



Rethinking U.S. Military Presence in Asia and the Pacific

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For the past six decades the U.S. military has enjoyed preeminence in the Western Pacific, but there are increasing questions about whether this advantageous position is sustainable given a combination of budget cuts, asymmetrical military threats, and local opposition to bases. The bottom line is that the United States can and must retain a robust military presence in the region, taking advantage of new partnerships, technologies, and operational concepts—while recognizing that many of the challenges we face are not entirely new. Inertia and incrementalism will not work, however. The United States will need to develop a holistic strategy that builds on all the instruments of national power as we rebalance toward Asia.

U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) faces a fundamental budget challenge: even with an administration pledge to hold U.S. capabilities steady in Asia while cutting force structure elsewhere, \$487 billion in planned cuts means hollowing out other commands' assets in ways that will ultimately force cannibalizing of



PACOM assets when crises hit the Middle East or elsewhere. Moreover, upgrading, consolidating, and dispersing U.S. bases and facilities in the PACOM area of responsibility will cost money—even if the result is a smaller footprint. Any serious strategy for sustaining a presence will have to take this into consideration.

The military challenges to U.S. forward presence are also growing. China's anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities are increasing the risk to U.S. assets located within the so-called Second Island Chain (south from Japan through Guam). The quantity, range, and lethality of Chinese and even North Korean ballistic missiles have grown several-fold in the past decade. This threat has prompted some experts to propose pulling critical U.S. assets out of missile range so there will be a conventional retaliatory capability in the region. This proposal is both ahistorical and counterproductive, however.

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The United States actually tried such a strategy in the 1930s. Under "War Plan Orange," a decrepit Asiatic Squadron left in the Philippines to deter attack was easily swept aside by the Imperial Japanese Navy, while the supposedly safe haven of Pearl Harbor proved far too vulnerable to air attack. Moreover, as the previous chief of naval operations has stressed, "you cannot surge trust." Influence and engagement in the region depends on constant presence.

Finally, it is worth remembering that the United States faced equally serious missile threats from the Soviet Union during the late Cold War. The response was not to scuttle and run, but instead to double down on air and naval assets and to integrate defense planning even more closely with Japan in order to complicate Soviet planning and enhance deterrence. That strategy worked, and the asymmetrical military challenges to our presence will require a similarly bold approach today.

The political challenges to U.S. forward presence in the Western Pacific are almost entirely local, but they matter. The most acute problem is in Okinawa, Japan, which has been forced by dint of history to host 80 percent of the U.S. military facilities in Japan. Efforts by the U.S. and Japanese governments to reduce that footprint by transferring 8,000 Marines to Guam have been hung up on local environmental permits needed to consolidate replacement facilities in Okinawa (specifically an order to close Marine Corps Air Station Futenma).

Meanwhile, escalating costs and questions about the capacity of Guam to absorb the new forces have further complicated the budgetary and political environment. Early in 2012, the U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to reduce the number of Marines going to Guam to 4,700 and to proceed with the move without waiting for the new facility to replace Futenma. That created some sense of forward movement, but it did not solve the basic problem of where to base Osprey and other aircraft the Marines need forward deployed. A solution will not come in a bilateral U.S.-Japan context alone; the Defense Department will have to find a way forward that involves new thinking about the Marines' rotational practices in the region as a whole.

Therein lays the opportunity for a fresh look at forward presence and engagement in the Western Pacific. China's aggressive diplomatic and military assertion of its territorial claims in the East and South China Seas has prompted almost every neighboring state to seek closer ties to the United States and a more sustained U.S. military presence. The U.S. response cannot be uniform and must take into account the unique nature of our different bilateral relationships in the region, as well as our partners' sensitivities vis-à-vis Beijing. However, the overall trend should be toward more jointness, integration, collaboration, and presence across the region.

- In Japan, this means development of joint strategies and coordinated requirements to implement the U.S. concept of Air Sea Battle and the parallel Japanese concept of a "dynamic defense."
- With Korea, the key will be implementing Seoul's defense reforms and establishing a more balanced set of relations among all the services (and not just the armies) as wartime operational command is transferred to Seoul in 2015.
- In Australia, polls show over half the public support hosting U.S. bases, and agreement has been reached for the regular deployment of up to 2,500 Marines in the north. Further opportunities exist in western Australia and at HMAS Stirling, where U.S. submarine operations were based in World War II.
- In Southeast Asia, the only fixed presence is in Singapore, where the United States will base littoral combat ships. Permanent bases, however, do not have to be the only model for regular presence, and countries like the Philippines are seeking alternative options to keep U.S. forces engaged in their immediate neighborhood.

Across the region, PACOM and the Defense Department should seek to reinforce patterns of cooperation in which the United States helps to provide maritime domain awareness that would enable navies, coast guards and air forces of all sizes to assist with search and rescue, antipiracy, and other multilateral operations.

The United States faces a range of budgetary, military, and political challenges to sustaining a forward presence in the Western Pacific, but a strategy for our bases and facilities in the Pacific that is embedded in a larger vision for building partnership capacity and greater jointness with our allies will give PACOM and the Defense Department considerably more flexibility as they proceed. This will require not only a whole-of-government approach within the administration, but also with critical committees and members of the Congress who are now more focused on questions of U.S. base realignment plans in Asia than they have been for decades. ■