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The 2025 National Security Strategy called for a “military capable of denying aggression anywhere in the First Island Chain.” During 2026, MWI focused its research efforts on understanding how the US Army can deter Chinese aggression by denying China a quick victory. MWI conducted a contemporary battlefield assessment to Taiwan and South Korea to understand their strategy, doctrine, and force modernization on the frontline. MWI’s efforts culminated with the annual Modern War Conference on “Deterrence in the Pacific.”

To support that conference and share the work of our many contributing authors, we have collected a selection of articles on the Army’s role in deterrence in the Pacific. We will publish additional articles in the winter 2027 edition of the *Modern War Journal*.

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Strategic Competition

When Maritime and Continental Powers Collide: A Historical Framework for US Asymmetric Competition with China

Matthew Sansone

Alternate visions grappling for supremacy over the structures and norms of global politics and power is at the very center of strategic competition. In this struggle, comprehensive national power across all dimensions of diplomacy, information, military, and economic might, often below the [threshold of armed conflict](#), are means to the broader end of national prestige and supremacy on the world stage. From Athens and Sparta to the United States and the Soviet Union, history is replete with competitions over the balance of power and the assertion of the dominant state's values, norms, and power.

History may not repeat itself, but it often rhymes, and modern competition has similar rhythmic tones to the past. Competition has historically played out most dramatically between maritime and continental powers, each party wielding strengths and mitigating vulnerabilities as it seeks to impose an international order that serves its interests. The dynamic interplay of maritime and continental powers occurs because of a fundamental difference in national statecraft and prioritization.

Continental powers emphasize territorial control, overland trade routes, and maintaining security through land-based military capabilities. They [prefer to focus](#) on immediate border threats and influencing the affairs of neighboring states to maintain border or territorial security. Continental powers traditionally utilize territorial conquest or overland trade to address national resource constraints. Historical continental powers include states such as Sparta, Rome, dynastic China, the Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg monarchy, Napoleonic France, and Imperial Russia and Germany. Although these states would acquire and often utilize naval forces, their primary imperative was territorial expansion for state security, creating a centralized economy, and a [unified national culture](#). These priorities would often lead continental powers to govern [through centralized governance](#) to maintain territorial security and political rule.

Modern continental powers like the Soviet Union and now China that have built naval capabilities have largely done so not to challenge Western sea control, but [to defend](#) their own littoral territories and claims. These states built naval forces that complement their objectives as continental powers—namely, that of maintaining territorial integrity. China currently has the [largest navy in the world](#) in terms of total number of vessels and shipbuilding capacity, but it is designed for littoral control not power projection or oceanic trade

protection. While continental powers do not fear the strategic impacts of naval power, they do [tend to act in a way](#) that reflects an apparent concern over seapower as the enabler of ideas that could undermine the political stability of the state.

Maritime powers have unique strategic attributes making them distinctive from their continental counterparts. Where continental powers see territory to be taken, [maritime powers see markets](#) to facilitate cumulative economic growth. The development of maritime power in part originates out of the necessity of trade. Early Mediterranean trade networks supplied the land empires of the Near East with commodities such as [timber, tin, and copper](#). These early Mediterranean trading states laid the foundation of maritime power identity, which is characterized by control of trade and trade routes, an emphasis on commerce, and more inclusive forms of government such as [republics or constitutional monarchies](#). Historical examples of maritime powers include Athens, Carthage, Venice, the Dutch Republic, and the British Empire. Maritime power states evolved out of the periphery of early civilization, not at the center as great continental powers did, and thus had to rely on more open societies to enable trade and commerce to meet their resource needs.

While the United States does not strictly meet the criteria of a seapower state as laid out by Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890, the Western liberal order is largely shaped by the political, cultural, and intellectual history of seapower states and protected by the [United States security umbrella](#). The United States was born out of a maritime power, the British Empire, and its early identity was shaped by its reliance on Atlantic trade, but the acquisition by conquest and purchase of a continent morphed its identity. Modern American views of seapower are strategic rather than cultural, but naval power continues to be a defining feature of American military might. The United States inherited the mantle of international hegemon from the British after World War II, placing it at the center of the contest between maritime and continental powers that continues today.

Modern Competition

Modern-day strategic competition between the United States and China follows along the historical trend lines defining the relationships between maritime and continental powers. The United States and China's competition spans across [five areas of interstate contention](#): different political systems, contrasting

ideologies, competing economic visions, informational misalignment, and military tension. Current strategic competition between the United States and China features all five facets of competition and encompasses competing visions for global order.

The current system of the liberal rules-based international order is championed by the United States. Both the United States and its Western allies and partners reap benefits from it. Built by the victors of World War II, the order is defined by the [primacy of law](#). It is characterized by a [set of norms and principles](#) seeking to promote peace and prosperity by expanding free trade, collective defense, and the spread of democratic governance. These core principles built into the liberal international order are in accordance with maritime power identity, mirroring maritime states' reliance on commerce and open governance. The United States inherited its own maritime power identity from the British and built a system of open governance with naval and air forces that have the capabilities to protect global commerce and project power abroad. This rules-based order, however, is under strain, as the reemergence of continental powers such as China challenge the United States in all aspects of national power, threatening to subvert or supplant the Western liberal order.

China, which prioritizes state territorial and political security, has been deeply skeptical of Western liberal democracies and is looking to change the international order into a system that, historically, China had successfully implemented and greatly benefitted from, known as *Tianxia*. At its core, *Tianxia*, meaning “all under heaven,” is a unique Chinese concept, deeply rooted in classical Chinese philosophy and thought. In implementation, [it allowed dynastic China](#) to control its immediate neighbors as tributaries and maintain control and influence over East Asian nations for millennia. With philosophical roots as deep as the Zhou Dynasty (1046–221 BCE), the concept of *Tianxia* is that of a [hierarchical, orderly world](#), with China at the center and satellite, or tributary, states on the periphery. The model represents that of a hub and spoke and is organized so that the edges revolve around the center like planets orbiting a star. Structured to be able to maintain territorial and political control of neighbors and borders, a *Tianxia* system is similar to previous continental systems, but with an additional cultural hierarchy. It includes an incentive structure under which the greater the cultural, political, and economic compliance to the Chinese Communist Party, the greater the [legitimacy endowed on the nation](#). The greater the submission, or tribute, to the party, the greater the rewards. A China-led system stands in stark contrast to the liberal rules-based international order and represents the gravest challenge to United States hegemony.

Maritime Advantages

The United States must leverage its maritime power advantages to successfully compete with China or be destined to repeat the failures of past competitions. Historically, naval forces struggle to engage resilient, well-protected land defenses—as Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson [succinctly put it](#), “A ship’s a fool to fight a fort.” Mainland China functions as a continental fort from which it can advance its objectives, undermine the US-led order, and when Beijing so chooses, force the capitulation and reintegration of Taiwan. Efforts by

the United States to assault the fort of mainland China using political, informational, or economic means have not been successful, so upholding the rules-based order means competing in the periphery and holding China’s global interests and influence at risk in places such as Africa and South America. The United States must utilize the asymmetric advantages of a maritime power to create the dilemma: Does China continue to seek confrontation and risk losing assets and influence abroad, or does it instead seek cooperation with the United States within the rules-based order? The United States must flex its maritime power advantages more effectively and learn from previous maritime power examples of how to use that might to maintain distance from the fort and weaken it from afar.

A prime example from which the United States can learn is the competition between the British Empire and Napoleonic France. Throughout the Napoleonic period, the British were able to wear down the French forces from afar utilizing their maritime advantages by maintaining control of the seas, implementing trade blockades, and employing diplomatic and economic leverages to keep allies in the fight against Napoleon. These advantages enabled the British to effectively chip away at French power over time. Learning from this example, the United States should emphasize its own similar advantages of naval superiority, alliance networks, and economic power to effectively compete with China and emplace capabilities to prevail in conflict if it were to occur.

A course of action available to the United States is to set conditions for a multidimensional blockade. This would entail not just a naval or trade blockade, but extend to diplomacy, information and influence, and cyber, to ensure that a hostile China can be comprehensively isolated. The United States needs to ensure it has the necessary capabilities to isolate the continental fort to disturb the enemy plans and [strengthen the hand](#) of the United States and its allies. By setting the necessary conditions, the United States can also use its leverage to remove any constraints on a friendly or cooperative China. In previous warfare in the modern period, the state, or states, that controlled the flow of trade on the seas has been able to wear down the adversary over time. Besides the example of the British against Napoleonic France, similar dynamics played out with the British against Imperial Germany and the United States against Imperial Japan.

Setting the conditions militarily would mean investing in the diplomatic, economic, informational, and military tools—such as naval, cyber, space, special operations, and irregular warfare capabilities—to hold Chinese assets and interests at risk outside of mainland China. These capabilities give the United States the flexibility to engage, or not, on its own terms at times and places of its choosing. These also enable the United States to address hybrid threats below the threshold of war while being able to prepare any operational environment in the event of conflict. Modernizing naval capabilities, diplomatic relationships, and economic resilience over time can yield powerful advantages if conflict occurs, but diplomacy is required to ensure these capabilities can be wielded to the greatest effect.

To be successful the United States needs to reinvest in diplomacy and cultivate its greatest assets, its allies and

partners, to leverage the unique strengths they can wield, while also developing new partnerships that can offset its own vulnerabilities. Greater investment in diplomatic muscle can enable the United States to rely on the strengths of our allies for collective defense and enable access, basing, and overflight for military assets. Through diplomatic efforts, the United States must reinvigorate the rules-based international order, as well. This can be done by negotiating positions of influence in multilateral and minilateral institutions, forging more beneficial trade relationships with new partners, and streamlining development and infrastructure deals with potential partners. These actions targeting potential partners in Africa and South America, for instance, would strengthen an

enforcement of a comprehensive, multidimensional blockade by ensuring the United States has the partners necessary to isolate any malign actors.

The ongoing competition between the United States and China will shape or alter the global system of power whether the United States or China emerges successful. By learning from historical competitions and utilizing the asymmetries afforded to a maritime power, the United States could chart a course that avoids a deeply destructive conflict and reinvigorate a world order that has brought about unparalleled peace, stability, and prosperity.



Integrated Deterrence, Integrated Friends: Countering China's Aggression in the Indo-Pacific with Multilateralism

Christopher Lee

Integrated deterrence—this is the concept at the core of US strategy in the Indo-Pacific. By bringing to bear, as the 2022 National Defense Strategy puts it, “the seamless combination of capabilities” to deter adversaries, this strategy offers the flexibility required of such an unpredictable and complex security environment as the Indo-Pacific region’s. However, it is geared largely toward defending the status quo. This is an important objective, but if the existing state of affairs is being constantly altered by [threat actor](#) then the strategy must also be altered—or at least augmented.

China is fully committed to changing the regional balance in its favor with its continual aggressive tactics in the South China Sea. President Xi Jinping has presided over a campaign of economic coercion, island building, and military intimidation to [gain the upper hand](#) against the United States and its allies. Therefore, preventing China’s behavior may require an enhanced deterrence: a broader focus on multiple scope of cooperation with its allies in the Indo-Pacific region. Pursuing more trilateral and multilateral relationships and weaving them into a network with the United States’ existing array of bilateral alliances and partnerships, would further strengthen Washington’s vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific and deter Beijing.

While several nations in the region have mutual defense treaties with the United States, these do not equate to deterrence and are certainly not enough to keep pace with the dynamic regional threat. These treaties promise commitment in times of crisis and conflict, but actions ahead of crisis or conflict are necessary to appropriately signal commitment while developing the theater-level interior lines that a joint and combined force will leverage in response to adversary aggression. This requires broad yet closely coordinated activities between likeminded nations that disrupt adversary aggression across the competition continuum.

The United States has several critical allies in the Indo-Pacific to include Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines.

The current US strategic concept seeks deeper ties with these allies to tackle the regional and shared security challenges posed by China and North Korea. These alliances are growing more substantive through increased [high-level consultations](#), including recent summits with President Joe Biden and each of these nation’s respective leaders. This substantive growth notwithstanding, an integrated deterrence with multiple trilateral groupings between the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines can offer a comprehensive strategy for managing strategic competition, maintaining peace, and, if necessary, prevailing in a future conflict. A deepened security cooperation framework between these countries, to [the level of AUKUS](#), could be a logical outgrowth of existing relationships and an effective deterrent against China’s aggressive actions in the South China Sea.

The United States, Japan, and South Korea conducted the first iteration of a trilateral multidomain exercise called [Freedom Edge](#) in June. The inaugural exercise signaled the will of the three countries and tested trilateral interoperability. Exercises like Freedom Edge will help to protect a free and open Indo-Pacific, as well as stability in key subregions like the Korean Peninsula. Whether a crisis on that peninsula, a Taiwan contingency, or conflict elsewhere in the region, a variety of natural multilateral groupings can take shape, involving states within an interest in deterring aggression in each case.

The US-Japan alliance would provide an important unifying factor for multilateral cooperation. Expanding multilateral cooperation nests well with both the United States’ and Japan’s scheme of organizing regional cooperation around the priorities of its alliance. These priorities are all aligned with concrete purposes and could be organized around shared goals. So while even though there may be limitations with possible cooperation between, for example, South Korea and the Philippines, as they face different threats and capabilities among their forces, there remain opportunities for purpose-specific cooperation. Whatever the scope of individual examples of multilateral cooperation, the Freedom Edge

exercise as well as this year's [US-Japan-Philippines trilateral summit](#) make clear the value of expanding relationships with the United States and Japan as the core.

As an example of the advantages that would accrue to each individual state by integrating more deeply in this proposed network of partnerships, consider the Philippines. For Manila, the goal should be to assist in maintaining and strengthening a free and open Indo-Pacific and working against China's challenges in the South China Sea with the United States and Japan. The Philippines' presence and participation in various multilateral exercises would contribute to deterring changes to the status quo by coercion and force. Washington and Tokyo can continue to share threat awareness and broad strategies along with providing qualitative training and exercises to Manila. This would promote multilateralization and multilayered cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, building capacity and strengthening a collective deterrence and defense posture against China among all three partners.

Existing exercises and other activities provide a useful foundation on which to expand cooperation. The Philippines could improve its interoperability by participating in [exercise Kamandag](#) with the US Marine Corps, for example, while the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force's participation as an observer in [exercise Balikatan](#) could take advantage of [Japan-Philippines Reciprocal Access Agreement](#), pending its ratification. Balikatan is a joint bilateral annual exercise involving US and Philippines forces, focused on positioning joint forces and command nodes in the First Island Chain, capability development in maritime long-range precision fires, and emplacement of terrestrial-based extended-range intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems. What is more, the participation of the Philippines Army in exercises [Orient Shield](#) and [Yama Sakura](#) would strengthen US-Japan-Philippines trilateral cooperation. Orient Shield is the largest field training exercise between the US Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Forces, exercising high-end defense capabilities, supporting forward posture, and facilitating access and force flow. The annual bilateral command post

exercise Yama Sakura continues to mature into a joint, trilateral exercise with growing participation from Australia. This year's iteration will include a warfighter exercise—which can involve the division level and higher—for the first time, demanding more effort Japanese and US forces to coordinate planning.

Talisman Saber, a joint bilateral field training exercise that provides a venue for US and Australian military forces to focus on high-end combat operations that transition into peacekeeping or other postconflict operations, is a yet another opportunity. The Philippine Army did not participate in last year's all-domain [Talisman Saber](#), but it would tremendously benefit from taking part in the complex series of training activities, allowing its forces to test combined capabilities across sea, land, air, cyber, and space operations. Just as the US-Japan relationship is an important foundation on which to expand multilateral cooperation, the US-Australia alliance can serve a similar role, in this case enabling the Philippines to improve combat readiness and interoperability with other forces.

Central to the requirements facing the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, there is a need for coordinating multilateral command-and-control and logistics networks to streamline the movement of multilateral forces between Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines. Through multilateral exercises, the United States and these four crucial allies can maintain and strengthen a free and open Indo-Pacific against China. Their presence and participation in various multilateral exercises will contribute to deterring changes to the status quo by coercion and force. This is a vital way that these states can share threat awareness and broad strategies, mutually provide qualitative training and exercises, and promote multilateralization and multilayered cooperation. These outcomes, along with the consequent capacity buildup, are a powerful means of establishing and strengthening their deterrence and defense posture against China based. This is how integrated deterrence can be strengthened—by seeking greater integration among alliances.



A War of Chokepoints: Mavulis Island in a Future Taiwan War Scenario

Christopher Lee

Amid the strategic competition and simmering tensions in the Indo-Pacific region between the United States and China, Japan has worked to boost its military capability on Yonaguni Island, the westernmost island of Okinawa. This is a sensible move given the island's strategic importance and proximity to both Taiwan and China. The Japan Self-Defense Forces [established a military base and radar station in 2016](#) with approximately 160 troops to monitor airspace and waterways. Plans are also in place to [deploy a missile unit](#) to the island.

To the south, a little less than 250 miles away, lies Mavulis Island. Slightly smaller than Yonaguni Island, it shares many

of the same characteristics. Just as Yonaguni Island is the westernmost piece of Japanese territory, Mavulis Island is the Philippines' northernmost point. Similarly close to Taiwan, it likewise has a strategic importance disproportionate to its size. Mavulis Island may appear to be a seemingly insignificant speck on the vast blue map of the region, but it may be the linchpin of the defense of Taiwan. What is more, the Bashi Channel that lies between Mavulis Island and Taiwan's Orchid Island will likely be utilized as a primary route for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to blockade the island and isolate it from US and allied forces. In short,

Mavulis Island could be a key terrain in any Taiwan conflict scenario.

And yet, compared to Japanese action on Yonaguni Island, the Philippines has not given Mavulis Island similar treatment. This is a missed opportunity to strengthen deterrence against China in the region and, in the event of a conflict, counter any Chinese aggression against Taiwan. It is in the United States' interests to encourage Manila to take advantage of the island's strategic importance.

While narrow, the Bashi Channel serves as a critical conduit between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. As a [chokepoint](#), its strategic position influences the operational capabilities of major naval forces of the United States and its allies. [Pundits postulate](#) that chokepoints such as the Bashi Channel could dictate the outcome of a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan because of its ability to control access into the Pacific Ocean. The Bashi Channel's importance is further magnified by its relevance to submarine warfare as the deep waters of the channel provide an ideal environment for the [PLAN's operations](#). China would likely utilize these waters for concealment and to strategically position the PLAN to achieve Beijing's overall military objectives. The Bashi Channel, therefore, should influence broader maritime strategy against a potential Taiwan invasion.

Mavulis Island could serve as a key focal point of the United States' and its allies' strategies to restrain China's maritime expansion and deter a potential Taiwan invasion. Stepping up efforts on the island to match Japan's actions on Yonaguni Island would help to limit the PLAN's movement within the Indo-Pacific region. A central goal of both sides in the US-China strategic competition in the region is establishing and maintaining key locations. The PLAN's [increased activities](#) around the Philippines highlight its strategic objective of securing unrestricted access through the Bashi Channel. Thus, it is in the United States' and its allies' interests to control the strategic waterway.

The Bashi Channel is indispensable for Taiwan's defense and for regional stability. One can posit that China's military strategy for the channel treats it as a potential route for the People's Liberation Army [to encircle Taiwan](#), posing a direct threat to peace and security. Any attempt by Beijing to invade the island will almost certainly utilize the Bashi Channel for military operations. These will have immediate and profound implications for Taiwan's defense posture. The PLAN's continuous operations in and around the Bashi Channel reflect Beijing's ambitions to extend its power beyond [the first island chain](#) and into the Pacific Ocean. Thus, controlling key waterways in the chain of islands—like the Bashi Channel—is crucial for any prospective US intervention in support of Taiwan. Moreover, ensuring open and secure access through the Bashi Channel would enable rapid deployment and sustainment of US forces and allies in the event of a crisis.

As another major ally in the region, the Philippines can also deploy advanced surveillance systems in Mavulis Island to strengthen its maritime domain awareness (MDA) while monitoring China. The United States can utilize the annual [Balikatan exercise](#) to enhance real-time monitoring of vessel movements into a broader network of sensors to contribute to

a [comprehensive MDA framework](#). Since the MDA network can track both surface and subsurface PLAN maritime activities, it would be crucial in giving the United States and its allies information superiority in this area.

The [establishment of a Philippine Navy detachment](#) on Mavulis Island in October 2023 marked a significant step in reinforcing Manila's northern defenses. The presence of military assets on the island sends a clear message of commitment to regional security by the Philippines' government. But more can be done. The United States and the Philippines can conduct, in partnership, maritime key terrain security operations around Mavulis Island to demonstrate the strategic value of forward-deployed forces in deterring China's actions. The strategic positioning of military assets on Mavulis Island contributes to a credible deterrent. Yet, Mavulis Island could also serve as a forward operating base to strengthen and reinforce this deterrent. Establishing such a forward operating base on the island would cement its role in enhancing the Philippines' defense posture.

The Bashi Channel's strategic importance becomes immediately apparent just by looking at a map, given its position within the first island chain, a series of archipelagos stretching from Japan through Taiwan and the Philippines. This chain represents a key perimeter for the United States and its allies aiming to counter China's maritime expansion. Having control over the Bashi Channel, therefore, enables monitoring of—and if necessary, influence over—the PLAN's movements between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea, making it a focal point in the broader US strategy to isolate and deter China's aggressive posture.

China has increasingly employed [gray zone tactics](#) in the region, utilizing maritime militia and coast guard vessels to assert its claims without crossing the threshold into open conflict; these actions aim to achieve strategic objectives while avoiding direct military engagement. Such maneuvers exemplify China's strategy of using nonmilitary means to apply pressure and alter the status quo in contested maritime regions. Multilateral security cooperation is necessary to address these issues. To balance China's gray zone activities and maintain stability and cooperation between external powers, forums like [the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue \(QUAD\)](#) are key. The QUAD seeks to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific and [improve collective security](#) through coordinated diplomatic efforts, intelligence sharing, and cooperative military exercises to prevent coercive activities and preserve the strategic balance in vital waterways—like the Bashi Channel.

Understanding and recognizing the importance of chokepoints like the Bashi Channel is crucial for formulating effective policies to navigate the complex security landscape of the Indo-Pacific. The security dynamics and geographic realities of the Bashi Channel necessitate strong regional partnerships to deter and respond to threats. The United States, Japan, and the Philippines have [intensified combined military exercises](#), enhancing their interoperability and their collective deterrence capabilities. Meanwhile, Australia is [expanding its role](#) in the region with intelligence-sharing initiatives and coordinated maritime patrols. These relationships are critical for

countering China's gray zone tactics and ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific.

But also critical is controlling key terrain. The Bashi Channel is not just a maritime passage—it is a strategic flash point

where geopolitical rivalries converge. Mavulis Island is therefore a piece of key terrain, influential in shaping security dynamics in the region and a means of contributing to stability and the defense of US allies and partners. Just like Yonaguni Island to its north, it should be treated as such.



Minerals, Magnets, and Military Capability: China's Rare Earth Weaponization Should Be a Wake-Up Call

Macdonald Amoah, Morgan Bazilian, and Jahara Matissek

When China [imposed](#) export controls on seven of the seventeen rare earth elements in April 2025, it wasn't just a trade policy tweak—it was a shot across the bow of the US defense industrial base. American fighter jets, satellites, guided missiles, and submarines all rely on high-performance [magnets built with rare earths](#) like neodymium, samarium, and dysprosium. This blocking action by China followed earlier prohibitions on [gallium and germanium](#), which are foundational to infrared optics and radar systems. These materials are overwhelmingly Chinese controlled, processed, and manufactured—and American reliance on foreign minerals and rare earths exposes critical vulnerabilities.

China [refines](#) over 85 percent of the world's rare earths and [produces](#) nearly 90 percent of high-performance rare earth magnets. That means US weapon systems, from F-35s and Virginia-class submarines to hypersonic weapon systems and precision-guided munitions, are all critically dependent on materials from strategic rivals. Exotic minerals are no longer just for the [green revolution](#); this is about the United States and its allies having the raw materials needed to sustain a future war.

What began as a commercial pressure tactic has escalated into a strategic stress test of the US defense industrial base.

American defense firms are already [reporting](#) procurement delays, while [companies](#) like General Motors are [scrambling](#) to source non-Chinese magnets to avoid broader industrial paralysis. Just weeks after the April restrictions took effect, multiple defense suppliers—including subcontractors for radar and propulsion systems—reported slowdowns and sourcing complications, signaling an era of Chinese weaponization of materials. While the civilian economy may appear [resilient](#) to substitution; the defense sector is not.

To counter this critical vulnerability, the United States must act decisively with a three-pronged strategy: (1) revitalize the National Defense Stockpile with ready-to-use materials, (2) accelerate domestic magnet manufacturing through bold market incentives, and (3) forge binding partnerships with trusted allies. Only through such measures can America safeguard its military readiness against China's strategic chokehold.

The National Defense Stockpile, Restocked

The United States once took strategic material stockpiling seriously. At its Cold War peak, the National Defense Stockpile [held](#) an inflation-adjusted \$42 billion in critical reserves. Today, it is [valued](#) under \$1 billion and lacks usable quantities of the rare earth materials needed for rapid defense production.

