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The United States Marine Corps Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept relies on greater access to a wider range of locations in the Indo-Pacific to counter China and to better reassure allies and partners.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
EABO; Distributed Operations; Indo-Pacific; Allies and Partners; China

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

AUTHOR: Major Jacob R. Godby, USMC

AY 2020-21

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Executive Summary

Title: Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations Requires Access

Author: Major Jacob R. Godby, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The United States Marine Corps Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept relies on greater access to a broader range of locations beyond fixed bases in the Indo-Pacific to counter China and better support allies and partners.

Discussion: The US Naval services updated key operational concepts when the Obama administration announced a renewed focus and balance towards the Indo-Pacific and the Trump Administration's declaration of China as the US's primary competitor. The United States Navy developed a Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) concepts. The United States Marine Corps (USMC) developed Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) as a complementary operational concept to support Naval operations. The success of these operational concepts depends on US forces' ability to operate away from known fixed locations that China's advanced military capabilities can easily target.

Conclusion: The US must gain additional access by strengthening security relationships with allies and partners for distributed operations to succeed.

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Illustrations

	Page
Figure 1. China Missile Range Capability.....	3
Figure 2. Contested Features.....	4
Figure 3. US Bases in the Indo-Pacific.....	5
Figure 4. China Outposts in Spratly Islands	12
Figure 5. Archipelagic Defense Concept.....	15
Figure 6. Inside-Outside Defense Concept	16

Table of Contents

	Page
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	ii
DISCLAIMER	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	iv
PREFACE	vi
SF-298.....	vii
INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND.....	1
PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	6
LITERATURE REVIEW	7
DISCUSSION	13
CONCLUSION.....	23
ENDNOTES	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	29

Preface

I want to thank the faculty and students in the Sea Power Strategy Gray Scholar Program for the excellent learning experience as we visited pivotal moments in maritime history throughout the course of the academic year. I also want to recognize Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff, Dr. Douglas Streusand, Dr. Nathan Packard, the late Colonel Arthur J. Corbett, USMC (Retired), and Lieutenant Colonel Jarrod Stoutenborough, USMC, for the knowledge, insight, and guidance they provided throughout the program.

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Introduction & Background

The Obama administration's rebalance to Asia and the Pacific and the Trump administration's focus on great power competition, specifically against the People's Republic of China (PRC), transformed US policy and strategy after a long counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency period. President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) outlined the strategic vision for the region, a key point of which was to promote a balance of power that favors the US, allies, and partners.¹ The Biden administration's recent Interim National Security Guidance also reinforced this strategic vision.² In response to China's advanced military capabilities, especially its long-range strike systems, the US developed operational concepts that do not rely on vulnerable fixed bases. The United States Navy (USN) created Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE). The United States Marine Corps (USMC) developed Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) to complement and support DMO and LOCE. These approaches are operationally sound but require access to multiple locations for temporary advanced bases. Current US arrangements with allies and partners do not allow the necessary operational access. The US's current distributed operations concepts rely on access to more locations within the borders of ally and partner nations.

The Indo-Pacific is the largest, most diverse region globally and has long been of strategic importance to the US. This area encompasses approximately 50% of the world's population across 36 different countries, a third of which are island nations, where people speak over 3,000 different languages. The region is home to the most populous country in the world, China, the largest democracy, India, and the smallest republic, Nauru. Two of the world's three largest economies, China and Japan, and ten of the world's fourteen smallest economies also

reside here. The region has become the center of world trade, with the most maritime traffic and nine of the ten busiest ports. Additionally, several of the world's largest standing militaries reside here: China, India, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, and Australia, as well as three of the world's declared nuclear nations in China, India, and North Korea.³ The economic, military, and geographic diversities in the area, specifically countries bordering the East China Sea (ECS) and South China Sea (SCS), offer a variety of options for operational access. The growing Chinese threat to regional and global order have impelled the US to increase its focus on strategy and operational planning on this region.

China's economic power, military capability, and diplomatic influence make it the US's primary rival. Beijing's leadership has stated the desire to have a world-class military, meaning parity with or superiority over the US, by 2049. China's capabilities are already formidable. The PRC military has the world's largest navy, has multiple variants of land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles with far-reaching capabilities (see figure 1), and has one of the most extensive integrated air defense systems (IADS) in the world.⁴

