

# Demystifying the Indo-Pacific Theater

GENERAL CQ BROWN, JR.

The Indo-Pacific Theater by-and-large, is a mystery to many. The focus of our nation and our Department of Defense (DOD) has long been oriented toward Europe, and more recently the Middle East, so that few Americans understand and appreciate the significance of the Indo-Pacific. For starters, 60 percent of the Earth's population, or an estimated 4.5 billion people, reside within the Indo-Pacific region. Additionally, the Indo-Pacific region is responsible for 44 percent of the world's trade, making its economic significance unparalleled. Five of the seven military treaties between the United States and our allies—Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand—are within the Indo-Pacific region. Conversely, four of the five stipulated *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* challenges are also tied to the Indo-Pacific: including Russia, China, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and violent extremist organizations. Many Americans are unaware of the complex history of Taiwan, the territorial disputes within the South China Sea, or even the location of many Pacific Island countries.

The Indo-Pacific region is unlike any other area of responsibility (AOR). It is unimaginably large. The Indo-Pacific Theater stretches from the coast of California to the western shore of India and from the Arctic to Antarctica. Said another way, from Hollywood to Bollywood and from polar bears to penguins. To expand upon this illustration using numbers: the Indo-Pacific AOR is roughly 52 percent of the Earth's surface, or 100 million square miles, and it is mostly water. For reference, the continental United States is slightly more than 3 million square miles, and Europe covers approximately 4.766 million square miles (including European Russia and Greenland). Thus, the vast expanse of the Indo-Pacific creates a significant logistical challenge. Depending on the mode of transportation, it can take the better part of a day to multiple weeks to reach many locations within the region, making pre-positioning, requirement anticipation, communication, and domain awareness critical to any civil or military operation.

In addition to the expanse, the Indo-Pacific is also home to some of the world's worst natural disasters. Typhoons, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes are commonplace within the region—each natural disaster putting a portion of the 4.5 billion residents at risk. The ability to overcome the spatial challenges of the region to provide relief when and where it is needed after a natural disaster has become a hallmark capability of our DOD. This noncombat-related capability is

respected by all nations, challenged by no nations, and often critical to developing alliances and partnerships.

Within the Indo-Pacific reside a number of dynamic and complex regional challenges with worldwide implications, including nuclear powers, disputed territories, ballistic missiles, and highly adaptive adversaries. Countering each of these challenges requires a whole-of-government approach in which the other three instruments of power understand that the military maintains a necessary level of readiness to backstop their combined efforts. Revisiting, in detail, the four *NDS* challenges in the Indo-Pacific validates this construct.

## Challenges

The People's Republic of China (PRC), first and foremost, has steadily risen to a credible potential adversary in every facet of power. Beijing has incrementally developed China's combat capability, militarized the South China Sea, and inflicted a destabilizing effect within the region through coercion and intimidation tactics in an effort to establish a new normal. The PRC's actions are defining a modern-day colonialism in which its practices entrap and diminish national sovereignty. While nations have recently become more vocal about the nefarious activities executed by the PRC, a comprehensive and coordinated effort is lacking.

Second, Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) has significant focus on a more familiar foe, Russia. Russia is a shared threat between United States European Command (EUCOM), United States Northern Command (NORTHCOM), and United States Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Moscow's capabilities and willingness to employ those capabilities has maintained Russia as a relevant adversary. Similar to China, Russia is a nuclear power with diverse military capabilities that has sold military hardware and software to other nations—all while executing a complex information operations campaign to obscure their actions and true intentions. The recent combined activity between Russia and the PRC has raised concerns among many nations, making any narrative regarding regional security suspect.

The tension between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is the third identified *NDS* challenge within the Indo-Pacific region. Despite recent diplomatic efforts, the DPRK remains a viable threat. Pyongyang's continued efforts to develop offensive missile capability destabilizes the region as a whole as it holds American forces, allies, and partners at risk.

Finally, violent extremist organizations (VEO) seek to impose their views and radicalize people across the globe by attacking vulnerabilities. VEOs gain footholds in underdeveloped geographic areas and rapidly spread ideologies that are inflicting as much terror as possible. VEO activity within the Indo-Pacific region

may not be as publicized as in the Middle East or Africa, but the threat and results are very real. The Siege of Marawi (Philippines), the Easter Sunday attacks on multiple churches in Sri Lanka, and the ongoing struggle within Indonesia to uncover terrorist cells are just a few examples of the VEO activity within the Indo-Pacific.

I say all of that to reinforce my next point: “The Indo-Pacific is the Department of Defense’s priority theater.”<sup>1</sup> That sentiment is my belief and, for obvious reasons, my current focus, but those words are not mine. That phrase comes straight from the DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report published in June. The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report has expressed a vision to preserve a free-and-open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). All nations should be free of coercion in terms of security, values, and trade. In an effort to guarantee that freedom, INDOPACOM is committed to a safe, secure, and prosperous region benefiting all nations by promoting an Indo-Pacific that allows all nations to fly, sail, and operate in accordance with international laws. As described earlier, the Indo-Pacific is complex, diverse, and expansive. The realization of a FOIP vision is only possible by the willingness of free nations working together in coordination with American forces postured within the region.

