

# Practical Understanding of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy: Analysis of USINDOPACOM and Implications for U.S. Allies and Partners

Dongmin Shin

**Abstract:** *Despite the rise of the importance of the ‘Indo-Pacific,’ this article argues that discussions on the concept remain at the theoretical level, such as seen in the grand strategy debate. However, in the policy field, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved to a much more detailed one that manifests as an action plan. Given the discrepancy between theory and practice, this article aims to provide a tool to read the development of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy with a focus on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), which is in charge of operationalizing the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy in the security field.*

*With the review and analysis of mission, strategy, and operational essence of USINDOPACOM and its component commands, this article finds that first, at the mission and strategy level, the commands assume that their main position is to deter and defend rather than to preempt conflict in the region. The operational level finding is that to fulfill its mission and strategy, USINDOPACOM and its component commands consistently emphasize the importance of strengthening and enhancing its posture in the region. Third, USINDOPACOM and its component commands are establishing new types of troops equipped with enhanced mobility and capabilities covering multi-domains.*

*This analysis and review has implications for the allies and partners of the U.S. when pursuing their own Indo-Pacific strategies. Based on the current evidence, there is a likelihood that the U.S. will request allies and partners act jointly or mini-laterally beyond the established bilateral relationship. In addition, in order to overcome the logistical difficulty caused by the ‘tyranny of distance’ in the Indo-Pacific area, the U.S. may request allies and partners play additional roles in this context beyond what they have done to date. Allies and partners need to consider these practical trends toward which*

*the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is heading and what this means for their own national interests, strategies, and operations.*

**Keywords:** *U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, USINDOPACOM, PACFLT, PACAF, USARPAC*

## Introduction: The Era of Indo-Pacific Strategy

If asked what trends in the field of international relations (IR) are in fashion, most IR intellectuals would point to keywords related to ‘Indo-Pacific,’ such as ‘Indo-Pacific strategy,’ ‘Indo-Pacific era,’ and so on. In fact, it was Japan that led the discussions on the Indo-Pacific from the early 2010s and proposed the concept of ‘Free and Open Indo-Pacific’ (FOIP) in 2017. Since then, an array of countries have published their own version of an Indo-Pacific strategy, including the United States in 2021 and the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 2022. Although we do not know how future generations will define the nature of international politics at this time, the term ‘Indo-Pacific’ certainly stands as the so-called structural essence of current geopolitics, as ‘Cold War’ did in the 1950s and ‘unipolar moment’ did in the late 1990s.

Despite the rise of the importance of the term ‘Indo-Pacific,’ this article argues that scholarly discussions on the concept seem to remain at the theoretical level. Wilkins (2019: 741, 756) says that debates about American grand strategy<sup>1</sup> in the Indo-Pacific region have returned to the fore, with regards to the

<sup>1</sup> Fever (2009) views that the term ‘grand strategy’ refers to the collection of plans and policies that comprise the state’s deliberate effort to harness political, military, diplomatic, and economic tools together to advance that state’s national interest. The classic exemplary of grand strategy is containment during the Cold War and liberal internationalism after the Cold War.