Conventional Strike Capabilities

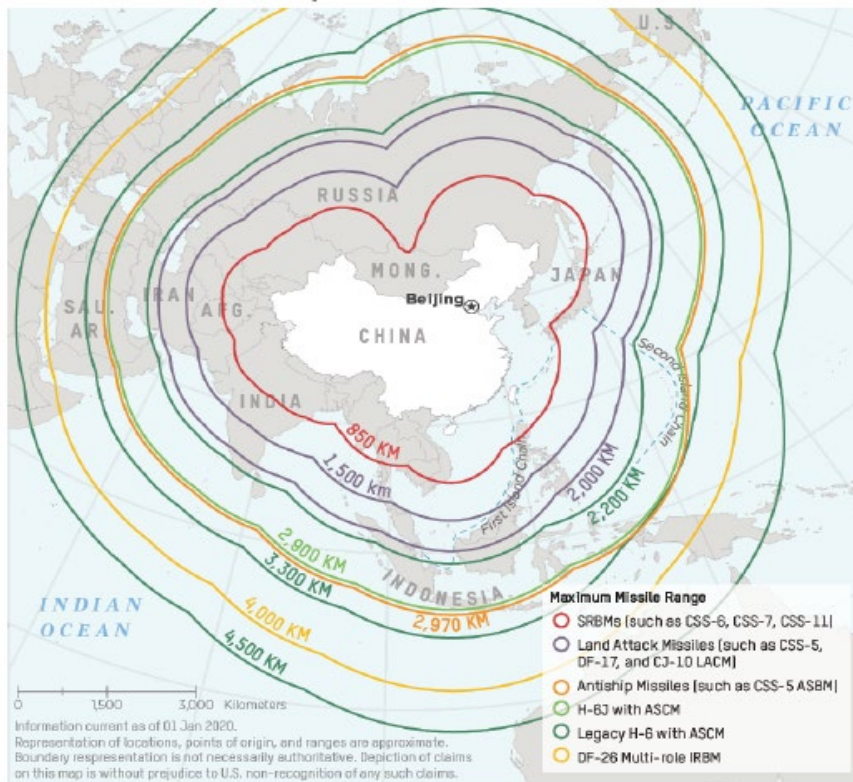


Figure 1
 US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020), 57.
<https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

China's economic power supported a \$209 billion defense budget in 2021 which is a credible expenditure to continue modernization efforts.⁵ The PRC has established controversial military outposts in the ECS and SCS with its modernized and growing military (see figure 2).⁶

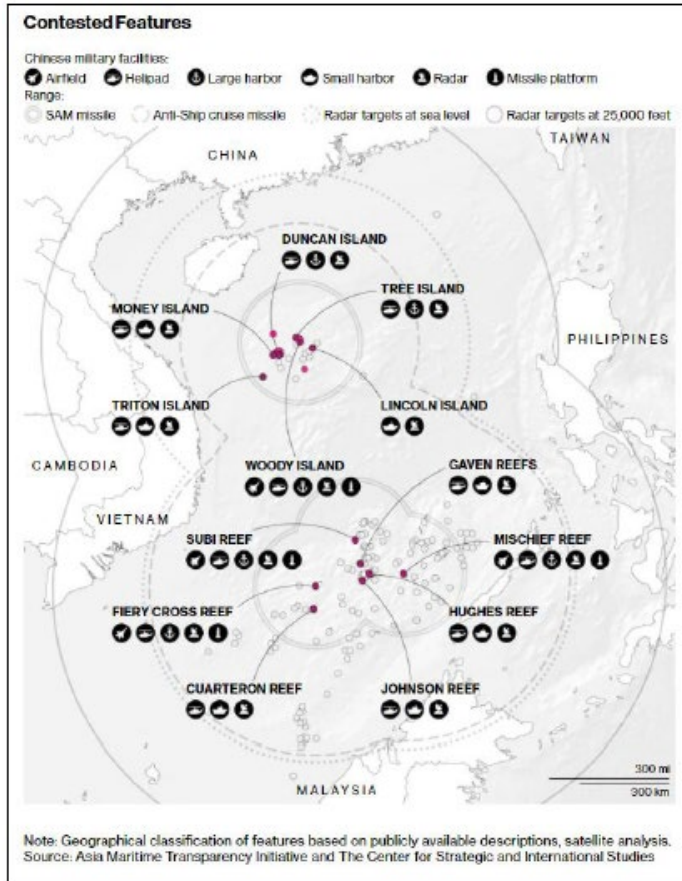


Figure 2
 Ronald O'Rourke, *US – China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress R42784 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Updated March 18, 2021), 12, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R42784/%20>

In 2013 Beijing initiated the One Belt One Road (OBOR) to enhance trade and develop and deepen economic ties with neighboring countries. Buying this type of access gives the PRC strategic leverage.⁷ Finally, China's military and economic self-assertion has increased its diplomatic influence. The PRC military conducts exercises with other nations in the region, participates in United Nations peacekeeping operations, and Beijing has invested approximately \$137 billion in construction contracts throughout the Indo-Pacific from 2006-2017.⁸ These activities and advancing military capabilities required the US to seek a new operational approach.

The Naval services have developed distributed operations concepts to counteract the PRC's long-range strike capability, which puts the fixed bases on which the US has historically relied at risk. Previously, the US achieved security through forward stationed forces concentrated around fixed bases and ports, primarily in Japan and South Korea (see figure 3).⁹

