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RISING STARS OVER THE PACIFIC?

CULTIVATING INDO-PACIFIC EXPERTISE IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

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2026

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Katherine Bloomfield, Brian Davis, Eric Edelman, James R. FitzSimonds, Frank Hoffman, Heino Klinck, Paul Martin, Evan B. Montgomery, and several anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on the draft. They would also like to thank the participants in a workshop that CSBA hosted in August 2025 to discuss the draft findings of this study.

The analysis and findings presented here are solely the responsibility of the authors. CSBA receives funding from a broad and diverse group of contributors, including private foundations, government agencies, and corporations. A complete list of these organizations can be found on our website at www.csbaonline.org/about/contributors.

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Executive Summary

The last four presidential administrations have assessed the Indo-Pacific region to be the world's most consequential theater for U.S. national security. This rhetorical focus on the Pacific has had to compete with the reality of U.S. commitments across the globe, particularly in the Middle East and Europe. This study explores the extent to which a focus on the Indo-Pacific region has been reflected in the behavior of the U.S. armed Services. More broadly, it examines how the prioritization of various geographic theaters has shifted over the past quarter century and the extent to which the incentive structures of the Services have accommodated those shifts.

We employed two approaches to get a sense of these historical trends. First, we created a dataset of the careers of senior uniformed joint and Service leaders from 2010 to the present. That database was used to assess trends in assignments by Service over time. Second, we augmented this quantitative data set with a series of structured interviews with current and former joint and Service leaders to gain additional insight into Service talent management policies. To get a sense of how current policies seek to shape the future of the Services, we collected recent Service promotion board precepts to assess the weight they place on regional experience in general or in any region. We also examined changes to Service concepts of operations and associated force structure.

After more than 15 years of emphasis on the growing threat posed by China and the strategic importance of the broader Indo-Pacific region across presidential administrations, focus on the theater among the U.S. armed Services remains uneven. The Navy maintained a strong focus on the region throughout the period, followed by the Marine Corps, Air Force, and Army. This is reflected in the career paths of senior leaders, the value that the individual Services place on tours of duty in the region, and the organizational culture of the Services. Moreover, U.S. force structure has not undergone major shifts in the face of the Chinese long-range strike threat. Rather, the U.S. Navy and Air Force continue to invest in large numbers of relatively short-range tactical aircraft based at high-signature land and sea bases located very close to the Chinese mainland.

Navy. Of the four traditional Services, the Navy is the one that most identifies with the Pacific. Its strategic traditions emphasize the region, and the importance of the area is echoed in the books the Service's leaders value. Moreover, the Navy has traditionally prized tours of duty in the region as stepping stones to Service leadership. For years, the Navy has emphasized the need to compete with and perhaps fight China. A series of events in the last decade, however, disrupted traditional promotion paths and thus the link between the region and Navy leadership.

Marine Corps. The Marine Corps also identifies strongly with the Pacific given its World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War heritage. This identity competes, however, with the Service's identity as the nation's "911 force" as well as its heavy involvement on land in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the Marine Corps has done more to tailor itself to the Pacific than any other Service across the tenure of several commandants. The Marine Corps has developed doctrine and fielded formations designed to support a maritime campaign in the Western Pacific. The Marine Corps' move to embrace the mission of countering China in the Western Pacific—in line with the then-existing National Defense Strategy—drew strong protests from former Marine Corps leaders who saw that mission as an abdication of the capabilities needed for contingencies in other theaters.

Army. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the greater Middle East supplanted Europe as the Army's primary theater of interest. By contrast, the Pacific, with the partial exception of the Korean Peninsula, has been seen by the Service as a theater of secondary importance. The Army has in recent decades drawn its leadership from officers whose tours have largely been in Europe and the Middle East; service in the Indo-Pacific theater has been rare among Army Chiefs and Vice Chiefs of Staff. The Army has begun to field new formations that appear to be driven by the need to sense, communicate, and strike across the vast expanse of the Pacific. At the same time, the senior Army leaders with Pacific experience who were interviewed for this project were concerned that other Army leaders have not accorded enough importance to the Indo-Pacific region. In particular, they believed that the Army lacked a deliberate policy to build intellectual capital related to the region.

Air Force. Although combat pilots make up less than one-fifth of the Air Force, they have dominated the Service since its inception: All Air Force Chiefs of Staff since 1982, with two exceptions, have been fighter pilots. Air Force leaders have acknowledged the need to prepare for the range of Indo-Pacific threats. There is tension, however, between a force structure largely based upon tactical fighter aircraft with relatively limited ranges and the geography of the Western Pacific, which requires aircraft capable of operating over long ranges and has an intense Chinese threat to air bases in the region. The Air Force has responded to the China threat by promoting sixth-generation long-range strike aircraft such as the B-21 Raider and F-47 fighter and by developing new concepts of operations such as Agile Combat Employment.

The U.S. armed forces need to build a deeper bench in the Indo-Pacific region, given its importance to the United States. This should involve broadening expertise in the Services

that already value the theater while building it in the Services for which Indo-Pacific expertise has been of secondary concern. This will require Service leaders to make it a priority. As they do so, it would be wise for them to go beyond rhetoric and embrace each Service's strategic culture and historical traditions.

To be successful, efforts to build intellectual capital related to the Indo-Pacific region should incorporate tangible career incentives. More can and should be done to develop leaders with Indo-Pacific expertise through operational and staff tours. Indeed, many of the senior leaders with whom we spoke expressed concerns that personnel policies had diluted Service expertise. Moreover, more should be done to craft paths to leadership in the Service and joint communities that run through the region. Finally, more should be done to encourage theater-specific expertise and joint operational planning as part of Joint Professional Military Education.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The last four presidential administrations have assessed the Indo-Pacific region to be the most consequential theater in the world for U.S. national security.[1] The Barack Obama administration's 2011 "Pacific pivot," later termed the "Pacific rebalance," was meant to signify that the Indo-Pacific region was the most important theater for the United States. The first Donald Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy emphasized the need to focus on the reality of great-power competition with China and Russia as well as the growing possibility of great-power war.[2] During his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper undertook a series of efforts to increase the Defense Department's intellectual capital related to China.[3] The Joe Biden administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy in many ways echoed their Trump administration predecessors, with even more focus on China as the "pacing challenge," only to have that focus complicated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Hamas' attack on Israel in 2023.[4] The second Trump administration's National Defense Strategy reiterated the goal of deterring China in the Indo-Pacific region, placing it below homeland defense but ahead of Europe and the Middle East.[5]

Nevertheless, the Indo-Pacific region was hardly the only or even the most important theater of U.S. military operations during this period. Rhetorical focus on the Pacific had to

1 The George W. Bush administration held a similar view before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

2 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017); and Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2018).

3 Mark T. Esper, *Implementing the National Defense Strategy: A Year of Successes* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), p. 3, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/17/2002459291/-1/-1/1/NDS-FIRST-YEAR-ACCOMPLISHMENTS-FINAL.pdf.

4 The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022); and Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2022).

5 Department of War, *2026 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Department of War, 2026).

compete with the reality of U.S. commitments across the globe, particularly in the Middle East and Europe. While the United States prepared for possible conflict in the Pacific, for much of the period it faced the reality of combat operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Similarly, Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, including its seizure of Crimea, halted efforts to scale back the U.S. presence in Europe. The second Trump administration spent its first year using force against the Houthis in the Red Sea, striking drug smuggling boats in the Caribbean, seizing Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, and launching an air strike against Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Most dramatically, the Trump administration in its second year launched Operation EPIC FURY against Iran, decapitating the Iranian leadership, damaging Iran's missile force and navy, and degrading its nuclear and military production infrastructure

This study explores the extent to which a focus on the Indo-Pacific region, as expressed in the strategic priorities of the last four presidential administrations, has been reflected in the behavior of the U.S. armed Services. More broadly, it examines how the prioritization of various geographic theaters has shifted over the past quarter century as well as the extent to which the incentive structures of the Services have accommodated those shifts.[6]

A central, and we hope uncontroversial, premise of this study is that the regional priorities of the armed Services should reflect those of the national defense strategy. Indeed, we believe that such alignment not only represents a concrete manifestation of civilian control of the military but also is an important ingredient of strategic success. Knowledge of a region involves developing a deep understanding of its physical geography: time and distance constraints as well as those imposed by climate and terrain. It also involves developing a nuanced understanding of the human geography of the region, of friend and foe alike. It includes efforts to deter adversaries and strengthen the capabilities of allies and friends. Put simply, geography matters. The geography of the Indo-Pacific region differs markedly from that of Europe, just as that of Europe differs markedly from that of the Middle East. These geographic differences, in turn, influence the development of capabilities and concepts. For several reasons, it is important to develop strategic leaders who understand the strategic geography of regions of vital importance.

First, history demonstrates how geographic focus shapes capabilities. More than three decades on, the U.S. armed forces still bear the mark of the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. The Army's "Big Five" modernization priorities of the 1980s—the M1 Abrams main battle tank, the M2 Bradley Fighting Vehicle, the UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter, the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, and the Patriot air defense system—weapons that were developed to defeat the Warsaw Pact across along the inner German border, remain mainstays of the Service today. Similarly, the range and other characteristics of the F-35 Lightning II aircraft grew out of the distances involved in a war in Europe.

6 Jeffrey W. Donnithorne, "Principled Agents: The Role of Service Culture in American Civil–Military Relations," *Orbis* 61, no. 4, 2017, pp. 506–526.

Second, history demonstrates the importance of geography to the development of innovative operational concepts.[7] As will be described in chapter 2, the geography of the Western Pacific spurred the emergence of carrier aviation, amphibious warfare, and expeditionary logistics during the interwar period. The geographic conformation of the inner German border likewise crucially shaped the development of Air-Land Battle during the late Cold War. Many current Service concepts, such as the Army's Multi-Domain Operations (MDO), the Navy's Distributed Maritime Operations, the Marine Corps' Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, and the Air Force's Agile Combat Employment (ACE) are explicitly or implicitly tied to the geography of the Western Pacific. Similarly, the Services are fielding units that are tailored to the Pacific, such as the Army's Multi-Domain Task Forces (MDTFs) and the Marine Corps' Marine Littoral Regiments (MLRs). Conversely, operational concepts can fail in practice when they neglect the brute facts of geography, such as distance, terrain, and climate.

Third, the successful development of new capabilities and concepts requires a cohort of leaders who understand strategic geography. Put simply, it is vital to have the right leaders in the right places for the right theater at the right time. Senior officers play important roles in developing doctrine and operational concepts, fielding systems, and determining force structure. They also command U.S. forces in wartime. It is perhaps not coincidental that under Marine Corps General David Berger and Air Force General CQ Brown, two leaders who served as their Service's component commanders in the Pacific before assuming the leadership of their Service, the Marine Corps and Air Force were seen as the Services that were engaged in the most serious efforts to deal with the operational challenges posed by the growth of Chinese military power in the Indo-Pacific region. Conversely, failure to take strategic geography into account could lead to inferior or suboptimal outcomes and create strategic risk.

