

Bases, Places, and Faces

Operational Maneuver and Sustainment in the Indo-Pacific Region

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Since the dramatic demonstration of US military power in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when a then reasonably well-armed Iraq was rapidly ejected from Kuwait and defeated with great losses, potential opponents have studied the US military way of war to determine the most effective means to counter US advantages. Careful observers noted as central to success the ability of the US and coalition forces to build up forces uncontested and then to operate from large, fixed bases with minimal interruption throughout the campaign.¹ In the decades since, potential opponents have adopted strategies and made major investments to limit and constrain the ability of the United States and its allied or partnered forces to assemble forces, conduct operational maneuver, and logistically sustain major combat operations. Known as antiaccess and area-denial (A2/AD) warfare, the goals of such strategies are to deny sanctuary, inhibit maneuver, and attrit forces to the point that insufficient combat power can be brought to bear at decisive points in the battle.²

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been a particularly astute student of the US way of war, and for the past three decades Beijing has deliberately developed doctrine and capabilities to counter US and allied advantages. Buoyed by a rapidly growing economy over the same period, and unconstrained by prior treaty obligations such as the now defunct Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty,³ the PRC continues to assemble significant forces intended to hold targets at risk as far away as the second island chain in the western Pacific. These forces employ a variety of all-domain threats—surface-to-surface, air-to-surface, undersea, space, and cyber—all intended to complicate what is an already difficult maneuver and sustainment challenge in the region simply by virtue of the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific. Lines of communication are long, there is a lot of water, and even under favorable conditions, US and allied military planners find that there are never “enough” assets available to maneuver forces nor “enough” sustainment supplies to meet every need.

Yet the A2/AD strategy pursued by the PRC is no sure path to victory. Those very same US and allied planners understand the challenges of conflict in the Indo-Pacific and have accounted for them in their plans. Put another way, it is one thing to have a bunch of weapons available to shoot. It is another thing entirely to effectively counter an entire system that understands the nature of that threat and

is actively adjusting in recognition of the changing security environment in the Indo-Pacific. These active adjustments are an evolving combination of “bases, places, and faces,” reflecting exactly what the United States, in concert with allies and partners, is doing to ensure operational maneuver and sustainment will continue despite the aggressive offensive arsenal being accumulated by the PRC.

Bases

US overseas basing structure in the western Pacific is largely a result of the enduring outcomes from multiple conflicts, especially World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam conflict. While some installations were downsized, or even closed, in the 1990s,⁴ the infrastructure and capacity at the remaining “main operating bases” (MOB) remain significant. The United States relies upon these installations to support daily commitments in support of Alliance obligations to Japan and Korea and to support and sustain global operations as US forces transit the Pacific to other areas. In a conflict with the PRC, the United States will undoubtedly have to rely on these MOB as key locations from which to maneuver; to receive sustainment flow from Hawaii, Alaska, and the continental US; and to further distribute such sustainment deeper into the theater. Not surprisingly, PRC military planners understand this network well and would certainly target the MOB at the beginning of a conflict. Even when actively defended, these MOB are vulnerable and, thus, cannot be the sole means of US and allied maneuver and sustainment in a great-power conflict.

Places

These “places” are what the “bases” are not—alternate locations, sometimes remote, often austere, but with sufficient infrastructure to support maneuver and sustainment should use of these alternative operating locations become necessary. In some cases, these locations will already have some element of US forces present, while in other cases, these will be host-nation military facilities, or even civilian airfields, ports, or other facilities typically not put to military use. The key reason for these places is to permit dispersal of US, allied, and partner forces, reducing the concentration of assets at the MOB and, thereby, increasing survivability and the ability to operate despite the opponent’s A2/AD strategy, which will include attempts at saturation attack.

Agile Combat Employment (ACE) is the USAF method of dispersed operations to survive and operate. The US Marine Corps’ equivalent to ACE is termed Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO), while the US Navy approach to dispersed operations is contained in the overall Distributed Maritime Operations

(DMO) concept. The US Army, through the development of Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTF), is also establishing mechanisms to account for the likelihood of saturation attacks. While the various approaches differ in terms of forces and locations, the fundamentals remain the same: decomposition of larger force elements into smaller elements, dispersal at multiple locations, and use of a combination of pre-positioned materials and in-stride resupply—all enabled by a resilient communications network that enables command echelons to remain connected and, even under rare cases of full communications denial, empowered by mission-type orders upon which lower echelon commanders can operate from clearly stated higher command intent. Within the USINDOPACOM area of responsibility, each of these service components are regularly testing, evaluating, and then exercising these approaches to dispersed operations, with the intended end state to be that operating in such a manner becomes standard for the force. To the greatest extent possible, this process is also playing out in concert with allied and partner forces who will play key roles by conducting their own dispersed operations or supporting and enabling US forces that have dispersed to locations within the host country.

