

# Bolstering Relations with Allies in the Pacific

■ *By 1st Lt. Matthew W. Buck*

The U.S. and the Philippines have a long history of cooperation, officially starting in 1951 with the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. There have been diplomatic relations between the countries since 1946, and currently, both the U.S. and the Philippines are members of the United Nations, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. With large-scale combat operations (LSCO) becoming the focus of the U.S. military along the spectrum of conflict, sustaining the force requires changes equivalent to those of the forward line of troops. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) was established January 1, 1947, and is currently headquartered in Honolulu, Hawaii. Sustainment in this unified command covers over half the globe, 14 time zones, and some of the most contested waters and territories.

**To truly project force and prepare the joint forces in a contested and difficult logistics environment, creating a new APS region for South/Southeast Asia would greatly improve on the current APS-4.**

The 8th Theater Sustainment Command is the senior Army logistics command in the USINDOPACOM area of operations (AO). They are responsible for assigning priorities and disseminating tasks regarding sustainment operations. They also act as a touchpoint between USINDOPACOM and Army Material Command, U.S. Transportation Command, and the Defense Logistics Agency.

Sometimes described as opportunistic, logistical planning in the middle years of World War II was regularly contested between the Army and Navy. Each branch believed that its ideas and strategies were the better courses of action. In the Pacific theater, lines of transportation were largely waterways, as opposed to major ports, roads, and train lines in the European theater. Battlefields separated by hundreds or thousands of nautical miles made it challenging to maintain the steady flow of personnel and equipment necessary to keep the advantage.

This analysis still applies today. The distance between the center of USINDOPACOM and most potential points of friction are too far apart for the current logistics posture to truly be effective. Maj. Alice Bechtol posits that while all the branches of the U.S. Armed Forces are standing up new task forces in the Pacific theater, we should also implement a joint logistics command. This new form of command would help unify the

fight and inform commanders at all levels so they could make quicker and more effective decisions. It would also prevent disruptions in the supply chain and implement a new standard of theater support.

In the 2022 National Security Strategy, partnerships with treaty allies in the Pacific were highlighted, including the Philippines. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has visited the Philippines several times during his tenure but has had a larger focus on the Pacific theater since 2023. The two countries developed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). This agreement includes heightened interoperability between U.S. forces and Philippine forces. The Philippine constitution forbids foreign military bases on its land, but the recent EDCA has made exceptions to this by allowing U.S. forces to be indefinitely stationed at the four new bases on a rotating basis. The EDCA also includes U.S. financial aid to improve Philippine military posts. One such upgrade was a \$24 million package to improve the runway at Basa Air Base.

Another major U.S. partner in South Asia is Thailand. In 2003, the White House designated Thailand as a major partner in the war on terror and a non-NATO ally. Thailand has gotten closer economically with China over the past few decades but has maintained positive relations with the U.S. Reinforcing ties with Thailand and providing economic and military assistance would help

establish stronger relations with current partners in South Asia.

A superior method for analyzing the effect of logistics in any given region is through field training exercises (FTXs), during which Soldiers are given scenarios to test their training and decision-making skills. Logistics, however, continues to be a real-world mission during these training events. Balikatan is a joint-country FTX between the Philippine and U.S. armed forces. Working shoulder to shoulder and sharing the load, there have been 38 iterations of the Balikatan exercise designed to enhance both forces' abilities to work together efficiently and effectively in response to crisis operations, especially in the South China Sea. The French Navy has announced it will take part in Balikatan 2024. This shows an increased interest from other Western allies for closer military relations with the Philippines in response to growing tensions in the region.

Talisman Sabre is similar to Balikatan as a transnational FTX in the USINDOPACOM AO but is a much larger exercise executed biennially. The most recent iteration in 2023 was the largest ever, including more than 30,000 Soldiers from 13 nations. It was the largest iteration of Talisman Sabre since its inception in 2005. Many U.S. allies and partner nations were there. Most of them sent soldiers to participate in the training. A handful of countries—Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga—participated for the first

time, while the Philippines did not (although they did send observers). Including the Philippines, our oldest treaty ally in the region, in the large-scale joint training, or other partners, such as Thailand, would be invaluable to demonstrate alliance, partnership, and cooperation in the Pacific theater.

Outside of establishing and maintaining secure supply lines, the DoD has used pre-positioned stock to increase force projection and to signal commitment to a region to the rest of the world. The Army pre-positioned stock (APS) program reduces deployment response times, allowing Soldiers to fall in on equipment as opposed to bringing their own organic property. These stockpiles can contain a whole brigade combat team's worth of equipment and are available to every combatant commander to support missions, major training exercises, and humanitarian aid. The Army has seven APS regions so commanders can utilize the equipment located within their theater. APS-4 is the designation for stock located within Northeast Asia. These countries include China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan.

USINDOPACOM is much larger than APS-4, however. To truly project force and prepare the joint forces in a contested and difficult logistics environment, creating a new APS region for South/Southeast Asia would greatly improve on the current APS-4. This eighth APS could be located with one of our

major partners in southern Asia, such as the Philippines or Thailand.

As national security discussions continue to revolve around potential threats from China in relation to Taiwan and other disputes in the South China Sea, it is important to evaluate the current logistics standpoint, review historical examples, and strengthen our positioning with allies in USINDOPACOM. With the focus now on LSCO, we must be able to adapt and provide sustainment in a contested environment.

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