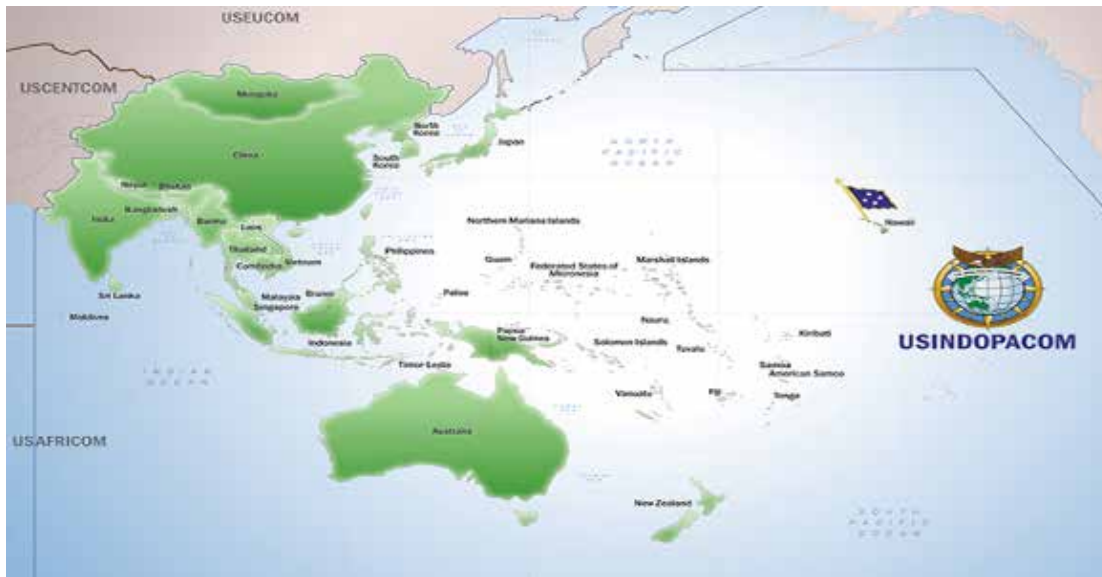


Figure 1: USINDOPACOM's Area of Responsibility (USINDOPACOM 2023)

central question: the rise of China. Recent academic writings on Indo-Pacific strategy are centered on such grand strategy level discussions as maintaining the liberal international order against its challenges and how to deter China in the context of power politics.<sup>2</sup>

However, in the policy field, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy has evolved from these conceptual discourses to a much more practical one, that manifests as an action plan. For example, from this article's viewpoint, the recent bilateral discussions on the transformation of U.S. Forces in Japan (USFJ)'s command and control structure stem from the ongoing process of U.S. execution of its Indo-Pacific strategy. In other words, practical transformation, such as change of military as well as diplomatic policy direction and reshuffling of the related organization and strategic locations, occurs as the critical element of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, moving us beyond conceptual debates about the Sino-U.S. rivalry or great power competition that academic articles still focus on.

The critical thinking of this article begins from this point: there is a discrepancy between what is

happening now on the ground and the main point of view of academics in terms of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. Given that, this article aims to provide a practical tool to understand U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, which evolves and develops day by day.

### ***Focus of This Article and the USINDOPACOM***

In order to move from the theoretical to the practical, this article focuses on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM), which is in charge of operationalizing the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy in the security and political-military field. USINDOPACOM defines its Area of Responsibility (AOR) as stretching from the waters off the west coast of the U.S. to the western border of India, and from Antarctica to the North Pole (USINDOPACOM 2023). The AOR of the command corresponds to the area that the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy covers.

USINDOPACOM is one of six geographic Unified Combatant Commands of the U.S. Armed Forces. The Commander of USINDOPACOM is the senior U.S. military authority in the Indo-Pacific Command AOR. Approximately 375,000 personnel are assigned to the USINDOPACOM AOR and the commander is supported by five subordinated component commands: U.S. Pacific Fleet (PACFLT), U.S. Pa-

2 For example, recent articles on Indo-Pacific Strategy published in *Foreign Affairs* include: "China's Alternative Order" (May/June 2024), "The Big One: Preparing for a Long War with China" (January/February 2024), and "China's Indo-Pacific Folly: Beijing's Belligerence is Revitalizing U.S. Alliance" (January 2023).

cific Air Forces (PACAF), U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC), U.S. Marine Forces (MARFORPAC), and U.S. Space Forces Indo-Pacific, which was added in November 2022. As subordinated unified commands, U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), U.S. Forces in Japan (USFJ), and Special Operations Command Pacific are under USINDOPACOM. This means that the command is not only a headquarters that makes plans and issues orders to its subordinates, but also a center that conducts operations with its forces in service.

In this respect, it is possible to say that USINDOPACOM is one of the best indexes to read and analyze what the U.S. is now planning and how it is acting towards the Indo-Pacific region beyond conceptual discussions. Here is the distinct value of this article: although there are policy-oriented reviews of U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, it is rare for them to focus on USINDOPACOM in order to read the directions in which U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is heading. In fact, Japanese security expert Tsuchiya (2023: 4) points out that in spite of the command's essential role, there is not much academic research taking a straightforward look at the Honolulu-based command.

