

# EVOLVING THE U.S. BASE STRUCTURE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How should the United States seek to posture its military in the broader Indo-Asia-Pacific region in 2021 and beyond? During an era in which China has expanded its military capabilities and access, from Sri Lanka to Pakistan to Djibouti, and in which the Pentagon has argued for more distributed basing and operations, the U.S. military should consider substantially broadening its footprint in the region, as well. However, the United States should be slow and careful in pursuing any such initiatives.

Today's U.S. force posture aligns rather well with commitments, interests, and threats. Japan and the Republic of Korea are America's two most important allies in the region, especially when weighting importance by a combination of the nation's size, economic/military/strategic clout, and threat environment. Australia is also important, but because that country is farther from the main potential area of action in the broader Indo-Pacific, and is less at risk, U.S. basing capabilities there can be correspondingly more limited. Hypothetical alliances with Vietnam or other mainland Asian states would create as many new vulnerabilities and obligations as benefits for the United States, so they do not make sense at present. A stronger alliance with the Philippines, possibly desirable under some circumstances, is not presently advantageous given the nature of the Duterte regime and the downsides of America being sucked into potentially violent disputes over relatively insignificant land formations. Increasing the U.S. military presence on Guam makes sense, but it has already occurred. The addition of access options in smaller places such as Singapore and Palau seems broadly consonant with strategic requirements and realities and should not extend much further given the present threat environment. The U.S. Navy's concept of basing 60% – rather than the traditional 50% – of total American naval power on the Indo-

Pacific side of the world, which dates back to the Obama era rebalance policy, makes sense and is sufficient for now.

To be sure, some small additional steps may be warranted. Deepening security cooperation with the "Quad" nations of Japan, Australia, India, and the United States makes sense; it might even be expanded to a Quint to include South Korea. Modest increases in U.S. presence here and there, for example in the Philippines, could make sense even if they do not involve major combat bases. But overall, the U.S. position in the broader western Pacific is sound, and the vulnerabilities that do exist cannot easily be mitigated by different basing arrangements. Rather, they call for different and more indirect, asymmetric strategies for protecting interests and allies.

## GENERAL STRATEGIC CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has called implementation of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) that he inherited upon taking the reins of the Pentagon in the summer of 2019 his top priority.

As is well known, the first-order goal of the 2018 NDS is to re-emphasize great-power competition with an eye toward strengthening U.S. and allied deterrence in conventional, nuclear, and advanced-technology realms.

This diagnosis of the global strategic environment leads naturally to the emphasis of the NDS on lethality, resilience, and innovation for high-end combat and thus deterrence, especially vis-à-vis China and Russia. It also leads to primary strategic emphasis on two theaters: eastern Europe and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Much of this thinking is widely accepted in both political parties and would undoubtedly inform a Biden administration, as well.

Yet the objective of greater strategic focus on great-power competition is at some tension with the global obligations of a country with around 60 allies and security partners, distributed across all continents except Antarctica. Redirecting the super-tanker that is the American Department of Defense is a slow process in which change is measured in modest reallocations of parts of the budget.

There is another potential downside to adding many more U.S. bases abroad. As a result of such presence, the United States could be entrapped in conflicts it would rather avoid — and that its core strategic interests might not otherwise require it to fight.

There is a huge positive side to stationing U.S. forces on allied territory when the alliances are highly important to the United States and when the threat to U.S. allies or security partners is serious: the essence of deterrence usually works in such situations. Japan and South Korea have not been attacked since American forces were consistently stationed on their territories, just as western European allies were not attacked by the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. By contrast, deterrence can fail when rhetorical commitments are not backed up by real military power, formal alliance commitments, and demonstrated resolve.<sup>1</sup> For example, Kim Il-Sung and Saddam Hussein doubted America's will to respond to their aggressions against South Korea and Kuwait in 1950 and 1990, respectively, after unfortunate comments by Secretary of State Dean Acheson and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie, among others (Indeed, it is difficult to classify these cases as deterrence failure, since the United States had no formal commitments to the security of these countries and signaled that it was *not* interested in defending them).<sup>2</sup> By contrast, deterrence can fail when rhetorical commitments are not backed up by real military power, formal alliance commitments, and demonstrated resolve.<sup>3</sup> For example, Kim Il-Sung and Saddam Hussein doubted America's will to respond to their aggressions against South Korea and Kuwait in 1950 and 1990, respectively, after unfortunate comments by Secretary of State Dean Acheson and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie, among others (Indeed, it is difficult to classify these cases as deterrence failure, since the United States had no formal commitments to the security of these countries and signaled that it was *not* interested in defending them).<sup>4</sup>

