

# The Army in the Indo-Pacific

## Relevant but Not a Tripwire

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**T**wo recent *Military Review* articles endorse the utility of land forces in the Indo-Pacific, specifically regarding Taiwan (Capt. Walker Mills, “Deterring the Dragon,” and Brian J. Dunn, “Drive Them into the Sea,” September-October 2020). While Dunn calls for a corps-sized element intended to deploy

to Taiwan to deter Chinese attack, Mills recommends basing U.S. troops in Taiwan to demonstrate American commitment. While landpower clearly has a role to play in the region, a Taiwanese tripwire is a foolhardy suggestion that would *undermine* American military capacity and flexibility while inflaming tensions without gaining advantage. This article considers the unique capabilities landpower brings to the Indo-Pacific while cautioning against overestimating China’s capabilities or responding rashly to its growth.

*(Note: To simplify, the Republic of China*

*will be hereinafter referred to as Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China will be referred to as China or PRC.)*

### Landpower’s Utility in the Indo-Pacific and Need for Joint Options

Much has been written about a return to great-power competition, but the Army must consider its primary duty is to provide a spectrum of flexible, coherent, affordable, and feasible options to policy makers. Strategy is fundamentally about matching means to ends, but ends can vary across a region, necessitating varying means. An era of great-power competition does not imply a great-power war will be predominant. Even during the forty-year Cold War, U.S. and Soviet planners designed forces and doctrine to counter the other, but each state’s forces were predominantly employed in low-level conflicts, often working with or against proxy forces. Lest we become the “instruments of our own downfall,” the joint force must develop tools across the spectrum of conflict during force design, fielding, and training.<sup>1</sup> Platforms, units, and plans cannot exist solely for high-end conflict while we hope they work at the low end; the force must provide policy makers options across the spectrum of conflict ranging from deterring an adversary to compelling him to our will (see figure 1, page 24).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the 2017 *National Security Strategy* calling for growing America’s capabilities in the region, a 2020 Army War College report stated the joint force was “out of position” in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> The lack of a “common joint path” and a force posture ill-suited to the region’s “hypercompetitive” environment means the joint force cannot ably respond to developing regional threats and

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Taiwanese soldiers take part in a drill 19 January 2021 ahead of the Chinese New Year at a military base in Hsinchu, Taiwan. (Photo by Ann Wang, Reuters)

