

Winning in the Indo-Pacific Despite the Tyranny of Distance

The Necessity of an Entangled Diarchy of Air and Sea Power

LT COL GRANT “SWAT” GEORGULIS, USAF

The Russian invasion of Ukraine continues to illustrate an immutable fact. Without control of the air, ground forces are frustrated and less mobile. Thus, an army cannot gain desired control to achieve political objectives. In the Pacific, the Chinese are observing the conflict in Ukraine closely, as many believe it is a matter of *when*, not *if*, a play for Taiwan commences. If the United States is serious about thwarting any overt Chinese Communist Party (CCP) action against Taiwan, localized control of the air and sea is a must. The United States can reach the far side of the Pacific quickly and powerfully to exercise military power only by achieving localized command of the air and sea.¹ To do so, the United States must accomplish two things. First, it must ensure access to air bases within the geographical region for military operations. Second, it needs to leverage land-based air and carrier-based aviation to achieve localized air and sea control.

The United States' geography requires reliance on air and maritime lines of communications to project forces across the globe.² As a result, the United States confronts a paradox within space and time strategies of war. The United States has been able to arrive quickly and powerfully to theaters of war, but rarely both, in equal measure, at the same time. Identifying and achieving the optimal balance between presence and power constitutes one of the essential tasks for US strategists.

For centuries, theorists posited two power structures on the international stage: maritime and continental, each with its own formulae to balance speed and power. Airpower brought another calculus in the transcendent pursuit of control. *Control* is the ability of a military force to dictate actions in a desired region or domain in pursuit of national objectives. Optimization of speed and power requires positioning forces at the right place and time, making control more likely.

Russia has yet to maximize the concept of speed and power in its assault against Ukraine, thus preventing conditions to achieve control. Russia began positioning forces around the Ukrainian border in early 2021.³ Under the guise of “exercises,” the Russians pursued power prevalence through overwhelming numbers. Perhaps not believing Russia would invade, Ukrainian leaders did not respond in kind with a concentration of forces near its borders with Russia and Belarus. Despite this, Russia has been unable to establish air superiority and gain freedom of move-

ment. The primary Ukrainian capability preventing air superiority is the ingenious implementation of its surface-to-air capabilities. Through unpredictable mobility and disciplined radiation of target-engagement radars, Ukraine has been able to deny Russian air forces freedom of movement over the skies of Ukraine. As of 12 July 2022, Ukraine claims to have destroyed 217 Russian aircraft, 188 helicopters, and 676 drones.⁴

Additionally, due to Russia's atrophied navy, Moscow cannot rely on carrier-based aviation to supplement land-based air forces. Russia's lone aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, is not projected to rejoin the fleet until late 2023.⁵ Russia's lack of carrier-based aviation translates to Ukraine's ability to focus its surface-to-air missile systems targeting aircraft originating from air bases in Crimea and along Ukraine's eastern border with Russia. Russia's failure to establish air superiority is a prime cause of its current struggles.

The United States must focus like a laser on the need for air superiority in the Pacific region. The United States must recapitalize islands gained during World War II to form a Second Island Chain of strategic expeditionary points. The current First Island Chain, with basing locations on Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines, is neither a survivable nor viable operating location due to Chinese military capabilities in long-range bombers, cruise missiles, and theater ballistic missiles. Thus, the United States should prioritize Midway Island, the Marianas, Palau, and the Marshall Islands to complement an already fortified Guam. Doing so will create a strategically valuable Second Island Chain to support air and maritime operations in the Indo-Pacific. Three efforts are critical at these islands. First, the expansion and development of multiple runways at each location are needed. Second is the maintenance of deep-water channels and harbors capable of receiving US Navy (USN) surface ships and submarines. Third, the United States must deploy adequate air defenses to make these islands twenty-first-century expeditionary strategic points.

Like World War II, multiple airstrips will be required at each Second Island Chain installation to achieve force dispersion and complicate China's targeting conundrum. By constructing numerous airstrips at each location, the United States can launch significantly more combat and surveillance aircraft, increasing the capacity of forces capable of being brought to bear. As Lt Gen Joseph Guastella, USAF, the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, believes that "multiple airfields on Pacific islands provide greater capacity and increase launch speed for valuable combat aircraft needed to achieve air superiority."⁶

Multiple airstrips on Second Chain islands also provide flexibility for carrier operations. Presently, if a US aircraft carrier needs repairs while operating in the Pacific, it must sail with its complement of aircraft back to the nearest major port,

possibly as far away as the American West Coast. In the throngs of potential conflict with China, multiple airstrips on Second Chain islands could allow carriers to send their air wings to operate as land-based detachments.

Perhaps the model airfield to implement this strategy is Tinian Island's North Field, from which B-29 bombers delivered the nuclear airstrikes that ended World War II.⁷ North Field consists of four massive parallel runways separated by no less than eight parking aprons. In 2019, the United States secured a 40-year lease, providing access to the other World War II-era airstrip on Tinian, West Field, now serving as the international airport. This deal will allow the United States to expand upon the already existing 8,500-foot runway and parking aprons to support more combat aircraft.⁸

Another critical piece to the Second Island Chain concept, the tiny island nation of Palau, has already signaled its desire to assist the Washington in strengthening its Pacific posture, inviting the United States to build "land bases, port facilities, and airfields."⁹ Securing additional harbors and port facilities like that on Guam at other Second Island Chain locations such as Palau allows greater access for maritime combat forces, especially valuable nuclear attack submarines. Additionally, Palau is one of Taiwan's four Pacific allies. The United States should recall the problem faced by the British, having to stage 4,000 miles from the Falklands at Ascension Island and secure Palau as a strategic expeditionary point that lies less than 1,500 miles from Taiwan.