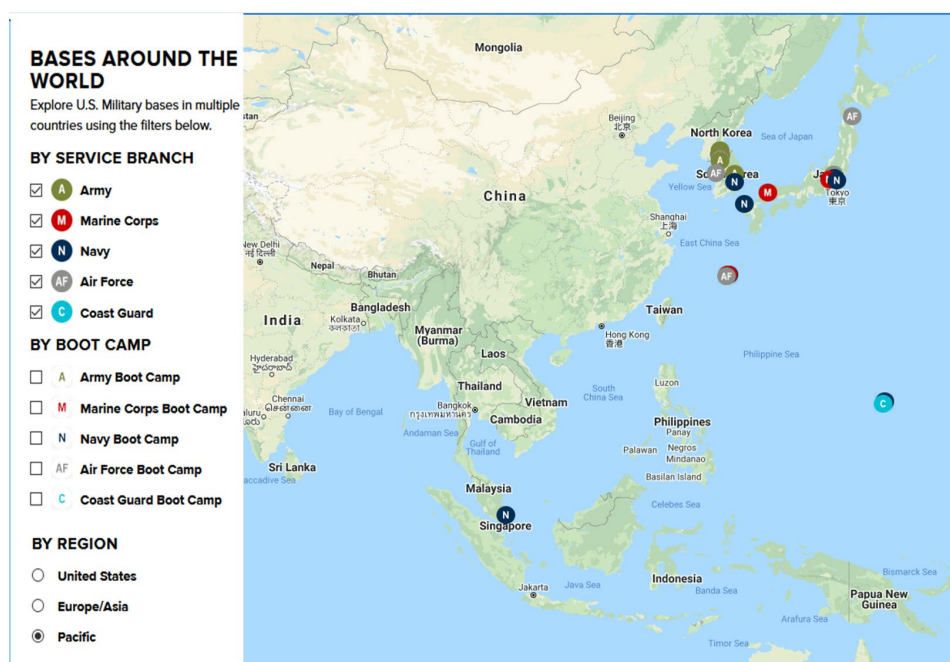


Figure 3
todaysmilitary.com, “Bases Around the World,” accessed March 20, 2021,
<https://www.todaysmilitary.com/ways-to-serve/bases-around-world>

However, the ability to maintain free and open access is at risk due to China's capability to disrupt the established rules-based system led by the US along with its allies and partners.¹⁰ Of note, Japan has a regional strategy that is consistent with US strategy but lacks specific provisions for access that the new operational approaches require. In 2016, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe actively promoted Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy that included promoting and solidifying the rule of law, pursuing economic prosperity, and a commitment to peace and stability.¹¹ Abe's efforts garnered support from the US as well as

other countries abroad. Nonetheless, going forward requires the US to obtain operating access to multiple locations for temporary advanced bases from our allies and partners in the First Island Chain (FIC). The temporary bases will increase China's military challenge exponentially and thus enhance deterrence.¹²

Problem Statement

The US's current distributed operations concepts rely on greater access to a broader range of locations within the borders of ally and partner nations and beyond fixed bases in the Indo-Pacific. There are three primary points to inform this thesis; the type of access required to implement this strategy, the implications if the US does not gain access, and recommendations on how the US can gain access from allies and partners. First, as mentioned, the current level of persistent access is limited to fixed bases at known locations that PRC military capabilities can target. US forces must be able to operate more freely and consistently outside of these fixed locations to enhance survivability. Persistent access includes maneuver space near the littorals and using the local economy to sustain the force. Second, if the US does not gain access, then unfortunately, US naval forces will not wholly realize its operational concept. This is because the forces inside the First Island Chain (FIC) will not be positioned to enact maritime pressure against the PRC, which ultimately will inhibit the subsequent introduction of forces from beyond the FIC. Moreover, the US will find it increasingly difficult to support allies and partners against Chinese aggression. Lastly, a way to gain access is by strengthening the security relationships with treaty allies and enhancing the security architecture with partner nations. There are diplomatic measures available the US can use to incentivize allies and partners to grant greater access. If enacted, these measures can enable distributed operations without being overly provocative to China and benefit the host nation's security and economy.

Literature Review

Assessing future access needs requires examination of US regional strategy, the new operational concepts, the PRC's capabilities, and current US security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. The first body of literature is the US's national strategy and subsequent naval service's distributed operations concepts, second is the PRC's strategy and overall capabilities, and third, the current US security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

Distributed operations fit within the overall US strategy defined by the *National Security Strategy*, *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), and the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (IPSR). Additionally, there is an overview of select naval strategies to include *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, *Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment* (LOCE), and *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power* in order to refine the framework on distributed operations. Lastly, this includes a more detailed orientation to both the *Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations Handbook* and the *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*.

The 2017 NSS outlines the strategic vision for protecting US interests and promoting a balance of power that favors the US, allies, and partners.¹³ It states that China unfairly leverages economic power, conducts influence operations, and implies military threats against lesser powers to persuade them to submit to Beijing's political and security agenda. It also says that the PRC's efforts to militarize outposts in the South China Sea endanger the free flow of trade, threaten the sovereignty of other nations, and undermine regional stability.¹⁴ In March of 2021, the Biden administration released an Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that reinforces the US's position against China and its commitment to allies and partners, specifically with Japan, as well as, India, New Zealand, Singapore, Vietnam, and the remainder of the Association

of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).¹⁵ The 2018 NDS is the second strategic level document that articulates the Defense Department's position on how to compete, deter, and win in a competitive environment in order to maintain US global influence, cohesion among allies and partners, and access to markets.¹⁶ It goes on to explain that the US must strengthen alliances and partnerships in the region in order to deter aggression, maintain stability, and ensure access to common domains.¹⁷ Both of these documents are broad in scope but still establish the framework for theater and service level agendas.

