

The Army's Role in the Future Pacific Theater

Emily Martin

Samantha Wooley



At a time when threats to U.S. national security are constantly evolving and growing, it is imperative that the U.S. armed forces be prepared to fight and win in an increasingly complex world. The U.S. Army anticipates that in the 2030–2050 timeframe it will face a near-peer competitor that will attempt to restrict U.S. freedom of maneuver, challenge its superiority across multiple domains (air, sea, land, space, and cyber), and turn current U.S. strengths into weaknesses.¹ One of these looming adversaries is China and the challenge it presents to U.S. forces and its allies within the Pacific theater of operations. China is already taking steps to limit the freedom of maneuver of other nations in the South China Sea through island building (see figures 1 and 2, page 106) and its buildup of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities.

The geopolitical importance of China's encroachment in the South China Sea should not be underestimated. In his influential 1944 work *The Geography of Peace*, Yale political scientist Nicholas Spykman postulated that maintaining control of the inner seas surrounding an area's outer islands and territories was a mandatory prerequisite to securing power over these rimlands and thus, access to the mainland.² By Spykman's logic, three of the most important regions for global power are the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the Yellow Sea. As the entryway for access to power over the entirety of Asia, stability of control over these particular inner seas is a vastly important issue.

China's control over this air and maritime region would affect not only Asia; it would also have detrimental consequences to the United States and, to some extent, the rest of the world. According to East Asian regional experts like Dr. Michael Auslin of American Enterprise Institute, the Asian region, particularly China, poses a threat to both the United States and to the world due to major unmitigated risks in the region. In June 2017, Auslin consulted with Army officials from The Army Concepts Integration Center on the risks that China poses to U.S. regional

allies such as Japan, as well as the risks it poses to the United States itself. In his recent book *The End of the Asian Century*, Auslin states that despite the West's overwhelming praise of the successes of the "Asian Century," during which the region has experienced incredible economic growth and prosperity, there are five interrelated risks that pose a major threat to political and economic stability in East Asia.³ The five risks are (1) lack of relevant economic reforms, (2) demographic imbalances, (3) unfinished political revolutions, (4) lack of a formal political community in Asia, and (5) the possibility of war in the region. These risks could disrupt the rest of the world by inflicting heavy economic losses to countries that trade with East Asian countries and causing the global stock market to plunge. China, particularly, could pose not only an economic threat to the United States but also a military threat should it continue to pursue territorial disputes and confront its neighbors with an increasingly aggressive military in its surrounding waters. According to Auslin, the threat to the maneuverability of

Emily Martin holds a degree in government and a minor in organizational management from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Her academic research centers on international politics in regards to national security and transatlantic relations, and she has a particular interest in the politics of international conflict. She recently completed an internship with the Army Capabilities Integration Center at Fort Eustis, Virginia, where her research focused primarily on Asia.

Samantha Wooley is a researcher with the Army Capabilities Integration Center. She is a senior at the College of William and Mary, pursuing a BA in international relations. She has a strong background in international security, as well as economics and political theory. Wooley has done research on the psychology of homegrown terrorists, nuclear security threats posed by criminals in post-Soviet states, challenges posed when international security concerns and international law intersect, and completed a Diplomacy Lab project that proposed solutions to State Department officials regarding methods to create inefficiencies within communications and transportation networks of Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria.

A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptor missile is launched during a flight test 1 November 2015 from a THAAD battery located on Wake Island, which lies northeast of Micronesia in the Pacific Ocean. During the test, the THAAD system successfully intercepted two air-launched ballistic missile targets. (Photo by Ben Listerman, U.S. Missile Defense Agency)



the United States and Asian countries within the Pacific endangers the economic and trading capacities of these powers. Additionally, China's air defense identification zone in the South China Sea (figure 3, page 107), established in 2013, integrates its naval and air power to assume military control of both the skies and sea in this critically important region, thus presenting a more integrated, complex, and long-term threat to the United States and its allies.⁴

Over the past few decades, the world has witnessed the rise of Chinese economic and military power. While the People's Liberation Army has been shrinking in physical size, spending on the military has increased as it has refocused its efforts on developing quality over quantity capabilities. It is estimated that China's defense spending will continue to increase by at least double digits every year, and spending will be up to \$260 billion by 2020, with much of this money being directed toward the People's Liberation Army Navy.⁵ Recurrent political tensions between the United States and China coupled with this recent military buildup increases

Rodney Rose (*top left*), U.S. Army Japan political-military advisor, looks at the work being discussed by junior officers from Japan, the United States, and the Republic of Korea (ROK) December 2015 during the annual U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateral Junior Officer Exchange program held in Camp Zama, Japan. The program stresses the importance of developing a trilateral relationship as the foundation for security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Continued engagements such as this provide a venue for dialogue between future leaders from their respective countries. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Pacific)

the likelihood of armed conflict between the two countries sometime in the future. In exploring the potential for conflict with China, the U.S. Army must be prepared to play any one of three possible roles: a central role, a supporting role to the U.S. Navy and Air Force, or little-to-no role.