Aligning with this belief, PACAF has developed a strategy concentrating on long-term strategic competition. There are three lines of effort that serve as the foundation of the PACAF strategy: (1) strengthening alliances and partnerships, (2) improving interoperability and lethality, and (3) developing operational concepts for great-power competition. These lines of effort vector PACAF’s actions to support a FOIP and reinforce my priorities for the command: to be ready, resilient, and postured for the future.

### **Strengthening Alliances and Partnerships**

Strengthening alliances and partnerships is the first line of effort in PACAF for two reasons. Relationships provide the United States with a distinct asymmetric advantage over our adversaries and directly contributes to the collective ability to deter aggressive actions. By strengthening the United States’ relationships and developing new partnerships with nations in the Indo-Pacific region, we establish an environment in which we win before fighting. Next, should deterrence fail, the United States must be ready to fight and win. Critical to moving this idea from conceptual to reality is access. Alliances and partnerships provide the United States with many advantages. It is imperative for all military operations, from cooperation to conflict, that the United States have access to prepare, launch, execute, and recover to the airfields and ports within the region. Equally important is the collab-

orative capacity to operate in a synchronized manner with American joint forces and the forces of other nations willing to fight alongside American personnel.



(US Air Force photo by SSgt Mikaley Kline)

**Figure 1. Strong relationships.** Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld, chief, Royal Australian Air Force; Gen Philippe Lavigne, chief of staff, French Air Force; Gen Yoshinari Marumo, chief, Japan Air Self-Defense Force; and Gen David L. Goldfein, chief of staff, US Air Force participate in a multi-domain operations panel during the 2019 Pacific Air Chiefs Symposium (PACS) at Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam, Hawaii, 5 December 2019. The theme of PACS 19, “A Collaborative Approach to Regional Security,” focused on building mutual understanding of varied regional perspectives through bilateral engagements and multinational panels and meetings.

It is my experience that the most effective way to strengthen alliances and recruit new partners is through presence and personal engagement. The United States recognizes and respects the different levels of interoperability that are possible from each opportunity to interact with foreign nations, ranging from coalition warfare to regional security initiatives to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR). Combining personal engagement and presence with the capability and desired outcome of any nation is the genesis of fortified relationships within the region.

Analyzing the Indo-Pacific in terms of subregions facilitates a better understanding and empathetic approach to tailor our lens toward each nation. No two countries are alike, and applying a cookie-cutter approach to partnerships is generally unsuccessful. As a result, the AOR can be subdivided into four subregional objectives: Reorient Northeast Asia, Strengthen Southeast Asia, Secure Oceania, and Create Opportunities in South Asia.

### ***Northeast Asia***

Any discussion referencing Northeast Asia starts by recognizing the threats. Despite the recent relational thawing between the United States and the DPRK, Pyongyang remains the most immediate threat to peace within the AOR. Additionally, both China and Russia are located within Northeast Asia and are the focus of our long-term threat picture. Our alliances with Japan and South Korea provide balance to counter three of the five named *NDS* challenges within the Northeast Asia region.

### ***Southeast Asia***

Shifting the focus to Southeast Asia, there are similar threats as well as opportunities to expand American partnerships within the region. First, PACAF supports measures to strengthen the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), expand multilateralism, and improve the combined security capacity within the region. With Thailand, the United States' oldest Asian ally, we are still finding ways to enhance training opportunities, bolster interoperability, and increase mutually beneficial security agreements. In Indonesia, PACAF is expanding HADR training and establishing avenues to increase information sharing. Singapore supports a strong American presence and consistently pursues training opportunities with the United States to increase the city-state's overall military response capabilities. Malaysia has opened the aperture to strengthening ties with the United States through mutual areas of interest, including expanding collaboration, information sharing, and maritime-domain awareness. Finally, there are growing opportunities with Vietnam, which assumed the chair for ASEAN in 2020 and pursues US capabilities.

### ***Oceania***

Securing Oceania involves an area that spans from Antarctica to Micronesia, making the efforts executed today to enforce international norms in coordination with New Zealand, Australia, and Japan even more critical. The Antarctica Treaty is up for review in 2048. By preserving the "research" status of the Antarctic continent, we not only dissuade activities that are not research-related but also bolster our relationships with like-minded nations.

Securing Oceania goes beyond the climate-related challenges within the Antarctic. As a result, PACAF, in concert with the interagency departments, has made an effort to reaffirm US presence and commitment to the three states in the Compact of Free Association: the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia. Reiterating the United States' desire to be a partner of choice and not

a partner of coercion is widening the aperture for stronger relationships with those nations.

### ***South Asia***

Creating South Asia opportunities is another area where PACAF is actively working to enhance our relationships. India, as one of our “Major Defense Partners,” provides opportunities for PACAF to actively expand our relationship by increasing training opportunities through our exercise program. In addition to the increase in training opportunities, India and the United States signed the Communications, Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, facilitating greater information sharing between the two nations.