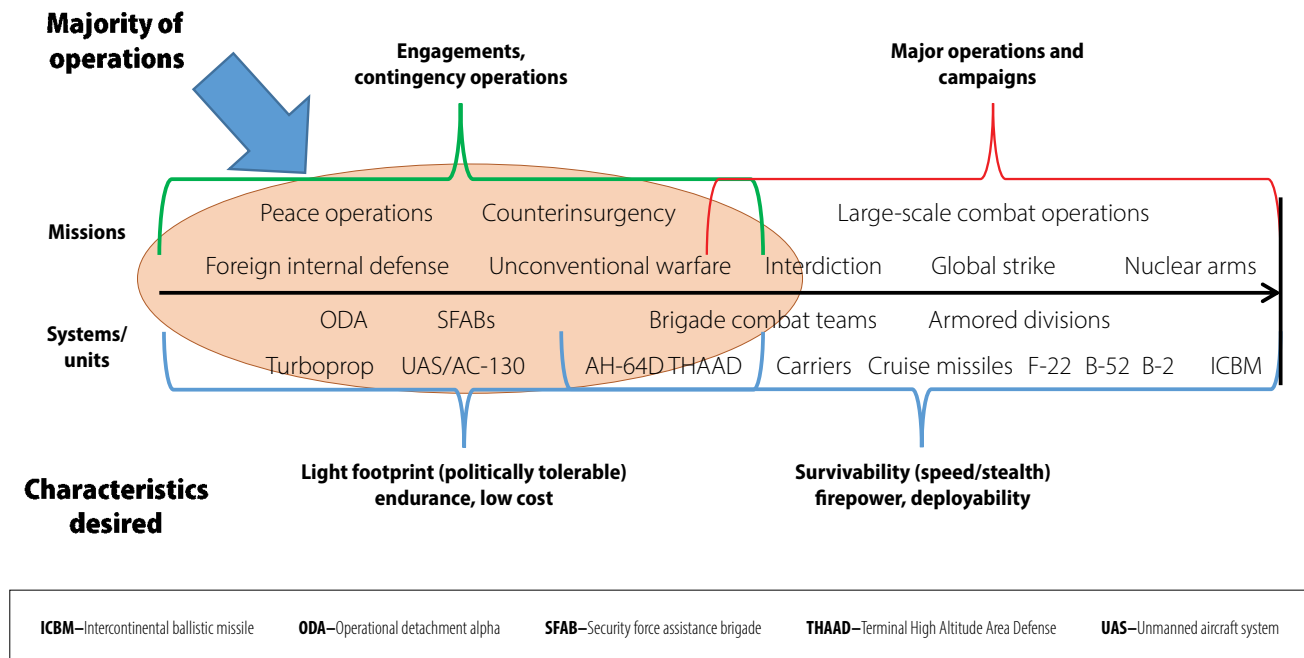
conditions.<sup>4</sup> These deficiencies (both conceptual and structural) are made clear by China's development of anti-access/area denial capabilities underpinned by illegal island building and also by China's increasing use of "gray-zone" techniques such as encouraging Chinese fishermen to illegally trawl in other states' economic zones. By the former, China inhibits American freedom of maneuver, while the latter exploits Western cognitive demarcations between war and peace.

Given the maritime scope and vast scale of the Indo-Pacific, naval and air domains would seem predominant. And while air and naval platforms may do the bulk of the movement, and potentially the fighting, land forces retain their utility simply because people reside on land, only temporarily occupying the air or sea. Furthermore, land-based capabilities are often easier to conceal, cheaper to employ, and more survivable.<sup>5</sup> Systems ranging from Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense to Short-Range Air Defense and Aegis Ashore demonstrate these traits.<sup>6</sup>

Landpower has unique characteristics beyond seizing and holding ground. It can function as a "grid" of theater-wide functions including basing, port operations, and general sustainment, enabling joint force

access and longevity (see figure 2, page 25).<sup>7</sup> This grid consists of enabler units and host-nation support and staging agreements. Accordingly, the Army should continue to develop I Corps (based at Joint Base Lewis-McChord) as its Indo-Pacific operational headquarters, which, working with U.S. Army Pacific and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, can conduct reception, staging, onward movement, and integration for joint and multinational forces across the region while also coordinating joint fires for multi-domain task forces. Developing these capabilities ensures policy makers have options.

Landpower also has its distinctive utility as a means for regional cooperation. Army security force assistance brigades and special operations forces allow the application of landpower short of war by working with allies and partners.<sup>8</sup> Army forces can best relate with partnered and allied forces given the fundamental similarities between ground forces as opposed to platform-focused naval and



(Figure by author)

**Figure 1. U.S. Military Units and Systems Across the Spectrum of Conflict**

air forces. Since “7 of the 10 largest armies in the world are in the Pacific theater, and 22 of the 27 countries in the region have an army officer as chief of defense” (many of whom attended the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), the Army is well-equipped to “speak” to regional players with its cadre of foreign area officers.<sup>9</sup>

The Army’s Pacific Pathways framework means American landpower is “west of the international date-line ten months of the year” and engaging with multiple regional militaries including Singapore, Thailand, Australia, and Palau.<sup>10</sup> Pathways builds interoperability and relationships in ways that port visits or senior leader delegations do not. However, landpower’s utility does not allow for poor strategy. Placing U.S. forces in Taiwan would needlessly escalate tensions with China for a purely symbolic show of support, one that pales in comparison to actual support such as the sale of nearly \$2 billion worth of arms to Taiwan annually.<sup>11</sup> Doing so would unnecessarily escalate predominantly gray-zone competition, forcing China to actively consider Taiwan “lost” and then potentially escalating plans to attack Taiwan or elsewhere. With this gauntlet thrown, we now turn to China and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