It appears most likely that the U.S. Army will be a key or supporting entity, rather than nonexistent, should there be a conflict with China in the Pacific theater. As we will show, academics, midlevel Department of Defense (DOD) experts, and leaders within the DOD and Department of the Army



generally concur that the Army would play a central or supporting function in the region. We discuss each of these potential roles in detail below.

The Army as the Primary U.S. Player in the Pacific

While most of the literature surveyed indicated that should there be an armed conflict between China and the United States, the U.S. Army would most likely have a supporting function in the Pacific, several academics and national security experts, along with lessons learned from wargames, suggest that the Army could indeed have a central function during a conflict with China.⁶ In fact, at the 24 May 2017 Land Forces in the Pacific Symposium, Adm. Harry Harris of U.S. Pacific Command stated that he would “like to see the Army’s land forces sink a ship, shoot down a missile, and shoot down the aircraft that fired that missile—near simultaneously—in a complex environment where our joint and combined forces are operating in each other’s domains (air, land, sea, cyber, and space).”⁷ Like many other senior

Pvt. 2nd Class Darrell Enger, 2nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division (*left*), conducts a counter-improvised explosive device patrol with other U.S. and Malaysian Army soldiers 20 September 2014 during bilateral training exercise Keris Strike 14 in Kem Desa Pahlawan, Malaysia. Keris Strike is a U.S. Army Pacific-sponsored Theater Security Cooperation Program exercise conducted annually with Malaysian Army forces to enhance partner land-force capacity and capabilities. The exercises contribute to the regional peacekeeping capability in Asia. (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Adora Gonzalez, U.S. Army)

DOD officials, Harris is advocating implementation of the multi-domain battle concept in the Pacific, with the U.S. Army playing a critical role in the Pacific by integrating its capabilities with those of all services across all domains.

The Army War College follows this line of thought, declaring that the future Pacific theater will be a “land-force centric, maritime theater” that will require the Army to have a central role in coordinating with regional allies, establishing forward-positioned bases, and significantly increasing its anti-A2/AD capabilities in the region.⁸

The 2017 RAND report, “What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?,” proposes that the Army focus its resources on countering Chinese A2/AD capabilities by establishing forward-positioned bases with its own A2/AD capabilities by sending antiship, antiaircraft, and surface-to-surface missiles to the Pacific theater.⁹ This report also suggests that the United States should provide support and reinforcement to its regional allies in order to counter Chinese aggression. If the U.S. established its own A2/AD antiship, antiaircraft, and surface-to-surface capabilities in the region, the U.S. Army would certainly be able to accomplish Harris’s goal of sinking a ship, shooting down a missile, and shooting down an aircraft within a short window of time should conflict erupt.