North Field should be the model for airfields that need to be established at all Second Island Chain locations to serve as strategic expeditionary points in competition with China. Like Tinian, most of these islands also have functioning civilian airfields the United States can expand to increase available airstrips for military use. Greater capacity of aircraft at each island equates to greater power. And multiple runways swell the speed at which these aircraft can launch and conduct air superiority operations. Simply put, the power and speed variables created by establishing multiple airfields among the Second Island Chain will generate control for the United States. Unlike some aspects of airpower that fail to transcend time and technology, airfields capable of quickly delivering massed air effects are timeless and unsinkable.

The USN needs to rethink the construct of its surface forces by harkening back to the World War II concept of dispersed fast carriers supported by light carriers. Pioneered by legendary USN admiral Marc Mitscher, the Navy should develop light carriers to pair with its current fast nuclear supercarriers.

The Navy should invest in a minimum of six light carriers capable of complementing the existing supercarrier force. It is on the way, with "Lightning carriers" via *Wasp*- and *American*-class amphibious assault ships capable of carrying 13 or

more F-35Bs.¹⁰ For the cost of a single *Ford*-class supercarrier, the Navy could acquire three light flattops and their air wings.

Supercarriers supported by light carriers complement the multiple airfield discussion regarding Second Island Chain airfields. Multiple carriers spread out on the open ocean present a similar targeting problem and provide the same dispersal capability as multiple airstrips on Pacific islands like North Field on Tinian Island.

To compete with China in the Pacific and maximize the power and speed variables needed to achieve control, the USN should purchase at least six light carriers, allocating no less than three specifically for the Pacific. Paired with the two supercarriers in the Pacific, the United States would have a formidably dispersible carrier force.

Second Island Chain airfields and super/light carrier mixes are only part of the equation to success in the far Pacific. Modern-day Chinese capabilities pose significant risks to the airfields and harbors therein. Therefore, to succeed in competition with China, the United States needs air defense assets, in addition to the aircraft operating from the island, to protect airfield infrastructure and surface force sustainment.

US Indo-Pacific Command leaders favor a mixture of Aegis Ashore, offshore Aegis destroyers, and an aging Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system to defend places like Guam. However, given China's rapidly rising attack capabilities, the United States will need to significantly increase Aegis Ashore's role in the coming years.

Successful competition against China in the Pacific will resolve itself in an entangled diarchy of air and sea power. The symbiotic relationship between land- and carrier-based air presents a variable of power technologically superior and unique among great-power nations. Suppose this combination can be made dispersible, defensible, and survivable. In that case, it will significantly complicate Chinese targeting challenges and ensure the United States can arrive, stay, compete, and win on the far side of the Pacific. ♣

Lt Col Grant "SWAT" Georgulis, USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Georgulis is the Commander, 965th Airborne Air Control Squadron, Tinker AFB, Oklahoma. He commands an operational E-3 Airborne Warning and Control Squadron consisting of more than 200 personnel and six aircraft valued at more than \$3 billion. He entered the Air Force in 2007 through the ROTC program at Texas State University-San Marcos. Lieutenant Colonel Georgulis has served on a combatant command staff, was an Air Force Weapons School instructor, and graduated from the Naval War College's College of Naval Command and Staff and Air University's School of Advanced Air and Space Studies.

Notes

1. Localized control, or command, of the air and sea is the principal theme of this commentary. I am borrowing the description from Sir Julian Corbett who theorized command of the sea was either general or local and temporary or permanent.

2. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 605.

3. Matthew P. Funaiole, et al., “Unpacking the Russian Troop Buildup along Ukraine’s Border,” *High Resolution*, 22 April 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>.

4. The Kyiv Independent [@KyivIndependent], “These Are the Indicative Estimates of Russia’s Combat Losses as of May 28, According to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. <https://t.co/Amu2h8CCK8>,” tweet, *Twitter*, 28 May 2022, <https://twitter.com/>.

5. Martin Manaranche, “Russian Aircraft Carrier To Rejoin The Fleet In Late 2023,” *Naval News*, 24 June 2021, <https://www.navalnews.com/>.

6. Lt Gen Joseph Gueastella, Interview with Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations, Headquarters Air Force, April 5, 2021.

7. Tyler Rogoway, “Air Force to Build Alternate Airbase On Tinian Island In Case Guam Gets Knocked Out,” *The Drive*, 1 December 2020, <https://www.thedrive.com/>.

8. Rogoway, “Air Force to Build Alternate Airbase.”

9. “Palau Invites US Military to Build Bases as China Seeks Regional Clout,” *The Defense Post*, 4 September 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/>.

10. Kyle Mizokami, “The Navy Has a Supercarrier Problem, So It’s Looking to Get Lighter,” *Popular Mechanics*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/>.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.