The 2019 IPSR affirms the US's commitment to stability and prosperity through preparedness, partnerships, and the promotion of a networked region.¹⁸ Like the NSS and NDS, the IPSR identifies China as the primary competitor. This document explicitly identifies the PRC's A2/AD capabilities as a means to prevent countries from operating in areas near China's periphery in both the maritime and air domains. These are spaces that should otherwise be available for use by all countries within the rules, standards, and norms of international law. Moreover, the IPSR identifies that Beijing is militarizing the South China Sea by placing anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles on the Spratly Islands as well as conducting provocative patrols near the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.¹⁹ The IPSR is the authoritative regional document that helps inform the necessary service level capabilities.

Two USN documents outline the foundation for distributed operations concepts and two USMC publications expand further the concept. First, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower*, contends that this strategy requires a forward naval presence to strengthen alliances and partnerships, promote stability, deter conflict, and respond to aggression.²⁰ This includes bolstering existing alliances with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea,

and Thailand, as well as increasing partnerships with Bangladesh, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Pakistan, Singapore, and Vietnam. Enhancing these relationships will enable a better response to local maritime security challenges and lead to access within the maritime environment.²¹ The second USN document, LOCE, describes that USMC land-based contributions to sea control are an integral aspect of operating in the littorals.²² The document emphasizes that if a conflict should occur, a key part of prevailing in these contested spaces is through the employment of expeditionary advance bases.²³

The Department of the Navy recently released a tri-service strategy *Advantage at Sea: Prevailing with Integrated All-Domain Naval Power* that outlines a comprehensive maritime strategy for great power competition environment. In essence, this strategy coordinates the aforementioned maritime strategies underneath it. Three of the six objectives recognized that setting maritime conditions include: preserving a stable and secure global maritime environment that is free, open, and advances prosperity through transit, trade, and lawful pursuit of natural resources; enabling allies to counter coercion and if required defending allies from aggression; and, reinforcing favorable balances of maritime power by expanding collaboration and interoperability with allies and partners.²⁴ This document identifies allies and partners as the key to increasing US legitimacy, strengthening regional deterrence, and demonstrating multinational resolve while concurrently contributing to intelligence, logistics, cyber, and space capabilities.²⁵ This highlights why it is critical for the US to strengthen the security architecture in the region.

The first USMC document, EABO Handbook, complements the USN publications and outlines in detail a vision of how the Marine Corps will enable the USN in the maritime domain. EABO supports the USN with sea denial or sea control capabilities from low-signature locations ashore as they operate in and around closed and confined seas in an A2/AD environment.²⁶

EABO helps create an active, robust, maritime defense in depth. The previous security architecture involves allies and partners.²⁷ It is essential to be able to posture and partner forward with operationally relevant capabilities to support and defend US interests and those of US allies.²⁸ The second USMC document Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations further explains this concept in operational and tactical level detail. Although the manual covers the full spectrum of planning through execution, this overview will identify specific requirements to support operations and logistics. One of the main ideas behind EABO is to not rely on the development of permanent US only bases but rather to operate within the existing framework of an ally or partner's infrastructure freeing them from fixed bases. They thus have sufficient freedom of movement to operate among a variety of expeditionary locations. As such, development of infrastructure such as airports, seaports, roads, and bridges by EAB forces will also benefit the host countries.²⁹ These forces would also contract with local vendors for other sustainment supplies or commercial containers for storage and coordinate with host nation hospitals for emergency use if needed.³⁰ The economic benefits from this concept can facilitate long-term cooperation, and support dual-use of any facilities used since the benefits of EABO extend to the US's allies and partners.³¹

An overview Beijing's strategy for the region fits within the 2019 *China National Defense in the New Era*, the 2018 *Assessment on US Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access*, and lastly, the *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020 Annual Report to Congress*. These documents will help provide a framework on the challenges US forces will face given the PRC's strategic intent and military capabilities if the US is unable to gain additional access to support distributed operations.

In 2019 Beijing released the *China's National Defense in the New Era*, commonly referred to as the China Defense White Paper. It acknowledges in this document that this region is now a place for competition between major powers and asserts that the US brings complexity to security due to its military alliances, deployments, and interventions.³² It mentions disputes over maritime borders and asserts that regional actors threaten China's national security by undertaking air and sea reconnaissance in territory it claims.³³ China is not seeking hegemony, expansion, or spheres of influence and is instead adhering to principles of defense, self-defense and post-strike response, and adopting an active defense.³⁴

The Department of Defense *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020 Annual Report to Congress* provides a US perspective. It identifies some of China's military capabilities and the PRC's development of overseas bases and presence in contested areas. PRC capabilities include the 350 ships and submarines in the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the 1,250 ground-launched ballistic missiles (BLGMs) and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, and the PRC's robust and resilient IADS. All of this enables China's A2/AD capabilities in the FIC. Moreover, the Report to Congress asserts that the PRC is likely to pursue military bases in countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Cambodia.³⁵ This is in addition to the 20 outposts in the Paracel Islands, 7 in the Spratly Islands (see figure 4), Scarborough Shoal, and the creation of 3,200 acres of new land through dredging and artificial island-building elsewhere in the South China Sea.³⁶