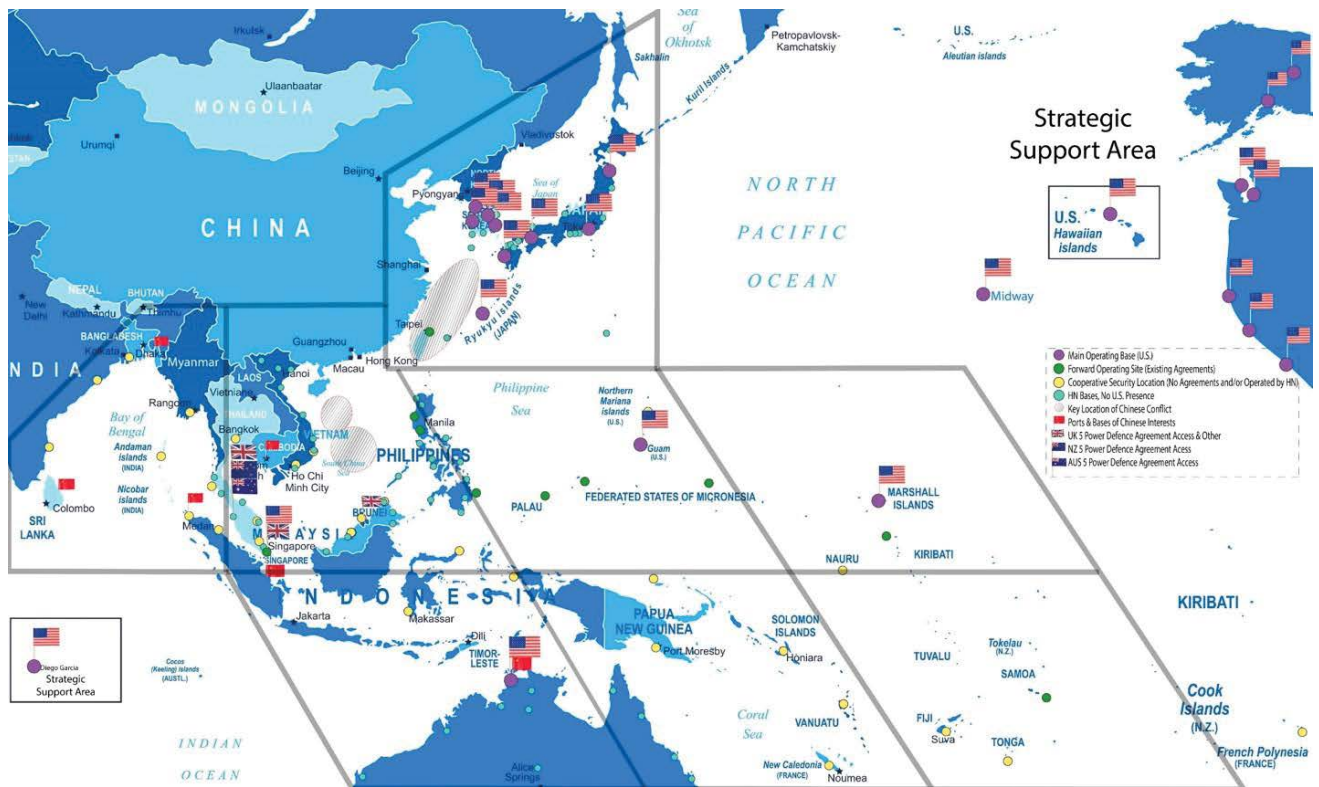
## Assessing the People’s Liberation Army