As desirable, even essential, as it is for the military's regional priorities to reflect those of the national security and defense strategies, achieving such alignment is often difficult and can take time. The military Services are large bureaucratic organizations, which makes it challenging to effect change. Moreover, military organizations are conservative by nature. Absent outside intervention, one should expect them to evolve slowly in response to changes in political guidance. Military leaders may be forgiven for questioning a tight focus on a particular region or a specific form of warfare, considering that the U.S. armed forces have, over the career of a soldier or the life of a weapon system, been employed under a wide variety of circumstances. Furthermore, as described below, the cultures of the various Services attach more or less value to different geographic theaters. Each Service—and each community within that Service—has its own promotion requirements that make specialization difficult. Moreover, the need for officers to complete joint duty assignments for

7 Thomas G. Mahnken, Grace B. Kim, and Adam Lemon, *Piercing the Fog of Peace: Developing Innovative Operational Concepts for a New Era* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019).

promotion and selection to higher command and the proliferation of joint and interagency staffs that require staffing complicate things further.[8]

Effecting change also takes time. Senior leaders emerge toward the end of a professional career that generally spans three decades or more. Today's joint and Service leaders were commissioned in the mid- to late-1980s. The men and women who will lead the Services in 2050 are already in uniform. Indeed, they are well into their second decade of military service.

Although we tend to think about military organizations in terms of external features such as their size and budget, such a superficial view neglects the fact that each Service has a distinct organizational culture that has been molded by its history and in turn shapes its views of the present and future.[9] Strategic culture consists of a limited, consistently ranked set of preferences that persist over time and can generally be thought of as "a persistent system of values held in common by the leaders or group of leaders of a state concerning the use of military force."[10] More simply, it is "the cognitive lens through which [an organization] view[s] the world."[11] Moreover, today's armed Services contain different communities with their own subcultures. Some of these, such as an officer's branch, generally remain fixed throughout an individual's career; others can emerge over the course of a career. An aspect of Service organizational culture that this study considers is its geographic orientation.[12]

As Stephen P. Rosen has written, each of the U.S. armed Services has developed a unique "strategic tradition" regarding the Indo-Pacific region.[13] In Rosen's view, "Service cultures emerge from the intense emotional experiences through which they have passed, experiences that created vivid and enduring memories that readily spring to mind."[14] Such traditions can be both functional and dysfunctional: "Tradition may reflect the habits of the

8 Steve Wills, "Senior Officers Are Not the 'Villain'," *RealClearDefense*, May 10, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/2025/05/10/senior_officers_are_not_the_villain_1109420.html.

9 Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); James Ryseff, Jonathan Welch, and Lewis Schneider, *Exploring Differences in Organizational Culture Within the Department of Defense* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023); and S. Rebecca Zimmerman, Kimberly Jackson, Natasha Lander, Colin Roberts, Don Madden, and Rebeca Orrie, *Movement and Maneuver: Culture and the Competition for Influence Among the U.S. Military Services* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

10 Andrew Scobell, "Soldiers, Statesmen, Strategic Culture and China's 1950 Intervention in Korea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 8, no. 22, 1999, p. 479.

11 Stephen Peter Rosen, "Strategic Traditions for the Asia–Pacific Region," *Naval War College Review* 54, no. 1, Winter 2001, p. 14.

12 On strategic culture, see Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 5; Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Strategy Culture" in John Baylis, James J. Wirtz, and Jeannie J. Johnson, eds., *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, 7th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); and Kerry M. Kartchner, Briana D. Bowen, and Jeannie L. Johnson, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture* (London: Routledge, 2023).

13 Rosen, "Strategic Traditions," pp. 14–21.

14 Ibid., p. 15.

last war, vividly imprinted on the minds of the men who waged it – valuable lessons learned, lessons paid for with blood. Tradition may also be habits of the last war that make it difficult to see and react to change."[15] He has further argued that common elements of U.S. strategic traditions regarding the Indo-Pacific region include a tendency to discount the importance of nuclear weapons in the region, the dominance of offensive rather than defensive forces, reliance on allies who will give American forces bases and assistance, and minimizing the importance of lines of communication and logistics to combat operations in the theater.[16]

Another way of understanding the value that the Services place on various geographic theaters is to examine the pattern of appointments to lead a particular geographic command over time. Whereas research by R. Russell Rumbaugh found "a remarkable consistency of balanced representation among the Services" across combatant commands over time, the opposite was true at the command level, where a single Service has tended to enjoy a monopoly.[17] The Navy has led U.S. Pacific (now Indo-Pacific) Command since its founding. U.S. European Command (EUCOM) was under the command of an Army general until 2000; since then, it has seen Air Force, Marine, and Navy commanders as well. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has generally rotated between Army and Marine Corps commanders, except for 2007–2008 and since 2025, when it was led by a Navy admiral.[18]

The original Unified Command Plan, approved in 1946, was intended to acknowledge the predominance of one Service over the others in a particular region or mission. Accordingly, the Navy had Pacific Command and Atlantic Command, the Army EUCOM and what became Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), and the Air Force had Strategic Air Command.[19] In the subsequent 40 years, there was only one instance when a commander did not come from the traditionally dominant military Service.[20] The 1986 Goldwater–Nichols Act led to the rise of Marine Corps generals to command combatant commands, with Marine generals leading CENTCOM, U.S. Atlantic Command, and SOUTHCOM.[21]

During the George W. Bush administration, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld sought to place nontraditional officers into commands, assigning Marine generals to lead U.S. Strategic Command and EUCOM, traditionally Air Force and Army commands, respectively; Navy admirals were put in charge of SOUTHCOM and CENTCOM, which had been

15 Ibid., p. 14.

16 Ibid., p. 20.

17 R. Russell Rumbaugh, "The Best Man for the Job? Combatant Commanders and the Politics of Jointness," *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 75, 2019, p. 96.

18 Ibid., p. 93.

19 Ronald H. Cole, Walter S. Poole, James F. Schnabel, Robert J. Watson, and Willard J. Webb, *The History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–1993* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chaiman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995).

20 From 1957 to 1962, Air Force General Lauris Norstad commanded U.S. European Command, traditionally an Army command. Rumbaugh, "Best Man for the Job?", p. 94.

21 Ibid., pp. 94–95.

the province of ground commanders; a Navy admiral was put in charge of U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), traditionally the province of the Air Force; and an Air Force general led U.S. Joint Forces Command, descendant of Atlantic Command.[22] As described further in chapter 4, Rumsfeld tried but failed to put an Air Force officer in charge of U.S. Pacific Command. With Rumsfeld's departure, the pattern returned to a traditional one with some allowances for jointness, including a Navy admiral to EUCOM, Air Force to SOUTHCOM, and Army to NORTHCOM, all firsts.[23]

The second Trump administration has sought to shake things up yet again by appointing a Navy admiral to lead CENTCOM and an Air Force general to lead EUCOM. U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), however, remains the province of the Navy.

This project seeks to understand the extent to which the policies and practices of the U.S. armed Services have reflected the political and strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific region beginning in the Obama administration. It answers these questions:

- To what extent have Service personnel policies been aligned or misaligned with the overall national security and defense strategies? To the extent they have shifted, how rapidly have they done so, and was it in response to shifts in national security and defense strategy?
- To what extent do Service personnel policies reflect the Defense Department's current emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region? To what extent have the various armed Services sought to cultivate deep knowledge of the region among future Service and joint leaders?
- Where have Service and joint leaders come from, and how may their past experiences have shaped their outlook as leaders? Where have the Services assigned officers who have been perceived to be the best?

To make the topic more tractable, the study focuses on three geographic theaters: Europe (EUCOM), the Indo-Pacific (U.S. Pacific/INDOPACOM), and the greater Middle East (CENTCOM). Although the study considers Service talent management overall, it focuses on Service and joint leaders at the general officer level. The former includes flag officers in Service assignments, and the latter includes flag officers assigned to joint geographic or functional commands as well as the Joint Staff. This is not to say that regional expertise is not important at all levels, but rather is an acknowledgment of the fact that senior officers play leading roles in developing doctrine and operational concepts, building and nurturing relationships, fielding capabilities, and leading forces in combat. The project is confined to the four traditional Services: the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. We did not consider Space Force due to its recent creation and small size.

22 Ibid., p. 95.

23 Ibid., p. 96.

The project began by trying to understand how each of the Services has historically viewed the Indo-Pacific region, Europe, and the Middle East, as well as how they have been affected by shifting regional priorities over recent decades. This historical baseline pointed to continuities and discontinuities in how the Services are responding to the current strategic focus on the Pacific.

We employed two approaches to get a sense of these historical trends. First, we created a dataset of the careers of senior uniformed joint and Service leaders from 2010 to the present. We surveyed their publicly available online biographies and coded them for tours in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the greater Middle East. We used that database to assess trends in assignments by Service over time. This database paints a picture of the past and present leadership of the joint force and the Services.

The major challenge we encountered during this effort was the varying level of detail about the length and nature of professional tours that was contained in publicly available online biographies across the four Services. Whereas the Air Force provides a lot of detail in its official biographies, the information in Army and Navy biographies is sometimes much less informative.

Second, we augmented this quantitative data set with a series of structured interviews with current and former joint and Service leaders to gain additional insight into Service talent management policies. We also interviewed a cross section of past Service chiefs to gain their perspective.

To get a sense of how current policies seek to shape the future of the Services, we collected recent Service promotion board precepts to assess the weight they place on regional experience in general or on experience in any region. We also examined changes to Service concepts of operations, such as the Army's MDO and the Marine Corps' Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) and associated force structure, to include the Army's development of the MDTF and the Marine Corps' development of the MLR.

Finally, we convened a workshop to present draft findings of the study. Workshop participants included current and former policy makers, military leaders, and scholars. The workshop discussed a draft of this study, and we incorporated feedback from participants and external reviewers in the final report.

This study proceeds in five chapters. Chapter 2 will demonstrate the value of developing military expertise in key regions. It will do so by exploring how senior military leaders who had deep regional expertise led to the development of innovative operational concepts in the interwar period and in the late Cold War. Chapter 3 will describe how the geographic focus of U.S. national security strategy has evolved since the end of the Cold War. Chapter 4 will go on to examine the extent to which this shifting geographic focus has been reflected in the priorities of the Services, their shape and composition, and the professional background of joint and Service leaders. Chapter 5 will present the study's insights and implications.

CHAPTER 2

Background

In the decades between the two world wars and during the Cold War, the United States developed a cadre of leaders who were steeped in strategic geography and thus could put innovation in a concrete geographic context. A central premise of this study is that similar knowledge is needed today.

Plan ORANGE: Planning for War with Imperial Japan in the Pacific

Between the two world wars, the growth of Japanese military power and the emergence of new technology combined with the unchanging reality of geography to call into question the assumptions upon which the United States had based its force development and operational planning. In response, the United States developed innovative operational concepts and capabilities that proved crucial to Allied victory during the Pacific War.

Then, as now, the United States needed to defend distant territory and interests from a more proximate adversary. The U.S. Navy's fleet base in San Diego is 6,400 nm from the Philippines and 4,800 nm from Tokyo. Even when forward deployed to Pearl Harbor, the U.S. fleet was 3,350 nm from Japan. By contrast, Tokyo is only 1,600 nm from Manila.

A conflict with Japan was the U.S. Army and Navy's top planning contingency throughout the interwar period because only the Japanese fleet was strong enough to threaten U.S. interests in Asia: first and foremost the Philippines, then an American territory, as well as U.S. island possessions in the Western Pacific.[24] The Army and Navy developed a series of plans for a war with Japan, which came to be known as War Plan ORANGE.[25] In 1923, the

24 Thomas G. Mahnken, "U.S. Grand Strategy, 1939–1945," in John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley, eds., *The Cambridge History of The Second World War, vol. I*, Fighting the War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

25 Edward S. Miller, *War Plan ORANGE: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991); and Louis Morton, "War Plan ORANGE: Evolution of a Strategy," *World Politics* 11, no. 2, January 1959, pp. 221-250.