Normally, when studying policies and actions of the military, a series of concepts (i.e., mission, strategy, operation, and tactics) are referred to as of "levels of war" (Harvey 2021: 75–81). Through reviewing the documents, statements, and actions of USINDOPACOM and its component commands, this article will follow those levels by examining the mission, strategy, and operations that the Hawaii-based commands are now planning and executing. It will then suggest implications for U.S. allies and partners when materializing their own Indo-Pacific strategy.

## **Review and Analysis: Mission, Strategy and Operations of USINDOPACOM and its Component Commands**

### ***U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)***

At the 2021 Halifax Forum, John C. Aquilino (2021), commander of the USINDOPACOM, described how the command viewed the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region. He mentioned that "militarily, seven of the world's ten largest armies, five of the world's declared nuclear nations, and some of the most sophisticated navies reside in the Indo-Pacific." The commander assessed the current situation in this region by saying that "the rules-based international order, is being challenged. Revisionist, autocratic powers seek to disrupt and displace the current system" (Aquilino 2021).

Against this backdrop, the document, Statement of Aquilino, U.S. Navy Commander, before the Senate Armed Services, Committee on U.S. Indo-Pacific Command Posture, which USINDOPACOM submitted to the U.S. Congress in March 2022, provides details into how the command perceives of its mission. USINDOPACOM defines its mission as to "prevent conflict through the execution of integrated deterrence, and should deterrence fail, be prepared to fight and win" (Aquilino 2022: 2). It further highlights the People's Republic of China (PRC) as one of the main challenges. In so doing, the command asserts that the PRC seeks to become a global military power and acquire the ability to seize Taiwan while developing conventional weapons that can reach the U.S. homeland (Aquilino 2022: 4). According to the document, the PRC seeks to establish a network of overseas military installations that allow support for the People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s power projection far beyond the Indo-Pacific.

Denny Roy (2023: 6–7) at East-West Center in Honolulu views USINDOPACOM's mission within a historical context. Since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, U.S. governments maintained a belief that the U.S. should reside in Asia, and this lesson from the past has remained influential, even into the post-Cold War era. Such thinking is represented in the 1992 Wolfowitz Doctrine, according to Roy's reinterpretation, which states that U.S. policy should prevent a hostile power from dominating East Asia

and that the U.S. should be a selective and self-interested global cop prepared to address wrongs that threaten U.S. or allied interests that could unsettle international relations.

As its strategy to materialize its mission, USINDOPACOM proposed ‘Seize the Initiative’ in 2022 (Aquilino 2023: 2–3). The first focus of the initiative is to strengthen the distributed force posture. An enhanced posture of the U.S. forces in the region supports all elements of the joint force, enables USINDOPACOM’s ability to seamlessly operate with allies and partners, and demonstrates U.S. commitment to a stable security environment. The second focus is a joint and combined operations campaign that synchronizes full spectrum military operations in all domains. This campaign is expected to build a warfighting advantage and accelerate the command’s ability to respond immediately. To do so, USINDOPACOM emphasizes persistent forces positioned west of the International Date Line (IDL) to deter potential adversary aggression. The third focus is delivering advanced warfighting capabilities that outpace those of challengers. The commander pointed out the importance of building capabilities that enhance USINDOPACOM’s decision superiority making better decisions better, faster against threats and enemies. The fourth focus is to build a robust network of allies and partners. The commander asserted that USINDOPACOM is strengthening all layers of its security network: allies, multilateral arrangements, partners, friends, and the Five Eyes nations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

### ***U.S. Pacific Fleet (PACFLT)***

Like all combatant commands, USINDOPACOM constitutes a headquarters without military units permanently assigned to it. USINDOPACOM operates with its component commands, such as PACFLT as the naval arm, which maintains their own military units and equipment. As the U.S. Navy component command of USINDOPACOM, PACFLT views itself as the largest force on the front line against

revisionist actors (Paparo 2022a). We can have hints of the perspective of PACFLT from the speeches of Samuel Paparo, commander of the fleet.