Stockpiling raw ore isn't enough. The Department of Defense needs finished or near-finished materials—especially neodymium-iron-boron and samarium-cobalt magnets—that can be directly integrated into weapons systems. Holding unrefined oxides does nothing for a defense contractor trying to build an F-35 or a hypersonic glide vehicle.

Congress must authorize an immediate strategic restocking initiative focused not just on bulk commodities but on specific components tied to operational readiness. This means finished magnets, sensor-grade alloys, and defense-critical components, all backed by scenario-based planning and annual audits.

A recent [Government Accountability Office report](#) estimated the cost to fix these gaps at \$18.5 billion. That amount is a fraction of the Pentagon's budget but a potential game changer for insulating the military from Chinese leverage.

Magnets Made in America

The Pentagon has taken [initial steps](#) to fund rare earth production, backing companies like [Lynas](#) and [MP Materials](#) through the Defense Production Act. But the pace is glacial. China's restrictions are already here; the US supply chain won't be fully stood up [until 2027](#) at the earliest—if ever.

That timeline is unacceptable. Congress must move faster, and more aggressively, by unleashing market incentives that match the threat's urgency. The most effective first step? A production tax credit for each kilogram of defense-grade magnet material produced domestically. This [approach revived](#) the US semiconductor and battery industries, and it would boost magnet production. A fully integrated US rare earth supply chain is [achievable](#) with sustained government and private-sector commitment.

Second, federal law must establish fast-track permitting for rare earth mining, refining, and magnet fabrication. Fully funded projects can [languish](#) for years in permitting limbo.

Strategic infrastructure deserves strategic exemptions. Without domestic production, strategic competitors like China can more easily weaponize global supply chains against the American economy and defense manufacturing.

Finally, the Department of Defense must initiate [multiyear offtake agreements](#) with domestic magnet producers. These guaranteed contracts would derisk private investment, enabling companies to raise capital and build capacity without betting against Chinese state subsidies. If the United States wants a resilient supply chain, it needs to put real skin in the game—not just more memos and grants.

A transformational multibillion-dollar public-private partnership between the Department of Defense and MP Materials was [announced](#) on July 10 marking the Pentagon's most significant move to date. This comprehensive agreement includes substantial equity investments, loans, a ten-year price floor commitment, and an exclusive ten-year magnet offtake arrangement, dramatically accelerating America's push toward rare earth magnet independence. This is precisely the type of action the United States needs.

Strategic Cooperation with Trusted Allies

Allied collaboration is necessary, but not sufficient. Current efforts like the [Minerals Security Partnership](#) are well-intentioned but nonbinding. Most allied agreements are built on goodwill, not enforcement. That must change.

The United States should move toward coproduction requirements for all joint defense programs—especially those involving radars, guidance systems, and propulsion units. These clauses must mandate that essential components be sourced exclusively from trusted, non-Chinese supply chains. And additional funding must be allocated to ensure sourcing domestically and abroad from trusted allies and partners.

In the Indo-Pacific, this means expanding rare earth refining deals with [Australia](#) and [Japan](#) into comprehensive production partnerships with clear timelines, cost-sharing, and integration into US procurement pipelines. Rare earth cooperation should no longer be siloed in energy or industry ministries; it must become a core function of allied defense planning.

The United States should also use frameworks like the [QUAD](#) and the [D-10](#) to establish enforceable standards for rare earth traceability, magnet quality, and export controls. This would help close loopholes that allow Chinese-origin materials to enter US defense supply chains indirectly—particularly through third-party vendors or poorly screened global suppliers. While China has [begun restricting](#) the transfer of certain rare earths by foreign firms, its intent is to control chokepoints, not to ensure transparency. By contrast, US-led frameworks should aim to reduce strategic dependency by ensuring all critical components are sourced from trusted and verifiable supply chains.

Fortunately, Congress is [already stepping up](#): the House's proposed Commercial Reserve Manufacturing Network would

mobilize dual-use commercial firms into wartime capacity. Embedding rare earth magnet production into that framework could enable rapid conversion of civilian capacity into military readiness. This would ensure the defense base can surge supply and sustain the US military in the next war.

Anticipating and Answering the Critics

Some might argue that establishing new magnet production facilities in the United States is too expensive, but the cost of strategic dependency is far greater. A single Virginia-class submarine contains [about 9,200 pounds](#) of rare earths and making an F-35 requires [more than 900 pounds](#) of rare earths. A supply chain failure could destabilize procurement, derail billions in defense investments, and undermine joint force readiness.

Other critics might say that American allies can pick up the slack. In theory, this is plausible—but in practice, countries like [Australia still send raw materials](#) to China for processing. Without deep investment in allied refining and fabrication, these relationships remain symbolic rather than strategically functional. And knowing how China has demonstrated a penchant for weaponizing supply chains, there is no doubt Beijing would weaponize mineral and rare earth supply chains in a crisis or conflict. Given that [unclassified war games](#) indicate the US military would run out of many munitions within a week in the event of a Taiwan Strait conflict, a lack of access to minerals and rare earths would make it exponentially more expensive and difficult for [defense firms](#) to produce new weapons and munitions at a sustainable rate.

Still others point to [permitting delays and regulatory hurdles](#). These excuses are no longer tolerable when a rival is actively attempting to stymie the supply of critical minerals and materials to the United States. If Congress can [pass legislation](#) to fast-track microchip factories, it can do the same for the magnets and other materials that make radars track, fighter jets fly, and missiles strike.

A Test of Strategic Maturity

China's rare earth export controls are a calculated move in [its strategy of unrestricted warfare](#), leveraging and weaponizing global supply chains to Beijing's advantage. This geopolitical warning demands attention: It tests America's industrial resilience and strategic resolve to address the immediate problem of acquiring minerals needed for weapon systems. Access to rare earth magnets and exotic minerals underpins the American economy, innovation, and modern warfighting. Every F-35, missile battery, satellite constellation, and network-centric kill chain depends on them. Without urgent action, the United States risks losing strategic advantages on the battlefield and in its factories.

The question is whether America will heed this warning and act decisively—restocking stockpiles, rebuilding domestic production, and forging ironclad allied partnerships—or let a factory-floor vulnerability become its next strategic defeat.



The People's Liberation Army

How to Train Your Dragon: Understanding China's Growing Web of Combined Military Exercises and Security Relationships

Jane Kaufmann and Chris Pagenkopf

On July 24, 2024, US F-16 and F-35 pilots [scrambled to intercept](#) a combined formation of two Chinese H-6K and two Russian Tu-95MS bombers as they entered the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone—a [first-of-its-kind](#) combined operation for Beijing and Moscow. For Washington, the message was clear: China's military diplomacy is no longer confined to its backyard. This was not an isolated stunt, but the product of years of steadily growing international military cooperation cultivated through the execution of combined exercises with foreign forces.

Over the last eight years, Beijing has more than doubled its participation in such exercises, concentrating on partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and select Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states. While China still trails the United States in the scale and sophistication of its drills, the trajectory of its exercise growth suggests a long-term strategy to expand influence and challenge US dominance in Eurasia. Future growth in Chinese bilateral and multilateral exercises could significantly impact US interests. For example, deployment of Chinese military units to Iran for combined air defense exercises would have profound strategic impacts in the US Central Command area of responsibility. The United States must closely monitor these trends and posture accordingly to ensure that emerging patterns of Chinese foreign military cooperation do not translate into unchallenged strategic advantage.

China's Expanding Exercise Profile

To analyze China's expanding foreign military engagement, we extended [a 2021 joint military exercise dataset compiled by Jordan Bernhardt](#) to cover US and Chinese exercises from 2017 through 2024. Using the Department of Defense Freedom of Information Act library, LexisNexis, and official US and Chinese government press releases, the dataset extension captures 1,279 exercises involving 187 countries. The results underscore how rapidly Beijing has embraced combined exercises as a tool of influence, with much of this expansion concentrated within the SCO.

China's growth in economic and military power has been mirrored by increased participation in international exercises. In the early 2000s, China participated in only one or two exercises per year. That figure rose to an average of 9.5

annually by 2009–2016, per Bernhardt's dataset. Since 2017, the pace has more than doubled to 19.3 per year, an especially impressive increase considering the [lull in international exercises](#) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. The trajectory is unmistakable: China is deliberately normalizing its military presence abroad.

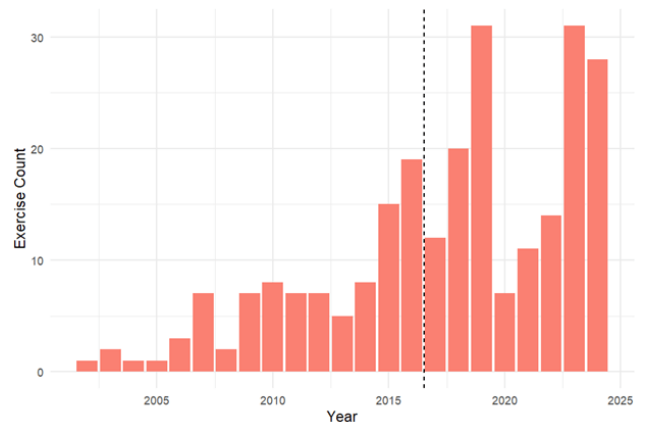


Figure 1: Total Chinese Combined Exercises, 2001–2024

While China has made gains in the raw number of exercises its forces participate in, the scope of countries that they integrate with is still relatively limited compared to the breadth of partners the United States works with. Table 1 shows the top ten most frequent participants of exercises with China between 2017 and 2024. Russia is China's most frequent exercise partner with sixty-three combined exercises conducted during this period. China's two other most populous SCO partners, Pakistan and India, follow in second and third place, with Thailand occupying fourth.

Interestingly, China participated in twenty-four exercises with the United States, enough to tie for fourth among China's overall exercise partners. Considering the strategic rivalry between these two states, this is very unexpected. There are two explanations: historical US integration efforts and participation in non-combat-oriented exercises.

Country	Number of Exercises
Russia	63
Pakistan	28
India	27
Thailand	24
United States	24
Australia	21
Indonesia	20
Vietnam	20
Japan	19
Singapore	19

Table 1: China Top 10 Exercise Partners, 2017–2024

In the 2010s, Washington invited Beijing into marquee multilateral events like Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and Cobra Gold. China participated in RIMPAC in 2014 and 2016 before being [disinvited](#) in response to [security concerns](#) and [Chinese militarization of South China Sea islands](#), but continued to join Cobra Gold through 2024, albeit with its participation [confined to humanitarian aid and disaster relief roles](#). Beyond that, many shared events were multinational peacekeeping or survival training exercises, such as Mongolia’s [Khaan Quest](#) or Australia’s [Kowari](#). Naval gatherings like Indonesia’s [Komodo](#) further padded the count without requiring true tactical integration.

China and the United States have a mutual interest in safeguarding information regarding military capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures from each other; despite combined exercise participation, the limited scope of these exercises demonstrates that neither country is interested in true military integration. Between 2017 and 2024, the United States conducted 1,143 exercises, underscoring its pervasive role in international military engagement. China’s relatively high exercise count with the United States says more about America’s hegemonic presence in global exercises than about China-US cooperation.

Why Combined Exercises Matter for China

Combined exercises are foundational to the establishment of effective security cooperation between states. They represent a distinct and strong form of alignment because they require the sharing of tactics, techniques, and procedures—creating a shared level of trust that is deeper than arms sales alone. Frequent exercises enhance interoperability, normalize deployments abroad, and foster habits of cooperation. For the United States, these serve as one of the bedrocks of its alliance system. For China, growing exercise participation signals its intent to develop a similar, if narrower, network of security partnerships.

SCO Partnerships: The Core of Chinese Engagement

Excluding US-linked drills reveals the extent of the SCO’s dominance within China’s exercise portfolio. Nearly half (68 of 154) of China’s combined exercises involved SCO partners. In addition, SCO members make up seven of China’s top ten exercise partners.

Country	Number of Exercises
Russia	52
Pakistan	18
Thailand	16
India	12
Vietnam	11
Kyrgyzstan	10
Tajikistan	10
Cambodia	9
Kazakhstan	9
Uzbekistan	9

Table 2: China Top 10 Exercise Partners, not involving the United States, 2017–2024

Founded in 2001, [the SCO originated](#) as a forum to settle cross-border disputes between its original partners: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It has since added India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus, and its member states now account for over [42 percent of the world’s population and 23 percent of global GDP](#). It has also expanded its policy purview to cover a wide range of economic and security cooperation initiatives. The SCO’s recent growth has alarmed Western observers about its potential as an [illiberal rival to the US-led order](#). That concern sharpened at the September 2025 [Tianjin Summit](#), where SCO members agreed to institutionalize cooperation with the establishment of a new development bank and called for a [new system of global governance](#). Against this backdrop, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has steadily expanded its combined exercises with SCO partners, using them as a proving ground for power projection.

Russia stands apart as China’s [most important partner in combined military activity](#) with fifty-two exercises during this period, including thirty-two bilateral drills. Most of these demonstrated power projection capabilities, such as the annual [Joint Sea](#) series of integrated naval exercises, which have ranged from the Western Pacific to the Baltic Sea. Since 2019, China and Russia have also conducted [nine strategic aerial patrols](#), pairing bombers and support aircraft on routes that often pass near key US allies like Japan and South Korea. The [eighth patrol](#), in July 2024, went further by piercing the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone over the Bering Sea, representing a significant posture escalation.

Pakistan’s second-place ranking is unsurprising given its status as the largest importer of Chinese arms. In [its recent skirmishes with India](#), Pakistan has served as a proving ground for combat employment of modern Chinese weapons, including the [J-10C fighter aircraft and PL-15 air-to-air missile](#). Its performance in these conflicts was likely enhanced by its participation in the [Shaheen](#) series of bilateral air combat exercises conducted with the PLA Air Force since 2011. Unlike Russia, however, Pakistan continues to maintain security ties with the United States and has executed several [bilateral military engagements with US forces](#) as well.

Similarly, India engages in exercises with both the United States and China. Its strategic alignment [remains complex](#) and has been a [focal point of US foreign policy efforts](#). Notably, between 2017 and 2024, India participated in four times as many exclusive exercises with the United States as with China, including high-end warfighting exercises such as [Red Flag – Alaska, RIMPAC](#), and [Pitch Black](#). However, this relationship remains fluid and closer cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing is possible as SCO institutions continue to mature.

Despite having relatively small militaries, the original Central Asian members of the SCO remain some of China’s most prominent exercise partners. PLA forces conducted some of their first international exercises in these countries and continue to prioritize integration with them, primarily in SCO counterterrorism drills such as the [Peace Mission](#) series of exercises.

The only two SCO countries outside of China’s top ten are Iran and Belarus. This is largely due to these countries joining the SCO very recently—2023 for Iran and 2024 for Belarus. Nonetheless, each country participated in six non-US combined exercises with China between 2017 and 2024, tying them at thirteenth among Chinese exercise partners. Of note, Iran has participated in a series of annual [trilateral naval exercises](#) with China and Russia since 2019. With their recent addition to the SCO, it is likely that combined exercise participation levels between China, Iran, and Belarus will grow significantly.

Overall, the data shows that China is prioritizing engagement with its SCO partners to train its military in deployed settings and to serve as a foundation for executing power projection operations beyond its borders.

ASEAN Engagement: Competing for Influence in Southeast Asia

All three of the non-SCO countries in China’s top ten exercise partners are in Southeast Asia, a clear signal of China’s regional aims. Table 3 details each ASEAN country’s exclusive combined exercises with the two superpowers between 2017 and 2024. The most strategically significant exercise partner is Thailand, where closer military ties with China threaten a long-standing US partnership. The [Cobra Gold](#) series, hosted annually by the United States and Thailand, is [the largest joint and combined exercise in the region](#) dating back to 1982. This capstone-level exercise features warfighting integration across conventional and special operations capabilities. Chinese military presence in Thailand caused US military officials to warn Cobra Gold participants to expect Chinese agents to be filming and listening to all exercise activities as early as 2017. Deepening Chinese-Thai military cooperation casts doubt on the US-Thai relationship and provides an ideal venue for Chinese intelligence to exploit US tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Although exercises with Vietnam have increased, they are primarily [combined border patrols](#) and [disaster relief exercises](#). These bilateral events are focused on preventing escalation along the border, not external power projection or warfighting integration. Increases in engagement in [Cambodia](#) and [Laos](#) are also concerning for US interests. Although both

countries have limited military capabilities, sustained PLA involvement could expand China’s ability to counter US partners in the region.

For now, Chinese military activities with ASEAN states remain modest and trail behind those of the United States. However, closer cooperation between China and Thailand should give US planners pause. At what point does Chinese integration threaten US core objectives with military outreach, or signal diverging alignment to the point that the stability of US-Thai relations is threatened? An uptick in arms exports, talks of Chinese foreign basing opportunities, or storage of war reserve materiel in the region would also be concerning for US interests. Although the SCO appears to be China’s main focus for expansion of military partnerships, continued engagement throughout ASEAN may help illuminate China’s regional ambitions and the appetite of local players to engage.

Country	Exercises with China	Rank with China (of 45)	Exercises with United States	Rank with United States (of 181)
Thailand	16	3	58	30
Vietnam	11	5	21	64
Cambodia	9	8	5	147
Laos	8	11	3	160
Singapore	7	12	76	25
Indonesia	3	16	51	34
Malaysia	3	16	54	32
Brunei	2	22	35	46
Myanmar	2	22	4	154
Philippines	2	22	52	33

Table 3: ASEAN Combined Exercises, 2017–2024

Limited in Scope—So Far

Despite steady growth, China’s combined exercises remain limited in scope compared those of to the United States. China’s 154 exercises conducted with 45 countries pale in comparison to the US total of 1,143 exercises conducted with 181 partners between 2017 and 2024. Compared to US alliances and partnerships, PLA activities emphasize presence and signaling over true interoperability. Most exercises involve limited force packages, basic coordination, and scripted scenarios. Even with Russia, [coordination has yet to reach the level of integrated command structures or combined operations](#) typical of US exercises with its primary allies.

The greater significance lies in trajectory. By conducting regular exercises, China normalizes PLA deployments abroad, familiarizes itself with diverse operational environments, and develops habits of cooperation with foreign militaries. These trends lay the foundation for deeper collaboration should Beijing choose to pursue it.

How Should the US Government Respond?

China’s rapid expansion of combined military exercises since 2017 illustrates a deliberate effort to strengthen its security partnerships, particularly within the SCO. While China’s total number of exercises still lags behind that of the United States, the geographic and political concentration of its activities highlights Beijing’s strategic intent: building durable security relationships within the SCO and deepening relationships with strategically valuable ASEAN neighbors.

For now, most exercises remain limited in scope, often emphasizing counterterrorism or symbolic displays of cooperation rather than deep integration of tactics, techniques, and procedures. Even high-profile drills with Russia, including combined bomber patrols near US and allied airspace, appear more focused on signaling than on operational interoperability. However, increasing military outreach points to potential future concerns.

US security leaders should track not just the number but also the scope of Chinese exercises. This requires attention to changes in force composition, technological sophistication, and operational integration. It is critical to avoid overreacting when exercises remain small or symbolic. However, persistent, higher-end drills should trigger a reassessment of US posture and readiness. Significant PLA integration in future [Russo-Belarusian Zapad exercises](#), for instance, would be an early indicator of a more assertive power projection posture. Another example would be [the sale of advanced air defense systems to Iran](#), paired with combined exercises to optimize their employment. Careful, disciplined monitoring would ensure that the United States can respond proportionally and maintain credibility without overcommitting to minor provocations.

The United States must avoid retrenchment and sustain combined training and exercise programs with international partners, especially strategically important nations such as India and Thailand. Exercises should emphasize interoperability, rapid crisis response, and practical operational value, demonstrating to partners that US engagement provides tangible benefits compared to Chinese alternatives. In addition, exercises should not occur in isolation but be paired

with diplomatic initiatives, economic incentives, and selective arms transfers to reinforce US influence across multiple domains. This approach signals a comprehensive and coherent strategy, highlighting reliability, long-term commitment, and multilateral cooperation.

If significant qualitative improvements in PLA capabilities are observed, the United States should scale up exercises and deployments in relevant regions to deny China uncontested influence. This includes close coordination with NATO and key regional allies to ensure that responses are unified, credible, and proportionate. A proactive posture would enable the United States to shape regional dynamics, reassure partners, and deter potential aggressive moves. For example, recent reports indicate [Russia is training Chinese airborne forces](#). If these efforts continue to the point of demonstration during a combined exercise, the United States and its allies could answer by forward-deploying air defense units and executing their own exercises that specifically focus on intercepting hostile airlift, signaling that the capability would not go uncontested.

Ultimately, Chinese combined exercises matter less for their absolute numbers than for their trajectory. The SCO provides China with a ready-made platform to build habits of cooperation, normalize PLA deployments abroad, and strengthen an illiberal security network. For US forces, the challenge is twofold: careful monitoring to distinguish signaling from meaningful integration, and sustained partnership building from Southeast to Central Asia. With proactive engagement, the United States can ensure that China's expanding military diplomacy does not credibly threaten US national security interests abroad.



Systems Over Steel: How China is Redefining Amphibious Armor Survivability

Joshua Arostegui

The contemporary discourse on drone-driven warfare rarely suggests the end of maneuver, but it highlights an [increasingly perilous gap](#) between tactical movement and force survivability in a hyper transparent environment. Against this backdrop, the Chinese People's Liberation Army's sustained commitment to amphibious armor invites examination of how a high-end force intends to bridge that gap in the contested littoral space. The recent discovery of a [mine-clearing variant](#) built on China's [new amphibious armored vehicle chassis](#), successor to the Type-05 series, shows that Beijing is not pivoting away from the littoral zone in the face of drone proliferation. Instead, China's defense industrial base continues to develop specialized variants that transform the platforms and the [army and marine corps brigades](#) that field them into a self-contained breaching ecosystem. This continuous hardware evolution signals a permanent pillar of China's force design.

This output defies the current Western strategic consensus. Driven by the proliferation of low-cost, uncrewed systems, the United States and Taiwan are pouring billions into asymmetric measures, including a [littoral "hellscape"](#) designed to saturate the Taiwan Strait with [autonomous loitering munitions](#). Such a posture aims to exploit the vulnerability of both unprotected Chinese civilian ferries and thin-skinned mechanized amphibious vehicles. Yet, as recent [Modern War Institute analysis](#) highlights, a successful hellscape strategy assumes industrial scale, production depth, and resilient logistics that the defender does not currently possess.

The gap between Western tactical theory and physical reality is where China's strategic calculus operates. The amphibious architecture of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) departs sharply from global military patterns. While Western powers abandoned or refrained from developing high-speed tracked amphibious concepts—most notably with the [US Marine Corps's 2011 cancellation](#) of the Expeditionary Fighting

Vehicle—Beijing has bucked the trend. By mastering and mass-producing a high-speed planing hull, and developing variants that include a [120-millimeter mortar-howitzer combination gun](#) and an [HJ-10 antitank guided missile carrier](#), Beijing is showing a willingness to sustain intense defense industrial focus on a specific geographic contingency.

For Beijing, a full-scale amphibious landing remains the [option of last resort for unification](#), favored only if gray zone coercion, blockades, or political pressure fail. Yet Chinese planners recognize a basic reality: Uncrewed systems can deny space, but they cannot seize territory, clear fortified urban centers, or consolidate a political victory. Despite the PLA's planned campaign of conducting exhaustive [initial joint firepower strikes](#) to decapitate command nodes prior to a landing, such barrages will likely fail to neutralize decentralized, mobile drone operators who will retain the ability to orchestrate a resistance.

As seen in the PLA's development of [new weapons platforms](#) with counterdrone capabilities, China is not ignoring the drone threat; it is engineering through it. However, the physics of an open-ocean swim strip the Type-05 of legacy protection, forcing the PLA to pursue radical engineering and system-level alternatives.

The Ukraine Contrast and the Weight of Buoyancy

The war in Ukraine has [rewritten battlefield survivability](#), forcing rapid, ad hoc adaptation in ground combat. To survive low-cost first-person-view (FPV) drones and loitering munitions, ground forces have transformed armored vehicles into bulked-up fortresses. Main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles are [routinely field-modified](#) with explosive reactive armor, heavy steel cage armor, and [counterdrone electronic warfare systems](#). For vehicles on solid ground, the weight penalty is an acceptable trade-off; they sacrifice mobility to gain the passive protection needed in a drone-saturated environment.

The PLA Army has embraced this up-armoring paradigm for its land-bound forces. It has equipped some combat vehicles with [overhead antidrone structures](#) during training and is building integrated platforms for the drone age. During China's [September 2025 military parade](#), the PLA highlighted the new Type-100 tank and support vehicle and next-generation airborne infantry fighting vehicles. These platforms combine dense passive plating with the hard-kill GL-6 active protection system, which uses quad-faced phased-array radars to shoot down top-attack threats. Because they operate on land or within air-drop constraints, the added weight of radar arrays and reactive tiles does not compromise them in their intended operational environments.