Joint Army–Navy Board (made up of the Army Chief of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), their deputies, and their chief planners) identified a war with Japan as the most pressing contingency facing the United States, a judgment it reaffirmed five years later.[26] In the years that followed, a generation of Army and Navy officers became intimately familiar with the challenges and opportunities of operating in the Western Pacific through war games, fleet exercises, and maneuvers.[27]

In its original form, War Plan ORANGE envisioned the U.S. Navy conducting a rapid trans-Pacific naval lunge to defend U.S. possessions, primarily the Philippines, against Japanese aggression. The plan envisioned the Navy defeating Japan by "isolation and harassment," the disruption of its sea lines of communication, and "offensive sea and air operations against her naval forces and economic life." If these measures were insufficient, then planners ambiguously called for the United States to take "such further actions as may be required to win the war."[28]

The growth of Japanese military power, however, forced the Army and Navy to reconsider the assumptions that undergirded U.S. planning. As early as 1928, war games at the Naval War College in Newport, RI, showed the balance in a war between the United States and Japan shifting in Tokyo's favor.[29] The Navy was forced to modify its plans: Whereas Navy planners had envisioned a rapid trans-Pacific lunge as the best way to relieve the Philippines, planning shifted to a protracted, sequential campaign to recover islands they assumed would fall to the Japanese before help could arrive. In one of the great ironies of history, the 1935 version of the plan, which consigned the Philippines to its fate, was prepared during the tenure of Douglas MacArthur as Army Chief of Staff. Seven years later, MacArthur would live out the consequences of that shift when the Philippines fell to a Japanese invasion without relief from the U.S. armed forces.

The operational challenge posed by the need to cross the Pacific, establishing support bases along the way, in order to recover U.S. territories in the Western Pacific and then defeat Japan, promoted innovation in the Navy and Marine Corps during the interwar period.[30] First, it helped drive the Navy to develop carrier air power as a way to project power across

26 Joint Board to Secretary of War, "Coordination of Army and Navy War Plans," JB325, Ser. 210, Records of the Joint Board, Roll 9, Record Group 225, National Archives (NA), June 7, 1923, p. 1; and Joint Planning Committee to Joint Board, "Order of Priority in Preparation of War Plans," Records of the Joint Board, Roll 9, RG 225, NA, April 21, 1928, p. 1.

27 Henry G. Gole, *The Road to Rainbow: Army Planning for Global War, 1934–1940* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002); and Michael Vlahos, *The Blue Sword: The Naval War College and the American Mission, 1919–1941* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1980).

28 Joint Army–Navy Basic War Plan ORANGE, 1924, JB325, Ser. 228, NA.

29 Michael Vlahos, "War Gaming, An Enforcer of Strategic Realism," *Naval War College Review* 39, no. 2, March–April 1986, pp. 10, 13.

30 See, for example, William M. McBride, *Technological Change and the United States Navy, 1895–1945* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Jan M. van Tol, "Military Innovation and Carrier Aviation: The Relevant History," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Summer 1997, pp. 77–87; and Thomas Wildenberg, *All the Factors of Victory: ADM Joseph Mason Reeves and the Origins of Carrier Airpower* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2003).

the vast expanse of the Pacific. The need to operate in the environmental conditions of the Pacific shaped the design of American aircraft carriers. The requirements of a campaign against Japan, as played out on the game floor of the U.S. Naval War College, also led to operational concepts that emphasized the independent, offensive use of carrier aviation. Second, the need to supply naval forces during a protracted trans-Pacific campaign led to the development of expeditionary logistics. Beginning in 1924, the Navy's annual fleet exercises examined various underway replenishment methods to learn more about the conditions under which they could be performed.[31] The Navy also explored the possibility of creating a series of floating base facilities that would operate out of austere harbors to support naval operations.[32] Third, the challenge of a war with Japan motivated the Marine Corps to develop amphibious warfare concepts so they could seize and hold the island bases that would be needed to support a trans-Pacific campaign. Innovators such as Lieutenant Colonel Earl Hancock "Pete" Ellis translated their understanding of the strategic geography of the Western Pacific into doctrinal innovation.[33]

Many of the key U.S. military leaders in World War II were steeped in the strategic geography of the Pacific theater and the operational challenges of a war with Japan. MacArthur famously had extensive experience in the Indo-Pacific region, including brigade command in the Philippine Division and service as commander of the Philippine Department before being appointed Chief of Staff of the Army in 1930. Five years later, upon leaving that position, he was appointed Field Marshal of the Philippine Army as the U.S. territory made its way toward independence.

Service in the Pacific was a staple of a Navy career during the interwar period as well. Chester W. Nimitz, for example, served as the commander of Submarine Division 14 at Pearl Harbor and supervised the construction of Submarine Base Pearl Harbor. He also played a key role in promoting innovation in the submarine community, ensuring that the U.S. Navy's fleet submarines were designed with the vast expanse of the Pacific in mind. He went on to command USS *Augusta*, the flagship of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet.

These senior leaders were supported by planners and intelligence officers who had a deep understanding of the theater. For example, during the 1920s and 1930s, the Navy developed a cadre of junior officers who spoke Japanese, including some who had lived and studied in Japan. Likewise, some Army officers had closely studied the Imperial Japanese Army.[34]

31 Albert Nofi, *To Train the Fleet for War: The U.S. Navy Fleet Problems, 1923–1940* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2010), p. 61.

32 Miller, *War Plan ORANGE*, pp. 147–148.

33 Dirk Anthony Ballendorf and Merrill L. Bartlett, *Pete Ellis: An Amphibious Warfare Prophet, 1880–1923* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

34 Thomas G. Mahnken, *Uncovering Ways of War: U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 45–46.

AirLand Battle: Imagining War with the Soviet Union in Europe

A deep understanding of the strategic geography of Europe played a similarly important role in the development of AirLand Battle during the Cold War. AirLand Battle doctrine was tailored to the threat posed by the Soviet Union in the geographic context of Central Europe. The development of AirLand Battle flowed from a dedicated effort to understand the Soviet threat through their military doctrine and operational art.[35] This yielded a sophisticated understanding of Soviet strengths and weaknesses, as well as their predilections and proclivities, that the U.S. military could take advantage of. For example, Soviet military leadership depended upon tightly scripted operations, a significant vulnerability that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces sought to use deep strikes to exploit. Moreover, the Soviet Army's top-down command structure meant that decisive action by NATO could create delays in decision-making. In this way, AirLand Battle reflected a thorough understanding of the contemporary threat environment.

AirLand Battle was largely the brainchild of General Donn Starry. Starry's career demonstrates the value of deep understanding of the regional setting of innovative operational concepts. In 1973, Starry became the Commanding General of the U.S. Army Armor Center and School, where he intensively studied the lessons of the 1973 Arab–Israeli War and sought to apply them to the central problem facing the U.S. Army at the time: "how to fight and win on an armor-dominated battlefield against an enemy who enjoyed vast quantitative superiority in both men and equipment."[36] The result was the 1976 revision of the Army's Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, which emphasized the doctrine of Active Defense. The manual argued for concentrating overwhelming firepower against the enemy's main attack using the "new lethality" of modern weapons.[37]

General William DePuy and the team drafting the manual learned an enormous amount from the Israeli experience in the 1973 war, including how the advent of precision-guided munitions had dramatically increased the lethality of the modern battlefield.[38] Active Defense reflected DePuy's views of anti-tank guided missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and other accurate long-range weapons used during the Yom Kippur War to cause staggering losses of heavy equipment. As he wrote in 1975:

> First, modern weapons are vastly more lethal than any weapons we have encountered on the battlefield before. Second, in order to cope with these weapons, it is essential that we have a highly trained and highly skilled combined arms team of armor, infantry, artillery and air defense backed by the support required to sustain combat operations. Third, training of

35 John A. Battilega, "Soviet Military Thought and the U.S. Competitive Strategies Initiative," in Thomas G. Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 106-127.

36 Mike Guardia, *Crusader: General Don Starry and the Army of His Times* (Philadelphia: Casemate, 2018), p. 116.

37 Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 100-5: *Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, July 1, 1976).

38 Guardia, *Crusader*, p. 117.

> the individual as well as the team will make the difference between success and failure of the battlefield.[39]

In 1976, Starry was given the opportunity to put Army doctrine into practice when he was put in command of the Army's V Corps, one of two Army corps forward stationed in West Germany. Because the inner German border was the front line of the Cold War, the Army assigned its best officers to forces stationed in Germany. Starry was chosen in part because he had been, in the words of DePuy, "the strongest commandant on the tactical side and on the technical side and throughout the scope of combat development activities. He has dominated the Armor School with his strong, brilliant mind [and] a very practical yet technical bent."[40] Once there, he sought to overhaul the training system of the corps to take advantage of the terrain of the inner German border. Close acquaintance with the terrain also convinced him of the inadequacy of existing Army doctrine—which he had helped develop—and the need to defeat follow-on Warsaw Pact forces in order to defend Western Europe against a Soviet attack. Such an effort would require "a chorus of intelligence, surveillance, long-range artillery, and tactical support" in order to "extend the battlefield" and "attack deep."[41]

Starry would command V Corps for only 16 months before he was selected to succeed DePuy as the commander of U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. In that job, he would drive far-reaching changes in Army doctrine and equipment, to include the 1982 revision of Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, which embodied the doctrine of AirLand Battle.[42] The doctrine combined the tactical lessons of the Yom Kippur War with existing operational concepts of "mass, momentum, and continuous land combat."[43] The doctrine, and the weapon systems designed to implement it, emerged out of Starry's intimate understanding of the European theater in general and the inner German border in particular.

The doctrine sought not only to halt an initial Soviet thrust in Central Europe but also to interdict Soviet follow-on forces in a concept Starry called the "extended battlefield."[44] The fact that the Soviets envisioned employing their army in echelons opened opportunities for NATO commanders to use tactical air power and long-range artillery to destroy Soviet armored formations before they made contact with NATO forces.[45] Starry felt that it

39 Willam Depuy, "Implications of the Middle East War on U.S. Army Tactics, Doctrine and Systems," in Richard Swain, ed., *Selected Papers of General William DePuy*, (Fort Monroe, VA: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1994), p. 77.

40 Quoted in Guardia, *Crusader*, p. 129.

41 Ibid., p. 135.

42 Ibid., chap. 7.

43 Donn Starry, *Press On! Selected Works of General Donn A. Starry*, ed. Lewis Sorley (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute Press, 2009), p. 28.