### **Improving Interoperability and Lethality**

PACAF’s second line of effort is to focus on improving interoperability and lethality. Last year, PACAF Airmen led 29 of the robust 54 total exercises scheduled within the Indo-Pacific region to improve all aspects of military capability. These simulations covered flying training exercises, command post exercises, humanitarian assistance training, and joint exercises with an end goal of producing a better-prepared joint and coalition force. Additionally, the command scheduled and executed Airman-to-Airman talks, subject matter expert exchanges, and senior enlisted forums. Each of these personal engagements, regardless of topic or complexity, bolsters the foundation of our relationships with the participating nations. Simultaneously, these training avenues allow us to identify knowledge gaps, improve processes, and synchronize our efforts as a collective force. It is as simple as this: security for America and the region is inextricably linked to the number of nations we train with and the number of times we exercise together.

### **Developing Operational Concepts for Great-Power Competition**

This leads us to PACAF’s third and final line of effort: developing operational concepts for great-power competition. As with any other time in our history, the challenges that we face today are unlike any other we have faced before. To hone the development of our operational concepts for today’s challenges, we have to understand what *great-power competition* means. The PACAF definition of *competitors* is a spectrum that establishes a nation as somewhere between *friends* and *adversaries*. The artificial spectrum places the United States on a playing field in which the competition plays out in a “gray zone,” or below the level of conflict. Conceptually, this has led PACAF to expedite efforts that challenge our status

quo. As we integrate fifth-generation weapons systems into the Air Force, we need to bring the Air Force into the fifth generation.

The vision of a fifth-generation Air Force is based on the actualization of concepts such as agile combat employment, revision of command-and-control models, and implementation of multi-domain operation proposals. PACAF's ability to posture and operate in a number of locations, proven through its prior preparation, enables us to be a more dynamic operating force. The cornerstone of our operating concept is agile combat employment, or ACE. ACE enables us to operate from locations with varying levels of capacity and support, ensuring Airmen are postured in a position of advantage to generate combat power. PACAF is taking measured steps to distance itself from the idea of big bases and War Reserve Materiel to pre-positioning essential items through regional base cluster positioning operations. Essentially, our operating concepts revolve around our coordinated ability to become lighter, leaner, and more agile to deter aggression or inject chaos should conflict arise.

## **Conclusion**

The three lines of effort developed to implement the PACAF strategy were prepared with the challenges of the Indo-Pacific in mind. It is unrealistic to assume these challenges can be overcome without acknowledgment; more importantly, we cannot transform these challenges into opportunities if we are not aware of them.

Currently our forces within the "first island chain" are capable of being ranged by adversary threats. Not only do we have to be comfortable with that fact, we have to be prepared to fight in a contested and degraded environment with only the forces that we have in theater should the situation dictate. Additionally, our allies and partners are within that same first island chain. The United States has cultivated a relationship of trust, in which nations have sided with us from cooperation to conflict. Even if it were possible to fall back, retreating to a position of safety would break the fundamental trust of these relationships. There is a level of risk associated with that mind-set. PACAF is aware of the inherent risks of this approach and continues efforts to buy down risk across the doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy (DOTMLPF-P) spectrum.

The *NDS* highlights the return to great-power competition and the threat to our national security within the Indo-Pacific region. The emerging threats, added to the complexity of an already challenging spatial and diverse environment, are creating a level of uncertainty for our future. The PACAF strategy is designed to capitalize on a collective framework that not only benefits the security of the regional nations where 60 percent of world's population resides but also every na-

tion that seeks to fly, sail, or operate within the Indo-Pacific region in accordance with international norms to support 44 percent of the world's trade. INDOPA-COM is advancing as a joint and coalition force with our allies and partners to compete and win. At the same time, we are reserving a seat at the international table for all nations to voice their concerns, increase understanding, and resolve differences with a goal of preserving a peaceful and prosperous region. 🌐

### **General CQ Brown, Jr.**

General Brown (Master of Aeronautical Science degree, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University; BS civil engineering, Texas Tech University) is the commander, Pacific Air Forces; air component commander for US Indo-Pacific Command; and executive director, Pacific Air Combat Operations Staff, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. PACAF is responsible for Air Force activities spread over half the globe in a command that supports more than 46,000 Airmen serving principally in Japan, Korea, Hawaii, Alaska, and Guam.

General Brown was commissioned in 1984 as a distinguished graduate of the ROTC program at Texas Tech University. He has served in a variety of positions at the squadron and wing level, including an assignment to the US Air Force Weapons School as an F-16 instructor. His notable staff tours include aide-de-camp to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force; director, Secretary of the Air Force and Chief of Staff Executive Action Group; and deputy director, Operations Directorate, US Central Command. He also served as a National Defense Fellow at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

General Brown has commanded a fighter squadron, the US Air Force Weapons School, two fighter wings, and US Air Forces Central Command. Prior to his current assignment, he served as the deputy commander, US Central Command.

The general is a command pilot with more than 2,900 flying hours, including 130 combat hours.

### **Notes**

1. US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (Washington, DC: DOD, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

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