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For a concept like Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) to be successful within the First Island Chain (FIC), diplomacy must first enable obtaining the active consent and cooperation of the sovereign states on which the Stand-in Force (SIF) must operate. It is precisely this sovereignty that China is attempting to diminish, which threatens the ability of the United States to defend the islands. Therefore, there must be a symbiotic relationship between the United States' national interests and preserving the FIC's sovereignty. The future fight in the Indo-Pacific will not be a bilateral Sino-American dispute but will be about the local countries banding together in an existential fight for their sovereignty, supported by the United States across the instruments of national power. Mutual defense and security among the islands themselves are critical to preserving their sovereignty while enabling the United States to defend them.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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A CASE FOR MUTUAL SECURITY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## *Executive Summary*

**Title:** A Case for Mutual Security in the Indo-Pacific

**Author:** Major Marianne C. Sparklin, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** A regional defense institution can set the conditions for deterring China in the Indo-Pacific.

**Discussion:** For a concept like Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) to be successful within the First Island Chain (FIC), diplomacy must first enable obtaining the active consent and cooperation of the sovereign states on which the Stand-in Force (SIF) must operate. It is precisely this sovereignty that China is attempting to diminish, which threatens the ability of the United States to defend the islands. Therefore, there must be a symbiotic relationship between the United States' national interests and preserving the FIC's sovereignty. The future fight in the Indo-Pacific will not be a bilateral Sino-American dispute but will be about the local countries banding together in an existential fight for their sovereignty, supported by the United States across the instruments of national power. Mutual defense and security among the islands themselves are critical to preserving their sovereignty while enabling the United States to defend them.

**Conclusion:** Mutual defense commitments provide better strategic options for the United States and its allies to address the China threat. Working with allies and partners will require time and investment; however, these relationships represent one of the United States' greatest strengths. Therefore, the United States' strategic advantage must shift from a purely military advantage to one where it combines all of the instruments of power to enable its military operations in competition and conflict.

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## *Preface*

With new military concepts comes new considerations for how to execute these concepts. For example, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) is a transformative approach to solving a complicated geopolitical and military problem in a region like the Indo-Pacific. However, while reading about this new operational approach, there was one glaring issue: how would a concept like EABO work if the Stand-in Force (SIF) were not allowed on the sovereign territory to begin with, and what would be required to facilitate operational access? The research ultimately led me to a diplomatic solution that would set the conditions for innovative military concepts like EABO. My biggest concern with a concept like EABO was that the Marine Corps (and the Joint Force at large) is putting the cart before the horse. This paper aims to examine what military-political conditions in terms of commitments, permissions, and organizations in the Indo-Pacific would be necessary to facilitate a military concept like EABO.

I would like to thank my family for their patience and support in writing this paper. I would also like to thank my mentors, Dr. Anne-Louise Antonoff and Dr. Douglas Streusand, and my second reader, Lieutenant Colonel Jarrod Stoutenborough, for their guidance and patience during this process. Finally, I would like to dedicate this paper to the late Colonel Art Corbett, USMC (Ret). Without his vision for future Marine Corps operating concepts and personal impact during the school year, this paper would not have been possible.

## *Introduction*

The United States' national security depends on the continued sovereignty and independence of the First Island Chain (FIC). In his 2019 planning guidance for the United States Marine Corps, Marine Corps Commandant General Berger discussed the requirement to transform the force to meet future requirements in support of the United States national security interests. He stated that Marines "...will focus on exploiting positional advantage and defending key maritime terrain that enables persistent sea control and denial operations forward."<sup>1</sup>

Concurrently, the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab developed a concept known as Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations (EABO) in which a low-signature, combat credible "Stand-In Force" (SIF) can persist forward inside of an adversary's Anti-Access / Area-Denial (A2AD) Weapons Engagement Zone (WEZ). The SIF and EABO satisfy General Berger's operational requirements by confronting and countering malign adversary behavior and acting as a deterrent for war in support of the Joint Force.<sup>2</sup> However, the Commandant's Planning Guidance (CPG) and EABO do not address how the SIF will be allowed access to "persist forward" and "exploit the positional advantage" on key terrain during competition and conflict. If the SIF is expected to be credible, positioned, and ready to "confront malign behavior," the United States must first address how the SIF is allowed to be there in the first place.

There is a "geostrategic flaw of assumed international acquiescence" where the United States assumes access to all domains will be granted wherever and whenever it wants in a time of crisis.<sup>3</sup> However, for a concept like EABO to be successful, diplomacy must first enable obtaining the active consent and cooperation of the sovereign states on which the SIF must operate. It is precisely this sovereignty of the local states within the FIC that China is attempting to diminish, which threatens the ability of the United States to defend them. Therefore, there

must exist a symbiotic relationship between the United States' national interests and preserving the FIC's sovereignty.

The future fight in the Indo-Pacific will not be a bilateral Sino-American dispute but will be about the local countries banding together in an existential fight for their sovereignty, supported by the United States across the instruments of national power. Mutual defense and security among the islands themselves are critical to preserving their sovereignty while enabling the United States to defend them. Therefore, a regional defense institution can set the conditions for deterring China in the Indo-Pacific.

This paper will provide the reader with a geographical and geopolitical context for the current state of competition between the United States and China and the strategic importance of the FIC. The paper will then introduce geopolitical theory through the lens of Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman and a modern-day application of their theories. Next, an operational context will describe the requirement for EABO and the SIF and the need for mutual defense and security to facilitate these concepts. After context, the paper will examine the theoretical and practical foundations of alliances and then give historical examples of various security architectures and the strategic requirement for such organizations. Finally, the paper will examine considerations and recommendations for a modern-day security institution for the Indo-Pacific.

### ***Geographical and Geopolitical Context***

Conflict between two Great Powers that results in a zero-sum outcome is no longer possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The United States and China are both at the center of vast economic and diplomatic networks. Unlike the USSR in the Cold War, the West invited China, and China

accepted the invitation to become an integral part of the Western global economy.<sup>4</sup> Today, China uses its integration into these Western supply chains and investment in Third World infrastructure to complicate relationships between the United States, its allies and partners, and candidates for a security and defense institution in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>5</sup> Influencing countries within the Indo-Pacific is vital to China's expansive interests. This tactic allows China to leverage its economic power over weaker countries that may be dependent on China for their economic vitality.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, defending those countries that China is likely to exploit is vital to the defense of the United States' national interests and, therefore, the security of the global commons, open market access, and global economic stability. The countries most at risk of Chinese exploitation are the countries closest to China's shores – the FIC. As depicted in figure 1, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the many contested islands in the South and East China Seas are the countries and territories within the FIC.<sup>7</sup> The loss of their sovereignty to China would pose the greatest threat to the United States and its allies' national interests.



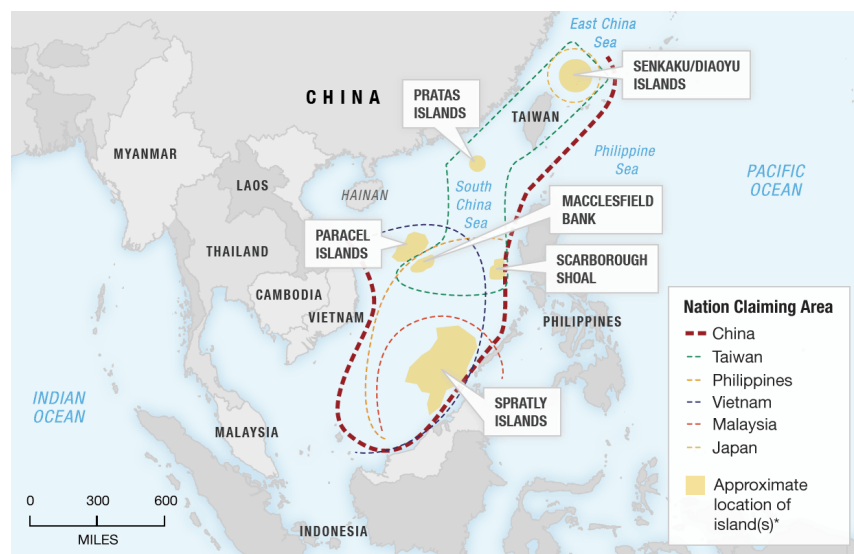
**Figure 1: The First and Second Island Chain**

Source: Indo-Pacific News – Watching the CCP-China Threat Twitter Page  
[https://twitter.com/indopac\\_info/status/1257275288532082689](https://twitter.com/indopac_info/status/1257275288532082689).

In the past 20 years alone, China’s military and economic expansion have propelled China’s influence into the far reaches of the world. Within the Indo-Pacific, China’s territorial claims within the “9-Dash Line” (depicted in figure 2) continue to inflame relationships and tensions with the United States and the competing claimants in the East and South China Seas. Additionally, since the 1990s, China has been communicating its intentions to upend the United States-led international world order and replace it with a China-led order.<sup>8</sup> Since then, China has been pursuing its own economic, military, and political initiatives in support of “...what it views as a natural transition to regional predominance.”<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, China views the United States’ presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific as the most significant roadblock to China’s rise and sovereignty, specifically with Taiwan and its territorial claims in the South and East China Seas. Furthermore, China continues to be a threat to global access, denying other countries freedom of

navigation and contesting the ability to operate freely in economic and commercial zones.<sup>10</sup>

Although China presents itself as a mutually beneficial partnership, the risks usually involve diminished sovereignty to its “clients” around the globe.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2: The 9-Dash Line and Territorial Disputes in the South and East China Seas**  
*Source:* Camila Domonoske, “Beijing’s Claims to South China Sea are Invalid, International Tribunal Says,” *NPR*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/12/485666758/beijings-claims-to-south-china-sea-are-invalid-international-tribunal-says>.

