



Soldiers guide a UH-60 Black Hawk off the USNS *Fisher* (T-AKR 301) during port operations 1 May 2017 in support of Balikatan 2017 at Subic Bay, Zambales, Philippines. Balikatan is an annual U.S.-Philippine bilateral military exercise focused on a variety of missions, including humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterterrorism, and other combined military operations. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Nashaunda Tilghman, U.S. Army)

# The Tyranny of the Shores

## Army Planning for the Asia-Pacific Theater

Brian J. Dunn

### **The Tyranny of Distance**

In any future emerging confrontation in the Asia Pacific, the U.S. Army eventually will have to take a

pivotal role in order for the United States to prevail. Therefore, the U.S. Army must consider and prepare for a role in the Asia-Pacific region that goes beyond merely

fighting anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) threats to the Navy to one that better accounts for the value of large-scale land operations in support of a joint campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The Army currently regards the Asia-Pacific region outside of the Korean peninsula as primarily the responsibility of the Navy and Air Force, augmented as necessary by the Marine Corps, who supply any limited requirement for ground-force needs. Such a misconception forfeits options to contribute to victory in the eventuality of large-scale engagement against the sophisticated, well-prepared, near-peer adversaries that are emerging in the Asia-Pacific region. As stated in an Association of the United States Army defense report, “The joint force must have expeditionary, campaign-quality strategic landpower to ensure the protection of the vital interests of the United States.”<sup>2</sup> At present, in anticipation of future conflict in the Asia-Pacific region, the Navy is focused on overcoming the A2/AD threat.<sup>3</sup> The commander of U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) envisions a minimal combat role for the Army in this endeavor, one tailored primarily to defeating Chinese A2/AD weapons threatening the fleet.<sup>4</sup>

In apparent support, citing historic Army coastal and harbor defense as well as a homeland air defense role, the commander of United States Army Pacific, Gen. Robert Brown, explained the combat role of the Army in the multi-domain battle concept for the Pacific region. In an article published in March 2017, he described an Army battalion protecting an airfield and Army anti-ship assets ashore. But he only hinted at the traditional role of the Army defeating enemy armies when he wrote that multi-domain Army operations described in terms of assisting sea and air dominance “will then re-enable maneuver for the entire joint force in any region.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Tyranny of the Pivot

America continues to shift military power to the Pacific in response to China’s rise, but the Army’s full-spectrum capability is not being advocated in the mistaken belief that employment of sizable land power is ill-suited to the wider Asia-Pacific theater.<sup>6</sup> This myopic Asia-Pacific vision that truncates a full-spectrum Army combat role—despite the long history of Army land campaigns there—must be fixed. The Army must make the case for employing greater land power in strategic calculations concerning the vast continent away from the

Korean peninsula beyond the Pacific littorals, where large armies and air forces of near-peer adversaries or allies already stand ready to do battle.

America has worried almost exclusively about the “tyranny of distance” that America must overcome just to reach the Asia-Pacific theater. Increasing Chinese A2/AD capabilities create an environment that complicates the sheer distance by challenging the joint force to penetrate and operate within range of Chinese anti-ship weapons.<sup>7</sup> In a 9 November 2011 briefing, a Department of Defense official explained the need for what was then called Air-Sea Battle:

That environment demands that U.S. forces be able to turn quickly from a defensive posture to one of offensive posture—not to turn and leave an area, but to stay in place and to continue to operate within an area of the global commons and not to be pushed out.<sup>8</sup>

Renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC), the initially articulated objective remains to get into the sea areas off Asia and to “stay in place.” This is a reasonable objective. While a distant blockade is a potential U.S. response to the China A2/AD threat, this abandons all allies and partners who lie closer to China than the blockade line. The joint force must be able to push closer to China.