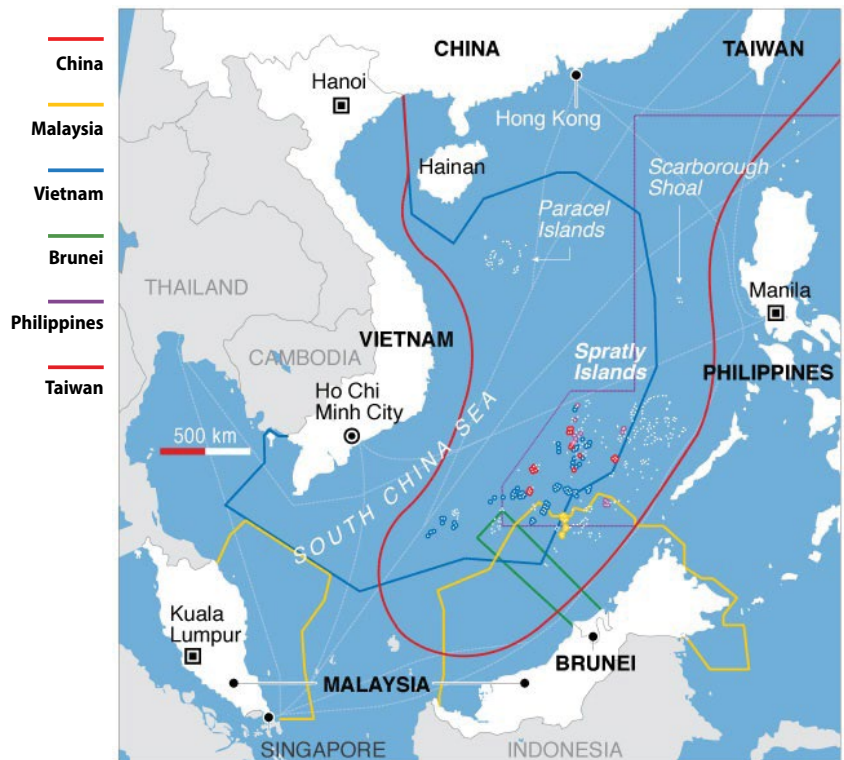
Along with the 2017 RAND report, scholars such as Andrew F. Krepinevich propose that the United States work with allies to establish Army bases within the Pacific theater and provide allies with support, training, and reinforcement.¹⁰ Krepinevich states that the Army should deploy to several islands within the Philippines, including Palawan, and that the Army should aim to eventually deploy to Vietnam as well.

Perhaps the most outspoken study regarding the Army’s role in the Pacific Theater is RAND’s “The U.S. Army in Asia, 2030–2040” report.¹¹ It asserts that alongside providing defense of U.S. assets, support to allies, and support to the joint force, the Army should even project expeditionary combat forces



(Graphic by Arin Burgess, *Military Review*)

Figure 1. Area of Chinese Constructed Reef Islands and Surrounding Seas



(Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Figure 2. South China Sea Claims

into the theater, including the ability to execute modest-sized forced entry operations.

“What Role Can Land-Based, Multi-Domain Anti-Access/Area Denial Forces Play in Deterring or Defeating Aggression?” and other literature, such as J. Michael Cole’s “How A2/AD Can Defeat China,” agree

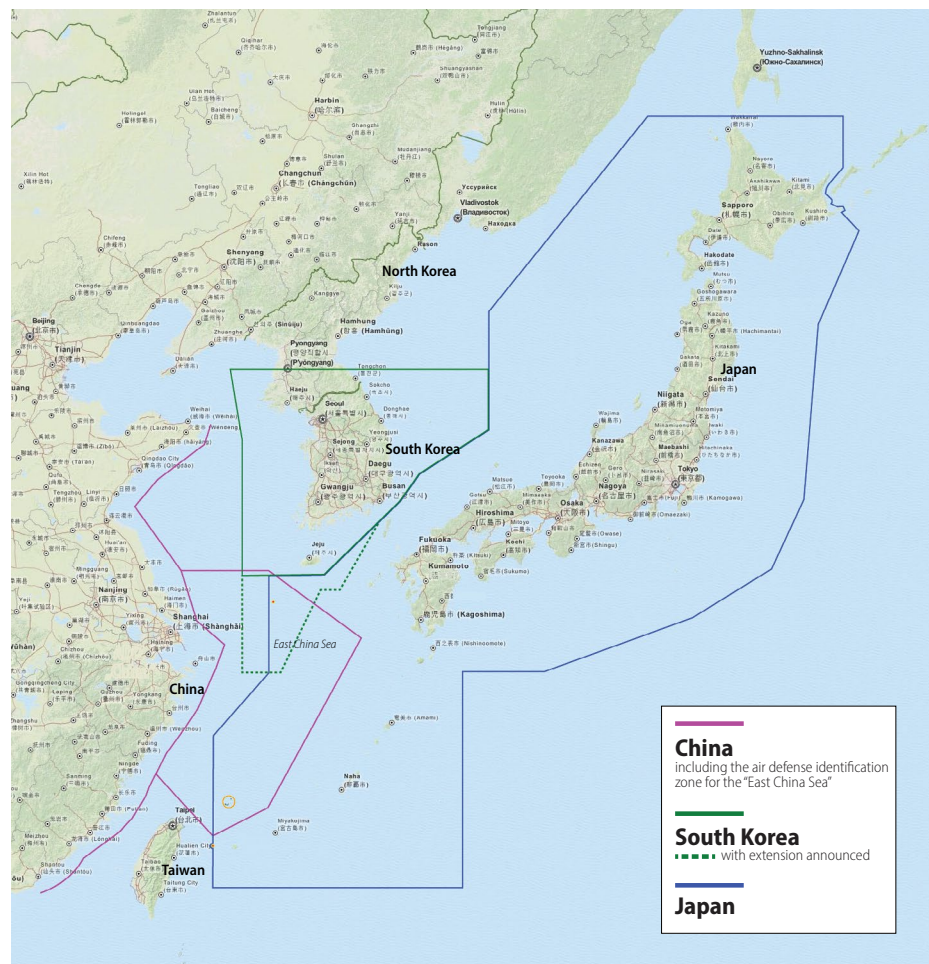
These studies project that it will be crucial for the U.S. Army to have the capabilities to successfully oppose China, and they support predictions of leaders such as Harris who believe that the U.S. Army will be one of the most important actors in the Pacific during a conflict with China. According to

