



Units from the 25th Combat Aviation Brigade and 25th Infantry Division Artillery participate in a joint live-fire exercise with U.S. Marine Corps units 30 December 2020 during Operation Wardog Kila at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The 25th Infantry Division consistently demonstrates its readiness to accomplish any mission set through its active engagement with joint and international partners to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. (Photo by Sgt. Sarah D. Sangster, U.S. Army)

# The Theater Army and the Consequence of Landpower for the Indo-Pacific

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The Indo-Pacific is the focal point of military competition among great powers where adversaries like China, Russia, and North Korea increasingly contest the U.S. joint force in all domains. Adm. Chris “Lung” Aquilino, the new head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, agrees with the bold statement by his predecessor that “the erosion of conventional deterrence is the greatest danger to the United States in the region.”<sup>1</sup> But given national policy that labels the Indo-Pacific as the priority theater and tags China as the pacing threat, the U.S. Army has struggled to communicate why landpower matters in a region characterized by oceans, seas, and straits, and against an adversary that few expect to fight on land. Policy makers have backed an approach to restore conventional deterrence largely by procuring more advanced naval, air, and space platforms like unmanned surface vessels, fifth-generation stealth fighters, and early warning satellites.<sup>2</sup> However, to help cover these investments, the Army’s topline has been slashed by \$3.6 billion, which raises security concerns across the globe but acutely in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> The decline in landpower investments, made worse by tightening defense spending, poses a grave concern because only landpower can generate the foundation of conventional deterrence. Advanced platforms from other services undeniably provide enhanced coercive capability, but the U.S. Army and landpower uniquely underpin the joint force’s coercive credibility to apply all forms of military power across all domains.

As defense policy analyst Andrew Krepinevich argues, deterrence works—by denial or by punishment—when the threat of or actual use of force prevents an adversary from pursuing a desired action.<sup>4</sup> Further, Krepinevich perceives “a growing reliance on conventional forces to underwrite deterrence against non-nuclear forms of large-scale aggression.”<sup>5</sup> One way to illuminate landpower’s vital contribution to conventional deterrence, and the broader value of the Army in the Indo-Pacific, centers around three intertwined and nonreplicable sets of roles performed by one of the least understood, yet most essential, Army echelons—the theater army. First, as America’s theater army for the Indo-Pacific, U.S. Army Pacific conducts the bulk of the joint force’s endless administrative and support requirements that no organization from any service has the capability, capacity, or desire to perform. Second,

the theater army shapes and influences the terrain of military competition by expanding the competitive space alongside security partners and extending the operational reach of the joint force. Finally, the theater army prevents emerging crises from irreversibly harming U.S. interests and, most critically to national defense, allows the joint force to prevail in all forms of land warfare including large-scale combat operations. The other services’ advanced platforms all perform key roles, but without decisive landpower to integrate and enable all domain capabilities, the joint force will never achieve the secretary of defense’s urgent desire to establish “integrated deterrence.”<sup>6</sup>

## Administer and Support Enduring Needs of the Force

The Army has routinely formed organizations meant to address the hefty administrative and support tasks associated with raising and maintaining armies. However, today’s theater armies do far more than their organizational predecessors. The Army has historically formed organizational units by function or geographic boundaries under a department system. Departments date to the American Revolution and have been used in one form or another since. For example, prior to World War I, the Southern Department organized and supplied a force commanded by Brig. Gen. John J. Pershing to pursue Pancho Villa in Mexico.<sup>7</sup> Around the same time, the Army formed the Hawaiian Department, which expanded during World War II into U.S. Army Forces Pacific Ocean Areas, evolving later into U.S. Army Pacific.<sup>8</sup> Having scrapped the department title, today, both functional and geographic Army Service Component Commands (ASCC) continue to perform the enduring administrative and support tasks colloquially known as Title 10. But as newly refreshed doctrine explains, “every combatant command has an ASCC,

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and the theater army is the ASCC for the geographic combatant commander.<sup>9</sup> In other words, a theater army functions as a geographic ASCC, not the other way around. This fact is widely misunderstood yet incredibly

PDI initiatives. The Army, with its declining budget and zero dollars appropriated thus far from PDI, is the only service investing in the “transformation of landpower in the Indo-Pacific.”<sup>15</sup>

“The theater sustainment command supports joint operational areas by conducting the bulk of fuel and supply distribution, deploying forces, distributing equipment, and providing extensive troop life support like food and water subsistence.”

important because unlike past departments, theater armies do far more than administration and support.