Outposts in the Spratly Islands

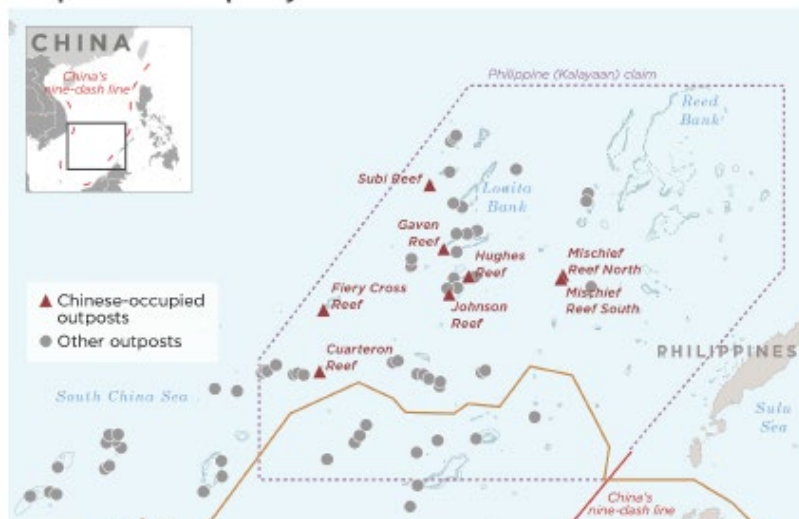


Figure 4

US Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020), 101. <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>

The report explains that part of Beijing's motivation in taking these actions is to restore the PRC to a dominant place in the world after going through a century of humiliation in the mid-19th century to approximately 1949.³⁷ These brief insights reveal the need for distributed operations. Forces inside the FIC, let alone outside forces trying to penetrate this A2/AD environment, will have enough difficulty contending with these challenges.

The Department of Defense's December 2018 *Assessment on US Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access* assesses China's methods of gaining influence in the region. This includes the expansion of bilateral exercises with other nations, economic coercion, and military equipment and technology support. China has increased participation in military exercises ranging from counter-terrorism, border security, peacekeeping, and disaster relief to more conventional ground, maritime, and air with other regional countries such as Russia, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Australia. Three examples of economic coercion include ceasing exports of rare earth minerals to Japan due to a maritime collision incident, restricting banana imports from and tourism to the Philippines due to Scarborough Reef dispute, and restricting

tourism to Korea, cutting imports, and closing Korean supermarkets in China due to South Korean missile defense policy.³⁸ These examples show how the PRC continues to use economic leverage to undermine US influence.

Lastly, The current US security architecture in the Indo-Pacific is a hub and spoke model where the US maintains primarily bilateral relations with other countries. The rationale for pursuing this type of arrangement is best explained from a quote in Victor Cha's article "Powerplay: Origins of the US Alliance System in Asia." In this article, Cha cites a memo from Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of Defense Marshall where they assert to President Harry Truman that a series of bilateral agreements, instead of a large multilateral arrangement, would position the US to achieve better results in this part of the world.³⁹ Even with the stated advantages of bilateral agreements, the US nonetheless attempted to create multilateral arrangements such as the Pacific Pact proposals from 1949-1951 and South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) from 1954-1977.⁴⁰ Although both organizations ultimately failed, there have been more recent ideas such as the so-called Indo-Asia-Pacific NATO (IAPTO) that Stephen Burgess and Janet Beilstein address in their article *Multilateral Defense Cooperation in the Indo-Asia-Pacific Region: Tentative Steps Toward a Regional NATO*. However, they conclude that this is not a viable security arrangement due to nationalism, diverging interests, and disparate geopolitical situations of the different regional states, and China's power.⁴¹ This background explains the diplomatic obstacles to gaining greater access and will illuminate the rationale of the current security architecture and diplomatic challenges.

Discussion

This literature demonstrates the need to supplement existing fixed bases with access to a wide variety of locations and infrastructure in the FIC. Without the ability to operate from a

variety of locations, the US will be unable counter the PRC growing combat power. The type of access required must support the operational and logistical needs of EABO. These needs require the ability to use host nation infrastructure such as ports, airfields, and roadways as well as locations such as beaches, storage facilities, and land. The current state of fixed US bases in the Indo-Pacific is well known and therefore vulnerable should conflict occur.

EABO fits into the broader strategic concept of archipelagic defense. Andrew Krepenevich presents archipelagic defense as a framework for deterring China and reassuring allies that they do not need to submit to Chinese coercion. He defines the US and Japan as the leaders of a coalition that should include the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and South Korea.⁴² The creation of such a coalition requires the incorporation of new partners into a broader strategic architecture in order to take operational advantage of their territories. The new arrangement would permit US and coalition forces to conduct distributed operations from dozens of possible locations and thus to implement two components of archipelagic defense, a maritime pressure campaign and inside-outside defense (see figure 5).⁴³ Gaining access beyond what currently occurs with yearly mil-to-mil exercises will help ensure the inside force is appropriately geographically postured to support distributed operations.

