

# A Short History of US Involvement in the Indo-Pacific

Christopher L. Kolakowski

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The United States has always been tied to the Indo-Pacific. Indeed, the last battle of the War of Independence that started on Lexington Green in 1775 occurred in India in 1783. What follows is a short history of US involvement in Asia, from its humble post-independence beginnings to the prominent engagement of today.<sup>1</sup>

The first US presence in Asia comprised trading vessels that serviced China in 1784. New England whalers soon joined, and over the next decades American ships increased their presence in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. During the War of 1812, the frigate USS Essex embarked on a famous cruise against British shipping along South America's Pacific coast.

After the war, America realized the increasing need to protect its interests in the Pacific. In 1821 the Navy authorized the Pacific Squadron, and in 1835 the East India Squadron. These squadrons carried out the first US military operations in Asia, namely two punitive expeditions against Sumatran pirates in 1832 and 1839. The Pacific Squadron also helped conquer California during the Mexican–American War in the 1840s.

Also in the 1840s, the East India Squadron became involved in the First Opium War, securing US access to China via treaty in 1844. American missionaries now started their educational and ministerial work in earnest, which led to increasing American interaction with China's interior communities. This spurred the US Navy to create the Yangtze River Patrol in 1854, which when it ended in 1949 was the longest sustained overseas naval commitment in American history.

Arguably the most famous US naval operation of this period occurred on 14 July 1853 when Commodore Matthew Perry took the East India Squadron to To-

kyo Bay and successfully opened Japan to the world for the first time in 200 years. Perry's mission spurred Japan to become a major Asian power, a process marked by the Meiji Restoration in 1868..

East India Squadron ships also participated in China's Second Opium War from 1856 to 1860. The treaty ending that conflict recognized the United States—along with Britain, France, and Russia—as one of four major powers allowed direct access to Chinese ports and the capital Peking (Beijing), plus extraterritoriality for its citizens from Chinese laws. These concessions sparked the Taiping Rebellion from 1860 to 1864; American mercenaries participated on the government's side. Most notable of these was Frederick Townsend Ward, who formed the Ever Victorious Army and died leading it in battle near Ningbo in September 1862.

The American Civil War reached Asia when the CSS *Alabama* captured several Union merchant ships in the Straits of Malacca and docked at Singapore in September 1863. Fifteen months later the CSS *Shenandoah* sailed across the Indian Ocean, refit in Australia, and ravaged Union whalers in the central and northern Pacific before discovering on 2 August 1865 that the war had been over for several months.

During and after the Civil War, the East India Squadron (renamed Asiatic Squadron in 1868) continued antipiracy operations in waters from Japan to the South China Sea. Major actions in this period included skirmishes in Shimonoseki Strait, an expedition to Formosa in 1867, and operations in Korea in 1871. This latter operation resulted in the first Medals of Honor awarded for action on foreign soil at the Battle of Ganghwa, the US military's first combat on the Korean Peninsula.

As the nineteenth century neared its end, the US presence in the Indo-Pacific increased. The purchase of Alaska in 1867 staked a major claim to the North Pacific and Arctic, while development of California's ports linked the continental United States with the Indo-Pacific. US traders and missionaries extended American reach from the Kuril Islands to India. American backing of a rebellion in 1893 against the queen of Hawaii led to her overthrow and the islands' annexation by the United States five years later.

War with Spain made the US a prominent Pacific power. Commodore George Dewey's victory on 1 May 1898 at Manila Bay, followed by Maj Gen Wesley Merritt's capture of Manila that August, led to the Spanish relinquishing the Philippines to the United States after 350 years of colonial rule. Guam also became American. The Filipinos revolted in 1899 against American rule but failed to win



From right, Marine Corps Gen Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Coast Guard Adm Karl L. Schultz, commandant of the Coast Guard; and Army Lt Gen Daniel R. Hokanson, vice chief of the National Guard Bureau, render honors during a wreath-laying ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, 16 July 2018, to commemorate the 74th anniversary of the liberation of Guam. DOD photo by Army Sgt. James K. McCann.

independence after three years of fighting. Also in 1899, the Second Samoan Civil War concluded with the signing of the Tripartite Convention, dividing the archipelago between Germany and the United States.