Nonetheless, the ASCC roles are extensive due to their associated authority. The secretary of the Army delegates an authority granted by Title 10 of the U.S. Code known as administrative control, or ADCON, to the theater army’s commanding general.<sup>10</sup> Thus, U.S. Army Pacific exercises this authority to perform functions for Army forces and footprints throughout the region like organizing and deploying units, training and supplying troops, servicing and maintaining equipment, and constructing military infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, ADCON allows the theater army to handle the bulk of theater intelligence data to support operational missions and coordinate for cyber support to protect networks. ADCON also involves administrative actions like finance and discipline, mobilization of reserve component forces, and regional health care for hundreds of thousands of soldiers, civilians, dependents, and retirees.<sup>12</sup> As the ASCC to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the theater army offers the combatant commander an entry point into the program and budget, since the bulk of the joint force’s purchasing power lies with the services. For example, the six-year, \$27 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) prioritizes land-based air and missile defenses and long-range precision fires, but this is “not a separate fund.”<sup>13</sup> The services finance closing these gaps out of their base budgets unless expressly appropriated by Congress, and regrettably, the Army received zero dollars in the \$5 billion PDI appropriations request for fiscal year 2022.<sup>14</sup> Yet, the joint force requires substantially more investment in landpower aside from select

ADCON is not a command authority, but it allows the theater army to serve as the primary enabler for joint force operations and activities at multiple echelons. Gen. Joseph Dunford, a marine, once referred to the Army as the “linchpin” of the U.S. military. “I use that word—linchpin—deliberately,” Dunford said during his recent tenure as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “because the Army literally has been the force that has held together the joint force.”<sup>16</sup> Much of his sentiment stems from a sweeping set of external support requirements—Army support to other services and Department of Defense Executive Agent responsibilities—largely performed by the theater army’s unique theater-enabling commands. For example, the theater sustainment command supports joint operational areas by conducting the bulk of fuel and supply distribution, deploying forces, distributing equipment, and providing extensive troop life support like food and water subsistence.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Army Air and Missile Defense Command integrates a dispersed and highly survivable land-based network of short-, medium-, and long-range defenses against ballistic missiles and counterair threats. By comparison, the Army is responsible for more executive agent requirements than all military services, defense agencies, and Department of Defense field activities combined—but upon which they all greatly depend.<sup>18</sup>

U.S. Army Pacific is the critical link that integrates Department of the Army initiatives to address the joint force’s most urgent landpower needs. For example, by providing the institutional Army with insights into a rapidly evolving operating environment, the theater army influences force development and design changes,

doctrine overhaul, and concept development needed to maintain, or in some cases regain, asymmetric advantage. U.S. Army Pacific's training areas offer the potential to replicate the large-scale collective training at the Army's combined training centers. Moreover, these archipelagic, jungle, mountain, and arctic training environments present unique opportunities to live, operate, and fight in the unforgiving terrain of the pri-

of joint and multinational operations and training. The Army's first multi-domain task force, under the operational control of U.S. Army Pacific, exemplifies how the theater army experiments with and rapidly employs long-range sensing and fires, artificial intelligence, and machine-learning-enabled capabilities for the joint force in all domains, including cyber and space. Furthermore, U.S. Army Pacific has the po-



Soldiers of the 97th Transportation Company, 7th Sustainment Brigade, and civilian contract workers load an Avenger Air Defense System assigned to 1st Battalion, 174th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, onto an Army Watercraft System 28 July 2021 in support of Exercise Forager 21 at Naval Station Guam. Exercise Forager 21 is a U.S. Army Pacific exercise designed to test and refine the theater army's ability to flow landpower forces into the theater, execute command and control of those forces, and effectively employ them in support of our allies, partners, and national security objectives in the region. (Photo by Spc. Olivia Lauer, U.S. Army)

ority theater—terrain that Pacific War veteran Eugene Sledge viscerally described as “so unbelievably rugged, jumbled, and confusing.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the theater army coordinates with the Army's global sustainment and logistics network by managing billions of dollars in pre-positioned stock, conducting depot-level maintenance, and directing contractor support for all levels

tential to serve as a key integrator for each service's ongoing experimentation and future concept development like the Army's Project Convergence, the Navy's Project Overmatch, and the Air Force's Advanced Battle Management System and Agile Combat Employment. This is possible because the theater army provides the landpower that interconnects all joint

force activities and sets the theater to enable the full range of military operations.