But, what is the purpose of fighting through anti-access weapons and staying there, if not to influence events ashore? The Army should provide its unique contribution to a joint campaign, “the ability to defeat and dominate opposing land forces and those elements contributing to the enemy’s ability to generate and project combat power.”<sup>9</sup> Although JAM-GC recognizes the need for land power, it forfeits the potential unique Army contribution by treating the Army (and the Marine Corps, to a lesser extent) as an auxiliary in an air and naval campaign.<sup>10</sup>

Fighting a major war in Asia is a new challenge for the modern Army, which is battle tested in Central Command and reengaged in Europe. While the Pacific does challenge America’s ability to deploy, fight, and sustain combat forces far from established bases, the Army cannot rule out land campaigns in Asia because it “does not have the luxury of preparing to fight only one type of enemy, at one time, in one place.”<sup>11</sup>

“Tyranny of the shores” is a far more serious problem than simply overcoming the tyranny of distance. It is

wrong to preclude debate about the Army's role in Asia by assuming there will be no land campaign in a war with China in the wider Asia-Pacific region:

We postulate that a war between the United States and China would be regional, conventional, and high-tech, and it would be waged mainly on and beneath the sea, in the air (with aircraft, drones, and missiles), in space, and in cyberspace. Although ground combat could occur in certain scenarios (e.g., a conflict over Korean unification), we exclude the possibility of a huge land war in Asia.<sup>12</sup>

China may or may not accept a limit on the scope of American military action, but the United States should not go along with that convenient assumption that simplifies China's defense problems. Rather than precluding a land campaign by the U.S. Army, China's geographic size confers both advantages and disadvantages for Army ground operations.<sup>13</sup>

The basic issue is that China is big, making it difficult for even a large invasion force to conquer China. On the other hand, if China must defend its far-flung coastal regions from American invasion because America does not assume such limits, the People's Liberation Army ground forces could be dispersed, both ceding the initiative and giving the U.S. Army an opening to gain victories with local superiority after early-entry forces secure a lodgment on the mainland.

Although Chinese economic growth enables the military means to challenge America in Asia, that growth creates vulnerability. A modernized China will have significant regional interdependence, making China an integrated whole rather than a collection of semi-independent economic centers. That China will be far more vulnerable to losing one piece of territory, and it may find that it cannot retreat to the interior and wait out an enemy that captures part of the periphery.<sup>14</sup>

For those focused on the naval missions, a close blockade enabled by Army and Marine Corps forces ashore will be more reassuring to allies within range of Chinese air and missile power. For a joint campaign with an objective to force China to accede via a land war, the Army may be able to achieve a limited victory in a ground campaign along the coast of China despite lacking the numbers to occupy the country.<sup>15</sup> But better opportunities exist around China's periphery.

## The Tyranny of Jointness

As an insular power, America must exert power and influence onto the Asian mainland from the sea. The Navy vision is to provide America with "maritime dominance."<sup>16</sup> Yet the Navy recognizes that even the core Navy mission of sea control "may require projecting power ashore" for supporting missions.<sup>17</sup> The Navy is understandably focused on Navy and Marine Corps roles. The Army needs to push for an expanded role ashore. The Army should prepare for a joint campaign in the Asia-Pacific theater that includes the full spectrum of Army combat capabilities to provide land dominance anywhere in the theater.<sup>18</sup>

The Falklands War required the Royal Navy to operate within range of Argentinean air power, reflecting current A2/AD concerns.<sup>19</sup> Yet, Britain operated within range of Argentina's air power because Britain needed to land ground forces in the Falklands to liberate the land and the people who lived there.

In World War II, the American fleet fought its way to the doorstep of Japan in the face of potent anti-access weapons (both conventional and Kamikaze planes that functioned like early cruise missiles) in order to carry out military operations directly against the Japanese home islands.

What does PACOM do with the access it gains to remain in the seas close to China? The ability to defeat A2/AD capabilities is not an end but the means to overcome those capabilities *to influence events ashore*. PACOM must contemplate using access to the sea areas off China to project Army-led forces ashore to help allies under attack or to open new ground fronts against China.