44 Donn Starry, "Extending the Battlefield," *Military Review* 61 , no. 3, March 1981, p. 33.

45 John L. Romjue, *From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine, 1973–1982* (Fort Monroe, VA: Historical Office, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 1984), p. 33.

was crucial for commanders to see deep into Warsaw Pact territory to locate the follow-on echelon, strike it before the initial assault could break through the NATO defense, and defeat it before it could reach the main body of NATO forces.[46] As a result, he envisioned allocating responsibilities to different echelons of command in time rather than distance: brigades would be responsible for attacking all enemy forces within 12 hours of the forward line of troops, divisions if they were within 24 hours of that line, and corps that were within 72 hours.[47] Such a capability would not only defend the territorial integrity of NATO in wartime but also, it was hoped, strengthen deterrence in peacetime.[48]

AirLand Battle fortunately never underwent the test of battle against the Soviet Union in Central Europe, but the training, equipment, force structure, and doctrine developed to fight the Soviets on the plains of Central Europe were used to devastating effect in the more permissive terrain of Kuwait and Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

Conclusion

Today, the United States faces an acute threat from China in the Western Pacific. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has spent decades studying the U.S. military's preferred approach to war, which is centered around sea- and air-based power projection supported by air bases, ports, and logistical facilities in theater. The PLA has invested considerable sums over decades to implement a largely missile-based strategy centered on long-range precision strike to destroy U.S. theater air bases and aircraft carriers. By contrast, the U.S. Navy and Air Force have invested in large numbers of relatively short-range tactical aircraft staging from high-signature land and sea bases located very close to the Chinese mainland. Indeed, U.S. force structure has not undergone major shifts in the face of the Chinese long-range strike threat.

Just as leaders in the interwar period and the Cold War were able to harness deep understanding of a geographic environment and operational challenges to develop new ways of war, today there is a similar need to build intellectual capital related to China and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Chapter 3 will describe how the geographic focus of U.S. national security strategy has evolved since the end of the Cold War. Chapter 4 will examine the extent to which this shifting geographic focus has been reflected in the priorities of the Services, their shape and composition, and the professional background of joint and Service leaders.

46 Richard Swain, "AirLand Battle," in George F. Hofmann and Donn A. Starry, eds., *Camp Colt to Desert Storm: The History of U.S. Armored Forces* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 379.

47 Ibid., p. 383.

48 See Samuel L. Huntington, "Conventional Deterrence and Conventional Retaliation in Europe," *International Security* 8, no. 3, Winter 1983/1984, pp. 32–56.

CHAPTER 3

The Shifting Geographic Focus of U.S. Strategy

The geographic focus of U.S. grand strategy has shifted several times since the end of the Cold War. This chapter describes changes in the geographic focus of American national security in recent decades; the next chapter will explore how well the Services have reflected those changes in their personnel policies.

Given the central role that the U.S.–Soviet competition played in U.S. national security policy during the Cold War, the European theater was the centerpiece of U.S. national security from the 1940s through the 1980s. A war with the Soviet Union along the Central Front in Europe formed the primary planning contingency, with other conflicts consigned to a subordinate role.[49] Even as the United States fought two wars in Asia, first on the Korean Peninsula and then in Southeast Asia, Europe remained the primary theater. Tellingly, although the Truman administration's defense buildup was occasioned by North Korea's invasion of South Korea, the bulk of the forces that resulted from it flowed to Europe rather than Asia. Indeed, many policymakers saw the war in Korea as a conflict that underscored the importance of the U.S. commitment to its European allies.[50] Similarly, the Vietnam War was largely fought with doctrine and weapon systems that had been developed with a war in Europe in mind. Although the Services did produce innovative organizations tailored to the geographic circumstances of Southeast Asia, such as the Army's Mobile Riverine Force, such new ways of war did not last long past the end of the war.[51]

49 Robert P. Haffa, Jr., *The Half War: Planning U.S. Rapid Deployment Forces to Meet a Limited Contingency, 1960–1983* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021).

50 See Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4, December 1980, pp. 563–592; and Walter LaFeber, "NATO and the Korean War: A Context," *Diplomatic History* 13, no. 4, Fall 1989, pp. 461–477.

51 Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War Since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 105.

During the Cold War, other geographic regions were viewed in relation to the Soviet threat in Europe. For example, U.S. Pacific Command was focused on countering the Soviet Navy in the Far East as well as planning for the possibility of horizontal escalation of a NATO–Warsaw Pact war in Europe to the Far East.[52] During the 1970s and 1980s, concern over a Soviet drive into Iran to seize its oil resources drove the development of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force and eventually the establishment of CENTCOM.[53] The command's main war plan, Operational Plan (OPLAN) 1004, was accordingly designed to meet a Soviet armored thrust to seize Iranian oil fields.[54]

Saddam Hussein's August 2, 1990, invasion of Kuwait thrust CENTCOM into the spotlight. The youngest geographic combatant command, CENTCOM was literally and figuratively a backwater. Headquartered far from the greater Middle East in Tampa, Florida, with few forces assigned to it, the command did not have the bureaucratic weight of its Pacific and European counterparts. Indeed, CENTCOM was viewed as "an untested command that had long been seen as having one of the weakest staffs in the military." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William J. Crowe considered CENTCOM's commander, General H. Norman Schwartzkopf, "a general of no special distinction for a post of no great importance."[55]

The decade following the 1991 Gulf War, in contrast to the decade preceding it, saw the Middle East assume a key role in U.S. national security strategy, in the form of continued efforts to contain Iraq as well as measures to thwart Iran's malign influence in the region. Yet the track record of sending the Services' best to CENTCOM was mixed. When the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks occurred, the commander of CENTCOM was General Tommy Franks, whose leadership and decision-making during Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM has been widely questioned.[56]

As the Middle East came to the fore, Europe's role receded from its Cold War dominance. During the 1990s, U.S. force planning was driven by the need to fight and win two nearly simultaneous major regional contingencies or major theater wars. The main contingencies driving U.S. force planning were a conflict in the Middle East with either Iraq or Iran and

52 See, for example, Command History Division, *Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command History,* vol. I, 1983 (Camp H.M. Smith, HI: Office of the Joint Secretary, Headquarters USCINCPAC, 1984), p. 79, https://nautilus.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/c_eightythree.pdf.

53 William E. Odom, "The Cold War Origins of the U.S. Central Command, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 2, Spring 2006, 52–82.

54 David B. Crist, "U.S. Central Command Campaign Planning Against the Soviet Union, 1979–1987," Joint Chiefs of Staff, September 18, 2020, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Dec21/Crist%20CENTCOM%20offsite%2018%20Sep%2020_complete.pdf.

55 Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1995), pp. 41, 45.

56 Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II* (New York: Pantheon, 2006), pp. 25–27.

the prospect of war on the Korean Peninsula.[57] EUCOM played a central role in the Balkan wars, to be sure, but Europe was increasingly seen as a springboard for global operations—a place to be deployed from rather than a place where combat operations would occur. The Western Pacific was similarly seen as an "economy of force" region, where limited ground, sea, and air forces could deter a North Korean attack on South Korea and, in the second half of the decade, keep a watchful eye on China.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, followed by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, marked the further ascent of the greater Middle East in U.S. national security strategy. In the years that followed, the Defense Department understandably emphasized those wars over hypothetical future contingences.[58] The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, fought in CENTCOM's area of responsibility, marked the careers of a generation not only of soldiers and marines but also sailors and airmen.

Even in wartime, the military personnel system did not always fully recognize battlefield performance. As a result, in 2007, Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates selected General David Petraeus to lead an Army special promotion board to select some 40 brigadier generals from a pool of more than 1,000 colonels. Among those selected for promotion were Colonel H. R. McMaster and Colonel Sean McFarland, who had played key roles in counter-insurgency operations in Iraq but had been unable to attend the Army's Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) Phase II program, deemed essential to promotion to flag rank, due to their combat tours.[59] Gates subsequently tapped Army generals with experience in Iraq to cultivate the next generation of Army leaders.[60]

In notable cases, the influence of combat in that theater extended beyond officers' military service. For example, two former CENTCOM commanders, Marine General James Mattis and Army General Lloyd Austin, went on to serve as Secretary of Defense after their retirement from military service. Moreover, several senior members of the second Trump administration are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, including Vice President J.D. Vance, who served as a Marine corporal; Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, whose Army National Guard career included deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan; Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, whose service in the Hawai'i National Guard included a tour in Iraq; and United Nations Ambassador and former Assistant to the President for

57 Mark Gunzinger, Bryan Clark, David Johnson, and Jesse Sloman, *Force Planning for the Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), chap. 1.

58 See, for example, Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014), pp. 144–146; and Robert M. Gates, "A Balanced Strategy: Reprogramming the Pentagon for a New Age," *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 1, 2009, p. 29.

59 Ann Scott Tyson, "Petraeus Helping Pick New Generals," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2007, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/national/2007/11/17/petraeus-helping-pick-new-generals/e31a5233-997d-4500-a550-8a71a897bb5e/.

60 Jeff Schogol, "Gates: Iraq Experience Crucial in Training Future Leaders," *Stars and Stripes*, April 7, 2009, https://www.stripes.com/news/2009-04-07/gates-iraq-experience-crucial-in-training-future-leaders-1943429.html1.

National Security Affairs Mike Waltz, whose Army career as an active-duty and reserve Army Special Forces officer included service in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy's office responsible for Afghanistan and the Office of Vice President Richard B. Cheney. Service in Iraq and Afghanistan appears to have shaped their views of the role of the United States in the world, American foreign policy, and the efficacy of the use of force. Indeed, such experiences have similarly influenced post–9/11 military veterans who now serve in Congress.

Even as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars wore on, the growth of Chinese power led the Obama administration to emphasize the Indo-Pacific region as the most consequential theater for U.S. national security. The Obama administration's 2011 Pacific pivot, later termed the Pacific rebalance, was meant to signify that the Indo-Pacific region was the most consequential theater for the United States.[61] The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy emphasized the need to focus on the reality of great-power competition with China and Russia and on the growing possibility of great-power war.[62] During his tenure as Secretary of Defense, Esper undertook a series of efforts to increase the Defense Department's intellectual capital related to China.[63] The Biden administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy in many ways echoed their Trump administration predecessors with, at least initially, an even greater focus on China as the "pacing challenge."[64] The second Trump administration came to office similarly focused on the China threat. The 2025 Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance reportedly gave top priority to deterring China in the Indo-Pacific theater.[65]

After nearly a decade and a half of strategic guidance emphasizing the primacy of the Indo-Pacific region in U.S. defense planning, it is worth assessing the extent to which Service personnel policies have aligned with defense strategy. The next chapter takes up that topic.

61 Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2012).

62 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*; and Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.*

63 Mark T. Esper, *Implementing the National Defense Strategy: A Year of Successes* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), p. 3, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/17/2002459291/-1/-1/1/NDS-FIRST-YEAR-ACCOMPLISHMENTS-FINAL.pdf.

64 White House, *National Security Strategy*; and Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy.*

65 Alex Horton and Hannah Natanson, "Secret Pentagon Memo on China, Homeland Has Heritage Fingerprints," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/29/secret-pentagon-memo-hegseth-heritage-foundation-china/.

CHAPTER 4

Service Attitudes Toward the Pacific Theater

This chapter considers how the U.S. armed Services have thought about the Indo-Pacific region against the backdrop of the shifting geographic focus of U.S. strategy since the end of the Cold War. It examines the emphasis that each of the four traditional U.S. armed Services—the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force—have placed on the Indo-Pacific region relative to others over the last 15 years.[66] In each case, we consider the past, present, and future of the Service. To explore the past, we examine how the structure of the Service has changed over time. We also examine the Service's strategic traditions regarding the Indo-Pacific region, including those expressed in the books that senior leaders recommend that others in the Service read. To examine the present, we assess in depth the careers of the men and women who have led the Service over the past decade and a half, including the role that tours of duty in various regions played in their professional careers. We expand upon this with insights gained from interviews with past and current military leaders. To forecast the future, we examine how each Service seeks to shape that future through the precepts that promotion boards use to select officers for promotion.