## Shape and Influence the Terrain of Military Competition

U.S. Army Pacific must set conditions not only for all U.S. land forces to operate *on* land but also for the entire joint force to operate *from* land. This is no small task considering that in ten years, two-thirds of the world's population will live in the Indo-Pacific, an area that covers half of the globe.<sup>20</sup> In 2014, Gen. Vincent Brooks, the first four-star commanding general of the theater army since its elevation to a four-star command, implemented a joint directive designating U.S. Army Pacific as the Theater Joint Force Land Component Command.<sup>21</sup> This standing designation bestows coordinating authority to synchronize and integrate the planning and training among all U.S. land forces in theater, which includes Army, Marine Corps, and special operations forces.<sup>22</sup> The designation is significant for two reasons. First, the theater army coordinates the joint force's day-to-day operations and activities on land—the only domain where people live—which is central to influencing the amorphous human dimension of military competition. Second, considering the Army's corresponding effort to develop the joint concept for contested logistics, the

theater army coordinates much of the joint force's intratheater force projection activities while providing the bulk of intratheater logistics during joint operations.

Adversaries increasingly contest the joint force throughout the region and in all domains, but the terrestrial landscape of military competition revolves around information, influence, and people. Unlike the other services that are platform-based, the Army is people-based, and as the chief of staff of the Army, Gen. James McConville, has expressed, "People are the Army."<sup>23</sup> For example, the regionally aligned security force assistance brigade presents multiple dilemmas to the People's Liberation Army by deploying and employing U.S. troops on the ground in South Asia, Oceania, and inside the first island chain in Southeast Asia. Concurrently, these forces provide hands-on education, training, advising, and assistance that directly addresses our allies' and partners' most vital self-interests: defending their sovereign borders and protecting their populations. In other visible displays of U.S. commitment, the theater army embeds land forces, like those conducting operations in Pacific Island nations, with State Department-led country teams across the region. These forces conduct military information support operations, among many other mission sets, to directly counter Chinese, Russian, and North Korean corrosive



misinformation and disinformation campaigns. The use of cyber tools, flyovers, or freedom of navigation operations all have their effects, but the Army excels at the rudimentary, yet nonreplicable, ability to gain and maintain influence through person-to-person exchanges and persistent engagement with populations.

The theater army's exercises and events bind the region's landpower network and sets the mortar for complex regional security architectures. A recent RAND report concluded that successful U.S. deterrent relationships hinge on clear displays of commitment and a clear advantage in local balance of forces.<sup>24</sup> U.S. Army Pacific's security cooperation activities, like the annual Talisman Sabre exercise with Australia and other multinational partners, do both. Moreover, since 2014, U.S. Army Pacific has annually combined several of these previously stand-alone events into a premier large-scale, joint, and multinational operation known as Operation Pacific Pathways. As a congressional report highlights, Army officials stated that Pathways "builds readiness at multiple command echelons; increases exercise complexity for partners ... supports the rebalance of forces to the Pacific with a persistent forward presence; and allows the Army to experiment with capabilities."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Army-sponsored senior leader conferences, like the annual Indo-Pacific Army Chiefs Conference and the Indo-Pacific Landpower Conference, not only clearly demonstrate commitment, but they also create opportunities for foreign military sales, promote interoperability, and encourage other nations to choose the United States as the security partner of choice. Finally, for over twenty-five years, the National Guard's State Partnership Program has formed bonds with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam.<sup>26</sup> Access gained through the landpower network has allowed the joint force to strengthen its operational footing throughout the region but notably inside the first island chain—an area, where the joint force is widely considered to be "out of position."<sup>27</sup>