China uses gray zone warfare and “salami-slicing” tactics to improve its position and influence weaker countries, daring more powerful countries to come to the small states’ rescue. “Salami-slicing” tactics are the “...slow accumulation of small changes, none of which in isolation amounts to a casus belli, but which add up over time to a substantial change in the strategic picture.”<sup>12</sup> On top of this, China will also use its economic leverage over the country to make it comply with these “salami-slicing” tactics. This combination of tactics puts less powerful countries in a catch-22. If the smaller country turns to the United States, they run the risk of economic retaliation by China. On the other hand, if the country succumbs to China’s tactics, they risk reduced sovereignty, impacting the region's overall security. Therefore, the

countries will attempt to hedge between China and the United States for fear that balancing or bandwagoning with one side may cause them to lose the benefits of the other. Unfortunately, the result of this hedging often swings in China's favor. Combined with the United States' forbearance concerning salami-slicing tactics, China's strategy below the threshold of overt military conflict continues to prove successful in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

Since the implementation of Obama's "Pivot to the Pacific" strategy in 2012, China has increased its expansive efforts in the Indo-Pacific. Examples of these efforts include, but are not limited to: the establishment of Chinese military and paramilitary garrisons at "Sansha City" on Woody Island (Vietnam and China); protracted stand-offs over Scarborough Reef (the Philippines and China); disputes over Senkaku and Diaoyu Islands (Japan and China); and, tensions over the Line of Actual Control (India and China). Because of these examples and countless others, the Trump Administration placed more emphasis on China's rise and threat to access in the region. Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) acknowledged that these threats undermine regional stability, diminish sovereignty, and endanger the free flow of trade through the region.<sup>14</sup> Because of these increased risks, the Trump Administration consequently placed China in the foreground of foreign policy.

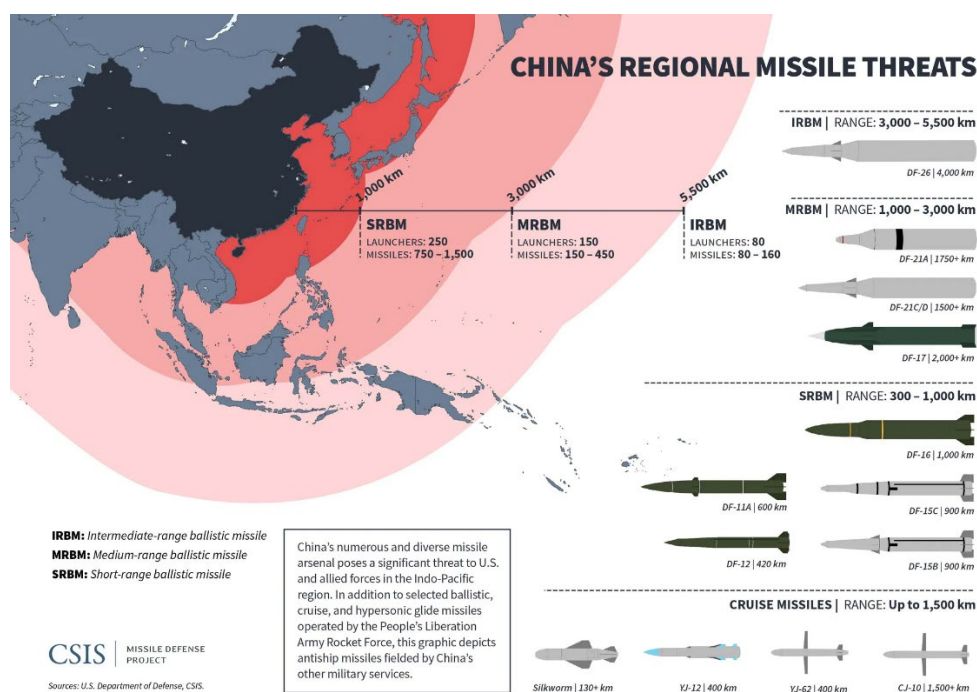
The Biden Administration plans to continue Trump's hardline foreign policies on China while also maintaining stability and relationships with allies and partners in the region. The Biden Administration recognizes that China is the most significant competitor and that the United States must work in cooperation with allies and partners to rise to that challenge.<sup>15</sup> In their first cabinet-level trip to the Indo-Pacific in March 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin acknowledged the China challenge and affirmed the United States' commitment to the region.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the two cabinet members asserted that

cooperation with allies to counter China is the focus of the Biden Administration's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>17</sup> As the Biden Administration continues to craft its policies toward China, it will be essential for American leadership to understand China's strategic outlook in order to create a strategy to balance or counter it effectively.

According to a 2020 RAND Corporation report on China's trends and trajectories, China's grand strategy has evolved from rebuilding to one of rejuvenation since the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.<sup>18</sup> Throughout this evolution, two enduring goals remained constant: restoring and maintaining China's territorial integrity and preventing domination by another world power.<sup>19</sup> However, there is tension between China's stated goals and how they are filtered through China's national security priorities. For example, China increasingly uses its economic strength and trade relationships to compel or coerce local countries to cooperate with it. China's leadership says it wants regional stability. Still, the country is willing to play a destabilizing and threatening role in fulfilling its strategic goals of territorial integrity and regional hegemony. Because China directly threatens the sovereignty of the nations of the FIC to advance its strategic interests, preserving its sovereignty must be at the heart of United States foreign policy.

Since World War II, the United States has aimed to maintain open sea lanes of free trade and commerce, freedom of navigation, and power projection to protect its allies' and partners' sovereignty. By doing this, the United States ensures that no one power can establish exclusive control over the Indo-Pacific or dominate a specific region in the geographic area.<sup>20</sup> Up until recently, the United States has been enormously successful in achieving these goals. Over the past 20 years, however, China has challenged the United States' preeminence both militarily and economically in the Indo-Pacific and now appears poised to surpass it.<sup>21</sup> China's gray-zone

tactics combined with its hard and soft power tools make it increasingly difficult for the United States to operate in the region by traditional military means such as sea-basing and power projection close to enemy shores. For example, its extensive build-up of military assets to coerce (hard power) and economic influence to co-opt (soft power) are ways that China gains leverage in the region.<sup>22</sup> Above all, China's A2AD systems, as depicted in figure 3, make it extremely difficult for the United States and its allies to operate inside the WEZ. Therefore, persistent forward presence inside China's WEZ is an operational requirement to achieve the strategic ends for the United States' defense of the FIC.



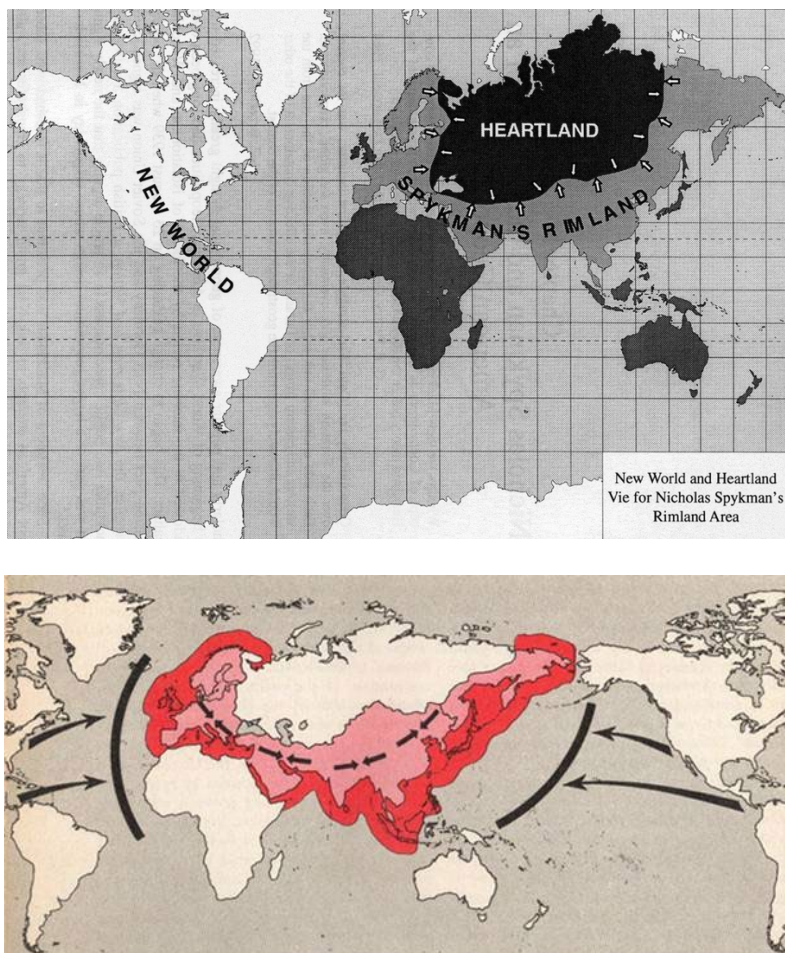
**Figure 3: China's Anti-Access / Area-Denial Weapons Engagement Zone**

Source: U.S. Department of Defense, "China's Regional Missile Threats," *CSIS Missile Defense Project*, [https://i0.wp.com/cimsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/China\\_Missile.png?ssl=1](https://i0.wp.com/cimsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/China_Missile.png?ssl=1).

## Geopolitical Theory

When viewing Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific through the lens of geography and geopolitics, one must understand the geopolitical theory to help conceptualize the

problem. In the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, two theories emerged regarding the Heartland and the Rimland, which analyzed the power struggle between a land-based power and a sea-based power, as depicted in figure 4.



**Figure 4: Spykman's Heartland and Rimland Maps**

Source: Francis P. Sempa, "The United States, China, and 'The Geography of Peace'," *Real Clear Defense*, June, 12, 2020, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/06/12/the\\_united\\_states\\_china\\_and\\_the\\_geography\\_of\\_the\\_peace\\_115373.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/06/12/the_united_states_china_and_the_geography_of_the_peace_115373.html).

In 1904, Halford Mackinder of Britain published his seminal article "The Geographical Pivot of History" in which he theorized about the power of the land-based Heartland. According

to Mackinder, the Columbian Age<sup>i</sup> was approaching its end, and other parts of the world, once in the shadows of British maritime dominance, would soon begin to challenge the maritime power.<sup>23</sup> With the end of this maritime era looming, Mackinder's work was clearly a warning directed at his own country that the balance of power would swing from a sea power to a land power.<sup>24</sup> At the turn of the century, modern technology and industrialization unlocked the potential of rail transportation over long distances. As a result, people and resources could now be moved quickly within the Heartland's large geographic expanse. Additionally, the geography and terrain surrounding the Heartland helped protect and insulate its society from sea-based competitors like the British Empire. Therefore, Mackinder theorized, the Heartland could "... possess the power and geographic centrality to overwhelm the states of the coastal marginal crescent."<sup>25</sup> With the rise of a Heartland power, the Inner and Outer Crescent maritime states would have to constantly remain on guard to fend off continental aggression and expansion.<sup>26</sup>

Building on, but contrasting Mackinder's theory, Nicholas Spkyman published *America's Strategy in World Politics* (1942) and posthumously *The Geography of Peace* (1944). These two works, published amid World War II, argued that the real power "...lay neither in the maritime nor in the continental worlds but the land in between them."<sup>27</sup> Spykman theorized that the Rimland states (the Inner and Outer Crescent, according to Mackinder) had the geopolitical advantage over the Heartland. The superior mobility by way of the sea, capacity for power projection inland, and access to natural resources and trade would keep the Heartland power and its expansion at bay. Therefore, according to Spykman, whoever controlled the Rimland, could control "the destinies of the world."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Columbian Age: "A period of European expansion and world domination which began in the fifteenth century." (Source: Parker, Geoffrey. *Geopolitics: Past, Present, and Future*. London: Wellington House Press, 1998.)

