

GEOSTRATEGIC COMPETITION AND OVERSEAS BASING IN EAST ASIA AND THE FIRST ISLAND CHAIN

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Executive summary

Under the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, the Department of Defense (DOD) now enfoldes East Asia within the broader regional framework of the Indo-Pacific. However, significant U.S. forward presence and the U.S. obligation to defend allied territory in Northeast Asia with ground forces means that the needs and dynamics of great power basing in that region will differ from the maritime theaters of the South Pacific and Indian Oceans. Although the DOD has been simultaneously criticized for being too ambitious or doing too little to address U.S. force posture, geostrategic competition with China dictates prudence in making any major changes to overseas basing in East Asia. Yet Chinese ambitions to strengthen its claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea may require some adjustments to U.S. force posture to surmount evolving challenges within China's so-called first island chain.¹ For long-term geostrategic competition with China, U.S. force posture in East Asia may be sized correctly but wrongly composed and dispersed. That is, the numbers and strategic concentrations of U.S. forces today in East Asia may be largely right, but their

specific capabilities may not always be sufficient — they should continue to evolve, not according to a single grand plan but according to ongoing strategic developments.

Introduction

Recent analysis on U.S. basing calls for strengthening force posture in the Indo-Pacific in response to China's military growth and U.S. vulnerability to Chinese attacks. Although the DOD is aware of this need, some analysts have argued that a significant "say-do gap" exists between strategy and posture;² these critics assert that the changes in force posture the DOD recommends in the 2021 Global Posture Review do not fulfill the strategic needs outlined by the most recent Indo-Pacific Strategy and the National Security Strategy (NSS).³ As the Center for New American Security's Stacie Pettyjohn argues, institutional inertia, bureaucratic politics, budgeting priorities, and a lack of will at the top levels of leadership have prevented the United States from making significant changes to its force posture over the past decade.⁴

Broadly speaking, the U.S. force posture in the Pacific looks very much like it did in the mid-1990s, with the preponderance of America's 100,000-strong troop presence there concentrated in Japan and South Korea. Since that time, the only major changes involving thousands of forces have been the reduction in the U.S. Army presence in South Korea by about 10,000 in the early 2000s and the more recent gradual shift of about half of the 18,000 U.S. Marines on Okinawa to Guam. (The process of restructuring the U.S. Marine Corps presence in the Pacific remains ongoing due to interminable delays in relocating a Marine Corps airfield from southern to central Okinawa). Decisions to make both of these changes predated former President Barack Obama's announcement that the administration would "rebalance" or "pivot" its focus to Asia around 2011 — a shift in strategy that the Donald Trump and Joe Biden presidencies then reinforced, at least in spirit.

Long-term geostrategic competition with China may require a rethink in U.S. military posture — that is, its "forces, places, and agreements" — in the broader Indo-Pacific.⁵ In East Asia, renewed tensions over the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula, as well as ongoing concerns about the South China Sea, have called attention to whether the United States has the adequate capabilities and means to defend its interests and those of its allies. The combination of old Cold War rivalries and new threats within the first island chain thus favors maintaining a substantial U.S. force presence in East Asia.

Chinese basing developments

Until the 2000s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) avoided expansionist policies that ran counter to China's strategic narrative of a "peaceful rise."⁶ As China's commercial interests and military capabilities have grown, however, so too have its global political ambitions.⁷ The CCP claims a need to protect its far-flung assets, offering a strategic rationale for increasing access to ports and developing a blue-water navy, which can operate globally across deep

waters. As stated in China's 2019 Defense White Paper, "The PLA [People's Liberation Army] actively promotes international security and military cooperation and refines relevant mechanisms for protecting China's overseas interests. To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks."⁸

China's strategic interests now extend to the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America. However, Beijing still places greater attention and focus on its near abroad, particularly the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea. The first island chain represents China's "core interests," especially from the perspective of PLA combat planning. The CCP will do all that it can to prevent the United States and its allies from dominating China's sea line of communication (SLOC) and/or undermining China's position on Taiwan. China's development and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea signal the seriousness of its assertive claims within its first island chain.

U.S. force posture

In light of U.S.-China competition, the United States has sought to increase its force posture to make it "more geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable," since the Obama administration's strategic rebalance to Asia.⁹ Modest steps to address the changing threat environment in East Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific over the past decade include (1) sending 2,500 marines to Darwin, Australia; (2) rotating littoral combat ships from Singapore; (3) realigning and reducing the number of marines in Okinawa while boosting U.S. posture in Guam; (4) adding prepositioned equipment and strategic assets on the Korean Peninsula; (5) gaining greater access to bases, ports, and facilities in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, including in the Maldives; and (6) re-upping U.S. security commitments to the Pacific Islands.¹⁰ Most of these changes except the Guam relocation involve just hundreds or at most a couple thousand U.S. personnel.