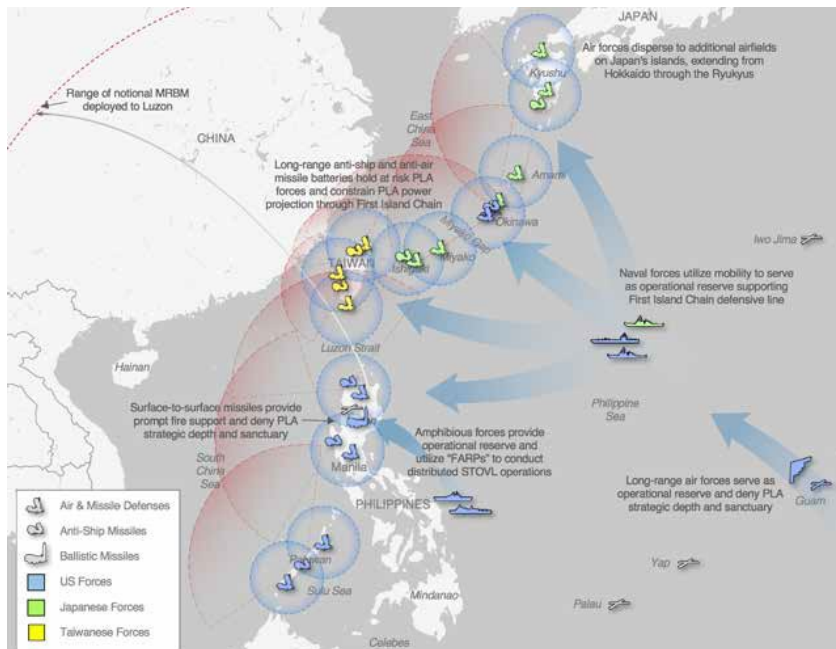


Figure 5
 Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *Archipelagic Defense: The Japan – US Alliance and Preserving Peace and Stability in the Western Pacific*, (Sasakawa Peace Foundation), 70.
https://www.spf.org/en/jpus/publications/20170810_1.html

To ensure survivability and the ability to operate in a dispersed manner in the FIC, the US must bring additional partners into the existing security architecture. In fact, three of the nine key planning assumptions for archipelagic defense rely on these additional partners outside of the US and Japan relationship.⁴⁴ Distributed operations, specifically EABO, are the only viable employment of US forces given the geographic challenges and the PRC military capabilities. This posturing of US forces with allies and partners will enable a maritime pressure campaign and implement the inside-out defense concept.

The idea of a maritime pressure campaign and the use of an inside-out defense concept is complementary to the broader idea of archipelagic defense in countering China's A2/AD advantage. Maritime pressure involves the forward positioning of US forces in critical locations within the FIC as a means to bolster confidence in US commitment to allies and partners should deterrence fail against China.⁴⁵ The Inside-out defense concept refers to an inside force being able to fight and persist within the contested environment inside the FIC so that the outside force

can fight from a distance, such as the Second Island Chain (SIC), and penetrate into the contested space if required (see figure 6).⁴⁶

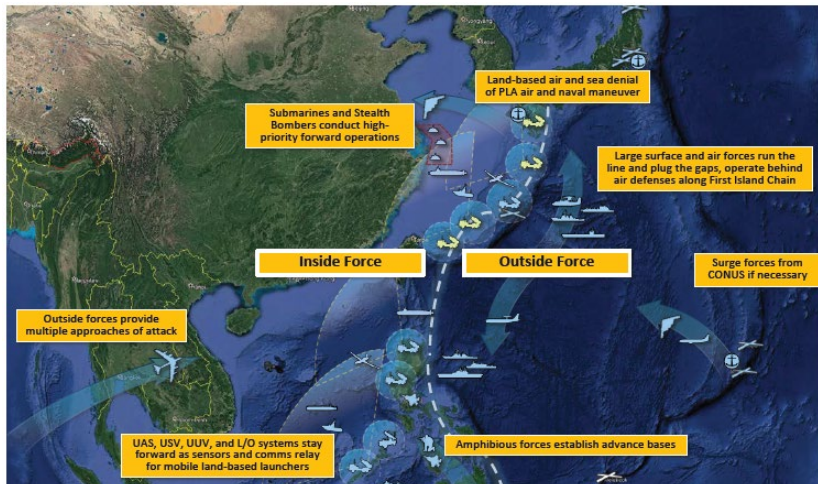


Figure 6

Thomas G. Mahnken, Bill Fabian, Peter Kouretsos, and Travis Sharp, *Tightening the Chain: Implementing a Strategy of Maritime Pressure in the Western Pacific* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2019), 31.

<https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/implementing-a-strategy-of-maritime-pressure-in-the-western-pacific>

A consistent theme is that both maritime pressure and inside-out defense require access to a variety of operating locations.

The US has fixed military bases in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Australia. Japan and South Korea host the most US military capabilities, whereas Singapore contains a smaller size force from USN Logistic Group Western Pacific (CTF-73), and Australia has US maintained facilities to support a rotational presence in Darwin. This level of access is insufficient to support EABO since the US presence inside the FIC is largely in Okinawa. The few exceptions are forces embarked on amphibious shipping as part of a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), US forces deployed from the fixed bases to participate in limited duration theater security cooperation exercise, a small special operations forces (SOF) presence conducting partnered operations, and, as mentioned, CTF-73 in Singapore. All others are on the periphery of the FIC or tied to a fix base, and therefore out of position to support. The US needs greater access to operational space in countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam due to their location near the

South China Sea. US forces are positioned to apply pressure in the East China Sea due to US bases present in Okinawa and mainland Japan but cannot apply persistent maritime pressure in the South China Sea.