As for PACFLT’s mission, Paparo (2023) stated that “together with our joint and combined partner operations, we are positioned to deny and defend—across all domains—any attempts to break the peace accorded by the rules-based international order.” In detail, in 2022, in the format of the commander’s guidance, PACFLT made clear its mission as part of a joint force, building combat readiness and employing credible combat power (Paparo 2022a). Similar to the viewpoint of USINDOPACOM, the fleet named the PRC, Russia, and North Korea as its key challenges. In particular, against the PRC, PACFLT made clear that its mission is to “deter any PRC attempt to resolve disagreements or arrangements by force or coercion” (Paparo 2023). One interesting point is that the fleet said that its aim is “not to contain ... but to deter” the PRC. The fleet repeated that “this is not about containing PRC economic and military growth. It’s about ensuring that PRC’s actions and behaviors do not disrupt the rules-based international order” (Paparo 2023).

As ways to fulfill its mission, the commander of PACFLT suggested four elements of the fleet’s strategic priorities (Paparo 2022b). The first is to build and demonstrate dynamic combat power. Paparo argued that “this is key to executing deterrence.” According to him, deterrence is an enemy’s knowledge that you possess the capability and the will to impose costs for undesirable behavior. Demonstration means that there must be a contact layer that can impose early costs against said enemy. In keeping with this conceptualization, Medcalf’s (2020: 249) explanation of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific region is “the denial of gains to an adversary, and the ability to strike back.”

The second strategic element is to strengthen alliances and partnerships. The commander said that “it’s that ability to plug and play with our partners per each nation’s sovereign wishes to knit together that

combat capability that will provide that deterrent effect.” The third element is to improve the theater posture of the fleet’s forces, bases, places, access, operations, activities, and investments across the theater. As for the fourth element, Paparo emphasized information operations such as delivering the U.S. government’s top-level key messages in an effective manner. In a similar context, Sauders and McGuiness (2020: 8–9) focus on the Navy’s plan to counter Chinese A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) capabilities. They view the U.S. Navy as making efforts to disrupt the kill chain—the steps required to identify and destroy a target—which is necessary for Chinese missiles to locate and target U.S. carriers, as well as to develop the ability to operate and reload ship armaments from a diverse set of non-traditional port facilities.

At the operational and tactical level, PACFLT proposed a series of items to fulfill its strategy such as: defeating adversary amphibious forces in a contested environment by fielding cost-effective lethal asymmetric capabilities; developing agile, resilient, and secure joint and coalition fires network, which means integrated intercepting and attacking capabilities with sensors and data processing; delivering maritime intra-theater logistics to sustain combat operations and developing tactical-level electronic warfare and cyber capabilities (Paparo 2023). In addition, the naval command emphasized the importance of combined exercises with allies and partners.

### *Pacific Air Forces (PACAF)*

PACAF views that, in the complex and ever-changing Indo-Pacific strategic environment, it must continue to set the pace as the premier Air Force (PACAF 2023: 3). Against this backdrop, PACAF (2023: 4–5) argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Russian Federation (RF), and North Korea undermine the rules-based international order through coercive actions, enabled by their growing conventional and nuclear capabilities. In particular, according to PACAF, while speeding up military

modernization, the CCP retains expansionist claims and hegemonic ambitions.

To accomplish its mission, the Air Force focuses on the following strategic priorities. First, PACAF argues that its top priority is to protect Americans at home and abroad while defending the homeland, including territories west of the International Date Line (IDL). Second, to deter aggression, PACAF will maintain a resilient, combat-credible force postured for rapid response in the face of adversary counter-intervention efforts. PACAF will deny strategic competitors’ threats or actual use of military force to achieve political objectives or territorial goals. The third strategic priority is to reinforce allies and partners. PACAF views that the forces’ asymmetric advantage is the American-led global network of like-minded countries through enhanced integration and interoperability (PACAF 2023: 6).

