but that communications infrastructure needs to exist. Whether it is to connect a warhead to a target or to



signal via a manual or automated request that another munition is needed from a rear area supply network, a robust and secure communications network must be present to support such activities, particularly in a region marked by vast distances between combatants and support areas. In the event of a Pacific conflict, demand for such a network will only increase as more joint forces teams, both manned and unmanned, each with their own communications networks and struggles, deploy to the region amidst persistent Chinese attacks on American communications and satellite infrastructure. Army communications teams will be in high demand to ensure that the joint force's ability to communicate does not become a sudden Achilles' heel.

Of all the Army combat services branches, it is likely that the engineers, including the Army Corps of Engineers, will have the most diverse mission set from the forward line of troops to the ports of embarkation in America. While the presence of a highly lethal sensor to shooter network would prevent robust, permanent facilities inside the engagement zone, engineers would be needed to assist in the rapid creation of temporary bases and facilities long enough to accomplish a series of missions before moving to avoid detection or a PLA counterstrike. In contrast, the demand upon rear area units to process and push vast

The U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command (DEVCOM) Aviation & Missile Center, in support of the Long-Range Precision Fires Cross-Functional Team and in partnership with the DEVCOM Ground Vehicle Systems Center and the 18th Field Artillery Brigade, successfully demonstrates an Autonomous Multi-Domain Launcher, culminating with a multi-round live-fire demonstration 22 June 2021 during a proof of concept at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

amounts of material forward from multiple support areas will require such areas to be not only maintained and probably expanded, but in many cases, created out of remote locations prior to operation. In the rear area, Army engineers would also be needed to ensure the continued operations of critical infrastructure and logistics nodes likely to be under a mix of Chinese kinetic and nonkinetic attacks.

Sustain the Joint Force

The Army as a key player in executing joint force sustainment in a maritime theater can understandably be greeted with skepticism. However, such skepticism ignores oft-overlooked Army capabilities and the reality of the rear area in a future Pacific conflict.

The Army possesses latent sustainment capability, even in a maritime theater. Often overlooked in

the Army's inventory is its almost three hundred watercraft as part of the U.S. Army Transportation Command.¹⁶ While poorly acknowledged and similarly funded, they nonetheless provide an additional transport capability, either manned or unmanned, and operating within the Chinese defensive perimeter or on less dangerous supply missions throughout the rear area.¹⁷ Crucially, the Army also possesses ship-to-shore connecting causeways, critical in an immature theater where port facility infrastructure for large material transfer is lacking or has been damaged.¹⁸

While the Army's contribution to logistics support is a critical piece of the sustainment warfighting function, it is not the sole piece. Army Doctrine Publication 4-0, *Sustainment*, describes sustainment as "the provision of logistics, financial management, personnel services, and health service support necessary to maintain operations until successful mission completion."¹⁹ Critically, while the Army may take lead on facilitating, organizing, and coordinating such processes, and adding its significant resources to such actions, it should not attempt to unilaterally override independent service modes of operation regarding rear-area sustainment activities. In a conflict with China, the demands on joint force sustainment will be extreme enough without infighting caused by an inability for services to cooperate.

Equally important to the smooth functioning of the rear area would be the Army's ability to ensure its security. While much focus has been on the growing Chinese ballistic missile inventory capable of targeting the second and third island chains, thus demanding an Army theater ballistic missile defense presence, China also possesses rear area deployable assets in both its People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia and its massive civilian fishing fleet. Such vessels would have significant use in intelligence gathering operations on joint force activities both to integrate with Chinese strike capabilities and warn of upcoming joint force operations.²⁰ While Christopher Booth argues the United States should copy the British Shetland Bus program of using civilian vessels to support covert operations in Norway during World War II for a future Pacific conflict, it can be clearly seen that the Chinese maritime militia is already preparing for such a mission through repeated training and naval exercises.²¹ Chinese fishing vessels would serve as support vessels for a variety of purposes including drone attacks, long-range

offensive mining, and ferrying Chinese special operations forces.²² While a Pacific rear area would begin in the second island chain, distance does not provide complete security. The Chinese fishing fleet has already raised alarm in defense circles for large-scale fishing operations as far away as the Galápagos Islands, and their avoidance of maritime positioning devices makes detection difficult, a problem during a conflict in which the bulk of American intelligence efforts would be focused on the disposition of the PLAN and not the thousands of quasi-civilian Chinese fishing vessels that have the added advantage of appearing similar to the vast majority of fishing vessels belonging to any nation.²³ Of additional concern is an increasing array of Chinese land purchases as far out as Micronesia that could provide additional logistics support for such efforts as well as bases for more conventional drone or missile attacks.²⁴