US forces are currently limited to establishing EABs from the fixed bases, such as Okinawa, or amphibious shipping to operational space in another nation once a crisis occurs. In March of 2019, the Okinawa-based 31st MEU performed an EABO mission rehearsal. Reconnaissance Marines departed amphibious shipping and conducted a military free-fall parachute insert onto a small island with an airfield capable of accommodating military aircraft. Approximately 72 hours later, a company of Marines from the embarked battalion landing team conducted a 600-mile long-range insert to secure the airfield for follow-on operations. Once the airfield was secure, the 31st MEU airdropped a Helicopter Expeditionary Refueling System (HERS) to establish a refueling point for transiting aircraft. A KC-130 military transport aircraft then landed in support of a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) Rapid Infiltration (HIRAIN) which then conducted a simulated long-range precision strike mission against an adversary target. Once the HIRAIN was complete, the KC-130 refueled and quickly departed. The EABO mission rehearsal concluded with refueling an F-35B aircraft. Next, an infantry platoon conducted a 900-mile long-range raid to a follow-on objective. Finally, the remainder of the unit returned to amphibious ships.⁴⁷ The entire EABO evolution took approximately five days. Pre-crisis deployment and steady-state operations are inconsistent. Ideally, a unit such as the 31st MEU would have the necessary freedom of movement in places such as the southern Ryuku Islands, Philippines, Malaysia, and Vietnam to deploy forces in order to conduct persistent steady-state operations alongside host nation forces.

The 3d Marine Division March 2021 exercise Castaway 21.1 demonstrated the problem of conducting distributed operations from fixed bases. It showed the ability to seize and defend key maritime terrain, conduct long-range precision fires in support of naval operations, and operate in a low signature environment over an extended period of time. During this event 3d Marine Division demonstrated the ability to seize and defend key maritime terrain, conduct long-range precision fires in support of naval operations, and showed how to operate in a low signature environment over an extended period of time.⁴⁸ Moreover, this exercise demonstrated how EABs could integrate with and enable the joint force given that additional participants included the *USS Halsey* (DDG 97), elements from the Army's I Corps Multi-Domain Task Force, a C-17 Globemaster III transport from the US Air Force, elements from 1st Special Forces Group, and even integrated capabilities from the Space Force.⁴⁹ These forces were limited to fixed bases on Okinawa, unlike the previous example where units such as the 31st MEU routinely deploy aboard amphibious ships and therefore have a more mobility within at least the maritime space. Instead, US forces such as the 3d Marine Division need to operate routinely beyond Okinawa, mainland Japan, or Korea, and operate consistently elsewhere within the FIC to fully realize the advantage of distributed operations.

As a contrast to the above current example, the EABO Handbook provides a vision of employing EAB forces in the near future based on the description of EAB characteristics and vignettes. In this example scenario, the Okinawa-based 12th Marine Littoral Regiment has forces participating in theater security cooperation events in the southern Ryukyu Islands, the Philippines, and Vietnam. During this pre-conflict shaping phase, the forces are on a three-month rotation to each location. They are there to foster and build mil-to-mil relationships and capabilities, pre-position equipment for disaster relief and future conflict, improve the critical

infrastructure required for EAB activities, source contracting requirements for logistic sustainment, and engage in civ-mil projects that benefit the host nation.⁵⁰ These EAB pre-conflict deployments enable several opportunities such as providing an additional level of deterrence independent of fixed bases, reassuring allies and partners of the US's commitment to the region, and having a more persistent distributed force operating in the FIC.⁵¹ If deterrence does fail and conflict occurs, then these forward-deployed forces are geographically postured to gain the initiative in applying maritime pressure through sea control or sea denial, supporting the introduction of the outside forces, and conducting sustained operations in support of the joint force pre-conflict actions.⁵² All this, however, is predicated upon achieving a persistent level of access to operational space in ally and partner nations.

If the US does not gain additional access, then a distributed operational concept such as EABO is not tenable, outside forces will have an even more challenging time penetrating into the FIC should conflict occur, and the US is not demonstrating its total commitment to allies and partners.

China's military presence and capability continue to increase in the region. The PRC conducts mil-to-mil engagements with other countries such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam, assists in disaster relief operations, and conducts port calls to gain a military advantage.⁵³ Furthermore, Beijing has been emboldened in many aspects, specifically, in the maritime domain. For example, in June of 2020, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) conducted maritime operations near the Japanese-owned Senkaku Islands and even attempted to evict Japanese fishing boats from the area. In this example, it required the Japanese coast guard to intervene.⁵⁴ This is exacerbated further by aggressive actions in the South China Sea, where China declared "administrative districts" over the contested Paracel and Spratly Islands. Both

Vietnam and the Philippines denounced China's actions, but both countries can do little beyond that due to the economic and military superiority of China.⁵⁵ Moreover, the US has also been subject to aggressive actions from the PRC to include numerous unsafe and unprofessional encounters with PLAN ships in the South China Sea.⁵⁶ Again, the lack of persistent operational access places the US in a position of disadvantage to deter the PRC's actions.