For the PLA's amphibious Type-05 family, this approach is physically impossible. The Type-05's utility depends on a strict weight-to-buoyancy ratio. To cross open water at an [unprecedented forty-five kilometers per hour](#), the 26.5-ton vehicle must hydroplane using hydraulic bow planes and transom flaps on a lightweight aluminum-alloy chassis. While the US Marine Corps plans to equip its slower [8x8 wheeled Amphibious Combat Vehicles with active protection systems](#), bolting a land-based drone-defense suite onto a planing Type-05 would drastically reduce performance. Heavy steel cages,

reactive tiles, or high-output electronic warfare batteries would shift the vehicle's center of gravity and force the hull deeper into the water.

Shifting the center of gravity would destroy its planing lift and drop its water speed down to a sluggish ten to thirteen kilometers per hour. According to a [study on amphibious armor battle damage](#) published by researchers at the PLA's Naval University of Engineering, such a drop in velocity is operationally unacceptable. Chinese researchers explicitly noted that faster assault velocities directly correlate to lower battle damage rates because they compress the vehicle's exposure to multidomain littoral fire. By robbing the Type-05 of its speed, passive up-armoring could invite the exact catastrophic attrition Chinese planners are trying to avoid.

Because the Type-05 cannot passively absorb or deflect drone strikes without destroying its own ability to swim, its vulnerability is hardwired into its design. This engineering paradox means the PLA cannot protect the Type-05 using legacy, passive methods. Instead, it must look outside the vehicle frame, relying on an external *system of systems* of uncrewed vanguard screens and radical, clean-sheet vehicle redesigns like the new Type-05 replacement vehicle that appears to include an [unmanned turret and potential for active protection system integration](#), to actively shield the armor during its high-speed transit.

The Tyranny of the Horizon

If the Type-05 family is so structurally vulnerable to modern uncrewed systems, a logical question arises: Why does the PLA continue to double down on a lightweight, high-speed tracked amphibious platform instead of pivoting to heavily armored, slow-moving displacement vehicles? The answer is dictated entirely by geography, operational geometry, and the cold mathematical reality of the Taiwan Strait—the tyranny of the horizon.

In a cross-strait contingency, the survival of the entire amphibious invasion force [depends on a highly compressed operational timeline](#). According to PLA operational art textbooks like the National Defense University's 2014 *Informationized Army Operations*, defensive antiship missile systems and long-range artillery ensure that large, vulnerable transport vessels—such as large naval amphibious transport docks or civilian roll-on/roll-off ferries—cannot safely approach a contested coastline to disembark armor directly onto a beachhead.

According to [February 2026 analysis](#) from the Center for New American Security, the potential layered approach to a hellscape asymmetric defense would increase the danger to the PLA's transport vessels between eighty and forty kilometers from shore with aerial, surface, and underwater attack drones. The middle layer would extend from forty to five kilometers offshore and use loitering munitions and mine-laying drones to slow Chinese landing fleets after they leave larger ships. The analysis then noted that the third layer, the final five-kilometer run to the shore, would make PLA landing craft face short-range missiles, rockets, and first-person-view drones.

The problem with this analysis is that landing craft are few and will serve in a supporting role as amphibious armor

spearheads the assault. Short-range missiles and rockets will likely have minimal effect on the high-speed Type-05 vehicles, but first-person-view drones with ranges out to twenty kilometers could devastate the light-skinned vehicles. Consequently, the PLA's landing concept likely now demands an over-the-horizon launch strategy:

- The Standoff Buffer: Amphibious assault waves will likely have to debark more than twenty kilometers from shore, outside the line of sight and immediate reach of short-range coastal defense systems and many first-person-view drones.
- The Vulnerability Window: For a traditional displacement vehicle swimming at ten to thirteen kilometers per hour, crossing twenty kilometers of open water takes nearly two hours, leaving an assault wave exposed to the full density of a littoral drone hellscape.
- Speed as the Primary Armor: By hitting forty-five kilometers per hour, the Type-05 cuts open-water transit time to roughly twenty-five to thirty minutes. In the PLA's calculus, a lightweight aluminum hull moving at forty-five kilometers per hour has higher survivability than a heavily armored steel hull crawling at ten kilometers per hour. Hydrodynamic speed is the vehicle's primary passive armor during the most dangerous phase of the assault.

Furthermore, this high-speed capability is the linchpin for the broader logistical chain. The unarmored, [deep-draft civilian roll-on/roll-off ferries](#) that carry the bulk of China's heavy follow-on landpower cannot land until the first wave has completely synchronized, breached, and sanitized the beach defenses. Nor can the PLA's [newer Shuiqiao landing barges](#) and their extendable Bailey bridges safely set up their 820-meter relocatable pier without an established beachhead. The Type-05 functions as the rapid, high-speed breaching wedge designed to punch open the door before the defender can organize a coordinated drone or artillery counteroffensive.

By accepting the thin skin of the Type-05, the PLA is not ignoring the drone threat; it is explicitly gambling that speed will get the vehicles across the horizon faster than an adversary's kill chain can cycle. However, because speed alone cannot dodge every loitering munition, the PLA must complement this physical velocity with an external shield—transitioning from the raw math of the horizon to the heavily integrated drone screens of the vanguard.

Engineering the System-of-Systems Approach

Rather than bolting heavy, passive armor onto the fragile hull of the Type-05 family, the PLA is attempting to redefine vehicle survivability. In response to uncrewed littoral threats, China is developing operational concepts that externalize armored protection into the surrounding battlespace through a system-of-systems approach.

The External Shield: Uncrewed Vanguard

PLA operations researchers emphasize replacing human-crewed assets with uncrewed systems to execute high-risk

beachhead penetration. This operational architecture relies on multidomain, decentralized "[unmanned vanguards](#)" acting as an advanced protective screen to sanitize the littoral zone before the main amphibious armor force arrives.

- Preemptive Clearing: Operating well ahead of swimming armor, [surface and underwater drones](#) will be deployed to autonomously detect, chart, and systematically detonate shallow-water obstacles and minefields, sanitizing sea channels ahead of the amphibious armor.
- Decentralized Swarm Suppression: Moving past isolated uncrewed platforms, the PLA is developing plans to utilize decentralized shipborne UAV swarms driven by distributed edge computing. These intelligent swarms could conduct group-level autonomous target allocation and situational mapping.
- Electronic Blinding: To sever defensive kill chains, the PLA hopes to use [disposable swarm units](#) dropped to ultra-low altitudes to serve as decoy targets, forcing defensive air radars to expose their coordinates. The swarm would then pair software-defined network penetration with localized electromagnetic jamming to systematically blind defender coastal command networks.

The Internal Hardware Revolution: Organic Systems

While external uncrewed screens filter multidomain friction, the PLA is structurally adapting its next-generation amphibious warfare architecture to maintain a continuous, unjammable information link with the uncrewed system of systems.

- Manned-Unmanned Teaming: Operating directly alongside amphibious armor, airborne assets act as [flying information nodes](#). Backed by robust satellite and ship-to-shore communications, these integrated platforms leverage multisource data fusion to execute real-time target identification and immediate battle damage assessment.
- Persistent Aerial Relay: Advanced shipborne uncrewed helicopters like the [Xuan'ge-500CJ \(AR-500CJ\)](#)—engineered specifically to operate in rough Sea State 4 to 5 conditions—act as vital airborne relays. This anchors a dense, software-defined network that links cross-strait command data directly down to the platoon level, ensuring swimming armor can be guided into gaps opened by the uncrewed vanguard.

By combining decentralized drone swarms that blind defensive networks with organic, ship-launched drones, the PLA circumvents the mechanical laws of buoyancy. Protection is no longer bolted to the hull with steel; it is projected through an uncrewed, networked architecture, keeping the assault force's hydroplaning speed intact.

The PLA's approach to the cross-strait amphibious armor paradox shows that Beijing is not ignoring the drone

revolution; it is rejecting localized, vehicle-level modification. While global land forces add restrictive physical mass to individual hulls, the PLA has conceptualized survivability as an all-domain systems architecture. By using autonomous drones to sanitize the maritime approach and decentralized swarms to blind coastal defenses, Chinese planners intend to keep the amphibious timeline compressed.

For military wargamers and defense analysts, this paradigm shift demands a fundamental reevaluation of cross-strait simulations. Standard combat power models that evaluate the invasion fleet [through traditional, linear attrition calculations](#)—simply pitting columns of sprinting amphibious armor against kinetic beach defenses—are fundamentally obsolete. To capture the realities of a modern cross-strait contingency, analysts must adapt their simulations to account for the uncrewed and algorithmic dependencies inherent in Chinese landing operations. This shift mirrors the [2025 blockade wargames](#) from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which moved beyond legacy kinetic clashes to measure the electronic warfare contest occurring over the littoral horizon.

This reality also alters the strategic utility of Western uncrewed architectures. Programs like the [Defense Autonomous Working Group](#) and the former Replicator—which prioritize mass-producing attritable, autonomous

loitering munitions to aggressively scale defense capabilities—become vital because they create the numerical and computational density required to challenge a massed offensive screen. However, passive operational concepts like the initial hellscape framework require tactical adaptation. If the hellscape model relies heavily on standard, manually guided drone defenses at the waterline, it faces a Chinese amphibious doctrine specifically designed to absorb or redirect those systems through decentralized, self-healing decoy swarms and dense electromagnetic shielding. This vulnerability is underscored by [analysis from Harvard's Belfer Center](#) on the Replicator initiative, which highlights that fully autonomous weapons designed to operate seamlessly in denied electromagnetic environments remain years away from operational maturity. While the data deficits and technical constraints of true autonomy trap the defender in a multiyear development cycle, the PLA's high-speed, all-domain systems architecture is operational, fielded, and ready to exploit that exact developmental buffer.

Ultimately, China is betting that all-domain integration can outpace the reality of modern antiarmor defenses. If wargamers and defense planners continue to evaluate this conflict as a legacy clash of armored vehicles hitting a beach in a vacuum, they risk fundamentally miscalculating the tempo, the friction, and the lethal reality of the modern defense.



Deterring a Cross-Strait Invasion

Five Plays to Seize Time and Deter War in the Western Pacific

Gary Sampson

In July 1982, Albert Wohlstetter and Dennis Gormley [were studying](#) how emerging precision weapons could exploit the time an adversary needed to mobilize and move from peacetime readiness to war. Their work responded to a wider strategic problem: Western access to forward bases was becoming less certain, threats of nuclear escalation were losing credibility against conventional aggression, and democracies needed ways to limit potential collateral damage. [Rose Gottemoeller recently described](#) a contemporary version of that dilemma, arguing that increasingly accurate conventional capabilities are making nuclear deterrence more uncertain while increasing the value of resilience and survivability. The problem is especially acute in the western Pacific, where long-range strike, politically contingent access, and the prospect of a rapid Chinese campaign compress the time available for allied decisions.

Deterrence today is a contest over time. The United States and its Pacific allies and partners need time to decide, move, repair, and coordinate. Beijing needs speed, ambiguity, and an opportunity to present the region with a fait accompli. Those opposing clocks point to five practical plays available to the United States and its allies and partners to deter Chinese aggression in the region now.

Play One: Make Access Real Before a Crisis

Access, basing, and overflight are too often imported into plans as assumptions. [RAND's recent work](#) on fighting from allied territory is a useful corrective. In one scenario, even a friendly state withheld access because of domestic politics. Another [RAND study](#) delivers the larger point more bluntly: Some allied and partner decisions on access could determine the outcome of a conflict with China.

East Asia has lived with this problem for decades. [Consultation arrangements](#) signed with Japan in 1960 required Washington to consult with Tokyo before using US forces based in Japan for combat operations elsewhere in the region, such as in Korea. A [1969 memorandum](#) from national security advisor Henry Kissinger to President Richard Nixon on Okinawa described the same dynamics in even plainer

language—weighing the political costs of maintaining US administration of the island against the security costs of returning administration to Japan and the consequent reduced flexibility in the use of Okinawan bases. The [2023 expansion of Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement sites in the Philippines](#) is important for the same reason. It makes access, dispersal, storage, and repair more real before the clock starts.

The policy implication is straightforward. The United States should continue to treat access as daily work. More logistics drills. More movement exercises. More repair and refuel rehearsals. More small deployments that normalize allied presence without looking like a dress rehearsal for a first strike. And if allies and partners see the machinery working in peacetime, they are less likely to hedge when pressure rises.

For the US Army, this is where theater-specific formations should earn their keep. [Multidomain task forces](#) were designed in part for the western Pacific antiaccess problem and are already rehearsing distributed command and control, sensing, and effects across the theater. The less glamorous aspect of the same effort belongs to the [Army's sustainment enterprise](#): Theater opening, movement control, prepositioning, repair, and distribution are what turn assumed access into real access before a crisis.

Wohlstetter saw the older version of the problem clearly. In a 1982 memo to Rear Admiral [Leland Stanford Kollmorgen](#), then chief of naval research, preserved in the [Hoover Institution Library and Archives](#), he described a “deteriorating Western military position” marked by “decreasing Western access to bases and air space in critical spots and increasing Soviet access.” The geography in question may have changed, but the fundamental problem has not.

Play Two: Accelerate US and Allied Readiness, and Make It Legible

The next play is readiness. Allied preparation must move faster while remaining sufficiently legible that defensive measures are less likely to be mistaken for imminent offensive action. In the western Pacific, reserve call-ups, munitions dispersal, fuel movements, and communications activation can

all look ambiguous when viewed from the other side. Legibility does not require exposing operational detail. It requires making the defensive purpose of visible preparations difficult to misread.

Some of the answers here are procedural. Governments should decide now which actions can be preannounced, which can be privately notified, and which should be explained in the same way across regional capitals. Some drills should be described plainly as logistics drills. Some reserve and mobility measures should be accompanied by explanations of the conditions that would trigger them and the defensive purpose they serve. A little disciplined clarity buys time. Thomas Mahnken's work on [selective disclosure](#) offers a companion principle: reveal enough about new concepts and capabilities to reassure allies and complicate People's Liberation Army (PLA) planning, while protecting the details that preserve advantage.

The US and its regional allies and partners are already moving in this direction. [Australia's 2024 National Defence Strategy](#) makes a strategy of denial the cornerstone of defense planning. [Taiwan's 2025 Quadrennial Defense Review](#) warns that the PLA can shift from blockade to invasion quickly and says Taiwan's armed forces will rely on immediate readiness training, rapid mobilization, defense in depth, and sustainable resilience. As an example, during a June 2026 readiness exercise in Taipei, I watched troops rehearse urban deployments in Daan Forest Park through a morning of heavy rain and strong winds. [Japan's National Defense Strategy](#) uses different terminology, but the meaning rhymes: By fiscal year 2027, it aims to reinforce transport, resolve ammunition shortages, harden key facilities, and improve the resilience of command networks.

[Valiant Shield 2026](#) offered another glimpse of this pattern, integrating allied forces across Japan, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and multiple domains of warfare in [activities including detection and tracking, resupply, cross-decking, expeditionary reload, and live fire](#).

[Gormley](#), another Reagan-era defense intellectual who worked closely with Wohlstetter, succinctly identified the underlying problem in July 1982. In a dictation memo preserved in the [same Hoover archive](#) mentioned earlier, he wrote that existing US capabilities did little to exploit "the time dynamics of various target sets, or the time required to bring a military force from its peacetime readiness condition to a full wartime readiness posture." He had Soviet mobilization in mind. A similar time problem applies to allied mobilization today. The allied force that can move first, explain enough, and avoid a panic spiral starts from a stronger position.

Play Three: Protect the Allied Decision Cycle

In the event of a conflict, China would try to attack the allied decision cycle early. That effort has already begun in

peacetime. [Taiwan's 2025 defense review](#) describes gray-zone harassment, cyberattacks, and cognitive warfare meant to test and exhaust readiness, erode morale, reduce warning time, and speed the opening tempo of any fight.

The third play is to protect the allied force's ability to decide. That process begins with resilient command and control, but it does not end there. It also means establishing backup communications paths, commercial redundancy, degraded-mode operations, and consultation habits that keep allies in touch when the information picture fragments. The 2018 [Joint Concept for Operating in the Information Environment](#) frames the task as protecting the "decisions" and "behaviors" of the joint force, its allies, and its partners.

This work is less glamorous than missile ranges or order-of-battle charts, but it is more important than most observers acknowledge. An allied force built around exquisite awareness and perfect connectivity can become brittle very quickly. An allied force that has practiced amid uncertainty, however, can keep functioning after the first hit.

Wohlstetter's phrase from 1982 still hits home. In the [same July 1982 Hoover file](#), he wrote about "time urgency and the weapons release problem." His list of central factors was spare and familiar: fixed targets, dwell times, time to make the decision, time to effect the decision. Remove the Cold War framing, and the logic holds. Every step in the chain depends on sensing, making sense, deciding, and communicating before the window of opportunity closes.

Play Four: Make the First Week Slow and Expensive for China

China benefits from speed. A fast blockade. A quick seizure. A political shock before allied logistics and command arrangements catch up. The allied force should plan to wreck that timeline. [Analysis published in 2019](#) by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) put it plainly: US and allied forces will not have weeks or months to mass near the theater. They will have to inflict losses from the outset. The Defense Department's [2025 China report](#) is a reminder of why. PLA conventional strike capabilities already place Taiwan, Japan's southwestern islands, and many US and allied operating locations across the first island chain at risk. CSBA's study adds another uncomfortable observation: Concentrated hubs such as Kadena Air Base and Yokosuka Naval Base are highly vulnerable to massed missile attacks.

This is where the grubby work of logistics and readiness pays dividends. That means having stockpiles in the right places. Runway and port repair capabilities. Forward sustainment. Spare parts on hand. Fuel. Redundant intelligence collection, processing, and dissemination paths. Mines. Uncrewed underwater systems. It all counts. The goal is delay and disruption. [Taiwan's own defense review](#) makes the same

assertion using more operational language: defense in depth, rapid mobilization, and resilience designed to slow, break, and deny a swift-victory strategy. A 2018 [Taiwan-focused study](#) makes the deterrence logic even plainer: raise the costs of invasion and reduce the prospect of a quick victory for the PLA.

This is friction by design. Enough of it, applied in the right places, can change Beijing's political calculations before a campaign begins.

Play Five: Fortify Off-Ramps Before Crisis Channels Can Fail

The objection to this play is fair: Beijing has repeatedly used military dialogue for political signaling when bilateral relations sour. After the August 2022 visit to Taiwan by the speaker of the US House of Representatives, [China canceled](#) planned talks between senior military leaders, defense policy discussions, and Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) meetings. The MMCA working group remained on ice [until April 2024](#). Beijing's willingness to suspend these channels does not make prioritizing off-ramps naïve; it makes building them before a crisis more urgent. Because formal channels can go dark in response to events, backup procedures must be in place before a crisis begins.

Hotlines can be useful when they work. The harder work is procedural: establishing agreed responses to unsafe air and maritime encounters, standardized incident reporting, and meeting regularly to review dangerous behavior. Allied decision rules must also keep escalation-sensitive actions under political control. [CUES](#), the 2014 Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, offers one modest model: a nonbinding protocol adopted by twenty-one Pacific navies for unplanned naval encounters. Its reach is limited, however, for it excludes coast guard and maritime militia vessels and their activities. The US–China MMCA offers another model. Its working-level meetings review unsafe naval and air encounters and reinforce professional conduct; the [latest round](#) met in Hawaii in late May 2026.

[RAND's work on Taiwan escalation](#) identifies target selection as the most powerful factor to manage escalation under US control. Off-ramps therefore also require allied rules governing which targets are struck or held at risk, who authorizes escalation-sensitive moves, and how consultation continues amid disruption. This risk-control architecture has two layers. Bilateral procedures reduce misperception and unsafe encounters, while allied rules govern targeting and authorities even when Beijing lets bilateral channels go dark.

East Asia has seen the cost of late improvisation. The first Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954–55 helped produce the US–Republic of China Mutual Defense Treaty, signed in December 1954 and effective as of March 1955, and the

January 1955 Formosa Resolution. The [resolution authorized](#) President Dwight Eisenhower to use US forces to defend Taiwan, Penghu, and, as he judged necessary, related positions. The treaty covered Taiwan and Penghu but did not automatically protect Quemoy/Kinmen and Matsu. When China shelled those offshore islands again in 1958, Washington faced ambiguous commitments, inadequate conventional preparations, and a real risk of nuclear escalation. China would not test its first nuclear device until 1964, but Washington considered nuclear options, and the Sino-Soviet alliance meant that any US atomic attack risked Soviet involvement. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev warned Eisenhower—in messages published at the time—that an attack on China [could bring Soviet nuclear retaliation](#). [US intelligence nevertheless assessed](#) that Moscow sought to keep the conflict limited to avoid direct military participation unless the war expanded. Meanwhile, [US commanders worried](#) about sortie rates, questioned whether conventional defenses would hold, and found forward bases short of needed supplies. The lesson is plain: Military leaders should not have to improvise escalation control under fire.

This play rests on procedures that assume confusion, partial information, and fear in the opening stages of a conflict. The allied force must build mechanisms now that remain useful when normal channels go dark, and decision rules that still function when nobody is manning the other end of the hotline. Some of this amounts to plain, old-fashioned staff work. That basic blocking and tackling can keep decision-makers working with partial information from making irreversible decisions under terrible pressure.

None of these plays will settle the problem on its own. The strategic challenge in the western Pacific is cumulative, and the response must be as well.

Wohlstetter's 1982 treatment of the dilemma formed one part of a broader effort already underway. Years of research and development, investment, experimentation, acquisition, and organizational work turned stealth, precision strike, improved battlespace sensing, and related [Second Offset](#) technologies and innovations into operational advantage. However, the new technology became decisive only after institutions learned how to use it effectively.

The United States and its allies may eventually assemble comparable advantages in today's strategic competition with China. They should still act now. The work outlined here cannot wait: make access real, accelerate allied readiness, protect decisions, build friction into China's first week, and fortify off-ramps before crisis channels fail. Together, these steps buy allies time, deny Beijing time, and preserve room for diplomacy. The task now is to design initiative before the crisis begins.



Hellscape Defense in Taiwan: Would It Work?

Wes Hutto

Discussions regarding the defense of Taiwan increasingly feature the idea that low-cost emerging technologies are an answer to China's geopolitical position and overwhelming military might. China lies 180 kilometers across the strait from Taiwan, making an invasion scenario difficult to block by a US carrier group dependent on distant regional basing. To counter this, Admiral Samuel Paparo, commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, proposed in 2024 a [Taiwan “hellscape” strategy](#), supported by the mass adoption of a variety of uninhabited systems, both aerial and maritime, to stave off a potential invasion from the mainland. Since the proposal, the strategy has gained traction among [policy analysts](#) and [think tankers](#), pointing to Ukraine as an example of how a small state may effectively defend itself against a larger and more powerful adversary. These analysts suggest that more attritable aerial and maritime drones saturating the Taiwan Strait would be able to halt a Chinese invasion, perhaps even making such an operation so costly as to deter Beijing from even attempting a military takeover of the island. Most recently, [Stacy Pettyjohn and Molly Campbell](#) argued that by significantly increasing and diversifying its arsenal of uninhabited systems and rethinking its operational warfighting concepts to accommodate them, Taiwan can independently guarantee its own security.

Operationally, the hellscape strategy is creative and brilliant, exacerbating the tactical difficulty of an amphibious invasion with a multi-layer robotic defense that frustrates and attrits an invading force beginning eighty kilometers across the strait and continuing all the way past the beaches of Taiwan. Pettyjohn and Campbell describe “four tiers to the Hellscape concept.” The first of these is “the over-the-horizon outer layer” featuring long-range one-way attack drones, antiship cruise missiles, and maritime drones to disrupt China's ships in the earliest part of the operation. Next is a “muddy middle layer” hosting sea mines to canalize Chinese ships into predictable paths targeted by myriad aerial drones, including loitering munitions similar to Russian Lancets. After this, a “final run to the shore” layer would leverage shorter-range missiles, rockets, and drones targeting the narrow approach Chinese ships would be required to take toward a landing. And finally a beach landing layer featuring a first-person-view drone wall to complement and replicate Taiwanese artillery bombarding any Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces that were able to successfully establish a beachhead. Together, this multilayer approach presents Chinese leaders with an incredibly costly operation intended to complicate their decision-making concerning a potential invasion.

At first blush the hellscape strategy appears as an easy policy win. Low-cost, low-risk, attritable drones fielded in high volume should provide a capable and asymmetric defense to the Taiwanese armed forces. In so doing, they may even provide an effective deterrent to a potential Chinese invasion, demonstrating both resolve and the capability to inflict high costs on an invading PLA Navy force. Nevertheless, politically the hellscape strategy will likely prove unrealistic and unrealizable for two broad reasons. First, Taiwan's armed forces are unlikely to modernize their equipment and doctrine in a such a way that accommodates the strategy. Second, the Taiwanese people are unlikely to agree to a strategy that turns the island into an armed camp. The hellscape strategy is meant to present Taiwan with a workable alternative to US participation in its defense, but in its problems of implementation it actually demonstrates why the United States remains crucial to the island as a deterrent force.