In 1900 the Boxer Rebellion in China surrounded the international legations in Peking. The defenders held out for 55 days of siege while the international China Relief Expedition fought inland from the Yellow Sea. US Marines distinguished themselves in Peking's defense; US Navy, Marine, and Army units supported the expedition, marking the first time since the War for Independence the United States allied with other sovereign nations in a conflict. China paid reparations (the Boxer Indemnity); the United States used its portion of those payments to educate Chinese students in American universities. The 4th Marine and US Army 15th Infantry Regiments assumed permanent station in China to protect American interests.

American power in the region grew in 1905, when President Theodore Roosevelt presided over the Russo–Japanese War's end via the Treaty of Portsmouth. In 1907 the Great White Fleet, consisting of 16 new battleships and a variety of de-

stroyers and auxiliary ships, sailed throughout Asia on its global military-diplomatic voyage, demonstrating to the world America's newly established naval power and rendering humanitarian assistance.

Meanwhile, the United States developed the Philippines. American teachers arrived to create schools, while investors stimulated the Philippine economy to unprecedented levels. Self-government gradually took hold under American control. In World War I, the Filipinos supported the United States; however, the war ended before the US Army's Philippine Scouts could deploy to Europe.

In 1921 the Washington Naval Treaty forestalled a naval arms race by fixing the ratio of British, American, and Japanese capital ships at 5-5-3 respectively. This treaty generated resentment in Japan for its inequality and stoked nationalist sentiment, which in turn drove the aggressions against Manchuria in 1931 and Chiang Kai-shek's China in 1937. The war in China, still a source of bitter memory and recrimination today, bogged down and left Japan unable to secure victory despite four years of effort. Americans supported China via supplies on the Burma Road and the American Volunteer Group (also known as the Flying Tigers). Further Japanese expansion into French Indochina caused Britain, the United States, and the Netherlands to embargo Japanese raw material shipments, including oil.

Unwilling to retreat or concede, Japan decided to attack. The Pacific War opened on 8 December 1941 (7 December in Hawaii and Washington) with attacks on Allied bases from Pearl Harbor to Malaya. Guam fell on 10 December, Wake Island 23 December, and Hong Kong on Christmas 1941. British troops retreated in Malaya and US/Filipino defenders in the Philippines made a stand on Bataan and Corregidor. Singapore fell on 15 February 1942 in the largest surrender in British military history. Japanese forces swept into Burma, the Netherlands East Indies (today Indonesia), New Guinea, New Britain, and the Gilbert Islands.

The Philippines became an increasingly isolated outpost behind Japanese lines. Pres. Franklin Roosevelt ordered the commander of the islands, Gen Douglas MacArthur, to Australia, where general famously pledged, "I shall return." Australian prime minister John Curtin gave MacArthur operational command of the Australian Army, thus forging an enduring alliance between the United States and Australia. Bataan surrendered 9 April 1942, the Philippines one month later.

These events occurred as British prime minister Winston Churchill gave the United States primary operational responsibility for China and everything east of the Asian coast and Singapore, effectively ceding the Americans first place among Allied powers in Asia.

Japan's expansion ended with the American victories at Coral Sea and Midway in May and June 1942. Both sides turned to New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, where the Americans and Australians won grueling campaigns at Buna-Gona and Guadalcanal. In November 1943 forces under Adm Chester Nimitz drove west from Hawaii through the Gilbert Islands. As MacArthur encircled Rabaul in early 1944 and leapfrogged along New Guinea's northern coast, Nimitz captured the Marshall and Mariana Island groups.

On the Asiatic mainland, American planes began to fly supplies from northern India over the Himalayas (the Hump) to China. Lt Gen Joseph W. Stilwell had been sent to China in 1942 to coordinate aid, training, and operations of Chinese forces, and in late 1943 he started a campaign in northern Burma to reopen a land route to China, which lasted until the capture of Myitkyina in August 1944. Meanwhile Japan (assisted by collaborationist Indian forces) invaded India in March 1944 but ran into stout defenses at Imphal and Kohima. US air units helped supply the British at both places as they defeated the Japanese in heavy fighting. Follow-up advances opened the road to China in early 1945.

MacArthur fulfilled his pledge to return by wading ashore at Leyte on 20 October 1944. The Filipinos had believed in him, and a quarter million guerrillas aided the liberation forces as they fanned out over the islands, in some cases, liberating entire provinces on their own. The cost was high—more than 100,000 Filipinos were killed in a month of house-to-house fighting during the Battle of Manila. However, alone among the colonial powers, the United States kept its promise to liberate its colonies by war's end—a fact that further cemented the United States as a key player in Asia.