We should not mistake China’s economic might for assured military dominance nor assume the PRC is blessed with exceptional foresight. The evidence does not support these assertions. China demonstrated strategic mistakes and errors over the past generation, from antagonizing its Southeast Asian neighbors to failing to build an effective anti-American coalition. Assuming PRC clairvoyance repeats America’s early Cold War mistakes about Soviet missiles, aircraft, and technological developments when, in fact, the United States led in nearly every measurement, always qualitatively and often quantitatively until the 1970s.<sup>12</sup> In examining China, we see a pattern of often disastrous grand plans, from the 1950’s Great Leap Forward and Anti-Sparrow Campaign to the modern Belt and Road Initiative (which has not yet borne the fruit PRC President Xi Jinping promised).<sup>13</sup>

## U.S. and Chinese Capabilities

Turning to China’s military, a 2017 RAND Corporation report as well as the annual Department of Defense *China Power Report* demonstrate that while





(Figure from *An Army Transformed: USINDOPACOM Hypercompetition and US Army Theater Design*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2020)

**Figure 2. The Army as the Grid**

the PLA's capabilities have certainly improved, China still has, at best, regional parity with American and Taiwanese forces (see figure 3, page 27).<sup>14</sup> This is not to say the PLA forces are not formidable, but the PLA's last major fight was a limited invasion of Vietnam in 1979 (China lost) while its last amphibious operation was in the 1950s against nationalists fleeing Hainan Island.<sup>15</sup> Looking further back, excluding 1979, not a single PLA soldier has fought in more than a border skirmish since the Korean War. We should not confuse modernization for capability or experience, nor quantity for quality.

Mills notes that China has declared returning Taiwan to the PRC is a "core interest" and that a cross-strait operation is the PLA's "#1 strategic objective."<sup>16</sup> But Americans often fail to understand the PLA is a component of the CCP, meaning ideology is predominant, and these declarations must be taken in context as propaganda as much as they are doctrine.

Even so, when considering that China's armed forces are focused on invading Taiwan, one must remember

Taiwan's military is *entirely* dedicated to defending the island. Taiwan is no mere symbolic island. For the Taiwanese, an invasion is a question of literal life or death, not power politics. The Taiwanese military is not a pushover—even when compared to its mainland nemesis. Discounting Taiwanese capabilities (or love of freedom) is incorrect at best and, at worst, reflects paternalistic attitudes that previously spoiled America's relationship with South Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> According to the U.S. Naval Institute, though Taiwan's military is dwarfed by the PLA, its active-duty forces are comparable to the U.S. Army, with roughly three hundred thousand troops.<sup>18</sup> As a percentage of twenty-three million citizens, this likely represents the world's highest mobilization rate. Furthermore, Taiwan's reserve mobilization capacity is able to arm hundreds of thousands of islanders.<sup>19</sup> Taiwan's military is well equipped after decades of buying American equipment. As a result, Taiwanese forces comprise a strong defense against invasion from an improved but still developing PLA.

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## Imagining a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan

While the forecasts vary, none assume that the PLA, even with operational dominance, would easily subdue Taiwan. To occupy Taiwan, China would first need to establish air and sea dominance against peer (or better) systems before deploying sufficient force to establish a foothold and then occupy the island. Given Taiwan's approximately 120,000 active army and marine troops, the historical attacking-to-defending ratio of 3:1 means nearly 300,000 PLA troops would need to fight ashore via airborne, air assault, airlift, and amphibious means. It is unlikely that the PLA could ready such an enormous force without tipping its hand, further enhancing Taiwan's (and the combined American, Japanese, and Australian) response. Estimates generally agree that the PLA would need at least thirty days to begin moving equipment and personnel to embarkation ports and airfields, giving the Taiwanese time to mobilize their million-plus reserves.<sup>20</sup> Taiwan's geography also favors the defense. With only three to four months of good weather