China is certainly not America's enemy. China's ambitions may yet mellow to solidify cooperation for mutual and regional benefit, but thus far "China's behavior

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has created friction with regional neighbors including U.S. allies and partners.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite China’s geographic size, which limits ground campaign objectives in China itself, a significant ground campaign would be possible in JAM-GC-enabled campaign plans around China’s periphery. This view of defeating China is worth exploring:

A limited maritime campaign would afflict China with a nagging “ulcer,” much as the Duke of Wellington’s 1807–14 campaign in Portugal and Spain—one prosecuted from the sea, with expeditionary forces fighting ashore alongside indigenous partisans—inflicted on France what Napoleon termed a “Spanish ulcer.”<sup>21</sup>

This suggestion is interesting, and recent emphasis on multi-domain synergy has the potential of moving the Army role beyond the impulse of the recent past that suggested that Army (or Marine Corps) units “with maritime-strike capability would deliver major strategic benefits.”<sup>22</sup> That thinking, if not corrected, will continue to envision a limited Army combat role that fails to exploit the Army’s ability to seize and hold land, which was the real source of Napoleon’s Spanish ulcer that thwarted his efforts to dominate the European continent.

If America seeks to influence events on the shores of Asia, small Army units with anti-ship and antiaircraft assets posted on small strategically important islands are merely unpleasant indigestion rather than a debilitating condition that could fatally weaken China.<sup>23</sup>

The Army may have been given a seat “very late” in the JAM-GC process, but the Army’s perspective can bring a view that is lacking.<sup>24</sup> To truly exploit JAM-GC—and indeed for the doctrine to make any sense at all—the Army must be prepared to go ashore in force for limited objective campaigns. That scope of threat will fulfill the Army vision of being part of a joint military and civilian effort that can prevent conflict and defend stability.<sup>25</sup> This will truly “defeat aggression against U.S. interests and increase the likelihood of ... preserving peace” in Asia and the Pacific region.<sup>26</sup>

## The Tyranny of Numbers

The 2010 “Quadrennial Defense Review Report” focused the military on overcoming enemy conventional forces that use anti-access strategies.<sup>27</sup> The retreat from the centrality of ground war occurred despite the fact that ground forces defeated enemies in

Iraq and knocked back enemies in Afghanistan with surges of ground troops. Even though there were worries that a decade of combat would break the Army, in the end, it became combat tested.

Yet Americans in response to the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may be unwilling to contemplate such casualties any time soon.<sup>28</sup> The country seemingly resumed its pre-9/11 path to deemphasizing ground combat and reducing the Army in favor of joint forces capable of wielding precise air-delivered firepower supplemented by Army fires assets.<sup>29</sup>

China fields sizable and well-supported land forces. How can the smaller U.S. Army wage a ground campaign against such a foe defending a large territory?

For the Army to provide its unique capabilities to a joint campaign in Asia, it must concede that this tyranny of numbers makes the Army more suited to limited-objective campaigns. Just as the Army advanced on Mexico City to achieve territorial concessions and marched across Georgia to sow despair in two of our nineteenth century wars, the Army may have enough operational superiority to dominate the area where it stands.

But, the ability to march at will and destroy local defenders is no substitute for the ability to occupy an enemy nation and impose victory. Air and naval power (and increasingly in the future, space and cyber power) will always be able to punish more easily than large ground forces, albeit much more slowly, so the Army must make sure its operations are not simply a substitute for bombardment and destruction. The Army must be able to achieve limited objectives in a war against a regional peer competitor, despite its small size relative to the Asia-Pacific area. Leveraging the land power of friends and allies will be crucial to allowing the Army to employ land power to gain strategic effect in a joint campaign.

The *National Security Strategy* states that Russia and China challenge American power, influence, and interests; while naming Iran and North Korea as states that threaten America and its allies by destabilizing regions.<sup>30</sup> Russia, North Korea, and China lie in the Asia-Pacific theater (see figure, page 105).

The Korean peninsula is the most obvious scenario—because it was done once already—of fighting a land campaign with an ally against a threat. Other scenarios suited to ground operations in Asia include Japan, Taiwan, or the Philippines to repulse



(Graphic by author; map courtesy of CIA World Factbook)

**Figure. Potential East Asia Scenarios Involving Ground Forces**

invaders; the capture of Hainan Island to deny China bases to project naval and air power south; an expedition to Myanmar to deprive China of power projection bases into the Indian Ocean (either as an enemy or ally of Myanmar); the South China Sea (and other areas with small strategically important islands); Vietnam, which may look to America for help against a repeat of China's 1979 invasion; and India, which could face Chinese ground forces in India's northeast where assertive Chinese territorial claims compel India to bolster force structure and infrastructure. The red arrows in the figure show these potential points of friction.