Today, China employs aspects of both the Heartland and the Rimland theories. China uses Mackinder's Heartland theory to expand its influence around the globe. As depicted in figure 5, China spends trillions of dollars through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)<sup>ii</sup> to expand rail, highways, ports, and transportation hubs to re-route trade to China. It is also expanding its reach into the territory of the Rimland states near the East and South China Seas to gain regional hegemony. In both cases, China challenges less powerful nations in exchange for economic assistance and security. China does so by building islands and infrastructure, establishing a military presence, and using its navy and maritime militia to expand its maritime control and project power outward. Moreover, expanding their maritime power into the Rimland areas gives China the advantage by restricting other states from accessing these strategically significant areas.

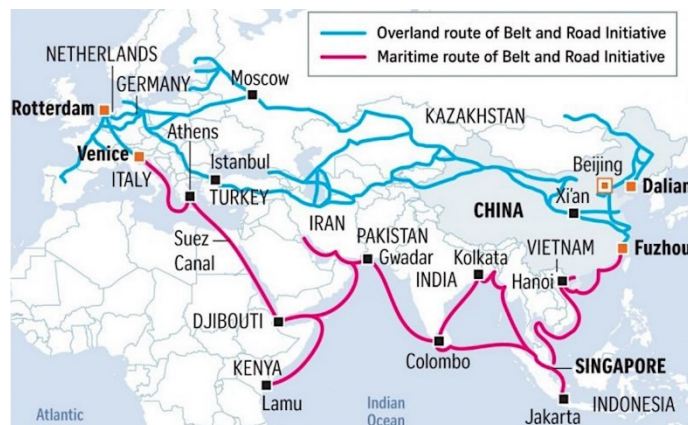
Furthermore, China's A2AD strategy in the Indo-Pacific acts to protect the Heartland while simultaneously allowing it to expand its influence into the Rimland. The control of the South China Sea and the island-nations within the FIC enable China to project its power through major sea lines of communication and trade into the Pacific and Indian Oceans and beyond. If China can control these key locations, it can establish a strategic, global advantage. Therefore, the nature of the United States' competition against China, as Spykman would say, is to prevent China from "controlling the destiny of the world." Therefore, there must be a strong emphasis on protecting and defending the sovereignty of the states within the FIC and the access around these

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<sup>ii</sup> Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): "The BRI is a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program which aims at infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road. The Initiative was unveiled in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping and, until 2016, was known as OBOR – One Belt One Road." (Source: Belt and Road Initiative, "Belt and Road Initiative," accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/belt-and-road/>.)

geostrategic areas. In this context, Great Power Competition with China is about competing for the sovereignty of Rimland states within the Indo-Pacific.

The SIF and EABO offer the United States military and its allies one option for holding the Heartland – or China – at risk. The United States military depends on its interaction and involvement with allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific as a critical capability to project global power and to protect its national interests abroad. If China dominates the region by exploiting gaps in bilateral relationships to coerce weaker nations to take the “China option,” the United States could potentially lose its ability to respond to crises. A concept like EABO would give the United States the geographic and geopolitical advantage to prevent this exploitation from happening. Positioning the SIF in geographically advantageous locations within the FIC makes it much harder for China to do the same. This proactive and pre-emptive military deterrent depends on the United States’ ability to defend the entirety of the chain, not piecemeal or individual islands. Especially in a conflict against Taiwan, the United States’ response to Chinese aggression will depend on its ability to prevent China from out-maneuvering the United States and its allies from the onset of a crisis. Therefore, the United States’ ability to defend its interests in the region depends on its ability to be physically present across the entire archipelago before conflict begins.



**Figure 5: China’s Belt and Road Initiative**

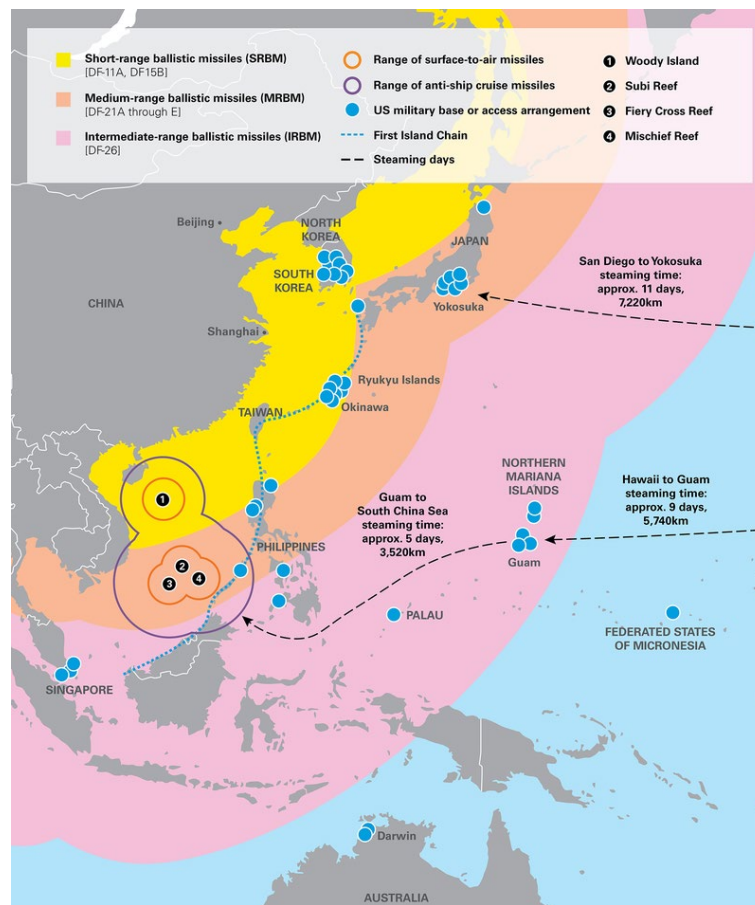
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[https://twitter.com/IndoPac\\_Info/status/1257275292344651776/photo/1](https://twitter.com/IndoPac_Info/status/1257275292344651776/photo/1).

### *Operational Context*

The United States exercises its “Power Projection” capabilities to deter potential adversaries. Dating back to the Spanish-American War of 1898 and throughout numerous wars and conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the United States has been “a prominent power” and has generally kept conflict with other “Great Powers” far from the American mainland.<sup>29</sup> Unmatched superiority and supremacy across multiple domains facilitated American freedom of action and maneuver “...to the point where the nation came to take it for granted that it would always have ‘access,’ welcome or not.”<sup>30</sup> However, the return of Great Power Competition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with “near-peer” and “peer” adversaries and long-range A2AD systems invalidates these assumptions of guaranteed operational access.

The solution of Expeditionary Advanced Bases and the importance of geography arises from the fact that both fixed and conspicuous infrastructure, such as hardened structures and established runways, and the more “expeditionary” solution of sea-basing on “blue-water” naval shipping is complicated within China’s WEZ.<sup>31</sup> This is because China’s robust A2AD WEZ can deny the United States multi-domain access close to Chinese shores, as depicted in figure 6. As a

result, traditional United States power projection techniques of patrolling large, blue-water navies are becoming increasingly obsolete. Therefore, EABO provides a suitable and transformative alternative to conventional power projection roles. This “alternative” operational approach offers the United States military the ability to “persist forward” with an uninterrupted yet low-signature presence while still maintaining the offensive capability to react to threats. Furthermore, this approach allows the SIF to react quickly and respond to Chinese aggression in the event of crisis or conflict within the region.



**Figure 6: China’s growing missile threat to US bases and regional access locations**

Source: Ashley Townshend, Brendan Thomas-Noone, and Matilda Steward. “Averting Crisis: American Strategy, Military Spending and Collective Defence in the Indo-Pacific.” *United States Studies Centre*, August 19, 2019, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/averting-crisis-american-strategy-military-spending-and-collective-defence-in-the-indo-pacific>.

The SIF's purpose is to set the necessary conditions to make EABO possible if deterrence fails. Therefore, the SIF must be permitted to operate from within the WEZ well before conflict begins, which requires the invitation from the sovereign nations to be there in the first place. Access to these islands must be granted to enable the SIF to functionally and seamlessly operate in an EABO-like construct. To be effective at EABO, the SIF must be low-signature, highly mobile, and most importantly, distributed across archipelagos within the island chains in the Indo-Pacific. In turn, they must also be reliant on the sovereign host-nation for supplies, logistics, sustainment, energy, electricity, water, etc., to provide that uninterrupted and low-signature presence.

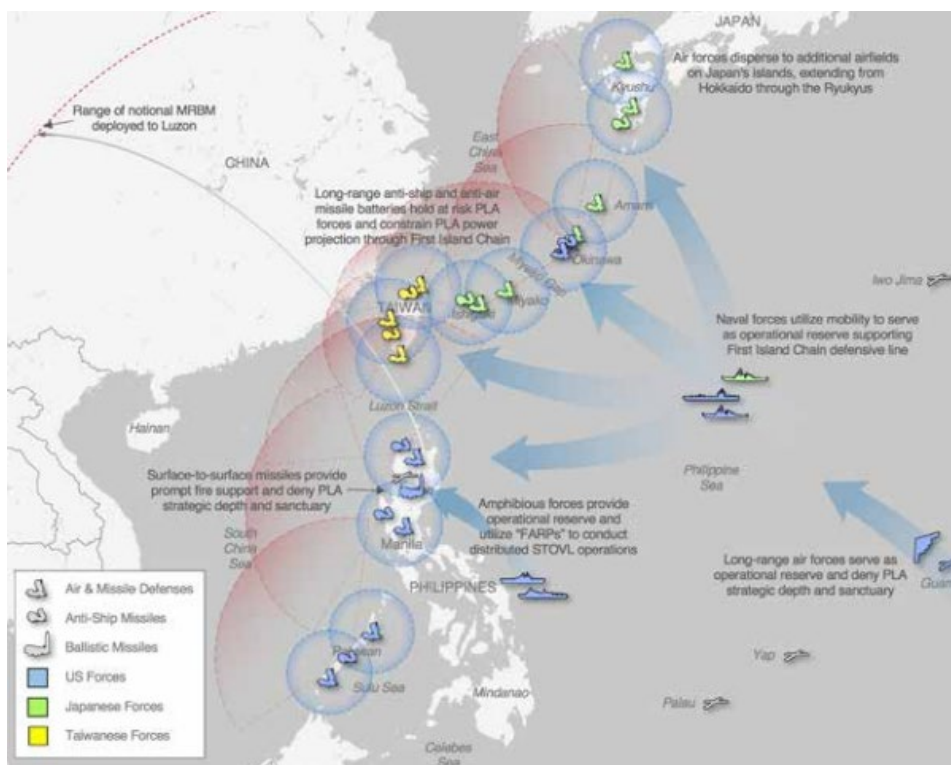
Moreover, the presence of a SIF requires coordination, sustained access, and other pre-arranged support capabilities, relying heavily on the state itself in exchange for its defense.<sup>32</sup> This symbiotic relationship will also require interoperability of weapon systems, logistical support, and diplomatic interaction to support the sustained and persistent presence within the FIC. Without the cooperation of allies and partners in the region and a unified strategy for maintaining the territorial integrity of the island chains, a military concept like EABO is not feasible, and therefore neither is global security against Chinese aggression.