Taiwanese Air Force "Not Old Anymore—See You Soon" infographic released in 2019 of the Taiwanese F-16s, which are emblematic of America's commitment to Taiwan. (Photo courtesy of the Taiwanese Air Force)

per year and only thirteen western beaches capable of landing large amphibious forces, PLA forces moved to Taiwan via air would quickly find themselves isolated, especially considering the mines, destructible bridges, and other impediments built along Taiwan's coast.<sup>21</sup>

Carl von Clausewitz cautioned that "war is a more than sum in arithmetic."<sup>22</sup> Taiwan, which is fiercely committed to its independence, would not simply be quelled with PLA troops ashore. PLA troops would find armor, air power, and high-tech advantages nullified by Taiwan's dense urban environment. Historic doctrine recommends at least twenty troops per one thousand civilians to subdue an insurgency.<sup>23</sup> Applying this standard, China would need to sustain approximately 460,000 troops on Taiwan for years after an invasion. Both attacking force

and occupational force totals exceed the PLA's strength in the regions adjacent to Taiwan, and the latter is roughly 50 percent of China's total ground forces.<sup>24</sup> For reference, this force is nearly three times what America maintained in Iraq at the height of that war.<sup>25</sup>

As this brief analysis shows, an invasion remains unlikely, despite the alarmist rhetoric, due to weather, accidents, and chance compounding already enormous difficulties. It seems more likely that an island of twenty-three million freedom-loving Taiwanese with an effective navy and U.S.-provided fourth-generation fighter aircraft could repel a force that has not fought a war since a limited invasion in 1979 and has not won a battle against a peer in nearly three centuries. At a minimum, the Taiwanese could delay the PLA while the United States and other Western powers mobilized forces and enacted punishing economic sanctions; one can imagine even a successful PLA invasion devolving into a contested occupation. Such a "Taiwanese ulcer" would constrain PRC options over the medium and long terms.

Why Basing Troops in Taiwan is a Bad Idea

U.S. troops in Taiwan would create an unacceptable moral hazard, underwriting Taiwanese with American lives and geostrategic flexibility. Mills presumes too much regarding the deterrent effect of potential U.S. forces in Taiwan. Mills quotes Thomas Schelling to point out that "one cannot incur a genuine commitment" solely via promises but fails to heed Schelling's advice that the best strategies limit an adversary's options while preserving one's own; U.S. troops in Taiwan would do the opposite.<sup>26</sup> U.S. forces are an ancillary consideration to China's calculus in what is primarily a political decision

Taiwan conflict				
Scorecard	1996	2003	2010	2017
1. Chinese attacks on air bases				
2. U.S. vs. Chinese air superiority				
3. U.S. airspace penetration				
4. U.S. attacks on air bases				
5. Chinese anti-surface warfare				
6. U.S. anti-surface warfare				
7. U.S. counterspace				
8. Chinese counterspace				
9. U.S. vs. China cyberwar				

Key for scorecards 1–9		
U.S. capabilities		Chinese capabilities
Major advantage		Major disadvantage
Advantage		Disadvantage
Approximate parity		Approximate parity
Disadvantage		Advantage
Major disadvantage		Major advantage

(Figure from *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard*, RAND Corporation, 2017)

Figure 3. RAND Corporation Scorecard

(to attack Taiwan). Moreover, any U.S. force short of an armored brigade would be tactically and operationally insufficient to seriously affect PRC decisions but would

become America's focal point, hindering its ability to support Taiwan. In effect, troops on the island would cripple American policy. Like Douglas MacArthur's isolated Philippines garrison in 1942, this force would not deter a major power having decided on war but would constrain America's response.