The operational reach of other services' platforms largely depends on a backbone of sustainment and logistics provided by the theater army. From Oceania to the Arctic and South Asia to the Pacific homeland, U.S. Army Pacific provides common-user logistics and land transportation, constructs and maintains forward basing and marshaling areas, coordinates contract support requirements, and pre-positions equipment, supplies, and transportation assets. Paradoxically, Army watercraft systems in the Indo-Pacific conduct the lion's share of ship-to-ship transfers, ship-to-shore transfers, and intratheater transport of personnel and cargo.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, U.S. Army Pacific exemplifies joint interdependence, which is defined as "the purposeful reliance by one Service on another Service's capabilities to maximize complementary and reinforcing effects of both (i.e., synergy)."<sup>29</sup> William T. Johnsen, professor at the U.S. Army War College, suggests that no single source of military power will dominate the future security environment. Instead, Johnsen argues, "the key question will be how to best blend the components of military (and usually national) power to provide the desired result."<sup>30</sup> With a plan to restore conventional deterrence hinging on advanced platforms, continued joint interdependence will rely on foundational capabilities that only the theater army can provide, whether in competition, crisis, or likely wars of the future.

## Prevent and Prevail in Crisis and Conflict

As military competition intensifies, the theater army offers a persistent advantage to the joint force: leadership. With augmentation, U.S. Army Pacific can function as a four-star combined joint task force headquarters over joint and multinational coalitions. It can also provide the land component command for joint and multinational forces in a joint operations area, like U.S. Army Japan during the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in 2011 or U.S. Tenth Army on Okinawa during "the longest and largest battle of the Pacific War," Sledge writes.<sup>31</sup> Like their department predecessors, theater

**Previous page:** Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 1st Air Defense Artillery Regiment, fire an MIM-104 Patriot to destroy a drone target 16 July 2021 during Exercise Talisman Sabre 2021 at Camp Growl in Queensland, Australia. This was the first time the MIM-104 Patriot had been fired on Australian soil. Army forces operating in the Indo-Pacific bring a unique blend of key multi-domain capabilities that enable the joint force. (Photo by Lance Cpl. Alyssa Chuluda, U.S. Marine Corps)



armies can constitute field armies should the need arise, representing the joint force's sole capability to exercise command and control over multiple corps-sized elements. Exercising the command authority known as operational control, or OPCON, U.S. Army Pacific permanently leads the U.S. military's largest combatant commander-assigned force—a quarter of the Total Army's combat power—including a corps, several tactical divisions, and multiple general officer-led enabling commands. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Army forces have delivered huge wins promoting American leadership and values by distributing medical supplies and administering vaccines throughout the region.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, theater army planners excel in leading contingency planning efforts by integrating the fundamental aspects of landpower into joint wargaming, operations, and plans. Doing so offers tailorable, scalable, flexible deterrent options to prevent adversaries from achieving gains through opportunistic aggression. However, the intermittent need to deploy, sustain, and lead forces during a crisis or contingency chiefly depends on the theater army's permanent ability to provide security to the joint force.

Soldiers with 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, and Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian Armed Forces) make their way to an objective 7 August 2021 during joint training exercise Garuda Shield 21 at Baturaja Training Area, Indonesia. (Photo by Spc. Rachel Christensen, U.S. Army)

The theater army delivers the critical security architecture needed to operate within all contested domains. U.S. Army Pacific leads the joint force's efforts in counter-unmanned aircraft systems, chemical and biological defense, and enterprise-wide warning and mass notification—all significant sources of strategic vulnerability. The multi-domain task force provides a host of integrated capabilities that enable advanced platforms, like a Ford-class carrier, to degrade and penetrate adversaries' antiaccess and area denial (A2/AD) bubbles. Advanced Army cyber tools and long-range hypersonic and antiship missiles offer protection over extreme distances. Emerging network capabilities, like those within the Army's Capability Set '25, offer the joint force a concealable, survivable, and distributed "network that is more expeditionary and mobile but can pass and

process massive amounts of data.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as other services undergo reforms, their reliance on Army capabilities will likely increase, particularly in base security, protecting populations, and defending Pacific homeland areas like Hawaii and Guam. For example, the chief of naval operations favors “divesting non-core

example includes the “total package” sale of Strykers to Thailand that includes vehicles, maintenance, training, and spare parts.<sup>38</sup> For decades, U.S. Army special operations forces have been a mainstay in the Philippines, conducting counterinsurgency operations against groups like Abu Sayyaf and the Islamic State.<sup>39</sup> The

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Navy missions like Aegis Ashore,” but aside from Aegis Afloat, the joint force would then lean exclusively on the Army to provide ballistic and cruise missile defense.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the Marine Corps elected to scrap its tanks, along with much of its organic artillery and rotary aircraft, but doing so greatly increases the burden on the Army to protect and support any-sized Marine element once ashore.<sup>35</sup> This raises the oxymoronic issue that while the demand for landpower increases, the Army’s budget slips into decline.