The Organizational Challenge: Retooling Taiwan's Military for a Hellscape Defense

The hellscape strategy relies on an array of mines, autonomous and semiautonomous drones, and cruise missiles to batter an invading PLA Navy fleet. Today, the Taiwanese arsenal is not equipped for such an operation. To its credit, Taiwan has increased its asymmetric capabilities [in the last six years](#). But this increase has been marginal—its [recent acquisition](#) of Harpoon cruise missiles from the United States, for example, amounted to a mere four hundred munitions. According to *The Military Balance* most of Taiwan's military hardware acquisitions have been exquisite air and maritime capabilities such as the sixty-six F-16s it purchased in 2019—[those these have yet to be delivered](#). Even this has not been enough. As [Aswin Lin](#) points out, while budget allocations to defense increased twofold between 2016 and 2024, “the PLA's Eastern and Southern Theatre Commands' order of battle” remain “far superior to Taiwan's.” To implement a hellscape strategy, then, Taiwan would need to acquire a massive asymmetric capability arsenal *at the expense of* its current arsenal. Reconstituting Taiwan's armed forces around a drone fleet appears unlikely for two reasons: sovereignty and military professionalism.

First, militaries make investments in exquisite capabilities often as a public demonstration of sovereignty. State sovereignty has both internal and external components. Internally, sovereign governance depends on [the monopoly of legitimate violence](#). Externally, state sovereignty is dependent on recognition by the

international community of states. To gain this recognition, states tell stories about themselves—they build museums, consulates and embassies, and, of course, militaries. Due to its history and relationship with China, Taiwan may not be a traditional state, but it still pursues the recognition of its autonomy and independence in the international sphere. To this end, Taiwan creates military power that is [synonymous with a traditional state practice](#). Its [military arsenal includes](#) several hundred fighters including dozens of Mirage 2000s, over one hundred F-16s, and several indigenous fighter aircraft, as well as four attack submarines and four destroyers, and over one thousand armored fighting vehicles—but less than fifty medium-altitude long-endurance drones (including one-way attack drones), four minelayers, and a number of ground-based and ship-based antiship missile launchers. Additionally, while there is a growing indigenous small drone industry in Taiwan, these are produced mainly as exports since, [as a former chief of Taiwan’s general staff described](#), “relying solely on military procurements is insufficient to sustain long-term research and development and industrial scaling.”

To adopt a hellscape strategy, therefore, the Taiwanese armed forces would need to acquire an autonomous and semiautonomous arsenal at the expense of its traditional arsenal. To do so would require a fundamental shift in its organizational culture, away from emulating traditional state militaries. Military organizations can change, sometimes even by their own volition, but these innovations tend to accompany significant political or technological changes in the strategic environment. China’s threat to Taiwan has existed for at least half a century, and its naval and air incursions across the [Taiwan Strait median line](#) have been a constant since a controversial [2022 visit to Taipei by US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#). Given Taiwan’s accompanying acquisition history, it appears unlikely it will change its force structure without a significant change in Taiwan’s strategic environment. In fact, the complete abdication of US security guarantees may be the only thing that might force a change in Taiwan’s force structure. In this event, however, it might already be too late to enact the changes necessary to implement a hellscape strategy.

The second difficulty with retooling Taiwan’s force structure stems from the final phase of an invasion scenario—a breakout assault on Taipei—and the need for the Taiwanese citizenry to take up arms in this phase. For the hellscape strategy to effectively deter China, it needs to be more than just a deterrence strategy—it must also be an operational plan that should contain contingencies in the case of an actual Chinese cross-strait invasion. Otherwise, it simply presents a capabilities calculation: If Beijing is confident its hard military capabilities can break through the Taiwanese capabilities that make up the four layers of a hellscape defense, even for a small force, then seizing Taipei may look feasible. So what would a Taiwanese operational plan dictate if the PLA were to

successfully establish a beachhead and break out for the capital? The most obvious answer is to leverage two inherent advantages: challenging terrain and the Taiwanese people. In addition to an open and dangerous march through mountain passes on roads or through rice paddies (making maneuver with armor either difficult to conceal or impossible to progress) and over rivers, a Chinese invasion force bent on taking Taipei would encounter an urban warfare environment comparable [to an invasion of New York City](#). In this scenario, Taiwan’s final efforts would likely rely on an insurgent uprising in Taipei and the mountains to its south and east. While the urban and geographic features of this location make an insurgency possible and potentially effective in neutralizing PLA firepower, sustaining such an insurgency over the long term is rendered difficult by the geographical realities of the island—[external support will be risky and necessarily limited](#) in scale. Any insurgent operation will thus require incredible belief and effort by the Taiwanese people to enact and sustain it.

Importantly, evidence suggests that the Taiwanese public’s resolve to fight is directly tied to its perception of its military’s capabilities. Research published in 2024 and based on [the Taiwan National Defense Survey](#) revealed that “the majority of the respondents who expressed confidence in the Taiwanese military also showed willingness to defend Taiwan” in the event of a Chinese invasion. This finding does not necessarily prove that a change in the Taiwan military’s force structure will decrease the probability of a Taiwanese insurgency against invading forces, but it does raise the question of whether such a change would impact the Taiwan public’s confidence in their military’s ability to mount a successful island defense. Respondents who lacked confidence in Taiwanese defense capabilities were found to be less willing to defend the island against invasion. It should be added that this finding was especially the case among respondents that did not believe the United States would deploy troops to help. As the Taiwan hellscape strategy is designed for Taiwan to be able to defend itself independent of US assistance, this finding should be cause for concern since the hellscape strategy encourages both a reconstitution of the Taiwanese military and a US exit from previous commitments to the island.

The Political Challenge: Selling a Hellscape Defense to the Public

The Taiwanese public presents another barrier to the realization of a hellscape strategy—simply put, to an important degree, their approval is needed for the strategy’s enactment. The Taiwanese elected government maintains what Taylor Fravel calls “[civilian supremacy](#)” over its armed forces. One key requirement of civilian supremacy is that existing political institutions ensure that elected governments maintain control over the military. In fact, Taiwan’s transition to democracy in the 1990s was in part determined by the ability of its legislature, judiciary, and press to pressure executive reforms to

the military. In the wake of this, as Fravel recounts, “a more activist legislature has bolstered democratic control through increased supervision of the military.” Any fundamental shift in Taiwan’s military arsenal will have to go through the civilian elected government, and by extension, the Taiwanese public.

Perhaps most significantly, for Taiwan to implement a hellscape defense, the Taiwanese public will need to unify around the strategy. In fact, the strategy presupposes a minimal level of consensus regarding the character of the threat facing the island. It is unclear at this point that any such consensus exists. Given current levels of [party polarization in Taiwan](#), any unification around a new strategy appears unlikely. The center-left Democratic Progressive Party (which holds the presidency) and the center-right Kuomintang (which controls the legislature) vehemently disagree not only on approaches to defending the island, but more fundamentally on whether Beijing is even a real threat to Taiwan’s semi-independence.

Even if some consensus around the China threat did exist among the parties, for the Taiwanese people who live out their daily lives on the island, a hellscape approach is a less-than-attractive defensive option. [Hanson Baldwin once warned](#) a US audience of the consequences of building a Cold War garrison state, arguing that preparations for “total war transcend the period of hostilities; they wrench and distort and twist the body politic . . . prior to war.” While not a foregone conclusion, it is possible that prepping the Taiwan hellscape ultimately requires an effort equivalent to the creation of a Taiwanese garrison state—a preemptive armed camp that militarizes Taiwanese society. Pettyjohn and Campbell, for example, suggest that Taiwan should focus on hardening passive defenses on the island rather than using its capabilities to intercept Chinese saturation strikes. After having leveraged passive defense to merely survive the initial barrages, [Taiwanese defense would shift](#) to shorter-range drone interceptors, anti-aircraft defenses, and artillery based out of prepared positions with trenches and obstacles to further disrupt invading forces along their routes to Taipei and other major cities. The required number of individuals to mount such a defense threatens re-empowering the Taiwanese military to a dangerous degree. Taiwan has already deftly defeated martial law, and this was in recent history. It seems unlikely that the public would welcome back this form of governance to enact “fortress Taiwan.”

Finally, the prescriptions found in a hellscape strategy are loosely drawn from lessons learned from the Ukrainian defense against Russia. Ukraine’s effectiveness in denying Russia complete victory in its war of conquest is often seen as a blueprint for how Taiwan might effectively deny China something similar. Indeed, this is [the primary aim of the hellscape](#)—a denial strategy “rooted in a force posture aimed at denying a [Chinese] invasion force the ability to achieve a swift victory.” In Ukraine’s case, the effective denial of a swift Russian victory has produced more than four years of attritional

war. By 2023, [merely one year into the war](#), “More than 30% of the territory of Ukraine suffered losses from war-related pollution, destruction, bombings, etc. In just half a year of war, the amount of losses from Russia’s military aggression, confirmed by the World Bank, amounts to more than 340 billion dollars.” Ultimately, the argument—*This is going to be just like Ukraine*—is not the selling point that some might think it is in a Taiwan deeply divided about the threat posed by China and with living memory of military dictatorship.

Problems Without Solutions?

The problems overviewed briefly here are not insurmountable. There is a way that Taiwan can implement a hellscape-like defense strategy and maintain its current arsenal, all while effectively deterring a Chinese invasion and continuing to enjoy its democracy and way of life. Each of these outcomes is achievable under a sustained and credible US commitment to Taiwan’s defense.

For the better part of a century, the United States has relied on [strategic ambiguity](#) to perform “dual deterrence” between mainland China and Taiwan, seeking “to deter a Chinese attack on Taiwan while deterring Taipei” from declaring independence. Since the beginning of China’s [wolf warrior diplomacy](#) abroad and the crisis of its [one country, two systems](#) policy at home, there is reason to think that a decision to invade may not be contingent on Taiwanese movement toward independence—as it has been in the past. If this is the case, strategic ambiguity is no longer a functional dual deterrent strategy, leaving US the options of backing away from Taiwan or committing to its defense.

Without a US commitment, many analysts agree that Taiwan does not possess the military capabilities necessary to fight off a Chinese invasion on its own. The hellscape defense is an attempt to allow the United States to back away from historic commitments to Taiwan. Pettyjohn and Campbell note, the underlying intention of the hellscape “is grounded in Taiwanese self-sufficiency and seeks to identify a theory of victory that is not reliant on the United States.” Yet as I have argued, the Taiwan hellscape is unworkable. Militaries are [“born arming”](#) in such a way that displays their sovereignty and likeness to other sovereign states. Taiwan’s populace is not interested in a martial state, and its politics are too divided to enact such a governance structure. Instead, to guarantee the continued existence of this flourishing democracy, the United States will need to be clear about its commitment to defend Taiwan under any potential invasion. Taiwan cannot invest in drones the way it needs to, which means if drones are the answer to a credible defense of Taiwan, it will continue to need US resources to field the drone capabilities necessary to mount a credible defense. The United States remains crucial to the island as a deterrent, hellscape strategy or not.



Is Taiwan Preparing for a Long War?

Rowan Allport

On August 14, Han Kuang 42, the field phase of the latest edition of Taiwan's largest annual wargame, drew to a close. For many military hardware enthusiasts, the sight of recently delivered US-built M1A2T Abrams tanks [practicing](#) concealment, movement, and refueling near Taiwan's main international airport, Mirage 2000-5 combat aircraft being rapidly loaded with air-to-air missiles while their base was [under simulated attack](#), and Taiwanese navy and coast guard ships conducting [antiblockade operations](#) will have been an encouraging sign of serious defensive preparations.

Others will have been more skeptical. In the past, such flashy displays have been the source of criticism from analysts, who have, with justification, claimed that such Taiwanese exercises have been [heavily scripted media events](#) that do little to prepare Taiwan's military for the reality of modern war. Yet the recent evolution of Han Kuang tells a more important story of the kind of war Taiwan is preparing to fight. [For decades](#), Taiwanese defense planning placed overwhelming weight on stopping an invasion force before or around the point at which it reached the island. However, the most recent exercises have pointed toward a desire to ensure that a successful landing does not, by itself, decide the war. This has potential implications for any US intervention in the event of an attack.

Han Kuang began in 1984, after Washington's 1979 derecognition of Taiwan and the subsequent termination of the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty pushed Taiwan toward a more conservative defensive strategy. Taiwan was then an authoritarian state with a large conscript military and a qualitative edge over China. Today it is a democracy with a smaller, largely professional full-time force facing a vastly stronger opponent on the mainland. Such is Beijing's military overmatch at present that Taipei's prospects for sustained success in conventional air and sea battles can be largely discounted.

Taiwan's response to Beijing's growing power has evolved over time. At the turn of the century, [it was proposed](#) that the weight of defensive effort be put into destroying an enemy force before it reached the island as part of a "Decisive Battle Offshore" strategy. Subsequently, the "Hard ROC" strategy, formalized in the [2009 Quadrennial Defense Review](#), envisaged that while an invasion force would still be attacked while it crossed the strait and at the beachhead, there would be a greater focus on force survivability and the defense in depth of the main island to [prevent the consolidation](#) of any forces

that landed. In 2017, the asymmetry-focused [Overall Defense Concept](#) (ODC), which placed an emphasis on force protection, decisive action in the littoral zone, and destruction of landing forces at the beachhead, emerged. 2019's [Han Kuang 35](#) tested this approach, first as a computer-simulated exercise that has historically comprised the initial phase of Han Kuang, and then in the field. [Institutional inertia](#) within Taiwan's armed forces [limited the ODC's implementation](#)—a military's desire for traditional weapons and tactics often dies hard—but asymmetric warfare still became embedded in [Taiwan's defense plans](#).

Asymmetric operations on the scale needed to defend territory from a conventionally superior opponent require mass to be sustainable. Taiwan's professional military of around 170,000 personnel could never be adequate alone. While its army is centered on [seven combined arms brigades](#) wartime mass is dependent on a core of around twenty brigades split between conscript-heavy standing garrison formations and mobilized reserve brigades that would be made ready in a crisis, with an overall theoretical pool of over [2.85 million reservists](#)—although in practice [this number is smaller](#), with the Pentagon giving a figure of [1.5 million](#).

[Han Kuang 36](#) in 2020 incorporated reservists into artillery live-fire exercises for the first time, but the [reduction](#) of conscript service from twenty-two months to twelve months between 2000 and 2008, and then to [four months](#) of military training in 2013, as well as poor refresher training, badly eroded the pool of military personnel that would be available in a crisis. To help counter this, compulsory military service of one year was [reintroduced](#) in 2024, although the ramp-up is slow. Reservists [are now liable for up to four](#) fourteen-day training periods within eight years of discharge from service to bolster readiness. A [restructuring](#) of the armed forces went into effect the same year to more effectively allocate responsibility between regular personnel, conscripts, and reservists.

A major attack by China would not produce a simple front line: Beijing would seek full-spectrum paralysis, making decentralization and wider societal resilience essential. Han Kuang 37–39 increasingly practiced force dispersal and command survival. By [Han Kuang 40](#) in 2024, decentralized command and less scripted scenarios had taken firmer hold, including a command-post scenario in which a Chinese military exercise masked preparations for a real attack,

although Typhoon Gaemi ended the field phase of the exercise early.

After these marginal shifts, 2025's [Han Kuang 41](#) saw major changes. The duration of the command-post and field exercises were doubled—the latter from five to ten days. As foreshadowed in the [2025 Quadrennial Defense Review](#), instead of the standard phases of dispersal, live-fire, internal security, and antilanding operations, a [new phase model](#) featured a sequence of responding to gray-zone provocations, transition to war force deployment (including force protection and preservation), antilanding combat, littoral and beachhead operations, defense in depth, and “protracted warfare.” While the original ODC framed the postlanding resistance as the fallback layer behind the preferred decisive battle at the littoral and beach areas, it was now at least rhetorically coequal. The objective is no longer merely to prevent a landing; it is to make a landing insufficient to end the war and prevent Beijing from taking political control.

Reservist participation also expanded: The supporting [Tung Hsin 35](#) drill mobilized a full infantry brigade as part of the [largest ever](#) reserve participation, while the parallel Urban Resilience exercise tested evacuation, shelters, and civilian support. The 2025 Quadrennial Defense Review similarly stressed whole-of-society defense, mobilization, and civil-military integration, coordinated in part through the [All-Out Defense Mobilization Agency](#), formed in 2022.

This year's [Han Kuang 42](#) modified the exercise sequence: The overall architecture of the exercise is now year-round, with an [immediate combat readiness exercise](#) (held for the [first time](#) in March 2025) now covering the gray-zone element and, together with the [joint defense drills](#) in July, feeding into the main event. Han Kuang itself began with a Chinese military exercise that masked invasion preparations, which triggered Taiwanese mobilization, dispersal, and force preservation measures. President Lai Ching-te participated in an [“anti-decapitation” drill](#), traveling in an armored vehicle to a protected command location—a measure designed to prevent the capture or killing of Taiwan's leadership. US-sourced Patriots were among the air and missile defense systems [kept on the move](#) to avoid being targeted.

While US forces do not directly participate, Taiwan's drills increasingly feature [procedures adopted from the US military](#). Military command decentralization has been further built upon with expansion of the mission command concept in which subordinates are left to accomplish missions as they judge appropriate based on the commander's intent rather than through following detailed instructions from above. A [“back brief”](#) model in which subordinates inform their commanders how they intend to accomplish their assigned mission was also introduced.

As part of measures to interdict the transiting landing force, the recently inaugurated [Littoral Combat Command](#), bringing together truck-launched antiship missiles, mobile radar, and uncrewed systems, sought to provide a survivable counter to Chinese naval surface ships. Shoreline antilanding drills also took place, including on the frontline [island of Nangan](#) and the mid-strait [Penghu Islands](#). Around Taipei and Taoyuan International Airport, Taiwanese army units rehearsed defense against airborne seizure and amphibious assault via a [river estuary](#).

Postlanding defense in depth and protracted warfare formed a critical component of the exercise. This included the denial of infrastructure such as [bridges](#), [roads](#), and [tunnels](#) to the enemy, cross-island reinforcements, and logistics and maintenance support of forces in the field. This year has seen [two reserve-dependent brigades](#) mobilized under [Tung Hsin 36](#) rather than one. Civilian assets were utilized for wartime tasks, including the use of commercial trucks to [transport tanks](#) and [distribute artillery shells](#), and civilian ships to [block access](#) to port facilities. There was also [industrial dispersal](#) and conversion, [maritime resupply](#) under escort, [communications disruption](#), [evacuation](#), and [mass-casualty response](#).

There are still problems with the exercise. For all the breadth of activity types, the depth was limited relative to the scale of the actions that would be required in wartime. While it is impossible to fully replicate the conditions of a conflict, the gap between what this year's Han Kuang demonstrated and what would be required in a real contingency—including millions mobilized into wartime roles, access to vast munitions and supply stockpiles, and maintenance of resistance in the face of mass infrastructure loss, supply chain breakdowns, and Chinese infiltration—needs to be closed. Rehearsing protracted warfare does not mean Taiwan is in a position to sustain it.

This brings us back to the potential role of the United States. There is a well-established, if small, US [military presence](#) in Taiwan for advisory and training purposes, and photos indicate a US Marine Corps general [participated](#) in the planning for last year's Han Kuang. Protracted resistance gains much of its strategic value by buying time and preserving options for outside assistance. Yet US strategic ambiguity means Taiwan cannot base its defense plan on intervention being guaranteed. Taipei may well seek to prolong a conflict to buy time for outside intervention, but it is not clear whether that intervention will be forthcoming. This does not in and of itself invalidate forcing a protracted war: Ensuring that China is aware that it will pay a high price even if it is ultimately successful still has deterrence value. But the uncertainty of US involvement risks feeding back into how willing the island's inhabitants are to sustain the high price of resisting Beijing.



The Corcyra Dilemma: What Happens When Deterrence over Taiwan Fails?

Adam Kuź

What if a security commitment designed to preserve freedom of action ends up taking that freedom away? That possibility sits at the edge of the American debate over Taiwan. The argument usually turns on whether [strategic ambiguity still deters China](#) or [Washington should replace it](#) with a clearer promise to defend the island. Both sides, in other words, concentrate on the moment before a crisis. The harder problem begins once deterrence fails. A challenge can change the value of the commitment being tested, leaving the guarantor with less freedom than it thought it had preserved.

The United States has deliberately stopped short of giving Taiwan an unconditional defense guarantee. The [Taiwan Relations Act](#) treats an effort to determine Taiwan's future by nonpeaceful means as a matter of "grave concern" and requires the United States to maintain the capacity to resist coercion, but it does not automatically send American forces to war. There is a logic to this arrangement. It complicates Chinese planning without giving Taipei an explicit guarantee that might encourage unilateral political moves. But ambiguity is not static. Its meaning can change once a crisis starts.

I call the mechanism behind that change the Corcyra Dilemma. A great power makes a limited commitment to a smaller partner because it wants to deter aggression without accepting every risk of an unconditional guarantee. The rival sees the limitation and concludes that there may still be room to test it. Yet the test itself changes the calculation. Once the partner is attacked, the political and strategic cost of abandoning it can rise sharply. What looked like a limited commitment beforehand may become much harder to escape afterward.

The name comes from [the crisis](#) that preceded the Peloponnesian War. In 433 BCE, Athens received an appeal from Corcyra, a city-state on the Ionian island of Corfu whose large fleet made it strategically valuable even as its conflict with Corinth threatened to pull Athens toward a wider war. Thucydides records that the Athenians rejected a full offensive alliance and chose a defensive arrangement instead. Their aim was to keep Corcyra from falling into Corinthian hands without openly breaking the existing peace. Athens initially sent only ten ships and gave them restrictive instructions. At Sybota, however, the line between limited support and direct involvement became harder to hold, and a commitment that was supposed to control escalation produced a crisis that changed the price of standing aside.

Corcyra did not mechanically cause the Peloponnesian War, and not every ambiguous commitment produces a Corcyra Dilemma. The mechanism requires a particular sequence: a strategically important but weaker partner; a guarantor seeking deterrence without full entrapment; an adversary that believes a limited test remains possible; and a challenge that raises the cost of nonintervention. The crucial variable is what happens to a commitment after the adversary acts.

Two historical examples show why the distinction matters, although neither is a duplicate of Corcyra. The first of these is the Siege of Saguntum in 219 BC. Rome's relationship with Saguntum before the Second Punic War [remains disputed in its legal details](#), but [Polybius shows](#) how Hannibal's attack turned a peripheral dispute in Iberia into a confrontation Rome ultimately treated as intolerable.

The second example is Munich. In 1938, Britain and France [accepted the transfer](#) of the Sudeten territories to Germany while supporting a [future international guarantee](#) of Czechoslovakia's new borders, an attempt to limit immediate obligations while containing future risk.

Again, neither is a precise analogue to Corcyra. However, the common thread is narrow but clear: Commitments can acquire a different political meaning once pressure becomes action.

Taiwan presents the problem in a much more dangerous setting. China is no longer relying on diplomatic warnings alone. The Pentagon's [2025 report on Chinese military power](#) describes increasingly frequent joint combat patrols and exercises around the island. During the 2024 [Joint Sword exercises](#), for instance, the People's Liberation Army practiced operations associated with air and maritime superiority, blockade of key ports, and precision strikes, while the China Coast Guard demonstrated a growing ability to operate alongside it. This matters because a test of American commitment need not start with an unmistakable amphibious invasion. A blockade, quarantine, seizure of an outlying island, or sustained coercive campaign could be calibrated precisely to make Washington's first military response politically difficult.

That is where the familiar ambiguity-versus-clarity debate runs out of road. Before a crisis, Washington can weigh the cost of intervention against the cost of staying out. After China uses force, it would be making a different calculation. Taiwan would still matter, but so would the credibility of US

commitments elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific, the security calculations of Japan and the Philippines, the military balance along the first island chain, and the precedent set if a major power can revise the regional order by force. Intervention could remain extraordinarily costly. The point is that nonintervention could become more costly at exactly the same time.

The United States has already encountered a smaller version of this problem. During the 1958 Taiwan Strait crisis, Washington had no simple commitment to defend every offshore position held by the Republic of China. Senior officials [questioned the military value](#) of Quemoy and Matsu even as they worried that losing them could damage Taiwan's morale and American credibility. In one National Security Council discussion, [President Dwight Eisenhower observed](#) that the islands lacked strategic value while acknowledging that earlier choices had created a difficult psychological and political problem. That tension is the important part of the episode. Once a piece of territory had become a test, its value could no longer be measured by geography alone.

The same crisis also warns against allowing a rival to interpret ambiguity as weakness. Washington combined uncertainty about the exact scope of its commitment with military preparation, naval support, and signals that further escalation could become dangerous. US forces helped resupply the offshore islands while leaving room for political de-escalation. The result makes 1958 a useful negative case for the Corcyra Dilemma. A limited commitment can survive a test when the challenger sees both a real capacity to resist and a serious risk that continued pressure will widen the conflict.

Taiwan's own choices would shape that process. Smaller partners are not passive objects of great-power commitments. Their military posture, political decisions, and capacity to absorb coercion affect the guarantor's room for maneuver. If Taiwan can keep its government functioning, preserve command and control, protect critical infrastructure, and deny China a rapid victory, Washington gains time and options. If Taiwan's defenses unravel quickly, the United States could face the worst version of the dilemma: intervene at far greater military cost or accept a new regional reality whose effects would reach well beyond the island. Taiwan's resilience is therefore more than a way to make invasion difficult. It helps prevent Beijing from turning an ambiguous American commitment into an emergency decision on Chinese terms.

