

The Army's Role in the Indo–Pacific

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Of the U.S. Armed Forces, the Navy and the Air Force have the largest roles to play in the Indo–Pacific, but there is also a critical role for the Army.

Smart investment and strategy can allow the Army to punch above its weight in theater and deny air and sea littorals to China using asymmetric tactics.

The Army's newest long-range-fire capabilities are critical to deterring China in the Indo–Pacific and should be prioritized.

The Indo–Pacific is primarily a maritime theater. Strategically important countries in the region are separated by hundreds or even thousands of miles of open ocean. The United States is a treaty ally of Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines, two of which are island nations that are primarily threatened by the naval, air, and missile forces of China. As a result, in a conflict with China, the U.S. Navy and Air Force would play the leading roles. The Army, though, has a critical role to play in the region, both with its existing assets and with new capabilities currently under development.

The Army's two main roles in an Indo–Pacific conflict would be to provide logistics and air defense for forward airfields (a familiar role) and to provide shore-based anti-access capabilities—a relatively new role for which the Army began readying itself

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only recently. The Army can draw lessons in denying access to air and sea littorals with limited and mobile land-based assets from two examples: the Ukrainians and the Houthis.

The Navy and Air Force will play the leading roles in a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, and therefore draw the bulk of new funding for the near future. Given the difficulties in expanding the defense budget in a meaningful way, the Army may even need to downsize to further fund the acquisition of the ships, planes, and munitions that will be most critically needed if the U.S. were ever again engaged in a war in the Indo-Pacific. Given these difficulties, the Army may need to narrow its ambitions and commitments around the world to focus on its role in the Indo-Pacific.

The Marine Corps has already done something similar in a plan called Force Design 2030, divesting itself of equipment and cancelling planned purchases that would be irrelevant to a conflict in the Indo-Pacific and reshaping the service away from how it was structured for counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan and toward near-peer adversary conflict in the Pacific.¹ Although it would not be a perfect fit for the Army (which does need to maintain assets such as armor), Force Design 2030 does have some useful lessons for how the Army can retool itself to be relevant in the coming decades as the U.S. and China compete for influence and position in the Indo-Pacific (hoping and assuming that the United States does not repeat its mistake of engaging in any more nation-building occupations in the near future).

The Army's Role in a Conflict

Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth has identified five core tasks for the Army in the Indo-Pacific if war were to break out:²

1. Serve as the “linchpin” service by establishing and protecting staging areas and joint operating bases for air and naval forces, including providing air and missile defense.
2. Provide logistics for the joint force, especially in terms of secure communications.
3. Provide command-and-control capacity.
4. Use ground-based, long-range fires to interdict enemy missiles, suppress enemy air defense, and provide counter fires against mobile enemy targets.

5. Provide counterattack capability with ground combat forces.

In the Indo–Pacific, the U.S. Army must operate in a primarily naval theater of operations against an adversary that has the home field advantage. China is hundreds of miles or less away from the potential conflict zones—as opposed to the United States’ main Pacific nodes of San Diego and Hawaii, which are thousands of miles away from the potential conflict zones—with protected interior supply lines and numerical superiority in terms of equipment and munitions in theater.

The Army can draw lessons from the outsized success of both the Ukrainians and the Houthis in land-based targeting of ships in recent years. The Ukrainians, with no navy to speak of and only short-range and intermediate-range missiles, have sunk Russian ships, targeted Russian port infrastructure, and largely denied the Russians the use of the Ukrainian littoral for offensive operations against Ukraine. The Russians have withdrawn most warships from Crimea and now keep them safely out of range—but also out of the fight. Likewise, the Houthis are threatening international commerce and targeting Western warships with nothing more than cheap drones and land-to-sea missiles.