But we should be wary of forward basing in other cases. That is especially true when potential host nations are either hard to defend, strategically secondary to our interests, shaky in their own commitment to democracy and good governance, and ambivalent in how they feel about the United States versus China. While it may be tempting to try to match every new Chinese airfield or missile battery on a South China Sea islet, it may not be so wise to get drawn into fights that do not engage core American strategic interests of a type which George Kennan or Hans Morgenthau would have recognized and approved.

## U.S. GLOBAL BASING, TRUMP, AND THE FUTURE

There has been much continuity in American global basing in recent decades. The most lasting big changes came with the end of the Cold War. In Europe, the U.S. presence decreased by two-thirds. In Asia, changes were less dramatic, especially after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Philippines in the early 1990s. Then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye spoke of the importance of strategic “oxygen” and put a floor under the U.S. military presence in the western Pacific region of about 100,000 GIs. Since that time, America's global military footprint has expanded dramatically and subsequently declined dramatically in the broader Middle East, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, its overall size and scale in Europe and East Asia has changed only modestly.

These major basing countries for U.S. troops play different kinds of roles. The preponderance of U.S. forces stationed now in the Indo-Pacific region are in Northeast Asia. Japan is a regional and global hub, also hosting major combat forces from all services except the Army. U.S. armed forces in Korea are dominated by Army and Air Force capabilities, focused specifically on the defense of the peninsula.

Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, a British territory, is a crucial hub, particularly for transiting to and from the broader Middle East. Bahrain hosts the Navy's Fifth Fleet; Qatar hosts the Middle East region's major U.S. Air Force base known as al-Udeid; Kuwait provides logistics capabilities, many of them Army-focused, for U.S. forces in Iraq. Facilities in Djibouti provide a mix of capabilities

across the services. Spain and Italy host U.S. naval capabilities; Italy also has considerable numbers of Air Force and Army personnel. Turkey's Incirlik base is an important U.S. Air Force facility. U.S. bases in Britain are principally Air Force installations; Germany hosts large contingents of both Army soldiers and Air Force personnel.<sup>5</sup> Turkey's Incirlik base is an important U.S. Air Force facility. U.S. bases in Britain are principally Air Force installations; Germany hosts large contingents of both Army soldiers and Air Force personnel.<sup>6</sup>

Despite President Trump's disruptive and often dismissive views toward American military alliances, the United States global military footprint will not have changed dramatically during his first term.

Of course, under Trump, even if numbers haven't changed much, America's alliances are often in a state of greater agitation than before. For example, the United States has demanded at least a fivefold increase in the roughly \$1 billion a year that South Korea (a good burden-sharer by most measures, devoting 2.5% of GDP to its own armed forces) has been paying in host-nation support for American forces on its territory. The issue remains unresolved in late 2020, with Seoul proposing a much more modest increase. Similar disagreements continue, of course, with NATO allies, even as Trump claims credit for inducing them to spend \$130 billion more on defense since 2016. This situation is not to America's strategic benefit because it risks weakening deterrence if taken to extremes, and it should be remedied.

Any broader U.S. defense budget increase is unlikely — and that was true before COVID struck. Any expansion of American forces in the Indo-Pacific region will have to be drawn from a force posture that is no larger than what exists today, if not somewhat smaller.

Big changes seem unlikely and probably unnecessary. That does not rule out smaller shifts, as noted before. In terms of additional new ideas, the Commandant of the Marine Corps has written of the obsolescence of large-scale amphibious assault and directed his service to focus on smaller, more survivable platforms and more innovative warfighting concepts that might, for example, contest rather than seek to control areas of the western Pacific where China's anti-access/area-denial capabilities are strongest.<sup>7</sup> War plans for