Allies would shape the calculation as well. Japan hosts forces central to many conceivable US responses to a Taiwan contingency, while the Philippines has become increasingly important to American access and regional posture. Neither government's choices can simply be assumed, but both would draw conclusions from Washington's response to coercion against Taiwan. A decision intended in Washington as a

narrow judgment about one island could be read elsewhere as evidence about the future reliability of American power in Asia. The reverse problem also exists: A response undertaken to defend credibility could generate new escalation risks. After a Chinese use of force, Taiwan's strategic value would therefore be partly created by the crisis itself—by what Beijing did, how Taipei resisted, how allies reacted, and how Washington answered the first move.

This changes how deterrence planning should be done. Asking whether Beijing believes the United States will intervene is not enough. Planners should also ask how different forms of coercion would alter the political and military value of intervention after a crisis has begun. A blockade creates a different decision from a missile strike; a seizure of an outlying island creates another. Deterrence has to be tested against sequences, not just opening moves.

Washington also needs a commitment that can survive being tested. That does not require an unconditional public promise to fight. It does require making it difficult for Beijing to believe that a limited challenge can cheaply separate Taiwan from the United States. The practical emphasis should fall on denial: distributed forces, survivable logistics, adequate munitions, access to regional bases, Taiwan's own resilience, and the ability to contest blockade or coercive operations before they harden into a *fait accompli*. Ambiguity without credible military options can invite probing. Ambiguity backed by visible capacity leaves Beijing uncertain about the exact response, but much less uncertain about the danger of forcing the question.

At the same time, stronger denial should not eliminate routes back from escalation. The Corcyra Dilemma becomes dangerous because each move can narrow the guarantor's next set of choices. Strategy should work against that dynamic rather than reinforce it. Private warnings, reliable communication channels, proportionate response options, and advance coordination with allies can make it harder for an initial test to become a sequence in which both sides conclude that escalation is the only remaining way forward.

This is not an argument for binding the United States in advance to military intervention under every imaginable scenario. An unconditional guarantee would solve one problem by creating others: greater entrapment risk, less room for crisis management, and more opportunity for both Beijing and Taipei to read American policy in ways Washington cannot fully control. Rather, the Corcyra framework asks planners to consider how today's apparently rational commitment may look after an adversary has acted and changed the costs surrounding it. A strategy built on the assumption that those costs and perceptions will remain fixed is a strategy built for the wrong crisis.

Security commitments, then, are political relationships whose effective strength depends on language, military capability, perceived interests, allied behavior, and events. An adversary does not merely discover whether a commitment is credible by testing it. The test can change the commitment itself.

That is the danger Washington should keep in view in the Taiwan Strait. Strategic ambiguity may still serve a purpose, and strategic clarity carries risks of its own. Whether the United States can deter the first move is important. But the decisive question is whether Washington is prepared for the possibility that the first move will change the commitment it was meant to test.



Ukraine and Taiwan: Why Learning the Right Lessons Matters

Zenel Garcia and John Nagl

As the world watches the war in Ukraine reshape the global order, the United States and its allies are seizing the moment to extract [hard-earned lessons](#) on the art of managing great power rivalry, crisis, and conflict. Arguably, the United States has adeptly employed its diplomatic, informational, military, and economic [instruments of national power](#) to keep its population safe and out of the conflict, while helping Ukraine impose severe costs on Russia. Diplomatically, it has built a coalition of partners to simultaneously seek a [peaceful solution](#) and cast [opprobrium](#) on Russian actions through international institutions like the United Nations. Informationally, it took the unprecedented step of [releasing intelligence](#) on Russian activities to deprive Moscow the element of surprise or the means to conduct false flag operations. It has also promoted an effective discourse portraying Russia's action as threatening to the international order. Militarily, it has delivered one of the few recent successes in [training and equipping](#) a foreign military. Finally, economically, it has led the organization and implementation of severely [damaging sanctions](#) on Russia.

The apparent success of these efforts has generated much discussion about lessons to be learned. However, overly optimistic analyses risk obscuring the applicability of these policies to future conflicts. This is particularly important as the foreign policy community [draws parallels](#) between Ukraine and a potential conflict over Taiwan. It will be difficult, if not impossible, for the United States to apply its instruments of power in a similar fashion in a Taiwan contingency, specifically because [China is not Russia, and Taiwan is not Ukraine](#). Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine offers lessons across the elements of national power for the prospects and likely consequences of a Chinese attempt to invade Taiwan. For both military and economic reasons, China is unlikely to follow Russia's example of an overt invasion; instead, it will likely rely on diplomatic and informational power to accomplish its objectives.

Amphibious Invasion Complexities: Military Challenges for China

The principal lesson that President Xi Jinping is likely to have learned from watching Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the past three years is disarmingly simple: Invasions are hard.

Russia and Ukraine share a long contiguous land border that is largely flat and rolling hills—the easiest of all geographical conditions for a land invasion. Additionally, the Black Sea ostensibly allows Russia to use its advantage in seapower to apply additional pressure on Ukraine from the south, and there is a long fighting season from approximately May to October during which military operations are essentially unhindered by weather or terrain conditions. Literally none of these conditions apply to a potential invasion of Taiwan.

Most obviously, Taiwan is an island separated from the Chinese mainland by roughly one hundred miles of open water. There are [only two months](#)—May and October—when sea conditions would allow China to launch an amphibious invasion of Taiwan, which has limited (and well-defended) invasion beaches, a significant mountainous spine, subtropical jungle, and several large cities, all of which present major obstacles to military conquest even if the Taiwan Strait could be conquered. Amphibious operations are among the most difficult of all military operations, in no small part because they require the achievement of air superiority prior to beginning the invasion to protect vulnerable troop transports. This is why the “so few” in Winston's Churchill's [famous quote](#)—“never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”—were the pilots of the Royal Air Force. [Russia's inability to achieve air superiority over Ukraine](#) is hence an important cautionary tale for Xi; if Ukraine's skies have been protected by American intelligence and American missiles, it is not too much to expect that Taiwan's would be as well—and that the island, about six percent the size of Ukraine and surrounded by a sea [likely to be populated with American air defense assets aboard ships](#),

would be even better defended against air attack than Ukraine has been.

Moreover, Russia's challenge in establishing dominance over the Black Sea highlights another vital requirement for any successful campaign: naval superiority. Without command of the sea, China would be unable to secure and sustain the logistical lifeline required for a full-scale amphibious assault or to shield its invasion fleet from interdiction. Despite the [significant advances](#) of the People's Liberation Army Navy, the narrowness of the Taiwan Strait could become a deadly bottleneck under the threat of Taiwanese and [American submarines and missile-equipped ships](#). The United States Navy and its regional allies and partners possess considerable blue-water capabilities and regional presence, making the contest for maritime dominance not only unavoidable but arguably decisive. Xi's planners must therefore consider not only how to reach Taiwan—but how to keep the corridor open once the first boots are ashore.

Sanctions and Interdependence: Economic Deterrents and Limits

China has become the [manufacturing center of the world](#) and, therefore, a pivotal component to [global supply chains](#). It has also become the [largest trading partner](#) to most countries, and through the Belt and Road Initiative, it has emerged as a [major investor](#). Consequently, the degree of sanctions currently being imposed on Russia are unlikely to be replicated for two reasons. The first is that implementing these kinds of sanctions on China would require a significant level of decoupling between the United States, its partners, and China. This is likely to be particularly painful to the consumer economies in the West. Even with the requisite political will, a policy of decoupling would be [difficult to implement](#). The second is that China is increasing its footprint in [emerging markets](#), which may mitigate some of the effects of US and European sanctions. This means that even if sanctions were imposed, the interconnected nature of the global economy provides Beijing with access to additional markets outside of the sanctions regime, as [Moscow](#) has quickly learned. Put simply, the United States would face domestic and structural challenges if it sought to impose the same level of punitive economic sanctions on China.

Despite these relatively positive lessons, there are legitimate economic constraints to China's resort to the use of force. The most important of these is that any conflict across the Taiwan Strait would have a negative economic impact even in the absence of sanctions. This is important because of Beijing's preoccupation with ensuring a stable environment conducive to economic development—something Chinese officials have [long believed](#) to be correlated with social stability, and therefore, security. There is also the concern that any cross-strait conflict would result in the reorientation of regional

shipping and a spike in insurance costs. Few Chinese ports would be capable of conducting regular trade operations and overland trade routes would not be capable of handling the current volume. This would result in compounding economic challenges that may prove too costly for Chinese officials that have historically prioritized domestic stability.

De Jure Containment and Coalition Building: Diplomatic Obstacles for Taiwan

One key distinction between the conflict in Ukraine and a potential one over Taiwan is their legal status and the effect this can have on the framing of the discourse over such an event. Ukraine is a recognized sovereign state. As a result, it is straightforward to designate Russia's actions as a war of aggression. Moscow is essentially undermining two foundational norms of the international order: the [sovereignty and territorial integrity](#) of a recognized state. This messaging has currency across the globe. Taiwan, however, is a different entity altogether given its lack of de jure recognition. While the US [interpretation](#) of the "One China" policy does not necessarily recognize Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, this is not the case around the world. In fact, Beijing makes this the [basis](#) for the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries. This makes framing a mainland invasion of Taiwan as a war of aggression more difficult given that [few countries](#) recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country.

Furthermore, Beijing actively blocks Taiwan's participation in international organizations such as the United Nations and even forums like the World Health Organization by leveraging its position within these bodies. This systematic marginalization reduces Taipei's ability to build international coalitions or gain official support in the event of conflict, further complicating global efforts to frame Chinese military action as unlawful aggression. As a result, many countries may see a cross-strait operation as a domestic issue for China.

Shaping the Discourse: Informational Power and Taiwan's Marginalization

Chinese officials have worked to shape international narratives to portray Taiwan as an inseparable part of China. In this effort, China has used both overt and covert means to influence media outlets, foreign governments, and international institutions. Over the past two decades, China has [invested heavily](#) promoting its media platforms around the world. Chinese media companies have [established a foothold](#) by increasing their overseas capacity and presence, training local journalists, acquiring existing local outlets or establishing new ones, and finally, creating local content. This allows them to achieve Xi Jinping's mission of "[telling China's story well](#)," a phrase rooted in his broader strategy to shape global public opinion around Chinese interests and legitimize China's governance model.

For its part, the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department (ILD) has played a significant role in advancing these objectives. Traditionally tasked with managing party-to-party diplomacy, the ILD has increasingly positioned itself as a tool of [influence operations](#) abroad, including shaping discourse around Taiwan. Through building relationships with foreign political parties and think tanks, particularly in developing nations, the ILD subtly promotes Beijing's narrative that Taiwan is an internal matter and not a subject of international concern. This strategy enables Beijing to cultivate sympathetic elites and suppress pro-Taiwan positions in multilateral forums. Additionally, the ILD often collaborates with [United Front](#) organizations and media partners to amplify favorable coverage while discrediting Taiwan's democratic legitimacy. Such efforts are part of a broader, long-term campaign to normalize the Beijing's claims and marginalize Taiwan on the world stage. As a result of these developments, China is likely to have a greater capacity to shape the discourse surrounding the status of Taiwan than Russia has had vis-à-vis Ukraine—as well as the legality of any use of force—among a broader audience.

China has been paying close attention to the ongoing war in Ukraine, including [reportedly sending](#) some of its own soldiers to observe the battlefield. What Chinese leaders have learned cannot be encouraging to a country that has not engaged in combat since 1979, and that [in a war it arguably lost](#) to a much smaller neighbor. Rolling the iron dice of war is always a risky endeavor; doing so to invade a country that the under secretary of defense for policy has repeatedly declared is his [top national security priority](#) is a reckless act beyond any China has conducted since its intervention in the Korean War seventy-five years ago. That invasion happened because China believed that its homeland was under imminent threat; it is hard to imagine an equally rash act short of a similar belief today. So long as Taiwan does not announce its independence, China is far more likely to play a patient game of increasing diplomatic and informational pressure, accompanied by military actions short of war, to win this battle without firing a shot.



The US Army in the Pacific

Transform, Campaign, Repeat: Winning in the Indo-Pacific

Ben Blane and Christopher Lee

Throughout its history, the US Army has continuously adapted itself to the environment—not out of ambition, but out of necessity, as the response to evolving global threats has always demanded new doctrine and technologies. From the dawn of the nation to the multidomain front lines of the twenty-first century, the Army has never enjoyed the luxury of standing still. The service’s relevance to the national defense strategy and the security of allies and partners depends on its ability to keep pace with an increasingly complex global threat environment. On the surface, transformation and campaigning ahead of conflict appear to be opposite—and perhaps even competing—initiatives for the US Army. Upon closer inspection of designated units in contact, however, the Army’s busy campaigning efforts across the Indo-Pacific region are *accelerating* rather than hindering transformation.

In response to the global environment, rather than promising delivery of a [new Army](#) or advanced capabilities as a one-time overhaul, the US Army’s most senior uniformed and civilian leaders issued a new [transformation initiative](#) that views modernization as an ongoing and iterative process, one that recognizes rapid developments in the environment. Amid the implementation of this change, senior leaders have also acknowledged that the Army is already “[really busy](#),” with many across the force concerned that their units’ operational tempo will likely be the biggest derailer of modernization. Nevertheless, the scale of transformation expressed in this initiative cannot be accomplished in a lab or in a moment of operational pause. Additionally, as the US Army optimizes its force structure, top-heavy formations must right-size their organizations to enable, not encumber, the [small units](#) that will drive this transformation.

[US Army Pacific](#) is an example of a command leaning forward into this multidomain transformation imperative, applying new organizations, technologies, and concepts even as Army units and activities are dispersed across thousands of miles of the Indo-Pacific region. While the transformation in contact period of modernization describes the timeframe between now and 2027, units designated as part of “[transformation in contact 2.0](#)” in the Indo-Pacific are in contact with more than

just a [closing time window](#). Through campaigning, the key to this transformation is their persistent contact with an adversary, with the [environment](#), and with partners.

Setting the Theater: Preconflict Maneuver in the Indo-Pacific

Over the past decade, nations in the Indo-Pacific region witnessed an [increasingly audacious](#) China expanding [joint military activities](#) around Taiwan and aggressively pursuing military [modernization](#). Beijing is moving closer to General Secretary Xi Jinping’s capabilities development milestones for a military that can support China’s [unification of Taiwan by 2027](#). Collectively, these efforts normalize China’s presence in the Indo-Pacific region, further shaping perceptions of inevitability, and set conditions for reunification on Xi’s terms. Uncontested, one can assess that China will achieve this goal below the threshold of armed conflict and in line with China’s strategic aim of [winning without fighting](#), which will come at a [great cost](#) to the Indo-Pacific region and United States’ national interests.

While experiments and tests conducted in the continental United States may be necessary to support more distant transformation windows, they do little to [reestablish deterrence](#) in the region. The distances associated with the Indo-Pacific region make rapid response by units out of contact [exceptionally challenging](#), with the throughput of our power projection stations underprepared to rapidly deploy forces at the scale required of this theater. China pays most attention to those capabilities with the immediate ability to impose costs and [produce more rapid kill chains](#) than those of its adversaries, thus presenting a credible impact on Beijing’s own objectives in the region.

It follows that the US Army is introducing more [long-range missiles](#) and [unmanned drones](#) into formations, some of which are already operating in the Indo-Pacific region today. Decisive application of land power onto key terrain during campaigning provides commanders options in crisis and a consistent reminder of this credible deterrence to the adversary. Put simply, combat-credible capabilities are in

positions relevant to the fight and must persist in [Xi's mind](#), not in a distant training environment.

Deterrence through Dilemma: Shaping in Plain Sight

While campaigning supports the positioning of new technologies, transformation during campaigning is not just about delivering new stuff into priority theaters. Effective transformation efforts in the Indo-Pacific region must demonstrate a comprehensive undertaking across multiple fronts while shaping the operational environment.

If the value of land forces is that they can operate [geographically dispersed](#), they must be able to move and function in the environment. At the small-unit level, units identify what works and what does not work, allowing them to iteratively improve and learn faster than they would in any other environment. Should the Army choose to ignore the lessons from those [persistently](#) (rather than episodically) campaigning in theater, the service will continue a costly path of delivering capabilities that are logistically burdensome and unable to contribute to the future fight.

Equally important as geographic dispersion is that these units are also [technologically linked](#). Units in contact must build [interior lines](#) that link them all through a single unified network, which is appropriately the [number one priority](#) in transformation. This is why, as the network is the foundation for all warfighting capabilities, units in the Indo-Pacific region are building and continuously operating on a persistent, always-on network.

All forward network-focused experimentation efforts must advance the development of the Army's ability to support a protracted fight while informing the wider Army modernization enterprise. Several US Army command post exercises focus on optimization of force structure, but only those [experiments](#) that involve command and control of live formations in theater with adequate dispersion will appropriately inform and drive these decisions. While [previous iterations](#) of Project Convergence dipped its toe into the Indo-Pacific region, [recent efforts](#) are going all in with forward experimentation and leave-behind capability for real-world operational use. The US Army, along with other military branches, continues to emphasize the importance of artificial intelligence and machine learning to enable decision-making. It is relatively simple for cyber and operational data teams to develop algorithms in home stations, but placement on key terrain with connection to the right sensors, shooters, and command nodes along with access to the right data sets is necessary to defend networks and enhance joint kill webs.

Only when executing in theater while continuously building the network—which the US Army will use to train, rehearse, experiment, and (if necessary) fight—can the US Army transform at the scale and speed relative to the nation's pacing

threat. Furthermore, the introduction of new tactics and technologies in the backyard of the pacing threat forces China to continually rethink its strategic calculus.

Regional Recalibration: Partners in Contact

In the Indo-Pacific region, transformation efforts are not limited to the US Army. Other US military branches—though longstanding players in the region—are far from defenders of the status quo. In the summer of 2025, the US Air Force will deploy nearly three hundred aircraft spread across twenty-five locations during [Resolute Force Pacific](#), which will stress the service's [Agile Combat Employment](#) concept using new technologies and theater-level experimentation efforts. [Lead-up exercises](#) to this event have also integrated US Navy surface vessels and US Army land-based fires. The Navy-led exercise [Valiant Shield 24](#), once limited to a series of unilateral joint rehearsals spread across the Second Island Chain (Guam, Marianas islands, and Palau), for the first time ever expanded to include partner nations with execution throughout the First Island Chain (Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines) testing [Distributed Maritime Operations](#) in contested locations. This exercise is unlikely to ever return to a unilateral event contained to the Second Island Chain. The US Marine Corps, undergoing its own [force design](#) transformation efforts, is also employing [prototype systems](#) in the Indo-Pacific region within major joint exercises. If key players in the US Army elect not to participate, they will miss out on the limited number of joint rehearsals left before the transformation in contact window closes.

Over a dozen partnered nations in theater are also recalibrating their defensive postures, restructuring their forces, and [forging new alliances](#) in response to the rising challenges posed by an increasingly aggressive China. Campaigning puts the United States [alongside allies and partners](#). [Japan](#), [Australia](#), [South Korea](#), [Singapore](#), and the [Philippines](#) have all shifted focus onto the most prescient threat in the Indo-Pacific region and have begun their own transformation efforts to support multidomain operations. Learning from one another helps advance our own tactics and technologies while further contributing to the build of enduring interior lines. If the US Army is not signaling commitment by operating side by side with partners, we forfeit the competitive advantage necessary to operate and win in this theater.

Transforming the Army Now for the Future

To ensure the continued [lethality](#) of the US Army, it must *transform*, not just change, where the transformation effects are iterative, yet not incremental. The [resulting transformation](#) must be profound, organization-wide, and disruptive. The transformation must fundamentally reorient the organization (in strategy, structure, and processes) so drastically that it can never return to its previous state. The US Army's

transformation largely stagnated during the post-9/11 wars and global counterterrorism focus. The redoubled emphasis on transformation, combined with a shift in focus to China as the pacing threat means that formations in the Indo-Pacific region, like the Army corps and division, function very differently than they did a decade ago. But that is not enough. The corps and division in 2027 should look and operate differently than they do in 2025. More important than the doctrine and technology that develops in that time are the organizations and the application of that doctrine and technology in theater.

US Army senior leaders must maximize time during campaigning to exercise multidomain combat operations at scale. They should prioritize and pay attention to experiments in the Indo-Pacific region, which, due to the complexity associated with distances and extreme environmental conditions, will inform all other efforts. Small units must maximize this experimentation in the environment to validate and invalidate concepts, identify what works, and divest [what does not work](#), which includes a focus on only the training necessary to fight and win. Every exercise is an opportunity to identify facilities and storage locations for prepositioned stocks and leave-behind equipment. During the acquisition

process, as Army units attempt to get lighter and leaner, these units must contemplate what they can actually transport around the battlefield with consideration for universal mobility standards (e.g., the [twenty-foot equivalent unit](#)). [Industry](#) and bureaucracies take a long time to change, but the nature of war can change instantly. While US Army leaders are adjusting acquisition processes, units must not accept the status quo. Transformation in contact cannot simply be a buzzword; it must define a bias towards action.

The US Army will forfeit its right to critique the next fight in the Indo-Pacific region if it is not adequately preparing and deploying lethal, combat-credible formations and capabilities today. It cannot only provide color commentary on the next fight from the wrong side of a [seven-thousand-mile wet gap crossing](#), talking about what could have and should have been. And it cannot deploy untested capabilities at the time of need and find its soldiers digging foxholes on the island of irrelevancy. The Army is on the precipice of a major shift, where ceding key terrain is not an option. At echelon, senior leaders must drive the necessary transformation efforts to maintain the service's legacy as the most ready and lethal army on the planet.



How to Kill a Multidomain Task Force

Ben Blane, Ryan DeBooy, and Dale Hunter

Over the past decade, the Army has taken the multidomain task force from whiteboard concept to operational centerpiece, emerging as one of the clearest expressions of how the Army intends to fight and win against near-peer adversaries. Designed to operate [within an adversary's weapon engagement zone](#), these organizations have become central to the Army's [continuous transformation](#), translating multidomain concepts into reality while simultaneously imposing real costs on adversaries. In doing so, they have reshaped how land forces contribute to deterrence, signaling that dominance in future conflict will not be earned by mass alone, but by integration, persistence, and speed across domains.

Purpose-built to challenge antiaccess / area-denial networks, multidomain task forces (MDTFs) matured through years of [pilot experimentation](#) before their formal activation and have since proved their ability to deploy forward capabilities that [complicate adversary decision-making](#) and disrupt the coherence of near-peer operational designs. While the brigade combat teams that drove the Army's transformation to a modular force twenty years ago possessed four thousand soldiers or more, MDTFs are roughly half that size. As a cornerstone of then Chief of Staff of the Army General James McConville's "[hard to kill](#)"

vision, these formations embody a shift toward smaller, offensive-based, more survivable forces that operate within the [joint force's contact layer](#), where competition activities are most consequential and escalation risks are highest.

Yet the very attributes that have made MDTFs effective also expose them to distinct vulnerabilities. If unaddressed, these weaknesses threaten to erode the momentum the Army has built by standing up these organizations—three were [activated between 2017 and 2022, with two more planned](#)—and undermine their deterrent value at the precise moment [when it matters most](#).

What follows is a candid examination of how MDTFs can be defeated, drawing on insights from soldiers who have served inside these formations. Understanding how to kill an MDTF is not an argument against the concept. Rather, it is vital for ensuring the Army remains decisive in an adaptive, protracted war, where exploiting MDTF vulnerabilities would degrade not just the formation, but the Army's ability to counter the very adversaries these formations were designed to defeat.

This examination is not an exercise in theory but an urgent warning. The MDTFs initially served as the Army's

“[organizational centerpiece](#)” in its broader transformation to adopt new concepts and units and to address threats across domains. While the MDTFs were designed to counter external adversaries, their greatest challenges have been internal. By design, the MDTF concept deliberately sidestepped traditional processes, which, while accelerating innovation, also generated powerful antibodies within the institution. In a culture that valued the established procedures that allowed the Army to prevail in the Cold War and Desert Storm, the MDTFs were not seen as a model for future change but as an aberration against process.

This internal [cultural resistance](#) is arguably more dangerous to the Army’s future than any near-peer competitor. As the Army now seeks to scale the lessons of the MDTF across the force, these same currents of resistance see an opportunity to reassert the status quo ante. The hurdles the first MDTFs overcame are the same ones that now threaten to stifle the Army’s broader transformation, making this a critical moment to understand and confront the institutional forces that would rather kill innovation than break with tradition.

1. Bury it Under Bureaucracy

While MDTFs are optimized to counter near-peer adversaries while complementing sister service concepts, an equally consequential competitor has loomed throughout the time they have been stood up: bureaucracy. The most effective way to neutralize the MDTFs is not to target its sensors, shooters, or networks, but to overwhelm it with process. The central challenge to an MDTF ahead of a conflict—and the one that would prove especially dangerous during one—is the institutional tendency to pile on structure and staff, stifling the very agility that makes it effective. This underscores a critical lesson for the Army’s broader transformation: Higher headquarters must be [rightsized](#) to enable, not encumber, innovation.

