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# The Significance of the Establishment of the United States Indo-Pacific Command for U.S.–China Relations

An essential element of U.S. foreign policy strategy is an active presence in Asia. China's economic strengthening and the American–Chinese trade war have also given America a greater emphasis on projecting military forces into the region. One key element of this is the establishment of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). In this article, I detail the reasons for setting up the headquarters, its task and its area of responsibility. I describe the military factors that affect U.S.–China foreign policy relations.

**Keywords:** U.S.–China relations, USINDOPACOM, U.S.–China trade war, U.S. force projection

## 1. Introduction

The U.S. military presence in Asia is an essential factor in U.S. defence and foreign policy. After World War II, there has always been a reason for the U.S. to intervene militarily in a Middle or Far East country. Nevertheless, the ability of the U.S. to deploy forces is greatly aided by close economic and military cooperation with Japan and South Korea. China's economic strengthening and the U.S.–China trade war have also prompted America to place greater emphasis on the deployment of military forces in the region, as exemplified by the stationing of large numbers of military forces in the region and the establishment of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM). In the following, I present the factors that played a role in setting up the new headquarters and their impact on China.

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## 2. United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM)

USINDOPACOM is one of six U.S. Joint Operations Commands for the U.S. Armed Forces. The Commander of the Indo-Pacific Command (CDRUSINDOPACOM) is the senior U.S. military representative within the area of responsibility of the Indo-Pacific Command. CDRUSINDOPACOM, through the Secretary of Defense, is accountable to the President of the United States. It has two joint headquarters, U.S. forces stationed in Japan and Korea, and 5-component headquarters: the U.S. Pacific Fleet, the U.S. Pacific Air Force, the U.S. Pacific Land Forces and the U.S. United States Marine Corps and the United States Special Operations Command in the Pacific. These commands are based in Hawaii, and their forces and assets are present and deployed across the region.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 1: Badge of the USINDOPACOM

Source: USINDOPACOM, 'Headquarters', s. a.

Approximately 375,000 U.S. soldiers and civilians perform their duties in the area of responsibility of the USINDOPACOM. The U.S. Pacific fleet includes about 200 ships (five aircraft carrier strike groups), nearly 1,100 aircraft and 130,000 sailors and civilians. The Pacific Marine Corps consists of two naval expeditionary forces and approximately 86,000 personnel, and 640 aircraft. The U.S. Pacific Air Force comprises 46,000 soldiers and civilians, or more than 420 aircraft. Nearly 106,000 troops from the U.S. Pacific Land Forces consist of a corps and two divisions, with more than 300 aircraft and five vehicles operating in the area of responsibility, from Japan and Korea to Alaska

<sup>2</sup> USINDOPACOM, 'Organization Chart', s. a.

and Hawaii. It should be noted that the number of Army headquarters includes more than 1,200 special operations soldiers. The civilian staff of the Department of Defense is approximately 38,000 in the area of responsibility of the Indo-Pacific Command.

USINDOPACOM defends U.S. territory, people and interests with U.S. government organisations. With its allies and partners, USINDOPACOM is committed to strengthening stability in the Asia-Pacific region, which must be fought to victory by promoting security cooperation, fostering peaceful development, effectively responding to unforeseen events, deterring aggression and the need for it. This commitment is based on partnership, presence and military readiness.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: Area of responsibility of the USINDOPACOM  
Source: USINDOPACOM, 'Area of Responsibility', s. a.

### 3. INDOPACOM's area of responsibility: Geopolitical and military significance

The area of responsibility of the United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) covers half of the Earth's surface, stretching from the west coast of the United States to the western border of India and Antarctica to the Arctic. The 36 countries in the Asia-Pacific region make up more than 50% of the world's population. Two of the world's three largest economies and 10 of the other 14 are located in the Asia-Pacific region. The shift in the focus of the world economy to the Asia-Pacific

<sup>3</sup> USINDOPACOM, 'Headquarters', s. a.

region is expected to continue in the coming years, with the development of South Korea and Southeast Asian states in addition to China and India.