### ***The Need for Mutual Security***

In his work "Archipelago Defense," as depicted in figure 7, Andrew Krepinevich discusses that a coalition of local countries' "...ability to impose a successful blockade could...increase Beijing's anxiety over its ability to sustain arms production and operations as well as maintain internal stability in the wake of shortages created by a Coalition blockade."<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he discusses that if the countries can maintain this "blockade" during conflict,

China would risk high attrition rates and cause China to account for a broader range of potential adversaries.<sup>34</sup> For a concept like EABO, the FIC must collectively act as this “blockade” to deter China’s expansive efforts. The SIF is the combat-credible force on the archipelagos that would deter China by denial and counter any *fait accompli* gambits. Therefore, an effective “blockade” would depend on the ability of the nations of the FIC to defend themselves with the help of the United States and its allies and partners who are willing to cooperate and contribute resources for establishing a credible and robust defense. This “collective defense” would require a comprehensive effort across the FIC’s entirety from which to exercise sea control and denial. It does no good if the Chinese can out-maneuver the SIF at the many chokepoints or narrow seas between neighboring territories.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, a commitment to mutual defense across the entire island chain is necessary to ensure the SIF can effectively execute a concept like EABO. Without an agreement for mutual defense between the countries themselves, a concept like EABO may be impossible to achieve. It is essential to have a unified and coordinated response before the outbreak of war; it cannot be an improvisation when conflict begins. A commitment to mutual defense would give the United States and its allies the strategic options necessary to support the local nations’ defense of their sovereignty against China. It sets the diplomatic prerequisites for having a SIF who can operate across the entire island chain in setting the conditions for defense against a *fait accompli*, thereby facilitating the coalition’s operational and strategic success in a potential conflict with China. Given that preservation of the sovereignty of the entirety of the FIC is the ultimate goal in the United States’ strategy against China, a commitment to mutual defense is necessary to ensure that such sovereignty is maintained.



**Figure 7: Archipelagic Defense Overview**

Source: Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Archipelagic Defense: The Japan-U.S. Alliance and Preserving Peace and Stability in the Western Pacific*, The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, August, 2017, [https://www.spf.org/en/global-data/SPF\\_20170810\\_03.pdf](https://www.spf.org/en/global-data/SPF_20170810_03.pdf).

### Theoretical Foundations of Alliance-Building

When considering mutual security and defense between states, it is important to understand the theoretical foundations for building alliances and the geopolitical considerations for what type of alliance to build. In his book *The Origins of Alliances*, Stephen M. Walt argues that countries build alliances to benefit from each other and balance against threats.<sup>36</sup> He challenges the conventional wisdom that countries build alliances to balance against the rising power. He concludes that where "...balance of power theory predicts that states will react to imbalances of power, balance of threat theory predicts that when there is an imbalance of threat, states will form alliances or increase their internal efforts in order to reduce their vulnerability."<sup>37</sup> He uses the example of how the United States and its allies grew to be more powerful than

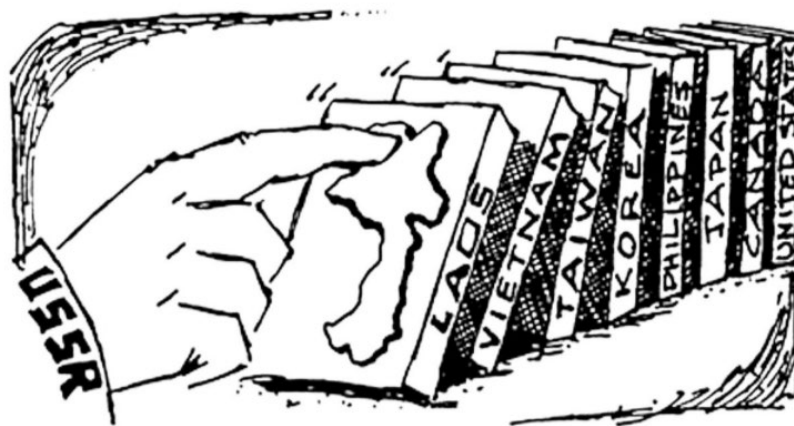
Germany, although Germany was more “threatening” with its aggregate of offensive capabilities, proximity, and aggressiveness which caused a coalition to form in response.<sup>38</sup> He further concludes that balance of threat theory explains that states of “equal” power will ally with the side that the state believes is the least dangerous. He uses the example of the states choosing between the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War to illustrate this theory.

Today, the countries in the Indo-Pacific do not want to be forced to choose between China and the United States. Forcing them to choose between two countries on which they depend could be disastrous for relations with the other. No country in the Indo-Pacific wants to get dragged into a conflict between the United States and China by being forced to choose between the two. However, the countries must be willing to band together in the name of mutual defense as China continues to assert its malign influence in the region. The “balance of threat” theory suggests that the countries form a coalition of aggregate capabilities to balance the threat of China. A mutually supportive relationship that centers on the defense of the countries themselves and not simply advancing the United States’ national interests would be necessary for the foundations of a mutual defense commitment in the region.

Victor Cha argues that great powers maximize their strength by using a system of alliances where the states are “asymmetrically dependent” on the hegemon.<sup>39</sup> He uses historical examples of the network of bilateral alliances formed in the 1950s into what would be known as the hub-and-spoke alliance system in Asia, which he later refers to as an “informal empire”<sup>40</sup> created in the 1950s by the United States to exert power over smaller states in the region. In Cold War Asia, this “informal empire” was critical to control the ally, preventing it from slipping into communism or dragging the United States into an unwanted conflict. Cha refers to this asymmetric relationship as a power play. He describes how after World War II, the general goal

of alliances in East Asia was to “contain the Soviet threat” and prevent “rogue” allies from getting the United States involved in an unwanted conflict.<sup>41</sup>

Cha further describes the domino theory – that if one country falls to communism, the rest could follow suit, as depicted in figure 8.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower calculated that the benefits of a power play in direct bilateral alliances far outweighed the risk of a multilateral security construct. Cha concludes by stating that entrapment by rogue allies in an unwanted war was one of the most significant driving factors behind the bilateral construct.<sup>43</sup> Generally, Cha shows that “power asymmetries” select for either multilateral or bilateral security structures. The bilateral structure offers more control; therefore, more powerful nations will choose bilateralism, and less powerful nations will choose multilateralism.<sup>44</sup> In the case of the United States in post-World War II, bilateralism gave the United States the most control over the rogue allies to prevent any individual country from bringing the United States into an unnecessary war.



**Figure 8: A Political Cartoon of the “Domino Effect” in the Cold War**  
*Source:* Political Dictionary, “Domino Theory,” accessed March 16, 2021,  
<https://politicaldictionary.com/words/dominoe-theory/>.

In the modern-day Indo-Pacific, there no longer exists a power play moment for the United States because allies in the region are no longer rogue allies. Although Asian allies and partners were once considered “inferior and distrustful” in post-World War II requiring “tighter” United States control, little of that logic exists today.<sup>45</sup> However, the region’s countries can band together to have their own power play moment in mutual defense and prevent individual countries from falling “like dominos” into China’s control, as Victor Cha’s theories suggest. The United States’ unipolar margin may be decreasing, but the propensity and requirement for multilateral institutions are not. Local countries must first band together in balancing the threat of China and establishing their own power play moment.

A commitment to mutual defense between the FIC countries allows the United States and its extra-regional allies to support their efforts across the chain. This commitment provides the foundations or forum on which the local countries can decide how the United States can best support their defense and security with the SIF. The power play for the local countries rests in their ability to confront the China threat and decide that mutual defense is critical to their survival.

### Historical Examples

Historical analogies provide today’s Indo-Pacific with examples and models of alliance structures and security institutions that both failed and succeeded. The Delian League, NATO, and the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) provide examples of what could work, what may not work, and considerations when envisioning a modern-day security architecture for the Indo-Pacific.

### The Delian League

The Delian League was a predominantly maritime organization formed under Athens, encompassing the many city-states of the Aegean in opposition to the Persians. Persia was the clear and present aggressor who was trying to aggrandize hundreds of regional city-states. Formed in 478 B.C., the Delian League offered Ionian cities mutual protection against Persia because they were concerned about being picked off one at a time by the Persian Empire. Headed by the naval hegemon Athens, the league consisted of over 200 members within the Greek poleis to weaken the Persian Empire, as depicted in figure 9.<sup>46</sup> Driven by collective “honor, fear, and self-interest,”<sup>47</sup> the alliance’s primary goals were to prepare for an invasion, seek revenge and reparations against Persia, and guarantee the poleis’ continued freedom.<sup>48,49</sup>

There were multiple benefits of being a member of the Delian League. First, members of the league collectively determined the League’s policies and actions during *synods* or meetings.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the central location of a treasury<sup>iii</sup> in Athens allowed for access to funds to support the alliance economically and militarily for the city’s security and financing for military operations during the Peloponnesian War.<sup>51</sup> The most significant advantages of the newly formed alliance over its predecessors were states’ autonomy within an organized system, pledged defensive support for each other, and the ability of the system “...to act swiftly and decisively with considerable resources.”<sup>52</sup>

Over time, however, the league evolved into the imperialistic Athenian Empire, which required smaller member poleis to become Athenian military naval bases. Furthermore, Athens became less concerned with “...defending the Greeks against external aggression than with

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<sup>iii</sup> The movement of the treasury from Delos to Athens during the League’s existence marked a turning point in the Delian League’s transformation from an alliance system into the Athenian Empire. (Source: Wikipedia, “The Delian League,” accessed December 21, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delian\\_League](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delian_League).)

fostering the power and glory of a single state.”<sup>53</sup> Internal strife, disobedience, and rebellious discontent of member states contributed to the alliance’s evolution and strong-arming of Athens. Although the Peloponnesian War would eventually destroy the Delian League at the defeat of Athens by Sparta, it would be the first large-scale successful defensive and economic alliance to unify the strong and weak in a cooperative system within Hellenes against Persia.