Conceived as an experimental formation in the Army’s transition to multidomain operations as its operational concept, the MDTF was nonetheless built with the explicit intent to scale. This model was intentionally chosen because the MDTF was created before multidomain operations doctrine even debuted, serving as a [minimum viable product to field-test concepts](#) and inform doctrine, rather than simply execute it. To achieve this, MDTFs were built with small, lean staffs to foster a culture of rapid experimentation. This structure allowed them to [fail fast](#)—to quickly test new concepts and technologies, proving what works before committing to a larger investment. The council of colonels so common in traditional Army decision-making processes is not what has made the MDTFs effective. Instead, its success and potential for scalability have been driven by streamlined authorities and focused priorities, proving the

concept’s value and delivering relevant capabilities directly to combatant commanders.

This inherent dynamism is fundamentally at odds with the friction imposed by well-intentioned, but cumbersome, bureaucratic processes. The most effective way to neutralize the initiatives of the Army’s MDTFs is not through opposition or budgetary cuts, but by quietly absorbing it into the administrative fold. This bureaucratic absorption does not produce visible failure. On the contrary, it often appears as institutional success: compliance with doctrine, alignment with existing force structures, and adherence to established processes. However, this administrative coherence masks a deeper operational failure, as programs optimized for peacetime processes meet the harsh demands of real-world conflict and institutional incentives discourage timely pivots to more relevant solutions.

The result is strategic atrophy, which becomes acutely dangerous in conflict. An MDTF does not need to organically possess authorities necessary to deliver effects at speed—but it must have streamlined access to them. If it is instead buried under multiple echelons of command, far from the theater-level decision-makers it is meant to support, its decision-making cycles will inevitably slow, its innovative capacity will diminish, and its speed of delivering effects will be made inconsequential. In this way, bureaucracy functions as a precision weapon against innovation; it does not attack the MDTF directly but renders it irrelevant by removing the freedom to experiment, integrate, learn, and deliver effects at the pace modern conflict demands.

This same challenge will undoubtedly complicate the Army’s wider transformation. As the service integrates new formations like [multidomain commands](#) and disruptive technologies such as [drones](#), these efforts will face the same institutional inertia. If large headquarters staffs are allowed to impose rigid, process-heavy oversight, they will stifle the very innovation these new concepts are meant to foster, proving that an organization’s greatest obstacle can often be itself.

2. Standardize it to Death

The MDTF was designed to break the Army’s traditional force generation model. Historically, the service manned, trained, and equipped organizations in their [final form](#) before providing them to combatant commanders. As the Army’s [multidomain transformation white paper](#) states, “MDTFs break this mold.” They are not static formations, but dynamic, adaptable organizations built, trained, and exercised within the context of a combatant commander’s specific requirements. Forcing them to conform to legacy force design models would neutralize their very purpose.

Resegmending an MDTF's functions back into stovepiped, single-capability organizations would also erode their utility to the joint force. When the MDTF is forced through established approval chains, acquisition timelines, and validation mechanisms designed for traditional formations, its ability to innovate is stifled—experimentation gives way to staffing and adaptation yields to synchronization meetings. The task force becomes less a laboratory to drive innovation against novel threats and more a coordination headquarters for legacy capabilities.

This is because the MDTF was designed as a layered, agile effect formation. Its early successes in joint exercises and live rehearsals in theater were not the product of any single capability, but of its ability to integrate fires, intelligence, cyber, space, and air defense effects at speed. It possesses organic sensors and intelligence systems to shorten its own kill webs; protection capabilities so it does not have to compete for a spot on the joint force defended asset list; and organic information, cyber, and space assets to enhance the lethality of its long-range fires. This model recognizes that the current era is not about delivering capabilities in a linear fashion, but about [transforming the entire acquisition ecosystem](#) to enable rapid, [integrated solutions](#). Separating these functions and forcing the MDTF to rely on external support transforms it from a combat enabler into a joint burden.

Even if the Army were to move away from the MDTF model, the lessons learned from these cross-functional formations must be preserved and expanded upon. The Army's new [transformation in contact](#) initiative, which experiments with new organizational designs like [restructured divisions](#), [mobile brigade combat teams](#), and [multidomain long range strike battalions](#), is already building on the MDTFs' foundation by creating more composite, multicapability formations. These new units recognize a fundamental truth that the MDTFs have already proven: In an era where technology is moving too fast to solve every problem before fielding, the ability to rapidly integrate, experiment, and adapt is the most critical capability of all.

The central lesson of the MDTFs' structure is not about any specific piece of equipment, but about organizational design. Divesting of the MDTF without a clear plan to institutionalize its cross-functional, experimental model across the force would be a strategic error—a retreat from genuine innovation back to the comfort of the legacy structures the MDTF was created to overcome.

3. Preserve it for Crisis

In the vast and contested battlespace of the Indo-Pacific, the US joint force's greatest challenge is the [tyranny of distance](#). To be credible, deterrence requires persistent, combat-ready forces

capable of acting in the critical opening hours of conflict. MDTFs were purpose-built for this role.

MDTFs are not break-glass-in-case-of-war formations built for rapid response deployment into theater; placing them in a reserve status in the continental United States over three thousand miles away from the friction zone negates their primary function and undermines the [denial defense in the First Island Chain](#) outlined in the recent National Defense Strategy. The MDTFs essentially perform the two primary security tasks—screen and cover—but on a theater-level scale, operating across all domains.

Positioned forward within the cross-domain contact layer, an MDTF serves as a screening force, providing early warning to the main body without becoming decisively engaged. Alongside other forward-positioned US and host-nation land forces, an MDTF uses an integrated array of space, high-altitude, aerial, cyber, and terrestrial sensors to observe the operational environment and report on adversary activity.

Upon transition to conflict, the MDTF's mission evolves to that of a covering force, which is designed to make initial contact with the enemy. It leverages its positions gained in competition to engage the adversary with layered, agile effects. Executed as part of a larger, sequenced plan, these actions delay and disrupt the enemy, buying the joint force the critical time and space needed to introduce air and naval forces under favorable conditions to prevent a [fait accompli](#). In turn, this sets conditions for the introduction of additional decisive land force combat power.

Crucially, while most army units must be mobilized from their home bases in scheduled waves, an MDTF's ability to perform this covering mission is entirely dependent on its forward positioning during competition. The intelligence networks, host-nation relationships, and logistical footprint that provide it the durable force disposition necessary for effective operations in a protracted fight cannot be surged from the continental United States in a crisis. Without being persistently in theater, an MDTF loses its ability to screen effectively and, consequently, its ability to cover for the joint force.

Because larger follow-on land forces will simply not arrive in time for crisis, the Army's relevance to the National Defense Strategy's priority of deterring and fighting in an Indo-Pacific contingency hinges entirely on providing forward-positioned units equipped with [critical technologies](#). A forward-positioned MDTF is not merely [a valuable asset](#); it is a prerequisite for a credible deterrence and defense strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Dismantling the MDTF model without immediately replacing it with a dedicated forward-positioned land force would equate to acceptance of strategic irrelevance for the Army. Without a dedicated force in place to influence a Taiwan contingency from

the outset, the Army risks becoming a spectator in the Indo-Pacific's most consequential fight.

4. Suppress its Voice

An MDTF that cannot dominate its own narrative at the speed of relevance is a force fighting with one hand tied behind its back. Perhaps the most insidious way to defeat an MDTF is to sever its connection to the global conversation. This is achieved through information calcification: a hardening of the bureaucratic arteries that slows the release of information to a crawl, rendering it irrelevant upon arrival and allowing our adversaries to define our actions before we can.

The strategic value of an unsuppressed external voice was demonstrated during rotational exercises in the Philippines in 2024. The [historic first deployment](#) of an Army long-range fires system prompted [immediate and sharp denunciations](#) from the Communist Chinese Party. This outcome was no accident; it was a deliberate signaling effort, made possible by integrating public affairs into the commander's decision-making process from the start. The deployment was a powerful reminder that the narrative surrounding a capability can be as influential as a wartime demonstration of the capability itself.

The risk of this paralysis is not theoretical. It was [highlighted](#) by General Bryan Fenton who, prior to his retirement as commander of US Special Operations Command, warned that the United States suffers from an information operations "void," where approval for a single message can take months. He further suggested authorities be delegated at lower levels to keep up with the speed of information before the narrative is gone.

Equally damaging, however, is suppressing the MDTF's voice internally within the Army, which stifles the service's own evolution. The Army designated the MDTF as its [signature formation for its organizational change](#). This makes the lessons learned by the MDTF essential for the entire institution, especially in its continuous transformation efforts. Near-term transformation initiatives, however, must be about more than a fleeting moment of contact within a closing time window. MDTFs remain in persistent contact—with the operational environment, with partners, and with the adversary. Therefore, the lessons borne from this persistent, real-world contact should carry far greater weight than those learned in a closed laboratory or a US-based training environment.

The most critical of these lessons is the [agile mindset](#) that MDTFs have cultivated—an indicator of a cultural shift that prioritizes rapid, iterative problem-solving in the face of ambiguity over the status quo's linear, risk-averse model of delivering a solution that is perfect but late. Combined with new

AI and machine-to-machine interoperable technologies, MDTFs can apply an agile and agentic form of command and control to keep pace with the adversary. If these lessons from the forward edge are not conveyed to the broader force, [transformation in contact](#) becomes an empty slogan. Suppressing the MDTF's voice, whether external or internal to the Army, cripples its dual purpose. Cutting it off from the global conversation neutralizes the deterrent effect of its combat-credible capabilities. Cutting it off from the rest of the Army renders it an isolated experiment rather than the driver of transformational change it was designed to be.

Crossing the Rubicon of Relevance: Opportunities to Succeed and Fail

The Army stands on the edge of a cataclysmic choice between two irreconcilable futures. Behind it lies the warm comfort of the status quo: an industrial-age machine that perfected processes, standardized solutions, and found success in the Cold War and Operation Desert Storm but that guarantees strategic irrelevance in a software-defined age. Before it lies the chaotic, ambiguous, and necessary crucible of continuous adaptation to stand ready for a protracted war across contested domains—a future that the MDTFs have offered a glimpse into.

Therefore, to dismantle the initiatives that have defined the MDTFs—whether by burying them in bureaucracy, forcing them into legacy models, preserving them for a crisis they cannot influence, or silencing the lessons they have provided—is to make a deliberate choice. It is a declaration that the hard-won lessons learned alongside allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific over nearly a decade were merely an interesting experiment, not an urgent mandate to enhance the Army's combat relevance. It is to allow the institution to be lured back by the siren song of bureaucratic process, even as the drums of a future potential war grow louder.

Yet, there is an opportunity to seize this moment and institutionalize the transformation that began with the MDTF. The ongoing initiatives to develop a [theater-level multidomain command](#) along with the transformation of legacy Army formations represent a chance to both scale these concepts and forge the lessons learned from forward experimentation into the Army's evolving structure and culture. This creates a clear decision point: Was the MDTF merely a successful prototype to be discarded, or is it a blueprint for the Army's future force design? This is not a choice about force structure, it is a choice between institutional comfort and operational necessity—a decision that will determine whether the Army accepts leaving the [joint force](#) and multinational partners with a critical capability gap at its greatest moment of need.



Operational Art on Islands: Division Battle Management in the Pacific

Michael Carvelli

It is 2027. China has spent three years repositioning forces under cover of maritime exercises and coast guard operations. In October, Beijing declares an expanded air defense identification zone covering the Luzon Strait, the Senkakus, and the waters between Taiwan and the Philippine archipelago. Chinese forces occupy three undefended features within seventy-two hours, positioning air defense and antiship missile systems on each. Electronic warfare nodes begin jamming GPS and communications across the contested zone. The positioning is not an invasion. It is a new status quo, enforced by systems already in place before the United States can respond.

The US response is fundamentally a combined effort. Japan maintains forces in the Senkaku area and expects US support. The Philippines operates in the Luzon Strait region and depends on US capability. Taiwan faces the immediate threat in the central sector and requires assurance of US commitment. The Army commits three divisions to support the operation across separated sectors to provide ground-based long-range fires, forward intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance positioning, and base defense for the airfields and ports the joint campaign requires.

Sector distances exceed real-time coordination. Enemy cyber and electronic warfare force coordination into periodic windows of two to six hours. Division commanders make decisions on reconnaissance, fires, and sustainment independently.

The 2026 [National Defense Strategy](#) prioritizes deterring China in the Indo-Pacific and directs a strong denial defense along the first island chain. Assuming the Army has a role in that effort, what does it mean for Army divisions, the service's newly designated chief warfighting formations? The question of how Army divisions should execute battle management [across the dispersed maritime geography](#) of the first island chain is an unresolved one.

The vignette above is imagined. But it is based on current Chinese activities—military exercises, coast guard operations, maritime coercion, and pressure against Taiwan and the Philippines. And it highlights the consequences of letting the question remain unresolved.

Division commanders in separated sectors execute [battle management](#) independently. They synchronize reconnaissance, fires, maneuver, and sustainment within their own sectors. They make decisions when brigades commit to contact and enemy tempo compresses decision windows. This is the operational

reality. Army doctrine accounts for decentralized execution and degraded communications, but provides limited detail for division battle management across widely separated littoral sectors. Geography and enemy capability forbid it.

Army Divisions in the World War II Pacific Theater

Pacific island campaigns in World War II provide historical examples of dispersed operations, restrictive terrain, contested sustainment, and Army [dependence on joint air and naval support](#). US [planners repeatedly underestimated](#) resistance in the western Pacific. On Peleliu, Major General William Rupertus expected a four-day fight, but decisive control took sixteen days and Japanese resistance continued for months. Aerial photography identified large enemy positions but missed small, lethal infantry embedded in terrain. In New Guinea, jungle terrain [fragmented](#) the deployment of large formations and made company- and platoon-sized actions the norm. Jungle obscures enemy activity: Close vegetation, deep jungle, and broken terrain limited visibility and made enemy locations difficult to determine. These visibility constraints persist today. Terrain fragments formations, and small positions defeat formation-level firepower.

On Guadalcanal, ground success required naval movement, naval fire, air support, and supply-line interdiction. Ground forces depended heavily on air and naval support to maintain essential logistical support and interdict Japanese reinforcement. Airpower helped protect the lodgment, interdict Japanese reinforcement, and support ground forces. Ground forces risked culmination when essential logistical support could not be maintained. These lessons were discovered under fire.

Basing determined what divisions could accomplish. [Henderson Field](#) became the center of an Allied lodgment whose survival depended on sustained air, naval, and logistical support. A division's operational reach extended only as far as logistics [could sustain](#). Japanese attacks on Allied sea lines repeatedly threatened the ability to sustain the Guadalcanal lodgment. The campaign demonstrates how loss of logistical endurance can drive a land force toward culmination. Continued air and naval support preserved essential logistical support while interdicting Japanese efforts to reinforce and sustain their forces. During the Pacific campaigns, commanders also learned to understand their sectors independently and sustain operations.

Much has changed since World War II. Enemy fires capabilities have advanced at a pace that has accelerated dramatically and

Chinese positioning operations have grown much more sophisticated than what the US Army faced more than eighty years ago. But operational art has remained constant. A division commander in 2027 operating in the Senkaku area will face a much more capable adversary but also the same constraints that divisions faced on Guadalcanal: Basing determines where operations can be sustained, operational reach determines what joint forces can accomplish, and culmination arrives when a critical system fails. Divisions cannot hold terrain without naval forces protecting supply. Divisions cannot sustain operations without air support. A division will reach culmination when logistics break or when protection architecture collapses.

Why Independent Divisions are Necessary

The division is the Army's primary battle-management formation in large-scale combat operations. When these operations are conducted across connected terrain, the division synchronizes reconnaissance, fires, maneuver, and sustainment spanning multiple brigades fighting simultaneously over extended depth and duration. The division integrates these functions through continuous planning, fires allocation, protection priorities, and operational sequencing while brigade commanders retain initiative within division-directed bounds. By managing commitment, support, transition, and reconstitution across subordinate formations, the division prevents brigade culmination. This does not change when the terrain is noncontiguous or when communications are degraded. Rather, it becomes harder and more critical.

The Pacific requires the same battle-management functions across noncontiguous sectors. Distance and enemy electronic warfare [can disrupt](#) continuous coordination between widely separated division sectors. Division commanders should establish their operational limits—how far they can reach, how long they can sustain operations, when they will reach culmination—before deployment. Adjusting these limits under fire means discovering them when brigades have already committed.

In the imagined vignette that opened this article, each division receives delegated authority over reconnaissance, fires, and sustainment within its assigned sector. Geographic dispersion and degraded communications [increase the need](#) for delegated authority and decentralized execution within commander's intent. But Pacific operations require divisions to master intradivisional battle management across their sectors. Brigades sustain combat [through division-level integration](#) of reconnaissance, fires, and sustainment. Divisions should establish delegated authorities, decision protocols, and commander's intent before communications degrade. Those unprepared will lose operational coherence.

Operational Art in the Pacific

A division operating in a Pacific island sector is constrained by three [elements of operational art](#): basing, operational reach, and culmination. Each element determines what a division can and cannot do. Division commanders who understand these constraints before deployment will sustain operations long enough for joint forces to act.

First, basing shapes where a division can position forces, generate combat power, and extend operational reach in support of the maritime campaign. A division sustains operations from positions that are protected and defensible. It supplies forward brigades through logistics bases, maintenance areas, casualty collection points, and protected command posts. In the Pacific, distance, access, austere infrastructure, and contested distribution [constrain](#) basing and sustainment options. Scarce and austere infrastructure constrains where sustainment nodes can operate and how much combat power they can support. A division that positions sensors near secure supply lines sustains them through enemy pressure. A division that extends sensors forward accepts reduced visibility in exchange for better sensor positioning. Weighing sensor positioning against basing capacity is important because the sensors' ability to enable joint operations depends on sustaining those positions under fire.

Next, operational reach is the distance and duration across which a force can successfully employ military capabilities. Maritime sustainment introduces distance, access, distribution, protection, and infrastructure constraints that affect operational endurance and reach. Restrictive island and jungle terrain can limit terrestrial observation and complicate reconnaissance. Fires from land positions have limited range across water. A brigade positioned three days of water movement away from supply bases reaches culmination faster than a brigade two hours away by road. Operational reach establishes the distance and duration across which a division can employ capabilities in support of joint operations. Forward Army sensors can extend joint sensing and targeting networks in support of air and maritime operations. Army land-based fires can support maritime operations by extending joint force depth and imposing additional threats on enemy maritime forces. If division operational reach is limited by basing constraints, a division cannot feed joint forces with the intelligence and fires support they need to shape maritime operations.

Finally, a division approaches culmination as declining endurance and operational reach reduce its ability to continue operations. A division may plan for thirty days of supply, but indicators of declining endurance can appear well before stocks reach zero. Casualty evacuation capacity fills over time, not instantly. Air defense and communications degrade under pressure but retain function until they fail completely. A division commander and his staff should identify indicators of declining endurance before the force reaches culmination and loses

freedom of action. Waiting until culmination arrives leaves limited options.

Dispersed Battle Management

A division executing battle management in separated island sectors should organize around the three elements: basing, operational reach, and culmination. Task organization decisions ripple across basing options. Moving an engineer company from one brigade to another changes logistics demand, maintenance coverage, and protection requirements. A division staff should calculate basing implications before approving task organization. A brigade positioned on an island with limited basing can absorb fewer attachments than a brigade positioned near established logistics infrastructure. Division commanders and their staffs should understand which task organization options basing can support.

Division staffs should synchronize reconnaissance, fires, maneuver, and sustainment across positions separated by water. Under these conditions, reconnaissance reaches less distance and fires have limited range. Maneuver takes days, not hours. In the vignette that opened this article, planners assume that some inter-island reinforcement requires five to seven days. Maritime sustainment faces long distances, contested distribution, limited infrastructure, and vulnerable nodes and routes. Divisions must communicate these constraints to brigade commanders so they understand that commitment to contact is commitment to sustained operations without quick relief or resupply.

Protection architecture should be independent by sector. Command posts, air defense systems, supply nodes, and casualty collection points cannot assume mutual support from sister divisions. Each division sector protects its own critical systems. Command posts [require](#) dispersion, redundancy, mobility, and reduced signatures to survive sustained large-scale combat operations. Each division sector requires an air defense plan that protects prioritized critical assets and accounts for the support available from Army and joint air defense forces. Sustainment routes and nodes should be incorporated into a division's protection plan based on threat, vulnerability, and operational priority. A division that establishes independent protection architecture before crisis onset will sustain operations. A division that assumes mutual support will discover that assumption was wrong under enemy pressure.

Recommendations

Divisions preparing for Pacific operations should produce three specific planning outputs before deployment. Each output shapes how division and brigade commanders make commitment

decisions. Divisions with these outputs will understand their operational constraints, while those without them will discover their limits under enemy fire.

First, divisions need to produce a basing matrix before deployment. Map suitable locations within the sector. Calculate logistics capacity at each location. Calculate brigade sustainability per location. Determine what happens when primary basing is damaged. Show brigade commanders where their operations can be sustained and for how long. Divisions arriving with this matrix should be able to decide faster on positioning.

Second, divisions need to understand their operational reach before committing brigades. Planners should calculate how far reconnaissance can see, how many days resupply takes, how long casualty evacuation requires, and how far fires can reach from division positions. Equally importantly, these limits should be communicated to brigade commanders so they understand what support is and is not available. A brigade commander who knows resupply takes five days will plan differently than one who assumes one day. Division commanders who communicate operational reach constraints to brigades prevent commitments that lead to early culmination.

Third, divisions need to identify the critical system that will fail first and communicate that timeline to brigade commanders. Staffs should calculate how many days of supply forward brigades carry, casualty evacuation capacity compared to expected casualty rates, air defense capacity against expected air threat, and command post redundancy under electromagnetic attack. They should identify which system reaches its limit first. And they should communicate this culmination timeline to brigades so they understand how long they can sustain contact. If leaders know a division will reach culmination on day thirty unless resupply arrives, they can plan the entire operation around that constraint. Ignoring this timeline leaves the division to discover it has no options left when culmination arrives.

In the Pacific Theater of World War II, divisions learned the hard operational truths that constrained their operations. In a Pacific theater in a 2027 war, divisions would face an adversary with entirely more sophisticated capabilities than those fielded by the Japanese eight decades ago. The 2027 war would be characterized by technologies barely imaginable during World War II, and the character of the two wars would be radically different. But the hard operational truths and their consequent constraints will remain. Divisions cannot wait for those truths to impose themselves and their constraints to be revealed. The work must start now.



The Jazz Band of Mars: What if the Army's Shift to Division-Centric Warfighting is Wrong?

Robert Rose and Matthew Revels

"You musicians of Mars must not wait for the band leader to signal you. . . . You must each of your own volition see to it that you come into this concert at the proper place and at the proper time."

You may have seen a version of [this quote](#) from General George S. Patton before, potentially in a 2022 article publicizing the [enshrinement](#) of multidomain operations as the Army's current operational concept. But if you saw it there, you did not see the whole quote. The authors omitted Patton's guidance to "not wait for the band leader to signal you" and to act "of your own volition." The article paired the abbreviated quote with a drawing of Patton as a conductor, baton raised, personally orchestrating multidomain capabilities. In doing so, they mischaracterized Patton's meaning. He described a jazz band improvising with initiative. They implied an orchestra synchronizing to a commander's direction.

By portraying commanders as battlefield conductors, the article echoed the French interwar doctrine of *la bataille conduit*, which, while often translated as "methodical battle," literally means "conducted battle." The French Army believed it had developed and validated a doctrine that met the changing character of war. It viewed war as increasingly lethal and artillery as central to that lethality; however, its doctrine was ill-suited to its strategic context, just as the US Army's [multidomain operations doctrine is ill-suited](#) to its current context.

The Army needs to be optimized to meet the threats against which it would have the least amount of time to adapt, which means a Chinese [joint island landing campaign](#). To meet that threat, the Army needs decentralized, flexible forces that can counter Chinese strategic surprise, deny Beijing a fait accompli, and regain the initiative.

Conducting Convergence

Instead, in its efforts to transform for [multidomain operations](#), the Army has moved toward a centralized orchestra. To align its force design for multidomain operations, the Army announced a [new plan](#) intended to optimize the service around the requirements the future (specifically, 2030) would impose on it. [Senior leaders argued](#) that while in Iraq and Afghanistan the brigade combat team was the Army's primary tactical formation, in the future divisions would serve as the primary

tactical formation. The Army 2030 plan, they claimed, recognized that only divisions could effectively synchronize maneuver with effects on the modern battlefield. Moreover, they wrote that "delivering the enabling capabilities to the division level allows these commanders to allocate the weight of the main effort and shift quickly to support brigade combat team commanders in the close fight."

Behind the assertion of the authority of divisions and corps is a tacit belief that modern commanders must conduct the battlefield—synchronizing dispersed forces through centralized control of intelligence, fires, and decision-making. This belief rests on a critical assumption: that headquarters at echelons above brigade are best positioned to handle the complexity of a future battlefield. However, the Army's evidence for this assumption largely comes from corps and division-level Warfighter exercises, which are simulations with little grounding in the fog and friction of war.