Beijing's activities continue to intensify as military capabilities continue to increase which aligns with its assessed intentions for the region. A recent Congressional Research Service report identified six efforts of PRC military modernization to include a greater degree of control over the South China Sea, enforcing Beijing's view of its 200-mile maritime exclusive economic zone, defending sea lines of communication, and displacing US influence from the Western Pacific.⁵⁷ This is important to understand that the longer the US does not have access to the necessary operational space in ally and partner nations, the more difficult it is to implement distributed operations due to the significant amount of influence China has within the region. This build-up in PRC capabilities and lack of access directly impacts the inside force's ability to move beyond fixed bases once conflict occurs, which in turn increases the level of risk to US forces in the FIC. An additional consideration and level of risk is that the inside force is not positioned to support the introduction of outside forces. The distributed operational concept is the best way to deter Beijing's aggressive actions and continued growing military.

Finally, the lack of additional access depicts a wavering commitment of the US to its allies and partners. China is already the largest economic partner with countries such as South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore, and is within the top three trading partners with the Philippines and Vietnam.⁵⁸ The US does maintain a closer mil-to-mil relationship with many of these same countries. However, even then, Beijing continues to undermine US efforts in an

attempt to gain regional hegemony. Having continued access to ally and partner nations shows the US's resolve, demonstrates burden-sharing in countering China's aggressive actions, and shows that the US is willing to assume the same level of risk as other countries under the PRC's military capabilities. Not having access leaves the US's allies and partners vulnerable to Beijing's growing influence in the region.

The US must strengthen the security relationships with treaty allies and enhance the security architecture with partner nations in order to gain the access required for distributed operations. The required changes go beyond the military's scope of authority and requires diplomatic involvement to address these deficiencies. An assumption, however, is that the US will continue to maintain primarily bilateral treaties and agreements and not pursue a European-style NATO-like multinational design. Even with this constraint, there are still diplomatic ways to improve existing relations and create new ones. Also, the intent of this recommendation is to present diplomatic planners with an idea from the military perspective and would require more detailed study and research beyond the scope of this paper.

With the aforementioned in mind, the following programs are available to enhance the security architecture. These include Section 1263 Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI), US Arms Export Control Act, and the Foreign Assistance Act. The purpose of Section 1263 Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) is to increase maritime security and domain awareness with countries in the South China Sea region. This includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, all of which are strategically important to distributed operations.⁵⁹ Second, US Arms Export Control Act is the US law that outlines the conduct of foreign military sales and commercial sales of defense articles, services, and training.⁶⁰ Lastly, the Foreign Assistance Act outlines aid that the US provides to other

countries in order to support global peace, security, development efforts, and provide humanitarian relief.⁶¹ These three programs are potential ways to better incentivize allies and partners in the region to grant greater access that will enable the viability of the US's distributed operations concepts.

Additionally, there have been studies conducted that come to similar conclusions in the above paragraph, and the Department of State echoes similar themes in its strategic documents regarding China and US allies and partners. For example, a December 2019 study from the Center for New American Security December 2019 entitled *Rising to the China Challenge: Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific* supports the idea that China will challenge US policy in the region with countries such as the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam due to China's proximity and economic power. This study further argues that the US could improve its security architecture by strengthening regional institutions, offering military assistance, supporting civil society and anti-corruption initiatives, and providing development finance and human capital training.⁶² In total, this study recommends 17 changes designed to strengthen US diplomacy.⁶³ As mentioned, it is important to note that US State Department's Joint Strategic Plan and Integrated Country Strategy for China label Beijing as an authoritarian actor that challenges well-established democratic nations and emerging democracies.⁶⁴ The documents continue that the US must collaborate with regional allies and partners in pressing the CCP to respect international law and norms, freedom of navigation, and contribute to regional peace and stability.⁶⁵

Despite the benefits to the US and its allies and partners in the region of a fully enacted distributed operations concept, there is a counterargument against this approach. First, China may perceive the idea of an archipelagic defense derived from distributed operations as a form of

containment designed to limit China to the western Pacific. This is true but arguably an acceptable risk since it is easier to manage the PRC's growing capabilities in a smaller geographic area such as the East and South China Seas.⁶⁶ Second, distributed operations may further embolden China to conduct even more aggressive actions, specifically in the maritime domain and over territorial disputes. Again, also valid; however, it presents Beijing with a more significant cost imposition on their strategic calculus regarding what type of posture to assume. Moreover, distributed US forces persisting with and around its allies and partners will likely serve more as a counterweight rather than an accelerant.⁶⁷ Lastly, China may leverage economic power against countries where the US currently has lesser amounts of mil-to-mil engagements, such as Vietnam, if those countries do allow a persistent presence in support of distributed operations. The US can mitigate this concern since it is already among the top trading partner for many of the countries of interest, so between that, the economic benefits gained from a persistent US presence living off the local economy, and the added security benefits, the US can still negotiate from a position of strength.

Conclusion

The US must secure access to a broader range of locations beyond fixed bases in order to counter China's military capabilities and reassure US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. This access must include host nation infrastructure, such as ports, airfields, and roads and permission to use territory for training and operations and storage of prepositioned supplies. Obtaining this access will require modifications of existing diplomatic arrangements with allies and partners as well as new arrangements with regional states. Failure to obtain the necessary permissions and authorities will make the distributed operations, and thus the overall strategy of Archipelagic

Defense unviable. The lack of effective counter to China's growing regional military capabilities would permit China to dominate the region and end the prospect of a free and open Indo-Pacific.

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¹⁵ The White House, *Interim National Security Guidance*, 8 & 10

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²⁰ Department of the Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower* (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, March, 2015), iii.

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