Schelling also warned that deterrence depends on "communicating our own intentions."<sup>27</sup> Since America

competition with China, allies and partners are paramount and an important American advantage. But the minute a uniformed American soldier or marine arrives on Taiwan, states will have to make a choice between the U.S. and China, curtailing U.S. asymmetric advantages by forcing allies and partners to choose between the United States and the PRC absent any PRC inciting action. Forty years of strategic ambiguity

“An island of twenty-three million freedom-loving Taiwanese with an effective navy and U.S.-provided fourth-generation fighter aircraft could repel a force that has not fought a war since a limited invasion in 1979 and has not won a battle against a peer in nearly three centuries.”

has pledged to provide Taiwan a credible defense for two generations, sending troops to the island is escalation (and also major change to policy) without benefit. Troops in Taiwan would marginally raise the threshold of Chinese action but tie the hands of American policy makers and military commanders. Just as dangerous as not appreciating an enemy is naively committing to unachievable ends. American troops on the island would explicitly show Taiwan was lost to the PRC. Well-established "loss aversion" behavior means that troops on the island, rather than deter, would *increase* the chance of war.<sup>28</sup> Deterrence presumes a rational adversary who understands American actions as intent, an astounding presumption of American ability to convey strategic intent. But given the PRC's ideological focus on reclaiming Taiwan, rationality should not be expected in this area.

Conflict on a spectrum requires utilizing all elements of power, not just military and certainly not U.S. troops used as a "tripwire." But if troops will not deter China, what will? Put simply: everything else. The United States has other instruments of statecraft and elements of national power to deter and, if necessary, compel China. For example, one-third of China's oil comes from the Middle East or Africa via sea lanes America and its allies could control.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, American economic power allows for targeted sanctions against China's "military-civil fusion."<sup>30</sup> In

has served America well; placing troops in Taiwan would abrogate that flexibility.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

A Chinese invasion of Taiwan is no mere theoretical exercise. The island's independence has been a thorn in the CCP's side since 1949. Taiwan's independence is a reminder of China's "Century of Humiliation" from 1849 to 1949 when Western powers, internal rebellion, and civil war destroyed the Chinese state. The CCP, and Xi especially, use this history and near-xenophobic nationalist rhetoric—"勿忘国耻" (Never Forget National Humiliation) is a common phrase in CCP propaganda—as a means to foster unity and excuse the party's abusive techno-authoritarianism.<sup>31</sup> As an example of this nationalistic bent, in May 2020, China dropped "peaceful" from its pledge to retake the island.

However, China's overarching focus is maintaining domestic tranquility.<sup>32</sup> We should not perceive, through our own narcissism, that China is a diabolical actor built on succeeding the United States. China is acting as one would expect a growing, insecure, power to act—haphazardly flexing its muscle (economic and military) to establish regional dominance with success in some areas and failure in others—much like the United States of the late nineteenth century.<sup>33</sup> That does not mean the United States should ignore or



accede to Chinese actions, only that China's actions are not surprising, nor are its attempts to challenge existing orders to build its own institutions.

Indeed, as China grows, securing domestic tranquility (or at least acquiescence) will become increasingly important as the emerging Chinese middle-class chafes against CCP restrictions. Xi's use of Chinese nationalism can be better seen as a means to quell domestic dissent than achieving global dominance.



Chief Warrant Officer 4 Trevor J. Saari (right) holds a discussion with Royal Thai Army aviators in early 2019 during a deployment in support of Pacific Pathways 19-01 in Thailand. The Pacific Pathways program has the goal of expanding the U.S. Army's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and is critical in building alliances that can help deter Chinese aggression in the region. (Photo by author)

Overestimating the PRC's threat to Taiwan and the larger Indo-Pacific reflects a failure of imagination and an inaccurate calculus regarding U.S. strengths in the region. We must remember that most of China's military developments are *defensive*, designed to *inhibit* U.S. freedom of maneuver. These Chinese tools require a deliberate response across the joint force, not simply placing troops in harm's way. The thought of basing troops in Taiwan falls into a classic American trap of seeing conflict as binary, with clear distinctions between war and peace. Mills' logic is simple: since we cannot stop

China everywhere, we should shape the conflict to our liking by putting troops in Taiwan. But doing so benefits China more than America because it plays into the imperialist narrative the CCP espouses while limiting U.S. options.