Although North Korea is the most likely land threat and while China poses the broadest range of land challenges, should America not consider that Russian-Japanese territorial disputes could require a limited ground fight with Russia that would need to overcome Russia's A2/AD capabilities? Indeed, is it out of bounds to wonder if Russia one day might value the potential power of an American contingency expeditionary force to help Russia resist irredentist Chinese claims to

portions of Russia's far east that China lost in the nineteenth century?

While the U.S. Army is relatively small in numbers compared to the space and population of the Asian mainland, there are many scenarios where America would have large local allied ground forces to fight alongside.

In many ways, given the hard-earned experience gained in Iraq since 1991 and Afghanistan since 2001, American ground forces have

a greater relative advantage over China's ground forces than American naval and air power have over their opposite numbers. Just maintaining a ground war option against China will cause China to divert resources from air and naval capabilities, giving American air and naval assets a greater chance of defeating Chinese A2/AD to enter and remain in the western Pacific.<sup>31</sup>

An Army-Marine Corps force on the scale of those sent for Desert Storm or the Iraq War is the practical upper force limit even for a war against China unless America is willing to commit all active and reserve units for the duration and mobilize large numbers of new units.

And yes, even this would help in the A2/AD realm. Once ashore in force, Army air defense and fires assets could assist the Navy in staying in east Asian waters, in addition to the advantage of holding terrain and bases that the enemy might otherwise use to project power to sea. The Air Force could deploy air assets to captured air bases on the mainland to defend the Navy's ability to operate close to the Asian mainland.

The problem will be in translating operational-level battlefield success into victory in war. That

will be the job of the diplomats who must persuade China to accept limited losses rather than risk a prolonged war or escalation.

## The Tyranny of the Shores

The Army's core competency is combined arms maneuver:

Combined arms maneuver is the application of combat power in time and space to defeat enemy ground forces, seize, occupy, and defend land areas and achieve physical, temporal, and psychological advantages over the enemy.<sup>32</sup>

The relatively small size of the U.S. Army limits its unique contributions to a joint campaign against a regional peer competitor such as China. But, full multi-domain synergy requires PACOM to leverage the full spectrum of Army combat capabilities.

The Army can support Navy and Air Force JAM-GC efforts with anti-ship and air defense assets, but this must not be the limit of the Army's combat role in PACOM. Army force levels must be determined in the context of how the Army will fight a possibly protracted land campaign in the Asia-Pacific theater in conjunction with the Air Force and Navy, and with the Marine Corps at its side, as these two ground components have long fought.

The Army must contribute its unique capability to America's pivot to Asia, where large areas pose new challenges to the Army accustomed to conventional campaigns in the narrow confines of Europe, South Korea, and Iraq. On the surface, JAM-GC seems central for PACOM, where the tyranny of distance puts a premium on strategically mobile naval and air power. As the Navy likes to say, "70 percent of the world's population lives within one hundred miles of a coastline."<sup>33</sup>

That fact is true enough. But 100 percent of those people live *on land*. And six of the world's ten largest armies are in Asia.<sup>34</sup> A pivot to the Asia-Pacific region is a weak pivot without a focus on the land where our allies live:

A more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners, will sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order.<sup>35</sup>

The U.S. Army must take its rightful place in America's Asia-Pacific strategy in order to control (or help allies defend) the land and people that JAM-GC seeks to gain access to. Just knowing that the United States will not commit significant ground power gives an enemy the advantage of knowing it can operate in ways that they could not without that knowledge of American commitment limits.<sup>36</sup>

Continuing conflicts in the Middle East since 2001 and a renewed focus on Europe since 2014 make it understandable that the Army has not fully recognized the wider challenges and opportunities in the Asia-Pacific region.

The full potential of the Army to contribute significant numbers of brigade combat teams for land campaigns appears largely ignored in the vast expanse of PACOM. Without disembarking the Army on the shore, what is the point of being able to penetrate A2/AD weapons and remain off the coast of China as their area denial strategy seeks to prevent America from doing? Is it really important merely to sail at will off the coast of where those people and those armies live and deploy?