U.S. Army Pacific’s forward posture showcases U.S. strategic commitment and solidifies the joint force’s operational footing to project power. In an early trip to northeast Asia, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin remarked that the United States’ alliance with South Korea “has never been more important.”<sup>36</sup> The Army’s fixed presence on the peninsula has been the cornerstone of conventional deterrence against North Korea for nearly seventy years, where the only active U.S. field army greatly reduces the risk of transitioning from competition to armed conflict.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Japan hosts U.S. Army Japan, a subordinate Army force, which not only oversees critical forward-deployed signal, sustainment, aviation, and artillery units but also offers the ability to establish a forward operational command post should the need arise. U.S. Army Alaska hosts similar capabilities but also includes units that specialize in extreme cold weather and high-altitude environments, which is relevant given intensifying military competition in the Arctic. In Southeast Asia, the Army has expanded its presence around the South China Sea. One recent

Navy can draw on the Army’s positive influence in the Philippines as it pushes to restore a naval base at Subic Bay, strategically vital given the scarcity of deepwater ports nearby.<sup>40</sup> Army posture equals stronger security relationships but, as one posture study points out, it also allows for “high volume force flows for major wars.”<sup>41</sup>

Should conventional deterrence fail in the Indo-Pacific, the joint force must be ready to prevail in war. Only the Army can provide the scale of mass, depth of multifunctional capabilities, and permanence of land forces required for an all-domain conflict. Future battlegrounds, while impossible to predict in detail, will likely involve localized, distributed forms of data-driven, fast-paced, and protracted violence without discounting the possible employment of strategic weapons. All forms of power have their limits in war, but as Lukas Milewski, a leading scholar on military strategy, writes, “Land power alone enables the take and exercising of control.”<sup>42</sup> Considering the focus on advanced technology, the Army is the only force capable of permanently seizing, occupying, and defending the associated ports, airfields, and staging areas of advanced platforms because they are all located on land.<sup>43</sup> Though few policy makers expect to fight the Chinese on land, the fact remains that China’s military center of gravity remains the People’s Liberation Army, the largest standing ground force in the world.<sup>44</sup> Further, the risk of a Russian military incursion is not isolated to Europe, and as U.S. Indo-Pacific Command admits, “North Korea remains our most immediate threat.”<sup>45</sup> The land domain in the Indo-Pacific remains primordial to U.S. interests, not



only because of the strategic value of strongpoints and key terrain but also because it includes U.S. sovereign territory. Above all else, the Army must defend the U.S. homeland and protect the American people. Altogether, the theater army ensures that the joint force can deploy, fight, and win against enemy armies in all terrestrial environments, under any adverse condition, and for the duration of any conflict.

## Conclusion

Advanced platforms undeniably provide enhanced coercive capabilities, but no other service can replicate the essential and inherently fundamental roles of the U.S. Army—the Nation’s only force capable of providing and sustaining landpower. Retaining asymmetric advantages relies on advanced technologies and platforms, but fully restoring conventional deterrence and achieving “integrated deterrence” requires the attendant transformation of U.S. landpower in the Indo-Pacific. Platforms have yet to extract their dependence on the land—Arleigh Burke-class destroyers must

port, surveillance aircraft eventually touch down, and overhead persistent infrared satellites continuously communicate with ground terminals. Having evolved significantly from past geographic departments, theater armies now are the “linchpin” for the joint force, exemplifying joint interdependence and providing the foundational capabilities that amplify the joint force’s coercive credibility across all domains. The theater army competes day-to-day by presenting multiple dilemmas to adversaries, strengthening joint force integration, and solidifying the region’s landpower network. U.S. Army Pacific defends the Pacific homeland, protects the American people, and prepares to fight and decisively defeat our Nation’s enemies in the land domain—which remains the elemental battleground in war. By administering and supporting the enduring needs of the force, shaping and influencing the terrain of military competition, and preventing and prevailing in crisis and conflict, the theater army represents and cements the indispensable value of the Army and landpower for the Indo-Pacific. ■

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