key officials such as Harris and scholars such as Evan Braden Montgomery of the Belfer Center, in order to decisively defeat China in an armed conflict, the U.S. Army should send its own A2/AD capabilities into the theater and establish itself on forward-positioned bases to be able to launch land-based offensives against China if necessary.¹³

The Army in a Supporting Role

Most literature surveyed, as can be seen in this section, supports the theory that the Army will play a supporting function in the Pacific theater should the United States continue its political and military competition with China. The Army will do so through the pursuit of advanced technology that will aid maneuverability and capability in the Pacific, ensuring deterrence and supporting other military branches, particularly

the Navy and the Air Force, within the Pacific theater. Former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter stated in 2015 that the Army would focus on modernizing its current capabilities and supporting new innovative technology.¹⁴ In fact, Carter asserted that the United States was focused on investing in critical future technologies, like long-range stealth bombers, a new, long-range antiship cruise missile, and railguns, as well as space and electronic warfare capabilities. The U.S. Army would be primarily responsible for cyber



(Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia Commons; modified)

Figure 3. Air Defense Identification Zones

that a robust Army presence will be central to maintaining and supporting alliances, defending key assets, facilitating cooperation across all branches of the armed forces in the region, establishing forward-positioned forces, and countering China’s A2/AD systems while providing its own A2/AD systems.¹² “The U.S. Army in Asia, 2030–2040” RAND report previously noted goes so far as to project that the likelihood of armed conflict with China is high, thus requiring the Army to preposition forces that have the ability to execute forced-entry operations.

and space capabilities within the Pacific theater, since operations that assure free access to cyberspace require ground-based support, and locations for space-based platforms are directly affected by capabilities on land.¹⁵

Most national security experts and academics believe that although the Pacific is a primarily maritime theater, the U.S. Army will certainly have a supporting future presence in the region. In fact, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Mark A. Milley supports current initiatives in the Pacific like the Pacific Pathways program.¹⁶ Pathways is a multinational, three-part series of U.S. Army training exercises in the Pacific.¹⁷ These training programs “provide semipermanent presence, strengthen relationships, improve interoperability, and build capacity.”¹⁸ Training programs such as the Pacific Pathways program allow U.S. Army soldiers to gain experience and increase their readiness without taking the decisive step of establishing Army bases in countries like the Philippines. A combination of coordination efforts with allies and the mastery of new technologies that can be used in the Pacific will allow the U.S. Army to support credible deterrence toward China and play a supporting function in the Pacific theater.

Col. Bob Simpson of the Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC) states that the U.S. Army, though it might not need to directly put forces on the ground to have land power, must have the credible threat of the ability to deploy in order to deter aggressive governments.¹⁹ Many national security experts within the DOD and defense think tanks emphasize the need for the United States to create an A2/AD shield—consisting of mobile land-based forces and integrated air defense—that will be able to inflict heavy naval and air losses on near-peer competitors such as China and will allow the United States to “project power outward from land” within the Pacific theater.²⁰

Experts such as Dr. Evan B. Montgomery and Bryan Clark, who are both senior fellows at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) and who have testified before Congress, agree through various CSBA publications that the United States can continue to promote credible deterrence by modernizing, supporting technological innovation, and continuing to fund Army capabilities and training. To that end, Montgomery advocates for building the United States’ forward defense posture by employing ground-based missiles in the western Pacific. He contends that ground-launched missiles

would deter aggressive military action in the region and would inflict heavy losses on Chinese military assets should Beijing begin a conflict with the United States. Clark argues that the United States should modernize by using directed energy technologies to aid in missile defense, improving electromagnetic spectrum (EMS) warfare capabilities (particularly by improving the ability to jam and confuse EMS sensors), and employing stand-off and hypersonic missiles to build upon current strike and surface warfare. If the U.S. Army harnessed these technological capabilities and then integrated them in the Pacific region, they would make the U.S. Army a very costly and challenging force to engage.