The PACAF document suggests its operational and tactical plans fulfill its strategic priorities as follows (PACAF 2023: 7–15). Concerning its first strategic priority, ‘enhance warfighting advantage,’ PACAF emphasizes that the forces must be ready to generate and sustain airpower to deliver effects at the location and time of its choosing. In this context, the forces propose the concept of Agile Combat Employment (ACE).<sup>3</sup> In addition, to achieve its second strategic priority, ‘advance theater posture,’ PACAF pays attention to building up its capable posture to rapidly respond to a wide range of crises through expanding access, basing, and overflight across the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, PACAF plans to invest in rapid runway repair, fuel resiliency, aircraft shelters, prepositioned material, and communications infrastructure. As operational ways to fulfill its third strategic priority, ‘strengthen alliances and partnerships,’ PACAF will promote allies’ and partners’ participation in initiatives that bolster high-end combined training. As action plans, PACAF pays attention to fighter and bomber integration with allies and partners through

<sup>3</sup> ACE is the operational concept of dispersing teams of multi-capable Airmen to operate from remote or austere locations in a ‘hub-and-spoke’ manner to make air units more survivable (Hadley, 2023).

activities such as an increase of 5th-generation fighter training.

### *U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC)*

USARPAC (2023: 2) set its mission as “providing the Combined Joint Force with decisive integrated land power to consolidate gains across a joint campaign and to prevail in conflict in the U.S.’ priority theater.” Evans (2021: 27) explains the U.S. Army’s role in the Indo-Pacific theater as that of a “Joint Enabler.” According to him, for the purpose of U.S. power projection, the Army has long endeavored to solve the conundrum of how to redefine its supporting role in the Joint Force in such a way as to regain the U.S. advantage in the Indo-Pacific region.

USARPAC (2023: 3–6) argues that coercive tactics, mis- and disinformation operations, border incursions, excessive maritime claims, territorial disputes, river damming, violent extremism, domestic instability, drug and human trafficking, and social inequality present invasive challenges to the sovereign rights of each country. Among these regional concerns, USARPAC focuses on the PRC. The force views that the PRC’s core interest to ‘resolutely safeguard’ sovereignty, security, and development translates into perceived vulnerabilities given the PRC’s contentious claims within its ambiguous ‘nine-dash line’ in the South China Sea. In this context, according to USARPAC, the PRC is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances.

USARPAC aims to contribute to USINDOPACOM’s operationalization through the following four inter-related strategic areas of focus: organizing, warfighting, campaigning, and wargaming efforts (USARPAC 2023: 11–18). First, with regards to organizing, USARPAC has newly added units such as Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTF), 5th Composite Watercraft Company and 5th Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB). Second, for warfighting, USARPAC emphasizes the Joint Pacific Multinational

Readiness Center (JPMRC). Through the JPMRC, USARPAC aims to generate ready, combat credible forces to project west of the IDL via Operation Pathways, which is the critical element of USARPAC’s third strategic focus, campaigning. In fact, JPMRC training exercises ran from late October through early November 2022 in Hawaii, with 6,000 soldiers of the USARPAC alongside military partners from Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

At the tactical and operational levels, for the operational design of campaigning, USARPAC has developed ‘Operation Pathways.’ Operation Pathways aims to posture USARPAC Forces to respond agilely in crisis or contingency as an improvement over former reliance on fixed bases and static force levels (USARPAC 2023: 16). In addition, in terms of posture, USARPAC emphasizes building ‘Joint Interior Lines.’<sup>4</sup> Their view is that an ‘inside force’ can more easily supply and communicate, and more quickly and unpredictably move forces. In fact, through combined exercises with allies and partners, USARPAC tries to actualize the concept of the Joint Interior Line. For example, *Talisman Sabre (2023)* was a U.S. and Australia-led multilateral combined exercise that included the first joint-logistics over-the-shore operation. Brumfield (2023) asserts that both of these events demonstrated the ability to build interior lines, deploy combat credible forces, and resupply in the sea.

### **Key Findings and Implications for U.S. Allies and Partners**

From the above analysis, we can find key elements regarding the directions which USINDOPACOM are heading from the operational and practical perspectives, and thus a practical index to understand the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. First, at the mission and strategy level, USINDOPACOM and its component commands commonly assume that their main position is to deter and defend. In other words, it is possible to say that rather than taking a pre-emptive

<sup>4</sup> According to USARPAC (2023: 17), Joint Interior Lines describe the lines of movement, communication, and supply that are shorter inside an area than on the outside.