There are seven of the world's ten most significant forces, five nuclear powers and five nations allied with the United States through mutual defence treaties. "The increasing arms competition and China's growing power ambitions in the region have made former latent contradictions more dangerous. Washington, too, is watching the frequent incident-laden conflicts and China's aspirations with greater concern. Monitoring these conflicts and security challenges, the main strategic objectives in the region of the United States are the following:

- securing allies and partner countries;
- apprehending potential opponents (China, North Korea);
- supporting the development of military capabilities in threatened states;
- in the spirit of building trust, encouraging cooperation and promoting joint action with China on the challenges."<sup>4</sup>

The United States India-Pacific policy is defined in three essential documents. According to the 2017 National Security Strategy,<sup>5</sup> China is a revisionist power, and it is crucial to serve the United States out of the region, expand the economic model of state governance and rearrange the region according to its interests. The *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region*<sup>6</sup> published by the Department of Defense in 2019 includes the following: The old Indo-Pacific is the primary battlefield of the Department of Defense, which is why China has reshaped the region to its own advantage by forcing and restraining other countries through military modernisation, influence operations, and a predatory economy. The document's key is to meet this challenge by working more closely with allies and partners. India also has a pivotal role in this cooperation, as it renamed the Pacific Command in 2018 to the Indo-Pacific Command.

The third document, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, prepared by the U.S. Department of State in 2019, emphasises the need for infrastructure development for many countries in the region. China is holding hands with the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, but the document mentions alternative programs for partners.<sup>7</sup>

The main challenges in the region:

- North Korea poses the greatest threat until the nuclear situation on the Korean Peninsula is resolved.
- China represents a major long-term strategic threat to security, but this applies not only to the region but to the world as a whole.
- Russia's growing influence in the region and the deepening of relations between Moscow and Beijing gives reason for serious concern.

<sup>4</sup> Gergely Varga, 'Az Egyesült Államok katonai jelenléte a csendes-óceáni térségben', 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The White House, 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The Department of Defense, 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships and Promoting a Networked Region', 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Cleo Paskal, 'Indo-Pacific strategies, perceptions and partnerships', *Chatham House Research Paper*, 23 March 2021.

- The spread of terrorism and radical views by non-state actors.
- The region is currently the most vulnerable place prone to disasters and many countries lack sufficient capability and capacity to manage natural and man-made disasters.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S. Pacific defence strategy is China-centric. It aims to maintain its military superiority over China in the East Asian region and prevent it to gradually expand its influence in the western Pacific basin.<sup>9</sup>

“China’s growing power is being watched with concern in the surrounding Asian countries and the United States is viewed as a formative power that protects the power status quo, provides stability and counteracts China. China’s growing economic power, along with the emerging and, at the same time, increasingly dominant economic selection has forced Asian states to strike a careful balance. In the interest of their economic development, they do not intend to jeopardise these relations, so there may be a possibility that these countries in question in East Asia and Southeast Asia, or some of them, instead of counterbalancing would line up with China, which would significantly weaken the position of the United States. With this in mind, America must strive to ensure that its Asian allies not only enjoy American security guarantees as “free riders” but also play their part in ensuring their own protection and that the region remains strong enough to act as a deterrent and a credible military dominance.”<sup>10</sup>

China’s Pacific Strategy uses all elements of the national resource, diplomacy, information, military force and economy in parallel and combined use, thereby creating unique challenges involving the United States and its alliance.<sup>11</sup>

In the American interpretation, the creation of China’s “One Belt, One Road” is not only of an economic nature but also supports the strategic interest achieved through this program and ensures the overseas applicability of its military power.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Indicative name change?

On 30 May 2018, the United States Pacific Command (USPACOM) underwent a name change and a change of commander. This is how the Pacific Command became Indo-Pacific Command. The name change was announced by U.S. Secretary of Defense James N Mattis at the Joint Forces base in Pearl Harbor, citing the growing interconnection between India and the Pacific and the U.S. focus on the west.

The move reflects the growing importance of the Indo Ocean in U.S. strategic thinking and recognises India’s growing role in ensuring regional security. The move

<sup>8</sup> Phil Davidson, ‘China’s Challenge to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific’, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 1 October 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Varga, ‘Az Egyesült Államok katonai jelenléte’.