Although the Delian League existed over two millennia ago, it shows a dominant land power with the ability to threaten smaller island-nations and how those threatened states responded in the face of that aggression across the instruments of national power. Thucydides postulated that Athens’ rising power made the Peloponnesian War inevitable with Sparta in what today would be known as the “Thucydides Trap.”<sup>54</sup> Global politics today reflect the same scenario that occurred 2400 years ago. Today, local states are faced with an important geopolitical problem in the Indo-Pacific as they navigate the increasingly competitive landscape between the diplomatic, economic, and military options offered by the United States and China. It is in the United States and its allies’ best interests to provide countries within the FIC better options for ensuring economic and military stability in the face of potential hostilities with China. Escaping the “Thucydides Trap” may require the United States to manage the China threat to the point where conflict with China is preventable. It will require credible deterrence within the FIC, starting first with the mutual defense commitments between the states themselves.

Allies’ and partners’ defense within the FIC supported by the SIF provide the United States the ability to prevent conflict with China (through deterrence) and avoid the “Thucydides Trap.” The geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific resembles the strategic challenges that led to the formation of the Delian League. A “Delian League” of the Indo-Pacific centered on the

defense of the FIC and access to a “treasury” in the form of resources, troops, and support from the United States and its allies would give the local nations defense credibility in the face of China. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a regional-centric “league” provides a “synod” from which the states themselves can discuss (virtually or otherwise) what is necessary for their defense and for the ability to deter conflict.



**Figure 9: The Delian League**

Source: World History Encyclopedia, “Delian League,” accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.ancient.eu/image/4571/delian-league/>.

### NATO and SEATO

Like the Delian League and consistent with Mackinder’s Heartland theory, NATO was primarily created in response to a threat– the rising threat of the Soviet Union – although there were numerous challenges for creating this alliance network. Gary Schmitt, a scholar of strategic studies at the American Enterprise Institute, noted the initial challenges of the United States having to overcome its “quasi-isolationist tendencies” and that the capitals of Western Europe

“...would have to set aside long-standing, often bitter enmities among themselves”<sup>55</sup> to make the organization work. Overcoming these challenges would prove difficult, but the organization eventually provided much more than collective defense. Over time, the treaty organization became part of a larger strategic vision “...that saw economic prosperity, security, and liberal governance as essential to preserving and growing a nascent Western community... and proved instrumental in encouraging states and peoples to put aside traditional rivalries in the name of regional cooperation.”<sup>56</sup> This cooperation prevented the revival of militarism on the European continent and created a structure for political integration and international security.<sup>57</sup> In NATO, most importantly, member countries were afforded the benefit of collective defense under Article V.<sup>iv</sup>

At the end of the Cold War in 1989, the fate of the alliance was uncertain. However, Germany’s reunification under the umbrella of the alliance would allow NATO to shift focus from collective defense to building a security architecture, focusing on both diplomatic and military functions. Like the Delian League, member states within NATO retained their sovereignty, acted on consensus, and acted collectively in defense of other member states.<sup>58</sup> NATO, unlike the Delian League, survived. One possibility as to why NATO endured was

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<sup>iv</sup> NATO Article V: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.” (Source: NATO, “The North Atlantic Treaty,” accessed January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm).)

because the sovereignty of the region (local states within Europe) that were directly adjacent to the threat (the Soviet Union) remained at the center of the organization's defense commitments.

In 1954 on the other side of the world, the United States also created SEATO to prevent the expansion of communism in the region and to align with the Geneva Accords<sup>v</sup> during the Cold War.<sup>59</sup> Secretary of State John Foster Dulles convened eight nations to sign the treaty (Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States).<sup>60</sup> However, most of these countries were located outside of the region, as depicted in figure 8. Additionally, unlike NATO, SEATO lacked standing forces, command posts, and the same "Article V" protections NATO pledged for its members. Instead of mutual defense, the SEATO article only provided for consultation; therefore, SEATO members were never required to intervene militarily in defense of other members. The Vietnam War highlighted this organizational weakness, and member nations began pulling away from the treaty due to a lack of support for the war. By 1977, SEATO finally succumbed to its general lack of enthusiasm (specifically by its founding member – the United States), lack of mutual defense commitments, absence of a unified military command, and competing national foreign policies in the region.

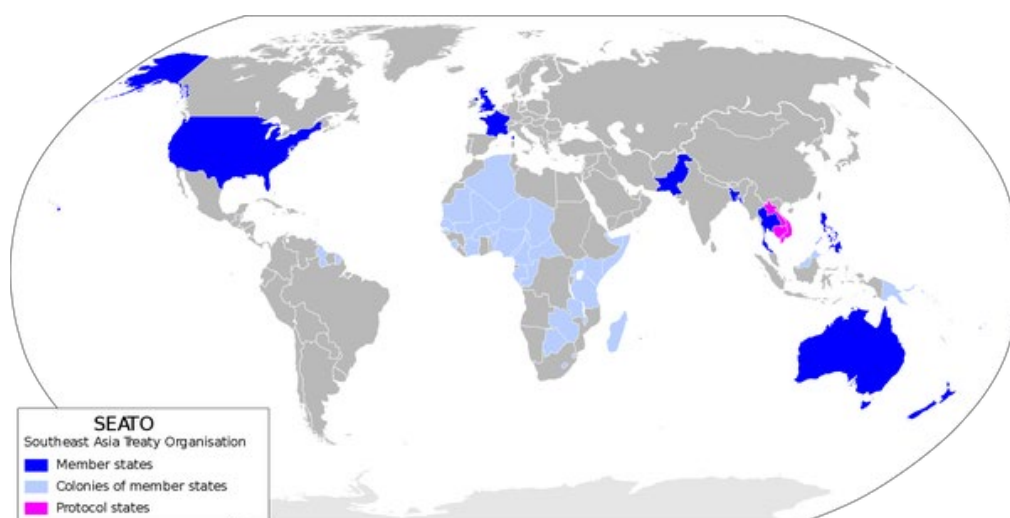
Christopher Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein, in *International Organization*, compare the origins of NATO and SEATO and the differences between the two regions when the organizations were created. The authors discuss the perceptions of collective identity and racial,

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<sup>v</sup> Geneva Accords: "The terms of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 signed after the fall of French Indochina prevented Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from joining any international military alliance, though these countries were ultimately included in the area protected under SEATO and granted 'observers' status." (*Source*: Office of the Historian, "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization," accessed March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato#:~:text=Finally%2C%20the%20terms%20of%20the.and%20granted%20%E2%80%9Cobservers%E2%80%9D%20status.>)

historical, and cultural factors as the main factors that shaped the choices of the United States' decision-makers after World War II. For example, where the United States saw its European allies as equal, America saw its Asian allies as "...part of an alien and inferior community."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the collective identity in the North Atlantic region made it much easier for multilateralism to endure, whereas, in Asia, bilateral approaches were the preferred method of international cooperation. Moreover, there was a lack of a mutual defense commitment inside of SEATO, which, combined with the geopolitical and cultural fissures, ultimately led to its demise.

As the Indo-Pacific looks toward a modern-day security architecture, it will be important to understand a valuable lesson learned from SEATO: "a military alliance is only as strong as its partners' intent and capability to meet its commitments."<sup>62</sup> Specifically, SEATO disbanded when the founding member (the United States) lost the political will to uphold the treaty after the Vietnam War. Like NATO, for a mutual defense organization to be successful in the Indo-Pacific, the countries themselves must "buy in" and cooperate multilaterally with each other for the sake of themselves, not for the United States' interests alone.



**Figure 10: Depiction of SEATO Members**

*Source:* John J. Tierney, "Reviving SEATO," The Institute of World Politics, August 25, 2021, <https://www.iwp.edu/articles/2020/08/25/reviving-seato/>.

## Strategic Requirement

Global threats like China combined with the complicated geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific presents unforeseen challenges that require creative and contemporary military solutions. Regardless of China's rise in the international arena, achieving parity with the United States power may be out of reach for China because the United States' strategic advantage is its network of global alliances. However, the United States must strengthen this global archipelago of countries to preserve the international rules-based system. Most importantly, the regional states themselves must be resilient for their own sake, for their neighbors' sake, and the sake of the region's security. Ultimately, the sovereignty of the countries within the FIC is the key on which their defense against China will depend.

Like the Delian League, NATO, and SEATO, common fear and security interests can spark an alliance's creation. But, according to INDOPACOM Commander Admiral Davidson, alliances are about trust and mutual understanding.<sup>63</sup> He further goes on to say that alliances "...provide the building blocks for a security architecture that promotes interconnectivity and interoperability."<sup>64</sup> The *INDOPACOM Strategy Report* specifically addresses enhancing the current network of alliances to address China's rise and promote interoperability with allies in the region. Detailing strategic imperatives for the United States in the region, the report annotates "Promotion of a Networked Region" as one of its three primary lines of effort. In this report, the United States Department of Defense leadership recognizes the value that alliances play in cultivating security relationships to maintain peace, prosperity, and stability. Additionally, alliances facilitate governments' and militaries' interaction, promoting interoperability, access, and coordination – the lynchpin to success for concepts like EABO.

A security architecture that promotes mutual defense in the Indo-Pacific would also serve to increase interoperability in command and control, weaponry, and Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures. If conflict were to commence with China, it would already be too late to solve the problem of interoperability. The work must be done upfront to ensure allies can work together, minimizing the diplomatic and military hurdles that could be catastrophic to “...to act swiftly and decisively with considerable resources.”<sup>65</sup> A conflict with China will most likely involve many other countries. These countries must train together, consolidate their resources, and interoperate with a common purpose and vision in peacetime, competition, and conflict.

The Biden Administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance addresses the importance of alliances and partnerships in competition and conflict against threats like China. Specifically, the guidance mentions “reinvigorating and modernizing” the United States’ alliances to protect national interests and “...hold countries like China to account.”<sup>66</sup> The Biden Administration manifests the belief in partnerships and alliances as a critical element in preserving and advancing national security interests abroad. Thus, the challenge for the United States military strategies in the future is how to best support Indo-Pacific countries’ desires for regional defense against China with the SIF.