Table 1: USINDOPACOM and its Components Commands' Mission, Strategy, and Operational Focus<sup>5</sup>

	USINDOPACOM	PACFLT	PACAF	USARPAC
Mission	prevent conflict through integrated deterrence - Should deterrence fail, be prepared to fight and win	deny and defend any attempts to break the rules-based intl order	set the pace as the premier Air Force in the Indo-Pacific - maintaining and exploiting comparative advantages	provide the Combined Joint Force with integrated land power
Key Challenge	PRC - seek global power and seize Taiwan - develop conventional weapons that can hit the U.S. homeland	PRC - attempt to remake the order to its own proprietary advantage - not to contain but to deter PRC	CCP - speed up military modernization - retain expansionist claims and hegemonic ambitions	PRC - expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project military power
Strategy	titled as "Seize the Initiative" - defend the homeland, deter strategic attacks, deter aggression, and build a resilient joint force	build dynamic, combat power  strengthen alliances and partnerships  improve theater posture  enhance info-operations	defend the homeland,  deter aggression - maintain a resilient, combat-credible force  reinforce allies and partners	organizing - add units: MDTF, 5th Composite Watercraft Company and 5th SFAB  warfighting - JPMRC: generate ready, combat credible forces to project west of the IDL
Operational Focus	strengthen distributed force posture  conduct a joint and combined operations campaign  deliver advanced warfighting capabilities  build a robust network of allies and Partners	defeat adversary amphibious force  develop agile, resilient, and secure joint and coalition fires network  deliver maritime intra-theater logistics  strengthen tactical-level electronic warfare  conduct combined exercises	enhance warfighting advantage - be ready to deliver effects at the location and time chosen - Concept of ALE  advance theater posture - invest in runway repair, fuel resiliency, aircraft shelters, prepositioned material  strengthen alliances and partnerships - tighter integration/dombier integration	campaigning - Operation Pathways: increase regional presence / reduce transportation costs / over concepts reliant on fixed bases and static force levels - Joint Interior Lines: gain positional power as 'insider force'  wargaming

approach, USINDOPACOM and its component commands have taken a 'wait and see' position, particularly against the PRC, while strengthening their readiness and warfighting capabilities. The keywords and the phrase of USINDOPACOM, "Prevent conflict through integrated deterrence. Should deterrence fail, be prepared to fight and win," demonstrates this basic position well. Their actual activities support that this is not just in words, but in deed.

The second key finding at the operational level is that to fulfill its mission and strategy, USINDOPACOM and its component commands consistently emphasize the importance of strengthening its posture. Paparo (2022b) defines the notion of posture by saying, "It's forces. It's bases. It's places. It's access. It's operation, activities, and investments across the theater." One of the main reasons why USINDOPA-

5 The name of 'Freedom Edge' is a combination of two existing exercises: 'Freedom Shield (U.S.-ROK annual joint exercise)' and 'Keen Edge (U.S.-JPN annual joint exercise).

COM and its component commands emphasize an enhanced posture seems to have originated from a geographical feature of the Indo-Pacific theater, that is to say, "tyranny of distance" (Linetsky 2022: 210–214). In other words, as Figure 2 shows, the theater is so wide that U.S. forces are facing the difficulty of coordinating and operating over vast distances. The USARPAC's efforts, such as Operational Pathways, Joint Interior Lines, and conducting of related military exercises, can be viewed in this context.

Third, USINDOPACOM and its component commands are now establishing new types of troops equipped with enhanced mobility and capabilities covering multi-domains. This focus seems to be in connection with the efforts to improve USINDOPACOM's posture. For example, the U.S. Army established two Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTFs) in recent years, including the third MDTF based in Hawaii, which is under the control of USARPAC. While defining MDTF as theater-specific units, USARPAC says that MDTF brings together existing lethal and non-lethal capabilities by integrating and synchronizing them across multi-domains—air, land, water, space, and cyber—in order to overcome a specific target (Shimooka 2022).

Fourth, all the commands emphasize the reinforcement of relationships with allies and partners. This aspect is also highlighted in the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy. One step towards this is that USINDOPACOM and its forces have been materializing and furthering cooperation and interoperability with allies and partners by conducting a variety of joint military exercises.