U.S. Navy

Of the four traditional Services, the Navy identifies with the Pacific the most. Its strategic traditions emphasize the region, and the importance of the area is echoed in the books its leaders value. Moreover, the Navy has traditionally prized tours of duty in the region as a stepping stone to Service leadership. A series of events in the last decade, however,

66 This report does not consider U.S. Space Force because of its recent establishment and small size. Space Force is not defined by a terrestrial region and, as of the writing of this report, has a component at only one geographic combatant command.

has disrupted traditional promotion paths and thus the link between the region and Navy leadership.

Past

The 20th century witnessed the U.S. Navy's evolution from a unitary organization to one that is composed of a group of communities. At the dawn of the 20th century, navies were synonymous with surface fleets. To be a naval officer was to be a sailor. During the first decades of the 20th century, however, the development of naval aviation and submarine forces changed the structure of the Navy by adding new branches and career paths. Although additional communities have been created, the dominant ones in the Navy today are surface, submarine, and aviation. Collectively, these three branches control the Navy.[67]

The Navy has historically cultivated Indo-Pacific expertise, even though its commitment to Foreign Area Officer (FAO) training has lagged that of the other Services. An admiral has led U.S. Pacific Command (now INDOPACOM) since it was established in 1947 as the first U.S. geographic combatant command. The Navy and its supporters have guarded the position jealously. Indeed, Rumsfeld's attempt to name Air Force General Gregory "Speedy" Martin as commander of U.S. Pacific Command failed at the hands of Senator John S. McCain, the son and grandson of admirals, whose father served as commander of U.S. Pacific Command during the Vietnam War.[68]

The experience of the Pacific War and the decades that followed is deeply ingrained in the Navy's strategic traditions. Navy officers believe deeply that dominance in the Pacific is its birthright. As Rosen put it:

> The Pacific belongs to us. The most important experiences my organization has lived through over the last fifty years demonstrated over and over again that we can dominate the Pacific and so enable the United States to project power and influence to the periphery of the Asian landmass.[69]
>
> Today and for the future, we can operate in the Pacific by means of a network of bases and ports on foreign soil. This way of conducting operations began with the island-hopping campaign across the Central Pacific in 1943–45 against Japan. It continued through the Cold War with bases in Japan itself, Okinawa, the Philippines, and elsewhere.[70]

The Navy's emphasis on its strategic traditions in the Indo-Pacific region is reflected in the books it recommends officers read. For example, the seven books on the most recent list, approved by Admiral Lisa Franchetti when she was CNO, include four focused on the

67 See Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, pp. 48–49.

68 Rumbaugh, "Best Man for the Job?", p. 95. See also Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, p. 61.

69 Rosen, "Strategic Traditions," p. 17.

70 Ibid., p. 18.

Pacific: two historical accounts and two contemporary studies. The two historical volumes are James Hornfischer's *The Last Stand of the Tin Can Sailors*, about the Battle off Samar during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, and T.R. Fehrenbach's chronicle of the Korean War, *This Kind of War*. The contemporary volumes focus on China's growth as a rival: Michael McDevitt's *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power* and Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes' *Red Star over the Pacific*.[71]

The Navy's Seventh Fleet, headquartered since 1971 in Yokosuka, Japan, has been forward based in the Western Pacific since its establishment in 1943. Service in the associated Forward-Deployed Naval Forces in Japan has given sailors a deep understanding of the maritime geography of the Western Pacific and built relations with Japan and others in the region.

Balanced against the Navy's historic interest in the Pacific is the fact that the Navy has worldwide commitments. Moreover, as discussed in chapter 3, in the years after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, the Pacific was often seen as peripheral to U.S. national security policy.

Present

There have been six CNOs over the past 15 years, three from the surface warfare community and three from the submarine community. None have come from the aviation community. Indeed, only two of the 13 CNOs who have served since 1978 have been naval aviators. Admiral Gary Roughead was the first CNO to have served as the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander since 1982. His successor, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, had some Pacific experience, though not at the fleet level.

There have been eight Vice Chiefs of Naval Operations during the same period, including two (Greenert and Franchetti) who were later promoted to CNO. Four were from the surface warfare community, two from the submarine community, and two from the aviation community. In nearly every case, these leaders had previously served multiple tours in the Pacific, aboard or in command of warships or submarines stationed in the Pacific and in leadership positions on Service and theater commands in the region.

Until 2011, the path to CNO generally involved command at sea, followed by major command at sea; command of a deployed Carrier Strike Group (CSG) or submarine group; command of a forward-deployed fleet; and then four-star operational command, such as commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet or commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe. The Fat Leonard scandal,[72]

71 "Admiral Daryl Caudle, Chief of Naval Operations," U.S. Navy, https://www.navy.mil/Leadership/Chief-of-Naval-Operations/Chief-of-Naval-Operations-Professional-Reading-Library.

72 The scandal, which involved bribes associated with logistics contracting in the Western Pacific, ended the careers of a number of Navy officers who had command responsibilities in the theater.

exacerbated by destroyer collisions in 2017, disrupted the established qualification path.[73] The residue of that scandal persists in the fact that the current generation of senior Navy officers who are eligible to become CNO lack the experience of fleet command or four-star operational command.

Beyond the CNO, the Navy has two four-star billets in the Pacific: the commander of INDOPACOM and the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet. As noted above, an admiral has led U.S. Pacific Command since its creation. One frequent pattern of promotion is from Commander, U.S. Seventh Fleet, to Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet, to Commander, U.S. Pacific (now Indo-Pacific) Command. Much as the Fat Leonard scandal disrupted the traditional path to CNO, so too did it disturb the traditional progression to joint command in the Pacific.

TABLE 1: CHIEFS OF NAVAL OPERATIONS, 2007–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Community
ADM Gary Roughead	2007–2011	Surface Warfare
ADM Jonathan W. Greenert	2011–2015	Submarine
ADM John M. Richardson	2015–2019	Submarine
ADM Michael M. Gilday	2019–2023	Surface Warfare
ADM Lisa M Franchetti	2023–2025	Surface Warfare
ADM Daryl Caudle	2025–present	Submarine

TABLE 2: VICE CHIEFS OF NAVAL OPERATIONS, 2009–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Community
ADM Jonathan W. Greenert	2009–2011	Submarine
ADM Mark E. Ferguson III	2011–2014	Surface Warfare
ADM Michelle J. Howard	2014–2016	Surface Warfare
ADM William F. Moran	2016–2019	Aviation
ADM Robert P. Burke	2019–2020	Submarine
ADM William K. Lescher	2020–2022	Aviation
ADM Lisa M. Franchetti	2022–2023	Surface Warfare
ADM James W. Kilby	2024–Present	Surface Warfare

Interviews with past and present senior Navy leaders highlighted the tension between the requirement for officers to perform joint duty assignments and staff joint organizations, on the one hand, and the ability of officers to develop deep regional expertise, on the other.

73 Michael Furay, "The Next CNO," *RealClearDefense*, April 23, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/04/23/the_next_cno_1105774.html

Senior leaders cited an emphasis on sending the Service's top officers to joint jobs at the expense of building deep regional expertise.

Navy leaders complained that the Goldwater–Nichols Act had diluted Service expertise. Many of the best Navy officers do not serve on operational staffs in the region but rather are pulled into joint commands if they want to be promoted. The regional focus, if any, of the joint command is too often a secondary consideration. They also pointed out that nominations for higher command are the result of horse trading among communities. In such an environment, it is important for senior leaders to advocate on behalf of those they believe in.

Interviews also highlighted the impact of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the Navy's ability to build expertise on the Indo-Pacific region. To take just one example, the Afghanistan–Pakistan (AFPAK) Hands Program, which was focused on developing a cadre of officers with expertise in the greater Middle East, was characterized as a "disaster" in terms of grooming Indo-Pacific talent. The program sent an (intentional) message to the Services that their best should focus on the greater Middle East at the expense of other regions. The Navy started an Indo-Pacific Hands Program, now known as the Indo-Pacific Cadre, to "develop and track intellectual capital to support operations in response to the projected continuous rise of China's national and economic strength, military power, and increasingly coercive actions to reshape the Indo-Pacific region."[74]

Service leaders emphasized the need to take a hard look at how the Navy grooms officers to acquire deep regional expertise through both operational and staff tours. For example, senior leaders noted that it would be desirable to build a cadre of officers with a combination of carrier strike or submarine group experience linked with major command experience in the Pacific. Such a path would allow officers to develop a deep understanding of the geography of the region and gain exposure to the countries in the region. As one noted, an officer must operate in the Pacific to gain a real understanding of the vastness of the region and its geography.

Service leaders believed that expertise in the Indo-Pacific region was particularly important for the CNO, Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Director of Naval Intelligence, and President of the Naval War College.

Future

For years, the Navy has emphasized the need to compete with and potentially fight China. The Service likely considers a focus on China as supporting its institutional goals of preserving the relevance of forward presence, sea control, and power projection.[75] The Navy has doubled down on its program of record to meet the threat posed by the PLA.

74 Navy Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture Office, "Indo-Pacific Cadre," MyNavy HR, https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Portals/55/Career/LanguageCulture/IPAC%20Trifold%2020240226.pdf.

75 Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, p. 173.

That is, the Navy has pushed for investment in highly advanced ships, submarines, and aircraft—in some cases paired with longer-range munitions—capable of carrying out sea control missions against China in the Western Pacific. It has also advocated power projection through a combination of fifth-generation aircraft and advanced land-attack cruise missiles launched from ships and submarines. The extent to which the program of record is optimized to meeting the threat posed by China in the Western Pacific and beyond remains unclear. By contrast, the Navy has invested relatively little in unmanned systems, and the fate of the Navy's next-generation carrier fighter, the F/A-XX, remains unclear.

One former Navy officer with whom we spoke suggested that the Navy's hierarchy, bureaucracy, and culture is so invested in the short-range, high-signature carrier strike approach to warfare that the Navy's strong focus on and presence in the Pacific is irrelevant, or perhaps even an impediment to change.

The Naval War College has supported some initiatives meant to build intellectual capital related to China and the operational and tactical challenges associated with high-end war in the Pacific for more than 20 years. The China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI), which was stood up in the early 2000s, conducts "research to inform the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, advise U.S. civilian and military leaders and educate the joint force's next generation of warfighters."[76] Among its products are translations of Chinese maritime publications and assessments of China's approach to using maritime power. More than 20 years ago, the Naval War College also established the Halsey ALFA Group, a "collaborative student-faculty program that conducts data collection, research, analysis, and wargaming to analyze access denial challenges at the operational level of war, with net assessments informed by tactical-level details and research."[77] As one graduate of the program has described it, Halsey ALFA has conducted a large number of war games and has produced "a wealth of valuable insight on operational warfighting, with [the Office of the CNO], flag officers, and senior leaders regularly consuming [its] outputs."[78]

Professional education at the U.S. Naval Academy has more recently begun to emphasize the Pacific. In the words of one midshipman, "Professional knowledge during my plebe year focused on China and the INDOPACOM region. We memorized Chinese ships, naval bases, missiles, and aircraft. Lectures addressed the threat posed by euphemistic 'near-peer adversaries.'"[79] Yet that same midshipman highlighted a disconnect between rhetoric and reality:

76 "China Maritime Studies Institute," U.S. Naval War College, https://www.usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Research-Centers/China-Maritime-Studies-Institute.