Because of the modest scale of these changes to date, a consensus appears to have emerged among defense experts that despite the strategic priority placed on the Indo-Pacific by the last three U.S. administrations, current U.S. force posture remains insufficient to meet future challenges — especially as China’s military footprint begins to grow.

Geostrategic competition and basing in East Asia

The heaviest U.S. overseas footprint is concentrated in East Asia with approximately 28,500 troops on the Korean Peninsula¹¹, 50,000 on Japan (Okinawa)¹², and 12,000 on Guam.¹³ There is also typically a naval presence in the region of several thousand sailors (sometimes sourced out of the U.S. presence in Japan and sometimes involving additional vessels from Hawaii or the continental United States). This footprint exists for historical reasons, but it is also undergirded by a strong ongoing strategic and political rationale.

The United States maintains large permanent forces in South Korea and Japan because of existing alliance commitments and ongoing security threats. Moreover, U.S. allies and partners in East Asia depend heavily on trade and commerce. A U.S. naval presence is thus critical in protecting SLOCs and freedom of navigation in the region. With potential for major crises in the Taiwan Strait and North Korea, U.S. ground forces stationed in East Asia act as a major deterrent. They are prepared for combat operations and security force assistance should conflict break out.¹⁴ It is not yet clear whether American and allied forces should be postured in Southeast Asia in anticipation of major combat operations. China’s behavior to date, while certainly concerning, does not yet justify, for example, the deployment of hundreds of surface-to-surface missiles in the Philippine Archipelago or other island nations of the western Pacific region. Of course, that could change.

U.S. force posture in East Asia may therefore be sufficient already, and calls for any dramatic changes may be unnecessary.¹⁵ The United States has a first mover advantage in East Asia against any potential rival. Dozens of permanent bases and established deployment patterns with 90,000 to 100,000 military personnel gives the United States considerable military and political leverage in the region. The former Soviet Union never seriously challenged the United States militarily in East Asia. China, too, faces greater obstacles in challenging U.S. interests in Northeast Asia where U.S. presence and alliance commitment is heaviest. It is partly for this reason that China began turning its attention westward, using the Belt and Road Initiative to gain an economic foothold in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and beyond. It was easier for China to establish its “string of pearls” along the Indian Ocean to the Middle East in the absence of significant U.S. presence.

Force posture concerns in East Asia may therefore be less about insufficient military presence and access and more about force distribution and composition.¹⁶ Given the emphasis on strategic competition in the 2022 NSS, pressure may build for the military to disperse or reduce its force posture in East Asia to strengthen its position in other areas of the Indo-Pacific where China has made recent political-military advancements.

This change in approach may mean a relocation of resources to the Western or South Pacific, though some of the forces could be sourced from the United States rather than Japan or South Korea. For example, some of the U.S. Marine Corps forces on Okinawa and Guam might be partially relocated, perhaps through small and modest steps in the next decade — not only to Australia, as has already been done, but to the southern islands of the Ryukyu Islands in Japan, parts of the Philippines, and/or some of the small island nations of the Western Pacific. However, for now, some of those changes should remain dependent on future Chinese behavior and the magnitude of the threat as perceived in not only Washington and Tokyo but also in Seoul, Manila, Singapore, Canberra, New Delhi, and elsewhere. Decisions about military preparations should account for what remains a fluid strategic context.

In addition, the new approach might require a shift in posture from forward basing to forward access, since many countries in the region will be wary of committing too soon or too clearly to what could be interpreted in Beijing as a U.S.-led encirclement of China. Finally, even if force numbers in East Asia are appropriate, greater dispersal toward Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean may require a different composition of forces — such as a smaller ground force and a larger naval presence. This could mean a greater role for the U.S. Coast Guard in countering China’s “grey zone” tactics to gain control in the South China Sea and tackle issues of concern to regional actors, including illegal fishing.¹⁷

U.S. forces should also move away from depending on mega facilities with huge logistics requirements, as well as reduce their dependence on large fixed assets like long runways or large surface ships homeported at known locations. Much of the recent thinking of the U.S. Marine Corps, under Commandant General David Berger, makes good sense; the corps’ Force Design 2030 concept emphasizes leaner logistics, smaller amphibious ships, more accurate firepower together with less brute-force traditional capabilities, and survivable command and control.

