

Congress Should Act to Boost Military Deterrence in the Indo–Pacific

Frederico Bartels and Walter Lohman

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Commitment to a free and open Indo–Pacific will require a capable American military presence to deter aggression and, if necessary, to react effectively to China.

The current security environment unquestionably points towards the Indo–Pacific as the most important region for American interests. U.S. policy must reflect this.

Congress has a great chance in this year’s defense budget to strengthen American presence in the Indo–Pacific and position the U.S. for great power competition.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy changed the focus of the Department of Defense (DOD) to great power competition with two principal competitors, Russia and China.¹ Looking toward the horizon, there is no doubt that in the long term, China is the greater, full-scope strategic challenger. The DOD has been clear about this. It has also explicitly stated that the Indo–Pacific is its “priority theater.”² This being the case, the commitment to a free and open Indo–Pacific will require a capable American military presence to deter aggression and, if necessary, to react effectively. It is an effort that, beyond collaboration and coordination with allies and partners in the region, will also require more military assets forward in the region.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib5072>

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Multiple Proposals

In responding to a congressional request for detailed information on how to bolster military deterrence vis-à-vis China in the Pacific theater,³ the Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) Admiral Philip Davidson recently responded with a plan named “Regain the Advantage.”⁴ The plan outlines an investment of \$20 billion over five years, with \$1.6 billion in the first fiscal year (FY) 2021. In a way, the plan represents a post-script to the normal process of federal budgeting. For that reason, the specifics, such as they are, need to be closely scrutinized.

Congress is already seriously considering the requests for the FY 2021 budget cycle. House Armed Services Ranking Member, Representative Mac Thornberry (R-TX), released draft legislation creating an Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative.⁵ The proposal is substantially more aggressive in its first year than Davidson’s, asking for \$6.09 billion versus \$1.6 billion in the INDOPACOM plan. However, it only outlines one year of resources. Thus, in order to compare these in a more equitable manner, this analysis excludes the four-year projection from the INDOPACOM proposal.

On the other side of the Hill, Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) has introduced a more comprehensive \$43 billion supplemental package to enhance deterrence against China.⁶ The Senator’s proposal includes \$6.1 billion in an Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative; however, there are scant details on what would be a part of this initiative beyond the five lines of effort outlined by the INCOPACOM plan.⁷ In this regard, it lacks the details that are available for both the Thornberry proposal and the INDOPACOM one, and for that reason, this paper focuses on the Thornberry and the INDOPACOM requests.

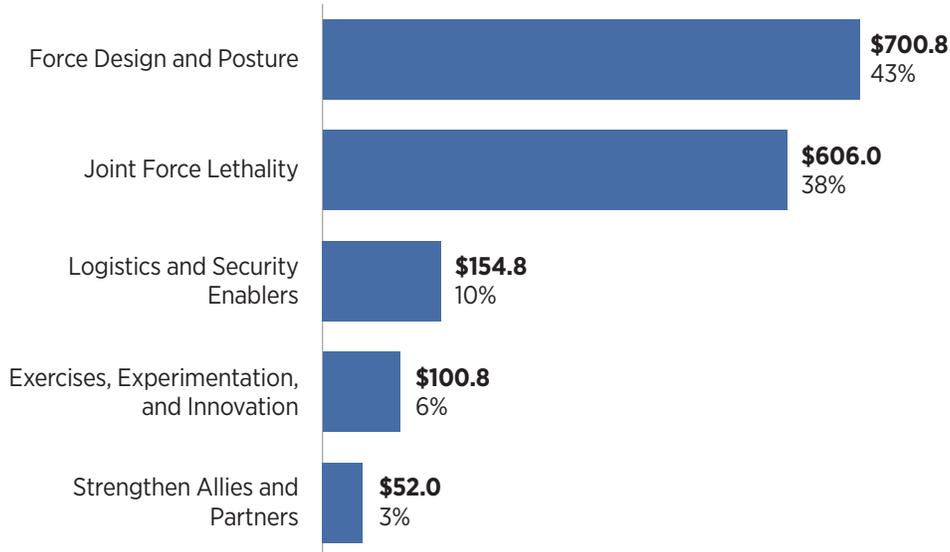
All in all, there are some elements in the plan and the draft proposal that ought to be supported by Congress and others that are better left to be prioritized through the internal budgetary process of the Department of Defense (DOD). At a minimum, Congress must be able to understand and visualize all the various funding streams and programs that the Pentagon is proposing and already has underway that directly contribute to enhanced warfighting in the Indo-Pacific theater in order to put this new request in its proper context.