77 "Halsey ALFA Group," U.S. Naval War College, https://www.usnwc.edu/Research-and-Wargaming/Advanced-Research-Programs/Halsey-Alfa-Group.

78 Anthony LaVopa, "Building Warfighting Competence: The Halsey ALFA Wargaming Experience," CIMSEC, January 13, 2025, https://cimsec.org/building-warfighting-competence-the-halsey-alfa-wargaming-experience.

79 James Marshall, "They Told Me It Was All About China," *Proceedings* 151, no. 9, September 2025, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2025/september/they-told-me-it-was-all-about-china.

> From my perspective as a midshipman who will soon join the fleet, reality must begin to match the rhetoric I heard during my plebe year. A modern war against China would be the Navy's greatest test in 80 years. The strategic imperative is to be ready for that potential conflict. Carriers should be deployed away from the Pacific when a CSG is the only thing that can fulfill the mission—and never otherwise.[80]

Despite the Navy's strong affinity for the region, the Navy's Selection Board precepts only began to make specific mention of the Indo-Pacific region and China in Fiscal Year (FY) 2023. The precepts list Indo-Pacific area expertise among the factors for consideration, behind leadership.[81] The precept mentions China by name, reiterating that its ongoing military modernization poses a challenge to U.S. national security interests, and states that the Navy must develop an officer corps knowledgeable in both political–military affairs and U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. This guidance suggests that the Navy values strategic skills and experience at higher levels of leadership. Whereas the Navy has often looked unfavorably on homesteading, the precept also states that the board should not penalize those who have served multiple or consecutive tours within one geographic location.[82] This could be interpreted to mean that the board may place a higher premium on officers who have developed deep expertise in the Indo-Pacific, even if it has come at the expense of experience across regions.

U.S. Marine Corps

The Marine Corps also identifies strongly with the Pacific given its World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War heritage. Moreover, two of the Corps' three Marine Expeditionary Forces are stationed in the Pacific and have been for decades. This identity competes, however, with the Service's identity as the nation's "911 force" and its heavy involvement on land in Iraq and Afghanistan. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Marine Corps shifted away from its traditional expeditionary focus and toward sustained land operations. The corps often operated as a second ground force rather than as soldiers from the sea.

That having been said, the Marine Corps has done more to tailor itself to the Pacific than any other Service across the tenure of several commandants. The Marine Corps has developed doctrine (EABO and Littoral Operations in Contested Environments) and fielded formations (the MLR) designed to support a maritime campaign in the Western Pacific. The Marine Corps' move to embrace the mission of countering China in the Western Pacific—in line with the then-existing National Defense Strategy—drew strong protests from former Marine leaders who saw in it an abdication of capabilities needed for other contingencies in other

80 Ibid.

81 Secretary of the Navy, "FY-25 Active Duty and Reserve Navy Flag Officer Promotion Selection Board Precept," MyNAVY HR, p. A-5, https://www.mynavyhr.navy.mil/Portals/55/Boards/Flag/FY-25%20Active%20and%20Reserve%20Flag%20Precept%20-%20SECNAV%20Signed.PDF.

82 Ibid., p. A-5.

theaters. Indeed, some of the opponents to the Marine Corps' Force Design 2030 argued that the Corps was focusing too much on the region, to the detriment of its role as a global force in readiness.[83]

Past

The smallest of the Services, the Marine Corps is also the most cohesive. Its ethos is based on the notion that all marines are the same and that every marine is a rifleman. Despite the fact that the Marine Corps contains all combat arms—infantry, artillery, and armor—and an aviation component, virtually all Marine commandants have been infantrymen.[84]

Of the U.S. armed forces, the Marine Corps has the strongest commitment to tradition and the status quo, a commitment reinforced by the deliberate, self-conscious study of history. It is, for example, the only Service that teaches history as part of Officer Candidate School.

The Marines' emphasis on tradition and conformity is manifest in the Marine uniform. Not surprisingly, it has changed the least of any Service's uniform since World War II. It also reflects the Service's ethic of uniformity: With the exception of aviators, who wear gold Navy flight wings on their chest, it is impossible to determine a Marine's specialty from their uniform.

Marines value technology the least of any Service. In part, this is the result of a culture that puts the individual warrior at the center of warfare. It is also the result of the fact that the Marine Corps, as the smallest Service, has historically had the least money to devote to technology. Until very recently, the Marines let the Army and Navy develop most of their equipment, adopting and adapting it as necessary.

The Marine Corps, for its part, has traditionally been divided into East Coast (Atlantic-facing) and West Coast (Pacific-facing) communities. Despite global deployments and roles in Europe (along the northern flank) during the late Cold War and in the Middle East since its end, the Marine Corps has embraced its Pacific heritage. Under the leadership of former Commandant General David Berger, the Marine Corps adopted an explicit Pacific focus. Berger served as Commander, U.S. Marine Forces, Pacific before being appointed commandant.

The Marine Corps' strategic traditions regarding the Pacific are distinct from those of its sister Service, the Navy. As told by Rosen, such a tradition includes the following beliefs:

83 See, for example, James Amos and John J. Sheehan, "Former Marine Generals: 'Our Concerns with Force Design 2030,'" *National Interest*, December 12, 2022, https://nationalinterest.org/feature/former-marine-generals-our-concerns-force-design-2030-205989.

84 On the organizational culture of the Marine Corps, see Frank Hoffman, "The Marine Mask of War," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 3, 2011, https://www.fpri.org/article/2011/11/the-marine-mask-of-war. See also Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, chap. 5.

> We have fought many times in the Pacific-Asia theater, and it has been a deadly place for us. From the Boxer Rebellion to Tarawa and Iwo Jima, from the Chosin reservoir to Khe Sanh and Hue, a lot of Marines have died there.... We do not take this part of the world lightly, and we do not assume that we would be able to execute our missions there easily, even with all the high-tech weapons in the world—and which we, as Marines, get only the leftovers. We think very hard about what we do there, militarily, and we are not sure what the answer is. Why else would you think that we are engaged in the most serious set of military experiments of any of the services to explore the future?[85]

The prominent place that the Pacific holds in the Marine Corps' strategic tradition is evident from the 2025 Commandant's Professional Reading List.[86] The 14 books listed under "heritage" include volumes that are explicitly focused on the Pacific theater of World War II and the Korean War—E.B. Sledge's *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* and Bob Drury and Thomas Clavin's *The Last Stand of Fox Company*, respectively—but also several general histories of the Marine Corps. That section also contains volumes on Afghanistan, Beirut, and other Marine campaigns. The Marine Corps' reading list also places greater weight on innovation than those of the other Services. The fifteen books listed under "innovation" include historical volumes such as T.X. Hammes' *Forgotten Warriors*, about the Korean War, and James Hornfischer's *Neptune's Inferno*, about the Guadalcanal Campaign, but also Mick Ryan's *White Sun War*, a fictional account of a future war across the Taiwan Strait. The Indo-Pacific region in general, and China in particular, are also well represented among the 15 books listed under "strategy." This category includes historical accounts of the Korean and Vietnam wars—Fehrenbach's aforementioned *This Kind of War* and Michael Morris' *Corps Competency? III Marine Amphibious Force Headquarters in Vietnam*—as well as three volumes on Chinese strategy and doctrine: *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA, Chinese Amphibious Warfare,* and M. Taylor Fravel's *Active Defense*.

Present

There have been five Commandants of the Marine Corps over the past 15 years. All but one have been infantrymen. Similarly, there have been six Assistant Commandants of the Marine Corps during the same period, including two who later became Commandant. Given the Marine Corps' emphasis on innovation, it is notable that command of Marine Corps Combat Development Command is often seen as a stepping stone to becoming Commandant or Assistant Commandant.

85 Rosen, "Strategic Traditions," p. 18.

86 "2025 Commandant's Professional Reading List," Marine Corps Association, https://www.mca-marines.org/2025-commandants-professional-reading-list.

TABLE 3: COMMANDANTS OF THE MARINE CORPS, 2010–PRESENT

Name	Years in position
Gen James F. Amos	2010–2014
Gen Joseph Dunford	2014–2015
Gen Robert Neller	2015–2019
Gen David H. Berger	2019–2023
Gen Eric H. Smith	2023–present

TABLE 4: ASSISTANT COMMANDANTS OF THE MARINE CORPS, 2010–PRESENT

Name	Years in position
Gen Joseph Dunford	2010–2012
Gen John M. Paxton, Jr.	2012–2016
Gen Glenn M. Walters	2016–2018
Gen Gary L. Thomas	2018–2021
Gen Eric H. Smith	2021–2023
Gen Christopher J. Mahoney	2023–present

The Commandant and Assistant Commandant are the only four-star billets in the Marine Corps. The most senior marine in the Pacific is the three-star Commander, U.S. Marine Forces, Pacific. In addition, a Marine lieutenant general has periodically served as the Deputy Commander of INDOPACOM. Lieutenant General Steve Sklenka held the position between 2021 and 2024 and Lieutenant General George B. Rowell assumed the position in May 2026.

Senior Marine leaders who gained extensive experience in the Indo-Pacific region credit Service leaders with providing them the opportunity to gain deep expertise through repeated tours in the region. They similarly emphasized the need for the Marine Corps leadership—the Commandant first and foremost—to identify promising officers and provide them with tours that will give them deep regional expertise.

Whereas Marine leaders with deep expertise in the Indo-Pacific region credited the Marine Corps leadership with identifying them and managing their careers, they also acknowledged the role of happenstance in their development of Indo-Pacific expertise. For many of them, being in the right place at the right time at a key point in their career allowed them to develop deep regional expertise over time.

Marine leaders generally credited the Navy with doing the best job of cultivating experience in the Indo-Pacific region but also believed there was a conscious effort within the Marine Corps to build a cadre of senior officers with Indo-Pacific expertise. Marine leaders also bemoaned the steady subordination of the Services to joint commands in a way that hinders the development of deep regional expertise.

Future

The Marine Corps Promotion Selection Board precepts began to mention Indo-Pacific regional experience within a larger section on career patterns in the FY22 precepts, and the language has remained unchanged through the present FY26 precepts.[87] The section states that the Corps has no established preferred career pattern for officers and that members of the board should consider candidates with a broad spectrum of skills and experience.[88] The precept mentions foreign language proficiency and cultural awareness, with China and the Indo-Pacific region given special attention. This emphasis on specific skills and experience, rather than geographical assignments, differs from the language used by the Navy, suggesting that Marine promotion boards value specific skills (language and cultural familiarity) over broad regional experience.