<sup>10</sup> Varga, ‘Az Egyesült Államok katonai jelenléte’.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, ‘China’s Challenge’.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

references the U.S. 2018 defence strategy, which recognises the challenges and signals found in the Pacific that America is permanently committed to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>13</sup>

In 2017, former President of the United States Donald Trump declared that the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) area freely translates as "Free and Open India-Pacific". Donald Trump interpreted this concept as a kind of end-state about the region, which has become widespread, and many states in the region are applying the concept.<sup>14</sup>

Originally based on the idea of Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan's FOIP strategy was launched in 2016, with the explicit goal of freedom, the rule of law, a market economy, freedom from coercion and violence, and making the region prosperous and successful. The U.S. has adopted the concept since 2017 and has been applying it ever since. In the United States and Japan's strategic thinking, together with Australia and India, the concept can be seen as a normative framework, with ASEAN actors as a perspective. Since the concept is freely interpretable, each state translates taking into account its own circumstances. This is precisely why several smaller, risk-averse states view the concept with a sort of reluctance, as the theory of thought, the varied forms of interpretation of the U.S. identifies China differently.<sup>15</sup>

However, in the interpretation of USINDOPACOM, the word "free" is not limited to the traditional security interpretation of the word itself. Respect for free societies respects individual freedoms such as free religion, good governance that promotes a free society, and insists on the value of the UN and the universality of Human Rights Declaration, and free nations do not have to choose a trading partner out of coercion or fear. Of greater importance to the open Indo-Pacific space is the need for all nations to have open access to the sea and air routes upon which economies and prosperity depend. Otherwise, it also refers to the region as an area of open investment, transparency among nations, protection of intellectual property, and justice and mutual trade.<sup>16</sup>

## 5. The Chinese benefit

For the past 70 years, the region has been mostly peaceful, and China has been the biggest beneficiary of the conditions and values just mentioned, making it the world's second-largest economic power.

Most of all, however, China wants to rewrite the basic rules, i.e. with hidden coercive procedures that can be applied in the economy prosperity can be gained. It provides loans, develops infrastructure and the economy. Nevertheless, if a country takes out more credit than it can afford, the lender can quickly increase its influence over that country's sovereignty.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> DoD News, 'Pacific Command Change Highlights Growing Importance of Indian Ocean Area', 31 May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Department of State, 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision', 4 November 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Reeves and Joanne Wallis, 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities for Engagement (Introduction)', *Asia Policy* 15, no 4 (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Davidson, 'China's Challenge'.

<sup>17</sup> Department of State, 'A Free and Open Indo-Pacific'.

The permanent military presence and demonstration of strength in the East and South China Seas are intended to intimidate other countries. Furthermore, in these areas, the means of coercion and intimidation are the excessive territorial demands that are sought to be underpinned by the strict construction of crafts and their militarisation. China calls this activity of a defence nature, which is pursued by Chinese sovereignty, but hinders the freedom of other countries to fly and navigate, which is also condemned by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague.<sup>18</sup>

When we mention the security of freedom of navigation, we do not mean the dangers and manoeuvres and actions of ships, but the right and security of all nations' trade, communications and the communication of financial communications and financial information on the seabed. Some examples to illustrate the freedom of navigation in the South China Sea:

- Nearly a third of the annual global trade, approximately \$3.5 billion comes from the region.
- One-third of the world's crude oil and liquefied natural gas traffic passes through the South China Sea.
- Trillions of dollars in trade travel annually on the South China Sea communication routes.<sup>19</sup>

China exerts tremendous pressure on ASEAN countries to vote for all ASEAN members to veto which non-ASEAN countries can sail, fly, practice and operate in the South China Sea. Thus, China is practically a substitute for U.S. naval exercises in the region, ideal for exercises with Australia or Japan in international waters. For the time being, ASEAN member states oppose this suggestion.<sup>20</sup>

## 6. China Task Force

Nothing proves the U.S.'s relationship with China better than the fact that Joe Biden, the President of the United States recently announced a new sub-unit of the U.S. Department of Defense called the China Battle Group. The 'battle group' task force provides portfolio-level provisions, measures, programs and processes related to the Chinese challenge and develops recommendations for defence leaders. The group's task is to examine essential areas such as strategy, operational concepts, technology and force structure, deployment and command of forces and intelligence.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Phil Davidson, 'China Power: Up for Debate', *U.S. Indo-Pacific Command*, 30 November 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Viet Hoang, 'The Code of Conduct for the South China Sea: A Long and Bumpy Road', *The Diplomat*, 28 September 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Garamone, 'Biden Announces DOD China Task Force', *DoD News*, 10 February 2021.

## 7. Conclusion

Chinese leaders have previously openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the current world order, which they believe is based on Western values and is solely in the interests of the United States, so China aims to turn that world order into a system where national power is more important than international law. The United States does not have to give up its dominant power, and the creation of USINDOPACOM and the China Task Force demonstrates the importance of retaining the Asian region and stationing its resources close to China.

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