When he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph Dunford emphasized that allies and partners are the United States’ “strategic center of gravity”<sup>67</sup> and that these alliance networks are the primary enabler of maintaining the competitive advantage. He recognizes that these relationships enable access, extend reach, and give the United States military the flexibility to project power around the world.<sup>68</sup> He further discusses the benefits of integrated command and control, information and intelligence sharing, and technological

interoperability as primary benefits of enduring alliances and partnerships. These capabilities would be especially critical for the SIF's ability to operate in an EABO construct within the FIC.

The sovereignty of the nations within the FIC must be at the heart of United States' military operational concepts. There must be a strong emphasis on the defense of national sovereignty for these island-nations. It is much better to preserve a nation's sovereignty than to take it back from a hegemonic power (such as China). An option to maintain the FIC's sovereignty and prevent a *fait accompli* is for the local states within the Indo-Pacific region to band together in mutual defense, supported by the United States and its allies. Their sovereignty and the sovereignty of their neighbors must dominate the narrative for the creation of a mutual defense commitment for the region.

### *Considerations*

The hub-and-spoke system of bilateral arrangements developed after World War II is no longer adequate because it does not permit the interoperability and information-sharing necessary for modern-day conflict. In the early 1950s, alliances with Asian countries and the United States were not "networked" into a more extensive multilateral alliance system because there was a lack of a common enemy, rampant authoritarianism, and regional rivalries.<sup>69</sup> However, in the Indo-Pacific today, "...little of this alliance logic remains true."<sup>70</sup> Shared ideologies and identities, shared democratic values, security and defense goals, and political, military, and economic modernization are all conducive to security and defense networking in the Indo-Pacific today. Therefore, promoting a regional defense institution in the Indo-Pacific is essential to ensuring the United States and its allies are in position within the WEZ and interconnected before the onset of conflict. Moreover, multilateral cooperation is vital to

integrated operations. This integration allows forces from multiple countries to converge on any flashpoint without improvising at the last minute.

Unlike in the Cold War, when the hub-and-spoke alliance system was created, the regional states are all deeply embedded within the international economy and with each other. Additionally, the common threat of China unites them in a shared vision for regional security. These conditions alone could enable the development of a security institution for the region if the countries also understand the risks of not committing to the mutual defense of each other. Without a regional security and defense institution, individual states may end up losing their ability to resist China's strong-arming. Although the United States does not want to force the regional states to choose, China may eventually force them to decide. Therefore, the local states must understand that by not choosing a commitment to mutual security and defense, they risk ceding regional dominance to China.

Some could argue that creating a "NATO-like" alliance in the Indo-Pacific would push China over the edge into an unwanted conflict. Given most countries' economic interconnectedness to China, impacts to trade, revenues, and imports/exports may take the biggest hit. According to former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, "...there is little doubt that a multilateral, U.S.-led security alliance in the Pacific – particularly one involving Taiwan – would draw swift Chinese condemnation and a whole-of-government response."<sup>71</sup> Additionally, a mutual defense commitment must be looked at through the lens of the countries that depend economically on China. Most countries, including the United States, have some level of economic dependence on China. Therefore, the risks must be weighed between bandwagoning with a country or keeping with the status quo and continue to hedge its bets. However, China does find "collective action" to be daunting. Thus, multilateral organizations present the best

option to deter China.<sup>72</sup> Like the Delian League and NATO, the states' collective actions against a single threat proved to have demonstrable effects on the group's ability to deter the threatening entity.

Additionally, historical relationships, territorial disputes, and contradictory strategic culture all come to a head when considering a multilateral security architecture in the Indo-Pacific, making the concept of "collective defense" troublesome. Historical disputes over war reparations between Japan and the Republic of Korea, territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas, and previous inter-country rivalries all contribute to the complexities associated with creating a formalized security architecture rooted in mutual defense. However, with time, diplomacy, and rigorous negotiations, a multilateral approach to mutual defense can be built that accommodates member countries' interests. Mainly, the United States needs to understand the FIC's needs. The United States needs to promote a strategy that works for both the United States and is mutually understanding of what the FIC countries actually want.

Weaving China into the international community is an option to accommodate countries' reluctance to choose between the United States and China. Former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter recommends a "...principled, inclusive network...driven by shared principles like peaceful conflict resolution, freedom of commerce, and shared security responsibilities."<sup>73</sup> This "inclusive" network would be open to China to participate but should also be accompanied by strict adherence measures. The United States can welcome China into its multilateral institutions, albeit it must enforce a strict code of conduct for its participation, where it can earn other member states' trust. This type of multilateral organization can accommodate a wide variety of international and domestic national security interests while enhancing a shared vision of regional stability for everyone's sake. Instead of containing China's rise, an inclusive system that

regulates China's behavior is an alternative option. For example, international institutions that give "...China greater incentives for integration than for opposition and [increase] the chances that the system will survive even after U.S. relative power has declined..." is an option instead of an alliance that counters China.<sup>74</sup>

China's inclusivity in international institutions facilitates engagement, negotiations, and restraint. The United States must lead countries in the Indo-Pacific toward "...more security and economic relations [that] are multilateral and all-encompassing, [so] the more the global system retains its coherence."<sup>75</sup> The United States cannot stand alone against China. However, the United States, with the Western order backing it, can.

### ***Recommendations – A Security Architecture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century***

A 21<sup>st</sup> century approach to Indo-Pacific multilateralism is not setting up a NATO-style institution but forming a regional security architecture with NATO-style capabilities. There is no "off-the-shelf" model for a mutual defense commitment between states, but in the face of global threats like China, collectively responding to the China threat is becoming more of a requirement and less of an option. Like other defense commitments, a mutual defense commitment for the Indo-Pacific would be an agreement between the states "...subject to binding international norms such as the ban on international aggression [and] have the freedom to shape [the commitment] according to their interests."<sup>76</sup> A security architecture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Indo-Pacific would require a whole-of-government approach from participating countries; shared strategic visions for deterring threats like China; be adaptable and flexible in both security and defense; promote interoperability and collaboration across all members; and, most importantly, must be centered on the interests of the island-nations themselves. The security architecture this paper argues for may not bind the local countries' leadership to act, but it gives them the ability to do so at a

moment's notice. The strategic imperative for the United States is to make sure the island chains can defend themselves and each other from Chinese aggression and an attempted *fait accompli*.

A security institution designed around mutual defense will require a whole-of-government approach, not just from the United States and non-regional allies but from the island-nations themselves within the FIC. A whole-of-government approach would bring in all of a national government's resources and make those resources available across allies and partners within the FIC. Multilateral coordination at the strategic level enables success at the operational level through interoperability, information-sharing, and cooperative training. Furthermore, without multinational coordination across the FIC, the distributed forces (the SIF) may be vulnerable to out-flanking or out-maneuvering from neighboring islands or littoral regions. To succeed in a concept like EABO, access first will have to be granted, and coordination must exist not just with one island but with them all.

A commitment to mutual defense centered on the countries in the Indo-Pacific deters the threat of China. It protects individual nations' sovereignty, ensuring the Indo-Pacific does not bifurcate into separate democratic and communist spheres. By consolidating allies' intelligence and information-sharing capabilities, joint attributions could be made against China in response. Defense does not solely have to be military. Economic defense and security would address the coercive techniques levied against allies, prompting a collective response from the United States and its allies. Solidarity is the best way to deter China from threatening states' sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific and was one of the underlying reasons for NATO's creation.<sup>77</sup>

A mutual defense commitment in the Indo-Pacific would not be a mirror image of NATO. There are diverse political systems, the tyranny of distance, and cultural differences compared to the geopolitical landscape of NATO at its creation. There would be similarities,

however. China represents a common enemy like the Soviet Union in post-World War II. However, China is not vying for world domination like the Soviet Union in the Cold War, nor is China trying to overthrow governments in hopes that they too become communist. Unlike the Soviet Union in the Cold War, China is deeply intertwined with global markets, global organizations, and the world economy. A mutual defense commitment in the Indo-Pacific would represent a community effort to deter China instead of destroying it. The collective power of a more extensive network of allies in the region is vital to deterrence in the FIC. A shared vision of deterrence would then set the diplomatic preconditions for enabling a deterrent force (the SIF) to operate within the region. Additionally, this would represent a formalized multilateral institution that would serve as a venue for discussing shared visions, regional economic and information strategies, and military interoperability. The supranational institution would promote building partner capacity, relationship building, and training exercises between different countries to build confidence and morale between forces.

An Indo-Pacific security institution would also require adaptability and flexibility in response to varying levels of threats and crises like NATO. In her report “Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War,” Celeste Wallander, former Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and Senior Director for Russia and Central Asia on the National Security Council staff, discusses the institutional adaptability of NATO. She states that the capabilities of NATO play a crucial role in forward-basing for “...logistics, air defense and control, and reinforcement...and a common infrastructure program [that] enables members’ militaries to work together as complex and multipurpose organizations, not merely as military instruments to blunt attack...”<sup>78</sup> She further discusses interoperability, integrated command and control, joint exercises, institutional transparency, information-sharing, and general

organizational capability as benefits of this type of security architecture. The United States must gain the strategic initiative through forward deployment and forward-basing of forces to “defend quickly” with a “full-scale effort” if an enemy attacked.<sup>79</sup> A security architecture that enables the SIF “to defend quickly” is critical to executing EABO from the onset of crisis. Although treaties and alliances do not always guarantee access, diplomacy provides the structure from which operational capability will arise.<sup>80</sup>

Regardless of the political practicality or feasibility of a “NATO-like” organization in the Indo-Pacific, proactive steps must be made toward joint commitments in the region that foster unity in the face of China and enable interoperability in the event of a conflict. Developing these joint commitments with the help of intergovernmental agencies such as the State Department and existing multilateral groupings would be practical intermediate steps that would promote security and defense in the region as well as enable operational access. Examples of these joint commitments include access/overflight diplomatic agreements, information and intelligence sharing agreements, joint Freedom of Navigation exercises in commercial, international, and contested waters, and collective economic pledges. For example, former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster suggests that the United States “...create an international agreement where like-minded countries agree that they will only invest in China and they will only allow Chinese investment in countries if those investments [meet] an economic Hippocratic Oath: Do no harm.”<sup>81</sup> Economic agreements such as this would buy time for an institutionalized security architecture while still achieving deterrent effects in the short term.

These joint agreements must be continually revisited and updated. There is no guarantee for access or overflight rights in peace or conflict, but negotiating the agreement upfront can save time and hassle when those agreements are needed. In the long term, a formalized security

architecture can set the foundation for persistent or guaranteed overflight and access rights. Until then, a coalition of democracies must work collectively to protect smaller countries' sovereignty while preparing for the worst-case scenario with China.