Meanwhile, Nimitz captured Iwo Jima and Okinawa after weeks of very bloody combat. By July 1945 the Allies stood before Japan itself. The war in Europe had ended in May 1945, and reinforcements were on the way for what all expected would be the climactic battle of the Pacific War. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August, plus entry of the Soviet Union into the war, compelled Japan's surrender on 15 August 1945. World War II thus ended with the US in a pivotal position regarding Asia, which it maintains to this day.

General MacArthur became ruler of Japan with the title Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers. Over the next six years he rebuilt Japan into a modern state, leaving a legacy that echoes to this day. Elsewhere, US troops assisted in disarming and reoccupying Japanese-controlled territory throughout the Indo-Pacific.

The 30 years immediately following Japan's surrender were defined by conflicts between Communism and the West. China fought a major civil war, which ended in 1949 with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang clinging to Taiwan and Mao Tse-tung's Communists firmly in control of the mainland, now the new People's Republic of China. Korea had been divided in 1945, and the communist North invaded South Korea in 1950. The United Nations, with the United States leading the way, entered the conflict on the side of the South; Russian and Chinese "volunteers" assisted the North. After three years of back-and-forth fighting, an armistice ended fighting on 27 July 1953. Meanwhile, the United States covertly supported the French effort to hold Indochina against Ho Chi Minh's communist revolutionaries; after France's defeat in 1954 led to partition, the United States fought unsuccessfully to support South Vietnam against the communists. The fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 destroyed South Vietnam and ended 33 years of unbroken US involvement in Southeast Asia, dating back to Stilwell in 1942.

One of the most important events in the latter half of the twentieth century occurred in 1972 when Pres. Richard Nixon established relations with the People's Republic of China. This presaged increased economic ties between the two nations over the next four decades and helped bring Communist China onto the world stage after nearly a quarter century of effective isolation. As part of this transformation, Taiwan was forced to give up China's seat in the United Nations.



A US sailor interacts with children in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, 2 May 2018, during a community relations event as part of Pacific Partnership, an annual multinational mission in the Indo-Pacific. Navy photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Kelsey L. Adams.

In the four decades since, the United States has continued its defense alliances with allies like South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. The US presence has expanded back into South and Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, India, and Pakistan. These ties, many forged in World War II and its aftermath, retain their importance to America today.

In recent years, US strategy focuses more on Asia—first with the Obama administration’s “pivot” to the region and now with the Trump administration focusing on the Indo-Pacific. These initiatives continue a legacy of engagement dating back to the War of Independence. The United States has always been involved in the Indo-Pacific, and it will continue to be well into the future. **JIPA**

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise cited, see John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to the Present* (New York: Henry Holt, 2016); Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911–45* (New York: Macmillan, 1971); Ronald H. Spector, *The Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Vintage, 1985); and Craig L. Symonds, *The Naval Institute Historical Atlas of the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, MD: USNI, 1995).

2. For more on Perry’s mission and its impacts, see George Feifer, *Breaking Open Japan: Commodore Perry, Lord Abe, and American Imperialism in 1853* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 2006).

3. For more on Confederate commerce raiders see Dwight Sturtevant Hughes, *A Confederate Biography: The Cruise of the CSS Shenandoah* (Annapolis: USNI, 2015).

4. The best history of this conflict is Brian McAllister Linn, *The Philippine War, 1899–1902* (Topeka: University of Kansas, 2000).

5. For more on this period, see John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936–1945*, 2 volumes (New York: Random House, 1970); William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880–1964* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978); and Christopher L. Kolakowski, *Last Stand on Bataan: The Defense of the Philippines, December 1941–May 1942* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016).

6. For more, see John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

7. See Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (New York: Anchor, 1989); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1997); and Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (New York: Holt, 1963).



## Christopher Kolakowski

Christopher Kolakowski is director of the MacArthur Memorial in Norfolk, Virginia. Prior to this, he served as director of the General George Patton Museum and Center of Leadership in Fort Knox, Kentucky from 2009 to 2013. Mr. Kolakowski has written and spoken on various aspects of military history from 1775 to the present and is the author of four books on the American Civil War and World War II in the Pacific. He is currently working on a book about the 1944 India–Burma campaigns. He received his BA in history and mass communications from Emory & Henry College and his MA in public history from the State University of New York at Albany.