A particularly large strategic hole in U.S. force posture exists in Southeast and South Asia where basing access agreements remain limited. Here, China has moved out in front of the United States by building commercial ports and potentially fitting them to provide military logistics and intelligence capabilities.¹⁸ Yet, although the United States should be wary of recent Chinese gains in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Islands, it is not obvious that a near-term push for a major military response would achieve desirable results. Furthermore, China may also react to any U.S. westward shift, particularly if the shift gives the United States a strategic edge in a Taiwan Strait conflict. Such actions may accelerate a regional security dilemma.¹⁹ Any major shift away from Northeast Asia would raise significant concerns from Japan and South Korea regarding the

United States’ commitment to defense and deterrence. Perhaps more importantly, premature U.S. efforts to prepare for sustained combat operations against China over scenarios that could emerge in places like the South China Sea could push away allies and weaken collaboration with America’s security partners.

In light of these concerns, one option is to seek basing access rights in Southeast Asia where the United States has built some political capital in recent years. Greater access to local bases in the Philippines through the 2015 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement is already happening under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who has been more supportive of the U.S.-Philippine alliance than his predecessor, Rodrigo Duterte.²⁰ Although Southeast Asian countries prefer not to take steps that would trigger economic punishment or military coercion from China, strengthening defense ties bilaterally (for example, between Japan and the Philippines and Vietnam and South Korea) or multilaterally (for example, through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the India-France trilateral framework) may ensure stability and open SLOCs, as all of these countries have an incentive to ensure open commerce and freedom of navigation.

It also may make sense to base survivable platforms carrying sensors and anti-ship missiles in regions near Taiwan, along the lines of what RAND Analyst David Ochmanek has advocated.²¹ This could be the best near-term step among the various possible modifications to the U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific region that could be made this decade. Right now, the United States’ ability to help defend Taiwan against an amphibious assault relies too much on vulnerable airfields in the region and potentially vulnerable aircraft carriers. Weapons systems placed on forward-stationed unmanned underwater vehicles east of Taiwan, or mobile rocket-launchable unmanned aircraft on Okinawa, could help deter this contingency. Taiwan, too, needs more survivable platforms to deter this kind of assault.

Holding the line in East Asia

Crises have often been the impetus for bringing about major change in U.S. force posture.²² In the case of geostrategic competition and basing in East Asia, however, crises may just help reinforce existing postures.

Following the 2018 North Korea-United States summit in Singapore, questions about the future of the U.S. military presence in South Korea was put under the spotlight when Trump mentioned that U.S. forces might be removed in the future.²³ North Korea has long demanded the removal of U.S. troops as a condition for improved relations with the United States and a possible path to Korean reunification. As the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang axis strengthens, it would not be surprising for China to also encourage North Korea to push for troop reductions, especially if U.S. forces in South Korea are drawn into a Taiwan Strait contingency. However, heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula have likely reinforced U.S. commitment and allies' insistence that U.S. forces stay put in the region. The long-term nature of competition with China will require the United States to maintain a hub in Northeast Asia, even if the composition of forces may change.

The U.S. presence in Northeast Asia also deters potential Russian threats in the Far East. For example, in the last five years, Moscow has rapidly militarized the Kuril Islands, while maritime disputes over the islands have continued between Japan and Russia.²⁴ Ongoing Russian violations of South Korea's air defense identification zone and bomber patrols in the East Sea, Sea of Japan, and Japanese air space also remain a problem.²⁵

While strategic competition and regional threats provide the rationale for sustaining U.S. bases in East Asia, new security issues related to space, cyberspace, and critical and emerging technologies may require an entirely new way of thinking of force posture in the next decade. U.S. and allied military innovations should not always emphasize troop numbers and locations but rather focus on the actual and changing capabilities needed in the region and beyond. Is a large ground force effective against tactical nuclear and missile threats, or is there a need for greater force dispersal? Will autonomous robots and weapons help fend off attacks against a massive swarm of attack drones? In such scenarios, forward basing may not provide much more advantage beyond access.

Conclusion

In sum, America's basing arrangement in the Indo-Pacific region seems broadly correct, with a total of about 100,000 military personnel stationed or deployed in the region at any time and an emphasis on presence in Japan, South Korea, and to a lesser extent Guam. However, considerable adjustments in the overall U.S. presence in the region may be needed in the coming years — not only related to locations and the greater dispersal and hardening of assets but also related to combat capabilities, particularly in Southeast Asia, and to the way U.S. forces partner with regional friends and allies.

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