One way the United States can support the creation of a regional security organization is to lead the Indo-Pacific through a process of security collaboration without imposing United States' national interests on the narrative. Post-1945, the United States found itself in an "empire by invitation" where it was frequently "invited" to play a significant role in global leadership.<sup>82</sup> This "invitation" was partly because the United States was perceived as different from traditional superpowers who wanted to "conquer." Instead, America ruled "...in more indirect, more American ways, so indirect that frequently it is still invited to play the preeminent role."<sup>83</sup> In the Indo-Pacific today, there is still an invitation for American power indirectly that can uplift and support the local states without being labeled as something resembling an "American empire." Brokering statecraft between the countries themselves without imposing imperialistic solutions is one way that the United States can achieve these goals. Like Athens in the Delian League, a country that is "too imperialistic" may become less concerned about "defense" and more on expansion. The United States must communicate that mutual defense of the region is at the heart of any proposed security architecture.

Finally, another option to increase defense and security cooperation without formally naming a security institution is to enhance the capabilities of the Quad<sup>vi</sup> by making this

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<sup>vi</sup> Quadrilateral Dialogue: The United States, Australia, India, and Japan are member countries of the Quad. Initially created in 2004 to assist in humanitarian disasters, the Quad met formally once more until Australia withdrew from the nascent group in 2007. The Quad was revived in 2017 at the East Asia Summit in response to "tectonic shifts in the geopolitics of the region and in the Asia policies of the members of the original Quad." (Source: Jesse Barker Gale and Andrew Shearer, "The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative," CSIS Briefs, August, 2018, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180717\\_GaleShearer\\_QuadSecurityDialogue.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180717_GaleShearer_QuadSecurityDialogue.pdf).)

organization a more robust forum for foreign policy and military coordination. In March 2021, Quad leadership released a joint statement reaffirming their commitment to cooperation and uniting in a shared strategic vision for the future of the Indo-Pacific.<sup>84</sup> To improve, the Quad can include more countries for exercises and coordination in interoperability and communications without the formality of an official alliance. Augmenting the Quad with as many partners as possible is particularly attractive because interoperability built during peacetime and training operations does not have to be improvised during times of war or conflict. Moreover, the Quad represents that forum where like-minded countries can come together for multinational operations without committing to a treaty organization. In his speech to the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, former Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford acknowledged that there is new momentum given to the Quad in the past year and that the Quad's structure can be leveraged to respond to China in more than simply military approaches.<sup>85</sup> He further noted that the Quad allows participating countries to develop and test and train integrative strategies that focus on regional security, defense, and interoperability in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>86</sup>

### *Conclusion*

General Berger points out in his planning guidance that the United States' ambitions must be "...more aggressive than preserving status quo options." He further goes on to state that "...while others may wait for a clearer picture of the future operating environment, [the Marine Corps] will focus efforts on driving change and influencing future operating environment outcomes." The "status-quo" security architecture and traditional "power projection" activities in the Indo-Pacific are not optimized to address the threat of China, nor can change "wait for a clearer picture" of what China may do. The transition from gray zone warfare to a fait accompli may happen without warning, leaving improvisation as the only option. Just like the Marine

Corps must “modernize for the future” to execute concepts like EABO, so too must the diplomatic conditions in the Indo-Pacific to set the conditions so improvisation does not need to occur.

A “NATO” of the Indo-Pacific may not be the answer. Still, mutual defense commitments between the nations of the FIC will provide better strategic options for the United States and its allies to address the China threat through concepts like EABO. Working with allies and partners will require time and investment; however, these relationships represent one of the United States’ greatest strengths. The United States’ strategic advantage must shift from a purely military advantage to one where it combines all of the instruments of power to enable its military operations in competition and in conflict to protect its national interests.

China is playing the long game, and the United States can too. The United States strategy must be a whole-of-government approach that begins with diplomacy abroad in the Rimland to “balance the threat” of China. To enable the Department of Defense and the SIF to succeed in military concepts like EABO, it must start with a unified vision and strategy with allies and partners rooted in protecting the FIC’s sovereignty. Defending the FIC requires the SIF to access geographic terrain necessary to prevent a *fait accompli* if deterrence fails. Diplomatic agreements for mutual defense provide the structure from which access to these areas will arise. A solution rests somewhere between a formal “NATO-like” institution and the status quo in the Indo-Pacific. The answer is not binary, but formulating a cohesive long-term strategy within a modern 21<sup>st</sup> century security architecture is necessary to preserve the international rules-based order and facilitate the United States’ ability to defend allies and partners in conflict. The United States and its allies must start looking ahead to manage global threats like China collectively.

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## *Glossary*

**Access.** The ability to project military force into an operational area with sufficient freedom of action to accomplish the mission. (*Source:* DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Alliance.** The relationship that results from a formal agreement between two or more nations for broad, long-term objectives that further the common interests of the members. (*Source:* DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Anti-Access.** Action, activity, or capability, usually long-range, designed to prevent an advancing enemy force from entering an operational area. Also called A2. (*Source:* DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Area Denial.** Action, activity, or capability, usually short-range, designed to limit an enemy force's freedom of action within an operational area. Also called AD. (*Source:* DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Balance of power theory.** An imbalance of power occurs when the strongest state or coalition in the system possesses significantly greater power than the second strongest. Power is the product of several different components, including population, economic and military capability, technological skill, and political cohesion. (*Source:* Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliances*)

**Balance of threat theory.** An imbalance of threat occurs when the most threatening state or coalition is significantly more dangerous than the second most threatening state or coalition. The degree to which a state threatens others is the product of its aggregate power, its geographic proximity, its offensive capability, and the aggressiveness of its intentions. (*Source:* Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliances*)

**Bandwagoning.** Occurs when a state aligns with a stronger, adversarial power and concedes that the stronger adversary-turned-partner disproportionately gains in the spoils they conquer together. Bandwagoning, therefore, is a strategy employed by states that find themselves in a weak position. (*Source:* owlapps.net)

**Collective defense.** The principle of collective defense lies in accepting the bond of providing all possible assistance, including military assistance, in case of a member state being attacked from the outside. Within the concept of collective defense, security of member states is not assumed to be threatened from the inside of the alliance. The alliance formed in this way is oriented towards an external enemy. (*Source:* Zdenek Kriz, "NATO Transformation and the Summit in Bucharest: Towards the Organisation of Collective Defence, Collective Security or Cooperative Security?")

**Competition.** Exists on a continuum of interactions between and among states. On one end of the spectrum is cooperation, and on the other is direct armed conflict. In between, states compete in varying states of collaboration and confrontation. They edge toward cooperation and collaboration when geopolitical goals are aligned. They drift toward confrontation and armed conflict when main geopolitical aims are perceived as divergent and mutually unattainable.

(Source: National Defense University Press, *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Ear of Great Power Competition*)

**Crisis.** An incident or situation involving a threat to the United States, its citizens, military forces, or vital interests that develops rapidly and creates a condition of such diplomatic, economic, or military importance that commitment of military forces and resources is contemplated to achieve national objectives. (Source: DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Deterrence.** The prevention of action by the existence of a credible threat of unacceptable counteraction and/or belief that the cost of action outweighs the perceived benefits. (Source: DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations.** The purpose is to employ Marines as an “inside,” low signature, joint naval force conducting sea control and denial operations in littoral and chokepoint regions. (Source: cimsec.org)

**Fait Accompli.** Imposing gains at the expense of an adversary without getting into a larger war. They are not conquests of states via war, but limited land grabs based on the bet that the opponent won’t risk a larger fight for the territory. (Source: Michael Kofman, “Getting the Fait Accompli Problem Right in U.S. Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*)

**Freedom of Navigation Operations.** Operations conducted to protect United States navigation, overflight, and related interests on, under, and over the seas. (Source: DOD Dictionary, JP 3-0)

**Great Power.** Displays three conspicuous attributes: capabilities, behavior, and status attribution by other states in the international system. It has unusual capabilities in comparison with other states. It uses those unusual capabilities to pursue broad foreign policy interests beyond its immediate neighborhood. It is perceived by other states as powerful, having influence, and is thus treated accordingly. In the dawning era of new GPC, the United States, China, and Russia fit this description. (Source: National Defense University Press, *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Ear of Great Power Competition*)

**Hard Power.** The coercive use of military power and leveraging economic power as a payoff. (Source: National Defense University Press, *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Ear of Great Power Competition*)

**Hedging.** When a state conducts a counteracting policy to temporarily avoid an explicit confrontation with a potentially adversarial state; an insurance policy against opportunism. (Source: Kei Koga, “The Concept of “Hedging” Revisited: The Case of Japan’s Foreign Policy Strategy in East Asia’s Power Shift”, *International Studies Review*)

**Interoperability.** 1. The ability to act together coherently, effectively, and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational, and strategic objectives. (JP 3-0) 2. The condition achieved among communications-electronics systems or items of communications electronics equipment when information or services can be exchanged directly and satisfactorily between them and/or their users. (Source: DOD Dictionary, JP 6-0)

**Multilateralism.** Embracing cooperation with other countries and international institutions in pursuit of common goals. This option carries the cost of continuing to commit resources to international efforts and potentially sacrificing a degree of national autonomy. (*Source:* [modeldiplomacy.cfr.org](http://modeldiplomacy.cfr.org))

**Partnership:** Partnerships are less formal than alliances. Often called “strategic partnerships,” they help build relationships between nations or organizations like militaries. Like alliances, they benefit the members of the partnership, but they can be short-term and don’t involve a treaty. (*Source:* [defense.gov](http://defense.gov))

**Power Projection:** the finite application of military power by national command authority to achieve discrete political ends outside the borders of the United States, its territories, and possessions. (*Source:* Mark Gunzinger, “Power Projection: Making the Tough Choices”)

**Salami-slicing Tactics.** Tactics that involve the slow accumulation of small changes, none of which in isolation amounts to a *casus belli*, but which add up over time to a substantial change in the strategic picture. (*Source:* Robert Haddick, “America has no answer to China’s salami-slicing”)

**Soft Power.** the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment. (*Source:* Joseph Nye, *Bound to Lead*)

**Sovereignty.** States have the freedom to govern themselves as they choose, with full control over their internal and external affairs and free from interference or intervention. (*Source:* Luke Glanville, *Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect*)

**Stand-in Forces.** Forces with disruptive tactical capabilities that will persist and operate forward within an adversary’s weapons engagement zone. During day-to-day competition, stand-in forces enable the United States and our partners to confront fait accompli gambits and malign behavior with proportionate, responsive, and credible military options to match adversary aggression with commensurate force and risk. (*Source:* Marc Riccio and William Grimball, “Command and Control Considerations for EABO,” *Marine Corps Gazette*)

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## Appendix A: The Stand-In Forces

# Stand-In Forces

Disrupting the current struggle for dominance

by Col Art Corbett, USMC(Ret)

**T**he nature of war is constant, and war will forever remain a violent contest of human will. In contrast, the character of war is constantly changing and persistently subject to the human dynamics of tactical creativity, technical innovation, and conceptual insight. Consequently, institutions dedicated to deterring and waging war must be similarly dynamic and recognize the essential truth that *change is a medium of advantage in war*. The greater the change, the wider the aperture for generating new advantage. A warfighting organization that is not constantly adopting, adapting, or initiating new means and methods of warfare is standing still, and most assuredly will be passed by more ambitious, creative, or sinister forces.