As Congressman Thornberry noted, “These are not all new programs, but by pulling them together under one policy we will be better able to judge our own commitment here at home, demonstrate our resolve to our allies and partners, and deter China.”⁸ Congress should be able to see the relative amount of resources being applied to the Indo-Pacific and to judge whether they are sufficient for this priority theater.

CHART 1

“Regain the Advantage” Emphasizes Enablers and Force Lethality

IN MILLIONS OF U.S. DOLLARS, FY 2021



SOURCE: U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, “Regain the Advantage: National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) 2020 Section 1253 Assessment,” March 2020, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6864-national-defense-strategy-summ/88515175e10106bc3b1/optimized/full.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2020).

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INDOPACOM Emphasizes Enablers, Force Lethality

Eight-one percent of the funds in the first year of the INDOPACOM plan are dedicated to two areas: force design and posture, and joint force lethality.⁹ Joint force lethality represents largely investments in radars and in long-range precision fires. Force design and posture relates to the better dispersal and relocation of forces through the region.

The biggest ticket item in the first year of the plan is force design within U.S. territories, accounting for over \$686 million in FY 2021, or 42 percent of the plan. Force design in U.S. territories develops “key strategic locations to project power, deter adversaries, and respond to crises across the Indo-Pacific. Investments are focused on divert and dispersal locations, as well as new training facilities.”¹⁰ The new National Defense Strategy placed a high premium on improving force posture, and these proposed investments directly support that effort. They are also investments that we

can be assured the INDOPACOM Commander has a clearer perspective on than the military services or the DOD staff.

The joint force lethality component of the plan proposes substantial investments in radar systems to be deployed in the region and long-range precision fires. This \$214.5 million represents 27 percent of the total investment in the first year. The push for a new missile defense site in Guam and systems to be deployed in Hawaii and Palau need to be considered within the context of all other DOD investments in missile defense, not in the isolated context of the Pacific region.

For instance, building a missile defense site in Guam is a costly undertaking and should be weighed against other needed improvements to the homeland missile defense system, like replacing the aging kill vehicles used in the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense system. Congress more properly should weigh the need for those assets within the budget and the plans for the Missile Defense Agency (MDA).

In general terms, equipment investments are best formulated by the military departments and the MDA, as opposed to combatant commanders. Combatant commands typically do not have the long-term perspective necessary to conceive, design, test, field, and sustain equipment programs. Nor are combatant commanders able to consider how specific equipment investments can and should be integrated into larger DOD systems. Investments in regional infrastructure and building partner capacity, by contrast, are programs in which combatant commanders generally have far superior perspective and knowledge compared to the departments.

Thornberry Highlights Infrastructure

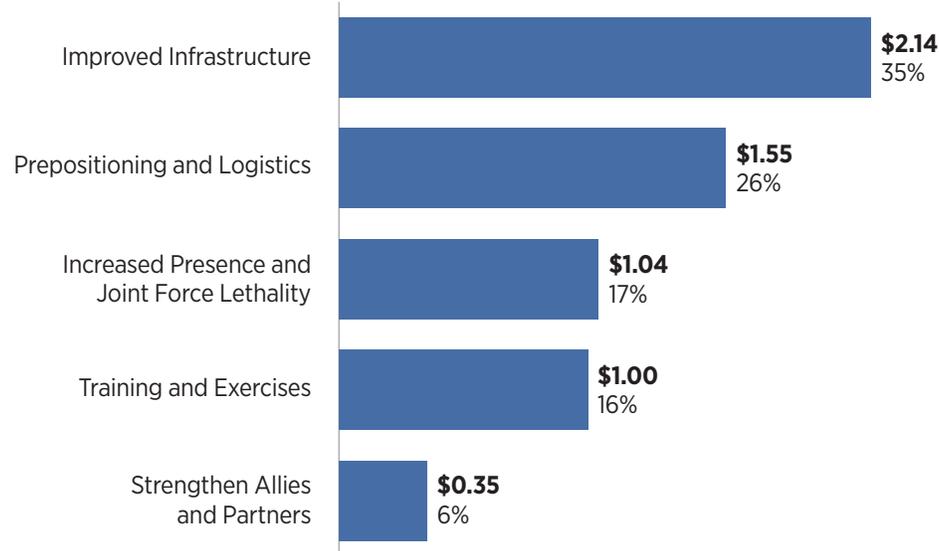
Thornberry's Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative represents a more aggressive effort in its first year, requesting \$6.09 billion for FY 2021, as opposed to the \$1.6 billion of the Regain the Advantage plan. The Thornberry Initiative emphasizes improved infrastructure, which is analogous to the force design and posture of the INDOPACOM plan, and prepositioning and infrastructure, analogous to logistics and enabler. These two account for 61 percent of the resources in the plan, or \$3.7 billion.