Until 2019, the United States had been unable to construct ground-based missiles with a range between 300 miles and 3,400 miles due to the restrictions of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which restricted both the United States and the Soviet Union (later Russia). The Chinese were never a party to this agreement and have been engaged in a substantial buildup of missile capabilities over the past several decades. China’s most recent national security white paper states that it is “strengthening its intermediate and long-range precision strike forces ... so as to build a strong and modernized rocket force.”³ The Chinese now have missiles capable of reaching targets as far away as Guam and a variety of missiles with different capabilities for both conventional and nuclear missions.⁴

Since the end of the INF Treaty in 2019, the U.S. Army has been free to develop and field ground-based intermediate-range missiles. These missiles, coupled with air defense systems, such as the Patriot missile battery, could make it exceedingly difficult for the Chinese to operate in certain contested straits—including the waters between the northernmost tip of the Philippines and Taiwan. China has designed its existing anti-access/area denial capabilities to counter American warships and aircraft and may have a more challenging time targeting and destroying mobile land-based assets. In the event of a conflict in the region, land-based air defense and

anti-ship missiles distributed throughout the region would give the Chinese a complex problem to solve and add another layer of deterrence.

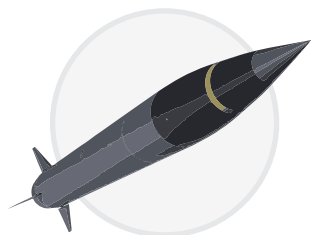
New Weapons in the Army's Arsenal

In 2021, the Army committed to fast-tracking and delivering multiple new fires systems by 2023. The Army has done a respectable job of meeting this target, surprising many doubters who were familiar with the Army's failed modernization programs in the early 2000s.⁵ Most of these new weapons and systems have been tested successfully, and U.S. Army Pacific Commander General Charles Flynn has stated that the Army plans to deploy some of them to the Indo-Pacific in 2024. The Army is further developing these new weapons and systems to improve its capability to deliver long-range precision fires that would be especially relevant to a conflict in the region.⁶ The new weapons and systems are:

- **The Precision Strike Missile (PrSM).** The PrSM is the next-generation surface-to-surface missile being developed by the Army to replace the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS).⁷ Lockheed Martin, the missile's developer, says the missiles have a range of up to 310 miles.⁸ Like the ATACMS missile, the PrSM will be launched from the mobile HIMARS launch system, although the launcher will now be capable of carrying two PrSM missiles, whereas previously it could carry only one ATACMS missile.⁹
- **The Strategic Mid-Range Fires System.** Also called the "Typhon" missile system, it has been developed to fire anti-ship missiles, air defense missiles, and land-to-land mid-range missiles. The system is mobile and therefore difficult for enemy forces to target, and its range varies by missile type.¹⁰
- **The Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW).** The LRHW is set to be the U.S. military's first long-range hypersonic missile, with a range of at least 1,700 miles (but possibly more).¹¹ The Chinese have already deployed a significant number of hypersonic missiles and are significantly ahead of the United States in this regard.¹² Hypersonic missiles, traveling at least five times the speed of sound, are a huge challenge for traditional air defense measures that the United States has yet to adequately address. If the Army successfully fields an LRHW battery in the near future, it would go a long way toward addressing this capability gap.

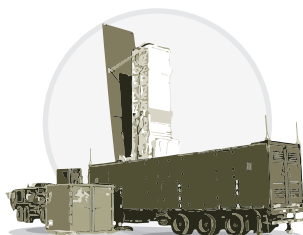
FIGURE 1

Army Weapons Systems to Be Deployed to the Indo-Pacific



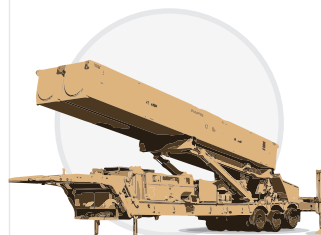
Precision Strike Missile (PrSM)

A next-generation, long-range precision strike surface-to-surface missile. It replaces the ATACMS missile system and provides increased range and survivability. Its reported range is 310+ miles and will soon be extended.



Strategic Mid-Range Fires (SMRF)

Also known as the “Typhon.” This mobile fires system is capable of carrying surface-to-surface missiles, including anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles. Its range varies depending on the missile type.



Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon (LRHW)

A ground-launched, long-range hypersonic weapon designed to defeat enemy anti-access/anti-denial capabilities, enemy long-range fires, and other targets. Still in testing, its reported range is 1,725+ miles.

SOURCE: Author research.

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- **The Multi-Domain Task Force (MDTF).** The Army has introduced a new type of unit to accommodate these and other precision fires systems, called the MDTF. The Army describes the MDTF as “theater-level maneuver elements designed to synchronize precision effects and precision fires in all domains against adversary anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) networks in all domains, enabling joint forces to execute their operational plan (OPLAN)-directed roles.”¹³ The 1st MDTF was established in 2017 at Joint Base Lewis–McCord in Washington State, with the 2nd MDTF following in 2021 in Germany and the 3rd MDTF in 2022 in Hawaii.

The Army’s Role in Peacetime

To shape the region and build an enduring advantage, the Army is deeply engaged in building allied and partner capabilities, especially through joint exercises and training. The U.S. military’s strategy in the Indo-Pacific

necessitates building up capable partners and allies in the region to deter the Chinese from launching a war of aggression. The stronger that Japan, South Korea, Australia, Taiwan, the Philippines, and India are (and to a lesser extent, Vietnam and Indonesia), the more constrained China is in its ability to solve political questions in the region by force. The Army's campaigning strategy in the Pacific demonstrates to Beijing the ability of the United States and its partners and allies to operate jointly technically, procedurally, and at the human level.¹⁴

To further complicate matters for Chinese military planners, the Army should consider expanding joint training exercises to newer partners, such as Vietnam and India, which both share American security concerns about China. In both Vietnam and India, there is a rationale for the U.S. Army to train with local forces in traditional ground combat operations. If such joint training exercises are sustained and effective, the Chinese would not be able to plan for a war over Taiwan that involves solely the United States. Instead, the Chinese will have to consider whether taking Taiwan is possible in the face of opposition by both the United States and U.S. partners and allies, working in tandem and having planned and practiced a joint response for years. The ultimate effect is to deter the Chinese from either an invasion of Taiwan or using military force in one of its many territorial disputes.

The Army recently opened its first regional training complex in 50 years—the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center (JPMRC)—with the goal of training both U.S. and allied forces in a Pacific environment.¹⁵ This center maintains two permanent campuses (one in Hawaii and one in Alaska) and one mobile campus that cycles between allied countries for joint training purposes. Over the past several years, the JPMRC has operated from Indonesia and Australia, and this year it will be moving to the Philippines.¹⁶ The United States has long maintained bases in Europe where joint training exercises can take place, and this new center has filled a critical gap in allied readiness in the Pacific.¹⁷

The Army conducts exercises, such as Operation Pathways, to practice establishing supply lines and command-and-control networks in the Western Pacific in the event of a conflict. Army units, such as the Fifth Security Force Assistance Brigade, deploy in support of joint exercises in the Pacific, acting as integrators between American and allied troops.¹⁸ These sorts of exercises are exactly what the Army should be doing at this point. The primary issue is that the U.S. commitment of troops and resources in the Pacific does not match the Indo-Pacific's status as the primary region of concern in the National Defense Strategy. The Army continues to devote as much or more troops and resources to other theaters, especially to the

U.S. European Command and U.S. Central Command, and is struggling with fully manning its units as a result of the recruiting crisis. If the Army wants to be decisive in the joint effort to deter China in the Indo–Pacific, it will need to shift personnel and resources away from other theaters and to the Indo–Pacific.

Conclusion

The Army deserves praise for moving quickly on these new systems, for being proactive in its engagements with partner and allied nations in the Pacific, and for being responsive to policymakers pushing it to reorient its procurement and force structure around the Indo–Pacific. If the Army is able to build and deploy significant numbers of these new systems to the Indo–Pacific, it will deter China from launching an attack on either American forces or its partners and allies.

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Endnotes

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