U.S. Army

Although the U.S. Army played an important role in the Pacific Theater in World War II, with MacArthur leading allied forces in the Southwest Pacific, in the Army's corporate memory its Pacific experience takes a back seat to its role in the European Theater. The Korean War and the Vietnam War figure in the Army's strategic tradition, but with largely negative connotations. As Rosen has put it, "Asia is a big headache for the Army. When we fight in Asia, we compromise and degrade our core skills in the conduct of high-intensity, combined-arms maneuver warfare."[89]

During the Cold War, the Army prized service in Europe above all other theaters. After the Cold War, the possibility of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula played a major role in driving the Army's end strength. During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the greater Middle East supplanted Europe as the theater of primary interest. By contrast, the Pacific, with the partial exception of the Korean Peninsula, is seen as a theater of secondary importance.[90]

Past

Whereas the U.S. Marine Corps has a unitary structure, power in the U.S. Army is shared among the traditional combat arms: infantry, cavalry/armor, and artillery. Not surprisingly, the position of Chief of Staff of the Army tends to rotate among these combat arms. The

87 U.S. Marine Corps, Officer Promotions, "Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2022 U.S. Marine Corps Major General Promotion Selection Board,", p. 4, https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/22_Precept_USMC-MajGen_SECNAV-signed.pdf (accessed January 5, 2025).

88 U.S. Marine Corps, Officer Promotions, "Precept Convening the Fiscal Year 2026 U.S. Marine Corps Major General Promotion Selection Board," p. 4, https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/FY25-USMC-MAJGEN-PRECEPT.pdf (accessed January 5, 2025).

89 Rosen, "Strategic Traditions," 19.

90 The Army's professional reading list is no longer publicly available.

Army has also traditionally invested much more of its force structure in specialized communities than the Marine Corps has. The Army is, in Carl Builder's words:

> A mutually supportive brotherhood of guilds. Both words, *brotherhood* and *guilds*, are significant here. The combat arms or branches of the Army are guilds—associations of craftsmen who take the greatest pride in their skills, as opposed to their possessions or positions. The guilds are joined in a brotherhood because, like brothers, they have a common family bond (the Army) and a recognition of their dependency upon each other in combat.[91]

Unlike the Marine uniform, an Army officer's branch identity is visible on his or her uniform.

Over the long term, the Army has created new branches (such as the armor branch, which was established in 1940) and eliminated others (such as the coast artillery, which was disestablished in 1950). In the short term, the Army has tended to assimilate technology into its traditional missions. For example, the Army's widespread adoption of the helicopter coincided with a redefinition of cavalry to include rotary-wing aircraft. The Army's aviation branch was only stood up in 1983.

Army officers, like their Marine counterparts, frequently profess that technology plays a subordinate role in warfare. In fact, however, the U.S. Army has traditionally valued advanced technology. Indeed, Army leaders have consistently seen advanced technology as a comparative advantage over potential foes.

The Army emphasizes the link between military effectiveness in wartime and forward presence in peacetime, to include security cooperation and allied and partner engagement. Both the Army and Air National Guard work with friendly countries through the National Guard's State Partnership Program. The California Army and Air National Guard worked with the Ukrainian armed forces beginning in 1993, and Taiwanese soldiers have participated in the National Guard Bureau's Northern Strike exercise in Michigan.[92]

Present

There have been six Chiefs of Staff of the Army over the past 15 years. Four came from the infantry, one from artillery, and one from aviation. There have similarly been nine Vice Chiefs of Staff of the Army during the same period, including two who went on to become Chief of Staff of the Army. Seven came from the infantry, one from cavalry, and one from aviation.

91 Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 33.

92 Phillip Walter Wellman, "In Northern Michigan, Thousands of Troops Train for Combat Across the Pacific," *Stars and Stripes*, August 18, 2025, https://www.stripes.com/theaters/us/2025-08-18/michigan-northern-strike-exercise-taiwan-18798757.html.

TABLE 5: ARMY CHIEFS OF STAFF, 2007–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Branch
GEN George W. Casey, Jr.	2007–2011	Infantry
GEN Martin Dempsey	2011–2011	Infantry
GEN Raymond Odierno	2011–2015	Artillery
GEN Mark Milley	2015–2019	Infantry
GEN James McConville	2019–2023	Aviation
GEN Randy George	2023–2026	Infantry

TABLE 6: ARMY VICE CHIEFS OF STAFF, 2008–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Branch
GEN Peter W. Chiarelli	2008–2012	Cavalry
GEN Lloyd J. Austin, III	2012–2013	Infantry
GEN John F. Campbell	2013–2014	Infantry
GEN Daniel B. Allyn	2014–2017	Infantry
GEN James C. McConville	2017–2019	Aviation
GEN Joseph M. Martin	2019–2022	Infantry
GEN Randy A. George	2022–2023	Infantry
GEN James J. Mingus	2023–2026	Infantry
GEN Christopher C. LaNeve	2026–present	Infantry

The Army has in recent decades drawn its leadership from officers whose tours were largely in Europe and the Middle East. Not surprisingly, the overseas tours of the Army Chiefs of Staff and Vice Chiefs of Staff were weighted toward Europe from the mid-1970s through the 1990s and toward the Middle East—specifically Iraq and Afghanistan—thereafter. For example, General George Casey had four tours in Europe: as a junior officer; as G3 and Chief of Staff of V Corps in Germany; as Assistant Division Commander of the First Armored Division in Europe, including Operation Joint Endeavor (Bosnia-Herzegovina); and as Commanding General of the First Armored Division. Casey also had a tour in the Middle East as Commander, Multi-National Force–Iraq from June 2004 to February 2007. General Martin Dempsey had one tour in Europe as a battalion commander and six tours in the Middle East, including service in the Third Armored Division during Operation Desert Storm, training the Saudi Arabian National Guard; with the First Armored Division in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq; and as Deputy Commander and Commander of CENTCOM. General Ray Odierno had two tours in Europe and four tours in the Middle East, including one for Operation Desert Storm and three during Operation Iraqi Freedom. General Mark Milley held command at the brigade and division level in Afghanistan. The careers of the six Vice Chiefs of Staff who did not go on to serve as Chief of Staff of the Army followed a similar pattern.

By contrast, service in the Indo-Pacific theater has been rare among Army Chiefs and Vice Chiefs of Staff. Only one, Milley, had a tour in the region—with the First Battalion, 506th Infantry in South Korea. Two Vice Chiefs each had a single tour in the Pacific—General John F. Campbell with the 25th Infantry Division in Hawai'i and General Daniel Allyn in South Korea. That having been said, the Army has cultivated significant pools of expertise about Asia through its FAO and strategist career fields.

At least until 2019, the route to Army chief of staff passed through the Middle East. For Casey, it came after serving as commander, Multi-National Forces–Iraq; for Dempsey, after serving as Commander of CENTCOM; for Odierno, after serving as commander of U.S. forces in Iraq; and for Milley, after serving as Deputy Commanding General of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. There are two four-star Army billets in the Pacific: Commander, U.S. Forces, Korea and Commander, U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC). Officers who have held these positions have not, however, gone on to lead the Army or serve as the Chairman or Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The previous Commander of USARPAC, General Charles Flynn, was something of an oddity in that he had five tours of duty in the region—three with the 25th Infantry Division and two with USARPAC.[93]

Senior Army leaders with Pacific experience were concerned that Army leaders have not accorded enough importance to the Indo-Pacific region. As one put it bluntly, "The Army doesn't understand what the hell is going on out here." As a team of RAND researchers concluded several years ago:

> For the Army, a strong [Department of Defense] focus on China is not conducive to its institutional health because it does not feature a strong role for landpower. This makes the Army's arguments for its foremost competitive goals—acceptance of the value of landpower and preservation of end strength—harder to pursue. The Army will fear that a China scenario could result in losses to end strength and force structure.[94]

Army officers interviewed for this project cited Navy and Marine Corps efforts to build deep regional expertise through multiple tours in the region. By contrast, they believed that the Army lacked a deliberate policy to build intellectual capital related to the region. Rather, it was too often "catch as catch can." Indeed, some Army officers we interviewed believed that the Army deliberately prevents people from staying (homesteading) in a region. In their view, the Army's focus is on jobs rather than regions, on warfighting rather than specialized roles.

They also noted that the Army FAO program, which was traditionally a strength of the Service, had been consolidated for promotion purposes. As a result of a significant investment in training and billets, the Army FAO program has long provided levels of regional

93 "Gen. Charles A Flynn," U.S. Army Pacific, https://www.usarpac.army.mil/Our-Team/Our-Leaders/Biography-Display/Article/3219624/gen-charles-a-flynn.

94 Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, p. 170.

expertise at the joint staff, Army, combatant command, and component command level. Unfortunately, the Army appears to be moving in a different direction as senior leaders seek to reduce training costs and recapture billets. As part of this, the FAO community's subregional specialties have been consolidated into one specialty for promotion purposes.

Others with whom we spoke believed that there had been a conscious decision over the past four to five years to build a cadre of general officers with regional experience. For example, the current Commanding General of USARPAC, General Ron Clark, previously served as the INDOPACOM Chief of Staff, Commanding General of the 25th Infantry Division, and USARPAC Chief of Staff. He also served in the 25th Infantry Division as a junior officer. The Commander of U.S. Forces, Korea, General Xavier Brunson, served as Commanding General of I Corps and Commanding General of the Seventh Infantry Division at Ft. Lewis, Washington. The Deputy Commanding General of USARPAC, J.P. Vowell, had been Commanding General of U.S. Army Japan, Deputy J5 of INDOPACOM, and the Deputy Commanding General for Operations of the 25th Infantry Division. The Commanding General of I Corps, Lieutenant General Matt McFarland, was Deputy Commanding General of USARPAC. Lieutenant General Joe Ryan, the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-3/5/7, had been commanding general of the 25th Infantry Division. The current Commanding General of the 25th Infantry Division, Major General Jay Bartholomees, was USARPAC Chief of Staff and G-3. All these officers are from the infantry branch, which makes up the largest percentage of previous Army Chiefs and Vice Chiefs of Staff.

Future

The Army has fielded new formations that appear to be driven by the need to sense, communicate, and strike across the vast expanse of the Pacific. Two of the Army's first three MDTFs—at Ft. Lewis, Washington, and Ft. Shafter, Hawai'i—are focused on the Pacific.

In 2024, the Army established the China Landpower Studies Center at the Army War College.[95] The center joins the Navy and Marine Corps' CMSI and the Air Force's China Aerospace Studies Institute (CASI).

Recent Army Selection Board precepts contain no references to China or to the Indo-Pacific region within its policies and procedures.[96] The most recent available document, however, is from FY22, so it is possible that subsequent board precepts include criteria geared toward the Indo-Pacific.

95 Strategic Studies Institute, "China Landpower Studies Center," U.S. Army War College, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/CLSC/About-CLSC.

96 U.S. Army, *Policies and Procedures for Active Duty List Officer and Department of the Army Selection Boards*, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN30242-HQDA_POLICY_NOTICE_600-2-000-WEB-1.pdf (accessed January 5, 2025).

U.S. Air Force

Past

The Air Force had its origins in, and continues to be defined by, the technology of manned flight. The Air Force is divided into pilots and nonpilots and between different communities of pilots. Even though combat pilots make up less than one-fifth of the Air Force, they are the ones who have dominated the Service since its inception.[97] From 1947 to 1982, the Air Force Chief of Staff was always a bomber pilot; since 1982, with two exceptions, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force has always been a fighter pilot.

The Air Force's strategic traditions in the Pacific region are a combination of the Air Force's vision of itself and the strategic geography of the region:

> We have air supremacy in Asia, and air supremacy is good. Strategic bombardment works, it can win wars, and it has.... Like the Navy, we can operate in this region by means of a network of bases on foreign soil. Air-to-air refueling means we can use fighters with ranges that work very nicely in the European theater as bombers in Asia. That is a good thing, because it means that fighters can remain the dominant platforms in our service.[98]

The strategic geography of the Pacific favors long-range air power, the value of which has grown as the Chinese threat to U.S. air bases in the region has multiplied. In a nod to the Service's Pacific heritage, the Air Force named its next-generation bomber, the B-21, the Raider as an homage to Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle's 1942 raid on Tokyo, a previous long-range strike in the Pacific.