dealing with Russia and China contingencies are now being more robustly and regularly reviewed, as well.<sup>8</sup> That will likely continue even if particular formulations from the Trump years, like emphasis on succeeding in the "contact" and "blunt" phases of a future conflict, may be rethought. Big changes seem unlikely and probably unnecessary. That does not rule out smaller shifts, as noted before. In terms of additional new ideas, the Commandant of the Marine Corps has written of the obsolescence of large-scale amphibious assault and directed his service to focus on smaller, more survivable platforms and more innovative warfighting concepts that might, for example, contest rather than seek to control areas of the western Pacific where China's anti-access/area-denial capabilities are strongest.<sup>9</sup> War plans for dealing with Russia and China contingencies are now being more robustly and regularly reviewed, as well.<sup>10</sup> That will likely continue even if particular formulations from the Trump years, like emphasis on succeeding in the "contact" and "blunt" phases of a future conflict, may be rethought. Together, these efforts could lead to some (hardened) prepositioning of supplies in a few places in the broader region to facilitate distributed operations in times of crisis or war and perhaps an "archipelago" defense strategy that could someday emerge.

A couple more points merit mention. The Trump administration also took several controversial steps in the nuclear realm in recent years. A new low-yield nuclear warhead has been fielded (without requiring testing) to dissuade Russia by showing that it could dominate the low-yield nuclear battlespace. Two conventionally-armed intermediate-range missiles have already been tested in the wake of the U.S. decision to withdraw from the INF Treaty. But as Frank Rose has underscored, it is not clear where these missiles would be based in the region — or whether, given America's other long-range strike options like the B-21 bomber, they need to be.

And in 2019, the Department of Defense also released a new Arctic strategy. It emphasizes greater presence and situational awareness and the fostering of greater international cooperation in that region.<sup>11</sup> Still, in the Arctic, any expansion of the U.S. presence will likely be measured in terms of single-digit additional deployments of icebreakers (the United States now really only has just two) in the years to come.

## THE TAIWAN CHALLENGE

Taiwan has become more vulnerable to Chinese attack over the years. How should the United States address this troubling trajectory?

The concern is greatest for scenarios in which China might use a partial blockade, cyberattacks, and some menacing missile strikes against Taiwan in an attempt to coerce it into capitulation and forced reunification, and it is not clear that the United States could confidently defeat such a PLA strategy. Geography works heavily to China's advantage in such a scenario. To win decisively in classic military terms, we might determine the need to attack Chinese submarines in port, missile launchers on mainland soil, and Chinese command/control networks that are also used for China's nuclear arsenal. Escalation could certainly ensue; China could easily respond with attacks against U.S. bases in Japan or beyond. Any such scenario would be highly fraught and not easily or confidently won.

Hence, I would caution that, with all the improvements in Chinese military power that are documented in the 2020 Pentagon report on Chinese military power and other sources, attempting an indirect defense of Taiwan in such a contingency may make most sense. Rather than try to break a blockade comprehensively and directly, for example, the United States might primarily rely on geographically asymmetric operations against Chinese shipping in the Persian Gulf, for example, together with moves toward a fundamental decoupling of our economy from China's as a punitive measure. These approaches would themselves be dangerous and painful – and they might not immediately rescue Taiwan, as I discuss in my 2019 book, *The Senkaku Paradox*. But they would have a much lower chance of escalating to what could become World War III. The military elements of such a response would benefit from America's impressive network of bases in the broader Middle East/Persian Gulf region, as well.

## CONCLUSION: THE PAST AHEAD

The U.S. military posture in the Indo-Pacific region, with its concentrations in Northeast Asia and the broader Persian Gulf region, as well as its additional key discrete capabilities from Guam to Palau to Australia to Singapore to Diego Garcia, is reasonably well aligned with American interests and strategy already. It may not gain headlines like China's recent "string of pearls" efforts. But America's presence is more like an armored necklace than a string of pearls, and it continues to provide the United States with big advantages.

To the extent modifications to existing posture are considered in the years ahead, they should be planned prudently, patiently and selectively. Three main guidelines or principles should be used to assess their utility:

- Do they improve hardness and resilience against modern precision weapons?
- Do they help the United States make more efficient use of existing force structure, at a time when American defense budgets will likely plateau? For example, homeported ships are a great advantage.
- Do they avoid new encumbrances and potential for strategic entrapment with countries that only share American values and interests to a limited and potentially fickle degree?

With these ideas in mind, the future of America as an Indo-Pacific power should be bright, and the ability of the United States and allies to push back when needed against a rising China should be promising.



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