Our strategic competitors recognize that dynamic force innovation is a critical part of continuous military competition, and they have demonstrated a coherence in force development be-

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tween new tactical means and more ambitious strategic ends that has largely eluded the United States. China, for example, has invested heavily in long-range fire capabilities in pursuit of their publicly declared *counter-intervention* strategy. This strategy appears designed to negate the ability of U.S. forces to persist forward in the Pacific, thereby compromising the credibility and deterrent value of the force to achieve desired strategic ends. The U.S. and regional allies have been compelled to accede to the illegal but expanding Chinese infrastructure supporting aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea. All make appropriate protest but,

ultimately, confrontation is limited to gestures in consideration of the vulnerability of the current combined force posture and structure relative to Chinese anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The most valuable U.S. military capabilities are now concentrated or dependent on highly vulnerable bases within the potential adversary's weapons engagement zone (WEZ) and face either destruction or withdrawal in the event of war. These conditions fail to offer credible force deterrent options or assure allies. Given the global proliferation of A2/AD capabilities, similar challenges exist in other theaters as well. The growing mismatch between U.S. strategic objectives and the tactical means required to ensure force credibility and effectiveness demand increasingly prudent, favorable, and affordable options.

There are two readily apparent but divergent paths to resolve this dilemma. The first option, reflexive and familiar, is to double down on the long-evolved means and methods of war and request additional funding for traditional capabilities with improved performance and additional capacity. The basic presumption of this option being that fundamental assumptions need not change, and the joint force can off-set adversary weapons and sensor range and capacity with greater capabilities and capacities of our own. In essence, we attempt to play "catch-up" and eventually regain the lead. The inherent danger with this option is that it risks giving the com-



**The character of war is constantly changing.** (Photo by LCpl Dalton Swanbeck.)

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petitor a complementary cost imposing strategy.

The second option is more difficult, but holds much greater promise, as it presumes that fundamental assumptions regarding the character of war have changed, and that considering mathematic and geographic realities, it is better to defeat an adversary's strategy than defeat his many forces through attrition. However, this option is hard. It requires devising new methods of warfare, innovating new and different capabilities, initiating new forms of competitive advantage—all with a focus to restoring the strategic initiative.

One potential approach aligned to the second option is the development and employment of resilient “stand-in” forces equipped with disruptive new tactical capabilities that will persist and operate forward within a peer adversary's WEZ. Informed by the constraints of both physics and economics, stand-in forces could be advantaged by exploiting emerging technology to enhance mobility and lethality and employing new design and manufacturing techniques to enhance platform numbers while reducing size and cost. They need to be deliberately designed to obviate the utility of adversary investments in long-range precision fires and impose time and cost impediments to deter their hegemonic ambitions. These new, smaller and more risk worthy capabilities will generate a new force structure that is relevant in both countering malign behavior and deterring general war. Stand-in forces will support recent strategic guidance for force innovation as well as current and emerging joint and naval operating concepts.

During day-to-day “competition,” stand-in forces will enable the U.S. and our partners to confront *fait accompli* gambits and malign behavior with proportionate, responsive, and credible military options to match adversary aggression with commensurate force and risk. During conflict, stand-in forces may be employed as one of several simultaneous operational efforts within a wider joint campaign to defeat the counter-intervention strategy of peer adversaries. These forces will

take advantage of partner geography to conduct an integrated maritime defense of the straits that control access to close and confined seas. Stand-in forces will conduct engagements that contrast sharply with the more familiar *stand-off* approach long preferred by technologically adept western forces. Stand-off engagements are designed to minimize “*risk to force*” by confronting enemy formations with greater accuracy, over further distance, for a longer period of time. For centuries, military innovators and practitioners have sought to generate and sustain disproportionate tactical advantage through stand-off engagements; iterating and employing increasingly lethal and precise weapons systems from ever greater distance against enemies who require close proximity to effectively engage in combat. Stand-in engagements deliberately contradict this long-evolved pattern.

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### ... it is better to defeat an adversary's strategy ...

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From the longbow and Minnie ball to the bomber and today's long-range precision weapons and their supporting precision navigation and timing architecture, much of the modern military technical revolution has centered on extending the range and precision of stand-off weapons. The U.S. joint force has perfected this over generations with ever more exquisite and expensive weapons and systems. Some adversaries, like the Iraqis during Operation DESERT STORM, never successfully adapted to negate these advantages. Others, however, were able to learn from their losses. The Vietnamese, for example, focused on avoiding detection and giving battle on their own terms by “grabbing the Americans by their belts” to render stand-off weapons irrelevant.

A portion of future U.S. forces could follow the Vietnamese example by making a virtue of proximity, stealth, ambiguity, simultaneity, and quantity to close with and destroy enemy forces before they can bring their own ad-

vantages to bear. This requires arming our stand-in forces with relatively smaller, less expensive, hard to find, risk worthy platforms in all domains. This low signature force structure is the antithesis of the current high signature, expensive, exquisite, and vulnerable joint capability set. This resilient new force structure will likewise need to be supported by an equally low signature and difficult to target expeditionary sustainment system that can support forward deployed warriors and their weapons systems without advertising critical vulnerabilities and generating single points of failure. The combination of resilient, low signature, forward infrastructure supporting similarly low signature, but highly lethal and dense, arrays of minimally manned and autonomous capabilities builds the next joint force on new and more realistic assumptions concerning the character of future war. Equally important, it enables the U.S. to shape the character of future war into an innovative competitive space where we will still dominate.

While the U.S. still has an advantage in technological innovation, we need to acknowledge that we have lost our long-standing competitive advantage when it comes to building major warfighting platforms. Considering the broad difference in the numbers of shipyards and the annual production of ocean-going bottoms between China and the United States, why would we consider a war that requires the risk, expenditure, and replacement of ships to still be a competitive space for the United States? The large platform *industrial base* that provided the sinew to win the Second World War is now in the hands of our strategic competitors. What still remains a dynamic and competitive space for American ingenuity is the fast emerging *innovation base* that already uses computer assisted design, additive manufacturing, robotics, and many new manufacturing techniques to produce many smaller and more resilient platforms at significantly reduced cost. When equipped with autonomy packages, these resilient platforms offer the opportunity to create and field a significant number of lethal, affordable, and hard to detect and kill unmanned

and minimally manned weapons platforms. Unmanned systems are low signature, risk worthy assets that could be boldly employed in overwhelming numbers against expensive, exquisite, large signature platforms to achieve disproportionate result at minimal cost. They enable naval forces to shift investment away from expensive to produce and maintain ships and reinvest in the many payloads that will be necessary to win a war in the missile age. Autonomous and minimally manned surface, subsurface, and air platforms clearly meet the criteria of *disruptive technologies that establish a new competitive space* for America's emerging innovation base and may provide capabilities optimized for stand-in forces.

While the concept of stand-in engagement is as old as war itself, the establishment of 21st century stand-in forces will be disruptive because it creates what John Boyd called a “fast transient maneuver,” an “Irregular and rapid/abrupt shift from one maneuver event/state to another.” By disrupting the evolved and anticipated pattern of force development and engagement we may generate highly exploitable asymmetries and provide new opportunities for cost effective advantage. *Adding* stand-in engagements to the tactical mix will cause the enemy to hazard expensive offensive platforms against a lethal and dense mix of inexpensive, risk worthy, defensive platforms, and payloads—imposing disproportionate cost and asymmetric risk to enemy forces designed to strike against large signature standoff ships and infrastructure.

Since the operational level of war is designed to link tactical action to strategic ends, it follows then that the proper ambition of a *future* operational concept is to describe how *new tactical capabilities*, used in *new ways*, will provide future decision makers *better strategic options*. A proper operational concept has many components and points of consideration, but it is essential that it describe how investment in new tactical means will enable better strategic consequences, preferably at reduced cost in blood and treasure. Credible operational concepts are dependent on cred-



**Combat credibility and demonstrated resolve equates to deterrence effectiveness.** (Photo by Cpl Aaron Henson.)

ible forces that are sustainable in battle and sufficient in lethal capability and relative capacity.

An optimum strategy—particularly one versus a nuclear-armed adversary—will be *adequately coercive, but not vertically escalatory*. To avoid provoking vertical escalation, the military operations associated with such a strategy will exploit off-shore naval operations to generate coercive conditions. Toward that end, stand-in forces may fully exploit the many advantages of the tactical defense, which is the far stronger form of contemporary naval battle.

The *strategic offensive* complemented by an *integrated maritime tactical defense* provides unique and relevant advantages. Stand-in forces may be *highly coercive* when employed to deny adversary access to commerce or counter fait accompli gambits yet, when employed from treaty partner terrain using largely defensive capabilities, they are *not vertically escalatory*.

Combat credibility and demonstrated resolve equates to deterrence effectiveness. Stand-in forces stand forward with partners. Stand-in forces can persistently and resolutely declare intention. These forces may be regionally aligned and assigned. They will not withdraw upon indications and warning and their platforms and payloads

can be proliferated in large numbers at affordable cost. The comparative ease of hiding their signature and masking their disposition leads to uncertainty and compounds the variables when calculating correlation of force, perhaps the greatest deterrent when facing an adversary who regards war as a scientific endeavor with computable results.

The development of a stand-in forces offers the potential for innovative change to disrupt the current great power competition and *regain the strategic initiative*. They will do so by satisfying the operational requirement to *create credible combat forces* to persist and operate inside the adversary's WEZ with sufficient capability and capacity to restore deterrence and produce favorable strategic outcomes.

The pattern and reality of war in the missile age makes the concept of stand-in forces inevitable. First to the force development blackboard wins.

USMC