In the improved infrastructure element, the majority of the resources is dedicated to military construction dispersed through the military departments.¹¹ There are not yet details on the specific projects that would be funded. However, the importance placed on military construction is aligned with the necessity of building more military assets in the region and having them closer to the necessary theaters of operation. It is also

CHART 2

“Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative” Highlights Infrastructure

IN BILLIONS OF U.S. DOLLARS, FY 2021



SOURCE: House Armed Services Committee Minority, “Thornberry Unveils Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative,” Press Release, April 16, 2020, <https://republicans-armedservices.house.gov/news/press-releases/thornberry-unveils-indo-pacific-deterrence-initiative> (accessed April 20, 2020).

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aligned with the experience of efforts of the widely praised European Deterrence Initiative, which emphasized improving the prepositioning of forces and equipment.¹²

When it comes to the prepositioning and logistics effort, it is mostly concentrated in munitions prepositioning, with \$819 million, followed by prepositioning efforts in the Navy, with \$497 million.¹³ The plan is sparse on details on munitions preposition or what type of munitions would be procured. These details are important for Congress to evaluate the appropriateness of the plan. These are appropriate investments that reflect the uniqueness of the theater of operations.

One important question emerges from evaluating the budgetary prioritization of the Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative, which is the amount of money dedicated to training and exercises. The Thornberry plan allocates \$1 billion for training and exercises in FY 2021, while the plan developed by INDOPACOM only asks for \$100 million in FY 2021. This difference of

level of resources raises questions about what amount of funding is actually executable in FY 2021 and what type of resources should be appropriated now or in the coming fiscal years. In general, it makes sense to defer to the regional commander in this instance.

The main question in both plans, more pronounced with Thornberry's Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative, is what is already in the budget request and what would be entirely new programs. This question is even more salient if Congress ends up relying on a continuing resolution to start the next fiscal year, when ordinarily there are no new programs.¹⁴

Recommendations

Congress should provide selected support to INDOPACOM's request—as Congressman Thornberry has already begun to do—as a necessary enabler to implement the changes required by the National Defense Strategy.

In doing so, Congress should:

- **Develop better tracking for regional funding.** Because of how congressional appropriations are written and how the Department of Defense divides its resources before being allocated, it is very challenging for both the DOD and Congress to have a precise sense of how much is dedicated to the military's operations in any given part of the globe.¹⁵ There is a reliance on proxy metrics, such as number of troops assigned to each of the regional combatant commands and number of assets. Congress should take advantage of the current debate on the state of our forces in the Indo-Pacific to develop better budgetary tools to track and label what is dedicated to each different theater.
- **Prioritize funding for logistics, enablers, and exercises.** The European Deterrence Initiative has been effective because it has relied on prepositioning equipment and assessing the gaps that exist in the military assets in theater.¹⁶ Further investments in the Pacific should focus the elements that do not have a natural constituency within the Pentagon, such as logistic enablers, building partner capacity, and testing the assets and the coordination through exercises.
- **Emphasize the role of allies and partner capacity-building in the region.** The greatest advantage that the United States has over its adversaries is its extensive network of allies and partners.¹⁷ The Maritime Security Initiative provides a good building block for the allied

and partner integration.¹⁸ The efforts to reinforce deterrence in the Pacific need to have our allies and partners as an integral portion of it, from consultations to exercises, and everything else in between.

- **Fund through the base budget.** The European Deterrence Initiative, a usual model for the Indo–Pacific Deterrence Initiative,¹⁹ was funded through contingency funds and that, in turn, created some structural weakness in its planning.²⁰ Congress should allocate resources from the base defense budget for the Pacific effort in order to have predictable five-year projections—a tremendous benefit for allies as well as the defense enterprise.²¹

Conclusion

The current security environment unquestionably points towards the Indo–Pacific as the most important region for American interests. The United States military needs to reflect that reality and truly emphasize the area. The plan developed by the INDOPACOM Commander combined with the draft released by Congressman Thornberry point toward a very promising effort. In the same vein, Senator Cotton’s proposed legislation shows that there is a bicameral drive to act. Congress needs to leverage the 2021 defense budget and make a down payment on a long-term strategy to treat the Indo–Pacific as the “priority theater” it is.

Frederico Bartels is Senior Policy Analyst for Defense Budgeting in the Center for National Defense, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. **Walter Lohman** is Director of the Asian Studies Center of the Davis Institute.

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