Looking at this from the PRC's perspective, the ability of US, allied, and partner forces to successfully execute dispersed operations presents a daunting dilemma. For example, the PRC might have 500 long-range weapons that could reach the 10 MOBs that they have determined must be struck to significantly degrade US, allied, and partner operational maneuver and sustainment. Fifty weapons per location results in a fairly good ratio to ensure that all key targets at, say an airfield, can be struck, ideally early in the conflict to “freeze up” maneuver and sustainment. However, what happens when forces disperse and, instead of 10 MOBs, the target set now expands to 10 MOBs plus 50 alternate operating locations spread widely across the theater? Simple math indicates that the ratio of weapons to targets drops precipitously—and with that ratio, PRC confidence that an operating location can be neutralized decreases correspondingly. In this circumstance, the element of time also matters considerably—with only a very limited number of weapons to possibly align to each operating location, does the PRC shoot early for as much effect as possible, or do they hold weapons in reserve and wait for better understanding of the US, allied, and partner scheme of maneuver? One obvious solution could be to simply buy more weapons, but it is important to realize that it requires nearly an order of magnitude increase in the number of long-range precision-strike weapons to restore the previous 50:1 ratio. The cost of going from 500 to 3,000 such weapons is anything but inconsequential for even an economy the size of the PRC.

So, the decision dilemmas and cost-imposition resulting from dispersed operations in the Indo-Pacific are significant. To be clear, these dispersal activities are

not merely aspirational. Each of the various components of USINDOPACOM are developing and practicing how they will maneuver and sustain dispersed forces. It is complicated work and will require institutional adjustment of the various military services to ensure enduring effect, but this is work in progress today. However, dispersed operations in the Indo-Pacific will always require willing partners to host US forces. This is where the “faces” part of this construct comes into significant importance.

Faces

The *faces* in this discussion are the connections made daily through direct, frequent, and persistent personal interaction within the Indo-Pacific theater among US, allied, and partner nation forces. The actual mechanisms to do so can vary significantly; in some cases, daily interaction in command centers or performing other operational functions is the norm. In other cases, frequent interaction during combined training activities generates the contact. Less frequent, and episodic, engagement through exercise or subject matter expert exchanges are often the primary contact when military-to-military ties are less robust. However, the fundamental positive element of each is some form of direct human contact, or face-to-face interaction.

The consistency of US military engagement with allies and partners is a clear sign of two-way commitment driven by common values and a shared belief in the importance of a free and open Indo-Pacific region. This sense of commitment can be augmented by, but never fully replaced with, virtual means of engagement and communication. Boots on the ground make personal relationships possible. Equally as important, physical presence allows better understanding of potential operating locations, including what is needed to successfully maneuver and employ from those locations. To the benefit of the host location, this familiarity can then lead to infrastructure investments made to the benefit of both military and civilian use at the dispersal location. Finally, the frequent interaction of US, ally, and partner faces across the theater creates opportunities to enhance interoperability. Initially, that could be focused primarily on process interoperability, such as common terminology, frequency use, and basic tactics, techniques, and procedures. More deeply, common investment in similar equipment creates deeper interoperability among systems, resulting in opportunities for shared training, supply, and sustainment activities. Taken together, the benefits of direct, frequent, and persistent personal interaction—trust, understanding of the operating environment, interoperability—all enable operational maneuver and sustainment by contributing to reliable and consistent access to airspace, facilities, and equipment necessary to successfully conduct dispersed operations.

Putting It All Together

The result of this combination of bases, places, and faces amounts to a web of operating locations, none of which are the same in terms of capacity, capability, or location. Some will afford the United States and its allies and partners the full range of options from which to respond to PRC aggression. Others may be limited in which functions may occur and perhaps constrained to activities not directly related to combat but only for support functions. However, most will likely be somewhere in between, with the willingness of the host nation to provide broader support a function of capacity as well as their own interests. The scope and extent of PRC aggression is also a factor, since the more China is perceived as the aggressor, the more likely the web of operating locations available to the United States and its allies and other partners will expand in depth and breadth. Taken collectively, this dispersed network of MOBs and alternative operating locations poses a significant challenge to the A2/AD strategy pursued by the PRC. Dispersed operational maneuver and sustainment enabled by bases, places, and faces ensures PRC decision makers can have little confidence in being able to completely, or even sufficiently, prevent US, ally, and partner forces from remaining viable even during a PRC onslaught. The absence of such confidence helps to avoid armed conflict and supports US, allied, and partner goals for a free and open Indo-Pacific. 🌐

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Notes

1. For an analysis immediately after the Gulf War of the effect on PRC military thought, *see*: Harlan W. Jencks, “Chinese Evaluations of Desert Storm: Implications for PRC Security,” *Journal of East Asian Affairs* 6, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1992): 447–77.

2. For a thorough study of this subject, *see*: Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering Anti-Access and Area-Denial Strategies* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

3. The INF treaty was a 1987 agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union to eliminate all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges of 500 to 5,500 kilometers. The PRC was never a party to this treaty. In 2019, the United States officially withdrew from the treaty after years of assertions of Russian noncompliance.

4. Several circumstances led to the drawdown in US bases in the Pacific in this timeframe. In some cases, the end of the Cold war enabled the United States to pursue efficiencies by concentrating forces at the larger bases and closing smaller installations. However, in other cases, host-nation preferences also came into play. The closure of Subic Bay Naval Base and Clark Air Base in the Philippines occurred as result of multiple factors, including damage from a volcanic event and strong sentiment displayed by the Government of the Philippines to reduce the US presence.