For the Army to play a supporting role in the Pacific, not only must it have credible methods of deterrence and tailored technological advancements but it also must be an adaptive force that is able to coordinate with allies. When Milley was asked to give insight on his vision of future warfare, he stated that soldiers in the future battlefield must adapt to live and fight in difficult and uncomfortable conditions, learn to have units that are constantly mobile in order to avoid becoming targets, and practice “disciplined disobedience” that would allow junior level officers to disobey orders in order to achieve important objectives on the battlefield.²¹ Through Milley’s insights, it can be understood that top Army leadership envisions future warfare requiring a mobile, adaptable, and dedicated Army that encourages flexible leadership.²²

The Pacific Pathways program, an operational deployment program that allows U.S. soldiers to train alongside allies in the Pacific, further supports the notion that the Army will have a supporting role in the Pacific theater; the Pathways program places an emphasis on the importance of a lasting, strong Army presence and influence in the Pacific. Not only does the Pathways program reinforce the U.S. Army’s presence in the Pacific and strengthen relationships with

A 2.6-kilometer runway is clearly identifiable in this 22 July 2016 satellite photo of the western arm of Mischief Reef, located east of the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The reef is one of several that have been occupied by Chinese forces in recent years as part of that country’s land reclamation efforts, undertaken to gain and control access to the South China Sea. (Photo courtesy of the Center for Strategic and International Studies/Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative/DigitalGlobe)



allies, it also makes soldiers comfortable operating within environments in the Pacific and develops their leadership skills and adaptability. The program does this through joint exercises with Asian allied forces, such as those of the Philippines and the Republic of Korea. For example, a battalion task force might partner and train with host-nation forces during combined-arms live-fire exercises, allowing the U.S. soldiers to acclimate to foreign environments, bridge language barriers, and overcome cultural divides.²³

Adapting to difficult environments and remaining flexible are both abilities that Milley has emphasized for soldiers to be successful in future environments.²⁴ The Pacific Pathways program certainly aims to achieve these objectives and aims to prepare soldiers for a complex, unpredictable battlefield in the Pacific theater. Current programs like Pacific Pathways and objectives like Milley's signal that current leadership acknowledges and anticipates the U.S. Army will likely play a supporting role in the Pacific theater.

Little to No Role

Alternatively, although unlikely, there remains a possibility that the Army would play little to no role in a conflict with China. As identified below, some academics and DOD thinkers have written on the Army's role being advisory or nonexistent. However, discussions directly challenging the need for ground forces in the Asian-Pacific theater are limited; most simply focus on the superiority and importance of air and maritime forces instead of directly asserting that ground forces are unnecessary. Most suggestions lean toward the idea not that the United States should neglect the development of land-based forces but simply that it should focus more on naval and air capabilities such as forward-positioned aircraft carriers and submarines. This viewpoint is logical, as the main source of current tension between the United States and China is the recent Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, making this problem of more immediate concern to air and naval forces.²⁵

Chinese development and occupation of man-made islands there, and their subsequent militarization, continue to increase friction between China and the United States. And, due to the rimland and inner sea position of these islands and the South China Sea itself, the militarization and increasing aggression is primarily an issue of an air and maritime nature.²⁶ Many proposed solutions

to the rising tensions in the South China Sea, therefore, leave little room for a significant function for the Army or other ground-based forces.

For example, in a series of East Asia policy recommendations, Dan Blumenthal of American Enterprise Institute suggests that the U.S. military should focus on forward-positioned combat aircraft, carrier strike groups, and attack and ballistic missile submarines as a deterrent in the region. Blumenthal recommends the United States focus on maintaining regional alliances and partnerships, and that it continue funding maritime and air capabilities rather than land-based capabilities.²⁷ His viewpoint is shared by several others within the defense community.

In their publication "War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable," RAND Corporation scholars David Gompert, Astrid Cevallos, and Cristina Garafola suggest that China is intent on establishing and maintaining sea power, particularly dominance over the United States, in the western Pacific.²⁸ Recommendations notably include that the United States should make its sea power less vulnerable by relying more on submarines, pursuing a political strategy, and engaging in an East Asian maritime security partnership. Because China continues to develop its maritime power, this is mainly an issue for the Navy, with support that can be provided marginally by other armed services; therefore, the role of the Army in such a situation would be almost nonexistent.