Freeing Brigades?

With a hint of doublespeak, [Army 2030 portrayed](#) the centralization of assets as liberating for subordinate units: "These commanders are therefore freed to concentrate on maneuvering their forces, offloading the more complex allocation and coordination challenges to division commanders." In exchange for this supposed freedom, brigades sacrifice the ability to rapidly integrate fires, conduct independent reconnaissance, and employ engineering assets without an additional layer of coordination and oversight.

Of course, divisions could provide such assets to a brigade, and [a recent article](#) argued that the Army's main problem in meeting Army 2030 is that it needs to educate staff officers to task organize better. But staff work cannot replace cohesion. During Warfighter exercises, staffs move units like interchangeable parts. In real life, to effectively fight, units need to train together. They need to develop techniques, standard operating procedures, and mental models that act as lubricants amid the friction of war. The Army already impedes such developments by [constantly moving personnel](#). Army 2030 will further undermine the cohesion necessary for disciplined initiative.

[During World War II](#), General Lesley McNair believed that capabilities could be pooled at higher echelons and efficiently

moved between units as required. In practice, units formed enduring relationships because [cohesion proved essential](#) in combat. Divisions created persistent combat teams of infantry, artillery, engineers, and tanks. The [triangular infantry division](#), validated in World War II and Korea, provided a 105-millimeter artillery battalion in direct support of each infantry regiment and retained a 155-millimeter artillery battalion for general support. In combat, the Army learned these enduring relationships mattered.

In previous wars, the Army also recognized that adding layers to processes slows them. Every minute matters in a fight. [During World War I](#), the US Army initially adopted the French doctrine of centralizing artillery, but during the more mobile fighting of the Hundred Days Offensive, General John Pershing decentralized his artillery after recognizing that fires needed to be responsive to the needs of the infantry.

Recently, one of this article's authors observed a division-level National Training Center rotation during which artillery was centralized, resulting in fire missions averaging over thirty minutes and illustrating how additional layers slow responsiveness. During that event, it took three hours to approve a scatterable minefield. The division headquarters approving the minefield would have been long overrun if the opposing force had not been administratively halted. Despite all the dreams of digitalization, in the real world, even without the threat of electronic warfare and cyberattacks, communication breaks down.

Think Deep

In "[freeing](#)" brigades from thinking about the deep fight, Army 2030 sacrifices an essential element of modern warfare. All units need to think in depth to shape the battlespace for their subordinates. [Army 2030](#) artificially separates deep and close fights, assigning depth exclusively to higher echelons. However, the Army should not view deep fights as a function of echelon, but by capability to shape the battlefield. Every echelon that can conduct reconnaissance and fires, whether with HIMARS (high-mobility artillery rocket system) or 60-millimeter mortars, should shape the fight for its subordinate units. On the modern battlefield, as each echelon fields unmanned systems with differing capabilities, the Army needs a framework that understands how brigades, battalions, companies, and even platoons shape the battlefield.

The Ukrainian armed forces blunted Russia's aggression by primarily fighting at the brigade level. In the authors' discussions with Ukrainian officers, they reported that artillery batteries were often assigned in direct support of infantry battalions to ensure fires within three minutes. Ukraine's Kropyvva system—which has been described as "[Uber for artillery](#)"—links observers directly to firing units, enabling fires within minutes.

Ukraine did not even formalize an echelon above the brigade level [until 2025](#). Even now, Ukrainian corps centralize select, scarce assets, such as 155-millimeter artillery, HIMARS, or the fixed-wing Hornet unmanned system. Corps fight 100–150 kilometers deep, but brigades still fight out to thirty kilometers. Brigades retain artillery battalions with 152-millimeter artillery, 122-millimeter rockets, and 105-millimeter artillery. They regularly have an unmanned systems battalion, an engineering battalion, an air defense artillery battalion, and an electronic warfare company. Ukrainian leaders understand that decentralized capabilities provide the responsiveness required to defeat Russian infiltration attempts and rapidly counterattack to prevent Russia from solidifying gains. Recognizing how Ukraine fights makes [any argument](#) that Army 2030 and its centralization of capabilities in divisions reflect the "changing character of warfare" a curious one.

The Army does indeed need to base force design on a forecast of the future character of warfare, but that forecast cannot [myopically focus on technology](#). Instead, it must design units to prevail against its most dangerous adversary in the first days of a conflict. It needs to forecast the character of the fight based on its strategic context. When armies do not optimize units for their strategic context, they risk disaster.

Army 2030 or Armée 1930?

"To allow front-line leaders to concentrate on the close fight, division and corps commanders will have the responsibility and capability to visualize the larger picture."

— [Army of 2030](#)

"The systemic allocation of all artillery to subordinate elements must be avoided; it constitutes an abdication of command."

— [Règlement de manœuvre de l'artillerie, 1926](#)

The logic of methodical battle and Army 2030 echoes. They both deemed that due to the increasing lethality of the battlefield, senior leaders had a responsibility to ensure the efficient allocation of fires. Just like the US Army today, the French Army believed that the answer for increased battlefield complexity was centralization. The resource allocation and the synchronization of fires with maneuver could only be carried out by higher-echelon commanders. [Confident in its analysis](#) of World War I, the Spanish Civil War, and wargames, the French Army believed fires would dominate the battlefield and dictate movement. Advancing was only possible if French forces achieved a much greater concentration of fire than the enemy.

Methodical battle rested on two interdependent assumptions: first, that the French could mass matériel, men, and equipment at the chosen decisive points, and second, that they could

control the tempo of operations. Ultimately, the [Germans exposed](#) the fallacy of both assumptions, causing a systemic breakdown in the centralized French Army, which, due to slow decision-making and a lack of unit cohesion, could not reestablish a coherent defense or mount an effective counterattack to seal Germany's breakthrough.

Today, [division leadership learns in Warfighter exercises](#) that movement supports fires. Operations revolve around a targeting process that attempts to scientifically allocate assets ninety-six hours in the future. Through this process, divisions methodically apply combat power against multiple decisive points. It's a system to efficiently synchronize a symphony of multidomain capabilities. But what happens when enemy forces do not play their designated role? What if they do not wait to be converged on?

The French faced an army that did not follow their tune. Instead of trying to methodically synchronize on decisive points, the [Germans selected a single Schwerpunkt](#)—an easily communicated geographic area—to weight their effort against. Each level broadly determined a Schwerpunkt in terms of width and length to provide maximum flexibility for subordinates operating under a shared vision.

To an American military attaché [observing interwar German maneuvers](#), it seemed like chaos. The Germans did not adhere to timetables or worry about maintaining a continuous front: “At first the impression was given that these irregularities . . . were due to errors in carrying out the intentions and orders of superiors. But later it was proved to be done by intent.”

In turn, a German [observer of French maneuvers](#) wrote that the French placed “twice as much importance” on synchronizing combined arms as the Germans. He noted their slowness as higher headquarters controlled successive operations. The French Army tried to scientifically manage units, putting [scant emphasis on cohesion](#). Germany [prioritized unit cohesion](#), which provided the shared understanding necessary to operate with minimal guidance.

When Germany attacked in May 1940, it exploited the fluid battlefield created by French forces rushing to establish defensive positions in the Low Countries. Following the principle of Schwerpunkt, Germany aimed its breakthrough along the Meuse River at Sedan. German units did not wait for higher echelons to set conditions for a river crossing. Small units rapidly crossed the river and continued pushing deep into French lines. Not prepared for such a fluid fight, [French fires were not responsive](#). Suffering a communication breakdown and fearing being overrun, the [divisional artillery at Sedan displaced](#) early and contributed little to the defense. Once the Germans broke through, French units attempted to reestablish a defense, but they arrived piecemeal. They could not effectively fight in such a context.

Surprisingly, French generals accurately forecast their strategic context, even [predicting Germany's likely breakthrough](#) point in 1936. They debated the need for “seven mechanized divisions . . . [that] could render most valuable service in the first days of mobilization. They could go to the aid of the Belgian army . . . exposed on its southern flank in the Ardennes.” Due to bureaucratic inertia from siloing of strategic thought, doctrine, and force design, they aligned their forces to meet a vague, [technological “character of war”](#) rather than their specific strategic context.

The Character of War is Context Dependent

In certain contexts, armies should centralize their capabilities to achieve efficiencies and concentrate combat power. But careful synchronization only works when an army can dictate the tempo of a fight. While the methodical approach failed catastrophically for France, later Allied commanders succeeded with similar approaches. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery applied careful [synchronization at El Alamein](#) to defeat the Afrika Korps. Similarly, General Dwight Eisenhower pursued a methodical, [“broad front” strategy](#) to minimize vulnerabilities against Germany. Even then, just like the Ukrainians today, the Allies did not centralize all assets at the division level and above.

After 1943, the Allies controlled the tempo of the fight. They could focus on synchronizing overwhelming combat power against the Axis. In a future fight against the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the US Army would not have such a luxury.

The PLA can decide where and when to fight, and might dictate the tempo of operations. Xi Jinping has waged a decade-long campaign against the [“Five Incapables”](#) to ensure that the PLA can fight with flexibility and [initiative](#). As part of those reforms, while the US Army has been centralizing assets, the PLA has decentralized its forces and [made brigades its primary tactical echelon](#). Organized with organic reconnaissance, artillery, rocket, electronic warfare, air defense, and engineer capabilities, a recent [US Army Transformation and Training Command report](#) highlighted that a PLA combined arms brigade would “challenge [a US Army brigade's] intelligence, fires, and protection warfighting functions.” Meanwhile, the PLA's [system destruction warfare](#) would aim to isolate US Army brigades from their higher headquarters. The PLA has optimized to fight against a centralized, slow enemy.

The National Defense Strategy calls for the military to “build, posture, and sustain a strong denial defense along the [first island chain].” The Army needs to [understand its role in deterrence by denial](#), which requires forward-positioned forces to prevent an initial fait accompli. Army forces in the first island chain cannot wait for convergence from divisions and

corps. They need to be ready in the opening moments of a war to rapidly regain the initiative from a PLA joint island landing campaign. To do so, they need to be structured to fight decentralized.

While the US Army requires a decentralized force structure to deny an initial Chinese fait accompli, it may later have to centralize assets if China solidifies its position. After the initial period of every modern, major, prolonged war, a static battlefield emerges due to armies shoring up vulnerabilities that can be exploited by surprise and tempo. To address such contexts, Soviet interwar theorists recommended [centralized capabilities](#) to [create a breakthrough](#). During World War I, the Germans [consolidated artillery](#) to create conditions for achieving [initial breakthroughs](#) at Riga, at Caporetto, and during the 2018 spring offensives, but then rapidly returned

those assets to directly support advancing infantry battalions to maintain tempo.

Patton understood that war could shift between mobile and static conditions, but he prioritized preparing for a fluid battlefield. When a war becomes static and requires centralization to achieve a breakthrough, armies have time to reorganize forces. They lack such time in a faster-paced fight. Therefore, when planning, [Patton insisted](#) that “the situation must be considered mobile, since a mobile situation would be the most difficult. Anything which would work in a mobile situation without further refinement would work in a static one, while the reverse was not necessarily true.” It is easier to synchronize a jazz band than to command an orchestra to improvise.



Sustaining an Indo-Pacific Fight: The Contested Logistics Triad

Ronald Ti

It's an uncomfortable truth that we can't know precisely what the next war will look like. But it is equally true that defense planners, military practitioners, and strategists have a professional obligation to do their best to forecast the character of a future conflict in order to guide the way we prepare for it. The place to start is with what we know to be true and the evidence-backed assumptions we have the most confidence in. We can be all but certain, for instance, that a conflict in the Indo-Pacific region would be characterized by contested logistics.

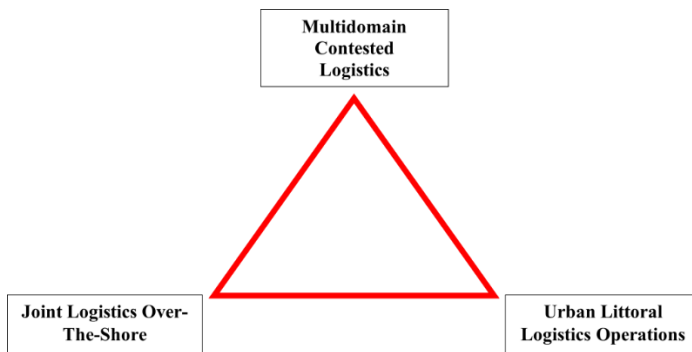
Unfortunately, in the ongoing public discussion on contested logistics in the Indo-Pacific region, two topics have gotten far less attention than they warrant. First, despite the Indo-Pacific being one of the most [heavily urbanized regions in the world](#), with most of these urban spaces situated in [the littoral zone](#), fewer commentaries focus on the problem presented by combat operations in the most likely ultimate battleground, that of Indo-Pacific urban littoral battlespaces. Second, even fewer commentaries emphasize the necessity for JLOTS (joint logistics over-the shore) operations—in short, [a way to](#) “enter a land area from sea despite insufficient port infrastructure”—in sustaining an Indo-Pacific fight. This is puzzling, especially when operational planners employing a worst-case-scenario paradigm must assume that a conveniently located port is either degraded or totally nonfunctional, in which case JLOTS operations are effectively the only viable sustainment alternative. Perhaps part of the problem is that most—[but by no means all](#)—commentators perceive operations in the Indo-Pacific region primarily as a maritime and air domain fight.

In recent years, despite the Pentagon's [public acknowledgement](#) that China is the United States' pacing threat, US defense publications have featured little commentary recognizing contested multidomain logistics, JLOTS, and urban littorals as critical elements of Indo-Pacific logistics—with [a few important but rare exceptions](#). The same is true in my country, where despite the [2023 Defence Strategic Review](#) specifically directing the Australian Army to focus on amphibious operations in the littoral environment to the archipelagic north of Australia, there has also been a lack of commentary that considers all three relevant elements, particularly urban littorals—though also with [notable exceptions](#).

If we're serious about being ready to fight in the Indo-Pacific, then we need a conceptual framework to understand contested logistics in that region. And it is imperative that it accounts for such a conflict's multidomain character, emphasizes the importance of JLOTS, and acknowledges the challenges of operating in the region's urban littoral environments. Taken together, these three elements form what I have conceived as the contested logistics triad, which should take its place as the conceptual framework we currently lack.

I have yet to see these key elements represented in this way elsewhere in either Australian or US operational commentaries. My intention is for nonspecialist US and Australian readers—those without professional logistics experience—to be able to grasp the true dimensions of the problem of multidomain Indo-Pacific sustainment at a glance by understanding this contested logistics triad. Effective

sustainment in the Indo-Pacific area of operations must consider all three elements, particularly the two that have received less attention to date: JLOTS and the demands of complex urban littoral battlespaces. The latter element extends to logistics all of the [demands, challenges and requirements](#) that urban littoral combat operations entail. The Indo-Pacific urban littoral is the malevolent presence waiting for US and allied forces at the end of the long, contested logistics supply line and past the JLOTS operation in a deadly littoral zone—a truly nasty ending to a long series of sustainment challenges these forces will face.



Multidomain Contested Logistics

The first element in the contested logistics triad is multidomain logistics itself. This describes logistics being contested across the [five operational domains](#) of land, maritime, air, space, and cyberspace. Much has been written in recent years on conducting logistics operations in these domains and the challenges to those operations. Too often these perspectives are siloed, however, often reflecting service bias and single-domain emphasis. Thus, articles written by army officers will focus, quite reasonably, on the land domain, while another on logistics by a naval officer will often display a corresponding [maritime domain](#) emphasis. The presence of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) and its much vaunted (but thus far unproven) [antiaccess, area-denial zone](#) has become a recurring theme when discussing contested maritime Indo-Pacific logistics. To discuss each domain element in [contested logistics](#) is outside the scope of this article. However, no appreciation of contested logistics is complete without considering all domains—whether cross-domain kinetic fires, cyber threats to key sustainment software, or disruption of space-based positioning, navigation, and timing systems. Nor can asymmetric action be ignored, like the prospect of potential phase-zero actions by up to two thousand [Chinese distant-water fishing vessels](#), or by vessels of the [Peoples' Armed Forces Maritime Militia \(PAFMM\)](#), both of which are not readily identifiable as potential combatants.

Joint Logistics Over The Shore

Multidomain contested logistics is only the first substantial issue facing American, Australian, and allied force elements deploying by sea into the archipelagic zone of the [first island chain](#). Once any force has reached its ultimate land destination the critical issue of sustainment from sea to shore then arises. This leads to the second element of the contested logistics triad: the JLOTS requirement.

Prudent military planners need to plan according to worst-case and not best-case scenarios. In the context of Indo-Pacific, it must therefore be assumed that viable port facilities will be degraded or nonexistent. Given this operational assumption, it follows that the only effective alternative for seaward replenishment of land operations must be provided through JLOTS sustainment operations. The US Department of Defense [publicly defines these as](#) “operations in which Navy and Army logistics over-the-shore forces conduct logistics over-the-shore operations together under a joint force commander. Logistics over-the-shore operations, in turn, [are defined as](#) “the loading and unloading of ships without the benefit of deep draft-capable, fixed port facilities; or as a means of moving forces closer to tactical assembly areas.”

Unfortunately, the current state of US JLOTS is not optimal, with a [recent report](#) from the DoD Office of the Inspector General on the conduct of JLOTS in Gaza humanitarian operation making for disturbing reading. This report highlighted a [number of critical deficiencies](#), including the nonavailability of secure communications between US Navy and US Army JLOTS elements, structural incompatibility of platforms (with respective single-service pier assets at significantly different heights, resulting in substantial pier section damage), and even the failure by operational planners to factor in critical (and fundamental) amphibious planning parameters such as tide times and sea states. The other critical issue of JLOTS is the relative vulnerability of the logistics structures to adversary action, with both pier structures and [sea-to-shore connectors](#) generally unarmored and unarmed. In a future Indo-Pacific fight, JLOTS will very likely be required, considering the operational planning assumption that the existence and ongoing viability of a convenient port cannot be guaranteed. Given its current state in the US military, JLOTS represents a distinct [critical vulnerability](#).

Urban Littoral Battlespaces: The Nasty Ending

To reiterate, not only is the Indo-Pacific one of the most [heavily urbanized regions in the world](#), but the majority of these urban spaces are located within the littoral zone. Urban combat imposes a number of specific constraints on operational planners. Urban operations are conducted in a highly challenging battlespace, but also require specific demands in terms of everything from resourcing and force

ratios to logistics. The attritive nature of urban warfare further adds to the logistics burden. Urban littoral combat has been described by Australian operational commentators as the “[worst of both worlds](#),” combining the challenges of urban and amphibious operations. In an Indo-Pacific conflict scenario, it is conceivable that Chinese forces would secure a major Indo-Pacific urban littoral center well before the arrival of theatre US or allied forces and then reinforce and fortify it against any counteroffensive. The capital of Taiwan is a prime example of such an urban littoral battlespace. This scenario would be totally consistent with the established Chinese military philosophy of “[active defense](#).” Any fight occurring ultimately in an urban littoral battlespace is truly a potentially nasty ending, especially if the full spectrum of threats are directed toward US and allied logistics lines of communications. If JLOTS will be required, it will be carried out in a highly targeted, littoral battlespace. Moreover, the volume of supply needs to be robust enough to support attritive, drawn-out urban operations. This will be especially true if, as [Professor Anthony King has described](#), a series of grueling micro-sieges with greatly increased logistics demands and operational duration is anticipated.

Why the Triad Matters

Not all the elements of the contested logistics triad may be present at every stage of every future Indo-Pacific operation. It may well be, say, that in a future scenario a functioning port will be available. Or it could be that the ultimate assault will be in a nonurban setting more reminiscent of the sands of Iwo Jima than the gates of an Indo-Pacific Stalingrad. Nevertheless, military planners must assume worst-case scenarios. The contested logistics triad and its elements extend its effects throughout the Indo-Pacific battlespace and before its risks can be mitigated, they must first be recognized. A major issue in understanding the challenges of Indo-Pacific sustainment is in understanding a complex logistics problem.

Although each element of the triad is often individually discussed, we need a conceptual framework that links the three, depicts their effects in relation to one another, and, in particular, highlights the need to conduct JLOTS in support of high-intensity, protracted, urban littoral combat operations. By representing multidomain contested logistics together with JLOTS and urban littoral battlespaces as the contested logistics triad, we have a construct that may be more easily recognized by operational planners, not just logisticians. Recognition must precede planning: We must first recognize something before we can plan for it.

Further, the logistics challenges at play in the Indo-Pacific are more than the sum of the challenges related to each of the three elements. The contested logistics triad should be recognized as a discrete entity with elements that compound each other. Even if we were comfortable with multidomain

contested logistics, even if we were good at JLOTS, and even if we were prepared for the intense combat required in complex urban littoral spaces, that isn’t enough. There is an interactive and amplifying relationship between the challenges associated with each element and we cannot meet the challenge if we, collectively—across services and among allies—lack a holistic approach.

For two decades, our expeditionary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan were sustained by a logistics enterprise that was essentially uncontested. Cargo sent by ship wasn’t at risk of being sunk to the bottom of the ocean and was certainly not at risk of any cyber interdiction. Supplies sent by air flew over enemy forces with little means of shooting down aircraft. Even on the comparatively dangerous roads, where supply convoys could be ambushed or targeted by roadside bombs, successful enemy attacks were infrequent enough that the cumulative effect did little to dent combat forces’ time-tested assumption that there would always be plenty of whatever was needed to sustain their operations.

We became accustomed over a generation to dining facilities that never ran out of energy drinks and protein shakes. Creature comforts became the norm. Maneuver units need to prepare for a future where [supplies of water are more important](#) than WiFi connections to call home, where supply chain interdictions could mean dwindling ammunition stocks and equipment sidelined by an inability to deliver spare parts. The contested logistics triad, in reflecting three elements that will challenge our ability to sustain forces and operations and acknowledging their compounding effects, is an important mechanism for operational planners and tactical commanders to think about the operational realities they will face.

In closing, consider the following situation. It is 2027. Taipei has fallen. People’s Liberation Army troops are in occupation and have had weeks to prepare an urban defense at multiple levels, at sea, in the air, on land and in the underground. [A cyberattack](#) has severely impaired all cabotage on both US coasts, resulting in commercial shipping being disrupted for weeks. A series of mysterious, unattributable accidents have closed the Port of Houston with its long sea lanes and severely reduced flow from the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach in southern California and, across the country, the Port of New York and New Jersey. In addition, major Chinese commercial shipping firms like [COSCO](#) have been struck by widespread delays that, for reasons unknown, have only affected shipments to and from the United States. Supermarket shelves in America are starting to empty rapidly and US public opinion is turning against any action to reverse the status quo in Taiwan. A recent UN resolution, [backed by virtually every African and South American country](#), has strongly supported China’s reestablishment of sovereignty Taiwan. Given all these events, US military planners are now confronted with planning a long maritime move, the need for a highly risky

JLOTS operation well within China's antiaccess, area-denial zone (since Taiwan's major ports have been essentially destroyed by the Chinese), and the prospect of an intense urban littoral fight at the destination.

This is the contested logistics triad at its worst. Acknowledging and preparing for it, then, becomes a matter of deterrence. And if deterrence breaks down, it will prove essential to sustain the fight that follows.



Sustaining at the Edge: Army Reserve Integration in the Indo-Pacific

Joshua Koncar

Eisenhower [was right](#)—wars are won or lost on logistics. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the Indo-Pacific, where America's long-standing military advantage could evaporate from a failure to sustain the force. The theater's staggering distances, its complex logistics, and the growing threat of China's military modernization demand a forward-postured combat capability ready to defend American interests and guarantee a free and open Indo-Pacific. Sustaining a joint force in this region poses an unparalleled strategic challenge, and the urgency has never been greater.

In April, [Admiral Sam Paparo](#), commander of Indo-Pacific Command, highlighted the pressing need to address the escalating threat posed by China's aggressive military modernization and assertive behavior. He emphasized that Beijing's provocative maneuvers around Taiwan are not mere exercises but “dress rehearsals for forced unification.” This assessment aligns with US intelligence, indicating that Xi Jinping has ordered the People's Liberation Army to be ready to invade [Taiwan by 2027](#), and Beijing drove the point home when it [began its largest wargames yet](#) around the island just days ago.

The joint force has no alternative: It must be prepared for large-scale combat operations in a contested environment encompassing nearly half of the Earth's surface—and projecting and sustaining combat power will be crucial to ensuring this preparedness. Robust, flexible, and resilient sustainment networks are urgently required to deter our enemies and, if necessary, fight and win decisively. And the Army will play an integral role.

The Army's Role in Joint Logistics

The [United States Army](#) provides the foundation for joint sustainment in the Indo-Pacific by setting the theater, including establishing logistics partnerships, beginning or refining host-nation service agreements, and gaining access to critical infrastructure nodes. Sustainment supports the [Army's strategic role](#) of prevailing in large-scale ground combat operations by providing freedom of action, prolonged endurance, and extended operational reach. “The Army's role in theater-wide sustainment cannot be overstated,” [Admiral](#)

[Paparo noted earlier this year](#). “As the Department of Defense's executive agent for much of our logistics enterprise, the Army provides the backbone of our ability to sustain combat power across the region.”