Evans' explanation of the concept of 'Ring of Fires' helps us to understand the inter-connectivity of the above four key findings. Ring of Fires is a deterrence concept that would employ U.S. Army precision, long-range strike capabilities to target PRC land and maritime assets to cripple China's economic means of survival in the unlikely event of war (Evans 2021: 29). To realize the concept, new capabilities are required for U.S. forces, such as long-range preci-

sion strike capability, basing, and pre-positioning of supplies and other logistics support for distributed All-Domain operations. Evans argues that new bases could be established either through new status of forces-type agreements that permit basing, training, joint exercises, interoperability, and joint-unified command with allies. In addition, Evans (31–32) explains the role of MDTFs from the perspective of Ring of Fires. Using MDTFs, the U.S. Army’s targeting plan would be a maritime attack against PRC surface warships and merchant shipping. The targeting plan is based on Army missile ranges and missile warheads for different functions. According to the argument of Evans, to fire on the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that sustain overseas PLA expeditionary forces, and to do so while signaling the means to hold the Chinese economy hostage, would credibly demonstrate U.S. commitment to maintaining peace and stability in the region in the face of challenges to the status quo.

This analysis and review of USINDOPACOM’s mission, operations, and tactics has implications for the allies and partners of the U.S. when pursuing their own Indo-Pacific strategies. For example, at the strategic level, USINDOPACOM focuses on building a robust network of allies and partners to reinforce the deterrence capability in the region. Accordingly, there is a likelihood that the U.S. side will additionally request allies and partners such as Japan and the ROK to act jointly or mini-laterally beyond the existing ‘hub-and-spokes’ based bilateral relationship. Wilkins (2022: 474) purports that the U.S. has sought to re-energize some of its alliances and attract new strategic partners in accordance with its vision of a networked alignment architecture. The variety of military exercises that USINDOPACOM has led demonstrates this trend. For example, this June, ‘Freedom Edge,’ U.S.-Korea-Japan trilateral multi-domain exercises, were held for the first time. The name of this new exercise highlights the thinking behind such initiatives. Accordingly, allies and partners are required to be ready to meet these developments based on their relationship with the

U.S. as well as their own national interests as they are currently perceived.

At the operational level, USINDOPACOM and its component commands commonly point out the necessity of overcoming the logistical difficulty of ‘tyranny of distance.’ Thus, there is a possibility that the U.S. will request allies and partners play additional roles. For example, Evans argues that under the concept of Ring of Fires, the U.S. Army is required to reposition to a broader range of firing and logistics positions than it currently occupies. The recent development of the relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines, which allow U.S. forces’ more access to Philippine bases under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), can be understood in this context (Buck 2024).

In addition, the U.S. is making efforts to renovate or transform the current command structure with the forces of its allies and partners in order to enhance its operational effectiveness. The ongoing discussions on the transformation of the command and control structures of the USFJ and Japanese Self-Defense Forces, which became public on the occasion of the U.S.-Japan summit held in April, imply this possibility. All in all, with the review and analysis of mission, strategy, and operational essence of the USINDOPACOM and its component commands, this article discovered the practical trends toward which the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is heading. This discovery is expected to provide clues for the allies and partners of the U.S. when planning and executing their own Indo-Pacific strategies. The essence of these trends is that ongoing U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy is highly likely to request that allies and partners to do more in the region which will, accordingly, provide opportunities as well as risks to the countries. In addition, the countries will face domestic support or opposition, as well as backlash and pressure from those countries competing with the U.S. The development of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as a structural variable in the Indo-Pacific region demands that allies and partners think and act in a prudent manner to ensure their national inter-



ests. They must be like surfers in Hawaii, where USINDOPACOM is located, who read the directions and strength of the tide and wind, and thus ride well on big waves.

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## About the Author

**Dongmin Shin**, former infantry officer of the ROK Army, studies international relations with a focus on security affairs. He graduated from Seoul National University, earning a Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree in international relations. He also holds a Doctoral Degree in War Studies from King’s College London. His articles include “North Korea’s Perspectives in Its Argument for a Peace Treaty” (2017) and “A Critical Review of the Concept of Middle Power” (2015). Mr. Shin now lives in Honolulu.