The Indo-Pacific region in general, and China in particular, play a relatively minor role in the April 2025 Air Force Leadership Library, accounting for one of 11 books–Yoshihara's *Chinese Lessons from the Pacific War*—one of six podcasts, and one of five articles.[99] That having been said, the Air Force has been paying increasing attention to the challenge posed by China. In 2017, the Air Force established CASI "to advance understanding of the strategy, doctrine, operating concepts, capabilities, personnel, training, [and] organization of China's aerospace forces and the civilian and commercial infrastructure that supports them." It supports the secretary of the Air Force, the Air Force chief of staff, and other senior leaders of the Air and Space Forces.[100] Among other things, it translates Chinese publications, analyzes Chinese air and space doctrine and capabilities, and educates government personnel about China's aerospace forces and doctrine.

97 Thomas P. Ehrhard, "Unmanned Air Vehicles in the United States Armed Services: A Comparative Study of Weapon System Innovation" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2000), p. 89.

98 Rosen, "Strategic Traditions," p. 19.

99 "Air Force Leadership Library," U.S. Air Force, https://www.af.mil/About-Us/CSAF-Leadership-Library. Note that this website was subsequently disestablished, although archived lists remain available.

100 "China Aerospace Studies Institute," Air University, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/1611279/china-aerospace-studies-institute-casi-mission.

Present

There have been six Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force over the past 15 years. Four came from the fighter community and two from airlift. There have similarly been eight Vice Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force during the same period, including two who later became Air Force Chief of Staff.

Not surprisingly, given the character of air power, these officers had fewer overseas tours than their Army counterparts, and a greater proportion of their overseas tours were on the staff of joint task forces, theater Service staffs, or geographic combatant commands. Indeed, the route to Chief of Staff of the Air Force ran through theater component command. General Norton Schwartz served as Commander, Special Operations Command Pacific; General Mark Welsh served as Commander, U.S. Air Forces Europe; General David Goldfein served as Commander, Air Forces Central Command (CENTAF); and General Charles Brown served as Deputy Director of Operations, CENTCOM, Deputy Commander and Commander of CENTAF, and Commander, Pacific Air Forces.

TABLE 7: AIR FORCE CHIEFS OF STAFF, 2008–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Community
Gen Norton A. Schwartz	2008–2012	Airlift
Gen Mark A. Welsh III	2012–2016	Fighter
Gen David L. Goldfein	2016–2020	Fighter
Gen Charles Q. Brown, Jr.	2020–2023	Fighter
Gen David W. Allvin	2023–2025	Airlift
Gen Kenneth Wilsbach	2025–present	Fighter

TABLE 8: AIR FORCE VICE CHIEFS OF STAFF, 2009–PRESENT

Name	Years in position	Community
Gen Carrol H. Chandler	2009–2011	Fighter
Gen Philip M. Breedlove	2011–2012	Fighter
Gen Larry O. Spencer	2012–2015	Finance
Gen David L. Goldfein	2015–2016	Fighter
Gen Stephen W. Wilson	2016–2020	Bomber
Gen David W. Allvin	2020–2023	Airlift
Gen James C. Slife	2023–2025	Rotary wing
Gen John Lamontagne	2026–present	Airlift

Many Chiefs and Vice Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force had tours in the Indo-Pacific region. The current Air Force Chief of Staff, General Kenneth S. Wilsbach, had six tours in the region, including Assistant Director of Plans and Operations at U.S. Pacific Command;

Deputy Commander, U.S. Forces Korea; and Commander, Pacific Air Forces. Brown had three tours in the region, Schwartz two, and Welsh one, whereas Goldfein and Allvin had none. The first two Vice Chiefs of Staff of the Air Force during the period had multiple tours in the region, but the next four had none until General James Slife, who had one.

Future

Air Force leaders have stated the need to prepare for the range of Indo-Pacific threats and are planning to be able to do so if needed.[101] There is tension, however, between a force structure largely based upon tactical fighter aircraft with relatively limited ranges and the geography of the Western Pacific, which requires aircraft capable of operating over long ranges and in which there is an intense Chinese threat to air bases. The Air Force has responded to the China threat by promoting sixth-generation long-range strike aircraft such as the B-21 Raider and F-47 fighter. It has also developed new concepts of operations, such as ACE, which envisions dispersing aircraft in the Western Pacific to reduce their vulnerability to Chinese missile strikes.

Like the other Services, the Air Force has begun calling out the Indo-Pacific region in its promotion board precepts. The Air Force Memorandum of Instructions for FY25 mentions the Indo-Pacific region within the context of experience in ongoing operations. Under the section on specific experience, skills, qualifications, and responsibilities, the precepts state that personnel "who have performed duty or are performing duty in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Indo-Pacific region, and other areas of the world have developed or are developing combat, international partnering, and coalition-building skills that need to be retained and utilized for future application."[102] That the Indo-Pacific is placed at the same level of importance as active combat theaters is notable and suggests that the Air Force is taking its need of Indo-Pacific experience seriously. The precept states that deployment information, critical language skills, and assignments in the region may be reflected throughout various documents in a candidate's record. Moreover, it instructs members of the board that this requirement should not be considered a pass–fail item, as many officers have not had the opportunity to deploy or to serve in the Indo-Pacific.[103] The phrasing of this addition is particularly notable: The implication is that experience in combat theaters and in the Indo-Pacific is emphasized to such an extent that otherwise qualified candidates may be rejected for not meeting these criteria.

101 Zimmerman et al., *Movement and Maneuver*, p. 176.

102 Secretary of the Air Force, "Regular Air Force Field Grade Generic Memorandum of Instructions," p. 6.

103 Ibid., p. 6.

CHAPTER 5

Insights and Conclusions

As chapter 3 discussed, the U.S. military's geographic focus has historically shaped its capabilities and spurred the development of new operational concepts. Despite the priority that several successive presidential administrations have accorded to the Indo-Pacific region, the depth of Service and joint operational commitment to the Pacific theater remains unclear.

After more than 15 years of emphasis on the growing threat posed by China and the strategic importance of the broader Indo-Pacific region across presidential administrations, focus on the theater among the U.S. armed Services remains uneven. As chapter 4 explored in depth, the Navy maintained a strong focus on the region throughout the period, followed by the Marine Corps and Air Force and the Army. This is reflected in the career paths of senior leaders, the value that the individual Services place on tours of duty in the region, and the organizational culture of the Services. Moreover, U.S. force structure has not undergone major shifts in the face of China's long-range strike threat. Rather, the U.S. Navy and Air Force continue to invest in large numbers of relatively short-range tactical aircraft based at high-signature land and sea bases located very close to the Chinese mainland.

As startling as this may sound, it is not surprising. As chapter 3's survey of recent decades demonstrates, it takes time for the geographic focus of large organizations to change. This process is complicated by the fact that the Services face requirements, such as the need to staff joint and interagency commands, that cut against developing and retaining deep regional expertise. Moreover, the Services do not have the luxury of focusing on a single region. Rather, in recent decades they have had to respond to threats from across the globe.

For much of the first quarter of the 21st century, the United States was fighting wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Given that combat leadership frequently holds the key to future promotion and command, it is hardly surprising that the U.S. armed forces are today commanded by a generation of leaders shaped by service in the greater Middle East. Such experiences can both inform and mislead when it comes to future wars in the Indo-Pacific region.

This report has uncovered several factors that have promoted the development of intellectual capital related to the Indo-Pacific region. The first has to do with the value that a Service attaches to tours of duty in a particular theater. The Navy, for example, has traditionally valued service in the Pacific, and that value is expressed in promotion patterns. The Army, by contrast, has tended to view service in the Indo-Pacific as less desirable than that in Europe and the greater Middle East, something that is equally visible in promotion patterns.

A second, reinforcing factor is the existence of Service traditions that favor the region. Put simply, the more essential the region is to how the Service sees itself, the more the Service values the region. Here the Navy and Marine Corps stand out as celebrating the legacy of past wars in the Pacific more than the Army and Air Force—even though the Army and Air Force played vital roles in the Pacific theater and in the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

A third factor that has promoted the development of intellectual capital related to the Indo-Pacific region is the support of senior leaders. Interviews conducted for this project made it clear that senior Service leaders had often taken care to ensure that future leaders received operational and staff tours that would give them deep regional expertise while grooming them for future success.

A final, related factor is the existence of established paths to the top that run through the region. For the Navy, these include the progression from command of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, U.S. Pacific Fleet, and INDOPACOM. For the Army, they include command of the 25th Infantry Division, USARPAC, and INDOPACOM.

Conversely, our research identified several factors that have worked against the development of deep regional expertise about the Indo-Pacific region. The first is the enduring legacy of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which shaped the careers of a generation of officers, particularly those from the Army and Marine Corps. Service in Iraq and Afghanistan and leadership in combat have for understandable reasons been prized by the Service and joint communities, but they work against developing deep expertise in the Indo-Pacific, a very different theater.

A second barrier to developing deep regional expertise in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere flows from the need for joint assignments to be promoted to higher rank. Because such assignments are relatively scarce, getting a joint assignment frequently trumps where that joint assignment is. More generally, Service assignment practices appear to hamper the development of regional expertise. With the exception of the Navy, the Services do not appear committed to building theater expertise through repeated assignments in a given region. To the contrary, they frown upon what is often portrayed as homesteading. Relatedly, the joint staff and Services do not appear to encourage theater-specific expertise and joint operational planning as part of JPME.

The U.S. armed forces need to build a deeper bench in the Indo-Pacific region, given its importance to the United States. This should involve broadening expertise in the Services

that already value the theater and building it in those Services where Indo-Pacific expertise has been of secondary concern. To be successful, this will require Service leaders to make it a priority. As they do so, it would be wise for them to go beyond rhetoric and embrace the Service's strategic culture and historical traditions.

To be successful, efforts to build intellectual capital related to the Indo-Pacific region should incorporate tangible career incentives. More can and should be done to develop leaders with Indo-Pacific expertise through operational and staff tours. Indeed, many senior leaders with whom we spoke expressed concern that current personnel policies had diluted Service expertise. Moreover, more should be done to craft paths to leadership in the Service and joint communities that run through the region. Finally, more should be done to encourage theater-specific expertise and joint operational planning as part of JPME.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACE	Agile Combat Employment
AFPAK	Afghanistan–Pakistan
CASI	China Aerospace Studies Institute
CENTAF	Air Forces Central Command
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
CMSI	China Maritime Studies Institute
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CSBA	Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
CSG	Carrier Strike Group
EABO	Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations
EUCOM	U.S. European Command
FAO	Foreign Area Officer
FY	Fiscal Year
INDOPACOM	U.S. Indo-Pacific Command
JPME	Joint Professional Military Education
MDO	Multi-Domain Operations
MDTF	Multi-Domain Task Force
MLR	Marine Littoral Regiment
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NORTHCOM	U.S. Northern Command
OPLAN	Operational Plan
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SOUTHCOM	U.S. Southern Command
USARPAC	U.S. Army Pacific

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