Given this obligation, it's significant that [almost 80 percent of the Army's combat support and combat service support units](#) reside in the reserve components. The 1993 “[Offsite Agreement](#)” created a new division of labor, with the National Guard largely mirroring the Regular Army, and the Army Reserve specializing in combat support and service support at the corps level and above. Considering the magnitude and complexity of potential sustainment demands in the Indo-Pacific, the Army's combat elements cannot fight and win without essential theater support capabilities that are situated almost exclusively in the Army Reserve. Despite this reality, Army Reserve formations remain largely underutilized in the Indo-Pacific. If the Army's logistical backbone sits mainly in the reserve, can the joint force risk operating without it?

Integrating Army Reserve Strategic Enablers and Logistics in the Indo-Pacific

Comprised of 172,000 soldiers delivering more than [56 percent of the Army's](#) sustainment, medical, and distribution capabilities, the [Army Reserve](#) will play a pivotal role in every future contested environment. Nearly ten thousand Army Reserve soldiers are mobilized or deployed to support combatant commands worldwide. However, very few deploy to support the Indo-Pacific Command under [Title 10 mobilization authority](#), leaving critical enabling capabilities on the sidelines. The joint force has an opportunity to mitigate strategic risk by proactively mobilizing tailored Army Reserve sustainment formations west of the international date line. The key to leveraging this opportunity is the creation of a new operational construct: the Army Reserve Strategic Enablers and Logistics (ARSENAL) concept.

The ARSENAL concept offers an innovative, proactive solution to address critical Indo-Pacific sustainment gaps. By mobilizing specialized Army Reserve units under Title 10 authority, ARSENAL would deliver enduring, cost-effective support to joint operations while providing reserve soldiers

meaningful operational experience. This initiative would align strategic priorities with operational demands to keep the joint force agile amid emerging threats. By leveraging the Army Reserve's existing force structure and employing it in the priority theater now, this proposal would help the joint force achieve positional advantages that become clear when considered through the lens of the operational factors of force, space, and time.

Force

Deploying enduring ARSENAL forces would provide critical capabilities that enhance operational effectiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The Army Reserve boasts the most force structure in [key support enablers](#), including quartermaster, transportation, medical, civil affairs, and psychological operations. Unique, low-density ARSENAL formations and equipment can conduct theater-opening operations, distribute ammunition, provide maintenance support, and establish water purification sites. The Army Reserve contains approximately [85 percent](#) of the Army's bulk petroleum capacity and [59 percent](#) of its medical forces, essential capabilities needed at the outset of hostilities.

The ARSENAL concept would also provide invaluable training opportunities, delivering soldiers real-life sets and reps in the priority theater. Although the Army Reserve participates in several exercises in the Indo-Pacific theater, barriers limit full integration. For example, [Title 10 limits](#) service on active duty during Ready Reserve training periods thirty days each year. With travel distances, time zone acclimation, and equipment integration, valuable training days are consumed quickly. With enduring ARSENAL forces in the area of responsibility, risk to force would be significantly reduced.

Additionally, reserve forces can help facilitate Indo-Pacific campaigning activities through joint theater distribution center operations. Anchored by modular [distribution hubs](#), these centers provide essential capabilities like multiclass warehouse storage, central receiving and shipping points, motor transportation, and container management. Army Reserve units like the adaptive and versatile [transportation theater opening elements](#) can conduct command and control, conduct terminal operations, and establish initial distribution networks at joint theater distribution centers to enable force projection.

Employing ARSENAL units would improve logistics networks, provide realistic in-theater training, and increase campaigning activities in the priority theater. Although the [efficient use of force](#) is crucial for maximizing combat effectiveness and sustaining military operations, units must be postured to exploit positional advantages.

Space

US Army Pacific's [theater strategy](#) outlines four key geographic regions that codify joint interior lines of communication: the northern, central, southern, and western approaches. Aligning the requisite logistics capabilities with these four approaches bolsters combat credibility while empowering operational-level commanders to execute a myriad of contingencies.

The proving ground? [Operation Pathways](#)—a series of international training exercises involving over forty multinational engagements led by US Army Pacific. The theater army uses [this initiative](#) to test and rehearse sustainment tasks, including joint reception, staging, onward movement, and integration, and joint logistics and petroleum over-the-shore operations with reserve, joint, and multinational partners. Established Operation Pathways exercises in Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Japan are excellent potential ARSENAL locations due to their strategic axes of approach. Plus, US forces already operate in these countries, lowering the threshold for host-nation diplomatic acceptance.

Finally, placing ARSENAL units in geopolitically and operationally relevant locations, alongside programmed [Pacific Deterrence Initiative](#) infrastructure investments, would strengthen logistics networks and reduce implementation costs. The revived [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement](#) with the Philippines and the updated [Compacts of Free Association](#) with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Micronesia create new opportunities for ARSENAL units to maintain a presence in key terrain. In 2023, the Philippines and the United States revived their agreement, granting the Department of Defense access [to nine Philippine bases, including four near the](#) South China Sea. This renewal shows a shared commitment to regional deterrence and aligns with US Army Pacific's plans for positional advantage. The [renewed Compacts of Free Association](#) strengthen US military cooperation with three strategically located nations. [Palau has even requested a US military presence and encouraged](#) the secretary of defense to use the compact to facilitate stationing. With growing interest in US force presence and construction projects planned in the Philippines, Palau, and Micronesia, the joint force can leverage these agreements and [Pacific Deterrence Initiative infrastructure](#) to station ARSENAL soldiers while limiting costs.

The Indo-Pacific region [encompasses](#) more than half of the world's population, 65 percent of its oceans, and 25 percent of its land. Distributed sustainment concepts are crucial for mitigating risk and ensuring the joint force can effectively project and sustain combat power. By leveraging Operation Pathways exercise locations and geopolitical opportunities, ARSENAL could reinforce key geographic approaches and reduce risk to large-scale combat operations.

As Napoleon [aptly noted](#), “The loss of time is irreparable in war. . . . Operations only fail through delays.” The ARSENAL concept would offer a solution to mitigate critical time constraints that often hinder large-scale mobilization operations and reliance on strategic military lift. By maintaining an enduring presence in the Indo-Pacific, ARSENAL units can lessen the time required to position unique sustainment capabilities, ensuring the joint force is better postured to respond swiftly to contingency conflicts.

In a study of reserve component mobilization for the First Gulf War, the [RAND](#) Corporation estimated that Army Reserve units can be airport-ready within twenty-four days, with sealift deployments taking twenty-nine to forty-two days, depending on unit equipment density. Given these timelines, reserve units will be unlikely to be fully mission-capable in theater with their gear within forty-five days of a contingency conflict. A more recent [2019 report confirmed](#) these findings: Based on time-phased force and deployment data, the report’s authors concluded that even smaller reserve units are likely to have trouble meeting demands in the first thirty to sixty days of a conflict, assuming there is no early mobilization. Compounding the issue, a finite number of available trainers and training space constraints at mobilization sites can limit the number of reserve units that can mobilize at any given time. With ARSENAL units already in place, the joint force would significantly mitigate risk to mobilization time.

Additionally, past efforts to test large-scale mobilization operation preparedness should serve as a harbinger of its potential complexity. In 1978, Exercise [Nifty Nugget](#) was the first set of exercises to stress the mobilization pipeline, involving over two thousand personnel from multiple federal agencies. Nifty Nugget exposed several readiness gaps, including bureaucratic redundancies, a lack of coordination in troop and equipment movement, and ineffective transportation platforms and logistics infrastructure.

Shortfalls in strategic lift capability also present unacceptable risks. The US military’s sealift capacity relies on an aging fleet, with vessels averaging over [forty years old](#). A 2019 exercise revealed that only [40 percent](#) of Military Sealift Command and Maritime Administration vessels were ready to support a sealift operation within five days, which could severely delay reserve unit deployments.

Time is the most significant risk to large-scale combat operations. In a contested logistics environment, adversaries can impose time delays by hindering mobilization operations from home station to training site, from fort to port, and from point of embarkation to debarkation in theater, underscoring the need for action.

The Operational Reserve Value Proposition

Critics may contend this approach will overburden the Army Reserve and prove too costly to implement. However, the [Total Force Policy](#) developed in the 1970s enables the rapid organization of Army Reserve units tailored to support a full range of missions, including overseas contingency operations. And building and deploying unique Army Reserve formations is not a novel concept. The Army Reserve validated the feasibility of the ARSENAL concept in 2020 by creating and mobilizing tailored [urban augmentation medical task forces](#) to support US hospitals during the COVID-19 response.

Moreover, mobilizing reserve components instead of maintaining active component rotational forces is inherently cost-effective. A [US Government Accountability Office report](#) highlights the cost savings, concluding that reserve personnel generally cost less than active personnel when in use. Additionally, with a slight increase in overseas operating costs, ARSENAL can save operations and maintenance dollars by providing in-theater maintenance and sustainment support, making campaigning more cost-effective.

Finally, valuable data from ARSENAL operations can help inform artificial intelligence algorithms and train machine learning models to support predictive logistics initiatives. Collecting data from a broader range of locations enhances the accuracy and effectiveness of predictive analytics by providing a more comprehensive and diverse dataset. For example, during Operation Mojave Falcon, the largest training event in the Army Reserve’s history, an [operational data team](#) was employed—a forward-leaning initiative that integrates advanced data analytics into Army operations. Incorporating these teams in ARSENAL operations can empower commanders and staff by rapidly transforming massive amounts of operational data into actionable insights, enabling faster, more informed decision-making. By leveraging AI-driven analytics, the Army can more accurately anticipate soldiers’ needs, ensuring that vital supplies reach their destination on time and in the right location, ultimately providing an advantage to the warfighter.

Recommendations

Force: Moneyball Logistics

Employing cost-effective ARSENAL units with low-density, high-impact logistics capabilities will strengthen sustainment networks and reinforce joint interior lines of communication. The joint force can leverage Title 10 authority to request tailored ARSENAL units, equipped with the personnel and resources necessary to achieve initial operational capability, while maintaining the flexibility to rapidly scale up to 100 percent full operational capability when required.

Space: Consider the Approach

Aligning ARSENAL units with each of the four theater army avenues of approach ensures that the right capabilities are in the right place at the right time. Furthermore, overlaying those forces on joint theater distribution centers in geopolitically advantageous key terrain will bolster positional advantages and lower implementation costs.

Time: Augment Rapid Home Station Mobilization

Optimizing the [rapid home station mobilization](#) model can improve the flow of reserve forces into the region by bypassing legacy mobilization sites. Growing this initiative across the Indo-Pacific would address the need for rapid mobilization without relying on mobilization force generation installations stateside.

World War II in the Pacific theater was a war of distances and advanced bases, driven and constrained by logistics. By [1945](#), over 1.8 million ground soldiers were serving somewhere in

the Pacific or Asia. [Historians note](#) that the US military was ill-prepared logistically for such a large-footprint, manpower-intensive Pacific campaign at the outset of World War II. Shall we allow history to repeat itself?

If achieving positional advantages is foremost to the theater army's success, we must be postured to sustain them. As currently organized, the Army Reserve contains a significant portion of the Army's total logistics capability. Despite its ready-made mobilization capacity, reserve formations aren't optimally positioned for large-scale combat operations, and deployment to the Indo-Pacific will undoubtedly face delays. The ARSENAL concept would mitigate strategic risk, reinforce combat credibility, enhance the joint force's integrated deterrence, and facilitate campaigning. Indo-Pacific Command needs an ARSENAL. America's Army Reserve can deliver.



No More Train and Pray: The Consequences of Cutting the Army's Security Force Assistance Capability

Jahara Matisek, Anthony Messenger and Curt Belohlavek

In May 2025, the Pentagon [announced plans](#) to shutter two of the Army's six security force assistance brigades (SFABs) and to downsize Security Force Assistance Command into a small shop of about three dozen personnel within US Army Forces Command. This decision ignores clear doctrinal and operational [evidence](#) demonstrating SFABs' strategic value—from [Field Manual 3-22](#) accounting for the utility of Gulf War advising to how the Korean Military Advisory Group was [pivotal](#) in halting North Korea's initial assault in 1950. Yet, SFABs today face shrinking personnel authorizations and institutional ambivalence about their future.

Drawing on operational insights, doctrine, and firsthand observations, we contend that SFABs are indispensable across the competition–crisis–conflict continuum. They shape the battlespace before, during, and after conflict, and *must be treated* as core elements of US joint campaigning—not peripheral experiments to be cut. For too long, the US military relied on a train-and-pray model of building foreign militaries: ad hoc trainers sent with the hope the forces they train actually perform under fire. This is the epitome of hope as a strategy, and the approach has repeatedly failed. Since 2000, the United States has [spent](#) over \$400 billion on [security force assistance](#) only to see many foreign units “[crack](#)” once US personnel depart—in [Afghanistan](#), in [Iraq](#), and [elsewhere](#). This is because the train-and-pray template emphasizes numbers trained over actual combat readiness; it also does not take into account having a cadre of dedicated professionalized advisors that are specialized in working with foreign militaries.

SFABs offer a different path. Established in 2017, these dedicated advisor units provide persistent engagement, forward presence, and scalable missions across the competition continuum. As professionalized advisors, they replaced what were effectively pickup teams (ad hoc [MiTTs](#)) with cohesive units of specially trained soldiers. SFABs bridge the gap between peacetime engagement and wartime effectiveness through sustained, embedded advising that builds real trust, capacity, and ability to [conduct large-scale combat operations](#) as a coalition.

SFABs are not a boutique capability; these units strategically [bridge](#) forward presence with enduring operational goals. And per a Department of Defense Inspector General [report](#), SFABs “have been highly effective in building partner nation capacity and providing partner nations with new capabilities.” As the administration of President Donald Trump [demands](#) more burden sharing, allies and partners in [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) are expected to invest more in their defense and military readiness. SFABs can help make this a reality, as they are an [enabling function](#) that makes sure allies and partners are more militarily effective and capable of interoperability with US forces. Policymakers must consider their value to the joint force, given that advisors are often the only Army element in-country building the military-to-military relationships that will be needed in a future crisis.

Redefining the Advisory Edge

Advisory missions can no longer be relegated to the margins of defense planning. Current strategic competition requires consistent engagement, not reactive deployments. SFABs provide that persistent presence, real-time situational awareness, and operational agility. Unlike past ad hoc [efforts](#), SFABs institutionalize a scalable, professional advisor corps with the expertise to maximize partner capabilities.

SFABs also embody a “[left of boom](#)” approach, deploying to key regions to cultivate access, influence, and interoperability. In contested theaters like Eastern Europe or the Indo-Pacific, advisors assess partner readiness, [will to fight](#), and logistical resilience. Finally, persistent relationships and ground-level observations give SFABs the ability to provide nuanced information to combatant commands so that they understand partner capabilities and friction points. All of this enhances deterrence.

SFABs elevate deterrence by making any potential adversary face a more networked and prepared coalition. A partner force that trains regularly with American advisors, speaks a common operational language, and can leverage US systems in a crisis is far more resilient—and from an adversary’s perspective, more dangerous—than one left to fend for itself. By shaping local armies into credible, [interoperable](#) warfighting partners, SFABs complicate enemy planning, create additional dilemmas for aggressors, and reduce the likelihood of miscalculation. In effect, they build partner capacity and ensure a coalition can rapidly coordinate a response.

SFABs close a critical gap: linking peacetime advising to wartime integration. Too often, advisory programs have been treated as disconnected shaping activities divorced from real combat outcomes. SFABs upend that paradigm. They train to fight with their partners as part of US-led operations, not merely to train and depart. SFAB advisors’ work feeds directly into theater campaign plans and CJADC2 (combined joint all-domain command and control) networks, enabling host-nation brigades to plug seamlessly into American-led missions. Ultimately, SFABs translate partnerships into combat power.

Preconflict Phase: Presence as Prevention

SFABs are most valuable *before* bullets start flying. Their persistent forward presence gives the United States a unique ability to shape the security environment in ways that episodic training teams or advising by video teleconference simply cannot. In competition, deterrence is about more than hardware—it hinges on relationships, trust, and readiness. SFABs help build all three.

During the [shape, deter, and compete phase](#), SFAB advisor teams enable geographic combatant commanders and Army

service component commands to understand conditions on the ground. Advisors provide granular visibility into the readiness of allied and partner units. Unlike scripted, one-off exercises, SFAB engagements span multiple echelons of a partner’s military—not only training individual soldiers, but helping mold entire brigades to conduct [large-scale combat operations](#) alongside US forces. These shaping efforts include establishing interoperable communications, reinforcing institutional backbones, and improving combined mission planning and force posture.

Unlike short-term mobile training teams, SFAB deployments provide continuity and local intuition. Advisors live with and observe partner forces continuously, acting as sensors for both battlefield and institutional friction points. They don’t just gauge whether a foreign battalion is trained on paper—they assess whether it is truly ready, with cohesive leadership, logistical endurance, and the ability to regenerate combat power after taking losses. Such ground-truth insight is irreplaceable.

For example, over a recent twenty-five-week period, a 2nd SFAB advisory team operating at only one-third of its brigade strength provided more than ninety on-the-ground observations across Africa that answered fifty-nine priority information requirements for five US agencies. Persistent engagement builds the muscle memory needed for interoperability. Rather than discovering a partner’s capabilities and limitations in the fog of war, advisors that help train alongside partner forces learn to streamline tactics, radios, and rhythms. They develop trust in peacetime so they can move in lockstep during crisis. This is a decisive competitive edge, where vast distances and antiaccess/area-denial threats will slow US responses.

Finally, SFABs serve as powerful signalers. American advisor presence reassures allies and partners of commitments, while shaping adversary perceptions. Unlike regular units that rotate in and out on fixed tours, SFAB teams stay long enough to foster continuity of understanding, language, and rapport that short deployments or video teleconferencing cannot match. In sum, SFABs provide the connective tissue between competition and conflict.

Crisis Response: Winning the First Fight

When deterrence fails, speed and timing become decisive as SFABs already in theater can give US and partner forces a vital edge in coherence, responsiveness, and coalition alignment. During an interview as part of a DoD Minerva-backed [research project](#) on security force assistance, an SFAB major explained that combatant command planners assume it takes “five allied brigades to equal the combat power of a single American brigade.” The work of SFAB teams, he

added, aims to “close that gap.” Moving partner forces closer to a one-to-one effectiveness ratio can only be achieved by having American advisors, enabling interoperability, readiness, and coalition warfighting.

The concept of *winning the first fight* is hardwired into SFAB design. As a crisis unfolds, SFAB advisors embedded at various echelons provide real-time battlefield awareness and help integrate combined command and control, ensuring partner formations maneuver in concert with American objectives. Armed with secure communications and digital liaison tools, SFAB teams can bridge interoperability gaps and cue multinational actions at the speed of relevance. They liaise between units, synchronize efforts, and fill critical voids. [Advisor handbooks](#) often ignore these unsexy but essential activities.

A recent National Training Center (NTC) rotation further proved these advantages. In early 2025 at Fort Irwin’s [“division in the dirt” exercise](#), one SFAB team embedded with a partner brigade alongside the US 1st Infantry Division, while another SFAB contingent partnered with a foreign division under the Army’s III Corps. The SFAB advisors gave US commanders a clear picture of the partner units and integrated those formations to achieve shared objectives. The two SFAB-led elements synchronized daily to align US and partner operations. This success mirrored 1st SFAB’s contribution to the XVIII Airborne Corps [Warfighter 24-5 exercise](#), where SFAB advisors helped a foreign corps headquarters coordinate with US forces in a multinational scenario.

At both NTC and during the warfighter exercise, SFAB advisors were the vital link—helping partners leverage US assets (for example, calling in American long-range fires to hit the enemy early) and buying time for US reinforcements to arrive. In the NTC after-action review, observers noted the partner brigade’s artillery—enabled by SFAB fire support advisors—achieved near parity with the opposing force’s fires, an unprecedented outcome at NTC. Without SFAB advisors, such coalition lethality and integration would be impossible. By empowering partners to win at first contact, SFABs help set the stage for overall victory. Among other deleterious effects, then, cutting SFAB advisors would greatly diminish the lethality and operational reach of a multinational corps.

Conflict Phase: Grind and Regeneration

Success in the conduct of large-scale combat operations is usually less about the shooting, and more about sustained operations (e.g., endurance, logistics, regeneration, etc.). After the initial clashes, both sides face the challenge of maintaining momentum, replacing losses, and generating fresh combat power. This is where SFABs become even more strategically

vital: They can pivot from pure advising and enabling roles to actively regenerating and scaling up a partner’s fighting force.

SFABs accelerate force regeneration in several ways. When allied units suffer casualties or equipment losses, embedded advisors provide rapid assessments, coordinate recovery efforts, and guide the reconstitution of those formations—drawing on preexisting relationships and deep contextual knowledge. SFAB presence also allows the United States to surge additional advisor teams into theater as needed, seamlessly integrating them with local forces rather than starting from scratch. Given sufficient time and resources, SFABs can help raise a partner brigade’s effectiveness close to parity with US formations, which can quickly change the calculus of warfighting. For example, during the Korean War, advisors from the Korean Military Advisory Group [helped](#) build the South Korean Army into a force that by 1953 was defending two-thirds of the front line and absorbing two-thirds of casualties. This experience led General James Van Fleet to author his [“25 Divisions for the Cost of One”](#) essay in 1954, detailing how it was much cheaper and more efficient to use advisors to build up the Korean military to do the fighting than to just deploy more American soldiers.

As a conflict deepens, SFABs can shift focus from battalion- and brigade-level advising to strengthening the host nation’s institutional base—training centers, logistics hubs, military schools—to create a self-sustaining pipeline for recruiting, equipping, and fielding new units. In a drawn-out war, this ability to scale up a partner’s war effort can prove decisive for maintaining operational tempo. Even if it means teaching a foreign military officer how to use Microsoft Excel to track fuel, food, or ammunition, these are the boring, essential tasks that keep battalions alive in [large-scale combat operations](#).

Recent experience underscores this point. Western advisors [helping](#) Ukraine since 2014—and especially after 2022—played a critical role in [bridging gaps](#) between Ukraine’s frontline needs and its institutional capacity. They did not just pass on tactics; many have [worked](#) with Ukraine’s military to overhaul training and logistics. Unfortunately, US SFAB teams have been kept at a distance in Ukraine—a [missed opportunity](#) to further boost Ukraine’s combat effectiveness and to [gather lessons](#) for the US Army. This is precisely the kind of wartime advising SFABs are uniquely positioned to conduct with partners: operating forward in the thick of the fight, adapting alongside allied and partner officers, and shaping their development in stride with battlefield realities, all while simultaneously [feeding lessons](#) learned back into the US military. Whereas other US units might rotate in for short combat deployments, SFABs provide a continuity of doctrine, relationships, and institutional memory that helps partners stay resilient even as conditions change unpredictably.

From Episodic to Enduring

When the first shots are fired, it is too late to start building trust and interoperability. Beyond cutting two SFABs, these units are already undermanned, dropping from the [816 billets originally envisioned](#) to a constrained 550 soldiers per brigade. SFABs can inform decision-makers and build partner capacity at echelon. And they can provide real-time assessments of partner goals and objectives, to include assisting with [reception, staging, onward movement and integration](#)—as shown by US-Chilean Army [exercises](#) in 2024. But achieving interoperability goals is only possible with sufficient numbers of SFAB advisors in each region to [ensure coalitional large-scale combat operations are effective](#).

The US military has spent years relearning a hard truth: Presence matters. [Field Manual 3-22](#) reinforces the realities that [relationships](#) can't be surged, trust and interoperability can't be retrofitted, and posture and placement can't be airdropped in once a war starts. SFABs offer a proven alternative to the failed episodic model of advising—not with slogans or postconflict lessons learned, but through persistent, forward engagement that shapes outcomes before, during, and after conflict.

SFABs aren't just trainers on the sidelines. As demonstrated in [exercises](#) like the “division in the dirt” rotation at NTC, SFAB teams enabled partner units to integrate seamlessly with US forces, synchronize fires, and align with US campaign objectives. In short, SFABs act as relationship builders in competition, integrators in crisis, and force generators in the grind of war. They enable partners to fight smarter, scale up faster, and endure longer. By operating at multiple echelons in stride with their foreign counterparts, SFABs can elevate a partner brigade or division to a level of effectiveness much closer to that of a US formation—provided they're given the time, trust, command-and-control authority, and resources to do so.

If the US military is confronted by the need to conduct large-scale combat operations, America's allies and partners will be needed to tip the military balance. SFABs' mission is not a secondary or nice-to-have one. It is central to coalitional warfighting success. SFABs must be recognized for what they truly are: not boutique, niche formations, but critical nodes in America's ability to campaign, compete, and win alongside our partners. Especially given the current focus on countering China in the Indo-Pacific, sending US military advisors to [strengthen](#) allies and partners in the region is a cheap and efficient approach that can deter China with minimal provocation.

If the US military continues marginalizing the advising mission or ignoring it altogether, then it means going back to the failed train-and-pray model. Fully staffed SFABs are not a luxury; they're a necessity. Without them, the United States risks being flat-footed in the next war.