Likewise, in a statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Bryan Clark said,

Deterrence will, therefore, rely on new operational concepts and capabilities that enable ships, aircraft, ground units, and their bases to survive and conduct offensive operations in these highly contested areas long enough for them to stop aggression and punish the aggressor. These operational concepts and capabilities should be the focus of efforts to reshape the U.S. military over the next decade.²⁹

Clark continued to assert, "the most important areas for DOD to address in reshaping the force are air and missile defense, EMS warfare, strike and surface warfare, land warfare, and undersea warfare."³⁰

Conclusion

In a survey of the discourse regarding the U.S. Army's potential function during a hypothetical conflict

with China, we have identified three clear policy forecasts. The first is that the Army would play a central role. This view is supported by several experts, academics, and the results of wargames. Those asserting a central role suggest that the Army would be key to counter- ing A2/AD capabilities as well as in coordinating with allies and establishing forward-positioned based as part of a joint force. In this role, proponents of the position assert the U.S. Army would also be key to training and maintaining allied forces in the region.

Alternatively, the vast majority of literature surveyed suggests a second view: that the Army's part in the Pacific theater would be important but not central. Instead, its role would be primarily supportive in nature. According to this view, in performing such a supporting role the Army will inevitably pursue new technologies to aid maneuverability and increase military capabilities, provide aid and support to other military services, and, most importantly, ensure deterrence through an A2/AD shield and physical projections of military power.

In apparent support of this view, the Army has already begun playing this role with the establishment of initiatives like the Pacific Pathways program, which help to train soldiers and establish a semipermanent

presence without having a permanent, perhaps provocative base in the region.

Finally, in a third view, some believe that the Army or ground forces would have little or no role in the strategy to defeat China in an armed conflict. This is primarily asserted through detailed discussions foreseeing the nature of the conflict, which would be so heavily focused on air and naval power during narrow timeframes that there would be little space or time for the Army to provide meaningfully assistance. However, it is worth noting that this rationale is a minority view, the least common of the three.

It appears from this survey of the available literature generated by experts both in and out of the military that if the United States were to enter a war against China, the Army would necessarily assist the other military services greatly by acting as a supporting entity to the joint force in the ensuing conflict. Thus, we should expect that the U.S. Army will play a significant role at a minimum as a joint force enabler, securing joint freedom of action. Consequently, the Army, while shifting focus toward modernization and joint integration, should emphasize preparation for scenarios in which it will play a supporting role in the Pacific against a near-peer adversary. ■

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FEATURE ARTICLE



The Department of the Army announced in February 2017 the establishment of a new type of unit—the security force assistance brigade (SFAB)—to support foreign nations in developing military capabilities that foster stable and secure areas of operation around the world. The Military Advisor Training Academy on Fort Benning, Georgia, trains SFAB soldiers on the specialized skills required to succeed as combat advisors. The author of "Getting Inside the 1st SFAB" interviews participants in the overall development of this program as well observations on the status of the first SFAB preparing to deploy in 2018.

Getting Inside the 1st SFAB

By Kimball Johnson

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Staff Sgt. Justin S. Seely, right, and Staff Sgt. Joshua Maynard, assigned to 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, are grid coordinates during a Master Armored Aircraft System Operator course, Nov. 3, 2017, at Fort Benning, Ga. Soldiers assigned to joining the 1st SFAB should contact their branch manager for more information. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Anjela Nunez)

It is no doubt a good thing to conquer on the field of battle, but it needs greater wisdom and greater skill to make use of victory. —Polybius (as quoted in Field Manual 3-0, Operations)

Security Force Assistance Brigades are the newest addition to the Army's evolving responses for the need to establish stable and secure areas of operation around the world. The SFAB's value lies in its sustained ability to support a commander's mandate, per FM 3-0, paragraph 8-17, to "consolidate gains and transition an AO to a legitimate authority able to maintain security and public order."

Therefore, according to Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey, the creation of SFABs is the number one priority for Gen. Mark A. Milley, Army Chief of Staff.²

The Army is currently offering incentives to qualified noncommissioned officers who volunteer to be team members in one of six SFABs to be fielded (five for Regular Army and one for the Army National Guard).³ NCOs holding the rank of promotable specialist and above are needed to accomplish the SFABs' mission.

To view this article, please visit <http://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2017/December/SFAB/>.