The tyranny of the shores is absolute. Asia is an Army problem, too. ■

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## Notes

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[maritime/150227-CS21R-Final.pdf](http://www.navy.mil/local/maritime/150227-CS21R-Final.pdf). "Today's global security environment is characterized by the rising importance of the Indo-Asia-Pacific region, the ongoing development and fielding of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities that challenge our global maritime access, continued threats from expanding and evolving terrorist and criminal networks, the increasing frequency and intensity of maritime territorial disputes, and threats to maritime commerce, particularly the flow of energy."

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7. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2017* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense [DOD], May 2017), 49–52, accessed 5 December 2017, [https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017\\_China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report.PDF?ver=2017-06-06-141328-770](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF?ver=2017-06-06-141328-770).

8. "Background Briefing on Air-Sea Battle by Defense Officials from the Pentagon," U.S. DOD news transcript, 9 November 2011, accessed 5 July 2017, <http://archive.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4923>.

9. Brian M. Michelson, "Strategic Landpower in the 21st Century: A Conceptual Framework," Landpower Essay No. 15-1 (Arlington, VA: AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, March 2015), 3.

10. Robert Brown, "At a Pacific Crossroads: U.S. Must Prepare for Present, Future Threats in Dynamic Region," *Army Magazine* (May 2017), 32–33. Brown wrote that the Army "can no longer leave the air and sea to other services." But, changing the Army too much to venture into the air and sea risks neglecting the Army's unique ability to fight land campaigns. If the Army will not fight on land, who will?

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12. David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garaola, *War with China: Thinking through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), 11, accessed 12 January 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1140.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1140.html).

13. John M. Collins, *Military Geography for Professionals and the Public* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1998), 17–18.

14. Charles F. Hawkins, "The People's Liberation Army Looks to the Future," *Joint Force Quarterly* 25 (2000): 16.

15. Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54–57. Archer Jones contrasts a raiding strategy with a persisting strategy. His definitions work for both offensive and defensive warfare. A persisting strategy of taking or holding terrain requires a high troop-to-area ratio to exert a strong physical presence to own the land. With a low troop-to-area ratio, attempting to occupy the entire area is futile. A raiding strategy is the alternative. On the defensive, a raiding strategy does not attempt to hold a front to stop an enemy but conducts a mobile defense to defeat the invader by waiting for opportunities for military victories or just seeks to avoid battle in the hope of tiring the invaders out. On the offensive, a raiding strategy involves maneuver to inflict military defeats or seize critical terrain to inflict pain and does not seek to take and hold terrain except for short periods to gain local successes. Despite advances in weaponry and surveillance, neither virtual occupation with aircraft flying overhead nor Third Offset-enhanced troops spread thinly are a substitute for troop density.

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17. A *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, 24.

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21. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, "Asymmetric Warfare, American Style," *Proceedings* (April 2012): 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 29; citing U.S. DOD, *Joint Combat Concept, Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, 8 November 2010, 27.

23. Vincent Alcazar and Thomas M. Lafleur, "A Role for Land Warfare Forces in Overcoming A2/AD," *Military Review* 93, no. 6 (November–December 2013): 79, accessed 5 December 2017, [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20131231\\_art014.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20131231_art014.pdf). A step up from being the Navy's land-based anti-shipping force, while still insufficient, is the suggestion that the Army use light infantry brigade combat teams for A2/AD raids, seizures, and reconnaissance.

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27. Roy Godson and Richard H. Shultz Jr., "A QDR for All Seasons?," *Joint Force Quarterly* 59 (4th Quarter 2010): 53–54, accessed 5 December 2017, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-59.pdf>.

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31. Nicholas R. Krueger, "The Rationale for a Robust U.S. Army Presence in the Pacific Basin," *National Security Watch* 12-2 (Arlington, VA: AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, March 2012), 5–6.

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33. A *Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, vi.

34. Benjamin A. Bennett, "Integrating Landpower in the Indo-Asia-Pacific through 2020: Analysis of a Theater Army Campaign Design," *The Land Warfare Papers*, no. 107 (Arlington, VA: AUSA Institute of Land Warfare, May 2015), 2.

35. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. DOD, 2018), 1, accessed 12 February 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

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