To protect against such operations, the Army could utilize an array of assets at its disposal. First would be the simple presence of ground troops to protect against sabotage and special forces raids.²⁵ That is not to imply that Marine, Navy, or Air Force security forces are incapable, but their size in comparison with potential security demands creates their own inadequacy. Thus, it may not be surprising that even Army infantry units might be used for mundane security force use. Army aviation and additional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets could also be present to assist in patrolling such a large area for Chinese irregular maritime vessels, preserving limited Navy and Coast Guard presence for the actual seizure of such vessels. As a last line of defense, Army assets including air defense and engineers could attempt to limit the effects of attacks through active missile defense as well as through passive measures such as base hardening and force and facility regeneration and repair.²⁶ In the rear area, the Army could also be employed to conduct attacks on smaller Chinese support bases, likely to be less defended and protected than a Chinese base inside the first island chain, while preserving more specialized units for tougher targets. As threats to the rear area are no longer confined to the kinetic destruction, Army communication specialists would work to ensure that extensive lines of communication are maintained to enable the movement of supplies and forces into the theater while Army cyber teams work to protect critical civilian and military logistics nodes.

Support Partner Nations

The infamous tyranny of distance in discussing U.S. operations in the Pacific makes it clear that in addition to limited pre-positioned U.S. forces bearing the brunt of the fighting, so too would any regional allies, and it

traditional maritime trade and fishing networks that would devastate local economies. While it would vary nation to nation and depend on U.S. force availability, it is foolish to assume that the United States will not be asked to conduct a variety of assistance missions

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will be vital that the joint force is prepared to support and operate alongside such allies. In this respect, the Army with its purpose-built SFABs would be key in facilitating such cooperation and coordination. That is not to say that the rest of the joint force does not have its own cooperation agreements and partnerships in the region, but that the SFAB possesses a unique advantage. Despite the maritime geography of the Pacific, most Indo-Pacific militaries remain Army centric and are focusing on increasing cheaper asymmetric capabilities—chief among them, land-based antiship missiles to combat the PLAN.²⁷ While some may suggest that the Marines can fulfill the role, such a decision would be spreading an already thin force thinner while ignoring a ready-made force capable of conducting military-to-military partnerships.

In addition to direct military assistance, Army Special Forces units and SFABs could assist partner nations in various internal stability actions, including combating Chinese information campaigns on civilian populaces and boosting internal security forces. The reality of a conflict between the two global powers occurring within the most heavily populated and maritime-trafficked region in the world guarantees fallout for surrounding nations that goes beyond just physical and environmental damage. Both the United States and China would look to generate willing partners to open additional basing options for land-based assets and provide sea and air maneuver space. Thus, it is reasonable to expect a barrage of information operations campaigns designed to sway populaces and their governments to a position on the conflict occurring simultaneously with the disruption of

in the Indo-Pacific as a result of fallout from a Pacific conflict. To maintain ongoing relationships, bolster alliances against China, and maintain the moral high ground in a conflict, it is likely that the United States would find itself obligated to respond.

Challenges

Even with clearer framing of U.S. Army priorities in the Pacific, problems exist. Army leaders will have to explore and experiment with new concepts including the possible regional primacy of fires over maneuver, new tasks organizations, reconfigured force structure, and changes to command relationships both internal to the Army and with the joint force. Units will need to train for Pacific operations on training areas that are not flat desert tank ranges but instead tropical jungles and vast maritime spaces, not only by themselves but also with other elements of the joint force in both active and reserve components. There is equipment that will need upgrading, buying, and testing at home station and in the wet humidity of the Pacific to ensure full reliability. The Army will have to think about how any force package, even if perfectly organized, gets to the Pacific. Not only would even the Army's watercraft need some kind of naval escort, but the diversion of key Air Force and Navy logistical assets would also require the Army to carefully prioritize its own force inflow to the region with limited external support. As tricky as these logistical problems are, perhaps trickier is finding a location for Army forces. While rear area support bases and MDTFs can find plenty of a real estate in U.S. territories within the second and third island chains, any basing further west

would require host-nation access; currently a troublesome proposition.²⁸ Finally, all these proposals must be balanced against significant ongoing U.S. Army global commitments.

Conclusion

Currently, the joint force is preparing to fight China without serious consideration to the host of capabilities that the Army brings to the table. Whether it is military advise and assist missions, joint force logistics support, or targeting of PLAN and PLAAF assets by Army MDTFs and other units, the Army provides serious capabilities to the joint force in the Pacific, capabilities that should not be underestimated or dismissed. As the likely supporting force, the Army will continue to face questions on its Pacific investments

considering the dominant maritime geography of the theater and ongoing Army global commitments, necessitating a clear and concise justification of any current or future Army contributions to the Pacific. In order to properly envision and articulate Army support for the joint force, all Army Pacific efforts should be categorized into three distinct missions: set the joint force, sustain the joint force, and provide Army support to partner nations. Such precise framing would not only provide a ready answer for what the Army provides in the Pacific but also serve as a benchmark against which future Army initiatives and planning can be measured, helping to prevent internal Army diversions of time, resources, and efforts into merely duplicating joint force capabilities simply for the desire to put an olive green touch on it. ■

Notes

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