The United States has a plethora of tools, ranging from economic pressure and sanctions to a capable, forward-deployed military, whereas China has two: financial coercion and military threats. Between allies

(China has North Korea) and partners (China has few) and global leverage, America remains strong. We should not discount the power and attractiveness of American ideals which, even when tarnished, still appeal to people around the world. China's leaders are "haunted by the power and attraction" of these American ideals to the Chinese people.<sup>34</sup> In 1947, George Kennan predicted the Soviet system would collapse as it "[bore] within it the seeds of its own decay."<sup>35</sup> As it is with modern China—it is an appearance of strength predicated on unsustainable coercion, manipulation, and control.

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* calls for the employment of informational and economic elements of power to counter China.<sup>36</sup> Complicating policy options, troops in Taiwan would make the ambiguous explicit. Rather than helping the United States regain the initiative in the Indo-Pacific, plopping an isolated contingent in a vulnerable location would limit American options while giving credence to Chinese claims of America striving toward hegemony, all while hamstringing Taiwan's operational-level defense. As a result, the United States would have to align significant combat power to respond to nearly any threat to Taiwan. Such



power would be apportioned and therefore unavailable for other efforts to expand U.S. influence and further any competitive advantages throughout the region. The joint force must provide flexible, rapidly deployable force packages to provide policy makers a suite of options to respond along the spectrum of escalation. While the logic of forward positioning troops make sense, Taiwan is a bridge too far, lacking the facilities and power projection platforms needed

to be useful.<sup>37</sup> Instead, joint force should consider basing a brigade-sized unit in Guam, Okinawa, or the Japanese mainland. This force would have the deterrent effects Mills calls for while also being applicable across the Indo-Pacific.

For the Army, Taiwan represents a scenario where landpower may not be predominant but is nonetheless essential. U.S. Army Pacific and I Corps will be required to usher joint and multinational forces into the region in the event of conflict in Taiwan. The “grid” concept modernizes and regionalizes theater support operations performed by the Army during the Gulf War as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, Army operational capabilities such as airborne employment from the continental United States or Alaska to the Indo-Pacific, tactical air assault, and air movement remain essential.

That said, the Army *must* invest in its Indo-Pacific capabilities. While units have become regionally aligned with a specific Pacific Pathways exercise, the personnel system does not leverage regional expertise effectively. No language or regional association considerations exist within the assignment system, despite the nearly decade-old “pivot to the Indo-Pacific.” Given the region’s importance, specialized training, especially in language skills, is necessary.

The Army must continue to improve its linkages to joint and regional partners throughout the Indo-Pacific. Though Pacific Pathways is a fine start, the Army must ready itself for competition along a spectrum of conflict. Decisive action training has helped shepherd this concept, but the nature of the Indo-Pacific, with multiple states, languages, and competing interests, creates a complicated venue for employment. As a result, the Army should establish a Pacific University under the auspices of U.S. Army Pacific to better prepare Army leaders for operating in the region. By providing “the grid” for empowering the joint force as well as landpower capabilities such as Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense and survivable basing options, the Army remains a key player in the Indo-Pacific. It is uniquely capable to reinforce the asymmetric advantages the United States possesses vis-à-vis China. ■

*The author wishes to thank Maj. Frank Kuzminski for his contributions to this article.*

## Military Review FOR YOUR INTEREST



To view “Deterring the Dragon: Returning U.S. Forces to Taiwan” by Capt. Walker Mills, U.S. Marine Corps, from the September-October 2020 edition of *Military Review*, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Mills-Deterring-Dragon/>.



To view “Drive Them into the Sea” by Brian J. Dunn from the September-October 2020 edition of *Military Review*, visit <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/September-October-2020/Dunn-Drive-Into-Sea/>.

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